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Cosplay: An Ethnographic Study of Subculture and Escape

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DECLARATION

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This thesis is my own work, aside from where indicated and has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

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Contents

Abstract

This thesis provides an immersive insight into the cosplaying subculture, whose members emulate characters from geek media, wearing intricate and often striking costumes. Through a longitudinal ethnographic study, taking place over a period of two years, I attended dozens of events and interacted with hundreds of cosplayers: becoming a full member of the cosplaying subculture, shedding light on the nature of this activity and its subcultural values. Through doing so I construct a working definition for this activity, reveal the demographics of the subculture and uncover the role that cosplay played for its members. Furthermore, I demonstrate that notions of tolerance were a core facet of the cosplaying subculture's identity. With cosplayers shaping their norms and values around the concept of acceptance. Especially in relation to three key theoretical areas; ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and social disorders and mental health. Resulting in cosplayers framing their subculture as a site where they could escape from established intolerances within everyday life.

These sociological areas were explored in depth using the framework of Escape Attempts. A theory which asserts that individuals use a number of techniques known as 'Escape Attempts' to find relief from their everyday lives. Accessing separate 'Free Areas', to find respite from the mundane. With cosplay therefore being framed as a Free Area for its members. Through doing so this thesis tested Escape Attempts within an empirical setting by exploring the extent to which cosplay successfully provided its members with escape.

This revealed that escape was granted to varying degrees. Cosplayers formed their ideas around inclusion, as well as the norms of the subculture, using notions drawn from everyday life, which influenced the extent to which escape could be achieved. With members constructing isolated spaces and employing the methods of codification and policing in an attempt to uphold the escape of members and preserve the subculture's values. This thesis not only adds to the knowledge on cosplay by providing a detailed insight into this subculture grounded in empiricism; but also makes a contribution to subcultural theory by providing an empirical account of how subcultures construct and manage their norms. Ultimately expanding the theory of Escape Attempts by demonstrating that everyday life and escape may be more intertwined than previously thought.

Chapter One: Introduction

I was stared at for the duration of my journey. Some were curious glances that peered over the tops of newspapers, whilst others were openly hostile. One woman looked me up and down and glared at me from across the train carriage. Another, not-so-subtlety nudged her partner and gestured my way, before telling off their child who had turned around in his seat to have a look as well. At first, I had tried to make myself smaller, slouching back into my seat in an attempt to avoid detection. But since I was wearing a bright purple wig, as well as winged boots which conjured up images of the Greek god Hermes, it was near on impossible.

I was dressed in a cosplay, and whilst the exact definition of this word will be explored in more detail later within this thesis, for now it suffices to term cosplay as the act of dressing up as characters, largely from geek media. With those who wore cosplays being referred to as cosplayers. It is however important to highlight that what sets cosplay apart from fancy dress is the sheer amount of effort that goes into these outfits. I myself was replicating one of my favourite characters from a Japanese cartoon, but I wasn't just dressing up as my character, through cosplay I was embodying her. I wore a wig that I had cut, styled and even glued to my face to mirror my character's hairdo. Makeup had been used to mimic my emulated character's features and every part of my outfit had been shined and ironed to perfection. I had even replicated my character's bright green eyes, buying different pairs of contact lenses until I found ones which were the perfect match. Whilst I was undoubtedly proud of my outfit, the sheer amount of effort it took to assemble meant I had no choice but to wear my costume for the duration of my three-hour journey and my mood was slightly dampened by all the attention I was attracting.

When I pulled into the station, I quickly threw myself into a taxi, startling the driver who gave me a bemused grin from his front view mirror. At first, when I looked out of the window, I continued to contrast with the people outside in their everyday clothes, but this all changed as we drew nearer to the convention where I was heading. Small groups of convention attendees started to converge as they all marched towards our shared destination. But even as the bodies grew denser, those in cosplay continued to catch my

eye. They wore wigs all the colours of the rainbow, light glinted off their replica swords and golden armour and you could spot glimpses of tails, horns and even hooves peppered throughout the crowd. Princesses, dragons, cat girls and ghouls. Ninjas, school idols and aliens. Some cosplayers wore clunky armour or mech suits, with some even hiding stilts within their faux robotic legs to enhance their size. Some cosplayers were painted blue and green; one woman had even shaved off her hair to look more like a cyborg from a recent superhero film. There were also those whose costumes looked more mundane in comparison. Those emulating members of sports teams in school jerseys or schoolgirls in plain Japanese style uniforms. Only their unnatural hair and golden eyes added a sense of fantasy. Together the cosplayers' colourful outfits were striking, and I reflected on how vividly they stood out compared to the stark grey city blocks behind them.

Me and a convention attendee, both cosplaying characters from the same series.

As I let myself out of the taxi, I was hit will a wall of sound and a shared feeling of anticipation. Although I spent the next thirty minutes shuffling forward within a line which snaked around the outside of the venue, a huge rectangular exhibition centre plonked in the middle of nowhere, much to my surprise the queue actually added to my excitement. Those waiting in line frequently erupted into laugher as hundreds of its members collectively sang songs or called out catchphrases from geek media. Cosplayers cut and styled each other's wigs, safety-pinned and hot glue gunned their outfits and made last minute makeup touch ups. Strangers complimented each other on t-shirts featuring characters from Sci-fi television series or geek related quotes and puns. Those with portable game consoles used both the wait time and concentration of likeminded souls as an opportunity to send out in-game friend requests, to find buddies to aid them on their virtual missions. After half an hour, which flew by a lot quicker that I was expecting, I reached the front of the line and brimming with excitement, I was tagged with a wristband and was herded into the geek culture convention.

Inside the convention hall

Inside, both the noise and heat resonating from the thousands of bodies was immense and I was constantly buffeted between groups of people. This was one of the larger conventions, which was heavily promoted for all to attend and as a result the walls were lined with many adverting banners for a range of products. Taking place within huge halls with high ceilings which amplified the noise even further, the convention was full to the brim and the smell of katsu curry from the food stalls permeated throughout.

The image of a shopping centre made specifically for geeks came to mind. Vendors shouted like market greengrocers as they attempted to sell their wares. Many peddled authentic (and sometimes counterfeit) products from East Asia, figurines of fictional characters from television shows, badges, stickers, t-shirts. All the geek related memorabilia you could think of. Stalls sold perfect weapon replicas, Japanese sweets and snacks and mystery boxes which promised the chance to win huge prizes, but often only contained disappointment. Tucked away in one corner with large eighteen plus signs were stands selling cartoon 'adult literature', where groups of underage girls schemed to get their hands on the latest boy on boy, very graphic, romance novels.

At every convention there also seemed to be a new item trend. This year, a couple of stalls selling plastic cat ears with ribbons and bows were raking in the cash and one in ten convention attendees could be seen sporting a pair. On the other hand, there were also many sad looking stalls attempting to sell the products which had been popular at conventions the year before, which judging by their lack of demand seemed to have fallen from favour.

It was not however only professional traders flogging their wares. Fans rented stalls to sell their home-made comics, fan art and wholesale merchandise imported from Asian sites. You could even meet artists whose work had attracted thousands of online followers. For a fee some even offered to draw commissions.

Crowds browsing Stalls within a Convention Hall

I made my way past this more commercial end of the convention, passing by the multiple large props from videogames and television series and attempted to navigate through the long lines of fans eager to take selfies with them. You could always find something from Dr Who somewhere, be it a life-sized Tardis or Darlek.

As a I needed to fix up my costume, which had become slightly crumpled amongst the crowds, I decided to head to the designated chill out area. This year it featured massive fake Sakura Trees and a six-foot sculptor of the Japanese anthropomorphic cat Kiti Howaito, more commonly known as Hello Kitty. Here I sat alongside other convention attendees who lounged on bean bags and played on their portable game consoles, before I made my way to the paid workshops that I had pre-booked onto, a sake tasting tour and a plushie making class.

Between these workshops, the annually increasing entry fee for the convention itself and all the stalls I had browsed, my purse was getting lighter at an alarming rate. Luckily there were also plenty of things I could also do for free, including viewing some random

demonstrations. I witnessed handmade robots fighting each other in the run up to a new television series and wrestlers performing a quick match. At one convention, a bus full of dancers attempted to set a new world record to promote their game, getting as many people as possible to dance in unison.

My favourite part of conventions however had to be the chance to try out videogames that were yet to be released. Some of the videogame stalls even hosted quizzes or fighting game tournaments where you could win a range of prizes.

After losing spectacularly to a rival team at a multiplayer fighting game, I headed over to one of the multiple small stages dotted around the convention hall to see a group of young women lip-syncing and dancing to a Japanese song. Attendees could apply ahead of time to give performances on these stages and many, with aspirations of fame, used their acts as an opportunity to grow their fan base.

There were also large stages too, reserved for performances by artists who were famous within the niche geek culture circles. But the most popular and heavily advertised event occurring on the main stage had to be the cosplay masquerade, where cosplayers showed off their costumes in front of both a judging panel and the convention crowd. Those who won could gain prizes or in some cases qualify to represent their country at international masquerade competitions. Many of the masquerades specified that the cosplays had to be handmade, with entrants meticulously documenting their construction process. Entrants did not however solely showcase their outfits. Performances were choreographed to fully show them off, and originality and creativity were sure-fire means of pleasing both the crowd and judges. Within the most coveted masquerades the performances could be breath-taking. Entrants engaged in martial arts and gymnastics, performing feats of strength and skill when emulating their characters' attributes. Pre-recorded soundtracks, lights, smoke, projected images and dynamic background sets brought stages to life, and seamless costume changes and interactive props were commonplace. Ribbons could be used to imitate fire, water and energy and concealed stage makeup could give the appearance of throats being cuts, recreating the grizzliest of fight scenes.

Guest celebrities were often on the judging panel for these masquerades, and they too held events on the main stages, answering questions as part of celebrity panels or promoting their next projects. Some celebrities went on to give meet and greets after, allowing fans to get a photo with them for a fee. Some conventions even gave fans the opportunity to meet their idols for free, although raffleted tickets could be enforced due to popular demand.

A cosplayer getting an autograph with game illustrator, both doing one of the character's signature poses.

Although I had arrived at this convention on my own, I was constantly interacting with others. As I navigated around the halls I was stopped constantly and complimented on my cosplay, pausing for brief conversations if the other guests wanted to discuss the character I was emulating or the series they originated from. Many attendees asked for my photo and I posed as my character would, trying to look friendly and approachable like she was. Many onlookers however, did not gain permission to take my photos, snapping shots whenever I paused for a breath or over the shoulders of those who had sought my consent. I felt a bit cheated by this, I had put in so much effort to look good and if they had asked for my photo, I could have provided them with a nice pose. I cringed at the thought of how many pictures of me looking unprepared and exhausted must be out there somewhere.

My faith was restored a little while later when an older Japanese man, well versed in convention etiquette, asked for a photo with me. Whilst he wanted it to look like he had his arm over my shoulder, he hovered his arm above me, just in case I did not want to be touched by a stranger. But others paid no attention to my personal space. They placed their hands around my waist for photos and squeezed tightly, making crude comments about the low cleavage featured within the costume design. One guy even attempted to take a photo from the floor- at an angle where you could see up my skirt. Maybe they failed to account for the fact that I was a real person under my outfit.

Feeling flustered and exhausted I made my way to the designated smoking space outside. Here in the fresh air the cosplayers gathered, chatting amongst friends and posing in the good lighting whilst they had their photos taken by professional and aspiring photographers.

Cosplayers posing for photoshoots in the outside areas within conventions

Whilst this convention was a large commercialised affair, there were also smaller fan-run conventions. A few weeks later I made my way to one of these, a four-day event where attendees stayed in accommodation nearby. These conventions were a lot smaller due to size constraints and for some, tickets sold out in minutes. Unlike the larger conventions, the smaller conventions were not advertised to the general public as an unusual day out for all. You had to know about the smaller conventions to attend, so they mainly attracted those who heavily identified with geek culture, with the majority of attendees being cosplayers. Whilst the bigger conventions attracted hundreds of thousands of people, these smaller conventions could have hundreds of guests. With the larger of the fan-run conventions having a capacity of roughly one and a half thousand attendees.

These fan-run conventions were a lot more intimate, starting with an opening ceremony full of puns and catchphrases which soon became inside jokes and I quickly felt a sense of connection to the other guests because of it. As with the larger conventions, there were masquerades and a much smaller shopping area where attendees could buy goods and sell their own. But there were also many additional activities for the convention guests to participate in over the long weekend. An entertainment room hosted video, board and trading-card games, allowing you to play with established friends or make new ones. They also tended to have a tradition of supporting a charity, raising money through their annual auctions and donations.

Throughout the day I attended panels, where convention attendees applied months in advance give talks, workshops or performances on wide variety of topics. I learnt how to walk in heels at one panel where audience participation was mandatory. Both male and female guests strutted down a fashioned walkway in borrowed six-inch heels, to a chorus of wolf whistles and encouraging applause. A crafting panel demonstrated how create realistic amour using the thermoplastic Worbla, which provided me with a wealth of information that I utilised within my subsequent cosplays. I also attended entertaining presentations, on topics ranging the best fictional cats, to the worst fan made music videos, which always seemed to have ‘Likin park’s’ hit song ‘Numb’ as their soundtrack of choice.

The panels continued into the night, with quizzes, humorous talks on the topic of hentai-Japanese cartoon porn, burlesque shows and talent competitions which demonstrated the variety of skills and interests of the convention guests. Each night drew to a close with a

party that catered to a range of musical preferences, whilst late night karaoke, film nights and board game sessions ran concurrently for those wanting to escape the noise and make new friends.

Convention attendees watching a panel

Whilst there were many organised activities to partake in, some convention guests preferred to spend their time posing for photoshoots or drinking in the sun with their friends. Furthermore, as many cosplayers wore multiple costumes each day, with more causal cosplays being a welcomed relief after hours wearing bulky or constraining costumes, a great deal of time was spent getting ready, with the cosplayers transforming themselves into different characters throughout the day.

Whilst at the bigger conventions there was barely time for me to catch my breath, at the smaller conventions all the downtime between panels meant I had the opportunity to sit around and talk to cosplayers. I was invited to pre-drinks in hotel rooms with group of strangers before the evening parties, playing card games and catching up on the latest gossip. One night as I sat on the concourse outside of the party hall, I was roped into an impromptu game of laser tag. The social and laid-back atmosphere of these smaller conventions meant that I was able to actively get to know cosplayers, with the interactions we shared being more meaningful compared to the brief chats I had experienced at the larger conventions. Furthermore, the shared interests amongst the convention guests

instilled me with sense of connection to other attendees. I could discuss games and series here that none of my friends had even heard of. I understood the obscure references behind some cosplayer's outfits and felt able to enjoy geek culture without presenting it as a nerdy guilty pleasure. For me, the convention felt like a friendly little bubble removed from the outside world. Finally, on the last evening of the convention, a closing ceremony was held which restated the inside jokes shared over the weekend, cementing a sense of inclusion. As I attend the last party, a formal ball, and watched the cosplayers attempt to waltz whilst dressed up as characters in ball gowns and black ties, I felt a profound sense of sadness that it was over.

The Research

The above descriptive account helps to provide some context for the focus of this thesis, cosplay, and gives an insight into the unique convention spaces in which this activity usually takes place. I had personally attended many conventions before I commenced by PhD as I held an interest in videogames and Japanese media, having grown up helping out in a games store and watching Japanese cartoons on television. At these conventions I was able to trial new games and buy geek related merchandise which were unavailable elsewhere and it was here that I first saw cosplayers, feeling amazed by the skill of their costumes and their passion for the characters they emulated. I later came to know some cosplayers personally, who revealed that it was more than just an activity. Cosplay also seemed to exhibit subcultural elements with there being a whole subculture based around engaging in the practice.

Within a few years, the commercialisation of many large conventions coupled with the trend of 'geek chic' popularising geekiness within mainstream culture, resulted in cosplay receiving both media and scholarly attention. However, many of the media accounts tended to be shallow or sensationalised, and whilst cosplay was still relatively underexplored academically, the few existing papers, whilst offering an interesting insight into cosplay, tended be more descriptive and theoretical (Duffett, 2013; Poitras, 2001). Consequently, I decided to gain an understanding of cosplay through the eyes of the subculture's members, engaging in a two-year ethnography in which I travelled to conventions and cosplay related events around the UK, actively talking to cosplayers about the activity. In order to fully

understand cosplay, I also engaged in cosplay for the first time during my research, making the transition from an outsider of the cosplaying subculture to a full member, subsequently engaging in cosplay whilst undertaking the remainder of my research.

During this data collection I discovered that cosplay was related to a number of areas of sociological interest. Crucially, underpinning all of these themes was the notion that the cosplaying subculture provided its members with an accepting space which was juxtaposed against an intolerant everyday word, with cosplay offering cosplayers a sense of escape.

Therefore, due to the prominence of escape identified within the data, this thesis not only offered the opportunity to explore cosplay but also allowed for the theoretical framework utilised within this thesis, 'Escape Attempts', to be tested within an empirical setting (Cohen and Taylor, 1975). In which the authors argue that individuals use a number of methods, to break away from their regular routines in order to establish a sense of identity and provide escape from everyday life.

Overall, the main aim of this thesis was to provide an ethnographic exploration of the cosplaying subculture, utilising Escape Attempts as a framework. Through doing so I sought to achieve four main aims:

- To highlight the key theoretical areas of significance to the cosplaying subculture- investigating them in greater detail under the framework of Escape Attempts
- To explore the ways in which cosplay could be employed as an Escape Attempt
- To examine the extent to which Escape could be achieved in relation to the identified key theoretical areas
- Finally, this thesis also aimed to test the theory of Escape Attempts in an empirical setting.

<u>Outline of the Thesis</u>

The following chapter comprises of a review of the literature on cosplay. Beginning with an exploration of the history of the activity it provides a working definition of cosplay, based upon cosplayers' accounts, as well as theoretical and empirical evidence. From this, the theme of subculture emerges, therefore this area is discussed in greater detail allowing

cosplay to be framed as a distinctive subculture. Within the literature review I also outline the current academic work on cosplay, demonstrating how authors have contributed to the knowledge on this subject whilst acknowledging how they have failed to address the key concerns of this thesis. Through an exploration of the current literature I additionally highlight the concerns that need to be addressed when researching cosplay, including the selection of a suitable theoretical framework. Therefore, the chapter concludes by outlining the framework of Escape Attempts, demonstrating how it will be used to explore cosplay and how in turn cosplay could be used to test this theory.

Within chapter three I discuss the methodological decisions that were taken within my research. As well as outline the methods that were utilised; qualitative methods consisting of overt ethnographic fieldwork with high levels of researcher participation, interviews and focus groups. I also provide a detailed ethnographic account of my entry into the cosplaying subculture, highlighting the theoretical approach formed within this research project, as well as the ethical considerations that were made.

Chapter four explores themes related to cosplay and community. By exploring how cosplayers themselves framed cosplay, I demonstrate that the subculture understood itself in terms of similarity between its members and distinction from outsiders. With acceptance being highlighted as a core component of cosplay's subcultural identity.

In chapters five through to seven I analyse and discuss the key substantive areas that arose from the collected data, examining them through the lens of Escape Attempts. Chapter five focuses on the topic of ethnicity, six on gender and sexuality and seven on mental health and social disorders. These chapters reveal that cosplayers were able to subvert established notions in regard to these substantive areas to varying degrees, with this impacting upon cosplayers' ability to successfully escape.

Lastly, chapter eight reviews this research project's key findings in relation to its aims and objectives. Demonstrating how this project not only expands our knowledge of cosplay, but also contributes to debates on subcultural theory and extends the theory of Escape Attempts. But first, the following chapter provides an examination of both cosplay and the framework of Escape Attempts, starting with an exploration into how cosplay as a phenomenon was established.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Whilst the previous chapter offered a glimpse into the world of cosplay, this chapter will provide a more concrete definition of the activity reached through an exploration of how cosplay has been understood by the public, academics and cosplayers themselves. Outlining the history of cosplay in order to highlight the activity's attributes. With an examination of subcultural theory demonstrating that cosplay forms a distinctive subculture, touching upon themes of authenticity. This chapter also examines the current literature on cosplay, demonstrating not only the knowledge contributions made by wider academics, but also what the existing work fails to address, which will therefore be explored within this thesis. Crucially, by examining how previous studies on cosplay have been undertaken, the considerations that need to be made when researching this activity are brought to light, with a suitable theoretical framework being flagged as key. Consequently, the final section of this chapter turns to outlining the framework utilised, Escape Attempts, presenting how this theory will be used to frame the thesis and demonstrating why cosplay offered the perfect opportunity to test Escape Attempts within an empirical setting.

Understandings of Cosplay

It is safe to say that the amount of attention that has been paid to cosplay has skyrocketed in recent years, only having to search the BBC news archives to see a proliferation of articles and short programmes on cosplay published within the last half a decade. With many such accounts presenting cosplay as a means for enabling social interactions whilst describing cosplay as an escapist activity[1]. Plus, following the sharp rise in attendance figures to some geek culture conventions within the UK, members of the public may be more exposed to cosplayers than ever before[2]. Even those who fail to frequent geek culture conventions may

[1] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-40085977 (accessed 14/08/ 2019); https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/esports/article-5638993/The-best-cosplay-London-Games-Festival-2018.html (accessed 14/08/2019)

[2] http://www.mcmcomiccon.com/london/2013/06/13/london-comic-con-sees-record-attendance-and-will-expand-in-october/ (accessed 14/08/2019)

be inadvertently conscious of cosplay, with mainstream television programmes including the 'Big Bang Theory', featuring cosplay without providing a definition of the activity.

Whilst an awareness cosplay is undoubtably growing, due to limited clarification surrounding cosplay's definition, the word continues to be used incorrectly.
Within much of the mainstream media the term cosplay has used interchangeably with fancy dress, with the Oxford Dictionary of English (2010, pp394) defining cosplay as 'dressing up as a character from a film, book or videogame, especially one from the genre of Japanese manga [comic books] or anime [cartoons]'. Whilst an article within The Independent[3] defines cosplay as taking on the appearance of a fictional character from a Japanese source specifically, an article within The Daily Mail[4] extends this definition to include all fancy dress, from Eastern or Western sources, as long as it takes place within science fiction conventions. In article featured within The Sun[5] cosplay is described as any form of fancy dress not limited to a specific setting, with the paper using an image of a glamour model in a revealing and inaccurate 'Mario' costume to illustrate its point. This range of definitions of cosplay found within the mainstream media demonstrates a lack of clarity surrounding the term.

There was also found to be a variety of definitions for cosplay within academic texts. The majority of articles described cosplay as the act of emulating characters, who largely originated from geek media, however the following theoretical papers provided alternative definitions (Winge, 2006; Lamerichs, 2013; Hale, 2014). Sharp (2011) describes the uniforms worn within maid cafés to be cosplay, therefore presenting cosplaying as dressing up. Similarly, within Kotnai's (2007) analysis of the clothing of female characters within films, the outfits worn also described as cosplays. Whilst Kotnai fails to provide a definition for cosplay, the article's translator adds his own, describing it as a blanket term for dressing up.

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[3] http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/the-manga-girls-of-middlesbrough-2299942.html (accessed 21/7/2018)
[4] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2687013/Dude-looks-like-lady-From-Miley-Cyrus-Pokemon-meet-gender-bending-men-cosplay-arent-ones.html (accessed 21/7/2018)
[5] http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/features/5992209/Meet-the-cosplay-girls-at-Comic-Con.html (accessed 21/7/2018)

Furthermore, Duffett (2013) terms cosplay as dressing up as famous characters, stressing that cosplay places a specific focus on the clothing itself rather than the act of impersonation. Lastly, Whilst Ito and Crutcher (2013) describe cosplay as individuals emulating characters from geek media, with cosplay being framed as a public performance, the authors also describe other groups including goths to be cosplayers, despite them being framed as distinct fashion based subcultures by wider academics (Gagne, 2008). These varying accounts of cosplay therefore demonstrates the need for a working definition on the activity. Which will be achieved using evidence from both empirical and theoretical sources, exploring the origins of cosplay in order to highlight the key components of this activity.

The History of Cosplay-1900s

Although cosplay is largely associated with geek fandom conventions, aspects of the activity have been found decades before the first convention was held. The first recorded account associated with cosplay can be seen within an American newspaper published in 1908, describing a couple wearing costumes based on characters from the Sci-Fi comic strip 'Mr Skygack'. This account is claimed to be the first documented emulation of fictional characters whose images came from a visual source, with this act being regarded as an expression of fandom (Miler, 2013).

"MR. SKYJACK FROM MARS" AND "DIANA DILLPICKLES" ON SKATES.

Cartoon Characters Successfully Imitated by Participants in a Mask Carnival.

CINCINNATI, O., Dec. 17.—During a mask skating carnival at Music hall rink, "Diana Dillpickles" and "Mr. Skygack from Mars" appeared on the floor and made the hit of the evening with the refreshing novelty of their disguise. "Diana" was represented by Mrs. William A. Fell and the Martion correspondent by her husband. Both the costumes closely followed those of the comic characters made familiar to the public through their appearance in the cartoons of Artist Condo.

An article from The Spokane Press, 19 December 1908, reporting on the Mr Skygack outfits.

Although dressing in costume occurred decades before 1908, the use of printed cartoons allowed individuals to actively see characters rather than imagine them and therefore enabled them to directly reproduce their physical appearance. As a result, rather than being a recent phenomenon cosplay is argued to have evolved from a long-standing tradition, occurring since the advent of modern media (Ashcraft and Plunkett, 2014).

Wins First Prize As "Skygack"

Times readers don't need to ask who the dickens this is. Sure, it's Skygack from Mars, one of the Times' humorous characters. August Olson of Monroe, Wash., contributed the picture. He "made up" as Skygack and "copped" the first prize at a masked ball at Monroe.

Photograph from The Washington state, 1912, shows an image of another Mr Skygack costume, which closely replicates the design from the comic strip.

1930s-1960s

Whilst the act of imitating fictional characters from visual sources can be traced back to the last hundred years, Pettinger (2014), an archivist from the international costumer's guild, argues that the attributes of cosplay evolved from the earlier tradition of costuming. An activity said to have started at Worldcon in 1939, when two fans arrived at the science fiction convention wearing home-made futuristic style clothing, making their own unique personalities for the outfits they wore (Sanders, 1994; Pettinger,2014). At subsequent conventions, costuming grew in popularity, becoming a more formal activity, with competitions and prizes encouraging attendees to also dress in costume (Bacon-Smith, 2000).

Fast forward to the 1960s and the popularity of the Sci-Fi television series Star Trek, saw not only an increase in numbers at Worldcon, but also a trend of individuals directly imitating the clothing of specific Star Trek characters (Lunning, 2011). This activity, known as 'recreation costuming', began to rise in popularity, with those who engaged in this activity also emulating the attributes of the characters whose costumes they wore. Recreation costuming is argued to be the origin of cosplay today, with cosplayers similarly replicating the appearance of specific characters along with their personal qualities (Mai, 2014; Huskinson, 2013).

1908s

The term cosplay was not coined until the 1980s, 20 years after Star Trek piloted and recreation costumers first made their appearance, however the origin of the word cosplay has been a topic of much debate (Winge, 2006). The majority of literature on cosplay's origins can be found on the blogs and websites of those participating in the activity, many of which tend to display a personal bias in their accounts of the emergence of the activity (Winge, 2006). As a result, there are a number of conflicting theories regarding where cosplay came from, with debates surrounding whether it was a new term for recreation costuming, or instead a term for a distinct activity originating from Japan, where members

of fans clubs dressed up to express their consumption of anime and manga (Peirson-Smith, 2000; Winge, 2006).

Winge (2006) however argues that the most factual account of the origin of 'cosplay' is an amalgamation of both Western and Asian contributions. This argument asserts that one of the founders of a well-known anime company, Takahashi Nobuyuki, visited an American convention and witnessed fans dressing up as characters from Sci-Fi for masquerade shows. Nobuyuki termed cosplay as a combination of costume and play as the term masquerade had connotations of elitism when translated into Japanese (Ashcraft and Plunkett, 2014). Nobuyuki later published an article on masquerade within America, encouraging his Japanese audience to begin 'cosplaying' themselves within anime and manga conventions (Bruno, 2002). With cosplay today similarly taking place within designated spaces, rather than being outfits worn as everyday clothing. Consequently, a limited number of online bloggers argue that due to the Japanese origins of the word, cosplay should denote the emulation of East-Asian characters specifically. Despite this, all the cosplayers I spoke with within this project were aware of cosplay arising from both Western and Eastern influences, and as a result they also recognised non-Asian emulations as cosplay.

1990s- Current Day

Cosplay has continued to change and evolve since its advent, with the arrival of the internet in the 1990s having a particularly large impact on the activity. Zwart (2010) argues that the internet provided geek media fans with online spaces where they could locate those with similar niche interests outside of confines of their local communities. Whilst some individuals may have been reluctant to cosplay on their own, through the internet they could make friends with others interested in the activity, with many meeting offline to cosplay together, often prearranging to cosplay as characters from the same series (Wang, 2010). Furthermore Wang (2010) claims that online cosplaying forums dedicated to newbies, have allowed individuals to learn the rules of the cosplaying subculture and get tips on making costumes, with these factors increasing participation in the activity.

Alongside an increase in cosplayers numbers, the internet has also altered the quality of costumes seen at events. The internet has enabled images of cosplayers to be widely circulated with pictures of elaborate outfits gaining a great deal of attention online, putting pressure on cosplayers to similarly wear more spectacular costumes. Furthermore, the internet has allowed fans to upload pictures of characters from artbooks as well as screenshots of digital images, allowing minute details of outfits to be scrutinised. As a result, many cosplayers use these images as references, increasing the accuracy and quality of the cosplays being produced.

In recent years companies have also identified the potential for cosplay to be used for marketing purposes. Some cosplayers with large online following are now paid to advertise products, with some conventions employing official cosplayers as attractions to boost ticket sales. There have even been cases of game companies changing their character designs to look like specific cosplayers, therefore becoming real-life advertisements[6]. This commercialisation of cosplay has led to monetary investment in the activity, with the increase of cosplay competitions with cash prizes resulting in some cosplayers aiming to make cosplay a career (Craig and Copes, 2014).

The proliferation of computers and an increase in computer literacy has additionally resulted in some individuals manipulating cosplayer's photos. Many professional photographers now attend conventions, some of whom edit their photos of cosplayers to improve factors such as lighting or add effects. Furthermore, some cosplayers digitally edit their own photos and whilst some simply alter backgrounds or airbrush their skin, others may use programmes to change their appearance to look like fictional characters, achieving looks that are physically impossible. As a result, some famous cosplayers may be unrecognisable when compared to their photos online.

[6] https://uk.ign.com/articles/2012/12/03/bioshock-infinite-cosplayer-becomes-official-face-of-elizabeth (accessed 17/08/2019)

Cosplay Verses Fancy Dress

Although the distinction between fancy dress and cosplay will be discussed in more detail within chapter four, the term cosplay was shown to be used interchangeably with fancy dress by both the media and academics (Kotnai, 2007; Sharp, 2011). Therefore, it is important to outline what sets these two activities apart when considering the definition of cosplay.

Whilst fancy dress can be bought cheaply and look inauthentic, cosplayers may devote considerable amounts of time and money to their costumes in order to make them as accurate to their chosen characters as possible (Atkinson, 2012; Winge, 2006). With significant attention being paid to factors such as the colours of wigs, eye contacts as well as the look and feel of fabrics. Many cosplayers even make their outfits by hand, constructing props to make their outfit as close to the original source as possible (Martinez, 2014). As a result, a majority of academics differentiate cosplay from fancy dress within their definitions, claiming that wearing a costume is not enough to constitute as cosplaying (Norris and Bainbridge, 2009; Wang, 2010).This view was also found to be shared by cosplayers, with interviews conducted by Osmund et al (2012) discovering that convention attendees wearing inauthentic costumes or outfits that took very little effort, were perceived to be engaging in fancy dress rather than cosplay. Despite this however, some costumes were still reported to be cosplays despite being inaccurate to their original source.

As the media cosplayers consume often originates from East-Asia, the internet has played an essential role, allowing anime and manga from overseas to be uploaded and translated by fans and discussed on dedicated chatrooms (Winge, 2006). This online presence has resulted in some individuals sharing their own fan art, depicting characters in clothing designed by fans, or humous outfits that are shared widely online. Some cosplayers may emulate the outfits from this fan art, and rather than being looked down upon for their inaccuracy to the original source, they are often viewed as desirable. Displaying that the wearer has a keen interest in the media and is aware of the related images shared online[7].

Alternatively, some cosplayers may reimagine characters, in costumes from a different time period or series, playing close attention to the accuracy of their outfits and their representations of their characters. There have even been instances of cosplayers dressing up as real people. For example, the popularity of memes relating to the American painter Bob Ross resulted in cosplayers emulating him at conventions[8]. Gaining positive attention for their knowledge of online trends.

A popular online meme speculating what the Pokémon Dugtrio looked like underground.

[8] https://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/clcrpm/bob_ross_cosplay_from_sdcc/

Two groups of cosplayers, at conventions on the other side of the world, cosplaying the above meme

Credit: David DTJAAAAM Ngo

Credit: Wrath of Con Pics

Cosplayers may also engage in crossplay, cross dressing as characters of the opposite sex (Winge, 2014). Whilst some crossplayers may take steps to look accurately like their character's sex, others may cosplay as a gender swapped versions of them.

Alternatively, some cosplayers may dress up as characters, wearing outfits traditionally associated with the opposite sex such as female characters in tuxedos or male characters in gowns. Despite this, cosplayers dressing as alternative versions of their characters are still expected to put effort into their outfits and accurately portray their characters, whether they are reimagined as the opposite sex or in clothing that they would not usually wear (Winge, 2014). Furthermore, cosplayers dressing up as fan art also place emphasis on accuracy, closely replicating the outfits drawn by fans.

Female cosplayers dressed up as male characters wearing maid outfits. Their facial expressions mirror the personalities of their emulated characters. Credit: Smile250.

As was previously mentioned, cosplayers take on the personal attributes of the characters they emulate, with this being another factor that distinguishes cosplay from fancy dress (Mai, 2014; Huskinson,2013). Within Wang's (2010) research, the cosplayers he interviewed argued that that whilst anyone could wear an outfit, a cosplayer had to become an embodiment of their chosen character. With Norris and Bainbridge (2009, pp15) similarly claiming that cosplayers adopted the 'role of a character both physically and mentally', with the emulation of a character's mannerisms and personal attributes being flagged as a key component of cosplay.

However, this does not mean that cosplayers have to remain in character for the duration of their time in costume. An article by Wikipedians (2011) argues that cosplayers are instead expected to act as their emulated characters during specific social situations, such as mimicking their character's mannerisms for photoshoots, otherwise they may fail to be regarded as real cosplayers.

The last factor argued to set cosplay apart from fancy dress is that whilst fancy dress can be an individual display, cosplay is seen as a group activity, with a number of academics claiming that cosplayers form a distinct subculture (Lunning,2011; Kawamura, 2012; Winge, 2006). In fact, Lunning claims that being accepted into the cosplaying subculture is the primary reason why most cosplayers wear costume, with outfits being worn as a way to facilitate conversations with the subculture's members. As the notion of subculture is contested, it is therefore important to examine this area in greater depth. Exploring the origins of the term, pioneering subcultural studies and contemporary debates on subcultural theory. To provide a definition of subculture and frame cosplay as a specific type.

Subcultural Theory

Origins of the Term Subculture

The term subculture has been described as 'a chameleon theory' possessing a range of definitions; being viewed as a model to explore subnormal behaviour, the expression of resilience or a visual display of consumer choice (Blackman, 2004, p104). Despite this, underlying the majority of definitions is the notion that the term subculture describes groups of individuals who display distinctive forms culture, which therefore distinguishes them from their wider society (Okamura and Shaw, 2000; Winge, 2012; Shuker, 1998). This definition of subculture however, differs from the concept's original meaning, which was established in the 1920s within the Chicago School, an informal term for sociologists with a focus on society and culture, who studied or taught within the Sociology department at the University of Chicago (Thornton, 1997). With the term originally describing criminal or delinquent groups (Ross, 2014). Whilst the meaning of subculture may have evolved from its earlier terminology, Ross (2014) points out that the studies conducted within the Chicago School continue to shape subcultural studies to this day. Therefore, in order to fully understand what subculture means, it is first important to explore the origins of the term.

Prior to Chicago School thinking, deviance and poverty were largely attributed to an individual's morals and eugenics, with a large focus of criminology research considering why African Americans, immigrants and the working class were more likely to engage in deviant behaviour (Kalunta-Crumpton, 2008). The Chicago school scholars however proposed a radical new way of framing crime and anti-social behaviour, arguing that deviance instead stemmed from an individual's social environment (Williams 2007). In 1922 Parks and Burgess from the Chicago school proposed the Human Ecology Theory which considered the interactions between individuals and their environments, likening society to a biological organism whose members adjusted according to social change in an attempt to restore equilibrium conditions. Therefore, for Parks and Burgess, deviance was argued to stem from disruptions to the normative structure of society, caused by societal shifts rather than the inherent generics or values of certain individuals.

The concept that deviance was the product of one's environment prompted a number of seminal studies within the Chicago school (Haenfler, 2014). Shaw and McKay (1942) expanded the Human Ecology Theory, proposing the Social Disorganisation Framework for understanding deviance, in which they argued that poverty and deviance were the result of individuals' geological location. Similarly, Sutherland and Cressey's Differential Association Theory argued that individuals learnt criminal behaviour through interactions with others who rationalised or justified crime, presenting criminal activities in a desirable light. With subculture denoting groups of deviant or criminal individuals within these early studies (Haenfler, 2014).

The idea that deviance stemmed from social rather than biological factors led to a number of subcultural studies from Chicago School scholars, who employed ethnographic methods to explore the subject of deviance and give a voice to marginalised groups (Haenfler, 2014). Notable examples include 'The hobo' a field study conducted by Anderson in 1923 focusing on the experiences of the homeless. Departing from previous studies within this field which tended to focus on statistics, Anderson instead used fieldwork to shed light on the personal experiences of the homeless population (Steiner, 1923). Thraser's (1927) doctoral thesis on Chicago Gangs rebutted claims that gang formation was an innate characteristic of immigrant youths, instead presenting gangs as an outlet for young men to rebel against traditions and formal institutions (Hagedorn, 2007). Within Cressey's (1932) study of taxi-dancers, women paid to dance with men at dance halls, the author examines the experiences of these women and the factors that led to their engagement in this deviant line of work. Fraizer' (1939) Study, The Negro Family in the United States, was one of the first studies to explore the lives of African American's, demonstrating how the effects of slavery and the Jim Crow laws continued to have a lasting impact on African American's which drove some to crime. Lastly, Whyte's study Street Corner Society (1943) utilised participant observation to give a rich insight into the lives of the Italian immigrant population within Cornerville. Providing a detailed account of how the local gangs were structured and formed. These studies demonstrated that utilising qualitative methods to explore the lives of particular groups was a worthwhile means of generating rich empirical data, departing from traditional research approaches which tended to focus on theory (Gilgun, 2019).

Strain Theory

The studies produced by the Chicago School are argued to have resulted in a paradigm shift in the understanding of deviance, with a number of wider US scholars exploring how social conditions could contribute to delinquency (Jones, 2010; Haenfler, 2014). With these studies proceeding to shape contemporary understandings of subcultures. In 1939 Robert Merton drew upon Chicago School thinking to argue that crime was the result of individuals lacking the ability to achieve society's cultural goals, such as power, wealth or status. These individuals could therefore turn to illegitimate means to achieve these goals or engage in anti-social behaviour to express their frustrations. With deviance therefore, being seen to stem from the strain between culturally prescribed aspirations and the lack of opportunity to achieve them. Cohen (1955) built upon Merton's concept within his book Delinquent Boys arguing that those unable to achieve societal goals formed subcultures with alternative norms, with these subcultures holding their own deviant goals. Howard Becker was also influenced by the Chicago School's ideas on deviance, taking upon its principles in the development of the Labelling Theory, in which the author proposes that deviance is not inherent, but a label placed upon individuals by others (Collin, 1997). Within his book 'The Outsiders', Becker demonstrates that individuals become deviant when labelled as so by others, with societal attitudes influencing how an individual sees themselves. A similar concept was also expressed with Goffmann's (1963) theory on stigma, which explores the process and implications of individuals being socially discredited by wider members of their society. Goffman describes how individuals with a deviant, or spoiled identity, may engage in stigma management, attempting to alter how they are perceived.

Haenfler (2014) argues that these early American studies played a key role in advancing subcultural studies. Demonstrating the importance of exploring subculturalists' subjective understandings using systematic ethnographic means, whilst highlighting that subcultures stemmed from society itself and the individuals within it, rather than pathologies. Despite this, whilst the methods and theory underpinning the Chicago School continue to inform subcultural studies, both ecology and strain theory can be critiqued for being too deterministic with the formations of subcultures being framed as the direct consequences of societal forces or geographical locations (Williams, 2007). With the focus on deviance

specifically aligning subcultures with the field of criminology rather than wider sociology, presenting subcultures as 'social problems rather than diverse, meaningful social spaces' (Haenfler, 2014, pp7).

The Birmingham School

It was not however solely America scholars who shaped the concept of subculture. The 1960s and 1970s also saw the emergence of a number of ethnographic studies within The Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, with a particular focus on the working-class youth cultures that emerged after the second world war (Williams, 2007). Subcultures were presented as a form of resistance against capitalistic society, which was argued to promote economic exploitation and cultural domination (Haenfler, 2014). The CCCS drew upon Gramsci's (1971) theory of cultural hegemony to inform their theory on subcultures, which argues that the ruling classes makes subjugated groups complicit in their repression by creating an ideology that legitimises the dominant position of those in power (Bassi, 2008). Coupled with the ideas of Althusser (1970) who extended Gramsci's work outside of the realms of politics to propose that the ideologies that individuals held were a product of their social structures, with values and beliefs being a result of socialisation from birth (Agger, 1992). Alongside these concepts of hegemony and structuralism, the concept of semiotics is also argued to have shaped CCCS subcultural theory, with semiotics focusing on the idea that symbols are defined by their relationships to other symbols within a system (Chandler, 2002). With CCCS scholars adopting the idea that symbols can be infused with power dynamics or signify certain statuses (Williams, 2007).

For CCCS academics, youth subcultures represented a working-class struggle, with youths attempting to distinguish themselves from the working-class culture of their parents which was associated with alcoholism and unemployment. As well as well as from the dominant bourgeois, figures that were considered negatively, including the police, teachers and bosses (Williams, 2007). With the CCCS claiming that subcultural identities and the struggles of the working class could be viewed through youth styles and rituals (Haenfler, 2014). In Jefferson and Hall's book Resistance Through Rituals the authors studied a number of post-

war subcultures including Mods, drug-users and teddy boys. The authors combined ethnography and theory to give a detailed insight into the lives of the young working class throughout the historical period (Winlow, 2007). Arguing that subcultures took aspects of mainstream culture and subverted them as a form of resistance. Another key text from the CCCS was Hebdige's (1979) Subculture: The Meaning of Style, which argues that members of subcultures took items and altered their meanings- being most visible through a subculture's clothing, with specific subcultures wearing a particular style. For Hebdige the clothing worn by members of subcultures helped to set them apart from wider members of society whilst being used to build a subcultural identity. With the clothing worn denoting aspects of the subculture's norms and values, such as the chaotic style of Punks reflecting their 'no future' attitude (Hebdige, 1979, p61). As a result of this work Haenfler (2014) argues that subcultures came to be associated with specific forms of spectacular fashions, departing from previous subcultural definitions that focused largely on member's deviant actions.

CCCS scholars also considered subcultures positions within wider society, with Cohen's (1972) theory of moral panics demonstrating how subcultures could be used as scapegoats, being presented as a threat to social values. Furthermore, within Willis' (1977) study, Learning to Labour, the author showed the consequences that subcultures could have for its members, being a means to reinforce socio-economic positions. Willis demonstrates that the values of working-class lads and their counter-culture attitudes resulted in their poor performance in schools, which ultimately prevented their social mobility through employment, and forced them to remain in working class jobs. Therefore, demonstrating that whilst subcultures may be viewed as a means for subverting mainstream society, they may in fact serve as a tool to perpetuate established conventions.

The CCCS research outlined above made a number of contributions to the field of subcultural studies; highlighting that fashion could have ideological connotations, style could be a form of resistance and demonstrating that subcultural studies could be used to explore the topic of class (Haenfler, 2014). Despite this, a majority of the studies conducted by the CCCS focused on the experiences of white working-class males leading to critiques of their lack of intersectionality (Boogaarts-de Bruin, 2011). With McRobbie and Garber's (1976) study on bedroom culture, demonstrating that the subcultural lives of young women

largely took place within the confines of the home. Suggesting that the CCCS scholars had exhibited selection bias in their research by focusing on the experiences of men exclusively.

Furthermore, whilst some Birmingham School studies, such as Willis' used empirical methods, the majority of the work produced was based on theory and failed to account for the subcultural member's own experiences. Therefore, the work of the CCCS has been heavily criticised for potentially misrepresenting or overemphasising the styles and rituals of the groups they studied (Williams, 2007).

Post-Subcultural Thought

The 1990s saw the emergence of theorists who critiqued the class-centred explanations of subcultures that emerged from the Birmingham School. These theorists, associated with the post-subcultural movement, argued that subcultures no longer existed or were little different from mainstream culture, claiming that subculture had become a ''catch-all term for any aspect of social life in which young people, style and music intersect'' (Bennett, 1999, pp599). Studies such as Anderson's (2009) work on groups who visited Electronic Dance Music clubs demonstrated that individuals from a range of socio-economic backgrounds came together at these events. With the desire to escape through hedonism being central to this scene rather than the theories on class resistance proposed by the CCCS.

Post sub-cultural theorists argued that the 'subcultural groups' arising in the 1990s were diluted, 'hollow representations' of earlier subcultures, with members drawing upon a range of fashion styles and displaying an eclectic taste in music, leading some authors to claim that subcultures no longer existed (Haenfler, 2014, pp10; Lewin, 2013). Within Redhead's (1990, ppx) book Subculture to Clubcultures, Redhead presents subcultures as a fantasised academic creation, claiming that the term was 'no longer appropriate- if indeed, it ever was'. Rather than reducing youth culture to one dimension as many within the CCCS had done with class, Redhead drew upon postmodernist thought within his study of popular music scenes, to propose that the youth drew from a range of different sources. Combining music and fashion to create their own styles and identity. Therefore, rather than youth culture being framed as distinctive subcultures based around specific phenomenon,

theorists such as Redhead present it as much more fluid, with youths taking aspects from different cultural sources as they please.

Polhemus (1998) also opposes the notion of subcultures, arguing that consumers pick and mix their clothing, blending fashions together in a 'supermarket of style'. As a result, rather than fashion representing displays of subcultural membership or markers of class resistance, Polhemus instead argues that clothing has lost it wider symbolic meaning. Chaney (2004) similarly proposes that modern society has resulted in an amalgamation of styles, arguing that individuals are no longer interested in collective identities, instead prioritising their own creativity, drawing from various sources when forming their lifestyles in order to do so. As a result, Chaney argues that dominant culture has become fragmented due to the plurality of individuals' lifestyles, eliminating the divide between subcultures and dominant cultures. Straw (1991) also supports the concept of fluidity between cultures, replacing with the term subcultures with 'scenes' within his research. In comparison to the rigid boundaries discussed by previous subcultural academics, Straw presents the boundaries between music scenes as porous. With different scenes sharing characteristics which blur the borders between them, and individuals' participation in scenes being less consistent compared to the youths described within subcultural theories (Haenfler, 2014).

For Maffesoli (1996) post-modernist society has resulted in individualism and social dissolution, with individuals therefore attempting to return to notions of community. Maffesoli (2017, pp742) describes the term subculture to be 'nonsensical' and 'tired', proposing that individuals rely less on existing social phenomenon such as class to shape their identity. Instead Maffesoli proposes the act of neo-tribalism, whereby individuals re-establish their connection to a community through collective affinities such as the temporary feeling of community which crowds share when watching a football match. Therefore, neo-tribes exist for the duration of their rituals, coming into being alongside the occasion. With individuals belonging to and shifting between multiple tribes, which are 'temporary groupings which we are members of at different times of the day' (Shields, 1996, ppix).Bennett (1999, pp600) draws upon Maffesoli's concept of tribes within his study on urban dance music in which he argues that 'subcultures are better understood as a series of temporary gatherings characterised by fluid boundaries and floating memberships'. Bennett discovered that club attendees came from a range of backgrounds and held a variety of

fashion styles, consuming music from different genres based on their mood. With Bennett therefore arguing that the social gatherings of young people should be understood as fluid neo-tribes rather than rigid subcultures.

These post-subcultural theorists brought a range of new concepts to the notion of subculture. Arguing that culture was no longer bound to socio-economic characteristics, such as class or ethnicity, with youth social gathering being presented as a choice rather a consequence of one's social status. They also framed cultural identity as fluid, with membership being a temporary manifestation which demonstrated a desire to seek pleasure rather than being a display of resistance. Furthermore, these scholars also promoted the idea that there was no clear distinction between mainstream culture and so-called subcultures, claiming to have rendered the concept of subculture obsolete.

Contemporary Subcultural Work

Despite claims by post-subcultural theorists that term subculture is 'superfluous' and 'no longer relevant', Shildrick and MacDonald (2006) critique this view, arguing that post-subculturalists have understated the cultural lives and identities of young people (Chaney, 2004, pp36). Haenfler (2014) argues that a new generation of scholars have in fact continued to demonstrate that the concept of subcultures may not in fact be obsolete, taking on board the critiques of CCCS theory to propose a revised view of subcultures. These contemporary theorists have sought to provide thorough insights into subculturalists' experiences through their participant's subjective points of view. Moving subcultural studies away from the Birmingham School's focus on class, they have explored how inequalities and contradictions may be reproduced within subcultures, with subcultures being argued to have the potential to challenge or reinforce social norms. Furthermore, these contemporary subcultural theorist draw upon post-subcultural thought, departing from the notion of subcultures as stable groups with rigid boundaries. With subcultures being presented as the shared meanings between members which are constantly changing and evolving. Holding a variety of diverse members, and being one of the many micro-cultures that individuals subscribe to (Hebdige, 1979; Fine and Kleinman, 1979).

Within Hodkinson's (2002) analysis of goths, the author demonstrates that goths display cultural characteristics that marks them as a distinctive subculture compared to wider mainstream society. With goths' specific styles and musical preferences forming a specific subcultural identity. Whilst post-subcultural theorists have argued that the increasingly globalised nature of society has led to youths consuming from a range of sources, therefore disrupting the traditional view of subcultures, Hodkinson shows that goths have established specific goth related global networks and local goth scenes, opposing post-subcultural arguments and reinforcing goths as a specific, recognisable subculture (Spracklen and Spracklen, 2018).

