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Cosplay: Community, hierarchy, and the Acafan methodology

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Abstract

Cosplay is the act of dressing and performing as a character from popular media and is typically associated with fan conventions. The academic study of gender-play cosplay (explicit play with gendered codes) has framed cosplay as a socially transformative act (Bainbridge and Norris, 2011; Gn, 2011; King 2014; Lamerichs, 2018). Engaging with these ideas, the linchpin of this thesis is an analysis of cosplayers relationships with their chosen characters, and how cosplayers use character to affirm, subvert, or play with one's gendered identity (set within a North American and UK context). However, my combined textual analysis, autoethnography, and participant interviews revealed something more complex to say about the cosplay community, its related industries, and subsequent study. Drawing on these findings, I develop the concept of 'networks of contradiction' to characterize the complex cultural relationships that facilitate and structure costumed play.

The research is an examination of the audience-consumer paradigm which structures cosplay and cosplay communities. The thesis presents two distinct data sets, one which affirms the findings of contemporary Acafan cosplay scholarship which represents cosplayers as creative social agents. The second data set challenges current cosplay scholarship which I conceptualise by drawing on broader literature from critical theory, cultural studies, and postfeminist criticism. This second data set prompts an assessment of the Acafan methodology, bringing to light: ways in which fan industry and popular media encode meaning and tailor audience engagement, the industrial manipulation of fan creativity, and cases of abuse and harassment between cosplayers. From the analysis of these entangled oppositions emerges the proposition that the proposed networks of contradiction might even have larger applicability to popular fandom more broadly.

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Introduction

This thesis started as an investigation into how cosplayers engage with gendered performance, setting out with an initial aim to find whether cosplay's interactions with characters from popular media texts can be used by the cosplayer as a tool to experiment with and/or express one's own gendered (and sexual) identities. The original catalyst for this research project is still the through thread of this thesis. However, through my engagement with cosplay, by interviewing cosplayers, attending fan conventions, as well as my relations with fan and cosplay literature, as well as my attendance of fan studies conferences, the research project underwent some significant changes. However, before detailing these changes and the reasons for them, it is useful to define the key terms at the centre of the thesis.

Firstly, cosplay is a fan medium. The term is an abbreviation of costume and play, it is a process in which a fan crafts their own replica costumes of characters from popular film, TV, games, and comics (Dorfman and McCormick 2007, 6; Gn 2011, 583; Lamerichs 2014, 124). These costumes are subsequently worn and performed in character typically at fan conventions, or online within cosplay groups by sharing images or videos. Whilst these costumes are typically handmade, store-bought costumes are increasingly available as the cosplay community continues to grow beyond its niche origins and into popular culture.

For just over a decade, a small body of cosplay scholarship has been growing. Most of this scholarship is a subsection of fan studies written by primarily Academic Fans or Acafans King (2016), Lamerichs (2014, 2018), Winge (2019). An Acafan is a scholar who self-identifies as both a fan and academic (Jenkins, 2011). The Acafan derives from Fan-scholar (Hill, 2002) it is a form of self-study, in which the academic is also part of the fan communities they are studying. Cosplay scholars have produced narratives of cosplay as a fan medium through which the player can reinvent one's body with costume, it is a process which can lead to social and personal transformation. Cosplay is considered a revolutionary and disruptive force in the work of writers such as Bainbridge and Norris (2011), Gn (2011), Mountfort, Peirson-Smith, and Geczy (2019). The first half of Chapter 1, the literature review, will unpack contemporary fan studies and cosplay scholarship situating cosplay fandom as an active revolutionary audience which can shape the production of popular media. The second half, draws less on cosplay scholarship and more on fan studies more broadly, introducing potential faults of the 'active audience' model and how fans construct hierarchy to limit one another.

As I began this project, I was inspired by this body of scholarship and sought to examine how cosplayers used characters to negotiate their own identities, to unpack the ways in which cosplay could be a process to negotiate and experiment with one's gender and/or sexual identity. I set out three central questions to situate the project:

1. How do cosplayers engage with popular media, and how do their chosen characters relate to their own negotiation of identity?
2. Can cosplayers use cosplay as a form of identity expression and/or experimentation?
3. Can cosplayers challenge social expectations of gender and sexuality?

However, as I began to develop my study, my research and theoretical frameworks changed in response to the data that I was collecting. I adopted a mixed methodology, incorporating autoethnographic reflections within the cosplay community. For context, prior to this study, I have not participated in cosplay, nor am I a member of any online fan groups. Whilst I enjoy several popular media franchises and texts, I approach this study from the perspective of a cultural studies scholar with interests in leisure industries. Thus, there is a unique lens that comes from my engagement, a position I unpack in greater detail in Chapter 2.

The data that emerged during my mixed autoethnography and ethnographic made visible cases which confirm fan and cosplay literature, however also a data set which challenges much pre-existing scholarship. To conceptualise this new data, I began a dialogue between the Acafan methodology in fan and cosplay literature, which I began to read alongside traditional critical theory, cultural studies debates of power, audience theory, meritocracy, and postfeminist criticism. The thesis is consequently just as much about Acafan methods, Cosplay Scholarship, and the power dynamics in the cosplay community as it is about identity expression. In this thesis I argue that the future of cosplay scholarship is dependent on fan scholars reengaging with the critical traditions from cultural studies, and in doing so will be able to better represent the complexities of the cosplay community, and perhaps popular fandom more broadly.

Combining the Acafan Methodology with Critical Cultural Studies Traditions

Fan studies (and the position of the Acafan) is a relatively new field having emerged from the field of audience studies. Audience studies has a much longer history, emerging in response to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School between 1920-50, who perceived audiences as passive and susceptible to manipulation by media producers and cultural figures.

Subsequent cultural studies researchers have come to suggest that audiences are more diffuse. Namely the Uses and Gratifications model "which recognised that 'the individual uses the media, rather than being affected by it' to gratify his or her needs" (Chauvel et al. 2014, vii)". Notable writers of the Uses and Gratification include Katz (1959), Glaser (1965), and Lundberg and Hulten (1968). The uses model was notably developed upon by Stuart Hall in his paper 'Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse' (1973). In Hall's paper, he drew on the uses and gratifications model, and Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Gramsci defined hegemony as "a cultural and ideological means whereby the dominant groups in society, including fundamentally but not exclusively the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the 'spontaneous consent' of the subordinate classes" (Stratinati, 2004, 149). In Hall's reapplication of these two frameworks, Hall recognised that audience decoding of text occurs in heavily encoded environments which limit interpretative possibilities. Though most notable, Hall recognised that audience decoding occurred differently between different audience members, it is this latter argument which has heavily influenced contemporary fan studies. The former recognition that there are industrial factors which tailor decoding, has however been downplayed in fan and cosplay scholarship.

The landmark text of fan studies is *Textual Poachers* (1992) by Henry Jenkins. Jenkins' book is written with an aim to legitimise fandoms, their associated industries, and their academic study. In Jenkins' introduction he acknowledges "my motivations for writing this book are complex and bound to my dual role as fan and academic" (Jenkins 2013, 8). Jenkins expresses his concern for prior research on fans commenting how "previous academic accounts of fan culture are sensationalistic and foster misunderstandings about this subculture," going onto write that he "want[s] to participate in the process of redefining the public identity of fandom, to use my institutional authority to challenge those stereotypes, and to encourage a greater awareness of the richness of fan culture" (Jenkins 2013, 8). Jenkins is very clear cut about his own relationship between academic communities and his fan communities. Jenkins considers these two statuses of fan and academic as intertwined, it is a perspective which has defined the Acafan methodology for contemporary scholar-fans.

Another highly influential Fan Scholar (and Acafan) is Matt Hills, he opens *Fan Cultures* (2002) reflecting upon his own experiences as both a fan of BBC's science-fiction programme *Doctor Who* (BBC, 1963-), and the balance of his life as a fan alongside his life as academic. Hills proposes the term "scholar-fan"/" academic-fan" to define himself as a writer (and the growing community of ‘scholar-fans’ like him). Despite academic snobbery which looks down on the study of fandoms, and the challenges these pose on academic scholars (Hills 2002, xxvii). Hills goes onto argue: “Studying academic-fans studying fans (or themselves as fans!) can, all too often, reveal the ways in which an academic imagined subjectivity triumphs over a fan imagined subjectivity.” (Hills 2002, xxx). From the offset Hill’s is critical of the way that academic norms hinder expressions of fan identities. Audience/Cultural scholars have neglected “the possibility that fan and academic identities can be hybridised or brought together not simply in the academy but also outside of it, in the figure of the fan-scholar” (Hills 2002, xxx). Hills is suggesting here that the academic-fan can embrace one’s fandoms and delve into one’s experiences as fan, and in drawing upon one’s academic traditions, can mine one’s own experience as a resource in and of itself.

It is the process of drawing on one’s own experiences as fan, which prompts me to discuss the Acafan as methodology. It is common that the Acafan method will be an entanglement of cultural theory, autoethnographic self-reflections, as well as ethnographic documentations of their fellow fans (these might consist of observations/interviews/surveys). It is the Acafan methodology which pops up time and time again as the basis of much cosplay scholarship, and as much as it has accessed many productive insights to the cosplay community, and how one understands the cosplay community. I argue in this thesis, however, that this method has also led to misunderstandings of cosplay relations and structures of power. The agency of fans is illustrated in my literature review by drawing on secondary literature discussing fan creativity which I illustrate with the case study of Bowsette, a fan made artifact which has been used as a figure head for gender-play and experimentation by the character’s fans. Notions of fan productivity, creativity, and identity play was similarly experienced by my own experiences of attending conventions, learning to cosplay myself (Chapter 3 Part 1), and my participant interviews (Chapter 3 Part 2). However, whilst my observations validated much of the cosplay scholarship (Chapter 1), I made observations both at the convention hall and online which had not been captured in cosplay scholarship to date. I noticed an opposing side to cosplay, a side to cosplay which did not challenge dominant cultural norms, but a side which was oppressive and reinforced them.

In the early stages of my research, I was fortunate to attend and speak at several fan studies and cultural studies conferences where I got to share my early research findings and discuss my ideas with notable contemporaries within fan and cosplay fields of research. My attendance at fan studies conferences echoed my concerns, whilst I met with a lot of fan scholars doing incredible research. What is more, the people I met were each unified by their own fandoms and their own loyalties to their fandoms. However, as a cultural studies student who does not share the position of Acafan with the other conference attendees, I became more aware of the differences between Acafan methods and traditional cultural studies criticism. Where researchers in attendance at these conferences would recall fandom and cosplayers as creatives who take control over production of texts. I have been attending conventions and observed mass consumption as audiences queued, sometimes for long stretches of time, just to exchange money for merchandise, autographs, talks, or photos. In many respects I felt that fans and cosplayers were subject to the industries they supposedly had mastery over. In conversation with cosplay academics and in the wider cosplay literature, they document cosplay a revolutionary sphere through which gender-play and experimentation is a disruptive force against patriarchal hegemonic norms. Yet from my observations I witnessed cosplay as a self-contained practice that had little impact on the world beyond the convention hall, as well as cases of harassment and abuse which circulated within the community itself.

I found it especially disconcerting that cosplay scholarship had been so full of praise for the agency of cosplayers when I had observed so many cases of oppression and abuse in cosplay communities, examples which were similarly reflected on by my interview participants (Chapter 3 Part 3). This is not to suggest that Acafan scholarship hasn't produced some important insights, because Acafan cosplay scholarship has produced an incredibly insightful body of work. Rather, cosplay scholars have tended to privilege one dimension of fandom – creativity – of what is, in practice, a multifaceted cultural phenomenon. The aim of this thesis is to learn from the theoretical conceptualisations of cosplay from Acafan scholars, but also to investigate what might be learnt from cosplay communities once viewed though more traditional theoretical frameworks. In so doing, the central argument of this thesis is to understand the cosplay community in all its messiness, situated alongside fan industries, popular media, and wider social norms. I look to two main theoretical frameworks to contextualise the power dynamics within cosplay communities, and the ways in which fan industry and fan environments tailor and exploit fan creativity. These two frameworks are audience studies and postfeminist criticism.

In Chapter 4, I propose that by looking at alternative theoretical frameworks from the cultural studies tradition, not in replacement of fan studies scholarship, but in addition to, one can expect to gain a deeper understanding of the cosplay community for all its potentials to subvert social expectation, but also to reinforce and perpetuate social power relations. To develop a more nuanced documentation of the cosplay community, I draw on writers from the Frankfurt

School, and audience studies, namely: Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), Marcuse (1964), and Hall (1982). I find a lot of useful observations in the work of Adorno, writing under very different circumstances, much of his work, and much of the work of the Frankfurt school is very conscious of the ways in which political leaders and industries can use popular media as a tool to manipulate audiences.

To briefly illustrate, a fan attending comic conventions and spending money on merchandise can be read as both an ‘active’ decision made of a fans own accord, yet simultaneously being co-opted by fan industries. Adorno and Horkheimer in their paper ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’ (1944) argue that audiences are not ‘active’, but neither are they ‘passive’, rather audiences are complicit. Audiences are a fundamental structure, and the size of an audience will determine the longevity and success of an industry. “The mentality of the public, which allegedly and actually favours the system of the culture industry, is a part of the system, not an excuse for it” (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 2006, 42). Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model composes a similar argument which accounts for the variables of differing audience engagement:

> There can never be only one, single, univocal, and determined meaning or such a lexical item, but, depending on how its integration within the code has been accomplished, its possible meanings will be organised within scale which runs from dominant to subordinate.
>
> Hall 1973, 9

Hall argues that audiences and producers are multifaceted and there are lots of different ways in which texts are encoded which limit audience’s decodeding which can be in favour or against the encoder’s intentions. Many Acafan writers have developed from Hall’s research, understanding audiences to be active/powerful participants in media exchange. However, Acafan writers have failed to consider the variables not only between dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings; but also, the ways in which producers of texts limit readings by the narratives and values encoded into a given text. One might argue that audiences who do not take the dominant reading of a given text possess little to no power to change things. After all an oppositional reader is still subject the dominant rule.

I began to develop a new set of research questions in response to my findings and new theoretical frameworks, these new research questions included:

1. Can cosplay be used as a means of enforcing social norms and powers?
2. How do cosplay environment's influence/structure cosplay communication?
3. Do power structures exist within cosplay communities?

Because my argument relies on both perspectives of fan utopia and fan submission, I propose that cosplayer agency is entangled with submission, these entangled oppositions result in a contradictory network. It is this contradictory network however, which I suggest perpetuates the cosplay community and allows the growth of the community but also economic growth of the industries its related to, without changing preestablished power norms.

Networks of... Production, Popular Feminism and Misogyny, and Contradiction

As much as I will addressing a disparity between two sets of theoretical frameworks, the two sets of core questions ultimately structure an examination of the relationship between cosplayers and their source material, and by extension, an interrogation of consumers relationships with producers. Acafan scholars have suggested that fans are creative agents who work alongside producers in the creation of a text. Nichole Lamerichs in her book *Productive Fandom* (2018) provides an invaluable theorization of this consumer/producer paradigm called "networks of production". Lamerichs initially defines 'networks of production' as follows: "Media fans have a shared lingua franca and social protocols. However, they also have hierarchies that result in part from their interpretive and creative competencies" (Lamerichs 2018, 30). This earlier definition marks out a contradiction, that fans and cosplayers develop their own unique structures whilst simultaneously adhering to hierarchies interpreted from popular media. Lamerichs later redefines 'networks of production' in a way which places more focus on audience agency, whist she suggests that audiences and producers are entangled in the production of new media. In her latter definition: "texts are increasingly entwined with the participatory culture that media designers stimulate around their franchise. Nonetheless, fandom is still autonomous on online platforms, such as LiveJournal, or traditional platforms, such as fan conventions." (Lamerichs 2018, 326). Lamerichs here claims that producers and fan producers each contribute to the narratives of a given text. For Lamerichs:

> The production of fan texts occurs in specific systems where fans can provide feedback to one another and create specific fan values. Fandom consists of communities of authors, readers, and critics who appraise and advance one another's work. New norms

> and genres emerge within these networks. These pertain to gender and sexuality, as my references to cross-gender performances, asexuality, and slash have illustrated.
>
> Lamerichs 2018, 236

What is more, not only does text and fan text add to the experience of popular narratives, but fan communities consist of their own dimensions and are structured around their own unique set of practises and exchanges. As I shall shortly get onto, discussions of sex and gender are prominent among fans, and particularly explicit in the cosplay community. Whilst Lamerichs revises her initial definition for networks of production, to play down the role of industrial influence, in favour of amplifying audience creativity, I would suggest that it is important to recognise the ongoing role of the culture industry in shaping and facilitating this creativity.

Consider this thesis an exploration of networks of production in reverse. Thus, the first half of this thesis will be a close examination of cosplayers as creative agents with a particular focus on the ways in which cosplayers engage with characters from popular media to express/explore/challenge gendered (and sexual) identities. In the first part of this thesis, I will be abiding by my initial research questions, which were:

1. How do cosplayers engage with popular media, and how do their chosen character relate to their own negotiation of identity?
2. Can cosplayers use cosplay as a form of identity expression and/or experimentation?
3. Can cosplayers transcend challenge social expectations of gender and sexuality?

These research questions are integral through Chapters 1-3 and best situate the cosplay community as a productive fan practice which influences production. The above set of questions in tandem with debates from fan and cosplay scholarship reveal the ways in which cosplay is a creative tool which can be used to alter and explore oneself, but also a tool for social revolution and criticism. Being aware of these relations between consumer and producer is integral if one is to unpack the ways in which cosplayers poach from popular media. Meanwhile Chapters 4-6 will focus on my second set of research questions, which include:

1. Can cosplay be used as a means of enforcing social norms and powers?
2. How do cosplay environment's influence/structure cosplay communication?
3. Do power structures exist within cosplay communities?

It is by drawing on these set of questions in relation to theoretical frameworks form cultural studies literature on audiences and power that I will engage in a discussion between the active and submissive fan. I suggest it is by treating these two sets of questions in a more holistic sense that one recognises that fans hold power over fan industry and simultaneously abide by rules and expectations set out by these industries and dominant cultural powers in equal measure. The audience is both an active and passive participant in popular media production.

Just as there is a relationship between producer and consumer as conceptualised in Lamerichs' 'networks of production', Banet-Weiser conceptualises the term, 'networks of popular feminism and popular misogyny', which I draw on as a structural comparison to conceptualise the conflicting values present in cosplay (and fan) communities. Banet-Weiser prefaces her explanation of the networks between popular feminism and misogyny by drawing on examples such as misogynist Reddit groups and GamerGate, Banet-Weiser explains how "each is a nod in a wider network of popular feminist and popular misogyny" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 168). In short, because misogyny is the dominant cultural norm its visibility is very low and goes unnoticed, but explicitly visible misogyny exists in reaction to the feminist media which seeks to destabilise the misogynist norm. These are two opposing values which sustain the other in a seemingly endless network of opposing values and discourses.

In this thesis as I examine the ways in which cosplayers interact with cosplay and popular media to navigate their own identities (with a focus on gender expression). Drawing on postfeminist criticism, such as that by Banet-Weiser, is necessary to unpack the complex relationship between individual cosplayers, between cosplayers and producers and each group's relationship with dominant cultural norms. It is a mass of conflicting and collaborating discourses which prompts Banet-Weiser to suggest, "the fact that the globe's biggest companies now pander to feminist ideas, however distorted or market-driven they may be – that encourages and validates popular misogyny" (Banet-Wiser 2018, 169-70). Through bringing Banet-Weiser's arguments to bear on cosplay, I illustrate that whilst fan scholars read fan practises in relation to popular media, in many cases they fail to draw on wider social hierarchies and cultural values which influence both popular media production, but also the impact of subcultural communication.

Concluding her book, Banet-Weiser explains, "My argument in this book has been all about this *relationship* between popular feminism and popular misogyny, and the fact that we need to give our attention to this relationship because it has structural consequences" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 184). Unpacking the structural consequences has not been done is cosplay scholarship, much existing Acafan cosplay scholarship offers a somewhat utopian view of cosplayers as creative agents, it is only in drawing on broader fan studies literature and cultural studies literate that one begins to unpack some of their hierarchical structures that complicate cosplay communities and their performances online and at the convention hall. Thus, it is the latter half of this thesis which will draw more heavily on cultural studies and postfeminist criticism to examine the structural complexities alluded to here. What is more, by combing the networks presented in productions (by Lamerichs) and popular feminism and misogyny (here by Banet-Weiser), I endeavour to examine the ways in which these networks relate and argue that these networks entwine in networks of contradiction.

Chapters Overview

To briefly summarise, the catalyst of this research was to investigate if a cosplayer's relationship with their chosen costumed characters could be a means to explore, interrogate, and express a cosplayers identity, developing off from pre-existing cosplay scholarship. The significance of gendered performance and identity are still integral to the thesis. However, because of concerns with the overly utopian readings of cosplay, I place an equal focus on subcultural structures, fan industries, and popular media producers in response to a data set which challenged much cosplay scholarship. Subsequently I examine the ways in which cosplayers use cosplay as a means of social/personal transformation, but I add that cosplayers also use cosplay as a means of replicating social political hierarchies, as well as being subject to manipulation by fan industries and popular media industries. Towards the end of the thesis, I argue that cosplayers exist in networks of contradiction between other fans, fan industry, popular media, cultural dominant norms, which ultimately structure and sustain each group.

Chapter 1 is a literature review; the chapter opens with an introduction to fan studies and the Acafan methodology which has facilitated much cosplay scholarship. I will provide a detailed definition of cosplay, examining cosplay's origins, its different types, and the online/offline environments where cosplay is typically situated. Using the case study of the fan made character Bowsette; an original character developed by fan artists, writers, and cosplayers online inspired by the characters of Nintendo's *Super Mario* (Miyamoto, 1985-), the rest of the chapter will introduce core literature which will be relevant to the two sides of rest of the thesis. This case study is used, firstly to unpack cosplay and fan scholarship which regards fandom as creative and socially transformative. In so doing I draw out cosplay literature which has conceptualised cosplay as a medium for revolutionary gendered performance and critique. Secondly, I shall voice the small body of fan studies scholarship which has observed the emergence of hierarchies within fan communities, which takes a differing interpretation from prior cosplay and fan scholarship.

Chapter 2 is my methodology, in which I outline my position in direct relation to the Acafan as methodology. Inspired by the Acafan methodology, I took on a similar mixed autoethnographic and ethnographic approaches. Namely, I attended conventions and participated in online groups, by drawing on my own observations I provide a unique data set which is not tied up with any pre-existing loyalties with cosplay fandoms. In this chapter I also outline the formalities of arranging ethical approval for interviews, the collection of ethnographic data (online and in person) as well as outlining the benefits of these mixed methodologies (and mixed theoretical disciplines as outlined during the literature review).

Subsequently Chapter 3, is the central chapter in which I present and unpack the data collected during my interviews. Throughout Chapter 3 I place a primary focus on cosplayers (and my own) relationship with ones chosen cosplay characters. In Chapter 3 Part 1 I unpack my own cosplay participation and the processes of learning to create and perform a cosplay of Sucy Manbavarian from *Little Witch Academia* (Yoshinari, 2017), a character I picked in part as she is a character I like from a series I enjoy, but also as a means of encouraging contact with other cosplayers. The character was useful for encouraging a dialogue with others given that *Little Witch Academia* has a loyal but small community of fans, though not too large which risks a costume getting lost in the crowd. By cosplaying a character with a small but loyal fanbase, my cosplay is a novelty allowing me to stand out and better engage in public discussion. In this first part of the chapter, I reflect on my data collected highlighting the process of making and performing my character, as well as recounting key observations at conventions, and my experiences in online groups and forums.

Chapter 3 Part 2 and Part 3 will introduce the data collected from my interviews with my cosplay participants. Whilst I draw on their experiences throughout the thesis where relevant, Chapter 3 Parts 2 and 3 are entirely dedicated to conceptualising this material. In part 2, I draw on reflections by cosplayers which support much contemporary cosplay scholarship and confirm cases in which cosplay communities (online and offline) can be considered utopian spheres in which cosplayers create their own structures. The chapter supports evidence that cosplayers can transform their bodies through cosplay, and even have the potential to revolutionise social hierarchies. The material in Part 2 illustrates cosplayers engagement with popular media and one another, as a process of creating safe environments in online groups and at fan conventions. These safe environments facilitate momentary spheres in which cosplayers can experiment with gender (and sexuality), expressions which the cosplayer might not be able to express outside the safety of the convention hall. Chapter 3 Part 3, on the other hand, unpacks my interview participant's reflections of abuse, harassment, and power dynamics within the cosplay community which challenge existing cosplay scholarship. I draw on a selection of examples from my participants who draw on case studies of abuse on the convention hall floor, and how this is entangled with meritocratic notions of competition. For example, cosplayer's reflections on the cosplay masquerade illustrate the ways in which fan industries ingrain the community with meritocratic competition. Finally, I draw on my participants reflections on race-bending and black face in the cosplay community to examine how the practise of black face has become a point of contention. These two parallel data sets between Chapter 3 Parts 2 and 3 prompt a deeper study of the cosplay community and cosplay environments to better conceptualise the paradigm between cosplay fans and industries.

Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 (Parts 1 and 2), provide a deep analysis of an underdeveloped area of study in cosplay scholarship, this being the power dynamics present in fandom and cosplay communities. Chapter 4 unpacks my observations from fan conventions drawing on a broader body of traditional discussions of power in critical theory and cultural studies, namely Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), Marcuse (1964), and Hall (1982). From which, the agency of fans as argued by fan studies scholars (namely by Jenkins (1992)), I suggest there are cases in which fan industries use environments such as the fan convention to utilise, manipulate, and exploit the labours of fans. Chapter 5 Part 1, places a focus on online environments and cases of abuse and harassment between cosplayers. I open with an analysis of depictions of DC's Catwoman in media, observing how the character has changed over time to mirror the tastes of dominant culture. Consequently, I suggest that cosplay is a process of mimicry and replication and in doing so cosplayers fail to challenge dominant norms, but instead replicate them. These are arguments which are situated within a theoretical framework of academic postfeminist criticism, such as that by Gill (2007 and 2017), and Banet-Weiser (2018). Postfeminist criticisms are developed on in greater detail in Chapter 5 Part 2. In this shorter second part, I draw on parallels between the contradictions that emerge in postfeminist criticism to conceptualise the contradictions that have emerged between the first and second half of this thesis. I close Chapter 5 Part 2 by developing a definition of my phrase 'networks of contradiction', and its potential impacts on the Acafan methodology.

The postfeminist critical work drawn on in Chapter 5 are integral for Chapter 6 in which I illustrate my concept of 'networks of contradiction'. Halfway through this research, I had to adapt to huge changes in the way I work and gather data, because of the outbreak of Covid-19. As a result of social distancing policy in both North America and the UK, fan conventions moved online. In Part 1, I examine online fan conventions which took place on social media and streaming sites, I was able to collect data from numerous fan conventions based in both North America and the UK, which I suggest condensed the fan convention down to its core attributes. By continuing to draw on the frameworks of postfeminist studies from Chapter 5, I illustrate a complex networks of contradiction which sustains fans, fan industries, and popular media producers. Chapter 6 Part 1 primarily looks at the ways in which fan industries are entangled in practices of manipulating audiences yet are also subject to audience creativity. In this complex network fans have the potential to be both submissive and creative, what is more it is this entanglement which sustains each party within the paradigm.

Chapter 6 Part 2, takes the opposite position to Part 1, looking at fan agency and its entanglement with industrial manipulation. I draw on the case study of Nintendo's video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020), or *AC:NH*. I do so to illustrate the complexity of my proposed 'networks of contradiction' and begin to reflect on the core arguments this thesis has made. *AC:NH* is a culturally relevant example, the game was released shortly after the UK when into social lockdown and has maintained an active fan community. Importantly, the game was picked up by many cosplayers, who took to crafting and sharing 'virtual-cosplays' in the game. Given the game's popularity with cosplayers, the game developed its own online groups with their own rituals and hierarchies, it was even taken on by companies as a platform for advertising. The example of *AC:NH* is pivotal in illustrating that my proposed network has broader applicability outside of cosplay fandom, and can be used to conceptualise popular fandoms more broadly.

Finally, the conclusion offers a reflection on the thesis, recapping my central arguments and offering a final definition for my central concept of the networks of contradiction which structure cosplay practice, community, associated fan industries, popular media industries, and the ways in which each of these groups conform to and subvert dominant social norms.

My arguments centre on an entanglement of different positions, which refuse to value one over the other. I argue that fans and cosplayers are active and creative, but there are also cases in which fans and cosplayers are submissive and manipulated. I do not propose that either side of this argument is more prevalent than the other, rather both exist in a complex network of contradiction. I draw on a broad selection of criticism and methods to conceptualise cosplay communities as they exist in all their complexities and messiness, as opposed to the utopian depictions some writers wish they could be. The thesis is neither a celebration or critique of cosplay and fandom, it is an investigation of cosplay and fan literature, through which I propose alternative critical and theoretical approaches.

Chapter 1: Literature Review, Fans, Cosplay, and Hierarchies

To begin with, there are two definitions that need to be established, these terms are: Cosplay, and Cosplayer. At the centre of this thesis, it is vital that a definition of cosplay is set out. The term cosplay is an amalgamation of the words costume and play. Joel Gn defines cosplay as "abbreviated from the term 'costume play', is a performance art in which the participant masquerades as a character from a selected film, television series, or comic book" (Gn 2011, 583). In Gn's definition, cosplay is defined by an engagement with popular media, and fictional characters, a definition which would also conform with the work of McCormick (1999), Lamerichs (2018), and Winge (2019). Where 'cosplay' is a medium of craft and performance, it is also necessary to establish that the term 'Cosplayer' as an individual who practises cosplay, and to be a cosplayer is to incorporate the hobby as part of one's cultural identity.

I open this literature review by introducing the emergence of cosplay scholarship which comes out of fan studies and the Acafan tradition (which is in and of itself an extension of audience studies). I introduce the complex field of cosplay scholarship and its entanglement with fan scholarship and bring to the forefront debates concerning producer and consumer agency, as well as on topics of gender and identity in cosplay scholarship. Once I outline key theoretical frameworks, I provide a history of cosplay (and its study) to develop my own working definition of cosplay and cosplayer. Having outlined key theoretical terms, I introduce the central literature to this thesis concerning debates of identity and gendered expression in cosplay scholarship. Gendered expression in cosplay scholarship typically concerns different types of costumed play, including crossplay and gender-bend cosplay, which previous cosplay scholars have suggested are types of cosplays which have emancipated cosplayers from restrictive social expectations. The latter half of this literature review will draw on the case study of Bowsette (fan made character combing Princess Peach and Bowser from the *Super Mario* franchise (Miyamoto, 1985-)) to elucidate key debates in contemporary cosplay and fan scholarship addressing the power dynamics between producer and consumer.

Fans, Fan Studies, and the Acafan Methodology

Cosplay communities exist within the broader community of popular fandom. In a founding definition of fandom, John Fiske provides the following definition:

> [Fandom] selects from the repertoire of mass-produced and mass-distributed entertainment […] and takes them into the culture of a self-selected fraction of the people. They are then reworked into an intensely pleasurable, intensely signifying popular culture that is both similar to, yet significantly different from, the culture of more 'normal' popular audiences.
>
> Fiske 1992, 30

Fiske suggests that popular culture depends upon the reworking of established media by fans, prompting questions of authorship over given texts. Is a fan made object the creative property of the consumer, or the property of the producers, and to what extent popular media texts belong in a dialogue between producer and consumer? The paradigm that exists between consumer and producer is an all-too-common debate among audience and cultural studies scholars, explored by Fiske ([1989] 2004), but also in the works of Roland Barthes (1977) and Dick Hebdige (1979), or writers within the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies such as Stuart Hall (1980). Discussions of authorship are at the foundations of fan scholarship and many fan scholars have sought to conceptualise the power dynamics between producers and consumers.

In 1980, Alvin Toffler wrote that "we see a progressive blurring of the line that separates producer from consumer. We see the rising significance of the prosumer" (Toffler 1980, 267). Toffler's understanding of the 'modern' consumer predates the poaching argued by Jenkins, and its entanglement with consumer loyalty as Lancaster and Mikotowicz, and Sandvoss indicate. In Seymour, Chauvel and Lamerichs' work (2014) they argue that the typical fan environment is "a vibrant, socially rewarding space where groups of people come together to share interests, ideas, and occasionally work to change the world" (Seymour et al. 2014, vii). For example, the act of cosplay at fan conventions allows cosplayers to play as their chosen characters, to share crafting techniques, and offers affinity spaces for fans.

Debates surrounding these paradigms have become a cornerstone in fan studies today. This might be attributed to Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* (1992), a hugely influential book, laying down the foundations for contemporary fan studies. In *Textual Poachers,* Jenkins defines the 'fan' by drawing upon the origins of the word, commenting how "'fan' is an abbreviated form of the word 'fanatic', which has its roots in the Latin word 'fanaticus'. Simply meant 'of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee' but it quickly assumed negative connotations" (Jenkins [1992] 2013, 12). He reflects upon representations of fans in popular media, where they are often represented as extremely obsessive over niche media texts, submissive to popular media producers, and incapable of social interaction. These common perceptions have been reiterated in the more recent work of the aforementioned Seymour et al. open with an acknowledgment that "the terms 'fan' and 'fandom' bring with them a stereotypical idea of a person, generally a young man, socially stunted and locked in his room with a laptop or game console, absorbed in the latest happenings of a world which exists outside of reality" (Seymour et al. 2014, vii). Their work then attempts to counter these stereotypes by celebrating fan creativity, much as Jenkins had done in *Textual Poachers*.

In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins dispels these misconceptions of fans, arguing that fans and consumers are much more critical and reflective than early audience studies and cultural stereotypes would have one believe. Jenkins address how "fans recognize that their relationship to the text remains a tentative one, that their pleasures often exist on the margins of the original text and in the face of the producer's own efforts to regulate its meanings" (Jenkins 2013, 24). In contemporary fan scholarship Academic Fans (or Acafans) continue to heavily draw on the producer consumer binary. It is Jenkins' position as both fan and academic which defines the Acfan as methodology, being a form of autoethnographic self-study, drawing on one's own position as fan. I shall explore these ideas in greater detail in my methodology (Chapter 2) and propose a critique of this position later in Chapter 4. In Matt Hill's earlier 2002 work *Fan Cultures*, Hills begins to challenge this perception of fans, arguing that "fan-consumers are no longer viewed as eccentric irritants, but rather as loyal consumers to be created, where possible, or otherwise to be courted through scheduling practises" (Hills 2002, 36). What can be gathered here is that there is a difference in reception between fans in the eyes of the average consumer and fans in the eyes of producers.

The arguments associated with Jenkins and Hills came out of the tradition of audience scholarship, such as the work of Hall's Encoding/Decoding model (1973) which is a highly influential paper which established the diversity of audience reception, and thus the degree of power audiences have over media production (and yet in turn, producers encode texts to tailor audience decoding – which will be drawn on further in Chapter 4). In Barthes 'The Death of the Author' (1977), he proposes the similar notion that all texts are merely a hybrid of different myths, which once rearranged, will be independently interpreted differently by audience members to varying degrees of success, which may or may not correlate with an authors intended meaning (Barthes 1977, 146). Cornel Sandvoss' chapter 'The Death of the Reader' (2007) merges the work of Barthes with the fan scholarship of Jenkins to argue that "pleasures often exist on the margins of the original text and in the face of the producer's own efforts to regulate its meanings" (Sandvoss 2007, 28). Sandvoss continues, "the reader appears to be no-better indicator of the aesthetic value of texts, since exceptional readings would thus appear based upon forms of audience activity quite independent of texts themselves" (Sandvoss 2007, 28). The term 'audience activity' encapsulates the ways in which audiences interact with a text, which is perhaps most visible when audiences create their own fan texts based on authored work. For example, a fan artist drawing an image of Darth Vader from *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977), or a fan writing fan fiction of *Sherlock* (Gattis and Moffat, 2010-17), are creative endeavours through which audiences adapt and change texts, or as Jenkins put it, fans poach from texts for their own unique creative pursuits.

'Textual Poachers' is a concept popularised by Jenkins, who drew on de Certeau's term: 'poaching'. Jenkins writes, "de Certeau's term 'poaching', forcefully reminds us of the potentially conflicting interests of producers and consumers, writers and readers" (Jenkins 2013, 32). Jenkins cites de Certeau's explanation that, "readers are travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves" (de Certeau 1988, 174). Jenkins understands this analogy as characterizing, "the relationship between readers and writers as an ongoing struggle for possession of the text and for control over its meanings" (Jenkins 2013, 24). Jenkins goes into greater detail, reflecting on this idea of fans as nomadic, to suggest "unlike the readers de Certeau describes, fans get to keep what they produce from the materials they 'poach' from mass culture, and these materials sometimes become a limited source of economic profit for them as well" (Jenkins 2013, 49). Both Jenkins and de Certeau's use of the term 'poaching' is used positively, to emphasise fan's active role in cultural production. Whilst de Certeau implies that one's ownership of a text is restrictive and still abides by expectations/restrictions imposed by the producers, Jenkins takes a slightly different position arguing that fans take control/ownership of a text through their creative play.

Jenkins uses the term 'poaching' to place an emphasis on the creative agency of fans, and thus marks out fan studies as an important emerging field. The objects that fans create generate new stories and meanings in addition to the original source material, these are objects which are shared and distributed between fans who generate congregations of fans each poaching for a specific, or a selection of texts to construct their own additional materials (whether it be art, film, literature, or costume). In turn these fan communities generate narratives both distinct from and parallel to their source material of inspiration. Kurt Lancaster observes in his 1999 book *Warlocks and Warpdrive* just how some fans "want to be immersed in fantastic environments, in alternative universes and realities, such as the Star Tours ride at Disneyland" (Lancaster 1999, 75). I'd like to draw attention here to the specifics of "some people”. A phrase which might be easily overlooked is in fact very telling of the variety of audience engagement and reception. The values of each individual fan/consumer is an important consideration, as some fans are indeed nomads who move between texts, whilst there are also those who are loyal to a text or genre and “want to be immersed in fantastic environments”.

In the later 2001 book by Lancaster and Mikotowicz, it is evaluated that the fan act of poaching not only extends a texts narratives but is actively encouraged by a texts producers. They explain how for “the performance of *Star Wars* does not begin and end in the movie house. […] The corporate advertising for toys in a store, and the purchase of an action figure by a fan who opens up the package and plays with it all become a part of the performance of *Star Wars*” (Lancaster and Mikotowicz 2001, 4). The longevity of a text/franchise is determined by its long-lasting impact upon audiences, namely, is the fan willing to engage with additional material such as toys after the viewing of a film? By selling toys, producers might be said to be actively encouraging an active audience. In this example the producer holds financial control and in return permits audiences’ creative agency.

It is this facilitation of play on the part of media producers which encourages brand loyalty. Sandvoss defines fandom as “the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative in the form of books, television shows, films or music” (Sandvoss 2005, 8). What is captured in this definition is a sense of loyalty, a loyalty which can be interpreted in two ways: firstly, fan loyalty to a brand sees fans regularly consume and contribute to a popular franchise. Secondly, one must also consider fans loyalties with one another, between other fans within their community through acts of, sharing materials, discussing ideas, or project collaborations. Importantly both interpretations of Sandvoss’ quotation hold equal power in maintaining the loyalty of these fan bases.

As I mentioned in my introduction, Nichole Lamerichs’ book *Productive Fandom* (2018) provides an invaluable theorization of this consumer/producer paradigm called “networks of production”. Lamerichs initially defines ‘networks of production’ as follows: “Media fans have a shared lingua franca and social protocols. However, they also have hierarchies that result in part from their interpretive and creative competencies” (Lamerichs 2018, 30). Lamerichs later redefines ‘networks of production’ placing much less of a focus on hierarchies. Lamerichs concludes “texts are increasingly entwined with the participatory culture that media designers stimulate around their franchise. Nonetheless, fandom is still autonomous on online platforms, such as LiveJournal, or traditional platforms, such as fan conventions.” (Lamerichs 2018, 326). Lamerichs here provides a much more nuanced representation of fans compared to many other fan scholars, acknowledging that although producers might define a given text originally, fans have autonomous and creative production outside of industry control, which in turn feeds back into methods of production just as Hall (1973) suggested in his encoding/decoding model.

For Lamerichs, "The production of fan texts occurs in specific systems where fans can provide feedback to one another and create specific fan values" (Lamerichs 2018, 236). Not only do texts and fan texts add to the experience of a narrative, but fan communities consist of their own dimensions and structured around unique set of practices and exchanges. Whilst Lamerichs revises her initial definition for networks of production, I consider both to be of equal importance, both placing an emphasis on the network between producer and consumer, one which is built up by consumers and producers as equally creative, each party maintaining the other, and prolonging the narrative experiences of a given text.

Defining Cosplay, and Observing its Origin(s)

Having begun to unpack the ways in which fan communities function as active consumers according to key literature from fan studies, the next steps are to unpack existing debates about cosplay, by drawing on a body of cosplay scholarship (which is a growing subsection of fan studies and the Acafan methodology).

The task of reading the origins and growth of cosplay is an odd exercise given that each cosplay scholar has produced different and conflicting documentations of the form. One of the more comprehensive and well-articulated histories is by Lamerichs in *Productive Fandom*. In her chapter on cosplay, she addresses the fan convention's resonance with the medieval carnival, or the later Victorian masquerade. She argues that "Historically, the fan tradition of dressing up is extensive and goes back to historical re-enactments and Renaissance Fairs where earlier time periods are a source of inspiration. The dress-up of popular media characters however, dates back to American science-fiction conventions in the 1960s and 1970s" (Lamerichs 2018, 200). However, Lamerichs points out that the term 'cosplaying' itself is of Japanese origin, "coined in the 1980s by the game designer Takahashi Nobuyuki when he encountered the costuming practises of American fans on a visit to the United States" (Lamerichs 2018, 201). Despite Lamerichs' comprehensive documentation, there are benefits to drawing on a wider pool of writers. For example, Lundstörm and Olin-Scheller (2014) cite Bruno (2002) and Winge (2006) who argue that the term cosplay was coined in the 1980s and was "a widespread phenomenon among anime and manga fans in both Japan and the West"

(Lundstorm and Olin-Schuller 2014, 150). In a similar vein, Bainbridge and Norris write that cosplay "is claimed to have originated with a parodic performance of a manga or anime character by Mari Kotani in Japan in 1978" (Bainbridge and Norris 2013, 3). In each of these histories, whilst featuring similar dates to that of Lamerichs, cosplay is localised not to North America but distinctly originating from Japanese Anime and Manga fans.

Rahman, Wing-Sun and Cheung (2012) go into greater detail on cosplays origins developing out from the Anime community. Rahman et al. observe that cosplay "began at the doujinshi (amateurish magazines or manga) marketplaces (e.g. Comic Market or Comitek) in the 1970s. Many exhibitionists used cosplay as a tool to promote their doujinshi – by role-playing the auspicious characters from the magazine with real-life performers" (Rahman et al. 2012, 318). Rahman et al. thus establishes a history in line with Bainbridge and Norris's observations on cosplays origins. However, as Lamerichs, and Lundstörm and OIin-Scheller note, the widespread practice of cosplay between "both Japan and the West" gives greater substance to the argument that there is a distinct Western influence in the consolidation of the form. Whilst the term might be of Japanese origin, the practise of cosplay originates in the West, as argued by Ashcroft and Plunkett (2014) and Orsini (2015), though not in the 1960s/70s as Lamerichs writes. Rather, "cosplay dates back to 1939, when two science-fiction fans unintentionally invented it" (Orsini 2015, 8). According to Orsini, cosplay originated at the first World Science Fiction Convention in New York when, "Forest J. Ackerman and Myrtle R. Jones […] were dressed in styles from the twenty-fifth century: Ackerman as a space explorer, Jones in a gown inspired by the 1936 film *Things To Come*" (Orsini 2015, 8). Ashcroft and Plunkett go further back, pinpointing "March 1910 [when] an unnamed woman in Tacoma, Washington, took first prize at a masquerade ball" (Ashcroft and Plunkett 2014, 6). Ashhcroft and Plunkett highlight that "the costume was so unusual because it was based not on a figure from myth or literature, but one from a newspaper comic strip" (Ashcroft and Plunkett 2014, 6). The character in question was A.D. Condo's *Mr Skylark from Mars* created in 1907. In line with this event, they claim that cosplay goes back as early as 1908 with Mr. Skylark costumes appearing across America.

Of course, as Lamerichs noted, costumed performance has a much longer history, to the act of fancy dress in the carnival or the masquerade. The Victorian masquerade and fancy-dress have been documented previously by Roberts (1980), Castle (1986) and Mitchell (2016), whilst these later theorists do not write on cosplay, they do draw upon similar themes of dress and play as entangled with identity. Whilst many cosplay scholars have drawn on re-enactments as points of comparison, it is important to recognise that cosplay differs to the fancy dress of the carnival/masquerade. Importantly, cosplay is directly linked with the performance of fictional characters from popular media, most notably form Fantasy or Science-Fiction fiction genres, whereas fancy-dress in re-enactment is associated with historical figures, and myths of particular social archetypes. In costume play, the notion of 'play' is vital, highlighting that in cosplay, in donning the costume of a character, the cosplayer is expected to also play as the character, to perform their mannerisms and embody their behaviour. Play and embodied performance is emphasised by Matthew Hale who comments:

> The term [cosplay] describes a performative action in which one dons a costume and/or accessories and manipulates his or her posture, gesture, and language in order to generate meaningful correspondences and contrasts between a given body and a set of texts from which it is modelled and made to relate.
>
> Hale 2014, 8

Hale draws attention to cosplay as more than just the act of wearing a costume (as is the case with fancy-dress), instead cosplayers manipulate their own bodies, their body language, and voice to engage with other cosplayers as the characters they are conveying. There is thus a shared experience and knowledge of these existing characters, which are meaningful to those involved in the exchange.

Professional cosplayer and head writer of *The Cosplay Journal*, Holly Rose Swinyard argues, "the play part of cosplay is as much of a creative umbrella as the costume part" going onto say that "cosplayers who do events with charity groups or work for performance/party companies have to stay in character for a good few hours […] besides, breaking character could ruin a special moment for someone" (Swinyard 2018, 15). Community and performance are key under Swinyard's understanding of cosplay as a creative medium, and the play in cosplay emerges during the interactions between cosplayers, or cosplayer and spectator. In Swinyard's example of children's parties, cosplayers have a duty to stay in character as to not risk breaking the illusion for the child. A cosplayer's performance is to mimic the cosplayer's chosen character, it differs from fancy dress which does not expect people to perform (only to appear as someone/thing else). Performance between cosplayers is detailed by Lundström and Olin-Scheller, who with reference to Mackey (2007), note that "when 'playing a text' we not only make-believe, but we also perform this make-believing. Consequentially, performing as activity always involves some kind of bodily immersion" (Lundström and Olin-Scheller 2014, 155). Cosplayers immerse themselves into their chosen characters, whether they be accurate representations of their chosen text, or adaptations to fit within their adapted designs, their performances must be convincing.

Despite the conflicting narratives which compile cosplays origins and history, what remains prevalent throughout each documentation on the origins of cosplay is the location of the fan convention (or "con" for short) as a pivotal space which facilitates cosplay performance. The fan convention is an organised event, celebrating popular culture, usually animation, video games, and comics. Some conventions will focus on a specific genre or franchise, but every fan convention encompasses a variety of events organised by both fans and fan industries.

Fan conventions are spaces in which fans can come together to discuss their interests, meet cast and production crew from popular media, and buy merchandise. Winge defines the fan convention effectively as "'a temporary and ephemeral fan space created within a physical venue (hotel, arena, or convention centre) to facilitate the gathering of fans around a specific theme, activity, and/or genre" (Winge 2019, 10). These conventions can be quite broad: from San-Diego International Comic Con. which encompasses a whole host of different texts, from popular film, TV, animation, video games, and comics; to more specific conventions, devoted to a particular medium such as 'Insomnia' (UK based video game convention), genre such as 'Animangapop' (UK based Anime convention), or a specific text such as 'Vworp' (UK based Doctor Who convention). The environment of the fan convention facilities spaces in which cosplayers can perform for one another, enter competitions, share crafting ideas, or buy merchandise form other cosplayers.

In Jenkins' analysis of fan communities, Jenkins places an emphasis on the social aspects of the convention site. "For some fans, the con provides their initial exposure to fan culture and a point of entry into its social order. For others, the con renews contact with old friends known only through fandom" (Jenkins [1992] 2013, 254). In Jenkin's account, the convention is more than just about the products and media its participants are there to celebrate, instead it is about community, shared interests, and building social connections. As Plante, Reysen, Roberts and Gerbasi highlight in their paper on furry fandoms, gatherings at convention spaces "emphasize the importance of social interaction for fans who interact with one another in socially dynamic fan communities, or 'fandoms,' via real-world events (e.g., local gatherings and conventions) …" (Plante et al. 2014, 49). The social aspects of the convention site are not only integral to popular fans, but within the broader community of 'popular fandom' exist subgroups including the cosplayer, or the gamer, and the artist.

Regardless of whether cosplay originated in Japan or America, both cosplay communities remain tied with the convention space. McCormick documents that "the increasingly sophisticated and coded fantasy of transformative outfitting has cross-pollinated across cultures, traditions, and media. It is still most closely associated with Japan, which has the largest, moist visible, and least stigmatized cosplay subculture" (McCormick 1999, 6). In the later work of Winge, she highlights how Japanese popular culture has fed into cosplay practices and influenced Western consumption habits arguing that "the most important contribution to Cosplay is Japanese anime (animation) and manga (comics), where artists create fantastically gorgeous characters, exotic and seductive environments, and innovative systems" (Winge 2019, 3). Winge suggests that there is an engagement which co-exists between the cosplayer and the cosplayers chosen text. In addition to Winge's research, Peirson-Smith puts forward the idea:

> [The] Cosplay trend appears to be a further manifestation of the evolving entertainment landscape in Southeast Asia cities where Cosplayers are expressing themselves as active consumers of manga and anime in the leisure economics of China, Japan, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia.
>
> Peirson-Smith 2013, 82

The growth of anime and manga in North America and more recently in the UK has been given greater visibility to the growth of global fandoms alongside the development of new technologies, especially through online groups and forums. In the earlier work of Newitz (1994) and Luiz Pérez-González (2009) they look at how English dubs of Japanese anime were being created and distributed among fans, long before companies caught onto the market for producing English language versions of anime and manga. The shifting landscapes of global communication have made the processes of sharing audio-visual media between countries even easier, especially with the rise of online forums, and social media groups, which brings us around to the third wave of cosplay.

Over the course of the last twenty years, in addition to the important landscape of the fan convention, cosplay specific groups have emerged online, resulting in social media sites and groups having become important environments for the cosplay community. Plante et al. draw on the works of Bacon-Smith (1992); Jenkins (2006); Reysen & Lloyd (2012) highlighting that each of these writers

> emphasize the importance of social interaction for fans who interact with one another in socially dynamic fan communities, or 'fandoms,' via real-world events (e.g., local gatherings and conventions), mailing lists, and more recently online forums and discussion groups.
>
> Plante et al. 2014, 49

The ease and accessibility of web 2.0 and the rise of social media platforms has enabled people to connect regardless of their location within the world. Access to social sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or YouTube; as well as cosplay specific forums including the RPF (the Replica Prop Forum), Cure: WordCosplay, or Cosplay.com, permits cosplayers to discuss their favourite shows and characters throughout the year, as well as sharing pictures or videos of them performing as their chosen characters.

Cosplay has developed diverse online networks and communities, enabling cosplay to take place beyond the convention site and become part of people's every-day routines. These online spaces permit fan communities to share and perform their cosplays making cosplay more accessible outside of the convention space. In Henry Jenkins' book *Convergence Culture* (2006), he writes: "the web represents a site of exploration and innovation, where amateurs test the waters, developing new practises, themes, and generating materials that they may well attract cult followings on their own terms" (Jenkins 2006, 148). Online spaces, such as Cure: WorldCosplay or the RPF allow cosplayers to receive feedback on their work, to consult other members of the community and share craft techniques (such as sewing, or make-up). Online environments provide a space in which cosplayers can share stories, or even talking about other interests, developing their own in-jokes and unique narratives.

The communities that develop in online contexts have been discussed by many fan studies academics as affinity spaces. Gee (2004) defines an 'affinity space' as "a place or set of places where people can affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals", specifying that this does not apply to "shared race, class, subculture, ethnicity, or gender" (Gee 2004, 67). Gee looks at the popularity of the real-time strategy game *Rise of Nations* (Reynolds, 2003) and how websites have created affinity spaces for the game's fans. "Websites and publications devoted to RoN create a social space in which people can, to any decree they wish, small or large, affiliate with others to share knowledge and gain knowledge that is distributed and dispersed across many different people" (Gee 2004, 67). Similar observations of shared materials and community in online spaces are drawn out in the Jenkins' study, co-written with Clinton, Purushotma, Robinson and Weigel (2007). Jenkins et al. argue that online affinity spaces are “informal learning communities [which] can evolve to respond to short-term needs and temporary interests” (Jenkins et al. 2007, 25). In the cosplay community, some of these online affinity spaces include the Facebook groups: ‘UK Cosplay Community’ (1,641 members), ‘Cosplay Help and Advice’ (22,844 members), ‘The Art of Cosplay - Cosplay Photo Group’ (605,431 members) [At time of writing 02/01/2019]. For this research I have engaged with the social media platform Reddit as a subscriber to: r/crossplay (7.5k subscribers), r/cosplayers (15.2k subscribers), r/Cosplay (224k subscribers) [At time of writing 02/01/2019]. Cosplayers may also congregate on chat sites such as Discord which features cosplay groups: ‘Cosplayers United’ (general cosplay chat room), ‘Cup o’ Trap’ (crossplay chat room), and ‘Crossplay Guys and Gals’ (crossplay chat room). These safe affinity spaces are important, perhaps most notably for groups ‘Cup o’Trap’ and ‘Crossplay Guys and Gals’. Crossplay cosplay is the act of a cosplayer performing as a character whose gender is not their own as accurately as possible. Related to crossplay, the term ‘trap’ is colloquial homophobic expression referring to a man who dresses as a woman, the term is suggestive that a ‘trap’ crossplayer is trying to seduce heterosexual men. However, the term, ‘trap’, has subsequently been adopted by crossplay cosplayers and some members of the Trans* community as a point of pride as successfully ‘passing’. Given the gendered (and sexual) expressions of these cosplayers, these online safe spaces are removed from heterosexual and homophobic dominant powers, and thus removed from people who might abuse or harass these cosplayers. The high member ship figures of these groups suggests that whilst the fan convention is an integral space for the cosplayer online spaces are just as integral for communication and allow the hobby to feed into a cosplayer’s everyday life.

The online affinity spaces are easily accessible and offer safe spaces which permit fans to engage with materials that meet their own unique demands. Providing an outlet that the fan might not be able to access or participate in during their ‘real’ day-to-day life. As fans are “unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise, the fans assert their own right to form interpretations” (Jenkins 2013, 18). Fans gain authoritative positions by displaying a mastery over text through making personalised art, films, fiction, and cosplay, which can lead to opening communication with other fans (outside of the regulation of production companies). The notion that fans communities are centred around reworkings of popular media to escape the expectations of a dominant culture, is reflected upon by Dennis (2010). In his paper, Dennis argues that fan spaces offer audiences the opportunity to communicate and express themselves in ways that dominant society might not permit, such as through slash art/fiction (a process of reimagining heterosexual characters in homosexual relationships). Dennis looks especially at

LGBT adolescents' engagement with same sex relationships in fan art, particularly among participants who can't be open about their sexuality at home/at school. Dennis observed, "children and adolescents usually inhabit a culture blind to the possibility of same-sex desire" (Dennis 2010, 6). Fans (and cosplayers) engage with their texts of interest on a regular basis, the groups and communities' fans engage with seep into people's everyday lives, via online spaces and can aid in a person's development and negotiation with one's own identity.

From unpacking fan studies literature, this shows us that fan and cosplay practice are (at least in part) defined by their entangled between offline and online environments, and from the above history, one can see a definition of cosplay forming. However, where I define cosplay as the act of costumed performance of characters from popular media. Cosplay has been used as an umbrella term to describe lots of forms of costumed play at convention spaces. Whilst I follow Gn's definition of cosplay as linked to characters from popular media, there are different genres of cosplay which need to be acknowledged.

The Diversity of Cosplay Subcultures

In this section I reflect on the different cosplay genres and the unique subcultures that from around them. Whilst I acknowledge the differing types of cosplay, in this reflection I shall be marking out why they are exempt from the precision of my working definition for cosplay in this thesis. The multiple subcultures that fall under the cosplay umbrella each prove to be integral aspects of the fan convention experience. One such notable community is the 'furry' community. A 'furry' is someone who participates in the social practise of dressing and performing as anthropomorphic animal avatars, usually a wolf, fox, or cat. Although less common, Avians and Scalies are adjacent groups (Avians dressing and performing as anthropomorphic birds, and Scalies dressing and performing as anthropomorphic fish, reptiles, or dragons). Furries' interests typically revolve around:

> artwork of bipedal animals, anthropomorphic animal avatars in online communities, and composition of stories featuring anthropomorphic characters […] zoomorphism is manifested by assuming the identity of one or more animal species and/or wearing fabric animal ears and tails or elaborate mascot-like costumes.
>
> Roberts et al. 2015, 534

The formation of original characters is integral to the furry community and complicates the field of cosplay which primarily concerns the replication of character. Original anthropomorphic avatars are integral to defining the experiences of the furry community. Thus, a costumed performance of the anthropomorphic rabbit Judy Hopps from *Zootopia* (Howard and Moore, 2016) would be a cosplay experience, but a costumed performance of original animal avatar is one of a furry experience.

Similarly adjoined to the cosplay community is animegao kigurumi which “sees individuals turning themselves into image-like figures” (Jomain 2015, 6). A community largely comprised by male individuals, the members of this community “wear latex masks reproducing the doll-like features of the fictional characters they embody, but most interesting, they also wear skin-like spandex outfits, almost invisible to the eye, which aims at erasing all the characteristic features of human skin” (Jomain 2015, 6), cancelling out any pores and blemishes, to mimic the animated bodies of anime women. Anime kigurumi costumes can be replications of anime and manga characters. However, similarly to furry community, animegao kigurumi is characterised by the creation of original avatars which evoke the anime style. Members of the animegao kigurumi community tend to circulate the same spaces as cosplayers, given shared interests over popular anime and manga. In the UK at least, the animegao kigurumi is a very minor subsection of the cosplay community, its most prominent scene is in Japan, however events such as at Hyper Japan a UK based convention celebrating Japanese culture and media are opening the subculture to more UK based audiences.

Both the furry community and the animegao kigurumi community are distinguished from cosplayers given their performance of original characters as opposed to existing mediated characters. In the aforementioned work by Orsini, they refer to the performance of original avatars as ‘Creative Cosplay’. Sometimes it is the case that the reason “you can’t identify a cosplay is simply because it is not based on an actual character. These original costumes can be about an aesthetic or style of dress that has barely any relation to everyday clothing worn around the world” (Orsini 2015, 228). Such cosplay subsections include: DnD (a practise of adapting ones Dungeons and Dragons character into a costume); Steampunks (“imagines a world of technology that far surpasses that of today but uses nothing more than Victorian-era source material” (Orsin 2015, 228) evoking a similar aesthetic to *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Moore and O’Neill, 1999-)); Cyberpunk (90’s punk ascetic crossed with science-fiction) evoking similar aesthetics to *2000AD* (1977-); Original heroes and villains; and Original Characters (typically characterised with iconography attributed to popular genres).

Given the ongoing craft of an original character, I have chosen to separate these 'creative cosplays' from this research, in favour of examining cosplayers relationships with existing characters from popular media to place focus on unpacking the relationship between consumer and producer as outlined in my introduction. What is more, D&D cosplay, furry cosplay, or animegao kigurmi, are each associated with their own unique communities, just as costumed performers who replicate existing characters develop their own communities, defined by replication and mimicking onscreen characters looks and behaviour. As such I have concluded that discussing 'creative cosplay' in any greater detail would be counterproductive to the intentions of this project, aiming to examine the relationship between producer and consumer, and a character's influence on a cosplayers own identity. By examining replication in cosplay, I analyse questions of fan ownership/agency.

Like Swinyard, Adam Savage is a prominent member of the cosplay community (and North American TV personality and special effects artist). Savage has made a reputation of posting cosplay videos for his online channel *TESTED* and is a frequent attendee of San Diego International Comic-Con. Savage highlights that the cosplayer is entangled with their chosen characters. In his talk *My Love Letter to Cosplay* (Savage 2016) Savage states:

> This isn't a performer-audience relationship; this is cosplay. We are, all of us on that floor, injecting ourselves into a narrative that meant something to us. And we're making it our own. We're connecting with something important inside of us. And the costumes are how we reveal ourselves to each other.
>
> Savage, 2016

Savage's talk is often shared amongst cosplay groups and forums and provides an apt definition of cosplay. Firstly, Savage highlights the communal aspect of cosplay, cosplay depends on shared knowledge of texts and the open performance and engagement with these texts (of pop culture and popular media franchises – typically Anglophone/Japanese pop culture). Secondly, cosplayers figuratively take possession of a text, by making it their own, a process that hints at notions of textual poaching: a complex producer/consumer dynamic in which a fans use of a text, such as cosplaying a character from popular media, is an unauthorised poaching of a text that does not belong to the cosplayer. Finally, Savage's statement, that "the costumes are how we reveal ourselves to each other", explicitly refers to cosplayer's interactions with cosplay and character to navigate and express something about one's own identity.

For the purposes of this thesis, I define cosplay as the process of dressing and performing as characters from popular film, TV and gaming; whilst I recognise that cosplay is an umbrella term which facilitates multiple different forms of costumed play, by coming to a more specific definition, this serves the central thesis of this study to unpack the relationships between cosplayers and media industries, and how cosplayers use their chosen characters to express themselves. In the next sections I will look at fan agency, and cosplayers abilities to ‘play’ with texts by examining the complex relationship between fans and producers.

Cosplay Studies and its ties with Hand Craft, and Fashion Studies

Some cosplay scholars have drawn on the DIY and handcraft literature. Handcraft literature concerns itself primarily with the practise of craft and the communities that form around them (much like cosplay scholarship does of cosplay as practise and community). For example, Kirkpatrick (2015), argues that cosplay is not an exclusive subculture, rather there is overlap with popular media fandoms, role-play communities, and different crafting subcultures (specific to different crafts which may encompass different aspects of a costume) (Kirkpatrick, 2015). Or, Lamerichs (2018) notably reflects on her personal experience of handcraft and the construction of cosplay, which she conceptualises by drawing on writers including Gauntlett (2011) and Okabe (2012). Similarly, Crawford and Hancock (2019) have a chapter on craft within the cosplay community addressing the ways in which cosplay subculture exists across “networks of interconnected actors, practices, and knowledges” (Crawford and Hancock 2019, 163), drawing on the literature of Gauntlett (2018), and Jenkins (2006) discussing technology and craft as part of a wider convergent culture (Crawford and Hancock 2019, 180).

Both Lamerichs and, Crawford and Hancock draw on Gauntlett’s *Making is Connecting* ([2011] 2018), they draw on Gauntlett’s analysis of the communities which form around different hand crafts and hand crafts relationship with popular media. It is the subcultures which define themselves by handcraft which frequently overlap with the crafting practises present in both the cosplay community but also cosplay as a medium constituting of the replication of a character’s clothing from popular media. Gauntlett identifies craft as a process of three different forms of connecting and connected, Gauntlett argues that;

(1) “making is connecting because you have to connect things together (materials, ideas, or both) to make something new” (Gauntlett 2018, 10). Similar observations have been made by Chery Brigid (2016), in their book *Cult Media, Fandom and Textiles*, Brigid examines the ways in which crafts such as knitting have permit fans to have a tactile relationship with

popular media texts. “Handicrafters do not stop at reproducing knitted or crocketed items from films and TV series. Fan handicrafters are avid transformers of the text, using knitted and crocheted textiles as a medium with which they produce fan art.” (Brigid 2016, 5) these notions of handicrafters as “avid transformers” harks back to the notion of fans as poachers as Jenkins (1992) argues. In cosplay studies, Mountfort et al. identify parallel connections in the cosplay community, which were revealed during their participant interviews. Mountfort et al. found that their “interviewees claimed that the main benefits of their creative hobby comprised not only of creative skills required in assuming the ‘mask’, or in role playing their characters and creating a ‘front’ before observers” (Mountfort et al. 2019, 197) if a cosplayer crafts their costume they must engage with different types of “creative skills” in order to achieve the look of their costume, this could be learning how to tailor and sew Merida’s dress from *Brave* (Andrews and Chapman, 2012), or foam moulding to replicate Boba Fett’s armour from *Star Wars: Empire Strikes Back* (Kershner, 1980).

Other cosplay scholars who have similarly identified the importance of making as the physical process of combining materials, as Gauntlett has, would include writers such as Aljanahi and Alsheikh (2021), who suggest that cosplayers engage with “a text including numerous semiotics (visual, sound, textual, etc.) that cosplayers interpret and by remixing multiple modes of meaning making (e.g. clothing, performance, crafting). (Alianahi and Alsheikh 2021, 210). Notions of performance and craft have similarly been reflected on by Montfort et al. Even if a cosplayer did not construct the costume, the cosplayer still takes an active role in the construction and craft of their performance, this refers to the cosplayer “role playing their characters and creating a ‘front’ before observers” (Mountfort et al. 2019, 197). Performance as craft is reflected upon by Lamerichs, who surrounded herself with images and memorabilia of Effie Trinket images from *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012) to help her get to know the character (Lamerichs 2014, 123). These cases of performance as craft lead onto Gauntlett’s second notion of;

(2) “Making is connecting because acts of creativity usually involve at some point, a social dimension and connect us with one another” (Gauntlett 2018, 10). In Cosplay subcultures, social interaction often emerges through performance of character and through play on the convention hall floor. Writing on popular fan crafts, Cherry Brigid points out with reference to Lamerichs, a distinct difference between crafting subcultures and the cosplay subculture. “Some handicrafting prospects are incorporated into cosplay performances and competitions at conventions” (Brigid 2016, 27), however, “fan handicrafters simply wear or carry their projects to fan conventions and some even craft in public at such events” (Brigid

2016, 27). One might thus be wary about drawing on craft literature, as whilst there is a distinctive overlap between craft communities and cosplay communities, one must also be conscious off the different intentions of participants craft – notably whether it is to facilitate a performance of character as is the case in cosplay, or whether the maker intends to celebrate a text and their fandom through art. In spite of these limitations, fan studies, fan crafting studies, and cosplay scholarship have each identified social dimensions as a focal point of such communities. Such arguments can be found in the works of Jenkins (1992, 2006), Manifold, (2009, 2013), and Gn (2011). In the work of Manifold their 2009 and 2013 essays, focus on Adolescent and Young Adult engagements with fan art making as an educational and social tool. On fantasy art and play, Manifold (2009) observed that social interaction was an important part of their participant's experiences. "a third of the respondents reported that group participation in fantast play increased satisfaction by providing challenging intellectual simulation, self-validation, enhanced feelings of well-being, or sense of belonging to community" (Manifold 2009, 264). Relating this importance of community and communication between crafters, Manifold unpacks this further specifically to cosplay addressing how, when fan artists or cosplayers adapt each other's work they "turned to peers in real or online fandom for advice about composition, shading, sewing, and special effects" (Manifold 2009, 265). These notions of cosplayers (and fan artists) not only creating artefacts, but also connections through sharing the techniques behind their crafts, relates to Gauntlett's final point;

(3) "And making is connected because through making things and sharing them in the world, we increase our engagement and connection with our social and physical environments" (Gauntlett 2018, 10). Social spaces are important to fans, such as the convention centre, comic book shops, game cafes, or social media platforms (such as YouTube and Discord) and streaming services (such as Twitch). One can find an abundant of online videos shared by cosplayers, "services such as YouTube, WordPress and Instagram provide-users with easy-to-use platforms which enable them to place their creative work (such as videos, songs, writing, or photography) online" (Gauntlett 2018, 165). Relating again back to the work of Dennis (2010), Dennis observed the importance of social media as safe environments for LGBTQ+ children to explore their identities through fan art. In the cosplay community, Hale (2014) has noted the importance of both online and offline spaces (as I will highlight throughout the entirety of this thesis). Hale notes that at the convention, "Con attendees document cosplay performances using camcorders, smart phones, and DSLR cameras and distribute this content through various social media" (Hale 2014, 9). Online spaces function alongside physical

environments, permitting the exchange of ideas, safe affinity spaces, and sites of documentation (of a project) and self-promotion (of one's craft/skill/performance abilities).

What can be seen from unpacking Gauntltett's three types of 'connections' is the common ground that exists between cosplay and hand crafts, both in terms of the practises and communities which comprise these two mediums, but also the scholarship that has sought to conceptualise them.

Another, notable similarity between these two sets of literatures, is that fan crafts and cosplay have been appropriated by popular industries and brands. According to Luvass' (2013) study on D.I.Y streetwear. Luvass draws on Polhemus (1994), Asphelund (2009), and Sims (2010) to propose that, "the fashion world presumed to hold a monopoly on popular taste, to forge the new looks of the moment by tailoring the wardrobes of the elite and letting them trickle down (Asphelund 2009) to the masses, today, fashion much more often goes in the opposite direction, 'bubbling up' (Polhemus 1994; Sims 2010)" (Luvass 2012, Online). As a subculture becomes more visible, new market opportunities open to target and tailor to these new audiences. Brigid identifies that there is a flourishing knitting community who use the medium to create art and fashion inspired by popular media. "The examples of knitting patterns tied to film and television programmes suggest that fan interests have been commodified by both the culture industries and yarn companies" (Brigid 2016, 4). Companies capitalise on demands of craft materials to provide for these subcultures. In turn independent fan vendors can take to online stores such as ebay or etsy to sell their fan art to other members of their fan community (who desire bespoke memorabilia). Observing the contemporary shifts in handcrafts (in a broader sense, outside of fandoms), Luckman and Thomas observe how "craft work is being championed by individuals, communities and governments as the answer to complex and profound issues of economic and social inclusion" (Luckman and Thomas 2018, 2). The shift from craft communities as a niche subculture, to find apposition within the mainstream, and the subsequent acknowledgment of this shift (by "individuals, communities and governments"), has resulted in "the rise of various craft-based social enterprises, including many which enable displaced or otherwise marginalized peoples to use traditional skills in new contexts as both a source of income as well as identity and belonging" (Luckman and Thomas 2018, 2). There is a long history of a seeming collaboration between fan creator and industrial producers. Boumaroun (2017), with reference to the work of Berry (2000), identifies that "as early as the 1910's, woman looked to the movies for examples of fashionable dress and were encouraged by photography magazine in 1915 to sew their own copies of film costumes" (Boumaroun 2017, 650). Whilst this replication of film fashion, might be compared with cosplay one must consider that this concerns women’s fashions rather than a conscious play with identity or performance of character.

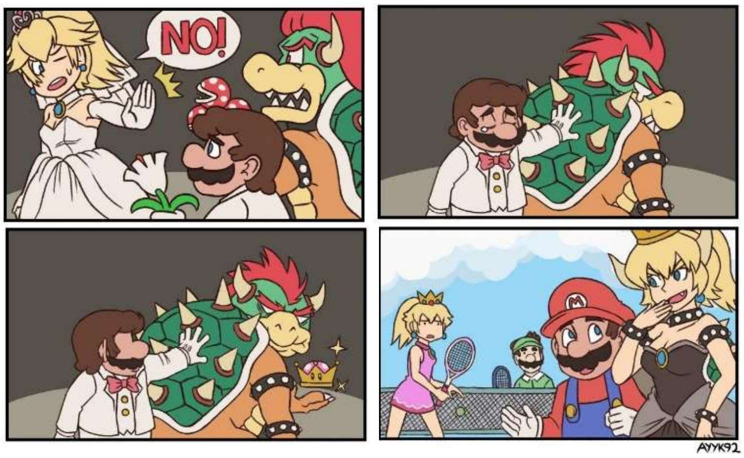
In a more contemporary setting, Bounaroun refers to the ‘everyday cosplay’ inspired by the film *Annie* (Gluck, 2014), and the range of clothing produced by Target during the release of the film. In the cosplay community ‘everyday cosplay’ or ‘casual cosplay’ are common phrases used to refer to the process of appearing and performing as a known character, everyday cosplay is a process “of wearing clothing which evoke a popular character” (Skentelbery, 2019). Bounaroun writes: “the Annie for Target collection is a consequence of the growing visibility of fan communities and the media industries’ recognition that even mainstream audiences want to engage with film and television beyond the viewing experience” (Boumaroun 2017, 650). In recognition of these growing communities of fans, and in turn fans longer have to rely on independent crafting but can purchase clothing and/or cosplays which celebrate their favourite characters from TV and film. Today, cosplay clothing is now much more easily available to purchase from online stores, or directly at the convention site. Boumaroun continues, “industry has capitalized on the growing desire to connect through clothing by licencing character’s costume designs for Halloween, readymade cosplays, and retail fashion collections” (Boumaroun 2017, 650). The crafting elements of cosplay are undeniably important to any cosplayer who specialises in competitions, but to the casual cosplayer, craft has become much more of an optional aspect of the hobby. Online one can easily find cosplay specific shops such as EZcosplay, ProCosplay, and Cosplay Shopper. And there are also opportunities for experienced costumers to sell tailormade costumes, as well as opportunities for cosplayers to sell photos/videos of themselves to other fans, as I shall go onto unpack in greater detail in reference to cosplayers such as Jessica Nigri and Mariah Mallad later in this literature review.

Whilst there is common ground between hand craft scholarship and cosplay scholarship, it is also important to be aware of their differences, and thus the limitations of applying crafting scholarship to aid in my conceptualisation of cosplay communities. For example, Brigid is very clear about the distinction between handcrafted clothes inspired by popular media, and cosplays which mimic popular media, pointing out that “clothing can thus be important in establishing a collective fan identity, though unlike vampire or steampunk fans many fans do not dress in ways that make them stand out as having a subcultural identity. However, handicrafters – by wearing, using, or displaying their own work – are already declaring their identity as a handicrafter” (Brigid 2016, 21). What Brigid highlights here is that handcraft fandoms are comparable to with fan art or fan literature and indeed cosplay. However, just as fan art, literature, and cosplay communities each have common threads which ground each subculture in an identification with and enjoyment of popular media, one must remain conscious of the differences that make these communities distinctive. Handcraft subcultures are about creating new art and fashion inspired by popular media, art and literature is about adaptation of popular media, whereas cosplay is about the performance of popular media.

What has been revealed in this section on handcrafters is that there is much overlap between these subcultures, and many of the participants will overlap between each of the communities. Yet, given the intentions of this thesis, hand craft literature will not form a substantial part of this research. Ultimately, as I have proved in this section with reference to notable popular fan crafts scholars and cosplay scholars, hand craft scholarship has not said anything that cosplay scholarship has not already said, and vice versa, given they share their foundations in fan scholarship. Thus, for the purposes of this thesis, I shall draw on alternative pools of research and cultural theory to forge an original, and more complex insight as to document the nuances, complexities, and contradictions which exist in cosplay practise and cosplay communities, and its associated industries.

