



**Cosplay and (Be)coming-of-Age: An Autoethnographic Inquiry into the Spectacularly
Feminine via Boudoir, Maid Café and Idol Cosplay Groups in the UK**

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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.

Georgia Thomas-Parr
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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my uncle, Jason Thomas, and my nan, Sheila Parr.

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	v
ABSTRACT	iv
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
Reflection 1.1 A Certain Type of Femininity	6
Coming of Age in the Digital Age	8
Limitations	16
Context and Implications of the Research	17
Reflection 1.2 Cosplay and Gender	19
Research Questions	18
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	27
Introduction	27
Subcultural Studies	29
Hegemony	31
Patterns of Difference	34
Girls' Subcultures in the UK	38
Girls' Subcultures in Japan	43
Fetishisation and Orientalisation	47
Femininity, Fetishism and Masquerade	54
Cosplay and Drag	57
Cosplay Studies and Identity	59
Reflection 2.1 Takarazuka	65
Cosplay Studies and Femininity	68
Conclusion	71
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	75
Introduction	75

The Research Journey	76
Reflection: 3.1 Ontological and Epistemological Foundations	79
Methods	83
Feminist (Auto)Ethnography	85
Auto-ethnography	87
The Research Setting	90
Reflexivity	90
Participant Recruitment	91
Participant Observation	94
Virtual/Internet Observation	95
Interviews	98
Interview Style and Questions	100
Media Analysis	104
Ethics	104
Ethics and Friendship as Method	108
The Data, Coding and Analysis	110
Conclusion	111
CHAPTER FOUR: PARIAHS OF FEMININITY	113
Introduction	113
Pariah Femininities	115
Feminine Pariah Number 1: The Female Nerd	119
Feminine Pariah Number 2: The Tomboy	121
Reflection 4.1 Tomboy Instincts	125
Reflection 4.2 Sharice	127
Feminine Pariah Number 3: The Queer Girl	134
Reflection 4.3 Passionate Friendships	137

Feminine Pariah Number 4: The Girl Who Has Autism	140
Reflection 4.4 Seeing the World Very, Very Differently	145
Conclusion	146
CHAPTER FIVE: COSPLAY AND THE EROTIC	149
Introduction	149
Female Cosplayers	152
Method	158
The Devaluation of Craft	161
Reflection 5.1 Kathleen: “How I Got Into Cosplay”	164
Sexification	168
Who is Jessica Nigri?	174
Reflection 5.2 Revolutionary Woman or Skin-Tight and Sexy?	176
Scarlett	179
“Don’t Lose Your Way”: <i>Kill La Kill</i>	188
Reflection 5.3 The Ahogao Challenge	192
What’s So Super About Sonico?	197
Conclusion	200
CHAPTER SIX: MAID CAFÉS (PART ONE): DE-MYSTIFYING THE MAID CAFÉ VIA SHŌJO	204
Introduction	204
Maid Cafés Defined	206
Men in Wonderland	207
The Symbol of <i>Shōjo</i>	208
Maid Cafés in the UK	211
Method	216
Reflection 6.1 What’s in a Name?	217

Maid Café Research	218
The <i>Shōjo</i> Sensibility	221
Abbie	226
<i>Kawaii</i> and Reverse Adultification	233
Reflection 6.2 Field Diary 6.2a and 6.2b	235
Conclusion	239
CHAPTER SEVEN: MAID CAFÉS (PART TWO): GIRL DRAG	240
Reflection 7.1 Becoming Doll	240
A Note on Immersive Participant Observation	242
Girl Drag	245
Reflection 7.2 Field Diary: I Look Like A Drag Queen	245
Dress Like a Girl: The Maid Uniform	249
Reflection 7.3 Field Diary: The Accessories	252
Hair and Girlhood	253
Field Diary 7.4 The Red Bloomers	254
The Dress	255
Reflection 7.5 Field Diary Excerpts	258
Reflection 7.6 Maid Cosplay: A White Fantasy?	260
Act Like a Girl	261
Reflection 7.7 Playing it Candid	266
Dance Like a Girl	267
Reflection 7.8 Learning to “Dance Like a Girl”	269
“What’s The Best Way to Learn a Dance?”	274
Dance Practice	275
Reflection 7.9 Field Diary: The Studio	276

A Final Word on Girl Drag	278
Conclusion	282
CHAPTER EIGHT: IDOLS IN THE LIMELIGHT	284
Introduction	284
What is <i>Love Live!</i>?	288
Method	290
Idols in Japan	296
Reflection 8.1	300
<i>Love Live!</i> The Narrative	303
Becoming Tween	308
Why Tweenhood?	313
From Feminine Pariah to Popular Girl	318
Reflection 8.2 Mean Girls of Anicon	321
Immaturity and Sexualisation	323
Reflection 8.3 Andromeda Muse, The Second Performance: One Year Later	329
The Illusion of Choice	332
Reflection 8.4 <i>Love Live!</i> Analysis: The Skirt	338
Moving On	340
Reflection 8.5 Andromeda Muse: One Year Later, The Final(?) Goodbye	342
Conclusion	344
CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION	347
APPENDICES	356
APPENDIX 1.1 Participant Overview	356
APPENDIX 1.2 Conventions in the UK: What to Expect	359
APPENDIX 1.3 Of Images and Illusions	364
APPENDIX 1.4 Anita	367

APPENDIX 1.5 “What’s All This About?”	374
APPENDIX 1.6 Let’s Talk About Voice	379
APPENDIX 1.7 <i>Otaku</i> Only?	382
APPENDIX 1.8 Ethics Approval Confirmation	386
APPENDIX 1.9 Consent Forms and Information Sheets	387
REFERENCES	394
References Chapter One: Introduction	394
References Chapter Two: Literature Review	404
References Chapter Three: Methodology	417
References Chapter Four: Pariahs of Femininity	425
References Chapter Five: Cosplay and the Erotic	431
References Chapter Six: Maid Cafés (Part One)	437
References Chapter Seven: Maid Cafés (Part Two)	445
References Chapter Eight: Idols in the Limelight	450
References Chapter Nine: Conclusion	456
References: Appendices	458
BIBLIOGRAPHY	460

List of Illustrations

1.1	Me as a tween in cosplay.	2
1.2	Spice Moon.	15
1.3	<i>Attack on Titan</i> anime and cosplay.	19
1.4	<i>Love Live School Idol Project!</i> anime and cosplay.	20
2.1	Bitch, hoe, whore.	27
5.1	Pikachu Nigri.	149
5.2	A figurine of the Japanese anime character and franchise, Super Sonico.	156
5.3	Halloween costumes and sexification.	170
5.4	Jessica Nigri's "birdoir" shoot.	173
5.5	Sexification in Cosplay: The Bunny Girls of Overwatch.	179
5.6	Ryuko's superpower unleashed.	191
5.7	"Neko" <i>ahegao</i> .	193
5.8	<i>Ahegao</i> t-shirts.	195
5.9	Sonico figurine unboxed.	199
6.1	Two maids take a selfie together.	204
6.2	Maid Cafe 101.	238
7.1	Immersive maid cosplay.	240
7.2	Before and after, ever becoming.	243
7.3	A guide to the different styles of maid uniform.	250
7.4	Two girls dancing a fan made choreography of Hatsune Miku's "Viva Happy".	267
7.5	Two maids hold hands as they walk to their event.	283
8.1	Circle of idol cosplayers.	284
8.2	Idol stall.	294
8.3	<i>Love Live! All Stars</i> .	300
8.4	Characters from the anime, <i>Love Live Sunshine!!</i>	308
8.5	Group hug.	346
10.1	<i>Tokyo Mew Mew</i> (2000).	382

Abstract

Even though cosplay is a female-dominant subculture, there are few studies that locate it as a feminine phenomenon. Based on 18 months' autoethnographic fieldwork at over 25 cosplay and anime-related events in the UK, I focus on three, yet-to-be-studied, feminine-presenting cosplay groups that are inspired by anime and other media related to Japan: idol groups, maid cafés and boudoir cosplayers. As I argue in this doctoral study, all three groups are evidence of social developments in the early 21st century in which gender is becoming increasingly symbolic, providing insights into discourses surrounding femininity and feminine adolescence (Driscoll, 2002) which are necessarily shaped by "a postfeminist sensibility" (Gill, 2007). Using a poststructuralist, feminist framework, I explore how femininity becomes manifest via cosplay, providing the subject with an opportunity to experience empowerment, transforming from a position of "pariah femininity" (Schippers, 2007) into an ideal vision of the "spectacularly feminine" (McRobbie, 2009: 60). I conclude that Japanese media provides an alternative for adolescents in the UK to negotiate global and local gender hegemonies, which ultimately reflect what it means to (be)come of age in the digital age, under the shadow of internet technologies.

Chapter One: Introduction

Without shape or substance, the “girl” has resided secretly somewhere within me.

(Honda, 2010: 37)

Throughout the evolution of this doctoral research, the topic of girlhood has been at its heart. Writing from my perspective as a “former girl”, this research has been “girl centred” in its aim of “defending and promoting the rights of girls” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2008: 215; 214), offering an intervention in girlhood studies via the discussion of three feminine-presenting cosplay groups.

As a research project on the phenomenon of anime-and-Japan-inspired girls’ subcultures in the UK, I feel that it is necessary to discuss one of the core aspects that informed this thesis: I used to be an ardent fan of anime during my adolescence. Derived from the word animation, anime is a form of media emerging from Japan with global fan cultures worldwide. Many of the anime fans that I met (and, as I remembered my own stance) felt anime—and manga (the non-animated form of anime)—to be much more than “just” a cartoon. In my experience, consuming anime was a psychic and psychological experience embedded in my adolescent subconscious, which is necessarily how I approach it in this thesis.¹ As a tween and teen, I would spend hours silently drawing pictures of large, doe-eyed manga-style *shōjo* (girls) in my sketchbook. Every moment that I could spend daydreaming was dedicated to imagining the colours, characters and narratives of anime that I identified as being representative of Japan, revelling in the wishful and wistful escapism that it all sparked in me.

In the photo below, I am cosplaying as a magical girl that I had designed, as inspired by one of my favourite mangas.

¹ I consider my former passion for anime and manga as being both spiritual and egoic. Although I do not touch upon this spiritual element so much in this thesis (which is, by contrast, interested in the egoic, material, hegemonic elements of cosplay), this is not to lessen its worth as a subject of consideration.



Fig. 1.1.²

I remember feeling particularly pleased with myself because, despite being fourteen, I had managed to fit into a swimming costume sized for a nine-year-old. Cosplay was, therefore, a means by which I could revel in a femininity that was simultaneously powerful and distinctly girl-like. At that age, I remember wanting to freeze myself in my current state. Womanhood was a horror and I deeply feared the death of my subjectivity as a girl. Luckily for me, I had an interest in Japan and its intriguing media which both captivated and distracted me from this fear.

When I reflect on my former captivation with Japan and its media, I often wonder what came over me. It was as though I had been possessed by a magic spell that was broken when I came of age. This is why the work of Japanese scholar, Masuko Honda (quoted at the beginning of this chapter) particularly resonated with me. In *The Genealogy of Hirahira: Liminality and the Girl* she interprets “the state of being a girl”, providing a “testimony as someone who once experienced ‘girlhood’” (2010: 20). She interchangeably uses the voices of someone who was “once a girl” and “no longer a girl” (2010: 20), using her own memories to embellish her analyses of *shōjo* (girl) literature. I therefore found an affinity with Honda’s

² 1.1. Me as a tween in cosplay.

style of writing from the position of someone who was once a *shōjo*, which I reflect in my own work.

Once I entered university at age eighteen, anime became “just a phase” of my teens to which I gave no further thought. Before I began this research, I considered my anime fandom—and my girlhood—to be essentially dead, pushed into “the darkness of my past”. As Honda describes it,

Once I became an adult, it became clear to me that labels such as “vulgar, sentimental, lacking social awareness, stylistically, superficial, and having the immature taste of a girl” had been used to condemn the garden of my youth. Accordingly, I pushed this garden into the darkness of the past.

(2010: 37)

Until I opened the cathartic door of this doctoral research, I had all but forgotten about what had enchanted me during my teens. Now, ten years since the beginning of my interest in anime, manga, and Japan, engaging in this research was a resuscitation of nostalgic memories and feelings. I began to have my own suspicions about what it was that had bizarrely captivated me. Was it just a coincidence that my obsession with anime and Japan happened to span the time when my relationship with the idea of becoming a woman was most fraught? And was there an aspect of my subconscious that had re-directed me towards this because I still had unanswered questions about my experience?

This is the key relation between *shōjo* critics and other scholars of girlhood: acknowledging the insights that our own memories illuminate in our research on girls, bridging the gap to the world that we once occupied as children and as teenagers. As Megan Sullivan argues, “feminist scholars should mine their own childhood experiences for insight into the study of girls” (2008: 95), in which engaging in this research became a case of opening myself up to the “unsettling empirical surprises” (Morris, in: Driscoll, 2014a: 6) that emerged on facing the memories from my past. Mitchell & Reid-Walsh state,

somewhere in the process of doing research with and for girls, we should consciously work with our own histories as useful starting points [...] we should take full advantage of various approaches of working with the past as part of girl-method in informing our studies of contemporary girlhood.
(2008: 226)

This study is therefore rooted in my subjectivity and history as a girl who used anime, manga and cosplay as a means of seeing, feeling and experiencing the world differently. Catherine Driscoll also observes girlhood as being “a particularly self-reflexive experience” (2014a: 6). In her auto-ethnography of Australian country girlhood, Driscoll discusses Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus as providing researchers with an iterative means of approaching the theories and questions that frame their work (2014a: 33). As she states, habitus is

a personal orientation in the world carried through later experiences and produced in the experience of particular conditions [...] This demands a sense of location, which Bourdieu often suggests is unconscious—not just of a space you move through but a space you manifest.
(2014b: 126)

In this sense, the underlying habitus of my own research was informed by my experiences as a fan of anime which manifested the conditions of this research seemingly by chance—or, as I prefer to think, serendipity. Engaging in this research made me aware of the critical role that anime and Japan played in shaping my feminine adolescence, which I saw as being a time of ambivalence towards my presumed state as an emerging-woman.³ Thus the fundamental intrigue of this thesis lies in exploring the phenomenon of coming of age, or growing up, via anime, Japan, and cosplay.

From 2017 to 2019, based at twenty-five cosplay-related events in the UK, I observed cosplayers transform themselves into visions of what Angela McRobbie refers to as “the

³ I use the term “emerging-woman” to denote society’s expectation of the female-assigned subject to eventually become society’s represented ideal of what a woman is: feminine, desirable to heterosexual men, and spectacularly so.

spectacularly feminine” (2009: 60). As I explore, these were by no means conventional visions of femininity in a contemporary UK context. Using auto-ethnography and other sociological and visual methods, I inquire into those subcultural scenes where the fantasies of imaginary girls in Japanese media are enacted by young people in a British context. Anime conventions, fan culture events which celebrate this media, are becoming increasingly popular worldwide as a result of the internet, in which cosplay, a portmanteau of “costume” and “play” is a highly visible, “participatory” form of fan practice (Crawford & Hancock, 2019: 106; Rahman, *et al.*, 2012; Gn, 2012; Cooper-Chen, 2011; Denison, 2011a; Lamerichs, 2011, 2014; Winge, 2006). Cosplay, as Matthew Hale defines it, “involves the material and performative reproduction or replication of a distinct and recognizable subject from a particular body of texts” (2014: 10). Therefore, cosplay, in its replication of “characters with hyper-gendered identities” (Winge, 2019: 160) has much to offer gender and media scholarship—and, as I aim to show, “a focus on girlhood and girl culture has much to offer” (Driscoll, 2014a: 5) the scholarship of cosplay and anime fandom.

As shaped by the ethos, theories and political insights of the field of girlhood studies, one particular characteristic of this work is its interdisciplinarity, drawing on the scholarship related to cosplay, subcultures, media, Japan and feminism. Considering “girlhood as an ongoing process of negotiation contingent on context and interaction with other realities” (Reddy, 2009), I witness how images of fictional characters resonate across multiple realities: virtual, actual, local and transnational. As a means of understanding the lived reality of what it means to come of age as a female subject in contemporary, patriarchally-driven, capitalist societies, I trace the performances of various anime-inspired femininities. Paradoxically, this study has emerged in light of the theoretical debates surrounding symbolic figures of girlhood who can trouble and thwart an “adult-centric and patriarchal logic” (Mandrona, 2016: 5), and yet, who are nonetheless undeniably imbedded in discourses of patriarchal, hetero-masculine

desire. As Gateward and Pomerance state, “It is the girl who is the most profound site of patriarchal investment, her unconstrained freedom representing the most fearsome threat to male control” (2002: 13). Overall, I observe cosplay practice as a means of witnessing those meetings between the symbolic and the real, where the imaginary figure of the girl—and the liminal, subversive properties that she represents—is evoked by the cosplayer who emulates her. Ultimately, I observe how cosplaying as a *shōjo* can work to undermine certain dominating forces such as capitalism and patriarchy while also, contradictorily, serving to reassert their hegemonic power. Evidently then, as characteristic to its feminist poststructuralist approach, there are tensions and contradictions that accompany this work.

As an auto-ethnography, I have chosen to present a selection of my reflections throughout this thesis in the form of these text boxes. Although intended as an aside to the discussion of the thesis, these reflections nevertheless provide vital insights to this research.

Reflection 1.1

A Certain Type of Femininity

On its surface, to an outsider of the anime convention (i.e. the average person in the UK who is not fanatic about anime), the following might be seen as bizarre: teenage girls dancing on stage to the hyper, high-pitched Japanese singing voices of anime, in bright colourful wigs (waist to short bob-length), wearing equally bright, frilly, flashy, dazzling dresses and accessories; moving in the way that a fantasy of the stereotypical little girl might dance, smiling sweetly, tilting their heads, clutching two fists together in front of their chests, *kawaii*-style,⁴ knees bobbing, toes pointed inward. This scene is different to the popular, normative, “western” imagination when one says the word, “teenage girl”.⁵ The

⁴ *Kawaii*, meaning “cute” in Japanese, has a variety of discourses surrounding it regarding femininity and commodification. I discuss this in more detail further on.

⁵ For a justification of my use of the problematic and polemical terms “west” and “western”, see chapter two.

mystery goes deeper, however, as this image of the girl performing on stage (innocent, naive, eager-to-please, energetic and, above all, girly) differs from what each member told me about themselves in their daily life: they were not girly and, for some, they did not identify as feminine at all. So what was it that motivated them to wear those dresses, to dance those dances that were redolent of a certain type of femininity—an immature femininity that is associated with anime, and, intriguingly, Japan?

The concept of *kawaii* is important to this research, a term used to mean “cute” in Japanese. However, *kawaii* encompasses more than the term “cute” signifies (Dale *et. al* 2016). It has become an affectual global influence, an aesthetic and consumer phenomenon, and fashion subculture with its own discipline (cute studies) in academia (Dale, 2016; Kinsella, 1998). As Sharon Hasegawa states,

The concept of *kawaii* includes elements such as “cute,” “pretty,” and “lovely,” but it is not restricted to these. It also implies something precious: something that we are drawn towards and which stimulates one’s feeling of wanting to protect something that is pure and innocent.

(quoted in Sharp, 2011: 65-66)

Therefore, cosplayers who perform as *kawaii* characters are not only doing girlhood; they are arguably doing femininity-as-“innocence”. *Kawaii* is defined as: “childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behaviour and physical appearances” (Kinsella, 1995: 220). What intrigues me particularly about *kawaii* is how it relates to girlhood, not only as cute consumer products orientated towards girls and young women, but as a means of bridging the gap between girlhood and womanhood, which the term *shōjo* denotes. *Shōjo* may be viewed as being an extension of the *kawaii* aesthetic and sentiment in which *kawaii* is derived from the word *kawaisō*, meaning “pathetic” and “pitiable”(Kinsella, 1995).

Notably, *shōjo* is a specifically gendered term for the liminal period between adolescent girlhood and womanhood that does not exist in the English lexicon (Wakeling, 2011; Driscoll, 2002; Sato, 1998;

Treat, 1993). I thus became interested in the potential similarities between *shōjo* and Catherine Driscoll's term "feminine adolescence" (2002: 127). Driscoll defines girlhood as "encompassing no specific age group but rather an idea of mobility preceding the fixity of womanhood and implying an unfinished process of personal development" (2002: 47). I observe how discourses of girlhood were present across cosplay groups in which the relationality of girlhood and womanhood was evoked by performances of "immature" and "mature" femininity. Therefore, as I show, cosplay exposes the becomingness of feminine adolescence in which the beginning of womanhood and the end of girlhood are imperceptible. As I explore in more detail in chapter six, *shōjo* (as a discourse of feminine adolescence) and *kawaii* (the aesthetic of cuteness) have a particular relationship to each other, their combined forces uncannily subverting a patriarchal gaze (Yano, 2006). This bears certain implications for those who become captivated by it during feminine adolescence. That is, if "cuteness is an aestheticization of powerlessness" (Ngai, in: Bow, 2019: 39), then what might this suggest about the people with whom it resonates and their feelings of autonomy within their own cultural context?

Coming of Age in the Digital Age

Coming of Age, *n.* and *adj.*:

1. An age at which a person passes from childhood to adulthood and assumes various rights and privileges [...]

3. [...] [T]he reaching of maturity; the point at which something is judged to have achieved widespread significance, recognition, or acceptance.

(OED online).⁶

What is coming of age and why is thinking about it important? The above entry from the Oxford English Dictionary reflects its traditional definition as a rite of passage in which the subject is seen to move from a position of immaturity (childhood) into one of maturity (adulthood), coming into a position that is recognised and accepted. Therefore, the term

⁶ Available at: <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/416943?rskey=PYNOLV&result=2#eid>

coming of age signifies more than maturity; it refers to coming into one's position as a socialised and (re)productive member of society. As Loren Lerner states,

[A]dolescence, for girls, begins at approximately eleven years of age and ends at about twenty. During these years personality develops in concert with changes to the body. Life-long characteristics are formed, often the result of experiences that have been deeply felt due to shifts in the physical and psychological self that have left the adolescent highly impressionable. These are the years when girls cultivate ideas about who they are and what they don't want to be. This is called coming of age—that time when girls not only understand themselves but observe the world around them differently and act on what they see.

(2008: 3)

The psychological and physical development of adolescence is therefore a transformative time which, intriguingly, is mirrored in the narratives of anime and the act of cosplay itself. If coming of age marks the point where we begin to observe ourselves and the world around us differently, perhaps this is why anime may resonate with those who are at the point of coming of age, if not solely speaking of my own experience. “[A]dolescence is an entirely cultural phenomenon” (Driscoll, 2002: 8) and this is reflected in the ways that we form our mature identities in relation to the available discourses that surround us. Moreover, “learning to be female and ‘performing femininity’ is ‘hard work’” (Bloustein, 2003: 4), in which this research observes cosplay as the site where “hard work” becomes transformed into “play”. As Gerry Bloustein states,

Play... is understood to be a fundamental human activity, a process of representation and identification. In popular discourse, ‘play’ has become synonymous with childish behaviour, trivial actions we (should) outgrow as we reach maturity and adulthood.