Brill (2008) similarly, describes goths as a subculture within her book Goth Culture: Gender, Sexuality and Style. In which Brill shows that whilst some individuals merely adopted components of goth fashion, others displayed specific consumption practices which formed a goth subcultural identity. Unlike Hodkinson's work however, which discovered no political meanings behind the goth style, Brill argues that male goth's androgynous clothing disrupted conventional gender norms whilst concurrently reinforcing masculine traits such as confidence and courage. Opposing post-subcultural studies which rejected the notion that fashions represented displays of resistance, viewing them instead to be consumerist practices (Haenfler, 2014). Blackman (2005) however, makes the point that clothing may exhibit both, with studies such as Brill's demonstrating the scope for subcultures to be consumerist as well as a form of resistance.

Furthermore, Best's (2005) study on car cultures demonstrates that subcultural theory remains a worthwhile framework for the generation new knowledge, being applicable outside the realms of music, fashion and class. Best explores how car enthusiasts formed loosely organised groups based on a shared appreciation for a distinct cultural style, participating in activities based around driving and framing their identity in comparison to these groups. Whilst the diversity of contemporary society has been presented as a factor which may weaken the notion of subcultures. Enabling individuals to draw from a range of sources rather than subscribing to the specific consumption practises (Polhemus, 1998; Chaney, 2004). Best demonstrates how a variety of individuals can be united under specific social trends. With the subculture formed around car culture, providing a common ground, bringing together its ethnically and economically diverse members.

Although these contemporary subcultural scholars may fail to be classified as a 'coherent school of thought', their studies have been monumental to the theory of subcultures, drawing upon the work of previous subcultural and post-subcultural theorists to inform their approaches, therefore successfully building upon and reinventing the notion of subculture (Haenfler, 2014, pp14).

Defining Subculture

Within this thesis I draw upon Haenfler's definition of subculture, which builds upon concepts found within previous subcultural and post-subcultural theorists. Haenfler (2014, pp16) defines subculture as a 'relatively diffuse social network, having a shared identity, distinctive meanings around certain ideas, practises and objects, and a sense of marginalization or resistance to a perceived "conventional" society'. Alongside the basic characteristics outlined within this definition, Haenfler argues that many subcultures have a specialised vocabulary which demonstrates subculturalists' insider knowledge. Connections to a particular fashion style or music genre, with some subcultures serving as a social support system for members. Haenfler also distinguishes subcultures from other social groupings, which will therefore be outlined below.

Firstly, Lifestyles are framed as distinctive modes of living, which are considered less deviant or oppositional in compassion to subcultures (Sobel, 1981). With Haenfler citing a middle-class lifestyle where members decorate their homes in certain ways or consume certain foods as an example of a lifestyle. Social movements are described as organised movements against authority structures, with social change being their key focus (McAdam et al, 2001). Counter cultures are presented as a grouping that exists between social movements and subcultures. Being less formally organised than social movements but more change oriented than subcultures. New religious movements are spiritual, religious or philosophical entities that differ from mainstream religions and place a focus on the spiritual or supernatural. Gangs comprise of marginalised individuals with criminality and territory often being their central feature. Lastly fandoms are presented as communities that share their interest of popular culture and translate this into cultural activities within other fans. Being a

participatory culture, whereby fans create their own stories fashions or objects based around their fandom rather than passively consuming.

Cosplay as a Subculture

Whilst cosplay has been described as a subculture by a number of academics, Jenkins (1992) instead presents cosplay as a fandom, with the costumes worn being argued to display a shared interest in the geek media genre (Lunning, 2011; Kawamura, 2012; Winge, 2006). Using Haenfler's definition however, cosplay can be understood as a distinct subculture whose members have constructed a specific subcultural identity, setting cosplay apart from wider fans of geek culture.

Haenfler describes subcultures as diffuse social networks, with the ongoing interactions between members making up the subculture itself. With cosplay similarly being presented as a highly social activity within introduction of this thesis, demonstrating how the costumes worn by cosplayers could be used to prompt social interactions and create a sense of comradeship amongst other members. Haenfler also argues that subculturalists share a particular identity with one another, viewing themselves as distinct from other subcultures and wider members of society. With this identity being a central part of a subculturalist's sense of self, rather than merely being a display of fashion or certain patterns of behaviour. Whilst the ways in which cosplayers distinguished themselves from wider subcultures will be explored in greater detail within chapter four, cosplayers clearly presented themselves as distinct from individuals in fancy dress, despite both wearing costumes within geek culture conventions. Furthermore, interviews with cosplayers have demonstrated that these individuals framed being a cosplayer as a key component of their identity, being used to distinguish them from other groups (Wang, 2010; Osmund et al, 2012).

Members of subcultures are also argued to hold shared distinctive meanings, which can consist of physical objects, practises, beliefs or values (Williams, 2011). With these meanings often differing from the norm, setting subcultures apart from lifestyles which are often more socially accepted. For cosplay this can be seen most readily though the cosplays themselves and the act of exhibiting these outfits, which connote a shared passion for geek

media, within conventions spaces (Jenkins, 1992). Furthermore, throughout the remainder of the thesis it will also be revealed that the cosplaying subculture shared specific norms which helped to construct the notion of a shared subcultural identity.

Whilst cosplay is a pro-social subculture, it does exhibit some forms of resistance to mainstream culture. As was discussed earlier within this chapter, a notable example can be displayed through the act of crossplay, where cosplayers flaunt established conventions of gender by dressing up as the opposite sex. Additionally, within chapters four to seven it is demonstrated that cosplayers viewed their subculture as holding values which were distinct from wider society. Mirroring the argument of Greeberg (2007, ppxvi) that subcultures hold beliefs which 'stray from those commonly held by the mainstream culture'.

A male cosplayer, crossplaying as a female character: Credit: Typestatic.

Subcultures are additionally argued to hold an outsider status, leading to the marginalisation of their members. This notion was highlighted within the opening lines of this thesis with the act of wearing a cosplay resulting in negative social interactions between myself and other passengers on the train to a convention. With this theme being explored in greater detail within the following methodology chapter.

Throughout my ethnographic work it was also revealed that cosplayers had their own vocabulary, using Japanese words as well as phrases stemming from online sources and videogames. With chapter four demonstrating that cosplayers use specific terminology to describe outsiders to the cosplaying subculture as well as divisions within it. Additionally, whilst the cosplaying subculture is revealed consist of a diverse range of individuals, subscribing to a range of fashion choices and musical preferences, cosplay can be regarded as a shared style that conveys subcultural membership. With cosplayers additionally being found to collectively recognise and bond over the music from the games and media they consume. Lastly, Haenfler argues that subcultures can provide a social support system for its members, as subculturalists may be labelled as deviant. This is seen to be a central concern of this thesis and is explored through its empirical findings. With cosplay being seen to provide a safe and inclusive space for the members of this subculture.

Authenticity

The concept of authenticity is also argued to be a key component of subcultures, being used to create boundaries to distinguish subcultural members from mainstream society (Williams and Copes, 2005). With authenticity therefore determining whether individuals are judged to be legitimate members of a subculture (Haenfler, 2014). A number of academics have highlighted the importance of authenticity within the cosplaying subculture. With interviews conducted by Wang (2010) revealing that in order to be considered a real cosplayer, individuals had to hold a certain degree of knowledge about the media or characters they cosplayed, otherwise they were viewed as engaging in fancy-dress. This finding was also mirrored by interviews conducted by Osmund et al (2012, pp12) who found that individuals who lacked subcultural knowledge did not feel like cosplayers themselves. Voicing that their lack of knowledge led to them being unable to engage in conversations with cosplayers,

which excluded them from the subculture. Furthermore, an article by Wikipedians (2011) argues whilst many cosplayers do not engage in role-play, they are still expected to hold enough knowledge of their characters to pose like them in photos. A failure to do so could lead to these individuals being labelled as frauds by the wider subculture.

Whilst authenticity is often presented as an inherent trait that certain individuals possess, authenticity is argued to be a socially constructed concept, an ideal that members of a subculture seeks to strive for (Vannini and Williams, 2009). Vannini and Williams (2009, pp3) argue that authenticity is not a 'state of being' but is instead the 'objectification of a process of representations'. With authenticity being a fluid target rather than a concrete phenomenon. As a result, members of subcultures have to engage in 'identity work' to continue being considered authentic, as the markers of authenticity are continuously changing (Peterson, 2005). This has been demonstrated within Fox's (1987) study on punks which revealed that members of the punk subculture had to follow the latest trends to be viewed as legitimate. Those who did not, faced being labelled inauthentic and were viewed as undesirable by wider members of the punk subculture. As cosplayers frequently change their outfits for different events, with many cosplaying characters from the latest or currently trending media, this could be viewed as a form of identity work, with cosplayers reaffirming their membership of the subculture through their costumes, broadcasting their awareness of latest subcultural trends.

Authenticity can also play an important part in the formation of hierarchies within subcultures, ensuring that the members display certain behaviour, granting membership exclusively to those who wish to participate for reasons which the subculture considers acceptable (Haenfler, 2014). This notion is also explored within Fox's study on punks, where individuals who were the most committed to the punk lifestyle with a strong focus on counterculture were known as hardcore punks. With hardcore punks being viewed as the ideal, or most authentic, members of the punk subculture, being the image that other punks aspired to. On the other hand, softcore punks held similar values to the hardcore punks but were less committed to their counterculture lifestyles. Whilst softcore punks were considered less desirable, they were still viewed as authentic due to their shared attitudes with the hardcore punks. Lastly preppie punks were found to be the group lowest down on the punk hierarchy with some claiming that they were illegitimate punks. The preppies were

looked down upon due their values and lifestyles, which differed from those held by both hardcore and softcore punks. With preppies placing focus on the punk fashion, which was considered undesirable by members of this subculture. Consequently, those wishing to be viewed as legitimate punks were encouraged to ascribe to certain values, to gain membership and avoid being regarded as preppies.

Similar findings were also reported within Masse's (2014) interviews with cosplayers, as individuals who were seen wear costumes to gain attention were looked down upon, labelled as fake cosplayers and were prevented from joining the cosplaying subculture. These individuals were argued to have worn costumes for the wrong reasons, with legitimate cosplayers wearing outfits to convey their interest in geek culture. Furthermore, the most coveted members of the cosplaying subculture were seen to display their interest in geek media through their intricate outfits and specialised knowledge. Therefore, suggesting that these hierarchies also exist within cosplay.

Fox's work also touches upon another key role that authenticity can play within subcultures, boundary making, with authenticity being used as a marker to construct the criteria for group membership. For the punks an individual's lifestyle was viewed as a key marker for group membership, with those who failed to ascribe to the punk lifestyle being viewed as existing outside of the boundaries of the punk subculture. Similarly, Widdicombe and Wooffitt's (1995) study on goths also touches upon boundary making, revealing that being a goth required members to hold specific motivations, as the fashion alone did not lead to an individual being viewed as a genuine member of the subculture. It is however important to note that as the notion of authenticity is constantly changing, so too is the process of boundary making which is argued to an ongoing process (Montemaggi, 2019). Furthermore Haenfler (2014) also points out that authenticity is not solely used as a means to keep individuals outside of subcultures. It can also give outsiders hints on how to get in, demonstrating the beliefs and styles that members must hold to be considered an insider. This is shown within Dupont's (2014) ethnography on the skateboarding scene, demonstrating that individuals could get access to the core skating subculture by learning the traits associated with its authentic members.

The process of boundary making can certainly be viewed within the accounts of cosplayers labelling certain individuals as engaging in fancy dress (Osmund et al, 2012). With academics demonstrating how those who engaged in this activity for the wrong reasons could be prevented from joining the subculture (Masse, 2014). Additionally, throughout the remainder of this thesis the process of boundary making within the cosplaying subculture is revealed, alongside the ways in which cosplayers could present themselves as legitimate members.

Subcultural Capital

Thornton (1995) draws upon the Bourdieu's (1984) concept of capital to explore the ways in which members of subcultures display their authenticity. Bourdieu proposes three main types of capital; economic- referring to resources, social- denoting one's networks with others and cultural- the knowledge accumulated due an individual's socio-economic position, conveying an individual's social class. Combined, these forms of capital shape the image that individuals project of themselves to others and therefore influences an individual's identity. From this theory Thornton coins the term subcultural capital, with different methods being utilised to convey subcultural status.

Thornton argues that subcultural capital can be embodied, such as through correctly using the subculture's specific slang. Subcultural capital can also be objectified, with many subculturalists wearing markers to display their subcultural status. However, trying too hard is argued to be a sure-fire means of depleting subcultural capital, being viewed as a desperate and unsuccessful claim of authenticity. Specialised knowledge can also be a key means of attaining subcultural capital with Whelan's (2006) study of online musical communities demonstrating that by talking about specific music samples online, members of online musical subcultures could display that they were aware about musical discourse, therefore demonstrating their own authenticity. This notion was mirrored within the work of Lunning (2011) who found that cosplayers could also use their knowledge of niche media to demonstrate their authenticity. Facilitating conversations with those who were part of the cosplaying subculture in order to secure their membership within it.

The attainment of subcultural capital is often part of a gradual process, with Driver's (2011) research on music-based youth subcultures demonstrating that members had to consistently practice in order to learn the skills needed to partake in certain activities at gigs. With both breakdancing and moshing taking a great deal of practise rather than being activities that 'new participants could just do' (Driver, 2011, pp981). Once these competences were developed, they were found to be a key means of obtaining subcultural capital, with individuals performing their moshing or breakdancing to other subculturalists. This particularly resonates with cosplay, with the following methodology chapter demonstrating that by honing my emulation skills and gaining knowledge from more established practitioners, I received more positive attention and praise which allowed me to embed myself further within the cosplaying subculture.

Lastly fashion and style are also seen to be a key markers of authenticity, symbolising subcultural membership. Haenfler (2014) argues that goths who wear their fashion style in all contexts may be viewed as more authentic. With those who failed to do so, risking being viewed as playing at being a goth rather than a legitimate member. With Fox's study similarly finding that preppies who did not consistently wear the punk fashion were regarded as outsiders to the subculture as a result. Whilst the act of wearing a cosplay is undoubtedly a major signifier of an individual's membership to the cosplaying subculture, cosplays are not worn at all times. Furthermore, whilst many cosplayers wear markers of their interest in geek culture within their everyday lives, through specific clothing or accessories, a failure to do so does not threaten an individual's authenticity. With cosplay therefore departing from other stylistic subcultures despite the centrality of clothing within it.

A cosplayer's Ita-bag- A bag covered in badges and merchandise displaying the wearers love for a particular anime character. Being worn alongside the cosplayer's everyday clothes, it could be regarded as a signifier of their interest in geek media. Credit: CosKittz.

Definition of Cosplay

Having explored the history of the phenomenon and demonstrated why cosplay could be considered a subculture, a working definition of cosplay can now be established. Within this thesis the term cosplay refers to a subculture whose members emulate characters, largely from geek media sources, at designated events. With cosplay requiring a degree of imitation of these character's attributes, and the subculture placing particular emphasis on the amount of effort put into emulations. As well as the accuracy of the costumes worn.

Having provided a definition of cosplay, the following section will now focus on outlining previous academic literature on cosplay, highlighting the insights made by wider authors as well as the knowledge gaps within the existing work, which this thesis therefore aims to address.

Literature on Cosplay

Despite both media attention and participation in cosplay rising considerably in recent years, cosplay has received relatively little academic attention. With much of the literature on cosplay being located on personal blogs, which were found to be based on opinions rather than theory or empirical evidence. This section will therefore outline the existing peer-reviewed literature on cosplaying in order to explore the contributions that have been made to the study of cosplay. Highlighting the knowledge gaps which this thesis subsequently seeks to address, as well as the considerations that must be made when researching this activity.

Descriptive Accounts of Cosplay

The majority of the literature on cosplay tended focus on describing the activity, with cosplay being mentioned briefly within the texts rather than being the focal point of these studies. For example, within Jenkin's (1992) book on participatory culture, the author uses cosplay to demonstrate the globalisation of culture and the media. Citing an instance where a white store employee with a Japanese name badge explained to a confused customer that she was a cosplayer. With cosplay being defined as fans of anime dressing up as their favourite characters. Whilst cosplay was not explored further within this text, Jenkin's work highlights an important point, that cosplay remained a focal part of this cosplayer's identity, even in instances when their outfit was not worn. Therefore, supporting the notion that cosplay provided a subcultural identity and demonstrating why further research needs to be conducted on the cosplaying subculture itself.

Within an article by Brehm-Heeger et al (2007) the authors outline the increase in popularity of anime within libraries, providing a brief definition of cosplay as a related activity. The act

of cosplay is framed as teenage fans of anime and manga, dressing up as their favourite characters, being presented as a means for fans to show off their creativity and knowledge, therefore mirroring the arguments made by Thornton (1995) that specialised knowledge can grant individuals subcultural capital. However, whilst Brehm-Heeger et al present cosplay as solely undertaken by teens, Winge (2006) argues that cosplayers range in age, whilst acknowledging that the demographics of cosplayers is currently unknown.

Whilst these studies begin to build a picture of cosplay and highlight the subcultural nature of the activity, they also demonstrate the need for a study that focuses on cosplay specifically. In order to build an understanding of cosplay that goes beyond its definition and provides a deeper insight into the demographics and nature of the subculture.

Theoretical Work on Cosplay

Whilst Winge's (2006) work is largely focused on providing a comprehensive account of cosplay, the author also refers to theory within this article. Drawing upon the work of Merton (1968), Winge argues that the interactions between cosplayers make cosplay a specific subculture with norms which may be distinct from dominant culture. The author also refers to Bakhtin's (1968) theory of Carnivalesque, theorising that through wearing a costume, cosplayers may temporarily take on the identity of another individual. Winge's article therefore begins to touch upon the concept of cosplay as a group activity whilst proposing that cosplay may grant individuals a degree of fluidity with their identity. Notions that will therefore be explored in greater depth through the empirical data collected within this thesis.

Lamerichs (2011) a media studies academic and an active cosplayer, also explores the theme of identity within her work, arguing that cosplay allows the wearer to create a new multi-layered identity. Lamerichs presents the identity of cosplayers to be a dynamic process, with cosplayers identifying with characters in a variety of ways. Furthermore, rather than simply taking on the identity of the character, Lamerichs argues that these individuals incorporate aspects of their own identity into their costumes, allowing cosplayers to make statements regarding their own identity. Not only does Lamerichs' work highlight the complexity of identity within cosplay, with cosplayers engaging in this activity in a variety of ways, but the

author also highlights a key consideration that needs to be taken into account when researching cosplay. Whilst Lamerichs uses Butler's (1990) theory of performativity as the theoretical framework within her work, the author is also keen to stress that many aspects of this theory were incompatible with the study of cosplay, such as identity being presented as deterministic rather than malleable. Lamerichs' knowledge of the cosplaying subculture however, allowed her to look beyond the arguments of Butler and prevented her from similarly framing identity in a deterministic manner. This therefore highlights that the framework used in the study of cosplay should not be too restrictive, allowing the findings to emerge from the data itself and prevent the data from being forced within a rigid framework.

Empirical Work on Cosplay

There was also found to be a limited number of articles which explored cosplay using empirical methods. Within Lamerichs' (2013) ethnographic work, the author explores the migratory fan practises of manga, examining cosplay within Japan, America and Europe. This study demonstrates that differences exist between cosplayers depending on their country of origin. For example, whilst Japanese cosplayers were seen to place an emphasis on looking accurately like a character, western cosplayers focused instead on making handmade costumes. Through utilising interviews, which allowed cosplayers to provide an insight into their subculture, Lamerichs was able to provide a novel contribution to the study of cosplay. Therefore, highlighting the necessity of further empirical research to investigate this underexplored subculture. Furthermore, as cosplayers were found to display regional differences, this study may be essential to adding to the knowledge on cosplay, as there were found to be no published work on UK cosplayers specifically at the time of writing this thesis.

Lamerichs' research also highlights that the cosplaying subculture was not homogamous, with different groups of cosplayers having alternative values and practises. As a result, it could also be stood to reason that cosplayers may also vary within countries as well as across them, especially as Lamerichs' (2011) previously discussed theoretical paper suggested that cosplayers could alter their identity through cosplay in alternative ways.

Therefore, this thesis, which aims to explore the different ways in which cosplay could be used for escape, may be particularly vital, exploring not only the wider cosplaying subculture within the UK, but also the specific experiences of the individuals within it.

Hale (2014), a culture and folklore academic, also utilised ethnographic methods to examine both cosplay and convention culture, attending three conventions over a period of three years. Aiming to explore how fans embodied textual elements and brought them to life through performance. Hale found that character representation in cosplay took two basic forms, reproducing texts through replicating a specific character's mannerisms or dressing up as generic characters. Each form of embodiment was found to have its own benefits and rules for the cosplayers, which could lead to criticism if broken. For example, whilst cosplayers who emulated established characters could gain a lot of attention, if their costumes were found to be inaccurate, they could be critiqued by other cosplayers. Hale's work supports the notion that variations may exist within the cosplaying subculture and begins to outline some of the norms and values of the subculture. As these areas are still relatively underexplored however, this thesis provides the perfect opportunity to explore them in greater detail through an examination of the areas of significance to the cosplaying subculture.

Chen (2007) who conducted a study on anime and manga fandom in Taiwan, undertook six interviews with the sample comprising of both cosplayers as well as well non-cosplayers who self-published their own manga. Within this work Chen demonstrates that cosplayers participated in the activity for four main reasons; to get attention and praise and to experience a sense of fantasy- with cosplay being presented as a way for individuals to escape from their problems found within real life. Cosplayers were also found to engage in this activity because their peers were involved, or because they used it as an opportunity to interact with other fans. Chen also revealed that cosplayers chose their characters for a variety of reasons, with some choosing characters with similar traits to themselves, which allowed for accurate emulations. Whilst others emulated characters which they saw as distinct in order to experience a novel identity. Furthermore, the cosplays themselves were found to be judged based on make-up, poses and how well the outfits were made. With Chen's research therefore providing an interesting insight into the motivations and values of cosplayers. Despite Chen's research being a small-scale study, taking place over the space of

two conventions, the author's empirical approach resulted in a wealth of new data on the cosplaying subculture. Therefore, the immersive and longitudinal nature of this thesis project may greatly add to the sociological knowledge on cosplay, whilst highlighting the norms and values of UK cosplayers specifically.

Norris and Bainbridge's (2009) article on Australian cosplay similarly aims to explore the ideology of the cosplaying subculture, whilst demonstrating that industry can shape fandoms. The authors argue that commercial industries play a role in shaping cosplayers' identity, with the cosplayers they interviewed being found to display elitism. Differentiating themselves from those who bought their outfits at mainstream retailers or cosplayed as well-known characters. Norris and Bainbridge make an interesting discovery, finding specific divisions within the cosplaying subculture- one being the elitists and the other being the cosplayers who were associated with mainstream retailers or characters. With Norris and Bainbridge's work also drawing parallels to the process of boundary making undertaken by members of subcultures. Norris and Bainbridge however, interviewed only one specific group of cosplayers within their research. Therefore, as different cosplayers may have alternative norms and values, this project which seeks to explore the experiences of a variety of cosplayers could provide a deep insight into the wider cosplaying subculture and the divisions within it (Lammerich, 2011; Chen, 2007).

Helgesen (2014) a childhood scholar touches upon the topic of cosplay within his work on technology mediated play, in which the author carries out a case study on a nine-year-old cosplayer from Norway. Within this study, cosplay is framed as an activity where individuals can take on the identity of others. Therefore, allowing the wearer to feel empathy for an emulated character. As within the work of Chen (2007) Helgesen's work also touches upon themes of escape, with the cosplayer framing Japan in a positive fantastical light, which was far removed from their everyday lives. Discussing a bright future in which they travelled to Japan. Whilst there have been no peer-reviewed studies that have placed a focus on cosplay and escape specifically, the association of cosplaying and escapism by the mainstream media alongside the themes of escape identified within the literature, demonstrates that this is an area in need of further consideration which this thesis therefore seeks to provide (Chen, 2007; Helgesen, 2014).

Finally, an article by Rauch and Bolton (2010) was found to be the only peer-reviewed article that focused on cosplay photography. Discussing how the motivations of the model, photographer and their relationship with the wider cosplaying subculture influenced the pictures taken. The authors demonstrate that cosplayers engaged in this activity for a variety of reasons such as to seek fame or to showcase costumes. Furthermore, Rauch and Bolton reveal that the images that are valued within the cosplaying subculture, which placed an emphasis on accuracy and were a display of the cosplayer's love for the fandom, were of less interest to those outside of this subculture. With outsiders instead seeking striking pictures for display purposes, which were not valued by or reflective of cosplay. Photographers who catered for outsiders were seen to impose their own notions of cosplay on their photographs; being viewed negatively by cosplayers for misrepresenting the subculture. As a result, such photographs were regarded as of little value to both cosplayers and those who aimed to gain an understanding of their subculture through them. Rauch and Bolton's article, therefore, highlights the importance of providing an accurate representation of cosplay, with this thesis aiming to give use cosplayers' accounts to generate valid and meaningful data.

The examination of the literature on cosplay has demonstrated that it remains an underexplored phenomenon, which would be greatly benefitted by an in-depth study focused specially on this subculture. Many of the studies on cosplay, whilst being relatively small in nature, have provided novel finding and begun to shed light on cosplay's norms and values. Therefore, a longitudinal study would build upon this work, with the examination of a wide variety of cosplayers helping to illuminate the demographics of the subculture and explore the experiences of both individual cosplayers and the subculture as a whole. As the literature suggested that cosplayers may vary dependant on geological location this study would also provide an insight into UK cosplayers specifically. Furthermore, whilst themes of escape were identified with the texts suggesting its applicability to cosplay, this area is yet to be explored, with this thesis therefore adding to the sociological knowledge on this topic. Finally, the literature demonstrated the key considerations that need to be taken into account when researching cosplay. A failure to explore cosplay through the eyes of its members could result in the subculture being framed in an unrepresentative manner, justifying the qualitative approach taken. Additionally, the framework utilised would also

have to be malleable, to prevent the data from being forced into a rigid theory. Therefore, within the final section of this chapter the theoretical framework utilised within this thesis will be outlined. Highlighting how the theory of Escape Attempts will be used to frame this project and how cosplay could be used to explore this framework.

Theoretical Framework

As was highlighted within the literature review, in order to study cosplay a malleable framework was needed to prevent data from being forced into a rigid theory (Lamerichs, 2011). Escape Attempts, a theory proposed by Cohen and Taylor (1975) was demonstrated by a number of theorists to be flexible enough to meet this criterion, being shown to be broad enough to accommodate the arguments of wider theorists and used as a framework to explore a range of phenomenon (Chaplin, 1999; Jenkins, 2010; Molesworth, 2009). Escape Attempts has also been used within studies that took a grounded approach and produced data relating to a variety of disciplines, anchoring together data from subject areas that do not usually overlap (Chaplin, 1999). Consequently, Escape Attempts is particularly suited for the study of cosplay, with the literature review demonstrating that cosplay was related to a variety of disciplines, being discussed by academics from fields including childhood, folklore and fandom. With this thesis similarly taking an inductive approach to the generation of knowledge, which could therefore result in a wide variety of data. Therefore, the final section of this chapter will present the key ideas from Escape Attempts, demonstrating how this framework can be utilised to understand cosplay and how cosplay can in turn be used to examine Escape Attempts.

Overview of Escape Attempts

In Escape Attempts, Cohen and Taylor describe the constant struggle which individuals face within their everyday lives. Between their desire to have a sense of individuality and freedom, which conflicts with the constraints of society which can create a feeling of homogeny. The authors argue that we are each shackled to dull and monotonous routines and roles. Which could include the 9 to 5 job that we drag ourselves to each morning, the responsibilities that come with being a parent. Or simply the act of getting up each morning,

standing blearily eyed in front of the mirror, and brushing your teeth in the same manner every single day. These routines can make life feel monotonous and lead to individuals feeling dissatisfied or depressed. Worse still, you may come to realise that there are millions of other people also stood brushing their teeth, dispelling your notions of individuality and leaving you feeling like little more than a cog in a machine.

Luckily Cohen and Taylor argue that we can gain a sense of individuality and build our identities within spaces known as Free Areas. These Free Areas are unscripted spaces, with their own norms and values. With Free Areas being presented as distinct spaces, separated from everyday life, in which people can be their 'real selves', providing relief from one's repetitive everyday lives and thus granting genuine escape. Free Areas are argued to come in a manner of forms, such as going on holiday to a new location to escape from your familiar settings and responsibilities. Or engaging in a hobby where you can feel as if you can truly express yourself. Even daydreaming can be used as a Free Area, granting temporarily escape from everyday live and injecting an element of fantasy into it. However, these Free Areas are argued to be fragile. Therefore, if aspects of everyday life are identified within them, Free Areas can crumble and lose their ability to provide escapism.

Furthermore, Cohen and Taylor argue that individuals can use a number of mental devices, or 'Escape Attempts' to access Free Areas or escape from routines. Some routines may be so minor that individuals can overlook them altogether, an Escape Attempt termed as 'Unreflective Accommodation'. An example being the morning routines that people establish to get ready for the day, carrying them out almost unthinkingly. Alternatively, some individuals may employ an Escape Attempt where they try not to think about the drudgery of their lives, instead focusing on the Free Areas that matter to them. Such as getting through the week at work by focusing on plans for the weekend.

Others, may find it difficult to ignore their routines and as a result they may attempt to inject a sense of novelty within their lives, doing something spontaneous or different from what they usually do in order to break up the monotony. Furthermore, those who become aware that their routines do little to set them apart from others may engage in the Escape Attempt of 'Distancing'- an act where individuals show an awareness of their routine and distance themselves from it. Individuals using Distancing may try and view themselves as

different from others carrying out the same routine. Treating their routine with a degree of cynicism or believing that they are merely acting out a role. Therefore, allowing individuals to feel distinct from others living their lives in a similar manner, creating a sense of individuality and building notions of identity. However, such Distancing may result in individuals being alienated or hinder their ability to maintain their routines. Therefore, individuals may engage in 'Self-Conscious Reinvestment', where they attempt to fully recommit to a routine, in the hopes that it will no longer be something they need to escape from.

However, routine management is argued to do little to change an individual's everyday life, and eventually even these Escape Attempts may become monotonous. This is due to us each holding certain 'scripts' which dictate how we think, feel, and behave within certain situations. You could fly to the other side of the world to try and mix up your routine and be disappointed to find that you still acted the same way and exhibited the same patterns of behaviours when overseas. Consequently, individuals may attempt to apply Escape Attempts to their scripts in order to reshape their identities and create a sense of novelty.

Cohen and Taylor argue that it is much harder to manage scripts through methods such as Distancing or Unreflective Accommodation as our scripts are central to our notions of self. Therefore, individuals may engage in the Escape Attempt of 'Script Switching', temporarily altering their script before returning to their original ones. With an example being the act of role-play. Whilst some may try to permanently swap their scripts for a new one, in an attempt to reinvent themselves, they may find that they are unable to enact them successfully and risk ridicule at a result.

These Escape Attempts, however, can only offer temporary relief from everyday life. Therefore, Cohen and Taylor argue that some individuals may engage in more extreme Escape Attempts, aiming to free themselves from everyday life completely. Individuals may attempt to make their hobby the centre of everyday their life, and act framed as abnormal and anti-social. Or instead live with a focus on introspection or an aim for transcendence, therefore separating themselves from wider society all together.

Escape Attempts and Cosplay

Both papers within the literature review as well as media accounts of the activity have linked cosplay with the notion of escapism. With the theme of escape additionally being highlighted within this thesis's pilot research. Cosplayers discussed seeing conventions as something they looked forward to, with a focus on upcoming conventions providing a distraction from everyday life. Drawing parallels to the concept of Unreflective Accommodation. Others mentioned that they carried around merchandise relating to geek media on a daily basis in the forms of phone cases, badges and lanyards featuring anime characters. With these mementos reminding them of good memorises at cosplay events, which could therefore be viewed as a means of taking aspects of Free Areas into their everyday lives. Some cosplayers also reflected upon how making costumes acted as a Free Area, discussing how they focussed completely on the act of cosplay when constructing their outfits, which granted them a break from their daily routines. Furthermore, the act of cosplaying itself draws parallels to script switching, as cosplayers not only physically embody the clothing of characters, but also engage in role-play, taking on the script of another in order to replicate their characteristics.

However, one of the most interesting findings was that most of the cosplayers described the cosplaying subculture itself as a Free Area. With cosplay offering a safe environment where they could get away from the intolerances of everyday life and be their true selves. Additionally, as is demonstrated within chapter four, cosplayers presented themselves as distinct from outsiders to the subculture, which could therefore suggest that cosplay may be used to build a sense of identity, which Cohen and Taylor argue individuals seek. Furthermore, the notion of escape was also found within the key theoretical areas identified from the empirical data on the cosplaying subculture. With cosplay being argued to provide escape in relation to these key areas. Therefore, the degree to which cosplay acted as a Free Area, provided a means to escape from notions within everyday life and enabled the experimentation of identity will be explored. Drawing upon and building on the range of Escape Attempts proposed by Cohen and Taylor in order to frame the cosplayers' actions

Testing Escape Attempts

Rather than solely using Escape Attempts as a framework to explore cosplay the study of this subculture also provided an opportunity to test Escape Attempts and build upon the arguments of Cohen and Taylor. For example, the theory of Escape Attempts was found to be written from the perspective of middle-class, heterosexual males. Who can be assumed to be the theory's intended audience, as many examples used throughout the text referred to the hypothetical wives of the readers, as well as middle class pursuits. As a result, this theory fails to account for intersectionality and the Escape Attempts of women are hardly mentioned. Therefore, as cosplayers were found to be largely female, with chapter four demonstrating that the subculture held members from a range of different backgrounds, this study allowed for Escape Attempts to be applied to a wider demographical population.

Furthermore, Cohen and Taylor present Free Areas and everyday life as completely distinct from one another, which may be due to the theory being formulated based on the experiences of prison inmates. Living within a highly structured context where their time for leisure was restricted to specific periods within their highly routinised days. Therefore, this study allows Escape Attempts to be tested in a setting which is less rigid than a prison, exploring the relationship between Free Areas and everyday life in a more open, empirical context. Additionally, whilst the authors used multiple examples from everyday life to demonstrate the Escape Attempts of Distancing, Self-Reflective accommodation and Re-investment, which gave the theory credibility. Cohen and Taylor used fictional and extreme examples to describe those who attempted to make their Free Areas their everyday lives. Therefore, making an empirical exploration of this notion essential.

Lastly this thesis also allows for Escape Attempts to be applied to theoretical areas in ways that it has not been previously. Academics have used escape attempts to understand how individuals from certain ethnic backgrounds escaped, how certain ethnicities may be prevented from escapism and the ways that ethnic minorities could escape from racism (O'Reily, 2000; Stephenson and Hughes, 2006; Archer, 2003). However, the idea of escaping ethnicity itself has not been explored through either the use of Escape Attempts or amongst the wider literature. Instead many authors argued that ethnicity is widely perceived to be a fixed trait which was visible through the colour of one's skin, making it inescapable for most

individuals (Gaines, 1997; Eriksen, 1993). Despite this, studies on cosplayers suggested that these individuals became a character in both a physical and mental sense (Wang, 2010; Bainbridge, 2009). Therefore, it could be stood to reason that cosplayers could shed notions of their ethnicity when becoming the embodiment of a character whose ethnicity may be different from their own.

There have also been studies that have used Escape Attempts to explore the theme of gender, examining the differences in escapism between men and women (Chaplin, 1999; Krenske and McKay, 2010). However as was identified with ethnicity, no studies focused on utilising Escape Attempts to explore the possibility of escaping gender itself. However, as cosplayers were seen to play with their gender through crossplay, this study could therefore offer a unique insight into the notion of escaping sex and gender (Winge, 2006). Furthermore, no studies have yet utilised Escape Attempts to explore the subjects of sexuality, with Pritchard et al (2000) arguing that further exploration is needed on the subject of sexuality and escape, which this thesis will subsequently provide.

Finally, whilst numerous studies on mental health and social disorders have highlighted the theme of escape, Escape Attempts has yet been used to explore these areas (Nock et al, 2009; Gunn and Lester, 2014; Corrigan and Wassel, 2008; Attwood, 2007). Therefore, this study, not only provides the opportunity to apply Escape Attempts to theoretical areas in new ways but will also test this framework on substantive areas that are yet to be explored, therefore providing a novel contribution to the literature.

Summary

This chapter has provided a deep insight into cosplay, exploring the history of the activity to highlight its key attributes, drawing upon the research of academics as well as the accounts of cosplayers themselves. This combined with an examination of subcultural theory allowed for an empirically grounded definition of cosplay to be established. With cosplay being framed as a subculture whose members emulate characters, largely from geek media sources, at designated events. With cosplay requiring a degree of imitation of these character's attributes, and the subculture placing particular emphasis on the amount of

effort put into emulations. As well as the accuracy of the costumes worn. A review of the existing literature provided an overview of the current contributions made to the study of cosplay. Whilst demonstrating that a longitudinal empirical study on the subject was needed, to provide a deeper insight into the wider cosplaying subculture as well as the experiences of the individuals within it. Which this thesis therefore seeks to provide. As the literature review additionally demonstrated that a malleable theoretical framework was essential for the study of cosplay, with themes of escape being highlighted in relation to this phenomenon, this chapter also provided an overview of the framework selected within this study 'Escape Attempts'. With cosplay being framed as a means for individuals to seek escape and build a sense of identity. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion on how cosplay could be utilised to expand Escape Attempts, testing the framework in new ways and in relation to substantive areas for the first time.

Chapter Three: Methods and Methodology

Within this chapter I outline the methodological approach adopted within this thesis and provide an overview of the methods used to conduct the research. Exploring the reflexive approach to data collection through my account of becoming a cosplayer. Describing the research setting and the participants. The nature of the data produced and how this was analysed. With a discussion on some of the ethical issues encountered within the project and the process of leaving the field.

The main aim of this thesis was to provide an ethnographic exploration into the cosplaying subculture through the framework of Escape Attempts. Through doing so it sought to achieve four main aims:

- To highlight the key theoretical areas of significance to the cosplaying subculture – investigating them in greater detail under the framework of Escape Attempts.
- To explore the ways in which cosplay could be employed as an Escape Attempt.
- To examine to extent to which escape could be achieved in relation to the identified key theoretical areas.
- Finally, this thesis also aimed to test the theory of Escape Attempts within an empirical setting.

The Research Setting

Over a period of two years I became immersed within the cosplaying subculture. Attending twenty-two geek culture and cosplay conventions across the UK, which each spanned between two and five days each. Socialising at pubs and coffee shops with cosplayers after these events drew to a close. These conventions varied in size and whilst the bigger, more mainstream events attracted tens of thousands of attendees, many of whom did not wear costumes. The smaller conventions could be limited to just over a thousand guests, catering to cosplayers specifically. The mainstream conventions attracted a wide population, being presented as an unusual day out that was suitable for all, in order to increase ticket sales. Consequently, there were many guests at these mainstream events who did not identify

heavily with geek culture. In comparison, the smaller conventions were organised and run by fans, being more niche events with a focus on attendees' shared interest in geek culture, rather than profit margins.

Alongside these conventions, I attended five 'meets'- the term for fan-run gatherings in costume, which often took place outside of a convention setting. Occurring at pubs, coffee shops and outdoor public spaces, the cosplayers at meets often received quizzical stares from onlookers. At these meets cosplayers dressed up as characters from the same series, posed for group photos, and discussed the media they were emulating collectively. Furthermore, I went to seven events that cosplayers had decided to attend in costume. These included Japanese cultural exhibitions, which showcased a variety of aspects of Japanese culture, with workshops including origami folding and sake tasting. Videogame launches, where attendees trialled new games and had their photos taken with life-sized props. As well as a videogame tournament, which I was asked to cosplay at by the event organisers. Dressing up as a character from the game in return for a goody bag, and the chance to watch rival teams on an online competitive game battling for a trophy. I was also invited to a number of events with cosplayers where their costumes were not worn, including gaming events and trips to restaurants and pubs. Allowing me to learn about cosplayers outside of their costumes.

Whilst my pilot research began with me observing cosplayers whilst wearing my regular clothes, when undertaking the main body of my research I attended these cosplaying events wearing cosplays myself. Through engaging in cosplay, I hoped to gain a better understanding of the activity by experiencing it first-hand, allowing me to explore factors including social interactions whilst in costume. In order to fully investigate cosplay and to prevent the manipulation of my participants, I completely immersed myself in cosplay rather than pretending to engage in this activity.

The Participants

I initially used a gate keeper to gain access to the participants within this study. However, once I was established within the subculture, I was able to network with wider cosplayers

engaging in opportunistic sampling where I found participants as the opportunity arose (Harrison, 2018). Interacting with cosplayers also meant there was an element of snowballing, as cosplayers introduced me to wider members of the subculture who were happy to be a part of the research project (O'Reily, 2000). In total, I got consent from 44 cosplayers to take part in the study, however over the course of the project I met hundreds of cosplayers who shaped my understanding of cosplay.

Reflecting the demographics of UK cosplayers, the participants within my study were mainly white females from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. However, whilst this group was the majority, cosplay was found to be a diverse subculture with participants including men as well as those from a range of ethnicities. My participants held a range of sexual identifications with some cosplayers claiming to be monogamous and other polyamorous. Some of the cosplayers I interacted with held non-normative gendered identities, including transgender and gender fluid individuals, further highlighting the diversity within the subculture.

Whilst the majority of my participants were in their mid-twenties cosplayers again varied considerably in age, with those discussed within the ethnography ranging from eighteen to their late forties. Cosplayers could also be under the age of eighteen, however for ethical reasons I decided not to include them within my study. Despite this, it was often hard to judge a cosplayer's age when they were in costume, especially as the quality of an outfit failed to be an indicator of this factor. Cosplayers started engaging in the activity at various points of their lives, some in their thirties were found to be undertaking it for the first time, whilst others, just turning eighteen had been cosplaying for years producing amazing costumes as a result.

At some conventions, identifying those under the age of eighteen was easy. Some events only admitted guests over this age; whilst others required adults to wear specific wrist bands or lanyards to indicate that they could buy alcohol, requiring these age markers to be visible at all times. However, whilst all the conventions I attended required those under the age of sixteen to be accompanied by an adult, some did not use physical markers to distinguish sixteen and seventeen-year olds. Therefore, whilst I had decided that I would not directly interact with children within this study, I could not guarantee that this group would not be recorded within my observations. However, as it would have been impossible to ask

the ages of everyone at conventions, and my research could still be considered ethical as my observations would not harm those being observed, I decided that such data would be utilised if needed within my results (Lofland et al, 2006).

I also recorded cosplayer's, as well as my own, interactions with those outside of the cosplaying subculture. Including non-costumed convention attendees, members of the general public as well as staff within the events.

More details on the participants within this study are provided within the Participant Overview document within the appendix of this thesis. Supplying further context for participants I spoke with and interviewed during this study.

Methodological Approach

As the literature review highlighted that cosplay was an underexplored topic, it was decided that an inductive strategy would be taken. This would allow the areas of academic interest related to cosplay to emerge from the data, rather than relying on the limited scope of established research to guide this project. Furthermore, as unreflective work on cosplay, based on the opinions of outsiders, was shown to be of little value when attempting to understand this subculture, qualitative methods were utilised to allow the meanings of participants' activities to be described and examined from cosplayers own point of view (Popay, 1992; Rauch and Bolton, 2010).

When using qualitative methods however, Bourke (2014) raises the important point that the researcher themselves becomes an instrument of data collection. Therefore, whilst I sought to understand the cosplaying subculture through the eyes of its members, factors such as my status as a researcher and my own personal biases could affect, not only the research process and data interpretation, but also my participants' behaviour due to my presence within the field (Davis, 1999). Whilst a positivist approach argues that objectivity can be obtained through ethnographic means, this stance asserts that researchers should distance themselves from their subjects to avoid a contamination of data (Howell, 2013). However, many previous studies on cosplay which failed to engage with cosplayers gave contradicting accounts of the activity (Winge, 2006; Brehm-Heeger, 2007; Ito and Cruther, 2013). My own

experiences also highlighted that little meaningful data could be gathered on cosplayers by watching them from afar, demonstrating the importance of interacting with my subjects within this study. Furthermore, whilst I had initially attempted to be objective, my prior assumptions accompanied me into the field, questioning whether objectivity was truly possible. Subsequently what emerged from my data was my own interpretivist stance, and as a result, rather than aiming to strive for an unobtainable objectivity, emphasis was placed on being aware of my positionality, attempting to acknowledge my biases and how they could impact on my research (Hall, 1990).

Ethnography

Whilst interviews could be a useful tool for gaining an in-depth account of the cosplaying subculture from the perspective of its members, many cosplayers had reported finding certain aspects of cosplay hard to convey through words alone. Therefore, ethnographic fieldwork was chosen as the primary method of investigation in order to simultaneously describe cosplayer's behaviour and examine the significance behind them (Howell, 2013).

Furthermore, as Pink (2015, pp5) argues that ethnography attempts to capture the experiences of reality, in a manner 'as loyal to the context as possible', the author proposes that participation can help researchers to understand their participant's experiences. Therefore, this study included an element of researcher participation, as I actively wore cosplay to events, aiming to become an insider to the subculture in order to gain a greater understanding of it.

However, through utilising this approach I made myself a part of the social world being studied, bringing my own biases into the field (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). Therefore, as was proposed by Fetterman (1998) I attempted to approach my research in a reflexive manner, being aware of my biases in an attempt to diminish them. As argued by Brewer (1994) I aimed to be aware of how my positioning affected my work, in order to assess the grounds on which my knowledge claims were justified. Therefore, in an attempt to capture my positionality throughout my research, I charted the process of becoming a member of the cosplaying subculture. Which is discussed within the following section alongside the consequences this had for my research.

Looking in

I began my research with a pilot study, a trip into the field to be used as the starting point for my observations. Over two days I attended a convention in my regular clothes. With this event attracting one of largest displays of cosplay within the UK. I had initially tried to approach my research as objectively as possible, making a decision argued to be common amongst novice fieldworkers 'schooled in bias avoidance' – in which I attempted to emphasise my participants' voices by diminishing my own (Lofland and Lofland, 2006, pp17). On the first day I simply made observations about the cosplayers I witnessed, however the data I collected was very surface level and descriptive, doing little to shed light on cosplayers themselves.

Therefore, on the second I decided to try and talk to cosplayers in order to understand the activity through their point of view. I had hoped for deep levels of interactions with cosplayers, as this group had been presented by academics as an underexplored group eager to have their voices heard (Lunning, 2011). However, in reality this was not found to be the case. Conventions were not a regular occurrence and individuals paid an annually increasing sum of money to be there. Whilst many cosplayers were happy to stop for a photo or to receive a compliment, they seemed eager to continue on their way, leaving little scope for further discussion. Again, I spent most of the day as a passive bystander merely watching cosplayers from afar. Despite this, one significant finding was identified, whilst cosplayer's interactions with non-costumed attendees were brief, I witnessed many cosplayers introducing themselves to each other for the first time, before proceeding to launch into more in-depth discussions. Therefore, I decided that I would cosplay myself in order to facilitate interactions with cosplayers and gain a more in-depth understanding of what cosplaying involved.

Becoming a Cosplayer

Although I was already acquainted with cosplayers, I decided that simply asking them how to cosplay would not provide an accurate account of entering this subculture. Many of the cosplayers I knew had engaged in the activity for many years, producing highly accurate

emulations as a result. As these cosplayers all claimed that their first outfits were not of a high standard, seeking their advice could have given me an unfair advantage in terms of costume making. Therefore, providing an unrealistic experience of becoming a coplayer.

Furthermore, whilst some of the cosplayers I spoke with had been introduced to cosplay by experienced friends, a majority had entered the subculture on their own, working out for themselves how to become a part of it. For this reason, I also decided to go to my first convention in cosplay by myself, in a distant city where the cosplayers I knew were not attending.

However, whilst I had initially wanted to start cosplaying without wider assistance, I was also aware that if I failed to conduct myself in a desirable manner this could hinder my transition into the subculture and even put a halt to my study. As argued by Bell (1999) how a researcher presents themselves to their participants is crucial, shaping the type of relationships formed, the behaviour expressed and consequently the data collected within a study. Therefore, I decided to ask some established cosplayers about their first-time cosplaying and the factors I would need to take into account. Whilst some cosplayers I spoke with had worn handmade costumes to their first events, they had previous experience in textiles. In contrast, those lacking sewing skills had bought their first cosplays from widely known websites, therefore I decided to do the same.

Choosing a Character

As was discussed by academics within the literature review, the cosplayers I spoke with made it clear that I should be aware of who I was cosplaying, otherwise I could be labelled as a fake geek which could stunt interactions (Masse, 2014). This however did not pose a problem. Whilst I considered myself to be an outsider to the cosplaying subculture, I saw myself as part of the larger geek culture fandom, playing videogames and watching the same media that cosplayers consumed. Therefore, I decided to cosplay a character from a popular anime I had recently finished watching. I personally liked several of the characters and knew them well enough to replicate their poses. Furthermore, I had seen a number of cosplayers dressing up as characters from this particular show at a previous convention, which suggested that the series was currently popular. I theorised that my costume could

therefore give me a reason to speak to other cosplayers emulating the same series as me. Deciding on a character with a similar body shape to mine as I concluded I could give a more accurate emulation of them.

I used online images of cosplayers emulating my chosen character as inspiration for my own cosplay, spending hours searching for both a wig and contacts which matched my character. I also watched video tutorials online to learn how to do the character's makeup, how to cut and style my wig and what to do to prepare for my first convention. I did my first 'costest' trying on my completed outfit in front of a mirror and was shocked by how different I looked. So much preparation had gone into an outfit I would only be wearing for a day. Whist I had assumed that cosplaying would feel largely the same as going to a convention without a costume on, the days of preparation added a great deal of anticipation. I felt as though I was gearing up for an event that I was actively a part of.

The morning of the convention I sent a picture of myself in my outfit to my cosplaying peers and was greeted with compliments and reassurances that I looked like a cosplayer. With many noting that my first attempt had been much better than theirs.

First Day Cosplaying

The convention I attended was relatively small as it had only been running for a couple of years. Therefore, many of the cosplayers I met claimed that they were fairly new to the activity. Furthermore, in comparison to many cosplayers at the event, my own emulation was of a very high quality. I had spent hours looking on mainstream UK based websites to find contacts and wigs which matched my character's features perfectly. However, many cosplayers at the event wore their natural hair and failed to use contacts.

The quality of my cosplay meant that I was mistaken for a more established cosplayer by some who had been practitioners longer than me. Some of these individuals asked me for tips which left me in a moral grey area. Some of the decisions I had made in putting together my cosplay had been due to my judgement alone. I still felt very much like an outsider to the subculture and was concerned that my advice would not be reflective of it. Having potentially determinantal consequences for cosplayers who emulated my decisions. As a result, I reasserted both my status as a researcher and my unfamiliarity with cosplay,

offering them links to the tutorials of experienced cosplayers instead, whose authority on cosplay was more legitimate than mine.

Before my study started, I had decided that I would actively attempt to become a cosplayer, rather than pretending to be one, as such an approach would not only be dishonest towards my research subjects but could also give an inaccurate reflection of the activity. However, whilst the compliments I received from attendees suggested I was passing as a cosplayer, I failed to see myself as one, fearing that I would be labelled as a fraud. With the compliments only heightening my sense of being an imposter.