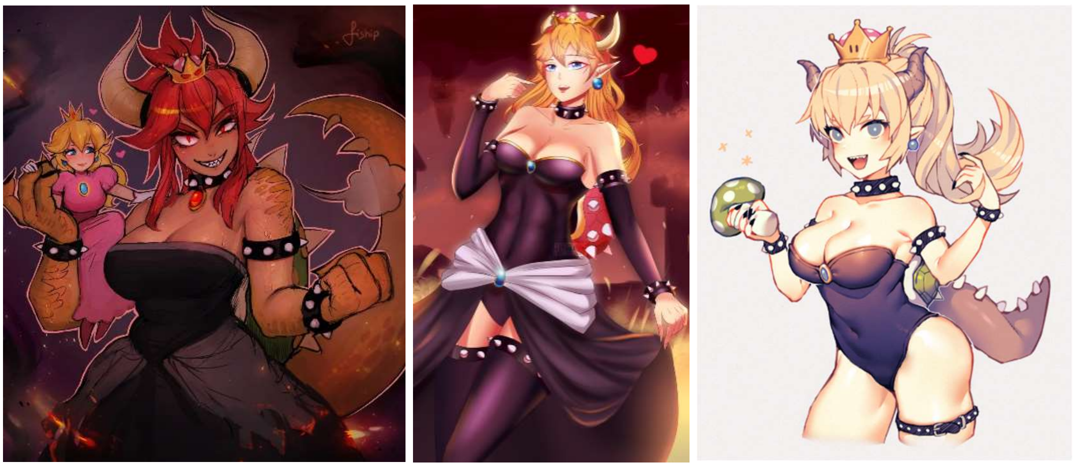
Bowsette, Fan Creativity, and Gender Subversion

To introduce existing literature on fan creativity and community, I draw on the case study of Bowsette as an affinity space for fans (primarily online). The case study of Bowsette facilitates a discussion of how cosplay and fan literature has framed cosplay as a productive site of identity experimentation, whilst also highlighting the limitations of these arguments. By drawing on the fan made character of Bowsette, I will not be saying anything new about fan agency, rather I am using Bowsette as a focal point to illustrate contemporary arguments in fan studies and in practice. Bowsette is a character which grew to popularity in 2018 primarily amongst fans of the *Super Mario* franchise. The character Bowsette is a culmination of Princess Peach (the damsel in distress) and Bowser (the villainous dinosaur). The idea for Bowsette emerged following a Nintendo announcement of a new in-game item called the ‘Super Crown’. The in-game item transforms the character Toadette into a Princess Peach lookalike, fans took to the idea and consequently posed the question, what if Bowser wore the Super Crown? Byrd (2018) via *Den of Geek!* and RandomMan via *Know Your Meme* write that Bowsette is the brainchild of a DevientArt-ist called Aykk92 who created a short comic illustrating the idea (1.1).



1.1

Aykk92's comic was so widely shared that it quickly sparked fans of *Super Mario* to created art, fiction, animations, porn, games, and cosplays of the character. Fan loyalty to both text and fan community can be seen clearly in depictions of Bowsette, in that all subsequent imaginings of Bowsette maintain Aykk92's design (which is in turn is a loyal reimagining of combining iconography associated with Princess Peach and Bowser from the *Super Mario* games). Though the specifics of her design does differ between fans, for example: sometimes artists depict sharp teeth, or scaled skin, or depict her as black with red hair (as Fiship (2018) has done in 1.2). There are considerable examples where Bowsette is depicted as a regal queen, with pale white skin, covered in jewellery, and wearing a large black ball gown such (as lo-Rax (2018) has done in 1.3). Bowsette might also be depicted in a black revealing leotard emphasising Peache's body, with Bowser's tail and shell (as Satchely (2018) in 1.4 has done). Consistently, fans have come to the consensus that Bowsette wears a black dress, she has got Peach's blond hair, Bowser's horns, and she always has the Super Crown on her head.


1.2, 1.3, and 1.4

In Stein and Busse’s research into fan authorship they determine that “no matter the media fandom, fans create texts […] in conversation with and against the background of the source text that inspired them in the first place” (Stein and Busse 2009, 185). In Aykk92’s conception of Bowsette, they capture a conflict between the evil and stereotypically masculine characteristics of Bowser, working against Nintendo’s (again stereotypically) feminine design of Peach. Stein and Busse suggest that “as fan-authored texts circulate, fan communities form out of both those who create fan works and those who offer feedback and recommendations. These communities in turn develop their own norms and expectations, imposing equally strong limits within which new authorship takes place” (Stein and Busse 2009, 185). Fan communities grew expectations of how Bowsette should and should not appear, and consequently fan creators adhere to these expectations in their own fan art. In the case of Bowsette it is the success of her character among fan creators that prompted further ‘super crown’ characters which merge the *Super Mario* cast with the design of Princess Peach, such as: Boosette which is based on the ghost-like villain Boo, Chompette a dog-like ball and chain villain called Chomp, and Piranette a carnivorous plant called Piranha Plants.

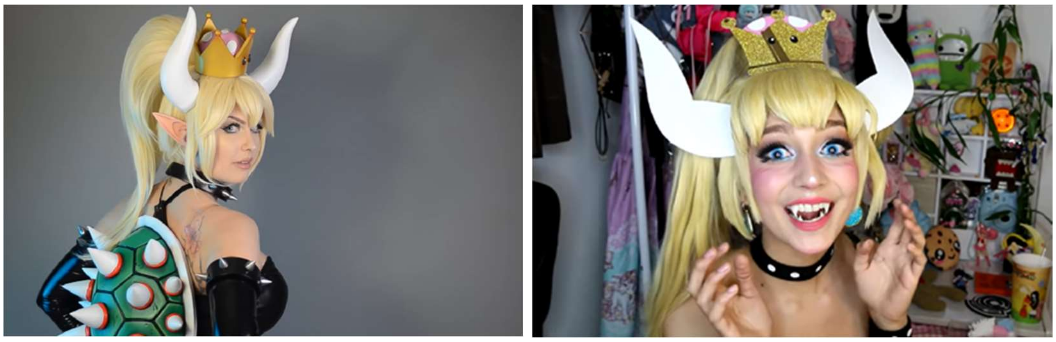
When fans shape and share their creations, the process of sharing raises the visibility of the character among online fans which in turn build expectations of how fans continue to shape and share their fan materials. Fans appear to “blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, speaking of characters as if they had an existence apart from their textual manifestations, entering into the realm of the fiction as if it were a tangible place they can inhabit and explore” (Jenkins 2013, 18). And yet, Bowsette does not belong to the Mushroom Kingdom of *Super Mario* but has been manifested by fans as a popular cultural text in her own right, with a coherent design and narrative history. With reference to the transmedia storytelling of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon, 1997-2003) which emerged between the television programme and online groups and games, Schmetterer (2001) observes, “The fantasy world of Buffy forms a spiritual basis for interaction. However, such interaction is only possible if the design of the interface encourages role-play for its viewers. Role-Play supports a fully immersive and interactive use of the interface” (Schmetterer 2001, 102). *The Buffy the Vampire Slayer* narrative exists across video games, online groups, and the source TV series. According to Jenkins it is in fans recreation and redistributing of texts that:

> Fans actively assert their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions.

> In the process, fans cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings.
>
> Jenkins 2013, 24

Like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Bowsette exists across multiple media. After all, Nintendo have denied the possibility of including Bowsette as a character in any upcoming *Super Mario* video game (Bankhurst, 2019), but her origins with these fictional worlds are integral to the characters formation. Bowsette is a product of fandom which poaches the iconography and logics of the *Super Mario* franchise and has become established across various online groups and online media.

Like art and fiction, cosplay is a fan activity through which fans become active participants in the construction and circulation of a text. The circulation of Bowsette online, prompted cosplayers such as 'Kinpatsu' (1.5) and 'T Cake''s (1.6), to take on their own cosplay renditions of the character. Both cosplayers display a mastery over the text in their display of accomplished technical ability to both craft and perform a community authored character.



1.5 (Left) and 1.6 (Right)

Hills makes the distinction between audience authorship over a text and fan poaching, Hills identifies a 'dialect of value' through which "fans' intensely felt and personal 'possession'/ownership of the text is important" (Hills 2002, 35). In the case of the above Bowsette cosplayers, both Kinpatsu and T Cake's cosplays feature the Super Crown, Kinpatsu features Bowsers iconic shell, and T Cake includes Princess Peach's distinctive bright make-up. Hills observes fans emotional possession over texts, manifested in physical objects such as fan art or cosplay. Debates around fan creativity are engrained in conflict and collaboration between consumers/producers of popular culture.

Gender Performance and Expression in Cosplay

In cosplay scholarship, numerous writers have sought to understand cosplayers' performances of gender (and to a lesser degree performances of sexuality). Cosplayers' playful attitudes with expressions of gender reveals much about the agency of fan creativity, and the social importance of cosplay for individuals within these communities.

Cosplayers' play with gender through play with conventional and unconventional gendered clothing. This highly visible type of play is engrained in fan communities more broadly in fan art and literature alike. In the case of Bowsette, the character is an explicit play with gendered expectations. To reiterate: Bowsette is the result of altering the male character Bowser to resemble the female character Princess Peach. In fan art communities this act of altering a character's gender is called 'Rule 63' referring to Anonymous' list of 'Rules of the Internet', a semi-humorous, semi-serious list of rules to help benefit online communities. Rule 63 specifies that "for every given male character, there is a female version of that character; conversely for every given female character, there is a male version of that character" (Lolrus, 2018). We might add to this that 'rule 63' can also include attributing gendered qualities to a genderless character. In fan fiction communities 'genderswap' similarly refers to giving an existing character alternative gendered characteristics. Judith May Fathallah (2017) draws on the work of Busse (2005) reiterating that fan fic and slash fic (erotic fan fic) writers "explore and connect through sexualities outside of the heteronormative binary" (Fathallah 2017, 30). Both 'rule 63' and 'genderswap' in fan art and fiction encapsulate a playful attitude towards the gender binary. Inevitably cosplay scholars who have discussed gender have similarly suggested that audiences are empowered through gendered play, and that such play can be a powerful disruptive force within the consumer/producer paradigm.

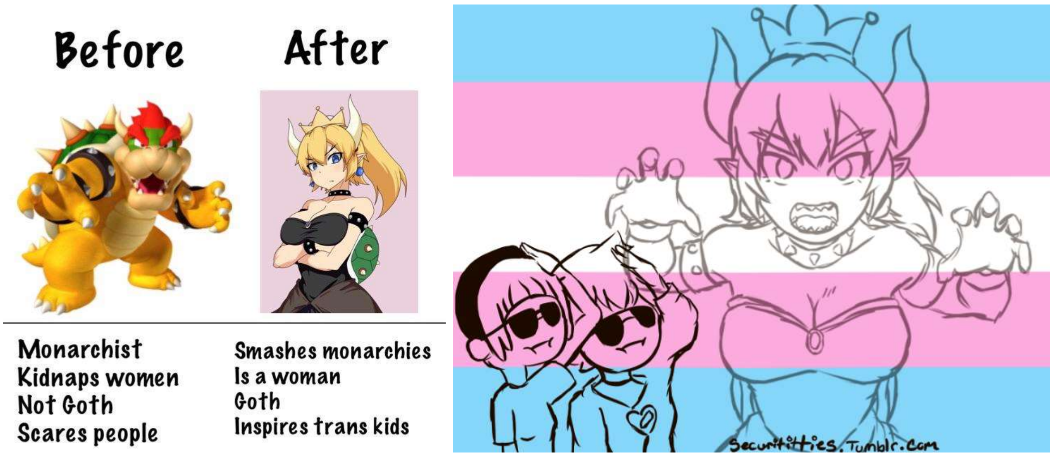
I use the term gender-play to refer to any cosplay that explicitly performs gendered codes and signs. This might indeed include a masculine cosplayer performing a hypermasculine character through cosplay in turn reaffirming the players own masculinity. But here I will be focusing on subversive gender-play, of which there are two main types of subversive gender-play in cosplay. The first identifiable form is commonly referred to as gender-bending, this is the process of "taking a character who is canonically female and reimagining them as male, vice versa, or giving a genderless character gendered characteristics" (Aadahl, 2018). Gender-bending is often playful in its mimicry of popular characters, when a feminine cosplayer adapts a masculine character onto the feminine body, take for example a gender-bend cosplay of Han Solo (from *Star Wars*), the feminine cosplayer might adapt the masculine clothing to be conventionally more feminine. A gender-bend cosplay of Han Solo for example may see a blue skirt instead of blue trousers, and the cosplayer may opt for heels instead of boots. Despite the differences in the clothing, its colour and style will be tailored to evoke the original character. Secondly, crossplay cosplay "is far less easy to spot. [...] The hope here is to not stand out as a different gender, to present themselves as the gender of the character as seamlessly as possible" (Aadahl, 2018). Thus, if a female cosplayer were to perform as Han Solo, their replication of the costume will be as screen-accurate as possible and thus will use costume hide their femininity, the cosplayer might bind their breasts to appear flat chested, glue fake stubble onto their face, and pad out their groin to mimic the masculine groin.

Cosplay scholars have argued that cosplayers are not only creative in their play with gender, but also offer queer alternatives to dominant heterosexual values. Bainbridge and Norris (2013) champion cosplayers as performers whose costumed performances create disruptive moments. Bainbridge and Norris emphasis this suggesting, "fandom itself is subversive in that it reworks narratives in ways not originally intended by commercial media industries, cosplay is more disruptive than subversive, a play more than a challenge" (Bainbridge and Norris 2013, 21). A feminine cosplayer dressing as the masculine hero Han Solo is a disruptive act because it is common opinion amongst popular western media and audiences that feminine bodies should cosplay feminine figures, by challenging this ideal, the cosplayer is a disruptive force who can rattle the gender binary.

To make sense of gender-play in cosplay, drag literature has commonly been appropriated by cosplay scholars such as by Galbraith (2013), King (2013) and Mountfort Geczy and Peirson-Smith, (2019) in a comparison which is not without flaw. On the surface cosplay and drag share several common traits, namely, the costuming of the body and gendered performance. In drag queens' performances of femininity, Butler argues that drag "reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence" (Butler 2006, 187). It might therefore be suggested that play with gendered codes and signs, mix and blur gendered markers. When read onto cosplay, one might interpret that by wearing gendered markers considered inappropriate to one's own gendered expectations, cosplayers might be seen to disrupt the conventional expected social norms of the male/female binary.

In the case of Bowsette and gender-play, a feminine cosplayer performing Bowsette might appear to not be engaging with gender-play. However, the narrative of Bowsette is distinctly tied with the Super Crown which allows the masculine Bowser to transform into a Princess Peach imitation. Thus, Bowsette's masculine and feminine attributes are equally important to the character and cosplayers of the character engage with entangled feminine and masculine codes. In their 2009 paper, Bainbridge and Norris argue that unlike other forms of dressing-up “cosplay is closer to drag. We would argue that it is not merely an act of becoming a particular character, or making out a particular alignment, but of *disruption*” (Bainbridge and Norris 2009, 95). Again, in Bainbridge and Norris’ later 2011 paper, they argue quite boldly, “emphasis on disruption here defines the cosplayer as a playful agent of change. The high regard given to cosplay’s transversal moment as it crosses gender, race or reality can be seen to offer an optimistic creative and social moment” (Bainbridge and Norris 2011, 35). Cosplays of Bowsette might be viewed as a complex example of drag in which stereotypical masculine and feminine characteristics are merged onto the cosplayers body, and in so doing have offered optimistic creative social spaces which go against the heteronormative structural grain.

Fans and cosplayers have drawn on ideas of gender to express, explore, and support trans* identities. Bowsette has even become somewhat of a trans* icon for some members of the LGBTQ+ community. The social media site Reddit’s group “r/traaaaaaannnnnnnnnns” (a community designed for and run by people who are transitioning) has seen several posts about Bowsette including figures 1.7 and 1.8 below:



1.7 (Left) and 1.8 (Right)

Figure 1.7 depicts a before and after image of Bowser to Bowsette accompanied with text which reveals the transitioning of the character. Figure 1.7 received 1.6k up-votes (an indication when someone likes a post/comment), and 100 comments. Many of the comments express an appreciation of the post and how much they identified with Bowsette in terms of their own transition. Figure 1.8 illustrates these feelings, depicting Bowsette in front of the Trans* flag with two fans saluting her. To reiterate the work of Dennis, he argued that the online affinity spaces in which audiences share and discuss fan art allows for safe spaces in which,

> Boys who grow up believing that there are no other gay people at their school, or in their town, or anywhere on Earth, find interacting with other artists interested in homoerotic fan art, or even seeing the art itself, a validating experience, a demonstration that gay people do indeed exist
>
> Dennis 2010, 25

In the above fan art, these example illustrates the ways in which fans can be seen to poach popular media texts (in this case, characters from Nintendo's *Super Mario* series), not only to shape new characters and narratives, but also as a means of identity expression, and affirmation.

Returning to the work of Jenkins, he observes, "fans seemingly blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, speaking of characters as if they had an existence apart from their textual manifestations, entering into the realm of the fiction as if it were a tangible place they can inhabit and explore" (Jenkins 2013, 18). The result of blurring fiction and reality, by bringing popular media to the forefront of identity/community/activism, is that "fan culture stands as an open challenge to the 'naturalness' and desirability of dominant cultural hierarchies, a refusal of authorial authority and a violation of intellectual property" (Jenkins 2013, 18). The blurring of fiction and reality as Jenkins puts it, offers a destabilization of social norms, the destabilisation of the everyday would illustrate cosplayers as disruptive actors.

The Problem with Cosplay Studies uses of Butler and Drag

In this section, I address some of the faults of cosplay scholarship addressing the momentary performances of costumed play to question literature which paints cosplayers as revolutionary social agents. I do so by continuing to draw on the Bowsette case study which also serves to illustrate that cosplay is a entangled with popular fan structures.

In cosplay scholars attempts to conceptualise gender-play many cosplay scholars have defaulted to drawing on the literature of Judith Butler. Crawford and Handcock for example, attempt to use Butler's work to address cosplayers as being disruptive to social gendered norms. "Butler sees ideas of gender and sex as a 'discursive effect'. That is to say that both gender and sex are the product of and are continuously remade through social performance, which adheres to dominant discourses" (Crawford and Hancock 2019, 141). In Butlers own words "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 2006, 45). In the landscapes of cosplay and other related fan practices, one might be eager to argue that such practises are subversive acts which can disrupt the hegemonic norms which govern how one presents one's identity to others. Alternatively, Joel Gn (2011) directly references Norris and Bainbridge (2009) to address a concern with cosplay literature relying on Butler as a point of reference. Gn considers "the potential for cosplay to provide new avenues for expression and subjectivity may be tenable, but the theoretical underpinnings of 'subversion' and 'deviance' in current arguments of the fan practice have remained cursory at best" (Gn 2011, 585-6). Gn observes that writers such as Bainbridge and Norris

> have claimed that the 'queering' of cosplay, as a means of deviating from heteronormative behaviours, parallels Butler's construction of drag as parody of the gender binary, but I would argue that their dialect for subversion not only leaves the character of affective individuation unresolved, but also presumes a reductionist strategy that overlooks critical aesthetic positions, or stylistic devices within the object of the animated body
>
> Gn 2011, 586

Gn highlights that as much as cosplay can be used to critique social norms, the effects of a cosplay rely on 'stylistic devices within the object of the animated body', in other words, cosplay as a process of replicating characters from popular media can also be used to reiterate and confirm social dominant norms. Despite this common process of reading cosplay under Butler's definition of drag, there are some cosplay scholars who express their concerns and draw away from drag theory when addressing examples of male-to-female gendered play. Concerns of reading drag and cosplay under the same theoretical frameworks is expressed firmly by Rachel Leng, in her paper 'Gender, Sexuality, and Cosplay' (2013) she highlights:

> despite apparent similarities, between crossplay and drag performances, they are fundamentally distinct. Drag Queens in Western culture typically connotes men cross-dressing as an exhibition of self-identity, whereas M2F [Male-to-female cosplay] cross players costume as female anime characters to partake in an aesthetic of transformation that goes beyond mere self-expression

Leng 2013, 90

Drag is a distinctive process involving participants who create their own unique personas, like furry and animegao kigurumi. Whereas cosplayers dress as pre-existing characters from popular media. The two communities have their own distinct traditions, expectations, and power structures and to read them as contemporaries overlooks the complexities of both subcultures. In Lamerichs' 2011 work, she voices concerns on cosplay scholarship's relationship with Butler's writing on drag, but ultimately concedes that the correlation between cosplay and drag is present within the community. Lamerichs draws on the works of Butler to suggest that both "cosplay and drag combine a sense of identity and playfulness with the wearing of an outfit. While Butler limits the acts of the subject to discursive practises, we see that cosplayers in fact play with identity all the time" (Lamerichs 2011, online). It is a cosplayer's knowing play with gender (and sexuality) which enables the player to inhabit and explore alternative spaces, and gendered expression. Yet there is a complication here, if a cosplayer moves between genders is done as Lamerichs suggests to playing with identity, this notion implies that any destabilization of gendered norms is a momentary experience.

In her 2018 work, Lamerichs revises her position, she points out the limitations of Butlers discussion of drag, suggesting that Butler fails to capture the community or subcultural aspects of drag beyond the spectacle (Lamerichs 2018, 212). Lamerich's arguments do not ultimately elucidate a flaw in Butler's work, but rather a flaw of how many cosplay scholars have incorporated Butler into their research. Whilst I share Lamerics' take on cosplay scholars over-use of Butler, this critique also reveals Lamerichs own misinterpretation of performativity. For instance, Butler's notion of performativity is defined by the repetition of gendered codes and signs in everyday life (Butler 2006, xv and 200). Cosplay scholars have misunderstood this term using it interchangeably with performance. In other words, performativity is not the same as performance, so criticising Butler for failing to reflect on off-stage elements of drag is a misreading of their arguments. Likewise, in Lamerichs 2011 address of Butler's work, she criticises Butler for focusing on discourse by opposing this concept to everyday life, which is a misreading of Butlers (Foucaldian) understanding of discourse.

Current cosplay literature might have one believe that the creativity of fans and cosplayers can change dominant expectations of gender presentation. However, in the work of Galbraith (2013), they are one of the few writers to recognise that cosplay is not disruptive or subversive, but simply momentary play. Galbraith suggests with reference to the work of Okabe (fan studies scholar) and Butler, "the naturalisation of sex in crossplay as practiced by

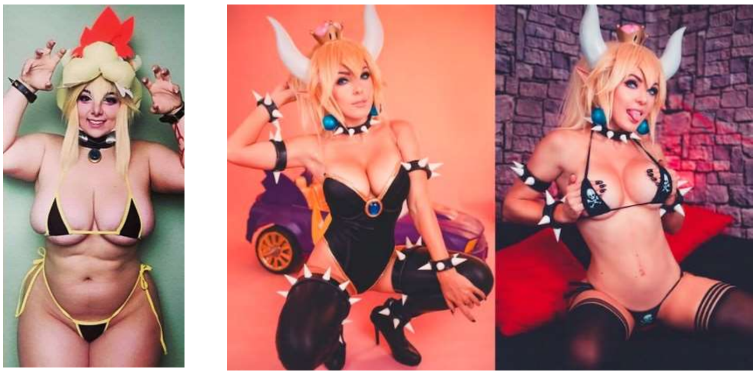
Okabe's informants seems to diverge from drag as described by Judith Butler, who saw in it the potential for destabilising norms. Indeed, Okabe tells his readers that no matter how queer cosplay performances and desires get, his informants 'lead conventional adult lives'" (Galbraith 2013, online). Here Galbraith (with reference to Okabe) emphasise the momentary nature of cosplay performance, as much as the gendered play of cosplayers might counter every-day performativity of gendered codes, cosplay's momentary performance cannot subvert everyday routine because of its very detachment from everyday routine.

Bowsette, Abuse Between Fans, and Sub-Cultural Hierarchies

Despite the revolutionary celebration of queer identities which has emerged between cosplayers and other fans of Bowsette, it is also necessary to address the ways in which cosplayers and fans reinforce dominant norms.

Lamerichs briefly looks at cosplay authenticity and cosplayer's ability to accurately replicate character. Lamerichs documents that fans "also have hierarchies that result in part from their interpretive and creative competences. Social status may be awarded to fans who have been in communities for a long time but can also pertain to their skills and the quality of their fan texts" (Lamerichs 2018, 30). Matt Hills similarly highlights authenticity in prop replication in his article on 'Mimetic Fandom', Hills discusses fans who replicate costumes and props. For example, "commercial Dalek builders similarly emphasize discourses of screen accuracy, thus proposing an implicit ontological unity between text and material object" (Hills 2014, online). The desire for accuracy is imposed upon the wider community, screen accurate props and costumes are typically praised, whilst a less experienced maker whose cosplays my feature inaccuracies are more susceptible to criticism from their peers. In the case of Bowsette, one might question whether a Bowsette cosplay could ever be inauthentic, given that the character is a fan creation with no definitive design. However, cosplayers have still successfully found ways of judging and criticising one another.

Professional cosplayer Mariah Mallad (aka Momokun on Instagram (604,000 followers) received backlash for her interpretation of Bowsette. Mallad's cosplay comprised of a blond wig, a Bowser head hat, spiked wrist bands, and a black bikini (1.9). Whilst the costume is relatively simple in its design, it still fits with the flirty overtly sexualized nature of the character. However, comments criticised Mallad's cosplay as lazy and unattractive. Several comments brought up sexual harassment allegations against Mallad, and even a Change.org petition "Prevent Momokun from cosplaying Bowsette" was set up and as of 24/01/2019 received a total of 10,495 signatures, after being live for four months. The abuse Mallard received was heavily misogynist and directed against Mallard’s body figure. In contrast, professional cosplayer Jessica Nigri (on Instagram (3.5million followers)), depicted two versions of Bowsette: both with her hair up showing off a set of horns, both with spiked bracelets, though one was in a tight leotard and the other in a bikini (1.10). Whilst Nigri received some comments directing sexual harassment, overall, she received a great deal of praise for her cosplay, many online comments celebrating the authenticity of her performance, and how ‘sexy’ she looked. Her cosplay was subsequently shared by *9Gag* a social media news page, and *Mandatory* a men’s online magazine (Gautier, 2018).



1.9 (Left, Mallad) and 1.10 (Right, Nigri)

To conceptualise the misogynist commentors seen here, one can draw on GamerGate literature. In scholarship on gaming communities, there is a growing body of literature which examines male abuse of female fans online. Postfeminist criticism has sought to dissect GamerGate (a harassment campaign defined by sexism and anti-progressivism). Such bodies of work include writers Mortensen (2016), O’Donnell (2019) and Scott (2019). Whilst Nigri’s photoshoot does have higher production values (distinctive colouring, lighting and set design), the bikini design and feminine performance appears the same as Mallard’s cosplay.

Both players lean towards Bowsette’s sexual confidence, with an emphasis on their figure. Given the striking similarities between the two cosplays, the criticism Mallad faced boils down to the body of the wearer, and Mallad’s cosplay is considered inferior because of her larger body type. One of the few websites that did feature her cosplay was Imgrum, which simply captioned the image with “At least she has Bowser’s proportions down” equating Mallard’s physique with Bowser. Postfeminist critic Sarah Banet-Wiser (2018) writes: “#GamerGate can be considered alongside other ‘toxic technocultures’ populated by users who employ online forums to spew hatred about and encourage violence against women” (Banet-

Weiser 2018, 163). The comments that Mallad faced criticising her body, and the sexual harassment both Mallad and Nigri are unfortunately common among online fans (of popular media, particularly among the gaming community).

Addressing the rise of misogynist groups on the social network Reddit, Banet-Weiser stresses, "the misogyny of these SubReddits is not limited to merely abstract expressions of hate; threats, harassment, doxing, stalking, and other violence, both cyber and offline, occur on a regular basis" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 165). As we can see between Mallad and Nigri, authenticity and technical ability is used as superficial reasoning to abuse, harass, and mock in such a manner that is not detached from dominant society, but rather confirms to popular misogynies (a concept I shall return to in the latter half of this thesis). And yet, the re-inscription and maintenance of these popular misogynies, by abusive commentators such as those associated with GamerGate, have equally been framed by others such as Orme, as a process of simultaneous replication and detachment of dominant norms. On male comic book fans abuse of female comic book fans, Orme (2016) suggests "'geek' masculinity imposes its own gender norms and stigmas, insisting that real men should enjoy traditionally masculine activities such as sports, not comic books. This rhetoric of masculinity […] leads geek men to then construct the artefacts and practises associated with geek culture as masculine culture" (Orme 2016, 405-6). Whilst the misogynist commentors of Mallad and Nigri reinforce certain cultural hierarchies, the same audience conceptualises their actions to legitimise their unique subsection of the fandom's community.

Fans and fan communities all hold different values, and thus different fan groups will prioritise certain values (and consequently hierarchies) over others. For example, Sandvoss draws on Hills (2002) and Thornton (2005) to suggest that fans will take on dominant hierarchies of age, or gender, to avoid discussions of class, or income. "Subcultural capital is constructed in opposition to class, yet maintains other social power relations, as it functions as 'the linchpin of an alternative hierarchy in which the axes of age, gender, sexuality and race" (Sandvoss 2005, 39). By being selective of social hierarchy, fans avoid certain arguments within their groups, though this does still result in excluding others. One might consequently question whether fans are as detached from dominant society as some fan scholars (and cosplay scholars) have suggested. In Lamerichs' recent work she argues that the stigmatization of fans relates to dominant social tastes, "even by those who are part of the communities. Through their behaviour, fans seemingly transgress social norms and are easily labelled as deviants as opposed to their types of audiences, such as those of the high arts" (Lamerichs 2018, 13). Lamerichs', albeit brief, comment that stigmatization can occur "even by those who are part of the communities" indicates something much more complicated about fan structures that is not being addressed in cosplay scholarship.

Just as there is a relationship between producer and consumer as conceptualised in Lamerichs' 'networks of production', Banet-Weiser conceptualises the term, 'networks of popular feminism and popular misogyny'. Banet-Weiser prefaces her explanation of the networks between popular feminism and misogyny by drawing on cases of misogynist Reddit groups and GamerGate, "each is a nod in a wider network of popular feminist and popular misogyny" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 168). Whilst fan scholars read fan practices in relation to popular media, they often fail to draw on wider social hierarchies which influence popular media production and audience consumption. Concluding her book, Banet-Weiser explains, "My argument in this book has been all about this *relationship* between popular feminism and popular misogyny, and the fact that we need to give our attention to this relationship because it has structural consequences" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 184). Unpacking the structural consequences has not yet been done is cosplay scholarship, as is clear in this literature review. Much Acafan cosplay scholarship offers a utopian view of cosplayers as creative agents, it is only in drawing on broader fan studies literature (outside of the specifics of cosplay scholarship) that one begins to unpack the hierarchical structures that complicate cosplay performances online and at the convention hall.

Matt Hills provides a more cautionary narrative and questions how much fans really abandon social hierarchies. Hills suggests that fans are drawn to certain texts over others because favoured texts authenticate the fans own values. "Contradictory limit to the power of the niche market is, then precisely that through seeing its own agenda on screen", as a result fans become "locked into its own rigidly maintained set of values" (Hills 2002, 38). Hills explains that whilst fan communities might be brought together through their shared interests, members of these communities will also compete for status in displays of knowledge and access to the "object of fandom" (Hills 2002, 46). Hills offers a reworking of Bourdieu to suggest that "cultural capital has been overly emphasised in later accounts, while other types of capital (social and symbolic) have been underplayed in studies of fan culture" (Hills 2002, 58). Powers which abide by dominant social norms and disrupt them are each equally prevalent within any given fan community, even if it is an area of study that has gone overlooked given that it is an area of study that would not concern the typical Acafan scholar who is loyal to one's own fanbase. Brownie and Graydon cite Michelle McCudden (2011) for identifying the development of hierarchies in fan communities. Brownie and Graydon write that fan communities develop hierarchies "in which status is achieved through various demonstrations of devotion. A fan who can prove that his or her devotion is greatest, moves to the top of the social scale" (Brownie and Graydon 2016, 112). Individual cosplayers will become more valued by their contemporaries if they perform and share (high quality) videos and pictures online meeting the expectations others have of the cosplayer's chosen character. Some cosplayers even become famous within online fan communities for cosplaying a specific character. An inaccurate costume, or a poorly performed costume will inevitably receive criticism from other cosplayers (in addition to any positive encouragement or advice).

Closing Remarks on the Literature Review

In this literature review, there are three main things that have been covered. Firstly, I have outlined critical work in fan studies and conceptualised the Acafan, which builds up much of the foundations of cosplay scholarship. Within this literature, pivotal fan studies writers including, Jenkins, Hills, and Lamerichs have been unpacked to introduce key debates of the active audience, and the producer/consumer paradigm. Placing an emphasis on Lamerichs' 'networks of production', which facilitates a working relationship between consumer and producer, but also unique exchanges and habits between consumers in fan communities. This paradigm is important and will be drawn on closely throughout the thesis.

Secondly, I introduced the cosplay community, outlining its history and locating cosplay environments between the convention hall and online groups/forums. Locating cosplay interactions is vital to my own investigations (as I shall outline in Chapter 2). The notion that conventions and online groups facilitate unique rules detached from dominant cultural norms was prominent in cosplay scholarship, such as by Bainbridge and Norris, Mountfort et al., and Dennis. Arguments of creative agency with potential for social revolution were illustrated by drawing on the example of Bowsette as a fan created character who has been a figure head for Trans and LGBTQ+ groups and individuals. These ideas of cosplay as offering cosplayers a means of creative expression and exploration of one's own identity will be the focal point of the first half of this thesis, discussed primarily within Chapters 2 and 3.

Finally, I drew on border critical work in fan studies such as by Hills, Orme, and Sandvoss, who each provide contrasting arguments to sections 1 and 2. These writers suggest that fan values and hierarchies are entangled with dominant cultural norms and hierarchies, which consequently can create conflict and hierarchy among fans/cosplayers. Addressing conflict and hierarchy is largely absent in contemporary cosplay scholarship, however I have pinpointed a need to address such hierarchies by my continued example of Bowsette cosplayers and circumstances of sexual harassment and abuse. These case studies were used to illustrate some broader scholarship from cultural studies and postfeminist criticism. In many ways, I found that Banet-Weiser's 'networks of popular feminism and popular misogyny', illuminated how two opposing values sustained the other. It is these more critical positions of cosplay which will be the focus of the second half of the thesis (Chapters 4-6), as I draw out the ways in which the utopian positions of Acafan cosplay scholars are entangled with the critical positions of cultural theory and postfeminist criticism.

Chapter 2: Defining the Acafan as Method and Thesis Methodology

In the main body of this chapter, I unpack my autoethnographic, ethnographic, and qualitative textual analysis which composed my mixed methodological data collection. I shall outline each component in stages, firstly I establish the benefits of the autoethnographic approaches describing the specific methods I used in engaging with cosplay and reflecting on my position as a cultural studies scholar. Secondly, I unpack the ethics attributed to my attendance at fan conventions and the ethnographic observations I was able to make at both in person conventions before the Covid-19 pandemic. I follow this by discussing the ethics of online observations and how I will use the data collected from these online environments. Finally, I discuss the benefits of participant interviews in existing scholarship, before outlining the design of my own semi-structured interviews.

Although I use tried and tested methods from fan studies (combining ethnography, textual analysis, autoethnography, and interviews) it is when it comes to the analysing of the data collected which is distinctly different from traditional cosplay analysis which prompts me to draw on literature from critical theory, cultural theory, and postfeminist criticism. In the following sections of this chapter, I outline the research methods of this thesis: *Cosplay, Character and Textual Analysis*, ethnographic observations at *Fan Convention Attendance and Observations*, autoethnographic participation and ethnographic observations in *Online Participation and Observation*, outlining my interactions with *Interview Participants*, and finally I outline the benefits of having an autoethnographic blog. But first, I will reflect on the Acafan to examine why Acafan methodologies benefit from autoethnographic methods as well as my own position as non-cosplayer autoethnographer.

The Acafan's Emphasis on Autoethnography

In my Introduction and Literature review, I have argued that the Acafan is reliant on autoethnographic methods, in which the scholar is also the subject of one's study. To reiterate, Acafan is an abbreviation of Academic fan, referring to an academic who also self identifies as a fan, or a part of the community they are studying. The term is credited to Henry Jenkins, whose landmark book *Textual Poachers* (1992) sought to legitimise the creativity of fans, and subsequently the study of fans and fandom. Acafan methods developed from the Uses and Gratifications model (Katz ,1959; Glaser, 1965; and Lundberg and Hulten, 1968), and Hall's Encoding/Decoding (1973) model as I referred to in the introduction of this thesis. Each of these writers influenced a change in how audiences were understood, from which a host of new methods emerged. To collect data for this thesis, I will be drawing on Acafan ethnographic data-collection methods in recognition of the value of these approaches for developing insight into how audiences engage with popular texts.

Fan studies methodologies emerged in the wake of renewed interest in qualitative research from the 1970s. One of the landmark works which established qualitative audience research was David Morley and Charlotte Brunsdon's Nationwide research (1978 and 1980), their work was pivotal in popularizing Hall's encoding/decoding model to audiences in practice. Together, Morley and Bunsdon "brought fundamentally different perspectives and abilities to the project – the one of us being trained in textual analysis as a literary scholar, the other a sociologist" (Morley and Brunsdon 1999, 9). Echoing the interdisciplinary experience of Morley and Brunsden, qualitative audience research is made up of several different methods, including interviews with practitioners and/or audiences, focus groups, surveys, or observational ethnographies (Dhoest, 2014; Evans and Stasi, 2014). Each of these listed data collection methods are crucial in the work of audience and early fan researchers including Lewis (1992), Bacon-Smith (1994) and Jenkins (1992).

In Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* for instance, he draws on a mix of cultural theory, critical analysis of fan texts, and illustrates numerous points with self-reflection. It was the intention of Acafan writers such as Jenkins, to emphasise the legitimacy of fans and their subsequent academic study. Matt Hills' *Fan Cultures* (2002) began to conceptualise this methodological approach as a unique position which Hills termed the fan-scholar. Hills explains that the position of the fan-scholar (or Acafan) can offer insights other methodologies could not offer. According to Hills, "fan and academic identities can be hybridised or brought together not simply in the academy but also outside of it, in the figure of the fan-scholar" (Hills 2002, xxx). The celebration of fandom and fan studies that emerges in this position is vital in the legitimisation in this young field of scholarship. Acafan as a term was then popularised in Henry Jenkins' blog Confessions of an Aca-Fan (2011). In Jenkins' earlier 2006 book *Convergence Culture* he acknowledges, "I can't claim to be a neutral observer in any of this, for one thing, I am not simply a consumer of many of these media products, I am also an active fan" (Jenkins 2006, 12). For Jenkins and many other such Acafan scholars who incorporate autoethnographic study and reflection, such as King (2016), Lamerichs (2014, 2018), and Winge (2019), they are each conscious that their observations cannot be 'neutral', and use this unique position to their advantage in not only drawing on their own unique experiences but through preestablished contacts with members of their fanbase(s) of study. In these scholars' work the combination of qualitative data collection with self-reflection has resulted in the production of some valuable data sets, for example the discussions in Chapter 1's literature review highlights pivotal works in fan and cosplay scholarship that have been generated by autoethnographic methods. Winge for instance opens her book illustrating the importance of entering one's research subject(s) by recalling an early experience attending CONvergence (in Minnesota in 2000), she documents:

> Unsure about what to expect, the masquerade was already forty minutes late in starting, and my seat was becoming increasingly uncomfortable, but at least my friends and I were not on the folding chairs haphazardly placed in the back corners of the expansive ballroom because more people were attending than anticipated.
>
> Winge 2019, 1

In this short reflection, Winge illustrates how, from a seemingly trivial observation one can learn that the cosplay masquerade is a core feature of the comic convention. One also gets a glimpse into the fan industry which could not predict the popularity of cosplay in the 2000's, given the make-shift quality of the event – as the fold-out chairs imply a smaller venue in contrast to the auditoriums/stalls set out at larger contemporary events such as MCM or San Diego International Comic-Con. Although scholars like Winge illustrate the value of autoethnography, problems have arisen in cosplay studies more broadly due to the way data gathered through ethnographic methods has been analysed. My literature review for instance, has drawn on fan studies and cosplay scholars who come to broad conclusions from autoethnography that universalises their subjects: foregrounding fan agency and dismissing the encoding that producers put into popular texts or fan environments, which tailor meaning and encourage audiences and cosplayers to interact with texts/environments in certain ways. It is this questioning of Acafan analysis which will be a focal point of Chapter 4-6.

Combining Theoretical Frameworks

This thesis is split into two key sections. Chapters 1-3 provide an examination of the cosplay community which support contemporary cosplay scholarship, whereas Chapters 4 and 5 examine data which challenges the literature of fan and cosplay scholarship. To analyse the data collected in Chapters 4 and 5, I propose that alternative theoretical frameworks are required in addition to the cosplay and fan scholarship that has framed much of the establishing material. To develop these frameworks, I engage with more critical work from audience and cultural studies, drawing on writers including Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), Stuart Hall (1973), as well as postfeminist criticism such as by Banet-Weiser (2018), and meritocracy criticism, such as the work of Littler (2018). These theoretical frameworks are integral in providing an analysis of the cosplay community and their engagement with gender and identity expression which is often absent from Acafan cosplay scholarship (for exceptions see fan studies scholarship such as that by Gn, 2011; Orme, 2016; Brownie and Graydon, 2016).

Chapters 6 and 7 are important in merging these two theoretical positions. I argue that contemporary fan and cosplay scholarship is incredibly important and has revealed a lot about audience creativity. However, because of the loyalties of the Acafan to their field of study, it is a theoretical position which risks overlooking cases in which audiences are passive or exploited by popular culture and fan industries. These are two theoretical positions which I conceptualise with reference to Lamerichs' 2018 term "networks of production" (from fan studies) and Banet-Weiser's 2018 term "networks of popular feminism and popular misogyny" (from postfeminist criticism) as outlined in my introduction. Each framework examines contradictions within their field of study, each a network of entangled contradictions, which perpetuate sets of opposing values which in turn perpetuate a community, cultural discourse, or social/political power structures.

My methodology is also influenced by the research frameworks present in Wood, Litherland, and Reed (2019) in which Wood et al. establish draw on neoliberal and postfeminist criticism, with reference to the works of Gill (2007), Banet Weiser (2015) and Rottenberg (2018)). Wood et al. used this postfeminist criticism to conceptualise cosplays of as Rey (from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (Abrams, 2015)). The distancing from fan studies as a framework for understanding fandom is very illuminated "contradictions surrounding young femininities in popular feminism" (Wood et al. 2019, 548). Wood et al.'s theoretical framework is paired with more traditional questionnaires and participant interviews, which are more commonly associated with the Acafan qualitative methodology.

Before I went about talking with cosplayers, and conducting interviews with cosplayers, I went through an extensive ethics approval process with my institution (Keele University). The ethics form marked out each attribute of data collection that went into the data collection for this research project. The ethics approval number for this project is HU-190021, and the approval was granted on 15th May 2019. The ethics approval for this research centrally laid out the central components of how I conducted acquiring participants and the subsequent interviews, but also marked out how observation data would be collected and used in online and offline environments, as well as how data would be stored and subsequently used. The rules I developed to ensure the research project upheld the ethical standards of Keele University and were followed closely without breach. However, I also felt it was important to go beyond the requirements that were strictly necessary and adapted a reflexive approach to ethics throughout the project as I will outline in the following sections, I have embedded ethical concerns into each data collection method in each of the subsequent 'Data Collection' sections.

Data Collection – Textual Analysis and Autoethnography

In this section I will identify how my research methods (including both autoethnography and ethnographic interviews) are entangled in textual analysis of cosplayers chosen characters, and cosplayers costumed performances. The entanglement of textual analysis with audience research methods is uncommon in cosplay scholarship which typically focuses on social interactions and broader representations of gender affirmation and subversion. However, these entangled research approaches can be found in the cosplay scholarship of self-proclaimed cosplayers: King, Lamerichs (2014), Winge (2019).

Emerald King is not only a respected academic of Japanese Language and Popular Culture but is an equally accomplished cosplayer. Her website lists both her academic and cosplay accomplishments including: "winning the Madman National Cosplay Champisonship in 2016 (as well as placing in 2012 3rd and 2018 2nd) and coming first runner up at the Australian heats of the World Cosplay Summit in 2019 (3rd in 2018)" (King, online). King's professional identity is an entanglement of both cosplayer and scholar. Whilst King does not tend to explicitly draw on self-reflection in her research, King's position is important in her reading of character and costume as texts. In her 2016 article 'Tailored Translations' King discusses cosplay as process of adaptation, referring specifically to cosplayers crafting costumes of characters from Japanese media. King argues that cosplay should be understood as a medium in and of itself. By "taking cosplay costumes as a readable text, cosplay is then a skilful amalgamation of elements that transforms and actualises an existing story or game" (King 2016, 363). When I break down my data, I follow a similar process to King, treating cosplay as text in and of itself to provide a joint textual analysis of character and costume as two data sets which make up unique cosplay text(s). In both my autoethnographic reflections, and in my interview data sets, I reflect on my relationship with my chosen character, and my participants' relationship with their chosen characters to pinpoint whether cosplay can be used to express/negotiate/question attributes of one's own gendered identity.

In Lamerichs' chapter 'Cosplay: The Affective Mediation of Fictional Bodies' (2014), she reflects upon the creation processes of cosplay and the ways in which the product of a fictional character is entangled with the fan made costume. Lamerichs chosen cosplay character during this study was Effie Trinket from *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012). Lamerichs reflects upon labouring over a sewing machine to replicate Effie's "golden and pink [dress] with a flowery pattern" (Lamerichs 2014, 123). Lamerichs explains: "I decide to make it [the costume] myself and perform Effie at a convention to bring her closer to me, to show my attachment to the movie, and to challenge myself in the art of dress making" (Lamerichs 2014, 123-4). Just as I observed in the opening literature review, the act of craft is an extremely personal endeavour, indeed Lamerichs describes this process as an important aspect of her professional identity, as both fan and scholar, or Acafan. For Lamerichs, "cosplay has been a passion of mine since my late teens and I have been interested in making this practise more visible within the field of fan studies" (Lamerichs 2014, 125). Much as Jenkins did in *Textual Poaches* to breakdown misconceptions about fans, Lamerichs draws on her own experiences as a case study to validate and legitimise cosplay and legitimise its study.

Many cosplay scholars have placed a distinct focus on cosplay and expressions of identity, for example, cosplay and sexual identity in the work of Jacobs (2013), cosplay and gendered identity in the work of Shih-Chen, C. (2017), and cosplay and racial identity in the work of Jenkins (2020). In Winge's *Costuming Cosplay* (2019), she highlights, "cosplayers identify with their chosen characters, and even express their desire to be more like the characters they dress like and/or roleplay". Winge continues, "cosplayers identification with the character also reflects their perceived personalities of themselves and those of their character" (Winge 2019, 86). The cosplayer's relationship with character is integral in one's performance and experiences, each cosplayer allowing themselves to be influenced by their chosen media. By drawing on these works of King, Lamerichs and Winge, I have established a background of combing mixing audience research with textual analysis, combined with autoethnographic data and interview participant data.

During my autoethnographic participation in the cosplay community, there were several considerations I needed to make. Griffin and Griffin (2019) highlight how "autoethnography has been described as ethically problematic (Delamont, 2007). This is chiefly because, unless the author writes under a pseudonym, details about their autobiography will compromise the anonymity of those close to them" (Griffin and Griffin 2019, 11). In my own autoethnographic documentation and analysis I do not at any point draw on specifics of people I engaged with at conventions, my primary focus is to analyse my own emotional responses to my cosplay construction and performance and observe and document the structures which comprise the fan convention. The only exception to this rule is in Chapter 3 Part 1 and in Chapter 4 where I refer to Georgia Thomas-Parr a cosplayer and PhD researcher who I attended several conventions with. I have named Thomas-Parr with her consent to acknowledge her as a contemporary of mine. This was a mutual decision which we discussed, as I am also named (where appropriate) in her own research. Naturally, to ensure that my research does not become a blinkered self-study, my incorporation of other methods, namely participant interviews, and mixed theoretical frameworks, will help to better produce a more comprehensive view of the cosplay community.

Once I received ethical approval from my institution, I began to put together a cosplay of Sucy Manbavarian from *Little Witch Academia* (Yoshinari, 2017) to take to fan conventions. I kept a record of my cosplay experiences (which are presented in Chapter 3 Part 1). In this record I documented my feelings towards crafting my costume, the techniques I learnt, how I related with my chosen character, the experiences of sharing images of my cosplays online, and responses I received on the convention hall floor. This leads me to addressing another concern Griffin and Griffin highlight about autoethnographic and self-reflective methods of study. Griffin and Griffin question whether this type of study only feeds a researcher's "narcissism": "there is concern that using autoethnography as a data-gathering and analysis tool may lead to self-indulgent research outputs" (Griffin and Griffin 2019, 14). As I alluded to in my introduction and literature review, it might be suggested that the Acafan methodology is a self-indulgent process of validating one's own loyalties to a fan community. Of course, this is not the case, as the Acafan methodologies have revealed much enlightening work into the structures and practices that exist in fandoms and in the cosplay community. That said, due to much autoethnography being produced by Acafans themselves, as I have argued previously, this approach has resulted in a lack of discussion of the negative aspects of cosplay. However, there are also risks to my own position as a cultural studies researcher taking on traditionally Acafan methods. My distance from my subjects can be a useful tool as I have already reflected on, but there are risks of taking a position that is unsympathetic or overly critical. I have built mixed methods to minimise a dismissive attitude in my reflections. At every stage of this research, I have taken my interview participants reflections seriously to understand the experiences and the issues that accompany them. I am not attempting to revolutionise fan studies or cosplay scholarship, but in many ways I am testing cosplay scholarship, and theorising anomalies that contradict cosplay scholarship that emerged in my experiences (and in my participants experiences) by drawing on more critical works from a cultural studies tradition.

Data Collection – Fan Convention Attendance and Observations

In addition to reflecting on my own relationship with my chosen cosplay character, it was also important to reflect on my autoethnographic and ethnographic experiences at fan conventions. Data collection in the form of observations is integral in cosplay scholarship. Cosplay scholars such as Hale (2014) and Yamato (2016) for example have argued that the convention hall is an environment which facilitates performance between cosplayers. I attended both larger conventions such as MCM, who hold multiple fan conventions across the UK celebrating pop culture every year. Meanwhile, I also attended smaller conventions such as Geeks Comic Con. who like MCM host a range of UK based conventions celebrating popular culture. The main difference between events like MCM and Geeks is their scale. Where MCM will take up the entire space of a convention/exhibition centre, an event such as Geeks will take up a Town Hall or Hotel Space. Finally, I even attended more local events such as VWORP and Yorkshire Cosplay Con, conventions which are specific to an area, usually only holding an event once or twice a year. I wanted to attend a mix of conventions to examine similarities between the formalities of fan industries.

Winge found that having been a part of the cosplay masquerade experience among a group of friends gave her a better understanding of the events compared to that of learning about the formalities of each event second hand. “For the first time, I felt like I understood multiple aspects of Cosplay and how Cosplay enhanced fan experiences at a fan convention” (Winge 2019, 2). During my own attendance of fan conventions, attending a range of different conventions both in scale and subject has been vital in developing an understanding of typical convention rules and layouts, and whether cosplayers and fans engage differently with a convention depending on its unique set-up and location. “Each convention has its own personality, if you will, and Cosplayers respond to a convention’s characteristics and attributes” (Winge 2019, 47). Drawing out the “personality” of each convention is important to unpack similarities and differences between conventions as becomes increasingly relevant in Chapter 4 and 6. It is in unpacking the uniformity between conventions, that one gains a better understanding of the structures in place imposed on attendees by fan industries across all fan conventions regardless of size and theme, but also an insight of the formalities developed by cosplayers in performance and interactions.

The duration of my data collection attending fan conventions primarily took place between June 2019 and December 2019. My attendance of conventions was grounded primarily within a UK context, and I drew on a range of convention experiences. During my data collection I attended the following conventions: Yorkshire Cosplay Con. (Sheffield, 2019), Anime and Gaming Con. (Cardiff, 2019), Stoke-CON-Trent (Stoke-on-Trent, 2019), and MCM London (London, 2019). I spent the best part of a day at each convention (approx. 6-7 hours) and encompassed an array of smaller and larger scales of convention types. At times I also draw on observations attributed to preliminary research, including conventions: Anime and Gaming Con. (Birmingham, 2016), Geeks Con. (Wolverhampton, 2016), MCM Comic Con. Birmingham (Birmingham, 2016), MCM Comic Con. Manchester (Manchester, 2016) VWORP an unofficial Doctor Who fan convention (Manchester 2018), at each I spent the best part of a day (6-7 hours). During many of my observations, I placed a focus on cosplay spaces, namely the designated cosplay photoshoot areas and the cosplay masquerade. Though given the large amount of time I spent at each given convention, this allowed me to take-in the wider attributes of the conventions and witness the entanglement between cosplay fandom and broader popular media fandom.

My in-person attendance at conventions concluded in December 2019, though I had planned on attending more conventions in person when they resumed in the spring of 2020. However, in March 2020 the Covid-19 global pandemic resulted in social distancing restrictions across the UK and in North America meaning that this was no longer a viable option. With this said, many conventions moved online and so I decided to attend and collect data from a variety of UK and North American based online conventions. The collection of data from online conventions took place between March 2020 and concluded December 2020. The online conventions I attended include: GlitchCon. the annual Twitch convention (USA, 2020), Mainframe Comic Con. (USA, 2020), MCM Comic Con. Birmingham (UK, 2020), San Diego International Comic-Con. (USA, 2020), Sci-Fi Weekender (UK, 2020), and Stay-At-Home Con. (Europe, 2020). Many of these events were considerably shorter than most in-person conventions and held at times which were not convenient (due to personal circumstance and time zone differences), as such I spent approximately 3-4 hours at each convention.

Between both in-person and online data collection methods, I attended a range of different conventions, totalling 10 events over 2 years (15 events including conventions I had attended during the preliminary stages of this research project). At each convention I recorded notes on my phone, which I then formally wrote up after each convention. My notetaking at these conventions consisted primarily of ethnographic observations noting certain observations about the convention set up or witnessing certain interactions between cosplayers/vendors/staff. I would also make note of how I felt about interactions, locations and conventions which is an integral part of my autoethnographic study, this self-reflection was written alongside my cosplay diary which became useful to document as a personal history of my own personal feelings cosplaying and recalling notable interactions between other cosplayers and convention attendees.

Data Collection – Online Participation and Observation

The physical spaces of the fan convention have been the primary environment documented in much contemporary cosplay scholarship, but increasingly there is a contingent picking up on the entangled experiences between offline and online spaces. My online data collection officially started in May 2019, which I conducted through till December 2020. Ethnographic data collection from online spaces is an integral method, allowing one to observe ways in which cosplayers use online spaces to share ideas, techniques, and resources, as has been well documented by Manifold (2009), and Matsuura and Okabe (2015).

Bainbridge and Norris (2013) suggest that cosplay design and craft is both an offline and online act. The cosplay itself is a physical object which emerges from offline craft and online collaboration with other cosplayers. The needlework involved in cosplay construction is "often created through assistance of online forums, cosplaying sites […] and other peer communities devoted to assist in the creation and craft of costumes" (Bainbridge and Norris 2013, 9). The global reaches of online environments have facilitated the global reach of previously localised TV and film and thus facilitating global fandoms, as Hyunji Lee (2018) explains in relation to Korean Dramas. Lee discusses Western media's impact on Korean popular culture (and vice versa) through the global outreaches of social media and international distribution and discussion. "Social media have also provided a space where transnational fans can meet like-minded people, expand their fandom by using it for their own cultural productions, and spread it to a wider audience" (Lee 2018, 366). Making use of online tools to access groups and communities is important, allowing fans and producers to engage with others they might not otherwise be able to reach. For cosplayers online spheres facilitate international forums to share ideas, new techniques, and templates.

Lamerichs explains how her research is characterised by "its combination of online and off-line data" (Lamerichs 2018, 54). For Lamerichs these online spaces should not be treated any differently from existing research practices at in-person locations. Lamerichs continues, "I do not want to make online ethnography into something innately different from traditional ethnography […] The Internet cannot easily be separated from one's habits or home. Like any other ethnographic undertaking, it involves journeying towards a field and taking notes on it" (Lamerichs 2018, 55). Lamerichs understands that offline and online experiences are entangled and cannot be read separately when discussion cosplay or popular media fans. Online and offline environments interact with each other and shape the community's collective identity (as was observed in my literature review).

On online communities, Dennis (2010) discusses the sharing of homoerotic fan art based on popular cartoon characters such as from *Danny Phantom* or *Fairly Oddparents*. The community Dennis discusses is primarily made up of juvenile fan artists, these online spaces are important for the fan artists, allowing individuals to "explore, or deny the possibility of same-sex desire" (Dennis 2010, 7). In response to his research participant data, Dennis suggests that fan artists build relationships with their chosen characters which can aid offline relationships. Dennis references a *Fairly Oddparents* comic in which the character Cosmo doesn't know how to respond to Eddy's desire to be "more than friends". Dennis explains how,

> many male juveniles experience similar situations in their everyday lives, where nearly everyone pretends to be heterosexual, open expressions of same-sex desire are swiftly punished and the only way to determine if a friend or acquaintance might be interested being 'more than friends' is to come out oneself
>
> Dennis 2010, 22

Lived experience as both offline and online is integral in fan communities. Online and offline experiences as part of my autoethnography are not only vital, but it will be an integral point of conversation that will be raised as a part of all my semi-structured interviews with my cosplay participants.

The duration of my data collection from online groups and forums is difficult to attribute hours to as I didn't participate in these groups for fixed periods (as I had for the conventions), but instead I followed Christine Hine's principles of online ethnography (2008). I joined Facebook groups including: 'UK Cosplay', 'UK Cosplay Community' and 'Cosplay Help and Advice'. I was conscious to adhere to recent ethical guidance for online ethnography and only collect data from open public groups, as opposed to closed groups (Townsend and Wallace 2016, 5). I deemed it inappropriate to collect data from closed groups as it would be an invasion of private/sensitive material not intended for a public audience and in cases where I have referenced public Facebook posts I have anonymised the users name to protect their identity. As I joined the public groups via my own pre-existing Facebook account, my observations of these groups became a part of my own everyday interactions with Facebook. I was a part of these groups for the first two years of study, before choosing to leave them mid-2020. During my time in these Facebook groups, I would make notes on posts that caught my eye, but what was perhaps most useful was having these groups as part of my everyday use of Facebook. By incorporating these groups into my daily use of social media, I picked up on certain trends in what cosplayers posted, the tone of posts, the languages, and expectations of the cosplay groups – and the uniformity between them. Many of these observations will be unpacked in greater detail in Chapters 3 and 5.

In addition to Facebook, I also joined Reddit, specifically on account of its reputation amongst popular fans. I joint several cosplay centric Reddit pages including 'r/cosplay', 'r/cosplayers', 'r/crossplay', and 'r/genderbends', these groups were much more cosplay photography centric, allowing a platform for cosplayers to exchange images of themselves and receive feedback from other members. Much like my engagement with Facebook, all the Reddit groups I collected data from were public groups and any circumstances in which I have referred to Reddit posts the user's name has been anonymised. Unlike Facebook, my engagement with Reddit was not incorporated into my own everyday usage. However, I would make sure to check the pages at least once, or twice a week which gave me ample opportunity to document the types of posts being made. With both Facebook and Reddit as part of my autoethnography, I would occasionally comment on people's posts, typically praising different cosplayers work or asking how a cosplayer had crafted parts of their cosplays. I chose to interact with these online spaces as part of my autoethnographic approach given that "some form of active participation in a group is […] often useful for an ethnographer who wants to try out emerging understandings, and to gain a sense of experience of taking part in group interactions" (Hine 2008, 262). As a part of my communication with other group members, I even posted some of my own images and received feedback which helped me to improve my cosplays, these are engagements which I reflect on in greater detail in Chapter 3.

During the preparation stages of this thesis, I considered joining cosplay groups on Discord, however, much in the same way I rejected joining closed Facebook groups, I decided against drawing on Discord as a site of data collection as Discord groups work via an 'invitation only' system. It would be unethical to draw on private information from these groups or break the trust of any of my contacts.

I also joined the cosplay forum, Cure: WorldCosplay which is a public forum available to view by anyone, though one must sign up to post/comment. The forum is a space for cosplayers to chat and share resources, but unlike Facebook and Reddit, Cure interested me specifically given that it centres on a 'world ranking' system. The world ranking system is judged by engagement, cosplayers who receive more positive engagement on their cosplay photos are ranked more highly than those with less and/or negative engagement. Furthermore, where Facebook and Reddit had country specific groups Cure is global in its outreach, I saw and virtually 'met' with cosplayers from around the globe. It's a forum which not only provides a space of discussion, but also competition, much like the cosplay masquerade of the fan convention, as I shall unpack in greater detail in Chapter 5. Much like Reddit, I would check Cure: WorldCosplay once or twice a week alongside Reddit for the purposes of data collection. Much like I had done on Facebook and Reddit, as part of my autoethnography I would occasionally comment and share my own images on Cure: WorldCosplay..

By participating in online cosplay groups, I was able to observe first-hand the traditions cosplayers shape and practice between online and offline sites. It was by experiencing these environments, that I was exposed to the structures that facilitate cosplay communities,

Attitudes towards social media ethics vary between institutions and being aware of the ethical debates around online data collection was vital in outlining my own stance on online data collection and analysis. Townsend and Wallace provide the guide *Social Media Research: Guide to Ethics* (2016) in which they outline formal ways to conduct online academic research that protects both the researcher and other online users. One of the main arguments in the paper concerns whether online material can be considered public or private information. Townsend and Wallace argue that "a password protected 'private' Facebook group can be considered private, whereas an open discussion on Twitter in which people broadcast their opinions using a hashtag […] can be considered public" (Townsend and Wallace 2016, 5). There are several occasions in this thesis where I reference posts from Twitter and Instagram, whilst considered public by Townsend and Wallace, I have still chosen to anonymise names to eliminate any concerns over the authors privacy. In drawing on social media posts as case studies, caution is necessary to reduce risk of harm to the original online author. Townsend and Wallace explain that risk to online users can occur when

> social media user's privacy and anonymity have been breached, and [risk] is also greater when dealing with more sensitive data which when revealed to new audiences might expose a social media user to the risk of embarrassment, reputational damage, or prosecution (to name a few examples)
>
> Townsend and Wallace 2016, 7

In this thesis there a multiple cases where I reference, analyse, and on occasion screencap images from social media users. All the data collected online comes from public groups as previously marked out, but nonetheless, when it comes to hobbyist cosplayers I have anonymised all names and in images I have censored faces to protect the identities of the subject. There are also occasions where I reference public figures and professional cosplayers, in these circumstances as public figures I have referred to their professionally known names and have chosen not to edit their images. The choice not to anonymise certain names was to properly credit the creators work and acknowledge their professional status. I have made this decision for professional cosplayers, professional photographers, and where appropriate online artists. With regards to protecting myself online, I was conscious to unfollow public groups after the collection data period and delete any posts that gained unwanted attention.

I developed an ethical methodology in my approach to the collection and use of online materials which went beyond the expectations of my institution. However, I made an active decision to do so out of respect to the cosplay community and to protect the privacy of individuals involved (even if an individual's data might be technically publicly available, this does not mean that said individuals may necessarily account for such attention).

Data Collection – Interview Participants

The Acafan writers I have been drawing upon conducted interviews with fans and cosplayers as key parts of their research data sets (such as in the work of Rahman, Wing-Sun and Cheung, 2012; Peirson-Smith, 2013; Mountfort, Geczy and Peirson-Smith, 2019; and Winge, 2019). Interviews allow the researcher to draw on the unique experiences of a wide pool of people, each with differing thoughts and unique lived experiences. In Portwood-Stacer's article researching queer identities in online anarchist movements/communities, she did not attempt to tailor her respondents to her call for participants, “I did not purposefully recruit interviewees based on any aspect of their identities […] This openness was intentional, based on the fact that when I set out I did not presume to know precisely how other identity categories would intersect with people’s identities as anarchists” (Portwood-Stacer 2010, 481). By putting out an open call Portwood-Stacer was able gather a set of actively engaging participants.

Rahman, Wing-Sun and Cheung (2012) explain the benefits of drawing on interviews in tandem with ethnographic observations, they open by explaining how in their study “a quasi-ethnographic approach was used to examine and understand the cosplayers’ behaviour and experiences. This method was deemed to be the most suitable approach for the present study because ethnographies can gain an insider’s view through interviews and observations” (Rahman et al. 2012, 323). During their study, Rahman et al. drew on a total of 15 participants who responded to two types of interview, including in-depth interviews (greater than one hour in length) with three participants, and casual interviews (informal conversations on the convention hall floor or in online forums) with a total of 12 participants (Rahman et al. 2012, 323). In-depth interviews and casual interviews each have unique qualities. In-depth interviews tend to follow a pre-planned set of questions or a semi-structured set of questions which allow more flexibility allowing for the participant to reflect on what is important to them as is used by many fan scholars (see Freund and Fielding, 2013; Katz, 2014; and Orme, 2016). In contrast the informal interviews such as at convention sites or on the street allow for immediate responses within the field of study (as opposed to reflecting on the field of study).

Peirson-Smith (2013) uses in-depth interviews to examine cosplay communities based in Southeast Asia and outlines that, “the empirical basis for this study is founded on a descriptive, analytical approach based on a collection of focus-group and individual interviews” (Peirson-Smith 2013, 87). And like Ragman et al. or Jacobs (2013), Peirson-Smith uses observational and interview data collection in their cosplay research. However, neither Jacobs nor Pierson-Smith go into detail as to the collection of data or even why it was necessary. On the other hand, in Winge’s own methodology she pinpoints the ‘organic’ nature of her interview processes and the advantages of using interviews as a source of data collection.

> I collected Cosplayer narratives by interviewing individual Cosplayers. […] The interviews focused around my guiding research questions, but the actual query process was organic in nature, which allowed for follow-up questions that probed deeper into the cosplayers’ answers and resulted in deeper reflections
>
> Winge 2019, 22

The semi-structured interview process is a productive one, in sparking a conversation with one's participants whilst allowing the participant to be directed towards sharing their own unique experiences and interests. I have conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews in the research for this thesis primarily because it prompts a dialogue between interviewer and participant. A semi-structured interview in favour of a structured interview is increasingly common in qualitative research, for example Dhoest points out that "one of the key methods in qualitative research, the in-depth interview, is no longer conceived as a method to 'dig up' information but rather as an active, interactive event in which interviewer and interviewee co-construct knowledge and meanings" (Dhoest 2014, 30). Structured interviews or questionnaires risk leading one's participants to feel directed towards giving a specific response. The results gathered in semi-structured interviews, however, provide a data set which helps to validate and or present conflicting narratives alongside one's own autoethnographic reflections.

I released my call for participants as a digital flyer (see appendix) which was shared in public Facebook and Reddit groups with permission from the page moderators. The flyer was designed to encourage cosplayers to contact myself to express interest in participating in an interview. The flyer describes that participants must be based in the UK and North America, at least 18-years old, and they must be active cosplayers. For full transparency I outlined the core topics of the thesis, and my contact details and academic biography for the participant's reference. Further information was available on a custom-made blog.

In my initial correspondence with participants who responded to my open call, I sent participants the following information: that they could ask questions at any time; interviews would be recorded (audio only); that recordings were stored on an encrypted memory stick, transcribed, and would be deleted after the completion of the study. Participants were also told that their names would be anonymised in all materials to protect their privacy, and if participants had any concerns they were free to drop out of the study. In the interviews themselves participants were told that they could refuse to answer any questions they weren't comfortable with. Participants were also informed that they could request a support sheet if they needed, this support sheet (see appendix) provided participants with details of USA and UK Mental Health, LGBTQ+, and Body Image support contacts. Before an interview was scheduled, I finally sent my participant with an information sheet (see appendix) with a detailed explanation of the study and additional contact information including my supervision team contacts and Keele University contact. Once the consent form had been signed and returned, a time and date was set for the interview. Following the interviews, I kept in touch with a handful of my participants via Twitter to update them on my research and my own cosplay participation. The relationship I built up with my participants was important, and consequently many participants allowed me to include images of themselves in this thesis to better illustrate points of discussion (I subsequently censored their faces to protect the participants identity).

A total of nine interviews were conducted, each lasting a minimum of one hour, with three interviews lasting two hours in length. I used Google Meets to facilitate each interview and made audio recordings using Audacity. Following each interview, I transcribed the audio footage (using anonymised names). Transcripts were saved alongside the audio footage on an encrypted memory stick. On the anonymisation of my participants, all names were anonymised using a list of Pokémon gym leaders in order of in-game appearance; thus, the given anonymised names of my interview participants bare no reflection on the age/gender/race/sexuality of said participant. Most of my interviews took place before the introduction of lockdowns and social restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic. During the pandemic there was a notable decrease of people inquiring into the project whilst interviewing 9 people meant that I had a small sample. The interviews I had conducted still generated rich data, which was strengthened further by the long length interviews and by the images participants has contributed for further analysis. Crucially, the interviews were only one component of my mixed methods, as a component of the larger project, the semi-structured interviews complimented my online ethnography and autoethnographic methods.

Autoethnographic and Ethnographic Benefits of Hosting a Blog

As briefly indicated during my outline of collecting interview participants, I set up my own blog upon which I recorded my cosplay experiences. The blog served several purposes, firstly it was a useful diary record of autoethnographic experience. Secondly, the blog was a means of publicising my research and encouraging potential cosplayers to contact me to participate in the study. Finally, the blog was also a means of being transparent with those participants who took part.

Academic traditions in publication have had a fraught relationship with blogging, as Kirkup acknowledges in the opening of her paper 'Academic blogging, academic practice and academic identity' (2010), she suggests that there has been little enthusiasm for blogging by scholars and researchers, "a significant reason for this is that traditional forms of scholarly production do not recognize blogging as an academic product" (Kirkup 2010, 2). The lack of peer review, the immediacy of self-publication, and (generally) short unreferenced format, are all factors which put to question the legitimacy of the work being published over blogs, and thus in turn questions the medium of blogging as an academic form. The reputation of blogs has seen a dramatic shift however, as academic policies (certainly in the UK) have placed greater emphasis on the outreach of academic research. Mewburn and Thomson in their paper ‘Why do academics blog?’ (2013) unpack academic blogs drawing on a wide pool of case studies. Drawing to their conclusion, Mewburn and Thomson note how

> Some of the problems nominated by advocates – communicating with a wider public, writing in publications other than journals – are now part of official policy concerns in countries like the UK, where all grant applicants are required to address their ‘impact’ on audiences other than academics.
>
> Mewburn and Thomson 2013, 1115

Reaching non-academic audiences is the primary argument in favour of blogging as an academic practise, in my own research as I shall go onto explain in greater detail was a means of encouraging cosplayers to participate in interviews as part of my research. But, in academia more broadly, blogging has been a means of outreach and impact.

Lupton, Mewburn and Thomas in their 2018 chapter ‘The Digital Academic’ document how the contemporary academic uses digital technologies to distribute their research, and that increasingly “academics are being encouraged to become performers as well as teachers and researchers – a new kind of academic selfhood” (Lupton et al. 2018, 10). The notion of academic as an online ‘performer’ is suggestive of the blog of having a distinctive tone and style different to that of academic publications. It is also suggestive that the blog is a much more personal medium within which the academic must add something of the self (or at least an avatar or performed self). Returning to the 2010 article by Kirkup, an emphasis on academic reach is similarly placed, Kirkup suggests that “for academic bloggers, the potential reach of blogs, even when it produces only a small audience is so much greater than they would expect for traditional academic publications” (Kirkup 2010, 17). For Kirkup, she argues that soon academic bloggers can expect to see blogs being “understood as a product of research and scholarship” which in turn will award the academic blogger external rewards and internal career advancement (Kirkup 2010, 19).

By setting up a cosplay blog as a core component of my call for participants and as a means of distributing my research findings to my academic contemporaries and potential wider cosplay readers, I added myself to an increasing tradition of using blogging as a tool of research. Alongside other academic bloggers including: Luvaas (2016), Lapadat (2020), as well as fan studies specific academic bloggers, namely Henry Jenkins [henryjenkins.org/], Nichole Lamerichs [nicollelamerichs.com/blog/], and Enerald King [emeraldlking.com/elkingblog]. My cosplay blog was created as an additional page on my pre-existing personal blog, on Wordpress [dskentel.wordpress.com], and consisted of three main pages, including: a Cosplay 'Home Page'; 'Cosplay Diary'; 'Information Sheet and Consent Form'.

The Home Page introduced myself as a PhD researcher with links to my Northwest Consortium Doctorial Training Partnership (NWCDTP) page. The page also included an outline of my research as a mix of auto-ethnography (linking to the cosplay Diary Page) and ethnographic interviews (linking to the call for participants flyer and consent forms). It is necessary to emphasise that a core aspect of the blog was to advertise the research and encourage cosplay readers to be involved in the research. In Luvaas 2019 paper 'Unbecoming', Luvaas highlights the unique position of the autoethnographer and blogging as a research tool. Blogging is itself a process of becoming and connecting with the researcher's subject community, for Luvaas "the emphasis on becoming is even more true for autoethnographers, those inwardly-turned 'vulnerable observers' (Behar, 1996) who make themselves their research subjects" (Luvaas 2019, 248). The blog was upfront about my position of outsider learning to become 'insider':

> As I began my research into gender and queer identities through cosplay, I have identified two primary methodologies for conducting my research. Firstly, the organization of interviews and talking with cosplayers; secondly, I will also engage in reflection upon my own cosplay practices. I still feel relatively new to cosplay, it is something I came to via my academic studies. But, something which has nevertheless seeped into my personal life.
>
> Skentelbery, 2019

The transparency between myself and my readers, and potential research participants was important not only as a point of ethical transparency but was also useful as a conversational point which came up during several of my interviews.

On the Home Page, I also used this as a space to highlight my call for participants in which I outlined: who I wanted to interview (cosplayers over the age of 18 based in North America or the UK), how potential participants could contact me (with my academic email and Twitter address linked), and I also provided links to PDF's of the information sheet and consent form for the potential participant to read through. It is also worth noting that this information was provided by text, but also represented visually by the inclusion of my research flyer [see Appendix 1] on the home page. The blog is a useful medium to interact with potential participants as the medium itself is a conversational one between blogger and audience commentor, an observation which is made by Mauranen in their paper 'Hybridism, edutainment, and doubt' which examines the relationship between science academic bloggers and non-academic audiences. Mauranen suggests that "in blogs, audiences are multifarious and heterogeneous: they are not mere observers or receivers of scientific communication, but active commentators and participants" (Mauranen 2013, 20). My blog spoke directly to an assumed cosplay audience and sought to actively encourage this audience to comment and participate in the discussions I was introducing in the blog posts. The active cosplay participants which are the focus of my research were encouraged to participate in a conversation, and the correspondence that took place during my interviews is proof of the blogs success as a marketing tool.