(2003: 2)

As I explore, cosplay, a form of play, is also a form of negotiation of the wider hegemonies of capitalism and patriarchy that shape contemporary (female) adulthood. If coming of age is a

process of negotiating the reproductively gendered destiny that has been imposed on us since birth, what significance then, might there be in finding fanatic, identificatory processes within a cultural media (for example Japan and South Korea) that differs from the one in which you are embedded? This was the case for all participants in this study who came into an awareness and appreciation of anime during adolescence. This ultimately reflects how, as a consequence of the internet, the nature of coming of age is evolving. As I explore throughout this thesis, in contemporary terms, coming of age is no longer able to be limited to its definition as the finalised realisation of one's societal and bodily maturity, marked by a ritual or celebration. Rather, I interpret coming of age as something that is never complete; an ongoing, cyclical process of self-actualisation relating to hegemony. This naturally has implications concerning gender, in which the focus of this thesis is femininity.

As Rika Sato states, "adolescence for girls is not the same as adolescence for boys, as the latter is merely a temporary stage of lower status" (1998: 19). Coming of age for girls then, marks a change in status from a position of freedom into constriction which is widely noted in the feminist literature (e.g. Halberstam 1998). In this thesis, I observe feminine adolescence, "the social process of becoming a woman" (Driscoll, 2002: 127), as being a personal negotiation of wider hegemonic ideals (such as capitalism and patriarchy) which conceive power along the lines of a gender dichotomy (or "heterosexual matrix") where masculinity is the quality of man; femininity is the quality of woman (Butler, 2006). It becomes increasingly necessary for individuals to conform to either side of this dichotomy once they enter adolescence. Indeed, one of the key theories that has shaped my direction in this thesis is as follows: "the girl, unless she is particularly graceless, accepts her femininity in the end" (de Beauvoir, 2011: 379). In other words, all girls must compulsorily conform to ideals of femininity in order to come of age. Therefore, by observing feminine-presenting

cosplay we may begin to deconstruct what it means to come of age as a female subject in contemporary times.

Notably, all participants of this study were assigned female at birth (AFAB), meaning that, in terms of societal ideologies (which I use the term hegemony to denote), each participant's ideal destiny as a future woman would lie in their becoming the ideal image of feminine (re)productivity. In this study, as well as cisgender female perspectives, I include transgender male, AFAB non-binary, and genderfluid perspectives.⁷ This is not to conflate the former with the latter, but rather, it was part of my focus on girlhood for the fact that all participants were assigned female at birth and the label "girl" is something that they would have had to have negotiated in relation to the hegemonic discourses of femininity as they grew up. In this sense, I use the term coming of age to refer to this compulsory, societal imposing of gender which becomes increasingly evident as an individual enters adolescence. In light of a hegemonic gaze, I observe how femininity is expected of all subjects assigned female at birth, especially in order for them to come of age and have societal value. In this sense, I explore feminine-presenting cosplay as an unserious means by which all participants were able to play with the hegemonic values expected of them in society: a spectacular femininity that was embodied and reified through cosplay performance. However, it is important to note that I cannot wholly attribute the term "girls" subculture to my study because to do so would fundamentally overlook those participants who transitioned out of girlhood into boyhood or manhood, or took up a more genderfluid identity as non-binary. Fundamentally, I came to observe cosplay as being a form of drag in which spectacular femininity was temporarily attained.

⁷ The term cisgender refers to someone who identifies with the gender that they were assigned at birth; transgender refers to someone who identifies with a gender that they were not assigned at birth; non-binary refers to someone who does not identify with the binary categories of male or female.

In my discussion of three, cosplay-based, anime-inspired groups, I observe “femininity as spectacle” which “is something in which virtually every woman is required to participate” (Bartky, 1997: 101). As Angela McRobbie states,

Women are actively engaged in the production of self. That is, it becomes increasingly difficult to function as a female subject without subjecting oneself to those technologies of self that are constitutive of the spectacularly feminine. (2009: 60)

In other words, (be)coming of age (i.e. being recognised as a socially valuable subject in capitalist, patriarchal society) as a female subject is contingent on one’s conforming to practices of the “spectacularly feminine” (McRobbie, 2009: 60). I work to develop McRobbie’s theory as a means of understanding the process of coming of age as a female subject in the 21st century, in which I consider cosplay as one of “the different ways in which we ‘work upon’ our bodies so as to become a self” (Evans, *et al.* 2010: 120). In this sense, cosplay becomes a catharsis of femininity, which is experienced through embodying an imagined (anime) girl’s body (Sato, 1998; Copeland, 2006; Abbott, 2015). I therefore observe the ways in which participants used cosplay to become empowered as spectacularly feminine subjects; how cosplay may act as a channel for becoming the ideal image of capitalist and patriarchal feminine power, which manifests in the form of a “postfeminist sensibility” (Gill, 2007). In this thesis, I define the “spectacularly feminine” as an achievement of femininity that is hypervisible, luminous (Kearney, 2015), youthful; a vision of celebrity (Kennedy, 2018) that makes a drag-like spectacle of the subject through exaggerated behaviour and consumer excess. As arguable reifications of “emphasised femininity” (Connell, 1987)—or “hegemonic femininity” as Mimi Schippers (2007) works to redefine—cosplay illuminates these moments where cosplayers transformed themselves into visions of hegemonically-esteemed femininity. Nonetheless, as I discuss, these performances are derived from a

complicated transnational web where alternative cultural discourses of gender become hybridically blended.

Specifically inspired by Japanese media, I explore cosplay as an opportunity to embody the spectacularly feminine via a means that is alternative to images of mainstream femininity in a British context. I observe the ways of “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987), or rather, “doing femininity” (Coates, 1997: 311; Paechter, 2006: 255), under the guise of an anime character. In particular, I discuss those individuals and groups of cosplayers who emulated personas of youthful female characters that were based on Japanese media (anime) and *otaku* subculture,⁸ manifesting as boudoir cosplay, maid café cosplay, and idol group cosplay. I felt particularly drawn towards these groups because they all evoked uncanny, caricature-like performances of femininity that initially unsettled me, due to the fact that they seemingly pandered to the “male gaze” (Mulvey, 1989). However, on further inquiry in my interviews with the cosplayers, they did not see it this way themselves. As sexualised as they might superficially appear, these were roles that they adopted in order to feel a certain way, such as cute and liberated (in the case of maids and idols) or powerful and independent (in the case of “professional” female cosplayers). Thus there was a rift between how cosplayers perceived themselves and how they might be received by others within a context (i.e. the misogynistic, “pornified” machine that is the internet)⁹ in which the female body becomes scrutinised for its sexual capacities.¹⁰ Indeed, “girls are positioned as objects of desire” (Lunning, 2011b: 72) in which

⁸ *Otaku* is generally used to denote a masculine, fanatic subculture in Japan. During the 1990s the term took on a particular dimension after four young girls were murdered and mutilated, in which the Japanese media sensationalised it as being at the hands of the “*otaku* killer” or “Little Girl Murderer” (Galbraith, 2019; Kinsella, 2014). Since then, the relation between *otaku* subculture and its interests in *bishōjo* (beautiful young girls, found in anime, maid cafés and idol groups) has been hotly debated, in which, in chapter six, I consider the relation that *otaku* subculture bears to a *shōjo* (girls’) sensibility.

⁹ I quote Pamela Paul’s book “pornified” where she argues that “the Internet has been a major driving force—perhaps the greatest force ever—behind the proliferation of porn” (2007: 59).

¹⁰ Is the female body a fetish object (Irigaray, 2004; Dant, 1996) in the patriarchal machine? The female body exists to be sexualised, in which sexualisation was the one thing that came through on all levels of cosplayers, whether they were actively seeking it (as with boudoir cosplay) or actively rejecting it (maids and idols).

One of the primary “luminosities” ... surrounding girls as both bearers of power and objects of risk centres on girls’ relationship to sexuality and entry into sexual womanhood.

(Renold & Ringrose 2013: 247)

I therefore explore cosplay as providing a means for each cosplayer to negotiate discourses that synonymise mature (“adult”) femininity with sexualisation. The significance of this I intend to contribute to the fields of cosplay, girlhood and feminist and sociological studies as part of my philosophical consideration of what it means to become a woman in the 21st century under the shadow of internet and media technologies. Ultimately, this research explores how young people (between the period of early adolescence to their late twenties) with an interest in Japan might use cosplay as a way of negotiating (rejecting, and/or accepting) mature, socialised femininity (or, womanhood) as it is expected of them in society. Naturally, one of the biggest themes that this thesis covers is the participants’ negotiation of their seemingly inevitable (hetero)sexualisation, because, as I argue in this thesis, womanhood is persistently defined by this factor in patriarchal society. As I explore, there are three key observations that emerged from this research. Firstly, the majority of participants did not consider themselves to be feminine (conventionally, or even at all) in their daily lives and yet, as teenagers or young adults, in an anime convention-setting, they performed hyperfeminine personas as inspired by Japanese media. Secondly, for participants, cosplay became the means of temporarily adopting a feminine guise that pertained to hypervisibility, spectacularity and luminosity (Evans, *et al.* 2011; McRobbie, 2009; Kearney, 2015). Thirdly, the cosplayers that I observed all saw their engagement with cosplay as rejecting their sexualisation, no matter how they were regarded by others. These elements are therefore key themes to this work which arise in consideration of the extent to which we are ever fully in control of the choices we make under our self-defined autonomy as neoliberal subjects.

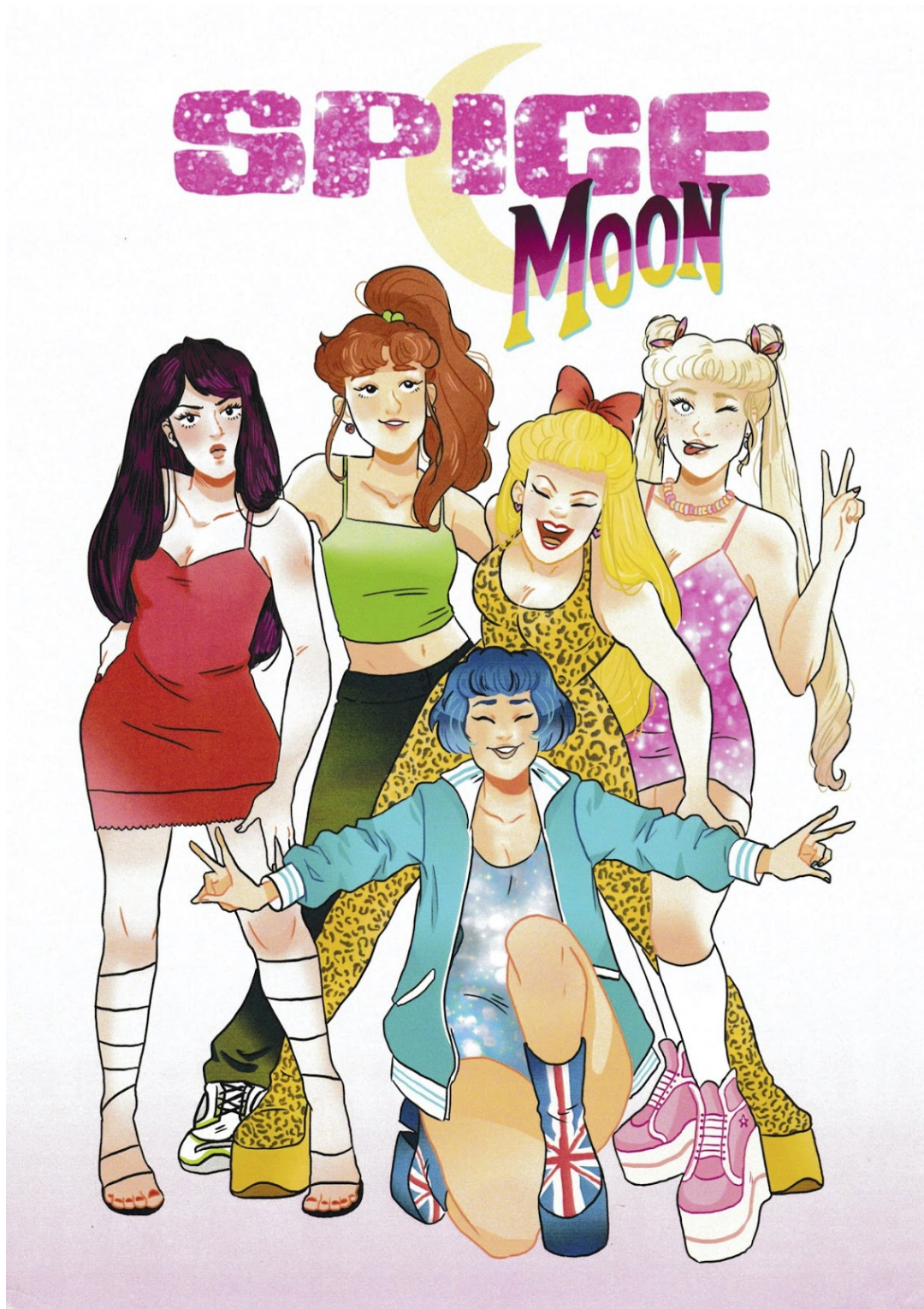


Fig. 1.2.¹¹

¹¹ 1.1. Spice Moon. I purchased this fanart at an anime convention, depicting the characters of the anime *Sailor Moon* as members of the Spice Girls. It shows the ways in which figures of “girl power” and postfeminism operate globally via the figure of *shōjo* (girl). As Zaslow states, “girl power has represented an expansive media culture that encourages girls and women to identify both as traditionally feminine objects and as powerful feminist agents” (2009: 2-3). Image credits: @nonneebee. Available at: <https://twitter.com/i/events/861572675210280960?lang=en>

Limitations

As a study of femininity, there are certain elements of cosplay practice that I do not focus on in detail. For example, I do not discuss the element of craft or skill that goes into cosplay. This is because my aim lies in the analysis and philosophical exploration of the social significance of becoming feminine via cosplay, as opposed to a description of the practices of female-presenting cosplayers. Nevertheless, I would encourage further studies of feminine cosplay subcultures to emphasise craftwork. This is because girls and young women are persistently represented (whether in cosplay or culture as a whole) as being inept in regard to manual skill or creativity (see chapter five for more exploration; Scott, 2015). My discussion of the three areas I have chosen (boudoir cosplayers, idols, maids) is not intended as being fully representative of Japan-inspired, feminine, cosplay subcultures in the UK on the whole, rather, I aim to provide a selective snapshot of that which seemed particularly contradictory and intriguing to me as a researcher. Indeed, unlike many ethnographies, my aim is to not necessarily be a comprehensive, descriptive analysis (although this is something that I strive towards nonetheless), but an exploration of what it means to be a female subject in an increasingly digital world in which gender is specifically coded along the lines of an ideological dichotomy (Butler, 2006; Connell, 1987).

Another element that is absent from my approach is a focus on the performance of masculinity. Indeed, as many of the cosplayers in this study cosplayed as masculine characters as well as feminine characters, it would be opportune for a future study to observe how hegemonic masculinity might also reveal itself via cosplay. Notably, I do not include in my discussion the perspectives of transgender women and girls, who, as much as I wanted to include their experiences in this study, were notably absent in the three selected cosplay groups of this study.¹² Nevertheless, it should be recognised that the scholarship of anime

¹² I feel it is important to note those encounters where individuals that I met were on the boundary of my discussion in this thesis. In my observations online, I found that transgender women and girls were more actively visible across the forum website Reddit. In one convention, a transgender woman that I met told me of

fandom and cosplay in the UK currently lacks focus on the experiences of transgender women and girls in spite of the key role that they play.

Another area that is lacking in this thesis is the focus on social class which has been a key aspect in subcultural studies in which early studies posited subcultures as being home to working-class, white men (Hebdige, 1979; Hall & Jefferson, 2003). Although I would agree with Crawford & Hancock (2019)—who argue that the nature of subculture is changing, particularly in regard to cosplay subculture where distinctions like class are not so clear—cosplay and anime fandom are nonetheless related to consumer practice (Hills, 2002) which necessarily requires money. Having money means the difference between being able to cosplay or enter a convention in the first place. Therefore, those individuals from privileged backgrounds necessarily had more access to the resources that would empower them via cosplay. (Furthermore, as a convention-based researcher, I had more access to these cosplayers). The attaining and maintaining of one's power as a feminine cosplayer is contingent on one's ability to stay relevant which rests on one's ability to perpetually consume oneself "into being" (Walkerdine, 2003: 247). In this sense, the financial (classed) aspect reflected the (be)coming of age of participants in a capitalist scape, in which one's socialisation is marked by the capacity to spend money and (re)produce one's image through consumer products. Therefore, anime fans and cosplayers from lower-class backgrounds might have to achieve their self-actualisation as capitalist subjects in other ways, given the materiality of the subculture. Although I am unable to discuss class in much detail in this study, it is nevertheless a key point for consideration that future studies may adopt.

Context and Implications of the Research

her aspiration to one day open her own LGBTQ+ themed maid café which I would be keen to observe for a future study. I also met one maid cosplayer who identified as male and cisgender, but following the fieldwork they came out as non-binary. Therefore, although it is not reflected in my study, transgender women and girls (and non-binary folk who were assigned male at birth) are nevertheless active across anime fan sites, playing an important part in fan culture, which ideally will be reflected as such in future research.

All of the participants of this thesis, who ranged in age between 11 to 30, grew up in the UK during or after the “girl power” of the 1990s (see Zaslou, 2009; Gonick; 2007; Whelehan, 2000; Budgeon, 1998). Therefore, this thesis depicts an adolescence that is firmly embedded within a postfeminist context, in which the term postfeminism denotes “the myth that ‘sexism’s been and gone’” (Whelehan, 2000: 57).¹³ On top of this, besides cosplay and a fanaticism about anime, the affinity that each participant and myself had was our experience of coming of age in a world where the nascent internet and its representations of gender and sex was dominant. Boudoir, idol and maid cosplay (as well as Japanese media itself) all enjoy the global popularity that they do today because of internet technology. In a world which has been predominantly defined by internet technology for at least ten years, becoming a woman in the 21st century means, in some way or another, negotiating that symbol of woman in light of how she is represented in internet technology and global image culture as a whole: as a pornified subject.¹⁴ Internet and media technology have only exacerbated the patriarchal extent of woman’s symbolic existence as a sexual vessel where she is valued for her sexually marked, bodily capacities and is preferably devalued for all else.¹⁵ As Raewyn Connell states, “Girls are still taught by mass culture that they need above all to be desirable” (2002: 2). This is the crux of this thesis, in which the feminine-presenting subject is considered to come of age when she becomes desirable to a hetero-masculine, hegemonic gaze.

¹³ There are many contradictory understandings of what the term postfeminism means (Gill & Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2007). I use the term postfeminism “as an object of critical analysis, rather than as a theoretical orientation, new moment of feminism or straightforward backlash” (Gill & Scharff, 2011: 5). Indeed, feminism is the theory and method; postfeminism is the object of scrutiny and critique.

¹⁴ When I heard that *Playboy* magazine had made the decision to stop printing naked women, I took it as a sign of how doomed the situation was. As the chief executive of the company justified its decision: “You’re now one click away from every sex act imaginable for free. And so it’s just passé at this juncture” (Somaiya, 2015).

¹⁵ Although I know that reality is more complicated than this, from personal experience, I had spent my adolescence loathing my femininity because woman was a sign, in my eyes, for a dehumanised, abject, pornified spectacle. The problem of negotiating my identity as an emerging-woman lay in what I understood from the history of culture, society and language as refusing women the right to subjectivity at all. This is one of the fundamental issues of feminist philosophy: how do I approach this problem of becoming a woman in a misogynistic world, when I know and define myself as a child who is free, inquisitive, creative and autonomous? Whether this was also the case for my research participants I can only ponder.

I cannot presume to know all of my participants' experiences, or even assume their experiences to be like mine. There is, however, a shared affect that underlies my writing in this study. I provide an overview of the demographic of participants that I met throughout my research, showing that being a fan of anime is not contingent on identity factors such as race, class, ability and gender (although these necessarily shape each participant's experience of their fandom). Rather, being a fan of anime is a way of seeing the world "very, very differently" as Kiara, a black, working-class, neurodivergent, participant told me in our interview. Indeed, in this study, I primarily work to acknowledge this distinctly different world-view of the cosplayers and anime fans that I met as shaping their desire for an escapism from societal limitations, nevertheless in light of the critical role that intersectionality plays in shaping their individual world-views.

Reflection 1.2

Cosplay and Gender

It should be noted that masculinity is just as equally performed as femininity in a convention context, as the following images show. Anime fan culture and cosplay are illustrative of the fact that *representation matters*.



Fig. 1.3.¹⁶

¹⁶ 1.2. *Attack on Titan* (2013-2021) anime and cosplay. All photos in this thesis have been reproduced with the permission of the photographer and/or groups involved.



Fig. 1.4.¹⁷

In this thesis, although I focus solely on how participants became spectacularly feminine via cosplay, it is hoped that my inquiry will invite similar studies on the performance of masculinity as well. What does it mean to emulate the image of gendered icons that detract from the representations that we more commonly see in the UK? Does Japanese (and, increasingly, South Korean) media and culture provide an alternative, “softer” (less aggressive) means of becoming (re)productively masculine and feminine? Or is this just how it seems behind the lens of anime (and Kpop)? Regardless, Japan and South Korea provide imaginary representations that are disseminated via the internet, received globally by individuals who are potentially looking to escape from the gender hegemonies of their own cultures.

Research Questions

Contrary to positivist, grounded research which aims to formulate its hypotheses based on empirical data (in its avoidance of “bias”), my research questions were born from my own subjective experience. Moreover, I did not begin fieldwork with the following research questions and objectives in mind. My research tentatively developed in relation to my initial inquiry into girls’ subcultures (McRobbie & Garber, 1978) via anime fandom, in which certain themes led me to shape my thesis around the resulting concepts and intrigues. Each chapter will present an insight into the following research questions:

¹⁷ 1.4. *Love Live! School Idol Project* (2013-2015) anime and cosplay.

1. How do the members of each cosplay group become “spectacularly feminine” (McRobbie, 2009: 60)?
2. How might these femininities be viewed as an alternative to UK modes of femininity via Japanese media?
3. How do feminine cosplay subcultures appropriate the symbols of girls and women from Japanese media subcultures and what cross-cultural implications may this have?
4. In light of the undisputed sexualisation that defines femininity in a patriarchal climate, how do cosplayers espouse or reject this?
5. What significance does each spectacularly feminine cosplay group bear in relation to (be)coming of age as a female subject in the 21st century?

The aims of this thesis are:

1. To provide a context and lay the foundations for further studies into feminine-presenting cosplay subcultures such as boudoir, maid café and idol group cosplay.
2. To explore (via feminine-presenting cosplay subcultures) the social necessity and means of becoming “spectacularly feminine” as a female subject.
3. To consider, in light of Japanese media and cosplay, “the ways in which bodies are known, understood and experienced through images, that is, the ways in which bodies become through their relations with images” (Coleman, 2008: 163).
4. To reflect on my own experiences as a former anime fan and the experience of becoming feminine through cosplay.

Based in a feminist, poststructuralist framework in the discipline of girlhood studies, I explore the ways in which feminine-presenting cosplayers in the UK adopt and emulate the

“spectacularly feminine” (as it is represented in Japanese media and society) for their own purposes and desires. The following chapter provides a deeper theoretical analysis of the concepts that have informed my stance throughout this thesis as well as an overview of the research on feminine and cosplay subcultures as well as the debates concerning the scholarship of Japanese media and culture. In the methodology, chapter three, I discuss the methods that I used in this thesis and the ontological and epistemological foundations behind my feminist-poststructuralist approach. It should also be noted that, due to the variety of feminine subcultures that I observe in this thesis, I also provide brief methodologies and literature reviews within each chapter of discussion to more effectively contextualise each subculture and the methods I used, which necessarily differed from group to group.