In particular, I felt as though I was in a costume on own rather than engaging in cosplay. Whilst wearing a cosplay did facilitate interactions with other cosplayers, who approached me with friendly smiles to talk about the series I was emulating, such exchanges were brief. I was still very much on the outside of the subculture looking in. Furthermore, I could not work out which data was significant and what was not, as I did not understand many of the behaviours I was seeing. For example, whilst some of those in low quality outfits were approached by cosplayers, others did not receive the same interactions (the answer to this observation was later provided to me by a cosplayer and is discussed in chapter four). Although Lofland et al (2006) argue that prolonged exposure within the field could help to shed light on observations, I was also aware that I first needed to be able to make sense of what I was seeing (Wolcott, 1999).

Rather than gathering information on the cosplaying subculture, I was instead generating a great deal of information on my own experiences of being in cosplay. Whilst this produced some interesting results, I did not want to take an autoethnographic approach to my research, wanting to instead produce research which was reflective of the wider subculture. Therefore, I decided to attend a meet within the convention, which had been organised in advance by a group of cosplayers, who advertised the event as means of meeting likeminded fans and socialising with strangers. However, when I arrived at the meet, the attendees arrived with their established groups of friends who stuck together. Rather than there being a great deal of interaction, the cosplayers mainly posed together in group photoshoots, before leaving to spend the rest of the day at the wider convention. I did however speak with a few cosplayers, mentioning that I was conducting a study on cosplay.

Whilst they seemed interested in the concept of my research, I got the feeling that none of them would have been willing to be shadowed themselves. Some suggested that I could shadow their group without me even proposing the idea. However, these offers seemed to be reluctant, hinting that they felt pressured into participating (*'you could follow us I guess'*). As I wanted my research to be as ethical as possible, I declined the offer. As argued by Crabtree et al (2012, pp94) I wanted consent to be fully given rather than as a result of 'cohesive pressure'.

Again, this experience highlighted the salience of my prior assumptions when entering the field. Whilst I had decided on an inductive approach so that my study would not have to rely on the existing literature, I had partly constructed an image of the cosplaying subculture based on the accounts of wider authors. Through cosplay, individuals were argued to easily form friendships due to their costumes displaying a shared interest (Brehm-Heeger et al, 2007; Aoyama and Cahill, 2003). This had led me to believe that assimilating within the cosplaying subculture would be much easier than it was.

However, whilst this experience highlighted my subjectivity in the field, it also demonstrated that the existing literature may not be applicable to my research. As a result, I felt able shed the notion that the existing secondary data could be treated as fact, which Gayle (2003) argues can prevent existing literature from impacting upon a research study.

After I returned home, the cosplayers I knew eagerly awaited the accounts of my first experience of cosplay. When I mentioned that I had been asked for tips, the fact that someone had asked after my wig made these cosplayers laugh. They explained that whilst my wig was passable, it was low quality and far too shiny for cosplay, which reassured me of my decision not to give advice.

I also recalled my experience at the meet and discussed a sense of failure in making inroads into the cosplaying subculture. This again resulted in friendly laughter. Despite what the authors had claimed, establishing bonds within the cosplaying subculture was not as simple as they had presented it. The cosplayers explained that when they started the activity cosplayers were friendly towards them, just as I had experienced. However, they were not able to automatically form a bond with cosplayers and enter their friendship groups through wearing a cosplay alone. They had instead attended many different meets over a period of

months until they found a group they connected with and started socialising with on a regular basis. Whilst I wanted to experience first-hand the process of assimilating into the cosplaying subculture, establishing those bonds over a period of months would have too time-consuming within the scope of this study. Therefore, I decided that I would focus on observing the cosplayers I already had connections with, to grant me direct access into the cosplaying subculture.

Reflections on My First Experience Cosplaying

Reflecting upon my first-time cosplaying brought my attention to a number of considerations. Whilst I had attempted to gain an accurate insight into the process of going from an outsider to an insider of cosplay, I may not have been able to achieve this. My previous connections with cosplayers had given me a privileged insight into their subculture meaning that I was not a complete outsider to it. Furthermore, although I had not asked the cosplayers I knew about how to cosplay, I had used them as my standard. Producing an emulation that was not reflective of many cosplayers' first attempts. I had been more influenced by the cosplayers I knew than I had previously expected, and It was naïve of me to think that I could carry out my first emulation in a value free manner.

On further reflection I also realised that the quality of my costume was not prioritised out of a desire to be accepted by cosplayers, as the cosplayers I knew had expressed that their first emulations were low-quality. Instead I had been embarrassed at the idea of the public seeing me in a low-quality outfit. Worried about what my peers would think if a photo of me in a bad cosplay surfaced on social media. In fact, when I considered the matter deeper, I was worried about how people would react to me cosplaying in general. Leading me to prioritise being viewed in a socially desirable manner over my research project. Therefore, I concluded that this was one of the main reasons why I did not feel like a cosplayer. I was separating myself from cosplay and failing to fully commit to the activity. Being further evidenced by the fact that when a member of the public asked me about my costume, I framed myself as a researcher studying a subculture, therefore presenting myself as distinct from it.

As argued by Clerke and Hopwood (2014) my feeling of discomfort in the field was distancing me from the research itself. However, having made myself aware of this I endeavoured to overcome this issue. After the event, I uploaded a picture of myself in cosplay onto my social media. Attempting to diminish my sense of discomfort by actively highlighting my participation in cosplay on my own terms. When my picture was received in a positive light my feelings of anxiety were quelled, and I finally felt able to dedicate myself to cosplay. As a result, when my fears later came true, bumping into an acquaintance who mocked my involvement in cosplay, I felt as though this did not impact upon my research, as cosplay was an activity that I no longer felt embarrassed about.

My reflections also alerted me to the notion that my high-quality outfit may have prevented me from generating certain data on the cosplaying subculture. Millroy's (1991) ethnography on carpenters demonstrated that the learning process itself could be a useful tool for understanding the inner workings of a group. I however bypassed this process, allowing myself to be regarded as a successful practitioner on my first attempt. Therefore, I asked the cosplayers I knew whether I should re-enter the field in a lower quality outfit for my next convention. However, I was warned against this. They argued that if cosplayers recognised me from my first event, they could regard my outfit to be mocking the subculture, or the efforts of others. Therefore, this was an area which I felt my study failed to shed light on.

Regularly Cosplaying

Over the next couple of months convention season started and I was attending events regularly up and down the UK. Whilst I had initially planned to attend these events with a gatekeeper, they had made changes to their plans, and as a result I attended the first couple of conventions on my own, with the intention to fully commit to cosplay. At these events I met many cosplayers, some of whom added me to closed online cosplaying forums, which notified me of a number of fan-run conventions which I attended, meeting more cosplayers at them.

However, at these fan-run events the interactions I had with cosplayers remained brief, comprising of compliments shared between us or a quick discussion before the cosplayers bustled away to attend the next panel in their busy schedule. Whilst my costumes were receiving praise and when I spoke to others and they classified me as a fellow cosplayer, I felt very much on the edge of the group. I did not feel like I had successfully become a member of the subculture or a true cosplayer, as in some ways I still felt isolated. I felt part of the wider subculture and distinct from non-costumed attendees, however wearing a costume and being a fan was not enough to instil the sense that I had a place amongst the other cosplayers. Again, I felt as though I was producing surface level knowledge.

Therefore, I decided to go through the self-reflexive notes I had made on my first experiences of cosplay, in order to see if my positionality within the subculture had altered. From these notes I realised that my involvement in cosplay had resulted in some changes. Conversations with cosplayers about niche media meant that I was aware of, and watching, what was popular within the subculture. Which allowed me to recognise more outfits and increased my scope for interacting. I was also taught a lot about cosplay by others, resulting in my costumes improving considerably. The brief conversations I had with cosplayers introduced me to different places to source cosplays which were cheaper, higher quality and had a far greater selection of outfits. Furthermore, interacting with cosplayers more regularly also changed the outfits I was wearing, as I started cosplaying according to the feedback I was getting. As a majority of cosplayers called me cute, so I started dressing up more sweet, feminine characters. As I did, I started receiving increasing amounts of praise. Whilst I started off dressing up as characters I liked, I now considered how others would react to my cosplays, with the activity becoming as much about them as it did about me. Soon after I noticed that the comments I received started to change as well. ‘You make a cute…’ became ‘you’re so cute’. I had become to be associated with the traits of characters which the cosplayers had steered me towards.

Furthermore, although I still felt like an outsider to some extent, I was starting to feel like a part of the wider cosplaying subculture, even though I did not feel connected to individual cosplayers. The cosplaying conventions presented themselves as a welcoming and tolerant and as a result this is how I framed the cosplaying subculture as a whole. When I attended panels which mentioned the games, comics and anime I grew up with, this fostered a sense

of similarity, especially as most of my friends did not engage with the same media as I did. The opening and closing ceremonies at conventions were also found to foster a sense of community, creating inside jokes specific to the convention, which I felt included within.

I also realised that the treatment I received from non-convention goers had also instilled a sense of comradery with other cosplayers. The staff in the buildings where the conventions took place often treated us differently from the other members of the public. We got stared at, and a smile directed at one member of staff was returned with a glare. But in contrast to when I was travelling up to my first convention in cosplay. Where I received similar dirty looks and felt alienated as a result. At this convention I was not alone in this treatment. With this providing a source of comfort and heightening a feeling of community. When asked about my funny clothes 'I am cosplaying' turned to 'We are cosplaying'. We were a group and that was reassuring. Through my reflections I realised that I had in fact begun to see myself as a cosplayer. However, my status as an insider may have resulted in me failing to initially notice the importance of my data, as I instead treated my findings as common knowledge (Bryman, 2001). Therefore, for the remainder of my study I ensured to frequently revisit both my data and my reflexive notes allowing me to identify their sociological significance (Wolcott, 1987).

Cosplaying with a Group

However, I still did not feel fully part of the cosplaying subculture. I felt part of it in a broader sense but not at an individual level. Furthermore, as I was not within a specific cosplaying friendship group, I could not see their inner workings. Therefore, over the next few months I attended conventions with my original gatekeeper and their wider cosplaying group. With us each cosplaying a specific character within the same series. Emulating characters from different sources throughout the events. Wearing one cosplay in the day and changing into another during the evening.

Within this cosplaying group I was able to meet cosplayers on a personal level. I was invited to socialise in cosplayers' hotel rooms at night and hung out with them during the day, lounging on the concourse outside between activities. Despite thousands of attendees, everyone seemed to know everyone, even if it was through tenuous links, and as a result I

was introduced to dozens of new faces. Whilst I was previously talking to cosplayers when they were out and about, standing in halls or heading to events, sitting around and spending significant amounts of time with cosplayers allowed me to get to know them more personally. I learnt names, exchanged online profiles and began recognising cosplayers at other events because of this. At subsequent events I bumped into cosplayers I recognised and actively hung around with them. I was not recognised just as my character but as an individual as well. Consequently, I was invited to the pubs that the cosplayers went to after conventions, when the majority of non-cosplaying attendees went home. With the pub whittling down the convention goers from thousands to hundreds, transforming even the biggest of conventions into a more exclusive experience.

As I built a familiarity with cosplayers, the types of discussions they had with me also changed. Throughout the first six months, cosplayers had framed their subculture as unanimously accepting and open, likening it to a Free Area where individuals could be themselves. However, from inside of the subculture I witnessed behaviours which challenged these notions. With cosplayers starting to discuss factors which disrupted the subculture's tolerant image, such as the presence of discriminatory behaviour. As argued by Adler and Adler (1987) who draw upon Goffman's (1959) theory of impression management, groups may seek to present themselves in a certain way to non-members. Therefore, becoming an insider to the cosplaying subculture may have granted me access to the backstage opinions of cosplayers. With my prior status as an outsider allowing me to examine the image that the cosplaying subculture projected onto the frontstage.

Cosplay and my Everyday Life

Talking to cosplayers also alerted me to a number of opportunities, one of which led me to compete in a cosplaying competition. Over the period of a month I made my first cosplay by hand and my room became covered in the photos of my character which I was using for reference. I bought figurines of my characters for comparison and searched for images of them from different angles to ensure that my outfit was accurate. Every inch of free space in my room was draped in fabric, failed bodices and ribbons and for one week straight sewing completely took over my life. Even though I had watched dozens of tutorials, learning to

sew from scratch was a matter of trial and error. I dreamt about sewing, spent hours researching the best way to sew sequined material. I also learnt how to craft with Worbla and how to make fangs from thermoplastic.

I was overwhelming proud of my finished cosplay on the day of the competition. Organisers and attendees alike complimented my outfit, with some asking if I was a professional cosplayer, doing so for money or having been hired by the games company. After having several attendees take photos with me, I walked away with the first-place prize - merchandise to add to my ever-growing collection. My experience of making a cosplay also provided me with another level of commonality with cosplayers, complaining about sewing and making props was an easy way to start off conversations, and making your own cosplay seemed to be a rite of passage that most cosplayers had gone through.

It was at this point that it dawned on me that cosplay was no longer something that was consigned to conventions. As soon as one event was over, I was planning for the next. My closest was as full of costumes, as it was with my regular clothes. I had also accumulated a number of figures from conventions which sat on my desk, many of which were characters I had cosplayed as. I was even practicing poses in front of mirrors in my free time. Cosplay had started to bleed into my everyday life.

My social media also became increasingly saturated with cosplaying peers, as well as pictures of myself in costume. Even my targeted adverts changed to cosplayer related merchandise. I also experienced the 'post con blues'- as soon as conventions were over, I immediately wished that I was back at them.

Offline, I was introduced to new acquaintances as a cosplayer by friends. At fancy dress parties, individuals would expect big things from my costumes or ask me for help with theirs. Although I was always interested in geek culture it was never described as a part of who I was. However, being a geek became a larger part of how I was described as well as how I saw myself. Whilst at the start of the project I had seen my relationship with cosplay as clear cut as the divide between work and home, this line became increasingly blurred. Cosplay had become a part of my identity.

Conducting research had changed the way I saw myself, which was claimed to be a common side effect of participant observation as a result of the immersive nature of this method (Scheper- Hughes, 1992; Israel, 2015). Whilst identifying with the group being studied could allow for in-depth data to be generated. Due to a sense of commonality granting researchers access to the innerworkings groups. Going native may have prevented my data from being judged in a critical manner (O'Reily, 2000; Byrman, 2008; Pink, 2009). However, whilst some researchers suggest that a degree of distancing is required between a researcher and their subject of study, Kaplan (1991) argues that developing a personal identity with research participants may not undermine the legitimacy of a study, as long as researchers remain aware of their status within the field. Therefore, as proposed by Busby (2013) I tried to accomplish this through re-visiting my compiled field-notes regularly, in order to bring my attention back to my status as a researcher. The gaps in between conventions also provided me with a means of reasserting my status as a researcher, allowing me to step back from my role as a cosplayer and attempt to examine my data from the perspective of a researcher. Furthermore, whilst Lofland et al (2006) argue that much literature discusses the danger of going native, there are few studies that suggest that researchers actually have. Instead they argue that many individuals confuse 'sympathetic identification' with 'overidentification', with the majority of researchers being able to understand their research participants, without over internalising their views (Lofland et al, 2006, pp62).

So far, this chapter has outlined this study's research setting and discussed the participants involved within it. It has also examined the methodological approach taken, with ethnography being utilised as the primary research method. Whilst my interpretivist epistemological stance meant that I could not achieve complete objectively within this study, I attempted to be aware of my positionality throughout it in order to minimise biases. Which is discussed through my account of becoming a member of the cosplaying subculture. The remainder of the chapter will proceed to explore the wider methods utilised within this study, as well as the scope and nature of the data generated. Concluding with an outline of how the generated data was analysed, the main ethical issues encountered as well as an account of the process of leaving the field.

Talk in Action

The majority of my data stemmed from what Lofland et al (2006, pp87) refer to as talk in action - conversations which I witnessed within the field directed by 'naturally occurring events'. Whilst such data was invaluable for exploring meanings within a situated context, which Gould et al (1974) refer to as perspectives in action, it only went as far as to shed light upon what I had directly encountered. However, I also wanted to capture perspectives on information which I could not gain direct access to.

Whilst observations and my own participation in cosplay revealed a great deal about interactions within this subculture, as argued by Bryman (2008, pp466) there was found to be a wide range of issues that were 'not amenable to observation' making it necessary to directly ask cosplayers about them.

Therefore, I engaged in what Gubrium and Holstein (2001) refer to as casual interviewing, asking conversational questions about witnessed phenomena as it was occurring, in an attempt to gain an insight into cosplayers perspectives. If the answers I received were short, I briefly summarised them in a notebook which I carried with me at all times. If this method was employed, I made sure that I shared my notes with the speaker, to ensure that I had given an accurate reflection of their opinions. Making alterations if I had failed to grasp their intended meanings to try and ensure that my research was as representative of cosplayers opinions as possible.

However, in many cases even the simplest of question resulted in a wider discussion which generated a great deal of meaningful data. In these instances, I asked the cosplayers for permission to record their conversation on a device on my phone. At first the interruption to seek consent for audio recording caused some cosplayers to forget their trail of speech, with some talking in a more formal manner during the recordings. However as argued by Cotterrell and Russell (1988) the cosplayers soon began acting in a naturalistic way once they had grown accustomed to being studied. After a while many cosplayers simply nodded or waved at my phone in dismissive manner to signal their consent at being recorded whilst continuing with their conversation. In these instances, I made sure to explicitly ask for

consent retroactively in case I had interpreted their signals incorrectly, offering to omit the recording from my research. This situation however did not occur.

Interviews

During my pilot research I had attempted to conduct some qualitative interviews with the cosplayers I encountered, which had been largely unsuccessful. I had tried employing unstructured interviews, being presented as a tool which allowed interviewees to talk 'from their own perspective', encouraging issues to emerge from the data itself making it suitable approach for an inductive study on cosplay (Edwards and Holland, 2013, pp30). However, as was discussed within Plummer's (1983) reflection of her ethnographic work, having stemmed from a research-based environment I made the assumption that my participants would be similarly familiar with the process of interviewing. However, in reality, many of the cosplayers I interviewed were unaccustomed to the practise and what it involved. Consequently, whilst I had hoped for open interviews, led by my participants to see how the members themselves framed their subculture, the answers given were concise despite my probing, resulting in very little meaningful data.

Therefore, I attempted to utilise semi-structured interviews in the hopes that a script would help to guide the interviewees, with the flexibility of this approach allowing me to pursue potential emerging themes (Bryman, 2008). However again these interviews were unsuccessful. Although I chose an informal setting - a coffee shop within the convention, in the hopes that this would produce a relaxed atmosphere, the cosplayers remained highly uncomfortable during the interview, responding again with closed questions. Therefore, I decided to focus on an ethnographic approach specifically.

After half a year in the field, I had started to view some patterns within the data which I wanted to explore in further detail. Furthermore, I wanted to generate data on matters which were unobservable through ethnography alone, including cosplayers' thoughts and perspectives and how they defined both themselves and one another. Therefore, I decided to attempt to interview cosplayers again, carrying out 16 unstructured interviews over the course of the project, excluding those I had undertaken within my pilot research. Each

interview ranged between 30 minutes and an hour and a half, and whilst some participants volunteered, others were selected due to their availability.

I felt very nervous at the prospect of conducting these interviews. My entry into the subculture was not as smooth as I thought it would be and it had taken months to build rapport with cosplayers. Whilst I frequently reminded my participants of my status as a researcher, after half a year they had started to refer to me as a cosplayer, which demonstrated the immersion I had managed to achieve. However, Katz (1996) argues that interviews are associated with power relations, placing researchers in a privileged position in extracting information from their 'powerless' research participants. Therefore, I was worried that conducting interviews would reinforce a sense of distinction between me and cosplayers, presenting myself as being in a position of authority, which could change the nature of our relationships (Edwards and Holland, 2013).

These interviews were however far more successful than the ones I had undertaken within my pilot study. As was argued by Taylor (2011) establishing a level of rapport with my interviewees prior to the interviews resulted in my participants being more confident around me, talking at length which resulted in a great deal of information. Although I had assumed that I would be in a position of power as a researcher, many of the interviewees' conduct was reminiscent of that of a teacher, educating me on the inner workings of cosplay. Furthermore, whilst the cosplayers in my pilot study had seemed nervous around me, I had established a close bond with many of the cosplayers I now interviewed, which could explain their more relaxed friendly conduct. Whilst this relationship resulted in a great deal of information, I was concerned that the participants may have overlooked my status as a researcher, treating me instead as a novice cosplayer or peer. Therefore, rather than solely seeking consent at the beginning of the study I made sure to frequently remind my participants of my role as a researcher, to try and ensure that what was being said was communicated in the full knowledge that it would be used for research.

During my research I also conducted five focus groups, allowing me to gain different perspectives on social phenomena. As with the unstructured interviews, these focus groups were informal affairs and were mainly used to shed light on behaviours I witnessed in more depth. Taking place in quiet spaces within conventions such as empty halls or cafes, I asked

groups of two or three cosplayers to elaborate on certain social phenomena. With these focus groups lasting about half an hour on average, being recorded upon my mobile phone.

Digital Media

As was previously mentioned within this chapter, forums were utilised as a tool to get information on fan-run cosplaying events, allowing me to expand the scope of my fieldwork. However, I also used forums to explore the opinions of cosplayers through the content and comments they posted within them. As some of these forums were open and available within the public domain Hewson (2003) argues they could be utilised as a data source without requiring informed consent, as long as anonymity was granted to the forum members. Therefore, this was the approach I took within my research. However, I was also invited to join closed forums, and which were inaccessible to the wider public. Whilst the ethics of online spaces are still very much up to debate, I decided that as these closed webpages were private, I would seek consent to study them (Bryman, 2008). Therefore, I contacted the private forum's admins, requesting permission to join as a researcher and outlining the exploratory nature of my study. I also asked these admins to pin a notice at the top of their forums to alert members that I was a researcher, and that I was intending to use anonymised posts within my research. This post also encouraged members to get in contact with me if they did not want their posts to be used, or if they wanted me to be removed from the forum. However, this did not occur.

I was aware that a failure to object to being studied, was not the same as seeking consent to be researched. However, as Barnes' (2004) guidelines for ethical conduct online suggests that messages exchanged in private discussions could be utilised if anonymity was granted. I therefore decided that I would utilise this data, paraphrasing discussions and omitting all identifying features, to ensure that users could not be recognised.

The Data

This research resulted in a wealth of data which was collected in a variety of ways. I carried a thick A5 notebook with me during my ethnography, filling up seven of these with my observations. Notes were also made on the timetables handed out at conventions which described the event's schedules. On these timetables I recorded what I was doing at different points of conventions, the atmosphere at events and how I felt throughout the day. Building a comprehensive account of each event for me to return to when examining my research. I aimed to record as much as possible within my observations, noting areas of sociological significance, cosplayers' characteristics, how cosplayers interacted with each other and outsiders to the subculture as well as the nuances of costumes. Seeking cosplayers' perspectives for clarity when needed. Furthermore, I made my own reflexive notes throughout my research project. I documented how cosplayers responded to certain outfits, examined how members of the subculture interacted across different events and within certain settings. I also recorded how individuals interacted with me, which was found to vary depending on the type of outfit I wore, how long I had been practising cosplay and their positionality to the cosplaying subculture.

Through interviews I was able to shed light of cosplayers' own perspectives, asking them to give their own interpretations of the phenomena I witnessed, their personal experiences of cosplay and their understanding of the wider subculture. Noting factors such as the language they used, the cosplayers' tone, as well as their body language.

My mobile phone proved to be a vital research tool and I gathered over 500 photos and numerous video-clips during my time in the field. Using this visual data to supplement my notes and as a visual aid to jog my memory of certain events. As carrying a Dictaphone was found to be too cumbersome and off-putting to many participants, I recorded both my formal interviews and informal field conversations on my mobile phone, generating over 100 hours of recordings. With some brief informal field conversations being noted on paper.

In total I spent over 650 hours at events with cosplayers during the period of two years. This figure however, does not account for my own engagement in cosplay related activities outside of events. Between conventions I spent hours preparing my costumes, sourcing

outfits, scrutinizing reference material and making props. In my free time I watched the latest geek media, following recommendations from cosplayers. Keeping me abreast of the latest trends and inspiring my next outfits. I talked about cosplay amongst my friends and spent a great deal of time thinking about and looking forward to the next convention. Plus, as my handmade cosplays took days of sewing to complete, half-constructed outfits littered my room, acting as a constant reminder of the subculture. Furthermore, 650 hours also fails to include my interactions with cosplayers online, with a number of cosplayers befriending me on social media and adding me to online cosplaying groups, which posted new content regularly. As a result, I interacted with the wider cosplaying subculture on a daily basis.

As was shown within Sluka's (2000) ethnographic study of violent groups in Northern Ireland, technology had connected me as researcher to my participants, even when I was outside of the field. Consequently, as argued by Sluka and Robben (2012) I may have failed to completely leave the field during my project, with the line between my everyday life and my research becoming ambiguous, as cosplay became a central to both.

Analysis

As my research project took an inductive approach, techniques from grounded theory were utilised when handling and analysing my data (Glasser, 1987). As Glasser's (1987) grounded theory was developed in accordance to a positivist epistemological position, I instead utilised a constructionist grounded theory approach. Which acknowledges that objectivity cannot be obtained, placing an emphasis on being aware of subjectivity to allow researchers to attempt to diminish biases (Howell, 2013; Charmaz, 2000). Furthermore, whilst traditional forms of grounded theory require researchers to consult the literature at the end of the research project, to prevent the data collection from being influenced by the work of others, this approach was not possible within this study having built research proposals which examined literature on cosplay (Hillyard, 2007; Ramalho; 2015). With a constructionist grounded theory approach allowing data to be consulted before the data gathering stage. Placing focus on 'constant reflexivity instead of denying prior knowledge', to ensure that the research was kept grounded (Thornberg, 2012). This approach therefore complimented my research study which emphasised reflexivity to draw attention to

researcher positionality, in an attempt to diminish the biases which were seen to accompany ethnography (Davies, 1999).

As prescribed in grounded theory, I aimed to construct my theory from the data itself. Undertaking my data collection and analysis simultaneous whilst in the field, in order to test my claims within an empirical setting and manage the huge amounts of data which arises from ethnography (Fetterman, 1984; Glasser and Strauss, 1967). I made reflexive notes when conducting my research, mirroring the memo-writing undertaken in grounded theory, used to 'contextualise data in narrative form' (Lempert, 2007, pp245). Which ensured that my data was recorded within the context of the cosplaying subculture. Furthermore, when going through my reflexive notes I attempted to shed any pre-conceived hypothesises, aiming to understand and sort my data according to my findings in the field (Charmaz, 1996).

My data collection also shared similarities with the theoretical sampling recommended by grounded theorists (Glasser and Strauss, 1967). As after I constructed a preliminary theory, I tested its validity by speaking with cosplayers, who provided me with additional data which developed my theory further. I then conducted multiple interviews and field conversations with different cosplayers to and see if my claims held, until no new findings arose from these accounts. However, on occasions when participants failed to validate my theory, I did not automatically discount my hypothesis. These discrepancies were found to shed light on a range of understandings within the cosplaying subculture. Which was used to develop and strengthen my theory, building an understanding of the cosplaying subculture that accounted for the different experiences of those within it. Finally, after a robust theory was constructed, I conducted focus groups to discuss it. Including participants from different, ethnicities, sexualities and gender identifications. As well as cosplayers who had been practitioners for varying degrees of time. Through doing so I was able to test that my theory was grounded and ensure that my research was representative of wider sections of the cosplaying subculture (Charmaz, 2012).

When analysing the data from my fieldwork, I followed the method of coding, grouping related data together under broad conceptual categories, which were examined independently and compared and contrasted against one another (Charmaz, 2012). With

this comparison occurring throughout the data collection and analysis process, allowing me to make sense of the data and highlight relationship between categories. Through doing so I was able to refine my categories, which became the key theoretical areas that form the findings and discussions chapters of this thesis.

Audio data generated through my interviews and talk in action were analysed in the same pattern as my fieldwork notes. These were transcribed as soon as possible after recording, in order to increase their accuracy (Blessing and Chakrabarti, 2009). Furthermore, I also made a note of a number of non-audible factors which occurred alongside my interviews. Including my participants' gestures and body language, as Cohen et al (2007) argue that such data can turn out to be significant upon further analysis.

Once my data had reached a saturation point, where no new findings emerged from the collected data. I stopped acquiring new data and focused on providing an in-depth analysis of my existing data (Seale, 1999). Whilst remaining in the field to test whether my claims were grounded.

Ethics

One of the major ethical concerns within this project was ensuring my participants' anonymity. Especially as the research touched upon a number of sensitive subjects, making confidentiality a key concern (Israel, 2015). Furthermore, as the cosplaying subculture was found to organise itself around notions of tolerance, stigmatising those who broke its norms. If a participant expressed opinions which deviated from the subculture's values, it could have potentially negative consequences for their membership within the subculture.

Therefore, I decided to use pseudonyms for all my participants using an online name generator. In order to be respectful towards my participants I made sure that the pseudonyms used aligned with their identified gender. In instances where cosplayers identified as gender neutral, I similarly used gender neutral names.

I also decided to anonymise the conventions attended, as some of these events were intimate in nature, increasing the chances that participants could be identified if the event's

names were included. Furthermore, I also decided to omit the details of the costumes worn by the cosplayers in case this factor made them traceable. However, in instances when the features of an outfit were required to add context to the data, I made sure to make slight changes in their description.

Whilst I tried to omit as many traits as possible, in some cases my participant's characteristics added context to the discussion. Therefore, these traits were only included when necessary, and with the consent of my participants, after it was judged that this data would not make my participants identifiable.

The relationships I developed with the cosplayers also raised ethical concerns. Whilst I had entered the field as an overt researcher, over the course of the study I had established bonds with my research participants who had become more open with me as the project progressed. Whilst this may have indicated that the cosplayers had become accustomed to my presence, it may also suggest that nature of our relationship had changed (Cotterrell and Russell, 1988). As a result, in some instances it was hard to ascertain if information was shared with me as a cosplayer in confidence, or whether it was instead discussed in the knowledge that it would be used for research. Therefore, in cases when I was uncertain, I made sure to check with cosplayers before including their accounts within my data. Furthermore, when information was shared under the influence of alcohol, I sought the participant's permission to include it within my research the next day, as the notion of whether drunk individuals can give informed consent is contested (Gamburd, 2008). I also made sure not to include information which could harm my participants. For example, whilst one cosplayer told me a very intimate story, claiming that they were happy for it to be used within my research, I concluded that doing so could cause them psychological harm, prioritising their safety.

My research also raised concerns about my own ethical wellbeing, as many conventions I attended were in locations which I had not previously visited, that I mainly travelled to on my own. Therefore, I made sure to research the location of each convention thoroughly before I entered the field, making a note of local taxi numbers in case any problems arose. I also let someone know about my location, alerting them when I travelled between sites.

Leaving the Field

After two years in the field my research had reached the point of saturation, where no new findings arose from the observations made (Grady, 1998). Whilst Michailova et al (2014, pp140) claim that many researchers treat the point of saturation as the ideal time to leave the field. Which such researchers proceeding to form their theory from a setting outside of the field 'behind closed doors'. This was argued to result in theories which lacked validity, based the researcher's experience of the field rather than their participant's. As this project aimed to examine cosplay though the eyes of its members, I followed the advice of Michailova et al, exiting the field only after a 'sufficient understanding of the phenomenon under study' had been achieved. Constructing and testing out my theory within an empirical setting and leaving the field when I was confident that my claims were grounded.

Despite this, leaving the field was not simply a process of removing myself from cosplay once my research had met its aims. Lofland and Lofland (2006, pp62) argue that many fieldworkers play insufficient attention to the process of disengagement from the field. A process that requires 'careful thought and pre-planning' to ensure the wellbeing of participants. With Gobo and Molle (2017) stressing the importance of leaving the field at a time when the researcher's exit would be considered acceptable to the participants. In order to cause minimal disturbances to the routines of the research subjects. Furthermore, within Iversen's (2016) exploration of leaving the field, the author demonstrates that research participants may become accustomed to a researcher's presence. Who could therefore be negatively affected by a researcher's disengagement from the field. Therefore, drawing upon these arguments, I endeavoured to exit the field in a manner that would have the least negative impacts on my participants. Deciding to leave after the last convention of the year. With this event being chosen as there was a long gap between this convention and the next one in the New Year. Theorising that this break would allow my participants to become used to my absence in a naturalistic manner. As many cosplayers did not have the opportunity to meet up with each other during these months.

When it came to my departure from the field, the cosplayers I was with simply wished me goodbye as they had done at previous events. This differed from many of the accounts I had

read to inform the process of leaving the field. Which depicted emotional goodbyes and tearful exchanges, as the researchers had successfully become immersed within the lives of those they studied (Moore and Kosut, 2013; Coffey, 1999). Although the reaction I received could have been considered a successful exit of the field, as my departure had not resulted in any overt negative consequences for my participants (Coffey, 1999). I questioned whether I had been as immersed within the subculture as I had previously thought, as my exit did not provide the same reaction that other ethnographers had experienced (Moore and Kosut, 2013; Coffey, 1999).

However, a few weeks later when a cosplayer prompted an online conversation with me, they revealed why my exit from the field was treated in such a mundane manner. This cosplayer explained that members could absent themselves from the subculture. Due to time constraints and the expenses that accompany cosplay. With some deciding to return to conventions at a later date, being welcomed back into the subculture even after a period of years. Therefore, rather than my departure from the field demonstrating a lack of immersion within the cosplaying subculture. My actions may have instead mirrored that of a cosplayer. Allowing me to successfully exit the field in a naturalistic manner which was considered acceptable to my participants. Whilst I was careful to ensure that my prior assumptions did not impact on my data collection, I had failed to apply this notion to the process of leaving the field. As is argued by Hartmann et al (2008) each ethnography is unique, with research participants holding different patterns of social behaviour across ethnographic studies. Therefore, it also stood to reason that my process of leaving the field would differ from the accounts of wider academics, being influenced by the norms of the group I had studied. A failure to account for this had nearly resulted in me undermining the amount of immersion I had achieved. Which could have led to me questioning the validity of my claims which would have negatively impacted on the theory I produced. With this experience therefore highlighting that social phenomena should be understood in relation to the group being studied. Not just in terms of the data collection by throughout the research process.

When I first left the field, as was discussed Coffey and Atkinson (1996) I felt a profound feeling of loss. Initially viewing this process as my complete departure from the group I had studied. However, as was argued by Michailova et al (2014) the line between the personal

and the field was found to be ambiguous. As was previously discussed, cosplayers continued to interact with me online and as a result, I aware of the social developments within the subculture, without being physically amongst its members. As was found within Sluka's (2000) ethnography, digital media provided a degree of connection to the field in the post fieldwork stage. Furthermore, although Stebbins (1999) argues that researchers never really leave the field, as the reminiscence of events connects us to our fieldwork, my relationship was more than just a memory. Whilst leaving the field had provided me with a degree of 'physical and temporal separation', I had developed a subcultural identity through my process of becoming a full member of the cosplaying subculture (Coffey, 1999, pp74). Therefore, as argued by Van Maanen (2010, pp244) this ethnographic work may have lacked full closure due to the 'meaningful relationships' I had built, not only with my research participants but with the subculture as a whole.

Whilst Shaffir et al (1980) point out that many ethnographers view leaving the field as the end of a specific period of their lives. Having entered a new social setting to explore a social phenomenon and leaving once this process once it was completed. As was discussed previously within this chapter, cosplay was already an established part of my life before I started my fieldwork. I was friends with cosplayers, had entertained the idea of engaging in cosplay and frequently visited geek media events and conventions. Therefore, I had always intended to return to conventions when this project concluded and carry on interacting with the cosplayers I already knew. What I had not envisaged however, was my identification with the cosplaying subculture which developed as part of this project. Which led to me returning to a convention after the write up of my thesis in costume, feeling like a full member of the cosplaying subculture rather than a researcher studying it. However, my relationship to the field may have been expected. Letkemann (1980, pp292) argues 'how one leaves the field depends a great deal on how one enters it'. Therefore, as I had entered the field with an existing relationship to cosplay and a desire to explore it more, this connection deepened throughout my research project and ultimately remained upon its conclusion.

Summary

This chapter outlined the nature of my study, a longitudinal immersive exploration of cosplay and Escape Attempts. In which I interacted with hundreds of cosplayers during more than 40 events. Spending over 650 hours in the physical field which produced a wealth of empirical data. The setting of the research was discussed, which included geek culture conventions, meets as well as gaming and Japanese cultural events. Furthermore, an overview of the UK cosplaying subculture was provided, being shown to be made up of predominantly white, female members, whilst containing a diverse range of individuals. The interpretivist stance developed within my study is also discussed, demonstrating how this impacted on the methods used and the reflexive approach taken. With an outline of the methods utilised- an ethnographic approach with elements of researcher participation. Which was supplemented with interviews, talk in action as well as digital media. The analysis method used, a constructionist grounded approach, is also outlined. Along with the key ethical issues encountered within the research. Finally, the chapter concludes with my reflections on leaving the field, questioning whether I was truly able to shed my status as both a cosplayer and a researcher on the completion of this project.

The following chapter draws upon data uncovered within my research, to frame the cosplaying subculture through the accounts of its members. Demonstrating that tolerance and acceptance were framed as a central components of this subculture's identity, with notions of similarity and difference building a sense of community amongst cosplayers.

Chapter Four: Cosplay and Community

Within the literature review, cosplay was framed as a distinctive subculture which I aimed to become a full member of within my thesis project. However, as was shown within chapter three, whilst I was recognised as a cosplayer by wider members of the subculture, I had initially failed to hold a subcultural identity, feeling like a fraud and an outsider at my first cosplaying events. It was not until I started to feel a sense of connection to other cosplayers that I began to see myself as one as well, subsequently framing myself as distinct from wider members of society due to my involvement in cosplay. My assimilation into the cosplaying subculture could therefore be a result of me acquiring a sense of community, providing a feeling of belonging within the subculture and a sense of similarity between myself and its members (Rovai, 2002; Bacon, 2002). With community being framed as the phenomenon that brings individuals together as a collective, creating a sense of solidarity between subcultural members (Thompson, 2012).

The term community is however highly contended. With Hillery's (1995) analysis of ninety-four definitions finding only one common theme, the fact that community was seen to involve people. In particular, a major point of disagreement was found to concern whether community was framed with a focus on either difference or similarity (Clement, 2010). Hall (1996, pp3) subscribing to the former school of thought, presents community as a collective identity whereby one group of individuals differentiates itself from others. With community therefore being a process, which operates 'across difference' and exclusion. In contrast Green (1956) presents community in terms of likeness, as a group of people sharing a common way of life.

This chapter however draws on Jenkins' (2006) theory on Social Identity to understand how members of the cosplaying subculture framed themselves as a group. As will be demonstrated within this chapter, the cosplayers presented their subculture as a collective entity, made up of diverse individuals who shared the same values, united through the act of cosplay. With Jenkins similarly framing the concept of community as a collective group identity, which allows diversity to thrive within it. Rather than the cosplaying subculture solely being understood in terms of similarity between its members, the cosplayers also situated their subculture by contrasting it against that of others. With this being a central

argument within Jenkins' work. Which asserts that identities, be them collective or those held by individuals in order to build a distinct feeling of self, are constructed through notions of similarity and difference. With identity therefore being defined as comparison between people or things, a dynamic process shaped through interactions. Furthermore, the boundaries of the cosplaying subculture were not always found to be clear-cut, which resulted in efforts to re-establish a sense of division. A process that can be likened to Jenkins' discussion of boundary maintenance. Which, similar to the process of the boundary making discussed within chapter two, asserts that parameters are drawn around the edge of groups to manage membership and maintain a distinct sense of identity.

This chapter therefore begins by exploring how cosplayers understood their subculture in terms of difference from wider sections of society, before discussing the demographics of UK cosplayers. It then proceeds to demonstrate that cosplayers conceptualised their subculture in terms of a shared values between its members. However, this sense of cohesion was found to be placed under threat by the popularisation of both conventions and cosplay, with the chapter examining how group values were maintained. Through doing so, this chapter helps to situate the cosplay by differentiating it from other groups which are commonly misconstrued to be part of this subculture. Revealing that notions of tolerance and acceptance were core features of cosplay's subcultural identity. With cosplay being framed by its members as providing a means of escape from an intolerant everyday life.

Normies

Normie was the term for 'normal' people, who were presented as the mirror opposite of cosplayers. This term was often used in a derogatory manner, with normies being presented as boring, judgemental and homogenous, subscribing to the mainstream and unwilling to accept anything beyond it. In contrast, cosplayers were framed as inherently tolerant and accepting, traits generalised across cosplayers, seen to unite all the subculture's diverse members. As Lucy, who had been cosplaying for three years, discussed during a semi-structured interview, which took place at an outdoor space within a mainstream convention.

> Lucy*: 'Normies mean you have to look a certain way or dress a certain way otherwise you get treated like crap. I can't even dye my hair red-y brown at work because it's not seen as acceptable. My boss said it makes me look like a druggie, so my face was basically against company policy. I can rock up to a con with rainbow hair and everyone's cool with it because cosplayers don't judge people by how they look.'*

After one particularly unpleasant journey to a convention in cosplay, where my bright purple wig had garnered disapproving looks and confrontational stares, I was particularly grateful to join in on a conversation berating normies. I was comforted with the knowledge that others shared similar experiences to my own and was left with feelings of superiority. The cosplayers and I laughed about the small-mindedness of the normies, highlighting the cosplaying subculture's liberal and accepting nature in comparison.

Normies were not however solely limited to those outside of the conventions. At a number of cosplaying events I had witnessed and experienced venue staff treating cosplayers in a disrespectful manner. However, as the organisers of these events encouraged cosplayers to put up with this negative treatment, citing that venues had the power to expel individuals from their premises, I found myself putting up with behaviour which I would not in other contexts. Despite this, the hostility cosplayers experienced at the hands of normies was found to have a positive function, heightening the sense of comradery between us. The negative treatment we received fostered a feeling of unity against a common enemy, which was widely discussed by cosplayers throughout the conventions.

In a direct reaction to this intolerant environment, one convention moved its annual event to a new location, which was more isolated and experienced in hosting a broad range of niche events. Consequently, the staff were found to be more tolerant and significantly more friendly to the cosplayers. With this change in environment providing the cosplayers with an insulated accepting space, physically removed from wider intolerant attitudes. Within this convention cosplayers were able to subvert everyday norms, enacting their values without fear of reprisal, which provided them with escape from the intolerance of wider society. Cosplayers used toilets regardless of their intended gender, those in non-heterosexual relationships publicly displayed their affections and male cosplayers walked around in feminine clothing as if it was normative.

Prior to the event I had initially theorised that without a common foe to contrast themselves against, the sense community amongst the cosplayers would lessen. However, I soon discovered that in the absence of the rude staff, closeminded normies emerged as an imagined enemy. Hypothetical situations mocked how normies could react to cosplayers outfits, re-establishing a sense of distinction from them as a subculture. Furthermore, the welcoming staff at this event were treated as an exception, a small minority of accepting outsiders which did not weaken the intolerant image of normies in general.

When asked to describe cosplay, many cosplayers highlighted tolerance as a key component of the cosplaying subculture. Contrasting this against perceived intolerant attitudes held by normies and wider society. At one convention cosplayers were warned about a white supremist march planned in the same town. Which led to discussions about racist and homophobic normies as a whole. Furthermore, when one premises complained about male cosplayers using female toilets, to get into costumes with their female friends, this led to heated complaints about a *'transphobic society, shackled to its outdated views on gender'* (a quote overheard during my time in the field). Similarly, the sale of posters argued to glorify mental illness at one convention resulted in claims that the majority of normies did not understand mental health. These were not however isolated accusations against the wider public. Stories on the news and the widespread presence of discriminatory language online were used to build the concept of a prejudiced wider society. Directly contrasting with the image of the cosplaying subculture, which was presented as unique in its tolerant attitudes.

Whilst the cosplaying subculture was framed as accepting in a number of ways, it was particularly argued to be opposed to racism, homophobia and transphobia. Being widely discussed as a subculture which was accepting of individuals with mental illness and social disorders. However rather than going into detail on these themes here, they will instead be discussed within the findings and discussions chapters that follow. What is instead important to highlight is that these attitudes resulted in cosplay being framed as a welcoming subculture, providing an escape from the perceived intolerance found within everyday life. As Aiden, who had been cosplaying for eight years, discussed within a semi-structured interview which took place at a coffee shop within at a mainstream convention.

Aiden: *'Our world is so judgemental, there's so much hate, but not in cosplay. There's no other subculture like it, everyone's so accepting. It's hard to describe. You can be yourself and no-one will judge you for it, there's just nowhere else like it.'*

Fancy Dress and Boundary Maintenance

One of the most common misconceptions of cosplay, and one which was seen to particularly annoy cosplayers, framed the activity as being fancy dress. All the cosplayers I spoke with, from those just beginning to those who had cosplayed for years, reinforced the distinction between fancy dress and cosplay. Fancy dress was easy, it could be cheap, and inaccuracy was not a concern. However, cosplay was associated with a high amount of effort to produce the best possible emulations. Wigs, coloured contacts and intricate props could all be used to give an accurate rendition of a character. With my own experience of cosplay demonstrating that even the most causal looking outfits could take a deceivingly long time to put on. Ensuring that wigs were well styled, outfits were ironed and pinned in place and that makeup was flawless took an exhausting amount of work.

Some cosplayers made their own outfits by hand, aiming to perfectly replicate the colours and textures of fabrics, which led to hours of searching for materials that were the perfect match. Reference books were utilised to ensure that costumes looked as close to the original source as possible, with characters being studied from different angles and in different lightings. Whilst some cosplayers bought their outfits, again this this was no simple feat. Many high-quality outfits originated from specialised websites based in Asia. Cosplayers would research the best sellers, cross reference pictures to find the most accurate outfits and locate translators to place orders. Third parties were also required to receive cosplays once bought, before shipping them over to the UK.

One convention I attended highlighted this difference between cosplay and fancy-dress in particular. This was a convention that was running for the first time and was largely aimed at the general public. Being advertised as a family activity and a unique day out, rather than placing an emphasis on geek culture. Having spent a significant amount of time around cosplayers who placed an emphasis on the accuracy of their outfits, I was instantly surprised by some of the costumes I saw. Many costumes were highly inaccurate and some of those

dressing up as popular superheroes, wore outfits with colour schemes slightly off from the originals, without wigs, props or contact lenses.

I spoke with a couple of attendees in these inaccurate outfits and they referred to their costumes as cosplays. When asked what the term meant they described cosplay as dressing up at conventions. With these individuals being found to lack a degree of knowledge on who they were emulating. Claiming that they were dressed up because it was part of the *'convention experience',* rather than them having a particular interest in the media their outfits originated from.

These individuals were not however considered to be cosplayers by wider members of the subculture. Cosplay was instead argued to involve putting effort into one's outfits and confer the wearer's interest in geek media. Camilla, who had been cosplaying for over twelve years explained that if an individual wearing an outfit did not value such media, they were instead viewed to be engaging in fancy dress. With our informal field conversation taking place within an exhibition hall at a mainstream convention.

> Camilla: *'Their character isn't meant to be orange and [their outfit] is literally falling apart. They've obviously just gone to a fancy-dress store and bought a costume for the day. You can come in an outfit and call it cosplay, but it won't be one just because you say it is. But then you might look into what cosplay actually is and then give it your best shot, then it would be cosplay. You might not be the best, but at least you're trying. Cosplay is actually knowing about geek stuff and actually being into it.'*

I had initially interpreted Camilla's stance to be elitist. Camilla had been cosplaying for a number of years and had high standards when it came to cosplays. However, the same sentiments were expressed amongst wider cosplayers, including Molly who I spoke with as part of an informal field conversation. Molly was a first-time convention attendee and was cosplaying for the first time at this mainstream convention.

> Molly: *If you're a cosplayer you want to share that you like geeky things with people who like the same stuff. You feel like you're connected to other people because you are showing that you like the same things, that other people aren't usually that interested in. Fancy dress is more doing it because why not. It's not about sharing your interests with other people because you don't have to like something to wear a*

costume of it. People who have no interest in sci-fi can dress up as Darth Vader at Halloween.'

Although Molly's outfit was inaccurate and poorly made, when I asked Camilla if Molly was considered a cosplayer she confirmed that she was, as Molly was seen to have put effort into her costume and had demonstrated an interest in geek media. I then questioned whether convention attendees in fancy dress were treated any differently to cosplayers. Camilla explained that cosplay conferred a deep interest in geek media which fancy dress did not. Consequently, whilst cosplayers would use geek media to prompt conversations with other each other, therefore facilitating friendships, they did not do the same with those in fancy dress. Instead individuals in fancy dress were claimed to be treated in a similar manner to non-costumed convention attendees, with conversations being brief, often facilitated by an individual in fancy dress asking for a cosplayer's photo.

After Camilla had pointed out this difference in interactions between the two groups, I could visibly differentiate between cosplayers and those in fancy dress, with cosplayers seeming to belong to a wider network which those in fancy dress were not. Creating an observable boundary between the two groups. With Camilla cementing a notion of distinction as our field conversation continued.

Adele: *'What if someone in fancy dress demonstrated an interest in geek media?'*

Camilla: *'If they went up to a cosplayer and they shared the same interests they'd probably get into conversation with them just like a coplayer would. Most of the time people like that get tips for outfits so they can come in cosplay next time. And if you get along you might end up being friends and invite them to cosplay with you. But it mainly depends on what the person's like, if they are a dick then they might just get ignored.'*

Adele: *'How could they be a dick?'*

Camilla: *'Like if they were homophobic or something. They might share similar interests but at the end of the day they would still be a normie in a costume.'*

Adele: *'Couldn't they be a homophobic cosplayer?'*

> Camilla: *'No. being a cosplayer is also about being part of the subculture and if you're homophobic people will try and prevent you from joining it.'*

Camilla's quote suggested that individuals who adhered to the cosplaying subculture's norms could be regarded as cosplayers despite the quality of their outfits; with Molly being framed as such for having put effort into her costumes and showing an interest in geek media. Furthermore, Camilla claimed that those in fancy dress with a shared interest in geek media, could experience similar interactions to a cosplayer. Resulting in deeper interactions, which Camilla argued could facilitate friendships and provide an inroad into cosplay. However, it was also argued that those with intolerant values could be shunned by cosplayers, with this being a behaviour I had witnessed first-hand.