I further encouraged an ongoing dialogue, by including on the home page links to blog posts, conference papers, publications, and videos where I had shared my research and where potential interview participants (as well as academics/general public) could learn more about my research and academic interests. Blogging as a means of distributing academic research amongst the academic community and with a wider public readership is a growing phenomenon among academics and is something which is reflected upon by María Luzón in their paper Connecting Genres and Languages in Online Communication (2017), "Blogs facilitate the immediate and wide circulation of material […] on the web, by providing an easily accessible space, open to a diverse audience, not restricted to experts or members of a disciplinary community." (Luzón 2017, 443). These additional blog posts which shared my research ideas, and developments in my research findings were important not only contributing to the marketing of my research and encouraging cosplay readers to take part in an interview but sharing these research updates were also useful in establishing transparency between academic and research participants. Like Mauranen, Luzón continues by placing an emphasis on the interactivity that blogs facilitate between blogger and reader "The interactive features of most blogs (e.g. commenting capabilities) allow for immediate discussions among the blogger and any reader interested in the topic of the blog post" (Luzón 2017, 443). Whilst my blog post itself did not get any direct comments on the blog page, I had many readers contact me over Twitter, and many participants bring up topics from my blog posts during interviews.

It is worth noting that, my Twitter and the Blog worked side-by-side, as I would share blog updates via my Twitter (@DSkentel) as well as engage in conversation with both fellow academics and public cosplay audiences. Returning to the work of Lupton et al. they draw on the work of Jessie Daniels in support of the argument that academic blogging is entangled with an academic's broader online presence. Lupton et al. refer to how Daniels "describes how she uses Twitter both to conduct informal conversations, but also, as a digital sociologist, to observe how others engage on the medium" (Lupton, et al. 2018, 9). Online conversations and observations indeed became an important part of this project as shall be discussed in chapter 3, and in greater detail through chapters 5 and 6. For the purposes of drumming up interest for the participant interview portion of this thesis, conversations on Twitter about the blog proved useful to engage in what other cosplayers were interesting, as well as them sharing advice and tips on aspects of the craft I had been struggling with.

Sharing my wider research findings, as well as engaging in Twitter conversations were helpful in terms of transparency between myself as 'outsider academic' and the 'insider cosplay participant', it made sure that cosplay participant was conscious of my research questions, my focus on gender and sexual expression, but also my more critical angle on cosplay's associated industries. Whilst blogs are a tool for distributing academic thought, Luzón returns to this notion, only to conclude that the dissemination of research is not the primary function (/outcome) of blogging as a medium, "the functionalities of blogs are used not to disseminate science to a diversified audience, but also to raise social awareness and bring about new forms of collaboration" (Luzón 2017, 465). The transparency between myself as academic and my cosplay participants that I made apparent by: outlining my academic position and research aims on my home page; by providing links to additional research blogs, articles, and videos; by sharing my research flyer, information sheet, and consent form; as well as by engaging with readers of my blog on Twitter – I raised awareness of my research aims as an ongoing project which needed the participation of my readership, through discussion of ideas online, and ultimately through discussion and reflection in the form of an interview.

The Cosplay Diary (also known as "Becoming More Like Sucy") documented my experiences as I entered the cosplay community. It documented the processes I went through as I learnt the technical aspects of cosplay craft, as well as notable interactions within the cosplay community itself. The Cosplay Diary is an honest reflection on my experiences cosplaying as the character Sucy Manbavarian from *Little Witch Academia* (Yoshinari, 2017). I updated the diary recording each development of the cosplay process. Under the first dated record: "Autumn 2018", I outlined my minor existing relationship with cosplay, but was not a part of the community and this diary would document all aspects of my experiences with cosplay. By outlining my position as academic becoming a cosplayer, rather than an academic cosplayer, was important for transparency between myself and my potential interview participants. In this Diary I recorded key processes of my interaction with purchasing a pre-made costume of Sucy's ceremonial robes, and how I learnt to embody Sucy's mannerisms and compose Sucy's wig and make-up. Secondly, I also recorded the process of crafting Sucy's school uniform and building her magic wand which I could use in my performance of her as a prop. Throughout, where relevant, I also documented interactions I had online.

A publicly available research diary, is an unconventional academic approach, but it is a process which does have its benefits, as Magasic (with reference to the research of Ellis, 2011) found in their own research on travel blogging (2014), in their paper they explain how by blogging their experiences "the space of my research diary functioned as a reflective domain where I could forge my 'self-claimed' hypotheses with academic rigour, thus making them useful to the wider research community" (Magasic 2014, online). From my experiences the blog worked, several cosplay readers (and cosplay academics) contacted me over Twitter to discuss my research, and several of these cosplayers even followed up on my call for participants and agreed to be interviewed. Again, addressing the travel blogger's relationship with audiences, Magasic explains how "the audiences' ability to respond to the blogger immediately, and the value this holds, means that they can influence the traveller's choices and routines on the road" (Magasic 2014, online). During my correspondence over Twitter there were several interactions with my readers which encouraged me as a cosplayer, welcoming me to the community. Notably conversations online encouraged me to place focus on creating my own cosplay, in addition to the purchasing of cosplay and performance of character.

The Diary is written in the first person and has a casual vocabulary compared with the formal academic lexis that can be found in this thesis. Being conscious of tone was important when writing the blog to present my research to a non-academic audience. The written tone, and style of the blog is important as I have already introduced and given my objective of becoming an auto-ethnographic blogger to document, inform, and converse with non-academic readers, the written tone needed to appeal to this audience, and in turn provoke an approachable conversation. The presentation and style of research material through blogging is examined by

Boylarn (2013) in their paper 'Blackgirl Blogs, Auto/ethnography, and Crunk Feminism', Boylarn reflects, "as an auto/ethnographer I examine my lived experiences through a cultural lens, using creative experiences through a cultural lens, using creative writing techniques and research methods to interrogate my experiences while making sense of cultural phenomenon" (Boylorn 2013, 74). In the Cosplay Diary, I would merge my own lived experiences, with some critical reflections, but I was creative in my presentation by injecting moments of humour, for example, when I discussed the Ceremonial Costume not fitting completely comfortably:

> I'm pleased with the fact I fitted within the dress (especially given I was confident I'd never even get in the thing. So being able to walk around in it (even if like a penguin) was great). […] However, I did find my fleshy features and my thick neck bothering. At the end of the day, my own physical traits are not like the character. Despite new narratives among cosplayers trying to dispel the narrative that a cosplayer's body image must conform to the original character, and despite my own support in dispelling these narratives, I was nevertheless annoyed to find that this bothers me.
>
> Skentelbery, 2019

The written tone of the Cosplay Diary which seeks to merge "creative writing techniques and research methods", is designed to both reflect and conceptualise my own experiences whilst also connect and relate with my assumed (cosplay) audience, to resonate with the assumed readers own experiences while also engage with them on an emotional level. As Boylarn elaborates towards the end of their paper, "blogs and auto/ethnography are emotionally intelligent texts whose success is largely determined by their capability to instigate a reaction in readers, either resonance or response" (Boylarn 2013, 77). In my own blog I was very clear that I was writing from the perspective of an academic, by directly informing my reader of this fact, and in my links to my wider research I do maintain something of an academic voice however the position is presented in a creative manor, making the academic world more accessible, and in turn making the cosplay community more accessible for me.

The relationship between academic blogger and non-academic blog reader is an important consideration made in the before mentioned 2010 paper by Kirkup. From Kirkup's own experiences with academic blogging, she recounts "I had to develop a voice for the blog, decide the relationship between my public (blog) identity and other professional and private identities" (Kirkup 2010, 6). When writing the Cosplay Diary, I was conscious about my tone, avoiding any academic terms or dense academic theory, instead focusing entirely on presenting my own observations and experiences in a casual diary like manner to encourage conversation between myself and my cosplayer audience. For example, when I explained the process of constructing Sucy's waistcoat out from a pullover:

> My plan with the pull-over is to sew buttons onto the front to make it appear more like a waistcoat. This was easily achievable as you can see below, I found two large blue buttons which I sewed onto the front to mimic Sucy's uniform.
>
> Skentelbery, 2019

In the above circumstance, my reflection is a direct explanation of how I constructed an element of Sucy's school uniform cosplay. Firstly, it was a useful documentation of how I constructed the costume. However, secondly, by directly addressing the reader in my writing "as you can see below" directs the reader to an image which illustrates the crafting process described and in turn involves the reader in the process I experienced.

Talking directly to this imagined non-academic cosplay reader, with an aim of encourage the cosplay reader to be involved within the project in volves a great deal of thought towards formatting the blog, style of the blog, and tone of the blog. In Zou and Hyland's paper (2020), they observe that the features of the typical blog are distinct from academic writing (in their paper, specifically science blogs):

> These stress a more personal and engaging voice and so, despite the popularity of hard science blogs among the general public, blog writing might be easier for those writing in the softer sciences who are perhaps more attuned to the needs of a more discursive interactional environments.
>
> Zou and Hyland 2020, 291

Writing in first person and directly addressing the reader emphasises the interactional intentions of the blog, to encourage cosplay readers to reach out to me, and participate in the research, as well as the readers to engage in conversation with me about the topics and ideas raised in the Cosplay Diary (as well as my related research links).

The findings of the Cosplay Diary are unpacked in greater detail throughout Chapter 3, Part 1, and a few cases which highlight my interactions with cosplay participants outside of interviews via the blog and Twitter are addressed in Chapter 3, Parts 2 and 3. Further reflections that took place online are revealed in Chapters 4 and 5. As one shall uncover when reading these Chapters, my intentions to use the Cosplay Blog as a means of: distributing research, calling for research participants, and also helping to ensure a transparency of my position as academic to my participants – were all successful. And I anticipated that it would be, given that academic-blogging, whilst still an emerging academic pursuit, nevertheless has a successful track record, something which Mauranen reflects on regarding science blogging and its relationship with non-academic readers. “Non-experts want to hear about new findings from researchers, rather than from mediators. The ivory tower [of academic institutions] has long been crumbling, and research blogging could be one way of building new bridges between the interested layman and the professional expert” (Mauranen 2013, 32). The inclusion of my research Information Sheet and Consent Form, is a point of transparency between my position as well as acting as an invitation to be interviewed. More than this however, the inclusion of these documents on the blog allowed readers of the blog to learn more about my call for participants, giving them the chance to be an apparent collaborator in the research.

It is worth offering a brief reflection on the aftermath of the blog. Once, I had gathered my interview participants, and had moved on to the write up stages of this research, I made the active decision to stop updating the Cosplay Diary (this was in part because my attendance at conventions had come to an end during the Covid-19 pandemic), but I had also significantly reduced the amount of academic research updates, by the summer of 2021, no further updates were being posted. The decision to stop posting updates was to ensure that I did not become too much a part of the cosplay community. Fundamentally I am a researcher, and I do not desire to be associated with the cosplay beyond the extent of this research project.

The fear of academic type-casting, or even losing touch with academic criticism in favour for the newfound community, are concerns expressed by Luvass. The focus of Luvaas’ paper is the aftereffects of autoethnography, reflecting on their own experiences of auto-ethnographic blogging Luvass recounts how: “The blog also, however, has made it difficult for me to move onto other projects. Embedded in a network of other blogs, it has a logic of its own: Post! Get more Followers!” (Luvaas 2019, 258). The notion of ‘going native’ through the process of auto-ethnography was in my mind throughout this research project, the connections I make with other cosplayers in this research were important and to a certain degree even pleasurable. For academic bloggers such as Boylorn, there are many advantages of this, in the sense that Boylorn is writing academically about everyday lived experiences, and blogging was a new way of reviewing these experiences. For Boylorn: “Blogging introduced my auto/ethnographies to a wider audience for the first time. The immediate feedback I received made me feel comfortable revealing private experiences in public a public forum because I knew that my experiences represented other black girl realities" (Boylorn 2013, 76). For myself however, I was not and am not a cosplayer, I merely took on the role of cosplayer. I was transparent about this on my blog and maintaining that critical distance was important to me. Being transparent about my critical distance on the Cosplay Blog aimed to be honest with my readers, and in turn prevent me from 'going native'. Maintaining distance is an important professional tool, in part to keep my research questions objective, and the long-term repercussions of dismissing the blog will hopefully allow me to move onto other research projects outside of the specifics of cosplay.

Closing Remarks on the Methodology

I combine autoethnographic approaches with ethnographic semi-structured interviews (in both online and offline spaces) influenced by the traditions in cosplay and Acafan scholarship. But there is an important distinction to be made in that whilst I recognise the values of the Acafan methodologies, I apply my findings to mixed theoretical frameworks between fan studies and traditions of power in critical theory, cultural studies, and postfeminist criticism. In this thesis, I break down the ways in which cosplay communities develop their own power structures applying the theoretical work of Acafan scholars such as Lamerichs' 'networks of production' (2018), as I outlined in my introduction; critical audience theory such as by Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), and more contemporary postfeminist such as Banet-Weister's 'networks of popular feminism and misogyny' (2018). The combination of these three theoretical positions has been used in subsequent chapters to unpack the data collected. These mixed theoretical frameworks built a greater sense of how cosplayers support one another, share ideas, and reimagine narratives, but also the ways in which cosplayers critique, harass and abuse one another. I propose, in contrast to much cosplay (and fan) scholarship, that cosplayers also replicate dominant social norms, and are subject to manipulation form fan and popular media industries. Thus, what I am examining through these mixed approaches is a complicated set of entangled discourses, a network of contradicting attributes which sustain both fan and industry.

Whilst I may have come across as critical of the Acafan methodology at points, I acknowledge that these methods have been productive in understanding the current landscape of cosplay communities and popular fandoms. It is due to Acafans' attempts to legitimise fandom and its study, that leads me to suggest that there are certain critical positions have been overlooked, such as growing concerns around racial exclusion and misogyny. I incorporate these mixed methods in part to assess the Acafan as methodology alongside my investigation of the cosplay community.

In Chapter 3 Part 1 I reflect on my own experiences constructing a costume and performing in cosplay on the convention hall floor. I reflect on my processes, what I learnt of the cosplay community on a technical level, but also how I responded to the practice emotionally. In unpacking my own experiences, I remain conscious of where I validate contemporary cosplay scholarship, but also certain observations and experiences which challenge cosplay literature. My observations from in person fan conventions will then be discussed in detail in chapter 4, with my observations of online conventions been discussed in detail in Chapter 6 Part 1. Meanwhile Chapter 3 Parts 2 and 3 will introduce my interview participants and reflect on their own cosplay experiences in relation to the theory discussed through the literature review. Part 2 will analyse cosplayers relationships with their chosen characters. Drawing on cosplay and Acafan scholarship, my participants illustrate and confirm the arguments of cosplay scholarship that cosplayers can be creative, and experimental with notions of identity and gender. Part 3 on the other hand will unpack participants experiences which challenge cosplay scholarship, drawing out cases of abuse and harassment, and the power dynamics which exist in the cosplay community.

Chapter 3: Unpacking the 'Active Audience'

Part 1 – Autoethnographic Reflections

Over the course of these three parts, this chapter will illustrate how cosplay offers opportunities for playful engagements with popular culture and identity, while also exploring how this play is limited by cosplay's momentary nature and the emotional labour involved in inhabiting chosen characters. Chapter 3 is split into three parts; Part 1: 'Unpacking the 'Active Audience' and Autoethnographic Reflections'; Part 2: 'Unpacking the 'Active Audience' and Interviews'; and finally, Part 3: 'Unpacking the 'Active Audience' and Audience Power Relations'.

Choosing my Cosplay

Fan agency and creativity has been at the foundations for much contemporary cosplay scholarship, off the back of established fan studies scholarship such as by Jenkins ([1992] 2013), Hills (2002), and Sandvoss (2005) as discussed in prior chapters. In many cases, the cosplay scholar draws on notions of fan agency to propose that through the act of cosplay, individuals draw on popular media to express something of their own identity. One such cosplay scholar is Peirson-Smith (2013) who addresses the agency of cosplayers craft, referring to Southeast Asian fan communities "the individual [cosplayer] actively and creatively projects their 'program' or socioeconomic profile as social agent, expressed through their clothing, or rather via the non-discursive communicative elements that they choose to wear in a given context" (Peirson-Smith 2013, 86-7). Peirson-Smith suggests that cosplay is built on individual and collective identities, and through reinvention of existing materials reconfigured onto the cosplayers body which redefine both the original source material and the cosplayers 'self'.

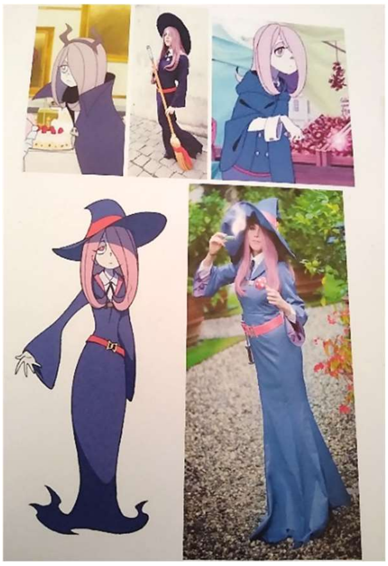
When cosplayers pick the characters they're going to cosplay, there are a multitude of motivations which can prompt an individual's decision. Within the vastness of variations between individuals, from my observations on Facebook cosplay groups, including 'UK Cosplay', 'UK Cosplay Community' and 'Cosplay Help and Advice', I observed two prominent motivations expressed by cosplayers: Firstly, a cosplayer chooses to cosplay a character because they admire the character and are a fan of the source material. I observed multiple posts from cosplayers announcing their upcoming projects, proclaiming their love of a character with accompanying images of their chosen character, or asking for crafting advice. Secondly, the cosplayer can be motivated by following popular trends in popular media. The rewards of cosplaying popular characters can earn the cosplayer respect from the wider community (regardless of whether the cosplayer is a fan of said character). Much like the first motivation, I witnessed many posts asking others what their next project should be or commenting on new film trailers/releases.

When it came to creating a cosplay for myself, I followed the direction of most hobbyist cosplayers and chose a character I like. However, whilst I chose a character I admired from popular media, I did set two conditions for the purposes of this research. The first condition was that I should choose a character that would be recognised by other cosplayers, but not so mainstream that I get lost in the crowd, such as Harley Quinn or Darth Vader which are commonly seen on the convention floor. By choosing a character that was well liked but not overly cosplayed, the novelty of my cosplay made me more approachable online and at the convention space. The second condition I set myself responds to the objectives of this study and examining gender-play. Given that I am a twenty-something, white, cis male, I chose to create my own crossplay cosplay. To reiterate, crossplay cosplay is the process of cosplaying a character whose gender does not match one's own as accurately as possible. Emerald King explains that for the crossplay cosplayer "often the goal is to 'pass as the character through wigs, make-up, posture, body hair cultivation or removal, binding or tucking of genitals or visible secondary sex characteristics, and of course clothing and footwear" (King, forthcoming). By taking on an exercise in crossplay cosplay, I was challenged to learn several new skills, not only in constructing a costume, but also learning techniques to manipulate my masculine body to perform the feminine characteristics of my chosen character.

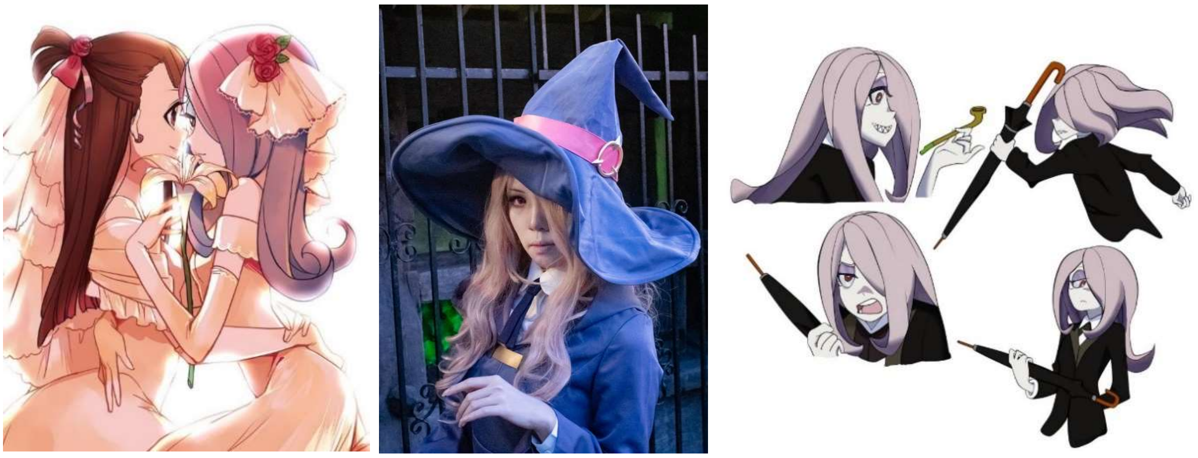
With these factors taken into consideration, I came to the decision that I would cosplay as Sucy Manbavarian from the anime series *Little Witch Academia* (2017), which grew some a sizable fanbase following the series launch in UK and North American on Netflix. In the cosplay literature, it was commonly suggested that the acts of crafting and performing a cosplay this can prompt a player to reflect on one's chosen character and oneself. I found that I was no exception to self-reflection during my experiences as Sucy Manbavarian.

The series *Little Witch Academia* is set in Luna Nova Magical Academy (a failing school for witches) the series follows Akko a young witch who is yet to master her powers. Sucy is one of Akko's best friends, though she does her best not to let on to this. Sucy is the half glass empty to Akko's glass half full, she is mischievous and has a fascination for the macabre. Whilst Sucy might keep her cards close to her chest, deep down she tries to be kind. As I watched the series and grew a familiarity with the characters, I developed a fondness for Sucy Manbavarian who I found an affinity with her macabre personality. Just as Lamerichs embedded herself within the *Hunger Games* (Ross 2012), during the process of creating her Effie costume (Lamerichs 2014, 123-4) as discussed in Chapter 2, I went about learning *Little Witch Academia* in greater detail beyond that of the show itself. I found and joined several online fan groups which celebrate the series emerged on Reddit and Facebook, in which members share their favourite moments from the series, share fan art, fan fiction, as well as discussing narrative threads, and even sharing cosplay photographs.

Just as Lamerichs had done (2014), I surrounded myself with fan art and music, I hung up pictures of the character, inserted images of the character into my research folders (3.1), rewatched my favourite episodes from the series, and even began reading some of the tie-in comic series. This process allowed me to gradually learn each detail of the character's composition, not only regarding costume but also the specifics of their mannerisms. Between my engagement with the source material and online fan pages, I went about learning not only the 'official' on-screen depiction of Sucy, but also the narratives which fans have built up around Sucy's character.


3.1

Mountfort, Geczy and Peirson-Smith in their book *Planet Cosplay* (2019) draw on a wide pool of interview participants from which they found (like Lamerichs) that cosplayers are typically avid fans of their chosen character(s): "most cosers [cosplayers] explained that they would typically start to plan their character choices [who the cosplayer will cosplay] some months before an event, spending considerable time privately researching online, scanning and monitoring forums and social media sites" (Mountfort et al. 2019, 199). I had been watching *Little Witch Academia* and enjoyed it, but my entry into its fandom was much more out of a need for the purposes of this research. The group I followed most closely was Reddit's 'r/LittleWitchAcademia' which primarily focuses on fan art and cosplay depictions of characters Akko and Diana illustrating their rivalry which is frequently reimagined as a romance. In the case of Sucy, there is still a wealth of fan art to be found featuring her, such as the three examples below 3.2 posted by Kayle_Silver, 3.3 posted by Jennie_chann and 3.4 posted by HappyRusevDay2.



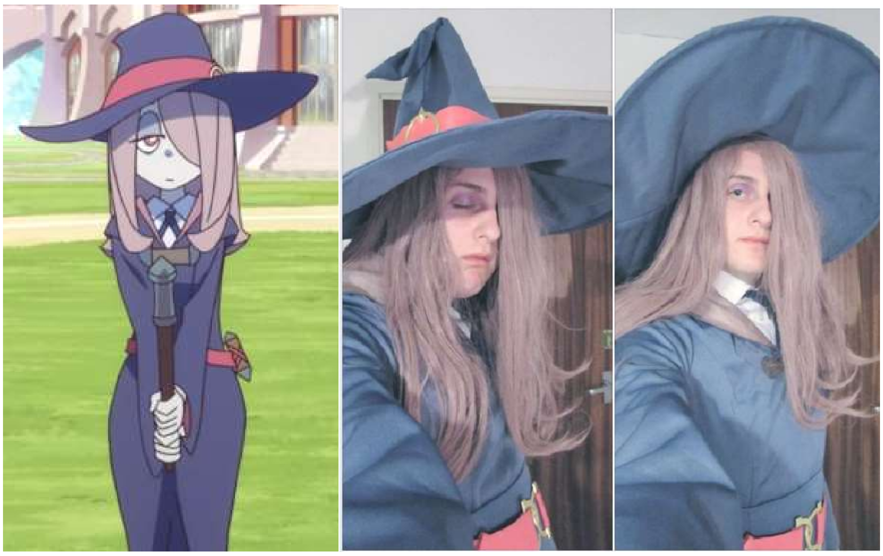
3.2 (Left), 3.3 (Middle), 3.4 (Right)

Upon my entry to the online fandom, I cannot deny that I was entertained by the members' creations. It quickly became apparent that concerns regarding whether fan art could be considered 'accurate' or 'loyal' to the original on-screen characterisations was not of concern to the fans, rather much like the case of Bowsette (Chapter 1), fans has developed their own versions of these characters, clearly influenced by the original text, but remained and given life beyond the show itself. Figure 3.2 is a reasonable representative for two strains of Sucy fan art, firstly 3.2 illustrates a strain of fan art and fiction referred to as 'Akko x Sucy' which depicts Sucy and Akko as romantic partners. This strain of art and fiction is in response to Sucy's repressed emotions and follows the fan consensus that Sucy hides her sexuality and her feelings for Akko (inspired by the episode *Sleeping Sucy*). Secondly, 3.2 is representative of another common strain of fan art which re-imagines characters in contemporary clothes as if they were 'real'. 3.2 depicts the characters in ball gowns (out of their onscreen costumes), by switching a characters onscreen clothes, artists make the character(s) appear 'real' (Manifold, 2009(b)) and in so doing fan artists, in particular adolescent fan artists, develop realistic identities by sharing and responding to each other's artwork (Manifold 2009(b), 9).

3.3 and 3.4, have been more influential in my own approach to Sucy. In the series Sucy has a fascination with potions and poisons mushrooms, and frequently tests her concoctions on an unsuspecting Akko. The cosplay of Sucy in 3.3 harks to the mischievous darker side of Sucy's personality, the monochrome colour palette of the metal bars and stonework contrast with the green backlighting, which is evocative of children's animated horror such as *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* (1969-70) or *Beetlejuice* (1989-91). Further to this the cosplayer's stern expression and grey skin lends a sinister spectral quality to Sucy's character, evocative of the Onryō from Japanese literature literally translating as 'vengeful spirit', popular depictions of the Onryō include the ghost in the film *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998) or video game *Dreadout* (2014). Continuing down this darker depiction of Sucy, figure 3.4 reimagines Sucy as DC's Penguin, specifically the iteration of Penguin form television series *Gotham* (2014-19). The gothic aesthetics of *Gotham* conform to Sucy's own character. Furthermore, Sucy's combination of grey skin and stern/crazed facial expressions nicely translate onto the Penguins character, conversely the Penguin's suave costume similarly suits Sucy's character.

Crafting the Costume

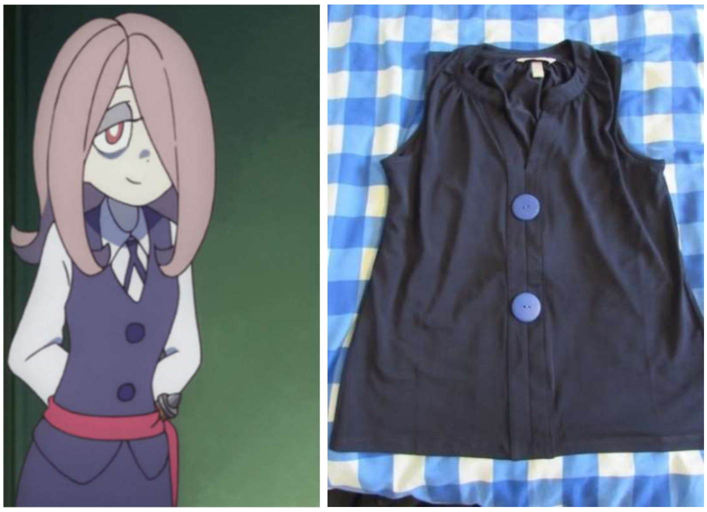
Having developed a better understanding of my chosen character, I went about putting together two costumes, one which I purchased pre-made, and the second which I put together myself.



3.5 (Left) and 3.6 (Right)

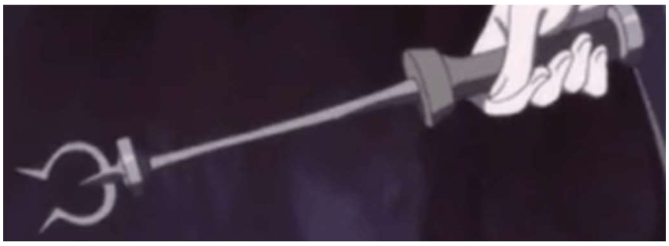
The pre-made costume I purchased replicated Sucy's 'ceremonial robes' (3.5) and it was a good introduction to cosplaying. The purchase of the costume was an easy (though not inexpensive) process. Once it arrived, I was then confronted with learning how to do Sucy's pale make-up, styling a wig, and performing the characters mannerisms (3.6). I felt comfortable performing Sucy's slow, unimpressed mannerisms, and found that I related with her closed off emotions, her social awkwardness. It was through this process of learning Sucy's character and performing her character which revealed to me just how important a process these stages are in cosplay performance. Crafting one's version of a popular character and perfecting one's performance is just as fundamental a process in cosplay as the crafting of a costume.

The second costume I put together was Sucy's 'everyday school uniform' (3.7), which was much more practical to take around to conventions as I had found the long dress of the Ceremonial robes impractical (and unflattering) to walk in. To put this costume together, I adapted various store and charity bought clothes. In addition to the uniform, I also went about replicating Sucy's magic wand. To construct an accurate rendition of the uniform, I acquired a matching navy skirt and pull over, which I later sewed on large cartoonish buttons to mimic Sucy's waist coat and its animated form (3.8). During the construction of this costume, I revised aspects of the make-up, choosing a slightly grey face paint as opposed to a white pale face paint, and picked out a brighter shade of purple eyeshadow. I found that translating a cartoon character onto the real-life body required a level of creativity as opposed to screen-accuracy.

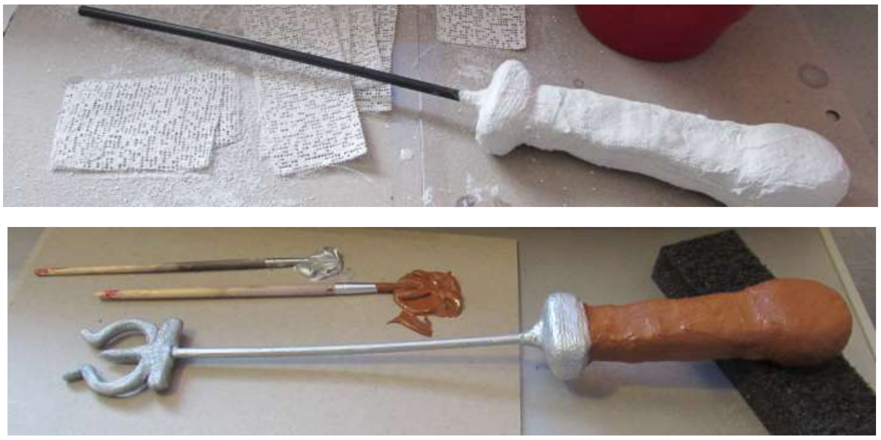


3.7 (Left) and 3.8 (Right)

One might note that between the two figures, the base colours of the uniform and buttons are inverted, yet this technical inaccuracy is hidden as the brighter colour pallet better evokes the animated cartoonish aesthetic of the character in real life. The process of ongoing adaptation and re-working echoes some of the findings from Mountfort et al. who reflect that from their participant interviews with North America and UK cosplayers “they often had to improvise when they were unable to access certain materials […] as a consequence, they tended to regard their costumes as a work in progress” (Mountfort et al. 2019 158). I identified with this feeling of cosplay as a work in progress which Mountfort et al. identify. Each time I put it on to take pictures, or took the cosplay out to conventions, I would be finding things that I should change with the make-up, or how I maintain the pink wig. It was following the completion of the base costume that I felt prompted to make Sucy’s magic wand (3.9) which was a prop I could interact with to lend a greater depth to my poses when being stopped for pictures.


3.9

To make the magic wand I used a block of foam, a plastic dowel, premo! modelling clay, plaster cast, and acrylic paints. The process of making the wand was relatively simple, drawing on techniques I was familiar with (having studied model making some years ago).


3.10

For the eagle eyed, one might note that as a prop replica my wand is not entirely accurate compared with the wand that appears on screen (3.10). However, the construction of the wand was precise and measured. Having learnt from my experience with make-up and the pull-over/waist coat, adapting a text into a caricature of itself can be beneficial to the overall design and more accurately evoking the animated aesthetic onto my own real body. In the series the handle appears to be made of wood with a metal bottom. But I chose to remove this, preferring a rounded, almost screwdriver-esque handle, a choice which I felt gave the prop a ‘friendly’ and ‘cartoonish’ aesthetic. Thus, whilst my wand is technically an inaccurate prop replication, it lends itself to mimicking the artificial nature of the cartoon (blurring these lines between the real and unreal). In terms of poaching from the text, I have enacted many of my findings from Chapter 1, in reworking and playing with a text to my own personal means, to my own personal expectations and tastes of a ‘good’ cosplay.

Identification with Character

In the work of Bainbridge and Norris (2013), they suggest that the cosplayers craft and creativity transposes something of the cosplayers’ identity into their costume(s). Bainbridge and Norris unapologetically draw on drag to suggest, that just as “drag is about materiality – about making the unreal real through cosplay. […] Cosplayers are able to bring to ‘life’ a figure that was once considered artificial” (Bainbridge and Norris 2013, 25). The flaw with this argument is that it would assume that cosplayers and drag artists are always in costume and that cosplayers are in a perpetual battle against dominant society. It is important to be aware of the temporality of cosplay, and at least in North America and Europe, cosplayers do not tend to face outspoken scrutiny from dominant society. Nicholle Lamerichs writes that the process of craft and performance in cosplay,

> is not just a projection of the self, but also an interpretive process of engaging with the character. In many cases cosplayers suggest that the activity is not so much about being the character as it is about getting to know him or her
>
> Lamerichs 2018, 220

One must be cautious when centring discussions on gender-play and identity, whilst cosplay can be used to navigate and experiment with identity, for many other cosplayers it the medium is considered much more a momentary playful experience. During my experiences, I found that my initial enjoyment of the character was increasingly becoming an identification with character through performance, but later these were feelings I later attributed to the sheer enjoyment of performing someone other to myself. Feeling of ‘release’ from social norms recurs time and time again in cosplay literature, noted in participant experiences in the research of: Rahman et al. (2012, 333), Jacobs (2013, 30), and Winge (2019, 56-7). In performing as

Sucy, I permit myself to be expressive in a manner which is blunt, in other words I entertain my own social anxiousness, and forgive myself for it. Cosplay facilitates a space for me to be playful with the part of me which identifies with the feminine, even if only for a couple of hours at the convention. Even during the crafting stage at home as I rehearsed presenting as Sucy in her school uniform, I did find myself feeling a great sense of achievement. The entangled processes of learning character and cosplay saw me develop an affinity with the character. What I did not necessarily expect from the exercise was how much I have learnt of myself, which brings me to a brief analysis of self and character, of fiction and my own lived experience.

3.11

As previously mentioned I related with Sucy's character. Sucy is not an emotional or romantic type, and performing her, allows me to escape such social expectations. Pravina Shukla (2015), argues how "in wearing costume we do not become someone else; rather, we become in some context a deeper or heightened version of ourselves" (Shukla 2015, 15). Of course, as appealing as this performance is, cosplay is a momentary experience an opportunity to be playful, and not a reflection of how I would want to go about my day-to-day life. Cosplayers rarely display their costumes in public, unless it is at a fan convention, or traveling to a fan convention. In my insecurity, I would wear elements of my Sucy costume, such as tights and blouse, but concealed under a jacket and trousers. Only upon arrival at the convention would I then get into costume.

Many fan conventions have designated spaces in which cosplayers can change clothes, apply make-up, or fix costumes, seemingly accounting for the fact that cosplay is confined to the cosplay hall. As I shall get into later in this thesis, I began questioning the origins of these insecurities, it was experiences like this that made me reflect on the limitations of cosplay and whether the creative expression it offered was restricted to the convention hall, and less revolutionary than cosplay scholarship has previously claimed.

Fan studies has long suggested that it is the creativity of fans blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality, or between product and consumer. Blurring fiction and reality is an argument which appears in Jenkins *Textual Poachers* (1992) and reappears in *Convergence Culture* (2006). In Jenkins co-authored 2006 paper with Clinton, Purushotma, Robinson, and Weigel, Jenkins et al. suggests that games which allow a player to create avatars enable the player to shape a:

> projected identity [which] allows the player to strongly identify with the character and thus have an immersive experience within the game, and at the same time to use the character as a mirror to reflect on his or her own values and choices
>
> Jenkins et al. 2006, 28

Fan creativity and the formation of a 'projected identity', might be read onto cosplay. Whilst cosplayers do not invent their own characters, there is a process of learning and recreating one's chosen character, a momentary reconfiguration of the body to become, or at least appear as a fictional character. This process of shaping character and learning one's character can be an intensive process as observed in Chapter 1. Cosplay is not just the act of putting on a costume, but it is a process of recreation and performance, this requires devoting one's time to learning crafting techniques, how to perform. The time involved inevitably results in the cosplayer imprinting a part of themselves onto their characters and conversely the cosplayer opens themselves up to being influenced by the characteristics of their chosen character(s).

In Chapters 1 and 2, I noted the recurring argument in fan and cosplay scholarship that fans blur reality and fiction in their creative acts. Notably Jenkins suggested that fans appear to "blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, speaking of characters as if they had an existence apart from their textual manifestations, entering into the realm of the fiction as if it were a tangible place, they can inhabit and explore" (Jenkins 2013, 18). A blurring between fiction and reality as the Acafan understands it can be found in my interpretation and experiences with the Sucy centric episode, 'Akko's Adventures in Sucy World' (also known as ‘Sleeping Sucy’) against my own cosplay. In the episode, a failed experiment sends Sucy into a deep slumber and it is up to her friend Akko to enter Sucy’s subconscious and wake her up. When Akko is inside Sucy’s mind, Sucy’s unconscious presents itself to Akko as ‘Sucy World’. Sucy world is completely populated by personified attributes of Sucy’s personality, such as: “desire to get plastic surgery”, “the easily influenced Sucy”, and “the instant-copycat Sucy”, and “the one who wants be a Hollywood star”. Each of these sides of Sucy express an insecurity with her own body. In cosplaying as Sucy I similarly go through these bodily insecurities. To produce a good crossplay cosplay, I had to simultaneously hide and negotiate my masculinity and my own insecurities. Consequently, I began to feel that cosplayers change not only their clothing, but in their attitudes and interactions with the world around them.

Performance and Play

When I took my Sucy cosplay to conventions, I also found the experiences of performing as Sucy for an audience to be an experience which became entangled with my own identity. At Yorkshire Cosplay Con, I was asked on several occasions for photos, where I would pull poses mimicking the attitudes of Sucy, as if I had become another iteration of Sucy. To prepare myself, I had practised posing in the mirror, though I later found posing for an audience to still be a hurdle I had to overcome. Cosplay performance is an emotional labour and performing for strangers in the busy environments of the fan convention is mentally and physically draining.

What I found from cosplaying as Sucy was that her character gave me something more to say about cosplay as a form, ‘Sleeping Sucy’ depicts Sucy’s multiple selves, her multiplicity illustrates the multiplicity of a person’s desires, the ability to be excited by and to perform (or cosplay) multiple different selves (or characters). The personification of Sucy’s desires exaggerates how performative actions and performance play can become entangled in one’s conceptions of identity, something which cosplay scholarship has used as a focal point to illustrate the revolutionary practise of cosplay on ‘finding’ oneself or disrupting social norms. The state of chaos that unfolds in Sucy world when Akko accidently saves one of Sucy’s hidden traits from execution by the Sucy Police, can be read onto the grounds of the convention hall, in my crossplay cosplay I damage the status-quo of how men are expected to present themselves, by making myself appear as a young woman.

From my personal reflection on my experience with cosplaying Sucy, I find parallels with literature on the Victorian masquerade. Mitchell (2017) argues how, “in the dizzying swirl of the masquerade ball, costumed attendees could defy social and sexual norms, amplifying or revealing desires that were otherwise disallowed by polite society" (Mitchell 2017, 292). If gender-bending or crossplay were to be performed outside of the closed off spaces of the convention hall (or indeed masquerade) this would unsettle expectations of good, gendered behaviour. Such observations have formed the basis of cosplay scholars praising cosplay as a revolutionary form which can reconfigure gendered (and sexual) norms. Bainbridge and Norris for example suggest that cosplayers are "a playful agent of change. The high regard given to cosplay's transversal moment as it crosses gender, race or reality can be seen to offer an optimistic creative and social movement" (Bainbridge and Norris 2013, 35). Bainbridge and Norris' sentiments highlight the emotional thrills of cosplay, and whilst gender-play cosplay can be a means for individuals to navigate and explore one's own identity, Bainbridge and Norris fail to capture the full complexities of cosplayers lives.

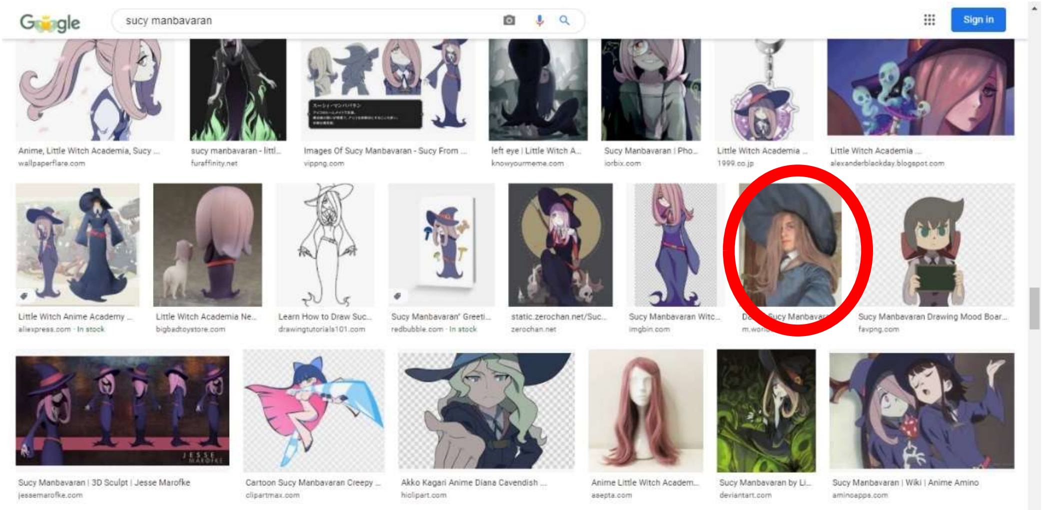
When I am crossplaying as Sucy I did find myself being swept away with this notion. When people praised my costume, or asked to have their picture with me, it did feel as though I had made an impression. However, it is impossible for me to know why, perhaps passers-by felt that my cosplay affirming their own gendered ideals, or perhaps I was a humorous novelty. This multiplicity of interpretation from my spectators put to question just how impactful cosplay can be as a form. In my experience of cosplaying as Sucy, the crossplay only existed privately (in making the costume), in cosplay specific online groups, and at the convention hall. Obviously, my motivations differ to the typical cosplayer, however, I did find myself susceptible to feeling emotionally gratified from my cosplay experiences, at the fan convention I was swept away through my dialogue and play with other cosplayers and spectators.

Community and Momentary Play

When I took my cosplay of Sucy in her school uniform to conventions, there were several occasions when people stopped me to take my photo or complement me on my costume. These experiences deepened my bond with my chosen character, Sucy became less a personalised sentimental object. During my attendance at Stoke-Con-Trent (2019) the shared joy between cosplayers was blatant, in the open areas of the convention space (at Staffordshire University) the convention organisers had created a display of replica cars from popular films and TV in which I recall watching a group of cosplayers of different characters have a sword fight with their props, and inside the main hall I recall watching as one of the celebrity guests Hacker T Dog (and puppeteer Phil Fletcher) play around with numerous cosplayers, and other attendees.

Whilst I did not take the store bought Sucy costume to conventions, I did share it in online groups: "UK Cosplay" a Facebook group, and on the cosplay forum Cure: WorldCosplay. On Cure I received a total of 9 likes, which I considered a surprise given how it was my first upload to this competitive site (which ranks cosplayers on experience and engagement). Via "UK Cosplay" I received 26 likes, 3 hearts, and 1 shock via the Facebook reactions. I also received two comments, one offering the compliment "Looks great.", and the second saying quite enthusiastically "YES that is superb". Despite the relatively low engagement (compared to other posts in the group), I was flattered by the engagement, the community's enthusiasm (for a new amateur cosplayer) felt validating. The process of piecing the costume together onto my body, and performing as the character was an enjoyable experience, whilst this experience was a result and not a motivation, I did enjoy the procedure of performance, of cosplay as a "playful activity that is a creative display and outlet for emotions" (Mountfort et al. 2019, 187). I do not undermine the importance of any emotional gratification that cosplayers might get from cosplay, but just like most other leisure activities the enthusiasm dissipated after logging off (or leaving the convention hall). For me, the disparity between my cosplay life and my day-to-day life highlighted that cosplay is a momentary experience.

With this said, it is necessary to acknowledge that, whilst my engagements online were mostly encouraging, a negative consequence of these experiences I found does contribute to the narrative of cosplay as an act with consequences. The sharing of images online has also resulted in images of my crossplay leaving my control. For example, images of myself cosplaying as Sucy now appear in Google search results: "Sucy Manbavarian Cosplay" and even "Sucy Manbavarian" (3.12). Whilst I chose to share my cosplay in cosplay groups, I had not anticipated seeing my cosplay widely accessible in the Google search to "Sucy Manbavarian", this revealed to me that I had lost control over the images I had taken and shared. Furthermore, I do not know whether photos of me taken at fan conventions are private, or whether they are being used and shared beyond my control. It was this experience which suggested to me that by sharing one's cosplay online, or by allowing people to take one's photo at conventions, this is in and of itself considered consent to use and reshare an image.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3.12

The unspoken rules and expectations which structure the cosplay community can lead to unfortunate circumstances. There was a moment at Anime and Gaming Con. Birmingham (2016) where I watched a young cosplayer asking other cosplayers for ‘latex glue’ to safely adhere a fake horn to her shaved head which would complete their cosplay. However, when they could not find any latex glue, the cosplayer resorted to using super glue. Later that day, I saw said cosplayer sat against a wall, looking dejected, with a large blister on the side their head from where they had attempted to adhere the horn. The pressures placed upon some cosplayers to look a certain way came as a shock to me, as this cosplayer had injured themselves attempting to complete their cosplay. Cosplayers ‘sacrificing themselves for cosplay’ is not an unheard-of narrative in online forums, for example praise is often given to those who share details about having stayed up all night to complete a costume. During my data collection I witnessed 3-4 cases of cosplayers fainting and needing medical attention as a direct result of the heat of their costumes. Cosplayer’s expectations of one another and of themselves have thus led to circumstances which are detrimental to the cosplayer’s health and welfare.

As much as I wanted to make a good cosplay, I have not gone to any extreme lengths perhaps given that I do not have any pre-existing loyalties to the community. Yet, whilst my experiences as previously reflected were overwhelmingly positive with the community, it is worth addressing that I did face cases of abuse and harassment from non-cosplayers at fan conventions. At some of the larger conventions I received the occasional passing comments “nice legs” and “faggot”. For all the emotional gratification that can be found in the cosplay community (both online and at the convention), in my literature review for example I observed cases of harassment and abuse directed at professional cosplayers Mariah Mallad and Jessica Nigri. Importantly, the comments I received only ever came from non-cosplayers. Whilst popular fandom and fans are entangled with cosplay communities this can lead to both positive and negative interactions. To get to London MCM (2019) for example, I took the Underground alongside many other cosplayers, the disparity between members of the public and cosplayers was incredibly varied as cosplayers would receive both smiles and rolled eyes. It is this disparity between the community of cosplayers within the cosplay environment set against the public environment which exemplifies the momentary nature of cosplay as momentary play, there is a sense that cosplayer do not belong outside of the convention hall.

Another case which supports the notion of cosplay as momentary, occurred at Yorkshire Cosplay Con. (2019). During my attendance at several conventions, one becomes familiar with certain faces over the duration of the day (especially at the smaller conventions. Over the duration of the day one can witness the momentary nature of performance in changes in cosplayer's appearance and behaviour over the course of a day. At Yorkshire Cosplay Con. I bumped into a cosplayer of Dark Magician Girl from card game franchise *Yu-Gi-oh!* (Takahashi, 1996-). She was bubbly and friendly, and put on a cute performance as one would expect of the character. Later in the day when I bumped into her (for the last time) her costume was ragged, and her arms filled with bags of merchandise. She was quiet and tired, but then so was I. By the end of the day, my wig was battered and no longer on my head, my make-up was running with my sweat, and I had no interest in performing as Sucy. In short, we were exhausted, and it was time to go home.

The momentary nature of cosplay is a vital part of what makes cosplay special, yet it often goes overlooked by cosplay scholars. To the credit of Mountfort et al., they briefly touch on this notion suggesting that "like historical carnivals, cosplay events temporarily disrupt and invert everyday life with 'the suspension of hierarchal procedure' through sanctioned, playful activity that is a creative display and outlet for emotions" (Mountfort et al. 2019, 187). By appearing as Sucy, I underwent the physical adjustments of shaving my leg and arm hair, using make-up to recreate Sucy's pale complexion, and learnt to tuck my genitals. Not only am I playing with character, but I am playing with femininity. However, these performances, are just performances. Cosplay is a momentary experience and at the end of the day the costume is removed, the make-up washes off, the hairs on my legs and arms quickly grow back, and it is a relief to untuck my genitals. If reality and fiction are blurred, as has previously been suggested, this blurring lasts only for a couple of hours.

In a later chapter, Mountfort et al. discuss cosplay and the cos/queer, they put forward two primary motives for cosplay: 1. "for the sake of wish fulfilment (such as becoming more a man/woman than you think you are capable in everyday life)” or 2. “Cathartic release (the expression of certain covert desires that the subject is less comfortable doing as their ‘real’ selves)” (Mountfort et al. 2019, 239). Through costume, they argue that a cosplayer can be heightened versions of oneself, detached from heteronormative society, and thus limiting backlash from experimenting with one’s identity. If cosplay is as I suggest momentary and confined to unique spaces, cosplay subculture would not be able to traverse society’s gendered and sexual hierarchies, as is claimed in existing cosplay literature. However, this should not necessarily undermine the benefits of cosplay on the individual which my interviews will explore in greater detail. From my experiences of cosplaying Sucy I did enjoy the process of making and performing as her at conventions. Perhaps most notably what I learnt in the processes of making the costume, in contrary to Bainbridge and Norris, cosplay itself is not about making the unreal – real; but to revel in lies. Bringing Sucy to life was not achieved by making a totally accurate costume, but by adapting it to bring the aesthetics of Sucy’s animated form to appear on my physical (and masculine) body. To become fictional, conforming neither to the real everyday life of Daniel, but nether conforming to the onscreen character of Sucy.

The common notion that cosplays blurs reality and fiction in early cosplay scholarship is a utopian perception that cosplayers do not seem to share (from my observations). Fans know what is and is not real, and cosplayers consciously flip between interacting with others as themselves and perform in character on the convention hall floor. Fortunately, in more contemporary cosplay scholarship perceptions are starting to change to a limited extent. Lundstorm and Olin-Scheller point out that in the practise of dressing up as a character cosplayers love, “the fans show their affection for the story at the same time as they interpret, perform, extend and remediate the narrative by putting the characters in new contexts” (Lundström and Olin-Scheller 2014, 150). Cosplay scholars (and fan scholarship) which suggest fans blur the lines between fact and fiction is nicely poetic, but as I discuss in more depth during my interview analysis in parts 2 and 3, this argument is often simply untrue.

For Lamerichs, despite common misconception, cosplay “is not about making the game real – one can even argue that cosplay is never the real thing, no matter how good it looks – but about personalising it and drawing it closer to the creator” (Lamerichs 2018, 205). To reiterate Shukla, “in wearing costume we do not become someone else; rather, we become in some context a deeper or heightened version of ourselves” (Shukla 2015, 15). In cosplaying, gender-bending, or crossplay, fans can create their own spaces, in which they do not have to be limited to the expectations of normal life. In doing so for some individuals cosplay can be a transformative and emotionally gratifying experience. However, the suggestion that cosplayers are socially revolutionary from my own experiences appears to have little weight to it and is not reflected in my personal experiences or observations. Thus, cosplay is both momentary once contextualised against the private and public, but from my analysis of the individual cosplayer, cosplay can simultaneously be transformative.

In the next half of this chapter, I will introduce and unpack the data collected from my interview participants. In Part 2, I shall identify the ways in which my participants experiences confirm existing cosplay literature and use cosplay to play with and negotiate their own identities. In Part 3, I will then examine participant data which questions and contradicts current cosplay scholarship, just as I have identified the ways my own experiences confirm and contradict existing cosplay literature.

Part 2 – Examining the Data Collected in Interviews

In Part 1, I unpacked my autoethnography experiences cosplaying as Sucy Manbavarian. In this second part I introduce my interview participants and analyse their cosplay experiences, with a similar focus on their engagement with their chosen character(s), and the ways in which their experiences resonate with existing cosplay (and fan studies) literature which illustrate the cosplayer as creative agents. It is worth noting here that in Chapter 3 Part 3, I will subsequently unpack cases in which the interview participants shared experiences which challenged existing cosplay and fan literature.

In Part 1 I began to identify a friction between cosplay as creative revolutionary experience and the limits of cosplay as a momentary experience. However, in turn I did also find enjoyment in learning new skills of craft, performance, and my strengthened connection with character. My experiences and research have guided the discussion points I brought into each of my semi-structured interviews. A full list of the semi-structured questions can be found in the appendix, but each interview included the following key questions:

- What are the participants favourite character(s) to cosplay?
- What is the cosplayers relationship with their chosen source material?
- Has cosplaying a character had any repercussions on a cosplayers day-to-day life?
- Does cosplay have social/political implications?
- What are some of the cosplayers favourite experiences cosplaying at conventions?

- Does the cosplayer engage with any online groups/activities associated with cosplay? What does the participant like/dislike about the cosplay community?

These core questions covered central topics of the thesis research intentions but were also designed to encourage the participant to reflect on their unique interests and experiences which is integral to the semi-structured design. From these key questions I was able to identify where cosplayers experiences conformed with existing cosplay literature, which I shall be exploring in this Part, but also experiences which challenged cosplay literature, which shall be explored in Part 3. At the start of each interview, participants were asked to provide details of their: age, gender, sexuality, pronouns, nationality, and race. The purpose of asking for these demographic details was mainly to assess whether there was any correlation between the participants identities and their chosen cosplay characters. However, they also became an interesting sample to discuss the typical demographics which make up the cosplay community.

Demographics Data Collected

My call for participants flyer (see appendix) was shared on Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit. The flyer encouraged all cosplayers to come forward on the condition that they lived in North America/UK and are over 18 years of age. My call for participants targeted cosplayers from North America and the UK given the uniformity of the convention and cosplay scene, but there was no conscious targeting regarding age/gender/sexuality/race. Everyone who contacted me to take part was accepted, whilst no one was rejected three participants chose to pull out of the study before taking the interview. On Facebook, and Reddit I targeted cosplay specific groups including ‘UK Cosplay’, ‘r/cosplay’ and ‘r/crossplay’. Twitter proved to be the most useful as I would share the call for participants flyer in tandem with popular cosplay hashtags. Finally, MCM agreed to share flyers at the Cosplay Corner stall during MCM London 2019.

In response to this call, I collected detailed data from 9 participants, interviews lasted one hour (except for three participants who talked with me for two hours). As outlined in my methodology all my participants will remain anonymous, and I have anonymised each participant by substituting their names for Pokémon gym leaders in order of in-game appearance. Following the interviews, several of the participants provided me with images of their cosplays to be include within the thesis. Where appropriate I have included an image of the participant’s cosplay alongside an image of the source character to better illustrate the cosplayer’s experiences, and to reflect on the cosplayer’s adaptation of their chosen character.

Before I introduce my participants and break down our conversations, I will first break down the demographics of my participants, as this has provided interesting results.

Cosplayer	Age	Pronouns	Gender	Sexuality	Location	Race
Misty	28	She/her	Female	Pansexual	North America	White
Brock	23	She/her	Questioning	Asexual	North America	White
Surge	23	She/her	Female	Heterosexual	North America	White
Erika	25	She/her	Female	Heterosexual	UK	White
Koga	41	She/her	Female	Heterosexual	UK	White
Janine	38	She/her	Female	Bisexual	UK	White
Sabrina	27	She/her	Female	Demisexual lesbian	UK	White
Giovanni	34	She/her	Female	Heterosexual	UK	White
Blue	46	He/him	Male	Pansexual	Canada	White

3.13

In the above table, the results present an overwhelming demographic of white women in their twenties. Whilst I had quietly hoped for a more mixed set of demographics from my participant data, these are important results in and of themselves which remain consistent with past cosplay demographic sampling. In Ellyssa Kroski's book *Cosplay in Libraries* (2015), Kroski draws on the past research of Lotecki (2012) and Rosenberg and Letamendi (2013) which each examine cosplay demographics in North American communities. Kroski highlights that from the 529 cosplayers of Lotecki's thesis, "the majority of the cosplayer respondents were female (76 percent), the average age was 23.8, 72 percent identified as 'white', and the majority – 71 percent – had some postsecondary education" (Kroski 2015, 2). Similarly, from Rosenberg and Letamendi's 198 participants they found 65 percent were women, "68 percent of whom were Caucasian. Participants' ages ranged from 15 to 50 years, and the average number of years cosplaying was 6.77" (Rosenberg and Letamendi 2013, 2-3). During the same year of Rosenberg and Letamendi's research, Lamerichs draws on her own experiences in cosplay communities, from which she observes that "cosplay should be understood as type of play that flourishes particularly well among female audiences" (Lameriches 2013, 3). Matsuura and Okabe go as far to state, "cosplay is a female DIY culture. The DIY spirit by the practise has become a standard in the cosplay community" (Matsuura and Okabe 2015, 1). Understandings of cosplay as a female dominated space is hardly unusual, in that popular fandom more broadly has long been considered a primarily female space. In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins outlines the demographics of popular media fandom, stating "this group [popular media fans] is largely female, largely white, largely middle class, though it welcomes into its ranks many who would not fit this description" (Jenkins 1992, 1). Jenkins reflects upon his own place within this female dominated sphere, commenting:

> if I am a fan, I am also a male fan within a predominantly female fan culture. Male media fans are less common that female fans, though certainly not remarkable within this culture; we have learned to play according to the interpretive conventions of that community
>
> Jenkins 1992, 7

Writing at the same time as Jenkins, Constance Penley draws on Trimble (1983) championing fan spaces as female spaces, writing that "it is widely acknowledged that Star Trek fandom was really begun and kept alive by women (see, e.g., Trimble, 1983)" (Penley 1992, 189). These are observations which remain present today in contemporary cosplay scholarship and reflected in my own participant demographics.

Whilst the participants were heavily weighted towards "female", the participants were from a mix between North America, UK, and one from Canada. Whilst the two locations share many similarities, this balanced mix of participants provided an insight to the nuances between the two communities. Given my interest in gendered performance, I also enquired as to the participants sexualities, which is another attribute I took into consideration during my examination of cosplayers relationships with their characters. The only potential difference found in my data set which differs with existing scholarship is that my pool of participants was older than the average cosplayer. The age disparity might suggest that people who got into cosplay in their twenties have continued to cosplay, alternatively the appeal of the practise is simply becoming much broader than previously documented. Finally, in the participant demographics of this study, one will note that all my cosplay participants identified themselves as "white". Having a more racially diverse set of participants would have provided a much deeper insight into the cosplay community, however, one must read these as results in and of itself. Considering the previous demographic studies by Lotecki, and Rosenberg and Letamendi, both similarly found that cosplayers comprised of a predominantly white audience.

Whilst a new detailed study into cosplay demographics is overdue, the findings of my own participant pool does confirm existing demographic data.

Comments on Race and Cosplay

It is worth noting here that as is indicated by the demographics found in my own call for participants, and in other cosplay studies, such as those by the before mentioned Lotecki (2012) and Rosenberg and Letamendi (2013), the academic study of cosplay has been white, young, middle class and female centric. Consequently, anyone who does not fit this specific audience demographic has rarely been discussed. The uniformity of my cosplay participants being exclusively white, is a shortcoming of this research project, and I had hoped to attract a more diverse pool of participants. With this said, the participants I accumulated are a result in and of themselves and as indicated above in line with current cosplay statistics. Indeed, in cosplay scholarship more broadly cosplayers outside of the before mentioned demographic of young white women are rarely acknowledged or discussed in cosplay scholarship or media coverage. Though, this does not mean cosplayers themselves do not acknowledge the power dynamics between white and non-white cosplayers (I will return to discussions of race again later in Chapter 3 Part). The normative values among white participants resulted in a lack of discussion of race. In fact, the topic of race only emerged in three interviews, those with: Misty, Surge, and Janine; and only mentioned off handily in a handful of other interviews. In Part 3, I examine Misty, Surges and Janine's reflections which each were prompted by my question "do you have any concerned about the cosplay community?" These three participants made observations and reflections on contested examples of race-bending in the cosplay community.

Much like gender-bending, which is the cosplay of a character that is not of one's own gender, or age-bending, which is the process of performing as a character younger/older than oneself (Skentelbery, 2019), race-bending is the process of cosplaying a character who is not of one's own racial identity. For example, this might be a White British cosplayer choosing to cosplay as Tiana the African American heroine of Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* (Clements and Musker, 2009). For the most part, race-bending is widely practised and accepted; however, where race-bending has caused controversy among cosplayers is cases in which cosplayers use 'blackface'. Given that Chapter 3, Part 3 will unpack tensions that have emerged within discourses of race and cosplay, in this brief section, examples from academic literature will be drawn out to highlight the ways cosplay can be a means of celebrating one's race, with a particular focus on minority ethnicities, in which cosplays and characters can be tailored to exists alongside a cosplayers race.

Where in Part 3, I shall be addressing concerns of white cosplayers using blackface in race-bending cosplay, alternatively, academic scholarship which has discussed black cosplayers cosplaying as a white character, have conjured more transgressional discourses. . Kirkpatrick (2019) sees race-bending for cosplayers of colour as a transformative act, "to traverse racial boundaries by cosplaying as white characters is to traverse literature and media that seek to make us invisible" (Kirkpatrick 2019, online). Race-bending is written by Kirkpatrick much in the same way that Prescott and Smith discussed gender-bending allowing female cosplayers to avoid male onlookers, or the way Bainbridge and Norris write about gender-bending as socially revolutionary. For cosplayers of colour who construct race-bending cosplays, such costumed performances

> Embody awkward questions [for the white, usually male, fan]. They are akin to feminist killjoys, fandom's killjoys: 'the one who gets in the way of other people's happiness. Or just the one who is in the way […] your very arrival in the room is a reminder of the histories that get in the way of the occupation of that room'.
>
> Kirkpatrick 2019, online

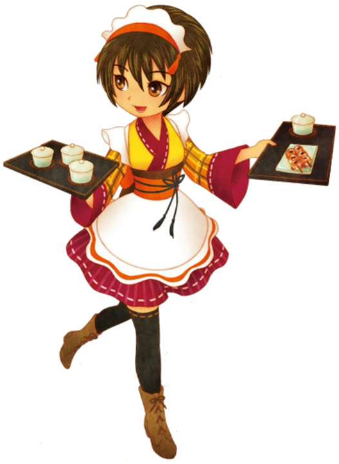
For Kirkpatrick race-bending cosplay offers opportunities for black fans to traverse popular (oppressive) media products. But much like the notion of feminine cosplayers using gender-bending cosplay to traverse masculine spaces (which will be explored in greater detail later in this part), one is prompted to suggest that the fact that such play is necessary hints to the very seriousness of racial expectations in the cosplay community. There is a growing body of fan studies work on masculinity, such as in the works of Weltzien (2005), Salter and Blodgett (2017), or Figel and Leggatt (2021). These writers scrutinise male fans for perpetuating patriarchal norms, harassing feminine members of the fandom, as well as perpetuating racism.

It is only in recent years that a small body of work on race and popular fandom has really started to emerge. Bryan Jenkins opens his paper 'Marginalization within Nerd Culture' (2020) commenting, "marginalization within cosplay is of importance as it is a form of expression that is reflective of geek and popular culture at large. One can easily compare attitudes held towards minority cosplayers with recent controversies concerning increased diversity in popular geek-related properties" (Jenkins 2020, 158). The absence of race literature in cosplay scholarship might be a result of not only the cosplay demographics being primarily white, but that the controversy of the topic is often avoided by Acafan cosplay scholars who are attempting to legitimise the field through academia.

Gaston and Reid in their paper 'Race and ethnicity in fandom' (2012) recall a contemporary researcher Sun Jung to elaborate on how race is commonly discussed in academia:, "Jung's analysis is one which race and ethnicity are central to the fandom, yet largely unremarked upon by the participants analysed" (Gaston and Reid 2012, 5.10), the absence of race in Jung's research speaks volumes, just as it does here in this thesis. Gaston and Reid continue, "Jung presents us with a fandom whose genderbending is remarked upon, and whose racebending is visible, yet remains largely unspoken" (Gaston and Reid 2012, 5.10). The notion of race as something that is both present and absent shall be explored further in Part 3 of this chapter. Whilst race, is not the focal topic of this research project, the cosplay community is a growing one, and increasingly attracting a more diverse and inclusive community. Therefore it is appropriate to address how cosplay is a medium which not only can be beneficial for cosplayers who play with gender binaries through cosplay, but to also acknowledge how cosplay can be a means of expression for ethnic minority backgrounds.

Play and Community

My first cosplay participant is Misty (28, she/her, female, pansexual, North America, white), in our discussion Misty expressed her love of video games. Misty named: *Harvest Moon*, *Story of Seasons* and *Pokémon* from which she has picked several characters and constructed cosplays for each of them. When I asked Misty whether she had a favourite character that she had cosplayed, she expressed:

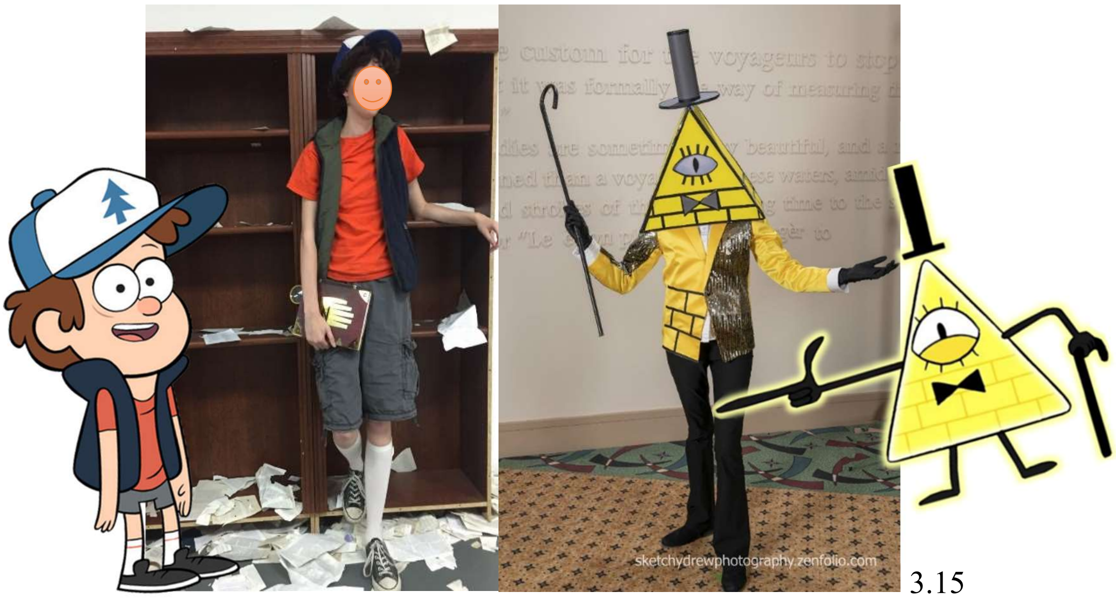


3.14

> probably Komari [from *Story of Seasons: Trio of Towns*] when I first wore Komari's outfit, cosplay […] a young teenage girl ran up to me and asked, 'oh, no one ever cosplays this character, and she's my favourite character'. So, she was really happy to see a character she really loved. That made me all warm and fuzzy inside.
>
> Misty

Misty's experiences cosplaying shows some parallels with my own. Like me, Misty was motivated to cosplay a character she liked, Komari from Story of Seasons (game art 3.14). But Misty's cosplay was made special by her engagement with other people attending the convention. Harking back to Mountfort et al.'s motivations as outlined in Part 1 (Mountfort et al. 2019, 239). After being asked to stop for pictures, I would pull poses that mimic Sucy for the camera, by 'putting on a show' for the photographer and passers-by, I found their enthusiastic responses to be warm and encouraging.

My second cosplay participant is Brock (23, she/her, Questioning, Asexual, North America, White). During my conversation with Brock, she shared her love for the children's cartoon *Gravity Falls* (Hirsch, 2012-16), a show I am familiar with and share an enjoyment of. Unlike Misty, Brock did not point to a favourite cosplay, but instead pointed to *Gravity Falls* as a franchise, having cosplayed lead characters Dipper and Mable, as well as the manic villain Bill on numerous occasions. "I've loved doing the main trio of characters. I've done Dipper [3.15, left], Mable, and Bill [3.15, right]. And those are always a lot of fun, especially seen as the characters are all very different to one another, personality wise". In response to a follow up question about performing these different personalities Brock reflected,



3.15

> Most of my interactions are with little kids and they are always the most fun. Because for them cosplay is very much a kin to Disney world or something, and I'm cosplaying a character that they're not- they hadn't considered they'd meet while they are there.

Brock

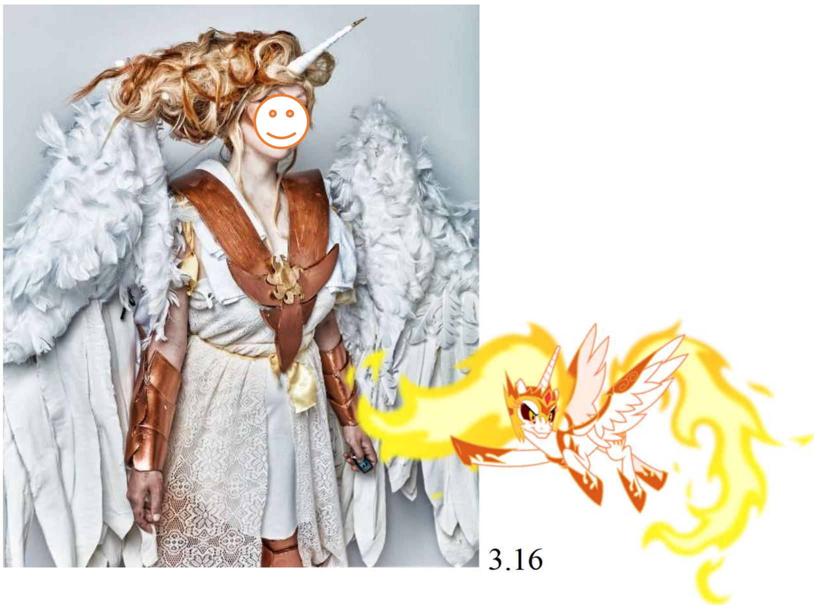
The cosplay of animated characters poses a challenge for the cosplayer, in Brock's cosplay of Bill, the animated character is a yellow triangle with an eye, top hat, and cane. The design is relatively simple but poses challenges in terms of translating the character onto the human body. Brock's process of adapting the character to work on the body yet retain the aesthetic and personality of the onscreen character, has successfully evoked the manic showman which characterises the demonic being from the series. The showman has been evoked by Brock's construction of a glittery yellow suit, and the welcoming outstretched arm of their pose is evocative of an American gameshow host, and the triangle mask and bright yellow colour scheme remains indisputably Bill. On cosplay performance, Lamerichs draws on Callois to explain how, "cosplayers engage in pretend-play, or *mimicry* as Callois (1961) defines it, as a category of play in which reality is transformed into an alternative scenario" (Lamerichs 2018, 204). Block illustrates this 'play' nicely in an exchange between herself and a young boy when dressed as possessed Dipper (in reference to the episode 'Dreamscrapers' in which Dipper is possessed by Bill), which Brock had constructed by combing her Dipper cosplay with a pair of yellow contact lenses to replicate the possession as seen onscreen.

> This little boy and his twin sister who are about seven, they saw me and were like, 'oh my god! It's Dipper!' so I get down on my knees and I say 'hi', and this kid looks at me and says, 'your eyes' and I'm, 'yeah do you like them?' and he is like, 'are they real?' and I say, 'of course' and then he punched me in the face
>
> Brock

Upon been told this I was shocked, even more so when Brock continued, "he was 'it's Bill, I'm going to kill you!'" however, Brock remembered this occurrence fondly, explaining that "you know, they're seven so it doesn't hurt. I was just laughing as these two kinds were just ultimately trying to destroy me […] I had a lot of little kids that day just freak out". Lamerichs addresses the importance of spectator as a part of cosplay performance. Cosplay relies on spectators; whether or not the spectator is a fellow cosplayer, "spectators also play a role in guaranteeing authenticity […]. Fans may evaluate the costume, appreciate the character being portrayed, or take photographs" (Lamerichs 2011, 2.2). Given the experiences of Brock, one might add to that the spectator may also role-play with, or initiate play with the cosplayer.