The first chapter of my discussion, chapter four, focuses on female positions that I came across which opposed hegemonic intent. That is, to be a “pariah of femininity” (Schippers, 2007) opposes the system that values women and girls for their desirability, primarily because their existence besmirches the ideal of the reproductively mature, sexy subject. All areas of inquiry in this doctoral research observe how cosplayers transformed themselves from a position of “pariah femininity” into one of “hegemonic femininity” (Schippers, 2007: 88). Cosplayers were able to experience a position of hegemonic femininity by evoking those characteristics that are associated with being hegemonically feminine in contemporary capitalist societies: hyperfemininity, hypervisibility and spectacularity (Projansky, 2014). Pariah femininities are decidedly not sexy and, therefore, worthless to the capitalist, patriarchal machine that values desirability in the female subject. I discuss certain instances of pariah femininities that I came across in my research, such as tomboys, nerds, queer and neurodivergent girls and how they experienced “discipline” (Foucault, 1995) as a result. Chapter four provides the foundation for the chapters that it precedes in its discussion of the demographic and thematic elements between cosplayers. Notably, all chapters of

discussion observe cosplay as providing a means of becoming validated as a feminine-presenting subject which is so necessary to one's survival and wellbeing in a hegemonically-ordained society.

In chapter five, I explore what it means to occupy a position that is instantly validated in female cosplayers in light of the internet and the wider ideologies surrounding women in general. I observe the reward that awaits the female subject if she is able to successfully embody a spectacularly feminine, erotically marked, guise—in this case, cosplay. “Boudoir” cosplayers enjoy the validation and recognition (and, as a result, financial reward) offered to those feminine-presenting subjects who successfully become desirable. As I argue, boudoir cosplay is a metaphor for coming of age in the 21st century as a (female) subject under the capitalist, patriarchal gaze: one becomes empowered through exploiting their image via technology. I observe those moments where certain cosplayers became the reified image of the caricatured, pornified symbol that woman has become in the 21st century, courtesy of the internet. I use these cases as a means of considering the point at which the feminine-presenting subject comes of age in an internet scape, in that moment when she fits the criteria for desire of the sexualising gaze that scrutinises her body for its (re)productive elements. Therefore, the boudoir cosplayer is esteemed as the symbol of hegemony, indoctrinated into a cycle of reproducing herself as a sexified image in the name of productive value. Nevertheless, as I pose, this reward is necessarily temporary which reflects the becomingness of socialisation in a capitalist, patriarchal context. Coming of age is a becoming that is contingent on the persistent reinvention and transformation of the self which works to redefine and resolidify hegemony's recognition of itself as its ideal image.

Chapters six and seven, by contrast, focus on the phenomenon of maid café cosplayers in the UK, observing how maids (between the ages of eighteen and their late twenties) embody the figure of the girl (*shōjo*) as a means of becoming spectacularly

feminine, yet, nonetheless, work to reject any gaze that might sexualise them. This is necessarily contradictory, which reflects the discourses surrounding symbolic girlhood in general, a sign which bears the power to deconstruct hegemony (Jackson, 2010). I thus observe maid café cosplayers as epitomising becomingness in their performances via cosplay, prolonging their coming of age via an uncanny means—by revelling in an infantility while working in a servile job, anachronistically and perpetually on the cusp of coming of age, forever becoming desirable. The subservient, frill-clad maid acts as a spectacularly feminine representation who uncannily and paradoxically may be used to affront the gaze of sexualising desire via the *kawaii*ification (making cute) of a symbol that embodies the image of a female subject who meets the criteria for heteromale, patriarchal, capitalist desire. Therefore maid café cosplay acts as a resistance to the sexualisation that perpetually defines the female subject's maturity, yet, nonetheless, is remarkably under the very guise that signifies her sexualisation.

The final chapter of my discussion, chapter eight, observes how the symbol of the girl manifests in idol cosplay groups, being used to gain recognition in an anime convention setting via a performance on the stage. I consider the girlish personas of the anime franchise, *Love Live!* and its subsequent inspired idol cosplay groups in the UK. *Love Live!* inspires a trend like no other, particularly with groups of teens and tweens who form cosplay groups and perform together on stage at a convention setting. In this chapter, I consider the trajectory of certain idol cosplayers who worked to achieve their performative success using discourses of tweenhood, in particular, coming of age via celebrity (Kennedy, 2018), to consider the idol as a star who achieves her self-actualisation (successful coming of age) through becoming spectacularly feminine. Therefore, idol cosplay, similar to maid café cosplay, is a means of (be)coming of age as a feminine-presenting subject that is not contingent on becoming the symbol of hetero-male, sexual desire. Nevertheless, the image that they are projecting

cannot be entirely divorced from that either. The recurring theme of this thesis observes the sexualising, scrutinising gaze of patriarchal capitalism that works to shape each cosplayer's experiences, ultimately reflecting what it means to (be)come of age as a female-presenting subject in contemporary society—a compulsory negotiation of one's ideal destiny of a (hyper)feminine, hetero, (hyper)sexual subject. (Be)coming of age is the repetitive process of being inducted and confined into one's (re)productive role in patriarchal, capitalist society. As I discuss, idol cosplayers were able to adopt the image of the cute Japanese-inspired idol as a way of refuting their sexualisation and, simultaneously, gaining hegemonic visibility as feminine-presenting subjects, experiencing the position of female celebrity which is a validated means of (be)coming of age in the 21st century. However, as with all of the cosplayers in this thesis, these experimentations with hegemonic power were each individual's neoliberal striving for self-actualisation, success and achievement that is made visible to us on a daily basis as subjects in a digital, patriarchal, capitalist 21st century.¹⁸ Ultimately, in terms of the significance that each cosplay group may offer to the wider inquiry of this thesis, I show that (be)coming of age as a female subject (in an image scape where identity is becoming increasingly identified with the symbolic) is achieved through becoming spectacularly feminine. Cosplay may be a means of negotiating this just as much as it might be viewed as a frustrated response (termed by McRobbie as “illegible rage”, 2009: 94), given the fact that “girls are pressed to internalize a misogyny built into the very structure of patriarchy, in which ... a resistance wells up inside them, grounded in their human nature” (Gilligan, 2010: xiii), and “most girls learn early on to deny their rage and instead express themselves through more acceptable modes of femininity” (Roberts, in:

¹⁸ This is characteristic to the neoliberal scape of which we, as capitalist subjects are part. George Monbiot states, “Neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency” (Guardian April, 2016).

Gateward & Pomerance, 2002: 218). With this in mind, I will now discuss the scholarship and theories that have informed this study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review



Fig. 2.1.¹⁹

Introduction

As the image above shows, three cosplayers hold pastel-coloured heart and star-shaped pieces of card in front of their mouths, with the words, “bitch”, “hoe” and “whore” written on them. Potentially read as an ironic rebellion by the subjects in this photo, this image also metaphorically encapsulates how discourses speak us into being as subjects, in which, evidently, misogynistic terms are negotiated by young women as part of their coming of age. Growing up female bears a characteristic tension between resistance and conformity which is also applicable to the nature of fan culture (Crawford & Hancock, 2019; Hills, 2002). Indeed, contradiction is fundamental to the definition of fan culture: “While simultaneously ‘resisting’ norms of capitalist society and its rapid turnover of novel commodities, fans are also implicated in these very economic and cultural processes” (Hills, 2002: 5). As I explore,

¹⁹ 2.1. Bitch, hoe, whore.

conformity and resistance is also imbued in the image of the girl as she appears in Japanese society and popular culture. As Driscoll states,

The difference of Japanese girl culture within globalized contemporary cultural studies is used to underscore the naturalization of demographics and categorical hierarchies of conformity and resistance.

(2002: 299)

Therefore, the performances of the feminine-presenting cosplayers that I observe, all influenced by the image of the girl as she appears in Japanese media, may ultimately be read as engaging with conformity to and resistance against hegemonic discourses of girlhood and femininity.

Although cosplay is a “female-dominant subculture” both in Japan and worldwide (Winge, 2019: 137; Crawford & Hancock, 2019; Mason-Bertrand, 2018; Galbraith, 2013), there is little in the academic literature that explores cosplay as a phenomenon of femininity. Certainly, at least, there are no studies on cosplay that relate it to the concept of coming of age, especially that which relates to female subjectivity. It is my aim in this chapter to paint a picture of the current arguments and trends surrounding cosplay studies, focusing on those areas which I intend to build on in this thesis. Firstly, I will observe the context of subcultural studies and its history of being viewed from a masculine orientation with distinctly classed elements (Hall & Jefferson, 2003; Hebdige, 1979). Following this, I observe the literature surrounding girls’ subcultures both in the UK and Japan. Then, I move into contemporary advances in the field of cosplay studies itself (Crawford & Hancock, 2019; Winge, 2019) as well as those studies that have focused on female cosplayers (Scott, 2015; Nichols, 2019). In my discussion of the literature surrounding femininity, cosplay, subcultures and girlhood, I also reflect on the theoretical framework that has shaped this study. Feminist poststructuralist theory aims to deconstruct the underlying structures that circumscribe our experiences as social subjects in which gender is complicit. Moreover, poststructuralist theory acknowledges

that a postmodern contradiction underpins certain areas of its inquiry, which relates to the areas of discussion in this thesis regarding feminine adolescence, symbolic girlhood, fan culture and postfeminism. My objectives lie in observing cosplay as revealing structures and powers of domination which is denoted by the term hegemony. I develop on existing theories of poststructuralism that relate to feminine adolescence, such as the theories of “becomingness” (Coleman, 2008a; Driscoll, 2002; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and “technologies of the self” (Foucault, 1988), considering postfeminism and neoliberalism as forms of “governmentality” (Scharff, 2014). Finally, it should be noted that, while I cover a wider overview of cosplay and feminist studies in this chapter, there will also be further, specific literature reviews in each chapter of discussion (for example, studies relating to maid cafés, idols and erotic cosplay respectively).

Subcultural Studies

There have been debates as to whether the term “subculture” is appropriate for cosplay, in which I agree with Adele Mason-Bertrand (2018) and Gerry Crawford & David Hancock (2019), that cosplay is a subculture in light of all of its nuances. Indeed, I approach cosplay as a subculture rooted in anime fan culture. Dick Hebdige’s (1979) study famously defined subcultures as being highly identifiable for their style and resistive practices. However, as Crawford & Hancock observe, the subculture of cosplay is not necessarily hypervisible or easily identifiable as a style, nor is cosplay (or even subculture itself, as they argue) a means of resistance. Using the theories of Paul Hodkinson (2002), they work to redefine subculture as bearing four qualities of “consistent distinctiveness, identity, commitment, and autonomy”, defining cosplay as

involv[ing] creative processes associated with crafting, social performance and identity, community, and ... these practices, performances, and communities have significant relationships to specific places (both online and offline). That

is to say, cosplay is not simply the act of dressing up in costumes, but it involves processes, performances, identities, communities, and places that are lived, engaged with, and experienced in many cosplayers' everyday lives.

(2019: 89)

This thesis is predicated on the view that cosplay is more than just “dressing up in costumes”; rather, cosplay may be viewed as reflecting processes of selfhood and becoming in the 21st century, which lends itself to its definition as a subculture.

Historically, studies on youth subcultures depicted them as specifically home to white, cisgender, working-class men (Hebdige, 1969; Hall & Jefferson, 2003) and have been criticised as such (McRobbie & Garber, 2003; Budgeon, 1998). This is something that has also been debated in fan culture regarding “generic” or “normalized” fan identities (Gatson & Reid, 2012). I view cosplay as a subculture that lacks the elements attributed in early subcultural studies to a particular class, race or gender—even though, contradictorily, these factors play a key role in cosplayers' experiences of this subculture (I discuss this further in chapter 4). Nonetheless, in light of Crawford & Hancock (2019: 95) who cite Zygmunt Bauman's (1992) view of culture as becoming increasingly fluid, I observe cosplay as being indicative of this with its predominant demographic of individuals (in their teens and early twenties) who experience “feminine adolescence” (Driscoll, 2002: 127) via cyclical, makeover-like transformations via cosplay.

Hills (2002) posits that all fan cultures are based on a series of contradictions, usually regarding hierarchies of power. We may understand cosplay and anime fan culture as being a community caught between various dichotomies, such as “consumerism and resistance”; “community and hierarchy”; “fantasy and reality” (Hills, 2002: vii). These contradictions and tensions emerge at certain points throughout this thesis in my discussion of cosplayers' performances.

Hegemony

I explore coming of age as a process of indoctrination into hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), one of the central theoretical concepts underpinning this thesis, which I use to refer to an underlying societal, dominating power to which we, as socialised subjects, consent. Ultimately, I approach the idea that hegemony is so ingrained in our (collective and individual) subconscious that we are continually producing ourselves in relation to society's ideal visions, which necessarily relate to a gender dichotomy. As Dick Hebdige defines it, hegemony is

a situation in which a provisional alliance of certain social groups can exert "total social authority" over other subordinate groups, not simply by coercion or by the direct imposition of ruling ideas, but by "winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural".

(quoting Hall; 1979: 16)

My theoretical orientation has also been informed by the theories of Michel Foucault (1995), where he observes how regulation has evolved to be more self-regulatory through an imagined gaze. I suggest that certain media texts (both in a British and Japanese media context) represent the gendered body as being disciplined, punished, and rewarded for representing itself in a way that adheres to hegemonic ideals. Just as the soldier in Foucault's description is broken down and built up, we are "subjected, used, transformed, and improved [...]" (1995: 136). Hence the ideal "docile body" of socialising intent is achieved through discipline. I observe those temporary, liminal moments when cosplayers became the ideal image of socialised femininity which was necessarily contingent on "aesthetic labour" (Elias & Scharff, 2017) "affective labor" (Lukacs, 2015: 488), self-discipline and practice. Nevertheless, these performances of the "spectacularly feminine" (McRobbie, 2009: 60) are also able to be read as an affront to cultural conformity, in (British) participant's expression

of femininities that are associated with Japanese media (Denison, 2011b; Driscoll, 2002). As Foucault states, “power is everywhere” (1995: 63) and power “produces”:

[I]t produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of [them] belong to this production.

(1995: 194)

Throughout my research, I came to understand a certain element of hegemony that comes under the scope of recognition (Butler, in: Willig, 2012). To be recognised positively by the collective is to enjoy a sense of power and validation for one’s existence. Therefore, observing how this power and recognition is represented through the media (and subsequently emulated by young women) may provide us with the means of witnessing and deconstructing hegemony. Recognition may be attributed in terms of visibility, in which, being subjects of an increasingly visual and mediated scape, ideologies of gender become particularly clear in our actions. If, as Foucault argues, power is productive, then we, as subjects under hegemony’s control, have the desire of producing ourselves to be as productive as possible. To become the image of hegemonically-valued productivity is to enjoy a certain power and visibility as a female subject.²⁰ Subcultures are not excluded from hegemony either (Hills, 2002), in which, as I consider, cosplay can potentially be a way of experiencing recognition and power in a setting (the anime convention) that mimics a wider hegemonic order. In the sense of how I use the term in this thesis, to come of age is to enter one’s social value; to become socialised and empowered by hegemony, temporarily. As hegemony has to be “won, reproduced, sustained” (Hebdige, 1979: 16), this is what lends itself to the concept of becoming, precisely because we are cyclically reproducing ourselves in light of hegemony’s representations of power to gain recognition.

²⁰ Hence the emergence of the term, “sex sells”, which is used to refer to the selling ability of sexualised media advertisements (Speno & Aubrey, 2018).

The concept of hegemony has certain implications on the phenomenon of adolescence. As Carol Gilligan states,

adolescence, the time when thinking becomes self-consciously interpretive, is also the time when the interpretive schemes of the culture, including the system of social norms, values, and roles, impinge more directly on perception and judgment, defining within the framework of a given society what is “the right way” to see and to feel and to think—the way “we” think. Thus adolescence is the age when thinking becomes conventional.

(1987: 8)

If adolescence is the period where thinking becomes conventional, then being subjects in a context that is dictated by hegemonic value systems (such as capitalism and patriarchy) necessarily dictates our identity-formation as teenagers. Moreover, adolescence is “a period between childhood and adulthood during which labor is trained for its role in industrial culture” (Treat, in: Driscoll, 2002: 290). I consider the cosplay groups of this study as exemplifying this “training”, where, as a means of self-discipline, the subject moulds themselves into (or plays with the idea of themselves as) the ideal, socialised, gendered validated subject. The term coming of age thus signifies our socialisation as subjects in a context dominated by hegemony. Therefore, adolescence, as the social process of becoming indoctrinated into hegemony, bears the potential to deconstruct hegemony itself. This is what lends a discussion of subculture so well to adolescence for the fact that both elements relate to identity which is shaped via resistance and conformity (Hills, 2002; Hebdige, 1979).

Regarding neoliberalism as the marker of capitalist identity, I explore the idea that success and validation in capitalist society are automatically designated to those subjects (especially female) who espouse the values of “reproductive maturity” (Halberstam, 2011: 2).

Jack Halberstam states,

success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation. (2011: 2)

In other words, we come of age when we are seen to fit society's definition of adulthood which necessarily relates to one's position in a heterosexual matrix (marriage and having children) as well as one's labour in a capitalist context (Marx, 2000; Bartky, 1982).

Halberstam notes how reproductive maturity is a marker of adulthood, manifested in one's generating their own heteronormative, nuclear family. The maturity of adulthood may also be related to one's position in the labour force via earning money and working. In relation to coming of age, I posit that adolescence is a period in which we learn to actively censure and self-discipline ourselves into the image that hegemony desires of us along a (re)productive (patriarchal, capitalist) dichotomy. Adolescence, for the female subject, is coming into that awareness of the constricted value she will bear as a woman in which becoming feminine is represented as "a rite of passage into adulthood" (Bartky, 1997: 103). This has certain implications for gender in which, as Butler states,

Femininity is... not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment... (1993: 232)

This study considers cosplay as being a means by which we may train ourselves in this act of normative gender citation. We therefore come of age when we become the image of reproductive maturity as a reflection of hegemonic desire, which is equated with power, productivity and capital. This all has certain implications for the subcultures that I observed in which girlhood is implicated.

Patterns of Difference

Anime, as a global media, nevertheless “remains inherently linked to Japan” (Prough, in: Johnson-Woods, 2010: 104). Therefore, as a study on anime-based cosplay, it is important that I contextualise this study in relation to Japanese society and culture. Before discussing the scholarship on girls’ subcultures in Japan and their influence on girls’ subcultures in the UK, I must first justify the use of the terms “western” and “West” in this thesis, as they are arguably contentious in the field of Japanese studies. My use of the term is not intended as solidifying a regressive, Orientalist (Said, 1981) dichotomy between “East” and “West”. Rather, I use the term “West” as an abbreviated means of referring to the Euro-anglophones, particularly the United Kingdom and the United States, imbibed as they are in each other’s media and linguistic cultures. For example, American media is readily available on British television, whereas Japanese media is comparatively not. My use of the term “West” is therefore an easier way of referring to the fact that cosplay and anime-related subcultures in the UK and US respond to Japanese media in a context that is particularly distant, suspicious and/or unknowing of Japan and its media. This is also justified by Susan Napier in her (2005) study.

While I do attempt to avoid an essentialist dichotomy between the two cultures of Japan and the UK, it is evident that each media culture represents femininities differently from the other. Indeed, the most apparent difference between the visual cultures of Japan and the UK is Japan’s media proliferation of girls. For example, in the idol industry, girls (sometimes as young as eight) are in the limelight until they mature (or “graduate”) into women. The woman (or veteran idol) fades into obscurity, to be replaced by a younger model, reinforcing the disposable, unsustainable cycle of consumer capitalism (Galbraith, 2012). This is interesting considering the discourses of girlhood in “western” philosophy that suggest that the girl is invisible until she reaches the point of womanhood, at which phase, she comes under the sexualised scrutiny of her peers (Winch, 2013; McRobbie, 2009; 1991).

In this sense, Japan provides the representation and valorisation of a distinctly girled, neoliberal and lucrative femininity that is not present in a British media context. The girl, then, is presented by Japanese media as an icon of capitalism, valued for her girlish assets.

In western or British media, however, we may observe patterns of, as Rosalind Gill notes, “the construction of a new femininity (or, better, new femininities) organised around sexual confidence and autonomy” (2003: 103). Gill argues that “We are witnessing ... a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification in constructions of femininity in the media and popular culture” (*Ibid.*). Each cosplayer’s experiences reflect what it means to be in a mature, feminine position in contemporary British society—and this is something that is unquestioningly sexualised. Rice terms this as, “the cultural belief that femininity is equivalent to sexual availability” and “[t]he cultural positioning of the pubertal female body as sexual and violable” (2014: 184). What I consider is the possibility that some individuals in the UK might turn towards a figure of femininity that is associated with Japan, noted for its distinctly immature properties, which, conceptually, is polarised against the mature sexuality found in the anglophones (see Monden, 2019). As Braidotti states, “the feminine as experienced and expressed by women is as yet unrepresented, having been colonized by the male imaginary” (2003: 45). This is reflected in each cosplayer’s reappropriation of a feminine image—“the patriarchal image of the *shōjo*” (Shamoon, 2012: 10) as “a girl fixation rooted in male sensibilities” (Kinsella, 2014: 22)—created for the pleasure of a heteromasculine (*otaku*) audience in Japan. In this study, I observe cosplay as a means of experiencing “the power that comes with being pretty” (Lunning, 2011b: 72) and cute (Yoshimi, 2000; Lai, 2005). Arguably, Japan and the UK are two cultures where “female youth and beauty are ubiquitous signifiers of desire and success” (Frost, 2001: 2), where all esteemed feminine identities in both cultural contexts arguably exist in relation to a patriarchally-ingrained gaze.

There are undeniable patterns of difference between the two media cultures of Japan and the UK in which both discourses arguably represent femininity along the lines of a paradoxical, wavering spectrum of cuteness and sexualisation. In light of this, I consider the potential implications of anime-inspired cosplay in a British context where the “adultification” of girls and the “youthification” of women is highly visible (Speno & Aubrey, 2018). The focus of Japanese media on figures of *kawaii* girlhood seemingly contrasts with what may be viewed as valuable in a British context of the female subject as someone mature and sexy, where, as scholars attest, “hyper-sexualized representations of women’s bodies repeat en masse through everyday interaction” (Ringrose, 2011: 105, see also: Marwick, 2010; Attwood, 2009, 2006; Gill, 2007). This is significant when we consider what the girl symbolically represents. As Deleuze & Guattari state,

The girl is certainly not defined by virginity; she is defined by a relation of movement and rest, speed and slowness, by a combination of atoms, an emission of particles: haecceity. [...] Thus girls do not belong to an age group, sex, order, or kingdom: they slip in everywhere, between orders, acts, ages, sexes... The only way to get outside the dualisms is to be-between, to pass between,... never ceasing to become. The girl is like the block of becoming that remains contemporaneous to each opposable term, man, woman, child, adult. It is not the girl who becomes a woman; it is becoming-woman that produces the universal girl.

(1987: 277)

In other words, the girl bears the symbolic potential of escaping the limiting confinements of patriarchally-confined adulthood. Indeed, the girl, as Irigaray observes, “can have no value before puberty” (1985b: 25) because she is unable to be evaluated just yet. Therefore, individuals who cosplay as the figures of girls (or *shōjos*) in Japanese media are able to evoke these subversive, liminal characteristics; the ability to be between states and to undermine a patriarchal authority via a feminine positionality. I explore certain cosplay groups as prolonging this period of liberation, agency and freedom—that liminal period where girls

can—and are actively encouraged to (especially following the “girl power” of the 1990s)—exert their voice, autonomy and creativity. Each cosplay group presents an alternative, uncanny mode of becoming feminine that is nonetheless spectacular, excessive and contingent on consumption—all markers of a capitalist scape that constructs and connects global femininities through consumer products.