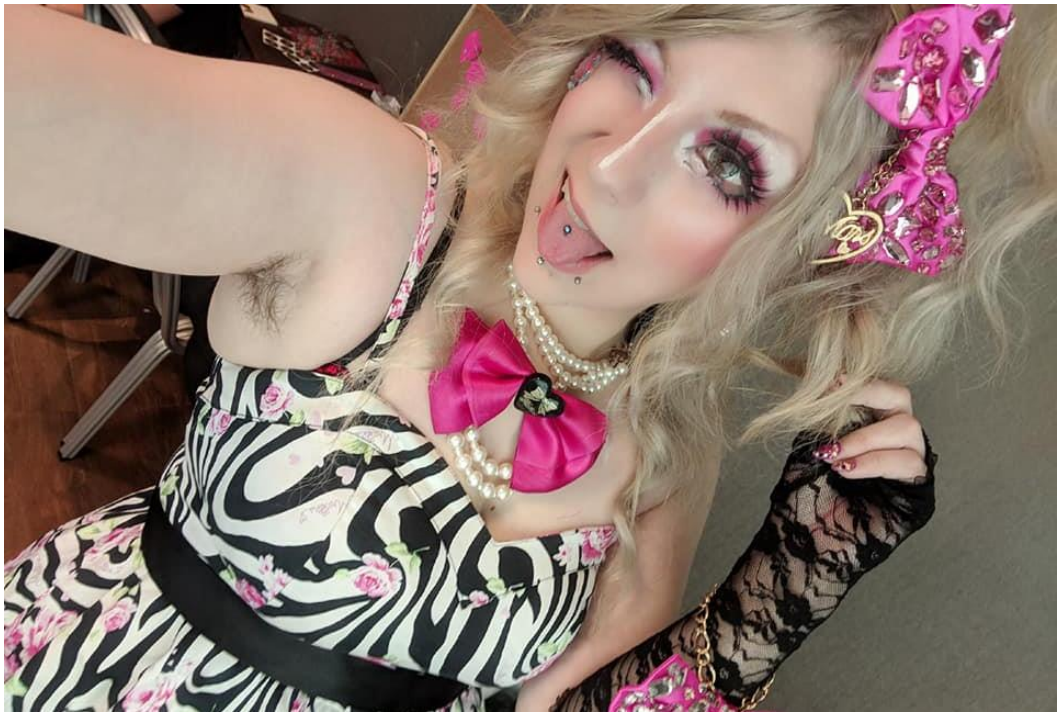
At one mainstream convention, an attendee called Russel struck up a conversation with the cosplaying group I was with. Joining us for a couple of hours he mentioned that he shared an interest in a sci-fi series which we discussed as a group. Russel had bought a superhero mask and cape from a fancy-dress stall, voicing an interest in getting into cosplay. As was argued by Camilla, Russel was given tips on starting out in cosplay and was invited to conventions occurring later in the year with this group of cosplayers. However, upon making a transphobic remark, Russel was told that *'cosplayers didn't agree with transphobia'* and he was told to '*go away*'. Furthermore, these cosplayers then recounted what Russel had said to their peers leading to declarations that Russel would be avoided by other cosplayers.

As was argued by Camilla, it seemed as though tolerance was a requirement of being a cosplayer, with those holding alternative values being labelled as normies and therefore viewed to be incompatible with the cosplaying subculture. The exclusion of Russel could therefore, be regarded as an act of boundary maintenance. With cosplayers actively attempting to bar individuals who subverted the values of the cosplaying subculture from it, helping to ensure that new members continued to subscribe to cosplay's norms. Regardless of whether an individual wore a costume to conventions or held an interest in the same media, without holding the tolerant values of the cosplaying subculture they could be viewed as not a cosplayer but as a normie in disguise.

Distinction from Wider Subcultures

Cosplayers were also found to frame their subculture by differentiating it from wider groups who also wore unusual clothing at conventions; in particular Gyaru, steampunks, larpers and furries. This section will therefore provide a brief definition of these groups, formed through conversations with members of these subcultures, before outlining how cosplayers presented these groups distinct from cosplay.

Gyaru, with their unusual clothing, bright hair and coloured contacts, are often mistaken to be cosplayers when they visit conventions. However, unlike cosplays which are costumes worn in specific settings, Gyaru is a fashion-based subculture, formulated by women within Japan. Gyaru fashion has many different substyles within it, but is most commonly associated with Ganguro, a style featuring dark tans and contrasting makeup, presented as a form of resistance against the Japanese beauty standard of pale skin. Therefore, Gyaru is a distinct subculture based around being rebellious, loud and fashionable with members often wearing big hair and makeup as well as bold prints. With some Gyaru showcasing their bodies in revealing outfits, as a form of rebellion against societal attitudes which encourages women to be reserved.



A Gyaru in an Agejo substyle, which emphasises femininity, glamour and sex appeal. Credit: Klaidonn

Those in steampunk inspired clothing could also be commonly mistaken for cosplayers. With steampunk referring to a genre of science fiction where society is powered through steam powered machinery rather than electricity. This steampunk world has created its own fashion style, based on a largely Victorian aesthetic, featuring goggles, top hats, exposed cogs and clunky fake metal limbs to reflect the steam-based culture. Some individuals presented steampunk as a way of life, discussing how they wore dapper clothing as their everyday clothes, talked on dedicated steampunk forums and bought wooden keyboards for their computers. For others however, it was presented as an identity that was played out in specific spaces, an original character to dress up as and roleplay at events including conventions.

A woman in steampunk clothing. Credit: Noel Nichols Photography.

Cosplayers were also commonly mistaken for live-action role-players, or larpers. With live-action role-play referring to a form of group role-play enacted within the real world. When larping, participants actively embody their characters, often using costume to do so. Whilst the setting of some larping events are fictional worlds constructed by game masters. Others

were argued to be based on historical events or set within existing universes, such as Tolkein's Middle-earth from The Lord of the Rings. With some players depicting existing characters from these worlds. When larping, the characters being roleplayed each have their own backstories and goals to pursue; with outcomes often being dependent on preestablished rules as well as interactions between other players. Therefore, the game element of larping and its specific focus on role-play was argued to set this activity apart from cosplay.

A fantasy themed larping campaign. Credit: Chase the Storm.

Larping does not always have to be based on a fantasy setting as is shown within this photograph of military themed larping campaign. Credit: Typestatic.

Lastly, whilst cosplayers could dress up as animal characters, there was also the distinct furry subculture. Whose members wore full body suits based on anthropomorphic animals, largely undertaken at designated events, including geek media conventions. However, as full body suits could be very expensive to produce, some furries simply wore animal ears or tails to signify their membership to this subculture. Some furries identified with the animals they dressed up as, even outside of costume, referring to their outfits as their 'Fursona'[9]. Unlike cosplayers, furries focus was seen to be on animals specifically and a sense kinship with them, which was expressed though the costumes they wore.

An image of a furry photographer, wearing their own fursuit. Credit: Furry Creatures Photography.

[9] A fursona is the furry identity of those who engage in the activity, a play on the word persona.

Blurring the Boundaries

When originally questioned about the nature of the cosplaying subculture the cosplayers gave concrete definitions which clearly distinguished cosplay from wider groups. However, cosplay also shared similar characteristics to the wider subcultures they contrasted themselves against, with some cosplayers being found to blur the boundaries between them.

Cosplayers could dress up as characters who wore Gyaru or a steampunk styles. However, whilst Gyaru was argued to be a clothing worn in everyday life, the cosplayers argued that cosplays were costumes, setting the two subcultures apart. Steampunks were also distinguished from the cosplaying subculture, with members arguing that whilst cosplayers emulated established characters, steampunks created their own- an alternative persona, set within a specific fantasy timeline. The cosplayers also stated that both steampunks and cosplayers saw themselves as separate groups, and as a result there was argued to be little interaction between them, with steampunks often carving themselves designated spaces within conventions.

As both larping and cosplay featured role play, I asked cosplayers if there were any differences in this activity across these two groups. With Camilla discussing this matter in depth during a semi-structured interview which took place in the outdoor area of a subsequent mainstream convention.

> Camilla: *'Role-play in larping is more structured and you have to stay in character when you're larping. In cosplay it's much less formal, more spur of the moment and shorter. Like making a joke with someone cosplaying the same show as you by acting like your characters would. And that might give you the chance to chat to them about the show and get to know them more. But you wouldn't spend the whole day acting like them. Cosplayers role-play for photos too, because if your character's shy, you act shy and copy their poses because it looks better. If you did a pose that didn't suit your character, it just doesn't look good.'*

Whilst Camilla had claimed that role-play in cosplay was for short durations, setting it apart from the role-play of larpers, some cosplayers were reported to roleplay for extended

periods of time. However, Leah who had been cosplaying for six years and Amber who had been cosplaying for nine, explained that this behaviour could be regarded as deviant. As they discussed within a focus group which took place within an empty room at a fan-run convention.

> Amber: *'If you roleplay too much it's seen as a bit immature and can get annoying. Like it's fine for skits and events but if I'm trying to talk to you specifically and you're not breaking character it can be a bit irritating. Like there was one time when this girl was cosplaying my character's nemesis and she was pretending to be confrontational which was funny at first. But then every time she saw me she'd be up in my face and I ended up snapping at her. I'd actually decided to go to the con last minute to get away from the stress at home and someone shouting in your face isn't very relaxing.'*
>
> Leah: *'At [a party within a cosplay convention], there was a group roleplaying and they swept onto the dance floor and pushed people out of the way. Sometimes people who roleplay forget that not everyone is in on it and it can be so self-centred. After a certain point it's not role-play it's larping, and people think that if you want to larp you should do it with larpers instead because cosplay really isn't really the place for that'.*

Both Amber and Leah claimed that extended role-play could be viewed as undesirable, with this action having the potential to negatively impact on convention experiences. Amber's quote demonstrated that the roleplay carried out by one cosplayer had disrupted her experience of escape; preventing her from using cosplay to distance herself from the stress she was experiencing within her everyday life. With such roleplay being presented as *'immature'* and *'annoying'* by wider cosplayers. This narrative could therefore discourage cosplayers from undertaking this behaviour, which could prevent such actions from disrupting the escape of others. Furthermore, Leah had suggested that there was a general consensus that those whose behaviour held connotations of larping should engage in larping instead. These notions could therefore prevent cosplayers from blurring the boundaries between the two groups, helping to establish clear divide between them, whilst encouraging an adherence to the cosplaying subculture's norms.

Certain cosplayer's outfits could also blur the lines between cosplayers and furries. Some cosplayers were found to wear fur suits when emulating anthropomorphic characters, with others emulating characters with animal traits in their design. However, the cosplayers argued those in cosplay could be easily differentiated from furries, as cosplayers were argued to emulate established characters. As a result, despite a similarity in costume, cosplayers emulating animal character were found to be treated in a distinctive manner to furries dressed up as animals.

At one cosplaying convention an anthropomorphic cosplayer received a great deal of attention for the quality of her fur suit, contrasting with a furry at the event in an equally impressive outfit who was largely ignored. With this furry being discussed by Charlotte, who had been cosplaying for eight years, during an informal field conversation at a fan-run convention.

> Charlotte: *'To be honest I don't get why a furry came to [this cosplay convention]. Cosplayers wouldn't go to a furry convention because they aren't into furry things. Furries and cosplayers are completely separate so why would you come here to roleplay your fursona. He's the only furry at the whole convention so no-one here's going to pretend like he's a wolf or whatever.'*
>
> Adele: *'Couldn't that guy be a cosplayer and a furry?'*
>
> Charlotte: *'I've never heard of one, but if they did exist you couldn't be both at the same time. If you were both you would cosplay at cosplay events and be a furry at furry events.'*

Whilst furries and cosplayers were seen to coexist within broader conventions, the presence of a furry at a cosplay convention was framed as unsuitable. Charlotte argued that the furry sought a form of interaction that cosplayers would not reciprocate, claiming that cosplayers as a whole would not attend a furry convention due to a difference in interests. When I raised the notion of a furry which was also a cosplayer, Charlotte's answer connoted a degree of scepticism, asserting that this was not a trend that she was aware of. However, Charlotte asserted that for this to be hypothetically possible an individual would have to shed one identity to and take on the other, again reinforcing a sense of distinction between furries and cosplayers.

Whilst cosplayers had similarly distinguished themselves from larpers, Gyaru and steampunks they seemed particularly keen to reinforce a sense of difference between themselves and furries. This was argued to be due to furry subculture being framed as particularly deviant. With both cosplayers and academics highlighting that the mainstream media has associated furries with bestiality (Martin, 2014). Furthermore, the furry subculture was argued have become a subject of media scrutiny, after pictures of furries wearing outfits featuring Nazi imagery were published. Resulting in the cancellation of certain furry specific conventions.[10]

Whilst a majority of cosplayers acknowledged that the deviant image of furries stemmed from sensationalised media stories, many continued to frame furries in a negative light. As was shown within a semi structured focus group with Emma who had cosplayed for four years, Poppy who had been cosplaying for eleven and Harry who had been a practitioner for seven. With our conversation taking place within a gastropub at a fan-run convention.

> Emma: *'Cosplayers dress up like characters. Furries identify with animals even when they take their fursuits off. They are two completely different things.'*
>
> Poppy: *'I'm sure that some furries are nice people but I'm not going to go out of my way to talk to them. There's not like a rule. Like "you can't hang around with them". We are different groups and we like different things.'*
>
> Emma: *'I wouldn't hang around with them. What if I was associated with yiffing[11] or that furred reich shit[12]I don't want to be seen as racist.'*
>
> Harry: *'It's not so bad here, but in America stories of racist furries were all over the news. I wouldn't really hang around with furries because I don't want people to think that cosplayers were like that too.'*

As was seen within Emma's quote, a number of cosplayers expressed fears that socialising with furries would lead to them as individuals being associated with the deviance of the

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[10] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4412692/Neo-Nazi-furries-uproar-causes-convention-cancelation.html (accessed 15/08/ 2018)

[11] Sexual activity or material within the furry fandom, including pornographic artwork and cybersex.

[12] A subgroup of white supremist furries

furry subculture. Similarly, Harry discussed avoiding furries in case the cosplaying subculture as a whole was viewed as deviant by proxy, therefore associating cosplay with intolerance. Furthermore, whilst Poppy had claimed that cosplayers could interact with furries, even before I had met one, I had heard infamous stories about them, coupled with jokes made at their expense. Although many cosplayers did not mock the furry fandom, the way they were widely described shaped my opinion of them, as I was initially deterred from wanting to interact with them. This could suggest that the cosplaying subculture may actively differentiate itself from deviant groups, deterring members from interacting with them to help cosplay to maintain its tolerant identity.

OC Cosplayers Further Blurring the Boundaries

Whilst many cosplayers asserted that cosplayers emulated established characters, there were also found to be those who created their own original characters [OCs]. OC cosplayers were largely framed in a negative light by members of the subculture. Cosplayers explained that gaining attention for your costumes was an important part of cosplay, signifying that costumes were valued. However, as OC characters were not widely recognisable, such cosplays did not receive the same level of attention as others, resulting in some OC cosplayers demanding attention for their outfits rather than earning it.

In particular, OC cosplayers were framed as undesirable as they could be seen to put little effort into their outfits. Throwing an assortment of costume components together and calling it cosplay, an action which was referred to as 'closet cosplay'. As putting effort in one's costume was argued to be an integral part of cosplay, such OC cosplayers were framed as breaking a major norm of the cosplaying subculture. Furthermore, as Lucy discussed with me at the pub after a mainstream convention, such closet cosplay could also blur the lines between cosplayers and normies in fancy dress.

> Lucy: *'At a con you can pretty much spot a cosplayer because they'll be dressed up as a character. And that lets you know that they're a cool person because cosplayers are an accepting bunch. But OC's confuse all that, they might turn out to be a judgemental normie in fancy dress. Con attendees always turn up in cat ears or fake*

kigus[13] or whatever. I probably wouldn't go up to a cosplayer in OC because I wouldn't know for sure that they were a cosplayer.'

Lucy suggested that wearing a cosplay could signify the wearer's tolerance, with this mirroring my own experiences in cosplay. I met a number of cosplayers for the first time who had presumed that I held liberal attitudes on a range of subjects, discussing non-binary identities and polyamorous relationships with me in passing, suggesting an assumption that I was accepting of them too. As was mentioned earlier within the chapter, many cosplayers presented tolerant attitudes as a key component of cosplayers identity. With Lucy presenting cosplay as a visible marker of these traits, with the emulation of an established character being used as a means to differentiate cosplayers from those in fancy dress. This distinction could therefore help cosplayers to avoid interacting with individuals who may fail to subscribe to cosplay's tolerant values. Which could provide cosplayers with an environment where they could escape from intolerant attitudes.

However, as OC cosplayers may not emulate existing characters, they could be perceived to be outsiders to the cosplaying subculture, which may explain the lower levels of attention which OC's were claimed to receive. Therefore, an absence of interactions, coupled with the negative narrative surrounding OC cosplayers, could again be seen to discourage cosplayers from engaging in activities that blurred the boundaries of the subculture, helping cosplayers to clearly identify members who could be assumed to be welcoming towards them.

So far, this chapter has conceptualised cosplay through notions of difference, helping to frame the cosplaying subculture by contrasting it against that of others. Through doing so it was shown that cosplayers were able to distance themselves from those with alternative norms as well as solidify the escape of its members. In the following sections attention will turn to exploring how cosplayers saw their subculture in terms of similarity. Beginning with an exploration of cosplay's demographics. Before proceeding to discuss the threat posed to cosplay's notion of homogeneous norms and the resulting methods used to reinforce group values.

[13] Kigu is an abbreviation of Kigurumi. A Japanese brand selling animal onesies, inspiring the onesies widely available within the UK.

The Demographics of the Cosplaying Subculture

Whilst predominantly comprising of white individuals, with female cosplayers outnumbering male cosplayers by a large margin, there was seen to be a great deal of diversity within the UK cosplaying subculture. I met cosplayers from a range of ethnic and social backgrounds, who travelled from up and down the country to attend events. Cosplayers varied in age too, some were young enough to require supervision from a guardian and others had children or even grandchildren of their own. The cosplayers I spoke with held a variety of gendered identities and sexualities, with cosplay being seen to accept all the variations of its members.

Along with a variety of personal characteristics, cosplayers were also found to have a range of interests and preferences outside of cosplay. Whilst music was found to be a major part of cosplay conventions, with many events offering pre-parties, club nights or even karaoke, the cosplaying subculture did not organise itself around this factor. Events instead catered to a wide range of musical preferences.

Furthermore, whilst the costume itself may be one of the most identifiable aspects of cosplay, unlike many fashion-based subcultures cosplay did not require its members dress a certain way in everyday life for group identification (Gelder, 1997). Conventions attracted a variety of fashion-based subcultures, including Goths, Lolita and Gyaru. In fact, one woman who had been cosplaying for over 10 years, stopped wearing costumes at conventions, as cosplay was argued to be too expensive and time-consuming. Despite this, she was still known as a cosplayer due to her past outfits and was very active within the subculture.

An example of Lolita, a fashion-based subculture from Japan, featuring clothing based on children's clothing from the Victorian and Edwardian era. Credit: Love-bumble.

As cosplayers were not required to wear their outfits within everyday life this allowed them to subscribe to other subcultures, which could lead to friendships between individuals who may not have otherwise interacted. One cosplayer called Patrick, who listened to grime music and wore sportswear outside of cosplay, discussed the fact that his best friend was a female goth, 6 years his junior with an interest in thrash metal. Whilst in other contexts their contrasting tastes and ages could have inhibited interactions between them, Patrick argued that their shared interest in cosplay brought them together.

This begins to build a vital finding, that despite the differences of individual cosplayers, they were able to build community through notions of similarity which were fostered in a welcoming environment.

Shared Norms within Cosplay

Patrick and many other cosplayers also claimed that tolerant attitudes united cosplayers, enabling diversity to thrive within the subculture. As Gemma, who had been cosplaying for two years, discussed during an informal field conversation at a cosplay meet.

> Gemma: *'Cosplay is when you dress up as characters from geeky stuff that you're interested in. You're doing it with other people, so you're not just dressing up on your own, you're cosplaying together as a community. And because the cosplay community is welcoming and accepting so you can be yourself without worrying about what other people think, because you know that cosplayers will be accepting.'*
>
> Adele: *'Why.'*
>
> Gemma: *'Because they are part of the community.'*
>
> Adele: *'What did you mean when you mentioned that you could be yourself?'*
>
> Gemma: *'Like you don't have to worry about being judged based on the colour of your skin or if you're gay or whatever because the community's accepting.'*

Gemma had presented the cosplaying subculture as both tolerant and accepting, with these traits being extended to individual cosplayers due to their membership. These sentiments were similarly identified within an informal conversation with Leo, who had been cosplaying for four years. Which took place within an exhibition hall at a mainstream convention.

> Leo: *'If I wore a dress down the high street I would not be surprised if I got beaten up. In cosplay you can be who you want, wear what you want, and it's all fine. People aren't going to be transphobic here, because cosplayers aren't like that. I have friends who thought they were gay but realised they were trans after cosplaying a girl. In cosplay that's all fine. I've worn a dress to try out being a girl and that's fine too.'*

Cosplayers also framed cosplay as a subculture where individuals could escape from intolerance. As is viewed within Leo's above quote, the cosplay was seen to provide a safe space where members could experiment with their identity and subvert conventions within everyday life, made possible through the inclusive attitudes of its members.

Threats to Cosplay's Identity

Having established the notion of shared norms within the cosplaying subculture, with tolerance presented as a unanimous trait of cosplayers, the following section examines how cosplay's accepting nature could be preserved through boundary maintenance.

Whilst members framed cosplay as a safe and tolerant space, the popularisation of the activity was seen to threaten these notions. Which Aiden discussed within a semi-structured interview, taking place at a coffee shop within a mainstream convention.

> Aiden: *'When I used to go on [an online cosplaying forum] it had like a couple of hundred members max. I'd share pictures of my cosplays talk about games and I met some awesome people, it had really chilled vibes. Now everyone's heard of cosplay so thousands of people use it and some pricks post racist and sexist shit on it all the time and that's not ok. People cosplay to get away from that shit don't start dragging it into cosplay.'*

As the conversation with Aiden continued, he maintained a stance that cosplayers were not racist or sexist in nature, claiming that those who posted discriminatory content on forums were outsiders to the subculture. Although Aiden claimed that those who posted such content may desire to join the cosplaying subculture, he argued that their attitudes would prevent them from doing so, as tolerance was again presented as a key requirement of being a cosplayer. However, Aiden argued that regardless of whether such posters were cosplayers or not their actions undermined the inclusive nature of cosplay, threatening members' escape, as such actions prevented cosplayers from *'getting away from'* the discrimination which cosplay was seen to provide refuge from. Furthermore, such posts were argued to have negative repercussions for cosplay's accepting identity, with Aiden pointing out they could be interpreted as opinions held by members of the cosplaying subculture.

However, some individuals suggested that cosplayers may have responded to this trend by reinforcing a commitment to tolerance as part of cosplay's identity. As was discussed by Amanda within a semi-structured interview, taking place in an empty space at a fan-run convention.

> Amanda: *'When I started cosplaying over 12 years ago cosplayers weren't as vocal about racism or homophobia or whatever. You didn't have to be because the community was small enough for you to know that everyone thought the same things. Now we have to be so much more explicit because we don't want our community to become overrun by bigots. We make it clear that if you're racist you're not welcome, sexist not welcome homophobic not welcome. We are not having anyone that can harm our friends in cosplay. It's not enough to not be homophobic or whatever, you have to be against it. If you're not against bigotry you're not coming in.'*

Similar sentiments were also identified during a semi-structured interview with Stephan, who had been cosplaying for over 10 years. With this conversation taking place in an outdoor space at a mainstream convention.

> Stephan: *'Cosplay used to be just about cosplaying, but now it's so much more than that. A big part of cosplay is actively standing up against prejudice. So many events are trying to make money out of cosplay by advertising it as a thing you turn up and do, to attract people to come. And I've seen people, who get called cosplayers, because they've dressed up for conventions, spouting really horrible opinions that we don't agree with and it looks like they are one of us. I think that's made cosplayers realise that if we want to protect our community, we have to make it clear that we are against prejudice and actively take a stand against it.'*
>
> Adele: *'How do you do that?'*
>
> Stephan: *'Well at the fan-run cons we now have notices which make it clear that prejudice isn't tolerated and will result in you being expelled and banned from them. Some cons raise money for charities against homophobia and stuff. And if we see shit on cosplaying forums, we make sure that people get banned so people know it's not going to be tolerated.'*

Both Stephan and Amanda argued that cosplay used to be much smaller, allowing shared values to be assumed. However, the mainstreaming of conventions was argued to have attracted some individuals' who openly subverted the cosplaying subculture's values. As a result, the above quotes suggest that tolerance has become a focal point of cosplay's identity, being presented by Amanda as a required trait to gain entry to the subculture. With Stephan arguing that cosplayers openly championed their commitment to tolerance, taking steps to eliminate discriminatory behaviour within spaces intended for cosplayers. Therefore, this assertion of cosplayer's tolerance could be a means for the subculture to sustain its values. Ensuring that new members continued to subscribe to its norms, and make sure that cosplay remained a subculture where individuals could escape from intolerance. Furthermore, it also suggested that the markers of the cosplaying subculture's identity were malleable, with tolerance being flagged as key due to external factors. Therefore, this act may also be a means for the cosplaying subculture to mark itself as distinct, by contrasting itself against intolerant outsiders.

Summary

From an outsider's perspective the boundaries surrounding the cosplaying subculture could be viewed as indistinct, with wider subcultures sharing similar traits with cosplay. However, the discussion demonstrated that within the cosplaying subculture a great deal of emphasis was placed upon drawing parameters around its boundaries, ensuring that its core values remained intact, therefore allowing its members to feel comfortable within it.

The cosplaying subculture was found to be made up of diverse individuals who presented themselves as united through the act of cosplay as well as shared accepting attitudes. Contrasting both themselves and the subculture as a whole against the notion of an intolerant wider society. With individuals who were seen to subvert these values being barred entry from the subculture and avoided. As a result, cosplay was framed as a distinct and unique subculture which allowed its members to escape from the prejudices within everyday life.

However, the mainstreaming of cosplay could threaten these notions of acceptance, with cosplayers being found to have reacted by reinforcing tolerance as a core marker of

cosplay's identity. In particular, this tolerance was framed in relation to 3 main areas; ethnicity, gender and sexuality as well as mental health and social disorders. Which will be explored in greater detail within the subsequent discussion chapters, examining whether cosplay successfully provided escape in relation to these areas.

Chapter Five: Cosplay and Ethnicity

This chapter begins the discussions of my findings, outlining the primary areas of sociological interest which were identified as the central pillars of the cosplaying subculture's identity. Throughout the following chapters emphasis will be placed upon testing Escape Attempts within an empirical setting, exploring this framework's applicability to the substantive areas identified within the project.

As was discussed within the literature review, Cohen and Taylor presented a rigid divide between everyday life and Free Areas, with the authors arguing that escape was limited to 'spaces relatively uncontaminated by the institutional reality' (1975, pp20). Whilst such boundaries may be more readily enforced within the rigid structure of prisons, from which the theory of Escape Attempts was formed, there may be a greater deal of fluidity outside of this context. Which could therefore suggest that escape may be less achievable outside of a prison environment. Furthermore, Cohen and Taylor also failed to explore the notion of intersectionality and escape. With the theory being written from a middle class, male perspective, who can be assumed to be the intended audience from many of the anecdotes used throughout the text. This therefore highlights the need for the empirical testing of this theory which this thesis provides. Examining whether escape through cosplay could be achieved, and if so, how escape may be used in practice.

Starting with ethnicity, this section explores how the cosplaying subculture organised itself in relation to this area, using its views on ethnicity to negotiate membership. It begins by demonstrating how the use of skin-colour as a key marker of identification may grant some individuals a degree of freedom in their performances when it comes to emulating characters of certain ethnicities. Whilst simultaneously having the potential to exclude others due to the demographics of cosplayers and the media they consume. Some individuals remained constrained by established notions of ethnicity, placing limitations upon their own cosplay performances as a result. Therefore, demonstrating that context has an impact on how escape is experienced.

Attention will then be paid to exploring how the cosplaying subculture has adapted to its increased visibility. Being found to set boundaries between acceptable cosplayers and

outsiders using codification, as well as insulating itself away from wider everyday society. From this I argue that cosplayers successfully sculpt spaces in which they can escape from everyday factors concerning their ethnicity, policing these spaces to prevent them being disrupted by mundane life. However crucially, rather than escape being limited to distinct spaces, it is theorised that escapism does not have to be entirely removed from everyday life to be successful. These overlaps between escape and the mundane could in some cases be beneficial to an individual's Escape Attempts. Therefore, through examining the relationship between cosplay and ethnicity, the chapter will demonstrate how Escape Attempts are enabled and constrained by local contexts, testing and extending the theory within an empirical setting.

Flexibility and Constraints when Playing with Ethnicity

At all the conventions I attended I witnessed cosplayers emulating a variety of characters with heritages from across the world. Consequently, the majority of cosplayers expressed that individuals were free to dress up as any character they desired, regardless of the character's or performer's ethnicity. With my surface level observations seeming to support these claims. At one masquerade within a convention, a white man dressed up as a black videogame character, received the same reaction from the crowd as the other contestants. Furthermore, during a meet based around a western comic book which took place within a mainstream convention, I saw a black woman dressed as a white superhero. With this cosplayer being just as included in the photoshoots and social interactions, as the cosplayers who emulated characters with a similar ethnicity to their own.

I asked this superhero cosplayer Ciara, and her friend Suzanne, about their experiences of cosplay during an informal field conversation within a mainstream convention. Ciara and Suzanne both described themselves as black and whilst Ciara had been cosplaying for over three years, Suzanne had been cosplaying for two. Ciara dressed up as a range of characters from different media sources regardless of their ethnicity. Whilst Suzanne dressed up as Asian characters from anime exclusively. Both these cosplayers claimed that they received the same amount of attention as other cosplayers, which they measured through compliments they received as well their requests for photographs.

I questioned these cosplayers about the experience of emulating characters with a different ethnicity to their own. With both Ciara and Suzanne using the terms skin colour and ethnicity interchangeably. When I asked the cosplayers for clarification on their definitions of these terms, they explained that for them they both meant the same thing. Where they were from and what they looked like in terms of the colour of their skin.

> Suzanne: *'I don't feel any different from other cosplayers because I'm black and dressing up as a Japanese girl. Everyone is so welcoming and accepting no matter where you are from. I don't think people really notice that I'm black, they see me as me and who I'm cosplaying because the colour of your skin isn't a big deal.'*
>
> Ciara: *'No-ones ever said anything to me about me being black. When I'm cosplaying I'm the character not me, so my skin colour doesn't matter at all.'*

Both cosplayers seemed to indicate that there was a certain degree of flexibility when it came to ethnicity in cosplay. Ciara's assertation that she was not herself but her emulated character when cosplaying suggested that she felt able to shed aspects of her everyday identity. Adopting a new fictional identity rather than merely being her mundane self, wearing an outfit. Drawing parallels with script switching proposed by Cohen and Taylor. This, coupled with the fact that the topic of her ethnicity had not been raised by others, was used as evidence that her ethnicity was not an issue in the cosplaying subculture, being argued not to *'matter at all'.* Similarly, Suzanne expressed feeling as though her ethnicity was not noticed by others. Instead she felt treated as a distinct individual- *'they see me as me'*, or as was voiced by Ciara, viewed as the emulated character instead. Analysed as a whole, these quotes suggest that cosplay may act as an unscripted Free Area. Whereby through taking on the identity of another, an individual's ethnicity may be rendered less significant, with the identity of the emulated character taking precedence over the characteristics of the cosplayer themselves.

However, whilst Suzanne and Ciara may not have viewed their own ethnicity or skin colour as effecting their performances, some cosplayers admitted that they did note the colour of an individual's skin; and this could be used to judge whether a cosplay was viewed as particularly desirable.

Many cosplayers expressed that emulating a character with a similar skin tone to the wearer was more highly valued, as this increased the cosplay's authenticity. Likewise, they claimed that cosplays where the wearers skin contrasted with their character's were less accurate and could therefore be seen as less impressive. However, if a cosplayer did decide to emulate a character with different coloured skin to their own, they were unlikely to receive negative comments for doing so by those within the subculture. The cosplayers I spoke with explained that such negative opinions could result in individuals feeling limited in their cosplay choices. Which would be interpreted as racist by the wider cosplaying subculture and seen as unacceptable. A number of cosplayers however expressed that they felt comfortable discussing these opinions amongst their peer groups. As in seen within the following excerpt from an informal field conversation at a fan-run convention. In which Patrick, a cosplayer who described himself as black and had been cosplaying for 15 years. Discussed that he thought that cosplayers who emulated characters with contrasting skin colours to their own looked 'weird':

> Adele: *'Would you tell them that you think their costumes look weird?'*
>
> Patrick: *'No. They can cosplay who they want. I don't want to stop them from cosplaying as it's a hobby and I wouldn't want to offend them. And it could come across as racist. But I'll talk about it with my friends because I know that we obviously aren't racist'*

Although Suzanne and Ciara had claimed that their skin colour was not noticed in cosplay, it may instead be the case that within the cosplaying subculture, bringing attention to skin colour was considered unacceptable due to fears of discrimination. Within smaller friendship groups however, a commitment to anti-racism could be assumed. Therefore, as shown in the above quote, views on skin-colour in cosplay may instead be shared within these contained spaces, away from those who may feel offended by such statements. As a result, this censorship of opinions may ensure that cosplay remains an outwardly welcoming space, enabling the cosplaying subculture as a collective to maintain an inclusive image. Allowing individuals to cosplay in the way they desire without the fear of experiencing overt negative reactions from those within the subculture.

Whilst negative sentiments surrounding cosplay and skin colour may not be publicly broadcast, some cosplayers were found to place constraints upon their own performances, stemming from a desire to provide an accurate rendition of a character. Throughout my interviews the concept of cosplaying characters which suited the wearer was frequently repeated. With factors such as appearance, height and body shape all influencing whether an individual was seen to emulate certain characters particularly well, therefore earning them a larger amount of positive attention. However, there seemed to be a great deal more flexibility to give an accurate emulation of a character, regardless of the performer's size. As I regularly witnessed cosplayers of varying body shapes and heights cosplaying certain characters, and despite the differences between these cosplayers, they all received praise for their emulations. In contrast, it was much less common to see cosplayers emulating characters with significantly different skin tones to their own.

I conducted an informal focus group with two cosplayers at a fan-run convention; Camilla, the seasoned cosplayer who I had spoken to at an earlier mainstream event and Rosie, who had been cosplaying for six years. These cosplayers both identified as white and they explained that they had never cosplayed darker skinned characters, as the contrast in their skin tones was viewed as too great. This was argued to be the reason why it was rare to see white cosplayers emulating characters with darker skin. They both explained that they had no issues with emulating Asian Characters, as despite being a different ethnicity to these characters, they were argued to share a similar skin colour.

> Camilla: *'If you're black cosplaying a white character, or white or Asian cosplaying a black character, their skin colour is a big part of their character design, so you can't help but notice it. But anime characters don't look Japanese, so if you've got the same-ish coloured skin I think you can look like them not matter where you're from.'*

As many white Westerners were drawn with the same facial features as East-Asian characters within anime, Camilla went on to express feeling able to produce accurate East-Asian cosplays. With many of the interviewees describing anime character's skin to be *'pale'* or *'white'*. However, I raised the point that anime did exist which presented white westerners as having distinctive features and contrasting pink skin. Questioning if cosplaying an East-Asian character from such a show would highlight a discrepancy between the white actor and their emulated character. In response Camilla raised a crucial point that within the

UK, the cosplaying subculture was mainly made up of white individuals emulating East-Asian characters. Therefore, the East-Asian cosplays undertaken by white individuals would look normative within the subculture regardless of whether their skin colour matched their character's or not.

> Camilla: *'I never really thought about my race in cosplay before you brought it up. If you're white and cosplaying a Japanese character it's just the standard.'*

In fact, the only time a white cosplayer mentioned feeling out of place for dressing up as a Japanese character, was when they cosplayed in East-Asia, feeling normal again when doing so at UK conventions.

> Rosie: *'I felt like a giant. It was so hot, and my face was bright red, but the Asian cosplayers looked paler and so much more like the characters than I did.'*

Through analysing Rosie and Camilla's responses it appeared as though the internal constraints held by cosplayers were dictated by context. As white cosplayers emulating East-Asian characters made up the majority of the cosplaying subculture within the UK, their performances could be rendered normative despite a discrepancy between their ethnicity. Outside of these settings however, when part of a minority as was discussed by Rosie, these performances may be disrupted, and the ability to successfully play as another ethnicity could be hindered. Whilst Cohen and Taylor had presented Escape Attempts as an overarching theory, failing to take into account that differences could occur between groups of individuals, the above quotes suggest that the demographics of the wider cosplaying subculture can influence the ability to escape. How an individual looked in relation to the wider cosplaying subculture influenced whether they could provide successful performances. Therefore, the ability to escape may be dependent on context of the individual and their relation to their wider society.

The Mundane within Free Areas

It was not however only white cosplayers who were found to base their cosplay choices on the colour of their character's skin. The idea of internal constraints when cosplaying was also discussed in a conversation with Patrick.

Whilst Patrick had started off cosplaying lighter skinned characters, he realised that his own skin tone stood out when doing so. Although he had initially thought that his skin colour was rendered invisible when in a costume, he had noticed the contrasting skin tones of others in cosplay, thinking they looked less desirable. Concluding that others could think the same regarding his own emulations. As Patrick's involvement in cosplay increased, so did his desire to become a more competent practitioner. Patrick discussed that he felt more able to look like a character when they had a similar skin colour to his own, therefore he decided to emulate darker skinned characters exclusively. Despite this limiting his character choices, as such characters were largely underrepresented within much geek media.

> Patrick: *'When I cosplay someone black I can become the character more because I look like them. When I do a dark character, I feel like people see me cosplaying them. But if I cosplayed a lighter character people see me as a black guy cosplaying them.'*

Patrick had expressed feeling unable to successfully cosplay white or East-Asian characters, as when doing so his skin colour remained a key marker of identification. His contrasting skin colour was argued to disrupt his portrayal of certain character to his audience, with the colour of his skin being viewed before the character he was emulating: *'people see me as a black guy cosplaying them'*. In contrast when cosplaying darker skinned characters, Patrick expressed being able to give successful performances '*becoming the character more'*, as his skin colour did not undermine the legitimacy of his outfits.

Cohen and Taylor present everyday life as completely separate from the Free Areas used to provide temporary relief from the mundane. Hobbies acted as spaces where self-consciousness could be suspended, where individuals could absent themselves from everyday life. Holidays allowed for the relocation to separate locations, where individuals could temporarily discard their established identities before regaining them upon their arrival home. Furthermore, mass culture allowed for the temporary transportation into a variety of fantasy worlds. However, from Patricks account, cosplay did not present a complete escape from his everyday life. Despite initially thinking it could be concealed, his ethnicity still accompanied him into cosplay and was used to form judgements, just as it was within the everyday.

As Cohen and Taylor present Free Areas as spaces where reality is excluded, if contamination from the mundane world occurred within them, these Free Areas were argued to lose their function, within individuals looking elsewhere for escape. However, despite conventions of ethnicity remaining within cosplay, Patrick continued engaging in this activity and actively incorporated his skin colour, an aspect of his everyday life, into his emulations. Rather than disrupting his Free Area, this action led to his outfits being viewed as more realistic, allowing him to *'become the character more'* and provide more authentic performances. This could therefore suggest that the areas used for escapism do not have to be entirely removed from reality to be successful. In some cases, incorporating elements of everyday life may be conducive for adding a degree of authenticity to the methods used for escape, heightening the success of Free Areas rather than disrupting them.

Parameters for Legitimacy

During my time cosplaying, I had only received compliments from others regarding my outfits. However, from the discussions within my interviews, this did not necessarily mean that my cosplays were positively received by the wider cosplaying subculture. Being mixed race with one black and one white parent, my skin tone was darker than many of the characters I emulated. As my skin colour contrasted with these character's, my emulations may have been viewed as less desirable. Plus, as such sentiments were found to be censored within the cosplaying subculture, negative opinions on my cosplays may have been concealed from me.

I asked various cosplayers whether my emulation of white and East-Asian characters looked abnormal, asking for an honest answer and asserting that I would not be offended by any negative responses. However, all the cosplayers expressed that the use of props was enough to mask my ethnicity, as my skin tone was considered pale enough to accurately look like these characters. With many admitting that they had assumed that I was *'white and just tanned'* when cosplaying.

The use of contact lenses and wigs was argued to mask my ethnicity.

Other mixed-race cosplayers I spoke with also expressed feeling able to successfully emulate characters who were paler than they were. Including Poppy, a cosplayer who like me had one black and one white parent. Poppy had been cosplaying for 11 years and I informally discussed issues of race with her and Patrick as we sat within a videogames room at a fan-run convention.

> Poppy: *'In a wig and contacts people think I look white. I've been asked what fake tanning lotion I've used before when it's just my skin'.*

Whilst many cosplayers had expressed that emulating a character with a similar skin colour was highly valued in cosplay, mine and Poppy's contrasting skin tones had not hindered our performances as we could be judged as white by the wider subculture.

When I continued this conversation, both Patrick and Poppy revealed that cosplays could in fact be viewed as successful even if the wearer had a contrasting skin tone to their character's. Poppy often emulated characters with much darker skin tones than her own arguing that I could do the same. She also discussed a friend from an Indian background, who was highly praised when emulating anime characters with African American origins, despite her skin colour not being accurate to the character.

> Poppy: *'She got a lot of compliments. It didn't really matter where she was from, she looked more like a character than a white person could because of her darker skin.'*

Likewise, Patrick had portrayed characters with lighter tanned skin, and often received compliments for doing so:

> Patrick: *'I've cosplayed tanned characters lighter than me. Mixed race people can cosplay black characters because even though you might be kind of pale, you're still darker that most white cosplayers, so compared to them you would look better than if a white person cosplayed them. You would suit them more in comparison because you can look more like them more than other [white] people.'*

As was previously discussed, internal constraints surrounding ethnicity and cosplay could be influenced by context. With white cosplayers such as Rosie feeling able to successfully emulate East Asian characters when part of a majority who did the same. Furthermore, a degree of fluidity was identified, with actors providing successful performances of characters with different nationalities to their own. However, restrictions were still identified, with judgements concerning successful cosplays being based on skin colour rather than ethnicity.

Through analysing Patrick and Poppy's quotes it seemed as if these constraints may be formed in relation to the subculture itself rather than being constructed around the media being emulated. Whether the replication of a character was viewed as successful or not, was found to depend on how a cosplayer looked in relation to the wider subculture, rather than being based the character's design. Patrick had expressed that white cosplayers' skin tone was used as a marker against which darker skin was judged *'you're still darker than most white cosplayers so compared to them…'*. With comparison influencing who could portray which skin tones successfully. Similarly, Poppy discussed that the comparison

against white cosplayers had allowed an Indian cosplayer to successfully emulate a different ethnicity altogether, despite her skin colour not being seen to match her character's: *'she looked more like a character than a white person could because of her darker skin.'*

A number of theorists' have argued that norms are widely constructed in relation to the dominant group, being utilised to build boundaries which can result in privilege for its members (Hall, 1997; Douglas, 1996; Lidchi, 1997). Therefore, rather than shedding established norms, the cosplaying subculture may instead have reproduced established systems of privilege within it. Although cosplayers with darker skin may be able to successfully cosplay as characters with a broader range of darker skin tones to their own. These established boundaries may also be exclusive, as such characters are underrepresented within the media many cosplayers consume. In contrast, those viewed as white may be able to successful perform as East-Asian characters within the UK, as such cosplayers were normalised due to the demographics of the subculture; providing these cosplayers with a wider array of characters to escape through. A degree of tacit discrimination may therefore appear within the cosplaying subculture, rather than providing a complete escape from the politics of ethnicity. As a result, the areas used for escapism may not be as free as was theorised within Escape Attempts. Traditional norms and values may be reproduced within Free Areas, mirroring aspects of everyday life rather than offering a complete departure from them.

<u>The Novelty of Darker Skin in Cosplay</u>

As was previously mentioned, characters with darker skin were largely underrepresented within geek media, resulting in some who emulated them exclusively, feeling constrained when choosing who to cosplay. However, as such characters were less likely to be emulated due to the largely white demographics of the subculture, those able to produce accurate cosplays of such characters based on skin colour could experience positive interactions for doing so. In contrast none of the white cosplayers I spoke with felt as if their skin colour resulted in additional compliments, due to their skin being viewed as the standard.

As the conversation with Patrick and Poppy continued, they both expressed feeling incentivised to cosplay darker skinned characters due to the higher amount of attention

they received when wearing these cosplays. However, their experiences of cosplaying such characters were not always positive. Poppy described an event she had attended in which she cosplayed as a darker skinned character. Knowing that the quality of her outfit was poor as she had put it together at the last minute.

> Poppy: *'Loads of people came up to me and complimented my cosplay which was so bad it was laughable. I made it the night before and I know if I was white, my costume would have been ripped to shreds. I think my skin colour was enough to make my costume impressive. One person said I had the perfect complexion for him. But it made me feel like I was getting attention for my skin not my cosplay. Once I made a really bad cosplay of a Japanese character and I was teased by my friends. But they complimented this cosplay and it was so much worse! I was like "No this is bad. It's shit". I was so surprised. I was ready to be laughed at, but when people were saying it looked good it was a bit embarrassing. I didn't want people to think this was all I was capable of. Now if I do a tanned character, I put in extra effort to make sure it's well made. I want to make sure I'm getting compliments for having a good costume, not just my skin. If you're a cosplayer that's what you want to be judged by.'*

> Patrick: *'Sometimes my friends will really want to do group shots, and they won't be able to find a cosplayer who wants to do dark skinned characters. So, I'd just do it, even if I don't like them or their outfit. It's not like I have to, it's still fun. I wouldn't be forced to, although I might get hounded a bit to do them. But my friends are normally thankful, and I get a lot of good feedback for it so why not. At one con I went to a meet dressed as [a character] and every group wanted a picture with me. There were like 20 groups and they all wanted me in their shoots. I was the only black guy there, so my cosplay looked really accurate. I was tagged in so many photos that it started to get annoying with all the notifications.'*

Whilst these cosplayers had reported benefits for cosplaying characters with darker skin through the compliments and increased attention they received, this emulation could also have its downsides. Although Poppy had reported a degree of leeway when it came to her darker skinned cosplay, allowing her to gain compliments despite the costume's low quality, this treatment was not positively received. Poppy had claimed that cosplayers wanted to be

judged upon their outfits, however her costume's success was based upon the colour of her skin. The reactions to her substandard cosplay had resulted in Poppy feeling as though her competency as a practitioner was undermined. Therefore, rather than the degree of attention given to her cosplay being viewed as positive, Poppy expressed wanting to be judged by the same parameters as the wider cosplaying subculture. As a result, when she cosplayed darker skinned characters, she put in additional effort to produce particularly high-quality outfits in an attempt to be judged in a similar fashion to the wider subculture - based upon the costume itself.

Patrick had similarly received compliments as well as increased requests for photos when cosplaying darker skinned characters. However, he also discussed being pressured into cosplaying characters with darker skin tones to assist his peers, due to a lack of cosplayers willing to do so. This was also reported in a semi-structured interview taking place within a gastro pub after a mainstream convention. With Tia, a participant who had been cosplaying for 4 years, describing herself as mixed race with one white and one black parent.

> Tia: *'My friends will assume that I will do the tanned character if we are doing a group cosplay. Most of the time I will just do them because my skin matches, and I get loads of photo requests when I do.'*

Whilst the demographics of cosplayers may place darker skinned individuals in demand, it could also result in them being type cast as characters based on the colour of their skin. Therefore, rather than inspiring individuals to experiment with their ethnicity, cosplayers such as Tia may be encouraged to emulate specific characters, based on their skin tone in relation to the wider cosplaying subculture. As a result, rather than being an unscripted space, ethnicities based on skin colour may be reproduced within cosplay, impacting on how escape is performed and experienced.

However externally, cosplay may continue to present itself as a diverse space. Both Tia and Patrick reported an increase in photographs when cosplaying darker skinned characters, with Patrick noting that these photographs were shared online. This may heighten the presence of minority groups within the cosplaying subculture exemplifying its inclusive traits. Furthermore, Ciara and Suzanne, the black cosplayers mentioned earlier in the chapter, reported the same amount of inclusion within photos as other cosplayers, despite

emulating those with paler skin to their own. Which may construct a narrative of diversity and inclusion, allowing cosplay to uphold its image as a Free Area open to everyone regardless of the colour of their skin.

So far, this chapter has explored the role of ethnicity within the cosplaying subculture, investigating how tacit aesthetics have impacted on experiences of escape. Whilst some felt able to shed their ethnicity, others revealed that notions of it still remained. With outfits being judged on the colour of an individual's skin, leading some to place internal constraints upon their performances. The ability to successfully emulate certain ethnicities was additionally found to be dictated by context, being dependant on how an individual looked in relation to the demographics of the wider cosplaying subculture.

In the following sections attention will be paid to exploring the subject of cosplay and ethnicity within the context of wider society. Considering how ethnicity may be used to challenge established conventions, build boundaries as well as police them, in order to construct spaces for escape.

Established Conventions of Ethnicity

Whilst cosplayers had expressed that cosplaying characters with a similar skin colour to their own was viewed as desirable, many cosplayers on my social media feeds regularly posted videos of mainly African American Cosplayers emulating white or East-Asian characters. Referring to themselves as People of colour (POC) cosplayers, they expressed their frustration at being expected to cosplay characters depending on the colour of their skin. As this limited their cosplay choices and devalued their cosplays of lighter skinned characters. Therefore in response, these POC cosplayers made an overt statement about cosplaying pale characters or reimagining them as their own ethnicity.

During an informal field conversation at a fan-run convention, Amber expressed admiration of POC cosplayers and the message they shared.

> Amber: *'[POC cosplayers] are making a point out of their skin colour. They are showing the world that representation is an issue but that doesn't mean that they can't cosplay. They are cosplaying who they want to and making a statement at the*

same time. Their costumes are empowering. They are bringing attention to their skin colour on purpose. And they look good. Cosplay includes everyone and the things we watch should do as well. They are taking a stand and cosplaying who they want to.'

As in shown in Ambers quote, wider cosplayers framed the POC cosplayers and their outfits in a positive light. When I questioned why their contrasting skin tones were valued when others were not, they explained that the POC cosplayers were aware of their skin tones and broadcasted this fact. Therefore, whilst other outfits highlighted inaccuracy, theirs were an active statement against discrimination and a demand for representation within the media they consumed. As this informal field conversation with Amber proceeded, another white cosplayer Nicky, who had been a practitioner for five years, joined the discussion and explained why POC cosplays were positively received.

Nicky: *'It doesn't matter if her skin colour matches or not. It's not about that. She's produced an amazing outfit and said "I'm black. So what. Deal with it". It's not inaccurate if she says she's black Sailor Moon, if she's cosplaying black Sailor Moon then her skin is perfect for it. Her cosplays make the point that people of colour need more representation and she shows that anyone can cosplay no matter where they are from.'*

By challenging their racialisation, the POC cosplayers used cosplay to subvert established notions of ethnicity. Through broadcasting an awareness of their contrasting skin colour, they were able to disrupt the parameters of desirable emulation. With cosplayers such as Amber suggesting that they were able to give successful performances of other ethnicities regardless of the tone of their skin. This therefore enabled them to reject internal constraints on their performances, granting them the ability to emulate a wider range of ethnicities in a manner viewed as desirable by the wider cosplaying subculture. Despite this however, by bringing their ethnicity into the forefront of their emulations they could not successfully escape from it, remaining a primary marker of identification within cosplay.