Screen accuracy more broadly is integral within the cosplay community and helps to embellish a cosplayer's performance, and subsequently interaction with other cosplayers or spectators. Yet, because "cosplay is centrally concerned with embodying a character accurately. Because of this, cosplayers often develop an increased awareness of their own bodies or choose a character that matches their own posture, identity, or social role" Lamerichs continues, "Cosplayers may be criticized for failing to fully reproduce their character's appearance, even when these failures are due to such factors as body size or medical necessity" (Lamerichs 2011, 4.4). In Brock's cosplay of Dipper and Bill, we see them having altered their hair and wearing baggy and scruffy clothes mimicking the look of a young boy. Brock's screen accurate Dipper and loyal adaptation of Bill proved to be successful with spectators on the convention floor. Similarly, for my Sucy cosplay, I shaved my leg and arm hair and tucked my genitals to give myself the appearance of an adolescent girl. The effort I had gone to was rewarded by enthusiastic responses from fans of *Little Witch Academia* at conventions. However, I also experienced more conflicting interactions, such as numerous comments (from male and female attendees) commenting, "nice legs", or "your legs are better than mine". The comments have multiple readings and can be interpreted as complimentary, harassing, mocking. Perhaps most significantly the comments emphasise the novelty to a man crossplay cosplaying and puts the accuracy of my costume to question.

The third participant Surge (23, she/her, female, heterosexual, North America, white), an experienced cosplayer, similarly reflected on numerous franchises and characters she had loved playing which flourished because of convention encounters. Notable examples Surge shared were: Gamzee Makara from *HomeStuck* (Hussie, 2007) a cosplay which Surge has revised over the duration of her time in the cosplay community, and Princess Celestia from *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (Faust, 2010-19) for which Surge constructed a huge pair of articulated wings. Surge explained, "one of the reasons I like to wear extravagant cosplays is that every five minutes someone will come up to me and be like, 'oh gosh, can I have your picture?'", Specifically addressing her cosplay of Princess Celestia and her corrupted alter ego Daybreaker (3.16), Surge enthusiastically recalled, "I went to a *My Little Pony* convention in June [2019] and I have these big articulated wings. I press this button and they extend out and open. That's really cool, it's a showstopper for people". Evoking a reaction from her audience was a fundamental part of the convention experience for Surge.



3.16

> My favourite villain to cosplay as well- from the aforementioned season two finale of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* -disguises herself as the Princess who is getting married […] So I entered into this costume contest, and this character is really tall, she's a black horse-thing. She is a changeling is what she is, so she is not technically a pony. […] and the character she is disguised as [Princess Cadence] was this pink horse with feathery wings and multi-coloured hair, a totally different aesthetic. So, what I've done is, I've made a costume of this changeling Queen Chrysalis, but I've made it so that I can hide it underneath a wedding dress version of the character she was disguised as.
>
> Surge

What Surge illustrates through both construction and performance(s) is the ways in which cosplay performance and construction are ingrained in the narratives of the source material. The process of research and embedding oneself into their chosen character and the original source material was dwelled on by Lamerichs as a process of ensuring screen accuracy (Lamerichs, 2014, 4.4). The cosplayers relationship with their character through research and construction was drawn out in Winge's earlier 2006 essay 'Costuming the Imagination'. In this essay Winge examines anime and manga cosplayers and explains how "a cosplayer researches and studies an already existing anime or manga character with a keen eye for detail, in order to create a cosplay character" (Winge 2006, 68). Surge recounted the contextual narrative behind her cosplay of Daybreaker with enthusiasm, making it apparent that the narratives and contextual background is an important part of both creation and performance. The way in which Surge has constructed a cosplay which transforms is not only a homage of the onscreen narratives but a direct replication. Consequently, Surge's cosplay depends on an audience which recognises the narratives from the show. With reference to Poitras (2001), Winge explains that the contexts of the convention are an equally important factor towards cosplayed performance. "Conventions are held at all times of year, around the world, for fans of science fiction, fantasy, horror, anime, manga, and the like to share their interests and passions with like-minded individuals" (Winge 2006, 69). Cosplay depends on communicating known narratives between cosplayer and spectator. For Surge, bringing her Daybreaker cosplay to a *My Little Pony* specific convention is a central part of its performance, to engage with and entertain other fans who share knowledge of the series and the characters.

Moving away from discussions of performance, my interview with participant Erika (25, she/her, female, heterosexual, UK, white) centred around the creativity and craft of their cosplay and the emotional connection cosplayers, like Erika, nurture over the duration of crafting a cosplay. Some of Erika's favourite cosplays include Nurse Joy (from *Pokémon*), the Joker from DC's *Batman*, and Sally Jupiter from *Watchmen* (Snyder, 2009), though her favourite cosplay was Dragon Trainer Kristina (3.17), from the video game *League of Legends* (2009). Erika explains her love of Dragon Trainer Kristina, and her own experiences with fellow cosplayers:

3.17

> I really like the champion; I really like the design. She is quite feisty I guess, and I quite like that, so she is quite fun, and everyone has always loved the dragon. […] but also, at the convention I met another Dragon Trainer Kristina cosplayer (we seemed to be quite rare), that was really nice, and I'd seen her work before. So, we had a chat about that and stuff, so that was really cool. I met these two cosplayers form Ireland who were there and, everyone was just really encouraging about what I'd done and stuff. […] I remember that a Morgana cosplayer came up and was like, "ah you look so good!" and

> everything was just nice, meeting people who played the same games and all those people I spoke to that I'd mentioned had played it.
>
> Erika

Erika's experiences resonate with those of Surge in the reflection on shared knowledge, though for Erika there is less of an emphasis on performance and more an emphasis on the relationship between fans that shared knowledge can initiate. The community fans create is an integral part of Acafan literature (Chapter 1). Forming connections with other cosplayers was important to all my participants, for the most part these connections are momentary, and cosplayers will not see one another again outside of the convention hall. I experienced similarly during my outings as Sucy, from which I became accustomed to a distinct etiquette between cosplayers and spectators. If a cosplayer approaches another cosplayer for a photo on the convention floor it is courteous to take it in turns to take photos of one another. When cosplayers take one another's images it is not uncommon (though not always the case) that a cosplayer is expected to perform for the camera with several poses (something I frequently forgot and was always called out on). There might not be any exchange of money but evokes a gift exchange in which each cosplayer gets to take photos and pose for photos. Whereas when a cosplayer is asked to pose for an attendee, the attendee usually takes a quick photo before moving on, or on occasion the attendee will ask to have their photo taken with the cosplayer.

Whilst these fleeting interactions are the most common connections cosplayers will make, cosplay can lead to establishing long term connections as Erika explained,

> I met a couple of people in London last year that I now follow [online] and would go over and say hi if I saw them again at another convention. They live in Ireland I think. […] Oh, and they'll go to meet ups and stuff and conventions, and then you make those friends, and you talk online. So, you're sort of following one another's work.
>
> Erika

In response to my call for participants, Brock and Surge approached me as friends, having met some years back in a cosplay and anime society at their university. Once again this suggests that cosplayer's favourite experiences are not only influenced by characters they like, but the connections made with other cosplayers in online and offline spaces. Thus, whilst cosplay as performance is momentary, it can have repercussions on a player's everyday life.

These reflections on my first four participants go a long way to illustrate the importance of shared knowledge of source material. The shared knowledge which is communicated through costume and play in turn are inextricably linked with the convention hall as an environment which facilitates these exchanges through performance. The convention hall was a safe space for Misty and Brock to perform in-character for young fans, and likewise the *My Little Pony* convention ensured a space within which most attendees have a shared knowledge of the narratives Surge was engaging with. In Erika's experiences it is also necessary to address the importance of the online cosplay space, which permit cosplayers to engage with one another outside of the convention hall. Lome (2016) observes that today "most people are first exposed to cosplay through the Internet, online groups, anime, or friends already in the community. Cosplay has many social media support groups that help cosplayers feel included" (Lome 2016, 3.4). In my own experiences of attending cosplay conventions, I was first introduced to Georgia Thomas-Parr online (Thomas-Parr is a fellow academic based at University of Sheffield who is similarly interested in the practise and study of cosplay), following several online discussions we eventually met at a Fan Studies conference (Fantastic! at University of Sheffield, 2019) and later at Yorkshire Cosplay Con.

Identity and Self-expression

My participant Koga (41, she/her, female, heterosexual, UK, white) similarly reflected on the value of friendships made in cosplay communities. In our interview, when asked what her favourite cosplays have been, Koga discussed her love of Narcissa Malfoy from the *Harry Potter* films, Irene Adler (BBC file image, 3.18) from *Sherlock* (2010-17)'s, and a character [unspecified] from *Star Trek Discover* (2017-). One of the main things I took away from my discussion with Koga was her experiences at conventions meeting with actors from her favourite shows.

3.18

Koga enthusiastically recalled being at a convention as Irene Adler where "I actually met Benedict Cumberbatch [lead actor from *Sherlock*] and he complimented me on my cosplay, and I went all fan girly". On a different occasion at a *Star Trek* convention, Koga cosplayed as an evil iteration of one of the crew members, "and I met the actress who played the character, who really loved it […] and I'd say it was probably- it is the costume I'm proudest of". As much as fans and cosplayers can be seen to poach and use texts to their own devices as Jenkins wrote (1992), we might look to Hills (2014), who pointed out the ways in which "fan prop makers are not only seeking to imitate what they've seen on screen, but they are also aiming to understand and replicate techniques of manufacture" (Hills 2014, 3.2). Affirmation from the artist was a validating experience for Koga, she recalled these events with excitement, suggesting that such approval was sought after. However, we see complex power relations emerge here. Whilst the cosplayer might read this exchange as a recognition of their creativity, Hills explains "affirmational activities supposedly reinforce the official author's power and control over their own works", though Hills does not dwell on this, quick to capture just how complicated these changes are adding, "the alternative is a democracy of taste with intended meanings being made over and retooled" (Hills 2014, 2.1). It is a complicated exchange in which both author and cosplayer hold equal powers.

During our talk, Koga explained that the characters she cosplays are informed in a more profound way, rather than just picking a popular character which might appeal to other fans.

> The characters I choose tend to be characters I either identify with on some level – so Irene Adler and Narcissus Malfoy, the commonalities I suppose being, I suppose that middle-aged femme fatal, which is the, it's part of the aesthetics I enjoy.
>
> Koga

Identification with one’s character came up in conversation in every interview. A love for the source material, and an identification or respect for the character was cosplayers primary motivator for cosplaying a character. There is the occasional cosplay a participant will put together as part of a group piece, or as a technical exercise, but for the most part cosplayers favourite characters to cosplay are ones they feel an affinity with. Because of how common a narrative this is among cosplayers it is a recurring discussion held in Acafan cosplay scholarship. Lamerichs for example suggests, “the activity [of cosplay] is not just a projection of the self, but also an interpretive process of engaging with the character” (Lamerichs 2018, 220). In my conversation with Janine (38, she/her, female, bisexual, UK, white) she explained that cosplay allowed for a means of expressing herself and managing her generalized anxiety disorder in controlled environments of comic and fan conventions. Janine told me that one of her favourite cosplays was of Mae from the video game *Night in the Woods* (3.19). For Janine, the events which occurred to Mae in the video game were fundamental to the construction and performance of Mae, and fundamentally why she identified so heavily with the character. Janine shared:

3.19

> One of the ones [costumes] that I did quite recently was, I cosplayed Mae from *Night in the Woods* (2017). And if you play the game, the character is really interesting because she is a kind of rebellious kind of character, and very forthright, and speaks her mind a lot. But as the game unfolds, you discover that she has these mental health problems and there is a lot she has gone through.

Janine

The events that unfold for Mae in the video game are reappropriated by Janine through costume to extend a discussion of a topic and to express herself to others. Lamerichs continues, “In many cases, cosplayers suggest that the activity is not so much about being the character as it is about getting to know him or her” (Lamerichs 2018, 220). Researching character and embedding oneself into the universe of their chosen character is just as much an important part of cosplay as dressing up. The process of learning, or ‘getting to know’ the cosplayers chosen character, in turn is a process of feedback between cosplayer and cosplay. From my textual analysis of Sucy I found parallels between mine and Sucy’s own use of costume to exaggerate one’s own personality, in the episode ‘Mad Love’ the main characters are seen attending a masquerade ball, at which Sucy attends dressed as Maleficent from *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi, 1959), a character who can be interpretated as an exaggeration of her own character.

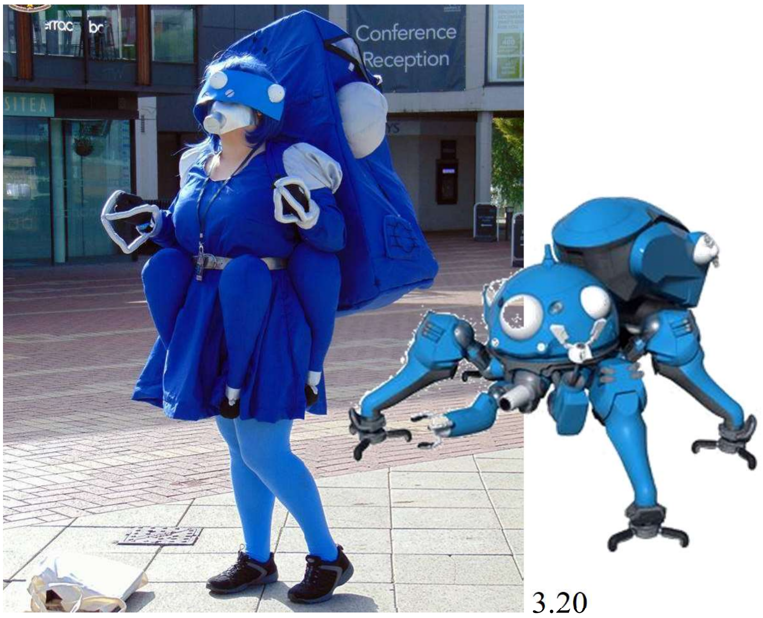
Cosplayers’ identification with characters can also allow for themselves to break free from social rules and expectations placed upon them, for myself and Brock, the momentary play of our crossplay cosplays allowed us to explore alternative parts of ourselves in safe spaces under the pretences of performance. The same experiences of safe expression was similarly seen in Janine’s cosplay who is engaging with narratives of mental health (rather than gender). Talking further on her Mae cosplay, Janine explained that “I really identified with her as a character, but it was kind of hard to portray that story of more insecure side of her” These ideas of identity expression and identification are discussed by Bainbridge and Norris (2009), they suggest that the convention hall floor offers a unique space for cosplayers to experiment:

> In the context of fan communities, it can perhaps be better read as part of this play with identity, the assumption of an identity which not only identifies, aligns, and defines the cosplayer with a particular character, series or group, but also liberates that cosplayer from traditional gender roles.
>
> Bainbridge and Norris 2009, 96

The notion of cosplay as "liberating” is not an uncommon idea in current cosplay scholarship. It is worth highlighting that cosplay as liberating has not been discussed purely in terms of gender and sexuality, but also of race and religion. Such as in the article ‘They said we ruined the character and our religion’ (2021) by Jurdi, Moufahim, and Dekel. In this paper Jurid et al. address the practise of “*hijab* cosplay”, which with reference to Rastati (2015), Jurdi et al.

describe as: “in hijab cosplay, women partake in cosplay while maintaining their religious identity by incorporating their hijab in one form or another into their chosen costume” (Jurdi et al. 2021, 44). For example, a *hijab* cosplay of Sailor Moon from the Manga and Anime *Sailor Moon* (Takeuchi, 1992) such a cosplayer would adapt their hijab to mimic the style of Sailor Moon’s hair; or a *hijab* cosplay of Thor from *Thor* (Branagh, 2011) might see a hijab with colours that mimic Thor’s blond hair, or colours which match Thor’s armour mimicking a helmet. In their conclusion Jurdi et al remark, “*hijab* cosplay provides our young informants with pleasurable experiences, empowerment, a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose” (Jurdi et al. 2021, 56). This adaptation of character allows cosplayers to express themselves through characters they identify with without compromising their own identity. Just as Janine adapted the character Mae an anthropomorphic cat onto their human body as a means of exploring their relationship with their personal mental health struggles.

Sharing these feelings of cosplay as a medium of self-expression and experimentation with identity was interview participant Sabrina (27, she/her, female, demisexual, UK, white). In our conversation Sabrina reflected on a particular type of character she aligned herself with. She expressed the ways in which cosplay was a creative process both in terms of crafting costume, but also a means of crafting oneself, having established herself as a cosplayer choosing almost exclusively robot and android characters. Sabrina explained that she designed and constructed each of her costumes to move away from a gendered expectations of her. As can be seen in the below image of Sabrina’s Tachikoma Tank (3.20), Sabrina has translated the design and aesthetic of the robot onto the female body. Sabrina told me how,



3.20

> I’m known for cosplaying like, humanified dress versions of robots. So, I have cosplayed BB-8 [*Star Wars*], of course I’ve played Baymax [*Big Hero Six* (Hall and Williams, 2015)]. I cosplayed the Tachikoma Tanks from *Ghost in the Shell* [(Kise and Nomura, 2015)].
>
> Sabrina

In the above figure, the four legs of the robot have been translated onto the body by being sewn into the pleats of a skirt. The abdomen of the robotic spider has been reimagined as a large backpack, and a mask mimics the expressionless head of the robot. Sabrina informed me that she has reproduced and adapted multiple robots and machines into dresses and ball gowns. For Sabrina, the labour of this adaptation is appealing in two main respects:

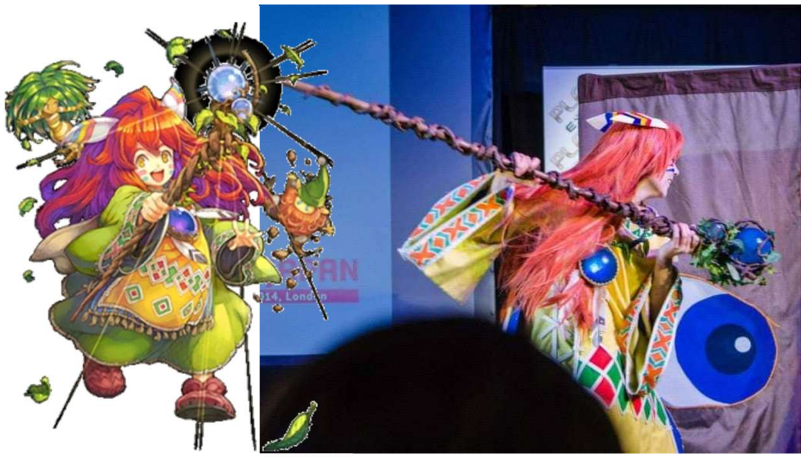
> I’m allowed to be a bit more creative and have a bit more fun with that. And, also, then-just like, the possibility it is because I’m not 100% neurotypical, I do a lot of robot characters more than human forms. And tend to find them [robots] very cute.
>
> Sabrina

Just as Janine was able to explore her anxieties through the narratives of Mae, through cosplay Sabrina has been able to disrupt any social expectations regarding gendered and neurotypical behaviour. Sabrina opened with “I’m allowed to be a bit more creative”, cosplay offers the feeling of being granted a sense of self-expression, even if it is for just a few hours. Mountfort et al. confirm how cosplay is almost defined by, “the theme of escape from, and control over, self and everyday reality” for Mountfort et al. escape “operates as an aid to the creative process that is visibly expressed through the making and wearing of a spectacular costume” (Mountfort et al. 2019, 185). Leng (2013) similarly observes that cosplayers not only “challenge hegemonic norms about masculinity and femininity, but also [work] to facilitate the construction of new modes of fan identity and creative expression” (Leng 2013, 92). The communities that have emerged amongst cosplayers have a reputation (at least among other cosplayers) as inclusive spaces to be oneself without consequence.

During our conversation Sabrina brought my attention to how cosplay “helped me find that community to be more comfortable with being a lesbian; it helped me figure out the way where I was getting confused – because I was falling on the demisexual end of the spectrum”. Again, reinforcing the notion that cosplay can be a personally affirmational medium, but integrally the values of community and finding likeminded people in a safe environment. Lunning explains “cosplay is – on some level – about sexuality, whether or not it is purposeful. Some characters are innately sexy or crossgendered – it is about flirting and exploration – sexual exploration without consequences” (Lunning 2011, 75). The notion that sexuality is intertwined with cosplay was not something any of my other participants felt particularly strongly about, though it was a strong part of Sabrina’s cosplay journey which resonates with prominent discussions on sexuality in cosplay scholarship.

Authority and Ongoing Role-play

My final two participants each offered very different perspectives compared to my prior participants. Firstly, Giovanni (34, she/her, female, heterosexual, UK, white) brought with her a unique perspective as she has not only entered several cosplay competitions, but has also been a cosplay contest judge for Euro Cosplay and MCM Comic Con. In the context of the cosplay competition (also referred to as the masquerade), craft and performance are key. Discussing her cosplay of Popoi (from *Secret of Mana* (Kikuta, Ishii, Tanaka, and Gebelli, 1993)) at World Cosplay Summit (3.21), Giovanni discussed the intricate nature of her costume and the ways in which craft and performance inform each process:



3.21

> I had costume props hidden inside the different layers [of the costume] so that I could just produce a big giant swath of fabric, or whatever […] there was a part of the performance where I fell down, and you know, lay on the floor while my cosplay partner tried to revive me, so to speak – he’s in the end game healing items.
>
> Giovanni

Giovanni illustrates nicely the ways in which planning one's performances can inform one's cosplay construction, such as accounting for hidden pockets. Surge similarly discussed how she would construct her cosplays to be itself the spectacle, fondly recalled from entering her Daybreaker cosplay into a competition, "I do love the feeling of being on stage and people cheering, because when I did this last year, cosplay on stage, I opened the [articulated] wings, and everyone cheered. It was just such good feeling". Writing in the contexts of cosplay competition in Malaysia, Yamato's 2016 paper uses interviews and surveys to examine how taking part in cosplay competitions can aid the development of an individual's personality and creative potential. Yamato concludes,

> These activities also give contributors the opportunity to explore their own creativity and capability. The event is the place to get feedback for their efforts. Therefore, the contributors can potentially discover and develop their own hard skills, technical skills to perform a certain task, as well as the soft skills that organisers do.
>
> Yamato 2016, 755

Even in competition Yamato centres these experiences in community, and the sharing of skills through feedback. Illustrating in which all the key discussion points that have been raised so far (identity, performance, craft, and friendship) are all entangled within the environment of cosplay competitions. For both Surge and Giovanni competition and community goes hand in hand, whether that's; the interaction between cosplay and performer (during the on-stage performance), or the sharing of crafting techniques as cosplayers prepare for competitions, or even whilst cosplayers chat off-stage waiting on the judges scores.

Giovanni brought with her the unique perspective of being a contest judge. Giovanni was keen to share her respect for just how much work goes into cosplayers' craft. "There is always something you can comment on as a judge. But I think the bar just gets raised higher and higher every year as more and more people get into it and share their skills". In our conversation Giovani spoke enthusiastically of her judging experience, and very fondly of those she has judged, but what is outlined in Giovanni's description of judging is a sense of authority, or power over other cosplayers. Winge notes that competition judges "are usually Cosplay 'experts' (i.e., interviewers, bloggers, researchers, costume designers, etc.), celebrity stars from fandom films, and popular cosplayers." (Winge 2019, 82). For the cosplay judge there is a distinct power relation at play, they are still fundamental to the community, but these cosplay authorities possess power over other cosplayers as individuals who judge what is and is not worthy of 'best in show'.

When considering how cosplay environments influence/structure cosplay communication, the experiences of Surge and Giovanni would point to the competition as an environment which generates modes of engagement and communication between cosplayers (a part of, yet distinct from, the convention hall floor). In Winge's earlier work, she lists cosplay competitions high up in the list of cosplay social settings, including: "masquarades (i.e., character-based costume performance competitions), photograph sessions, themed parties, karaoke, club meetings, and conventions" (Winge 2006, 68). In Winge's later work, she explains that in the setting of the cosplay competition, "cosplayers are judged on three primary criteria: (1) accuracy of the appearance of the costume to the actual character; (2) construction skills and quality of the costume; and (3) entertainment value of the performance" (Winge 2019, 82). Thus, whilst taking place at fan conventions, one might evaluate the cosplay competition as an environment in and of itself, which comes with its own set of expectations and traditions, permitting a specific space for cosplay performance and engagement.

My final participant provides another unique perspective. In my literature review I defined cosplay as the dress and performance of a character from popular media. This meant that costumed performances of original characters in related communities such as steam-punk, or furry fandom were exempted. With this said my final participant Blue (46, he/him, male, pansexual, Canada, white) is a member of the furry community. Blue is an exception to my 'no furries' rule, because he might be considered a 'furry cosplayer' in that he has an original furry persona (a Canadian Lynx) who cosplays as a Jedi from *Star Wars* (3.22). My discussion with Blue was exceptional in many respects firstly, it was my longest interview on record. Secondly, my discussion with Blue in many respects touched on all the main discussion points which emerged during all my other interview sessions.

3.22

Blue was very conscious of how his costumed play trod the line between cosplay and furry fandoms. Our conversation opened with Blue considering the ways in which furry fandom and cosplay fandom differ. For Blue, his's fursona dressing as a Jedi was not strictly cosplay, "I wasn't cosplaying, you know, cosplaying a Jedi. Not a particular Jedi or a character from the movie". Blue felt that the expectations that come with cosplay limited the potentials of his craft and performance. Blue used the following example to illustrate:

> If you had to cosplay Robocop, there would be a certain amount of expectations of how one should perform. Whereas if you are taking on a persona and you're creating a wolf, then you're going to inject that with an original performance.
>
> Blue

In other words, the furry has total free reign on how to present oneself and interact with others, whereas a cosplayer must meet the expectations of how their character ought to behave. Though, members of the furry fandom typically define themselves to one another through the guise of their own original anthrozoomorphic avatar and thus typically only have the one costume which they will take to each convention. Whereas cosplayers tend to not to be bound to a specific character but will cosplay new characters to each convention they attend.

Where cosplay is momentary, furries' avatars can be a long-term commitment to one's avatar and other members of the community (this is not to say that members of the furry community do not change their avatars, only that it is less common compared to the frequency at which the typical cosplayer changes their choice of character). Roberts et al. in their paper, The Anthrozoomorphic Identity (2015), observe that furries have strong emotional bonds with their avatars, "furries' felt connections to animals are diverse and multi-faced. Most furries have an anthrozoomorphic character or 'fursona' through which they relate to the fandom" (Roberts et al. 2015, 534). Whilst Blue may not have considered the process of his fursona dressing as a Jedi strictly as 'cosplay', Blue's original avatar appearing in Jedi robes does appear to have striking similarities to the cosplay experience. In Blue's explanation he recognises "the *Star Wars* stuff was more similar to playing a *Star Wars* roleplaying game. It was cool to drop in and be able to inhabit this universe, I can inhabit this character". Under the persona of his furry avatar, Blue was faced with meeting a particular set of expectations of the image of the Jedi. As one can see in his performance (3.22), Blue has the iconic brown robes and holds the lightsabre in a two-handed defensive stance, evocative of characters Obi-Wan Kenobi, Anakin Skywalker, or Rey.

As an older member of the furry community, Blue discussed how he entered the community and the ways it has changed over time, “this is 1993. So, it was like, you know, there is this thing called ‘the internet’. I’m like, ‘what’s that about?’ And there is this text based virtual reality [forum] on there, called *Fairy Muck*, you can join us. Full of fans who are interested in this kind of thing”. Over the duration of our talk whilst Blue had attended numerous conventions, Blue offered a particularly insightful introduction to the online aspects of fandom, and as can be read from the above quotation online communities were pivotal in nurturing Blues place within the furry community. Forums are a prime spaces for role-play, they are safe, usually closed off groups within which members can freely communicate with one another. Yet, when asked about any concerns within the community, Blue acknowledged that “There’s some speciesism in the furry community to some degree. It’s not super bad. It’s more stereotyping”, this came as a surprise to me, so I asked Blue to elaborate. Blue explained,

> Oh well, all foxes are ‘x’ sort of thing […] all foxes are just, you know, sex fiends. And dragons pretend to be powerful, but they’re just depressed. All cats are aloof. […] all wolves are loyal, and so on.
>
> Blue

After our discussion, I found myself curious over the development of stereotypes in the furry community and decided to see if I could find any examples. In the Reddit group, ‘R/Furry’ there is a popular post titled: “does speciesism exist in the fandom?”. Under the post one commenter expressed: “there are dozens of stereotypes, they’re usually in jest. Rabbits, for one, are often noted for outpacing even foxes in promiscuity”, another commenter spoke positively of speciesism in jest, “Honestly, I am pretty much okay with hearing these speciesist insults in RPs [role-play], because in a way, animals do have their own characteristics, but in real-talk, I think it’s a bit stupid”. Much in the same way that fans developed a consensus as to how Bowsette should look as I observed in the literature review, this nods back to a quotation from Jenkins: “fan reception cannot and does not exist in isolation but is always shaped through input from other fans and motivated, at least partially, by a desire for further interaction with a larger social and cultural community” (Jenkins 1992, 77). Here Jenkins, shows that norms and assumptions emerge within, and are contested by, the fan community at large. The stereotypes that develop in furry communities of particular animals become a part of communal role-play, and they are developed by the community at large based on broader social myths and narratives i.e., foxy lady, or 'at *it* like rabbits.

Pointing out that these narratives can induce conflicting reception, another commenter in 'R/Furry' expressed that 'speciesism' in role-play had been detrimental to their friendship group, "something like 10 years ago I tried to stop being a wolf, and then turn into a dragon and all but 2-3 of my friends weren't happy about that. I blame that on a couple of dragon furs in the friend circle being all jerkish and full of themselves". In the case of the furry community, role-play extends beyond the convention space, it is ongoing in the online groups where the players avatars primarily exist. We might term this an ongoing role-play, unlike the momentary experience of cosplay. Because of this ongoing role-play, players avatars become much more a part of a player's routine and can impact a person's interactions with others.

Despite the conflicting narratives, of collaborative play and collaborative hierarchy, that emerge in these communal narratives, Blue remained hopeful and believed that furry fans can be progressive and socially constructive. Blue illustrated this for me by explaining how he learnt of my research. In July 2020, I commented on a series of Twitter posts, after observing that furrys were commenting upon several right-wing Twitter bots who had misinterpreted the furry hashtag '#socialistteeth'. The hashtag had started trending among the furry community to condemn a racist joke which someone outside of the community had posted, subsequently right-wing bots used the hashtag without understanding its meaning, and in doing so exposed the Twitter accounts as bots. My comments on the events were retweeted 1.6K times and received 4.2K likes (see appendix), my reading of this engagement is that members of the furry community felt validated, that their efforts to stamp out hateful speech within their community had been recognised by someone outside of the community.

Blue explained how he became aware of my research after seeing my comments on Twitter. "Although ironically, I didn't find you through Twitter. It was through, somebody who rates role-playing games, he reposted your post about 'socialist teeth', that you posted about tripping the bots, which then led me to your research". Whilst I had found the event humorous and worthy of comment, I did not expect how important the event was within the furry community. It is also worth briefly noting a complication, in that I also have personal experience in my Tweet being reappropriated, shared, and discussed in Furry forums, much like images of my Sucy cosplay (discussed in Part 1), this was done without my consultation or permission. In the case of online fans, everything is up for grabs, and the author's intentions are not up for consideration. However, in spite of my concerns of how widely shared my Tweet had become, from Blue's position, "that level of response to, you know, we were going to step up in the moment, and show our progressiveness and stand in the face of authoritarianism, it's an element of the community that is- does give that hope".

Online spaces in many respects are considered fan spaces and are the subject of a great deal of Acafan writing, in Aljanahi's 2018 paper, 'You could say I'm a Hardcore Fan of *Dragon Ball Z*', Aljanahi draws on Jenkins et al. (2007) to emphasise the importance of the internet and online spaces commenting, "as a consequence of the ubiquity of the internet and the advancement of technology, affinity spaces have made it 'possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways'" (Aljanahi 2018, 4). Not only are online spaces for Blue sites of negotiated community undertaken through the veil of role-playing a anthrozoomorphic world of humanoid animals, but I also have personal experience in validating the furry communities (indirect) attack on right-wing bots.

When I asked Blue if he had any concerns within the furry fanbase, he did share some concerns yet remained ultimately hopeful. I asked all of my participants if they had any concerns about cosplay and the community, the responses I received are analysed in Part 3.

Part 3 – Audience Power Relations

In this final part to Chapter 3, I will be analysing responses to the question: "do you have any concerns with the cosplay community?" which was asked of all my participants. I'll be unpacking these responses to identify shared observations between myself, my participants, and existing cosplay literature. But, more significantly I will be identifying where my own experiences and the experiences of my participants do not line-up with cosplay scholarship. Examining the limitations of contemporary cosplay scholarship shall place a particular focus on topics of gender performance and competitions which were both prominent topics that emerged during participant interviews. Finally, I address discourses concerning race and cosplay which emerged during each of my participants discussions, and further examine the absence of black identities in cosplay fandom and scholarship more broadly.

Gendered Performances and the (Potential) Disruption of Gendered Norms

I asked all my participants about playing with gender in cosplay on account of its visibility and according to Acafan writers its potential to be socially disruptive. Gender performance applies to all my participants in some respect, whether they chose characters that are of their own gender or a different gender to their own, each cosplayer is playing with gendered conventions in some shape or form. During Part 2 of this chapter, I identified many examples from all my cosplay participants which confirmed many of the writings of cosplay and fan scholars. The ways in which cosplay participants such as Brock, Surge, Koga and Sabrina had each found cosplay as a means of becoming more themselves "the activity [of cosplay] is not just a projection of the self, but also an interpretive process of engaging with the character" (Lamerichs 2018, 220). In so doing, the participants gender-play cosplays could indeed be considered a "transversal moment as it [cosplay] crosses gender, race or reality can be seen to offer an optimistic creative and social movement" (Bainbridge and Norris 2013, 35). Gendered play was integral in my own crossplay of Sucy Manbavarian as I wore the feminine clothes of Sucy, adapted my body to appear more feminine, and took on Sucy's mannerisms to accurately embody her character (or at least as closely as I could do).

Given the gendered norms of North America and the UK, the very fact that I should have the audacity to crossplay as a young female witch, is to reject the privileges of my male body. Crossplay and genderbending in cosplay scholarship has been accepted as a revolutionary act. In Bainbriodge and Norris's earlier 2009 paper, they argue: "Cosplay is not simply the fannish act of dressing up, but rather the act of 'queering' gender roles and stepping outside hetero-normative behaviours through the assumption of fictional identities" (Bainbridge and Norris 2009, 135). When I asked about Brock's cosplays of the *Gravity Falls* characters, namely Dipper and Bill, Brock responded enthusiastically, "that [crossplay] has always been more fun to me […] to experiment with what I think that I might be underneath all of this. Outside social pressure, and all of that. […] At a convention people treat me differently when they think I'm a man". For Brock, cosplay offers a unique opportunity to fit within a community, but perhaps most importantly to express themselves in a place which is removed from oppressive expectations of how she should present and behave. This resonates with the work of writers such as Robertson (2014), who in their paper on *My Little Pony* fandom explains how the show and its fandom permits male adult fans to "transgress the stereotypical cynicism, hegemonic masculinity, and belligerence that tends to represent internet interactions" (Robertson 2014, 33). For Brock, cosplaying as Dipper allows them to experiment with what they're comfortable with performing and what they're comfortable with presenting about themselves. When I asked them if there was a correlation between passing as a character and as the character's gender, Brock explained:

> It is definitely passing from a gender perspective, not just as a character. I've noticed that as years have gone by, and I've perfected these characters more and more I get a lot of people calling me 'Sir' and mostly from men, roughly my own age […] and that is very validating on multiple levels; both as an artist and as someone who through cosplay has started to feel more complex feelings about passing as a different gender.
>
> Brock

Brock's actions might not be obviously socially transformative, certainly not in the ways that have been written in the publications of Acafans (King, 2016; Lamerichs, 2018; Winge, 2019), however this does not undermine the experiences and the importance of cosplay as a medium in their navigation and formation of Brock's identity. In cosplay scholarship, several writers have suggested cosplay can be a reaffirming tool for LGBTQ+ members of the community (Jn, 2011; Jacobs, 2013; Shih-Chen, 2017). Based in a gender and fashion studies tradition, Entwistle's *The Fashioned Body* (2000) discusses the ways in which clothing is a marker of sexuality. For Entwistle, clothes "embellish the body, infuse it with sexuality" (Entwistle 2000, 181). It is up to the discretion of individuals to transgress stereotypes and expectations of hegemonic masculinity. The time and labour that goes into learning a character (or characters), constructing their costumes, and inevitably performing can be an intense experience as the cosplayer's chosen character reveals attributes of said cosplayer's identity. Brock, and others such as Sabrina (play with gendered roles, and the lack of, through cosplays of robots) and Janine (drawing on characters such as Mae to navigate narratives of mental health) each suggested that through embodying characters it is up to the discretion of the cosplayer, how one explores and tests attributes of their identity.

Hiller et al. (2012) conducted research into online LGB groups among adolescents and young adults, from their interviews they suggest that "the main reason for LGB groups, it seemed, and the main reason for LGB youth having online friends, was that it was possible to find likeminded individuals and get support online" (Hiller 2012, 234). Likewise, the cosplayers interviewed often treated the convention hall as a 'safe space' in which people can congregate, the common thread of cosplay brings all these individuals together with the common goal to impress and entertain one another. Joel Gn suggests that it is through fan-ish acts such as cosplay, that participants can potentially find a sense of completion. By drawing on external forces of the non-human onto the human body "this qualitative and self-generating subject position, so precisely exemplified in the cosplay performance, clearly demonstrates that knowledge of the human body – with its current institutions, practises, and codes of conduct –

is still far from complete" (Gn 2011, 591). My participant's experiences of learning their characters are a processes of adaptation and negotiation to present the fictional bodies onto their real-life bodies. Cosplay as momentary is important in this relationship, it is the momentary nature of cosplay performance which permits a dialogue for a cosplayer, permitting a means of experimenting and learning about themself. Cosplay is as Gn points out a negotiation between the fictional body and the human body, to create a convincing cosplay one must understand both the perceived and the real body and combine them through performance.

Gender-play and cosplay can indeed be valuable and personally transformative for certain individuals (experiences which should not be undermined), but it's necessary to emphasise that the transformative potentials of cosplay are more personal rather than social as Acafan cosplay scholarship has suggested. In the case of Surge, she felt gender was personally less at the forefront of her costuming choices. Surge put emphasis on the aspiration of accurately translating a fictional character. She found that "whenever I cosplay [a] male character I get this sense that, I want to walk with a swagger, and I feel more confident, because I'm all manly". For Surge these mannerisms are less about interacting with her own identity and more about performance. Surge explained that for her, gender-play cosplay is "definitely detached from my own sense of identity. […] In real life I'm a cis female but it's fun to be like- […] well, it's literally putting on a costume". Surge's reflections reinforce cosplay a momentary experience. As much as cosplay has the potential to reverberate into an individual's life, for many other cosplayers such as Surge the cosplay performance remains detached, a momentary form of play detached from one's day-to-day expectations of themselves.

Cosplay as momentary gender is a form of gender commodification. Donna Haraway suggests that gender is a 'possession', for example Haraway argues, "not to have property in the self is not to be a subject, and so not to have agency" (Haraway 1991, 135). In the case of Surge's venture into crossplay cosplay, gender is a product which can be borrowed and returned. Gender and sexuality as object are exaggerated in the processes of cosplay which gives participants agency to express themselves, even if it results in abuse from their peers. To be able to possess the male or female body in gender-play cosplay, cosplayers have been encouraged to feel more confident in themselves, to experiment, and simply to play.

Where Brock had found a means of processing questions of the self through cosplay, Surge found a means of play as did participants Erika and Giovani. Meanwhile, other cosplayers find a means of self-expression. For cosplayers such as Koga, in choosing characters of their own gender/sexuality, cosplay is less a means of negotiating questions of one's sexuality/gender, but a means of reaffirming sexuality and gender through exaggerated performance. In reference to Koga's cosplay of Irene Adler, Koga reflected on her age, "I'm actually really enjoying being in my 40s and what that brings in terms of expression of my own femininity and my own sexuality", she continues, by suggesting that there is something "aspirational about them [the femme fatale] they are not necessarily how I see myself, but they are how I'd like to be". Cosplay's nature of replication encourages one to aspire to popular narratives of gender, which for Koga has resulted in an affirmation of self.

Sabrina had a similar relationship with expressing gender through her gender-bending cosplays by adapting robots from film and TV into gowns and dresses. Sabrina found that, despite BB-8 being referred to with masculine pronouns in the film, "my brain was like, 'oh, it's a female robot', you know, It's two balls. I associate rounded shapes as a more feminine shape". This gender-bending of character, was received well from other cosplayers. Sabrina recalls, "I've never had people misgender me […] I'm very clearly, you know, the neck is quite low cut, I'm wearing a dress, skirt, I've got long hair". In adapting a character's design onto a stereotypically feminine dress, Sabrina shapes a collaboration between body and character, transforms the character whilst specifically maintaining the players gender identity, in such a way that encourages spectatorship. Even Brock's crossplay Dipper cosplay conforms to existing codes and signs of boyhood. Though both result in different reception from onlookers, given the difference between gender-bending and crossplay – this being that those who gender-bend a character confirms with the own gender, whereas a crossplayer refutes their own gender in favour of their chosen characters gender.

Whilst I cannot deny, and do not wish to undermine the benefits of cosplaying for my participants, it is necessary to distinguish that whilst cosplay can indeed have positive emotional outcomes for cosplayers, cosplay scholarship's tendencies to represent cosplay performance as socially revolutionary was not apparent in my own experiences or in the data collected in observations and interviews.

In cosplay scholarship's attempts to validate cosplay communities, scholars tend to represent cosplay communities as utopian spaces, failing to reflect upon some of the negative experiences that can occur. During my conversations with my cosplay participants, each participant shared experiences of having been subject to abuse and misogynist harassment from both other cosplayers and spectators.

In *Gender and the Superhero Narrative* by Goodrum, Prescott and Smith (2018), they suggest that gender-bending (or "swapping") can give female cosplayers agency that distances them from dominant gendered norms by reinventing male characters as female. “Female genderswapping overcomes these restrictions by creating new characters from pre-existing models, removing limitations on authentic performance and selectivity assuming masculine codes to allow the female cosplayer masculine agency without losing femininity” (Prescott and Smith 2018, 172). However, one might firstly question why female cosplayers should feel they have to take on male agencies to fit in. Secondly, my own interviews and ethnography suggest that Goodrum et al.’s observations are not always the case.

When I asked Brock if she felt any connection between her cosplays and her sexuality, Brock nervously responded, “Oh god, yes. This is the part that I’ve had to come into the most. The part that I was most unprepared for when I got into cosplay”. Brock expressed that as an asexual cosplayer, she was made to feel very exposed. I asked whether cosplaying younger masculine characters such as Dipper from *Gravity Falls*, helped limit expectations of performing sexuality, to which Brock explained, “No. The opposite has happened”. Brock detailed an experience in which, “a couple of feisty 16/17-year-olds tried to get me to engage with whatever kind of play they’re interested in […] and it is not fun when you’re the adult in the room […] I try to defuse the situation, I try and say, ‘hey, remember I am wildly older than you. It’s not cool’”. Here we see experiences which are not removed from hegemonic norms, but instead reinforce popular misogyny. Mountfort, Geczy and Peirson-Smith (2019) briefly acknowledge how outside of the “cosplay ‘family’, some female informants received more sinister appraisals from outsiders”. (Mountfort et al. 2019, 191). In Brock’s experiences, one gets a sense of just how intense and uncomfortable this side of cosplay can be. When one cosplays, one puts oneself out there and risks being subject to alternative readings/motives from onlookers, as I documented earlier in my own cosplay of Sucy Manbavarian. Comments such as “nice legs”, or “your legs are better than mine” which I received on the convention floor as Sucy can be read as flattering, harassing, and mocking. My experience cosplaying the young teenage girl Sucy, and Brock’s experience cosplaying the adolescent boy Dipper both raise questions about the appropriateness of, what I have termed age-bending (Skentelbery, 2019). Age-bending is the process through which one cosplays a character significantly older or younger than the cosplayer. However, in a cosplayers play with age, much like during gender-play, complicated narratives can emerge such as the sexualisation of adolescent characters.

In a fan studies paper by Orme (2016) she discusses gender discourses within the contexts of the comic bookstore, she observes that it is popularly considered that “real men should enjoy traditionally masculine activities such as sports, not comic books. This rhetoric of masculinity […] leads geek men to then construct the artefacts and practises associated with geek culture as masculine culture" (Orme 2016, 405-6). One can see shared discourses from the comic bookstore and the fan convention (and their shared audiences). Popular fandom is an alternative male sphere in Orme's reading. The fan convention can be discussed in similar terms as a site in which male participants find alternative expressions of masculinity (in a primarily female space) as illustrated by Brock's conflict with the teenage boys. Fandom might be distinct from popular masculinity, but in male fans' reinvention of masculinity these male fans still conform to dominant misogynist structures. In my conversation with Erika, she shared an experience from when she cosplayed as Nurse Joy from *Pokémon*. Erika explained that as she walked the convention floor she was confronted by a young man.

> [He was] Definitely younger than me, I'd say seventeen maybe, and they were sort of like, 'Oh!' – I can't remember what Pokémon [toy] they had now – 'will you heal my whatever please?' and I was like, 'Oh, yeah'. So, he handed it me, and you know I gave it a little cuddle, 'there you go they're all better' […] I gave it them back and they said, 'oh, they're not healed. They're not fixed'. And I was like 'Oh… okay?' and so I tried again, and then they just kept going, and going and it just started to- I don't know what it was, I don't know whether it was picking on or teasing. I don't know if they were genuinely trying to have fun but, it felt malicious.
>
> Erika

In this unpleasant exchange, between Erika and a (young) male convention attendee, the young man engages with Erika in such a manner that engages with her in character following the narrative of Nurse Joy as the Pokémon nurse in the games and animated series. However, the attendee makes the exchange uncomfortable by repeating it, by suggesting that Erika has failed to complete the exchange (despite having played along). Returning to Orme, she continues, "hence, comic book culture becomes a site for performing masculinity, which places female comic book fans in a complex position, forcing them to negotiate their performance of femininity" (Orme 2016, 406). The young male spectator perverts the narrative of play, and in doing so makes Erika feel uncomfortable, holding the power in the exchange.

From examining the experiences of my participants relationship with gender-play cosplay, one finds a multitude of effects and interpretations. I have identified that gender-play can be used in multiple ways, each of which can be subject to multiple interpretations from other cosplayers and spectators: (1) cosplay can be a means of navigating and asking questions about one's own gendered and sexual identities; (2) cosplay can be a means of reaffirming one's own gender; (3) gender-play in copslay can be used as a means of personal experimentation and affirmation of gendered norms. However, each practise can find itself subject to unwanted interactions from other cosplayers or convention attendees. These narratives of abuse and harassment are absent from much contemporary cosplay literature; however it is such a common part of the cosplay experience that it demands analysis. As much as cosplayers are distinctly bound with the environment of the convention hall, it cannot be overstated that the convention hall floor will be home to attendees who are not cosplayers. Convention attendees might still share the interests of cosplayers as fans of popular TV, film, and games, but non-cosplay attendees may not understand or appreciate the formalities of the cosplay community.

Cases of abuse and harassment are analysed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Construction, Performance, and the Competitive Sides of Cosplay

As much as cosplayers might be subject to the expectations of spectators, it is also apparent from the discussions with my participants that cosplayers also have expectations of one another. These expectations emerge perhaps most prominently during the cosplay competition (or masquerade). Winge defines cosplay competitions in North America as follows, "during masquerades cosplayers wear their dress onstage and perform skits, often humorous but not necessarily an exact mime of their chosen character" (Winge 2006, 73). I can confirm that the cosplay competitions follow this layout having attended the masquerades of Yorkshire Cosplay Con (2019), Anime and Gaming Con. Cardiff (2019), and MCM London (2019), as well as earlier conventions MCM Manchester (2016), Anime and Gaming Con. Birmingham (2016), Geeks Con. Wolverhampton (2016), and MCM Midlands (2017). The competitive sides of cosplay however can also be found outside of the masquerade in conversation within the cosplay community. The competitive nature of cosplay has been acknowledged in some current cosplay scholarship, for example Mountfort et al. observe that:

> A performance requires an audience, and as Ellen Kirkpatrick notes of the role of spectators, cosplay is 'a simultaneous performance – as source character and as member of the cosplaying community'. This community is itself a double-edged sword that can mete out approval or condemnation
>
> Mountfort et al. 2019, 5

What is found in this quote is a recognition of hierarchy, the onlooker (whether they are a cosplayer or non-cosplayer) has power over the cosplayer in the act decoding and determining the apparent success or failure of a player.

On the cosplay masquerade, Erika explained to me just how seriously some cosplayers take their craft (at the expense of others). Erika recalled meeting a fellow *League of Legends* cosplayer at a convention, Erika explained how:

> I was saying to someone that, 'oh, your work is amazing, you've made such a beautiful dress', and they said to me […], 'Thanks, you too. Did you make those fangs yourself?' because I had little clip-in fangs, and that was the only thing I hadn't made from scratch, and I don't think that's important. But it matters in the contest context […] you've got to make at least 80% of it yourself, to participate. […] But by this one cosplayer, she wasn't a judge or anything like that and they just said, 'oh, I feel like I have to make everything myself, or I feel like I haven't done it properly'
>
> Erika

In Erika's account, she recalls her *League of Legends* cosplay of Dragon Trainer Kristina for which Erika constructed everything, including a puppet dragon, yet still faces scrutiny from a fellow cosplayer (and fellow fan of *League of Legends*) for purchasing false fangs. The level of scrutiny Erika experienced, she found to be unreasonable. What is significant about this reflection on behalf of Erika, is that my other participants each recollected similar experience(s) in which they faced unwanted scrutiny and criticism.

In Part 2, I referenced the article, 'They said we ruined the character and our religion' by Jurdi, Moufahim, and Dekel (2021), to give greater depth to illustrating the ways in which cosplay is a creative and empowering act. In this article *hijab* cosplay is seen as an empowering act allowing cosplayers to celebrate their favourite characters from popular media, whilst also retaining their religious identities. However, this adaptation of character has also been looked down upon by other members of the cosplay community. Jurdi et all provide some common examples of criticism and abuse that *hijab* cosplayers are often confronted with:

> The issue of authenticity emerged as being of prime importance to the *hijab* cosplayers. For one, it was often used as a criticism against their style of cosplay. Wan recalls some of the most common comments *hijabs* have received for their cosplay: 'they look so weird wearing like that' 'oh no they ruin our fave girls!' 'they all looked ugly!'

Jurdi et al. 2021, 53

Just as Erika's cosplay was critiqued for inaccuracies, and seemingly unsubstantial technical differences, *hijab* cosplayers have been confronted for failing to cosplay characters as seen on screen, by adapting characters to maintain their religious identities. It is a point of contention which is racially motivated discrimination, with the pale argument that hijab cosplayers are in some way unprofessional or ugly and fails to meet the technical standards expected of professional cosplayers. According to Griffin in their article, 'That moment meant a lot to my daughter: affect, fandom and *Avengers: Endgame*' (2022). In the article Griffin conceptualises how race has been discussed in fan communities (and in fan scholarship more broadly). Griffin observes; with reference to Martin (2019), how in "discussions of race or gender in popular culture often leaves 'white fandoms exnominated and normative, thus positioning race and fandom as fundamentally different from 'regular' fandom'" (Griffin 2022, 6). With reference to the cosplay surveys identified in Part 2 (Lotecki (2012) and Rosenberg and Letamendi (2013)), the one could well argue that whiteness is normative within the cosplay community, and consequently those who do not fit these norms and do not adhere to these norms may be confronted with criticism and abuse, such as the comments which *hijab* cosplayers have received. Something which will be explored in the next section is the concern that this thesis too discusses whiteness as normative.

Koga drew my attention to criticisms posted in online cosplay groups, from which Koga has distanced herself on account of: "when I see people passing judgment on the quality of someone's costume or passing judgment on whether someone is the right shape to be playing somebody, I just think, no, I'm sorry, that's not what I signed up for". Koga explained how she was made to feel uncomfortable engaging with online aspects of the cosplay community on account of how "nasty" some cosplayers would be to one another. Further to this, in Koga's own experience of cosplaying characters such as Irene Adler or Narcissa Malfory, just as cosplaying these characters had reaffirmed her own age and sensuality, these characters were chosen with a secondary function. Koga explains, "I picked Narcissa, who is Draco Malfoy's Mum, and part of it [the cosplay] is- it's almost a joke that I'm actually too old to be any of the main characters". As an older cosplayer at 41-years-old, compared against the primary younger demographics, Koga evaluated the notion of cosplaying the younger main characters from *Harry Potter* as being (in some way) inappropriate. This observation by Koga subsequently suggests that my concept of age-bending cosplay is in and of itself only acceptable to certain age demographics, or perhaps even an inappropriate practice.

Cosplayer Sabrina felt that a cosplayers age was a point of concern within the cosplay community, especially for younger members of the community. Sabrina explained how,

> A lot of people who get into cosplay I see are very young teenage girls, and they compare themselves with these Instagram [professional] cosplayers, and […] there is a lot of photoshop in those photos. So, like, you are 12, and the person you are comparing yourself to is three times your age and has been cosplaying for way longer and has a budget […] you get issues where, you are comparing yourself to standards that you can't meet up to.
>
> Sabrina

Cosplayers have expectations of how they wish to appear based of the 'successes' of other cosplayers, these are expectations crafted and established namely in online groups where images and videos can be tailored and modified. Whilst cosplayers have been known to guide and help each other to improve, by sharing crafting techniques and resources, cosplayers have also been known to criticise and abuse one another for failing to meet up to such high expectations. In the cosplay community, younger cosplayers have a great deal of pressure placed upon them to meet such high standards and expectations, whether it is within their technical ability or not.

The criticisms that have been directed at my participants can be referred to as cosplay gate keeping. Cultural capital within the cosplay community is highly sought after and drives people to help one another just as much as it can drive a person to abuse and critique others. Cosplay gate keeping is clearly a prevalent part of the cosplay community (even if it is rarely discussed in cosplay scholarship). Cosplay gate keeping here alludes to the phrase 'fan gatekeeping' which is often used to describe a member in a fan community who feels that they must test other (often new/younger) members of a community to judge whether said individual can call themselves a 'fan'. "Good" craft and performance are traditional markers of power over other members of the community, having seeped out from the standards of the cosplay masquerade. The masquerade and the cosplay competition are a fundamental attribute of the fan convention and the origins of cosplay as outlined in the literature review. Orsini (2015) documents, "the first masquerade, held at 1940s WorldCon, included dancing and a live band. Costumed attendees were given awards on their craftmanship at the end of the evening. By 1974, the dancing and music was gone, leaving just the contest" (Orsini 2015, 9).

Today, during my spectatorship of larger cosplay contests at MCM Manchester (2016), Yorkshire Cosplay Con (2019) and London MCM (2019), I have observed that each convention allows the cosplayer to choose their own piece of music (typically the theme tune to their chosen series), whilst they perform a small sketch/dance/pose their cosplay for the audience. At the larger conventions the level of organization behind these events is very high, I refer here both to the spectacle of the well-rehearsed performances by cosplayers, but also to the spectacle of the (typically) large auditorium setting, professional lighting, and a host introducing each act. Meanwhile a smaller convention such as Vworp (2018) or Anime and Gaming Con. Cardiff (2019) these took place in a conference room, giving cosplayers little room to perform. Or in the case of Anime and Gaming Con Birmingham (2016), the conference room 'theatre' only allowed cosplayers to walk on stage and spin, before walking off again, placing much more of a focus on the costume itself.

Participant Giovanni told me about her experiences both taking part in and judging at EuroCosplay competitions, when I asked her about how these experiences differed, Giovanni first noted how, "a lot of the people in the cosplay community that do judging are from the same kind of vintage- so they've been doing it for a long, long time". Giovanni's explanation makes out some important factors of cosplay cultural capital. Given that judges belong to the same "vintage", hints to age and experience as an important marker of authority. Age is often a marker of authority, on *Star Trek* fandom Jenkins observes a disparity between older and younger fans, he writes: "Older fans often look upon the emergence of new fan followings as a threat or competition: *Star Trek* fans directed the same scorn and ridicule Star Wars fans as they, themselves, received from the older science fiction community" (Jenkins 1992, 93). Jenkins marks age as a signifier of power, age is an indicator of experience and therefore an indicator of assumed expertise, which some members abuse claiming superiority over newer (younger) fans. Of course, technical ability also remains a marker of power within cosplay spheres in and of itself, youth does however come with consequence of apparent inexperience. Over the duration of Giovanni's experience in the cosplay community, as both a contestant in cosplay competitions, as an assistant to judges and as a judge herself, Giovanni encapsulated the craftmanship of cosplayers by saying,

> The bar just gets raised higher and higher every year as more and more people get into it and share their skills and like practise and develop new techniques and ways of doing things. And that is really cool. It really brings me a lot of joy to see people come to an event for judging.

Giovanni

The emotional joys that Giovanni experiences from contests are an important part of the cosplay community, notably shared by participant Surge, who recounted entering a contest at a *My Little Pony* convention as Daybreaker. Surge fondly recalled, “I won the contest, but it was against like 10 other people. People still really enjoyed it, because I was in armour and I had these huge wings, and the judges were like ‘WHOOO GIRL!’” For both participants there is a reward in the performance of a cosplay contest, regardless of who wins or loses, there is a spectacle which the audiences and cosplayers alike can (and do enjoy). Yet, there is a more cynical interpretation one might take. The cosplay contest, and consequently the cosplay community is one which might be said to abide by the meritocratic structures of dominant western culture. Hickman (2009) who suggests that under meritocracy, authorities (cosplay judges) and individuals (cosplayers and convention attendees) place “emphasis in individual advancement and by requiring people to be in a permanent state of competition with each other, meritocracy damages community” (Hickman 2009, 6). The cosplay competition in the masquerade is a structured means of valuing certain cosplayers over others, through a perceived set of criteria deemed fair, which nevertheless neglects the resources required to construct a cosplay and attend a convention. As much as the rules might have beneficial impacts on some members of the community such as Giovanni and Surge, one must also acknowledge that cosplayers such as Erika and Sabrina have observed and been subject to unwanted harassment and scrutiny because of the expectations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ cosplay set out by the requirements of cosplay competitions.

Expectations set out by fan industries and the masquerade are explored in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

The Presence and Absence of Race and Cosplay

So far, in this final part to Chapter 3, I have drawn out tensions experienced by my participants which question the cosplay literature which has made cosplay communities seemingly appear as a utopian community. Where in fact once drawing on a wider body of fan studies literature and the experiences of my cosplayers, the cosplay community is a much more complicated sphere. In the previous section I briefly drew attention to the fact that within the cosplay community and its academic scholarship positions the white cosplayer as normative, and any cosplayer who does not fit this demographic is irregular. To return to Griffin 2022, in their article they quote Pande (2018) to argue "'non white fans are seen to interrupt normative operations' and race is only seen as relevant when 'the presence of a significant character or issue that explicitly foregrounds' such identity markers" (Griffin 2022, 6). Race was a looming theme over many of my interviews, and subsequently this chapter. A topic which has been both present and absent, throughout conducting the interviews, therefore it has had an impact upon how the interviews have been written up and documented.

The absence and presence of "race" is touched upon by Click, Edgar and Holloday in their 2022 paper examining sports fans and race, 'Race talk, fandom, and the legacy of plantation culture in the NFL player protests'. Click et al. reference the research of Hunghey (2016) to suggest that,

> [If it] is correct that white people talk about race without explicitly racial language, using code words like 'inner city' and 'urban' it may be that white people are having conversations about race and sports, just in ways that are not really recognized.
>
> Click et al. 2022, 257

The observations of Griffin and Click et al. highlight distinct problems with how both cosplay communities have discussed race, as well as with how fandom and academic scholarship more broadly have limitations. This thesis is limited in terms of its discussions of race, but it is a topic which needed to be addressed and highlighted as an important point of both empowerment and conflict within the cosplay community.

Coming into these interviews, I had my own concerns with the cosplay community and environments from my autoethnography, I decided to ask all my participants: "Do you have any concerns with the cosplay community?" To which multiple participants drew my attention to race-bending which I introduced earlier in Part 2.

To recap, much like gender-bending or age-bending (Skentelbery, 2019), race-bending is the process of cosplaying a character who is not of one's own racial identity. For the most part, race-bending is widely practised and accepted; however, where race-bending does cause controversy are cases when cosplayers use 'blackface'. In the cosplay contexts, 'blackface' is when a cosplayer producing a race-bent cosplay also paints their skin to replicate their chosen character's race. For some cosplayers the process of painting one's skin, or 'blackface' in cosplay is considered no different from painting one's skin green to cosplay DC's Poison Ivy or painting one's skin blue to cosplay Violet Beauregard from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Stuart, 1979).

In my interviews only a handful of participants commented on race: these participants were Misty, Surge and Janine; and they each expressed how they did not condone blackface in cosplay in the cosplay community. Participant Misty explained that some "cosplayers that were engaging in things like blackface, or painting their skin, was in order to- as they were saying, to be more accurate to the character, and clearly that's very offensive". An example of blackface which gained a large amount of attention in cosplay and popular fandom more broadly, was in 2019 when the French representative for the EuroCosplay finals was banned from attending. The ban imposed on the cosplayer was in reaction to complaints that the white female cosplayer had used blackface in the construction of her Pyke costume, a black male character from *League of Legends*. The coplayer's ban was put in place in response to audience criticism, however, to get to the EuroCosplay final, the cosplay had already won the French Cosplay cup (Cleary, 2019) with the beforementioned cosplay. Despite complaints and the subsequent banning, all allegations in the media were framed "allegedly", only going to further emphasise just how divisive the subject matter of blackface in cosplay is. There are those in the community who see the practice as having deep ties with racist practise of blackface performance, but to another sizable portion of the community the practice is a means of connecting with character and striving for an accurate portrayal of character.

Surge reflected upon the controversy of the subject and pointed out that this controversy was more prevalent between white cosplayers. Surge recognised that depending on one's upbringing and cultural history, 'blackface' may be more acceptable in some countries than others, but "if the person is from America they have literally no excuse […] we've learnt a lot about racist history, and present". Given the history of 'blackface' especially in North America and the UK, a white cosplayer darkening one's skin is naturally not condoned, and those who darken their skin to accurately capture their chosen character is ladled ignorant.

Such power relations are not unique to cosplay but are a common problem in both popular fan communities and dominant western culture. In the furry community for example, participant Blue, addressed the mater of fascism in the community upon being asked if they had any concerns for the future of cosplay and the furry community. Blue explained:

> I do have concerns […] are they that much different than my concerns or hopes for society? Probably not too much. I mean, you know, there is a polarisation to some degree. I mean, the community is having a little bit of a reckoning right now with the…

> the Nazi furs as they're known. Apparently, the *My Little Pony* community also is having a reckoning with this right now as well.
>
> Blue

When addressing racism in cosplay and fandom more broadly, one is confronted by a multitude of interconnected power relations and structures between the subcultural hierarchies of the cosplay community and the hierarchies of oppression in North America and the United Kingdom. The direction of this thesis, as previously outlined is directed towards discussing the ways in which interconnected power relations between industry and audience set within and against dominant structures with a focus on gendered play. I have seen for myself just how overwhelmingly white these spaces are which were further reflected by my participants. It doesn't seem unlikely that white Acafan writers reflect the witness of the events, without ever acknowledging the witness of the space. In Jenkin's study, they examine conventions which are designed to target diverse audiences and the kinds of responses such events have gained. Jenkins writes:

> Something that appeared within this study that was not an original area of attention was the propensity of the respondents to attend diverse conventions. Many participants listed these conventions as some of their favourites, and the inclusive environment as a major factor as to why. This calls for more research into the positive attributes of having more conventions that intentionally aim to be diverse and de-center White males.
>
> Jenkins 2020, 170

Jenkin's unanticipated finding is an illuminating one, not only hinting again to a problem in masculine popular fandom spaces but goes to show that there is a demand for fan spaces to be diversified. In my interview with Janine they expressed similar concerns which Misty and Surge had shared, they also rather eloquently expressed their concerns around black face and race-bending in the cosplay community:

> It's a white privilege thing in general, there is this failure to appreciate the impact of your actions […] And the fact that you see [white] people making these arguments [for black-face cosplay] even as black or Indian or Asian people are saying, "Yeah, hey, this is kind of this is kind of racially insensitive" it's really depressing there's just this sort of weird refusal to see beyond the end of your nose

Janine

Firstly, here Janine points out that debates around race are not exclusive to cosplay, but rather these are fictions which exist in the 'day-to-day' world which feed into elements of cosplay culture. Secondly, here Janine understood the cosplay community as a racially diverse community (which might be questioned considering past surveys conducted as referenced in Part 2). However, the idea that the cosplay community is indeed a diverse (and mostly inclusive space) extending beyond what one sees on the convention hall floor would be supported by Jenkins 2020's observations in that Black and other minority audiences are present in popular fan communities, though often absent from fan environments, because of institutionalised racism within fan industries (and white fans).

In this final part to Chapter 3 I have revealed that the experiences of my participants do not always match the observations of contemporary cosplay scholarship, and in fact the community is much more complex than existing literature might have one believe. Research that explores race and popular fandom which would provide much greater insight into the complexities of some of the before mentioned debates, can be found in the works of; Wanzo (2015 and 2020), Hunt (2018), and Pande (a, 2020). Finally, the collection, *Fandom, Now in Colour* edited by Rukmini Pande (b, 2020) too is a collection addressing racism in fandoms as both visible and invisible. The collection explicitly addresses the complexity and contradictions within both fan practices and academic study.

Closing Remarks on Dissecting the Data

Chapter 3 has been divided into three parts, which track a shift in how I interact with cosplay scholarship and my perceptions of the Acafan methodology. In part 1, I presented my findings form my autoethnography documenting my entry into online cosplay communities, learning how to create a crossplay cosplay, and learning how to perform as Sucy Manbavarian (from *Little Witch Academia*) at fan conventions. These autoethnographic experiences permitted me to ask questions about masculinity and femininity, in adopting the tactics of the Acafan, I have confirmed several of the key arguments raised during my literature review. However, I also began to ask questions about the power relations between producer and consumer, as well as put to question the social impact of cosplay. Writers who have considered cosplay as transformative or revolutionary have been put to question, given that any playful discourses that cosplayers may embody is limited to online groups or the convention hall floor, rarely getting any wider exposure, unless as carnivalesque novelty.

In part 2, I presented data collected from my interviews, which confirmed with Acafan cosplay literature. From conducting in-depth interviews with a pool of cosplayers from North America and the UK, this has helped me to build a better sense of cosplay practices at both the fan convention and in online circles. In the participant data, I unpacked many circumstances which resonated with much cosplay scholarship, as a medium in which individuals could explore one's own identity through play without consequence. Of courses I also began to see the emergence of some tension between my participants experiences set against the cosplay literature which were analysed in greater detail in Part 3.

Part 3 centred around responses to the question: "Do you have any concerns with the cosplay community?" To which my participants recalled cases of harassment, abuse, and criticism from both cosplayers and non-cosplay spectators online and at conventions. To examine these structures, I drew on participants concerns regarding topics of gender-play, competition, craft, age, and race which each illuminate power divides which have been overlooked by much cosplay scholarship. I noted that cosplay culture stems out of a tradition of competition which typically takes the shape of the cosplay masquerade. The masquerade is a fundamental attribute of the fan convention which has perpetuated the meritocratic ladder of exclusive cosplay excellence. The concerns expressed by my participants suggest that cosplay hierarchies are in fact directly influenced by the misogynist patriarchy and meritocratic hierarchy of dominant western culture.

Discussions of gender, gender-play, and the hierarchies that emerge in this play will remain a central discussion in this thesis and will be unpacked in greater detail in Chapter 5. Firstly, in Chapter 4, it is necessarily to take a step back and ask questions about how hierarchies emerge in popular fandom by examining the fan industry. In the next chapter I look directly at the cosplay convention, by drawing on an alternative theoretical literature set to conceptualise the findings which counter much cosplay and fan scholarship. I introduce traditional debates from critical theory, cultural studies, and audience theory to question the utopian perspectives of much cosplay scholarship. Subsequently I pose the question as to whether cosplay power dynamics are shaped by cosplayers or in fact informed/structured by the fan industry.

Chapter 4: Corporate Brands and the Convention Experience

In the opening Chapters 1 and 2, I unpacked central discussions in cosplay scholarship drawing out central discussions of creative agency, identity expression, and establishing online and offline cosplay environments. Chapter 3 Parts 1 and 2 examined the data collected from my mixed methodology, drawing out the parallels between my own cosplay experiences, and the experiences of my cosplay participants, illustrating examples which confirmed cosplay literature. However, in Part 3 I began to explore comments and experiences from my participants (and from some of my own observations) that contradict and/or conflict with existing cosplay scholarship. In Chapter 3 it became increasingly apparent that while the Acafan methodology in cosplay studies tends to show a much more positive, even utopian perspective on the cosplay community, it is not always accurate, with Part 3 delving into documents of harassment, abuse, competition, and racism in the cosplay community.

Continuing from where Chapter 3 left off, the purpose of this chapter is to interrogate ideas regarding fan agency. Where Chapter 3 focused on the experiences of cosplayers, this chapter interrogates the environment of the fan convention, drawing on a mixture of literature, personal observations, and, where necessary the experiences of my participants. In this chapter I argue that fan industries tailor and manipulate the ways fans interact with one another in the convention environment. Consequently, to accurately understand the complexity of cosplayers and address circumstances of power between consumer and producer, I shall be drawing out tensions between Acafan and traditional Cultural Studies scholarship.

Defining Fan Industry, Participatory Culture and Cultural Producers

In the tradition of fan studies, the Acafan has placed a focus the complicated relationship between consumers and producers (or Participatory Culture and Cultural Producers respectively). In Chapter 1, I outlined how Acafan scholars have viewed the consumer/producer relationship as binary opposites, as if at odds against each other, or fighting the dominant author. The paradigm between consumer/producer emerged from audience and cultural studies namely from the works of writers including Fiske ([1989] 2004), Roland Barthes (1977), Dick Hebdige (1979), and notably Stuart Hall (1980) from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Ideas which were popularised in fan studies by Jenkins (1992), Hills (2002), and Sandvoss (2005). As I outlined in Chapter 1, each of these writers pinned industries as Cultural Producers, those who manufacture films, games, comics, etc. which gather audiences and fan communities. In turn, fans are active consumers who belong to participatory cultures. For example, in Ann Gilbert's 'What we talk about when we talk about Bronies' (Gilbert, 2015), Gilbert outlines core attributes of any given fan community. Gilbert suggests, "participatory culture, including fandom but also produsage, cocreation, and other patterns of convergence, is lauded for its liberating potential" (Gilbert 2015, 26). If fandom can be understood as a creative and productive community as Chapter 1 outlined, fans produce and share (and sometimes sell) their own fan made artifacts (fiction, art, videos, cosplay, etc.) However, Gilbert continues with reference to Scott (2013) and Johnson (2013), "but, [the liberating potential associated with fan creativity] can privilege young male users with disposable income and technological know-how – the perceived early adopters" (Gilbert 2015, 26). The privileges creative agency fandom brings male fans can have its positives such as "technical know-how" and community, conversely it can also lead to the emergence of hierarchies, power disparities, and abuse of power (as I began to identify in Chapter 3, part 3).

The separation of these two groups of fan/producer, or consumer/producer, stems from a long tradition in social-political theory, namely from the works of Karl Marx, in his 1859 work *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx refers to a 'political economy' to conceptualise the relationships between producers and consumers, or in his words the bourgeois classes and the labouring classes. Marx explains that,

> Political economy, which is an independent science, first sprang into being during the period of manufacture, views the social division of labour only from the standpoint of manufacture and sees it only the means of producing more commodities with a given quality of labour, and consequently, of cheapening commodities and hurrying on the accentuation of capital.
>
> Marx 1859, 359

Marx identifies a complicated relationship engrained in the division between working classes (labourers and consumers), set against the political ruling classes (industrial and corporate economic leaders). It is these binary opposites which have founded the basis of much fan studies and audience studies literature. For example, drawing on the cultural criticisms of Theodor Adorno (a writer I will go onto draw on in greater detail throughout this chapter), Emma Keltie (2017) acknowledges how "Adorno argues that the culture industry is the 'will of those in control'" (Keltie 2017, 15). Just as Marx highlighted opposition between the labourer and the employer through the notion of 'political economy', Adorno similarly highlights a tension between the culture industries and the distribution of media as having oppressive/manipulative capabilities over those who consume the media. Keltie differentiates Adorno by explaining how, "He [Adorno] takes care to note that the term 'industry' should not be taken literally, but rather refers to notions of standardization of products, and not necessarily modes and processes of production; for these standardised production processes can also create individual products" (Keltie 2017, 15). The division between producers and consumers, for Adorno is all the clearer as a sameness or "standardization" emerges between products being produced, even seemingly "individual products" being produced follow similar production processes. As I conceptualise the 'fan industry' in this chapter, standardisation and sameness are two key terms which I shall use in my documentation of the uniformity that exists between fan conventions, which in turn create apparent 'norms' of the fan convention, 'norms' which in turn create hierarchies between fans in attendance, but also between the fans and media industries present at a convention.

More contemporary literature has placed greater emphasis on blurring the distinction between producer and consumer. Which I intend to push away from. A useful starting point, to highlight the importance of terminology and categorising in cosplay/fan literature is writers Nick Abercombie and Brian Longhurst's book *Audiences* (Abercombie and Longhurst, 1998) they produce a table of definitions distinguishing different audience groups, this list is as follows: "Consumers", "Fans", "Cultists", "Enthusiasts", and "Petty Producers" (Longhurst and Abercombie. 1998, 148). The key term I wish to introduce from this list is "Petty Producers", which Longhurst et al. define as, "Textual and material production for the market – an imagined community" (Abercombie and Longhurst. 1998, 148). This, somewhat enigmatic definition, defines the petty producer as a creative individual who produces material items to be sold, it is an act which has financial reward, with economic repercussions. Whilst there might be a great number of petty producers, one might read the petty producer as an 'imagined community' as these vendors are typically a solitary pursuit, usually a side job as opposed to a full-time job. Abercombie and Longhurst. expand upon this definition contrasting their definition of petty producers against the "enthusiast" –

> The enthusiasm tends to revolve around the production of things, from railway models to plays to second-hand dresses. There may be textual productivity as well […]. This is where enthusiasts are different from those petty producers who are moving from the

> realm of production on the request of members of an enthusiasm, to production for the market itself.
>
> Abercombie and Longhurst. 1998, 150

The role of petty producer is characterised by the independent manufacture and selling of fan items, the term assumes that the petty producer is a fan selling fan objects to fellow fans, though one should not rule out possibilities of non-fans recognizing a market and producing fan items for a profit. One could compare the term of the 'petty producer' with terms such as the "Mumtrepreneur" (Littler, 2017) mothers who set up and run independent business (typically craft centric, such as the selling of handmade items such as candles/soaps/embroidery), or the "Fantrepeneur" (Lundberg and Ziakas, 2018; Scott, 2019).