Girls’ Subcultures in the UK

I began this research with girls’ subcultures in mind because I wanted to focus on the context of the anime convention as hosting a particular climate where girls were dominant, creative and visible. Angela McRobbie pioneered the study of girls and subcultures beginning with her joint study with Jenny Garber in 1978, observing that girls were “present but invisible” (2003: 211) in subcultures. They stated, “Girls’ subcultures may have become invisible because the very term ‘subculture’ has acquired such strong masculine overtones” (McRobbie, 2000: 14). Nevertheless, with the rise of social media, girls are becoming more visible and more public than ever before (Evans & Riley, 2017; Mazzarella, 2005). In my fieldwork, I began to consider the possibility that, through cosplay, girls—and other marginalised individuals—may be able to transform from their former state as “invisible” into temporarily hypervisible.

Key to my discussion of cosplay is McRobbie’s argument that subcultures in the UK either provided an “empowering space” for young women or existed to categorise them as “sexual objects” (2000: 19-20). Indeed, this exists within the wider discourses of girls’ subcultures in which the practices of fangirls are pathologised in society (Dare-Edwards, 2015). We may see both elements of empowerment and sexual objectification as shaping the experience of each cosplayer that I discuss in this thesis, providing insights into how “contemporary girls’ subjectivities exist ‘in between the poles of feminist agency and

patriarchal objectification” (Genz, in: Ivashkevich, 2011: 144). In light of McRobbie’s observations, I show that being a part of subculture as a feminine-presenting subject is a negotiation of these two elements in which empowerment is directly linked to sexualisation under a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007) which I explore further in chapter 5. As Jessica Ringrose notes,

there is very little analysis which situates the relationship of “sexualization” and girls’ own sexual cultures in the wider post-feminist context of “growing up girl” in late capitalist societies.

(2011: 391)

As girls come to terms with their womanhood as something that is objectified in society (Bartky, 1990; Young, 1980), my focus in this thesis observes coming of age for the female subject as a process that is defined primarily by sexualisation, which is reflected in the practices of the cosplayers in the three groups. I contribute to a body of work that observes the extent of the “pornification of the everyday life” (Gill, 2009: 141) via cosplay and the implications this bears on adolescence and its relation to maturation in a contemporary, digital context.

Hills describes fan culture as hosting “consumerism and resistance” which lends itself to McRobbie’s statement that “girls and women have always been located nearer to the point of consumerism than to the ‘ritual of resistance’” (2000: 19). If we are to consider the possibility that certain girls turn to Japanese media out of a rejection of western modes of representation, then the consumerism that is inherent to neoliberal-informed girlhood (e.g. Scharff, 2014; Harris, 2004) in this case may be founded on resistance. This resistance may be different from the conspicuous rebellion of, say, punk subculture, but it is resistance nonetheless. Each chapter of my discussion focuses on the testimonies of cosplayers who resisted and fought against the constricting choices available to them, using femininity to

both thwart and conform to those ideals of their socialised destinies in capitalist, patriarchal society. One of these forms of resistance could be observed in participants' interests in non-western (i.e. Japanese and South Korean media) culture, resisting the representations of femininity made available to them in the UK. As Napier states, "For the viewer of Japanese anime, the appeal is often seen in its very rejection or resistance to [western] cultural and production values" (2001: 249). To take this further, we may consider girls' interests in anime and manga as potentially stemming from a dissatisfaction with representations of idealised femininity and feminine power in a western context, using cosplay to embody a range of alternative (possibly Othered, see O'Brien, 2014) femininities instead. In other words, this may not necessarily be "resistance" in how it is conventionally understood (that is, in the aggressive sense), but rather a "resistance" by channelling one's passion's into an alternative choice. We might, therefore, term this as being resistance *through* consumerism. On the whole, however, I observe all resistance as being under the shadow of hegemonic conformity that defines our coming of age.

All participants of this study were, first and foremost, fans of anime; my exploration of cosplay practice developed later. Indeed, this study began as an inquiry into anime fandom as a girls' subculture in which I felt intuitively drawn towards cosplay as a transformative becoming that provides an apt means of interrogating discourses of womanhood. Anime, as a form of media, may offer certain insights into feminist scholarship that observes the relation between images, bodies and becoming (Coleman, 2008a). First and foremost, this project has been inspired by those feminist studies of girlhood that explore how girls negotiate the images that they see in the media, developing their identities in relation to a media with postfeminist messages (Jackson & Vares, 2013; 2011).²¹ In particular, the qualitative studies of Coleman (2008a) and Jackson & Vares (2013) both used feminist and poststructuralist

²¹ See also: Press, 2011; Renold & Ringrose, 2011; Ringrose, 2011; Coleman, 2008a; Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006; Frost, 2001; Durham, 1999; Grogan & Wainwright, 1996.

approaches in their interviews and discussions with girls and young women. These studies interviewed young women on female bodies and their representation in the media, considering how “bodies are known, understood and experienced through images” (Coleman, 2008a: 163). Their questions included: “how do girls make sense of, and relate to, media representations related to appearance” and “how do girls negotiate the possibilities for embodied identities conveyed by media representations?” (Jackson & Vares, 2013: 351). I bear these questions in mind, reflecting on, not only the bodies of cosplayers, but also their embodied identities, and the ways in which they can be understood as becoming through their relations with these specific kinds of images in global media (Coleman, 2008a: 170), where “popular culture provides a significant site for girls to become familiar with notions of being ‘sexy’, ‘cute’ and ‘hot’” (Jackson & Vares, 2011: 136) in which “the feminine body becomes fragmented”, “depersonalised, objectified and reduced to its parts” (Mills, 1995: 133). Given the idea that “women’s bodies are often both subjects and objects of images and do not exist as an entity that is secure and bounded from images” (Coleman, 2008a: 164), this ultimately reflects our existence in an age in which images increasingly dictate our view of the world and ourselves (see Appendix 1.3). I work to interpret cosplay as showing “women’s [and girls’] search for an embodied self in image culture” (Rice, 2014: 28). Ultimately, I observe how representations, as manifested in visual media, shape how we view and produce ourselves as social subjects in relation to discourses in society and culture which “hail us into place as ... social subjects” (Gonick, 2012: 9). Therefore, representation matters for the fact that our “understanding and experience of [our] social identity, the social world, and [our] place in it can only be expressed and understood through the categories available to [us] in discourse” (Budgeon, 1998: 116). “What demands careful attention,” Budgeon notes, “are the ways young women react to external constraints within the larger framework of

postindustrial, post-feminist social conditions” (1998: 116), and this is something that I hope to address in this thesis via the topic of cosplay. Indeed, as Rice states,

Coming of age in image culture, most women, regardless of their appearances or difference(s), saw their bodies as measures of their value and worth as women and, even further, as integral to their very sense of self. (2014: 12).

As a marker of the early 21st century, internet technology has made more readily available representations and discourses from other cultures. In this sense, I observe cosplay as a reflection of the multiplicity of self-making regarding discourses of gender in Japanese media, as disseminated by the internet and received by teenagers and young adults in the UK. Japanese media provides alternative discourses on (be)coming of age as a female subject, yet, nevertheless, discourses that still reflect “an image culture obsessed with youth and transformation” (Warren Crow, 2014: 9). Indeed, as an embodied becoming that is founded on the mimicry of represented figures of girls and women in media texts, cosplay subcultures bear certain insights into feminist theory because we may observe how the symbolism of images become reified in cosplayers’ performances. Femininity, as represented in anime, becomes actualised by cosplayers, who waver in a hybridic space of virtuality, fantasy and reality.

Necessarily then, an observation of the relation between identity and the media may be illuminated by the concept of becoming. As Coleman states, “Becomings are transformations—not of forms transforming into another or different form but of constantly processual, constantly transforming relations” (2008a: 168). A theory of becomingness can bring us insights into discourses of girlhood as occupying a changing, liminal state between and beyond regressive notions of duality, drawing attention to the self as a “threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities” (Deleuze & Guattari, in: Sotirin, 2011: 119).

Throughout this thesis, I observe cosplay as a mode of becoming which wavers between multiplicities such as between a hegemonically recognised power and hegemonically regulated abject state. All social subjects, as part of their (be)coming of age, are continually becoming hegemonic; becoming icons of desire. Therefore, cosplay is one of these means by which we might observe the threshold and becomingness of socialised identity in which gender is circumscribed. Indeed, becoming is

a specifically female and feminine process: the journey of transformation from young girl to young woman and the development of a gendered and sexual identity that goes with this.

(Kennedy, 2018: 20)

Whereas in the past, coming of age for the female subject might have been depicted as a distinctly concrete transition from girlhood to womanhood, contrary to this, I explore coming of age as a cyclical becoming, a characteristic of modernity in which the concept of adolescence was born (Driscoll, 2002). I build on the theories that define girls as being, not subjects in a “linear causal relationship between girl and woman”, but rather, part of a “never-ending process of becoming the woman” (Kennedy, 2018: 20). This is in reflection of the wider phenomenon that, as subjects of a capitalist, patriarchal 21st century, our coming of age is never complete, rather, we are continually submitted to a repetitive socialising process that produces us as the image of society’s ideal. Therefore, as becoming feminine via cosplay is contingent on the transformation or reinvention of the self, this ultimately reflects the act of becoming feminine as not a permanent achievement but, rather, a temporary one.

Girls’ Subcultures in Japan

As Christina Scharff states, “Women, and young women in particular, are increasingly positioned as ideal neoliberal subjects” (2014) and this is something that is made clear within the context of Japan where different forms of neoliberal self-actualisation are available via its

cultural aesthetics, from *kawaii* to J-idols, to maid cafés. *Kawaii*, in spite of being a “resistance youth culture” nevertheless arguably manifests itself as neoliberalism, as Iseri notes its emergence as an alternative to conventional Japanese femininity in its Euro-American-inspired excess, (re)appropriated by “neoliberal capitalism and national politics in Japan” (Iseri, 2015: 143). Similar to the nature of subculture then, *kawaii* itself may be observed for its contradictory wavering between conformity and resistance. In regard to *kawaii* as resistance, *kawaii* subcultures may be viewed as attempting “to reappropriate the dominant ideas of ‘cuteness’ which are fully contaminated with heterosexist assumptions... a *transformation* of existing images and meanings of the feminine” (italics in original, Iseri, 2015: 148); “to rescue the meaning of cuteness from the male gaze and redefine it as a tool of self-expression for [the girls] themselves” (*Ibid.*). Indeed, since the dichotomy of gender is “hierarchical” (Budgeon, 2014: 318), with femininity as the denigrated of the two, adopting a spectacularly excessive feminine guise may be viewed as resistance, “subver[ting] patriarchy and postfeminism via [cosplayer’s] sparklefication” (Kearney, 2015: 270). In this way, *kawaii* becomes the material expression of the becomingness of 21st century neoliberal feminine identities: continually becoming via consumerism, caught between modes of resistance and conformity. As Driscoll notes, “Japanese production of girl culture often plays out contradictory images of femininity” (2002: 298). Therefore, contradiction is inherent to both girls’ culture and the figure of the girl in a Japanese context.

As much as this doctoral thesis is interested in UK-based cosplay groups as providing insight into girls’ subcultures and femininity in a UK context, it is important that I note the research surrounding girls’ culture in Japan. Scholars of media, culture, society and literature recognise that the figure of the girl is symbolically pervasive in Japan (Kinsella, 2014). As a researcher operating primarily in English, I have had access to Japanese language texts on

girls by researchers who have translated them into English.²² Therefore, in regard to certain areas, my source range is notably lesser than a specialist study of Japanese girlhood in Japanese, as a study that applies philosophies and theories from a Euro-anglophone perspective to the influence of Japan on girls' subcultures, femininity, cosplay and fandom in the UK. What is key to note is that scholarly discussion of girls reinterpreting and reappropriating arguably patriarchal representations of girls is not limited to a UK context. Japanese scholars also note the relation between girls' culture and subversive and critical acts in which "skepticism is an essential part of the critical power of *shōjo*" (Aoyama, 2005: 61). Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley's edited work, *Girl Reading Girl in Japan* (2010), is of particular interest here for its focus on "how girls in Japan read other girls" (2010: 4), ultimately demonstrating the ability to read and interpret from a "peripheral social status" (Aoyama & Hartley, 2010: 14) as a key attribute of girls' cultures worldwide. As Aoyama and Hartley observe, *shōjo* culture emerged in response to a "universally male" cultural climate (2010: 3) in Japan in the early 20th century. This pattern of dissatisfaction has been repeated by girls who subversively read and creatively engage with cultural texts (Ivashkevich, 2011, Prough, 2011). As Aoyama observes, the style of writing of the girl, or *shōjo*, "critic" is "distinctively 'girl'-like", imbued with a "critical and creative power" (2010: 39).

In "The genealogy of *hirahira*: liminality and the girl", Honda interprets "the state of being a girl" (2010: 20), termed *shōjo*. As she argues, "'Girlhood' (*shōjo no toki*) is often linked to the sleep of a pupa awaiting the transformation into a butterfly, a time spent in a closed world" that is "closed to all except the girl" (Honda, 2010: 20; 35). *Shōjo* manga (a genre of manga aimed at girls) represents certain signs that resonate with those in the position of *shōjo*. Such signs include the movements of ribbons and frills, termed *hirahira*. This

²² These translated scholarly works include: Aoyama & Hartley (2010), Honda (2010), Kinsella (2014), Kotani (2007), Takahara (2006), Treat (1996).

research may be read as exploring “the acute sensitivities of girls that respond to these signs” (Honda, 2010: 27) of liminal girlhood through cosplay. Therefore, cosplay reflects the global impact of girlhood that is symbolically cultivated in a Japanese context, reified through J-fashion, visual culture and *kawaii* subcultures. As Honda states,

hirahira is absolutely alogical and unworldly. Boys’ culture has a place in the everyday order. It is, therefore, liable to become too closely attached to the establishment and thus be forced into the service of this establishment. Girls’ culture, in contrast, never associates itself with the establishment. For it perpetually sways and drifts, rejecting the intervention of everyday logic. (2010: 36).

In reflection of Honda’s work on girls’ culture in Japan, Aoyama discusses certain attributes of her “style, method, and perspective on reading the girl” (2010: 39) such as “her freedom of mind and abundance of ‘girl-like’ curiosity” and “a strong desire for a commitment to fairness, especially for those who are neglected and marginalized” (2010: 40). Indeed, as Aoyama identifies, one “important characteristic” of the girl critic is a “heightened awareness of the girl’s liminality, ambiguity, and ambivalence” (2010: 40). These are all elements that I felt drawn towards in this study in my recognition of “the girl’s ability to capitalize on the putatively negative attributes inscribed upon her by patriarchal society and to refashion these as powerful forces of innovation and subversion” (Aoyama & Hartley, 2010: 14). These assumed qualities of girls’ subcultures (i.e. denigration by and resistance against the hegemonic, adult norm) are therefore documented by both scholars in Japan and the UK.

Importantly, one *shōjo* critic, Eiri Takahara, highlights “the error of assuming that merely being a woman ensures the ability to think like a girl” (2006: 187), stating in his critique of *shōjo* literature, that “the consciousness of the girl does not simply or automatically belong to the biological girl” (2006: 188). Rather, “girl consciousness thoroughly disrupts all accepted notions of gender and sexuality” (2006: 189). Indeed, it is emblematic of *shōjo* to be drawn towards androgyny, asexuality and neutrality. Observed as a

position of perpetual transitioning and “transgendering” (Aoyama, 2005: 54), the *shōjo* bears a “yearning” for “a neutral sex” (Kanai, in Aoyama, 2005: 54). I began to see my own tween and teenage ambivalence towards coming of age as finding an affinity in the *shōjo*.

Therefore, as I discuss in more detail in chapter six, *shōjo* is a sensibility (Choi, 2016) that goes beyond the lived position of the girl as she is categorised in patriarchally-organised society. Indeed, the state of being a *shōjo* is a cultural, affective issue as opposed to being solely defined through gender—a position that I take in this study. Girlhood becomes a means of interpreting the world and its logic, where “‘girl consciousness’ [is] a peripheral position” (Takahara, 2006: 190). As I discuss throughout this thesis, the *shōjo* consciousness of participants comes through in each of my interactions and observations, used to understand the positions of many who feel different and exist outside the margins of gender hegemony. Hence the ability of *shōjo* texts and cultures to resonate with those in the affective position of *shōjo* worldwide, in their evocation of fantasy and escapism into otherworldly realms where femininity is both powerful and shielded from patriarchal constriction.

Shōjo critics such as Honda and Takahara have, nevertheless, been criticised for essentialism (Kinsella, 2014), in their reduction of *shōjo* or girl to a set of stereotypical characteristics. However, I would argue that this criticism reflects the nature of those who lack the affectual understanding and experience of being a *shōjo* at one point in their lives. *Shōjo* is a sensibility that can go beyond, but is nevertheless distinctly tied to, the affectual experiences of girls. It is a position of “both and neither” (Honda, quoted in: Aoyama, 2010: 39) symbolically and/nor lived. Indeed, these tensions and paradoxes become manifest in *shōjo*-oriented cultures in the UK and Japan alike.

Fetishisation and Orientalisation²³

²³ Selected excerpts of this discussion appeared in a dissertation submitted as part of the research proposal for this project (Thomas-Parr, 2017).

The appropriation of Asian girl culture by anglophone girl culture (and by academic reference) is often an imagination of girls everywhere, but also an orientalizing opposition to the complexities of modern Western girls after feminism.

(Driscoll, 2002: 298)

Why does Japanese culture resonate in the way that it does with certain girls in the UK (as well as worldwide)? I speak from personal experience in the knowledge of all of the individuals I met (both personally and through this research) who were similarly captivated by Japan in their teens. I would argue that, in the digital age, no other visual culture has had more of a shaping effect (and affect) on certain feminine adolescent subcultures as Japan. (Although, in recent years, South Korean media culture is rising in influence on global youth subcultures). As Driscoll notes above, there are certain complex, problematic elements attached to these Japan-inspired (or are they Japan-appropriated?) feminine subcultures based in the West. Napier's question also seems to hint at this when she asks,

[is] the current anime boom ... simply a new form of Orientalism, in which anime is one more product in a long line of "exotic" Japanese objects put on display for Western consumption?

(2007: 175)

Indeed, in the academic literature (O'Brien, 2014; McGee, 2012) impersonators of femininities as represented in Japanese media and culture are criticised for engaging in practices that apparently relate to fetishisation, exoticisation and Orientalism. Anna O'Brien, for instance, observed viral videos on YouTube, where non-Japanese girls altered their voices to become more high-pitched, speaking generic Japanese words and phrases associated with anime, and exaggerating the size of their eyes. Cases such as these have led to the coining of "weeaboo" on the internet, a derogatory term used in internet culture to refer to a (white, Western) person who engages with "egregiously stereotypical attempts to appear and act

“Japanese” (O’Brien, 2014: 128). As O’Brien observes, “Nearly all of the most (in)famous YouTube users commonly deemed ‘Weeaboo’ are young women” (2014: 128). This form of feminine mimicry is therefore a feminine phenomenon which may provide certain insights into discourses of growing up female. O’Brien states that,

These Western women, playing the role of hyper-feminine Asians, do little to subvert Orientalist stereotypes. Instead, it seems that stereotypes and fetishization of Asian women are channeled through these performances and appropriations of Asian feminine identity ... young women attempting to play with or embody the Western Japanese fantasy.

(2014: 134)

Orientalism, defined by Edward Said in his observations of western representations of the “East” (or “Orient”) in literature, art and culture, marks a colonial dichotomy between the “East” and “West”, where the “West” is rational, masculine, powerful and advanced, and, by contrast, the “East” is irrational, feminine, inferior and in need of taming by the “West”. Although there are other tensions of hybridity at play in the subcultures that I observed (e.g. maid cafés in Japan originally adapted the image of Victorian maids in British society), we might ask ourselves, why would girls of the “West” (i.e. the UK) mimic a femininity associated with the “East” (i.e. Japan)? If the East is already hyperfeminised by Orientalist discourse, does the young woman who performs a subjectivity that is associated with the feminised Orient become spectacularly feminine in a colonised sense? As Chizuko Ueno asks, “When Europeans define themselves as masculine, how is the “feminine” identity of “the other” constructed?” (1997: 4). Might Japanese media and culture then, with its associations with the “Orient”, be observed as providing a textbook means for certain girls to learn how to become feminine? Then again, using an Orientalist discourse to criticise the actions of western girls ultimately overlooks Japan’s own imperialist history.²⁴ A more

²⁴ Many women and girls were victimised at the hands of a Japanese colonial agenda, such as the enforced sexual slavery of hundreds of thousands of women and girls under the so-called “comfort women”

insightful approach arises when we become aware of the fact that girls come to terms with their womanhood as something that is objectified in society (Young, 1980), similar to how the colonised would negotiate their exoticisation by the coloniser. Therefore, arguably, cosplayers (or “weeaboo” performers) are not performing an orientalist Otherness that is tied to Japan; they are re-enacting the narrative of what it means to come of age as a female subject in a patriarchal society—an implicit retelling of what it means to enter the position of the objectified (and the fetishised), in which the figure of the *shōjo* (as culturally tied to Japan) happens to epitomise this affectual transition. To take this further, Driscoll notes the intriguing discourses surrounding anime characters as “a fetishization of the Western body” (2002: 294). In this way, the anime character as an aesthetic figure is a manifestation of fetish, which I explore further below. Potentially then, cosplaying and performing as an anime *shōjo* is a means by which girls may subconsciously experiment with the concept of fetish in which femininity and womanhood have become implicated.

The argument therefore runs deeper than a simple dichotomy of East/West orientalist discourse. Indeed, *kawaii* subcultures “transcend national boundaries” (Yoshimi, 2000: 222) and with this, they transcend the structural polarity of “East” and “West”. As Clammer states, “One thing ... certainly unites the East and West: the common devotion to consumption as a way of life” (1995: 199). Therefore, the fascination with *shōjo* in the West (as an aesthetic of *kawaii*) is a symptom of neoliberalism that girls in Japan both share with girls in the UK. Arguably, the figure of the *shōjo*, a girlhood body, could be interpreted as being a postfeminist icon (a cultural amalgamation of neoliberal ideals perhaps), her global reach being fueled by “technologies of sexiness” in the contemporary age (Evans, *et al.* 2010). Hence her ability to resonate with Western girls in the 21st century.

regime (see Mackie, 2005). Might then, the resonance of *shōjo* (or *sonyeo*, see Choi, 2016) serve to create an affectual connection of a shared historical and cultural pain felt by girls globally?

Napier recognises the transformative appeal of cosplay to anime fans: “[t]o transform is to change one’s identity, to become Other, if only for a little while” (2007: 161). In this case, we might consider Western girls as becoming the Other when they mimic the *shōjo* figure in Japan. Thus we have a complicated phenomenon of girls emulating and identifying with imaginary representations of idealised femininity (the *shōjo*) which may or may not necessarily be linked to Japanese femininity, in which I would be interested to see whether the performance of *shōjo* by young women is a matter of narcissism, not Orientalism.

Indeed, these performative acts of mimicry are to be read as characteristic to the global capitalist condition of socialised femininity itself. Sharon Kinsella observed the “ethnic parodies and sexual play engaged in by young women in contemporary Japan” (2014: 127) arguing that, in Japan, girls are seen to be a distinctive race altogether. She continues,

Girls imagined as subraces within the Japanese nation have at best been tolerated as amusing buffoons and have at worst become the targets of a single and indivisible vent of gender and racial derision.