Whilst Cohen and Talyor (1975, pp155) presented Free Areas as fragile and frail, threatened by the 'gusts of self-consciousness' and the presence of everyday life, the cosplayers' accounts suggest that Free Areas may be more robust than originally theorised. Just like Patrick, the POC cosplayers had altered their Free Areas to suit their changing needs when

the politics of race were identified within this activity. Whilst the POC cosplayer's overt declaration of their contrasting ethnicity may be seen to subvert the values of the cosplaying subculture, which places emphasis on precise imitations. By declaring that they were doing black versions of characters, the POC cosplayers altered the characters themselves to match the colour of their own skin. Therefore, allowing them to continue ascribing to the values of the wider cosplaying subculture by providing accurate emulations. With this act enabling the POC cosplayers to switch their scripts with a wider array of characters and be viewed as desirable when doing so. Therefore, rather than an awareness of race relations disrupting cosplay's function as a Free Area, the POC cosplayers used their ethnicity to subvert established notions on skin colour. Allowing them to give successful performances and continue using cosplay as a Free Area which suited their individual needs.

Furthermore, the POC cosplayers were additionally portrayed as a visual representation of cosplay's commitment to equality. With Nicky arguing that such outfits showcased *'that anyone can cosplay no matter where they are from'*. As a result, the POC's outfits could be seen to broadcast cosplay's core value of inclusivity, therefore rendering such cosplays desirable within the subculture. Suggesting that the context of the cosplay itself could impact on escape, with the connotations behind these outfits influencing whether performances were judged as successful or not.

External Racism

Whilst those within the cosplaying subculture were found to value costumes which explicitly showcased the wearer's contrasting skin tones to their character's, this attitude was not shared by all audiences. I spoke with an African American cosplayer who had shared a picture of herself online, alongside a caption that asserted that she was cosplaying *'a black version'* of an East-Asian character. As a result, she received racist abuse, exclusively from outsiders of the cosplaying subculture, who argued that her emulated character was not suitable to be cosplayed by someone of her ethnicity. In response, the wider cosplaying subculture voiced their support of this cosplayer's emulation, berating those who had left discriminatory comments to the point where many deactivated their accounts.

This abuse was not only found to be directed at black cosplayers alone. Interviewees similarly discussed cases were Indian and Middle Eastern cosplayers had experienced racism for emulating white and East-Asian characters. Again, commenters from outside of the cosplaying subculture had pointed out their contrasting ethnicity and skin tones, despite the cosplayers themselves making this fact explicit. In comparison however, the cosplayers discussed that there seemed to be a greater degree of tolerance towards white cosplayers emulating East-Asian characters by those outside of the cosplaying subculture. As is shown within the following informal field conversation with Hannah, a white cosplayer who had been engaging in this activity for seven years. Taking place in an outdoor area within a mainstream convention.

> Hannah: *'I've only seen this kind of response towards non-white and non [East] Asian cosplayers. If you're White or [East] Asian, you can cosplay a character with pale skin and get away with it even though you're doing a different race. I've seen commenters compliment white D.Va cosplays even though she's Korean. And then have a go at black ones for not cosplaying their own race.'*

This difference in attitudes could stem from established notions on ethnicity. White cosplayers such as Camilla had expressed being able to emulate East-Asian characters due their skin being perceived as similar and described as white. Which could result in white cosplayers being viewed as suitable actors to emulate East-Asian characters.

Whilst white skin was historically associated with East- Asians as well as Europeans, Keevak (2011, pp6) argues that white skin has come to mean Caucasian, with East-Asian individuals being classified as 'yellow' in an attempt to differentiate them 'from a white western norm'. As a result, audiences may be able to project whiteness onto East-Asian characters, allowing the emulations of these characters by white cosplayers to be viewed as successful. In contrast however, black and brown skin is argued to be viewed as the most removed from the whiteness (Manceron, 2004). As a result, those outside of the subculture, who may not subscribe to cosplays values of inclusion and diversity, could consider the emulation of such characters by darker skinned actors to be unacceptable. Whilst cosplay may grant a certain degree of flexibility in terms of emulating ethnicity, this may only apply within the context if the subculture itself. Outsiders may reject these performances as this may impact on a cosplayer's ability to escape and their experiences of doing so.

However, this reaction from outsiders was not viewed as acceptable by those within the subculture. As a result, cosplayers were found to take steps to reject such discriminatory opinions, which exemplified the subculture's commitment to inclusivity, and it's view that racism was abhorrent.

In order to explore this matter further, I conducted a focus group with cosplayers who had touched upon this subject in passing during conversations at conventions. Taking place within a gastropub close to a fan-run convention, the participants comprised of Poppy, Elliot- a white cosplayer who had been cosplaying for a year but had attended geek culture conventions for over a decade. As well as Tina, a black cosplayer who had been cosplaying for over 10 years. Poppy discussed how the cosplaying subculture was quick to rally against racist posts online, which criticised the emulations of cosplayers.

> Poppy*: 'It may just one or two racist comments, but eventually they are always found and shared, and cosplayers will start protesting over them. They will drown out negative opinions by posting their support of their cosplays. And who really cares what one or two racists think when you have an army of cosplayers proving you look amazing. We show that cosplayers don't think that racism is ok.'*
>
> Elliot: *'Imagine being black and being interested in cosplay. But when you look up images of black cosplayers doing non-black characters all you see is racism. You'd think cosplay was racist and you wouldn't want to do it. So I think cosplayers comment on racist posts to show that they are against it, and that anyone can cosplay what they want and be appreciated for doing so.'*
>
> Tina: *'Sometimes I do worry as a black person how people on the internet will react to my [East] Asian cosplays. When you see racist comments about how black people's skin is too dark or their features look wrong when doing Asian characters, it did make me think twice about doing anime characters. But I think people may be less likely to be racist because of how cosplayers have reacted to racist posts before. And even if they are racist I'll have cosplayers behind me who show me that my cosplays are good and they will back me up if I need it, so I have the confidence to do it.'*

Although those outside of the subculture may devalue certain cosplays based on the wearer's ethnicity, the cosplaying subculture was found to not only reject these opinions

but overtly challenge them; which simultaneously broadcasted the subculture's stance against intolerance. As a result, this could highlight that playing with ethnicity is acceptable in cosplay regardless of the opinions of outsiders. With Elliot arguing that such comments demonstrated that cosplayers could emulate any character they wanted to despite their ethnicity. For Tina this overt response towards racism had allowed her to continue cosplaying characters with a different ethnicity to her own, despite fears of the reactions from outsiders. Furthermore, the subculture's previous reactions against racist comments was presented as a deterrent, and demonstrated that cosplayers would be supported if they encountered such behaviour. *'Drowning out negative comments'* with supportive ones could also highlight that cosplayer's performances were successful within the subculture itself, where Poppy argued they mattered the most. As a result, this could allow cosplayers to reject established conventions concerning ethnicity, allowing cosplayers to continue engaging in their Escape Attempts despite encountering resistance from those outside of the subculture.

Co-existing Escape Attempts

Whilst many cosplayers applauded the POC cosplayers for bringing attention to race issues through their outfits, there was also the awareness that others may not want to do so with their own. As is demonstrated within a quote from an informal field conversation at a fan-run convention. Quoted by Rachel, a white cosplayer who had been cosplaying for seven years.

> Rachel: *'Cosplay is a hobby. If you want to use it as a platform for race issues do. But for some people cosplay a way to escape from all the race stuff, and they shouldn't be made to feel like their skin always has to be political, so people won't bring attention to your skin colour.'*

Again, the cosplayers seemed to outwardly render ethnicity invisible, drawing attention to it only with the consent of the actor. Which may have allowed the cosplayers, Suzanne and Ciara, to feel successfully able to shed their own ethnicity in cosplay despite the contrasting colour of their skin.

As was discussed earlier in the chapter this tacit attitude had allowed Patrick to initially feel able to escape from his skin colour in cosplay. With the illusion only being shattered by his own realisation that his skin tone remained visible. However, Patrick discussed upholding the notion that cosplay was colour-blind, over fears of being labelled as racist or limiting the character choices of others. Similarly, Sara who had been cosplaying for eight years and described herself as south Asian. Also discovered that her skin colour was noticeable in cosplay, discussing this with me during an informal field conversation within a Japanese cultural event.

> Sara: *'When I started cosplaying I used to think that nobody noticed my skin colour, because no-one said anything or treated me differently. But when I realised that I saw ethnicity so other people would too I felt a bit sad like some of the magic of cosplaying was gone. But then I thought so what? I still find it fun, no-one makes it an issue, I'll just carry on doing it.'*

Through exploring these quotes, it became evident that Free Areas were not precarious spaces that needed to remain separate from everyday life to be sustained. Cosplayers were shown to actively mould their Free Areas to suit their changing needs in a variety of ways. With POC cosplayers reimagining the nature of their emulated characters and Patrick incorporating his skin colour into his emulations. Furthermore, the data suggests that the mental devices used to manage access to Free Areas, could also be applied to the Free Areas themselves in order to enable escape. Ciara and Suzanne presented cosplay as an unscripted space where established notions on ethnicity could be experimented with. These cosplayers payed little attention to ethnicity when engaging in cosplay, which could be likened to the act of Unreflective Accommodation. However, Sara became aware that established conventions based on skin colour still existed within the activity. With Sara engaging in an act which mirrors Self-Conscious Reinvestment, as she continued to cosplay the characters she desired, regardless of their skin colour. Lastly both Patrick and the POC cosplayers had embraced their self-awareness, altering the way in which they cosplayed as a result which allowed them to continue cosplaying in a socially desirable manner. This may therefore suggest a further Escape Attempt to those proposed by Cohen and Taylor, incorporation. Where individuals use their shackles to the mundane in order to facilitate

escape, rather than attempting to distance themselves from these aspects of their every-day lives.

As was previously discussed, Sara was argued to have engaged in Self-Conscious Reinvestment, with her awareness of ethnicity failing to disrupt cosplay as a Free Area. However, whilst Cohen and Taylor argue that this mental device requires a great deal of effort. With actors being required to actively resist others who overtly projected their own self-awareness. For Sara this did not seem to be the case. Whilst the cosplaying subculture championed POC cosplayers for drawing attention to race relations. It also ensured that individual's skin colour, at least on the surface, remained invisible amongst those who did not want to draw attention to this factor. Allowing those who wanted to escape from notions of ethnicity to do so. This had enabled Sara to carry on engaging in cosplay despite an awareness of her skin colour as *'no one makes it an issue'*. Therefore, rather than these different Escape Attempts hindering each other, with self-awareness undermining attempts for reinvestment. The cosplaying subculture may provide a space where the mental devices used for escape can successfully coexist. Allowing individuals to cosplay in alternative ways and for different purposes.

Reactions to Racism

When discussing the topic of racism towards cosplayers, many of the interviewees discussed intolerance toward those with darker skin exclusively. Whilst the cosplayers initially argued that the public accepted white individuals cosplaying as East-Asian characters, deeper examination demonstrated that some were in fact opposed to these emulations.

When I brought up the topic of 'anti-western cosplay' groups, this notion was treated with ridicule. These groups had an online presence, berating white westerners who cosplayed as anime characters. As they argued that anime characters were designed to look Asian, they claimed that white anime cosplayers looked undesirable. The anti-western cosplay groups constructed forums where some members posted offensive comments, mocking the features of white westerners and their attempts to look like East-Asian characters. Furthermore, some added negative comments to pictures of white cosplayers emulating Asian characters. When I bought up these anti-western cosplay groups amongst cosplayers,

they treated the comments as insignificant. With many cosplayers claiming these groups were probably created by trolls and should be interpreted in a comical manner.

When I raised the point that, regardless whether these groups had been created by trolls or not, they still contained members who supported its sentiments, the cosplayers treated the matter with an air of ambivalence. As is highlighted within an informal field conversation with Rosie at a Japanese cultural exhibition.

Rosie: *'Those comments don't bother me, they don't affect me.'*

Rosie's comment was reflective of many of the white cosplayers I spoke with. Again, this may demonstrate that the notions relating to race may remain present within cosplay. As is demonstrated within the excerpt from focus group, conducted at a coffee shop close to a mainstream convention. With Corrin and Georgie, white cosplayers who had cosplayed for seven and three years respectively.

> Corrin: *'POC cosplayers are already a minority, so if one or two POC cosplayers receive discriminatory comments that might mean that like 10% of POC cosplayers have experienced it. And that can make the problem seem widespread and scare them away from cosplay. But If one or two white cosplayers receive racist comments it's out of thousands so it seems like nothing. And I think because of that, racism against POC is treated more seriously. You receive more of an outcry over it.'*
>
> Georgie: *'When a blog says that white people can't do anime characters because their noses are too big or lips aren't the right shape, it doesn't matter as much, because being white or having white features is still seen as good. But for other minorities it can't be dismissed as a joke because it has been treated as a bad thing.'*

As is highlighted within Georgie's quote, discriminatory comments aimed at non-white individuals may have a greater negative impact. Prejudice directed at groups with a legacy of discrimination against them may evoke historic cases of racism. Highlighting current discourses of this group's inferiority and reinforce the prevalence of racism towards these groups within wider society (Blum, 1999). As a result, cases of racism against minorities may be less readily dismissed, encouraging these vulnerable groups to act within the parameters considered acceptable within their ethnicity (Pease, 2013). Which could deter some

cosplayers from emulating characters with skin tones distinct from their own. In Tina's case, mentioned earlier with the chapter, she had interpreted the comments about the incompatibility of black features and skin tones when cosplaying anime characters to be racist. Which may be due to these traits being devalued and discriminated against in the past. And as a result, Tina had considered placing limitations on her performances. In contrast, cosplayers such as Rosie seemed more able to dismiss racist comments made towards white cosplayers. Which may be due to racism failing to have the same ramifications, due to this group being comparatively privileged (Blum, 1999). Furthermore, as was argued by Corrin, racist comments against non-white cosplayers may be statistically greater due to this group being a minority. Which may result in such comments being more meaningful when directed at a non-white group.

Corrin also suggested that racism towards white and non-white individuals was treated in a different manner. When I explored this issue during subsequent field conversations with wider cosplayers, the cosplayers I spoke with all agreed that this was the case. Arguing that as racism against ethnic minorities was more meaningful due to these groups being more disadvantaged in wider society. These cases of racism prompted a greater deal of outcry and assurances of the subcultures support. Whilst notions of racism may continue to be seen within cosplay, with non-members impacting on the escape of cosplayers. There was an awareness of this within the subculture, which resulted in a communal supportive response. For Tina this was reassuring and enabled her to continue playing with her ethnicity despite the views of outsiders. As a result, the response from the cosplaying subculture towards racism may allow its members to continue challenging conventions of ethnicity. Resisting the responses from those outside of the subculture, therefore allowing cosplay to continue acting as a Free Area for its members.

However, the subculture's tendency to denounce racism against ethnic minorities specifically could have unintended negative consequences for some members. Some cosplayers from minority backgrounds recalled instances where comments, which they had viewed as relatively harmless, had been interpreted as racist by their cosplaying friends. Whilst they claimed that such comments would have been ignored and dismissed as trolling if they were aimed at white individuals, cosplayers had instead intervened on their behalf.

This was argued to exacerbate problems and make the victims feel different from the white cosplayers who made up the majority of the subculture.

Furthermore, members of the cosplaying subculture were also reported to reshare infamous cases of racism towards non-white cosplayers. Which could impact on experiences of cosplay and escape.

> Poppy: *'Cosplayers repost the same old stories about Middle-Eastern cosplayers and black cosplayers experiencing racism, which they might have missed the first-time round. And it makes racism seem like such a bigger problem than it is. It's good that cosplayers care, but sometimes I think "here too?".'*

Repeatedly highlighting race issues concerning minority groups may not only exaggerate the extent of the problem, but also result in non-white cosplayers feeling distinct. As is expressed by Poppy this could lead to individuals feeling unable to escape from matters of ethnicity, even within cosplay. Therefore, although cosplayers may lend their support to minorities in cosplay in an attempt to counter racism and discrimination, this may not be entirely successful. Issues relating to ethnicity and racism were found to be complex, and despite the efforts of the subculture, they may continue to be present within cosplay.

<u>Codification and the Construction of Safe Spaces</u>

Having outlined cosplay's norms and values regarding ethnicity, it is also useful to consider how these norms are made: with the use of codification and insulation being utilised to manage boundaries between escape and everyday life.

As was previously expressed by Tina, some cosplayers were found to worry about how their emulations of other ethnicities would be judged, being similarly mirrored in a field conversation with Amanda within a convention hall at a mainstream geek culture event.

> Amanda: *'When I started cosplaying I shared my pictures knowing only cosplayers would find them, and they would generally be nice. Now most people have heard of cosplay so if you post pictures online you don't know who'll see them and the type of people who will comment on them and where they will go. One girl posted a photo*

showing racial acceptance in cosplay, and it was turned into something else and used to stir tensions.'

Amanda argued that the rising visibility of cosplay resulted in images being more accessible to non-cosplayers. Who could use and interact with these pictures in an alternative manner to how cosplayers intended. However, inappropriate comments concerning ethnicity were not only found to be expressed by those outside of the subculture alone. The interviewees also mentioned that content viewed as racist by the wider subculture was often posted on established cosplaying forums, by cosplayers themselves.

These forums were affiliated with mainstream conventions, being easy to find and widely promoted by the event organisers. As a result, they mainly attracted those new to conventions. Many of the cosplayers referred to these forums in a negative manner, claiming that they comprised of those trying too hard to fit in by acting quirky, which often led to inappropriate behaviour. The forums were described as being full of weebs- those starting out in cosplay who were yet to learn the rules of the cosplaying subculture. Weebs were also presented as cosplayers who were obsessed with anime or cosplay. To the point where they rejected the norms of the subculture, only caring about the media they consumed.

During an informal field conversation with Gary, a white cosplayer who had been attending fan-run conventions for over 15 years, he explained the dynamics of these forums. Some established cosplayers trolled these online groups in order to make fun of weebs and their views. However, as these trolls were established members of the cosplaying subculture, their status as an insider could prevent them from being labelled as racist, even if they posted inappropriate content.

Gary: *'Some people troll by posting racist stuff on mainstream forums which makes people feel uncomfortable. And they do it to make fun of weebs who support what they're posting, even though they're trolling. Most people see weebs as cosplayers, but only just, because they are starting out. They don't know that certain things aren't ok, so my friend that trolls laughs at their stupidity. But he's well known because he's been cosplaying for so long, so most people know he's trolling. So he doesn't really have to worry about people actually seeing him as a racist.'*

I had seen the images this trolling cosplayer had posted, and many of those who had reacted positively to them were new members to this online group. In response longstanding members of the forums pointed out how the images were racist, which often resulted in the newer forum members apologising and deleting their comments.

Some cosplayers had expressed finding trolling comical, as it mocked the views of weebs. With posters being argued to post racist content ironically. Furthermore, trolling was additionally described as a tool to expose those with racist opinions.

> Corrin: *'When a troll posts a picture of people in blackface, and a weeb likes it, they are going to get a bollocking for defending a racist picture. And everyone else on the forum can see that that's what we think about racists. And racists can probably tell from that response that if they're racist, cosplay probably isn't the hobby for them.'*

Corrins quote, which originates from the focus group discussed earlier within this chapter, suggests that trolling could play an important function for the cosplaying subculture. Those who overtly condoned images associated with racism could be disciplined for doing so. As these posts were public, this disciplining was available for all members to view. Which Corrin suggested could act as a warning to others, demonstrating which behaviours were considered unacceptable in the cosplaying subculture. Furthermore, these forums attracted new members, trolling could provide a platform for cosplayers to assert the group values of the subculture, therefore perpetuating its norms and reinforcing its stance against racism. With conventions of ethnicity therefore being codified in and through forums.

As is demonstrated in both Corrin's and Gary's quotes, cosplayers who were seen to condone racist practices, were additionally given the negative label of being a weeb. This label could be viewed as a method to distance the wider cosplaying subculture from cosplayers who condoned racism, preserving cosplay's anti-racist image.

However, regardless of the potential uses of trolling, some still found it distasteful as it seemed to support racism. As described by Sara as our informal field conversation continued.

Sara: *'I find trolling annoying and it can be hurtful. When I started out I took trolling seriously and I worried that cosplayers were actually ok with racism. If I had gone on the forum before I met cosplayers, I might have been more reluctant to cosplay.'*

As these mainstream forums were viewed in a negative manner, some cosplayers refused to interact with them due to their association with weebs and trolls. Therefore, some cosplayers constructed closed cosplayer dominated spaces instead, which adhered to the norms of the subculture. I was a member of a number of these closed groups, having been added by cosplayers. They had strict guidelines to ensure that all members were treated equally. As was discussed by Tina and Sara at a fan-run convention as we waited for a panel to begin.

Tina: *'My friend decided to make her own group and be its admin. Now it's full of hundreds of cosplayers who are supportive, so it feels like we have the community back and because it's smaller you can get to know people and make genuine friends. If you started acting like a weeb and saying racist stuff there, it would not go down well. Even trolls wont post there as they know people don't find it funny because there's no weebs to laugh at. Because weebs wouldn't be invited to join in the first place.'*

Sara: *'You can't be a part of them unless you request to join. You hear about them through other cosplayers so you can't just find them easily if you're a normie. They mean I can share my pics and not have to worry about some randomer online thinking it's funny to be racist. Or point out that I am in fact Asian not East-Asian. I can just show off my costumes like everyone else.'*

In response to those who subverted the norms of the subculture, separate spaces had been constructed. Placing a boundary between cosplayers who adhered to the subculture's values and those viewed as weebs or outsiders. Within them Sara had expressed being able to post pictures of her cosplays without the fear or racist reactions. This could therefore suggest that such groups act as spaces where cosplayers could escape, in the knowledge that their performances would not be disrupted by others. Acting as Free Areas in which they could successfully experiment with their ethnicity.

Tina's quote additionally suggests that these closed forums were valuable, being presented as spaces were individuals could have meaningful interactions and establish friendships. Therefore, they may be particularly useful for facilitating integration into the subculture. Tina also suggested these forums had allowed her to retain a sense of being part of small subculture with shared values, despite a sharp increase in participation in cosplay. This could again reinforce the core values of the subculture, suggesting uniformity of its opinions.

Those who were labelled as weebs could however be permitted to join these valued spaces eventually. As is discussed by Poppy during an informal field conversation at a mainstream convention.

> Poppy: *'If you start cosplaying often, you will meet more people and learn that being a weeb is bad and you learn what's ok and what's not in cosplay. And then when you stop acting like a weeb people might talk to you about smaller cons or add you to groups.'*

In the case above, Poppy argued that once individuals adopted the values of the core subculture, they could lose the label of being a weeb. This in-turn increased their chances of socialising with others and being invited to the private forums where friendships within the subculture could be cemented. Furthermore, within these closed spaces cosplayers could be granted the ability to successfully escape. As forum members were expected to hold the same values of inclusivity, restricting those who could inhibit the escape of others. Therefore, through insulation, cosplayers may create some separate spaces, setting a boundary between everyday life. With these forums acting as an area where members could successfully escape, being accessible to those who adhered to the subculture's norms alone.

<u>When Virtual Policing Fails</u>

However, online codification and insulation did not always guarantee that all cosplayers acted in a manner viewed as desirable. As was discussed by Camilla during a casual conversation at a pub after a mainstream convention.

Camilla: *'We overheard a group of weebs doing a really bad Asian accent and they got a proper telling of. We made sure they knew that what they did was wrong. They didn't have the excuse of not knowing it was racist anymore because we told them. If they had carried on we would have made sure that everyone knew they were racist so cosplayers would avoid them.'*

Similarly, longstanding practitioners of cosplay were also reported to break the rules of the subculture as Rosie discussed in the focus group described earlier within this chapter.

Rosie: 'There are cosplayers called elitists who normally make amazing cosplays but they think cosplay should be a certain thing or it isn't real cosplay. Being an elitist is viewed as a bad thing even if they look amazing. Some act like you have to look a certain way, and if you don't match your character, it's not good cosplay. If you're black some elitists say you should just do black characters. But if you turn up to a con looking just like your character, and you're a dick by saying racist stuff like that, you're not going to be made to feel welcome. Just because you think cosplay should be a certain thing doesn't mean you can ruin other people's con experience or make people think they can only cosplay certain things. The elitists I know stopped cosplaying because being ignored at a con isn't fun or they stopped being so judgemental. If you're nice and not a judgemental racist, people make you feel welcome. They will add you [on social media] and like your pictures- even if your cosplays aren't the best.'

The above quotes suggest that policing within the cosplaying subculture can also take place within an empirical setting, at the conventions where cosplay is frequently undertaken. With this behaviour being utilised to teach others the correct way to act or face alienation, which Rosie suggests could lead to individuals exiting the subculture. The label of being an elitist was found to be used in a comparable manner to the term weeb. Being presented as a stigmatised label placed on certain cosplayers to highlight their undesirable behaviour. In contrast however, Rosie argued that cosplayers in less desirable outfits who upheld the subculture's anti-racist sentiments could be integrated within the subculture. This may help to sustain the values of the subculture, allowing those who adhered to the norms of the subculture to feel welcomed within it, whilst discouraging others from participation: with a commitment to inclusion taking precedence over an outfit's authenticity. Rosie additionally

argued that the views shared by elitists could impact on individual's experiences of cosplay, limiting the scope of their performances in terms of playing with their ethnicity. Therefore, this offline policing could be utilised to preserve the escape of others when the methods used online may have failed.

Alternative Values

The increased visibility of cosplayers was not only found to have resulted in a greater number of individuals having access to pictures and spaces associated with cosplay. It was also argued to have led to different values being placed upon cosplayers by outsiders.

At cosplaying events there was one particular group who existed on the fringes of the subculture. Photographers, whilst not necessarily cosplayers themselves, were well entrenched within the subculture, with photographs making up a big part of convention culture. Many cosplayers, having put a great deal of effort into their costumes, voiced that they wanted documentation of their outfits through photos. Furthermore, photographs were used as a marker of successful cosplays, with requests for pictures being indicative of their appreciation.

At one convention I spoke with a group of cosplay photographers who discussed their preferences for models. Some wanted to take pictures representative of the cosplaying subculture, sharing their images within the subculture itself. However, others sought to make a career out of their photography, appealing to the broadest audience possible, in the hopes that their images would go viral. These photographers targeted the wider public, who were argued to be particularly impressed by authenticity. Therefore, they took photographs of models who looked accurately like their characters with matching skin tones. As these photographers wanted to appeal to those outside of the subculture, they shared their images on online spaces that non-cosplayers could easily access.

Whilst all the cosplayers I spoke with valued the images that these photographers took, many also reported discontent with the photographs marketed to those outside of the subculture. This was discussed during a fan-run convention, where I met up with Camilla and Gary. Arranging a focus group to discuss this topic, which took place in an empty space within the event.

Gary: *'These photos [which showed cosplayers who closely resembled their characters] are the ones that get shared the most so it's what normies think cosplay is all about. They make it seem as if cosplayers have look exactly like a character, so it makes it seem like you have to cosplay someone who looks like your own ethnicity. And I could see how that could put some people off from doing it. It makes cosplay look like it has rules, you have to do this or that to look good. But cosplay is about having fun and doing what you want.'*

Camilla: *'Cosplay is more inclusive than those photos. If all that people see are people cosplaying their own skin colour it looks like that's what's important. In reality being a cosplayer isn't about looking like a character 100%. It's about putting in effort, having fun and being part of the community. But if photographers aren't uploading pictures of cosplayers of all backgrounds cosplaying what they want, the public don't really get to see that side of it.'*

Photographers were found to have their own motivations for taking photos of cosplayers, which influenced the images they produced. Some photographers discussed providing a rounded insight into the cosplay subculture, sharing the images they produced in spaces less accessible to those outside of the subculture. Such as within closed cosplay dominated forums. Furthermore, as was discussed in the previous section, cosplayers themselves could restrict access to their photos. Posting images which highlighted the subculture's diversity in closed spaces to avoid racism and trolling. As a result, the public may only see a selective depiction of cosplayers, being exposed to the images they were seen to value the most. Therefore, this may create a narrative of cosplay based on the values of outsiders, rather than being founded upon the ideals of the subculture itself. As was argued by Camilla, these images could suggest that cosplayers needed to emulate characters based on their skin tone to be viewed as successful. Presenting cosplay as a space where conventions of ethnicity were reinforced and perpetuated. With Gary proposing that this may deter some from participation, if cosplay is construed as an activity where routines were upheld rather than a space where they could be suspended to enable escape.

Returning to my conversation with the cosplay photographers, it was also mentioned that some photographers, with a focus on profit, took pictures of sexually attractive white and

East-Asian female cosplayers exclusively. These were argued to be the most attractive models to a western audience and their sex appeal was argued to sell.

This focus on White and East-Asian female cosplayers could mirror established conventions of ethnicity and desirability in the West. Academics claim that white women have historically been presented as the 'epitome of beauty'. Valued above all other women, especially those viewed as black or brown who are seen as the most removed from this white ideal (Patton and Winkle-Wagner, 2012, pp182). Furthermore, East-Asian women have similarly been presented as particularly desirable, being stereotyped as fetishized objects of desire (Hagedorn, 1994; Marchetti, 1993).

However, as the focus group with Camilla and Gary continued, these cosplayers demonstrated that members of the cosplaying subculture could reject this normative standard of beauty. Viewing it as incompatible within a subculture which valued diversity and inclusivity.

> Camilla: *'I think it's wrong and racist to say that some ethnicities are more attractive than others. In our online groups' photographers share pictures of beautiful cosplayers of all colours, and they get as many likes as anyone else. Beauty isn't based on where you're from, if you're pretty you're pretty. Only a racist would think that way and cosplayers aren't as small minded as those racist photographers. If cosplayers recognise your cosplay they will ask for your photo and give you a compliment, so you feel welcomed. It doesn't matter if you don't look exactly like who you're cosplaying, and it certainly doesn't matter that you might not be white or Asian.'*
>
> Gary: *'Just because some photographers may think it's ok to discriminate against cosplayers doesn't mean that we think it's ok. You only have to go to a convention to see that we welcome all cosplayers. When you actually go to a convention, you see how many different people do it, and they get really good reactions. It annoys me that some people may think that's cosplayers are the ones discriminating when they see those pictures. But it's actually the photographers.'*

Camilla suggested that within the cosplaying subculture individuals of all ethnicities could be considered attractive, with the photos shared within cosplay dominated spaces showcasing

a diverse range of members. Those who thought otherwise were contrasted against tolerant cosplayers, with their 'r*acist*' views on beauty and skin colour being presented as undesirable within the subculture. However, as argued by Gary the heightened visibility of East-Asian and white cosplayers could suggest that these performances were the most valued within cosplay, regardless of whether these views were held by the subculture or not. Furthermore, showcasing cosplayers of specific ethnicities could also result in some individuals feeling less able to participate in this activity. As Tina explained within our informal conversation.

> Tina: *'All those pictures of white and Asian cosplayers can make you feel as though cosplay is for white or Asian people. Even though in the UK Asian cosplayers are a minority, they are still featured. You don't see as many pictures of other ethnicities cosplaying on those public pages. It's like it's not for us, we don't look good cosplaying, we don't exist on there. I don't feel like that when I'm at a convention or on the cosplay forums though. Because they show a much wider selection of cosplayers and people are always really nice about my costumes.'*

The proliferation of images of white and East-Asian cosplayers could therefore decrease the visibility of other minority groups within the subculture. Consequently, as is shown within Tina's quote this could suggest that cosplay is unsuitable for certain individuals based on skin tone. The idea that cosplay may be viewed as incompatible with certain ethnicities was mirrored within previous work on geek culture and race. A number of theorists have argued that historically geekiness has been associated with white and Asian individuals. Consequently, when other ethnicities have tried to engage in geek related activities, their presence could be viewed as abnormal (Ma'ayan, 2012; Bucholtz, 1999; Geraghty, 2014; Eglash, 2002). Therefore, the images of cosplayers shared widely online may reinforce established conventions of race and geek culture, resulting in some cosplayers feeling alienated as was expressed by Tina.

As was shown within this section, those outside of the subculture could place their own values on cosplayer's performances, with photographers providing a selective snapshot of the activity. Subsequently these values could be interpreted as belonging to the cosplaying subculture as a whole, which could present the activity as exclusive and deter some from participation. Despite this, the cosplaying subculture still presented itself as holding a strong

commitment to inclusivity. Camilla had described cosplayers as tolerant, arguing that those of all ethnicities were appreciated within it. Similarly, Gary had argued that conventions were made up of a diverse range of individuals whose outfits were valued. Using this to evidence that discriminatory views were in fact held by those outside of the subculture. As a result, cosplayers may resist their public image and continue to uphold the inclusive values of the subculture. Which allowed Tina to feel welcomed within cosplay, despite her arguing that the emulations of certain ethnicities were rendered invisible amongst the wider public. Therefore, regardless of cosplay's public image, within conventions and spaces specifically for cosplayers, members may reinforce cosplays commitment towards diversity and acceptance. Allowing actors from a range of ethnicities to continue using cosplay for escape in the spaces that matter the most.

Playing to Different Audiences

The rising visibility of cosplay was also found to result in those who produced emulations for outsiders of the subculture. Such individuals often had little involvement with the wider cosplaying subculture, producing cosplays for their largely non-cosplaying fans online. Those who wore outfits for an outsider audience were still regarded as cosplayers by my research participants. With many expressing neutrality towards such individuals as was highlighted by Poppy as out conversation with Patrick continued.

> Poppy: *'As long as they don't give cosplayers a bad name they can do what they want. It's nothing to do with me.'*

However, this ambivalent attitude towards those who cosplayed for a public audience was suspended if such individuals engaged in unacceptable behaviour. Such as donning a racist outfit which would result in members of the subculture intervening.

> Patrick: *'Cosplayers will always call out cosplayers doing blackface or yellowface. When someone cosplays something racist it reflects badly on all of us. It could make cosplay look full of racists or people who think racist costumes are ok. I see cosplay as a community where everyone is accepting and against racism, but if people get away with posting racist content it can completely ruin the image of the community. One*

or two racist cosplayers don't ruin it for me though, because they do always get called out so you know that cosplayers are against all that.'

Racist behaviour undertaken by cosplayers could be projected onto the subculture as a whole and many interviewees argued that this could prevent cosplay from being viewed as an activity in which individuals of all ethnicities could participate in. Furthermore, as was highlighted by Patrick, the visibility of racist costumes could disrupt the idea of cosplay being a space free from discrimination.

However, whilst Patrick argued that cosplayers could confront the racist practices of others, the usual methods of policing could be unsuccessful for those performing to outsiders to the subculture. As was discussed by Elliot within the focus group.

Elliot: *'One guy tapes the edges of his eyes to look Asian and cosplayers told him to stop because it's yellowface. But he didn't because he has so many fans online who went mad for his cosplays. He still went to cons and would deny he was racist but when people explained why it wasn't ok he would ignore it. People would ignore him but he didn't care. He came to one con with his groupies and they just ignore everyone anyway, so him getting the silent treatment meant nothing for him.'*

Whilst the cosplayer in the case above had been told that their behaviour was unacceptable and alienated as a result, this was not enough to alter their conduct. As was highlighted within Elliot's quote, such cosplayers were not seen to prioritise engaging with wider members of the subculture. Which allowed them to completely reject the norms of the cosplaying subculture and continue donning emulations viewed as deviant within it.

However, the cosplaying subculture was found to have a response to such behaviour. I was shown a number of websites by Nicky and Amber within our informal field conversation. With these sites describing controversial figures within the cosplaying subculture from around the world. These sites listed accounts of cosplayers who continuously engaged in racist practices. Descriptions of these cosplayer's actions were included alongside their real and online names as well as links to their social media. These websites also featured comment sections, with posters voicing their contempt towards these cosplayers.

Furthermore, some commenters encouraging members to critique the deviant cosplayers' actions on the perpetrators' social media accounts.

> Nicky: *'These sites might seem extreme, but they call out people who have no excuse for their actions. They aren't new to cosplay, they know that what they are doing is wrong but they continue anyway. If they won't listen, then I think it's fair enough for them to be shamed on there. Their actions hurt people and if they won't stop, they won't just be ignored after a while. If we did ignore them it would look like we were giving them a pass. On [these websites] cosplayers can see who they are and we show them that what they are doing is wrong, regardless of if they have loads of fans that love and defend them.'*

From speaking to cosplayers these deviant cosplayers were infamous, portrayed as abnormal individuals, with accounts of their actions being recalled in a sensationalised manner.

> *Amber: 'If you're a horrible racist person and continue to ignore people who tell you to stop people might start talking about you. And it will spread. Cosplayers love drama and you could find yourself exposed all over the internet and cosplayers all over the word will know who you are. [The cosplayer who did yellowface] once went to some remote con and cosplayers started shouting his name and hiding. Or laughing when he walked past. So he knew that we'd heard of him. He stayed for a photoshoot and left and did a status on his fan page saying "best con ever". He might be loved online and get away with being racist by his fans, but we will remind him that racism isn't a part of cosplay.'*
>
> *Adele: 'If he stopped being racist would cosplayers be more accepting of him?'*
>
> *Amber: 'I doubt it because most people would assume that he was being fake. He could turn himself around, but everyone would still remember him as that racist guy.'*

The above quotes touched upon a number of points of interest. Firstly, those who continued to breach the norms of the subculture could be seen to acquire a spoiled identity- an identity which resulted in stigmatisation (Goffman, 1963). This stigma was found to be

internally driven within the cosplaying subculture, being both embodied and virtual, and therefore applied to all the domains that cosplay could occur. As was argued by Nicky a failure to condemn such behaviour could suggest that the cosplaying subculture was compliant with it. Instead the continued public shaming of these stigmatised cosplayer's actions could reiterate the rules of the subculture, broadcasting its anti-racist sentiments.

Whilst the label of being an elitist or a weeb could also be regarded as a spoiled identity, Poppy and Rosie argued that these negative labels could be revoked upon adhering to the norms of the cosplaying subculture. However, Amber suggested that the spoiled identities of those labelled as racist were well entrenched, being associated with the individual themselves. This could therefore be a way to distance the racism committed by cosplayers from the subculture as a whole. Presenting racist cosplayers as abnormal, with Nicky framing cosplayers as a homogenous group who opposed racism *'we think that what they are doing is wrong'*. As in shown within Patrick's quote this could therefore preserve cosplay as an area for escape, *'a community where everyone is accepting and against racism'*. Allowing the cosplaying subculture as a whole to be regarded as accepting and respectful towards all ethnicities, with cosplayers who failed to uphold this image being presented as distinct.

Summary

On the surface there seemed to be a great deal of flexibility when it came to ethnicity in cosplay. With some individuals feeling able to shed their ethnicity through this activity. Others however were aware that notions relating to race still remained, and whilst this fact was largely unspoken, performances could still be judged based on colour of one's skin. Resulting in some placing limitations upon their emulations, which restricted the amount of characters they could escape through. Despite this, cosplayers could still successfully escape, by incorporating aspects of their everyday identity into their costumes, or through reimagining the nature of the characters they emulated. Alternatively, some cosplayers continued to cosplay the characters they wanted, despite the knowledge that their contrasting skin tones were highly visible within their outfits. Reinvesting in this activity as they were unlikely to received negative reactions to their cosplays from members of the

cosplaying subculture. This therefore suggests that Escape Attempts may be applied to Free Areas themselves. With individuals actively shaping these spaces to grant them escape, in response to conventions from everyday life as well as their own individual needs.

The cosplaying subculture was also shown to draw upon notions of ethnicity found within everyday life. Which influenced performances, attitudes and norms within cosplay. As well as the reactions that certain outfits or displays of racism received from the cosplaying subculture. Demonstrating that everyday life and Free Areas may not be completely distinct from one another.

Furthermore, racism could be bought into cosplay by both members of the subculture and outsiders to it. However, rather than this disrupting cosplay as a Free Area, cosplayers responded through policing behaviour both on and offline. Using codification to distinguish the subculture from deviant members. As well by constructing insulated tolerant spaces. With these methods allowing for the escape of cosplayers to be preserved.

This chapter demonstrates that matters relating to ethnicity remained highly present within the cosplaying subculture. However, there was found to be a certain degree of flexibility, which allowed cosplayers to play with their ethnicity. Cosplayers could successfully emulate characters with ethnic backgrounds distinct from their own. However, this was based on how an individual looked in relation to demographics of the wider subculture. This therefore reveals that whilst cosplay allowed its members to experiment with ethnicity to some degree, conventions from everyday life ultimately remained within the subculture, preventing complete escape from ethnicity.

Chapter Six: Gender and Sexuality

The previous chapter focused on the subject of ethnicity within the cosplaying subculture, considering the extent to which cosplay could enable the experimentation and escape from this social category. Whilst some felt able to successfully shed their ethnicity and take on that of another through cosplay, others were aware that skin colour remained as a primary means of identification which could not easily be discarded. Resulting in limitations being placed upon performances, due to the visibility of skin colour as well as norms from everyday life. As a result, rather than being a site where everyday values could be suspended, they remained present within cosplay, limiting the degree to which ethnicity could be escaped from.

In this chapter attention turns to the topic of gender and sexuality; considering whether cosplay acted as a Free Area where established notions concerning these areas could be escaped. It begins by considering cosplayer's attitudes towards sex and gender, as well as the judgement of gendered performances. Before exploring cosplayers experiences of playing with gender and sex, looking at the different motivations behind gendered experimentations. Demonstrating that cosplayers play with gender in different ways depending on their individual context. It will then proceed to explore how outsiders reacted to gender subversions, examining the impact this had on cosplayers. Before discussing gendered differences within this activity.

This chapter also explores sexualities within the cosplaying subculture, arguing that non-normative sexual orientations and gendered identities were normalised within it. With the subculture acting as a Free Area where established conventions of sex, gender and sexuality could be escaped. Whilst cosplayers claim that their accepting attitudes stem from the media they consume, I instead argue that cosplayers have placed their own interpretations upon such media, constructing the notion of Japan as an empirical Free Area where they could realise permanent escape. Lastly the chapter considers how the cosplaying subculture responds to challenges to its norms; with policing, stigmatisation as well as boundary maintenance enabling cosplay to uphold its core values to ensure the escape of its members.

Crossplay and Accurate Emulation

All of the cosplayers I spoke with stressed that cosplay offered a space where individuals could freely experiment with their gendered identity. With many arguing that the media which cosplayers consumed promoted tolerance of gender fluidity. I was bombarded with lists of anime which featured characters with ambiguous genders and tropes where characters would cross-dress to the delight of their fictional peers. Consequently, as cosplayers were used to seeing such subversions of gender, they argued that as a subculture they were very accepting of it. In fact, cross dressing was so common within the subculture that it had coined its own term, crossplay, which was undertaken by both men and women.

Despite dressing up as characters of the opposite sex, many cosplayers argued that they still aimed to give accurate performances when crossplaying. Therefore, a number of methods were used to transform bodies. Padding, corsets and contouring were all commonly used change male bodies into female ones. With female cosplayers discussing painting on muscles and binding down their breasts to be viewed as male.

As these cosplayers sought to produce authentic cosplays, many chose characters with body shapes that they could successfully replicate. Charlie, who described herself as curvy with large breasts, had tried crossplaying a slim male character. However, binding and makeup did not allow her to successfully look like this character leading her to change her choice of emulation. Charlie had been cosplaying for thirteen years and discussed her crossplays with me during pre-drinks in a hotel room at a fan-run convention.

> Charlie: *'When you bind, you wrap bandages around your torso to strap your boobs down and make them look as flat as the rest of your chest. My boobs were way too big and to make it level with my chest I had to wrap so much fabric round my ribs. I had to use so many bandages to disguise my boobs that I looked like a sausage in a casing. I tried my cosplay on with the binding, and it tried it with my boobs out, but it looked horrendous both ways. My friends laughed when they saw how stupid I looked. I was not going out wearing that.'*

Instead Charlie decided to cosplay a chubby male character. Claiming that her *'boobs just looked like man boobs'* when she used padding on the rest of her body to give her a more

rounded appearance. Charlie discussed that she received a great deal of positive attention for crossplaying this chubby male character. Therefore, she subsequently emulated characters with a similar body shape exclusively when cosplaying as the opposite sex.

As was found within the previous chapter, some cosplayers could not discard aspects of their everyday identity through cosplay. Charlie's body had prevented her from successfully emulating a slim male character, with her sex being identifiable by both herself and members of the wider cosplaying subculture. This resulted in Charlie placing limitations on the scope of her performances as she ceased crossplaying characters which she could not successfully emulate. However, by incorporating aspects of her own body shape within her crossplay Charlie was able to provide a desirable performance. Although Charlie limited the scope of characters she could escape through, the selected performances Charlie provided were argued to be highly valued by her audience.

Charlie's quote also suggested that her inaccurate crossplays were devalued by her peers, who were seen to laugh at her emulation. Similarly, this experience was also held by Camilla who was discouraged from crossplaying a character with stereotypically masculine features. Which Camilla discussed as we sat waiting for a masquerade to start at a fan-run convention.

> Camilla: *'I wanted to do a butch berserker character but when I did a costest[14] my friends pointed out that I'm too skinny and said I didn't suit him. I did a slightly camp playboy Adonis, who did actually suit me so much more. We all agreed I looked better as him.'*

<u>The Judgement of Gendered Performances</u>

As was shown within Charlie and Camilla's quotes the judgement of gendered performances could be permitted amongst peers, and as the conversation with Charlie proceed, she discussed why this was the case.

[14] Cosplay Test- Where cosplayers try on aspects of their costumes or the full outfit before an event. Often sharing pictures with their peers for tips or praise.

> Charlie: *'My friends know that when I crossplay I want to look like a character so it's good that I get their honest opinion. They know that I identify as female and my crossplays are just me dressed up as a character. But we have friends that crossplay because they are working out their gender and learning that they might not be as male or female as they had thought they were. And they would never be laughed at for doing so.'*

This therefore suggests that the judgement of gendered performances may be permitted in instances where the actor's motivations and gendered identities are known to their audience. In contrast however, in other contexts these judgements were considered unacceptable. As Poppy and Amber discussed during a focus group conducted in a coffee shop after a video-game event.

> Poppy: *'You can't just joke about how a person looks because you can't tell a person's gender from how they look. If you're making a joke about how "that girl looks like a guy", they might actually be a trans girl and that would be transphobic. I don't think people will even joke about that stuff with their friends, it's not acceptable. Cosplay has a lot of LGBTQ+ people and for some of them cosplay is the only place where they can be whatever gender they want without feeling scared or judged. And I think cosplayers respect that and take it into account. So, they don't make judgements based on how you look. My friend is trans and once a normie treated her costume as a joke because he saw her as a man in a dress. She was so upset and felt self-conscious. She had to rebuild her confidence to wear what she wanted to all over again. When you see your friends going through stuff like that, you don't joke about it.'*

> Amber: *'I look like a guy when I crossplay and some of my male friends are more beautiful than any girl when they crossplay. You can't tell anyone's gender, because some cosplayers are so good at disguising theirs. So a lot of people don't assume that you're a boy or a girl based on what you look like.'*

Poppy had presented cosplay as a Free Area where established notions of gender and sex could be escaped. Within the subculture it was argued that individuals could play with their gender without being stigmatised for doing so. With cosplay offering a safe space, or Free

Area, for gender expression and experimentation. Which could be unavailable to some individuals within their everyday lives. Cosplayers were additionally argued to hold a range of gendered identities which could not be judged through their personal appearance, and as an individual's biological sex could be easily masked in costume, Amber had suggested that it was not used as a primary means of identification within cosplay. Furthermore, Poppy argued the cosplaying subculture contained transgender members who could be offended by mis-gendering. With cosplayers being aware of this fact. Therefore, cosplayers were argued to ensure that assumptions were not made based on an individual's perceived sex. As doing so could disrupt the escape of members, undermining the accepting nature of the cosplay subculture.

Escaping Sex and Gender

Max, who identified as male, supported Poppy's statement. Arguing that cosplay was a supportive subculture where he could be open about his transgender identity, which he hid in other settings due to fears of negative social repercussions. Max described himself as biologically female and had been cosplaying for five years. With our semi-structured interview taking place in a café close to a fan-run convention.

> Max: *'My friends know I'm trans and literally no-one cares. No-one draws attention to my sex at cons, so I don't even think about it. But at home my parents try to make me look more girly. In cosplay I can be myself. I cosplay men because I feel comfortable that way and like myself in male clothing. At home I'm pretending to be a girl because I'm worried about how my parents would react. They see it as black and white- a penis makes you a boy. Cosplayers understand that sex is more of a grey area, so I can be myself. Cosplay's like a break from all the pretending because it can be exhausting to lie all the time. It's my chance to come up for air, before I have to continue trudging along pretending to be something I'm not. If I didn't have cosplay to take a breather and be myself I think I'd go mad.'*
>
> Adele*: 'Have your parents ever seen you cosplaying a man?'*
>
> Max: *'Yeah but they haven't read into it because my girly friends crossplay so they assume that's what I'm doing as well. Even though it's not called crossplay when*

you're dressed up as the same sex that you identify as. It's just regular cosplay. If I dressed up as a man at home I think my parents would flip, but here I can get away with it, even if they see it.'

Mirroring Poppy's statements, Max had presented cosplay as a space where established rules concerning sex and gender were relaxed. Max's gendered identity was not only accepted but normalised to point where members were seen not to care about it. With cosplayers being argued to view gender as a much more fluid concept in comparison to outsiders of the subculture. This allowed Max to not *'have to think'* about his gendered identity, suggesting that cosplay provided him with a complete escape from it.

However, outside of cosplay Max remained constrained by notions of sex and gender, being expected to look a certain way, with Max pretending to be female to avoid confrontations. Max's method of acting as a woman during his everyday life could be likened to Distancing. With Max being seen to 'play at' being a woman through pretence, rather than providing a performance he fully committed to (Cohen and Taylor, 1975, pp32). Allowing him to create a degree of separation between his own gendered identity and the one prescribed to him by others. Cohen and Taylor had discussed the use of Distancing to cope with routines. As well as to manage achieved statuses, markers of identities that could be acquired, such as the role of being a doctor or husband (Linton, 1936). Max however, was shown to use Distancing to manage and separate himself from his biological sex, an ascribed status seen as fixed and inseparable from an individual (Linton, 1936). This may suggest that the methods used for routine management may be more powerful than suggested by Cohen and Taylor, allowing individuals respite from even the most constraining of identities.

However, Max had suggested that this Distancing was difficult to uphold for extended durations, as pretending to be female was argued to be *'exhausting'*. As was theorised by Cohen and Taylor, being constrained to the routine of acting like a woman had resulted in Max experiencing deep dissatisfaction. However, these routines were tolerable as Max was able to escape the gendered rules placed upon him within his everyday life, by engaging in cosplay. With cosplay being presented as a Free Area, which allowed him to cope with his everyday routines. These breaks from routine therefore allowed Max to recommit to his everyday performance of gender, preventing him from *'going mad'* when doing so. Therefore, through temporarily subverting conventions of sex and gender, cosplay may

ultimately enable actors such as Max to uphold the established norms of sex and gender within their everyday lives.