Lundberg and Ziakas offer a brief overview of the emergence of the "Fantrepeneur" which resonates with Abercombie and Longhurst's definition of the petty producer: "as fans move from simply participatory at events to organizing them themselves, this represents an expression of fan productivity" (Lundberg and Ziakas 2018, 288). To expand upon this, in relation to what has been learnt from Abercombie and Longhurst, a fan (an enthusiast) might move from someone who attends fan conventions to someone who organizes fan conventions, and in doing so the fan becomes fantrepeneur (or a petty producer). Lundberg and Ziakas continue, "in this process, fans organize and manage an enterprise with initiative and risk in order to meet the perceived needs of their fandom, hence the denotation here – fantrepeneur" (Lundberg and Ziakas 2018, 288). In this sense, fans move from the position of audience member to industry-esque figures who produce and sell handcrafted items to other members of their fan community. Of course, Lundberg and Ziakas write on a greater scale compared to the smaller independent scale of the petty producer. The fantrepeneur, might belong to a group, or even an organization but crucially they are fans catering products and experiences to other fans.

Similarly, Scott's definition touches on the fantrepreneur as fan, but crucially Scott addresses how their economic pursuits are distinct from cultural industries, the fantrepreneur "commonly serves as a liaison between industries and audience, through their connections to 'official' industrial fan outreach initiatives can rage in degree. […] It is essential for fantrepreneurs to present themselves first and foremost as fan-cultural agents" (Scott 2019, 170). The introduction of the fantrepreneur might appear to blur the lines between producer and consumer, even more so than the textual poachers that Jenkins (1992) suggests; or the process of co-creation as Zwass (2010) suggests. "Co-creation is the participation of consumers along with producers in the creation of value in the marketplace. Activities of this kind go well beyond the notion of co-creation as conceived in services that are, to an extent, jointly actualized by their suppliers and the receiving customers" (Zwass 2010, 13). Zwass' "co-creator" might be compared with Abercombie and Longhurst's "enthusiast", as a creator who engages with a text (non-profit), but the very act of this engagement, and especially the distribution of such materials, even if done freely online, offers exposure and marketing opportunities for the original product. The free distribution of fan made objects online even encourages engagement and thus advertisement revenues are guaranteed for the host website.

The introduction of terms such as the fantrepreneur, petty producer, co-creator, and enthusiast, are all distinctive markers of the diversity that exists between fans, and the creative and economic hierarchies that exist in relation to industrial cultural producers (and/or it is a comment on the diversity of academia discussion and analysis given that these terms all practically observe the same set of results with minor unique distinctions).

To clear up the messiness present here, in a practical sense of observing fandoms, but namely the messiness that emerges in the academic discussion of fans, M.T. Schäfer in *Bastard Culture!* (2011) makes a useful observation which can be used to help better set out why distinctions and terminology is important here. "Despite the fact that user and producer blur in intertwined production processes, their specific role either as user or as producer must be defined with respect to the production process, institutional context, legal framing through licenses and copyrights, and their particular relations to companies and user communities" (Schäfer 2011, 78). These definitions are a recognition of the boundaries that distinguish different forms of fan engagement, crucially for the purposes of upholding copyright law and thus a creative hierarchy which has structural consequences on popular media economics and fan engagement. Specifically, in this chapter, by being vigilant of these different terms, they help one to better mark out the fraught relationship with culture industries.

Over the course of this chapter, I will be specifically discussing the power dynamics present between fans; fans and cultural industry; finally, fans and the fan industry. I have already gone into detail to establish the relationship between fans and the culture industry, but it is necessary to unpack what I mean by 'fan industry' in greater detail.

The term "Fan Industry", to the best of my knowledge is an original term. It is a term which I conceptualise as an additional party between the producer and consumer paradigm. Fan Industries facilitate media, products, and events specifically for fans, these industries are not the producers of mass media which attract fans, they are industries which profit from fan behaviour.

The vigilant reader may notice that it is a term I have already thrown around on a number of occasions, after all, it is a term which originated out of practical observations of fan conventions and the realisation of a need to separate fan convention organisers from the larger industries of film, TV, comic, and video game production as its own unique industry: the fan industry. The necessity to establish this term emerged from noticing patterns between the fan conventions I was attending in the UK. Many conventions were organised by the same three organisations: “MCM Comic-Con (Movie Comic Media Comic-Con)”, “Geeks”, and “Anime and Gaming Con.”, the majority of conventions I attended were branded and marketed under these companies, and each brand organises conventions across the UK. Furthermore, within each of these convention sites (and other convention sites associated to different brands), each convention had a uniformity to them. Every convention I attended would have the same set of attractions, guests, and vendors; even their venues had striking similarities (despite each being in different cities across different parts of the UK).

On the fan convention, specifically Comic-con, in Ann Gilbert’s earlier 2014 PhD thesis ‘Interactivity, Industry, and Audiences’ Gilbert argues how “Comic-con illustrates interactivity as a means of incorporation, one in which the community and industry access interests of attendees are aligned with the promotional function of the event for industry participants” (Gilbert 2014, 9) from which one is told that the fan convention is much like an “aggregator” as Zwass referred to. Zwass’ term aggregator refers to “a firm that provides the platform and aggregates the user-provided content” (Zwass 2010, 31). The fan convention (like an aggregator firm) provides a location (/“platform”) through which audiences and fans can directly(/seemingly) engage and converse with cultural industries. Gilbert continues:

> In order for the event to continue to hold value, it must address the social and economic interest of those in attendance, and it is therefore presented at a point of transition of how to simultaneously reinforce industry/fan structures, validate fan consumption, and invite an increasingly broad mode of media practice into the fan identity.
>
> Gilbert 2014, 9

Gilbert suggests here that it is financially beneficial to maintain the ‘rules’ of the fan convention, this includes expectations of activities/shows, photo opportunities, vendors, star guests, and independent artists. But these expectations also include ways of engagement on behalf of the cosplay attendant such as to go in cosplay or to take pictures, to buy and share items with fellow fans, to take part in games, and to spend money!

The fan convention is a third party to the audience/producer paradigm (much like an aggregator site), the fan convention thus serves not only as a leisure site, but a mediator which nurtures the relationship between Participatory Culture and Cultural industries. The aggregator is a comparable term to my own 'fan industry', only rather than an online mediator, I refer to a physical space of the fan convention (though as later chapters will illustrate, the Covid-19 pandemic brought the fan industry online). The space of the fan convention which fan industries facilitate in turn also provide for smaller petty producers and fantrepreneurs: such as for vendors, artists, photographers, cosplay vendors, and guest stars. Whilst my term fan industry might also be comparable to the fantrepenuer, in that both refer to groups or organisations producing products and experiences to fans. The crucial difference between the fantrepeneur and fan industry is that the fantrepeneur assumes that these brands are organized by fans, whereas my term fan industry makes no such assumptions, but rather places emphasis on the power dynamics and hierarchies present between the organisers of a convention and the fans in attendance.

Chapter 4 is an investigation of the fan convention as an integral environment that facilitates cosplay, but also the fan industries which structure cosplayer (and fan) engagement and behaviour. One should not rule out the broader prospects of fan industry such as: fan art/literature online libraries, fan music videos; or online gaming/streaming networks (such as Yogscast, Rooster Teeth, or Critical Role); or board game shops and leisure spaces, to name just a few examples. Though to reiterate independent fans who engage fan merchandise or services, such as those who sell videos/photos of their cosplayers, independent fan art vendors, or fan hand crafters who would fit much more appropriately under the category of the petty producer. I argue that the relationship between fan and producer is much more complex by introducing the third party (or mediator) of the fan industry. From my attendance at fan conventions, I argue that the fan industries have created a uniform convention environment (regardless of the organiser), they have established their own set of norms and can manipulate the ways in which fans and producers engage with each other, through their relationship with the fan industry. Simultaneously, convention organisers (fan industries) must abide by certain expectations of both cultural producers and of fans.

Reviewing the Acafan Methodology of Legitimising Creative Leisure

I have developed evidence to suggest that the Acafan cosplay scholar represents cosplay communities as utopian spheres with socially revolutionary potentials (see Chapter 3), and that it is a position which seeks to validate and legitimise cosplay as a medium, and its subsequent study. Given Acafan Cosplay narrow insights, Acafan writers overlook tensions in the cosplay community and fail to fully represent the complexities and contradictions that emerge in the community and between fan and fan industry, but also between fan and dominant culture. It is useful here to briefly reflect on the landscape of cosplay scholarships and highlight my concerns with the Acafan methodology.

Matt Hills, in the introduction to *Fan Cultures*, proposes that academics who identify as both fan and academic need not be made to feel that these positions are in conflict, rather "the fan and academic identities can be hybridised or brought together not simply in the academy but also outside of it, in the figure of the fan-scholar [or Acafan]" (Hills 2002, xxx). However, Hills remains conscious that, "attempts at hybridising and combining 'fan' and 'academic' identities/subjectivities must therefore remain sensitive to those institutional contexts which disqualify certain ways of speaking and certain ways of presenting the self" (Hills 2002, xxxv). The process of legitimising fandom as a noteworthy field of study owes credit to the emergence of the Acafan as methodology. Alice Chauvel, Nicolle Lamerichs and Jessica Seymour (2014) highlight that in the earlier critical theory of the Frankfurt School (which would influence much cultural studies scholarship), audiences were written about as if they had little to no agency in one's interactions with cultural products. Chauvel et al. document how it wasn't until, "certain scholars developed what Abercrombie and Longhurst call the 'uses and gratification' paradigm, which recognised that 'the individual uses the media, rather than being affected by it' to gratify his or her needs" (Chauvel et al. 2014, vii). Chauvel et al. go on to define the paradigm as seeking "to determine whether audiences are incorporated into the dominant ideologies encoded in media texts, or whether they are actively resisting them" (Chauvel et al. 2014, viii). Notable writers of the Uses and Gratification include Katz (1959); Glaser (1965); Lundberg and Hulten (1968).

Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973-4) aim to establish the fundamentals of Uses and Gratification theory. Katz et al. determine that it is the objective of gratifications theorists to "ask whether the media do actually satisfy their consumers – an assumption that radical critics of media take more for granted" (Katz et al.1973-4, 520). Katz et al. declare that it is their responsibility as gratifications scholars, "to be studying human needs to discover how much the media do or do not contribute to their creation of satisfaction" (Katz et al. 521). The position of the gratifications theorist is thus to view the cultural industry through the eyes of the consumer and to deconstruct the ways culture industries impose meaning. Assessing cultural products through the eyes of the consumer was a notion notably developed by Stuart Hall in his influential paper, ‘Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse’ (1973). Hall proposes a more nuanced approach which appreciated both cultural producers and consumers in equal measure. On the gratifications model, Hall comments,

> Effects, uses, ‘gratifications’ are themselves framed by structures of understanding, as well as social and economic structures which shape it’s ‘realisation’ at the reception end of the chain, and which permit the meanings signified in language to be transposed into conduct or consciousness.
>
> Hall 1973, 4

Media relies on structures of understanding; these are established by the language of a text’s given medium but also set against the structures that shape our understanding of the world and communication between individuals and public bodies. It is an outlook that highlights the importance of treating cosplay as momentary experience as outlined in Chapter 3, but what is more cosplay is both informed by everyday social relations, a reaction which has potential to both support and critique dominant structures. Hall outlines three audience relationships with television media (which have subsequently been applied and reapplied to wider cultural products and mediums). Hall suggests that audiences tend to engage with a text in three different ways. They are the dominant, negotiated and the oppositional positions. As a series of readings which highlights the different ways audiences interact and interpret a single text.

The ‘dominant reading’ which Hall proposes is heavily influenced by Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, Hall suggests that the “dominant or hegemonic code” (Hall 1973, 16) is when an audience member reads a text as its producer intended the text to be read. Gramsci’s use of the term ‘hegemony’ became “the key concept in understanding the very unity existing in a concrete social formation” (Laca and Mouffe [1985] 2001, 7). Hegemony is understood as a sequence of relationships, in cultural studies, the term ‘hegemony’ has been used to critically evaluate relations between powers such as producers, capitalists, and policy makers; and the users of this power, such as audiences, workers, and the public. Barker and Jane (2000) suggest,

> In the Gramscian view the ‘common sense’ and popular culture through which people organize their lives and experience become crucial sites of ideological contestation. This is where hegemony, understood as a fluid and temporary series of alliances, needs to be constantly re-won and renegotiated.
>
> Barker and Jane 2016, 603

The ruling classes: thus, do not (or do not totally) impose their powers over those who hold no-to-little power. Rather the dominant classes must coerce those without power to support the ruling classes.

Gramsci's notions of hegemony have been highly influential in cultural studies during the 1970-80s and the acknowledgment of audience agency, Gramscian influence has applied as structural frameworks to: "ideology in news and current affairs (Brunsdun and Morely, 1978), soap opera (Dyer et al., 1978), advertising (Williamson, 1978) and popular film (Bennett et al, 1986) […] audience research through Hall's (1981) essay […] and Morley's (1980) research" (Barker and Jane 2016, 607). Reflecting on this appropriation of Gramsci by cultural studies scholars John Storey (1996) argues that it is

> From the perspective of the cultural studies appropriation of hegemony, however, popular culture is neither an 'authentic' folk, working-class or subculture, nor a culture simply imposed by the capitalist culture industries, but a 'compromise equilibrium' (Gramsci, 1971) between the two a contradictory mix of forces from both 'below' and 'above'; both 'commercial' and 'authentic', marked by both resistance and 'incorporation'.
>
> (Storey [1996] 2010, 4-5).

Whilst Storey is broadly critical of the ways in which cultural studies has appropriated Gramsci's political and social commentaries, pointing towards the 'compromise equilibrium' which structures popular culture (dominant culture), a series of oppositions which both parties: the producers and users of a text must buy into in order to sustain a dominant lifestyle (and ruling class). Hall's framework, like many of Hall's contemporary's, "attempts to apply Gramsci's work on 'hegemonic' and 'corporate' ideological formations" (Hall 1973, 16). However, Hall remains aware of the oppositions present in popular culture's maintenance.

For Hall, the 'professional code' which refers to codes and devices broadcasters use to infuse texts with meaning, this 'professional code' "serves to reproduce the dominant definitions precisely by bracketing the hegemonic quality" (Hall 1973, 16). Whilst reading is imbued into text, these texts must also be read. For Hall, "'misreadings' of a message at the connotative or contextual level are a different matter. They have, fundamentally, a societal, not a communicative, basis. They signify, at the 'message' level the structural conflicts, contradictions and negotiations of economic, political and cultural life" (Hall 1973, 16). Hall's framework is invaluable in cultural studies conceptualisation of audiences and fans, however, it is a model rarely drawn on by Acafan scholars. One might suggest that this seeming rejection of Hall is a result of Jenkins' highly influential book *Textual Poachers* (1992), in which Jenkins takes a critical perspective of Hall's encoding/decoding model.

> Hall's model, at least as it has been applied, suggests that popular meanings are fixed and classifiable, while de Certeau's 'poaching' model emphasizes the process of making meaning and the fluidity of popular interpretation. To say that fans promote their own meanings over those of producers is not to suggest that the meanings fan produce are always oppositional ones or that those meanings are made in isolation from other social factors
>
> Jenkins 1992, 34

Jenkins favours de Certeau's notion of 'poaching', which like Hall illustrates audiences as active consumers, though doesn't necessarily account for the varied and distinctive ways in which audiences engage and interpret. In Hall's conclusion of his paper however, he warns that the action of intervention of materials to make hegemonic codes more effective is highly political. "To 'misread' a political choice as a technical one represents a type of unconscious collusion with the dominant interests, a form of collusion to which social science researchers are all too prone" (Hall 1973, 19). Jenkins, however, draws attention towards the ways in which audiences use texts (drawing on the prior work of de Certeau) consequently ignores the frequency in which audiences do not repurpose materials and conform to hegemonic norms. It is Jenkin's dismissiveness of Hall, which appears to have resulted in subsequent writers being similarly dismissive of the work.

Of course, both theoretical positions have their merits, and to Jenkins' credit he does acknowledge Hall's 1981 paper 'Notes on Deconstructing the Popular' which emphasises, in Jenkin's words, "popular culture is 'neither wholly corrupt [n]or wholly authentic' but rather 'deeply contradictory,' characterized by 'the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it' (228)". Jenkins elaborates, "such claims argue against a world of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readers in favour of one where each reader is continuously re-evaluating his or her relationship to the fiction and reconstructing its meanings according to more immediate interests" (Jenkins 1992, 35). Whilst this elaboration is not strictly laid out in Hall's paper, it is undeniable that Jenkins hints towards a recognition of the conflicting discourses which exist between audiences and culture industries.

Yet in subsequent fan studies work, fan scholarship has been less interested in interrogating conflicting discourses in favour of championing the creative fan. More influenced by Jenkins' push away from Hall, Acafan writers have developed a perspective which sacrifices the contradictory perspectives in favour of establishing the consequences of fan creativity within fan communities (and their impact on the culture industry). This tailored theoretical approach makes sense when one considers the emergence of fan studies in the 1990s (out from audience studies), to legitimise both fans, fandom, and the study thereof.

In 2015, *Cinema Journal* published 'In Focus: Feminism and Fandom Revised' which collected a series of short essays on different elements of fan studies, such as fan fiction, art, forums, etc. Each writer presents their argument from feminist frameworks to provide evidence for the legitimising of fandom. From this collection I draw out the arguments of Karen Hellekson, Kristina Busse, and Mel Stanfill. The author's efforts to legitimise fan works is notably done by developing the term 'fan labour'. In Hellekson's paper, she suggests that fan works should be considered legitimate cultural texts works. Hellekson argues that corporations are exploiting fan labour by pushing fans "to shift the traditional gift culture aside in favour of a commercial model" (Hellekson 2015, 127). Fans and cosplayers, for example, prove their influence upon the culture industry through their 'labours'. Whilst this does not exclude a cosplayer dressing as Darth Vader for fun, such labour can be explicitly seen in cosplayers such as Jessica Nigri, whose Bowsette cosplay was drawn on in Chapter 1. Her wide following has allowed her to profit from cosplay, by selling pictures and merchandise of herself. The act of fans profiteering from what is commonly considered a hobby shows the economic impact of 'fan labour'. The cosplayer Yaya Han is another noteworthy example, who has sold merchandise of their cosplays, written cosplay books and judged cosplay competitions at numerous fan conventions across America (see YayaHan.com).

One needs to look no further than a comic/fan convention to witness the creativity and artistry of fans. For example, during my visit to MCM London which I attended on 26th October 2019, artist vendors would sell prints of their fan art. In the cosplay scene, it is not unheard of that conventions will employ notable cosplayers within the community to attend conventions as guests to greet the crowds. At Yorkshire Cosplay Con. which I attended on 18th May 2019, the convention featured several established cosplayers; Fetsu Chan (Japanese fashion YouTuber), Jack Pendragon (LGBTQ+ Cosplay YouTuber), Scarlett Young (J-Pop cover artist), and The Entertainer-nator (*The Terminator* cosplayer). These people are considered authority figures within the cosplay community, to the point that it has become viable to make money from what might commonly be thought of as a hobbyist activity.

Busse's paper composes a similar argument to the contradictions, Hall highlights between the hard work of fans and the hard work of media producers, Busse warns of the "exploitation of fan labour. As customers, viewers, and users get rebranded as fans, and as fannish modes of sharing and spreading interest get rebranded as viral marketing" (Busse 2015, 113). For Busse, fan work is a legitimate art form. One can observe the ways in which culture industries themselves recognise the values of fan labour, but rather than rewarding fans, culture industries exploit this legitimacy. Stanfill continues these discussions arguing that, "under the labour theory of value, producing new value (in this case the semantic value) is, by definition, labour" (Stanfill 2015, 131). What Stanfill does here is equate fan acts with work. Whether it is creating a cosplay, writing fan fiction, or even sharing one's thoughts online, time and energy is spent to generate new artifacts.

The fan as producer is a common thread in cosplay scholarship such as in the works of King (2013), Winge (2019), and Lamerichs (2013, 2018), see Chapters 1-3. The fan as producer through the Acafan lens is also prominent in the fan scholarship of Pande (2018), Scott (2019), and Morimoto (2018, 2019), each prominent contemporary fan studies scholars. However, a shift in fan studies is long overdue. Where writers have dismissed traditional works in cultural studies and audience studies, to legitimise fan studies as a discipline, this has resulted in cosplay scholarship failing to capture the complexities of the community. I suggest that both the Acafan methodology and a cultural studies critical frameworks each hold equal academic merit (just as both perspectives must put the other to question). Thus, not only am I examining contradiction between consumer and producer, but also within Acafan scholarship itself.

The contradictions between the producer and consumer Hall observes in the encoding/decoding model are a focal point in my own understanding of the contradictions witnessed in cosplay fan communities. As much as fan practices might be a form of labour, it is distinguishable from traditional labour in that fan labour is typically done for oneself and for no money. In cosplay the costs of a cosplayer's materials will not be reimbursed, because the creative act is in and of itself a leisure activity.

Having already illustrated the ways in which cosplay practice validates cosplay scholarship in earlier chapters, I will now be adopting earlier cultural theory frameworks through this chapter. I will now present my findings from attending fan and comic conventions around the UK. In doing so, I will examine more of the conflicting and contradictory narratives that emerged over the course of my investigation, looking at the power relations that emerge between cosplayer/fan and the fan industry (which is also entangled with popular media). In pulling away from fan/cosplay scholarship in favour of drawing on traditional cultural studies scholarship, I will be grounding my observations, which go against the grain of current cosplay scholarship. By drawing on both cosplay and fan scholarship with traditional cultural studies literature, I negotiate a more nuanced position in cosplay scholarship and encapsulate the complexity of the cosplay community both with and against the broader spheres of fandom, the fan industry, and popular culture.

The Spectacle of Fans, Vendors and Attendees at the Fan Convention

On 18th May 2019, myself and fellow cultural studies colleague from The University of Sheffield, Georgia Thomas-Parr, attended Yorkshire Cosplay Con. [YCC] to make observations and speak with fellow cosplayers and attendees. I was dressed as Sucy Manbavarian and Thomas-Parr was dressed as an Anime Idol Girl. Part way through the day we split up to look for clues: I went to speak with the artist vendors, and Thomas-Parr went to speak with the merchandise vendors. When the two of us came together at the end of the day to compare notes (whilst watching performers from a London based Maid Café sing and dance), Thomas-Parr drew my attention to a conversation she had with one of the merchandise vendors. A vendor explained to Thomas-Parr that they always had all the LGBTQ+ pride flags on sale at these events, "They're guaranteed to make a profit" (Thomas-Parr quoting vendor). Indeed, we had seen a lot of vendors selling these flags throughout the day, and even commented over lunch just how many people in the crowd proudly flew their flags, or had the flags tied around them like a cape. In my view, this anecdote goes a long way to show the relationship between the attendees of a convention and the vendors and organisers of the convention.

Items one expects of a fan convention might include the following: comics, superhero figurines, DVDs, games, film posters, and were indeed found across convention hall of YCC. Yet, LGBTQ+ flags are a common sight at fan and comic conventions, even if they might not be items that are not obviously associated with the fan convention, more commonly thought of as an item you'd see at events such as Pride. LGBTQ+ items are a unique item that reliably appear at fan conventions. Where items such as DVDs, games and film merchandise are all connected with popular media, LGBTQ+ flags are unique in that they are associated with identity and community, rather than a franchise.

To readers unfamiliar with the convention scene, one might anticipate the convention hall and the merchandise being sold at such venues to present an overwhelmingly male heterosexual discourse. On the similar space of the comic bookstore, Orme's comments on the popular perception of North American comic bookstore patrons, noting that "comic bookstores are portrayed as a male space where female patrons are an anomaly" (Orme 403, 2016). These are notions, Orme goes onto challenge, just as I have explored in Chapters 1-3 with cosplay demographics as heavily weighted towards female participants. Many fan studies scholars have written on fandom as female dominated sites, and safe environments for the LGBTQ+ community (Dennis, 2010; Gn, 2011; Jacobs, 2013). The presentation and selling of LGBTQ+ flags reinforce these notions of community and the convention as a safe environment.

The rainbow flag is perhaps the most iconic LGBTQ+ flag and is a symbol of the diversity which exists within the community. The rainbow flag is an identifier of community, worn on badges, paraded in marches and protests; and has also been seen to have been incorporated in the logos and advertising of LGBTQ+ charities and organisations. The wide usage of the flag is to the credit of its designer Gilbert Baker (1978), who legally protected the flag to prevent it from being registered by any single organization. Baker's legal protection of the flag thus ensured its free use, and ensured its widespread symbolic power (Rosati, 2019).

Whilst one cannot evaluate an LGBTQ+ symbol as merchandise in the same way that a Darth Vader figurine is merchandise for the *Star Wars* franchise (a property of Disney), the selling of LGBTQ+ flags by vendors, under the security that these flags are "guaranteed to make a profit" marks a distinctive understanding of audience on the part of the convention vendors. Given the frequency of which the rainbow flag can be found for sale by vendors at the fan convention this suggests that they have a definitive understanding of the values of fans and cosplayers. What is more, because the flags are not the intellectual property of a single company, the flags are widely purchasable for resale. The selling of LGBTQ+ flags, in particular the rainbow flag, is a recognition of the LGBTQ+ contingent at comic conventions and fan gatherings, and as a result this profiteering venture in many cases comes across as a social political statement which values the experiences of the community (beyond that of what might be more traditionally thought of as the fan experience).

From this anecdote of the LGBTQ+ flags at Yorkshire Cosplay Con. I have painted a picture of the ways in which producers recognise the values of their consumers, and how producers use their customers values to profit from them. Looking back to the works of Stuart Hall and the complications he highlights in the dynamic between product and audience. Hall makes it clear that the dynamic between producer and consumer is one of co-dependency. In his paper 'Deconstructing the Popular' Hall provides a balanced assessment, contemplating:

> If the forms of provided commercial popular culture are not purely manipulative, then it is because, alongside the false appeals, the foreshortenings, the trivialization and shortcircuits, there are also elements of recognition and identification, something approaching a recreation of recognizable experiences and attitudes, to which people are responding.
>
> Hall [1981] 2002, 188

The parading of LGBTQ+ flags by convention vendors and attendees was a common sight at all the conventions I attended. Whilst the selling of these objects can be read as vendors recognition and identification with their audiences, it can conversely be read as a recognition and exploitation of their audience. Ultimately, Vendors simultaneously stand with and exploit their audience, which ensure these artifacts make profit. Regardless of vendors intentions, the very presence of LGBTQ+ flags are a performance of solidarity and mark the fan convention as a LGBTQ+ safe space: a location in which fans (and vendors) can be themselves, disassociated from the pressures and expectations of the heterosexual norm outside.

The selling of LGBTQ+ items is just one example of which the fan industry generates a sense of community and shared values (regardless of whether they are shared by the vendors or not). Like the LGBTQ+ flags, another example in which the contradictory nature of fans as both active and submissive, and fan industries as both supportive and exploitative, is seen in cosplayers relationships with photographers. At conventions, there is always an abundance of photographers, both professional and amateur. In most cases these photographers are explicitly looking to take photos of cosplayers (opposed to merchandise, or panels, or independent artists). During my attendance at YCC, Thomas-Parr introduced me to one such photographer, 'Donald Manning Photography', who Thomas-Parr had met at several conventions prior. At YCC, Manning leads the two of us to a small photography area at which the two of us were positioned in a small replica of the Nostromo (from *Alien* (Scott, 1979)) and Manning proceeded to take several pictures of us, directing us into certain positions and poses (4.1).

Donald Manning Photography added a new photo.
18 May 2019 ·

4.1

The photographs taken by Manning are free of charge, on the condition that the cosplayer (in this case me and Thomas-Parr) permits Manning to upload the pictures to his social media. Many Acafans have investigated the 'gift exchange' between fans (see Turk 2014; Chin 2014; and Ind, Coates and Lerman 2020). In this circumstance, the cosplayers have professional photos taken of themselves which they can later get via social media channels. The pictures for the cosplayer are a memorable token of their time at the convention, or in some cases even a means for the cosplayer to use said photo to show off and advertise their skillset. Meanwhile, for the photographer, they not only get a chance to take pictures and advertise their business, but these exchanges also build up a photographers' portfolio of work and increase their commission chances. But what might be read as a mutual exchange might also be read as exploitative. Just as sharing my cosplay of Sucy online had resulted in a loss of ownership or privacy (Chapter 3), I similarly do not own or have control over what happens to the pictures Manning took and shared.

In this photography case study, I referred to the reconstructed backdrop of the Nostromo spaceship. When looking at the environment of the cosplay convention, decoration is pivotal, whether this be in the flying of LGBTQ+ flags or the construction of popular sets. To conceptualise the values of these decorations we might draw on the location of comic and popular fan merchandise stores such as Forbidden Planet. Such spaces similarly build up an environment that tailors itself to a community, often including tables and seating areas for reading or tabletop games. Such stores are both shops and social spaces (as is the convention hall). Fan studies scholar Kurt Lancaster (1999) provides an analysis of chain store Forbidden Planet. He recollects visiting the Forbidden Planet on 12th Street Broadway and seeing inside the store, "the life-size cardboard cutouts of two Klingon females displaying their cleavage from a window facing 12th Street. They seductively stand above *Star Trek* models, novels, and toys". (Lancaster 1999, 79). Just as LGBTQ+ flags or recognisable backdrops appeals to popular media fans at conventions, Lancaster addresses the ways in which sellers perform a community for/with their customers.

According to Lancaster these decorated shop fronts, allow customers to travel "vast distances in time and space in their minds". As fans enter the store, they seemingly enter a new world. The shop decorations in my local pop culture shop (ManaFlux Gaming in Newcastle-Under-Lyme) includes posters of *Pokémon*, *Warhammer*, and sexy DC women, tables for people to chat or play board games, shelves of models and toys, and even a small café in which one can chat with others or read comics. All these decorative elements serve to create an environment which masks the economic transaction in favour of celebrating the imagined shared passions between seller and customer, whilst simultaneously putting the commercial front and centre, given that most of these decorative items will also be inevitably sold. Similar decorative environments can be observed across various comic and fan conventions. For example, at Cardiff Anime and Gaming Con, on 17th August 2019, I observed that several of the independent artist vendors appeared sat at their tables in cosplay. Whether these independent vendors are cosplayers or not is almost insubstantial, the fact that they are cosplaying creates the illusion of approachability, that they are a part of the community and thus worthy of spending your time with them (and importantly your money on them!)

From Lancaster's observations on Forbidden Planet, Lancaster goes on to draw on Disneyland and the 'Star Tours' ride. Lancaster argues that just as the environment of the Star Tours ride facilitates play, creating the illusion of having been transported into a fictional space, similarly "when we enter the store [Forbidden Planet], browse, and purchase the science fiction objects panoramically displayed about the room, it seems at times that we are no longer on 12th Street and Broadway" (Lancaster 1999, 79). In my interviews with cosplayers, my participants felt a difference between the novel environments of the convention hall and the rules of day-to-day life. For example, Brock expressed how they wished, "that people treated me with the same respect in real life, that they did on the convention floor. I wish that the way I looked in costume and how comfortable that I felt in costume was how I felt in my regular body". The allure of the convention is thus more than just the commercial exchange for goods, more than the hopes of unique experiences, but a fundamental part of it is community (as was explored in greater detail in Chapter 3).

During Sabrina's interview, she highlighted how she had experienced a moment of transition when leaving the 'real world' for the fan convention (and vice versa), "I never had an issue from another person in the community. If I was like, out and about in my cosplay, like, especially like traveling to and from conventions, you get a bit of a side eye". Here, Sabrina points out just how much the practices of convention attendees (of gender-play and extravagant performance) will be condemned by the heterosexual norms outside of the convention hall.

What I have begun to illustrate is a tension between fan and fan industry, with reference to three case studies (vendors selling LGBTQ+ flags, photographers, and convention environments), which illustrate techniques which create the illusion of community for profit and exposure. To develop my analysis of the ways in which fan industries create environments for media audiences, I will unpack how the fan industries tailor environment of the fan convention to encourage passive consumption.

I will be drawing on the earlier critical theory namely by Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) and Marcuse (1964), who come from the Frankfurt school critical theory tradition but have heavily influenced cultural studies literature. Writers such as Adorno are concerned with the ways in which media technologies can be exploited as a means of possessing power over a populace. Much of the Frankfurt School's work is in response to the Nazi's rise to power in Germany (1930s-40s) which they considered as analogous to the norms imposed by the culture industry. Drawing on such bodies of literature is rarely done in cosplay scholarship, but the failure to acknowledge the contradictions of cosplay/fan media and cosplay/fan environments in contemporary theory limits the reach of the field and is a disservice the fans who take part in said communities. By drawing on these earlier literatures of media relationships of power, I hope to open the door to new dialogues and ways of understanding fan practises.

In this interrogation of fans and media producer's relationship of power, I will continue to discuss the fan convention, drawing upon my own observations at convention sites, as well as my interview participant's reflections.

Fan Industries and the Tailoring of Audience Agency

In prior cosplay scholarship, cosplay and cosplay environments have been considered by many writers to be a utopian sphere removed from the heteronormative patriarchal values of dominant culture. However, as became increasingly apparent in Chapter 3 Part 3, I identified tensions and power hierarchy within these communities. One of the power tensions that is present is the fan industry which imposes values onto fan communities. In Adorno's work there is a focused analysis on popular media and the ways in which technology can be used to engage with and manipulate an audience. By drawing on critical theory (in particular the work of Adorno) I unpack the ways in which convention organisers and fan industries encode meaning to tailor audience decoding and encourage fans and cosplayers to interact in predesigned ways.

The first convention I attended was MCM Manchester in 2016 (Summer), and I found it to be a very exciting experience. The convention floor had a very theatrical, carnivalesque atmosphere. However, as I attended more and more conventions it became apparent to me that (much like the carnival) the fan convention is steeped in its own traditions, and there is very little variety between conventions. In Autumn 2016, I attended Geeks Con. a smaller event in a town hall in Wolverhampton. Whilst on a much smaller scale to MCM, Geeks followed the same basic floorplan. At every fan convention, one can expect to see: various vendors selling merchandise, artists selling pictures, comics and zines; photo opportunities for cosplayers, or to pose with special guests (for an additional fee to the entry ticket); gaming corners for video games, card games, and board games; and signings, where special guests talk with and sign pictures (for an additional fee). One will also typically find a zone designated to help cosplayers fix their costumes and store a change of clothes. Finally, the main stage is where talks, performances and the cosplay masquerade are held.

Fan conventions are typically held in large open venues, typically a convention centre, or a town hall, or a hotel space, or in the case of Manchester's *Doctor Who* convention VWORP (which I attended in 2018), The PrintWorks an arcade featuring several pubs, clubs, and a cinema. The convention took over the arcade, and each pub or club hosted a specific event. One pub held signings and vendors, a night club was adapted to host a main stage, and two of the smaller pubs facilitated themed talks. The cinema hosted more vendors and photo opportunities. Fan conventions follow a set formula of what is expected from them, what attractions should be provided and consequently how should fans be expected to act. In Adorno and Horkheimer's 1944 paper, they write: "the permanent compulsion to produce new effects which yet remain bound to the old schemea. becoming additional rules, merely increases the power of the tradition which the individual effect seeks to escape" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2006, 46). Even fan conventions set up by different organisations end up following this set formula, as to not offend the expectations of their audience – and conversely to make sure the attendees are easily managed, on account attendees are more likely to be familiar with what is expected of them. The result is sameness. Replication and sameness are integral to many cosplayers, especially within the cosplay competition. Even cosplayers who alter the design or style of their costumes must still apply certain recognisable traits to convey pre-existing character and/or genre.

Cosplayers typically aspire for screen accuracy, as has been viewed throughout this thesis. In a cosplayer's act of replication and mimicry, said cosplayer chooses to dress and perform as characters from popular media and in so doing promotes said franchises (without the production companies going to any extra expense). What is more, the desire for accuracy prompts competition between cosplayers, encouraging cosplayers to compete to provide the most detailed or the best spin on their chosen character (Chapter 3 Part 3). Adorno and Horkheimer establish how, "even during their [consumers'] leisure time, consumers must orient themselves according to the unity of production" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2006, 44). Cosplayers tend to pick characters that are in the popular imagination, typically following recently released films, games, TV, or internet trends (such as Bowsette). Even my decision to cosplay as Sucy was influenced from my recent viewing of *Little Witch Academia* following its release on Netflix (UK).

Such fan activity is unthinkable without the prior existence of such texts. According to Adorno and Horkheimer it is "under the ideological truce between them [audiences and producers], the conformism of the consumers, like the shamelessness of the producers they sustain, can have a good conscience. Both content themselves with the reproduction of sameness" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2006, 50). When visiting Stoke-Con-Trent on 13th October 2019, I made the personal note: "I feel stuck in time". Sameness has defined my fan convention experiences, given each convention I have attended followed the same basic floor plan, all in aid of emulating a perpetual state of nostalgia. Regardless of the convention size, or regardless of how well established the con. organiser is, each convention I have attended has followed the same basic set up.

My attendance at Cardiff Anime and Gaming Con. highlighted the distinctive set up of the fan convention, given the unusual setting. Rather than taking place in an open plan hall, as most conventions I had attended had, Cardiff Anime and Gaming Con. took place in a hotel. The convention sprawled over four floors. Just as VWORP had used the distinct areas around an arcade to segmentalize the convention attractions, Cardiff Anime and Gaming Con. segmentalized each attraction across four floors of the hotel. On the ground floor could be found the vendors, independent artists, and some minor actors doing signings. The first floor offered a seating area and the main hall where performances and the cosplay masquerade took place. The second floor contained more independent artists and tables for people to play board games and card games. Meanwhile, the fourth floor was set up for video game tournaments.

These observations from VWORP and Cardiff Anime and Gaming Con. are examples which exaggerate a formula of attractions and areas which fan industries featured at every convention I attended. Each attraction was consistently seen at every convention I attended, the only thing changing between them being the scale of the attractions, and the names of the special guests. For example, MCM London featured guests including Simon Pegg (*Shaun of the Dead*, *Star Trek*); and Sophia Lillis and Wyatt Oleff (*IT: Chapter 2*). In comparison smaller event Stoke-Con-Trent featured guests including Paul McGann (Doctor Who) and CBBC puppet Hacker T. Dog. I developed an understanding of how the timetabling of these events followed distinct formulae, for example the main stage tends to alternate between performances and shows throughout the day, leaving the celebrity guests to the lunchtime and afternoon slots (when attendance numbers are at their highest) and the cosplay masquerade will always mark the end of the convention.

To unpack the uniformity between the conventions, the ways in which cosplayers (and fans) are expected to communicate with one another, and consequently the power relations they both impose/maintain, I shall now look at each of the core locations the convention hall is made up of. There are seven core locations that make up the fan convention, these are: The Vending Hall, The Artist Alley, The Gaming Corner, The Signing Area, The Photography Area, The Open Area (and Cosplay Desk), and finally The Main Stage.

(1) Firstly, the Vending Hall. I have already discussed convention vendors in some detail, but it is worth briefly reflecting here on what one might expect from the vendor between smaller and larger conventions. At smaller events such as Geek's Wolverhampton, one can expect to see a lot of local vendors, toy shops and second-hand dealers. The stalls at these smaller conventions are typically one-two tables in size, and vendors put a lot of time into how their tables are presented, everything that is on display is ultimately up for sale (much like the items on display in Forbidden Planet). However, at larger events such as MCM London, not only can one expect to see sellers as described at the smaller conventions, but one will also see big brands, such as Funko Pops, and Hasbro (4.2) took up a large area the size of a shop in the high street. Vendors are ultimately an integral part of the convention, regardless of the convention size, however much like the disparity between special guests in attendance between smaller/larger fan conventions noted previously, the scale of a convention can indicate whether vendors are independent sellers, or notable brands.

EL
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TRANSFORMERS
WAR FOR CYBERTRON

4.2

(2) Secondly, there is the Artist Alley, this is where independent comic vendors and artists can be found, selling a mix of original and fan art, comics, novellas, and in some cases short films. In some cases, the Artists Ally is an opportunity to discover new talent, or even to meet with creatives you admire. When I attended MCM Birmingham in 2016, I met the artist Sylvia Carrus and discussed her zine 'Butt Ghosts'. For the artists, the convention is ample opportunity to draw in new audiences and sell their work. From a personal standpoint the Artist Alley is the most welcoming area of the convention hall, and I similarly talked with independent artists at several of the conventions I attended. Artists come across as generally happy to talk through techniques, ideas, and even the more technical attributes of formatting and printing. These spaces are a site of exchange of both money for physical products, but also for ideas and conversation. In or near the Artist Alley, one will also typically find a fan art wall, a space where convention attendees can draw fan art and share their creations, typically entering their pieces into a fan art competition. Every convention I have attended has had some form of art competition, usually consisting of a few tables with basic art supplies at which people can draw and then pin their creations to the wall. These spaces simultaneously facilitate a communal space, while still upholding meritocratic competition between fans.

(3) The third attribute is the Gaming Corner. At events such as MCM London, the gaming is distinguished by big brands such as PlayStation showing off new games. During my attendance at MCM London. A large area was dedicated to showing off the video game *Cyberpunk 2077* (Badowski, 2020), and drew in a big crowd (4.3). MCM London was held at the ExCel, a huge complex composed of a series of interlinked warehouses. One warehouse was dedicated entirely to a *Yu-Gi-Oh* Championship (a Japanese fantasy card game). The area was closed off, and to enter, one had to talk with an assistant at the entrance. Meanwhile at

smaller conventions the Gaming Corner will typically comprise of a series of tables set up with computers, consoles, and board games at which attendees can compete. At the Gaming Corner of Cardiff Anime and Gaming Con. I recall watching a large group of people gathered around a sofa cheering on a game of Nintendo's *Super Smash Bros*. *Ultimate* (Sakurai, 2018-). Both the *Yu-Gi-Oh* competition at MCM London and the *Super Smash Bros*. *Ultimate* game at Cardiff Anime and Gaming Con. evoked the feeling of the Gaming Corner as a small community in and of itself, hosting their own events and special attractions.

Cyberpunk
Cyberpunk
Cyberpunk

4.3

(4) A Signing Area is also a must at any given convention, each convention, regardless of how big or small, will hire actors and other notable personalities from popular franchises to give talks and signings (the bigger the convention, the bigger grade of celebrity can be found). Common attendees I have seen during my convention visits are actors (from minor and starring roles) from *Doctor Who*, the crew of *Red Dwarf*, as well as personalities from reality programmes such as *Storage Wars*, all of which are programmes on British television with large fanbases.

(5) The Photography Area is inextricably linked with the Signing Area. The Photography Area is where fans can have pictures taken with the special guests (for a fee). These areas are also typically designed for cosplayers to get their photos professionally taken, as I shall explore in greater detail shortly.

(6) Open Areas are a necessity at all conventions. They are a space in which attendees can go to sit, eat lunch, where cosplayers can get changed, or most notably where cosplayers can hold meetups and take photos of one another. These Open Areas might be located down the corridors of a Hotel, in a common room of a convention centre, or at the entrance the convention. An Open Area is simply a space that has not been filled with any specific attraction.

These intentionally empty areas are incredibly important for cosplayers. I first noticed the communal space when I attended MCM Manchester in 2016. Cosplayers would linger around the entrance of the convention to entertain the crowds whilst they wait in line to enter. During the day itself, cosplayers would gather on the steps outside of the convention centre to take photos and entertain passers-by. Despite taking place outside the convention hall, these meetups have nevertheless become an important part of the convention experience. Cosplayers arrange meet-ups on social media, for example groups and events can be found on Facebook set up by cosplayers specifically to arrange photo shoots. At MCM Manchester in 2016, I attended a Harley Quinn and Deadpool meet up after I saw the meet-up advertised in a cosplay group on Facebook. This meet-up was attended by cosplayers of DC's Harley Quinn and Marvel's *Deadpool* (Miller, 2016). Melanie Kohnen offers a glimpse into the ways in which fan industry makes use of fan activities to its own benefit. In her paper on the experience economy (2020) surrounding promotional events at San Diego International Comic-Con, Kohnen examines attractions held outside of the convention hall both in person and online. Though these events are not organised by the convention itself, Kohnen argues that "the industry encourages co-creation as long as it happens to their benefit. Marketers perceive the proliferation of digital platforms as increasing consumer agency" (Kohnen 2020, 8). The agency of the cosplayer is seen as groups of cosplayers arrange meet-ups via social media, and while such meetups are not the result of the convention organisers efforts, event organisers make Open Areas to make use of these gatherings, by sharing photographs on their own social media and thus become seen as co-organisers.

Because meet-up groups and events are shared on social media, this acts as free marketing for the convention. Fans see meet-up events being shared and become aware of upcoming conventions. In Kohnen's article she quotes Aaron Gaeir, the CEO and founder of Granddesign marketing agency. In the quotation Gaeir reflects on the impact of people sharing pictures or statements online when visiting attractions advertising popular television programmes, during San Diego International Comic-Con. Gaeir says; "98 percent of attendees take photos or videos of their experiences and post them to their network. Brands can generate billions of impressions on an activation that brings in 20 or 30,000 visitors. It's a giant multiplier" (Gaeir, 2018 quoted in Kohnen 2020, 5). What we have in this situation is another case in which the fan industry uses the 'freedoms' of fans and cosplayers to their own benefit. And yet, the fan/cosplayer would not perceive it as a submissive position given that from the position of the cosplayer such meetups and online engagement are socially and emotionally enjoyable. For the cosplayer, any financial benefits which fall upon the fan industry are circumstantial, and these meetups do not guarantee further financial success. The conflicting narratives in this example are an explicit case in which the consumer and producer co-shape each other, not in a strategic exchange, but in a circumstantial event which results in mutual benefits for both parties. Each party in this paradigm is relying on the other, for the bringing together of fans.

At MCM London in 2019, I attended a *Pokémon* cosplay meet-up, at which cosplayers of Nintendo's game and TV series *Pokémon* (1996-) gathered dressed as the monsters and characters from the franchise. I also watched, as an army of Jedi and Stormtroopers, took over one of the warehouses, in what appeared as an epic military procession for a huge group photo. However, what I saw here took up in-door Open Areas, two whole warehouses of the convention centre where people would gather to share their cosplays and take group photos. In this example, we see the convention having taken an active decision to set-up a space for these activities, and ensure it is within the building itself, where cosplayers are exposed to various posters for film and TV, and a large screen in the centre of the room showing various adverts. These Open Areas are an important function for the cosplayer, but the distinction between being outside on the steps or in a designated space within the centre is crucial, as it indicates a level of control over the cosplayer. In the latter example, the suggestion that cosplayers take a submissive role using indoor spaces would be accurate, as ultimately, it means one must purchase a ticket to take part, whereas at the previous MCM Manchester in 2016, the public was able to approach cosplayers to take their pictures without having to enter the convention.

These Open Areas are also sites which other people can take advantage of. At both 'Geeks' Wolverhampton, and again at Yorkshire Cosplay Con, I experienced many people in cosplay offering photo opportunities with the convention attendees for a small donation to local charities. At 'Geeks', cosplayers dressed as the Mystery Inc. Gang collected for a local Children's hospital, posing for pictures for a small donation and interacting with other cosplayers and attendees in character. At YCC, a Dalek patrolled the entrance to the convention, playfully interacting with kids and families, as a woman accompanied the Dalek with a charity pot. These charity cosplayers are another example of how these spaces are used; in extension it is another example of how cosplay itself is used to playfully engage with an audience of shared interests for financial (even if charitable) profit. Further to this, these mass gatherings are prime opportunities for photographers to take pictures, which (as I have previously commented upon) the photographer can use to build up a portfolio of work, advertise their commissions, or in some cases sell their images to local newspapers.

Given the significance of cosplayers in the Open Areas, I shall also mention the cosplay help desk which is an area which I have seen at every convention I have attended. Larger events such as MCM, or Yorkshire Cosplay Con will typically offer space for the cosplayer to store a spare change of clothes. But, at its most basic, these stations seen at both the larger and smaller conventions will be staffed by people offering cosplayers help to repair any damages to their costume for the duration of the convention. These help desks are typically located close to the Open Areas, removed from the vendor stalls, and located where cosplayers congregate, which goes to highlight that fan industries purposefully designate these spaces to tailor cosplayers interactions with a convention space.

(7) Finally, the Main Stage is the centre point of any fan convention. On the Main Stage one can expect to see performances, Q&A's with special guests, and of course this is where the cosplay masquerade is held which typically closes the convention. From left to right, figure 4.4 is a photograph from Anime and Gaming Con. Birmingham in October 2016, followed by figure 4.5 which is a shot from Geeks Wolverhampton.

4.4 and 4.5

It is typical of smaller fan conventions such as these to get all their cosplay masquerade entries onstage for a large group photo. The group photo is less practical at the larger events, such as MCM, whose competitions are performance based, and sees cosplayers coming on one by one and performing a short song or sketch. As reflected on in Chapter 3 Part 3 cosplay competitions can be a sight of exchange and celebration. However, it can also be a site of tension and meritocratic power dynamics. Whilst cosplay is considered a hobbyist leisure activity, cosplayers take cosplay competitions very seriously, especially for cosplayers whose successes have seen them become professional cosplayers. 'Free time' to Theodor Adorno (1991) is not quite as 'free' as one may think (or hope). Adorno suggests that during these moments of leisure "people are at least convinced that they are acting of their own free will, this will itself is shaped by the very same forces which they are seeking to escape in their hours without work" (Adorno 1991, 188). Yet can a cosplayer be said to be working of their own free will if they are replicating pre-existing characters that do not belong to them? Have they not been influenced by popular media industries? In cosplayers escape from the day-to-day, are they not just prescribing to different but equally meritocratic systems of power? In Chapter 5, I address the ways in which cosplayers are tied with meritocratic structures, but it is worth addressing here how fan industries provoke meritocratic competition. For Adorno, the populace who work for industries inevitably feed the money they have earnt back into these systems of power. Adorno argues that a "'hobby' amounts to a paradox: that human condition which sees itself as the opposite to reification, the oasis of unmediated life within a completely mediated total system, has itself been reified just like the ridged distinction between labour and free time" (Adorno 1991, 189). For the cosplayer, there is an expectation that their hobby will result in a product, in this case the costume. The expectation of a product (to look good and be well performed) results in consequences. Should the costume be poorly made/performed, the individual risks being judged and potentially disowned by the community.

The cosplay masquerade on the Main Stage is a fundamental attribute of the fan convention and a successful well-constructed and performed costume can lead to acclaim and notability within the cosplay community.

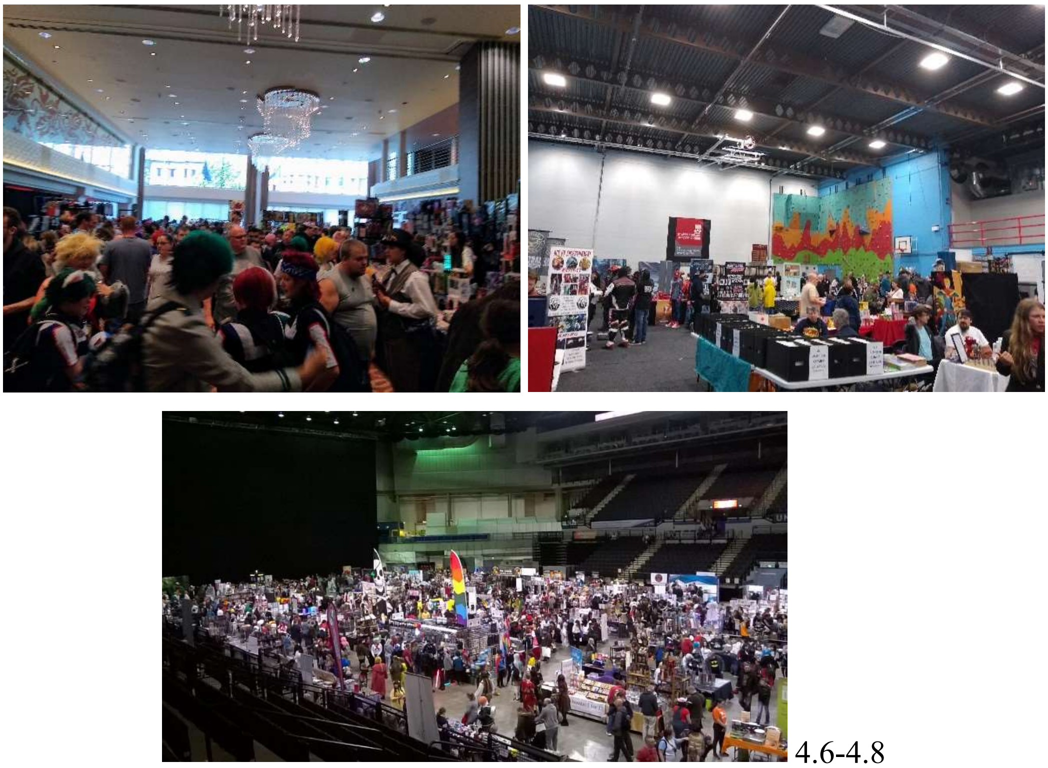
The Fan Convention, Sameness, and the Passive Audience

The seven attributes of the convention hall that I have observed at each convention over the duration of this research has illustrated a sameness between all conventions regardless of size. As a result of this sameness producers and consumers have an identifiable set of expectations as to what the convention hall must contain. The seven areas are essential in maintaining a relationship between the convention organiser and the cosplayer, one which generates the illusion of co-authorship. A relationship in which the cosplayer (and fan attendees) is both an active and passive participant. To conceptualise the replication of sameness across fan conventions, and the expectations that are placed on both attendee and convention organiser, one can draw on literature concerning social geographies of place. On the history of science and industry exhibits in the late 19th Century, Rosalind Williams in her book *Dream Worlds* (1982) she observes how, "over the decades, the dominant tone of these exhibitions altered. The emphasis gradually changed from instructing the visitor in the wonders of modern science and technology to entertaining him" entangled with this focus on entertainment came a focus on commerce, “more and more, consumer merchandise rather than productive tools was displayed” (Williams [1982] 1992, 59). The fan convention emerged from a similar tradition as explained in the Literature Review, fan conventions emerged out from a tradition of masquerades and carnivals, events which placed focus on entertainment and celebration, which have become entangled with commercial structures of selling merchandise and advertising new films, TV, or games.

The uniformity of fan conventions as commercial spaces is reflected in the samness that is present between the attendees. Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that regulated norms in popular media have provoked changes in human behaviour, they argue that “the most intimate reactions of human beings have become so entirely reified, even to themselves, that the idea of anything peculiar to them survives only in extreme abstraction. Personality means hardly more than dazzling white teeth and freedom from body odour and emotions” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2006, 71). In a crowd full of people in elaborate costumes with bags of merchandise and rainbow flags, in a culture in which each person defines themselves based of a small selection of films, a cosplayer’s agency is (at least partly) defined by the confines of its location, and thus a cosplayer’s agency is one that is regulated by the wider fan industry (and popular media production). If one conceptualises the convention hall using the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer, this leads to a somewhat extreme argument that the feeling ‘agency’ is only important to the individual who feels it, but it is a feeling that has no social repercussions, as said agency does not ultimately exist.

Williams suggest that the environment associated with exhibitions dopes its attendees, “People are doped. Seeking a pleasurable escape form the working world, they find it in a deceptive dream world which is no dream at all but a sales pitch in disguise” (Williams 1992, 65). For example, vendors or artists who sit at their stalls in cosplay present themselves as fans (on par with the convention attendees). In a similar regard, Burns (2012) suggests that communities grow around their environments, in their analysis of the social geographies of communities. Communities and their rules and hierarchies form over time, they “exist around a core both of highly committed and engaged users, practices, and knowledges held strongly by these users, collectively developed and defined over time” (Burns 2012, 819), Burns understands the relationship between producer and consumer as collaborative, thus one might say that the convention organisers and the convention attendees are collaborative in the formation of how one engages with the convention environment and the vendors and participants within it.

However, in contrary to this mutual community between producer and consumer, vendors and artists are not attendees and are at conventions to sell their merchandise, their appropriation of cosplay (no matter how sincere) is an abuse of power and encourages interaction with potential customers. Even the Nostromo Set at Yorkshire Cosplay Con. (2019) referenced at the start of this chapter, encourages cosplayers to have their photos taken, and engage in an exchange with amateur and professional photographers. Williams' understanding of the effects of these entertaining commercial environments intern harks back to notions of Adorno's free time as illusionary. Each individual participating in this cosplay/fan culture is just another mechanism which ensures the culture industry's longevity, and thus reinscribes dominant set of norms and values. Williams continues, "Even if the consumer was free not to buy at that time, techniques of merchandising pushed him to want to buy at sometime" (Williams 1991, 67). At London MCM 2019, for example, attendees could get a glimpse of *Cyberpunk 2077* and play exclusive demos, this may indeed provide an enjoyable experience for the fan, however, one must also recognise that it is an entertaining experience designed to encourage fans to purchase the video game upon its release. Similarly, two stands, one by Adult Swim which replicated the garage set from *Rick and Morty* (Harmon and Roiland, 2013-) and another by which replicated a corridor of the Overlook Hotel as seen in *Doctor Sleep* (Flanagan, 2019) are each design to allow the audience to play within the fictional world and take photos, but also to advertise the release of the new upcoming series and film respectively.



4.6-4.8

The sameness of conventions regardless of their organisation leads to the argument that because of this formalisation, attendees and cosplayers are inscribed a set of rules and structures for how they are meant to behave, how they are meant to present, and consequently how they are meant to identify. What is observed here can be compared with that of Foucault's disciplined body (1975). Foucault identifies that "discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space" (Foucault [1975] 2019, 101). Over the course of this chapter, I have outlined the ways in which the convention hall is a means in which fan industries can discipline cosplayers and fans. Indeed figures 4.6-4.8 point to a space of omnipresent visibility, rather than a space in which one might hide or appropriate.

Linking place and questions of freewill has similarly been addressed in the social geography literature of Tim Cresswell, in his book *Place: A Short Introduction* (2004), Cresswell argues, "clearly the things people do in place – the practices that, in turn, produce a lively sense of place – are not always the result of free will" (Cresswell [2004] 2015, 65). When attending a convention, Cosplay is a central component which generates a 'lively sense of place' it's ties with the fan convention, thus actively encourages attendees to participate in cosplay as a part of the convention experience. The liveliness of a convention is constructed. Not only is cosplay a social expectation generated by the attendees of these environments, but it is also actively promoted by fan industries and the convention organisers. Cosplay is typically a central component in the advertising of a convention in online material; vendors at comic conventions will sell cosplays (or components to embellish a cosplay), not to mention the cosplay stand being a central location at conventions, as well as the masquerade as a focal feature of any given fan convention. Cresswell continues "Some actions are freer than others and it is therefore necessary to take into account restraints on action that are the product of social hierarchies and power relations within society" (Cresswell 2015, 65). Whether the participation in cosplay is a choice freely made or an activity actively encouraged by fan industries is almost unsubstantial. What is important is that cosplay is highly structured by both fan and fan industry creating sets of rules, expectations, and hierarchies. Foucault later says of disciplinary spaces, or enclosures:

> Disciplinary space tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed. […] Its aim was to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt

> others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits.
>
> Foucault 2019, 102

Between the seven areas of the fan convention, gamers can be expected to be found in Gaming Corners, just as cosplayers can be expected to be in Open Areas. These Open Areas are in turn designated to discourage performances or photography around the vendor stalls, artists allies, and Signing Areas to reduce congestion and prevent people from being distracted from the vending stalls. The segregation of activity is in turn the disciplining of people, partly to prevent certain areas of the convention being overwhelmed, but also to maintain set rules and expectations of the cosplayers and fans in attendance.

Reading the convention hall as a space which surveys and tailors fan interactions is not unfounded, though it is worth remembering that the narrative of audiences as passive consumers is entangled with prior narratives of audiences as creative consumers. What is being observed here is cases in which audiences can be interpreted to possess little agency, a reading which emerges because of the formalization of the convention hall.

The space of the convention hall might, in some circumstances, allow cosplayers to challenge acceptable behaviours and values as has been argued in much cosplay scholarship (Chapters 1 and 2. As Mountfort, Geczy and Peirson-Smith argued in their book *Planet Cosplay* (2019). For Mountfort et al. "cosplay events temporarily disrupt and invert everyday life with 'the suspension of hierarchical precedence' through sanctioned, playful activity that is a creative display and outlet for emotions" (Mountfort et al. 2019. 185). However, the 'temporality' and 'sanctioned' are key words here which require greater unpacking.

The subversive disruption that emerges in play is ultimately momentary and, much like the carnival, cosplay performance is an outlet used to reinscribe dominant norms and values which people reproduce in day-to-day life. When conceptualising the social geography of the convention space, the 'temporality' of it as an environment is an important consideration and recalls Augé's 'non-places' (1995). On notions of 'non-places', Creswell explains "by non-place Augé is referring to sites marked by the 'fleeting, the temporary, the ephemeral.' Non-places include freeways, airports, supermarkets – sites where particular histories and traditions are not (allegedly) relevant, unrooted places marked by mobility and travel. Non-place is essentially the space of travellers" (Creswell 2015, 78). The temporality of the fan convention is comparable with that of a non-place. In the paper, 'Fan Homecoming' Waysdorf and

Reidnders (2019) examine permanent fan locations, namely Portmerion (and its ties with the cult Television series *The Prisoner* (McGoohan, 1967-8)), as pilgrimage sites for fans. As a point of comparison, Waysdorf and Reidners "conventions are typically held in what Augé [„,] refers to as 'non-places', hotel rooms or convention centres that can accommodate crowds but without distinctiveness on their own" (Waysdorf and Reidners 2019, online). Not only is the fan convention a temporary event within a permanent environment (within a hotel, town hall, or convention centre) but it is also an environment marked out by mobility, the fan convention is an environment which facilitates multiple places through which attendees travel: The Vending Hall, The Artist Alley, The Gaming Corner, The Signing Area, The Photography Area, The Open Area (and Cosplay Desk), and finally The Main Stage.

The temporality associated with events such as conventions or the carnival are each associated with the performance and play with norms (such as gender-play), Coronato highlights that "cross-dressing would question the accepted boundaries between the sexes – for the body is the domain to be charted and contained" (Coronato 2003, 87). However, "the choice between transgressive and normative readings of sexual inversion proves entangled: both learned and popular cultures resorted to the same carnivalesque imagery" (Coronato 2003, 90). Here Coronato speaks highly of the transformative values of cross-dressing and the carnival, but even in its 'rebellious' values consist of a set of expected images (or rules) of the carnival. Similarly, the convention hall is still subject to the same set of rules as the outside which governs it. Cosplayers who play with gendered norms through costume and performance find a safe place to experiment with such discourses in the carnival/convention space. However, this would also suggest that the attendee is not socially revolutionary as cosplay scholarship suggests but is simply conforming to the accepted norms of the fan convention, removed from any consequences outside of the convention space. For Augé, the users of non-place possess little agency, suggesting that the fan convention is comparable to notions of non-place given that cosplayers and fan attendees must abide to expectations and rules of any given fan convention. According to Augé, "the user of a non-place is in contractual relations with it (or the powers that govern it). He [the user] is reminded, when necessary, that the contract exists. One element in this is the way the non-place is to be used: the ticket he has bought, the card he will have to show at the tollbooth, even the trolley he trundles round the supermarket are all more, or less clear signs of it." (Augé 1995, 101). Cosplayers have developed their own expectations, aspirations, and anxieties, which are informed by the environment of the fan convention – cosplay performance, meet-ups, and photography are confined to open areas with it comes the expectations that cosplayers ought to entertain convention attendees. Another example one can draw on is the competition of the masquerade which encourages cosplayers to strive for screen accuracy in the cosplay and enforces meritocratic competition through which cosplayers aspire to outshine their peers.

If the fan convention is indeed a non-space, a temporary place which cosplayers and fan attendees move through, the rules and expectations within this environment is also temporary, "What reigns there [in the non-place] is actuality, the urgency of the present moment. Since non-places are there to be passed through they are measured in units of time" (Augé 1995, 104). For cosplayers, the differences between the 'normal world' and the convention environment were inescapable. The feeling that one can escape the 'real world' through cosplay and conventions came up time and time again in my interviews (Chapter 3). For example, my participant Janine discussed just how different she felt as an individual in performing as Yuko from *Pollock*, "I can sort of access a position where I feel more like I can be sort of extravagant and a little more extroverted. Whereas in real life, I tend to be quite introverted and a little bit shy". Cosplay participant Surge similarly drew on her personal relationship with fictional characters through cosplay set against her 'real' self, "[cosplay is] definitely detached from my own sense of identity. At least in terms of gender stuff. In real life I'm a cis female, but it is fun to be like- it's putting on a costume- well it's literally putting on a costume". Perhaps the bluntest description of this difference between the convention and the 'real' world comes from my participant Sabrina. Sabrina expressed just how much cosplay meant to her "especially with the world being the shit pile that it is".

As much as writers such as Jenkins, or Bainbridge and Norris have written about the blurring of fiction and reality, Fans and cosplayers are in fact hyper aware of the differences between everyday life and fan creativity. In their paper 'All the World's a Con' Casanova, Brenner-Levoy, and Weirich (2020), Casanova et al. dispel arguments that cosplayer's blur fiction and reality, to highlight that like any performer a cosplayer is hyper aware of the 'on-satge' and 'off stage' moments of cosplay play performance on the convention hall floor. "In backstage spaces and moments, cosplayers do not describe feeling as if they are someone else, for example, the character they are portraying" (Casanova et al. 2020, 807). In Casanova's understanding of 'backstage'/'off-stage' these phrases reflect both a physical space and a state of being. In a physical sense backstage/off-stage refers to locations such as: the toilets, food vendors, or cosplay help desk environment in which it would be inappropriate for an audience member to ask a cosplayer to perform for photographs, or environments in which cosplayers are resting, or piecing together their cosplay. These environments are in opposition to 'on-stage' environments such as the main stage, open spaces, or photography areas at which it would be appropriate/even expected that cosplayers will perform in character for convention attendees. Cosplayer's treat the expectations of performance spaces and 'off-stage' spaces seriously, and attendees are encouraged not to disturb cosplayers in 'off-stage' environments.

The on-stage/off-stage dynamic is also a mindset, given that cosplayers may not always be in character in on-stage spaces, or indeed may not be out of character in off-stage spaces. Casanova et al. continue, "We noted in our observations and conversations with cosplayers that sometimes actions take place in the frontstage that seem like they normally would or should be done backstage" (Casanova et al. 2020, 807). For example, at Yorkshire Cosplay Con. I had to do some impromptu wig styling on the convention hall floor after being asked to pose for a photo. The performance of character through cosplay is inextricably linked with the environment of the convention hall, it is a tradition which has been shaped by cosplayers and fan industries in equal measure. Mountfort et al. suggest that the process of craft, performance, and communication involved in cosplay and its adjacent communities "helps relieve the stresses of life for young people, given that they are often subjected to huge potential and institutional expectations to succeed" (Mountfort et al. 2019, 196). The temporary rituals of the convention space give cosplayers the illusion of agency. As Augé points out, when an individual enters a non-place, the individual takes on a new role, they wear a momentary uniform which must abide by the expectations of the non-place, "a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinates. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer, or driver" (Augé 1995, 103), or at the fan convention the cosplayer, attendee, or even organisers, vendors, and artists. Individuals each have their own roles to fill. A cosplayer is there to entertain and embellish the spectacle (on-stage), the attendee is expected to participate in the different attractions whether the be watching talks or spending money at stalls. Cosplayers are provided with a safe environment within which they can create and alter themselves, but this is a process which is permitted by the structures fan industries create for cosplayers, and of course to access these spaces, cosplayers will have to pay the entry fee.

By conducting this social geographical analysis of fan conventions, I have found that fan industries and convention organisers create safe spaces in which cosplayers can play. These environments are different to the structures of one's day-to-day life and create a sense of free will and agency for cosplayers (and attendees), these interactions are however artificial and ensure that convention organisers have a level of control over how cosplayers and attendees interact with one another, but more importantly how cosplayers and attendees consume.

Fan Industries and the Reproduction of Sameness

The sense of sameness, witnessed between conventions over the course of this chapter, was similarly expressed by many of my interview participants. Participant Erika told me about organising meetups with friends at conventions. Erika offhandedly commented, "people will post a picture [on social media] of their finished costumes saying that, 'I'm going to 'whatever' con. anybody else going?'" This throwaway remark "'whatever' con." is quite telling and goes to emphasise just how much of a staple cosplay is at the fan convention, regardless of where one is going one would not need to fear feeling out of place in costume.

Cosplay is itself a process of sameness. It is typically the cosplayer's objective to replicate the look and performance of existing characters from popular media. In Matt Hills' 2014 paper 'From Dalek half balls to Daft Punk helmets', he looks at fan prop replicas, a creative process Hills refers to as belonging to 'mimetic fandom'. Hills defines mimetic fandom as a creative process focused, "on the creation of highly screen-accurate prop replicas" (Hills 2014, 1.2). My participant Giovanni reflected on taking part in judging cosplay contests, recalling the winner. Said winner had chosen to replicate Edward Elric (from *Fullmetal Alchemist* (Mizushima, 2003-4)). Giovanni recalls how the entry had blown her and the other judges away, "all the props were handmade […] the performance was absolutely flawless. And when we had her in the judging room, she took off every single bit of cosplay. She had even made the boxer shorts from the show, that is only seen in some scenes. The level of detail was just phenomenal". Accuracy and detail are fundamental in cosplay competitions, a value which comes from cosplayers themselves, but also subsequently reinforces this hierarchy of accuracy and technical ability (to replicate/mimic).

Replication has often been overlooked by cosplay scholars, who are much more interested in the niche customisation cosplay, or playful mash-up cosplays (costumes which combine two or more characters). For Hills, "sections of fan studies have seemingly assumed that fan works that are not self-evidently transformational are simply of no interest, that they have nothing new or exceptional to tell us" (Hills 2014, 2.2). In the case of the Edward Elric cosplay, what I might perceive as sameness was evaluated as extraordinary by the cosplay judges and a real indicator of the cosplayer's exemplary technical ability. Hills concludes by stating, "mimetic fandom of replica prop making can promise both affirmational authenticity via the pursuit of screen-used looks and ontological unity, as well as transformational agency via customization and stylization" (Hills 2014, 3.16). Giovanni makes it clear that the attention to detail and screen accuracy was worthy of reward. Referring to the Edward Elric cosplay, she recalls: “The judges are just like, we don’t even care that this is seen as a simple costume, this is absolutely immaculate”. For someone to choose to cosplay a character, there would appear to be a degree of submission to character on behalf of the participant. In this momentary activity, the individual must perform as how other members of the community expect their character to act. In addition, the time and money that goes into the creation and/or purchasing of the costume, returns to the examples of the flags. Vendors use cosplayers for a profit, and yet in turn fans willingly submit, in the assurance that their money/time/effort will be reimbursed with social status, emotional pleasure, or imagined co-authorship over a text.

The cosplayer’s desire for accuracy is especially explicit in the cosplay masquerade. Writing about strong men shows, which is similarly characterised by bodily presentation and performance, Tivers’s paper ‘Not a circus, not a freak show’ (2011) examines the relationship strong men have with masculinity and the community that exists between strong men through competition. “I found the ‘world’ of ‘strong man’ programme-making to be essentially a ‘non-autocratic environment’ characterized by ‘craft pride’ rather than institutional constraint. Nevertheless, there were clear values, codes and conventions which were followed” (Tivers 2011, 48-9). In both the strong man show and the cosplay masquerade, the participants are given the illusion of autonomy, through creative practices such as costume, art, fiction, photography, or even the communal events of gaming competitions, celebrity signings and workshops. However, these are all goals, something the members of the community strive towards. They are goals set out by fan industry and mass consensus, and do not necessarily come down to active choice. In cosplay and the convention centre, the cosplayer is driven to perfect their costumes and performances by mimicking the onscreen characters as accurately as possible, just as the strong man seeks to emulate an extreme version of masculinity. In the strong man/body building community, bodies become “surfaces on which values, morality and social laws are inscribed” [quoting Longhurst 1997, 479] (Tivers 2011, 50). The body becomes lost, and becomes a component of culture, which reinscribes existing power relations and gendered norms (which of course, it has always been). And the same is seen in the cosplayer whose bodies become surfaces upon which characters are imposed, characters which possess pre-existing meanings and values.

Cosplay is both a process of creation and consumption in the contexts of the convention hall. While this might have emotional benefits for a cosplayer and provide a form of community, fandom is hardly a life necessity; one does not need cosplay to function and live in contemporary society. I do not wish to undermine the importance of cosplay as a medium for many cosplayers, especially those who have found community, or themselves through cosplay. However, it is necessary to recognise that these artifacts and experiences fall into a category of 'false needs' as Marcuse would refer to them. In Marcuse's book *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), he suggests,

> People recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced.
>
> Marcuse [1964] 2007, 11

Time and time again in my interviews, cosplayers expressed an identification with their chosen characters. For example, participant Erika reflected how they identified with and admired characteristics of their chosen characters. However, unlike the cosplay scholar, Erika drew acknowledged the artificiality of cosplay. Erika explained that "you might be like, 'oh, I see that in me' and like 'oh, they can do that!' and I do not want to devalue that […] just be aware of the narratives that you are producing or reproducing". Erika points out that cosplayers engage in a dialogue with their chosen characters, there may be attributes of a cosplay which feed into a cosplayers 'real life', but it is only a singular influence, and cosplay is only a part of a much more diverse and complicated life. Cosplay is a medium which brings together fans of lots of different cultural products, each with their own distinguished values. Consequently, the cosplay community brings together an audience which is not easily categorised.

Performance and play on the convention hall floor or at the masquerade, sees subsections of different fans located to different areas of the fan convention. Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that it is the result of an individual's class, race, age, and above all the communities and friends which direct an individual to become loyal to certain brands/myths, the communities which form around brands in turn establish their own set of values informed by said brands. Adorno and Horkheimer, explain how individuals and communities "all find themselves enclosed from early on within a system of churches, clubs, professional associations, and other relationships which amount to the most sensitive instrument of social control" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2006, 60). Even individuals who might be perceived to go against the grain of what is expected of them, do so in opposition, a position which only highlights the authorities in power. Adorno, equates hobbies with a Pseudo-activity:

> Pseudo-activity is misguided spontaneity. Misguided, but not accidently so; because people who have a dim suspicion of how hard it would be to throw off the yoke that weighs upon them. They prefer to be distracted by spurious and illusionary activities, by institutionalized vicarious satisfactions, than to face up to the awareness of how little access they have to the possibility of change today.
>
> Adorno 1991, 194

In other words, one's free time is one's own, however an individual's free time is tailored by the dominant powers of a culture and leading industries. Adorno draws on the example of a sunbather; Adorno argues that the objective of sunbathing as a hobby is to get a tan and thus gain social value amongst one's peers who similarly value the tanned bodily aesthetic (conforming to western perceptions of beauty). The fan convention is an environment in which fans and cosplayers can congregate under the supervision of fan industries. Fans and Producers alike are surveying one another and holding each other to high standards and expectations. As individuals take up hobbies and become involved and invested within their associated communities, these participants become complacent within a rigid systems, each member of the community (of cosplayers or sunbathers) aspire for the same thing (recognition by their peers by meeting predefined perceptions of good taste), resulting in uniformity amongst people.