(Kinsella, 2014: 127)

This derision of girls’ subcultures in Japan is arguably similar to the cosplay subcultures of this study. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that masquerading oneself as an Other is characteristic of feminine adolescence, regardless of national identity (Takahashi, 2008). For example, as observed in the styles of *gyaru* subcultures (Kinsella, 2014), Japanese girls would excessively tan themselves, donning brown make-up and iridescent eyeshadow in the styles of *yamanba* and *ganguro*. Rather than this being interpreted as a form of “racist stereotyping” (O’Brien, 2014: 134), the style has been likened by Japanese media to “tribal decoration”, viewing the girls and their girlhood as an ethnicity in itself (Kinsella, 2014: 109). Perhaps this is something to consider in light of Honda’s analyses of the *shōjo* sensibility, where “girls are otherworldly beings that are implicitly foreigners” in a

hegemonic masculine society (Kinsella, 2014: 118). If this is the case, it is possible that girls who take pleasure in *shōjo* may find an affinity in these feelings of being Othered in their societal context, searching for a means of freedom from oppressive structures. Therefore, O'Brien's argument lacks weight due to the fact that we may observe mimicry as being characteristic of the nature of *shōjo*-connected feminine adolescence, both in Japan and the UK. This is not to downplay the harmful aspects of cultural and racial appropriation, but it does offer an explanation as to why some girls, not only in the West, dress up in ways that would be considered as being far from politically correct.

I take the stance that the young women of O'Brien's study were not mimicking an actual Japanese racial identity; they were engaging and playing with embodying "anime" or "manga" femininities. Indeed, as O'Brien observed, many of the videos' comments remarked on the large size of these girls' eyes. Therefore, it is possible that these girls were not emulating a Japanese femininity *per se*, rather, it was a feminine Otherness embodied by anime characters who have their own hybridic significations of femininity, in which their large eyes are iconic. Napier's observations support this theory, where cosplayers were "not trying to be 'Japanese' so much as to be 'anime'" (2007: 166). Therefore, the association of anime with Japan (its "cultural odour" as Iwabuchi [2002] defined it) is conflated with its aesthetic. Representations of *shōjo* in anime may be viewed as a globalised, hybridised and idealised femininity which is accessible to all girls of capitalist nations, while nonetheless appearing as a deviation from the norm in British society. This is therefore a matter of "cultural hybridity" (Bhabha, 2004: 2), encapsulated in figures of the *shōjo* as mediated between Japan and the West in the 20th and 21st centuries, where

ethnically ambiguous girls with enormous, doleful eyes and pale skin ... indicate the kind of imaginary fusion of European and Japanese looks that became ubiquitous to fashionable appearances in prewar Japan.

(Kinsella, 2014: 132)

One of the paradoxes of anime then, lies in the fact that it is a cultural text associated with Japan, and yet, the aesthetic of anime cannot necessarily be defined as having specific racial or cultural characteristics (Iwabuchi, 2002). Rather, we may observe a “selective hybridity” at play here (Yoshimoto, quoted in Driscoll, 2002: 342). In spite of Koichi Iwabuchi’s (2002) argument that anime’s “cultural odor” is invisible due to its aesthetic, there are certain intangible elements and messages of anime and manga that go beyond mimesis. I agree with Driscoll’s criticism that, “Claiming that animation is a non-mimetic representation of Japaneseness is culturally odorless presumes that only a mimetic index could signify Japanese identity or embodiment” (2002: 293-294). Ultimately, this leads me to suggest that the *shōjo*, while not necessarily being able to be racialised, upholds the homogenising bodily characteristics sought in the ideal postfeminist neoliberal subject: slender, white, and, above all, youthful (Evans, *et al.* 2010).²⁵ Indeed, as the *shōjo* could be perceived as having Caucasian characteristics of normative, Anglocentric, “slender, long-legged, light-skinned” femininity (Hains, 2007: 68), these representations may be

understood as part of a transnational postfeminist femininity, which like neoliberalism generally morphs as it colonises new space by incorporating local understandings to make it more attractive.

(Evans & Riley, 2017: 136-137)

The anime girl is an ideological hybrid—and, yet, paradoxically, she is both and neither caucasian and Japanese, racialised and unable to be raced. This fundamentally demonstrates the “the underlying contradiction [which lies in the Japanese concept] of *mukokuseki*: the whiteness of human anime characters” (Bow, 2019: 46). However, this paradox is inherent to the very nature of the *shōjo* herself and how she is read and performed globally in which

²⁵ Or, as Takahashi recognises, “thin, frail-looking models with pale faces” (2008: 117).

these performances ultimately point towards modern conceptualisations of femininity as something that is tied to masquerade, mimicry, fetishisation, narcissism, drag and the abject.

Femininity, Fetishism and Masquerade

As a study on cosplay and femininity, it is important for me to observe the scholarship surrounding femininity itself which is necessarily vast.²⁶ In simple terms, femininity is “doing girl or woman” (Paechter, 2006: 255), where femininity is definable in relation to what it is not (i.e. masculinity) in which “the structure of gender as a binary relation has been fundamental to feminist critique” (Budgeon, 2014: 318). In this section, I observe one particular element that relates femininity to coming of age in this thesis: drag. As Bartky states, “Femininity is an artifice, an achievement” (1990: 65). As such, the artifice of femininity is reified by cosplay practice which is contingent on “revealing and maintaining an authentic self through a makeover-esque process and self-surveillance” (Kennedy, 2018: 21). Indeed, if we are to consider feminine adolescence as “the social process of becoming a woman” (Driscoll, 2002: 127), then it is necessary to factor drag as a performance of parody because the artificial Otherness of femininity serves to reinforce the normative humanity of masculine as subject. As such, “any cultural practice that makes visible an attachment to feminine identity is always already irreconcilable with feminism” (Ferreday, 2008: 51) which is what makes it so intriguing for feminist scholarship. As Luce Irigaray states,

There is, an initial phase, perhaps only one “path,” the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of mimicry. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it.

(Irigaray, 2004: 795)

²⁶ Then again, this thesis is an implicit definition of femininity in its observation of cosplayers who reflect various femininities in their aesthetic and behaviour. Even though the characters that they are performing have been inspired by Japanese media, this is not so much a reflection of femininity in Japan itself, but rather anime as a global text which bears hybridic resonances.

Mimicry is read as a distinctly feminine act. Our choice as female-assigned subjects is to accept our femininity and attempt to thwart it from the inside. Indeed, womanhood and femininity are defined by discourses “as a masquerade” (Riviere, 1929), with the ideal postfeminist subject as being in a continual makeover or transformation, in which womanhood operates as a symbol of fetishisation in patriarchal, capitalist society. One of the arising tensions of this work is the repeated disavowal of participants on their unwanted fetishisation by others during their performances in cosplay—a stance that I discuss in light of participants’ testimonies. Cosplay therefore becomes a means of “convert[ing] a form of subordination into an affirmation” (2004a: 795). Indeed, as a form of mimicry and masquerade, cosplay practice may be observed as a means by which the female subject may attempt to recover herself from discourses of exploitation—a means of taking her exploitation into her own hands. As Laura Mulvey (1996) notes,

Fetishism of the commodity ... is a political symptom particular to capitalism and those societies that come under its sway. ... Objects and images, in their spectacular manifestations, are central to the process of disavowal, soaking up semiotic significance and setting up elisions of affect. Most of all, they are easily sexualised.

(1996: 5)

The cosplayers of this study ultimately negotiate womanhood as it is understood in capitalist, patriarchal societies: as an object of fetish and sexualisation. As I explore throughout this thesis, cosplayers were emphatic in their rejection of their automatic fetishisation by others outside their cosplay circle. Nevertheless, as it becomes apparent in each case that I explore, the fetishisation of cosplayers was a reflection of the hegemonic context in which they (be)came of age. Namely, their fetishisation was a reflection of the commodifying, fetishising nature of capitalism and patriarchy, in which the spectacularly feminine became the manifestation of this fetishisation. Indeed, this is something that Emerald King notes as being characteristic to cosplay itself:

The Japanese language usage of “cosplay” includes not only fan costumes, but also any sort of Halloween-type fancy dress, and costumes of an adult or fetishist nature.

(King, 2019: 246)

Cosplay therefore bears a complicated relationship to discourses of fetishisation, troubled further by discourses of selfhood in a digital, capitalist context. As Habib states, in “postmodern media and consumer society, everything becomes an image, a sign, a spectacle” (paraphrasing Baudrillard, 2018: 43). Indeed, as “Spectacle proliferates in contemporary capitalist communication systems” (Mulvey, 1996: 15), surely then, the “spectacularly feminine” (McRobbie, 2009: 60) is an extent of capitalism in which fetishism is its mask.

Cosplay becomes a fetish, not in the sense of how participants used and understood the term in their interviews (i.e. as something sexualised and sinister), but rather, in the sense of how Mulvey uses it, as “the condensation between commodity and spectacle within capitalist economies” (Mulvey, 1996: 2-3). Indeed, cosplay is a fetish in the sense that it exposes the otherwise hidden elements of hegemony: the “social and sexual constructions of things at intractable points that trouble the social or sexual psyche” (1996: 3). The fact that cosplayers were “easily sexualised” by others was therefore the marker of their ability to “trouble” the social psyche with their costumed performances which, consequently, were interpreted as a form of fetish by a hegemonic gaze. Each cosplay group of this thesis exposes those points of trouble, such as the problematic desire that the *kawaii*, immature girl exposes, bringing into question structural norms and expectations of age and maturity. As Lunning states, “the profile of the *shōjo* offers a paradoxical appearance: she is the innocent and naive little girl and at the same time the highly erotic and sexually suggestive adult” (2011a: 14). I observe the selected feminine-presenting cosplay groups of this study as exposing those underlying discourses where femininity is understood by the hegemonic order as being existing for the fulfilment of hetero-masculine sexual desire. As Mulvey states, “It is

well known that the fetish very often attracts the gaze. In popular imagination, it glitters” (1996: 6). Similarly, many of the cosplayers of this study also glittered under *kawaii* consumerism, described by Bow as “the ultimate commodity fetish” (2019: 39). Ultimately, negotiating fetish is a practice of becoming a woman, as Mulvey notes, “woman ... consumes commodities to construct her own sexual surface into an armour of fetishistic defence against the taboos of the feminine that patriarchy depends on” (italics removed, Mulvey, 1996: 14). Cosplay then, as an act of fetish, becomes an “armour of fetishistic defense”. Similar to this then, the practices of the cosplayers that I observed might be related to drag, in their performances of femininities in imagined spaces where the consequences of being feminine do not exist as they do in wider society.

Cosplay and Drag

The use of these costuming forms and practices creates a space of abjection, a stage on which the fetishized imaginary identities supplant the real identity through the crisis and trauma of abjection. These imaginary identities secure for the cosplayer a temporary symbolic control and agency. The cosplayer enacts, embodies, and performs identities through a role scripted through the narratives of popular culture and the gender anxieties of fans. Cosplay is a *drag* performance.

(italics in original, Lunning, 2011b: 78)

Drag is, in the words of Debra Ferreday, “a parody of femininity which attempts to work with the tensions inherent in feminine identity: its pleasures as well as its constraints and absurdities” (2008: 58). Many have observed that cosplay is a form of drag (Bainbridge & Norris, 2013; Lunning, 2011b; Lamerichs, 2011). In this thesis, I observe how cosplay codifies and exaggerates the elements of femininity, bearing the potential to be subversive, parodic and drag-like. As Kearney states, “femininity (and thus sparkle) [is] a potentially resistant force by insisting on its significance to both queer culture and feminist culture, particularly in camp” (2015: 270). I am intrigued by the idea of the cosplay groups that I

observed as playing host to “female characters as hyper-feminine parody, which [reinforce] dominant ideas of acceptable femininity” (Crawford & Hancock, 2019: 144). That is, each cosplay group potentially provides an insight into the wider hegemonic expectations of femininity as a whole. Nevertheless, these performances may also be observed as transgressive guises of conformity in the sense that, for many participants, their partaking in feminine-presenting cosplay was a form of literal drag. As Bainbridge and Norris state, cosplay “is not merely an act of becoming a particular character, or marking out a particular alignment, but of *disruption*” (italics in original, quoted in: Crawford & Hancock, 2019: 143). I observe certain cosplay groups as embodying an image of the spectacularly feminine that is potentially disruptive in its excess—a “disruptive excess” (Irigaray, 2004: 796), much like drag itself—adhering to the ideal of patriarchal desire to a farcical, even grotesque, extent. I therefore explore cosplay as being relatable to positions and symbolic figures which bear certain ideologies, in which each cosplayer may experience and adapt each icon for their own purposes and pleasures via cosplay—all of which are underpinned by hegemonic power.

If “traditional femininity has been deconstructed to the extent it may now be consciously and playfully performed to destabilize gender hierarchy” (Budgeon, 2013: 320), then excessive and drag-like manifestations of the spectacularly feminine in cosplay may ultimately reflect what it means to become a woman in a context surrounded by images of the patriarchal imaginary. Femininity becomes a playful resistance under the guise of conformity, which is a contradictory becoming, ultimately reflecting “the complications and ambivalence involved in creating and staking positions within femininity” (Gonick, 2012: 7). Indeed, regardless of whether each cosplay phenomenon is to be seen as conforming or resistant to gender ideologies, what is of particular interest to this study is an exploration of the necessarily contradictory nature of each group.

As Lunning states, cosplay, as an extension of both *shōjo* and *otaku* culture, bears the “potential for an utterly mutable gender” (2011b: 80). Indeed, we might consider cosplay as being relatable to drag for the fact that it

detritorializes (disrupts and dissociates the location wherein it emerges) heterosexual norms through a gender masquerade, [...] and at the same time reterritorializes heterosexual norms by reinstating normative gender roles [...] even though it is [...] highly parodied.

(2011b: 81).

Paraphrasing Butler, Evans *et al.* note how “sustained and repeated acts of gender produce the illusion of a unified self through the process of simultaneously negotiating the power and resistances working within the subject” (Evans *et. al* 2010: 122). In this sense, cosplay serves to produce an illusion of a unified self through the repetition of gender which is parodic and therefore drag-like. I explore the different forms of femininity and the ways in which each cosplay group plays with them, observing the extent to which cosplayers’ performances may be read as subverting and/or reinforcing hegemony, demonstrative of our positions as contemporary neoliberal subjects.

Cosplay Studies and Identity

Cosplay is most popularly recognised as the practice of dressing up and emulating characters from fictional series that exist in the mediascape, where “fans engage in a pastiche by imitating the practices of media industries” (Crawford & Hancock, 2019: 111). Susan Napier’s *Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West* (2007) uses ethnography to analyse Japanese visual culture (and its visible influence on the West) with the use of interviews and surveys with anime fans. Indeed, her work provided a fundamental basis for my own research design and theory because she focused on the cross-cultural resonances of identity development, consumerism and modernity in relation to the visual sphere. She argues

that, in the West, there has been an increased interest in anime and manga from the end of the 20th century to the present. Westerners are being captivated by the “fantasy” of Japan, which brings to the fore issues of Orientalism (Said, 1978) and cultural hybridity (Burke, 2009). Developing on Cornel Sandvoss’ theories of “identificatory fantasy” (2005) in fan culture, Napier uses the term “fantasyscape” to describe spaces which act as catalysts for the creation of new imagined identities, “caricatures and fantasy creations existing in a separate dimension from the real and even the human” (2007: 167). Notably, the characters in anime and manga are representations, and therefore, not real. As such, we may observe cosplayers as entering the fantasyscape when they perform characters via cosplay (Rahman, et al., 2012). As Napier states, “participants [of the fantasyscape] lose their real world identities ... to indulge in ludic pleasures in a space securely outside mundane time and activities” (2007: 12). One of the contradictions of this thesis is its consideration of how cosplay may act as an escape from the confining reality of contemporary socialisation (i.e. hegemony) while nonetheless providing a veritable means of becoming hegemonically empowered. Unfortunately, what Napier’s work lacks is a deeper engagement with girl fans of anime. 76–85% of Napier’s (2007) study were male. Similarly, Annalee Newitz’s (1994) study observed an 86% male attendance in anime clubs in California. This contributes to the popular misconception of anime fan culture as being “overwhelmingly male” (Gateward, 2002: 274; Napier, 2007: 198) and leads me to ask, in a similar vein to McRobbie and Garber (2003), where are the girls? The terrain of fan culture has changed since Newitz’s study in 1994 (and even Napier’s in 2007), with studies beginning to note the presence of girls in anime-related fan cultures (Crawford & Hancock, 2019; Winge, 2019; Gregson, 2005).

As Crawford & Hancock state,

though the cosplay community seems fairly diverse, it is still possible to identify a predominance of cosplayers who are young, middle class, white, and

female, with a notable minority of these young women who identify as Gay or bisexual.

(2019: 88).

This was salient in my own observations in which a (queer) female demographic was highly visible in anime conventions and cosplay-related events. In this sense, either the early literature on anime fan cultures (e.g. Napier, 2007) was biased in its focus on mainly boys and men, or, there has been a sharp increase in the visibility and attendance of female fans at cosplay events. As well as being female-dominated (Lunning, 2011b), cosplay is also noted as “predominantly quite a young group” (Crawford & Hancock, 2019: 90) with its most notable demographic ranging from their teenage years to early twenties. As cosplayers are “predominantly female” (Crawford & Hancock, 2019: 91), then a study focusing on cosplay as a feminine phenomenon is therefore necessary to update the current literature on cosplay subculture, which has notably avoided a discussion of femininity—perhaps due to the fact that it is rather unwieldy, contradictory and inflammatory. Indeed, one of the key tensions that arises is, although these participants may appear as girls to the distant researcher observing them, on asking participants about their gender identities, I found that the reality was more ambivalently complex than a demographic assertion would allow. “Predominantly female”, then, refers to the fact that these cosplayers were assigned female at birth but somewhat overlooks the ways in which femininity (and gender itself) was troubled by participants. Nevertheless, as I hope to show in this thesis, a discussion of girlhood is most progressive when we orientate our discussions around the lived experience and positionality of girls while nevertheless acknowledging those identities and relationalities that transcend girlhood as a gender-confined definition.

In terms of cosplay scholarship, studies focus on cosplay as escapism, resistance and liberation from the wider structures of society (Crawford & Hancock, 2019; Nichols, 2019; Mason-Bertrand, 2018; Rahman, *et al.* 2012; Napier, 2007). As Napier states, “At its best,

anime cosplay suggests [...] a world in which one is finally liberated from the power dynamics of race, sex, gender, and nationality and even of species” (2007: 167). However, although the anime community may offer liberation from oppressive structures, there are nevertheless structural dynamics and power hierarchies which underpin it like any other subculture (Crawford & Hancock, 2019). Listening to what the participants of this study told me about the issues of harassment (sexual and otherwise; both online and offline), it seems that girls and young women are still negotiating their space and identities in relation to an undiminished patriarchal menace (McRobbie, 2009; 2007; 2004) and this is reflected in cosplay subculture as well (Nichols, 2019).

Using the framework of poststructuralist thought, my process in this thesis is founded on recognising and deconstructing signs and symbolic elements in anime as well as cosplay culture itself (Barthes, 1993). For example, as Hale notes, cosplay is a referent to both the text and character being cosplayed. He states, “A cosplayer’s embodied citational acts are both engendered and circumscribed by a specific character or text, its history, and the audience that recognizes that form as a conventionalized, repeatable configuration of signs” (2014: 8). Cosplay, as being relatable to the media culture of anime, reproduces its aesthetics and symbols via mimicry and mimesis (Irigaray, 1985a). This literalises Hall & Gay’s statement that, identities are “constituted within, not outside representation” (1996: 2). Identity is “a representational economy” (Battaglia, 1995: 2) that is informed by the discourses made available in society. Therefore, cosplay bears certain significations regarding identity formation and socialisation, which I use as a means of interpreting experiences and discourses of coming of age as a female subject in contemporary British society. Scholars of subcultural studies acknowledge the important relation that subculture has with identity formation. During adolescence, we develop our identities as emerging adults which may be expressed via subculture. This is not to say that subculture is limited to the phase of

adolescence. However, my study was directed towards individuals who found their subculture (anime fandom and cosplay) during their tweens and teenage years. Adolescence may be viewed as a period in which we, “as competent social actors, *actively* produce [our] own identities” (italics in original, Budgeon, 1998: 116). I became interested then, in the potential ways that cosplay and anime fandom might relate to identity formation, particularly feminine adolescence as “the social process of becoming a woman” (Driscoll, 2002: 127). I therefore approach cosplay subculture as being a form of identity negotiation that exposes the gender ideologies of society, relating to patriarchy and capitalism.

Cosplay is a form of performance, or rather embodiment, that is chosen by the cosplayer which allows them to experience the identity of a fictional character. Identity may be viewed as a process of becoming which is related to the subconscious, “partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmatic field” (Hall & Gay, 1996: 4). Crawford & Hancock note the relation that cosplay has to the fluctuating nature of contemporary identity:

The cosplay character does not sit on top of ourselves, but rather our self is a construct made up of the roles we play, which includes cosplay, and all that we do.

(2019: 155-6)

Contrary to being “coherent and stable” (Johansson, 2015: 446) identities might be considered as fluid, incoherent and unpredictable, “With the possibility of multiple and contradictory identifications co-existing in the subject at the same time” (Gonick, 2012: 10). That is, identity is becoming—which is encapsulated by cosplay practice in the sense that cosplayers’ adopted identities and guises are never static (Rahman, *et al.*, 2012). Becoming is, at its crux, “unstable” and ambiguous (Connell, 2002: 2), and therefore, is a useful concept towards approaching the nature of identity.

Matt Hills (2002) stresses the importance of observing the individual's psychology as a means of understanding why particular images and fandoms resonate in the 21st century. I became interested in the possibility that some anime texts and characters might resonate more in terms of cosplay practice because, as narratives and symbols, they embody the desire to become (and means of becoming) powerful. As Anthony Giddens states, contemporary selfhood consists of an "ideal self" which is "a key part of self-identity, because it forms a channel of positive aspirations in terms of which the narrative of self-identity is worked out" (Giddens, 1991: 68). In this study, I observe cosplay as a means by which individuals can experience being a version of their ideal self, something which is necessarily informed by discourses of power in society. Cosplay may therefore allow for feelings of acceptance, self-love and empowerment, if not solely for the fact that the cosplayer recognises these elements in the character that they are cosplaying. One cosplayer told of the significance of playing a character via his butler cosplay,

It's like having a separate space in your head where—not like a separate personality because that sounds like you've got a mental condition—but it is a freeing space because this person has no limitations or consequences. It's completely freeing. There are two variants of being a maid or butler, as with cosplay: picking a character that amplifies your personality, or; one that is completely different to you. You've got a shield of a persona that does not exist. If people do not like this persona, then this person can disappear and you can create a new one. Anything that they [you] do [as them] cannot harm *you* personally. It's a break from being you. Someone so different from you that it relieves the stress of being a person—of having to be you.

(Evan, 28)²⁷

I began to consider how cosplay might relieve the "stress of being a person"—that is, the stress of being someone who, in the hegemonic order, is abject and needs to be disciplined.

²⁷ Even though I do not include Evan (a white, cisgender, asexual and male cosplayer) on my list of participants, I wanted to include this excerpt of what he told me in a conversation because I thought it was so interesting.

Cosplay, in its manifestation as a choice, may therefore be seen as potentially reflecting (sub)conscious desires for ourselves: who we want to become. As one cosplayer said in our interview:

I think [cosplay] is a big thing with confidence because, *you're not you* for that time? Like, I don't feel like me right now, like, I'm Asuna,²⁸ I'm this amazing girl from a different world that can fight and just, making people happy and... I get to be someone else other than myself, someone that isn't the broken shell of a person that I am? Kind of takes away all the depression, anxiety, everything. Because *that's* me, and [right now] I'm not me.