Furthermore, whilst Free Areas were discussed as spaces where identities could slip, making way for experimentation and fantasy. For Max, cosplay offered a reconciliation with his non-fictitious self, by providing a respite from the gendered persona he upheld within everyday life. Although those siding with biological essentialism could argue that through cosplay Max played at being male rather than exhibiting his true gender (Fuller, 2011). For Max he acted in alignment with his gendered identity, being treated as a mundane male when doing so: thus, making cosplay a site for escape. This could suggest that Escape Attempts may be utilised in more ways than presented by Cohen and Taylor. Rather than solely being employed as a means to seek novelty or to grant individuals a sense of distinction from others. For those seeking acceptance and normativity their Free Areas may in fact grant them just that. Therefore, as individual's may have different realities they wish to escape from, the context of their Free Areas may also vary accordingly.

Cosplay was not only found to offer an escape from conventions of gender for transgender individuals. Sebastian, who described himself as a cis-gendered straight man, similarly portrayed cosplay as a space in which he could play with his gender as he often crossplayed as women at conventions. Sebastian has been cosplaying for a year and we discussed his emulations in the corridor outside of an after-party within a fan-run convention.

> Sebastian: *'There's nothing to read into. I haven't got any deep reasons for crossplaying it's just fun. My friends know that cosplayers do it, so they don't think I'm a drag queen or have a fetish or anything weird like that. They just see it as something that cosplayers do.'*

Cosplay could therefore be likened to Bakhtin's (1941) theory of carnivalesque, which argues that certain designated social events can allow individuals to deviate from established norms. With an individual's mundane identity being temporarily suspended within such events. Both Max and Sebastian framed cosplay as a space where the subversion of gender was permitted, being accepted by Max's parents and Sebastian's friends. With the experimentation of gender being viewed as an aspect of cosplay rather than a statement about an individual's gendered identity. Outside of these contexts

however, such subversions could be treated as negative. Sebastian argued that whilst gendered subversion in drag and fetishism was viewed as *'weird'*, it was not considered deviant when undertaken as a part of cosplay. Therefore, cosplay may allow members to experiment with, and exhibit non-normative expressions of gender, without the fear of social reprimand. With cosplay offering a 'safety-net function' where individuals can play with their identity within this designated space, with their everyday identity being re-established upon returning to everyday life (Cohen and Taylor, 1975, pp117).

Bodies and Crossplay

On one occasion during my fieldwork, within an outdoor area at a fan-run convention. I was approached Robin, who had been cosplaying for seven years, and was currently dressed up as a female character from a popular Japanese roleplaying game. I had met Robin the night before, when he was emulating a macho male character and was a bit surprised to see him now sporting fake eyelashes and a box pleated skirt. Robin grinned at me whilst twirling in a circle to showcase his outfit and soon the conversation touched upon why he had decided to emulate a female character. Upon hearing my interest in crossplay Robin invited over his friend Toby, who had cosplayed for over eight years and was currently cosplaying a female protagonist from the same game. With both cosplayers being found to have very different experiences of crossplay.

Toby had a slim physique and could successfully disguise his sex through his use of costume, arguing that crossplay offered him the chance to experiment with his gendered identity.

> Toby: *'When I crossplay I do think I get more of a sense of what it's like to be a girl. I partly do it to try out being one. When I put on a dress I look like a girl, people think I am a girl so it's easy to feel like one. Guys try to open doors for me, and I get helped with my luggage.'*

In contrast Robin had a more muscled physique, feeling unable to emulate more feminine characters as a result. Rather than crossplaying to experience life as a woman, he engaged in this activity to express his love of certain characters.

> Robin: *'I just liked the character it didn't matter that she was a girl. I don't feel like I'm trying out what it's like to be a girl specifically. I don't think I can because I'm so obviously a man. If I crossplay I always do tomboy characters, so I don't have to act like a girly girl. They just suit me more. It doesn't look weird if they are being cosplayed by a guy with a lot of muscle definition, if the characters are martial artists. I couldn't pull off the elegant characters that Toby does. My build is so obviously not elegant. I'd just look like a man in a dress waddling around and it'd look ridiculous.'*

Whilst many authors had portrayed the act of dressing as the opposite sex as an overt attack on the concept of gender, crossplay was not framed in this manner (Bolich, 2006; Garber, 1997). Toby had presented it in a more playful light, using crossplay for his own experimentation rather than to challenge conventions of gender. Furthermore, contrary to established arguments, these performances were not misogynistic critiques of women (Barrett, 2017; Paglia, 1994). With Robin arguing that they instead expressed his admiration for female characters. Both Toby and Robin had their own motivations for crossplay with each having different experiences of the activity based upon their own personal characteristics.

As was theorised by Bullough and Bullough (1993) through donning the clothes of a woman Toby was able to successfully take on the persona of one despite being male. In doing so Toby could be seen to disrupt established gendered norms based on sex (Butler, 1991). Many of the theorists who argued that clothing could subvert established notions of gender used the act of drag to form their conclusions (Bullough and Bullough, 1993; Butler, 1991). With men being argued to successfully alter gendered scripts by adopting the appearance of the opposite sex (Butler, 1991). Crossplay could be similarly viewed as an act of drag; where men dress up 'in female clothing for the purposes of performance' (Moore, 2005, pp103). However, as drag places particular emphasis on actors looking like authentic women, it may be the case that men who can pass as women, may be able to experiment with their gendered identity more readily (Barrett, 2017). Rather than solely being due to the clothing he wore, Toby suggested this that his physical features allowed him to play with his gendered identity. Therefore, by having a body that could look like a women's Toby may have been able to successfully enact his gendered performance, 'passing' as female to both

himself and onlookers, enabling a degree of experimentation and disrupting notions of gender (Garfinkle, 1967).

However, although Toby's feminine appearance and behaviour in crossplay could be argued to disrupt conventions of gender, they may instead reinforce them. By acting in accordance to his gendered appearance, Toby may uphold the established 'gender dichotomy' (Lorber, 1994, pp21). As was found within Devor's (1989, pp142) study of gender blending women who were perceived to be male. By hiding the traits that allowed his biological sex to be recognised, Toby may fail to challenge 'patriarchal gender assumptions', exhibiting normative behaviours for the sex he was seen to be. Furthermore, although his choice of clothing may demonstrate the social constructiveness of sex and gender, this may not be broadcast to his audience (Lorber, 1994). Despite this however, Toby had voiced being able to play with his own gendered identity, feeling like a woman and experiencing different interactions as a result. Therefore, whilst such crossplay may not offer complete escape from the rules and regulations of gender, it may offer some the ability to experiment with it on an individual basis.

Robin however, felt unable to cosplay more feminine characters due to his stereotypically masculine build. Claiming that he could not experience the same gendered experimentation due to the visibility of his biological sex. As Robin argued he was *'obviously a man'* his efforts to display femininity were regarded as absurd, highlighting the disparity between his sex and displays of gender. Therefore, rather than such crossplay blurring the lines between the genders, they may instead reinforce a sense of distinction between masculinity and femininity. Perpetuating notions of acceptable gendered displays based on the wearers physical appearance.

Despite this, Robin still felt able to provide successful performances by emulating more masculine female characters, who held similar physical characteristics to his everyday identity. With this mirroring the actions Patrick, who cosplayed characters with similar skin tones to his own increase the authenticity of his performances. Therefore, whilst clothing has been presented as a tool to escape from conventions of gender, established notions of gender and sex may remain present within cosplay, placing limitations upon experimentation as a result (Bullough and Bullough, 1993; Butler, 1991).

Robin's quote also suggests that the relationship between gendered clothing and the wearer may be more reciprocal than it has been previously presented. Whilst academics have presented individuals passively adopting the gendered characteristics of the clothing they wear (Buckley, 1996). When emulating female characters, Robin had selected those whose traits were seen to match his own. Projecting his own masculinity onto the female characters he cosplayed, rather than taking on their gendered. This therefore demonstrates that cosplayers may experiment with their sex and gender in a variety of ways, with escape being dependant on the context of the actor.

Humour and Male Crossplay

Although the cosplaying subculture was presented as a space where individuals could freely experiment with their gender, this did not mean that all gendered performances were normalised within conventions. Many of the sites where cosplay took place were shared with those outside of the subculture, who could react in alternative ways to the subversion of gendered norms.

Whilst Robin felt that his body prevented him from successfully experimenting with his gendered identity, he was keen to highlight that wanted his crossplays to be viewed as authentic. Robin argued that whilst cosplayers treated his crossplays in the way he had intended, those outside of the subculture often treated them as comical.

> Robin: *'If a cosplayer knows who I'm crossplaying they can tell that I've chosen a character that fits me, so they get it. And if they don't know who I'm cosplaying but they think I look good they might compliment me anyway. But I've had random con goers being really excited by my crossplay and then act like it's a joke. And when I let them know I'm not taking the piss they seem a bit shocked.'*

The assumption from the public, that male crossplays were intended to be seen as humorous, was a phenomenon I had witnessed many times first-hand. On one occasion, at a fan-run event closed to non-cosplayers, an individual who looked biologically male, who I will refer to as Danny, was dressed as a female character. Danny browsed the stalls amongst the convention hall with a lacey parasol in hand, receiving the same reaction as any other cosplayer. Despite their muscled build and facial hair contrasting with their emulated

character, Danny's appearance had not resulted in any overt reactions from the cosplaying subculture. However, at a larger mainstream event open to the public I saw Danny again, re-wearing the same outfit. Witnessing the heads of non-costumed attendees turning as Danny walked past. At one point an attendee asked for the Danny's photograph, treating their outfit as if it was comical, sarcastically joking that the cosplayer's hairy legs looked '*sexy*' in a dress. This offended Danny who stated that *'People should be able to wear what they want and without being mocked*'. Although the attendee seemed apologetic, he turned to his friend and referred to Danny as a *'weirdo'* when he was out of earshot. Again, making fun of the sight of a '*mans*' legs in a dress. When I observed Danny later in the day, their body language was much more reserved than it had been earlier, and I wondered if this exchange had dampened their experience of escape at this convention.

Garfinkle (1967, pp125) argues that the movement between the categories of sex remains prohibited within society, only permitted when escorted with the 'controls that accompany masquerading'. Which includes the expectation that individuals will shed their emulated gendered traits once performances are over. Danny however was disrupted mid-performance, with an audience member bringing attention to a perceived discord between Danny's biological sex and their gendered clothing. Which may be due to similar gendered performances encouraging audience participation.

Shaw and Ardner (2005) point out that there is long tradition of comical crossdressing within England. Citing the prevalence of pantomime dames, in which men cross dress as the opposite sex. With actors breaking the fourth wall within performances, to joke with their audience and bring attention to the fact that their biological sex differs from their emulated character's. This behaviour is also widely undertaken in drag, in which drag queens disrupt their performances to break the illusion of their femininity for comical purposes (Moore, 2005). Furthermore, Chess (2016, pp1) argues that male to female crossdressing has 'almost always' been played for humour. With the visibility of the actor's biological sex beneath a costume being used as a comical trope. Subsequently, this is seen to reinforce the notion that male and female bodies are distinct, presenting male bodies in female clothing as unnatural (Bell et al, 1994). As a result, it may be the case that the convention attendees had interpreted both Robin and Toby's performances as comical in accordance to norms within everyday life. Expecting these cosplayers to similarly interact with their audience and

disrupt their performances of femininity. However, as these cosplayers did not subtribe to the gendered norms of outsiders, these interactions could lead to conflict and impact on escape.

Although on the surface this situation seemed to be resolved through an apology, Danny's performance still seemed to be interrupted by this exchange. With Danny's change in body language suggesting that they felt less comfortable presenting non-normative displays of gender. Therefore, cosplay may have been suspended as a Free Area where escape from sex and gender was possible. Furthermore, as was found by Garfinkle, Danny was labelled as deviant for providing a performance that subverted established conventions of sex, being referred to as a *'weirdo'*. Therefore, whilst playing with sex and gender may be accepted or even normalised amongst cosplayers, these views may not be held by all. Within relatively closed spaces cosplayers may be able to escape from established notions of gender. However, interactions with members the public could disrupt this escape.

Deception and Deviance

However, it was not only cosplayers with masculine physiques who encountered issues when wearing feminine clothing. Male crossplayers who were mistaken for women also discussed being treated negatively by members of the wider public.

As our informal field conversation continued, Toby discussed an instance where he received homophobic abuse in a *'pub for cosplayers'* after mainstream convention.

> Toby: *'A guy in normal clothes kept on hitting on me. I kept telling him that I wasn't interested, but he just would not leave me alone. In the end I had to tell him that I was a guy before he finally fucked off. I also pointed out the fact that I was straight, so wasn't interested, which really pissed him off. He did that threatening puffed up thing that guys do when they want to look hard. But he just walked away swearing about me, calling me gay and a liar or something or other, even though he's the one who hit on me.'*
>
> Adele*: 'How did that exchange make you feel?'*

> Toby*: 'I didn't really mind being called gay. It's just not an insult to cosplayers, we aren't homophobic like that. But I remember thinking how lucky I was to be part of such an accepting community after it happened. Cosplay's like a complete other world where you can be whoever you want to be. People are so judgemental. You have to look a certain way or dress a certain way otherwise you get treated like shit. It's so narrowminded and bigoted. But not in cosplay.'*

As Cohen and Taylor (1975) argue that Free Areas are spaces where individuals could absent themselves from everyday life, this exchange could be seen to disrupt cosplay's capacity for escapism. With Toby's subversion of gender being treated as deviant within a space where such performances were usually permitted. However, for Toby this conflict was seen to strengthen his portrayal of cosplay as a Free Area. Highlighting the judgemental nature of outsiders and the constraints of everyday life, in which you had to look and dress *'a certain way'*. Which Toby contrasted against the level of acceptance and experimentation available in cosplay, being presented as a '*complete other world*' in comparison. Therefore, rather than Free Areas having to be completely removed from the mundane to be successful, the presence of the outside world may help to sustain Free Areas by highlighting their distinction from everyday life.

Toby was not the only cosplayer to mention receiving negative reactions towards his female emulations. Like Toby, Victor was often assumed to be a woman when crossplaying. However, Victor argued that he did not seek to experiment with his gendered identity through crossplay. There was '*no real reason*' why Victor crossplayed apart from the fact that he could, and as a result he argued that the activity had no impact on his identity. Victor had been cosplaying for four years and was emulating a female character from the same series as me which initiated our conversation. Which took place as we sat next to each other as we waited for a panel to start within a fan-run convention. When in crossplay Victor claimed that did not attempt to act in a feminine manner, and on more than one occasion he had shocked those who had mistaken him as female with his deep voice. However, Victor's attitude towards crossplay did not stop people making assumptions about his identity.

> Victor: *'I was travelling to a con and some homophobic guys overheard me talking to my girlfriend and they called me a faggot for wearing a dress. Cosplayers wouldn't do*

that, they know that who you sleep with makes you gay and that's it. It's nothing to do with how you act or what you wear'.

This association with male crossdressing and homosexuality has also been identified in other contexts. Bailey (2011) argues that historically heterosexuality has been normalised and framed in conjunction with a conformation to the established binary gender order. With those who violated these norms receiving the stigmatised label of being homosexual. As a result, crossdressing is argued to be widely viewed as a homosexual practice, despite being undertaken by a range of individuals. Furthermore, Bolich (2006) argues that this stereotype reflects an attempt to present both homosexuals and disruptions of gender as deviant for being abnormal, suggesting that crossdressing is incompatible with heterosexuality. Which could explain why Toby and Victor were labelled as homosexual for engaging in crossplay.

Whilst homosexuality is undoubtably more tolerated within the UK than it has been in the past, there is still argued to be a widespread fear of being labelled as gay amongst heterosexual males (Wincup, 2014; Harmening, 2010). However, the possibility of being judged as homosexual did not deter either Toby or Victor from emulating the opposite sex. Toby did not have an issue with being seen as homosexual, explaining that for him and other cosplayers this was not an insult. Furthermore, Victor argued that cosplayers judged sexuality through an individual's sexual preferences, rather than making assumptions based on stereotypes, which is argued to be common in other contexts (Newman and Johnson, 2004). As argued by Tyulenev (2014, pp34) this may therefore suggest that cosplayers as a subculture had created 'their own narration', generating its own norms and philosophy on social phenomena, which could contrast with those of wider society. With cosplayers developing their own views on sexuality and crossdressing which rejected the stereotypes prevalent within everyday life and held an accepting attitude towards homosexuality. As a result, these attitudes could result in crossplay being accessible to those holding a range of sexualities. Preventing heterosexual males from feeling stigmatised when engaging in this practice. Cosplay may therefore allow its members to play with their gender, offering an escape from entrenched views on sex.

The above quotes also suggested that cosplayers could experience different reactions to their cosplays from outsiders of the subculture. Dependant on the accuracy of these cosplayer's performances. As was previously discussed, crossdressing which highlighted the

disparity of the wearers biological sex has been long established. Treated as humorous and therefore considered acceptable by the wider public. This was also found to apply to crossplay, with Robin's emulations receiving positive attention from the public when judged as a joke. However, for Victor and Toby, revealing their biological sex had led to confrontation, and this difference in treatment may be due to Toby and Victor having successfully blurred the boundaries of sex and gender.

Cavalcante (2018, pp83) argues that biological males who subvert notions of gender by successfully masking their sex can be viewed as deceptive. Due to crossdressing's association with homosexuality, this action is often framed as an actor's attempt to trick 'innocent straight guys into being gay'. Consequently, there have been many cases of violence against men who subverted notions of gender. Committed by those expressing an initial attraction in individual's whose biological sex was disguised. With assailants attempting to re-establish their heterosexuality through acts of aggression (MacKenzie and Marcel, 2009). This could therefore explain the altercation Toby had experienced when crossplaying. However, whilst certain forms of gender subversion may be devalued by the public, Toby and Victor had not portrayed their crossplay in a negative light. Instead they had labelled those who had challenged their emulations as being homophobic and bigoted, classifying those outside of the subculture as deviant instead. Therefore, this alternative narration could allow cosplayers to reject their deviant label and continue subverting conventions of gender without feeling stigmatised when doing so.

However, whilst cosplayers may not see their crossplays as deviant, some still expressed discomfort about the reactions they received from outsiders. As John a cosplayer of six years discussed within our semi-structured interview, taking place on a concourse outside of a geek culture event.

> John: *'Some guys from uni saw a picture of me in a dress and couldn't believe it was me because they actually thought it was a picture of a girl. At first, they were good about it and said it looked convincing. But it soon turned a bit nasty because they acted like I should be embarrassed about it, as if It was some dirty secret.'*
>
> Adele: *'How so?'*

John: *'Like joking at my expense even though I don't think I have anything to be embarrassed about. A girl left her pink umbrella at a lecture and they were joking about me taking it for myself because they said I liked girly stuff. But I wouldn't wear women's clothes for the sake of it. I only do it in cosplay because I want to cosplay characters I really like. I think it's great that at cons you can wear stuff without people being dickheads about it like those guys were. It felt shitty that they tied to make me feel bad for doing something I actually really enjoy. They said they were just joking around, but it put me off crossplaying a little bit. I was worried I would be tagged in a photo and that, that would give them new material to tease me over.'*

Adele: *'Have those guys said anything else about your crossplays?'*

John: *'I don't speak to them now I've graduated. They didn't survive the social media purge[15]. I keep my cosplaying [social media] accounts private now so they wouldn't see pictures of my crossplay.'*

Adele: *'Why did you make them private?'*

John: *'Because people can be small minded and if I keep them private they can't see that I crossplay. If I enjoy crossplay then I should be able to do it without worrying about what people think. I'd rather just it amongst other cosplayers who accept it and understand it. I think people at work would be surprised because I kind of keep it a secret now.'*

Whilst earlier in the chapter the male cosplayer Sebastian had claimed that crossplay had not impacted on his everyday identity. Being viewed as a part of cosplay by his friends, which prevented Sebastian from being associated with the negative traits which accompanied crossdressing. For John his female emulations had affected his everyday life, resulting in John being treated as if he was deviant by his peers. Furthermore, this deviance was projected onto aspects of John's everyday life, with John being presented as effeminate as a result. This impacted on his experience of escape, deterring him from engaging in the crossplay. However, through restricting access to his social media, which offered an insight

[15] When individuals are deleted from a user's social media account

into his hobbies, John may have successfully preserved cosplay as a Free Area. Allowing him to continue playing with his gender without the fear of negative social repercussions.

The differing experiences of Sebastian and John may suggest that the positionality of Free Areas may depend on an individual's context. Some such as Sebastian, whose Escape Attempts have been accepted by outsiders, may permit aspects of their Free Areas to be visible to the public within their everyday lives. As these Free Areas failed to have negative repercussions. Therefore, for individuals such as Sebastian their Free Areas may be separate to, but not completely removed from their everyday identities. Others such as John however, whose Escape Attempts have been devalued by the public, may separate their everyday life, from their Free Areas to ensure that their escape is not impeded. Creating a rigid boundary between the two. Therefore, rather than Free Areas being separate spaces that are external to individuals, they may be altered by users themselves to suit their specific needs. With individual's dictating the extent to the divide between their Free Areas and their everyday lives, in order to ensure that these Free Areas can successfully provide them with escape.

Female Crossplay

So far, this chapter has largely focused on the experiences of male crossplayers, however it is important to note that many female cosplayers also engaged in crossplay. With men and women being found to have different experiences of this activity. Alice who had been cosplaying for two and a half years argued that crossplayers were treated differently depending on their sex. With our informal field conversation taking place within the queue to enter a Japanese cultural event.

> Alice: *'I think people at conventions see female crossplay as normal because girls dress in guys clothes all the time.'*

The female and male cosplayers I spoke with all agreed that female crossplay was more normalised amongst the general public, supporting Alice's quote. Both in cases where the actor successfully disguised their biological sex, and in instances the wearers sex was recognisable within their costume. Poppy explained that she was often mistaken for a man when crossplaying, however in contrast to Toby and Victor, this had not led to confrontation

when her biological sex was revealed. Poppy additionally claimed that she had never been viewed as homosexual for cosplaying male characters, unlike the male crossplayers discussed within the previous section. Another female cosplayer, Lauren, who had been cosplaying for roughly thirteen years, stated that her emulations had never been treated as comical by convention attendees, even though she claimed that she looked female when cosplaying men.

This differing treatment of male and female crossplayers may be due to gendered norms within everyday life. Kailey (2005) argues that masculine females are more accepted in society than feminine males, allowing women to wear men's clothing and take on male traits. With Archer and Lloyd (2002) proposing that this difference in attitudes is due to femininity being devalued within western society, with latent sexism enabling women to adopt more socially desired masculine traits, whilst presenting feminine men as deviant for degrading themselves with femininity. As a result, the authors argue that male crossdressers are presented as subjects of ridicule (Archer and Lloyd, 2002). Therefore, the subversion of gender when undertaken by female cosplayers may be viewed as more acceptable by members of the public, for mirroring conventions within everyday life. In which women may be more permitted to experiment with their gender identity (Flanagan, 2008). Ultimately allowing Lauren to crossplay without her emulations being mocked by outsiders.

Furthermore, a study by Migdalek (2015) similarly discovered an acceptance of females who adopted masculinity, with such gendered expressions failing to be associated with homosexuality when undertaken by women. Whilst McCreary (1994) points out that butch women could be stereotyped as lesbians, the author discovered that women displaying masculine behaviour were less likely to be viewed as gay for doing so. With the subversion of gender amongst men being viewed as particularly deviant for undermining an elevated social status. Leading to a greater degree of stigmatisation towards non-gender-conforming men. Being closely associated with homosexuality, and more harshly punished as a result. This may explain why Poppy was not labelled as homosexual for engaging in crossplay in the same way that Toby and Victor had.

However, Lauren discussed that male cosplayers could be viewed in a positive light by some outsiders to the subculture. With this topic being discussed within a semi-structured interview which took place within an outdoor area at a Japanese cultural event.

Lauren: *'In Japanese stuff, there's a kind of thing, where a character dresses up as the opposite sex and everyone loves it. So, the guy wears a dress and a wig and gets loads of girls fangirling over him. Or a cool girl dresses up like a handsome prince and the girls go wild for her too. Some people at cons kind of do that when men crossplay. Acting like a guy in a dress is sexy, and they get overexcited about it.'*

Adele: *'Does it happen to male crossplayers who look like women, or crossplayers who are visibly male?'*

Lauren: *'It happens to both. Obviously if it's a guy looks like a guy they are easier to spot so people will make a big deal out of them. But I've seen girls go crazy over a pretty convincing male crossplayer. I don't even know how they worked out he was male, but they were squealing about it being a guy dressed as a girl. Which I think was out of order because he could have been trans or he may not have wanted attention being drawn to him being a guy. He was loving the attention though. But if he looked uncomfortable I would have said something to those girls.'*

Adele: *'Who are the people who do the fangirling.'*

Lauren: *'People who like Japanese stuff, because they know about the obsession they have over there with people dressing up like the opposite sex and they are copying that.'*

Adele: *'What about cosplayers?'*

Lauren: *'I've never seen a cosplayer do it as it could be disrespectful if they didn't want their gender being made into a big deal of. But maybe some weebs would.'*

I later spoke with Toby and Robin about this fangirling during an informal conversation at the same fan-run convention. Both these cosplayers claimed to have experienced this reaction to their crossplays from non-costumed attendees.

Toby: *'It can be a bit much when someone's squealing at you. Sometimes it can feel nice, like you're being appreciated for your cosplay. But sometimes, if I've tried hard to look like a female character and they've seen through it, I wonder if I just looked a bit shit. And if I'm cosplaying a girl and trying to look all dainty for photos, someone*

shouting that I'm a guy and acting all flustered makes it so much harder to try and stay in character. It breaks your concentration.'

In contrast, none of the female crossplayers reported receiving attention for their biological sex whilst crossplaying, with Poppy offering a suggestion for why this was the case, as our focus group with Amber continued.

Poppy: *'In lots of Japanese schools, girls have to wear skirts as part of their uniform, so a female character wearing men's clothing for a school play is made out to be a big thing. But I could wear trousers to school so it's nothing new. Most cosplayers are female anyway and a lot of them crossplay. But there are less male cosplayers and even less of them crossplay and because it's rarer, people can get more excited over it.'*

Adele: *'Would you like to get the kind of reactions that male crossplayers get?'*

Poppy: *'Not in the slightest. I want people to give me attention for my cosplay not because I'm a girl. And if I'm cosplaying a guy I want to feel like one because it makes your costume look better, so I wouldn't want people making as big deal about me being a girl.'*

Male cosplayers could receive positive attention for their crossplays, which Lauren suggested stemmed from tropes within Japanese media, as well as the comparative rarity of such performances. However, the attention that male crossplayers received was not always viewed in a positive light. Although drawing attention to the wearer's sex could demonstrate an appreciation for crossplay, it could also interrupt performances. With Toby suggesting that this could undermine the legitimacy of an outfit, highlighting the actor's failure to successfully pass as the opposite sex. In contrast women were not found to receive the same attention for their crossplays, which Poppy argued was due to the normalisation of women in male clothing within the west. As well as the prevalence of such emulations. The absence of this attention could therefore allow female crossplayers to give uninterrupted performances. Allowing women to experiment with their gendered identity more readily, as Poppy argued this allowed her to *'feel like'* a man. Therefore, although within the cosplaying subculture non-normative performances of gender could be accepted and legitimised, those outside of the subculture could still bring conventions of sex and

gender into the subculture. Leading to differing experiences of gender experimentation depending on an actor's biological sex. Re-asserting existing dichotomies of gender and impacting on cosplayers experiences of escape.

Fluidity of Gender Verses Constraints of Ethnicity

The cosplayers I spoke with argued that actors had a wide berth to experiment with their gendered identity through cosplay. It was acceptable for cosplayers to provide non-normative gendered performances, regardless of whether they identified with these genders or not. Which could be seen to contrast with the rules and regulations identified when it came to emulating characters of specific ethnicities. With this difference in attitudes potentially being as a result of gender being framed as more fluid than ethnicity.

As was previously discussed, many cosplayers had presented skin colour as the main trait that defined ethnicity, using the terms synonymously. Patrick had done the same in within an informal field conversation at a mainstream convention, in which he highlighted the fixed nature of ethnicity by contrasting it against the malleability of gender.

> Patrick: *''When you see a white guy cosplaying Afro Samurai they aren't black. You can see that by just looking at his skin colour. But if you see a cute girl they may be a guy. They may be a trans woman. They might not even believe in gender at all. You never know when it comes to cosplayers.'*
>
> Adele: *'What do you mean by black and white?'*
>
> Patrick: *'The cosplayer was White, European, like Caucasian and Afro Samurai has African origins'*

Although white cosplayers could emulate black characters, Patrick argued that they failed to be viewed as black when doing so, as their skin tone remained highly visible. Furthermore, as was highlighted within the previous chapter, the painting of skin to match another ethnicity was viewed as deviant within the cosplaying subculture. With Patrick arguing that *'Cosplayers will always call out cosplayers doing blackface or yellowface.'* As a result, according to the norms of the cosplaying subculture, members were unable to mask their ethnicity by altering their skin colour. Preventing some from being able to successfully pass

between the categories of certain ethnicities. Therefore, whilst ethnicity itself may be socially constructed, with categories of race changing depending on socio-political factors, skin colour may still be utilised to sort individuals into socially defined groups (Furlong, 2013). With ethnic identities based on skin colour remaining a pervasive marker of identification within cosplay. Mirroring established conventions present within everyday life (Root, 2007; Cowlishaw, 2011).

In contrast however, Patrick had presented gender as a much more fluid category. Which unlike ethnicity could not be judged on an individual's personal characteristics. Therefore, the adoption of gendered traits was presented as acceptable within cosplay in a way that ethnicity was not. However, this concept of gender fluidity was not limited to cosplay alone. Ingraham (1997) argues that gender is now viewed as fluid amongst the majority of sociologists. Carroll (2016) similarly found an increasing acceptance towards the concept of gender fluidity amongst both the wider public and the mainstream media.

For Brubaker (2016) the difference in attitudes towards the crossing of gendered and ethnic boundaries is the result of a societal paradigm shift. Brubaker argues that gender fluidly as a concept has been legitimised, permitting individuals to play with both their gender and sex. However, the idea of ethnic fluidity has not been publicly recognised. Resulting in those who sought to experiment with their ethnicity facing stigmatisation. Brubaker theorises why gender fluidity has been recognised whilst ethnic fluidity has not. Whilst gender is argued to be viewed as subjective, dependent on the individual and therefore theirs to play with, ethnicity is presented as an identity tied to that of others. With Eriksen (1993) similarly arguing that ethnic identities hold connotations of ancestry, presented as rooted in one's DNA and visible through one's skin colour, making them fixed markers of identification. Therefore, due to its ties with others, the subversion of ethnicity is argued to be less acceptable than of gender, framed as discarding of one's lineage, rather than a personal trait that can be experimented with (Brubaker, 2016).

Whilst the cosplayers within this chapter had framed gender as fluid, Patrick had presented ethnicity as a fixed category, firmly tied to the identity of an individual, mirroring the claims of academics (Brubaker, 2016; Eriksen, 1993). Therefore, rather than subverting the norms of everyday life, with cosplayers creating their own distinctive values. Cosplayers may

instead draw upon liberal norms found within wider society to shape the rules of the subculture, which may ultimately sustain established notions of ethnicity and gender.

The Acceptance of Sexual Orientations

The cosplaying subculture was not only found to be tolerant towards those with non-normative gendered identities. Cosplay was also framed as an accepting space for individuals with a range of sexualities, with cosplayers as a whole as being presented as intrinsically opposed to sexual orientation discrimination. As was discussed by Lauren and Jack- who had been cosplaying for roughly six years, as we sat within a pub after a mainstream convention.

> Lauren: *'I know cosplayers who are straight, bi, queer. Homosexual, pansexual, skoliosexual. You get the idea. And there are people who are monogamous, polyamorous, asexual, the list goes on. And that's all cool, that's fine here.'*
>
> Jack: *'I have never met a homophobic cosplayer.'*
>
> Lauren: *'If you were homophobic or whatever you wouldn't last long in cosplay. Everyone has queer friends and homophobia is seen as bad as racism. Most would straight out hate you. Cosplayers can be open with who they love amongst other cosplayers because we treat it as completely normal, as it should be. It's sad that some of my friends have to be closeted outside of cosplay because people aren't as accepting.'*
>
> Jack: *'It's not just about putting up with gay people, cosplayers genuinely treat them the same as anyone else. Otherwise you might as well find a new hobby because everyone else feels the same way. Even if you say you're not homophobic and are fine with gay people, but feel uncomfortable around them kissing next to you, just get out. That won't fly. We won't put up with people who may make others feel like their sexuality is wrong. If you feel uncomfortable leave, because no-one's going to tone down their sexuality for you.'*

The above quotes suggest that a welcoming attitude towards non-normative sexualities may be a necessary requirement for entrance into the cosplaying subculture. Jack suggested that

homosexuality was not only accepted but normalised within the subculture, an attitude that went beyond tolerance alone. Those who did not express complete acceptance of non-heterosexual individuals were presented unwelcome within cosplay, as displays of discomfort could result in individuals feeling deviant due to their sexuality.

My own observations at conventions supported the claims of Lauren and Jack. Many of the cosplayers I met referred to themselves as queer or were close friends with individuals who were. Arguing that they fully supported the acceptance of non-normative sexualities. Furthermore, I had frequently witnessed couples from a range of sexual orientations holding hands and kissing at conventions, looking completely comfortable when doing so. Therefore, as argued by Lauren, the normalisation of sexualities, coupled with cosplay's stance against homophobia, could allow cosplayers to be open about their sexual identities. Therefore, providing escape from heteronormative everyday life in which Lauren argued people were not *'as accepting'*.

However, academics such as Goode (2016) argue that homosexuality may no longer be viewed as deviant within the West. Therefore, the acceptance of sexualities found within the cosplaying subculture may reflect the norms of everyday life, rather being a form of resistance to them. Nevertheless, whilst non-normative sexualities may be increasingly accepted, this does not mean they are treated in an equal manner to heterosexuality.

A number of cosplayers I interviewed mentioned that at conventions they felt confident showing affection to their same-sex partners openly. Whilst in other contexts they kept such behaviour private, due to the fear of negative reactions from strangers. Which in many cases stemmed from previous experiences of public abuse. This finding was found to mirror the work of Alonso (2013) who found that whilst homophobia was treated as deviant, homosexual relationships were still marginalised. With homosexual displays of affection being discouraged amongst the wider public. In contrast however, Jack argued that cosplayers treated non-heterosexual individual's as *'the same as everyone else'*. As a result, the cosplaying subculture may offer an environment where queer relationships are treated in a comparative manner to heterosexual relationships. Providing temporary relief from the established conventions of everyday life, with cosplay being a space where heterosexist norms could be suspended.

Idealism and Free Areas

In the previous section it was claimed that the cosplaying subculture was accepting of non-binary gendered identities, due to the media its members consumed, which often featured subversions of gender. This was similarly cited as the reason why cosplay was welcoming to those holding non-normative sexualities. Being discussed by Emma, Louise- who has been cosplaying for three years and Tom- who had been cosplaying for seven. During a focus group conducted within a coffee shop after a mainstream convention.

> Louise: *'In anime it's not as much as a big thing. I mean in the first couple of episodes of Naruto he has his first kiss with a guy, he does a special move where he shapeshifts into a woman. And he falls for that girl in the forest, who turns out to be a guy. And Sailor Jupiter and Sailor Uranus are an actual couple in the anime and manga, even though they changed it to them being cousins in the western release, which is really creepy. If you were homophobic I don't think you would watch shows like that, and I really don't think you would to dress up as them.'*
>
> Emma: *'You get loads of slice of life anime where there's a cool female student that other the other girls fall in love with, so I think it shows that being a lesbian is ok in Japan.'*

As well as the prevalence of same-sex love within this media, the genre of yaoi was also regarded as a key reason behind cosplayer's acceptance of non-normative sexualities.

> Tom: *'You get gay fiction over here but its more kind of specialised. But in Japan yaoi is huge and loads of people read it so lots of cosplayers read it too. Representation is really important, so it's refreshing to see that your relationships are actually shown over there. I would love to live in Japan some day because it is generally more accepting of homosexuality. In cosplay I feel accepted because cosplayers read Japanese stuff so they are tolerant. And treat being gay as normal as being straight. But one day I would like to live somewhere where most people find my sexuality ok. It makes life more bearable knowing that somewhere like that is out there.'*

As in shown within Tom's quote, many cosplayers used Japanese media to evidence the idea that Japan as a whole was accepting of homosexual relationships. Such statements about

Japan's accepting nature was often stated as a fact, with the cosplayers I spoke with claiming that they had formed these opinions solely through watching Japanese media. Likewise, the gender subversions within anime were also cited as proof of Japan's compliance with non-binary genders.

However, Japanese society may not be as accepting towards homosexual and transgendered individuals as was suggested by the cosplayers. A study by Ito (1996) found that whilst homosexual and transgender individuals were commonly featured on Japanese television shows, they were either treated as humorous or presented as contemptuous. Similarly, McLellend (2000) found that transgendered individuals who successfully passed as the sex they identified with within Japan, were treated as a threat to social order and presented as deviant as a result. With transgressions of gender being permitted when undertaken for humorous intent. This therefore mirrors the experiences of Robin and Danny, whose non-normative emulations were accepted amongst the general public when they were judged to be comical. Furthermore, although Louise had used Naruto to evidence an acceptance of homosexuality and transgendered individuals within Japan, this series similarly presented these depictions in a humorous manner. Suggesting that conventional norms may be reproduced within this media.

Both Emma and Louise additionally suggested that anime which featured the romance between schoolgirls, demonstrated that Japan was accepting towards female homosexuality. However, this may not be the case. Brenner and Wildsmith (2011) argue that Japan has different interpretations of same sex-love, based on historical practises and norms. With Mclelland (2004) arguing that an engagement in homosexual acts, may not undermine an individual's heterosexuality. Therefore, behaviours which may be considered homosexual within the West may not hold the same connotations within Japan (Connexions, 1981).

In fact, Fruhstuck (2003) argues that Japan traditionally accepted same-sex relationships between girls. Being presented as harmless youthful infatuations which did not denote homosexuality, as the girls who partook in these relationships were still expected to engage in heterosexual relationships upon adulthood. Furthermore, Shamoon (2008) argues that such relationships were permitted to allow young girls to experience romance, without the fear of their purity being threatened as it would within heterosexual relationships. As a

result, storylines which feature love between girls are argued to be accepted within Japan, being compatible with heterosexuality, whilst upholding patriarchal values which discourages young women from engaging in sexual contact with men (Shamoon, 2008).

Furthermore, whilst same sex relationships amongst young women may be tolerated within Japanese fiction, this does not necessarily mean that homosexuality was accepted within an empirical setting. Interviews carried out by Connexions (1981) found that lesbians within Japan felt as though their sexuality was rendered invisible. With women who declared their homosexuality claiming that their family and friends continued to project heterosexuality onto them. Therefore, rather than same-sex relationships within Japanese media reflecting a wider acceptance of homosexuality, it may instead demonstrate the deep-rooted prevalence of heteronormativity, within Japan. With depictions of female same-sex love failing to pose a threat to dominant heterosexuality. Being utilised instead as a means to sustain conventions of sex amongst young women.

Tom had similarly cited the genre of yaoi as proof of Japan's acceptance of male homosexuality. However, as was discussed with the media featuring the same-sex love of women. The widespread consumption of yaoi may not reflect a tolerance of homosexuality within Japan. Brazal and Abraham (2014) point out that rather than being targeted at homosexual men, yaoi's target marked is largely heterosexual women. With love between men being viewed as a heterosexual female's sexual fantasy (Ryder, 2008). Subsequently, this genre often features a narrative of forbidden love, placing this at the forefront rather than the homosexual relationships (Brenner and Wildsmith,2011). In fact, Mizoguchi's (2008) analysis of yaoi found that this genre typically depicted a relationship between two men who considered themselves to be heterosexual. With their love transcending the norms of society but failing to result in either character viewing themselves as gay. As a result, these stories often fail to explore homosexual issues, or provide an accurate portrayal of homosexual relationships (Brenner and Wildsmith, 2011). Suggesting that yaoi may not be representative of homosexual relationships as was implied by Tom.

Furthermore Peracullo (2014) argues that within yaoi protagonists are classified as either a feminine 'uke' or masculine 'seme'. With rigid role assignments being identified within sexual scenes according to these labels. Therefore, rather than providing a depiction of non-normative sexualities, yaoi may instead be a projection of female sexual fantasies, based on

heterosexual norms (Peracullo, 2014). Reinforcing the notion that relationships comprise of distinctive masculine and feminine individuals which therefore sustains heterosexual notions of gender performativity. Ryder (2008) additionally points out that yaoi is often imbued with a sense of ephemerality, suggesting that characters will eventually conform to heteronormative society and return to their heterosexuality after their same-sex romance. Therefore, rather than yaoi suggesting a tolerance to homosexuality within Japan, this genre may perpetuate established notions of gender and present heterosexuality as normative.

However, whilst Japanese media featuring same-sex love may not demonstrate a wider cultural acceptance of homosexuality, many of the cosplayers I spoke with interpreted this media in this way. With Tom claiming that he wanted to move to Japan due to the country's perceived acceptance of homosexuality. Tom was not found to be the only cosplayer who portrayed Japan as tolerant due to its media. Many cosplayers presented Japan in an idealised accepting manner. Concluding that as many anime featured protagonists who did not fit in, or narratives centred on accepting others, individuals within Japan would similarly adhere to these norms. Therefore, Japanese society was presented as holding similar values to the cosplaying subculture, with some cosplayers expressing a desire to live in Japan as they claimed that their genders and sexualities would be accepted within it.

The way in which these cosplayers presented Japan mirrored the features of a Free Area, with Japan being described as a space where the norms of western society could be escaped. Cohen and Taylor (1975) had similarly argued that the carving of new landscapes, distinct from everyday life, could be utilised as Escape Attempts. Holidays were framed as temporary excursions from everyday life and through mass culture individuals could briefly experience the notion of alternative worlds. Cohen and Taylor also discussed the idea of Free Areas merging with everyday life however, attempts to do so were framed as unsustainable. Visions of utopias as well as communes were seen to require isolation from wider society to grant them a degree of success. With those who attempted to ground their Escape Attempts within their everyday lives being presented as socially deviant. Comprising of those who completely rejected everyday life and breached the fundamental norms of society in order to do so. However, the cosplayers may have found an alternative way to make their Free Areas their everyday life. Rather than rejecting everyday life and isolating themselves from it, some cosplayers constructed the notion of an idealised society, rooted

within the empirical world. This had allowed Tom to persevere within his everyday life, claiming that his concept of Japan had made his everyday life '*bearable*'. Therefore, the pursuit of a permanent escape within everyday life may not always be as extreme as presented by Cohen and Taylor. Regardless of the validity of an idealised Japan, the promise of a society in which escape was not needed could act as a particularly strong means of escape in itself.

So far, this chapter has addressed the norms relating to sex, gender and sexuality within the cosplaying subculture. Demonstrating that cosplayers could subvert notions of sex and gender in a variety of ways. However, as outsiders could interrupt the performances of cosplayers, some cosplayers escaped within closed spaces, where the values of the subculture were upheld. The chapter then proceeded to demonstrate that non-normative sexualities were not only accepted but normalised within the cosplaying subculture. Providing an accepting subculture for those holding an array of sexual orientations. With Japan being framed by some cosplayers as a Free Area grounded within everyday life. In the next section attention will turn to exploring how values relating to sex, gender and sexuality were upheld within the cosplaying subculture. Which enabled the escape of its members.

Policing Within the Subculture

Although cosplayers were presented as accepting of homosexuality, with Tom claiming that many cosplayers read literature which featured same-sex love between men, the fetishism of gay relationships could lead to inappropriate behaviour.

During one convention I witnessed a group of female cosplayers loudly squealing at a stall selling yaoi. They flicked through their manga, showing each other the very graphic sexual scenes from their newly bought merchandise, until one spotted two male cosplayers holding hands. The group then proceeded to loudly refer to the couple as *'cute'* and *'sweet'* in friendly but patronising tones.

One of the men looked clearly uncomfortable with this reaction to his relationship, and judging from his deep frown, the other seemed to be annoyed with this exchange. As a result, a female cosplayer who oversaw this exchange went over to chastise the women who had made this couple feel uncomfortable. Explaining that the couple's relationship was

not intended for an audience and pointing out that no relationship should be *'gawked at'*. The reprimanding cosplayer assumed that she was a senior practitioner, telling the group that had acted inappropriately that *'even though it might [their] first time at a convention'*, they had to be more respectful or face getting into trouble.

This was not however an isolated incident. The cosplayers I spoke with similarly reported that some newer members treated male homosexuality as a spectacle. With such cosplayers being labelled as weebs who did not know the correct way to act around homosexual relationships as they failed to treat them as normative. Furthermore, just as I had witnessed at the yaoi stall, one cosplayer, who I interviewed within an outdoor space within a mainstream convention, discussed that she had been reprimanded for her treatment of a gay couple when she cosplayed for the first time over eight years ago. With Sam claiming that she had been taught the correct way to act by an established member of the subculture as a result.

> Sam: *'I would go out of my way to be nice to gay couples, because I thought it showed that I was accepting of it. But looking back I would have been annoyed at someone treating me like that, because it babied them. Another cosplayer explained to me that I was being a bit condescending and suggested how I should treat gay couples instead. I would tell others the same thing too if I saw them doing it.'*
>
> Adele: *'Why?'*
>
> Sam: *'Because I want to make sure that everyone feels comfortable and equal in cosplay.'*

Although the cosplayers who had acted in an inappropriate manner may have been tolerant of homosexuality, their fetishism of same-sex love resulted in them treating homosexual relationships as distinct. Which could ultimately disrupt the notion that the cosplaying subculture was a site where non-normative sexual orientations were normalised. However, by actively policing its members, the cosplaying subculture could teach others the norms of the subculture, preventing behaviour that may impact on members escape, therefore upholding cosplay as a Free Area.

As was found within the previous chapter, the cosplayers labelled members who broke the rules of the subculture as weebs, which conferred a degree of inexperience within the subculture. In Sam's case her inappropriate actions were presumed to stem from a degree of ignorance rather than being viewed as malicious. Which could suggest that weebs were granted a degree of leeway whilst learning the subculture's norms. With established members teaching new cosplayer the rules of the subculture. Furthermore, the label of weeb may distance the cosplayers who acted inappropriately from the core subculture, allowing cosplay to maintain its accepting image despite the undesirable actions of a minority of members.

I later spent a day at a mainstream convention with Sara. As well as James who had cosplayed for five years. With these cosplayers demonstrating that those who undermined the gendered performances of others could also be labelled as weebs.

At this convention a bunch of hairy muscled men dressed as young female superheroes flexed their muscles, with their behaviour contrasting with that of their chosen characters. Their outfits received laughter from non-costumed attendees, and they grinned broadly at this reaction. However, Sara and James presented the muscled cosplayer's actions in a negative light. Discussing the matter further within an informal field conversation which took place within one of the exhibition halls at this convention.

> James: *'Some crossplayers want to just wear a dress for the day and keep their facial hair and that's fine. But it's so annoying when people treat it as a joke. It's so common now to see weebs jumping on the "it's funny to see a guy in a dress" bandwagon for attention. It feels like they are mocking people who should feel safe about wearing what cosplays they want. But people think it's funny to see a man in a dress, and as long as they keep on praising them they will keep on doing it. They aren't gonna listen if we tell them to stop. Why would they if normies are giving them attention? They care about being told off by other cosplayers because they don't do it for them anyway.'*
>
> Sara: *'You never really see it at fan-run cons. I don't think people find it funny there.'*
>
> Adele: *'Why?'*

Sara: *'Because it's so overdone. Normies might find it funny because they don't see it all the time, but at the fan-run cons it's kind of separate from the public so people can feel safer dressing up as what they want. And if there are loads of guys in dresses because they want to be, if you see a weeb rocks up in a dress for attention they aren't going to get it. It doesn't seem as funny when more people are doing the same thing and not acting like it's weird. Fan-run cons are different to mainstream ones. People there are so much more open minded, so you can be more free in a sense. You don't have random parents taking their kids who stare at crossplayers like they are freaks.'*

James: *'Weebs wouldn't even go to fan-run cons in the first place. People go with their friends and if you're a weeb you wouldn't know cosplayers to go with. And how would they hear about them? There aren't adverts for them like at mainstream cons.'*

Adele: *'How did you hear about them?'*

Sara: *'Told by other cosplayers. Some of the cons were discussed in the closed online groups I was added to by friends. And when I went to one, I heard about more.'*

As was touched upon within Sara's quotes, I had similarly noticed that there were different reactions to the subversion of gender norms across conventions. Depending on whether these events were fan-run or not. As was mentioned earlier within this chapter, Danny's cosplay of a female character was normalised at a fan-run event, regardless of their physique and facial hair. However, at a mainstream convention, Danny's emulation received stares from non-costumed attendees, who judged Dannys's outfit to be humorous.

The conversation with James and Sara suggests that certain gendered emulations, which were approved by members of the public, were viewed as less acceptable within the cosplaying subculture. Being seen to mock the performances of others which could impact on their experiences of escape. However, as humorous male crossdressing was well established outside of a cosplaying context, with the cosplayers who engaged such behaviour being argued to play to members of the public. James suggested that little could be done to police such behaviour. Despite this, within the subculture itself such costumes could be devalued, which could prevent members from engaging in these emulations.

Some cosplayers additionally argued that they refrained from displaying markers of their sexuality due to a fear of receiving negative public reactions, having experienced this at mainstream events in the past. In contrast these cosplayers felt comfortable acting in an intimate way with their same sex partners at fan-run conventions. Arguing that the cosplayers within these events would be accepting of their sexuality.

In the ethnicity chapter it was shown that cosplayers created closed online spaces where the norms of the subculture could be upheld. With those who impacted on the escape of members being excluded from these sites. Which therefore provided cosplayers with safe virtual spaces which were likened to distinctive Free Areas. Adding to this, the conversation between James and Sara, as well as the perceived acceptance of homosexual at fan-run conventions, suggests that cosplayers also constructed empirical Free Areas. Which were closed to those who failed to uphold the subculture's norms allowing cosplayers to successfully escape within them. Therefore, whilst cosplaying subculture may be unable to enable escape in all settings due to cosplay's intersection with other groups, as well as members who played to alternative audiences. Through isolation this subculture could successfully provide spaces where cosplayers could escape from established conventions of sex and gender. Allowing cosplayers to feel comfortable when undertaken non-normative performances of gender and feel normalised when displaying a range of sexual orientations.

The Stigma of Intolerance

However even within these closed conventions, behaviours which could threaten the escape of cosplayers were still perceived to be present.