The replication of characters, stories, and in turn particular social-political values harks back to notions of Gramsci's term 'hegemony' and the dominant codes and readings as introduced by Hall. On Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Strinati (1995) recognises that, "subordinate groups accept the ideas, values and leadership of the dominant group not because they are physically forced to, nor because they are ideologically indoctrinated, but because they have reasons of their own" (Strinati [1995] 2004, 148). Here one can compare the 'subordinate groups' with the cosplayer and other popular fans, whereas the dominant group includes popular media industries and fan industries who set the environment and parameters for fan expression to take place. Attendees and convention organisers share the values of the convention organisers, or at least have needs which are being met by convention organisers, such as a space to meet with friends and peers. In turn cosplayers and fans replicate these structures affirming the structures of dominant powers as 'the norm'.

Strinati continues, "hegemony is secured because concessions are made by dominant to subordinate groups and it's cultural expression will reflect this" (Strianti 2004, 148), thus both dominant powers [convention organisers] and subordinate groups [cosplayers] contribute to hegemony in equal respect. Each contributing to the replication of sameness. However, one might suggest that subordinate groups who contribute to dominant hegemony are complicit in their own subordination. Hall, Clark, and Jefferson (1974) offer the following reading of Gramsci's hegemony: "when a ruling class is able, not only to coerce a subordinate class is able, not only to coerce a subordinate class to conform its interests, but to exert a 'hegemony' or 'total social authority'" (Hall et al. [1993] 2006, 28). An exertion of hegemony can be seen in the fan rigorous rules at the cosplay competitions and masquerade, something which has been seen universally between my own convention attendance and from my cosplay participants. In Hall and Jefferson's reading of Gramsci, they suggest that the dominant powers are much more manipulative and are capable of imposing structures its users into forced complacency.

Notably, Strianti's reading of hegemony overlooks groups and individuals who challenge dominant norms, Hall and Jefferson. addresses these groups and individuals in a somewhat cautionary manner, "movements which appear 'oppositional' may be merely survivals, traces from the past […] some may be merely 'alternative' – the new lying alongside the old. Others are truly 'emergent'; though they, too, must struggle, against redefinition by the dominant culture, and incorporation" (Hall et al. 2006, 52). There is a diversity amongst fans, just as Hall recognises that audience take on different readings of text, what one might interpret here is that cosplayers who are, at least visually, subversive may not actually intend to be subversive. For cosplayers such as Brock and Sabrina who have each constructed seemingly subversive crossplay cosplays and gender-bent cosplays; or even my own experiences cosplaying as Sucy Manbavarian, we have done so as means of expressing ourselves rather than out of a conscious social criticism. In so doing we have simultaneously related and reconstructed predefined characters, and in turn met to the expectations of our characters – even if they are in conflict to own everyday appearance. Thus, regardless of the cosplayer's/fan's/audience member's position, each member in some way contributes to the replication of sameness within the fan convention and reaffirm the dominant culture which fan industries encourage its participants/users to accept, to follow and to replicate.

The replication of sameness between fan industries (or the convention organisers) and the convention attendees' expectations of the fan convention result in a uniformity between all fan conventions regardless of the size or theme.

To understand the diversity of fans, I'd like to draw on Bourdieu's concept of the 'habitus'. Bourdieu argues that the habitus is a means in which, "the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes" (Bourdieu [1984] 1996, 170). Bourdieu goes onto address how "Life-styles are thus systematic products of habitus, become sign systems that are socially qualified (as 'distinguished', 'vulgar', etc.)" (Bourdieu 1996, 172). What we see is a complicated relationship, a relationship which exists between groups who possess symbolic values, between certain locations with similar symbolic value, and transmitted between certain products. The reading of these positions will differ not only upon the contexts and examples in question, but also subject to the positioning of the onlooker. Depending upon one's social class this can lead to a summation of the products that the individual will consume, how that individual will present themselves, and thus, how they are identified. Fans are thus identified by the media they consume and by the merchandise they buy. Cosplayers are identified by the costumes they wear, and crucially their ability to accurately mimic their chosen character, and whether they embody the rules of their character sufficiently well to attain high levels of cultural capital in the field of cosplay.

Closing Remarks on the Fan Convention and Structured Play

Chapter 4 opened by re-examining the Acafan methodology, following the findings of Chapter 3 Part 3 which had illustrated several complexities in the cosplay community which conflicted much of the utopian perspectives offered by contemporary (Acafan) cosplay scholarship. However, the optimism of much Acafan literature rejects the complexities of the actual fans and in doing so leaves fans further susceptible to the exploitation of fan industries and popular media production. I wish to emphasise that I am not dismissing any of the arguments and observations based in fan scholarship form Chapters 1-3. However, to capture the other side of cosplay communities in which cosplayers do not conform to the observations of Acafans (Chapter 3 Part 3), it is a necessity for this thesis to unpack the complicated relationship that exists between the fan industry and cosplayers.

The main body of this chapter presented and analysed the data I collected during my ethnographic research attending various large- and small-scale fan and cosplay conventions based around the UK. What is more, many of my findings resonated with the experiences of my North American based participants. In doing so, I examined examples in which fan industry's structure audiences to act in predesigned ways, but also the ways in which fan industries exploit agency that cosplayers do display. I analysed the data I collected by drawing on a wider pool of literature beyond cosplay and fan scholarship, looking back to on audience and power scholarship from traditional cultural studies debates. In addition to drawing on specific examples including LGBTQ+ flags and photographers, I also analysed sameness.

Despite differences of scale, I observed seven key areas which made up every convention I attended. Addressing the complexity environments has been vital in outlining the expectations (or rules) which are imposed on cosplayers (and fans) by the fan industry. By drawing on writers including Hall, Adorno and Horkheimer, Foucault, and Marcuse, I have documented circumstances in which audiences are active (confirming much Acafan scholarship), but also the ways in which audiences are submissive, or take part in a collaborative exercise which perpetuates dominant power structures.

I return to a discussion of environments with reference to online fan conventions in Chapter 6, however, the next step I take in Chapter 5 is a closer investigation of power structures that form between cosplayers. Chapters 1-3 which were based in a fan studies (Acafan) tradition suggested cosplayers form their own unique power dynamics as active creative agents. However, the latter half of Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 have gone to suggest that often these power relations are directly influenced by fan industries and their environments. In the next chapter I will take these ideas a step further by examining the ways in which cosplayers codes and power relations are not only structured by the cosplay community and fan industries, but I will be addressing how these dynamics are imposed and maintained by popular media industries and dominant cultural power structures. In Chapter 5, I draw again on a wider body of cultural studies literature, namely postfeminist and meritocracy criticism to unpack in greater detail the ways in which not only the fan industry creates rules which consumers and cosplayers engage with (in the contexts of the fan convention), but also the dynamics of power and taste that are imposed by popular media which often supersede the fan convention and can be witnessed in the exchanges between cosplayers in online groups and forums.

Chapter 5: Post-feminism and Meritocracy

Part 1 – Gender, Commodity, and Competition

Between Chapters 1-3 Part 2, I have illustrated the valuable research of Acafan scholars within cosplay scholarship. I have provided evidence which supports Acafan's 'utopian' representation of cosplayers which suggests that audiences are active poachers (Jenkins, 1992), revolutionary agents of change (Bainbridge and Norris, 2011) and productive collaborators (King 2011; Lamerichs 2018; Wing 2019). However, the latter half of Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 drew on observations and interview data which presented evidence of abuse, hierarchy, and competition. Experiences and observations which challenged the utopian Acafan position were conceptualised by drawing on traditional cultural studies discussions of power, such as that of Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), Hall (1973), and Marcuse (1964). These power struggles were observed primarily in Chapter 3 Part 3 to discuss cosplayers experiences, then in Chapter 4 these frictions were unpacked further by addressing the ways in which fan industry's structure audience behave in the contexts of the fan convention.

These two-opposing set of observations mark out contradictions between what cosplayers are experiencing and how Acafan scholars are writing about cosplayers. I do not seek to pit these two representations of cosplayers against each other as both arguments are backed up with extensive evidence and data. Rather, I propose the term networks of contradiction to conceptualise cosplay fandom, fan industry and popular media as a series of entangled structures within which each group displays moments of agency and submission.

By looking back and drawing on theoretical frameworks from audience studies and cultural studies discussions of power one can build a fuller representation of the cosplay community and the power structures at play between fans, and between fans and the fan industry. Chapter 4 revealed the ways that fan industries encode meaning into fan environments and products to encourage audiences to decode meaning in particular ways and subsequently act in particular ways. In my continued analysis of hierarchy and power I draw on postfeminist criticism to illustrate the ways in which hierarchies between cosplayers are much more complicated. In this chapter, I examine the effects of popular media and how encoded meaning is replicated by cosplayers. By drawing on postfeminist criticism I acknowledge the revolutionary potential as discussed in Chapters 1-3, also highlight the ways in which cosplay can be used as a tool to reaffirm conservative gendered codes, and the ways in which cosplayers who attempt to subvert these norms risk becoming the recipient of abuse and harassment from other cosplayers and fan spectators.

Recapping Gender-Play Cosplay

I use the term gender-play to refer to any cosplay that encompasses an explicit performance of gender. The term gender-play is integral to most cosplay. It can refer to a male presenting cosplayer performing as the hypermasculine character Bane from DC's *Batman*, or to gender subversion such as a feminine presenting cosplayer adapting the aesthetics of Bane to present a feminine version of the character. Gender subversion through cosplay has two main types: firstly, there is gender-bending cosplay, and secondly there is crossplay cosplay. Aadahl defines gender-bending as the process of taking a character from popular media "who is canonically female and reimagining them as male, vice versa, or giving a genderless character gendered characteristics" (Aadahl 2018, online). An example of gender-bending would be a male presenting cosplayer adapting the canonically female Harley Quinn (from DC's *Batman* franchise) to conform to the cosplayer's masculinity. Such a cosplay might see Harley's red and black skin-tight one-piece re-imagined as a red and black shirt and waistcoat. Secondly there is crossplay cosplay, which is less easy to spot. In King's upcoming chapter, she explains that "often the goal [of crossplay] is to pass as the character through wigs, make-up, posture, body hair cultivation or removal, binding or tucking of genitals or visible secondary gender characteristics, and of course clothing and footwear" (King, upcoming). An example of crossplay cosplay would be my own cosplay of Sucy Manbavarian from the series *Little Witch Academia* (2017) as I discussed in Chapter 3 Part 1. To construct a crossplay, I designed my costume to be as screen accurate to the original character as possible, to fully mimic Sucy's clothing and feminine figure, this included shaving facial and arm hair, and learning to tuck my genitals so that I might pass as a young woman.

The highly visible gender subversion which is present in the cosplay community prompts Bainbridge and Norris (2013) to define the "cosplayer as a playful agent of change. The high regard given to cosplay's traversal moment as it crosses gender, race or reality can be seen to offer an optimistic creative and social moment" (Bainbridge and Norris 2013, 35). Similarly, for Lamerichs': "cosplay blurs the relations between labour and play. The activity takes shape at fan conventions but also increasingly at promotional events of industry itself" (Lamerichs 2013, 1). My earlier chapters support these arguments illustrating cases in which cosplay and other fan creations influence popular media production. However, this chapter address cases in which cosplay and its community uphold dominant norms by replicating the gender norms present in popular media.

Ultimately, I am dealing with hypocrisy present in cosplay subcultures and their study. For example, as much as there are cosplayers who are playful with gendered codes and facilitate an inclusive environment, Chapter 3 Part 3 illustrated that there is abuse and harassment among cosplayers which impose limitations on the community. For example, body type is often a source of friction between cosplayers. Brownie and Graydon address how superhero cosplays "requires participants to aspire to an unattainable physique. In order to achieve muscular definition comparable to that of Superman or Batman, participants must commit to emulating their chosen superhero even when not in costume" (Brownie and Graydon 2016, 115). If a cosplayer does not resemble their chosen character, the cosplayer may face critique from other members of the community (regardless of how screen accurate their costumes is). Given that body-type is equitable to costume accuracy, this can drive cosplayers to go to extreme lengths to achieve a particular body shape (including: physical costs of time spent at the gym, altering body hair, altering one's diet, or money spent on padding/binding). Or given the potential consequences of failing to portray a certain body type, this can completely discourage a cosplayer from choosing characters they feel an affinity with.

In Winge's book, she briefly acknowledges a tension between cosplayers, observing that "there are of course, negative critiques from some peer cosplayers when ethnic, gender, racial, and size lines are crossed or challenged" (Winge 2019, 12). It is because of the expectations cosplayers have created for each other which results in a fear of receiving negative criticism and prompts cosplayers to "take advantage of their physical traits, which contribute to portraying a specific character" (Winge 2019, 13). The value that is placed on accuracy amongst cosplayers can prompt an individual to exclusively performing as fictional characters which resemble their own body type, regardless of whether the cosplayer likes said character. It is such expectations that may ward cosplayers off from subversive gender-play such as gender-bending or crossplay. Whilst Winge only recognises this side of the community in passing, I suggest that it is necessary to acknowledge abuse and harassment as a fundamental part of the community which maintains hierarchy in the community.

Postfeminist Criticism and Conceptualising Contradictions

Before I draw on the work of postfeminist criticism to conceptualise the replication of dominant norms by cosplayers, it is perhaps first necessary to address that postfeminist criticism has not been drawn upon in much prior cosplay scholarship. Instead, cosplay scholarship has a tradition on drawing on feminist literature to conceptualise the social discourses apparent in gender-play cosplay, arguing in favour of cosplayers as revolutionary social agents. As I addressed in Chapter 1, cosplay scholars have a tendency to rely on a misreading of performativity from the work of draw on Judith Butler. To recap my discussion on Butler from Chapter 1, scholars including Bainbridge and Norris (2009 and 2011), Gn (2011), Hale (2014), and Leng (2013); have all drawn on Butler's writings to discuss cosplay as a subversive medium. Yet, there are issues with how these writers have incorporated Butler's work. At first glance, Butler's ideas of drag and performativity appear to offer a useful framework for understanding performance in cosplay. However, performance and performativity are two different things. Gn argues that Bainbridge and Norris have,

> claimed that the 'queering' of cosplay, as a means of deviating from heteronormative behaviours, parallels Butler's construction of drag as parody of the gender binary, but I would argue that their dialectic for subversion […] leaves the character of affective individuation unresolved.
>
> Gn 2011, 586

Here, Gn goes onto argue that this dichotomy fails to account for cosplays of robots or aliens. However, Gn misses the point of Bainbridge and Norris (in addition to a fundamental misconception of Butler). What both writers appear to overlook is that, not only are robots and aliens frequently gendered in contemporary media, but as Butler clarifies in *Gender Trouble*,

> The discussion of drag that *Gender Trouble* offers to explain the constructed and performative dimension of gender is not precisely *an example* of subversion. It would be a mistake to take it as the paradigm of subversive action, or indeed, as a model for political agency. The point is rather different.
>
> Butler 2010, xxiii

Performativity is distinct from performance. Here performativity refers to the repeated actions of communities which code gendered myths to be perceived as normal. Meanwhile, performance is the momentary portrayal of something other. Cosplay (and drag) are performances and thus confined to momentary expression. Whilst each may in certain cases reflect on social gendered performativity, cosplay is closed off in convention halls, removed from the everyday, and thus has little consequence on social hierarchy.

When examining gendered performances in cosplay, there is an entanglement of conflicting discourses at play. On popular fandoms Matt Hills (2002) outlines how fans become loyal to texts which validate a fan's own values, and as a result, "fandom loses any possibility of creative textual mutation and thus becomes locked into its own rigidly maintained sets of values, authenticities, textual hierarchies and continuities" (Hills 2002, 13). These notions of textual hierarchy are so often overlooked in cosplay scholarship under an apparent assumption that fan texts are socially progressive. However, whilst many cosplayers do belong to a cosplay community, cosplay is ultimately a medium which is used by a vast spectrum of different fandoms. Cosplay groups and forums inevitably bring together a whole host of conflicting fandoms and thus conflicting values. It is the entanglement of values seen in the cosplay community which prompts me to draw on postfeminist criticism as a point of structural comparison. In 2007, Rosalind Gill argued that "what makes contemporary media culture distinctively postfeminist, rather than pre-feminist or anti-feminist, is precisely this entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas" (Gill 2007, 161). Conflicting discourses are ever present within popular media and might offer an explanation as to why cosplayers both challenge and adhere to social expectations of heteronormative gendered codes.

Gill provides a brief history of postfeminism, offering an informative introduction to the complexities which emerge in postfeminist criticism. Gill documents how, "for a short time in the 1970s and 1980s, notions of male and female equality and the basic similarity of men and women took hold in popular culture, before this was resolutely dispensed with in the 1990s" (Gill 2007, 158). The shift of perspectives echoes developments in audience theory outlined during the opening of Chapter 4, just as the 1970s saw a movement in audience perspectives, such as in the works of Stuart Hall (1973) and Katz, Blumer and Gurevitch (1973-4) which each acknowledge the complexities of audiences as multifaceted. These notions of equality were 'dispensed with in the 1990's' can be similarly read alongside the works of Acafan studies, as audience and fan studies became less critical and veered towards an exploration of the individual and empowerment of the fan. Today "feminism is now part of the cultural field. That is, feminist discourses are expressed within the media rather than simply being external, independent critical voices" (Gill 2007, 161). Gill highlights how many industries reappropriate feminist grassroot activism into commercial products. This process of reappropriating political discourse has re-conceptualised feminism as an identity one reaffirms by the brands one buys into, as opposed to a political/social ideal one enacts.

The appropriation of grassroot subcultures by media industries is not uncommon (Hebdige, 1979) and is similarly seen in fan and cosplay practises. In the 2009 (cultural studies based) paper 'The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life', Lev Manovich explains that "the logic of tactics has now become the logic of strategies" (Manovich 2009, 323-4). To Manovich, popular ideas, discourses and communities have become structured and commodified, no longer created by productive subcultures, they become products to be sold and bought. In the work of Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer (2017), they reflect on how "scholars coined the term 'commodity feminism' over a quarter-century ago to describe the harnessing of feminist messages to consumer products and the 'aesthetic depolitization' of feminism" (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017, 885). The 'commodity feminism' of the 90's and 2000's harks back to the notion that individuals are defined by the products they consume (see Chapter 4), as Herbert Marcuse argued. "People recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their commodities […]. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced" (Marcuse [1964] 2007, 11). Postfeminist media culture is defined against the feminist of the 1960s-80s; rather than campaigning for equality, discourse is directed towards feminine self-empowerment indicated by one's brand loyalties.

The relationship between feminist and postfeminist media is complicated depending on whether one's position on buying into popular feminist products is either as an act of feminism or an act of complacency. For Gill, she argues that just because an individual buys into so called feminist brands, it does not mean said individual is politically or socially a feminist.

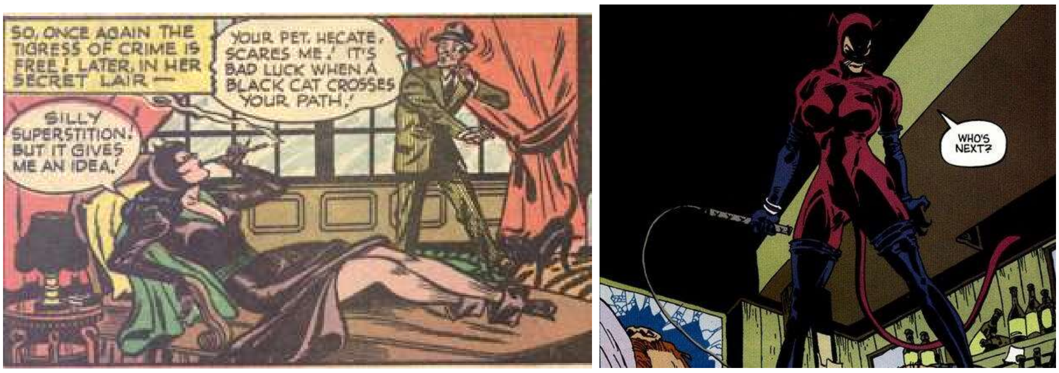
> Constructions of contemporary gender relations are profoundly contradictory. On the one hand, young women are hailed through a discourse of 'can-do girl power' yet on the other hand, their bodies are powerfully reinscribed as sexual objects; women are presented as active, desiring social subjects, but they are subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance which has no historical precedent.
>
> Gill 2007, 163

Gill acknowledges a messiness between feminist values and the version of feminism present in popular media, resulting in postfeminist media which is simultaneously empowering and degrading. Observations of contradiction are equally prevalent in Angela McRobbie's earlier 2004 paper in which she argues that "post-feminism permits the close examination of a number of interesting but also conflicting currents" (McRobbie 2004, 255). These conflicting currents can be illustrated if we return to Gill's notion of "power". To illustrate the importance of Gill's conceptualisations of power and surveillance, I will be drawing on the case study of DC's Catwoman, through which I point out the ways in which cosplayers have mimicked dominant social gendered norms and values which have been perpetuated across the character's history.

Catwomen Cosplayers and the Replication of Popular Hierarchies

Stephanie Orme notes that the portrayal of female bodies in comic books (and subsequently comic fandoms) has "a history of underrepresenting women and portraying them as hypersexualised and in gender-stereotyped roles" (Orme 2016, 404-405). She continues, referencing the comic book writer Trina Robbins, that the "comic book industry's legacy of misogynistic portrayals of women reflects the circular logic of many writers and publishers – that comics should be written with male sensibilities in mind, because women are uninterested in comics" (Orme 2016, 404-405). It is important to examine portrayals and designs of characters within the media given that it is these designs which cosplayers ultimately take on and seek to recreate in the real world upon their own bodies.

In composing a brief history of DC's Catwoman (from *Batman*), one can read how the character has transformed meeting the needs and expectations of heterosexual society. In Catwoman's first depiction in *Detective Comics* No.122 (1947) (5.1), Catwoman is depicted laying on a chaise lounge with her dress pulled up revealing her legs. The design of Catwoman's costume places emphasis on the sexualised female form. The choice of fitting Catwoman in a dress itself values traditional femininity over effective wear for a cat burglar. Notions of 'real' effectiveness is drawn out in Gavaler's work on *Superhero Comics* (2018), in which he reflects upon the Gendered Superhero, specifically the design of *Wonder Woman*. Gavaler observing, "although a corseted, malnourished body may be physically attractive according to culture's beliefs, it cannot be physically effective" (Gavaler 2018, 183). In contrast, male costumes are designed to combine both male attractiveness and effectiveness. Gavaler points out that for the male superhero "costumes operate as pseudoskins" (Gavaler 2018, 184). Take, for example, Batman and Robin who appear in skin-tight body suits extenuating an attractive hypermasculine body type. Where a man's strength is captured in his muscular form, the same can rarely be said for the design of female characters, whose strength does not often match their physique (Gavaler 2018, 183).


SO, ONCE AGAIN THE TIGRESS OF CRIME IS FREE! LATER, IN HER SECRET LAIR —
YOUR PET, HECATE, SCARES ME! IT'S BAD LUCK WHEN A BLACK CAT CROSSES YOUR PATH!
SILLY SUPERSTITION, BUT IT GIVES ME AN IDEA!
WHO'S NEXT?

5.1 (Left) and 5.2 (Right)

In later iterations of the character, such as 1996's *Batman: The Long Halloween* (Loeb and Sale, 1996-7), one can see that Catwoman's sexualised femininity is maintained for a more contemporary aesthetic. Catwoman is depicted in a tight dark purple body suit accompanied by black over the knee boots, black evening gloves, silver jewellery, a whip, and even a tail (5.2). The clothing is evocative of BDSM iconography, evoking the feel of a dominatrix. In addition to the costume itself the lighting of the costume in this panel places an emphasis on Catwoman's thin waist and large breasts. In Edward Avery-Natale's research into character design and reception in DC comics, he quickly establishes how "discussion of female superhero bodies often centres on breasts" (Avery-Natale 2013, 79). He continues drawing upon the research of Bukatam (1994) and Robbins (2002) to suggest that,

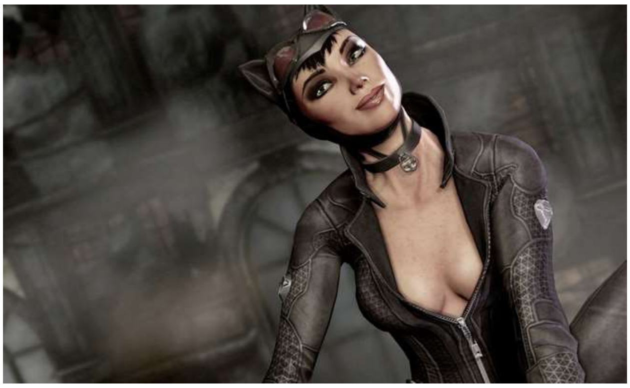
> Of course, many women naturally have large breasts. This analysis does not condemn large breasts, but rather criticizes the way in which comic books use large breasts as a representation of femininity. This both objectifies the female character whilst also turning the breast itself into an object of the heterosexual gaze.
>
> Avery-Natale 2013, 79

The performativity of entangled sexuality and gender in Catwoman's many iterations raise some theoretical concerns in cosplay, namely, are cosplayers challenging the norms in popular media, or just replicating and redistributing oppressive patriarchal norms? Concerns over repeated sexualised representations of women in media is something Avery-Natale alludes to, recalling how "in 2006 when Jodi Picoult was writing Wonder Woman, she requested that the character's breasts be reduced in size to make them more realistic, but her request was denied" (Avery-Natale 2013, 75). With the large breasted strong woman perceived as both normal and desirable, for cosplayers this results in expectation and places a pressure on cosplayers to have or be able to convincingly replicate fictional body types. It is a pressure that can lead to cosplayers feeling inadequate as, in the eyes of their peers, a flat chested cosplayer might fall subject to criticism from their peers if they cosplay a large breasted character. It is necessary to scrutinise the designs of these superheroes in this manner as they directly impact the ways in which cosplayers replicate them and who is allowed to replicate them. Some cosplay stores for example have started selling ‘literal breastplates’ (large ‘realistic’ foam breasts) to allow cosplayers to fit the body type of their chosen characters (Baseel, 2015). Some cosplayers have even created and shared their own D.I.Y boob patterns allowing cosplayers to build their own prop boobs (TechnoRanma, 2015).

Gill comments upon how, in popular media, women’s “bodies are powerfully reinscribed as sexual objects; women are presented as active, desiring social subjects, but they are subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance which has no historical precedent” (Gill 2007, 163). Over her many iterations Catwoman has become representative of ‘good’ femininity in western cultural taste (working alongside other popular conceptions of gender and sexuality). In TV and film, Catwoman’s character has followed the same design choices as the comics given that audiences expect to see Catwoman a particular way and any alterations will be scrutinised. Take for example the television series *Batman* (1966-68). Catwoman played by Julie Newmar (5.3), wears a tight black body suit which places an emphasis on the female figure. The costume is accompanied with gold (shiny) jewellery, equating femininity with fashion and wealth. In the later film *Batman Returns* (Burton, 1992), Michelle Pfeiller takes on the role as Catwoman (5.4) and she is similarly seen in a tight-fitting black body suit. Both designs display iconography associated with the dominator and BDSM, it is iconography, which is consistent throughout the history of Catwoman design as a sexualised object.

5.3 (Left) and 5.4 (Right)

In the video game *Batman: Arkham City* (Hill, 2011) Catwoman is again depicted wearing a tight black body suit emphasising her slender figure, and like her predecessors she is seen wearing lipstick and eyeliner. The notable addition here is that Catwoman is wearing a collar; unlike the dominatrix of *The Long Halloween*, Catwoman here is represented as submissive, as if she were Batman's pet (5.5). Furthermore, there is an emphasis on Catwoman's breasts, as Catwoman has her body suit zipped open below the breast for the entirety of the video game.

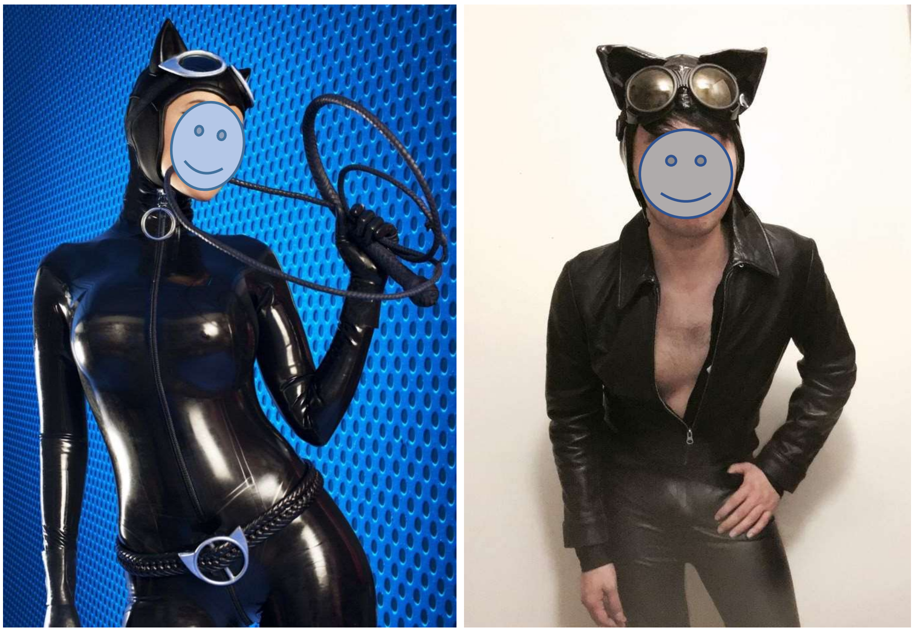

5.5

Whilst not all cosplayers may find themselves specifically tied to the superhero genre, the superhero genre is a useful focal point as not only is the genre particularly noteworthy amongst the cosplay communities, but costumes are a fundamental component of the genre. Reflecting on the Bowsette case study from Chapter 1, and some of the concerns raised by my cosplay participants in the latter part of Chapter 3, the sexualisation of female characters is all too common in popular media. Avery-Natale highlights that it is "the costume itself [which] is representative of the role the specific hero plays: […] Therefore, the female costume, which often accentuates the breasts and buttocks, represents the role of the female not only as hero but also as sex object, limiting her role as subject" (Avery-Natale 2013, 79). Catwoman is therefore both a powerful female cat-burglar and an object for the male-comic book-gaze.

In cosplayers replication of Catwoman, it is inevitable that most cosplayers will also replicate (even if unintentionally) the character's heteronormative role as sex object. The cosplayers who perform as Catwoman are subject to surveillance, both from the self and by other members of the cosplay community. A cosplay of Catwoman (regardless of the cosplayers gender) is expected to appear convincingly feminine and sexually alluring to meet the expectations of the established character. This is not to say some cosplayers do not put their own spin on their rendition of a character, but it is at least commonly considered good practice in cosplay to be as accurate as possible with one's treatment of one's source material. Cosplaying Catwoman must thus replicate an identity which is both physically sexually feminine, yet also powerful dominatrix, and a criminal mastermind.

In Christopher McGunnigle's chapter on gender-swapping cosplay by female cosplayers, he observes that female cosplayers who choose to cosplay female characters are subject to the gaze of primarily male onlookers. McGunnigle expresses concern that "the hypersexual codes often seen in female superhero cosplay" have "increasingly been met by the sexual harassment of comic con audiences" (McGunnigle 2018, 169). As a result, some feminine presenting cosplayers find themselves drawn towards cosplaying characters of the opposite gender. Hale suggests that many female cosplayers will dress as male characters to avoid the possibility of being subject to sexual harassment. By cosplaying as male characters, feminine presenting cosplayers "avert harassment wherein they were subject to the 'male gaze' of an overly aggressive photographer who took their photo without permission or inappropriate convention attendees who tried to touch their costume or body" (Hale 2014, 22-23). The expectation audiences have of an established character structures how cosplayers are expected to present and perform as their chosen characters. For example, my interview participant Brock was punched in the face because the young onlooker believed them to be the evil Bill from *Gravity Falls*, and Erika playing as Nurse Joy from *Pokémon* was led into an awkward exchange in which she had to heal someone's *Pokémon* toy. These performances are expected to be completed by the cosplayer, but the success of the performance comes down to how successfully the cosplayer's gender, race, body type, age matches onto their chosen character.

In two case studies found online, figure 5.6 is Selina's cosplay of Catwoman can be seen to be an accurate rendition of Catwoman from *Batman: Arkham City*. In figure 5.7, Kyle is a male cosplayer crossplaying as Catwoman, again as seen in *Batman: Arkham City*. The images were shared publicly online by the cosplayers; however, I have anonymised the cosplayers and provided fake names to protect the individuals identities.



5.6 (Left) and 5.7 (Right)

Selina is seen in screen accurate replication of Catwoman's figure hugging body suit, further to this, she holds Catwoman's iconic whip, and her make-up evokes the performance of the character as a crafty dominatrix. Likewise, Kyle wears the iconic tight black body suit with the top zip done down exposing their chest and placing an emphasis upon a sexualized body. The sexualised performance is embellished by the cosplayer's stance, with their hand on their hip and wry smile. Notably however, Kyle does not have Catwoman's make-up and is not holding the iconic whip. The loss of the whip is notable allowing Kyle's masculine body to take on Catwoman's femininity, whereas a masculine cosplayer with a whip might be read as more threatening than as a dominatrix.

Whilst there are alterations of Catwoman's design in Kyle's cosplay, the body suit, prop goggles, and the cosplayers performance, are all loyal to the source character. It is notable however, that Kyle's cosplay was subject to much criticism from online commentors.

The expectations individuals have of themselves (and of others) in western culture is entangled with one's perception of identity and free will. Duffy and Hund (2015) recognise that social media devices "celebrates individual choice, independence, and modes of self-expression rooted in the consumer marketplace" (Duffy and Hund 2015, 3). These narratives of choice and expression mimic the feeling of freewill, and yet when a male cosplayer presents as female through crossplay, this act comes with the condition that the male cosplayer must entertain heteronormative values of sexuality. Harking back to Adorno's free time (Chapter 4), Duffy and Hund go onto point out that "the post-feminist self-brand is the extent to which visibility gets articulated through normative feminine discourses and practises, including those anchored in the consumer marketplace" (Duffy and Hund 2015, 3). Where individuals perceive freewill and free time, they may be pushed towards certain social expectations given that failing to meet social expectations can subject an individual to criticism, much in the same way as the Bowsette cosplayer Mariah Mallad (Chapter 1) was criticised for her body image.

In Gill's later 2017 paper 'The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism', Gill responds to her original 2007 paper, reflecting how, "ten years on, the cultural landscape has become even more fraught and complicated" (Gill 2017, 609). Gill's updated perspectives of self-surveillance and surveillance relate back to themes of free time and free will. Gill suggests that pressures to self-surveil have intensified since her 2007 paper; "the requirement to self-surveil has also been amplified by social media and by digital culture more broadly" (Gill 2017, 617). Gill interrogates beauty apps and social media, and in doing so, observes how these technologies enable one to manipulate one's appearance through filters and effects. Consequently, Gill suggests that these digital products "are part of a wider concern with self-monitoring and self-tracking that seems […] to be profoundly gendered, facilitating intensive scrutiny and quantification of health indicators, mood, weight, calorie consumption, menstrual cycles, sexual activity and so on" (Gill 2017, 617). The culture industry generates expectations of consumers: as audiences begin to use cultural products, the users subsequently replicate and enforce these expectations. Kyle's failure to adjust his masculine body to convincingly portray a feminine body subsequently resulted in abuse and criticism from online commentors. Even in everyday fashions, there are conflicting desires and pressures upon the individual to present oneself in a particular manner. For Skeggs (1997), "appearance is simultaneously and across time a site for pleasure and strength but also a site of anxiety, regulation and surveillance. The feeling of looking good can also be lost if it is not continually externally evaluated" (Skeggs 1997, 107). This sense of external validation is a common aspect among cosplay communities in the commenting and sharing of ideas online.

An individual's choices can be heavily influenced by how others interpret and engage with said individual. For example, if a cosplayer crossplays at one event which is received badly, this can discourage a cosplayer from attempting to do so again. Gill observes that postfeminist discourses "operate on and through emotions and forms of selfhood, establishing and policing 'distinctive feeling rules' […] and psychological dispositions" (Gill 2017, 620), reiterating that the expectations of postfeminist discourse are highly personal. The multitude of positions which exist within postfeminist discourse is subjective and dependent upon one's circumstances and social positionings. When cosplayers, such as Selina and Kyle, take upon these popular characters, they momentarily embody a popular artefact and its values. In one sense, Selina is an example of popular feminism, proudly displaying her feminine (dominatrix) powers. Yet conversely, she might be seen to conform to the expectations of the heterosexual male gaze. These multiple readings exist simultaneously and capture the continuum of contradictions within subcultural and dominant structures of power.

The multiplicity of intention and interpretation leads to mixed power relations within any given product or society, in this case specifically the cosplay community. In the case of Kyle's Catwoman crossplay, he faced criticism online, and received abuse and harassment from multiple commentators. A recurring term that emerged in the comments on Kyle's images was "trap", a term which many male crossplayers have had used against them. The term is a homophobic slur, referring to a man who dresses as a woman to lure the gaze of heterosexual men. It is suggestive that men engaging in crossplay are thus also subjected to the heterosexual male gaze. Equally however, the term is also frequently reappropriated by crossplayers and subsets of the trans* community as a celebration of one's ability to create accurate costumes and performances, and to be accepted as 'passing'. In the end, "people want to belong to distinct groups" (Plante et al. 2015, 359). In cosplaying, there is a need to belong within a community and to engage with others. Cosplay is more than a process or a performance, cosplay is a medium which "is strong enough that people would rather identify with a stigmatized but distinct minority than with an accepted majority" (Plante et al. 2015, 359). Despite criticism from some members of the community, there will be other members who are supportive and welcoming. Thus, without knowing how Kyle felt about such comments, the term "trap" that emerged in their comments can be interpreted as both abusive and complimentary.

Cosplayer's desires for screen accuracy in cosplay might be read as a desire to be desirable (just as their chosen characters are). It is an intention that would no doubt be considered by Bauldrillard as a narcissistic endeavour. Baudrillard argues that such investment in adapting the body and by buying into popular myths, these are narcissistic endeavours. In this case buying into popular feminism and powerful women are also entangled with expectations of looking thin, looking pretty, looking sexy. Presenting oneself as fashionable according to one's biological gender is a narcissist position, even if unknown to the individual given the myth of normality. In turn, it is by conforming to these norms that one can increase their social capital and move up the ladder to social betterment. According to Baudrillard, "the main thing is that this narcissistic reinvestment [in crafting the body], orchestrated as a mystique of liberation and accomplishment, is in fact always simultaneously an investment of an efficient, competitive, economic type" (Baudrillard [1998] 2007, 150). Cosplay has yet to be described in such terms, but the act of fashioning one's body in such outlandish dress is narcissistic. A cosplayer is a narcissistic labourer who embellishes their personal investment with a piece of popular media. A cosplayer manufactures and commodifies their bodies and actively aspire to conform to dominant values. Cosplay is not a revolutionary practice, rather it is the continuation of dominant norms and powers which encourage the self-regulation of a populace. A man dressing as Catwoman might be read as revolutionary againgst gendered norms, yet, given the play is noteworthy, it implies a recognition that gender-play is a novelty and in turn reaffirms gendered norms. Furthermore, in crossplay when a male cosplayer successfully passes as the character and the character's gender, the cosplayer actively submits to becoming the sexualised fantasy of femininity.

The Entanglement of Popular Feminism and Popular Misogynies

Banet-Weiser puts forward the term 'popular feminism', distinct from postfeminism, to describe popular depictions and mediated reworkings of feminism. These two terms are entangled ideas; "popular feminism emerges within the ongoing ethos and sensibility of postfeminism (Gill, 2007). Postfeminism […] is dedicated to the recognition, and then repudiation, of feminism – and it is through this repudiation, an insistence that feminism is no longer needed as a politics, that women are empowered" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 19). It is through the highly visible feminist culture industry that the feminist identity becomes just that (devoid of its political grassroots). Banet-Weiser elaborates upon the distinction between 'popular' and 'post' feminism. She explains: "the popular feminist recognition that vast gender inequalities still organize our cultural, economic, and political world is important, and a necessary correction to the false optimism of postfeminism" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 20). Both postfeminism and popular feminism address the dynamic between grassroot politics, identity, and industry. Postfeminism marks the (seemingly) favourable relationship between consumer and industry. Banet-Weiser defines the 'popular' of popular feminism by drawing on Hall's definition of popular as a struggle for dominance (Hall, 1998). The struggle of popular feminism is set against the counter visible economy of 'popular misogyny'. Popular misogyny, "while seemingly present in all areas of social and cultural life, is not spectacularly visible in the way popular feminism is. But like popular feminism, popular misogynistic practices exist along a continuum" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 33). Confronting misogynies in cultural literature is important to acknowledge it as a constructed power. Literature which addresses misogyny is lacking in cosplay studies given Acafan scholars tend to take the postfeminist position which champions commodified identity expression.

When gender-play is visible, such as through gender-bending, it is exemplary and read as revolutionary provoking social consequence; yet, given that crossplay does not draw attention to these dynamics, it can be personally transformative though distanced from social consequence. By observing the powers of the fan industry and the convention hall, one is reminded that regardless of how visible the fan is, it is the popular franchises which control a status quo. Arnould and Thompson (2005) coin the term "Consumer Identity Politics", which they introduce to be concerned with "the coconstitutive, coproductive ways in which consumers, working with marketer-generated materials, forge a coherent if diversified and often fragmented sense of self" (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 871). If people's identities are shaped by the products they consume, as cosplayers replicate characters from popular media, this imposes dominant norms and values not only on a cosplayer's performance but also their identities. Thus, whilst a crossplay cosplay might not be socially revolutionary, this does not dismiss that cosplay is important for the individual, and both positive and negative consequences might befall the cosplayer. However, if a crossplayer's cosplay failed to accurately uphold the expectations of their chosen character, they can be subject to criticism which reinforces the gender-binary, such as those which Kyle faced.

Whilst misogyny can go overlooked given its perceived normality as a dominant power structure, it is an important attribute of fandom and popular media to unpack. Feminist values are only visible set against the perceived normality of misogynist values. For Bannet-Weiser, 'popular misogyny' "also circulates in an economy of visibility" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 32). It is the dominating normality of popular misogyny in in the UK and North America which makes it seemingly invisible. Once one views fandom through the economies of visibility paradigm, it becomes apparent that the dynamic between fans exists in a contradictory network between 'popular misogynist fandom', and 'popular feminist fandom' adhering to dominant social-political discourse. The dual narratives that emerge between consumers relationships with media industries, especially online, are reflected in the postfeminist research of Hester Baer (2016). She suggests that, with "the rise of digital media, the body has taken on further significance as a site of both self-representation and surveillance, not least with regard to gender identities and gender norms" (Baer 2016, 19). In many ways the physical body has become entangled with its online body (or online bodies). Self-representation relies on a surveillance of oneself, but also the surveillance of others, as groups collectively decide good and bad tastes of beauty.

It is the collaborative conflict observed by Banet-Weiser's popular feminism and popular misogyny which can be drawn on as a comparative framework to illustrate the disruptive-collaborative relationship between fans and fan industries. Earlier, I briefly drew on the work of cultural theorist Lev Manovich (2009). Manovich examined the ways in which audience made materials online reuses the templates designed by professionals, from which Manovich poses the question: "does this mean that people's identities and imaginations are now even more firmly colonized by commercial media than they were in the twentieth century?" (Manovich 2009, 321. Though my analysis of the cosplay community between chapters 4 and 5 might suggest that my answer to Manovich's question is "yes". When I reflect on the findings from my interview materials and ethnographic experiences, the response to Manovich's question is not necessarily a linear one. Instead, there is feedback between user and producer. In this feedback both groups simultaneously use the other, and in doing so simultaneously support and develop the other. In turn each group also critiques, manipulates and exploits the other in equal measure.

At fan conventions, fans can display a leverage of creativity and agency, such as in performances or sketches at the masquerade, or through playful interactions with vendors which range from simple meet-ups to more extravagant impromptu performances. For example, during my attendance of MCM Manchester (2016), I witnessed a cosplayer of Marvel's fourth-wall breaking superhero Deadpool (*Deadpool* (Miller, 2016)) flirt with vendors and prank numerous customers. Or, at Stoke-Con-Trent (2019) I observed a group of Storm Troopers from *Star Wars* marching up and down the vendor stalls and saying to convention attendees "Let's see some identification", referencing a scene from *A New Hope* (Lucas, 1977). These performances, which under the Acafan lens illustrate creative agency, are just momentary performance under a critical cultural studies lens. There is nothing overtly disruptive or transformative about them. Fan industries plan for these performances by making sure vendor halls are spaced out, and the 'tactics' of cosplayers are ultimately profited from by convention organisers who advertise cosplay as a part of the wider convention experience. Yet in turn, the Storm Troopers, embellish the spectacle of a convention which attendees expect. And ultimately willingly choose to perform. And thus, the fan can be seen to work with industries, just as much as they work tactically against them.

For every subversion and tactic observed in cosplay scholarship (Chapters 1-3), there are just as many cases in which industry exploits these actions. "Since the 1980s, however, consumer culture industries have started to systematically turn every subculture (particularly every youth subculture: bohemians, hip-hop and rap, Lolita fashion, rock, punk, skinhead, goth, and so on) into products" (Manovich 2009, 324). Cosplay is traditionally thought of as the act of crafting one's own costume, however there are many large companies which now mass produce cosplay fashion, including: *EZcosplay* (for Anime Cosplay costumes), *ProCosplay* (specialising in costumes of characters from popular franchises), *Cosplay Shopper* (for mainstream anime costumes), or *Syndrome* (Japanese fashion, and cosplay lingerie). In Stanfill's 2019 investigation of the fan industry, she comes to a similar conclusion as Manovich. "Between the media industry's increased interest in alternative sources of labour, fan traditions of nonmarket production, and the blurring of work and life, the exploitation of fan labour becomes the logical outcome from multiple directions simultaneously" (Stanfill 2019, 168). For the cosplayer, the community which was once defined by craft is challenged by the wide availability of mass-produced cosplay standard costumes. The cosplayers formation of character and identity is thus a product that is marketed and bought into, rather than sewn and constructed. A counter argument to this is a comment which came up time and time again during my interviews, this being that availability of costumes on the market opens the community to wider participants, and that craft still exists within performance, make-up, and exchange of ideas within the community (profiting both community and industry alike).

The rise of readily available costumes has challenged cosplay traditions, and it is thus hardly surprising that store bought costumes have become a point of contention in the community. In cosplay competitions, performers who wear store-bought costumes/props can be penalised or even disqualified from a competition regardless of how good their performance may be. My conversation with Giovanni (a member of MCM Comic Con's cosplay team, who has featured in and judged several cosplay competitions) highlighted craft on numerous occasions within our discussion. When I asked if members of the audience ever disagreed with the decision of the judges, Giovanni explained how on occasion the judging panel had received online criticism. In response to fans who challenge cosplay judges, Giovanni retorted,

> I wish people weren't always so judgmental about these things- if you haven't seen the blood, sweat and tears that have gone into crafting, especially now because there's a lot of people like armchair cosplayers and [they] think that they can judge a cosplay without having actually made their own.
>
> Giovanni

The hierarchy of craft and purchase in competitions undercuts any sense of democratization offered by these initiatives. Depending upon one's position within the cosplay community, and one's preference for craft or performance, store bought cosplays are both something that help the cosplay community expand and yet also a process of commodification which undermines the cosplay tradition. The consequences of store-bought costumes are simultaneously productive and destructive.

A cosplayer who pours both money and time into the construction of a cosplay is looked upon in higher regard in the competition circuit (and cosplay communities more broadly). For cosplayers, the practise of cosplay is not an inexpensive hobby; not only are there the costs of construction materials, or the expenses of purchasing a pre-made cosplay, but also the cost of convention entrance fees, travel, accommodation, etc. I have previously drawn on Kroski's (2015) deconstruction of cosplay demographics who draws on the work of Rosenberg and Letamendi (2013). In Rosenberg and Letamendi's study, they had 198 participants and found that "most respondents spent between $100 and $399 per costume" (Kroski 2015, 2). Given these average costs, a cosplayer must have an expendable income, and anyone who cannot afford to perfect their costume on account of resources, this is another factor which contributes to some cosplayers facing shame and abuse from others.

The disparity between cosplayers and non-cosplayers is a contentious subject in the convention hall; audiences who may want to get into cosplay might not be able to afford constructing their own. Stanfill, Slater and Winter's 2020 paper observes the ways in which other writers have conceptualised both fan and Open-Source Software communities as ideal spaces within which members reward and value one another for their work (just as I have observed of cosplay in Chapters 1-3). Stanfill et al. address the parallels between popular fan communities and open-source software communities, in each community, "status symbols inevitably produce inequality, and these spaces also feature in-group/out-group dynamics and exclusion" (Stanfill 2020, [Online]). Status, which is marked through exchange, returns the argument once again to the examples of cosplayers such as Ormeli and Jessica Nigri (Chapter 1) who have monetised their cosplays following commissions from gaming and film industries. These cosplayers have also made their name by selling pictures of their cosplays online or being employed by conventions as cosplay performers/judges. Another such notable example would be cosplayer and model Yaya Han.

Networks of Contradiction and Meritocracy

The networks of contradiction which sustain cosplay power dynamics can be unpacked further drawing on criticism of the social ideology of meritocracy. Meritocracy is a complex structure which governs positions of power and subordination. In short it is the belief that people are rewarded by moving up the socio-economic ladder on account of an individual's merit and hard work. In Rebecca Hickman's 2009 report, she suggests that under meritocracy, "thorough its emphasis on individual advancement and by requiring people to be in a permanent state of competition with each other, meritocracy damages community" (Hickman 2009, 6). The sense of damage can be seen in prior case studies such as the abuse and harassment which cosplayers of Bowsette and Catwoman faced, or in circumstances where people are unjustly criticised in contest scenarios (Chapter 3 Part 3). In the broad study of fans and fandoms, there is a small but growing number of writers drawing on meritocracy literature to conceptualise structures and hierarchies in fan communities, including: Schimmel, Harrington and Bielby (2007), Siutilla and Havaste (2019), and Hokka (2020). This said, it is worth highlighting that such observations typically come from writers who situate themselves in a broader cultural or sociological studies background and that these approaches are underdeveloped in cosplay scholarship by Acafan scholars.

At each fan convention I attended (Chapter 4), each event featured a 'Cosplay Masquerade' in which cosplayers show off their costumes with songs and sketches competing for the title of best cosplay. The nature of meritocracy for Littler is "about moving upwards in financial and class terms, but whilst this may entail, for example, being better fed, it does not mean existing in a 'better' or 'happier' culture" (Littler 2018, 7). Competition encourages one to do better than one's contemporaries. It is an integral feature of cosplay at the fan convention which rewards effort with titles and prizes. Cosplay competitions can even see financial rewards for those who do well. Prize money is a common reward in cosplay competitions; for example, at the International 2019 Cosplay Competition the contest saw a total prize pool of $15,000 (via esports.wanmei.com).

One might question how such 'ladders' and hierarchies form in fan communities. In Chapter 1, I drew on numerous examples in which cosplayers gain positive exposure (and thus cultural capital) within fan communities by gaining fans and followers on social media. Some cosplayers may even encounter financial opportunities in sponsorships or marketing opportunities from fan industries or even popular media producers. There are also means for cosplayers to monetise their cosplays; selling pictures and videos online such as Bowsette cosplayers Mariah Mallad (aka Momokun on Instagram (604,000 followers) and Jessica Nigri (on Instagram (3.5million followers)); or being invited to perform/judge at conventions, or in particular circumstances being approached by industries to take part in the production of new texts, as was the case for cosplayer Ormeli who was commissioned by Irrational Games, developers of BioShock Infinite, to perform in cosplay as Elizabeth in the game's online and TV advertisements, even appearing on the game cover itself.

Competition is even an integral part of the cosplay community's online language. Cosplay forum Cure: WorldCosplay for example is built on an international ranking system, ranking a cosplayers popularity and success based on engagement from other cosplayers (and members of the site).

It is these meritocratic structures which dictate the reasoning behind criticising others as observed in Chapter 3 Part 3 and in the above Catwoman cosplays. I make these observations not to condone criticism or harassment, but to acknowledge these actions are a cornerstone of the community. Writing on the structures of meritocracy in a UK context, Reay (2020) observes how government and business elites set a dominant narrative by which the individual is expected to abide. According to Reay, "the toxic workings of meritocracy, […] positions educational failure as a failing of the individual rather than the responsibility of wider society and, in particular those in power" (Reay 2020, 411). Looking back at Kyle's cosplay of Catwoman, their cosplay might be considered a failure for having unsuccessfully convincingly portrayed the hypersexualized feminine attributes of the onscreen character. Where most commentors allowed Selina to progress up the meritocratic ladder by praising her cosplay, Kyle 'must be pushed down the ladder' for attempting to challenge dominant good and bad taste. "Meritocracy's beneficiaries – predominantly the already successful and privileged – feel justified in looking down, disliking and expressing contempt for those who have not been given the opportunity to succeed" (Reay 2020, 411). Those who have bought into the gendered norms of UK and North America pose criticisms of Kyle and in doing so reaffirm the heterosexual patriarchal norm which currently governs our society.

In this affirmation of dominant norms in the actions of critical commentors, the "producer's replication of male heterosexual pleasure" and the protection of patriarchal privileges illustrates the meritocratic structures of the gaming industry. Given that both Sylina and Kyle were cosplaying Catwoman from the video game *Batman: Arkham City*, it is briefly worth reflecting on Christopher Paul's 2018 book in which he draws out the demographics that make up the bulk of mainstream game titles, noting how in the 2015 International Game Developers Association (IGDA) report on video game developer demographics, "it found that 75 percent of developers identified as male and 76 percent identified as white", with the prototypical developer being the age of 32-years-old. "The problem with a lack of diversity in people and background" as Paul writers, is that this "portends to a lack of diversity in new ideas" (Paul 2018, [online]). Hence the repeated discourses of gender expression and hierarchy in the history of Catwoman's design (and subsequent cosplay).

Returning to Stanfill et al. from the previous section. Whilst Stanfill et al. are not fan scholars, they draw on mixed theoretical literatures from cultural studies and fan studies to conceptualise open-source software communities as fandoms. Stanfill et al. draw on concepts of meritocracy to deconstruct the power relationships in open-source software fandom. They suggest that good software and hard work does not guarantee attention and praise. "Despite the belief in meritocracy, the merit of the user's code may not determine their status after all." (Stanfill et al. 2020, [online]). Here Stanfill et al. refer to not only an open-source developers pre-established popularity (as a marker of quality), but also digital algorithms and the ways in which certain developers gain greater attention than others. The meritocratic structures which are present in Stanfill et al.'s analysis can also be identified in the cosplay community (perhaps even popular fandom more broadly). For example, a cosplayer or fan artist who chooses to share their work online will lose control over how the images/videos are distributed and shared – a cosplayer's work might have high visibility but there may receive little to no credit attributed to their work.

Like the cosplay community, the open-source software community centres itself upon exchange through which a by-product is power. Stanfill et al. highlight that "participants in gift economies" like open-source developers "use gift-giving – not market exchange – to circulate goods and services" (Stanfill et al. 2020, [online]). During my interviews, many of my participants reflected on how cosplayers depend on the exchange of crafting techniques in online groups and forums. My participant Erika reflected that shortly after joining an online group, someone in the group asked for a template for heel-less shoes which resemble hooves. In Erika's words: "I had heel-less shoes, like gravity defying shoes, they look a bit like hooves basically. […] So, I sent them the link to where I got them from and was like, 'oh, you can always try these' […] people share things like that, there will be people who put up a 3D model on there [the online cosplay group]", Erika added, "that's probably where I'm most involved, I'm not hugely active on it, but when I've got something to share, I'll share it". My participant Janine enthusiastically commented that cosplay communities online "are not just a UK cosplay thing. It's a worldwide thing" and that people across the world "are so willing to share their process and, you know, there are plenty of resources for finding out about materials that you can use and where to buy things". Sharing information and designs online were important experiences for my participants, but they did not reflect on power, instead they cherished the community and the act of sharing.

The free exchange of ideas and techniques might appear to offer a solution to the divides of meritocracy. But, what we see here harks to the work of Raymond (1998) which Stanfill et al. draw on to acknowledge that, “giving in a gift economy is hierarchical”, people who exchange more, or more notable items earn greater autonomy, in other words, “status within the OSS community is the compensation for work submitted” (Stanfill et al. 2020, [online]). Of course, not only are ‘quality’ and ‘effort’ two different assessments of the goods being exchanged, but quality and effort are not guaranteed markers of value. A creative does not always receive due compensation for their work. Jo Littler writes in her 2018 introduction, that in scholarship, “the emphasis on effort is the element of meritocracy that has been expanded in recent years” (Littler 2018, 7). In cosplay, effort and craft is essential in my discussion of cosplay competitions from Chapter 3, and earlier in this chapter.

Participant Blue, from the Furry community, also reflected upon the sharing of materials. Blue explained that it was how welcoming everyone was in the online community which made him feel comfortable and a part of the group he wouldn’t have otherwise had access to. Blue explained that it wasn’t until university when he met someone with similar interests, “and he is like, ‘oh hey, there is this thing called the internet’. This is 1993. […] and, you know, there is this text based virtual reality on there called ‘fairy muck’, that you can join, it’s full of fans who are interested in this kind of thing”. Whilst I do not intend to underplay the emotional importance of this for Blue, people’s dependency on online communications is worth unpacking. In *Alone Together* (2011), Turkle exposes the ways in which human emotions are manipulated to create narratives of community, hiding narratives of consumption while quietly maintaining them. Turkle opens with the explanation; “we are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other” (Turkle 2011, 1). In the furry fandom, furries present themselves as avatars, and communicate with one another typically in character. Even at the convention hall, cosplay engagement depends on cosplayers shared knowledge of one another’s characters and not of each other, creating momentary connections without consequence or commitment.

Cosplayer’s choice of character in many ways emphasises these illusionary connections with one another, character, and self. Cosplayers tend to choose their characters depending upon their pre-established loyalty to a particular text. I even chose to cosplay Sucy on account of my enjoyment of the character and a feeling of shared values and mannerisms. My participant Brock cosplayed as multiple characters from *Gravity Falls* due to their love for the source material. In my interview with Janine, she discussed her cosplay of Mae (from *Night in the Woods*). Janine explained how, "I liked her [Mae] as a character and I really identified with her as a character". Similarly, Erika shared that her favourite cosplay had been of Dragon Trainer Tristana (from *League of Legends*) "because even though I was not terribly comfortable in myself wearing her, but I think that is a personal thing, I really like the champion". There is often a sentimental relationship between cosplayer and their mediated characters. It is in these sentimental relations in which cosplayers are seen to connect with "the sociable robot [which] may offer the illusion of companionship" (Turkle 2011, 1) and consequently, in literally disguising oneself, cosplayers "hide from each other" (Turkle 2011, 1).

Describing cosplay as a self-centred act has been alluded to on a few occasions. Not only can cosplay be viewed as 'self-centred' given that it depends upon a cosplayers craft of their own bodies with characters they feel affinity with, but there is also the desire to win in competitions, or to take and share images of oneself. The Acafan cosplay scholar suggests that cosplayers form unique connections and values with fan and cosplay communities through performance, but it is equally apparent that cosplayers present pseudo-identities, in which a momentary pseudo connection emerges and passes. In the critical work of Adorno, his paper 'Culture Industry Reconsidered' (1963) takes an almost holistic position to examine the multiple representations of audiences and industry in academic literature. Adorno writes:

> The two-faced irony in the relationship of servile intellectuals to the culture industry is not restricted to them alone. It may also be supposed that the consciousness of the consumers themselves is split between the prescribed fun which is supplied to them by the culture industry and a not particularly well-hidden doubt about its blessings.
>
> Adorno [1963] 2003, 58

For all the benefits of the Acafan methodology, it is necessary to scrutinise it. The Acafan in this case can be equal to the 'servile intellectuals'; after all, the position of the Acafan as a fan results in such research becoming entangled with one's own fan loyalties. Equally nor can one be wholeheartedly critical of fandom and popular media as such a position would be to ignore the positive and productive attributes of fandom (Chapters 1-3). One might also suggest here that Adorno is hinting towards dominant and oppositional audience decoding (as Hall would put it (1973)). The 'prescribed fun' as Adorno puts it being equitable to a dominant reading, and audiences ‘doubt’ of the culture industries ‘blessings’ being equitable to the oppositional reading.

The multiplicity of reading and interpretation on the part of both cosplay scholar and cosplayer, set against fan industry and popular media, can be related to Turkle’s discussion of conflicting responses to the notion of human and robot relations. For Turkle, “the idea of sociable robots suggests that we might navigate intimacy by skirting it. People seem comforted by the belief that if we alienate or fail each other, robots will be there, programmed to provide simulations of love. […] We are too exhausted to deal with each other in adversity; robots will have the agency” (Turkle 2011, 10). Cosplayers are subject to robots in several ways: through online group moderators who tailor the ways in which cosplayers are permitted to engage with one another; or in sharing and making fan art and fiction there is an expectation of mimicry and fan loyalty to the styles of the established text. One might even suggest that cosplayers are willing to become these robots. Through performance and mimicry, cosplayers have structured safe environments in which momentary connections can occur, cancelling out anxieties of embarrassment or responsibility that exist in day-to-day life.

A dependency in robots, or a cosplayer’s faith in fictional characters is deeply self-centred, rejecting the very real problems of members of a society who cannot afford to live, in favour of one’s own enjoyment and love of people who do not exist. Such individualism is inherently meritocratic.

> Creating an avatar – perhaps of a different age, a different gender, a different temperament – is a way to explore the self. But if you’re spending three, four, or five hours a day in an online game or a virtual world (a time commitment that is not unusual), there’s got to be someplace you’re not. And that someplace you’re not is often with your family and friends […] And with performance can come disorientation.
>
> Turkle 2011, 12

These momentary spaces do not necessary fulfil an individual’s desire, thus promting questions as to whether performed identity in cosplay is more real/rewarding than one’s relationship with family and friends. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 4, the seeming freedom to explore and perform is itself a construct on part of convention organisers and popular media. Of course, to generate this narrative of free choice, convention halls do not manipulate fans as such, rather they guide and direct them to expressions and communications. The same can be said of online cosplay spaces.

However, a counter argument to these arguments would be the experiences Brock had cosplaying Dipper. In our interview, Brock reflected on their more complicated relationship with their own gender. On the convention hall floor, when Brock posed as Dipper, she found a lot of people called her “sir”. For Brock this was “very validating on multiple levels; both as an artist, and as someone who through cosplay has started to feel more complex feelings about passing as a different gender”. For Brock, the processes of crossplay facilitated a unique way in which to “explore the self”. The safety net of the convention hall has been praised as an affirming space in which to experiment with such performances (Gn, 2011 and King, 2013). For some cosplayers, these sites are a means to experiment and have impact upon their identity in day-to-day life. For many others, the act of momentary performance is gratifying enough.

Closing Thoughts on Entangled Networks of Contradiction

The work of Acafan cosplay scholars have revealed much about the individuals cosplay experience, however the existing literature provides a very narrow view of the complexity of the cosplay community. To build towards a more complete view of cosplay, it is necessary to draw on wider theoretical frameworks to capture the power dynamics at play in cosplay communities which facilitate competition, criticism, abuse, and hierarchies of power that see some better off than others.

In drawing on postfeminist literature in the first half of this chapter, and meritocracy criticism in the latter, this chapter has aided my investigation in revealing the networks of contradiction, which I began to outline in Chapters 3 and 4. Meritocracy upholds a series of entangled power structures; condones criticism and harassment, competition, whilst also facilitating communication, exchange, and outlets of expression. It is the simultaneous ‘good’ and ‘bad’ binary opposites which are present, in both fan and fan industry structures (and between the Acafan and cultural studies theoretical positions) which prompts me to coin the term ‘networks of contradiction’. I use this term to encapsulate the messiness of fan interaction, fan industry, popular media, and other fans. Fans are both active (Chapters 1-3) and submissive (Chapters 3-5). Consequently, fans simultaneously challenge and reinforce dominant power structures, just as fan industries and popular media simultaneously structure the ways in which fans interact and adapt to the demands of fans. It is a complex relationship that is further complicated by the entanglement of offline and online spaces which facilitate the power dynamics imposed by dominant culture. Throughout this chapter, I have been examining contradictions through which I have illustrated how a given case study can possess simultaneously positive and negative values.

The mimicry of popular media observed in my Catwoman case studies illustrated how cosplayers not only mimic a character's design but replicate dominant norms presented in popular media. It is these processes of replication which also help generate competition and meritocratic structures in cosplay communities (mimicking the meritocratic structures of dominant culture). In Littler's 2018 work, she concludes with a somewhat ambivalent argument which suggests that the aspirations of meritocracy are inherently human. "Aspiring to do and be something different is of course, not problematic *per se*. Just as with focused hard work, pursuing such difference is usually a crucial and important part of living" (Littler 2018, 221). Such sentiments appear to be taken to their extremes in the act of cosplayers desire to present and perform as something (or someone) different. But "orienting these powerful affects and attributes in different directions, through less individualistic and more co-operative pathway, is crucial" (Littler 2018, 221). Cosplay is thus both a communal and individual experience. In the case of professional cosplayers such as Ormeli, Jessica Nigri, and Yaya Han, they each distinctly market 'the self' as product. In other cases, cosplay is extremely collaborative, such as in the cases of Erika, Janine and Blue, while simultaneously competitive resulting in humiliation for cosplayers such as Mariah Mallad, and Kyle.

Between the utopian positioning of Acafan scholars and the critical scholarship of writers such as Adorno, one finds a much more complex framework of contradictions which much more accurately captures the complexity of the cosplay community.

In this first part to Chapter 5, I have marked out further frictions which emerge between the cosplayer and the fan industry, and frictions which emerge between cosplayers. Having drawn on a wide breadth of audience studies, fan studies, and postfeminist criticism, these contradictions emerge through conflicting theoretical conceptualisations of the same subject. Whilst fans can be creative and disruptive agents who are loyal to one another, I have also examined circumstances in which audiences replicate dominant power structures and will critique one another for failing to meet up to the expectations of these power dynamics.

The networks of contradiction that exists between fans, fan industry, popular media, and dominant hierarchies creates conflicting structures in fan communities. I do not intend to undermine the work of Acafan cosplay scholarship as unpacked in Chapters 1-3, but merely to highlight that by drawing on additional theoretical frameworks one can identify examples which offer a different perspective. The fact is both these perspectives are present simultaneously. Therefore, in Chapter 5 Part 2, I will continue to draw on the work of postfeminist scholarship as a point of structural comparison. In so doing, Chapter 5 Part 2 sets a new precedent for cosplay scholarship, arguing that cosplay scholarship should draw on broader theoretical frameworks. In doing so one can better capture the messiness that exists in the cosplay community, and the ways in which subculture is affected by its entanglement with dominant power structures.

Part 2 – New Directions for Cosplay Scholarship

In Chapter 5 Part 1, I drew on contemporary postfeminist and meritocracy criticism to begin to conceptualise the disparity between my two data sets which conform and challenge current Acafan cosplay scholarship. I have begun to illustrate a contradictory network in which cosplayers are both active and passive agents to dominant power structures and values. By drawing on two sets of theoretical frameworks, I have revealed the ways in which Acafan responses to popular media and critical audience theory scholars' responses to popular media are equal sides of the same coin. Audiences are simultaneously active and passive consumers.

In this 2nd part, I open with a comparison between Networks of Contradition and Hegemony, addressing the overlap between the two framework, but importantly what is distinctive about networks of contradiction and why I do not draw on Gramsci's 'hegemony' in greater detail. From this distinction the remainder of the chapter places an emphasis on the ways in which, through the theoretical frameworks of postfeminist criticism, cosplayers are not revolutionary agents of change, but rather mimetic agents who replicate dominant heteronormative power structures through the replication and performance of popular characters.

In this chapter I will continue to be drawing on the postfeminist literature of Banet-Weiser (2018 and 2020), Gill (2007, 2017, and 2020), and Rottenberg (2018, 2019, and 2020). This 2nd part is a bridging chapter in which I will be drawing on parallels from postfeminist criticism and the ways in which they discuss contradiction to conceptualise the messiness and conflicting discourses I have observed in my research data. In drawing out these comparisons, I hilight the flaws in Acafan cosplay scholarship and establish the need for Acafan cosplay scholars to draw on broader theoretical frameworks to capture the diversity of the cosplay community, and not to rely on one's own loyalties to said community.

Conceptualizing the Duality of Fan Agency

In my earlier chapters, I introduced the current landscape of fan studies research in relation to the cosplay community, drawing on writers including Jenkins (1992 and 2006), Lancaster and Mikotowicz (2001), Hills (2002 and 14), and Lamerichs (2018). All these authors are self-proclaimed Acafan writers (academic fans) and have each written about fans as actively possessing agency over media production. Jenkins most notably coined the term ‘textual poachers’, referring to fans as possessing a mastery over established media.

The foundations of Acafan literature is deconstructing and presenting the agency of fans. In reference to fan produced texts of *Doctor Who*, Hills observes in his introduction to the 2002 work, how fans use “the programme as a starting point for further creativity” (Hills 2002, xvii). Hills himself is influenced by the work of Adorno and draws on “Adorno’s ambivalence” to suggest that the “online fan not only exemplifies the colonising spatiotemporal processes of timely and information-saturated commodity exchange, s/he also self-consciously ‘catches up with’ these objective processes” (Hills 2002, 140). Hills here suggests that online fans are poachers of both textual narratives and online environments, are in turn the fan is subject to industrial and online structures and the pre-established formalities of dominant values and tastes. Hall’s argument is a position which bridges the Acafan with the cultural studies tradition, reminiscent of the “two-faced irony” Adorno suggests exists within both a community and within its study (Adorno [1963] 2003, 58). Audiences (and cosplayers) are not necessarily conscious of the ‘objective processes’ of fan industry and popular media, though they still remain subject to consequences of being creative. Despite this, Hills later concludes in reference to impersonators (of Elvis Presley):

> The consumer or impersonator does not only imitate a specific cult icon or character taken from a cult text: he or she embodies the processes of stardom and textuality […] it also dramatizes the fans’ self-absence, blurring moments of the volitional subject (‘master of the text’) and the non-volitional ‘disciple’ of the text’
>
> Hills 2002, 133

Hills primary position, like Jenkins, or Lancaster and Mikotowicz, illustrates the ways in which fans gain agency over a text by creating fan art/fiction/cosplay. Following this narrative, Bainbridge and Norris argued that it was the performative efforts of a cosplayer which made cosplayers “a playful agent of change. The high regard given to cosplay’s transversal moment as it crosses gender, race or reality can be seen to offer an optimistic creative and social moment" (Bainbridge and Norris 2013, 35). Lamerichs too takes the position "Cosplay may provide this newness because it repurposes our bodies phenomenologically, a practise through which the body becomes alien but, at the same time, more of a self then ever" (Lamerichs 2018, 215), here Lamerichs blurs reality and fiction, but, as I have already observed in greater detail, cosplay is a momentary performance and thus has relatively little impact on the powers that cosplayers are said to disrupt.

It's also worth noting that social revolution was not a goal considered by my cosplay participants who valued their relationship with characters and the creativity of crafting a costume above anything else. Take, for example, interview participant Brock who upon being asked about their performance of their chosen characters from children's cartoon *Gravity Falls*, she responded thoughtfully: "if I'm not talking in character than someone is wildly disappointed. You know, fans who are closer to my own age are okay with if I decide not to, but because so many of my interactions are with kids who expect and get upset if I'm not acting in character – I turn it on much more easily than I turn it off". For Brock, cosplay was less about blurring the lines of reality or making a social commentary to play with an audience, and to celebrate one's favourite character(s). As discussed in Chapter 3, Brock used cosplay to explore their own relationship with gender, however even this is a personal activity as opposed to a social comment.

Participant Blue, who is a member of the furry community, reflected on the benefits of online performance of character in online forums. He explained that "you could create a second character that nobody knows. Someone you could act in a completely different way with". Part of the value of these online performances for Blue was because they are momentary performances. He felt that the "ability to explore and to become other people […] I'd been practising it for so long, it's become very natural". In many ways, for Blue, these experiences were not so much about blurring the lines between oneself and persona (or fursona), but rather the online environment which facilitated fan-ish expression. "When you are that other person (avatar) you are that other personality, you know, multiple personality type thing. And you get you know, the freedom to explore". Blue captures the complexities of performance, suggesting that the player does not become the character but uses the costume to explore their identity in ways that would not by possible day-to-day on account of restrictions and hierarchies outside of the convention centre or online forums.

Fandom and its relationship with industry is complicated; above all this relationship is messy. Stanfill (2019) aptly argues "the mismatch between fan and industry values matters.

Fans generally are not freely doing work for industry, they are freely creating for themselves or one another, and industry either happens to also benefit or sets the conditions to allow itself to benefit" (Stanfill 2019, 173). Here, Stanfill perfectly illustrates the complexities which exist between the culture/fan industry and fan consumer. Over time, the grassroots nature of fans and fandom has become a part of the mechanisms that compose media, and conversely media texts are what inspire fans to exchange these ideas and/or allow the means of exchanging these ideas. As much as fans create artifacts for one another, industries permit the exchange of such artifacts; they are the source of inspiration, which regulate how they are distributed and monetised. Whilst these arguments have emerged in more contemporary fan studies research, cosplay has yet to be discussed in such industrial terms.

What Fan Studies Can Learn from Postfeminist Studies

Before I get onto the ways online fan conventions might be perceived as colonisers of fan communities, I will unpack postfeminist literature in greater detail to introduce three key terms: Postfeminist Sensibility (Gill), Neoliberal Feminism (Rottenberg), and Popular Feminism (Banet-Weiser). These concepts aim to capture the contemporary moment of western feminism which exists both with and against mainstream feminist media. Banet-Weiser confesses in her joint paper with Gill and Rottenberg (2020) that, "While postfeminism, neoliberal feminism and popular feminism are all sensibilities that exist simultaneously, they are also engaged in a cultural conversation with each other that builds and expands; a central tenet of postfeminist sensibility as Ros [Gill] has discussed, is a focus on personal (and consumer/economic) choice" (Banet-Weiser in Banet-Weiser et al. 2020, 10). What is so important about these three academic positions (which I encapsulate under the term postfeminist criticism) is the ways in which these three writers recognise a need for feminist literature to broaden its horizons. There is a recognition on behalf of Banet-Weiser et al. that feminist/popular feminist literature had become entangled in its own self-study, just as I consider Acafans to have become entangled in a self-study of fandom and fan studies.