(Janine, 21).

For Janine, a non-binary cosplayer, cosplay acted as a temporary escape from their depression and anxiety, an escape from their daily identity where they were able to embody a feminine persona that was a source of happiness, agency and empowerment (Nichols, 2019). As cosplay allows individuals to embody certain characters as part of their experience, surely then, there are reasons why some are more popular than others? Cosplay (just as anime fandom itself) is informed by affect in which embodying a character evokes certain feelings in the cosplayer that potentially relate to their sense of identity and/or (sub)conscious desires of becoming (Rahman, *et al.* 2012). I approach each cosplay group in terms of how femininity is performed and displayed, whether this is the erotic masquerade of boudoir cosplay, the uncanny girlishness of maid café cosplay, or the glow of the celebrity-like idols. The approach I take is not so much interested in the particularity of each individual cosplayer themselves, but the sensibilities and aesthetics evoked by them as a group. In this sense, I observe the “postfeminist sensibility” (Gill, 2007) through boudoir cosplay, the *shōjo* sensibility through the maid café, and a sensibility of tweenhood through idol groups.

²⁸ Janine was cosplaying as Asuna from *Sword Art Online* (2012).

Reflection 2.1

Takarazuka

I found that there were many comparisons to make between the cosplayers that I observed and Jennifer Robertson's (2008) observations of the "Takarazuka Revue", an all-female performance troupe in Japan. In the Takarazuka, young women are trained for their performances of either masculine or feminine roles on stage. With this in mind, I found it interesting how feminine adolescence (or period of *shōjo* as Robertson identifies it) acts particularly as a space of gender play and fluidity which naturally relates to the spectrum of gender expression within a convention context (Nichols, 2019). Indeed, there were many points where I observed cosplay acting as the means of embodying both the masculine and the feminine for the participants of this project. Catherine Driscoll refers to the "Disguise, mimicry, masquerade, and performance styles" (2002: 294) of the Takarazuka that were also emblematic of cosplay subculture, in that masculine or feminine roles were chosen and performed by groups of teenagers who might be observed by the wider society to be girls (they were all assigned female at birth). In this thesis, although I do not look into the masculine element and how it was embodied via cosplay, the following aside is intended as a description of what was visible to me when I visited anime and cosplay conventions during my fieldwork. With the above in mind, observe the following taken from my fieldnotes at a convention in 2018:

Groups of teenage girls dressed as the characters from the idol anime *Love Live!* were practising their dance choreography before going on stage (in fact, the whole running order of performances was comprised of females under eighteen, with the exception of a transgender male entrant). One of the performances consisted of two girls between the ages of fourteen and seventeen, dressed as two male characters from a *yaoi*²⁹ fandom, dancing with rainbow umbrellas, and then finishing the act by kissing each other, whereby the audience (again, mostly female) erupted into applause with delight.

²⁹ *Yaoi* is a genre of manga with narratives of homosexual relationships between men (Galbraith, 2015).

We might consider the cosplayers of this thesis as having similarities to the Takarazuka with their fluid play of gender identity. Takarazuka, “characterized by excess” (1998: 26) also lends itself to a comparison with feminine-presenting cosplay which is also notably excessive.

Although both areas of the Takarazuka Revue and the anime convention have their cultural (political and historical) differences regarding gender, I would like to nonetheless discuss the anime convention as providing parallels to the Takarazuka. Robertson observes members of the Takarazuka as having two gender identities: their primary gender identity (assigned female at birth) and their secondary gender identity (given to them to perform on stage, either male or female). Nevertheless, “Gender assignments [of the members in Takarazuka, as part of their performance] notwithstanding, all the actors... were daughters” (Robertson, 1998: 16). I was curious about the apparent similarities between the Takarazuka Revue and the cosplayers I met for the fact that both groups were founded on homosocial and homosexual relationships between members who were assigned female at birth, performing and playing with the roles of feminine/female and masculine/male in a mix of gender ambivalence, androgyny. However, while for the Takarazuka performer, the embodiment of masculinity might be viewed as temporary for one’s term as a “daughter” of the company (one that is aligned with the period of *shōjo* itself, see Robertson, 2008), many participants in the cosplay convention identified as transgender masculine/male or non-binary. Therefore, femininity was literally drag for many cosplayers.³⁰

As both Robertson and Driscoll note, the symbol of the girl (*shōjo*) opens up a space of inquiry where gender definitions become multiplicitous and ambivalent, opening up a space for the dismantling of hegemony. Certain elements of the *shōjo*, as manifested in the Takarazuka, are also evident in the performances I witnessed at UK-based anime conventions in the large groups of (what appears to be)

³⁰ Robertson states, “many females are attracted to the Takarazuka *otokoyaku* [masculine performer] because she represents an exemplary female who can negotiate successfully both genders and their attendant roles and domains” (1998: 142). I would be interested to see a future project apply this idea to the presentation of masculinity in cosplayers assigned female at birth.

girls and young women playing masculine and feminine roles. There were no groups of boys and young men engaging with cosplay on the same scale as this. (Mason-Bertrand (2018) also remarks on this factor in her doctoral thesis on cosplayers in the UK.) I am therefore tempted to argue that the anime convention context extends itself into *shōjo* territory as something that is genderless and asexual (Treat, 1990; Nguyen, 2016) but nonetheless excessive in its play with gender and sexuality; divorced from the constrictions of socialised womanhood, but nonetheless a space of feminine gender expression. The *shōjo* is a blank (or abject, see Lunning, 2011a) canvas on which these excesses may be painted. In this sense, cosplayers may undo the sexualisation of their bodies through *shōjo* mimicry. With this in mind, in what ways might the “androgynous ambivalence of Japanese modernity” (Robertson, 1998: 23) serve as a site for gender play in the anime convention?

Cosplay Studies and Femininity

One of the clues to the emergence of cosplay lies in the profound role that fashion and clothing play in girl cultures, particularly those within patriarchal social systems. As the secondary subject in a patriarchy, the young girl seeks a way to achieve a place in a society where male culture has provided strict structures within which the female subject can operate.

(Lunning, 2011b: 72)

What does cosplay, the act of dressing up as a fictional character, have in common with femininity and coming of age? Quite a bit, as I came to discover throughout this research. As Hills states, “Impersonation ... tends to be culturally linked to femininity” (2002: 171) in which cosplay works well to interrogate cultural understandings of femininity. My focus explores the extent of femininity as something compulsory for female subjects to enact as they come of age, in which the anime convention acts as a context wherein the wider hegemonies of gender may be both challenged and embodied, ever in flux.³¹ Few studies on

³¹ For an overview of what to expect at a convention, see Appendix 1.2.

cosplay exist which relate it to women and girls specifically, or the experience of growing up female (for this, see Nichols, 2019; Scott, 2015; Matsuura & Okabe, 2016; Hjorth, 2009). Academic studies on Japanese fashion, however, focus on the element of femininity and its transgression of structures circumscribed by patriarchy (Carriger, 2019; Monden, 2019, 2014; Nguyen, 2016; Rahman, et al., 2011; Mackie, 2010). I therefore chose to draw upon these texts in my discussion of cosplay practice in spite of the fact that they are not studies of cosplay, but rather, fashion.

Two studies of note on female cosplayers and femininity are by Elizabeth Nichols (2019) and Suzanne Scott (2015). While I discuss Scott in more detail in chapter six (as she observes how female cosplayers are persistently undermined for their creative capabilities), I will turn my attention to Nichols, who is the only source during the time of my research to write specifically on participants assigned female at birth and their experience of femininity via cosplay. Nichols observes cosplay as reflecting how “women use it to perform their experienced and aspirational identities, both who they are and who they want to be” (2019: 275). Nevertheless, cosplayers are “constrained in their choices” (*Ibid.*) due to the fact that cosplayers choose a character for their affective, identificatory resonations, as well as being constrained by the limitations of the media itself in its representations of female characters. As Nichols states,

No longer restricted to one image, appearance or expression of self, women are empowered through cosplay to work creatively, constructing those images that will best represent their identity. The fact that they may do so in an environment that accepts and even actively encourages such embodied and performative experimentation makes the space of cosplay unique. (2019: 276).

Indeed, as Nichols also recognises, “cosplay is a space in which social expectations, such as ‘the policing of gender’, in Butler’s terminology, is relaxed”; cosplay therefore “allows

women [and girls] to experience freedom and agency in their performances” (Nichols, 2019: 271). I observe the anime convention as a context in which femininity can be embodied without the same level of consequences and constrictions in wider society. For example, as I note in chapter seven, some of the maids and idols that I interviewed told me how they learned to apply make-up and style wigs due to cosplay, in which any aesthetic errors were less likely to be disciplined (negatively remarked upon) than away from the convention.³² “Cosplay provides a unique space for women to explore the possibilities of creating outer appearances that reflect different elements of their inner selves” (Nichols, 2019: 276). Developing on this, I observe cosplay as reflecting subconscious (as well as conscious) processes of negotiating a gendered identity, in which femininity is the hegemonic ideal destiny of each participant assigned female at birth. Cosplay therefore becomes a site of negotiation where “the cultural space obtained by young women allows them the opportunity to construct their femininity in opposition [or, rather, in relation] to the version offered by the dominant culture” (Budgeon, 1998: 120).

Finally, the following post (from the MediaCommons initiative) is important because of what it reveals about the nature of feminine-presenting cosplay. TaLynn Kel writes,

Often, I’ve chosen not to be pretty. “Pretty” has power but carries challenging consequences. It carries the weight of a sexuality that I don’t control. It’s a sexual acknowledgement that I didn’t seek, and when violently experienced, was blamed for inciting. “Pretty” is a sexual currency that I’ve opted out of because its price is too high. Because I’ve learned that people view pretty and femininity as one, my choice not to engage in pretty erased my femininity for them. And because my definition of femininity did not match the society’s patriarchal version, it became a performance for me. I’d engage and disengage with feminine norms, but rarely, because it was too close to “pretty” and wielding “pretty” was still dangerous. With cosplay, I could be these imaginary characters who were powerful, and I could play them as pretty as I wanted because they owned their power. And the more I played with my looks, the more confident I became in my choices. I learned to trust myself

³² This is not to say that cosplay cultures are free from judgement or peer regulation of any kind. Many cosplayers told me of the negativity they received by other cosplayers online in the form of comments on social media. However, cosplay subcultures are, on the whole, less judgemental than normative daily life which positions women as objects of scrutiny for a neurotic, perfecting gaze (McRobbie, 2009).

more and that has extended into many parts of my life. As a fat, Black woman, I can remember many times I was coerced into a certain role. Cosplay helped me walk away from what I was told femininity could be and helped me design what it is for me. I still step in and out of pretty. I still step in and out of feminine. I choose to be beautiful, enraged, dominant, and vulnerable, antagonistic, heroic, spiteful, generous, petty, and graceful. The important part is my power to choose who I see and that suits me just fine.

(2018).

This was fundamental to shaping an understanding of my analysis of cosplay in this thesis, which may be applied to each cosplay group of focus. Kel's discussion is important because of what it suggests about cosplay as being a role in which the subject can "step in and out". Contrary to socialised expectations of women as being a continuous, unfaltering image of ideal femininity, cosplay is a means of taking on the role without permanently subscribing to it. Hence I use the term (be)coming of age to signify cosplay as a process of temporarily and unseriously experiencing socialisation. As Kel notes, pretty is synonymous with femininity, in which adopting this role is potentially both powerful and dangerous because it is a position that is actively recognised and lauded, but nonetheless objectified, casting the subject into a position of vulnerability in which the threat of sexual aggression and abuse is very real. Indeed, cosplay becomes a tentative space wherein feminine-presenting cosplayers can dress a certain way with less fear that they will be sexually harassed, even though anime conventions are not without these limitations. Each cosplayer becomes empowered as the image of validated femininity (pretty and powerful) while also being disembodied or removed from the consequences of their subjectivity should they experience sexual objectification. As Giddens states, "Disembodiment is an attempt to transcend dangers and be safe" (1991: 59). Might cosplay be a way of disembodiment or disassociating from oneself while nonetheless partaking in those acts that feel unsafe? This is in line with Laurel Kamada's view that "girls discursively construct, celebrate and value the notion of the symbolic and cultural capital of femininity and the staking of a feminine stance" (2010: 179).

Cosplay becomes the means of experiencing and negotiating femininity imbued with cultural capital across a range of different contexts. Overall, we might consider these sources as being the start of a new movement in the scholarship of feminine-presenting cosplay to which this study will also contribute.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I addressed the current academic discourses surrounding cosplay studies, girlhood, and femininity in light of this study's theoretical framework, feminist post-structuralism. As I outlined, there has been a historical tendency in sociological studies to represent subcultures as dominantly masculine and this is reflected in the scholarship of cosplay and anime fandom (Napier, 2007; Newitz, 1998). However, this is changing, with more studies appreciating that cosplay is predominantly female (Winge, 2019; Crawford & Hancock, 2019). It is therefore this gap that this thesis intends to fill, in its exploration of cosplay as a feminine phenomenon using the scholarship of girlhood.

As I argued in light of Crawford & Hancock (2019), cosplay is a subculture that lacks the identity characteristics posited by early scholars of subcultures in the UK (who were identified as white, working-class men). Nevertheless, there are certain identifiable characteristics that come through in cosplay subcultures such as a tension between conformity and resistance (Hills, 2002) in which cosplay is known for its fantasy-like escapism and liberatory aspects (Mason-Bertrand, 2018; Napier, 2007). I also considered the scholarship on identity formation during adolescence and the role it plays in cosplay practice. Working to clarify the concept of hegemony in this chapter, the critical concepts underlying this thesis include theories of gender, power and becoming (Foucault, 1995; Butler, 1990; Coleman, 2008). In light of these theories, I argued that, as subjects of the 21st century, we never truly come of age. Rather, we enter a cycle of becomingness where we continually

strive to produce ourselves via processes of self-actualisation and socialisation. We therefore realise our (be)coming of age in hegemonic society when we are indoctrinated into this capitalist, patriarchal cycle of self-definition.

As I explored, the academic literature on performances by cosplayers and young women draws attention to the cultural tensions (and what I term patterns of difference) between Japan and the UK in which matters of Orientalism and fetishisation are implicated. I also identified these areas of contention and contradiction as being characteristic to discourses surrounding the symbolism of girls in a Japanese and global context. I considered the extent to which British cosplayer's performances of these femininities that are associated with anime (as a cultural product of Japan) are an extent of Orientalism. Contrary to this, I argued that this behaviour is characteristic to the affectual position of *shōjo* which resonates with those worldwide who experience feminine adolescence and alienation from their own unique cultural contexts. Therefore, the performances potentially offer insights into coming of age as a female subject as a process of being Othered. Cosplay becomes an imaginative subculture where the constrictions of gender may be negotiated without the same consequences in wider society (Kel, 2018; Nichols, 2018). Therefore, certain cosplay practices are relatable to drag, providing an alternative means to conventional modes of becoming spectacularly feminine, in which British media is heavily influenced by discourses of sexualisation and pornography. Feminist theoretical debates on drag, masquerade and fetish are generally concerned with constructions of modern femininity and womanhood. Therefore, as I showed, studies of cosplay and femininity can bring meaning to each other, shedding light on the phenomenon of coming of age as a female subject in the 21st century.

On a final note, through cosplay, girls move from a position of being “present but invisible” (McRobbie & Garber, 2003: 211) into one of temporary hypervisibility. However, I am interested to ask, to what extent are girls' cosplay subcultures really becoming more

visible? Under cosplay, the superficial, symbolic and consumer qualities of girlhood are generally illuminated, while the girls underneath are obscured. Or, in the cases that girls cannot afford to buy costumes and materially present themselves as the vision of privileged femininity (i.e. middle-class whiteness), they are less able to gain access to the hypervisible hegemonic recognition afforded to the spectacularly feminine. This is the case for both subcultures in the UK as well as Japan where the patriarchal symbol of the girl becomes lauded and actual practices of girls become trivialised (Dare-Edwards, 2015; Aoyama & Hartley, 2010). Nevertheless, cosplay subcultures evidently offer young people the means of forming their identities as young adults in which social ideologies become increasingly implicated. The next chapter explores the methods I used in order to reach this conclusion.

Chapter Three: Methodology

All ethnography is part philosophy and a good deal of the rest is confession.
(Geertz, in: Pillow, 2003: 175)

Introduction

The following chapter discusses which methods I chose and why, in order to investigate my research questions in the most appropriate way and to the deepest extent. The word “deepest” is key here, as this project, in its speculative prizing of the particular and peculiar, was qualitative by nature. Quantitative methods, on the other hand, were not appropriate because I was not looking to quantify the experiences of feminine-presenting cosplayers. My research may be viewed as unconventional in the sense that I observe three separate cosplay groups using the same approach, auto-ethnography, albeit in different ways. Then again, this is characteristic of my orientation as a feminist researcher in “doing research differently” (Pillow, 2003: 179) This chapter is intended to provide an overview and justification of the methods that I employed, whereas I engage with more specificity in relation to the methods of each specific group in their respective chapter. As I aim to show, the consistent overarching aspects in this research lie in my ontological and epistemological perspective and my research framework. As Maggie Maclure states, “We are imminent to the research” (2019), in which this thesis is undeniably informed by my own subjectivity.

The objective of this research began as a simple one: to explore how representations of girls and women in Japanese media texts are emulated by girls and women in the UK under the guise of cosplay and the potential significance that this might have on social processes of becoming a woman in the 21st century. To inquire into this, I engaged in:

1. (Auto)ethnography
2. Interviews and Observations
3. Media Analysis

As varying as the approaches and my areas of inquiry came to be, my question remained constant throughout: how does the Symbolic—that is, ideological representations of

feminine-presenting subjects in media texts—relate to the lived experience of being an emerging-woman subject? This thesis aims to explore this as comprehensively as possible.

I designed my research methods to reflect the important role that Japanese visual media (anime) plays in shaping cosplay subcultures in the UK. For example, I apply thematic analysis to interviews and observations as well as the media texts recommended to me by participants. Before I detail each method in turn, certain areas will be addressed as follows: the project's research questions, my approach to recruiting participants and collecting data, and ethical considerations. Firstly, however, I will explore the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the thesis which my own experiences influenced before and during the research.

The Research Journey

It is important that I outline the journey of my research because it necessarily informed the project. As a 1+3 scholarship funded by the ESRC, this PhD involved an integrated Masters where I was trained in sociological research methods (from October 2016 – August 2017). In this year, I was trained in social research practice, able to formulate my doctoral project which would otherwise have been spent during the first year of my PhD. I owe it to the fact that I had this Masters year that I was able to begin collecting data in the first year of my PhD; to spend a total of 18 months in the field. Not many researchers have the luxury to explore their field so well.

My fieldwork was separated into two periods: Year One (9 months: October 2017 – June 2018); Year Two (9 months: January 2019 – September 2019).³³ While I also conducted aspects of research (such as interviews) during the interval between these two phases (July 2018 – January 2019), I mostly used this break time away from the field to consolidate my

³³ As I detail in chapter eight on idol groups, I conducted six supplementary interviews in 2020.

data as well as develop my academic skills further.³⁴ I began fieldwork in October 2017 following the submission of a dissertation “by project proposal” in the form of my Masters thesis. I had been granted ethical permission to conduct the research and I began by visiting conventions, recruiting participants and employing the methods of my research design. I saw this as my opportunity to practise the approaches I had learned during my Masters year and develop them according to what I found: to try, test and explore “conventional” qualitative approaches in light of the feminist literature and methodologies of Girlhood Studies (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2008). This was as much an exploration, development and becomingness of my nascent skills at sociological and anthropological research as it was a directed research project into its inquiry.

The areas of study on which I focus include boudoir cosplayers, idol groups and maid cafés.³⁵ During year one (October 2017 – June 2018) I conducted 35 interviews and observed 15 anime and Japan-related events. It was during this year that I established the majority of my connections which allowed me to engage with them more deeply in the second year (January 2019 – September 2019) at a further 11 events.³⁶ I attribute my project’s insights to this approach. For example, I was able to see the development of an idol group from the beginning of my PhD (where the members were all teenagers) to the group’s dissolution at the end of my research (due to the fact that the members were now beginning university). In addition, due to the rapport I established during an interview conducted in the first year, I was able to secure a place in a maid café for eight months which led to more connections with other maid cafés. This time, I was able to experience the same convention differently: as a “maid cosplayer” rather than how I had appeared previously as a researcher out of costume.

³⁴ This included taking part in skills-based workshops and courses; practising my teaching on two modules (Japanese Popular Culture and East Asian Cinema) and leading a ‘Girlhood and Visual Essay-making’ workshop.

³⁵ I also led an anime club for tweens between 11-13 in March 2019 for six weeks. Although I do not discuss the tween anime club in this thesis, I do intend to publish on this elsewhere.

³⁶ This does not include the number of observations I conducted away from the convention (such as dance practices and photoshoots for multiple maid cafés, which will be detailed more fully in chapter seven).

This also gave me the opportunity to catch-up with participants that I had interviewed one year later to hear their story. In this sense, having repeated interviews allowed for more than a brief snapshot into an individual's life-world. It became a collaborative and interactive exploration where I encouraged participants to ask about my research and the directions it had taken.

My research was also supplemented by various opportunities which shaped my approach to understanding my research matter. In particular, I took part in a "Filmmaking for Fieldwork" course which also shaped my data collecting. Most importantly, in June 2019, three months before the scheduled end to my fieldwork, I visited Japan for the first time to present a paper at a conference in Tokyo. Due to the fact that the majority of my participants had not been to Japan before (and they based their understanding of it on imaginings through the internet), this granted me more objectivity into anime subculture in the UK that undoubtedly shaped my outlook. The nature of my project meant that I was surrounded by different data-making opportunities. Much of the data that I collected was unable to make it into the final version of this thesis. I cut it down significantly, discussing only the areas that were thematically and intuitively intriguing to the discipline of girlhood studies and feminist theory. Nevertheless, I intend to use this data elsewhere, in which I was privileged to be able to co-lead an exhibition with my participants at the Festival of Social Science in November 2019, entitled *The Secret World of Fangirls*, which allowed for a public sharing of my research in a performative, immersive format which necessarily differs from the written thesis (Thomas-Parr, forthcoming).

As an immersive methodology, research ended when the immersion ended. However, with the end of one immersion, another began. I had lived and breathed my research so intensely that exiting the field (something which is so integral to the ethnographic process) seemed increasingly impossible to do: I had become consumed by it. Therefore, when

fieldwork ended in September 2019, I decided to move to Japan (where I was based as an associate fellow at Waseda University in Tokyo until the end of 2020) which gave me the physical distance to write this thesis.³⁷ Characteristic of my view that the environment plays a highly influential role in shaping one's experience, being in Japan gave me the time to isolate myself and be with my data in a different way to how I would have written it in the UK. Moreover, moving to Japan was, in my view, an ethically acceptable means of removing myself from the environment which I had inhabited for so long in a way that was actively supported by the contacts that I had made in the field.³⁸

Reflection: 3.1

Ontological and Epistemological Foundations

As a “philosophiae doctor”, a PhD needs to be certain of its philosophical underpinnings: one's belief of reality (“ontology”) which shapes one's approach to knowing one's reality (“epistemology”). In other words, “*what* do you know about your reality?” and “*how* do you know what you know?” (Crotty, 1998). This set of beliefs determines the outlook and output of the study and is therefore arguably the fundamental core to all research projects. So what of the thesis that is written by someone who no longer knows what they believe?