At one fan-run convention, a panel gave its audience the chance to sample sweets from Japan. With members electing to participate in a game where two players ate the end of a biscuit until their lips touched. One participant, Eric, was chosen and none of the men in the room rescinded their offer to volunteer as second player, who ended up being another man called Jake. However, Eric was clearly uncomfortable with this arrangement and when the game started, he attempted to break the biscuit in two. In response however, Jake gave Eric a kiss on the lips regardless, causing Eric to jump back and wipe his mouth. With Eric's response being treated negatively by some members of the audience.

'Seems a bit insecure with his sexuality to be that concerned about a peck.' remarked one individual, loud enough for Eric to hear.

'Some guys need to get over their fear of being seen as gay.' voiced another.

I discussed this interaction over lunch in a restaurant, after the panel drew to a close. With the cosplayers Emma and Tabatha- who had been cosplaying for six years. These cosplayers voiced that they were shocked by Eric's behaviour and whilst did not label Eric as homophobic, as his actions were not proof that he was uncomfortable with the sexuality of others. They explained that Eric's behaviour could upset non-heterosexual individuals by suggesting that gay interactions were viewed as undesirable by members of the cosplaying subculture. A space in which, they argued, all sexualities should be accepted. Therefore, the cosplayers claimed that members of the audience had chastised Eric to deter him from exhibiting similar behaviour in the future.

Emma: *'I can understand that some people hate physical contact and if someone kissed you without your consent that would be really wrong. But he volunteered to play the game for god's sake. And to react like that is just wrong, making out like a kiss with a guy is disgusting. That's not right to bring that casual intolerance into a LGBT friendly event. I don't think he did anything homophobic, otherwise he would have been asked to leave the con and people would be pretty icy towards him after that. But what he did still wasn't ok.'*

Tabatha: *'It's just weird that he reacted like that, any other cosplayer would have just played the game in the first case if they volunteered. It's just a kiss it's not like he tried to snog him.'*

In previous sections Jack and Lauren had claimed that homophobia was unacceptable within the cosplaying subculture, with those who expressed discomfort around gay individuals being framed as unwelcome within the subculture. This sentiment was repeated by Emma who claimed that those viewed as homophobic would be alienated by cosplayers. However, whilst Lauren had claimed that homosexuality was normalised within cosplay, Eric's actions had suggested otherwise. Although Eric may not have been viewed to be homophobic, his behaviour suggested that he was uncomfortable with same-sex interactions when they

involved him. With Tabatha presenting Eric as less tolerant than the wider subculture, and abnormal as a result.

However outside of a cosplaying context, Eric's reaction may be considered natural. Romantic gestures between men, even those enacted as a form of humour, can be perceived as a threat to the receiver's masculinity, resulting such advances being commonly treated in a negative manner (Blechner, 2009). Despite this, as such reactions could threaten the escape of cosplayers, behaviours permitted within everyday life could be viewed as unacceptable within this subculture. With public shaming being employed to deter such behaviour to ensure that cosplayers holding an array of sexual orientations would feel welcomed within the subculture. This could also grant individuals a degree of acceptance which they may be unable to locate within everyday life: as Lauren previously claimed that many of her friends concealed their sexuality in everyday life, due to a lack of understanding outside of cosplay.

Furthermore, public shaming may deter members from displaying behaviours which departed from the values of the subculture. With this censorship of opinions sustaining the notion that cosplayers held to a homogenous acceptance of homosexuality. With those who subverted this image being presented as an irregularity, thus separating their actions members of the wider subculture. As a result, stigmatising intolerance within the subculture could ensure that cosplay remained a site where individuals could feel open with their sexuality and uphold the escape of its members.

Restricting Access to the Subculture

Whilst Eric's actions were framed as undesirable, they were not viewed to be homophobic. With Emma suggesting that Eric would have been shunned by the cosplaying subculture if they were perceived as such. Cosplayers had similarly claimed that transphobic individuals would also be alienated by the cosplaying subculture. Which I witnessed first-hand at one mainstream event.

During this convention the group I was cosplaying with seemed to have acquired a new member called Mike. Mike was a first-time convention attendee, who seemed eager to be accepted within the cosplaying subculture. Changing into a manga style t-shirt he had

brought at the event and voicing an interest in cosplaying at the next convention. As the day wore on, the conversation focused on a cosplayer who had begun the process of transitioning. With the group expressing excitement and happiness towards this development. However, Mike argued that he *'didn't believe'* in gender fluidity, asserting that there were two genders and those who failed to conform to them exhibited *'some sort of dysmorphia'.* This resulted in the cosplayers arguing animatedly against this viewpoint, which I recorded excerpts of within my field notebook.

> Mike: *'Well I mean. I think your opinions are valid I just don't agree with them myself.'*
>
> Poppy: *'Well then you're wrong.'*
>
> Mike: *'People are who they are and I would never be horrible to someone because of it. I just don't believe in it.'*

The cosplayers tried to change Mike's stance on the gender, pointing out that he had never met a transgender individual and theorising that if he did, he might see the matter differently. However, Mike made it clear that his opinions on the subject would not change, claiming that the cosplayers should respect his opinion. This led the cosplayers pointing out that Mike's views were offensive and could be particularly damaging to hear at conventions. As many transgender cosplayers could *'be themselves'* in the cosplaying subculture by emulating the gender they identified with. With Mike reasserting that his opinion would not change.

After this exchange the cosplayers made it very clear that Mike and his opinions were not welcomed within this group. Some of the cosplayers were visibly hostile, and others answered his conversations with dismissive noises. In the end Mike excused himself and went to mingle with other people at the convention. After this exchange I asked Poppy how she felt about it, as we walked over to watch a masquerade event.

> Poppy: *'I don't have to respect the transphobic opinions of anyone. If you wanna think that way fine. But do it somewhere else. You don't get to be part of the cosplaying subculture and be transphobic, homophobic, sexist, racist or whatever.*

This is where me and my friends feel safe. Don't come in and try and change that and act like we have to put up with it.'

After this incident, the cosplaying group I was with relayed the conversation to other members of the subculture, causing Mike's story to spread amongst separate groups of cosplayers, who avoided him as a result. Emily who described herself as a transgendered female and had been cosplaying for seven years, recounted her interaction with Mike. During an informal conversation at a pub. Which we visited after attending the mainstream convention where the incident with Mike too place.

Emily: *'He tried to chat to me, but I was like "you wouldn't want to talk to me, I have gender dysmorphia" the transphobic prick.'*

Although certain transgressions could be overlooked within the cosplaying subculture, rectified through public policing to discourage such exchanges in the future. Homophobic and transphobic attitudes were viewed as particularly abhorrent and were not tolerated. These attitudes could have negative repercussions for cosplayers, who claimed they were able to feel comfortable expressing their gendered identities and sexualities within this subculture. As a result, whilst Mike had argued that his opinions should be respected, Poppy and the other cosplayers had dismissed this claim. Presenting intolerance and cosplay as incompatible, as discriminatory opinions undermined cosplay as a site where individuals could find acceptance.

Furthermore, the previous chapter demonstrated that members of the subculture circulated the identity of deviant cosplayers. Resulting in racist cosplayers facing alienation from the subculture both on and offline. Adding to this, the example of Mike also showed that this method could be used to prevent outsiders with conflicting values from gaining entry to the subculture: through cutting off their ability to have meaningful social interactions with members of the subculture. Ultimately allowing cosplay to continue serving as a Free Area where gender, sex and sexuality were, at least on the surface, accepted by its members.

Summary

This section demonstrates that cosplay provided a convincing Free Area, which enabled escape due to the subculture's acceptance of non-normative genders and sexualities. Through cosplay, members claimed that they could experiment with their gendered identities, with the subculture permitting members to cross the boundaries of sex without stigmatisation. Furthermore, the subculture also provided and a sense of normativity for those with a range of genders and sexualities, which was argued to be absent within everyday life.

However, the escape of members could still be limited by context. With the subculture's value of accurate emulations leading some to put limitations on their crossplays due to their own physiques. Despite this, as was identified within the ethnicity chapter, such cosplayers could still provide successful performances of characters with genders distinct from their own, by incorporating aspects of their everyday identity into their performances.

For cosplayers who wanted to experiment with their gendered identity or emulate character's whose sex aligned with those they identified with, cosplay acted as a Free Area where their performances were normalised. As gender was considered fluid within this subculture. However, the notion of gender fluidity was not a notion that was exclusive to cosplay and as a result, cosplayers were argued to take liberal values from everyday life to construct its rules. Which could explain why gender was considered fluid whilst ethnicity was not.

Whilst the cosplaying subculture was seen to place emphasis on normalising non-normative sexualities and gendered identities, whilst providing a space where members could play with their gender. Outsiders with alternative values could disrupt member's escape. Therefore, cosplayers could react by altering the positionality of their Free Areas, shielding them from outsiders to enable their escape. Suggesting that cosplayers may alter their Free Areas to suit their everyday needs. Framing Free Areas as malleable rather than distinct fragile spaces. Furthermore, cosplayers were also found to have constructed their own fan-run conventions, which were closed to members of the public. In which the norms of the value could be upheld, allowing escape to be fully realised within them.

This chapter also revealed that cosplayers may have placed the subculture's norms onto the media they consumed, resulting in some framing Japan as an empirical Free Area, with this being argued to act as a powerful method of escape in itself. Finally, the cosplaying subculture was found to uphold the escape of its members through policing the behaviour of cosplayers. As well as restricting those with alternative values from entering the subculture. Consequently, when it came to sex, gender and sexuality, cosplay was found to be a robust Free Area, which successfully allowed its members to escape from constraints and intolerances of every-day life.

Chapter Seven: Social Disorders and Mental Health

Chapter six explored sex, gender and sexuality within the cosplaying subculture. Considering the extent to which cosplay offered its members escape in relation to these areas. Cosplay was found provide members with accepting space in which various gendered identities were normalised. Furthermore, established conventions of sex and sexuality were found to be subverted within the cosplaying subculture, allowing members to escape through cosplay to a large degree.

In this chapter, attention turns to the topics of mental health and social disorders, with the cosplaying subculture being found to present itself as accepting of these areas. However, whilst chapters five and six demonstrated that cosplayers placed an emphasis on ensuring that members were treated equally regardless of their gender, sexuality and ethnicity, in order to preserve their escape. Cosplayers with social disorders and mental health issues could be treated in an overtly distinctive manner, in an attempt to ensure their inclusion within the subculture.

The first half of this chapter focuses on social disorders, examining how the individuals holding them were treated and framed, whilst considering the impact this could have on cosplayers experiences of escape. It then proceeds to examine the relationship between mental health and cosplay. Discussing how mental illnesses were treated, as well as how escape could be upheld despite the mental health of some members. With this chapter proposing that cosplayers may rely on notions within everyday life to build their norms on how to ensure inclusivity, which could assist or inhibit the escape of members.

Social Disorders and the Cosplaying Subculture

After my first day cosplaying with a group, I ended up at a nearby pub which became packed with cosplayers once the convention had finished. Soon after, our group was approached by a cosplayer called Zack. Who despite being a cosplayer for over eight years, was wearing a poor-quality outfit. Zack proceeded to name the characters we were dressed up as, interrupting our attempts to reciprocate conversation with him by monologuing his thoughts

on the shows we were emulating. The cosplayers smiled politely at Zack despite their interruption, which surprised me as one of the cosplayers, Poppy, was usually not very forgiving of such behaviour. In fact, I had witnessed Poppy walk away mid-sentence from those who had tried to talk over her before. However, when it came to Zack such behaviour seemed to be permitted.

After a while one of the cosplayers suggested that we should *'take some selfies'* and Zack beamed when she asked him if he wanted to be involved. After this, Zack walked over to another cosplaying group and loudly recounted his knowledge of their emulated characters. As he walked from group to group Zack received kind but slightly condescending looks.

After Zack left, the cosplayers explained that everyone knew Zack, going out of their way to be nice to him as they were conscious that he was *'on the spectrum'.* With an accepting attitude towards those with social disorders being argued to be expected of the members of the subculture. Many of the cosplayers additionally claimed that they had little interaction with those with such social disorders before they entered the cosplaying subculture. However, this changed when they started cosplaying. As Mathew- who had been cosplaying for eleven years, discussed with Poppy and Emma as we sat within the pub.

> Mathew: *'In school there were some people with Asperger's and learning difficulties, but they were often in separate classes, so you never really spoke to them or got to know them. It's mean to say, but they were treated like they were weird. And you didn't go out of your way to talk to them if I'm being honest. But when you're cosplaying it's normal to be approached by random people who you might not talk to otherwise and for me that included people with social disabilities. I remember the first time I was unsure about how to act and whether I should have just walked away. But my friend who got me into cosplaying just treated the guy like a normal human being and everyone else did the same. And it made me realise how wrong I'd been about that kind of thing.'*
>
> Poppy: *'Zack apologised to me at one convention for being annoying. He told me that sometimes he goes too far, and that he knows that he doesn't know when to stop, like other people do. He is a good guy. He can't help how he is so you have to be a bit more patient.'*

Emma: 'You're kind of expected to be nice to people even if they are different. I'm not saying you have to be friends with Zack, but at least saying hi is the decent thing to do. If you didn't then people might think you're a bit of a dick. And people might encourage you to compliment his costume or something. If someone was straight up horrible to Zack [there would be] a lot of people who would be angry with them especially as he was bullied at school because he's different. I think we can be quite defensive over him and others who may be more at risk at feeling left out. We want them to feel like they can have fun cosplaying too. At some fan-run conventions they try and make it easier for people who find it hard talking to others to feel involved. Like they do events away from loud noises that can make people uncomfortable. One place did badges which told people if you wanted people to come up and talk to you in case you found it hard to do so yourself.'

Howlin (1997) argues that those with social disorders are often aware that their social interactions may differ from that of others, being conscious that their alternative conduct may be viewed in a negative manner. With Poppy's quote suggesting that Zack was similarly aware that he acted differently from other cosplayers. Having expressed that he found it difficult to judge his behaviour at conventions. This could therefore suggest that cosplay had failed to grant Zack escape from his social disorder, as he continued to present himself as distinct from others who could regulate their behaviour more successfully. However, whilst cosplay may not grant individuals complete freedom from their social disorders, the cosplayers above argued that the subculture provided an accepting environment for those holding them. Therefore, cosplay may act as a Free Area where individuals can find acceptance despite their differences, rather than providing escape from them.

Within this conversation, Mathew argued that the nature of the cosplaying subculture allowed individuals to interact with those with social disorders, however in other contexts Mathew suggested that there may be less opportunity for this to occur. In Mathew's school those with social disabilities were separated from neurotypical individuals. Causing those with social disorders to be viewed as abnormal and avoided as a result. However, Mathew argued that within cosplay cosplayers could interact with those with social disorders more readily, as conversations between strangers were commonplace. With cosplay therefore, subverting the boundaries found within Mathew's everyday life.

Furthermore, through mirroring the behaviour of wider cosplayers, Mathew claimed that he learnt how to interact with individuals with social disorders. Allowing him to shed his previous attitudes on social disorder which had he had built within everyday life. Emma additionally claimed that some conventions actively encouraged cosplayers to interact with those with social disorders, with those who failed to do so being framed as undesirable. This could therefore ensure that individuals could feel included within the cosplaying subculture regardless of their social disabilities, providing them with a level of acceptance which may be less available elsewhere.

Alternative Treatment of Cosplayers with Social Disorders

The cosplayers above claimed that those with social disabilities were accepted within the cosplaying subculture and made to feel included within it. However, they were not always treated in the same manner as other members.

As was highlighted within the previous chapters, the accuracy of emulations was often highly prized within the cosplaying subculture, being seen to indicate the wearer's dedication to the activity. In contrast, low quality outfits could be met with criticism, demonstrating a lack of effort that reflected badly on an individual. Despite this, although the cosplayers acknowledged that Zack's cosplays '*weren't very good',* his outfits were not viewed negatively. When I asked why this was the case, during in a semi-structured with Emma. Taking place at a coffee shop during a fan-run convention. Emma argued that some of those with social disabilities were less able to produce high quality outfits. Therefore, such cosplayers were not judged in the same manner as others.

> Emma: *'Zack's on the spectrum isn't he. It would be pretty nasty to take the piss out of his cosplays don't you think? That costume is probably the best he can do. If he's having fun that's all that matters. You kind of have to understand that he's different so his costumes may not be as good, so you have to judge him with that in mind. If someone else was wearing that- like someone who wasn't on the spectrum, I would be like, "What the hell is that", because it's made pretty badly. But for Zack that may have taken a lot of hard work. So it deserves recognition as putting in effort is one of the most important things in cosplay. He's always so happy when you give him a*

compliment about his cosplays and even though they might not be the best, saying something nice to someone never hurts.'

Adele: *'Would you compliment Zack's outfits if you didn't think they looked good?'*

Emma: *'To be honest I think a lot of people do. Complimenting someone is a good way to make them feel included in cosplay. It's just being nice. I think most cosplayers put in extra effort to make sure that people with disabilities feel included, so Zack always gets a lot of compliments.'*

Adele: *'Why the extra effort for those with disabilities?'*

Emma: *'Because if you have a problem talking to people, you're more likely to feel left out. So it's our responsibility to make more effort to make sure that doesn't happen. People can just ignore people on the spectrum or treat them like they are weird. But cosplayers include them because they are part of our community too.'*

Emma's quotes suggested that the cosplaying subculture could treat cosplayers with social disabilities in a distinctive manner. Zack's cosplays were assumed to be *'the best he could do'* due to his social disorder, resulting in his outfit's acceptance. Despite Emma claiming such cosplays would be devalued if worn by neurotypical individuals, Zack's cosplays were instead framed as demonstrating a comparative level of application in relation to his perceived skill set. Resulting in Zack's costume being viewed in a positive manner. Adhering to the cosplaying subculture's values of putting effort into one's outfits. Therefore, whilst a cosplayer's social disabilities could be argued to hinder their emulation attempts. By placing alternative expectations on such individual's, the cosplaying subculture may grant them the ability to provide successful performances, overcoming the factors which could inhibit their escape. Whilst framing those with social disorders as upholding the cosplaying subculture's norms.

Furthermore, Emma also suggested that cosplayers could go out of their way to compliment the costumes worn by those with social disorders. Social disabilities were argued to hinder attempts to prompt social interactions, with compliments being used to facilitate a degree of inclusion. This was a trend which I had witnessed myself first-hand. At one fan-run convention, a cosplayer who I was told had autism, showed off her costume at the

masquerade. Despite her outfit being very poor quality compared to the other entries, she received one of the loudest applauds when she came on stage. Being heavily complimented after the show's conclusion. However, whilst Emma had framed such compliments in a positive manner, this attitude was not shared all cosplayers. As Amanda discussed as she sat next to me watching this masquerade.

> Amanda: *'I think it's wrong to pretend like a cosplayer's outfit is amazing just because they have a disability. Yeah clap and make them know that their efforts are appreciated, but when people act like they are really good and tell them how amazing their costumes are it's just lying, and I don't think that's ok. It's patronising babying someone like that. It makes out that you're above them if you feel like you can treat them like they are a child if that makes sense. It makes it seem like they are completely different from other cosplayers if you treat them so differently.'*

In the above quote Amanda had framed the complimenting of cosplayers with social disorders as *'babying'*, mirroring the work of McGuire (2016) which found that the West held a long tradition of infantilizing the disabled subject. Framing them as the subject of pity and inferior as a result. Furthermore, Amanda had additionally claimed that cosplayers treated those with social disabilities in a patronising manner. Which I had similarly noted when I watched cosplayers reacting to Zack, despite these cosplayers' good intentions.

Such sentiments were found to be widely discussed by academics. Individuals with social disabilities were argued to be seen as reliant on the generosity of neurotypical members of society: placing non-disabled individuals in a position of authority and therefore superiority (Dolmage, 2004; Haller and Preston, 2017). Therefore, whilst Emma suggested that the cosplayers treatment of those with social disabilities demonstrated the subversion of conventions within everyday life, highlighting that the cosplaying subculture was committed to including individuals who could be alienated in other contexts, such actions may instead perpetuate the norms found within everyday life. Presenting those with social disabilities as inferior and reinforcing a degree of distinction between neurotypical cosplayers and those with social disabilities.

It was not only the costumes of cosplayers with social disorders which were treated in an alternative manner. Such cosplayers could also be granted a degree of leniency in terms of

their behaviour. Which was discussed within a focus group, taking place within a gastropub during a fan-run convention. Conducted with Poppy, Emma as well as Zoe- who had been cosplaying for five years.

> Poppy: *'Zack doesn't really get social cues so you kind of have to let him off even though he might be annoying. He used to get bullied at school because of how he acts sometimes, but he's really happy here because everyone's nice to him. Most people wouldn't be able to spend the whole day with him. But everyone's always nice to him because they know that he doesn't mean to be so irritating. They would never be rude to his face like they were at school. When he's being too much I'll just go somewhere else, so I don't end up snapping at him.'*
>
> Emma: *'I do feel a bit bad for him sometimes though. He hasn't actually got like a tight friendship group and people can kind of brace themselves when he comes over. But I don't think he notices. He seems happy mulling between groups. And he's always included so I guess that's all that matters.'*
>
> Zoe: *'People might say hi to Zack or ask him about his costume but it never really goes beyond that because he can be so intense if you spend too much time with him. I think that happens quite often with people with social disorders. You make them feel welcomed by saying hi, but most people don't know what to do after that. So you have a quick conversation before it gets awkward, because if you're standing there wondering how to act it's not going to be pleasant for anyone.'*

Whilst in Zack's everyday life, his breaches of social etiquette were argued to have resulted in his alienation. With Zack being bullied at school as a result. In contrast, Poppy claimed that Zack was *'happy'* within the cosplaying subculture, as his undesirable behaviour could be overlooked by its members, allowing Zack to feel accepted. This could therefore suggest that cosplay had granted Zack a space which he was less able to locate within everyday life, where he could find acceptance despite his social disorder, which could therefore be viewed as a means of escape.

However, Emma questioned the extent to which Zack and his social disorders were actually accepted. Whilst other cosplayers were seen to form distinct friendship groups, Emma argued that Zack had failed to locate one. With Zack instead moving between networks.

Furthermore, both Poppy and Zoe presented the interactions shared with Zack as both superficial and brief. With Poppy claiming that she was unable to abide Zack's behaviour for extended periods of time. Therefore, whilst those within the cosplaying subculture may refrain from exhibiting overt negative reactions towards those with social disorders, as their inclusion was expected by the wider subculture. Cosplayers may instead hold tolerance towards those with social disabilities rather than complete acceptance of them. With such individuals being treated in a distinctive manner due to their social conditions, impacting on their experiences of cosplay.

Despite this, by removing herself from social interactions with Zack, Poppy argued she was able prevent confrontations, therefore sustaining their relationship. With Zoe similarly noting that the shallow nature of exchanges with those with social disorders prevented them from becoming awkward and therefore negative. Despite Zack failing to have a concrete cosplaying friendship group, Emma went on to suggest that this was not an issue. With both Poppy and Zoe claiming that this arrangement ensured that interactions with Zack were positive due to their brevity. As a result, whilst those with social disabilities may not be normalised with the cosplaying subculture and treated differently as a result. The alternative manner in which neurotypical cosplayers interacted with them could ensure that those with social disabilities continued to feel welcomed and included within the subculture. Therefore, whilst the interactions that the members of the subculture shared with Zack could be framed as insincere. The above quotes suggest that they still provided Zack with a degree of acceptance and inclusion. Therefore, cosplay could be argued to have successfully enabled Zack's to escape from the conventions found within his everyday life. Acting as a Free Area in which he could experience positive social interactions.

Superficial Interactions

Whilst the alternative treatment of cosplayers with social disorders could be seen to ensure their inclusion within the subculture, this distinctive conduct was not always positively received.

At one fan-run convention I spent the long weekend with a group of cosplayers for the first time. With one of its members, Andrew- who had cosplayed for four years, revealing that he

was autistic. As a group we played board games during the day, with the conversation drifting to our past cosplays. Andrew took out his phone to show me some pictures, leaning in closely which made me feel uncomfortable. However, not knowing how to respond in such a situation, I kept quiet. Despite this, Andrew's friend advised him that he was too close, causing Andrew to back away slightly whilst continuing to present me with pictures of his cosplays.

As we proceeded with the game, Andrew was chastised for talking over other people. Allowing the conversations that I shared with Andrew, to be more meaningful than the ones I had undertaken with Zack. Which were completely one sided in comparison.

As the day wore on, the cosplayers discussed how those with social disabilities were treated within the cosplaying subculture. The group explained that being kind to those with social disorders was expected, as the subculture held a reputation for being accepting. With Andrew claiming that cosplay provided him with a peer group where he was accepted despite this autism for the first time, and not treated distinctively as a result of it. The cosplayers also claimed that those who were seen to discriminate against individuals with social disorders faced being stigmatised or pushed out of the subculture as a result. However, whilst cosplayers were argued to be accepting of those with social disabilities, overt displays of acceptance could in fact alienate those with disorders.

One cosplayer called Grant, who had been cosplaying for six years, framed being '*extra nice*' to those with social disorders as belittling. A point that Grant, Andrew and I discussed as we continued playing boardgames within the convention.

Although Grant pointed out that cosplayers may speak to those with social disorders, as cosplay encouraged interactions between strangers. Grant claimed that these brief interactions were not enough to make members aware of how to treat those with social disorders. Furthermore, Grant claimed that he *'only knew to treat Andrew like a regular person'* when he became closer to the friendship group that Andrew was a part of. With his new peers informing him that the patronising manner in which he treated Andrew was *'wrong'.*

> Andrew: *'Sometimes I find it annoying when people speak to me because they feel like it's a good deed or something for some reason. I have friends, so I don't need*

people who don't actually want to be my friend. I don't want people to be nice to me because I have autism I want people to be nice because they like me. It just makes me feel different from everyone else. When I'm around my friends I used to get hurt when someone would talk to me and then they would avoid me because I would be crossing boundaries and they wouldn't know how to react.'

Grant: *'I remember once Andrew was cheating at a game and I told him to stop because he was pissing everyone off. And some random cosplayer came up and told me that I shouldn't talk to you like that because of your autism.'*

Andrew: *'She made me feel really awkward when she came over. I didn't need anyone to intervene on my behalf because it wasn't any of her business.'*

Grant: *'I ended up telling her off for being condescending towards you even though I was mad at you in the first place. I asked her if she actually knew anyone with autism and she said she didn't. Then I explained it was wrong to lump all people with autism as needing special treatment. And she apologised and explained that she never thought of it that way. She was just trying to make sure that he was ok but she went about it the wrong way because she didn't really understand. Some cosplayers think that everyone with a social disorder is unable to talk to others or make friends on their own so they act super condescending around them. But it's a spectrum and Andrew obviously is fine with making friends. I think most people just don't understand how to act around them.'*

Adele: *'Why do you think that is?'*

Grant: *'I guess there aren't loads of people with them [social disorders] in cosplay so how are you going to learn about them if you're never properly around them? And I guess even outside of cosplay you don't get to meet them or learn how to be around them.'*

Whilst the female cosplayer in Grants account may have initially regarded her defence of Andrew as an attempt to ensure his wellbeing within the cosplaying subculture. Her actions were instead found to be alienating. Which Grant argued may have stemmed from her inexperience in interacting with those with social disorders.

Furthermore, although the distinctive treatment of cosplayers with social disabilities was argued to have allowed Zack to feel welcomed within the cosplaying subculture. Permitting him to behave in a manner which could otherwise lead to his alienation. For Andrew such actions were instead argued to reinforce a sense of distinction from neurotypical cosplayers. Highlighting that his social disorder continued to mark him as distinct within cosplay. This could therefore suggest that the methods utilised to ensure the escape for cosplayers with social disorders, may not be universally applicable, with escape again being shown to be dependent on context.

Whilst within the ethnicity chapter, alternative means of escape were found to coexist within the cosplaying subculture. Andrew's escape was found to be frequently interrupted by those aiming to facilitate his inclusion. Which Grant claimed stemmed from individuals generalising the needs of cosplayers with social disabilities. Therefore, whilst Andrew had framed his escape as a degree of normalisation despite his autism. Wider cosplayers may have assumed that Andrew instead sought interactions and kindness, resulting in the distinctive treatment he aimed to avoid. With the perceived escape projected onto Andrew, actively disrupting the escape of his own. Consequently, although Cohen and Taylor present escape as a personal endeavour, Andrew's experiences may suggest that escape can also be social. Being projected onto others rather than being solely held by the self. With an individual's perceived context having an influential role on their experiences of escape.

Furthermore, Grant additionally claimed that cosplayers may assume that individuals with social disorders as a collective had an issue with interacting with others. Being framed as the reason why Andrew experienced condescending interactions. Which could also explain why some cosplayers had concluded that Andrew sought basic interactions with wider members of the subculture.

This trend was not only reported within the cosplaying subculture. Biklen et al (2007) similarly found that those with social disabilities were assumed to be incompetent as a whole, due to established stereotypes and generalisations. Therefore, established notions on social disorders may remain present within cosplay. With motivations for escape being projected onto individuals with social disorders by wider members. With the interactions experienced as a result having the potential to inhibit escape rather than assist it.

Teaching Inclusivity

Despite Grant's initial treatment of Andrew, Grant argued that he had been taught how to act in an inclusive manner towards those with social disabilities by other experienced cosplayers. Subsequently teaching others the correct way to act around Andrew by chastising the alienating behaviour of members. Therefore, as was found with both the ethnicity and the gender and sexuality chapters. Members of the cosplaying subculture could attempt to ensure inclusivity for those with social disorders through teaching and policing.

I had personally learnt how to interact with cosplayers with social disorders after spending time with this group. After seeing the exchanges between Andrew and his friends, I discovered how to interact with Andrew in a more meaningful manner. Discarding the patronising idea that I had to prioritise Andrews happiness. Which ensured that we both felt comfortable in our interactions, allowing me to establish a more genuine bond with him as a result. Furthermore, I continued to use this knowledge when interacting with subsequent cosplayers with social disorders.

At a mainstream convention later within the year, Poppy and I were approached by a cosplayer, and his non-costumed father. The cosplayer wore a badge which disclosed his social disability, bowing and talking to us animatedly about the media we were emulating. Whilst Poppy smiled at this cosplayer before excusing herself, just as she claimed she did with Zack. I made a conscious effort to ensure that my conduct was not belittling. Which resulted in the cosplayer's dad thanking me for *'talking to him like an adult'*.

Whilst norms and values based on sexuality, gender and ethnicity were found to be well established within the cosplaying subculture, Poppy had treated the cosplayer with a social disorder in a distinctive manner. An action which Andrew and Grant had framed in a negative light. Furthermore, at the convention I attended with Andrew and Grant, I saw a number of cosplayers initially treating Andrew in a patronising way, before their actions were called out by Andrew's friends. Which could suggest that the norms held by Grant and his peers were not unanimously held amongst all cosplayers. With Grant's conversation offering an explanation to why this was the case.

Although the cosplaying subculture could facilitate interactions with strangers, thus increasing the chance of meeting those with social disorders. Such cosplayers remained a minority within it, which decreased the frequency of such interactions. Furthermore, as many interactions shared between these cosplayers were argued to be brief, they may be unable to equip neurotypical cosplayers with the knowledge on how to ensure the inclusion of those with social disorders. As was argued by Grant '*how are you going to learn about them if you're never properly around them?'.* Consequently, whilst the cosplaying subculture may broadcast a desire to include members with social disabilities, a lack of experience may prevent its members from being able to successfully do so.

Despite this however, whilst Andrew may have been treated as distinct by members of the wider cosplaying subculture, which may have impacted on his experiences of escape. Cosplay may have provided him with a Free Area in the form of a friendship group who accepted him and treated him in a normative manner, regardless of his autism. Therefore, just like the cosplayers who attended closed fan-run conventions to be treated in a normative manner. As well as those who used closed cosplay forums, which were shielded from the public, to escape from intolerance. Andrew may have preserved cosplay as a Free Area by locating a shielded space within it, with Andrew's cosplaying friendship group successfully providing him with an escape, whilst policing those who could disrupt it.

The Framing of Social Disorders

The distinctive way that cosplayers with social disorders could be treated, could also stem from the narrative of social disorders present within everyday life. Whilst Ortega (2009) argues that sex, gender and ethnicity are viewed as intrinsic traits that make up an individual, social disorders are instead argued to be viewed as a handicap. As a result, individuals with social disorders are often categorised as distinct and, in many cases, presented as inferior to wider members of society (Ortega, 2009; Keith, 1996). Being framed as objects of pity to be treated in an infantilised manner due to this inferior status (Wilson, 2003). Consequently, Breakey (2006) argues that this narrative has resulted in a strong cultural expectation that those with social disorders should be treated with kindness. Which may explain why a cosplayer had felt the need to intervene on Andrew's behalf.

However, the social expectation of kindness towards those with social disabilities could legitimise patronising behaviour (Murray, 2008). With many accounts of those with social disorders demonstrating that gestures of goodwill towards these individuals were in fact condescending, leading to feelings of alienation (Crist, 2015, Mee, 2014). This was also expressed within Andrew's quote, as the social interactions he received due to his autism resulted in sense of distinction from wider cosplayers. Despite this, academics claim that such alienating behaviour persists due to a low level of public awareness towards social disabilities within society (Rimmerman, 2013; Byrne and Lundy, 2011). Which could therefore suggest that this lack of understanding was also present within the cosplaying subculture, despite claims that cosplay was a site for inclusion for those with social disorders.

Furthermore, Barnard et al (2000) argue that there is a lack of discussion concerning the inclusion of those with social disorders within society. Leading to low levels of awareness on this matter within everyday life (Byrne and Lundy, 2011). As many cosplayers similarly lacked a degree of understanding when it came to the inclusion of those with social disorders, this could therefore suggest that the subculture may rely upon the norms within everyday life to shape its values.

This theory could be further evidenced by the cosplaying subculture's high level of awareness on issues relating to ethnicity, gender and sexuality; substantive areas that are frequently discussed by wider society, often with an agenda to ensure equality and tolerance (Richardson and Monroe, 2012; Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Olson, 2006). Therefore, cosplayers may have drawn from established arguments on these areas to shape the rules of the subculture, in an attempt to ensure the inclusivity of its members. Demonstrating a degree of interconnectivity between everyday life and Free Areas. With notions within the former being seen to influence the norms of the latter.

Social Disorders: Accepted but Devalued

Although the cosplayers I spoke with argued that the cosplaying subculture was accepting of social disabilities, social disorders were also found to be devalued by members of the subculture. In 2016 BBC news released a short video entitled 'Why do autistic people really

love manga?'[16] featuring staff from a Japanese goods shop wearing cosplays. This video was widely shared by cosplayers, receiving a great deal of criticism from members of the subculture. Some accused the BBC of generalising the hobbies of autistic individuals. Pointing out that those with social disorders enjoyed a range of hobbies, with many failing to hold an interest in Japanese media. Furthermore, through generalising their interests, the BBC was argued to present autistic individuals as *'all being the same'*, exacerbating a common depiction that autistic people were *'like robots'.* However, whilst some criticised the video for the detrimental consequences it could have for individuals with autism, others voiced concerns that it could lead to all cosplayers being associated with the disorder. As Theo, a cosplayer for three years, discussed during an informal conversation in the exhibition hall of a mainstream convention.

> Theo: *'I have nothing against autism. I know people that have it. And I know that some cosplayers have autism, and that's why cosplays so great because it welcomes people despite their differences. But it's not like most cosplayers are autistic. But people already think that geeks have no social skills and videos like that reinforce it. And if people see manga as something for people with autism, people will think that cosplayers are autistic too, as we obviously like it if we are cosplaying it.'*
>
> Adele: *'Is it bad to be seen as autistic?'*
>
> Theo: *'Well most of us aren't so it's a bit offensive to be assumed to be. It's just annoying to be treated like our hobby shows that we have no social skills.'*

Opinions which mirrored Theo's were also found on a number of forums and comments on social media. Like Theo, many of these accounts claimed that whilst the cosplaying subculture was welcoming of those with social disorders. Individuals did not want to be associated with social disorders personally. With some treating autism as if it were an insult. Therefore, despite claims of acceptance within the subculture, members could continue to subscribe to conventions within everyday life, in which autism is devalued and treated as a

[16] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/business-36560792/my-shop-tokyotoys-in-glasgow-draws-a-range-of-customers (accessed 28/09/2019)

negative trait (Durig, 1996). Undermining the accepting nature that the cosplaying subculture projected.

Theo had also expressed concerns that an association with autism could reinforce existing stereotypes of geeks. With both geek culture and autism being widely associated with a lack of social skills (Salter and Blodgett, 2017; Bardsen and Lewis, 2017). As a result, Theo voiced concern regarding how outsiders to the subculture would view cosplay. This may again suggest that Free Areas and everyday life are more interconnected than was presented by Cohen and Taylor. Rather than offering complete escape, Free Areas could also be subject to notions from everyday life. With Theo voicing concerns about the stereotypes placed upon cosplay. With his Free Area having the potential to impact upon his everyday identity.

Whilst Theo voiced an awareness that social disorders were stigmatised. Arguing that cosplay's association with social disorders could lead to cosplayers being labelled as anti-social. Theo continued to assert that those with social disabilities were welcome within the subculture. With this inclusion being framed as a key component of what made *'cosplay so great'.* Therefore, whilst members of the cosplaying subculture may inhibit the escape of those with social disorders or present these disorders in a devalued manner. It may ultimately remain tolerant of those with social disabilities, promoting their inclusion within it.

So far, this chapter has explored social disorders within the cosplaying subculture. Examining the attitudes held towards them by members, as well as the ways that cosplayers tried to ensure the inclusion of individuals with social disabilities. However, it was theorised that cosplayers may rely on norms formed within everyday life to shape their views on inclusion. Which resulted in many cosplayers acting in a manner that could alienate those with social disorders and interrupt their escape. In the second half of this chapter, attention will turn to the topic of mental health. Exploring cosplayers' attitudes towards this area as well as how issues relating to mental health were resolved to uphold members escape.

Mental Health and the Cosplaying Subculture

Many cosplayers I spoke with claimed that the cosplaying subculture as a whole was particularly knowledgeable about and accepting of mental health issues. In fact, a number of

cosplayers discussed that whilst they had started cosplaying due to their interests in geek media, it was the subculture's attitude towards mental health which had encouraged them to embed themselves within it. As Lucy explained during an informal conversation, on the concourse outside of a mainstream convention.

> Lucy: *'I actually started getting more involved in the community side of cosplay because it was so good about my mental health problems. I went to a meet and I was really worried about my anxiety holding me back from talking to people, which was making me anxious and fidgety. But a cosplayer noticed it and checked to see if I was ok. She told me about how loads of people feel nervous meeting new people for the first time and it can be especially scary for people with anxiety. She must have known that I had it, but she didn't make me feel put on the spot. I was nervous about someone finding out I had anxiety because I thought they wouldn't know how to be around me. But she obviously properly knew about it, so it was reassuring. So I knew right away that I'd be accepted here. I don't have to pretend to be ok on days when I'm not but in other places I feel like I have to pretend to hold myself together. If I have a bad day, people help me deal with it if I need help, and then it's done. No funny looks, no tiptoeing around me. If I broke down at work people might pity me or treat me like I'm weird. It's nice being in a community that accepts you for who you are.'*

For Lucy, a wider cosplayer's awareness of her anxiety and the respectful way in which it was treated enabled her to feel comfortable within the subculture. Furthermore, despite Lucy fearing that her anxiety would hinder her chances of communicating with others, it was actively used as a means of prompting social interactions. As a cosplayer was seen to have approached Lucy due to the physical displays of her mental illness.

Other cosplayers I spoke with similarly discussed that they made an effort to initiate conversation with those seen to have anxiety. Arguing those suffering from mental health issues could be reluctant to prompt social interactions. One cosplayer even listed the signs of anxiety, which allowed them to identify who they should approach to establish conversations with. When I asked this cosplayer why they were so knowledgeable about mental health, they attributed this to the nature of the cosplaying subculture. Claiming that

as the subculture was very open with mental illness, this allowed members to learn about disorders, which may not be discussed as openly in other settings.

Whilst Cloudsdale's (2006) historical analysis of mental health shows that attitudes on the matter have undoubtedly improved Newman (2010) argues that there is still an established cultural taboo, which prevents individuals from discussing issues on mental health. Furthermore, whilst large public campaigns have highlighted the prevalence of mental health disorders, aiming to break the silence surrounding them[17], Hill et al (2016) argue that mental illnesses continue to be stigmatised, being regarded as issues that are unsuitable for public discussion.

In contrast however, cosplayers were seen to subvert this cultural norm, which had initially surprised me when I first started cosplaying. At one event I sat with a couple of cosplayers I had just met, with the conversation quickly touching upon personal accounts of their mental health; which they felt comfortable discussing in front of me, a relative stranger. However, over the next few months I became accustomed to such talk. As many cosplayers shared the consensus that mental health should not be hidden away, as this was argued to lead to mental illnesses being viewed as taboo. As a result, I learnt a great deal of information about a number of mental illnesses. As well as how to interact with the individuals who experienced them. Which was similarly discussed within an informal conversation with Josh- who had cosplayed for just over two years. With our conversation taking place within the entrance queue of a mainstream convention.

> Josh: *'In cosplay it seems like there are a lot of people with [mental] illnesses, but all that's different is we are willing to talk about them. Rates of mental health problems are just as high elsewhere, but people just hide them. But when you talk about something that so many people struggle with, you realise that it's completely normal. And when people talk about what it's like for them and what they need you can make sure that everyone feels comfortable and supported together at conventions.'*

[17] Lloyds Bank 'Get the Inside Out' campaign is a good example: https://www.lloydsbank.com/help-guidance/gettheinsideout.asp (accessed 28/09/2019)

As was shown within Josh's quote many cosplayers presented the cosplaying subculture as a space where mental illnesses were not just accepted but normalised, with mental health being framed as a common issue faced by many within society. As a result, mental health problems were widely discussed, which as was found in my case, could equip those within the subculture with the knowledge on how to interact with them.

For Lucy the subcultures treatment of her anxiety meant that she did not have to disguise it or *'pretend to be ok'* when her mental illness made her feel uncomfortable. Whilst Hill et al (2016) argue that public displays of mental distress could result in individuals being viewed in a negative light, Lucy argued that this was not the case in cosplay, '*No funny looks, no tiptoeing around me'*. Furthermore, Lucy pointed out that those outside of the subculture could view her in a pitying manner due to the breakdowns caused by her mental health. With Corrigan et al (2011, pp195) similarly arguing that mental health issues were commonly viewed through a lens of pity, causing individuals to be viewed as incompetent and in need of authority. Resulting in those with mental health issues receiving 'benevolent stigma'. Corrigan et al (2011) argue that instead those with mental health disorders need parity instead of pity, which cosplay may therefore provide. Lucy argued that cosplayers continued to treat her in a normative manner, despite her breakdowns. Providing her with an environment where she felt accepted despite her social disorders. Therefore, the cosplaying subculture may successfully grant individuals escape from established notions on mental health experienced within their everyday lives. With cosplay allowing mental health issues to be expressed openly, without the fear of stigmatisation.

<u>Safeguarding Mental Health</u>

As I befriended more cosplayers on social media, I noticed that many shared articles and memes relating to mental health on their closed accounts. Accessible only to those within the cosplaying subculture. These posts largely focused on how to spot mental health issues, how to get help regarding them, and how to support friends with mental illnesses. Many cosplayers also shared accounts of their own experiences with mental health, framed as an attempt to break the silence on the subject. Furthermore, before such posts, trigger warnings were listed for those sensitive to the issues being discussed. Ensuring that these accounts would not have unintended negative consequences for potential readers. This

could be interpreted as a means of educating other cosplayers on mental disorders, whilst demonstrating that within the subculture, the topic of mental health could be openly discussed. Furthermore, the trigger warnings indicated that cosplayers should take into account the mental health issues of others, which may suggest that cosplayers perpetuated the normalisation of mental disorders and the inclusion of those with them.

This trend was also identified within an empirical setting. At fan-run conventions, designated quiet spaces were allocated for those susceptible to loud noises. Allowing individuals to socialise in spaces away from the loud parties they held each evening. Venues were chosen which allowed therapy dogs, to alleviate their owner's mental health concerns and badge schemes were undertaken to let the wider subculture know about individuals' specific social needs. Furthermore, when I witnessed a problem with a cosplayer's mental health during my time in the field, it was dealt with in a skilled and respectful manner.

On one occasion, outside of a pub at the end of a mainstream convention, Hannah, started having a panic attack. Feeling overwhelmed by a group in regular clothes who were chanting loudly that the convention was *'the best con ever'*. At first some of the cosplayers smiled at this group's shouts. However, when a cosplayer we did not know, Emily, spotted Hannah's distress, she asked the group of revellers to keep the volume down. However, the group responded that they were *'just having a laugh'* starting up the chant again. After this exchange occurred a few cosplayers glanced our way, noticing that Hannah was hyperventilating. With many of them repeating that group should keep it down. When they failed to do so, the group started to receive glares from the cosplayers who had previously smiled at them, and soon after this group stopped chanting and left.

At the first signs of Hannah's anxiety one her friends took steps to resolve this issue. Although a few cosplayers showed concern at Hannah's distress, they quickly averted their gaze from the scene, once it was made apparent that Hannah was being taken care of. In contrast however, a couple of non-convention attendees, openly stared at Hannah the whole time her panic attack took place. With the bystanders' curiosity being discussed negatively by wider cosplayers.

After Hannah recovered, she returned to the pub and spoke with me about her experience. Whilst in other contexts Hannah reported that individuals were overly cautious around her

after a panic attack, which made her feel distinct and guilty. Hannah claimed that cosplayers treated her as they usually did, which allowed her to feel like *'a normal person'* despite her anxiety.

Later on, within the same pub, I spoke with Emily about the incident. Emily explained that she had asked the group to be less loud because she was aware that their behaviour may have triggered Hannah's panic attack. Emily claimed that she tried to get them to stop without pointing out Hannah, as this could single her out and add to her distress. When I mentioned that I was surprised that this incident did not cause more of a commotion, Emily argued that the subculture knew that privacy was needed in these situations. Framing the subculture as an whole to be accommodating towards mental illnesses.

The above case highlights that the cosplaying subculture was highly aware of issues relating to mental health. Whilst Emily did not know Hannah personally, upon spotting her distress she attempted to stem the source of Hannah's anxiety. With the subculture working as a group in order to do so. In addition, whilst outsiders to the subculture stared at Hannah in a curious manner, those within the subculture did not. Which Emily claimed stemmed from the accepting nature of the cosplaying subculture. After her panic attack, Hannah argued that she was not treated as distinct, which prevented her from feeling deviant or different due to her mental health. Mirroring the claims of Lucy who had similarly voiced that she felt accepted and normalised in cosplay despite her anxiety. Therefore, whilst individuals may be unable to escape from their mental health issues through cosplay, the subculture's mindful treatment of mental illnesses could enable those with them to feel accepted regardless: which in itself could provide a form of escape.

<u>Mental Health and Distinction</u>

Both Lucy and Hannah discussed that mental illnesses were normalised in cosplay, however, the cosplaying subculture was also found to treat those with them in a distinctive manner.

At one fan-run convention I bumped into Katie, a cosplayer of over seven years, who I had met briefly at a previous event. With Katie inviting me to lunch with a large group of her friends. I sat next to a cosplayer named Ian, who resisted my attempts to converse with him and instead talked with his friends sitting close by. After a while Katie came over and asked

me how I was finding the day. To which I admitted that I found it overwhelming meeting so many new people at once. Upon hearing my statement, Ian cast me a kind glance, and talked to me from then on, including me in his conversations with his peers. That evening I met up with Katie again, telling her about my experience with Ian. Katie seemed shocked that Ian was friendly towards me, explaining that Ian could be disinterested in making new friends.

When I saw Katie on a separate occasion, in the line for a panel within a fan-run convention. She informed me that Ian had thought that I had social anxiety, interpreting my comment about being overwhelmed to be allusion to an anxiety disorder. Which resulted in him making more of an effort in prompting a conversation. Luckily the rectification of this misunderstanding did not alter Ian's conduct towards me, and we continued to interact with each other at subsequent conventions.

> Katie: *'It's not like Ian disliked you, otherwise he would have continued ignoring you. But after he heard you were uncomfortable, he got it in his head that you had social anxiety and tried to put in more of an effort which actually made him warm to you.'*
>
> Adele: *'Is it common to make an extra effort for those with social anxiety?'*
>
> Katie*: 'Some people do. But it's not like people with anxiety are flooded with friend requests. If you're meeting someone for the first time and you know their anxiety might make them struggle, most people put in a bit more effort, but they aren't going to be extra nice to you whenever they see you just because of that. That would just be fake. If Ian decided he didn't like you after he properly spoke to you, he wouldn't have spoken to you again. Some people just aren't compatible. No-one's going to base a friendship around one person having anxiety. You are friends with people because you like each other. If you have mental illness, you're the same as everyone else. You just happen to have a mental health problem, which a lot of people also do. It doesn't make people automatically feel the need to love you because of it.'*

My perceived anxiety disorder had resulted in me being treated in a distinctive manner, leading Ian to make an extra effort in establishing an interaction with me. This drew parallels with the findings within the social disorders section. As cosplayers were similarly found to facilitate interactions with those with social disorders. However, as was demonstrated within Zack and Andrew's accounts, the interactions with cosplayer's with social disorders

could be superficial or undermining. However, in contrast, my 'social anxiety' had not resulted in Ian talking to me in a different manner to other cosplayers, it had instead solely prompted Ian to facilitate the initial social interaction. This difference could be due to social disorders and mental health issues being framed in different ways, both within the cosplaying subculture and wider society.

Many cosplayers had presented those with social disorders as inherently different from neurotypical cosplayers who were seen as the norm, mirroring conventions reported within everyday life (Wexler, 2016). Due to existing stereotypes, those with social disorders were conversed with in an infantilising manner, which could lead to feelings of alienation. In contrast, whilst Katie discussed that some cosplayers initially altered their behaviour when interacting with those with anxiety, exhibiting an increased level of engagement towards them, those with mental health issues were ultimately viewed as the *'same as everyone else'*. This attitude was also found within everyday life, as mental health is increasingly viewed as an affliction that could affect all members of society. Therefore, this could allow individuals with mental health problems to be viewed as normative regardless of their mental illnesses (Fitzpatrick, 2009; Warner, 2008). As a result, the narratives surrounding mental health within the cosplaying subculture, may be drawn from notions within everyday life. With this ensuring that cosplayers with mental health issues were not viewed as inherently different from wider members of subculture. Promoting inclusivity without reinforcing a narrative of distinction.

<u>Managing Mental Health</u>

The cosplaying subculture was seen to place a great deal of emphasis on ensuring that those with mental disorders felt safe and included within it. Consequently, I spoke with a number of cosplayers who made a concerted effort to ensure the wellbeing of their friends with mental illnesses.