To combat the narrowness that emerges in self-study, Banet-Weiser et al. draw on notable cultural studies writers to develop their field and acknowledge the contradictions that exist in contemporary discourse. It is my suggestion that Acafan scholars would, likewise, benefit from pushing away from the insular world of fan studies and reconnect with the broader field of cultural studies. To illustrate this reasoning, one must observe how Banet-Weiser et al. have drawn on established cultural studies criticism to the benefit of their approaches.

Gill develops the concept of a postfeminist sensibility in her 2007 paper ‘Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a sensibility’. In the article, Gill suggests that her conceptualisation of approaches is “informed by postmodernist and constructionist perspectives and seeks to examine what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media” (Gill 2007, 148). Here Gill begins to outline pre-established cultural studies literature as a means of beginning to identify and define Gill’s concept of the postfeminist sensibility. Gill continues; “this new notion emphasizes the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them” (Gill 2007, 149). In drawing on a wider pool of theoretical literature based within cultural studies, Gill offers a more holistic approach to understanding the contradictions in play which make up contemporary feminist and anti-feminist discourse, and importantly the ways in which they depend upon one another. In the later 2020 conversation with Banet-Wiser and Rottenberg, Gill reflects on the progression of her work, directly responding to her 2007 paper, arguing that for the contemporary feminist scholar there is a need to think of

> sexism *with* racism, ageism, classism, homophobia and (dis)ableism and also to think transnationally (Imre et al. 2009). As I noted, ‘it is not simply a matter of integrating sexism with other axes of power and difference, but also facing up to the complex dynamics and complicities in play in the current moment’ (Gill, 2011: 69)
>
> Gill in Banet-Weiser et al. 2020, 6

Here Gill clearly explains the benefits of expanding the scope of an area of study to face “up to the complex dynamics and complicities”. Her recognition that discourses of empowerment are entangled with classed, gendered and racialized inequalities can be used to complicate some of the debates I touched on in previous chapters. In multiple interviews, racism came up as a concern time and time again. For example, on race-bending (which is to cosplay as a character whose race is different to one’s own) participant Janine pointed out how “arguments about race-play in cosplay, they’re always really depressing when I see them […] it’s a white privilege thing in general”. Here Janine refers to the ways in which white cosplayers use the rhetoric of accuracy to justify blackface in cosplay, a principle which directly insults Black cosplayers. In Janine’s observation, she explicitly acknowledges the hierarchies and the structural racism that exists in North America and the UK which in turn frames the actions and choices available to cosplayers.

In Gill's introduction to her dialogue, she plainly outlines her intentions with her academic work: "I am a *feminist* analyst of postfeminist culture, and *not* a postfeminist analyst or theorist. This foregrounded the idea of a *critical approach to postfeminism* – a sensibility that I argued had as much to do with neoliberalism as with feminism" (Gill in Banet-Weiser et al. 2020, 5). In a similar respect, where Gill is not a postfeminist, I am similarly not an Acafan Rather, I am a cultural studies researcher of fandom aiming to produce a critical approach to fan studies. Gill sees postfeminism as being entangled with wider cultural debates, hierarchies and ideals. In Rottenberg's 2018 paper, intersectional theoretical approaches are integral to her analysis of UK newspaper coverage of the "#MeToo" movement in the wake of Donald Trump's transition to power as President of the United States in 2017. For Rottenberg (2018),

> It is important to understand that I do not understand neoliberalism merely as an economic system […] but, rather, following political theorists Michel Feher (2009) and Wendy Brown (2015, 2016), as a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject.
>
> Rottenberg 2018, 1075

In this paper, Rottenberg takes issue with certain attributes of feminism and feminist literature from the early 2000's, drawing on Mendes (2012), to argue that mainstream media framed feminism in very specific ways. "Feminism was frequently framed in individualising ways, focusing on 'softer issues such as fashion, leisure, and popular culture' rather than on organised social mobilization" (Rottenberg et al. 2019, 721). But, in Rottenberg's conceptualisation of the 'neoliberal feminist', she suggests that "this shift, which corresponds with the overall decrease in coverage, contributes to the de-politicization of feminist goals" (Rottenberg et al. 2019, 721). The shifting away from an idea's original meaning can be seen in cosplay scholarship's use of Butler's term 'performativity' to celebrate gender and gendered expression . Cosplay literature has centralized a neoliberal model of feminism and in doing so overlooked circumstances in which fans replicate dominant norms of good and bad tastes, such as cases in which racialized and gendered inequalities emerge online, or cases in which fan industry and popular media uses and exploits fan practises restricting an audience's ability to be active agents.

As part of the 2020 conversation, Rottenberg declares "I really do believe that in order to conceptualise and cultivate resistance, we also need to understand the operations of power and dominance" (Rottenberg in Banet-Weiser et al. 2020, 15). Thus, it really is in Acafan's benefit to take on these more critical approaches if they are to fully justify the ways in which fandom and cosplay can be considered revolutionary and powerful forms. In acknowledging the two positions of power, only then can one conceptualise resistance. The power dynamics hinted towards by Rottenberg leads nicely onto Sarah Banet-Weiser's work on Popular Feminism and Popular Misogynies. Notably, Banet-Weiser draws on the works of cultural theorist Stuart Hall (Banet-Weiser 2018, 15) to establish her definitions of popular, arguing that popular culture is a site of struggle for power. In Banet-Weiser's concluding remarks, she reflects how "as a scholar, I have found it hard to make coherent sense of the circulation of mediated popular feminists and the subsequent reactions to these iterations" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 183), continuing,

> Trying to rein in this beast has been difficult, not simply because information glut but also because there are many overlaps and convergences between popular feminism and feminist movements […] I've tried to address the cultural, political, and economic conditions that amplify popular feminism, and the ways that they are different from the conditions that support other modes of political practice
>
> Banet-Weiser 2018, 183

Postfeminist criticism identifies a necessity to draw on wider cultural and political theory to understand conflicting discourses generated by postfeminist/neoliberal and feminist/popular feminist media. Conflicting values have not necessarily allowed the writer to produce an optimistic or even revolutionary picture of their subjects, however these writers have drawn on wider theoretical works to outline the contradictions and complexities of the subject matter and accurately represent the messiness of popular culture and dominant power structures.

Contributing to the joint 2020 conversation, Banet-Weiser relates her work with Gill's comment on shared research experiences; "I, like Ros [Gill], was struck by the contradictions within and between a growing market for girls that centred 'girl power'". Again the phrasing, "contradictions" is important here, encompassing a variety of readings and intentions not only engrained within a text in question but within differing interpretations by consumers, as well as differing readings in academia. Banet-Weiser continues, "as its key selling point and cultural, social and economic context that clearly saw the 'power' in girl power as almost exclusively about consumer power – not a challenge of gendered power relations and rationalities" (Banet-Weiser in Banet-Weiser et al. 2020, 9). Just because a text calls itself 'feminist' does not make the product or its consumers 'feminist'. Is feminism a product, a political value, or a political action? It can be all and neither; the term is fractured and means different things to different people. It is this messiness which I apply to cosplay and the cosplay community. Just as I have observed Acafan literature to discuss power over both text and gendered normality (Chapters 1-3), these narratives have been complicated in Chapters 4 and 5, to the point where audiences are both active and submissive consumers, both socially revolutionary and confirmative.

Messiness, Power Struggle and Hegemony

There is an ever-present messiness in cosplay practise and scholarship, a messiness which I conceptualise as networks of contradiction which encompasses the diversity of the cosplay community. Networks of contradiction is in distinct reference to two frameworks: Networks of Production, as conceptualised by fan studies scholar Lamerichs (2018), and networks of popular feminism and popular misogyny, as conceptualised by postfeminist critic Banet-Weiser (2018). As discussed in my introduction, these two networks each capture the complex structures which help perpetuate sets of conflicting discourses and values. By drawing on these two frameworks, I propose that cosplayers exist in networks of contradiction which merge the 'active' and 'passive', harking back to Halls' encoding/decoding model (1973), in which the dominant, negotiated, and oppositional audience readings each contribute to the collective audience.

To reiterate from previous chapters, it is from Banet-Weiser's 'networks of popular feminism and misogyny', in tandem with Lamerichs' 'networks of production', that I suggest that cosplayers and fans exist in networks of contradiction which both challenge and sustain social norms reproduced by fan industries. Through Banet-Weiser's 'networks of popular feminism and misogyny', she acknowledges "The fact that the globe's biggest companies now pander to feminist ideas, however distorted or market-driven they may be – that encourages and validates popular misogyny" (Banet-Wiser 2018, 169-70). In short, because misogyny is the dominant cultural norm, its visibility is very low and unnoticed, but explicitly visible misogyny exists in reaction to the feminist media which seeks to destabilise the misogynist norm. These are two opposing values which sustain the other in a seemingly endless network of opposing values and discourses. If the fan exists in a set of entangled contradictions as I suggest by drawing on the mixed frameworks from Lamerichs' 2018 fan studies work and Banet-Weiser's 2018 postfeminist criticism, I propose that the cosplayer, and indeed the popular fan more broadly, exists in networks of contradiction. The fan and cosplayer are both a revolutionary agent of change capable of shaping popular media and critiquing it, and yet simultaneously the fan and the cosplayer remains subject to the manipulative powers of fan industries and popular media industries which perpetuate dominant power relations among cosplayers. It is these powers which allow cosplayers to praise one another and develop unique structures, but also leads to abuse and harassment among fan communities replicating dominant norms.

The contradicting structures I observe between producers of pop culture, fan industries, and fan audiences could be conceptualised by drawing on the frameworks of Gramsci's 'hegemony'. On a couple of occasions during this thesis, I have referred to Gramsci's term 'Hegemony'. I have drawn on this term to outline it's influence on cultural studies, such as the work of Stuart Hall. Chapter 4 drew on the concept of hegemony to better identify the influence fan industries have over fans, the meaning fan industries imbue into fan spaces (such as the convention) creates a sense of sameness between conventions. In turn audience buy into these expectations and contribute to the replication of sameness – maintaining dominant norms and rule. Hall, Clark and Jefferson (1975) observed in Gramsci's hegemony that "hegemonic cultures, however, are never free to reproduce and amend themselves without contradiction and resistance" (Hall et al. 1975, 52). What one finds in the study of hegemony is attempts at acknowledging the ways in which producers and cultural leaders coerce audiences into a particular way of life and consumption. In turn, the study of hegemony is also invested in 'contradictions' to these norms in the form of resistance. In this thesis I have similarly observed cases of resistance and subversion, however crucially I have argued that these examples of contradiction do not challenge dominant powers, rather their oppositions work to maintain power structures.

Storey (1996) similarly acknowledges that hegemony relies on a set of specific contradictions to take place in social discourse. Storey draws on Gramsci's term 'compromise equilibrium' to draw out these contradictions:

> Popular Culture is neither an 'authentic' subordinate culture, nor a culture imposed by the culture industries, but a 'compromise equilibrium' (Gramsci) between the two; a contradictory mix of forces from both 'below' and 'above'; 'both commercial' and 'authentic'; marked by 'resistance' and 'incorporation', involving both 'structure' and 'agency'
>
> Storey 2010, 171

The ‘compromise equilibrium’ indicates that popular culture is justly balanced between producer and consumer, or between those who create social structures and those who abide by them. Barker and Jane (2000) produced a similar reading of hegemony, with reference to the work of Bennett (1991), Gramscian tradition has accorded little attention to the specifics of cultural institutions, technologies and apparatuses. Instead, it is concentrated on textual analysis and celebrations of marginality” (Barker and Jane 2016, 621) whilst hegemonic literature can be used as a means of conceptualising the structures I have begun to unpack there are limits to its reach, which ‘networks of contradictions’ do a better job of addressing.

Where Gramsci’s concept of hegemony has been used by cultural studies scholars to conceptualise grassroot subcultures and activists' relationship with dominant power structures and the friction that emerges between these two distinct groups. Networks of contradictions seeks to not only encapsulate these oppositional forces, but to also address the ways in which these oppositions support each other. More importantly, networks of contradiction focus on the ways in which audiences and participants of pop culture actively replicate dominant norms, and in doing so maintain their own powers or in some circumstances guarantee their own oppression. Above all, ‘Networks of Contradiction’ acknowledges the 2018 work of Lamerich’s and Banet-Weiser tying together the specific entangled oppositions between producer and consumer but also popular misogyny and popular feminism which has been the focus through this thesis.

The drawing together of these two emerging Networks by each respective scholar is in a Foucauldian sense a recognition of an underlining grid of intelligibility, a recognition of the emerging contradictions in fan studies between producer and consumer, a recognition of the contradictions present between popular misogynies and popular feminism, and finally the ways in which both sets of contradictions are present within the field of cosplay and its associated fandoms.

Closing Remarks

Chapter 5 has sought to fully outline the influence popular media producers have over audiences (specifically cosplayers), the influence companies have over cultural production, coerces fans and audiences to replicate the dominant values presented to them and in turn ensure these values remain the dominant set of values which govern and regulate North American and UK life. In Part 1 I addressed the case study of DC’s Catwoman and examined how the design of Catwoman over the years has reinforced popular stereotypes of sexualised women, and in turn has contributed to the maintenance of popular misogynies.

Given the values embedded within Catwoman's design and character (and many other Western Superhero characters) cosplayers subsequently replicate these norms, in addition to this any deviation from these expectations can result in criticism or harassment from other members of the community.

Part 2 has sought to pin down a framework for understanding the power dynamics present, to identify these entangled relations between audience and consumer, with popular misogynies and popular feminism – in turn it has also been a recognition of the contradictions within them (with reference to the more subversive narratives of chapters 1-3). In Chapter 6, I will return to examining the convention hall and cosplayers engagement with space, however, I will be drawing on data collected during the Covid-19 Global Pandemic. Following the enforcement of social distancing policy in both UK and North America, several fan conventions made the movement online. In doing so, I argue that the fan convention was forced to boil down to its central attributes, exposing the fan industry as an industry which tailor's fan's engagement and creative capabilities. In this chapter, I continue to draw on the work of postfeminist writers, but also drawing on core literature and concepts throughout this thesis drawing out the entangled discourses and networks of contradiction at play.

Chapter 6: Networks of Contradiction

Part 1 – Conventions During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Throughout Chapter 6, I illustrate how networks of contradiction sustain the cosplay community and its associated fandoms and industries. In Part 1, I examine the entangled relationship between fan industry and fan, by examining how fan industries moved fan conventions online during the Covid-19 pandemic. I suggest that as much as fan industries design and encode spaces to tailor audience interactions, audiences and industries inevitably engage in a complicated dialogue in which both producer and consumer can be perceived as active and passive, or as revolutionary and submissive. In Chapter 6 Part 2 I examine the entangled relationship between fan and fan industry, by looking at the ways in which fans and industries engaged with the video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nogami, 2020) and illustrate the ways in which the networks of contradiction structure has applicability outside of cosplay scholarship, but might be useful in conceptualising popular fandom more broadly.

During the 2nd year of research, several adjustments needed to be made to my methods to accommodate for the changes to the fan convention, and fan engagement more broadly due to restrictions social distancing policies brought in to combat the Covid-19 pandemic which began in 2020. In the UK, under the contexts within which I am writing, public spaces began to close in early March, with a lockdown fully enforced from 16th March 2020 and lasted until 23rd June 2020, reintroduced from 14th October 2020 till 2nd December 2020, and a third lockdown was enforced after a catastrophic Christmas from 6th January 2021 till 29th March 2021. Further lockdowns loom heavy. At time of writing social distancing remains enforced, many public spaces remain closed (including fan conventions and gatherings), and further local restrictions are introduced in places where higher Covid-19 cases are recorded.

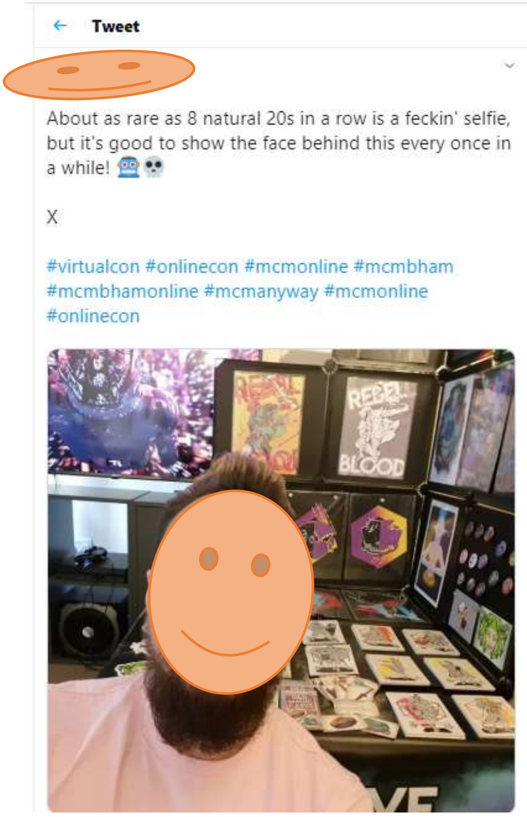
Under these changing living conditions for everyone in the UK, I observed first-hand, just how quickly fans and convention organisers adapted to new circumstances. Birmingham MCM on 21st-22nd March, an event I was scheduled to attend, made a quick transfer to a series of free online events. These online events took place primarily between Twitter conversations and YouTube livestreams. Several conventions followed suit such as SciFiWeekender 25th April 2020, Mainframe Comic Con. 25-26th April 2020, and San Diego International Comic-Con 22-25th July 2020. All these conventions were free to attend. Interestingly, these events also inspired fans to set up their own conventions detached from the preestablished conventions, Stay At Home Con. on 28th March 2020 was a European online event, featuring fans and creatives coming together for a variety of livestreams across Twitch, Youtube, and Facebook. Developing from Chapter 4's analysis of comic conventions which I attended before the Covid-19 pandemic, in this chapter I will offer a deconstruction of the online conventions with reference to postfeminist and popular feminist literature, in so doing, I shall be illustrating the networks of contradiction between fan industry and fan.

Exploring the Online Fan Convention Hall

In many ways the online convention boiled the experiences of the convention hall down to its core components and removed any possibility for attendees to make use of space in unpredicted ways. In the case of MCM Birmingham, the convention took place between a livestream on YouTube and regular posts on Twitter. YouTube allowed for a series of different showcases, featuring upcoming film and TV trailers, pre-recorded interviews with actors (who had been due to attend in person), but also featured broadcasts of the Cosplay Masquerade recording from MCM London 2019 to end day one on YouTube. The events also featured the MCM organisers playing Dungeons and Dragons, as well as discussions of popular media such as: "David Mazouz reads Bizarre Batman Comic Plots" and "Troy Baker & Noah North on Marvels Avengers" which both took place on day two.

However, as the MCM Birmingham YouTube streams were all pre-recorded, this inevitably meant that the interactivity between the convention organisers and the online attendees was significantly lower than would have been in person. There was still a level of interactivity between attendees however, as they can converse or comment in a live-chat which runs alongside the stream. Here we have two structures of power, these being the convention organisers (the fan industry) and the affordances of YouTube the streaming/social media platform. Whilst viewers can comment in chat, their comments are subject to moderation, and comments can be deleted if they do not meet the conditions of both the convention organisers and YouTube as the streaming service. The risk here is that if the viewer is restricted too much, it is ultimately the audience who determine the success of the videos viewing figures (the less appealing the online convention is, the less people will continue to engage). This relay like structure to this analysis will occur multiple times during this chapter, as it did in Chapter 5. This is an analysis which serves to illustrate the convoluted networks of contradiction which sustain the fan and fan industry paradigm.

Twitter allowed MCM Birmingham to engage with their audiences in a much more direct manner. In the Twitter hashtag "#MCMOnline" throughout the day (which collected all the Tweets, providing an ongoing linear timeline for the day's events). Twitter featured a Q&A with the cast from BBC's/Dave's *Red Dwarf* (who had been due to attend in person). The Q&A was conducted by Twitter users posting questions with the event hashtag, subsequently the actors would give their answers in quote retweets. Twitter also acted as a site to showcase vendors, under the same hashtag vendors advertised their websites and Etsy stores, many of which offered discounts specially for the convention. I also observed several independent artists setting up their own livestreams to gain the attention of potential customers and brought something more to the online event, independent artist 'Monet' [name anonymized] for example livestreamed themselves on Twitch to showcase their art. Another inventive showcase came from Twitter user 'Renoir' [name anonymized] who set up his stall in his living room, (6.1). In doing so, Renoir plays with the expectations of the convention set up, having built the illusion of the 'natural' vendor table but within the context of lockdown.



[redacted]

About as rare as 8 natural 20s in a row is a feckin' selfie, but it's good to show the face behind this every once in a while! 🤖💀

X

#virtualcon #onlinecon #mcmonline #mcmbham #mcmbhamonline #mcmanyway #mcmonline #onlinecon

6.1

In postfeminist literature, McRobbie draws on Riviere's notion of contemporary femininity being a masquerade as a strategy. "This new masquerade refers to its own artifice, its adoption by women is done as a statement, the woman on masquerade is making a point that this is a freely chosen look" (McRobbie 2007, 723). Under McRobbie's understanding of the masquerade performance, women are selective of their appearance, make choices which satisfy their identities and their bodies. In fan studies these strategies are similarly observed among audiences more broadly, only phrased as something closer to: audiences are tactical nomads able to construct their identities drawing on elements form popular culture. In the case of Renoir they use Twitter as a tactical space (just as cosplayers and photographers use the convention floor as tactical spaces for meetups and performances). Twitter is being adopted as a new digital convention space (as an opportunity for artists to show off their work, regardless of whether they were due to be at the convention or not). However, this is a murky and contradictory landscape, and Renoir's decision to reconstruct the convention stall at home and share via Twitter is both a tactical use of Twitter and play with expectation, yet also plays to the whims of the fan industry at large. McRobbie continues, "the masquerade functions to re-assure male structures of power by defusing the presence and the aggressive competitive actions of women they come to inhabit positions of authority" (McRobbie 2007, 726). Thus, there is a dual function to the feminine masquerade, in other words it makes the oppressed feel powerful without giving them any power. In fan communities, what might be read as tactical use of space are actions which ultimately still contribute to the norms and expectations of the fan industry. Furthermore, the artist whilst seemingly a fan in their playful online engagements is ultimately a part of the fan industry to make profit from online sales.

In Chapter 4, I argued that cosplayers and photographers were beneficial to the convention organisers, and in the case of Renoir's seemingly humorous Tweet and tactical usage of this online space to draw attention to his online store, ultimately contributes to expanding the "#MCMOnline" hashtag. It might be tempting to draw once again on Manovich to suggest that this is an example of industry incorporating grassroot tactics into their own economic growth and practices. However, what is being observed here is a contradictory relationships of power, because Renoir has posted the tweet willingly to sell his own merchandise, it cannot be totally said that Renoir is submissive to the authority of fan industry. It is a circumstance in which both vendor and the convention have mutual gain from the post, each lending the other greater exposure. After all, the action of posting one's store on Twitter under MCM's hashtag can equally be evaluated as free advertising which exploits the exposure gained by MCM's brand. Deconstructing the example in reverse makes it clear just how these two interpretations exist in an entangled network. Within our economy of visibility, "popular feminism is part of the larger 'attention' economy, where its sheer accessibility – through shared images, 'likes', clicks, followers, retweets, and so on – is a key component of its popularity" (Bannet-Weiser 2018, 10). Through the pre-existing structures of the fan industry (and in these contexts of social media more broadly), the fan gains potential customers through online exposure. Its therefore a network which is mutually beneficial.

As for the fans and attendees of the online convention, they appear to have little agency. On YouTube, these pre-recorded streams encouraged engagements through a live-chat, but as all the clips had been pre-recorded, the hosts would not interact with the chat, and thus the viewers had no impact on the day's events. On Twitter *t*he Q&A allowed attendees to pose questions to the *Red Dwarf* cast and the event received relatively good engagement. The MCM Twitter page (@MCMComicCon) posted the *Red Dwarf* Q&A thread at 2pm, by 2:45pm the post had gained 27 likes, 12 retweets, and 19 questions had been asked (2/3 of them came from the same people). At this timestamp, the thread saw a total of 43 replies, including questions and their answers. The figures are relatively low, but given the impromptu nature of the online event, these numbers did not come as a surprise to me.

At 5pm @MCMComicCon began the Twitter cosplay masquerade, again setting up a thread of cosplayers who had already signed up to the masquerade. At 5:30pm I noted a total of 27 likes, 7 retweets, and a total of 22 entries. It is necessary to highlight that the official @MCMComicCon account posted each entry from a preselected submission. Whilst a few Twitter attendees did post their own cosplays this engagement was minimal and clearly discouraged by the MCM Twitter moderators, who were aiming to judge the best costume through the most likes received on a particular entrant (that MCM had posted). The online thread was prescriptive and did not allow for group meet ups, or photo opportunities, or performances which one would find at the convention centre. At the convention hall, as discussed in Chapter 4, the convention attendee can easily appropriate the convention space to their own purposes, and despite MCM's efforts to control the Twitter masquerade, the fact some cosplayers replied to the Twitter thread with their own cosplays, and commented on one another's, did show audience's inventive engagement with the original intentions of the thread. Though just as cosplayers tactically use the convention hall which convention organisers subsequently reappropriate (Chapter 4), these cosplayers on Twitter still ultimately grant the MCM Thread greater exposure to more Twitter users.

The dynamic between fan and fan industry is in constant dialogue, within both parties differing opinions and values emerge creating further divides and sub structures, which compose the wider networks of power and inevitably the contradictions which exist between the fan and fan industry, but also between fans, and between industries.

MCM is the largest fan convention organisation in the UK. The most notable comic convention in North America is San Diego International Comic-Con. In San Diego's 50 year-long history, this is the first time the convention has been cancelled, at least in person. Like MCM, San Diego adapted their programme, so that a whole host of events could still run online, namely via YouTube livestream taking place from Wednesday 22nd July till Sunday 26th July. Whilst I was unable to virtually attend the convention live, I subsequently looked back through the convention pages and sifted through a selection of livestream recordings to get a sense of how the convention was. Like other conventions, the convention held an array of talks, workshops, and Q&A's, such events included: 'His Dark Materials Virtual Panel and Q&A Session' on YouTube, 'Pokémon Trading Card Game: Learn to Play' on Discord, and even 'Comics on Campus: Fandom and Academia' on YouTube. Further to this, unlike MCM, there were a whole multitude of sessions taking place at any given time. Upon taking a close look at the convention programme, sessions were scheduled on an hourly basis and within any given hour one could expect to find anywhere between 4-10 sessions taking place. Perhaps the greatest advantage for fans with the movement online, is that it has allowed this event to be accessible by audiences across the globe. Further to the global reach of being online, Lopez's article via IndieWire quotes San Diego International Comic-Con's Chief Communications and Strategy Officer David Glanzer to highlight that,

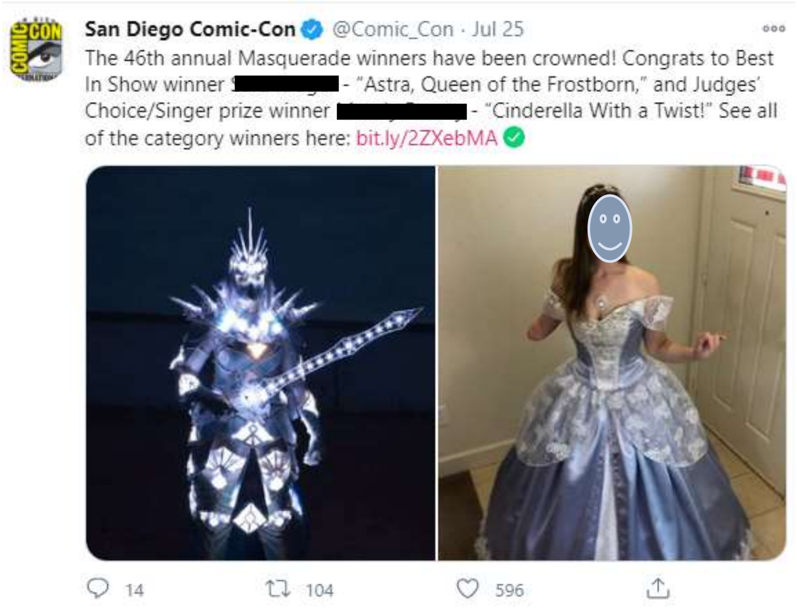
> disabled fans, long shut out of conventions due to crowds and accessibility concerns, are finally able to engage in the Comic-Con world. 'While we knew this would be a difficult year … we still wanted a place for the community to gather', said Glanzer, so this meant eliminating the pay wall and making the event free to everyone.
>
> Lopez 2020

Four months on from the convention (19.11.2020), the high number of viewing figures for numerous panels and workshops goes to highlight the success of the convention's move online. For example, the before mentioned 'His Dark Materials Virtual Panel and Q&A Session' has a total of 54,074 views, and the before mentioned 'Comics on Campus: Fandom at Academia' has a respectable 5,832 views. View counts which are considerably higher than MCM Birmingham, for example the video which opened day one 'D&D with the MCM Comic Con Team' has a total of 278, and the video 'MCM Cosplay Masquerade' which closed the first day has 911 views (at time of writing 19.11.2020). Unlike MCM, San Diego disabled comments on their videos, limiting the fan to only view the online videos without being able to talk with other viewers, or indeed the convention organisers.

By disabling comments, this creates a strict rigidity to the San Diego experience. Despite the online con. being free attendance, opening the convention to more people than ever, the online structures create an experience which tames fans and restricts their tactical ability to engage with each other or the fan industry. Just as the car which alerts its driver for not wearing a seatbelt and subjects its driver to comply, as Bruno Latour (1992, 226) might compare, the convention organisers impose restrictions upon the convention attendee to tailor how one might engage. In addition to the limitations imposed upon the convention attendee by San Diego, I observed a considerable lack of exposure for vendors and indie artists in comparison to MCM's use of Twitter to highlight independent creators. In the case of San Diego, exposure was placed towards big brands with online panels including: 'Dimond Select Toys & Gentle Giant Ltd.' 'Amazon Prime Video: Upload' and 'Amazon Prime Video: The Boys Season 2'. Though some workshops and panels did address the vendor and indie artist as audience, including panels: 'The Rise and Rise of the Australian Comic and Toy Collectibles Market' and 'How to Thrive as an Indy Comics Creator Now!' Marking the independent vendor and artist as fan (as opposed to a part of the fan industry as was observed during the in-person conventions of Chapter 4), creates a tension in the power dynamics positioning big brands as further up in the hierarchy between fan and fan industry. These limitations San Diego imposes might be read as even more excessive than the limitations imposed by MCM.

The power relationships viewed between fan and fan industry in the above examples each highlight an 'economy of visibility', a term which Banet-Weiser uses to illustrate how, "post- and popular feminism utilize different subjectivities to become visible, but for both, visibility is paramount" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 21). The term reiterates Hall's definition of popular culture as being a landscape in which media is in battle for popularity. On the 'economy of visibility', Banet-Weiser goes onto explain how "as with all economies, some are considerably more valuable than others (though this does not mean that other sorts of consumers and products don't exist)" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 28). In this relationship between consumers and producers, because of San Diego's restriction of comments on their streams, and because of limited attention being given to independent artists and vendors, big brands and popular media franchises were placed higher up in this economy of visibility. This breaks the illusion of attendee and fan industry as co-collaborators, disrupting attendees' expectations of the comic convention. The one-sidedness of this relationship in favour of San Diego International Comic-Con, and yet the success of the convention can be clearly seen in the high viewing figures the online events received. Fans appear to be set against both the fan industry and popular online services. In turn, fans and fan industries would appear to be subservient to popular brands and franchises which sell films, merchandise, gaming, etc. the products which ultimately inspire fandom and fan creativity in the first place. I refer to these examples as existing within entangled networks of contradiction because they are explicitly holding up and pushing down different aspects of themselves and of each other. Fans, fan industries and popular culture are each at the same time conflicting and collaborating elements in an economy of entertainment and leisure.

In the case of San Diego International Comic-Con.'s engagement with cosplayers, similar scenes to MCM could be found, like MCM cosplayers were encouraged to submit photos of themselves in cosplay in an online competition. However, unlike MCM, the voting was not public, rather the cosplay winners were decided upon by the "Comic-Con@Home Judges" (fandom via tumblr, 2020). Which again perpetuates this discourse of exclusivity by not permitting cosplayers to casually share their costumes, furthermore, it discourages other fans from being able to praise or discuss other cosplayers work.


San Diego Comic-Con @Comic_Con · Jul 25

The 46th annual Masquerade winners have been crowned! Congrats to Best In Show winner [redacted] - "Astra, Queen of the Frostborn," and Judges' Choice/Singer prize winner [redacted] - "Cinderella With a Twist!" See all of the category winners here: bit.ly/2ZXebMA ✅

6.2

Despite the lack of public engagement, this is not too different from the traditional judging that takes place at the in-person conventions at San Diego, which is traditionally left to a panel of judges. What is more, the online masquerade saw no decline on the average number of entries, in 2019 the masquerade featured a total of 37 entries, 2018 saw 40 entries, and 2017 saw 40 entries. 2020 remained consistent and saw a total of 39 cosplayers including "submissions from the USA, Canada, Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Scotland, England, Italy, Germany, Lithuania, Egypt, and Australia" (Comic-Con.org 2020). Though again, as there is always a counter, traditionally the in-person masquerade will include non-competitive performances, (not documented in the total entries), cosplayers who are now excluded from participating in the online convention.

Similar observations were made during my attendance at smaller online conventions based in the UK and in North America. Firstly, SciFiWekender another UK based online convention, took place primarily on Twitch, with updates on Facebook. Though unlike MCM saw considerably less online conversations. Despite SciFiWeekender being a considerably smaller convention than MCM or San Diego International Comic-Con. one might suggest that SciFiWeekender restricted audience engagement even further. The schedule for the convention composed of a series of interviews, talks, music sets and quizzes, starring the convention organisers. At 3pm their 'Outrageous Liars' comedy panel show, took the premise from BBC's comedy-panel show *Would I Lie to You?* (BBC, 2007-) in which contestants reveal unusual stories about themselves, leaving it to the opposing team to judge whether the story is true or false. I could not find any details of who the contestants of the show were, it is my assumption that they were the convention organisers. The show had a total of 224 viewers, and over the course of the day at that point Twitch had recorded a total of 786 viewers. The livestreaming service Twitch allows viewers to 'chat' by typing their responses in a window alongside the livestreamed show. However, despite the number of viewers, few people were commenting in the chat, though this might be considered a result of the fact that the presenters incorporated no engagement with its audience.

In Chapter 1, I highlighted the importance of community through online environments within social networking groups such as Facebook and Reddit, in forums such as Cure: WorldCosplay, or in private chats such as through Discord. I referred to these spaces as an 'affinity space' as Gee (2004) had put. Gee explained that online spaces created environments which offered "a place or set of places where people can affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals", specifying that this does not apply to "shared race, class, subculture, ethnicity, or gender" (Gee 2004, 67). However, what can be found in the online convention is an industrial appropriation of these online communities. Much like the MCM and San Diego International Comic Con. the livestreams by SciFiWeekender were highly structured and did not promote engagement with its viewers. These conventions enact a structuring of community which disallows community engagement, harking back to a quotation in Chapter 5 Part 1 by Manovich (2009). Manovitch argueed that “the work of consumer culture industries has started to systematically turn every subculture (particularly every youth subculture: bohemians, hip-hop and rap, Lolita fashion, rock, punk, skinhead, goth, and so on) into products” (Manovich 2009, 324). The online space of livestreams appears distinctly corporate in the contexts of fan conventions, a voice piece for popular media voices and fan industries which considers the audience as consumers as opposed to participants. Whilst I argued that the environment of the convention hall similarly manipulates its audience, in the case of the online convention, these events completely strip away the illusion of any agency or voice.

US based convention Mainframe Comic Con. was comparatively bigger than SciFiWeekender (though considerably smaller than San Diego International Comic-Con). Mainframe had a big line-up of celebrity interviews including actors such as David Harbour, Seth Green and Kevin Smith which took place as YouTube livestreams. My first interaction with Mainframe Comic Con. was at 6pm BST (or 12pm CST) when I watched an interview with *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*’s (Whedon, 2013-20) lead actor Clark Gregg, followed by an interview with the cast and creators of *NOS4A2* (O’Brien, 2019-20). Between these two interviews the view count averaged at 31 viewers between 6pm and 7pm (12pm-1pm CST). Though it is worth noting that YouTube’s live view count is commonly considered inaccurate. During these livestreams, the convention host asked the bulk of the questions, however, if viewers asked questions via YouTube’s paid “super chat” (as opposed to the free chat bar), viewers questions would be asked to the actors (the payment for these “super chats” subsequently went to the American Red Cross amongst a selection of other smaller charities). Day 2’s Kevin Smith interview conversely received a much higher view count of 222 viewers. Like MCM’s YouTube livestreams and SciFiWeekender’s Twitch streams, I observed minimal engagement, and both day’s events were heavily structured by a small number of convention organisers. Independent vendors did not feature heavilt at either Mainframe or SciFiWeekender, though it is worth acknowledging that Mainframe did highlight vendors and artists by including a selection of independent vendors and artists on their convention page website. Cosplayers and artists could both be found here, posted online after a selection process conducted by Mainframe organisers. The vendors, artists, cosplayer pages were presented in a very clinical fashion, almost like a catalogue, lacking the personal engagement of the in-person convention, yet still recognised as a fundamental part of the convention’s construction.

My observations of Mainframe and SciFiWeekender are comparable to the ways in which the (post)feminist industry and the fan industry emerged. In the rise of popular feminism or commodity feminism, McRobbie observes, “companies draw on the language of ‘Girl Power’ as though to bestow on their products a sense of dynamism, modernity and innovation” (McRobbie 2008, 533). In the case of the fan industry draws on the structures of fans and cosplayers to shape the fan industry blurring the lines between independent vendors and artists as somewhere between fan and industry. The movement online abuses this relationship as fan industries take control over any sense of community as products. The online exposure lent to vendors and creatives does not necessarily facilitate agency for these parties, nor does it guarantee them commerce. Fan industries have constructed ‘popular fandom’ which comes with desirable and undesirable expectations of how fans should engage and present themselves. Many of the above cases showed that it was preferable for the convention organisers to be allowed to get on with the convention schedule without interference or compromise.

From my observations of Mainframe and SciFiWeekender I found that audiences did not have space within which they could be expressive, to communicate (or to resist). Yet, the low viewing figures, can be read as a symptom of what happens when the relationship between fan and fan industry is broken by one party. Without room to be playful both Mainframe and SciFiWeekender received relatively low viewing figures. However, in this relationship between convention and viewer, we must also consider the streaming services and social media platforms convention organisers adopt. Latour examines the relationship between human and non-human actors which dictate the power relations between technology and user in western cultures. Latour argues, “no matter how clever and crafted are our novelists, they are no match for engineers. Engineers constantly shift out characters in other spaces and other times, devise positions for human and non-human users, break down competencies that they then redistribute to many different actors” (Latour 1992, 248). In this dynamic the ‘novelists’ are equivalent to the fans/users, at one level it would be easy to situate fan industries as the ‘engineers’ which to a certain extent they are, however convention organisers are also users. Whilst convention organisers may introduce their own rules and regulations, they remain subject to the rules and policies of online sites and software, namely Twitter, YouTube and Twitch. Each of these social media sites will profit from these online events through advertisements encoded in each of the platforms, and Twitch will receive further profit from subscriptions to the convention’s Twitch pages. Convention organisers must accept the terms and policies of the platforms they make use of, because of this, the fan industry is both producer and consumer. In turn these streaming services are middlemen to other brands, such as YouTube which is owned by Google, and Twitch which is owned by Amazon.

I do wish to highlight that it is these online contexts which highlight something more of the in-person convention, in that convention organisers remain subject to terms and conditions of the hired venues. For example, MCM London (October 2019) must design itself within the confines of ExCel London (exhibition and international convention centre), consequently MCM must also accept any conditions and rules the ExCel impose upon them, as well as being subject to paying for the use of the convention floor. Similarly, Cardiff Anime and Gaming Con (August 2019) is subject to the rules of the Mercure Cardiff Holland House Hotel and Spa. which sets out specific areas the convention can take place in, it is the location of a convention which ultimately structures where certain activities can take place, and how the activities may be conducted.

GlitchCon and Letting Audiences Play

Given the new online contexts of conventions throughout 2020 [and potential future events, regardless of the Covid-19 pandemic], it is unsurprising that one of the more successful conventions I attended online was GlitchCon. an online version of Twitch's annual Twitch Con. The event took place from 5pm GMT on 14th November 2020, until 5am on 15th November 2020. In comparison to most of the above conventions, GlitchCon. featured an extensive programme across four Twitch channels: the main channel which featured a selection of talks and shows took place on twitch.tv/twitch; independent artists and creative streamers appeared on twitch.tv/twitchpresents; gaming and role-play shows were hosted on twitch.tv/twitchgaming; and finally, Twitch's gaming tournament Twitch Rivals was broadcast on twitch.tv/twitchrivals. Given the convention organisers are also the owners of the streaming service, the whole convention was unsurprisingly well polished. From my initial observations of the programme, the convention differed from the usual fan convention I attended, where most of the conventions have been popular culture focused, centred around new film, TV, and gaming releases. GlitchCon. was specific to its platform featuring a host of notable Twitch streamers over the course of the convention's events. What is more, the convention made full use of Twitch's available features to engage with its audience.

Twitch's GlitchCon. is an exceptional case study, whilst it is still an example of a convention being translated to work within an online medium, GlitchCon. was established by the streaming service it is broadcast on. It would be as if Mercure Cardiff Holland House Hotel and Spa. hosted their own convention as opposed to renting their facilities out to the organisers of Anime and Gaming Con. At the start of this chapter, I opened with an analysis of how fan industries have incorporated fan tactics into its own practices, and the mixed ability of conventions being able to translate this to generate a similar relationship online.

In this final part, Twitch.tv will be discussed in detail introducing and deconstructing the unique language of this livestreaming platform. Whilst there is a great deal to unpack within this next step, it is an important process to better illustrate the control platforms have in dictating the limitations and conversely the potentials of the given platform (and thus how the online convention takes shape). In so doing I will also address the exceedingly messy positions both fans and fan industries take set against outside forces of power. Regardless of one's position, the messiness which can be observed in these relationships encapsulates how these groups flourish is sustained by this entanglement.

GlitchCon. opened with an event called 'This is GlitchCon.', the event was a welcoming lecture which distinctly marked out GlitchCon. as different to the usual fan convention. The introductory presentation was hosted by Emmett Shear (co-founder of Twitch.tv) joint by several other speakers from different department heads at Twitch. The keynote is a staple of Twitch Con., it is an opportunity for Twitch management to address Twitch content creators, moderators, and viewers about what Twitch has planned for the streaming service. The talk opened to an audience of 144,985 viewers (approx.). Each speaker addressed the audience as a community, as though all the viewers were collaborators in the Twitch enterprise, which unlike prior online conventions generates the feeling of Gee's 'affinity space' and the communal environment of the online sphere.

Whilst the convention was removed from popular film and TV, the convention did still contain all the distinct features one would expect from a convention hall. What we see in GlitchCon.'s programme is very similar to all other conventions (both online and offline). Unlike prior online conventions Twitch recognised the importance of communication and conversation and in so doing, GlitchCon reproduce the predefined atmosphere. It is seemingly an atmosphere which gives the illusion of collaboration, as of course audience engagement in the love chat is subject to Twitch moderators. What I have found in this breakdown of GlitchCon.'s programme, is that it follows many of the central attributes of the fan convention, which I marked out in Chapter 4: (1) The Vending Hall, (2) The Artist Alley, (3) The Gaming Corner, (4) The Signing Area, (5) The Photography Area, (6) The Open Area (and Cosplay Desk), and finally (7) The Main Stage. For example, the Main Channel acted as (7) The Main Stage, which incorporated the main shows, the After Party, and even a cosplay masquerade, overlapping with (5) The Photography Area and (6) Open Area (and Cosplay Desk), which the main channel also hosted. From 6:20pm – 8:40pm the cosplay contest featured a judging panel interviewing contestants and showing off the participants cosplays (mimicking the conversations held in open areas, or the cosplay help desk, reworked into the established cosplay masquerade. One might suggest that the Photography Area was mimicked in that that videos and photos were used to show off each cosplayer's entries alongside their interviews. These interviews were followed by an audience vote to decide the winners. This voting made use of the 'poll' function in Twitch's live-chat.

The channel Twitch Presents acted as the digital equivalent of (2) Artist Alley featuring notable art streamers giving talks and playing games. The channel also featured several streams sponsored by Adobe titled, 'Artist Alley Showcase Presented by Adobe', a direct nod to the Artist Alley of the 'in-person' convention. The Artist Alley Showcase was hosted by streamer Willneff, he interviewed a variety of art and creative streamers, offering the artist a space to advertise their streams and their work – which might be interpreted as a nod to (1) vendor halls of the in-person fan conventions. These interviews offered a much more personal insight, much closer to the experience of in-person conventions compared to previous online conventions.

The gaming zones which are a corner stone of conventions, often quite literally referred to as (3) The Gaming Corner. The gaming was featured on Twitch Gaming and Twitch Rivals. Twitch Rivals can be equated with the gaming tournaments which occur at larger conventions, such as the Yu-Gi-Ho! Card Game tournament I saw at MCM London 2019. Twitch Rivals featured notable gaming streamers compete in popular video games including: *Fortnight*, *League of Legends*, *Valorant*, and *Fall Guys*. Meanwhile Twitch Gaming was reserved for more casual shows, featuring Twitch streamers playing *Cyberpunk* (a table-top role-play game with a cult following, which has gained popularity following its adaptation into the upcoming video game *Cyberpunk 2077* (Badowski, A. 2020)). The fact they featured notable streamers; one might even align the personalities in attendance with (4) The Signing Area of in-person fan conventions at which viewers can see some of their favourite streamers in a unique setting to how they might typically stream. A recurring section on this channel worth giving a nod to is 'Let's Make a Game' in which the viewers got to vote on design choices which a team of game developers would use to build a game over the duration of the convention. The more relaxed atmosphere of Twitch Gaming, particularly with regards to the audience participation was a distinctive digital translation of the board gaming tables, and drop-in video game tables at Cardiff Anime and Gaming Con 2019, or Yorkshire Cosplay Con.

There is a replication of sameness observed in the foundations of an online convention, it is a sameness that is both recognisable yet vastly different in its performance. It's worth reflecting here on Adorno and Horkheimer and the notion of sameness between industrial (and audience) practises, after all, it is "under the ideological truce between them [industry and audience], the confirmation of the consumers, like the shamelessness of the producers they sustain, can have a good conscience. Both content themselves with the reproduction of sameness" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2006, 50). Under the conditions of social distancing and lockdown, the identifiable attributes of a convention; gaming, cosplay, artists, photography, and talks, have for the most part been condensed into a recognisable viewing experience.

In previous years Twitch Con. has been held in late September/October (2015-2019). GlitchCon. took place notably later taking place in mid-November. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that by postponing Twitch Con. and making the distinctive title change to GlitchCon., Twitch as both a streaming platform and as convention organiser have been able to learn from those who have used their services prior, to use the features of their streaming service to their full. To expand on a Manovich (2009) quotation used in Chapter 5, Manovich reflects on how western cultures have changed since the publication of de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988). Manovich addresses the notion that consumers are tactical in their interaction with products and environments, and he develops on this by suggesting: "companies have developed strategies that mimic people's tactics of bricolage, reassembly, and remix. The logic of tactics has now become the logic of strategies" (Manovich 2009, 323-4). In my observations of GlitchCon. I found that the convention made full use of its own resources as a platform, to make the audience feel as much a part of the convention events, whilst simultaneously maintaining Twitch's own rules, regulations, and scheduling of events. In the literature review I showed that fan academics have long been interested in "the importance of social interaction for fans who interact with one another in socially dynamic fan communities, or 'fandoms', via real-world events" (Plante et al. 2014, 49). On Twitch, the live-chat bar is a space in which viewers can comment and converse alongside the show, whilst the live-chat does not allow for in depth group conversations, it does permit audiences to simulate these in-person exchanges.

Many prior convention organisers had ignored the live-chat, however in the case of GlitchCon. not only was Twitch's live-chat active throughout the convention allowing viewers to comment, vote on polls and engage in the many choice-based streams; but during the opening lecture a portion of the screen was dedicated to a highlight reel of comments. The live-chat highlight reel would draw attention to certain comments, and it didn't take long for the audience to develop playful approaches to appear in this highlight reel in humorous ways. Such humorous highlights featured included: "is anyone reading these?", "I love you mom, thanks to Twitch I'm on TV", and "family friendly comment so I appear on stream". The intended function of this reel is to highlight comments that are both positive and in response to on screen material. However, the before mentioned comments are a means in which audiences have used the feature to gain the attention of other viewers, in ways which are not directly related to the convention itself. Comments such as these are interesting in several ways, at first, they might appear tactical in that they are humorous comments which play with Twitch bots and the expectations that come with a highlight reel. Of course, this dialogue exists in contradiction of itself, in that commentors must still conform to Twitch's chat rules, furthermore the self-awareness of the audience's engagement is still a process of using the feature and knowingly agreeing to Twitch's rules. The reel illustrates that tactics are gifted to audiences by Twitch which are still monitored by Twitch moderators and bare no consequence on the stream itself.

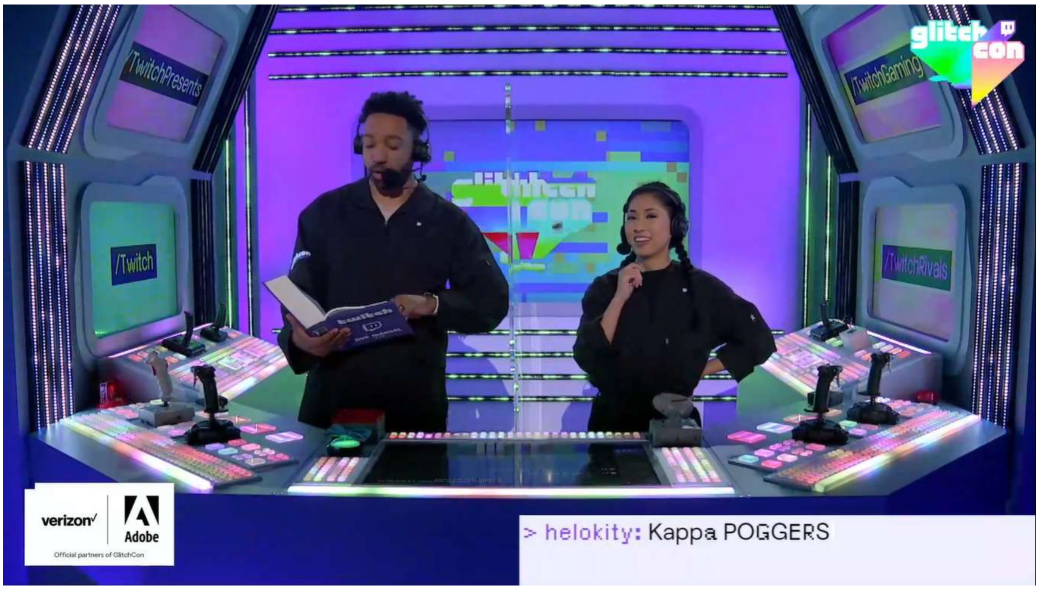
Manovich poses a useful question which is worth asking within these contexts, as to are audiences active in a situation in which activity is gifted? Manovich asks:

> Given that a significant percentage of user-generated content either follows the templates and conventions set up by the professional entertainment industry or directly reuses professionally produced content, does this mean that people's identities and imaginations are now even more firmly colonized by commercial media than they were in the twentieth century?
>
> Manovich 2009, 321

In response to Manovich's question, I would suggest that the answer is 'yes' at least within these contexts. Whilst comments such as "family friendly comment so I appear on stream" is a humorous play with expectation, the commentors action presents both a knowingness of how the highlight-reel bot. works (and of Twitch moderation more broadly), in this knowingness and understanding, this is indicative that the viewer has been colonized by Twitch, encouraged to learn the expectations and the formalities of Twitch as both community and streaming platform. In this example, the commentor also presents a desire to be a part of these structures, and to be a part of GlitchCon. in a way that is meaningful, elevating the viewer to a seeming position of participant. Thus, Twitch sets the conditions in which audiences can engage, and audience members ultimately choose of their own accord to both attend, and how they will engage with the convention. For members of the audience to construct a joke and to entertain other viewers shows a detailed level of knowledge and creativity.

Audiences have shown a playful knowingness and irony in their engagement with the highlight reel. It is irony and knowingness which consists as another central feature of postfeminist criticism. In Gill's book, *Gender and the Media* ([2007] 2015), Gill puts forward that "no discussion of the postfeminist sensibility in the media would be complete without considering irony and knowingness" (Gill 2015, 266). Gill points out that in "postfeminist media culture irony has become a way of 'having it both ways', of experiencing sexist or homophobic or otherwise unpalatable sentiments in an ironized from, whilst claiming this was not actually 'meant'" (Gill 2015, 266-7). In the case of Twitch commentators trying to appear in the highlights, the commenter engages in such a way as to be 'having it both ways', to be both humorous and to challenge the purpose of the highlight reel whilst simultaneously being a part of it and justifying the efforts that went into coding the reel by Twitch.

Play with form and a self-conscious knowingness of the 'new' form, has been built into GlitchCon. from the ground up. The name 'GlitchCon' directly acknowledges that there will be glitches [technical errors/interference/anomalies] over the course of the digital convention. Each talk/show during GlitchCon was framed by a loose fictional narrative in which (popular streamers) J.D. Witherspoon (6.3 Left) and Mari Takahashi (6.3 Right) had been teleported into 'The Glitch' to be the unsuspecting hosts of GlitchCon. It is up to them to navigate the interdimensional 'Glitch' and introduce each stream. Together they explained that:



> helokity: Kappa POGGERS

6.3

Mari: Each leaver is responsible for the starting and stopping of each of our four channels of content: /Twitch, /TwitchRivals, /TwitchGaming and /TwitchPresents
J.D: Yes! Yes!

Mari: It does indeed. Look at us learning!

The Glitch: Alert! Portal instability increased by 5%.

J.D.: Okay.

Mari: Now, The Glitch, and the portal it came from are super unstable.

J.D.: Yeah, yeah. It is a next level mess, like you would not believe.

Mari: But as you know, glitches bring good things.

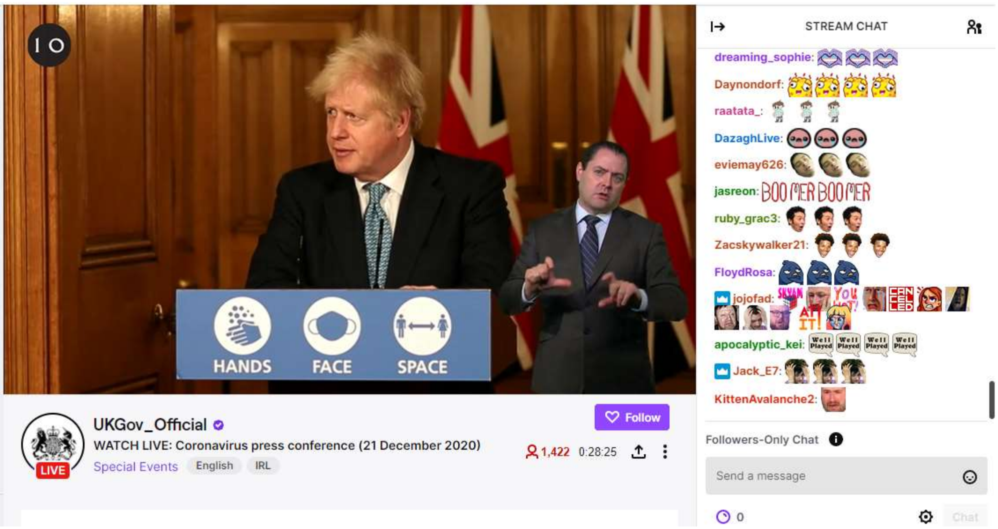
The 'glitch' narrative used to transition from each broadcast seemed especially appropriate as the above exchange led to J.D. and Mari launching Twitch Rivals, however when they cut to the stream, the audio was muted, and the broadcast had to cut back to J.D. and Mari until the audio was fixed. The muted audio could indeed be a scripted event, though this seemed unlikely. Rather this fictional narrative is a humorous acknowledgment that this is the first online convention Twitch has held, and thus technical difficulties are expected. What might have been an irritating technical difficulty, consequently, becomes a humorous event, something commentors in the live-chat can laugh about. Upon their return J.D. and Mari joked:

J.D.: Oh? We're back! Did we just glitch? Again?

Mari: Well, you know, it comes with the name.

By making glitches a laughing point, even something to get excited about (after all 'glitches bring good things'), in response to the muted audio comments in the live-chat included: "this is epic", "can't hear them lol [Laugh Out Loud]", "I think he broked it", "GLITCHES LEADS TO GOOD THING" and lots of 'Kappa' Twitch emotes – an emote which in the Twitch community "there is a wide agreement in the online community that this emote 'represents sarcasm, irony, jokes, and trolls alike'" (Barbieri et al. 2017, 12). The Kappa emote, and its usage in these contexts leads me onto addressing the well-established language of Twitch and its impact on the formation of online conventions that use the service.

An indicator of Twitch's success as a streaming service is that the UK Government even livestreamed their Coronavirus Briefings live on the platform, via their channel 'UKGov_Official'. See figure 6.4 below from 21.12.2020:



UKGov_Official
WATCH LIVE: Coronavirus press conference (21 December 2020)

dreaming_sophie:
Dayondorf:
raatata_:
DazaghLive:
eviemay626:
jasreon: BOOMER BOOMER
ruby_grac3:
Zacskywalker21:
FloydRosa:
jojofad:
apocalyptic_kei: Well Played Well Played Well Played Well Played
Jack_E7:
KittenAvalanche2:

6.4

UKGov_Official’s livestreams were in ‘emote-only’ mode, this means that viewers in the live-chat cannot comment on the livestream and are restricted to Twitch emotes, as one can see to the very right of figure 6.4. However, on Twitch each streamer can create their own custom emotes, and anyone who subscribes to a streamer has access to each of these emote databases. Given the varied databases of emotes available to Twitch viewers (as well as a varied selection of free emotes available to all Twitch users), audiences have a great deal of leverage in their critiques of the incompetent Tory government. For example, unique streamer emotes which depict various Twitch streamers crying, or holding their heads in their hands, have been reappropriated from their contexts of the original streamer to show the audiences distain for Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Another commentor uses unique streamer emotes to spell out “BOOMER” across two separate emotes to suggest the Tory government belongs to an out of touch generation. One can see at the top of the live-chat, one commentor sharing the Trans* flag which might be read as less of a critique against what is being said in the stream itself, but a critique on the conservative’s failure/and or attack on Trans* rights in the UK.

GlitchCon. received a total of 9,481,572 views which is distinctly higher than the before mentioned conventions. Of course, providing an exact explanation as to why comes down to a great many factors, one must consider the size of the brands participating, the popularity of the special guests, even time and date of broadcast. However, I suggest that it is largely down to the fact that Twitch has a loyal and unique community, distinctly different from, yet directly comparable with the communities that from around popular fan and comic conventions. The engagement between streamer and viewer are entangled in networks of contradiction which sustain a particular lexicon and thus the platform’s success.

GlitchCon. is unlike prior online conventions or indeed UKGov_Official's streams. At GlitchCon. audience and industry appear to be working in unison both playing along with the glitch narrative. One might go as far to say that the glitch narrative is a playful acknowledgment of the technical difficulties faced by streamers and Twitch users every day. In past literature, Twitch.tv has been discussed as a collaborative medium; between platform and streamer, in the work of: Hamilton, Garretson and Kerne (2014), Scully-Blaker, Begy, Consalvo and Gnazon (2017), and Consalvo (2017). This relationship has a materiality to it, composed of: the people watching (which one might quantify by the view count), the streamer, as well as the employees of Twitch. From one perspective the streamer might be perceived as holding greater power, in that they ultimately choose what is or is not to broadcast regardless of the viewers preference. Yet, if the broadcaster critiques their viewers, behaves in a way that their viewers don't like, or behaves in a way that Twitch doesn't condone, the streamer risk losing viewers or being banned form streaming.

My observations of play and knowingness between the convention organisers and the audience extended to the 'partner announcements'. For context, being made a Twitch Partner is a significant moment for the Twitch streamer. In essence it means that the streamer can monetize their streams. But, intermittently over the duration of the convention on the main channel, Erin Wayne (Twitch's Director of Creator and Community Marketing) interviewed lesser-known Twitch streamers and congratulated them by announcing their Twitch partnerships. These interludes were received with mixed responses, featuring positive comments including "well done", "congratulations", and heart emojis. But also contained many negative comments including "try hard", the 'comeonbrugh' Twitch emote (which depicts a man pulling a sceptical face), and "doubt" (which is in reference to a game mechanic in the detective-based video game *L.A. Noir* used to mark when the player thinks a character in the game is lying to the protagonist). Whilst many of these negatively phrased comments might appear to be critical of the seeming artifice of the situation, the comments are much more complicated than they appear. In full context, commentators have been spamming phrases such as "try hard" since the start of the stream (Try Hard - a common derogatory phrase in the gaming community referring both to people who succeed and/or people who try to win games by exploiting the games mechanics), it is a phrase which is also frequently used ironically. The comment "try hard" can be read in this circumstance as simultaneously complementary and derogatory, targeted at both the new partner as having worked their way up the 'Twitch meritocratic ladder' but also being directed at Twitch and the artifice of the interview segment.

The ‘comeonbrugh’ Twitch emote is indicative of the audience’s scepticism of the interview segments, indicating an assumption that the people being interviewed are fully aware of their (upcoming) partnership and the artificiality of the whole thing. One must subsequently interrogate why such emotes such as ‘Kappa’ and ‘comeonbrugh’ are available on Twitch, given their symbolic meaning, one might suggest that the emotes are self-deprecating on Twitch’s part. Yet, equally, one may read the use of this emote as a tongue-in-cheek knowing nod to the artifice (rather than a criticism). On knowingness and irony, Gill states, “the media offer contradictory, but nevertheless patterned constructions. In this postfeminist moment, as Judith Stacey (1987) has put it, feminist ideas are simultaneously ‘incorporated, revised and depoliticised’, and I would add attacked” (Gill 2015, 268-9). In the case of the online convention (especially within the context of Twitch), the ability to self-deprecate overshadows the powers of the producer by generating the feeling of collaboration and co-authorship (a notion Jenkins (1992) and other Acafan writers have written about fans, however failed to pick up on that these relationships were illusionary). It is therefore because of this seemingly cooperative relationship that not only does “the media offer contradictory, but nevertheless patterned constructions”, that so too does the audience/fans. Fans can take different readings of a single text, this might be the dominant intended reading, an oppositional reading, or even a negotiated (balanced) interpretation (Hall, 1973) it is these readings which subsequently translate to dominant, oppositional, and negotiated reactions.

The multiplicity of intention on behalf of both broadcaster and commentor, as well as the multiplicity of interpretation of broadcast as text, live-chat as text, and both streamer and live-chat as an entangled singular text, this creates a complicated multi-layered narrative. The networks of contradiction are in this case less hidden, but each party knows they are within a network of contradiction through which ironic humour can flourish, money can be made, and audiences entertained.

Such comments both support and critique Twitch, and support and critique the streamer. It is within these comments we find examples which both support and critique hierarchies which exist in popular western culture, and fandoms more specifically, such as the partnered streamer being more valued than the streamer who does not have a Twitch Partnership. In the case of partner announcements, this plays with narratives of selling out, in that by being partnered as part of a big event, this undermines the reality of filling in application forms (which every other partner has had to do). Equally, the life of a comment in live-chat is short lived and quickly passes by, regardless of the commentors intended praise or criticism, one might deem what they have to say is irrelevant, so long as they abide by Twitch's terms of service, even if they are openly critiquing the platform.

There are specific situations in which hierarchies can be decoded as I had done in Chapters 4 and 5, in which industry possesses power over a submissive audience and ways in which audiences replicate dominant modes of (patriarchal and heteronormative powers). But, upon taking a step back, what can be observed is that fan, fan industry, and popular media all contain a degree of (frequently contradictory) positions of greater and lesser powers, simultaneously confirming and critiquing the arguments of Chapters 1-3.

The phrasing of these observations as existing within "networks of contradiction" reflects a need to acknowledge the messiness of these communities and these industries, a recognition of their entangled structures, narratives, environments, and above all their complex power structures. Power comes and goes to all participants. However, this cannot be tracked in a linear fashion, rather power comes and goes simultaneously. It is only dependent upon the individual's perspective as to how these economies of power/popularity are interpreted. Where Banet-Weiser defined the 'popular' in terms of Hall's definition of the popular as a struggle for dominance, one can see this battle take place between fans and fan industry. But, if these positions occur at the same time as I suggest, it positions cosplayers (and fans) in a position of perpetual sameness, and any change that has the potential to occur, develops gradually often mimicking what came before it (just as the online convention mimics the convention hall).

For Banet-Weiser popular misogyny, "while seemingly present in all areas of social and cultural life, is not spectacularly visible in the way popular feminism is. But like popular feminism, popular misogynistic practices exist along a continuum" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 33). For the Acafan it is easy to be lured in by the tactics of audiences in comparison to the seeming normality of industrial standardisation. However, whilst seemingly hidden, the dominant presence of the fan industry is indisputable, and as I have shown tailors a lot of the fan activity which Acfans have represented as subversive and creative. These are observations of a messiness, which has so far been lacking in wider fan studies academia.

Closing Remarks on the Online Convention Space

Chapter 6 Part 1 has been an investigation of online conventions, in doing so I have illustrated fan industries responses to the Covid-19 pandemic to continue under the conditions of lockdowns and social distancing policies. But what is more, I have boiled down the dynamic between fans, fan industries and popular media, not as a battle for power, but as a field full of contradictions which compose its diverse existence. In many respects the online conventions which have emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic boil down the fan and cosplay experience to their central attributes – revealing them to be entangled in multiple discourses.

What was found from the examples of knowingness is something that exists within the networks of contradiction between producer and consumer. What is being observed here is a new set of norms and expectations (or rules) in the form of the online convention, set with and against the already well-established unique lexicon – of Twitch. GlitchCon and the before mentioned fan conventions, are an exciting opportunity; not only for attendees to test the waters of fan conventions whilst social distancing policies are upheld, but also offer great potential for future digital exclusive conventions beyond the restrictions of social distancing. As Jenkins suggested in *Convergence Culture*, "the web represents a site of exploration and innovation, where amateurs test the waters" (Jenkins 2006, 148). As such, audiences of GlitchCon. or indeed any convention, are passive consumers susceptible to Twitch as a medium, whilst simultaneously active participants in the formation of new digital leisure industry.

In Chapter 6 Part 1, I have analysed fan industry lead projects and its entanglement with fans suppression and fan agency. In Chapter 6 Part 2, I look at fan agency in the Nintendo Switch game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* [*AC:NH*] (Nogami, 2020) and fans entanglement with popular industry's appropriation tactics of fans, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Between these two case studies of online conventions and *AC:NH* I merge the ideas discussed over the duration of this thesis, from the active audience and creative cosplayer in Chapters 1-3, to the passive audience and subservient cosplayer in Chapters 4 and 5 and offer an explanation as to the ways in which fan activity and community are sustained by networks of contradiction.

Part 2 – Animal Crossing: New Horizons

Where Chapter 6 Part 1 examined the entangled relationship between fan industry and fan, by analysing fan industries move from in person conventions to online conventions during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the first part, I highlighted that as much as fan industries design and encode spaces to tailor audience interactions, audiences and industries inevitably take part in an exchange of attracting and opposing ideas in which both producer and consumer can be perceived as active and passive. In this second part to Chapter 6 I examine the relationship between fan and fan industry, by looking at the ways in which fans engaged with the video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* [*AC:NH*] (Nogami, 2020). *AC:NH* is a useful case study given its ties with the cosplay community, as cosplayers made use of the game's customization tools as an extension of the creative processes of cosplay during the Covid-19 pandemic which gave rise to virtual-cosplays in the game environment. However, the text can also help to illustrate how the contradictions I have been observing are not exclusive to cosplay, but in fact can be witnessed in popular fandom more broadly. The broad appeal of *AC:NH* developed a large fan community, and subsequently the interest of (outsider) popular industries.

Here, I will unpack my experiences and observations in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (*AC:NH*) and its surrounding community. By drawing on this video game an examining the discourses of power which structure the player community, I illustrate parallels between with discourses of power in cosplay practise. In drawing out these comparisons, I validate the notion of fans existing in networks of contradiction alongside fan industries and popular media.

Introducing Animal Crossing: New Horizons

On 16th March 2020 the UK entered a national lockdown in response to the Covid-19 global pandemic. Under this first lockdown, non-essential workers were instructed to work from home; schools and universities began online distance teaching, and all non-essential shops and public spaces were shut down. On 20th March 2020 the video game *AC:NH* was released on Nintendo Switch. *AC:NH* is a social simulator in which the player inhabits an island alongside anthropomorphic animal neighbours. With one's newfound virtual friends, one can collect bugs, fish, fossils, and art for the island museum, use a range of customization tools to construct one's dream (virtual) home, take part in a variety of seasonal events, and even connect with other players and visit one another's islands. In *AC:NH*'s first eleven days, the game sold 11.7 million units (Totten and Arch 2020, 91), and it is the bestselling *Animal Crossing* game to date (Zhu 2020, 1). The popularity of *AC:NH* is credited to have prompted a large rise in sales of the Nintendo Switch console, in North America and the UK, Nintendo Switch consoles had sold out in most places during the early months of lockdown (Zhu 2020, 1).

During the pandemic video gaming as a leisure activity increased, in a report on video games by market research company IPSOS they found that during the early months of the pandemic, time spent on video games increased by 1.5hrs per week across Europe (IPSOS 2020, 3). In the UK, the average play time per week in the second quarter of 2019 was 11.7hrs compared with the 2nd quarter of 2020 which grew to 13.6hrs per week (IPSOS 2020, 5). The report directly correlates this rise of game play with social distancing policies. "The coronavirus pandemic has increased video game playing time; players are replacing other hobbies which are not possible under quarantine and have time overall to spend playing video games due to fewer obligations" (IPSOS 2020, 7). Video games such as *AC:NH* have become an important tool, allowing players to have new experiences and visit virtual places one cannot physically visit. Furthermore, online multiplayer games offer unique spaces in which people can socialise during a time in which people could not physically socialise with others.

Players engagements with *AC:NH* have been vast and complicated existing both in-game and outside in online groups and forums. Fans and industries alike have used the game in lots of different ways for lots of different means, making it an apt case study to further illustrate the networks of contradiction that exist between fans and producers, especially when it comes to an analysis of cosplay. During my online ethnography in online cosplay forums, I observed many cases where cosplayers used the virtual space of *AC:NH* to create customizable virtual costumes, during a time when one could not cosplay out at conventions. Academics, namely in fan studies, have become fascinated by *AC:NH*, and the game has been the subject of numerous academic studies, many of which are defined by the contexts of the Covid-19 global pandemic. Such *AC:NH* studies includes the work of: Lewis, Trojovsky and Jameson (2020) who examine socializing in *AC:NH* and the games impacts on mental health; Lin and Su (2020), who present findings to suggest that *AC:NH* can be a productive educational tool; and Comerford (2020), who draws on responses from 2000 players to examine players' expression of self in this virtual landscape.

Autoethnographic Reflections, and Virtual-Cosplay

In Chapter 2, I outlined my methodologies, drawing on the methodologies associated with the Acafan cosplay scholarship of King (2016), Lamerichs (2014, 2018), and Winge (2019), who have each drawn on their own autoethnographic methods cosplaying and engaging in the cosplay community as a pivotal part of their research. I adopted this position choosing to collect data between my own autoethnographic participations and observations in conjunction with ethnographic semi-structured interviews as my primary means of collecting data. Just as I cosplayed Sucy Manbavarian from *Little Witch Academia* (Yoshinari, 2017) and attended fan conventions as unpacked in Chapter 3 Part 1, I purchased a copy of *AC:NH* and put together my own virtual-cosplays of Sucy to further my online autoethnographic research. However, where I do not personally identify as a cosplayer, I would class myself as a fan of video games and have an existing familiarity of the Nintendo brand. With this said *AC:NH* is my first *Animal*

Crossing game and I had to learn to interact with the rules of limitations of the game, as well as the online communities that exist around the game. I have provided criticism of Acafan methods for overlooking cases of abuse between fans and hierarchies in cosplay scholarship. However, I maintain that the Acafan methodology is incredibly useful in illustrating the position of fan as productive, creative, and powerful which makes up one half of the contradictory networks' paradigm. Reflections of learning are in themselves a productive research process, and my experiences diving into *AC:NH* was no different, and I even found myself enjoying the game greatly and still play it outside of the bounds of this research project.

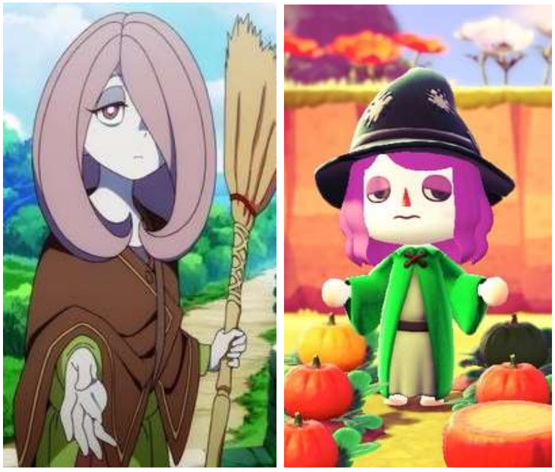
Most video games provide avatars for players, many games even allow players to customize and tailor these characters. Customizable characters in video games and other forms of role-play games more broadly have often been compared with the practises of cosplay. Many fan and video game scholars have researched the impact of video game avatars upon the player, and the ways in which these avatars communicate identity and alternative identities. See: Jenson, Taylor, Castell and Dilouya (2015), Chess (2017), and Morgan, O'Donovan, Almeida, Lin and Perry (2020). In my opening literature review, and especially in Chapters 2 and 3, I placed my attention on examining the ways in which cosplayers use costume to play with one's expression of identity and as a medium which could be taken to spaces such as fan conventions or shared in private online groups as spaces devoid of consequences. Gaming avatars can offer a similar experience, allowing players to play with one's identity and how one expresses oneself within the game world, and to others in online multiplayer gaming experiences.