At the beginning of this project, I was certain of my (feminist) ontology and (interpretivist) epistemology, which is to say that my research approach was predicated on the view that society was structured around a patriarchal hegemony and that the potential means of solving it was through listening to marginalised female voices. My research was designed to document the stories of girls and women with the view that this would have the potential to shed light on the inequalities of the 21st

³⁷ Not that I could have continued to conduct research at conventions if I had wanted, as, due to the global pandemic, anime conventions were postponed from early 2020 onwards. In this sense, I was incredibly lucky to have had the time in the field when I did.

³⁸ One of the concerns of the ethnographer is the guilt felt by leaving the field and its members behind after data collection has finished (Mason, 2002). I knew that *how* I exited the field was as ethically important as my time spent within it, particularly as my research was fostered on friendships with individuals who, as I was aware, had turned to the anime convention out of a need for friends that they could trust.

century and illuminate solutions to their change. Such a position is perhaps best encapsulated by feminist standpoint theory, which argues that a marginalised positionality offers an insight into the limitations of society where a privileged position does not. As Sandra Harding states,

Only through such struggles can we begin to see beneath the appearances created by an unjust social order to the reality of how this social order is in fact constructed and maintained.

(1991: 127)

Under this view then, the element of struggle can transform a person's perspective into one of a deeper understanding. Notably, transformation-via-struggle is a theme that underpins this study because of its relation to the subject of inquiry (coming of age) and my personal experience of it. It was a part of my personal history where I found myself transformed by my struggle during adolescence to negotiate what was represented in my society as being irreconcilable: subjectivity and womanhood.

Prior to starting this research, I had to submit a proposal for a project that was contingent on building on my existing undergraduate discipline, girlhood, in relation to one country in East Asia, as part of the department in which I would be based—in which I chose Japan. In thinking about what potential research project might relate to these two areas (girlhood and Japan), I began to consider how Japan had played a fundamental role in shaping my feminine adolescence in a way that I had never really considered before. Reflecting on how the project manifested, I now see it as being the result of a curious serendipity that bore the intent of coming to know myself.

At the beginning of this project, my position might have been termed “interpretivist/social constructionist feminist” in the sense that I believed that the patriarchal society in which I lived was socially-constructed, as was my own view of it (see: Bryman, 2012: 33). As Burr states,

Social constructionism insists that we take a critical stance towards our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world (including ourselves) ... to challenge the view that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world.

(2015: 2)

This is an approach which still applies to my logic of reasoning, intent on questioning that which is taken to be given as fact (see: Marks, 1998: 34). However, ontologies are never static; world-views can rupture tectonically from a struggle within. In essence, due to an unexpected bereavement one month into the beginning of this 4-year journey, my reality was irrevocably troubled. Hence a catharsis in my ontology: an epistemological crisis which dictated the direction of the research. While I do agree with certain tenets of social constructivism (i.e. that there is no single objective view of reality), for the most part, the paradigm was no longer adequate for describing my new ontological position due to the fact that certain assertions such as “what exists is what we perceive to exist” (Burr, 2015: 3) no longer satisfied the vitalist and metaphysical depth I now craved.

Moreover, while conventional research and science projects strive for objectivity, it would be contrived to strive for an objectivity that I never had in the first place. I had always been imbricated in anime fandom because it had been the defining point of my adolescence. Nonetheless, the scene had undoubtedly changed in the six years that I had been absent from it, as much as I myself had changed too.

Instead, my ontology might now be viewed as relating to “transcendental-empiricism” as formulated by Deleuze (1994: 56). Characteristic of Deleuze's theories, transcendental-empiricism seems paradoxical considering that the two schools of thought, transcendentalism and empiricism, are often placed in rivalry with each other in academia. For example, “transcendentalism is belief in the existence of things that transcend sense-experience” (Honderich, 2005) whereas empiricism is rooted in the senses. Transcendentalism works towards a “philosophical reasoning which aims to establish beliefs about transcendent entities” (i.e. a divine intelligence) whereas empiricism holds the belief that “substantive human knowledge is limited to what may be tested (confirmed or validated) by empirical observation” (Scott & Marshall, 2009). In other words, one epistemology is interested in formulating

knowledge through a belief in that which transcends the human world, while the other is rooted firmly within the human world as being the only world which we can witness and know. Thus the combination of the two appears to be an ontological contradiction. For me, this naturally lent itself to the inquiry into feminine adolescence and womanhood as both are understood as being contradictory by nature.

As Deleuze states, “It is never the beginning or the end which are interesting; the beginning and end are points. What is interesting is the middle” (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987: 39). Deleuze’s union of the two epistemologies signals his philosophical alignment of producing meaning by “starting from the middle” (Deleuze, in: Marks, 1998: 32) of two contradicting potentialities, between that which is rooted in the human world and its senses (empiricism) and that which acknowledges a higher intelligence beyond it (transcendentalism). As with Deleuze, I was interested in “undo[ing] dualism from the inside” (Deleuze, in: Stivale, 2003: 28). Rather than choosing to define my philosophical school through its opposition to another (i.e. by saying what it is not, as opposed to what it is), I chose to embrace both apparently conflicting theories in order to generate a new meaning. Again, this is part of my style of reasoning: not in argument against, but in collaboration with, observing the contradictory angles that come to light.

As it has been a disposition of mine to ask the big questions since I was a girl, many of the ideas that I explore are intended as a means of playing with these concepts and truths via philosophy. As Levi Bryant writes,

[T]ranscendental empiricism is not simply a metaphysics or ontology ... but rather a methodology of “anti-methodology.” ... [it] proceeds under the force of a “sign that can only be sensed” which “engenders thinking within thought” and which in turn explicates a new domain of experience. (2008: 18)

This reflects my intuitive approach to data collection, coding, and my discussion in this thesis. Indeed, this thesis is fundamentally philosophical in its approach to social science. If transcendental-empiricism is anti-methodological by nature, how, then, might a transcendental-empiricist epistemology be

incorporated into social science research? It is my intention for this to be expressed during the course of this chapter and thesis in its entirety.

Methods

One of the potential criticisms of my study is its vastness: how can a project which inquires into so many different avenues be adequately in-depth? This thesis is divided between three distinct entities (boudoir cosplayers, maid cafés, idol groups), all of which could each be a thesis separately on their own. Nonetheless, each is informed by one another to more deeply inquire into the central topic of its whole: femininity as a coming of age experience. The objective of the research is not to make an exhaustively descriptive account of each cosplay group. However, as someone opening the academic door to phenomena that do not yet exist in scholarly discussion, my thesis may be seen as marking the initial ground for further research. I use (auto)ethnography to do this, as Sarah Pink states, ethnography

does not claim to produce an objective or truthful account of reality, but should aim to offer versions of ethnographers' experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced.

(2007: 22)

This is what I have aimed to produce in this thesis. John Law (2004) makes a convincing case for re-evaluating our approach towards the methods we employ and the assumed rules that accompany them. As Law states, “methods, their rules, and... [their] practices, not only describe but also help to *produce* the reality that they understand” (2004: 5, italics in original). Therefore, there is no definitive process when it comes to exploring a research project's methods. Law argues that we should approach research in a different way, one that counteracts the assumption that “[if] we fail to follow [methodological rules] then we will end up with substandard knowledge” (Law, 2004: 5). This was a concern of mine during the

initial stages of my fieldwork. Despite this, I learned to trust in the belief that “intuition is neither a feeling, an inspiration, nor a disorderly sympathy, but a fully developed method” (Deleuze, in: Marks, 1998: 68-69). In light of Coleman’s work, I developed my project in relation to a method of intuition, an “intimate research method” where its characteristic markers are “becoming, uniqueness and coincidence” (2008b: 104). The findings of this project came as a result of my being guided by participants in the field; each of whom I met led me to a series of intriguing realisations and events. As well as this, I framed my orientation around affect (Hickey-Moody, 2013), choosing to engage with cosplay subcultures that initially unsettled me.

What I hope to contribute here is my case for the validity of a research project (especially one that is feminist) where its affective, intuitive capabilities are to its benefit. Indeed, as I was searching for those elements that were unstable and contradictory by nature, this approach that I took was particularly appropriate. As Law states, “[T]he task is to imagine methods when they no longer seek the definite, the repeatable, the more or less stable” (2004: 6). My exploration of this project’s methods was inspired by the indeterminate, the idiosyncratic and the unstable, precisely because I was searching for meaning in and through these factors. Subverting the desire for security and certainty, there was messiness to methods (Law, 2004: 9) which became oriented around immersion, embodiment, friendship, and subjective experience. As Kathy Ferguson states,

feminist theory flourishes best through scholarly practices that cast a capacious net across fields, think interrelationally about power and resistance, and seek alliances with others who are both critical of prevailing conditions and imaginative about collective possibilities for freedom, justice, and joy.
(2017: 270)

This thesis explores the “capacious net” which I cast across the different disciplines of girlhood, Japan, media, feminism and sociology, under the feminist aim to “do research

differently” (Pillow, 2001: 178). I immersed myself in various ways in order to understand the different performances, embodiments and imaginings of femininity as they are expressed by cosplayers in anime-inspired fan cultures.

The following sections explore the methods I chose to employ in this doctoral research: auto-ethnography, observations, interviews and textual analysis.

Feminist (Auto)Ethnography

Feminist ethnography... aspires to be a venture into new ways of conducting science differently... to both deconstruct hierarchical dichotomous thinking and engage in (self-) reflexive processes of knowledge production...

(Davids & Willemsse, 2014: 1)

Ethnography is one of the most common approaches employed in cosplay scholarship (Crawford & Hancock, 2019; Winge, 2019; Rahman *et al.*, 2012; Napier, 2007). Therefore, as a study with a theoretical framework of feminism and poststructuralism, I was naturally inclined towards feminist ethnography. However, regardless of how you might justify it, there is something unsettlingly colonial about the nature of ethnography and its origins.

Traditionally, the method is associated with its pioneers (namely, white, western men) who immersed themselves in global indigenous cultures and framed these cultures as the Other.

Judith Stacey (1988) sparked a debate with the question, “Can there be a feminist ethnography?” considering that such exploitative practices go against the ethos of feminism, while Elizabeth Enslin argues that “feminist ethnography appears to be more of an ideal than a practice” (1994: 538).

As Kamala Visweswaran notes, while there may be benefits to the research and involvement of a community, feminist ethnography is destined to fail because it is inherently the nature of ethnography to be exploitative (1994: 95). With this in mind, if I were to fail in my method, did this mean that I had succeeded in my feminist intent? Perhaps the great

paradox of feminist ethnography lay in one's ability to fail well. This is not to say that I threw all methodological caution to the wind. Rather, all of the choices that I made were in light of my own feminist ethics. I was continually considering ways in which my presence as a researcher might be perpetuating various assumed hierarchies and dichotomies that are inherent to our society and, by extension, academia. Nevertheless, rather than becoming consumed by the ethical debate on the (in)compatibility of feminism and ethnography, time might be better spent "[expanding] the notion of what constitutes a feminist ethnography ... to include a diverse range of feminist representations of knowledge production" (Davids & Willemsse, 2014: 1). I thus sought to trouble my understanding of ethnography in my evaluation and exploration of its approach.

Ethnography is generally considered to be a method that includes observation but is more extensive in the sense that the researcher is "immersed in a social setting for an extended period of time" (Bryman, 2012: 432). I was an ethnographer on multiple levels: an ethnographer of the anime convention and cosplay, of maid cafés (by undertaking immersive participant observations) and of my own experience in having once been an anime fan (auto-ethnography). In the sense of observations, however, I observed the practices of cosplayers (such as idol groups) within the convention and online (boudoir cosplay). For a feminist study which seeks to use ethnography to understand feminine adolescence (of which the notions of girlhood and womanhood are already depicted as Other in patriarchal society), I felt conflicted in my effort to formulate "a non-exploitative relationship" (Bryman, 2012: 454) in an ethnography with my research participants (particularly as I learned that many of those that I interacted with had experienced severe bullying and ostracisation at school and were open enough to let down their guard with me). This is why feminist ethnography may be understood as "one that continually challenges the very notion of a canon" (Viseswaran, 1994: 39), precisely because its epistemological standpoint is "concerned with interrogating

the relations of Self and Other” (Lengel, 1998: 230). In being a former girl and fan of Japanese media and culture, it was not so much a case of immersing myself in the world of the Other, but rather, immersing myself in the former world of my Self which was now Other, coming face-to-face with an uncannily (un)familiar world I had once inhabited during my adolescence. Hence the topic of coming of age, inspired by my own subjective experience, became the central inquiry to this thesis because I was interrogating the coming of age of cosplayers as much as my own. This is what lends this study well to the method of auto-ethnography.

Auto-ethnography

This project is an auto-ethnography because, between the ages of 11 and 17, I was a fan of anime, attending conventions and engaging in cosplay. The autobiographical aspects of my research relate to my being both a girl and a fan, experiencing my coming of age via anime (which happened to span my adolescence). Therefore, this was not only an auto-ethnography of anime fanculture, but an auto-ethnography of my own girlhood (or coming of age). In many ways, my six-year absence from the world of anime fandom meant that, at points, it felt as though I was conducting an ethnography as opposed to an auto-ethnography since I was no longer part of the anime fandom community, but I *had* once been. Bauman and May esteem the practice of “de-familiarising the familiar” and “familiarising the unfamiliar” (2014: 98) as a means of approaching one’s research subject. In the case of this project, my experience could be viewed as re-familiarising the unfamiliar in the sense that I was stepping back into a community from which I had become estranged. What seemed completely normal to me as a teenager had become remarkable in my place as an adult and researcher. It was therefore important for me to not only continually consider my place as a researcher, but to be reflexive towards my experience as having formerly been a teenage girl within the anime fan

community. To me, my fanaticism of anime was entwined with the final days of my girlhood in the sense that I was no longer legally definable as a girl over the age of eighteen, which meant that I was returning to a world that I had considered abandoned two-fold. While striving for objectivity is an essential foundation of social science research, my “critical distance” (Jenkins, 2002: 12) to the research was naturally a fluctuating one, being the case that I was once a girl who was captivated by Japan. As Lisa Tillman-Healy and Christine Kiesinger state,

In traditional ethnography, researchers engage in participant observation, usually in cultures to which they don't belong. Auto-ethnographers, in contrast, are participant observers of their own experience... Traditional ethnographers are trained to approach research “objectively.” Their emotions often are seen as “contaminating” the research process; therefore, these must be controlled as much as possible. In auto and narrative ethnography, however, emotions are seen not as biases to be eliminated but as unique sources of insight to be valued and examined, and to be featured in ethnographic texts. Because of this, such fieldwork demands a higher degree of reflexivity than does traditional ethnography.

(2000: 82)

My thesis is auto-ethnographic in its being embedded in my own subjectivity and reflexivity which I explore further below. Indeed, auto-ethnography is not so much a question of “distance, objectivity and neutrality” as it is “closeness, subjectivity and engagement” (Tedlock, in: Holland, 2010: 9). As Tillmann-Healy & Kiesinger observe of the qualities of auto-ethnography:

We employ techniques more often associated with fiction and new journalism than with social science. These include scene setting, thick description, (re)constructed dialogue, foreshadowing, dramatic tension, and temporal shifts. Inviting readers inside fieldwork experience and relationships, our texts take shape in one or more forms, such as ethnographic short stories, ethnographic fiction, poetry, ethnographic drama, and layered accounts.

(2000: 83)

The style of writing of this thesis is emblematic of auto-ethnography in its presentation of observations, analyses and stories which weave throughout its discussion. One particular aspect of auto-ethnography that resonates with my intention for this thesis is the fact that it “remain[s] open-ended, encouraging multiple interpretations, readers are invited to offer critical responses in the form of negotiated and subversive readings” (Tillmann-Healy & Kiesinger, 2000: 83). This is my intention for this thesis: each element of discussion (whether a descriptive observation or a three-page-long testimony that tells a story) points towards my central argument. I have arranged this thesis to be as dynamic and as engaging as possible with intervals and asides each exploring a different area of the same research inquiry.

My research is centred around,

ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us.

(Ellis, *et al.*, 2011: 274)

The objective in my choice of auto-ethnography as a method is to present the experiences and testimonies of each participant (as well as what I observed) in a way that inspires a different understanding.

The Research Setting

One of the benefits of basing my research at the anime convention was that I was able to flow between the three cosplay groups in a single setting. For example, in 2019, at one convention, the purpose of my fieldwork was to shadow a maid café. However, inevitably, I bumped into participants who attended every year, which meant that each event became a case of checking in with each cosplay group to observe and interview its members (for example, attending the *Love Live!* idol workshops and performances and interviewing them backstage afterwards).

Again, this was characteristic of the flow of my research style. The times when I had more of an insight into aspects outside the convention was in my immersive maid research (part two of the fieldwork). Here, I was able to interact with cosplayers outside of the convention (e.g. in dance practice or shared accommodation, travelling to/or from an event), nonetheless within the safe refuge of the group that they had created for themselves.³⁹ Overall, however, we might consider my approach to this ethnographic study as taking place wholly in a convention context, interviews included, unless otherwise stated. Therefore, my ethnographic research was limited to the bounds of the convention in which I had to understand participants' daily lives through what they told me in person and through my reflections and assumptions.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity under feminism is not only about investigating the power embedded in one's research but is also about doing research differently.
(Pillow, 2003: 178-9)

Reflexivity, particularly compatible with feminist research, complements the practice of auto-ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Barbour (2004) argues that full, impartial and detached objectivity cannot necessarily be possible for a phenomenon of subjective enquiry. As she states, "experience is as valid a method of gaining knowledge as rational knowing" (2004: 234). As Pillow notes, reflexivity is something that is strived for by researchers without defining exactly how they are being reflexive. Throughout this project, from proposal to fieldwork to analysis to writing, I prioritised my transparency, honesty and reflexivity as being the means of rooting my subjectivity and to better legitimise my data (Pillow, 2003: 176; Davies, 1999). This manifested itself in the form of fieldnotes that I took in multiple diaries (all of which I typed up thematically on maid cafés; idol groups; general ponderings

³⁹ I also attended a convention in the Netherlands with the maid café I was shadowing, which consisted of four days together including travelling.

and observations on cosplay and anime—dated 2016-2017 and 2017-2019). Moreover, my reflexivity also took form in my interactions with participants, where I asked for their thoughts on my theories. This comes with its disadvantages, as, Stacey warns of the dangers of “the delusion of alliance more than the delusion of separateness” (1988: 25) in feminist research (see Falconer, 2017). In my earnestness, did I risk erroneously assuming the similarities between myself and my participants? This was something that I had to continually check-in with myself, as, being a former fan of anime, there was always the possibility that I was assuming certain similarities between myself and my research participants which would otherwise not exist. As important as my memories were in shaping my worldview, being self-reflexive meant continually questioning my truth in favour of those participants that I interviewed. In this way, “knowledge [became]... an intersubjective process” (Davids & Willemse, 2014: 1).

Participant Recruitment

Besides being assigned female at birth, all participants mentioned in this thesis share one particular commonality: their interest in anime. I only became interested in cosplay as a means of embodiment following my initial pilots. All participants were recruited for their interest in anime, where I differentiate the discussion of each chapter in regard to those anime fans that engaged in cosplay.

I began recruiting participants by approaching groups of young people who looked like girls/women within the age range of their early tweens to late twenties. The flaw in my approach became readily clear when participants explained to me that they did not identify as female: they were transgender or non-binary. This naturally problematised my research which was interested in cosplay as a female (girls’) subculture. Participant recruitment thus became a tentative space where I could not assume the gender of those that I met. As a feminist

researcher who knows that representation really does matter, I sought to change my approach in order to accommodate more voices because I did not wish to exclude transgender people or non-binary individuals. I therefore changed my lens to focus on individuals and groups who were cosplaying as feminine/female characters regardless of their gender identity in daily life. Nevertheless, all of the participants that I discuss in this thesis (unless otherwise stated) were assigned female at birth and experienced the position of “girl” as they grew up. For certain participants, it was during their adolescence that they came into an awareness of their identity as transgender or non-binary. I am grateful to the participants I met who were patient in explaining to me how cosplay was as a means of playing with gender and exploring their identities which were constantly in-flux. Although I focus on how participants presented themselves as feminine (under my lens of value and hegemonic power), this is not to detract from the wider reality in which they also presented themselves as masculine (both in cosplay and in their daily lives).

My research thus became a case of approaching candidates based on the feminine character or style they were emulating because of the intrigue that it generated in me. In this sense, this is a study which cannot necessarily be said to be based on the responses of girls and women, but rather, temporarily feminine-presenting subjects in the context of the anime community. Although some of my interviews did go in the direction of discussing participants’ gender identities, I feel that this is something that I could have made more of a structured emphasis in my interviews on the whole, and would invite future research to do so. Nonetheless, as I explore further in chapter four, the majority of participants that I met and interviewed did not view themselves as being conventionally feminine, even those who were cisgender female. Coming of age (which is defined in relation to discourses of gender) was thus going to be a necessarily complicated subject to approach. I sought to do my best at representing the voices of those I met as well as I could.

In one of the conventions that I attended, my aunt joined me where she saw the process of my participant recruitment. I enacted my usual approach, beginning a conversation with a stallholder about her business and then introducing myself and my PhD project, asking about “the possibility of maybe doing an interview sometime?”. Being in the field for over a year at this point, I was practiced in my participant recruitment, to which my aunt was witness. She told me: “It was really interesting seeing you talk to her. Particularly the way you approached her and spoke to her and how you positioned yourself in relation to her. You were so polite and—if I can say—almost subservient in the way you behaved.” This was news to me, as I had never considered my “performance” during recruitment or research before. However, this was perhaps a result of my tentative awareness that anime conventions have the tendency to attract people who are socially anxious (due to their ostracisation at school from their peers). It became an ethical intention of mine for my interactions with all participants to be a positive social experience in the sense that it gave the participant confidence in their social abilities as opposed to acquiring data through a process which leaves them feeling vulnerable, disempowered, exploited and objectified. Retrospectively, I may not have been as interrogative in my approach as other ethnographers. Nonetheless, this was precisely a characteristic of my research style (and my nature as a person), allowing myself to be guided by my participants (Wise & Stanley, 1983). Beverley Skeggs’ words reverberate: “[f]eminist politics, of whatever variant, is always concerned with power: how it works, how to challenge it” (2001: 427). In light of my aunt’s remarks, it became clear to me that my manner subverted that power dynamic of researcher and participant. Moreover, my style seemed to have aligned itself with the case study I was undertaking, in which being an ideal Japanese-style maid involved docility and subservience to the customer.⁴⁰ Visweswaran (1994) notes the problem with relegating feminist research to a subservient role, possibly due

⁴⁰ Reflecting on my interview transcripts, one might remark that I was treating my research participants as though they were the *ojou-sama* (lady customer) of a maid café in the sense that there was a lot of laughter and shared memories (as much as there were poignant moments as well).

to the fact that subservience is viewed patriarchally, and by certain feminisms (particularly those associated with the first and second wave), to be weak, and therefore, lesser. However, to me, counteracting the colonial nature of ethnography required an appreciation for subservience and its worth in its potential manifestations as mildness, receptiveness, openness, compassion, patience, servitude, offering and softness. In a world in which these qualities are arguably denigrated (and, in my view, much needed), I sought to involve them in my approach, interacting with others to find the answers to my research questions collectively and progressively.