However, a number of cosplayers I spoke to, who were relatively new to the subculture, admitted that they were unsure of how to cope with their friend's mental illnesses. Consequently, some cosplayers prioritised their friend's needs over their own, which could disrupt these cosplayer's experiences of escape. Sandra, who had been cosplaying for nearly

a year and Marie who had cosplayed for six months, both discussed the difficulties they faced when dealing with their friend's mental health issues. During a focus group which took place in a coffee shop, near to the homes of these cosplayers.

> Sandra: *'I didn't feel like I was at a con because I was just sat around looking after my friend. At a con you normally walk around show off your outfits get pictures taken and its fun because it's so different from anything else. You feel like a minor celeb. Posing like a character makes you feel like a different person in a way. You can act and look a way that you don't usually. It's liberating in a sense, you can leave everything behind because you can be so different from who you usually are. But at that con there was no point in me being in cosplay, because I didn't get to experience any of that. It didn't feel magical like it usually does. When you're sat on the floor next to a bin in a hot hall it takes away some of the sparkle. She didn't want to leave but she didn't want to do anything, so I just sat with her even though I was bored because I knew she was anxious. I didn't want to say anything in case it upset her. I didn't really know what to do in that situation.'*
>
> Marie: *'My friend's depression means that she can be really mean to me sometimes and lash out. I know she doesn't mean it. It's her illness speaking not her but that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt. I've never really dealt with mental illness before, so I don't really know what to do. But I know that friends should be supportive so I'm trying to be understanding. I put up with behaviour from her that I wouldn't from other people because I know it's not her fault. But. I know it sounds awful. But when you go to a con to get away from the stress of uni, but you're with someone who's not in a good place, that can be stressful too. And it makes you think that you shouldn't have bothered going.'*
>
> Adele: *'Have you brought this issue up around her?'*
>
> Marie: *'No. What if it makes her feel bad. If she didn't have depression I would. But what if that discussion is too much for her and made her feel more depressed.'*

Both Sandra and Marie, voiced a degree of uncertainty with coping with mental illnesses, failing to discuss their friend's behaviour due to fears it would worsen their mental health. Whilst well-meaning, this action could be seen to infantilise those with mental illnesses,

assuming that they were unable to cope in certain situations without empirical grounding. This tendency to infantilise those with mental illness has been seen both within the media portrayals of individuals with mental health issues, as well as the accounts of those holding them (Gonzalez-Torres et al 2007; Ross, 1997). With those with mental health problems being presented as unable to handle sensitive information due to their fragility. Which may suggest that Marie and Sandra had used these notions to shape the way in which they interacted with their friends with mental health problems.

For Marie and Sandra, dealing with their friend's mental health impacted on their experience of escape. Whilst Sandra argued that cosplay provided her with a respite from the mundane, allowing her to feel and act like a different person. Comforting her friend prevented cosplay from fulfilling this function. Which ultimately drew attention to the features of everyday life within conventions such as the '*bin in a hot hall'* which undermined the fantastical, *'magical'* nature of these events. Similarly, Marie, claimed that she was unable to find escape through cosplay. Arguing that her '*friend's depression'* resulted in negative behaviour which resulted in Marie feeling stressed, the very emotion she wished to escape from through cosplay.

Marie's friend was also presented as not accountable for her actions, which were framed as external to her *'It's her illness speaking not her'.* Weiner (1995) similarly found that individual's with mental illnesses could fail to be viewed as responsible for their actions, which could result in those who subscribed to these beliefs, framing individuals with mental health issues as the object of pity. This, therefore, draws parallels to how some cosplayers with social disabilities were treated by the wider subculture. As Poppy claimed that Zack was permitted to act in a socially undesirable way as he *'couldn't help'* his conduct. Resulting in both Zack and Andrew being treated in a condescending manner. With Poppy's perception of social disabilities and her attempts to act in an accepting manner towards those with them, being found to mirror notions that were established within wider society (Wilson, 2003; Breakey, 2006; Rimmerman, 2013).

A number of established cosplayers similarly recounted stories of how their friend's mental illnesses had impacted on their experiences of cosplay. These cosplayers stated that they had initially acted in a manner mirroring that of Marie and Sandra due to their ignorance of mental health. However, an exposure to the cosplaying subculture was argued to have

provided them with the knowledge on to deal with mental illnesses; acquired from advice from established members as well as articles which cosplayers had shared online. These cosplayers explained that they had learned that all cosplayers were expected to adhere to the subculture's core values, regardless of their mental health.

Frankie, who had been cosplaying for four years. Explained that cosplayers were taught to address the problems that arose from mental illnesses. As overlooking the negative behaviour of cosplayers with mental health problems could result in superficial relationships, placing a strain upon friendships. Which, as was discussed by Frankie and Charlie. During an informal conversation, in a games room at a fan-run convention. Could result in cosplayers with mental illnesses feeling alienated.

> Frankie: *'When I'm on a high. I can't tell what's right and wrong. My friends at school would annoy me by acting like mental illnesses were cool and that they made me quirky. Which kind of just made me feel alone because they wouldn't understand what it was actually like. They'd watch me self-destruct like I was some form of entertainment. And I'd avoid going out on weekends because I was scared about what I might do, because they'd just let me do it and make out like I was a free spirt. Unless I was rude with then. Then it stopped being cool and they'd get annoyed at me. But I have real friends because of cosplay. And we support each other. And that includes them stopping me from acting out sometimes. When I'm doing something wrong they tell me, because sometimes I can't notice myself. And that means I don't hurt them or myself or wake up the next morning worrying about what I did the night before when I was manic. If I hadn't of started cosplaying I probably would have become a hermit.'*
>
> Charlie: *'If you're friend's suffering, it's also going to affect you. So you might be encouraged to talk to them about it, because they may be less able to because of their mental health.'*
>
> Adele: *'Encouraged how?'*
>
> Charlie: *'Like talking to your friends. Or if a cosplayer sees that something's not right, they might offer some advice. If a cosplayer sees another cosplayer in distress they may go over and check they are ok. There was one time that a random cosplayer was*

crying and being comforted by her friend who looked a bit stressed. I just asked them if everything was alright, but it turned out it wasn't, and the girl was having a bit of a breakdown. So, I showed them to the paramedics and told them about a really helpful mental health website that they could look at.'

In Frankie's everyday life her mental health was treated as a spectacle by her friends. Whilst Frankie's mental illness was presented in a positive light, causing Frankie to be viewed as *'cool'* and *'quirky'*, this only led to Frankie feeling distinct. Such framings of mental illnesses have also been discussed by academics, with certain mental illnesses being romanticised by the media, which was found to impact on public perceptions (Harper, 2009; Merskin, 2012). This romanticism of mental health was argued to lead to ignorance, causing mental illness to be viewed as a positive trait which could undermine the suffering of those experiencing it, ultimately leading to their alienation (Biswas and Dhar, 2010).

Furthermore, as Frankie's school friends failed to police her behaviour, this was argued to negatively impact on their relationship, which resulted in Frankie removing herself from social situations. However, in contrast, cosplayers were seen to intervene in matters relating to Frankie's mental health, preventing her from acting in a socially undesirable way. Which protected both Frankie and wider cosplayers from negative social situations which could arise due to Frankie's manic phases. With Frankie voicing that cosplay provided her with a supportive group of friends which she had been unable to locate in other settings.

Furthermore, Charlie claimed that cosplayers could actively intervene when a cosplayer's mental health was threatened. With Charlie providing support to an unacquainted cosplayer, who was seen to be struggling with her friend's mental health. Charlie also described that she offered advice to these cosplayers, which could aid them with dealing with mental illnesses in the future.

Whilst new practitioners such as Sandra and Marie, discussed that they were unfamiliar with managing the issues arising from mental health. Charlie suggested that members who were knowledgeable about this topic could inform others about how to cope with mental illnesses: with Charlie using a source from everyday life '*a really helpful mental health website'* in order to provide support to the subculture's members. Therefore, rather than Free Areas being separate spaces, which contain norms and values that are distinct from

everyday life, within Free Areas certain everyday understandings may be adopted and adapted by their members according to their needs.

In the case of cosplay, liberal values may be considered more socially acceptable, as this subculture was seen to place an emphasis on providing an accepting space where members could escape from intolerance. However, as was demonstrated by Sandra and Marie, being a member did not automatically equip cosplayers with the skills needed to uphold these values. Instead they may have drawn upon certain portrayals of mental health, found within the everyday world to shape their attempts to be tolerant. However, Sandra and Marie's treatment of their mentally ill friends was argued to limit their own escape. With Frankie's quote additionally suggesting that a failure to address the negative actions stemming from mental health issues, could result in those with them feeling alienated. Therefore, as was shown within Charlie's quote, the cosplaying subculture may actively perpetuate certain norms to deal with mental health, drawing from specific sources from everyday life in order to preserve the escape of its members.

A similar notion was also identified in terms of social disabilities, with Grant being shown to teach wider cosplayers the correct way to act around Andrew. However, Grant presented those with knowledge on social disorders as a minority arguing that '*most people just don't understand how to act around them'.* Therefore, if fewer members of the cosplaying subculture are equipped with the knowledge on how to correctly interact with those with social disorders. They may be less able to pass on this knowledge to wider members. As a result, the norms which could sustain the escape of those with social disorders may be less dispersed amongst the subculture. Which could explain why some cosplayers were found to treat those with social disorders in an infantilising manner, as they may have continued to draw upon incorrect notions from everyday life in their attempts to be tolerant.

As the conversation with Charlie and Frankie continued, they acknowledged that mental health issues could result in individuals acting in an undesirable manner. However, they both stressed that this undesirable behaviour was not considered acceptable within the cosplaying subculture. With is notion being similarly discussed by Amber during an informal field conversation, within a pub after a mainstream convention.

Amber: *'Mental health is not an excuse for your actions. It may make it more likely for you to act in a certain way. And if that happens once or twice it may be understandable. But if you just give in and blame your mental health for your actions, you aren't trying to change, you're letting it rule you. And then it's not your mental health's fault, it's partly your own too. And because cosplay is so open about mental health, we all know that and won't put up with it.'*

However, whilst Amber claimed that cosplayers knew that mental health could not be used as a scapegoat, she later discussed that some cosplayers used her mental illnesses in this way regardless.

Amber: *'If you're acting like a dick and blaming your mental health that isn't going to fly and you will get called out. And if you are actually unable to help it, you will get told you need medical help.'*

Adele: *'What if they refused to seek help and continued to act in an undesirable way?'*

Amber: *'That's up to them. But they can't expect people to just put up with it. People might avoid them. Cosplayers are accepting of mental illness, but they cosplay to have fun not to be someone's therapist. People won't be your friend just because you have a mental illness, it takes more than that.'*

Similar sentiments were also discussed by Liam, who had been cosplaying for seven years. With our conversation taking place on the concourse outside of a fan-run convention.

Liam: *'Mental health issues are not a get out of jail free card. If you are being a dick all the time and blaming your health, you will get called out. Once I got pissed off with a girl with depression for how she acted when she was drunk. She'd get absolutely smashed and expect me to look after her and I'd end up having a rubbish time. When I tried to talk to her she tried the "it's not me it's my illness" line and I straight up called her out. I pointed out that a lot of people had mental illness and still tried their hardest with them, and she actually started to take responsibility for her actions.'*

Whilst Weiner (1995) argues that those with mental illnesses were often seen as unaccountable for their actions, both Liam and Amber suggested that this sentiment was not held within the cosplaying subculture. Although mental illnesses could grant individuals a degree of leniency, allowing them to act in a deviant manner without long term stigmatisation. Those with mental illnesses were argued to remain partly responsible for their actions, allowing their behaviour to be policed as a result. With Amber arguing that cosplayers who continued to act in an undesirable manner, could face alienation regardless of their mental health. Therefore, as is seen with Liam's quote where he *'called out'* a cosplayer who was acting in a negative manner. Policing may ensure that those with mental health issues still subscribed to the subculture's norms, thus preserving the escape of its members and upholding cosplay's values.

Summary

This chapter explored the topics of social disorders and mental illnesses within cosplay, demonstrating that the subculture framed itself as particularly accepting of these areas. However, whilst members claimed that cosplayers were accepting of those with social disorder, many neurotypical members did not know how to interact with those with social disorders. Resulting in some stereotyping the needs of those with social disorders, treating the individuals with them in a kind but condescending manner, with social interactions remaining shallow and brief. Whilst this resulted in some cosplayers with social disorders feeling included within the subculture. Others had incorrect assumptions about their desired escape placed upon them, resulting in these cosplayers being treated in a distinctive manner which could be alienating. Despite this however, cosplayers with social disorders could locate friendship groups within cosplay, where members treated them in a normative manner. With these specific friendship groups being framed as Free Areas within the wider cosplaying subculture. Which were actively policed by members to ensure that those with social disorders could successfully locate the normalising environment they sought and successfully escape within them.

In contrast many cosplayers were found to be knowledgeable about mental health, with these cosplayers being found to convey this knowledge to other members. Providing support and advice on the topic of mental health. With the subculture policing the behaviour of

those with mental illnesses to ensure the successful escape of its members. Therefore, it was argued that cosplayers may draw upon sources from everyday life to shape their notions of tolerance. Which resulted in cosplayers being more equipped to deal with mental illness when compared to social disabilities. Due to established stereotypes on social disorders present within everyday life and a lack of cosplayers who could teach other members the correct way to act around social disabilities. As a result, Free Areas were argued to be intertwined with everyday life. With norms from everyday life being brought into Free Areas according to the needs of its members. Contrasting with the existing view of Free Areas as separate spaces with their own alternative norms and values.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

This final chapter focuses on restating and drawing together the main findings of the thesis, in order to reveal how the research project addressed its objectives. Through doing so it will demonstrate how this study expands our understanding of cosplay, contributes to debates on subcultural theory and further develops the theory of Escape Attempts. This chapter will also outline the limitations of the project, which will therefore highlight further avenues for study. Demonstrating that this thesis not only adds to the existing field but can be used to inform subsequent work.

The main objective of this thesis was to provide an ethnographic exploration into the cosplaying subculture through the framework of Escape Attempts. Through doing so it sought to achieve four main aims:

- To highlight the key theoretical areas of significance to the cosplaying subculture – investigating them in greater detail under the framework of Escape Attempts.
- To explore the ways in which cosplay could be employed as an Escape Attempt.
- To examine the extent to which escape could be achieved in relation to the identified key theoretical areas.
- Finally, this thesis also aimed to test the theory of Escape Attempts within an empirical setting.

Overview of the Thesis

Through exploring the history of the activity and utilising the accounts of cosplayers, the literature review provided a robust definition of cosplay, which was malleable enough to account for variations within the subculture. Revealing that cosplayers could wear costumes and engage in behaviour which blurred the subculture's boundaries. Furthermore, by distinguishing cosplayers from wider fandom and fashion-based subcultures, this thesis added further clarity to the term cosplay whilst contextualising the realm of fandom that cosplayers inhabit; providing a much-needed definition for cosplay which resolves the

current ambiguity surrounding the term. This definition could therefore be utilised within subsequent studies, which is essential as academic and media interest in cosplay continues to rise.

Within the literature review it was shown that cosplay was frequently described as a subculture, both by cosplayers and academics (Lunning, 2011; Kawamura, 2012; Winge, 2006). However, a review of subcultural theory outlined that this term was highly critiqued, with post-subculturalists claiming that youths drew from a range of fashion styles and music genres, holding fluid identities rather than subcultural ones (Maffesoli, 2017; Bennett, 1999). However, this thesis demonstrated that the concept of subculture remains relevant. Throughout the chapters, cosplayers were shown to hold strong subcultural identities based around a distinct notion of acceptance. As a result, the cosplaying subculture provided its members with a safe affirmative space that fostered tolerant norms, which in turn shaped members' values on a range of social phenomena. Therefore, rather than individuals merely drawing from subgroups to construct their own distinctive identities, this study demonstrates that subgroups continue to foster communal identifications (Redhead, 1990). Which in terms of cosplay, provided individuals who could face alienation, with their own welcoming place within society. Consequently, this study highlights that the term subculture remains a useful theoretical tool, producing knowledge of sociological value and offering an insight into the social lives of those who identify with them.

The literature review additionally demonstrated that there was a lack of empirical research on cosplay, as few studies explored this subculture through the eyes of its members. Therefore, within this thesis a qualitative and immersive approach was adopted, with chapter three outlining the methods used within this project. As is shown within the findings and discussions chapters, the methodological approach taken resulted in wealth of empirical data which provided the most exhaustive and in-depth account of cosplay to date. By providing the first sociological insight into the cosplaying subculture this thesis makes a much-needed contribution to the literature on cosplay, a subculture which is of increasing academic interest and becoming more visible within the public eye.

Within chapter three I also outlined my entry into the cosplaying subculture, providing an account that differed from previous ethnographies, where academics were either existing members of the groups they studied, or remained as outsiders throughout their research (O'Reily, 2000; Harrison, 2018). Within this thesis however, I actively became a cosplayer and built a subcultural identity, therefore providing a novel methodological contribution to the literature through an empirical account of the process of becoming a member of a subculture. Through doing so this chapter also highlighted the complications that can arise from crossing the boundaries of membership, which could be used to inform subsequent work.

Through exploring how cosplay created a sense of solidarity, chapter four revealed that cosplayers framed their subculture as holding uniquely tolerant values, with this trait being projected across all its diverse members. This study was undertaken during a time when cosplay was experiencing a sharp increase in public visibility, going from a shielded niche subculture to a widely recognised phenomenon. This resulted in an influx of new members who could bring intolerant values into the subculture. Subsequently, cosplayers were shown to broadcast the necessity of tolerance for subcultural membership as a direct response to this, which enabled the cosplaying subculture to uphold its norms. As a result, this study demonstrated that the boundaries of the cosplaying subculture were fluid and dynamic, with the values of cosplay adjusting and evolving due to wider societal pressures. Which as shown throughout the thesis, allowed members of the subculture to continue distinguishing themselves from mainstream society. Therefore, this research adds to contemporary subcultural literature, through providing an empirical account of how subcultures may adjust to a change in membership: producing a unique account of cosplay which could only be generated through researching this period of rapid social change.

Within chapter five it was revealed that cosplay was unable to grant complete escape from ethnicity, as skin colour remained a primary marker of identification which could be used to make judgements on performances. However, cosplay continued to function as a Free Area, which provided its members with escape as the norms of the subculture allowed cosplayers to emulate characters from a range of ethnicities. Furthermore, some cosplayers were shown to incorporate aspects of their everyday identity into their performances, to instil

them with a degree of authenticity. Therefore, this chapter built upon the theory of Escape Attempts by demonstrating that Free Areas are more robust than previously thought. Being shown to be spaces that are interwoven with notions from the everyday, with individuals altering and shaping their Free Areas to allow them to continue serving their purpose when elements of the mundane were identified within them. This study therefore provided a novel way of framing the spaces used for escape, reached through empirical testing.

Chapter five also showed that escape could be context dependent. With performances being judged and restricted according to the colour of one's skin as well as the demographics the cosplaying subculture. Whilst Cohen and Taylor were critiqued for presenting Escape Attempts as an overarching theory, which was written from a male middle-class perspective, this study therefore addresses this conceptual criticism, expanding the theory of Escape Attempts by demonstrating that this framework is applicable to wider demographics.

Chapter six revealed that the cosplaying subculture's acceptance of non-normative genders and sexualities provided its members with a high degree of escape, as cosplayers could cross the boundaries of sex without stigmatisation. However, escape was again found to be dictated by context, dependant on the bodies of cosplayers as well the presence of outsiders to the subculture. This chapter also demonstrated that non-normative sexualities and genders were normalised within the cosplaying subculture; with cosplay acting as a Free Area where established heteronormative values could be escaped. Whilst Cohen and Taylor presented escape as an individual's desire to free themselves from the mundane, this chapter demonstrated that escape could also consist of being treated in a normative manner. Therefore, this thesis extends the theory of Escape Attempts by demonstrating that escape is not universal, but instead varies according to needs of individuals.

Within Escape Attempts Cohen and Taylor additionally discussed that some individuals sought permanent escape. Framing this notion as a deviant endeavour, with the authors drawing upon extreme and fictional examples to support their claims. Within Chapter six it was revealed that some cosplayers framed Japan as a Free Area rooted within the real world. Presenting Japan as a space where non-normative genders and sexualities were openly accepted. Which resulted in these cosplayers aiming to move to Japan to locate

permanent escape from intolerance. However, in contrast to the arguments of Cohen and Taylor, this desire was neither deviant nor extreme but instead provided a symbolic Free Area which allowed members to continue partaking in their everyday routines. This thesis therefore offers an alternative view of the act of seeking permanent escape, further extending the framework of Escape Attempts by testing an aspect of this theory which was in need of empirical investigation.

Finally, chapter seven explored social disorders and mental health. Revealing that cosplayers attempted to ensure the inclusion of their members by drawing upon notions found within their everyday lives. This was shown to result in some members acting in a condescending manner towards those with social disabilities, which could ultimately lead to the alienation of cosplayers with social disorders. In contrast, many cosplayers showed a high level of awareness on mental health, mirroring trends identified within wider society. This enabled cosplayers to provide successful escape for those with mental illnesses. Providing a grounded examination of how norms are built within a subculture. Therefore, this chapter demonstrated that rather than Free Areas being external to members, they are instead shaped by those who use them. With individuals drawing upon specific notions found within their everyday lives to shape the nature of Free Areas, which influenced the extent to which escape could be achieved. As a result, this thesis builds an empirically grounded concept of Free Areas, which presents them as flexible and intertwined with the everyday; with this departure from established thought providing an alternative lens through which to view the nature of escape.

Contributions

This thesis provides the first sociological examination into the cosplaying subculture, which through its immersive and longitudinal methods delivered the most in-depth account of cosplay to date. This research significantly expands our understanding of cosplay by providing a robust definition of the activity grounded in empiricism, which could be utilised by academics and adapted as the subculture continues to evolve. Furthermore, by exploring the values of the cosplaying subculture through the eyes of its members, this thesis departs from many of the existing descriptive studies on cosplay. Looking beyond the costume itself to explore the social dynamics of the wider cosplaying subculture, which provided a detailed

insight into the significance that cosplay held for its members. With the act of cosplay being shown to impact on identities, provide a strong sense of community and have a significant positive impact on the wellbeing of members. Especially for those who could face alienation in other contexts.

As well as expanding our understanding of cosplay, this study also makes a number of contributions to subcultural theory. This thesis clearly demonstrates that the term subculture remains relevant, as cosplayers were shown to hold a strong subcultural identity. Contrasting themselves against wider sections of society which were framed as intolerant, therefore providing members with a sense of distinction, acceptance and escape.

Furthermore, subcultural studies have traditionally focused on male youths, placing an emphasis members' fashion styles and music genres (Boogaarts-de Bruin, 2011). The cosplaying subculture however was found to be largely female dominated, comprising of diverse members who held a range of fashion tastes and musical interests. With those who were interviewed within this project ranging from 18 to 49 years old, who were all presented as united through their shared tolerant and inclusive attitudes. Not only does this project address the previous knowledge gap surrounding the demographics of the cosplaying subculture, whilst demonstrating that the concept of subculture is applicable across a range of demographics, but it also contests the claims of post-subculturalists who argue that the plurality of genres within our globalised society has resulted in the death of subcultures (Redhead, 1990; Winge, 2006). Therefore, this thesis reveals that subcultures still exist and can successfully unite diverse individuals under a strong subcultural identification.

Within the ethnography it was also revealed that cosplayers attempted to uphold the escape of other members and perpetuate the norms of the subculture. Achieving this through the policing of behaviour, using codification to distance undesirable cosplayers from the core cosplaying subculture, as well as constructing insulated spaces, accessible only to those who upheld the subculture's values. Therefore, this thesis adds to the literature on subcultures by providing an empirical account of how boundary maintenance is undertaken within them, which could be used to explore other subcultures.

Whilst the theme of escape was commonly discussed in relation to cosplay, this was an area yet to be explored from an academic perspective. Therefore, through the use of Escape Attempts, the thesis addressed this knowledge gap whilst testing the framework within an empirical setting and applying the theory to a number of theoretical areas for the first time. Through doing so this study demonstrated that Escape Attempts could be used for the generation of systemised knowledge and built upon as a theory, resulting in this thesis uncovering an alternative image of escape to that proposed by Cohen and Taylor. Free Areas were shown to be influenced by context, intertwined with the everyday, shaped by members to provide escape, and were spaces that were more robust than previously thought. As a result, by building on the framework of Escape Attempts this study provides an alternative empirically grounded account of Free Areas, expanding both our knowledge on escape and the theory of Escape Attempts.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the cosplaying subculture framed itself as particularly welcoming of those with social disorders, such cosplayers remained a minority within the subculture. Consequently, I interacted with a small number of cosplayers with social disorders within this study, suggesting that the area needs further academic attention. However, this thesis successfully highlights the topic of social disorders within cosplay and can therefore be used as a starting point for additional research.

As this research was conducted on cosplayers within the UK specifically, its findings may not be applicable to cosplayers from around the world. Cosplaying subcultures are found within a number of countries including America, Japan, and Thailand. Therefore, as each country holds their own cultural values, it can be assumed that the cosplayers within them may also have distinctive norms. Despite this as the cosplaying subculture was found to be very established online, cosplayers from across the world could be interconnected to an extent. These themes began to emerge within the discussion of the POC cosplayers, demonstrating that the online social movements of American cosplayers impacted upon the norms of cosplayers within the UK. Demonstrating that this area is in need of further attention.

Furthermore, as was previously stated within the methodology chapter, I decided not to research those under the age of eighteen within this study. Consequently, my findings may not be representative of this group. However, as the norms of cosplayers were presented as unanimous, transcending categories including gender, ethnicity and sexuality, they may also be shared across the category of age as well.

The points discussed above could be explored in further detail to shed new light on the cosplaying subculture. Further to this the project additionally generated a great deal of data not used within this thesis, which could be used to examine the cosplaying subculture. An exploration into the topic of cosplay and identity could be of particular interest, as my own choice of costumes had been influenced by the comments of wider cosplayers, based upon how I was perceived.

Furthermore, at the time of writing this thesis many mainstream conventions have closed to focus on larger less frequent events and a number of fan-run conventions have gone on hiatus. It would therefore be interesting to explore how cosplayers respond to the loss of many convention sites, and the impact this may have upon the subculture as a whole.

Additionally, as interest in the cosplaying subculture continues to rise, with cosplayers being shown to segregate themselves into closed spaces as a result, it would be interesting to explore if this trend continued to occur, or if the cosplaying subculture instead developed additional means of maintaining its boundaries.

Final Thoughts

This thesis was able to successfully meet its aims, highlighting the key areas of sociological interest to the cosplaying subculture; ethnicity, gender and sexuality as well as social disorders and mental health. Exploring these areas in detail through the framework of Escape Attempts. Through doing so it was revealed that members used cosplay as an Escape Attempt in a number of ways. For some, cosplay was a means to shed aspects of their everyday identities, whilst for others cosplay provided an escape from the intolerances within everyday life. Furthermore, some cosplayers sought normativity which this

subculture ultimately provided. It was also demonstrated that the extent to which cosplayers could escape, largely depended on the norms of the subculture, which were influenced by notions found within everyday life and upheld using boundary maintenance and isolation. Therefore, through utilising Escape Attempts this study created a wealth of new empirical data on this theoretical framework as well as the cosplaying subculture, which could pave the way for subsequent research.

Finally, throughout the thesis it was shown that the cosplaying subculture presented cosplay as a uniquely tolerant space, full of accepting members who shared the same values. As a result, the cosplaying subculture may be a particularly powerful Escape Attempt in itself. A symbolic Free Area presented as distinct from an intolerant wider society, in which members could successfully locate a sense of belonging and achieve escape.

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Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Research title: Cosplay: An Exploration of the Subculture

You are invited to take part in a research project which aims to give an insight into the cosplaying subculture. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you do not have to take part if you do not want to. This sheet outlines the research project and explains what participation in it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information to decide whether you wish to take part in this research. Feel free to discuss it with others if you wish. If there is anything you do not understand or would like more information on, please contact me by email (amason-bertrand1@sheffield.ac.uk) or phone (07792705786).

The project

I am a postgraduate research student, studying within the department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield. This research project is being undertaken for my PhD and is supervised by Dr Alex Dennis (a.dennis@sheffield.ac.uk) and Dr Tom Clark (t.clark@sheffield.ac.uk).

The aim of my research is to conduct an exploratory study of cosplay as little academic work has been done on the topic. So far a majority of the literature on cosplay comes from the media, which often gives an inaccurate presentation of the activity, mainly portraying it in a negative light.

When examining the few academic texts on cosplay, the authors have linked it to a range of areas such as sexuality, gender and play. However many of these texts have been written without actually talking to cosplayers and instead give their own interpretations of the activity from an outsiders view point. Therefore within this study I want to gain a deeper understanding of the cosplaying subculture, finding out which areas are most applicable to it through actively interacting with its members. This will allow me to decide which topics I want to focus on in the remainder of my research project in which I will be actively cosplaying myself later in the year to gain a better understanding of cosplay.

In my research I will be shadowing a group of cosplayers, reading forums and conducting interviews in order to understand the cosplaying subculture better. I will also be taking photographs at events with the subjects' permission. My research will take place between June 2015 and September 2017. The data collected within this study may be used within my PhD thesis, which will be will be published by the University of Sheffield.

All the data I collect will be anonymised, with pseudonyms being used. If you decide that you want to withdraw your data from my study, or wish to take out certain things you have said please get in touch and I will do so for you.

I may also ask to take your photo for my research project. This is entirely optional and you are still able to take part in this research project without your picture being taken. These photos may be used as prompts to help me remember what we discussed during the research. I may also ask to use these photos when writing up my notes for reasons such as to show the reader what cosplay actually is. Once again you do not have to have to agree to have your photo used in this way. If you do allow me to include your photo, I will show which photo I intend to include and the way in which I would use it before I include it within my notes.

I will ask you to sign a consent form either on a paper or electronically, confirming that you understand the research project and consent to participation. You may withdraw your data from my research project at any time, even after you sign this form. All notes, photos and consent forms will be stored in a secure location.

This project has been ethically approved by the department of Sociological Studies' ethics review.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen to participate due to your involvement in, or knowledge of, the cosplaying subculture.

Do I have to take part?

You do not have to take part in this research, it is entirely up to you. If you do decide to participate, you can withdraw at any time without it having any negative consequence. Furthermore, you do not have to explain why you decided to withdraw.

What will taking part involve?

My study will be mainly observational, where I will be writing up what I witnessed at the cosplaying events I attend. Whilst I will be attending some conventions on my own, I will be shadowing certain cosplayers to learn about cosplayers through members of its subculture. I may request to interview you and may discuss your experiences of and ideas about cosplay. I may also ask you to explain to me any behaviours I may witness which I do not understand. The interviews I conduct will be open discussions in which we explore different topics as they arise. Alternatively, I may ask you for your opinions on certain topics identified through my research. There are no designated lengths for these interviews and you are free to talk for as long as you want and can decide to leave at any time. The

interviews may be taped with the recordings stored in a secure location and deleted upon the competition of the study. Alternatively, I may write up brief notes to record what was said within the interview.

Taking part in this research is not expected to place you in any risk. Whilst topics that may cause you discomfort could be discussed within the interviews, you are free to guide the focus of these discussions and you do not have to discuss anything you do not want to. Whilst there are no immediate benefits for participating in the project, it is hoped that this research will provide a greater understandings of cosplay, portraying it through the eyes of its members. Therefore, this may help to build a more accurate description of cosplay, being an alternative to the often inaccurate image of the activity which is largely presented in the media.

What if something goes wrong?

If you are concerned with any aspect of the research process or wish to make a complaint feel free to contact myself (amason-bertrand1@sheffield.ac.uk) or one of my supervisors Alex Dennis (a.dennis@sheffield.ac.uk) or Dr Tom Clark (t.clark@sheffield.ac.uk). If you feel that your query has not been handled in a satisfactory manner you may contact the head of department Professor Paul Martin (paul.martin@sheffield.ac.uk).

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. Whilst pseudonyms will be used, it is important to note that you may not be completely anonymous as there is always the chance that you may be recognisable by your answers to research questions. If I decide to use a quote which may make you recognisable, paraphrasing may be used to prevent the data from being linked to you as much as possible. If this method is used, any reworded texts will be shown you before they are included to ensure that I have not changed their meanings or misinterpreted them. I will also consider whether certain information is included within my research if it could cause you harm if it could be traced back to you.

If you agree to have your photo used within my research you may be recognisable, even in cosplay, if individuals interacted with you when wearing it. I will make sure that any photographs used are appropriate and not linked to any data on sensitive topics which may cause you distress. I will also ensure that your name is not published alongside any images used.

Organising and funding the research.

This research is undertaken within the department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield. I have a scholarship from the Economics and Social Research Council (ESRC) which is funding my PhD and research project. My research adheres to the ethical guidelines of both these institutions. This research project was organised by myself, and neither the University of Sheffield nor the ESRC will have access to the data collected within this research.

Contacts and questions

If you have any further questions please contact me please contact me by email (amason-bertrand1@sheffield.ac.uk) or phone (07792705786).

Alternatively you can contact my supervisors Dr Alex Dennis (a.dennis@sheffield.ac.uk) or Dr Tom Clark (t.clark@sheffield.ac.uk).

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and in advance if you decide to participate in this research project.

Appendix 2: Consent Forms

Title of Research Project: Cosplay And Escape Attempts

Name of Researcher: Adele Mason-Bertrand

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet Dated: 22/6/2015 explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions I am free to decline. *(Contact for lead researcher: 07792705786).* ☐
3. I consent to my photograph being taken. ☐
4. I agree for my photos to be used within journal articles, books, academic conferences and thesis published by the researcher. ☐
5. I am aware that the publication of my photo may make me recognisable, however my name will not be published alongside any photos used. ☐
6. I agree to take part in the above research project. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant will receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form will be placed in a secure location.

Title of Research Project: Cosplay and Escape Attempts

Name of Researcher: Adele Mason-Bertrand

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet Dated: 22/6/2015 explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. *(Contact for lead researcher: 07792705786).* ☐

3. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and the researcher will try and ensure that I cannot be identified in the report or reports that result from the research. ☐

4. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research. ☐

5. I agree for my data to be used within the researcher's thesis project, academic publications and/ or reports. ☐

5. I agree to take part in the above research project. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature

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Once this has been signed by all parties the participant will receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form will be placed in a secure location.

Appendix 3: Participant Overview

Aiden had been cosplaying for eight years and liked to emulate cool characters with big weapons who mainly came from videogames. Aiden attended fan-run conventions as well as one mainstream event which was close to his house. At mainstream conventions Aiden mainly met up with his friends to take pictures and try out new games. At fan-run convention he spent most of his time socialising and going to afterparties.

Alice was a cis-gendered female cosplayer who had been cosplaying for two and a half years. Alice attended mainstream conventions and Japanese cultural events and dressed up as both male and female characters from anime. Emulating innocent vulnerable characters. At events Alice spent her time with her group of friends browsing stalls and watching masquerades.

Amanda was a mixed-race cosplayer with one black and one white parent who had been cosplaying for roughly twelve years. She attended her local mainstream convention and went to a number of fan-run events. Amanda emulated female characters she liked from anime. Spending her time at conventions attending panels and socialising with her group of friends.

Amber was a white cosplayer who had been engaging in the activity for nine years. Amber went to mainstream conventions as an attendee but only went to mainstream conventions as a stall holder. With Amber claiming that this gave her an excuse to wear a cosplay, but meant that she did not have to spend her money on a ticket. Amber dressed up as cute anime characters exclusively and spent most of her time at fan-run conventions participating in photoshoots or watching panels. Amber did not have one concrete group of cosplaying friends but instead drifted amongst different groups.

Andrew was a cosplayer with autism who had been cosplaying for four years and attended fan-run conventions exclusively. Andrew enjoyed emulating brainy male characters from anime as well as anti-heroes from videogames. Spending most of his time at conventions attending panels and playing board games with his peers.

Camilla had been cosplaying for over 12 years, dressing up as a range of female characters from anime and videogames. As well as characters from western shows if they were currently popular within the cosplaying subculture. Camilla went to both mainstream and fan-run events, travelling up and down the country to conventions to see her cosplaying friends who originated from all over the UK. Camilla's cosplaying group collectively cosplayed as specific characters within a certain series.

Charlie was a cis-gendered white cosplayer who had been engaging in this activity for thirteen years. Carlie attending fan-run conventions and Japanese cultural events. As well as mainstream conventions on infrequent occasions. At these events Charlie spend most of her time posing for photoshoots with her friends. Emulating rotund male characters which suited her build or energetic female characters who she claimed matched her personality.

Charlotte had been cosplaying for eight years and mainly attended her local mainstream and fan-run conventions as she did not have to pay for accommodation at these events. Charlotte dressed up as the characters she liked with her friends, which were mainly female and male videogame characters. Spending the majority of her time drinking with her peers or taking part in photoshoots.

Ciara had been cosplaying for three years and described herself as black. Ciara went to both mainstream and fan-run conventions and spent most of her time at meets. In order to make new friends and have her photos taken with others cosplaying as characters from the same series as her. Ciara cosplayed as characters she liked regardless of their ethnicity and mainly emulated those from comic books and sci-fi television shows.

Corrin described himself as white and had been cosplaying for seven years. He mainly attended mainstream conventions close to his home to cut the costs of travel and accommodation. But occasionally went to fan-run conventions when a large number of his friends were going. Corrin dressed up as armoured male characters from videogames and spent his time at events posing for photos and socialising with his peers.

Danny was a cosplayer I observed browsing stalls at both a mainstream and fan-run convention. Despite looking biologically male with a beard and muscled physique Danny cosplayed as a female character and got defensive when this emulation was mocked.

Elliot described himself as white and had cosplayed for a year, having attended one mainstream convention and one fan-run convention in costume. Despite this Elliot had been attending cosplay, videogame and Japanese cultural events for over ten years and had attended these events with a group who engaged in cosplay. Therefore, Elliot was considered a part of the cosplaying subculture even before he started wearing costumes. With Elliot usually spending his time socialising with his friends or attending panels at fan-run conventions.

Emily described herself as a transgendered female cosplayer who went to both mainstream and fan-run conventions. Emily cosplayed as both male and female characters and liked emulating friendly absent-minded character types. Emily spend most of her time at conventions watching panels and performances on public stages before socialising with her friends at the pubs close to the conventions.

Emma had cosplayed for four years and still described herself as a newbie despite her amazing sewing skills. Emma had been introduced to cosplay by a friend and attended a fan-run convention as her first event. She preferred these to mainstream conventions as they were less busy in comparison but went to mainstream conventions if her friends were going. Emma cosplayed female characters exclusively and enjoyed dressing up as the 90s anime she grew up watching.

Eric was a cosplayer I observed at a panel, who responded negatively to a humorous kiss from another male cosplayer. Causing Eric to be treated in a negative manner by wider cosplayers.

Frankie had been cosplaying for four years and attended fan-run conventions as well as Japanese cultural events. Frankie cosplayed as female villains from popular anime and spent her time at conventions hosting panels and socialising with her friends.

Gary described himself as white and had been cosplaying for fifteen years. Whilst Gary started off attending mainstream conventions, he now only attended specific fan-run conventions exclusively. Dressing up as older characters from videogames who matched his build and age. Gary spent his time socialising with his friends and playing boardgames.

Gemma started cosplaying two years ago and went to every cosplay related event that she could. She had not attended a fan-run convention planned to go to a large fan-run event next year if she and her friends could get tickets. Gemma emulated female characters from anime which was currently popular within the cosplaying subculture, and enjoyed hanging around with her friends at conventions before going to the local convention pub with this group.

Georgie described herself as white and had been cosplaying for three years. So far Georgie had only attended mainstream conventions but was planning to attend Japanese cultural events and fan-run conventions in the future. Georgie cosplayed as female characters from anime and Japanese roleplaying games and picked the friendly smiley characters which she claimed suited her. Georgie spent her time at conventions at meets as well as browsing stalls for new merchandise.

Grant had been cosplaying for six years and only attended fan-run conventions. Grant cosplayed as mellow male characters from anime, choosing characters based on if he liked them, and if their outfits were easy to make and comfortable to wear. Grant spent most of his time at conventions attending panels and playing board games with his peers.

Hannah was a cosplayer who described herself as white and had been cosplaying for seven years. Hannah cosplayed as feminine characters from anime and Japanese videogames exclusively and went to both mainstream and fan-run conventions as well as Japanese cultural events. Hannah usually spent the day posing for photographs and socialising with her friends, before visiting the local pubs or bars once the events drew to a close.

Harry had cosplayed for seven years and mainly dressed up as male characters from videogames. Harry went to both fan-run and mainstream conventions as well as video-game events. Spending his time within games rooms or outside drinking with his friends.

Ian had been cosplaying for ten years and attended fan-run conventions exclusively. Ian emulated cool silent male characters from anime and spent his time at conventions socialising with his friends and attending afterparties.

Jack had been cosplaying for six years and attended mainstream conventions exclusively. Jack cosplayed as the male protagonists from his favourite Japanese role playing games.

Spending his time at conventions attending the paid workshops and going to celebrity meet and greets. Before socialising with his friends at the local pub after these events.

Jake was a cosplayer I observed at a panel, with Jake giving another male cosplayer a humorous kiss on the lips as part of a game.

James had been cosplaying for five years and whilst he preferred fan-run conventions he also went to mainstream events. James mainly emulated characters from first-person shooter videogames and spent most of his time playing demos of videogames or attending the convention's local pubs.

John was a cis-gendered male cosplayer who had been cosplaying for six years. He mainly went to geek culture events and mainstream conventions where he usually engaged in crossplay. John enjoyed emulating confident female characters and spent his time browsing stalls at events and socialising with his friends.

Josh had been cosplaying for two years and attended fan-run conventions exclusively. Josh enjoyed emulating the reliable best friend characters, who were common with anime and Japanese role-playing videogames. Spending his time at conventions watching masquerades and attending meets.

Katie had been cosplaying for seven years and attended fan-run conventions both within the UK and abroad. Katie only dressed up as male anime characters and enjoyed emulating the cool silent types. Katie spent her time at conventions attending different panels and socialising between her various cosplaying friendship groups.

Lauren described herself as a cis-gendered female cosplayer who had been cosplaying for roughly thirteen years. Lauren attended both mainstream and fan-run conventions as well as Japanese cultural events. She enjoyed cosplaying as female idols or crossplaying as feminine male characters. At these events Lauren mainly spent her time socialising with her friends and trying out videogame demos.

Leah had cosplayed for six years and dressed up as both male and female characters from a range of different media. Leah was skilled in sewing and regularly entered masquerades. Leah mainly went to fan-run conventions and Japanese cultural events and enjoyed running and watching panels.

Leo had cosplayed for four years. Whilst he mainly dressed up as male video characters from Japanese role-playing games, he also crossplayed as female anime characters on occasion. Choosing to emulate his favourite characters. He attended a number of mainstream conventions, mainly to socialise with his friends rather than for any of the attractions they offered. Leo attended his first fan-run convention the year that I met him, and he planned to go to more of these events as he enjoyed their panels and after parties.

Liam had been cosplaying for seven years and attended both fan-run and mainstream conventions. Liam emulated a range of characters from videogames and anime. Choosing his characters based on whether he liked their costumes and personality. Liam mainly spent his time at conventions socialising between different groups of his friends and attending after parties.

Louise had been cosplaying for three years and had only attended mainstream conventions. Louise cosplayed as female characters exclusively. Emulating the characters she liked the personality of within currently popular anime. Louise spent her time at conventions socialising with her friends and browsing the fan art stalls.

Lucy had been cosplaying for three years. So far, she had only attended mainstream conventions but hoped to attend fan-run conventions in the future. On average she went to three geek culture conventions a year. Lucy cosplayed as female characters from comic books and mainly went to conventions to buy merchandise, take pictures and meet up with the friends she had made at previous conventions. Lucy tended to dress up as who she wanted to rather than as a group.

Marie had been cosplaying for six months and had been to mainstream conventions exclusively. She enjoyed dressing up as female school idol characters from anime. Marie spent her time at conventions in the exhibition halls as she liked having her picture taken by convention attendees. As well as browsing the stalls, watching masquerades and attending meets within conventions.

Mathew had been cosplaying for eleven years and attended both mainstream and fan-run conventions as well as video-game events. Whilst Mathew watched a lot of East-Asian media he preferred cosplaying as male characters from western comic books, especially

anti-hero characters. Mathew spent most of his time playing videogame demos before attending the local pub to the convention.

Max described himself as a transgendered male and had been cosplaying for five years and attended fan-run conventions exclusively. Max cosplayed as male characters, with cosplay allowing him to express his gendered identity without negative social repercussions. Max emulated characters he liked, who were often the strong silent types. Spending his time attending panels with his friends.

Mike was a first-time mainstream convention attendee who voiced a desire to begin cosplaying. However, after making a transphobic comment he was alienated by wider members of the cosplaying subculture.

Molly was cosplaying for the first time at a mainstream convention when I met her. With Molly cosplaying a character from a Western cartoon, which was found to be popular amongst cosplayers. Molly had joined a cosplaying forum before her first convention and seemed well versed in the rules of the subculture as a result. Whilst Molly did not know anyone at her first convention, she explained that she had talked to a number of cosplayers. With Molly planning to meet up the cosplayers she had previously met online at an upcoming mainstream event.

Nicky described himself as white and had been cosplaying for five years. Nicky went to fan-run conventions exclusively which he attended to socialise with his friends and attend the convention's afterparties. Nicky solely cosplayed as anime characters he liked, who tended to be the suave, intelligent characters, who always had glasses as part of their character design.

Patrick had been cosplaying for 15 years and described himself as black. Whilst Patrick had started off cosplaying whoever he wanted, he now cosplayed as characters with darker skin exclusively. Preferring to cosplay cool characters from videogames. Patrick went to both mainstream and fan-run conventions as well as well as gaming events.

Poppy was a mixed-race cosplayer with one black and one white parent. She often engaged in crossplay where she dressed up as the sporty or arrogant characters who tended to be drawn with tanned skin. When cosplaying female characters Poppy usually cosplayed the

characters she liked or who her friends said she would suit. Poppy went to both fan-run and mainstream conventions and often went to Japanese cultural events. To mainly socialise with her friends.

Rachel was a cosplayer who described herself as white and had been cosplaying for seven years. Rachel only attended fan-run conventions as she liked the small communal atmosphere of these events. Rachel cosplayed as silent cool characters from videogames, and emulated both male and female characters.

Robin was a cis-gendered male cosplayer with a muscled physique who had been cosplaying for seven years. Robin crossplayed as tomboyish female characters if he liked their personality and character design. As well as a range of male characters from videogames and anime if he liked their personalities. Robin only attended fan-run conventions with an established group of friends. Spending most of his time at afterparties or within a pub close to the convention.

Rosie described herself as white and had been cosplaying for six years. Rosie went to fan-run conventions and Japanese cultural events exclusivity and frequently went to cosplaying events overseas. Rosie only cosplayed as anime characters and spent her time at events going to panels, attending meet and greets with those who worked on games, and playing videogame demos.

Russel was a convention attendee who voiced an interest in engaging in cosplay. However after making a transphobic remark Russel was shunned by cosplayers.

Sam described herself as a cis-gendered queer female who had been cosplaying for over eight years. Sam emulated tomboyish female characters from anime at the mainstream and fan-run conventions she attended. Spending her time browsing the stalls for merchandise and socialising with her friends.

Sandra had been cosplaying for a year and attended mainstream conventions as well as meets which took place in public settings. Sandra cosplayed as loud confident female characters from popular anime. Spending her time at conventions attending meets in order to make new friends.

Sara described herself as South Asian and had been cosplaying for eight years. Whilst Sara preferred fan-run conventions she also attended Japanese cultural events. As well as mainstream conventions on occasion if friends she had not seen in a while were going. Sara cosplayed as East-Asian characters from anime exclusively and enjoyed cosplaying magical girls in particular.

Sebastian had been cosplaying for a year and described himself as a cis-gendered man. Sebastian had only attended fan-run conventions, which he attended after making friends with a group of established cosplayers. Sebastian cosplayed as characters he liked the personalities of regardless of whether they were male or female and spent most of his time socialising within the grounds of conventions and attending after parties.

Stephan had cosplayed for over ten years and dressed up mainly as characters from Science Fiction shows. He attended both mainstream and fan-run conventions on an irregular basis due to his busy schedule, but met up with his friends from cosplay whenever he could. Stephan spent most of his time at conventions playing board games and drinking with his group of friends.

Suzanne who described herself as black, had cosplayed for two years and attended events with a focus on Japanese culture. As well as mainstream and fan-run geek culture conventions. Suzanne emulated the same Japanese character from an anime, who had multiple different outfits. With Suzanne wearing a different costume for each event she attended. Suzanne spent her time at conventions socialising with her friends, attending meets and watching masquerades.

Tabatha described herself as a heterosexual cis-gendered woman and had been cosplaying for six years. Tabatha went to fan-run conventions exclusively and cosplayed as female idol characters from anime. Emulating characters based on their costume designs. Tabatha spent most of her time at conventions watching panels or playing card games in gaming rooms.

Theo had been cosplaying for three years and had so far only attended mainstream conventions but was planning to attend a fan-run convention in the future. Theo cosplayed as the male villains from popular anime and spent his time at conventions playing videogame demos and browsing the stalls.

Tia was a mixed-race cosplayer with one black and one white parent, who had been cosplaying for four years. Tia preferred to cosplay as feminine anime characters but often cosplayed characters who were loud and sporty and tomboyish as they often had tanned skin that matched her own. Tia went to mainstream gaming and geek culture events that her local to her. As well as Japanese cultural events. Spending her time socialising with her cosplaying friends.

Tina described herself as black and had been cosplaying for over ten years. Tina cosplayed as a range of characters regardless of their skin tones and cosplayed as female characters exclusively. With Tina Attending both fan-run and mainstream cosplay conventions in order to socialise with her existing peer group and make new friends with shared interests.

Toby was a slim, male cosplayer who described himself as white and had been cosplaying for eight years. Toby cosplayed as whichever anime characters he liked, regardless of their gender. Who tended to be loud but supportive character types. Toby only attended fan-run conventions with his group of friends. Spending most of his time at afterparties or within a pub close to the convention.

Tom described himself as a gay cis-gendered man and had been cosplaying for seven years. Tom attended both mainstream and fan-run conventions and emulated shy male characters from anime. Spending his time at conventions socialising with his friends and posing for photographs.

Victor described himself as cis-gendered and had been cosplaying for four years. Victor attended both mainstream and fan-run conventions. Cosplaying both male and female characters based on if he liked their costume designs. Victor normally spent his time attending panels or watching the performances of cosplayers on public stages.

Zack was a cosplayer with a social disorder I met at a mainstream convention. My informal field conversations with Zack were very brief but within them Zack displayed a great deal of knowledge on a range of geek media. Zack had been cosplaying for over eight years and enjoyed emulating videogame characters in particular.

Zoe had been cosplaying for five years and only attended fan-run conventions. Zoe mainly cosplayed as female characters from videogames who wore clunky amour as she enjoyed

making these costumes. Zoe spent her time at conventions watching panels and running workshops, where she taught cosplayers how to make their own impressive armoured outfits.