Avatar creation in *AC:NH* is slightly different to most gaming experiences. Unlike high fantasy games such as *World of War Craft* (Pardo, Kaplan, and Chilton, 2004-) or *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Howard, 2011) where one might present oneself as a Lizard Archer, or a Orc Warrior, the game *AC:NH* encourages the player to create avatars of 'themselves'. When the player starts a new game in *AC:NH* the player is encouraged create a virtual representation of themselves. The player is prompted to provide their name, birthday (which is celebrated by the island villagers in-game), and to choose an island which matches one's own time zone (meaning the player experiences the changing of seasons in-game alongside the changing seasons of the real world). A quick scroll through *AC:NH* social media groups such as 'Animal Crossing: New Horizons (UK)' on Facebook (23.2k members), or 'r/AnimalCrossingNewHor' on Reddit (180k members), confirms that players tend to talk about their experiences in *AC:NH* as if they were their own lived experiences. In online groups, players will invite one another to their islands, share materials, hold quizzes, all of which are extensions of the in-game world as if existing alongside the real world, when one cannot meet with others in person.

The varied clothing customization options available in the game, not only allows players to replicate the style of dress one might wear in day-to-day life, but also allowed players to cosplay and experiment. Given that coplayers were unable to congregate in person, *AC:NH* provides a unique space in which cosplayers can socialise and play. The momentary nature of costumed play is facilitated in-game with the 'Wand' item which allows players to quickly change sets of clothes, and freely select from different costumes/personas. From my online observations I also found that many *AC:NH* cosplayers embellished their costumed experience by incorporating a multitude of the game's in built emotive animations which one could use to embellish the performance of their character. Players would also embellish their performances by arranging in-game items to replicate sets from popular film, TV, comics, and video games. To my surprise, the process of creating an *AC:NH* cosplay, has remarkable parallels with real life. Just like in the real-world cosplayers can construct a cosplay either by mix-and-matching store-bought clothes, by purchasing a pre-made cosplay, or cosplayers can construct a costume by hand. In *AC:NH* players have a choice of three similar options: to mix-and-match clothes from the in-game clothes shop, download other people's custom designs, or players can create their own custom clothes. Just like in the real world these costumed performances are generally treated as momentary experiences (for many players).

When adapting my Sucy cosplay into a digital *AC:NH cosplay*, I chose three different Sucy designs to try my hand at the three different creative tools offered in the game. These included: Sucy's civilian robes seen in S1Ep1 'New Beginnings' (Shimada, 2017). Secondly, Sucy's Ceremonial Robes, which I had previously cosplayed with a costume I had purchased pre-made from an online cosplay store. Finally, Sucy's school uniform, which I had previously cosplayed having crafted the costume myself.

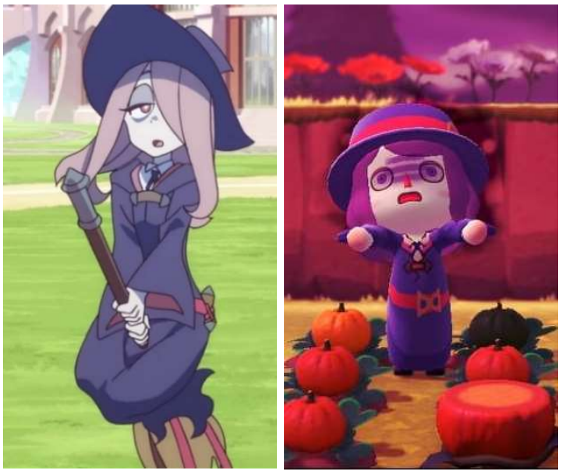
Firstly, Sucy's civilian robes. In *AC:NH*, players can purchase clothing from the in-game clothes shop run by two young hedgehogs, the Able Sisters. Items in the store change daily with unique items on slae depending on the season, in total the player can choose from a total of 4,692 items of clothing (animalcrossing.fandom), in exchange for the in-game currency 'bells'. The large variety of clothing and item choices grew to over 9,000 combinations following the final game update on 5th November 2021 allowing players a greater deal of customization options. In the below figures one can see a screenshot showing Sucy in her civilian robes from *Little Witch Academia* (6.5) alongside a screenshot of my *AC:NH* avatar cosplaying as Sucy using only the in-game items (6.6).



6.5 and 6.6

The virtual-cosplay came about by luck, given that the items of the green robes and witch's hat appeared randomly in-game, and whilst there are glaring inaccuracies compared with the source material, by focusing on similar colour pallets I have successfully evoked Sucy's character. Replicating Sucy's pale skin, tired eyes and pink hair was easily achieved using avatar customization tools. The importance of colour was something I had found in the construction of my own 'real world' cosplay of Sucy, and vital in successfully evoking the animated form of the character. In *AC:NH* I found that the altered colour scheme visually pleasing as the virtual cosplay evokes the style of *Little Witch Academia* whilst still fitting in with the stylised aesthetic of *AC:NH*.

Secondly, the 'Design Portal' is an in-game kiosk, located in the Able Sisters shop, which allows players to download other players custom clothes. Many of these custom made clothes are subsequently shared on *AC:NH* social media groups for other players to access. Making use of this tool, the second virtual-cosplay I wore is Sucy Manbavaran's ceremonial robes (6.7), and just as I had purchased Sucy's ceremonial robes in real life, I downloaded and wore another *AC:NH* player's custom designed Sucy robes (6.8).

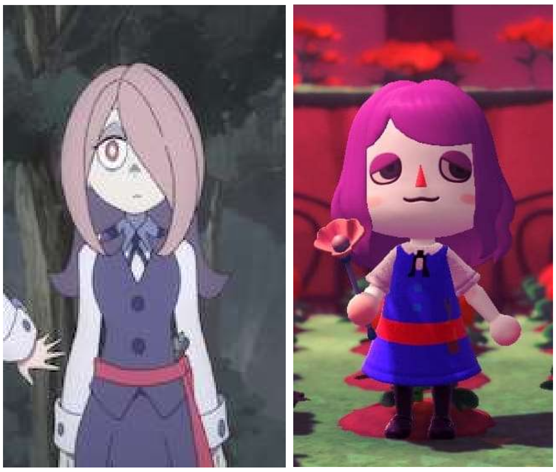


6.7 and 6.8

When I searched “Sucy Manbavaran” in the Design Portal, there were several options available from multiple creators. I downloaded my favourite, and matched the costume with the same avatar make-up and used the ‘haunted’ emote to perform the spooky and mischievous characteristics of Sucy. Much like my cosplay of Sucy’s ceremonial robes, the virtual-cosplay equivalent was similarly fulfilling even though I had not actually put effort into designing the piece. The emotional gratification I experienced resonates back to Mountfort, Geczy and Peirson-Smith (2018) who suggest that cosplay comes about through two key motivations, “for the sake of wish fulfilment” and “cathartic release” (Mountfort et al. 2019, 239). Performance is a creative act in and of itself and in so doing the player takes a level of narrative control, even when they have had little or no control in the origins of said character or craft of costume.

The emotional gratification I experienced through virtual-cosplay extends the argument that the virtual avatar in *AC:NH* is in some way an extension of myself. The avatar is both a representation of self and an extension of the self, a notion which is reflected in the findings of Chris Comerfort’s 2020 study which collected data from a total of 1,896 *AC:NH* players. Comerfort found that “during COVID-19’s social upheaval, the gameplay personas of *ACNH* – reliant on their serious leisure activities both in- and out-of-game – emerge as a confluence of player and character enacting tasks to serve the empathic needs of both” (Comerfort 2020, 110). My *AC:NH* avatar can be read as a representation of myself and in turn myself as player. I might not be physically on an island talking with an anthropomorphic racoon, but the virtual experience has a physical impact on myself and my emotional state.

Finally, in *AC:NH* players can cosplay by creating their own unique clothing using the Custom Designs tool. The Custom Designs tool provides players with a selection of clothing templates for items such as shirts, robes, or dresses which the player can then ‘paint’ on using a selection of colours and brush types. As one can see in the below figures, my third *AC:NH* virtual-cosplay was of Sucy's school uniform (6.9) Just as I made my Sucy school uniform cosplay by crafting and re-appropriating materials, I replicated Sucy's uniform using the game's Custom Designs tool (6.10).



6.9 and 6.10

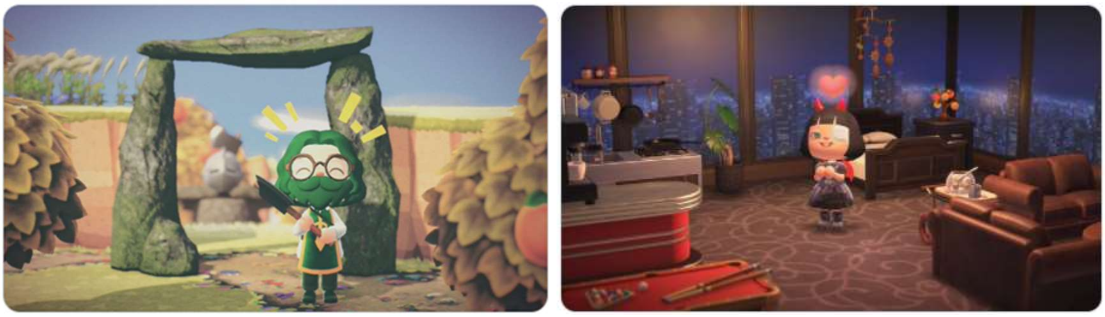
My engagements with virtual-cosplay in *AC:NH* re-enforced the findings of Chapter 3 Part 1 in which I argued that cosplay is a process of interpretation, replication, and adaptation. In Chapter 3 I drew on Lamerichs' suggestion that cosplay "is not about making the game real – one can even argue that cosplay is never the real thing, no matter how good it looks – but about personalising it and drawing it closer to the creator" (Lamerichs 2018, 205). My personalisation of Sucy's character comes from my own unique interpretation of Sucy. For example, a hybridity of authors can be read into Sucy's wand. Just as I had crafted a wand as a prop for my physical cosplay, I replicated this in *AC:NH* by drawing it onto Sucy's dress (as well as crafting the in-game 'Shell Wand' to be held as a prop). The virtual Sucy cosplay is a hybrid of authors and both fictional and real identities, combining the fictional worlds of *AC:NH* and *Little Witch Academia*, but also my own real identity.

Just as I illustrated in my earlier chapters, through my play with *AC:NH* virtual-cosplays I have highlighted the ways in which players identities are entangled with their chosen characters through play with virtual-cosplays in *AC:NH*. A player's identity becomes an entanglement between not only their own identity and their chosen character, but also with their own virtual avatar, and in turn Nintendo as the game's producers which facilitate this entanglement. In the next section, I analyse the potentials of *AC:NH* as a social space in which

I continue to draw on my own observations, but also draw on the experiences of other *AC:NH* players just as I drew on the experiences of other cosplayers in Chapter 3 Parts 2 and 3.

Ethnographic Data and Virtual Cosplay

In online *AC:NH* groups, I noted that (like myself), many players experienced heavy emotional connections with their in-game avatars and virtual-cosplays. To elaborate, Vossen (2020) compares *AC:NH* to the comfort of Hallmark movies whilst simultaneously being "a painful reminder of a life I can't have. This feeling has only become more intense while living through a worldwide pandemic" (Vossen 2020, 113). It is the contexts of the pandemic which have defined *AC:NH* for academics and players. For many players and for Vossen, *AC:NH* "is the only place where I can go and safely spend time with friends, where I can 'get outside' or go shopping without worrying about contracting something deadly" (Vossen 2020, 113). In Chapter 3 Parts 2 and 3, I unpacked data collected from interviews. Whilst I have not conducted any formal interviews with *AC:NH* players, on Halloween week 2020, I noticed that many *AC:NH* players were putting together and sharing virtual-costumes online. I followed suit and shared my virtual Sucy cosplay via Twitter, my post included some *AC:NH* tags and encouraged *AC:NH* players to share their virtual-cosplays with me to be included in this research. I received two responses, one is a virtual-cosplay of The Green Knight from Arthurian legend (6.11), and the second is an original character which draws on the devil incarnate character type from popular Japanese Anime (6.12).



6.11 and 6.12

Both players have made use of clothing items sold in-game and use animated expressions to embellish the personalities of their characters. The Green Knight even includes a prop axe as part of their costume. What I am perhaps most drawn to is the ways in which both players have enhanced their virtual-cosplays by customizing a unique set to situate the player in a narrative that appropriately accompanies their cosplay performance.

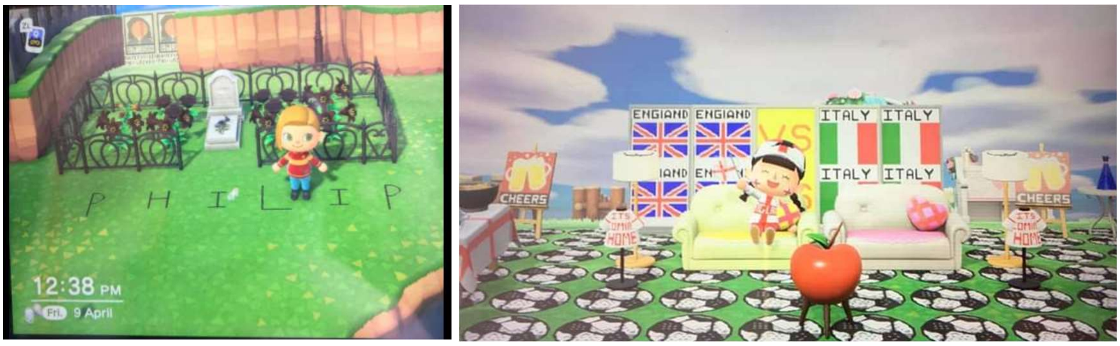
For my own virtual-cosplay I created a pumpkin patch as a fitting setting to take screenshots of my Sucy cosplay. The Green Knight is accompanied by the Green Chapel (from the Arthurian poem *Gawain*) having adjusted the land to create a space within a hill as well as using props such as a stone arch, and in the background one can see a knight's helmet to evoke the Arthurian setting. Finally, the devil incarnate has created a dimly lit penthouse which seemingly overlooks a dark urban skyline evoking popular Anime iconography, or even North American TV series such as *Lucifer* (Kapinos, 2016-). Bainbridge and Norris (2009) suggest as many other cosplay scholars have, that through cosplay the player liberates oneself from day-today cultural norms.

> In the context of fan communities, it can perhaps be better read as part of this play with identity, the assumption of an identity which not only identifies, aligns and defines the cosplayer with a particular character, series or group, but also liberates that cosplayer from traditional gender roles.
>
> Bainbridge and Norris 2009, 96

Virtual cosplay in *AC:NH* gives players the opportunity to play with identity on avatars which represent the player. The world of *AC:NH* permits a space for the player to experiment, express and play with how they present themselves through the design of ones avatar, and virtual costumed experiences. For example, the performance of the Green Knight is not only playful with Arthurian source material but (whether intentional or not) results in a play with masculinity hybridising the cute cartoon styles of *AC:NH* with the iconography associated with medieval knights. Likewise, during my discussion with interview participant Brock, she found that in her crossplay of Dipper from *Gravity Falls* (Hirsch, 2012-16) this play allowed her a safe momentary experience to explore her own gendered identity. Unlike many other video games, in *AC:NH* there are no restrictions on what clothes the player can or can't wear, regardless of the player's in-game gender. The player can customise their avatar with any of the clothing options available and the animal villagers will always be full of warm compliments for the player and their outfit of choice.

In some ways, virtual-cosplays are more accessible than physical cosplay. In *AC:NH* one does not have to worry about: access to materials, one's skills as a tailor or prop maker, the practicalities of wearing a costume for hours on end at the convention hall, or any anxieties of performing a character in front of a crowd. In person cosplayers risk being "criticized for failing to fully reproduce their character's appearance, even when these failures are due to such factors as body size or medical necessity" (Lamerichs 2011, 4.4). What has been observed so far is fan agency, players display creativity in their use of the customizable options available in *AC:NH*, through which players have the opportunity to create and share unique virtual costumes. In *AC:NH* there are freedoms given to the player which have very much been defined in the contexts of the limitations present in the real world during the Covid-19 pandemic.

I also observed cases of fan agency through transmedia play in the form of AC:NH groups on Facebook, such as the public group 'Animal Crossing: New Horizons (UK)'. But, not only are players engaging between *AC:NH* and Facebook, players display an entangled relationship between different media platforms, different media franchises, but also current events. For example on Facebook many *AC:NH* players shared their engagement with current events such as the Death of Prince Phillip on 9th April 2021. Player's shared screenshots of their *AC:NH* games within which players had created garden memorials and custom art. In figure 6.13 one can see a screenshot from a parent on Facebook, in their post they explained that the screenshot was of their child's memorial garden for Prince Phillip. *AC:NH* as a platform for mourning is the subject of Torres paper (2020), which examines how players have used the customizable tools of *AC:NH* to commemorate the death of loved ones, this is in part in association with social distancing restrictions imposed on funeral ceremonies. *AC:NH* players have also engaged in other national events such as the UEFA Euro Championship England/Italy final for example in figure 6.14 a player has recreated a divided living room filled with flags and props celebrating both finalists, England and Italy, to seemingly watch said final in.



6.13 and 6.14

The play enacted in these two examples (and indeed the play observed by the Green Knight and Devil Incarnate) each confirm early fan studies work, notably the work of Jenkins who championed fans as creative consumers who hold power within the producer/consumer paradigm. For Jenkins, "fans get to keep what they produce from the materials they 'poach' from mass culture, and these materials sometimes become a limited source of economic profit for them as well" (Jenkins [1992] 2013, 49). Players get to embellish national events through the creative options available in *AC:NH*, in these virtual landscapes players take control over cultural events during times when such events are faced with restrictions. Whilst there aren't opportunities to monetise the virtual-cosplays of *AC:NH*, virtual cosplayers can still gain higher status among fellow *AC:NH* fans (particularly within online groups and forums such as Facebook's 'Animal Crossing: New Horizons (UK)').

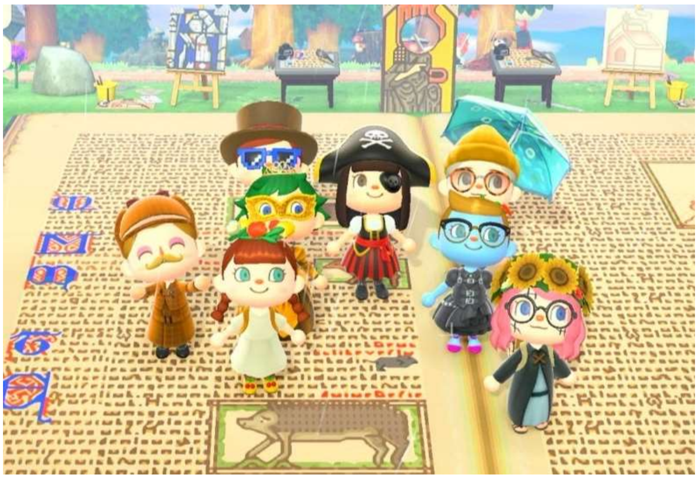
In Chapter 3 Part 3 I took a more critical position on the Acafan Methodology given that many of my observations and my interview participants recalled situations which did not conform with Acafan cosplay literature. I drew on cosplayers experiences of abuse and harassment and the ways in which cosplayers were not entirely removed from the hierarchies of day-to-day life, in contrary to the work of prior cosplay scholars. In *AC:NH* online groups I observed how players who collected the most items (museum items, clothes, or house furnishings) and and/or had multiples of certain items were granted status among their peers as talented and resourceful players (overlooking that items that appear in-game are completely random). In my observations of the Facebook group 'Animal Crossing: New Horizons (UK)' I assessed higher status with engagement (such as by how much likes or positive comments a post received). Examples of players with higher status could be found in members who regularly posted funny videos, shared custom design codes, or players who show off screenshots of their own remarkable landscapes (which tend to use a combination of in-game and customizable items to create complex optical illusions). By contrast, players asking for help, sharing their favourite island villagers, holding item raffles, posting thoughts on base-game items, or sharing screenshots of other people's islands tend to get little to no engagement from other group members. Members with little engagement thus might be considered to possess little status or influence over other members. In the group, it is also worth acknowledging Facebook 'stamps' which appear next to group members names, including 'New Member', 'Rising Star', 'Valued Responder', 'Group Expert', and 'Admin'. These stamps mark out a hierarchy unique to the group, where Facebook rewards members continued use and engagement within the group. The greater the 'stamp', is a mark of one's greater position within the group, which is again marked by the players regular engagement, but also the engagement the player receives.

Two other points which came up in my concerns for cosplay communities in Chapter 3 Part 3 regarded race and expendable capital, which are both worth briefly reflecting on in relation to *AC:NH*. Firstly, discussions of race by my cosplay participants centred around examples of racism in cosplay. One can also locate racism in *AC:NH*, for example as part of the 2020 Winter Update, new hairstyles were added to the game for Black fans and players of colour. An article by Hernandez for Polygon comments on the update trailer noting that the update will “make a notable difference for Black fans, or players of colour. You can now, for instance, give your character dreadlocks or an afro, or a fade” (Hernandez, 2020). Whilst the update might be considered a success and was reported as such, the failure to include the hairstyles upon the games release is indicative of the structural racism the base-game was complicit in. Secondly, the accessibility of cosplay as a leisure activity, or *AC:NH* as a leisure activity are both barriered by their substantial price tags. In Chapter 5, I drew on Kroski (2015) who references Rosenberg and Letamendi’s 2013 cosplay survey which found that “most respondents spent between $100 and $399 per costume” (Kroski 2015, 2). Whether a cosplay is store bought or handmade, the costs of materials/commissions the participant needs to have expendable capital. Making cosplays in *AC:NH* are free; however, to play *AC:NH* one must have expendable funds to purchase a Nintendo Switch console would set one back $299.99 (Nintendo Store price) and the *AC:NH* game retailed at $59.99 (Nintendo Store price) without which potential players will struggle to be a part of the game’s fan community. Both cosplay and *AC:NH* can only be accessed by people with expendable income. Whilst these finances do not necessarily explicitly exclude people, these financial factors do limit both leisure activities to being exclusive pastimes.

Ethnographic Data and Special Events

Just as Chapter 3 Part 3 scratched at the surface of a ‘darker side’ to the cosplay community which other cosplay scholars have failed to observe, in favour of representing the utopian creativity of cosplayers, I find myself in a similar position as I analyse the *AC:NH* fandom.

In Chapter 4, I began to unpack these frictions observed in the experiences of my cosplay participants by examining fan conventions and the ways in which fan industries tailored cosplayers engagements. There are numerous articles and papers on the social events *AC:NH* players have been able to host on *AC:NH*, for example: Twitch streamers such as Leoz spent New Year’s Eve on *AC:NH*, counting in 2021 with friends, for a viewing audience. During Leoz stream, she and her friends gambled with the in-game currency, danced with the animal villagers, and lit fireworks at midnight (Leoz, 2020/21). In another example, the 2020 paper by Totten and Arch (2020) shares how *AC:NH* became a place where they could showcase student work from the "Game Prototyping and Animation and Game Design Senior Capstone courses at Kent State University" (Totten and Arch 2020, 83), using a custom island as an exhibition space. Finally, over the last year, I even attended the public lecture 'Custom Design Scriptorium: Remixing Digitized Medieval Manuscripts' on 30th June 2020, hosted by Stanford University (USA) where a group of eight players (total number of players who can connect via *AC:NH* multiplayer) visited the beforementioned Green Knight's island (following our prior Twitter engagement). As the game has no voice connection, a discussion was held over Discord, which facilitated a talk by the Green Knight who discussed how they crafted a large replica of a double page from a Medieval Manuscript using the custom design tool (6.15).



6.15

In the above examples, players used *AC:NH* to facilitate events much in the same way fan industries had to adapt to online spaces as discussed in Part 1. Each of these events depend on incorporating social media (as did fan conventions). For example, Leoz depended on Twitch to engage with a viewing audience as she streamed her in-game antics. The organisers of the GameJolt showcase used Twitter and a regularly updated blog to promote their events. Gamejolt also featured hyperlinks on custom made designs in-game which direct visiting players to follow up on the student made games (Totten and Arch 2020, 94). And, in the case of the public lecture presented by the Green Knight, they advertised their events via Twitter and through a blog. And used Discord to deliver their talk (which was also recorded via Twitch). Connecting over voice-chat software such as Discord is much more convenient than the in-game text-based chat.

Players connecting with out-of-game social media are not in detriment to the game, Melanie Kohen (2020) examines attractions that take place outside a San Diego International Comic-Con to attract the same audiences. Kohen observes “the industry encourages co-creation as long as it happens to their benefit. Marketers perceive the proliferation of digital platforms as increasing consumer agency” (Kohnen 2020, 8). The agency of fans in examples of cross-platform engagement with *AC:NH* is mutually beneficial to: the player, social media sites, and Nintendo. In fact, one might argue that Nintendo rent players a sense of agency given that multiplayer is only accessible if the player subscribes to Nintendo Online (which is priced at £17.99 per year, for an individual account. Or £31.49 per year, for a family [19.07.2021]). As such the any sense of agency or play consumers might feel, this is set against the structures of Nintendo. I find myself asking are audiences creative, when any creativity they display is sanctioned momentary play permitted by Nintendo, just as cosplaying at fan conventions was sanctioned momentary play by fan industries.

Much like the fan convention, costume was pivotal in each of these examples. In Leoz’s New Year’s celebrations her and her friends brought various virtual-costumes including: a “Molly Cosplay” (a cosplay of one of the Duck villagers), a widow costume titled “’cause I killed hubby” evoking the rich murderess of an Agatha Christie play, and a “casino dealer” cosplay to accompany the games they played. In the case of the GameJolt event by at Kent State University “faculty also designed an in-game t-shirt for the event, which could be accessed by visiting the island’s clothing shop […], as a souvenir for visitors” (Totten and Arch 2020, 96). In Chapter 4, I drew on Adorno and Horkheimer who argued that “even during their leisure time, consumers must orient themselves according to the unity of production” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2006, 44). Cosplay and costume in *AC:NH* public events is clearly a prominent attribute, but then so is costume and cosplay in real life parties and events. It can be interpreted that virtual cosplay is a means of normalising these online events by replicating the experiences consumers are already familiar with.

With this said, costume is admittedly less common at public lectures, during my attendance to the public lecture on the Green Knight’s Island, we were all encouraged to ‘dress-up’ for the event as if it were a fancy-dress party, as one can see in figure 7.11. In the figure I am dressed as Sherlock Holmes (far left), other players appeared as a pirate, another as a zombie, and another as what appears to be the lead character from *Midsommar* (Aster, 2019). One might suggest that cosplay has become common place in *AC:NH* events, not out of a need to replicate in-person events, but a means of replicating the newly found expectations of an *AC:NH* event. The fact that virtual-cosplays have become something of a norm in *AC:NH* social gatherings, this prompts a further interrogation of virtual-cosplay as an *AC:NH* medium. In *AC:NH* there is a limitation to a players creativity given that the game is programmed with accessible custom options and actively encourages players to make use of them. Thus, players creativity might be read as less a display of creativity, rather players are simply following the expectations of the game, and virtual-cosplay is ultimately an easy way to brighten up an event which the game actively facilitates. Within the entangled networks of contradiction the video game *AC:NH* facilitates both creativity and submissive consumption equally.

Whilst I do not in any way wish to undermine the creative efforts of any *AC:NH* players, each player is restricted to, and motivated by, the mechanics of the game. *AC:NH* is a "disciplinary space" (Foucault [1975] 2019, 102) just as I had referred to the convention hall floor in Chapter 4. Foucault defines the disciplinary space as an environment, "divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed" (Foucault 2019, 102). Ultimately *AC:NH* both facilitates and controls what players can and cannot do, the creative components of the game are in the game's programming and actively encouraged by Nintendo. What is more, Nintendo benefits from the social sharing of custom designs and visiting other people's islands, as it requires that players buy a subscription to Nintendo Online (in addition to the console and base game). The craft and customization that players put into *AC:NH* is a virtual labour and thus cannot change or revolutionize the world outside, much like cosplay cannot revolutionise gender norms, both cosplay and *AC:NH* are confined to momentary performances. Thus, players virtual-cosplays/events are pseudo-activities, just as I have previously conceptualised cosplay. Adorno writes that a "Pseudo-activity is misguided spontaneity. […] They [people] prefer to be distracted by spurious and illusionary activities, by institutionalized vicarious satisfactions" (Adorno 1991, 194). Much like a sandbox, play is confined to a cordoned off space, play is permitted, but detached from any real tangible consequence. In the next section I draw even further on the ways in which *AC:NH* players abide by the rules and expectations of Nintendo, and the ways in which Nintendo structures play and regulates players creative capabilities.

Location Design and Structuring Play

In Chapter 5 Part 1, I looked at the ways in which audiences replicated pre-existing heteronormative values a consequence of mimicking characters which perpetuate these values from popular media. I used cosplays of DC's Catwoman as a case study to present these arguments, it was during this analysis I found that commentors on social media responded very differently between female cosplayers of Catwoman and male cosplays of Catwoman. Comments on the female cosplayer (Selina) were overwhelmingly positive, whereas the male cosplayer (Kyle) received overwhelmingly negative comments. In my analysis I found that both cosplayers were subject to heteronormative tastes of sexualised femininity. To contextualise these case studies, I drew on critiques of postfeminism, which proved to be a useful framework in beginning to unpack the hierarchies that are not only present in the cosplay community, but in North American and UK popular media and culture.

During my time observing *AC:NH* groups, I observed no notable examples of abuse or harassment (though this is not to suggest that it does not occur). In many circumstances *AC:NH* has been praised for the fact that, players can wear all clothing/make-up/accessories without limitations, discussed in greater detail in Smereczynski, 2020 thesis. Whilst game avatars only have a choice between male and female, the fact that *AC:NH* allows for such gender fluidity through presentation is remarkable given that it is unlike many other video games which are more prescriptive over gender presentation such as in other Nintendo games including *Pokémon Sword/Shield* (2019) (see Skentelbery, 2020). However, *AC:NH* does perpetuate other norms. In Byrne's 2021 thesis 'Simulating America: Ludocapitalism of the 1990s in Wall Street Kid and Animal Crossing', she argues that "social simulation games can have magical or fantastical elements such as talking animals, but at their core are usually a reflection of how societies operate in the real world" (Byrne 2021, 1). In *AC:NH*, players are encouraged to buy and sell items and fill their catalogues by purchasing/making one of each item that appears in the game. A common sight in *AC:NH* online groups is players offering to trade multiples of any items/recipes they already have for ones they do not yet have. Byrne, suggests that *AC:NH* is built on a blueprint of consumerism, however,

> Animal Crossing disguises itself as wholesome and innocent, putting a glossy veneer over the realities of capitalism […] the disguise projects a message to players that hustling for money and labouring over the development of the town are worthwhile endeavours because they benefit the collective community – and the fact that the citizens of this community are so irresistibly cute adds to the incentive
>
> Byrne 2021, 16

AC:NH reinforces values of financial capital and the exchange of goods as a marker of value masked by the illusions of ultimately one-sided friendships and a sense of importance within the village. By having the player at the heart of the village and the welfare of the villagers determined by the player, the player forms a parasocial relationship with the animal villagers which structure narratives of consumption and amassing capital.

The sense of importance players may feel is entirely fictional (even if emotionally addictive). The cuteness and illusion of friendships between player and AI, is reflected on by Turkle (2011). Calling back to Chapter 5, I drew on the work of Turkle who argues that producers play off human emotions to conjure the illusion of community to mask the realities of consumption. The cute animal villagers of *AC:NH* might be compared to how "Tamagotchis and Furbies – made children's evaluation of aliveness less about cognition than about an objects' seeming potential for mutual affection […] it becomes 'alive enough' for relationship" (Turkle 2011, 18). These parasocial relationships players form with non-tangible subjects is a danger in Turkle's perspective, and these would appear to be shared fears by Byrne. Byrne observes that in *Animal Crossing* a "character's consumption also benefits the economy of the town – the more they spend at Tom Nook's store, the larger he can expand it, meaning more items available for sale" (Byrne 2021, 17). Economy structures what the player is capable of in *AC:NH*. At the start of the game, players take out a loan with Tom Nook for a house on the island. Once a player finally pays off their loan, they have the option to take out more loans to add more rooms to their home, or to build further homes for animal residents, as well as opening options for other infrastructure such as bridges and ramps around the island. The player is encouraged to learn and play capital exchange, the reward of which is more tools and items to play with to customize one's island, and thus the player is actively lured into a cycle of amassing capital and spending capital to build up their villages and make the residents happy.

When self-betterment is equated to one's property, this generates narratives of meritocracy. Littler (2018) defines the nature of meritocracy "about moving upwards in financial and class terms, but whilst this may entail, for example, being better fed, it does not mean existing in a 'better' or 'happier' culture" (Littler 2018, 7). Even when playing alone, the player tends to take it upon themselves to climb the meritocratic ladder of *AC:NH*, to better ones property and amassed capital, to raise the rank of their home (which is assessed in-game every Sunday by a grade sent to the player via the in-game mail). Players are also judged by a star rating of their island, the higher the rating is assessed by how well a player can keep the island tidy and their villagers happy. As a result of the narratives of meritocracy present in the game, players must submit to the structures of the game if they want to proceed and unlock new items. Aspiring for bigger houses and better ranked homes and islands might appear to contradict the illusions of community and creativity, when in fact it is the contradictory network which sustains *AC:NH*, it's community of players, and a players loyalty towards the mechanics of the game. By giving players the illusion of control and creativity, the emotive responses from players mask the control and regulation of players on the part of Nintendo game design.

Whist *AC:NH* has helped people emotionally throughout the pandemic and lockdowns, *AC:NH*, remains another popular narrative incentivising the dominance of meritocratic capitalism.

AC:NH as Content and Advertising Space

Whether or not one reads cosplay/*AC:NH* fans as either creative or submissive, to reiterate, I argue that they are both. In Chapter 5 Part 2, I emphasized that it is necessary to address that for every community that captures the popular imagination, industries find ways of monetising these audiences. Then in Chapter 6 Part 1, I argued that fan industries exploited popular media fans in online fan conventions in 2020 during the social distancing rules of the Covid-19 pandemic. The online conventions I observed boiled the fan convention down to its core attributes and kept fan engagement to a minimum. Similarly, there have been many notable examples of large companies using Nintendo's *AC:NH* to promote their own products. These examples include: (1) KFC, who created their own island, on which they built a replica KFC diner (Justin 2020, online). (2) During the Christmas period of 2020, Hellmann's Island allowed players to collect custom made 'ugly food waste jumpers' (HellmannsUK via Twitter). (3) Finally, IKEA "to help promote their real 2021 catalogue, the company has released a series of pages from the publication remade with matching screenshots taken in Animal Crossing" (Justin 2020, online). Manovich (2009) writes that since the 1980's "consumer culture industries have started to systematically turn every subculture (particularly every youth subculture: bohemians, hip-hop and rap, Lolita fashion, rock, punk, skinhead, goth, and so on) into products" (Manovich 2009, 324). Each of the above examples, form KFC to IKEA, display a corporate appropriation of both the *AC:NH* community, and of a Nintendo product which is being treated as a social media platform – just as companies make use of Twitter/Facebook.

Even notable US politicians used *AC:NH* as a site of self-promotion, as if it were the socially distanced equivalent of going door-to-door. In May 2020, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (Democratic US Congress Representative) asked her Twitter followers to send her their island codes which would allow her to visit their islands. Subsequently Ocasio-Cortez visited several islands and posted images of her visits on Twitter to commemorate each one (Nesvig 2020, online). Later in the year, on the lead up to the 2020 United States Presidential Election, players of *AC:NH* could visit Joe Biden's island. Biden's island was "built around voting as the ultimate goal. There's even a little area made up to look like a polling station" (Walker 2020, online). Like the industries and communities which surround cosplay, *AC:NH* can be a creative and social space, yet not only are the customizable options available to players structured by Nintendo, businesses and organisations have reappropriated fan creativity for their own means to promote and sell products, or in the case of politicians to sell themselves and secure votes.

Calling back again to the work of Turkle, in Chapter 5 I quoted Turkle's following explanation: "we are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other" (Turkle 2011, 1). Online and in-game connections during the social distancing measures in response to the pandemic exaggerate the relationship Turkle warns about. *AC:NH* facilitates controlled socialisation with other people online, as well as the island animals, allowing players to meet the 'demands of friendship' by an encouraged dependency on digital/parasocial relationships. In *AC:NH*, one's island residents cannot love the player back, no matter how much they say they do. Businesses and political figures exploitation of *AC:NH* and its fanbase have prayed off players emotional dependence on parasocial connections and feelings of social reward. KFC's and Hellmann's virtual-gifts in *AC:NH* is an invasion of a virtual-community which participates in the illusion of making the player feel valued. Similarly, Ocasio-Cortez visit to other players islands permits players the feeling of forming a connection with a respected figure, even though they are not actually meeting them, and that their virtual connections are being exploited for their continued support.

In response to external companies and public figures using *AC:NH* as an advertising space, Nintendo subsequently released a set of rules for businesses and organisations to abide by (Plunkett 2020, online). Nintendo clarified, that businesses may use *AC:NH* in the following ways: "Providing your Custom Design and/or Dream Address to other players", "Inviting other players to your island", and "Uploading screenshots and/or game footage to family-friendly websites and social network services" (Nintendo 2020, online). The Guidelines also request that businesses and organisations do not create "vulgar, discriminatory, or offensive" materials; and that the game should not be used to forward on players to external social media activities. In this document, Nintendo requests that companies and public figures, "please also refrain from bringing politics into the game". However, these guidelines are not only difficult to uphold; but what is and is not appropriate comes completely down to the decision of Nintendo. What this goes to highlight is that, industries and public figures have used *AC:NH* from the position of both producer and as a consumer of Nintendo's product. Just as fan industries were consumers and producers in their engagements with YouTube and Twitch (notable livestreaming websites) to host the online conventions as observed in Chapter 6.

Closing Remarks on AC:NH

By unpacking *AC:NH*, I have uncovered a networks of contradiction. Players of *AC:NH* display creative agency in their creation of virtual cosplay's which players can use to perform identity and negotiate social connections during the age of social distancing. In addition to this, the sharing of materials between players displays a mastery over text as player's *AC:NH* lives exist outside of the game through social media groups and friendship groups. In turn the structures that players develop outside of the game illustrate both fan creativity in being able to build these groups, but in turn develop their own structures and hierarchies which distinguish 'good' and 'bad' *AC:NH* players. Yet in turn these are tools which are encoded by Nintendo. Whilst players display creative uses of *AC:NH*, Nintendo ultimately tailor the ways in which players decode and interact with their game. These dynamics are complicated further as exterior industries make use of *AC:NH* as a tool for self-promotion, it is an action which validates the creative community of the AC:NH fandom whilst simultaneously exploiting it.

The contradictory structures observed in the *AC:NH* community illustrate that players are both critical of dominant norms and active supporters which maintain meritocratic divides. The contradictions which exist between players in turn exist alongside contradictions between consumer and producer. *AC:NH* players are entangled in a networks of contradiction between *AC:NH* fan community, Nintendo and the games producers, dominant cultural norms, and exterior commercial industries. The entangled contradictions place the *AC:NH* player as simultaneously active and passive consumers. It is an entangled network which works in the same respect as the networks of contradiction observed in the cosplay community.

What I have illustrated in this chapter is that in cosplay, both in the contexts of the online fan convention, and in the virtual-costumes of *AC:NH* there are equal opportunities to play with the rules of a virtual space. But there are equal opportunities to be submissive, and for fan industries and producers to exploit the creativity of fans. In this 'proof of concept' chapter I have unpacked the idea that popular fan communities such as cosplay/gaming, thrive off networks of contradiction between fan and: fans, fan industries, popular media industries, all of which must be read in relation to dominant cultural norms and tastes.

Conclusion

In the introduction of this thesis, I outlined six central questions that would guide my research: (1) How do cosplayers engage with popular media, and how do their chosen characters relate to their own negotiation of identity? (2) Can cosplayers use cosplay as a form of identity expression and/or experimentation? (3) Can cosplayers transcend/challenge social expectations of gender and sexuality? (4) Can cosplay be used as a means of enforcing social norms and powers? (5) How do cosplay environments influence/structure cosplay communication? (6) Do power structures exist within cosplay communities? In response to these questions, I have developed the concept of 'networks of contradiction'. In Chapter 6 I stated: "The phrasing of these observations as existing within "networks of contradiction" reflects a need to acknowledge the messiness of these communities and these industries, a recognition of their entangled structures, narratives, environments, and above all their complex power structures". This is a new concept which taps into two pre-existing concepts by Lamerichs (2018) and Banet-Weiser (2018) respectively. From fan studies Lamerichs' 'networks of production', and from postfeminist criticism is Banet-Weiser's 'networks of popular feminism and popular misogyny', each establish an acknowledgment of the messiness within their fields of popular fandom and postfeminist criticism respectively, which I draw on as structural comparisons.

I use the concept of 'networks of contradiction' to recognise that there is a necessity to acknowledge the messiness of these communities and these industries, a recognition of their entangled structures, narratives, environments, and above all their complex power structures. Whilst I have used networks of contradiction to unpack cosplay fandom, I would suggest that it has applicability beyond the cosplay scene, in popular media fandom, or perhaps more broadly in discussing social structures and hierarchal powers entanglement with media.

The Productive-Destructive Contradictions of Cosplay

In Chapters 1-3 I discussed the ways in which cosplayers use cosplay as a form of self-expression and communication within a North American and UK context. These opening chapters drew heavily on cosplay scholarship and fan studies scholarship from the Acafan tradition to conceptualise my findings from my combined autoethnographic and ethnographic mixed methods. In the data set collected, I found many circumstances which validated Acafan arguments confirming that cosplayers are active and creative consumers. In these earlier chapters Nichole Lamerichs' 2018 work *Productive Fandom* was particularly influential, in which she draws on numerous fan communities to unpack the ways fans communicate with one another and with popular media production. From my own mixed methodologies and theoretical positions, I developed the argument that Acafan as methodology such as seen in the work of Lamerichs (or Jenkins, 1992; Hills, 2002; Winge, 2019) does provide a productive and useful perspective on fans as displaying fan agency and creativity. Further to this, I found in my data set that cosplay fans were able to use cosplay as a creative medium, to explore, reaffirm and play with gendered identities, and to an extent gendered convention. Not only is cosplay a socially productive medium, but for many of my participants, cosplay was also an emotionally fulfilling medium. However, this was not a complete insight to the cosplay community and overlooked many circumstances of power struggle and conformity.

I identified a need for cosplay scholarship to be equally positioned between its origins in fan studies, alongside a deeper contextualisation of a wider cultural history of power. During my interviews most participants recalled cases of abuse or harassment, and from my own autoethnographic observations of industrial structures, I began to question Acafan cosplay literature which represents a very specific, utopian, perspective of cosplay. For all the unique perspectives the Acafan methodology can provide, cosplay scholarship has failed to address the negative attributes of hierarchy, abuse, and harassment. In Chapter 4 I drew on critical theory and audience studies from the cultural studies tradition to conceptualise how fan industry's structure and exploit cosplayers (imagined) agency. To better contextualise this 'darker' side of cosplay interaction, I drew on more the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), Katz (1959), and Marcuse (1964), which were crucial in contextualising a history of audiences as passive recipients of popular media, as well as the ways in which media industries exploit the creativity of audiences.

During Chapter 4, my engagements with the work of Hall (1981) helped illustrate the complex relationship between the cosplay community and its associated industries. If, as Hall theorises, texts are encoded and decoded differently by producers and spectators alike; I suggest that audiences are simultaneously active and submissive in a complex network of contradiction which sustain the relationships between each group. These contradictions' function between: groups of cosplayers, between cosplayers and fan industries, popular media industries, and the dominant culture more broadly. The 'darker sides' of cosplay should not be dismissed if one is to best document and analyse cosplay fandom (or indeed fandom more broadly). It was at this point where Lamerichs' networks of production began to resonate with the conflicting data sets that I was collecting. Lamerich's explains the network of production in relation to fans by observing how, "Media fans have a shared lingua franca and social protocols. However, they also have hierarchies that result in part from their interpretive and creative competencies" (Lamerichs 2018, 30). This quotation encapsulates the interactions between fans and fan industries, suggesting that fans have influence in the production of media. Fans can both simultaneously influence production yet to get to that stage, fans must also be influenced by fan industries and popular media to engage with media in prescriptive ways.

To better illuminate the complexities of cosplay culture and acknowledge structural power imbalances, in Chapter 5, I drew on more contemporary postfeminist criticism to analyse cases of abuse and harassment in online communities, unpacking the structures that exist among cosplayers. I drew on the work of Gill (2007 and 2017), Rottenburg (2018 and 2019), and Banet-Weiser (2018 and 2020). By drawing on postfeminist and meritocracy criticisms to conceptualise cases of abuse and competition, it became apparent that just as cosplayers can shape their own structures, cosplayers also mimic and replicate dominant power relations. I unpacked evidence which showed that coplayers buy into characters and stories produced by huge corporations, and in doing so, buy into dominant values and discourses of power.

Contradiction between audience members, and between audience and product is a recurring observation in postfeminist criticism, which Banet-Weiser conceptualised in her 'networks of popular feminism and popular misogyny'. Banet-Weiser illustrates suggesting that: "The fact that the globe's biggest companies now pander to feminist ideas, however distorted or market-driven they may be – that encourages and validates popular misogyny" (Banet-Wiser 2018, 169-70)". The quotation from Banet-Weiser highlights that because misogyny is a dominant cultural power, feminist media is only visible in opposition, in turn misogyny is only visible in explicit condemning of feminist media. I observed several cases in Chapter 5 in which misogynist comments were visible set against feminist portrayals of DC's Catwoman. The two opposing values sustained one another, facilitating both expressive subversive forms of costumed play, but in turn facilitating harassment and abuse against such types of cosplay. Harassment as a means of reinforcing cosplay expectations and traditions was also observed in Chapter 3 Part 3 in many of my participants experiences. Cases of online abuse which were analysed in Chapter 5 ultimately illustrated a perpetuation of popular feminist and popular misogynist values which cosplayers replicate and enact in a seemingly continuous conflict of opposing values.

The contrasting positions fully formed in Chapter 6 with reference to my data collected in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic. Part 1 analysed fan industries entangled relationship with fans during online fan conventions. Part 2, conversely analysed fans entangled relationship with industry with reference to the video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* as an online social space. In Part 1, I illustrated how Acafan materials accurately represent cosplayers as creative revolutionary agents; whilst simultaneously, with reference to traditional cultural studies literature and more contemporary postfeminist criticism I illustrated the ways in which cosplayers are submissive replicators of power and subject to industrial manipulation. Subsequently, I proposed that these networks of contradiction are applicable to popular fandom more broadly in Part 2, by unpacking *AC:NH* not only as a space which cosplayers appropriated, but also how popular fandoms, popular industries, and academics each took to *AC:NH* as a social platform. Chapter 6 brought all the core theoretical positions together to mark out the messiness of the cosplay community.

The first half of this thesis brought to the forefront the ways in which fans are creative and can subvert social norms (Chapters 1-3), whilst the second half of this thesis questioned audience agency, suggesting that industries encourage cosplayers to engage with characters and spaces in certain ways which reproduce dominant norms (Chapters 4-5). Chapter 6 brought to the forefront that both positions are equally prevalent. I concluded that the cosplay community exists in a networks of contradiction, between producer and consumer in which cosplayers are both submissive and subversive participants of dominant power hierarchies.

Final Remarks

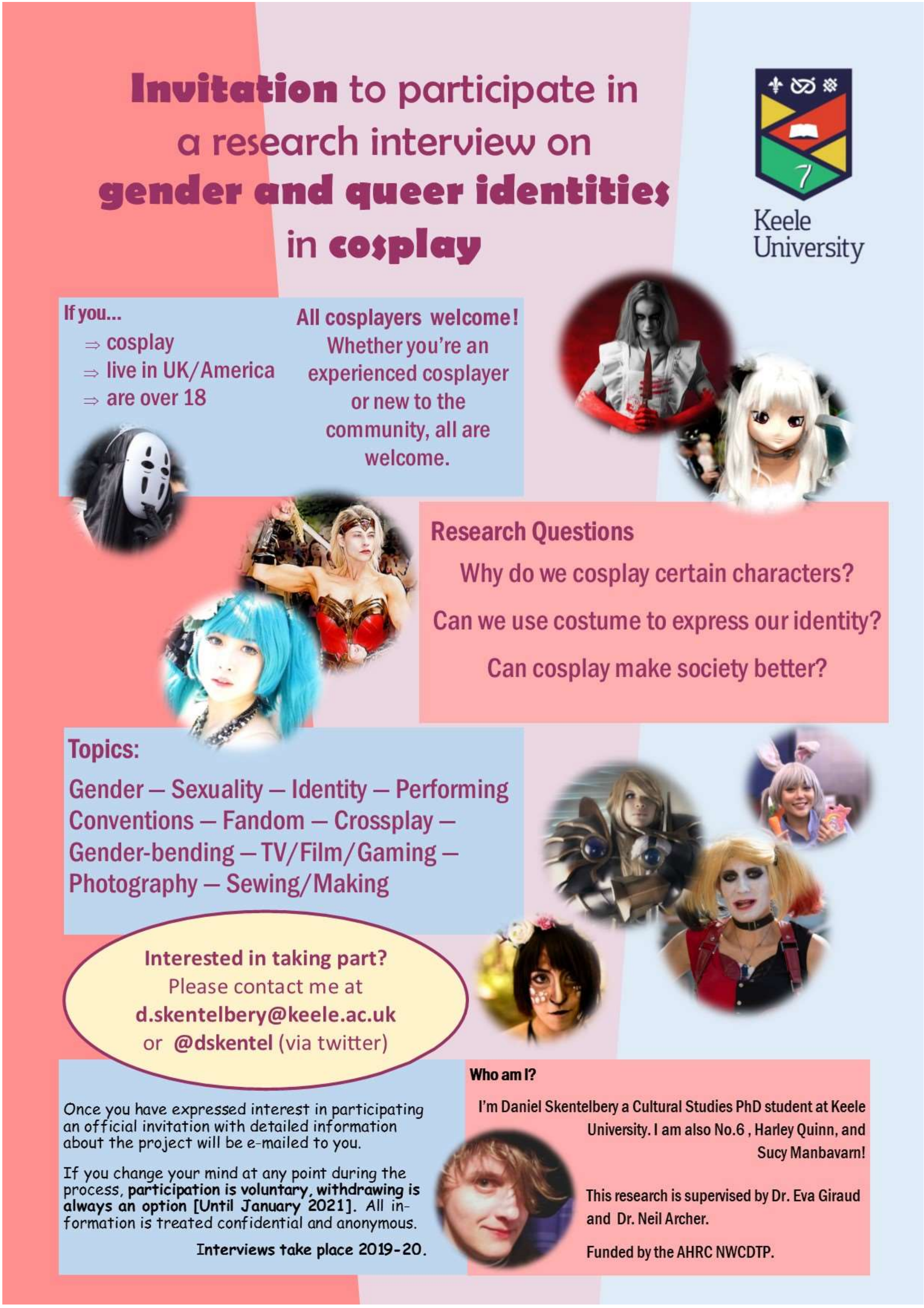
The vagueness of my phrasing of 'networks of contradiction' is almost comically necessary in capturing the messiness of the producer/consumer paradigm when discussing cosplay fandom, or even popular fandom more broadly as I addressed with my *AC:NH* case study. Not only are fans in these paradigms equally submissive, confrontational, and hierarchal within their own communities, but fans are also undeniably creative, collaborative, and subversive; set against fan industry, popular media, and dominant societal values.

Over the duration of this thesis, I have also found a need to address differing academic representations of audiences and fans, namely between Acafan cosplay scholarship, and traditional debates in cultural studies, and finally more contemporary postfeminist criticism. Where Acafan cosplay literature successfully illustrates the creativity of fans against fan industry and popular media, many Acafan cosplay scholars fail to address cases in which cosplayers were exploited by the power structures of the fan industry as became apparent in my online and offline observations, and in the experiences of my interview participants. Thus, not only is there a necessity to address the contradictions in a particular field, but to do so, one must create a network of contradictory theoretical frameworks, each framework revealing different attributes of a community.

My ‘networks of contradiction’ is purposefully broad so that I might address the entanglements not only within the cosplay community; but also between cosplayers and fan industry; between popular media industries; between cultural powers and hierarchies more broadly; but also within Academic methods and representation. The interactions that take place between each of these group’s support and challenge one another to build a seemingly endless chain of oppositions which sustains each group. The phrasing ‘networks of contradiction’ intends to capture the messiness of the cosplay community and its associated industries and environments. It brings together the physical contradictions between cosplayer and media industries (harking back to Lamerichs ‘networks of production’), whilst also encapsulating cases of conflict which emerge out or power struggles between cosplayers (harking to Banet-Weiser’s ‘networks of popular feminism and misogyny’). Networks of contradiction sustain the expectations and power dynamics between the cosplay community and its related industries and online/offline environments. The seemingly endless battle between opposing values encapsulates the diversity and the messiness of the cosplay community as it currently exists.

Appendix

1. Participant flyer:



Invitation to participate in a research interview on **gender and queer identities** in **cosplay**

Keele University

If you...

- ⇒ cosplay
- ⇒ live in UK/America
- ⇒ are over 18

All cosplayers welcome! Whether you're an experienced cosplayer or new to the community, all are welcome.

Research Questions

Why do we cosplay certain characters?

Can we use costume to express our identity?

Can cosplay make society better?

Topics:

Gender – Sexuality – Identity – Performing Conventions – Fandom – Crossplay – Gender-bending – TV/Film/Gaming – Photography – Sewing/Making

Interested in taking part?
Please contact me at
d.skentelbery@keele.ac.uk
or **@dskentel** (via twitter)

Once you have expressed interest in participating an official invitation with detailed information about the project will be e-mailed to you.

If you change your mind at any point during the process, **participation is voluntary, withdrawing is always an option [Until January 2021].** All information is treated confidential and anonymous.

Interviews take place 2019-20.

Who am I?

I'm Daniel Skentelbery a Cultural Studies PhD student at Keele University. I am also No.6 , Harley Quinn, and Sucy Manbavarn!

This research is supervised by Dr. Eva Giraud and Dr. Neil Archer.

Funded by the AHRC NWCDTP.

2. Information Sheet and Consent Form:

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Study Title

Transformations in Cosplay: Navigating the personal and social implications of how fans use costume play to navigate gendered and queer identities.

Invitation

You are being invited to consider taking part in the research study 'Transformations in Cosplay'. This project is being undertaken by Daniel Skentelbery.

Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read this information carefully and discuss it with friends and relatives if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information.

Aims of the Research are to investigate the following areas:

- Why do we cosplay specific characters?
- Can we use costume to express or explore identity?
- Are there any social/political implications of cosplay?

Why have I been invited?

This formal invitation has been sent to you following your expression of interest in taking part in a semi-structured interview to discuss your experiences with cosplay.

Do I have to take part?

You are free to decide whether you wish to take part or not. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to take part in a semi-structured interview to share your cosplay experiences. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time and without giving reason. Any data you provide throughout this process will be transcribed for use in the project thesis. If you wish to drop out at any point during the process, your information will be deleted. You have until 1st January 2021 to alert Daniel Skentelbery if you wish to drop out of the research project.

What will happen if I take part?

If you wish to take part, you will be required to take part in a semi-structured interview, this will be a conversation between yourself and the project leader (Daniel Skentelbery), discussing your experiences with cosplay (topics for example may include: conventions, performance, making costumes, gender, representation, film/TV/gaming). The interview will take place over online call, such as; Skype, Google Hangouts, or Discord (to your preference) and a time will be arranged to suit your convenience. All conversations will be recorded and later transcribed anonymously. Participants may be asked if they would like to supply a photo of their cosplay(s), this is not compulsory, participants will not be expected to provide any photos unless they are happy to do so.

What are the benefits (if any) of taking part?
In taking part in this research you will be contributing to a vital area of academic cultural study, which aims to shed light on the cultural importance of cosplay, and examine its potential uses of expressing and negotiating personal identities. What is more, this will provide participants a unique opportunity to discuss their cosplay experiences, thoughts and ideas in a safe, confidential and non-judgmental space.

What are the risks (if any) of taking part?
Precautions are in place to ensure that no risk will come to participants. All participants will be anonymised and information will be kept confidential (and will be deleted upon request). The participant will be asked about their gender and sexual identity as a core component of the study, however, participants are free to answer or withhold answers at their discretion. No personal details such as address/banking/medical will be asked of the participant. Should you be affected by any of the topics discussed in the interview, a support reference sheet will be provided on request.

(Pg. 2 of 4)

How will information about me be used?
Participants conversations with the project leader will be recorded and transcribed to be referred within the thesis 'Transformations in Cosplay'. Data will be held onto by the project for future reference, unless the participant requests the information to be deleted, in which case the participant's data will be removed from this project and all future study. Ethics approval has been sought for this project, if the participant has any concerns regarding Keele University's ethical process they are advised to contact the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at: humss.ethics@keele.ac.uk. Data collected is the property of Daniel Skentelbery, and may be subject to use and quoting in the thesis 'Transformations in Cosplay', and any subsequent publications.

Who will have access to information about me?
All participants will be kept anonymous and information kept confidential. Recordings will only be accessible by Daniel Skentelbery. You may have access to your own recording upon request. All data will be stored on a password protected computer. Supervisors (Dr. Eva Giraud and Dr. Neil Archer) may have access to the anonymised transcripts. Recordings and transcripts will be deleted upon request of the participant, if they wish to drop out from the study. After five years of the project's completion all data will be terminated.

[I do however have to work within the confines of current legislation over such matters as privacy and confidentiality, data protection and human rights and so offers of confidentiality may sometimes be overridden by law. For example in circumstances whereby I am concerned over any actual or potential harm to yourself or others I must pass this information to the relevant authorities.]

Who is funding and organising the research?
This research has been funded by the North West Consortium Doctoral Training Partnership (NWCDTP) one of the consortia of the Arts and Humanities Research Council

(AHRC). The research is based at Keele University and is being conducted by Daniel Skentelbery (award winning Media, Communications and Culture; and, Film Studies student).

What if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you may wish to speak to the researcher who will do their best to answer your questions. You should contact Daniel Skentelbery on d.skentelbery@keele.ac.uk. Alternatively, you may contact Dr. Eva Giraud (Lead Supervisor) at e.giraud@keele.ac.uk, or, Dr. Neil Archer (Supervisor) at n.archer@keele.ac.uk

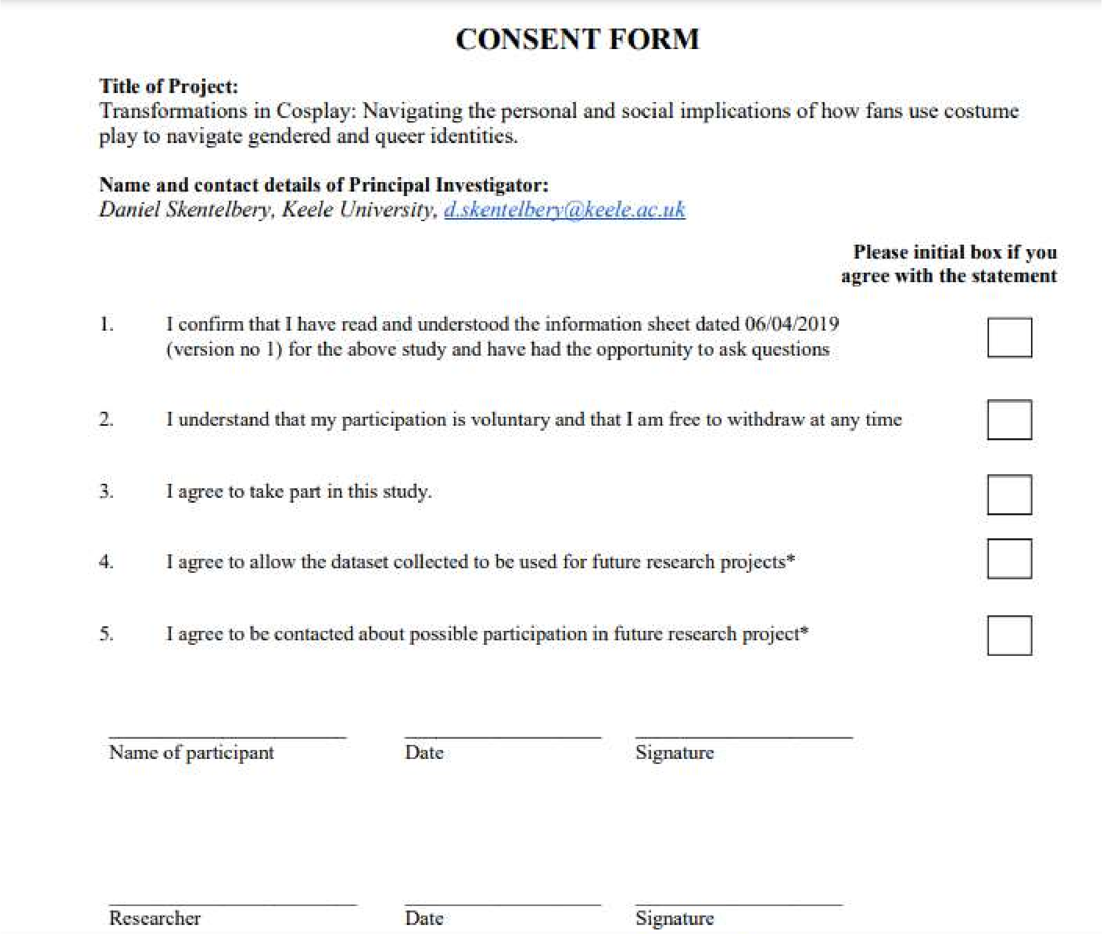
If you remain unhappy about the research and/or wish to raise a complaint about any aspect of the way that you have been approached or treated during the course of the study please write to Nicola Leighton who is the University's contact for complaints regarding research at the following address:

Nicola Leighton, Research Governance Officer, Directorate of Engagement and Partnerships, IC2 Building, Keele University, ST5 5NH, E-mail: n.leighton@keele.ac.uk
Tel: 01782 733306

Contact for further information

Daniel Skentelbery (Project Leader) e-mail: d.skentelbery@keele.ac.uk
Dr. Eva Giraud (Lead Supervisor) e-mail: e.giraud@keele.ac.uk
Dr. Neil Archer (Supervisor) e-mail: n.archer@keele.ac.uk

(Pg. 3&4 of 4)



CONSENT FORM

Title of Project:
Transformations in Cosplay: Navigating the personal and social implications of how fans use costume play to navigate gendered and queer identities.

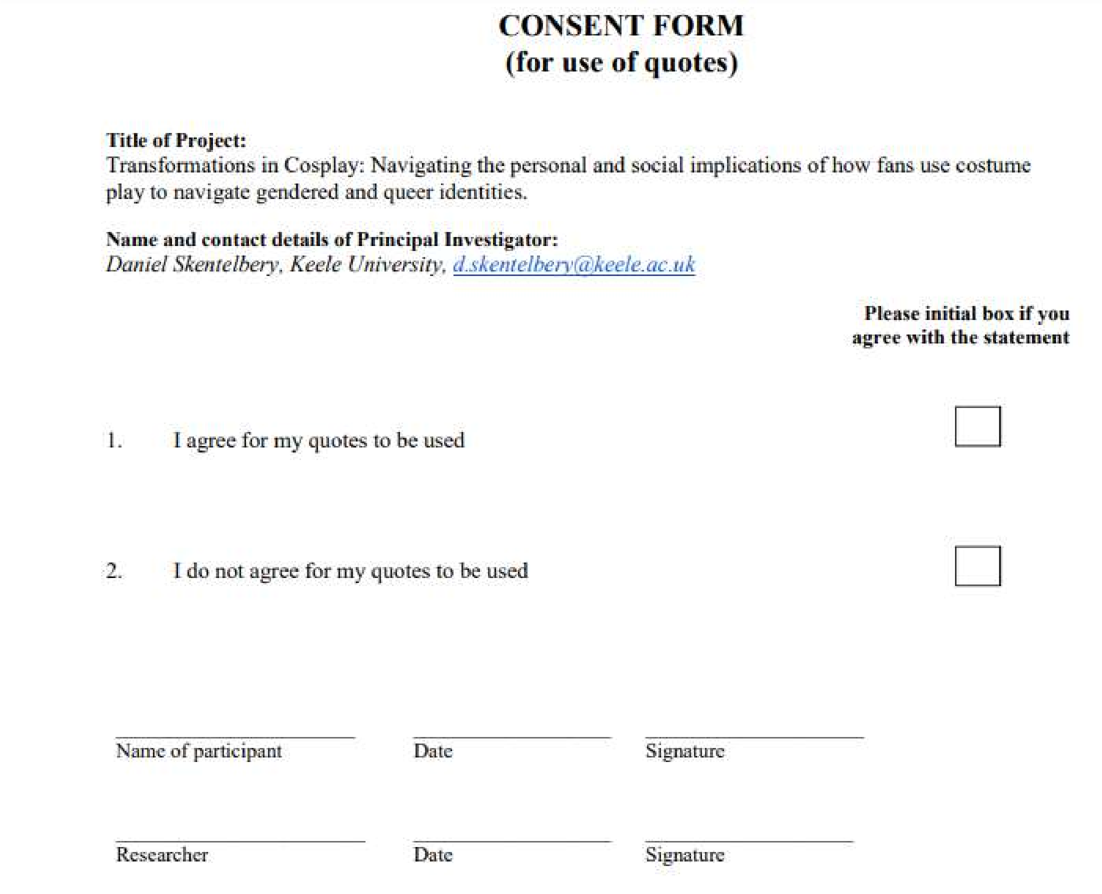
Name and contact details of Principal Investigator:
Daniel Skentelbery, Keele University, d.skentelbery@keele.ac.uk

Please initial box if you agree with the statement

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated 06/04/2019 (version no 1) for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time ☐
3. I agree to take part in this study. ☐
4. I agree to allow the dataset collected to be used for future research projects* ☐
5. I agree to be contacted about possible participation in future research project* ☐

Name of participant ____________ Date ____________ Signature ____________

Researcher ____________ Date ____________ Signature ____________



CONSENT FORM
(for use of quotes)

Title of Project:
Transformations in Cosplay: Navigating the personal and social implications of how fans use costume play to navigate gendered and queer identities.

Name and contact details of Principal Investigator:
Daniel Skentelbery, Keele University, d.skentelbery@keele.ac.uk

Please initial box if you agree with the statement

1. I agree for my quotes to be used ☐
2. I do not agree for my quotes to be used ☐

Name of participant ____________ Date ____________ Signature ____________

Researcher ____________ Date ____________ Signature ____________

3. Support Sheet:

Research Interview on Gender and Queer Identities in Cosplay

Project Leader: Daniel Skentelbery (d.skentelbery@keele.ac.uk)

Support Reference Sheet – For reference of the participant:

If you have been affected by any of the discussions held in the interview for this project, or you are experiencing any distress.

USA Mental Health Support:

- Mental Health – Government mental health support – https://www.mentalhealth.gov/talk/young-people
- NIMH – National Institute of Mental Health – https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/find-help/index.shtml

USA LGBTQ+ Support:

- Gender Diversity – support for individuals experiencing gender dysphoria - http://www.genderdiversity.org/individual-support/
- LGBT National Help Centre – Support for LGBT and questioning individuals - https://www.glbthotline.org/
- The Trevor Project – Support for LGBTQ youth - https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help-now/#sm.000070xyei8g8fmf11mbo1nwc1168
- Trans Lifeline – Helpline for trans individuals – https://www.translifeline.org/

USA Body Image Support:

- Office of Women's Health – Body image support for women - https://www.womenshealth.gov/mental-health/body-image-and-mental-health

UK Mental Health Support:

- Mind – Mental health charity – https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/
- NHS – Mental health support from the NHS - https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/mental-health-services/

UK LGBTQ+ Support:

- LGBT Foundation – LGBT charity – https://lgbt.foundation/how-we-can-help-you
- Mermaids – Charity for trans youth – https://www.mermaidsuk.org.uk/transgender-youth-forum.html
- Mind Out – LGBTQ+ mental health support – https://www.mindout.org.uk/get-support/
- Stonewall – Support for LGBTQ+ communities and individuals - https://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/student-frequently-asked-questions-faqs

UK Body Image Support:

- The Mix – Body image and self-esteem support for under 25s - https://www.themix.org.uk/mental-health/body-image-and-self-esteem

4. Semi-Structured Interviews (Core and Potential Questions)

Opening Questions:

- Pronouns/gender/sexuality/age/race.
- Who are you currently cosplaying, and why did you pick this character?
- Who has been your favourite character to cosplay? Why?

Potential questions include:

- How did you get into cosplay?
- Have you taken part in any gender-play through cosplay?
- How do you engage with the cosplay community?
- What have been your favourite experiences cosplaying?
- What have been your least favourite experiences cosplaying?
- Do you use cosplay to negotiate your own identity?
- Do you think cosplay has any social/political implications?
- Do you perform your own gender or other genders through cosplay?
- Do you perform sexuality through cosplay?
- Do you identify with your performed identities?
- Do you have any concerns about the cosplay community?

If the participant has participated in any form of specific gender-play such as Gender-bending cosplay or crossplay it may be necessary to ask:

What type of gender-play did you practise? and, what was the character?

- Did you enjoy the gender-play cosplay?
- What was the reception of you costume like?

If the participant has not participated in any form of specific gender-play such as Gender-bending cosplay or crossplay it may be necessary to ask:

- Would you still say you perform gender?
- What is your opinion on Gender-bending cosplay?
- What is your opinion on Crossplay?
- Is there a difference between male crossplay/gender-bending and female crossplay/genderbending? and, why do you think this?

5. Ethics Approval Letter

Dear Daniel Skentelbery, 15 May 2019

Project Title:	Transformations in Cosplay: Navigating the personal and social implications of how fans use costume play to traverse gendered and queer identities
REC Project Reference:	HU-190021
Type of Application	Main application

Keele University's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee reviewed the above application.

Favourable Ethical opinion
The members of the Committee gave a favourable ethical opinion of the above research on the basis described in the application form, protocol and supporting documentation, subject to the conditions specified below.

Reporting requirements
The University's standard operating procedures give detailed guidance on reporting requirements for studies with a favourable opinion including:

- Notifying substantial amendments
- Notifying issues which may have an impact upon ethical opinion of the study
- Progress reports
- Notifying the end of the study

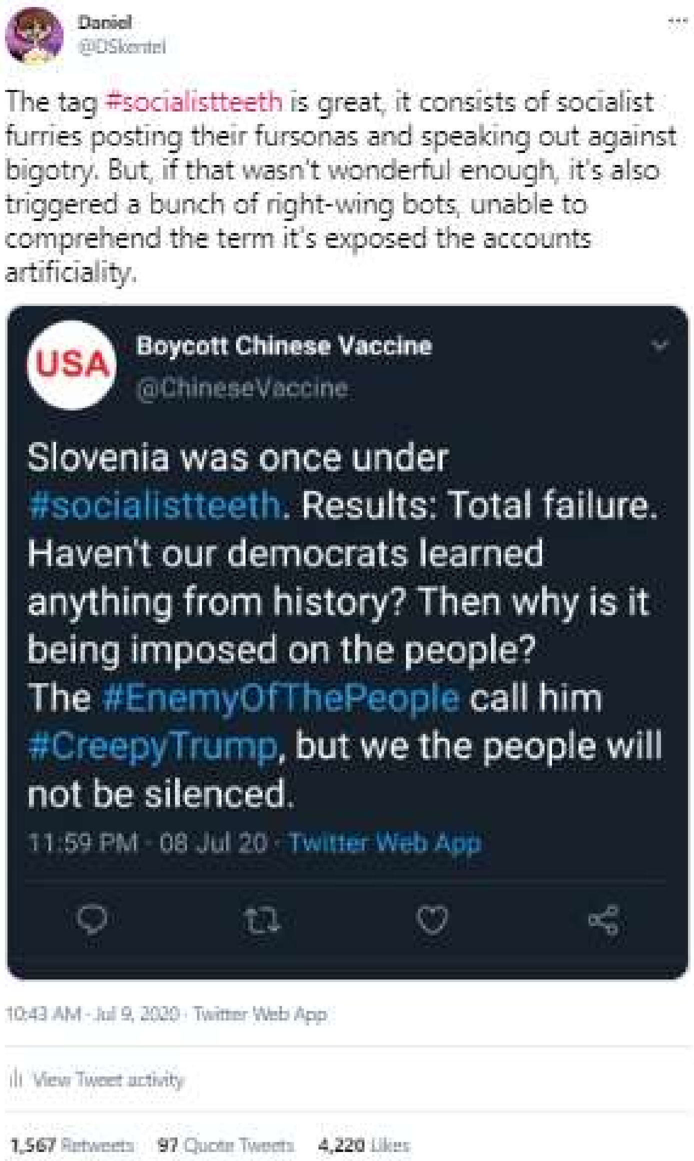
Approved documents
The documents reviewed and approved are:

Document	**Version**	**Date**
D.Skentelbery Protocol Development Tool (1) - Daniel Skentelbery	1	15/05/2019
Funding Award Letter - D.Skentelbery - Daniel Skentelbery	1	15/05/2019
Invitation and Information Sheet, Consent Forms - D.Skentelbery - Daniel Skentelbery	1	15/05/2019
Semi-Structured Interview Questions - D.Skentelbery - Daniel Skentelbery	1	15/05/2019
Support Sheet - D.Skentelbery - Daniel Skentelbery	1	15/05/2019

Yours sincerely,

Professor Anthony Bradney, Committee Chair

6. “#SocialistTeeth” - Referenced in Chapter 5:
   Figure. [Screenshot] – Skentelbery, D. 2020. ‘#SocialistTeeth’. via *Twitter*. <URL: https://twitter.com/DSkentel/status/1281162034411974657> [Accessed: 08/12/2021].



Daniel
@DSkentel

The tag #socialistteeth is great, it consists of socialist furries posting their fursonas and speaking out against bigotry. But, if that wasn't wonderful enough, it's also triggered a bunch of right-wing bots, unable to comprehend the term it's exposed the accounts artificiality.

Boycott Chinese Vaccine
@ChineseVaccine

Slovenia was once under #socialistteeth. Results: Total failure. Haven't our democrats learned anything from history? Then why is it being imposed on the people? The #EnemyOfThePeople call him #CreepyTrump, but we the people will not be silenced.

11:59 PM · 08 Jul 20 · Twitter Web App

10:43 AM · Jul 9, 2020 · Twitter Web App

1,567 Retweets **97** Quote Tweets **4,220** Likes

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Conventions

Anime and Gaming Con. (Birmingham, 2016)

Anime and Gaming Con. (Cardiff, 2019)

Animangapop (Not Attended)

Geeks Con. (Wolverhampton, 2016)

GlitchCon. (Online, 2020)

Hyper Japan. (Not attended)

Mainframe Comic Con. (Online, 2020)

MCM Comic Con. Birmingham (Birmingham, 2016)

MCM Comic Con. Birmingham (Online, 2020)

MCM Comic Con. Manchester (Manchester, 2016)

MCM Comic. Con. Midlands (Telford, 2017)

MCM Comic Con. London (London, 2019)

San Diego International Comic-Con. (Online, 2020)

SciFiWeekender (Online, 2020)

Stay-At-Home Con. (Online, 2020)

Stoke-Con-Trent (Stoke-on-Trent, 2019)

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