Participant Observation

Moving on to one of the other approaches that I used in this research, participant observation, despite its apparent similarities to ethnography, is nonetheless a separate method in itself (Bryman, 2012: 432). In terms of observations, I observed both physical and virtual settings, at convention events and on social media. My choice of observation depended on the group I was observing. For instance, boudoir cosplay (the act of posing in cosplay erotically) happens, for the most part, online. Therefore, my observation of certain boudoir cosplayers was necessarily in an online context as opposed to the idols who I observed performing on stage in the anime convention. I refer to this as a spectrum of observation in which my immersive observation of maid cafés was the most immersive of all my observations due to the fact that I engaged with maid cosplay and worked at several maid café events (I explore this in more detail in chapter seven). I estimate that I spent over 200 hours observing in total (each event could take up to five days, from travelling with a group's members to sharing accommodation with them). In terms of events, however, over 18 months I attended 25 different events of which each event was between 1 and 3 days. As the ways in which I

observed each group were varied, I have chosen to discuss them further in their respective chapters, hence my brevity here.

Virtual/Internet Observation

Ethnography has become embedded in academic culture as an appropriate way to explore how people make sense of the possibilities that the Internet offers them.

(Hine, in: Driscoll & Gregg, 2010: 16)

As a study on a subculture that has necessarily been globally disseminated via the internet, it was necessary to dedicate an area of focus to online observations. I have chosen one chapter in which I dedicate my discussion to online observations of Scarlett (a participant boudoir cosplayer) and Jessica Nigri (another renowned cosplayer on the internet). This is because their way of cosplaying was necessarily bound to the internet for the fact that they were erotically emulating anime characters. While these participants both appear at conventions for various “meets”, the majority of their activity happens online. It was thus through these instances that I was able to observe certain tendencies such as their “likes” and what this may reflect on becoming validated as a productive female subject in the 21st century. Thus the purpose of observing participants online was in order “to embed [each] subject's online behavior in the context of their real-world social setting”, to confirm the truth in their statements (in the case of Scarlett’s interviews) and to learn more about “motivations or the significance they attach to certain events” (Eynon *et al.* 2008: 10). By observing the individual’s social media presence I was granted an insight into how they presented themselves online in comparison to what we discussed in the interview. My use of the internet to observe certain practices was supplementary in the sense that, as much as the internet predominates the daily lives of the people involved in this project, I wanted to focus

on the physical, social elements as opposed to the internet which would deserve a dedicated methodology in its own right.

I was looking to “engage sympathetically with online culture” (Driscoll & Gregg, 2010: 16) in which my observations sought to avoid replicating an objectifying gaze that presents each individual as a “cultural dupe” (Budgeon, 1998: 121). Rather, each participant and their choices were reflected upon in light of my theory as a whole: we are all subjects in a capitalist, patriarchal society, therefore, becoming empowered via that hegemonic society necessarily shapes our actions that reflects its system of value. Moreover, it was important for me to consider the following:

ethnography is powerfully affected by an inevitable blurring of work/life boundaries in the act of research, but virtual ethnographers must remember the degree to which, as academics and citizens of contemporary culture, we are already participants in online culture.

(Driscoll & Gregg, 2010: 16)

Therefore, in conducting online research I necessarily had to be aware of myself as existing within the same scape with the same choices presented to me as my research participants.

In terms of the “virtualscape” (i.e. internet), I observed the social media accounts of the selected people I had met in the field (who had “added” or “followed” me on their accounts and were aware that I was conducting research as part of my PhD). This was a means of understanding the individual as opposed to observing the in-depth workings of social media, which depended on each person. However, Instagram proved to be popular among members due to its visuality and their preference for aesthetic.⁴¹ It is difficult to say exactly how many hours of virtual observation that I did due to the fact that it became a part of my life so deeply.⁴²

⁴¹ Instagram is a popular social media platform of the early 21st century, centred on the circulation and sharing of photographs.

⁴² For example, I was part of several maid café instant messaging chat groups, of which, before an event, a single chat could accumulate several hundred messages in a single day. The chat was a place where members would discuss their personal lives as well and share things of interest for the rapport of the group. This was one

Observing participants online came with its own ethical concerns for the fact that, although Scarlett was open and willing for me to have access to her accounts and follow her, I did not inform her exactly of how I would be observing her online activity. As Sveningsson states:

The opportunity of doing observations in online environments without informing the individuals who are under study decreases the risk that the presence of a researcher influences the natural flow of the environment, and, thus, it lets us observe cultures as they normally are.

(2004: 47)

Not informing my participants that I was observing them online would ensure that they would act “as they normally” do. I therefore had to take measures in order to ensure that how I observed and presented the information surrounding them in my thesis would protect their identities. All website names and hashtags were necessarily changed for my discussion in this thesis. For every element of data that I wanted to discuss I had to consider the following: how might this affect the anonymity of the participant?; what potential happenings may occur by my decision to quote and discuss this? I discuss this in further detail in chapter five in relation to Scarlett, who was the only participant that I discuss in detail from my observations of her activity online.

Interviews

Interviews and participant observations are the most popular ethnographic methods used to inquire into practices of cosplay, anime fandom and other Japan-inspired subcultures (Rahman, *et al.*, 2012, 2011; Napier, 2007; Galbraith, 2013a; 2013b; 2011). For this research, in total, I conducted 58 interviews with 66 anime fans and cosplayers (6 of these were group interviews; 52 were individual). This thesis, however, contains excerpts of interviews and

particular area which infiltrated my life the most, as, in checking my phone I would see it inundated with anything from updates on the café to creative, artistic expressions, to angry rants. Thus my online observations became a place where I could understand my participants better and become more involved myself.

conversations with 28 participants, chosen for the insights they bore in relation to my research inquiry.⁴³ I have separated these into four cohorts: idols, maids and boudoir cosplayers, as well as miscellaneous anime fans. All cosplayers, however, were fundamentally anime fans and my interview questions were directed around this topic at the beginning of each interview.⁴⁴ Selected participants' ages ranged from 14 to 29 which reflects the extent of feminine adolescence as having no definitive beginning or end (Driscoll, 2002). Although cosplay and anime fandom is not contingent on race, the majority of cosplay groups that I observed had mainly white members (5 out of the 28 quoted participants were non-white). This is something that I address later on as not necessarily being a characteristic of the demographic of anime fans, rather, it may be a reflection of factors that circumscribe non-white fans and their ability to attend conventions. For added clarity, I have created a list of participants (see appendix 1.1), in which all participants were of British nationality and assigned female at birth (unless otherwise stated).

The point of my research was to discover through subjective experience, a “different kind of knowing and a different kind of knowledge” (Gonick, 2013: 63); “direct[ing my] attention towards not only what already is, but also to what might be” (Johansson, 2015: 466). My decision for choosing which interviews of the 58 to include was based on two aspects: their relation to the discussion topic of each chapter (on feminine pariahs, boudoir cosplay, maid cafés and idol groups) and its potential to intrigue in relation to the central research questions of this thesis. Each interview varied from 11 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes. Some interviews were shorter than I would have liked because cosplayers were often eager to return to their friends (this is something that Mason-Bertrand [2018] notes in

⁴³ Of the 28 participants, 11 were idols; 8 were maids; 1 was a boudoir cosplayer; 8 were miscellaneous anime fans/cosplayers.

⁴⁴ Interview questions included: “How old were you and how did you first get ‘into’ anime?”; “Tell me about your favourite series”; “Who is a character that really resonates with you and why?”. Then, I would move into more specialised questions about their cosplay interests as well as their experiences of growing up as an adolescent with an interest in Japanese (media) culture.

her ethnography as well). On top of this, there were many distractions, such as friends and other cosplayers interrupting the interview. However, I saw this as a benefit to the research in which I was given a deeper insight into each participant's world and the digressing and ever-distracting nature of the anime convention itself.⁴⁵

Characteristic of ethnography, I spent many hours with participants away from interviews, in which many of the things they told me off-mic brought insights to my research. For example, Abbie (a participant in chapter six) told me in a hushed voice that nine out of ten *lolita* J-fashionistas that she knew had histories of sexual abuse (in which I asked her if I could add it to her interview retrospectively). Many of the quotes I use in this thesis are thus reconstructed from memories of conversations with individuals, which I jotted down in my diary or as notes on my phone, prior to which individuals were informed about their involvement in my research and I gained their consent.⁴⁶

Despite its distractions, I found that interviewing in the space of the convention was more effective than outside of the convention space because participants were more confident in cosplay and a convention setting. Similar to Mason-Bertrand in her doctoral research on cosplayers, I also noted the difficulty that certain participants had in articulating themselves in interviews (either in nervousness or due to the embodied, affectual nature of cosplay which cannot necessarily be described so easily) which is why ethnography is so important to “simultaneously describe cosplayer’s behaviour and examine the significance behind [it]” (2018: 70). I was surprised to find that many participants were happy to be interviewed during the convention of which I had anticipated that they would be too busy. Moreover, there was a difference between the interviews that I conducted away from the convention

⁴⁵ These moments of digression illuminated anime fandom as an internet-based subculture which mirrors the fast-paced, hyperactive tendencies of its members. As Placido (2020) discusses in relation to the animated series, *Midnight Gospel*, this “aimlessness... [and] empty enthusiasm, quickly forgotten as the next distraction approaches, echoes the mindset of the perpetually online”. In this way, the tangential digressions of my writing are emblematic of this mindset.

⁴⁶ In regard to those individuals who were unaware of my position as a researcher, I discuss in more detail further on in relation to covert research, in which I took all the necessary measures to ensure that these cases were ethically robust.

because, in these cases, participants were more shy. The convention was a safe space to conduct the interview—one that generated the most interesting discussions. I therefore preferred conducting interviews at conventions, which, adversely, made it rather difficult for me to include participants under the age of eighteen because they would usually come as a group of friends, and I needed written consent from a parent/guardian to interview them. This means that certain areas are lacking, such as my interaction with the younger tweens who were idol cosplayers. In this sense, although the hypervisibility of certain cosplayers was evident, the younger participants were technically “present but invisible” (McRobbie & Garber, 2003: 211).

Interview Style and Questions

One ethical proscription which most feminists begin with is the ideal of reciprocity. To use and objectify others is seen to be a particularly masculine way of conducting research. Valerie Walkerdine (1984) suggests that the power of the researcher to objectify and scrutinize the “subject” of research engages the researcher in a process similar to that of the male gaze.

(Skeggs, 2001: 434)

As I discuss in this section, my interview style aimed at moving away from the type of scrutiny that Beverley Skeggs describes above, choosing to share my experiences with each participant. The style of each interview was semi-structured. I had a sheet of interview questions that I shaped around each participant’s interests. All interview questions began similarly (how did you become interested in anime?), and, from there, it developed into their subcultural area, such as cosplay, maid cafés and/or idols. Being the case that each subculture is not separate from the others, there was generally some overlap in the topics that we discussed. One of my favourite questions to ask each participant was “What impact has (Japan, cosplay, anime, maid cafés, idol group cosplay) had on your life so far?”⁴⁷ This led to

⁴⁷ Many thanks to Richard Jenkins for his inspiration for this question.

an opening where each participant could tell me what was so important to them about their subculture, and this is a question that I would recommend future researchers to adopt in their own interviews. As a study of feminine adolescence, I was also interested in each participant's experiences at school and growing up. It was here that I learned of the majority of participants feeling different and alienated from their peers, which was the motivation behind chapter four, on feminine pariahs.

Mason-Bertrand, in her (2018) ethnography of cosplayers in the UK noted the difficulties she experienced in interviewing cosplayers. Where she expected individuals to be relaxed and aware of the mechanisms of the interview process, this differed in her experience, with participants appearing "highly uncomfortable" (2018: 84) and concise in their answers, preferring not to talk too much. This was something I had experienced as well and, in my pilots, I was uncertain of whether I would be able to conduct a meaningful interview. However, as Mason-Bertrand states, rapport played a large role in her breakthrough with interviewing cosplayers which was also the case for my research.

When rapport was not yet established, I made it my aim to create what I called an "environment of openness" to put the participant at ease, whether it would result in data or not. I did this in a variety of ways, such as telling participants about my own experiences as well as the theories that I had about the research (if they showed an interest). By having my own experience as an anime fan to draw upon, there were often feelings of trust and affiliation between ourselves as fans. However, in certain cosplay groups such as the maid cafés and idol groups, it took a while for me to build up a level of trust between myself and participants, which was necessarily a reflection of their way of protecting themselves from the outside scrutiny and judgement of non-fans.

Ann Oakley criticised interviewing as a “masculine paradigm”, making a case for feminist researchers to rethink their approach to conducting interviews without “objectifying your sister” (1981: 41). She stated that,

the goal of finding out about people is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her personal identity in the relationship.

(Ibid.)

This was something which I strived for in my interviews. I wanted to create an environment of openness, support and collaboration, where I could freely discuss the theories of my research and where each participant would feel encouraged to tell their own stories and feel unjudged in their opinions.⁴⁸ The more open I was with participants, the more open they were with me, discussing their experiences with me confidently.

My interview style was unconventional in the sense that I was agreeable rather than argumentative, willing to share my own experiences as much as the participant shared theirs with me. I also shaped my interview technique in light of what I knew of how anime may resonate with people who have difficulty socialising or who are on the autistic spectrum (Mason-Bertrand, 2018; BBC News, 2016). I treated each interview as though the participant may be nervous about social interactions or have painful memories of feeling used and bullied by their peers at school (which, as my interviews attest, many were and did).

During the interview, I also gave participants the option to ask me questions about my history as an anime fangirl as well as my hypotheses about the research, which, for practical (and often ethical) reasons is something that is usually not discussed with participants in conventional research. Nevertheless, as feminist research aims to reduce the power imbalances between researcher and subject (Naples, 2013) being open naturally led to a

⁴⁸ Obviously, I can never be certain of how a participant truly feels about the interview. However, intuitively-speaking, there were certain indicators that participants enjoyed the interview process (laughter, open body-language, telling me that they enjoyed it). Modelling each interview on the way that I would like to be interviewed formed the basis of my technique.

deeper discussion about the subject with my participants, regardless of whether they agreed with my theories (and many of them did not). My aim was to listen and generate knowledge and inspiration with those that I met. I did this by asking participants about what they were creatively passionate about and was encouraging in my responses.⁴⁹ Because of this, participants felt able to contact me following my meeting with them with ideas and memories of their experiences of having an interest in Japan and anime and what significance it might have for my research.

As Rosi Braidotti states,

Feminist knowledge is an interactive process that brings out aspects of our existence, especially our own implication with power, that we had not noticed before.

(2002: 13)

This was certainly the case with my research, which became a continually “interactive process” where I made it my aim as an interviewer to create a space in which the interviewee could speak openly, confidently and powerfully, of which I attribute my findings specifically to this. I learned that this was to the benefit of my research when the following two participants told me:

I wouldn't have told you so much if you hadn't been so open with me.

(Sharice, 26)

I'm amazed that I was able to talk so well. That means you're special since I usually can't talk much to new people.

(Priya, 17)

As I do not employ critical discourse analysis in this thesis, I have chosen (as inspired by Rice, 2014) to edit the interview transcripts to remove various repetitions, hesitations such “erms” and excessive “likes”. It was a decision of artistic license, in keeping with the

⁴⁹ Each participant was creative by nature, having cosplay and anime-related hobbies such as drawing manga, dancing to J-pop, sewing costumes, blogging, or photography.

narrative style of auto-ethnographic writing.

Media Analysis

The one overarching theme that all participants shared besides cosplay was their interest in anime and manga. This is my intention in including elements of media analysis throughout this thesis in which I based my interpretations on the animes that participants introduced to me, in light of Coleman's (2008a) discussion that we become in light of the media that surrounds us. For example, in chapter five, I analyse one of Scarlett's favourite animes and consider what this might suggest about her experiences as a feminine-presenting cosplayer within a patriarchal, capitalist context. In chapter eight, I also analyse the anime *Love Live!* because of the cosplay phenomenon it has inspired. On watching an anime media text, I look for the following: "How does it represent girls and women?"; "What do participants find resonates with them regarding this text?"; "What significance might this text have in light of the feminist and poststructuralist theory surrounding feminine adolescence as the social process of becoming a woman?". These elements emerge in my analysis of each anime and what they suggest of each cosplayers' experiences. Ultimately, I aim to show that, by studying texts, images and creations, we can better understand ourselves and how we position ourselves as subjects in the digital 21st century. Such an approach relates to the subconscious, of which I appreciated the irony of referencing Sigmund Freud, whose theories played a pivotal role in the formation of socio-cultural understandings of feminine adolescence (Driscoll, 2002).⁵⁰

Ethics

⁵⁰ As this research orientates itself via feminine adolescence, it would be fitting to incorporate approaches which explore the development of the self as being entwined with ideas of the psyche. Contrary to Freud, however, I was influenced by the theories of Deleuze & Guattari (1987).

My approach to ethical matters permeated throughout the whole study, from planning to fieldwork, analysis and writing. Therefore, while I will discuss it here briefly, I will inevitably be returning to ethical considerations and reflections throughout the whole of the thesis. While ethical considerations do not solely begin and end with ethics committees and proposals, I applied for (and was granted) ethical permission to conduct research four times, of which two applications were updates of the original ethical proposal; the third centred itself on maid cafés (the fourth was for the tween anime club that I do not discuss in this thesis). Ethical considerations were an ongoing process of which all interactions were mindful of an “ethic of care” (Fink & Lomax, 2016).

Before every interview, I gained informed consent with the use of an information sheet and consent form (see appendix 1.8) and I explained to participants that their voice would be recorded, however, they would be anonymised by changing their name to a pseudonym and other details such as geographic location which might reveal their identity. For participants under 18, parental and personal consent was required to conduct the interview. Interview questions were designed to talk about each person’s interest in a subculture related to Japan (anime fandom, cosplay, maid cafés, idol groups) and about their experiences. I was careful to note the possibility that the interview might go into personal matters and I was attentive to the “ambience” of the interview. For example, if a participant was visibly uncomfortable about talking about certain things, I did not probe it further, instead choosing to reflect on these affectual moments as “mad element[s]” that could not necessarily be captured as data (Deleuze, in MacLure, 2013b: 169). Indeed, Maggie MacLure acknowledges these uncomfortable experiences in the field as being an important part of poststructuralist research: “Being alert to the moments that have a hold on you and seeing whether it unfolds or takes you in different directions” (2019).

Certain subcultures associated with the anime convention (especially renowned cosplayers, maid cafés and idols groups) are particularly difficult to anonymise because they are all niche communities and still fairly rare in the UK, so I was conscious of the ways in which my discussion of certain aspects may potentially identify each participant and the implications that this could have on their wellbeing or safety.

As a project which may be considered as visual research, I wanted to make the thesis as visual as possible, which includes the use of photographs that I came across (or took myself) during my time in the field. Any photos that do appear in the thesis have been granted permission from those that appear in it (their parental guardians, for those under the age of 18) and/or the photographer. While photography plays an important role in visual studies research (Mitchell, 2016), many scholars have noted the ethical problem of taking photos of individuals, especially minors and how these may cause future emotional distress, sexualization, objectification, or ridicule (Fink and Lomax, 2016). Other studies have contemplated the use of techniques to anonymize the person in the photograph, such as pixelating the person's face as Allen (2015) points out. But this can be equally problematic because it risks objectifying, rendering invisible and removing the creative autonomy of the subject who may actively wish to be visible in the photograph (Mandrona 2016). Therefore, I was careful in the consideration of which photos I chose and the potential effects that they could have on the participant's wellbeing or safety in using them.

This was overt research, which means that I was open with my presence as a researcher with those that I met during fieldwork. However, as outlined in the chapter seven on my immersive experience of maid cosplay, some aspects were arguably covert in the sense that I had to perform as a maid persona, which naturally meant that I could not disclose myself as a researcher to the customers of the café in which I was working. Indeed, my decision to be covert as a maid with customers was an ethical decision for the fact that

customers attend maid cafés to experience a fantasy world that is alternative to ordinary life and telling them that I was a researcher might negatively affect their experience.⁵¹ Moreover, I anticipated that my telling each customer that I was a researcher would necessarily lead to an experience that was centred on my research, distracting from the experience of the café where personal questions about the maids are not allowed. Indeed, disclosing myself to customers would invite them to ask me questions that are not permitted in a café setting (i.e. questions about myself in the outside world) which would detract from my ability to observe the natural setting of the café (as well as negatively affecting my ability to understand what it is like to be a maid).⁵² I therefore had to be careful to consider all possible ethical concerns that might result from concealing my status as researcher and what effect this may have on behalf of each customer. David Calvey writes about covert research and how it is “effectively stigmatized in the research world” (2008: 907). He argues that, when conducted ethically, “covert research has a potentially creative and imaginative part to play and a voice to be heard in the sociological community” (2008: 914). In the sense of my research, customers would be treated the same as those who knew about the research—their presence in the study would be anecdotal, their names and identifying information would be changed. Moreover, I would situate myself in an awareness that, as a researcher, my actions necessarily have implications in which I sought to do no harm with my presence. An example of this was during a maid café event when an outsider came into the café setting, aggressively seeking an explanation for what “all this” was about (see appendix 1.5). In my awareness of the vulnerability of participants, I stepped in and settled the situation. I had several choices open to me in which two of them were: say and do nothing and observe how the participants react

⁵¹ I likened it to Disneyland where Mickey Mouse removes his head to reveal a person underneath, asking a horrified family, “Is it okay if I engage with you as part of my doctoral research?” and “Can you sign here, here, and here?”. My choice to be covert was fundamentally predicated on empathising with the customer’s position: would I want to pay money for a maid café experience (which happens only a handful of times per year) to be served by someone who disrupts the illusion of fantasy? My conduct with customers was, above all, ethical, in which I align with Calvey (2008) in his view that covert research need not be corrupt.

⁵² The engagement with covert research was minimal, however, as I served a handful of tables during my time as a maid.

(for the possibility of rich data) at the risk of it developing into an uncomfortable or dangerous situation, or; use my powers as a mediator to pacify the situation so that everyone would be able to peacefully continue their day. I chose the latter. My ethical process was thus contingent on listening to my intuition alongside the necessary planning that I discussed with my supervisory team and submitted for ethical review at my University's Ethics Committee. Indeed, as Coleman states, "intuitive research is desirable because of the ethics that it opens up and enables" (Coleman, 2008b: 104). Therefore, on top of my methods that were designed around a feminist ethos, so too was my ethical engagement, which in the words of Calvey, "[ran] throughout the lifetime of [the] project" (2008: 909).

Ethics and Friendship as Method

What are the ethics of making friends in the field? The researcher-participant boundary is something that is problematised by ethnographic research (Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014; Tillmann-Healy, 2003). With several of the participants that I met and interviewed during my fieldwork, a friendship developed between us which went beyond the conventional "researcher-participant" boundary (to the extent that we are still in regular contact over a year after the fieldwork ended). Making friends initially troubled me in light of its implications (i.e. "Is it appropriate to make friends with participants? Does this complicate necessary ethical boundaries? Will making friends negatively affect this study's validity?"). However, as a feminist study, I began to consider the friendship that had developed between myself and my participants as a strength of the research. For example, Lisa Tillmann-Healy describes friendship as method as a way to "undermine and disrupt [...] the power imbalance between researcher and participants" (2003: 744). This lends itself to feminist research which seeks to deconstruct the power hierarchies of research. Nevertheless, there were certain aspects that I needed to be especially aware of ethically, which made for a necessarily tentative process.

Of all the friendships established in the research, there were three in particular with whom (all of them in their early twenties, like me)⁵³, long after our initial interviews, we maintained contact (I was even made a bridesmaid at one of their weddings). This was inadvertent in the sense that I did not expect to make friends in the field. They sent me updates about their daily lives, creations and thoughts, as I did with mine. I was open with my theories with them; many times they disagreed, progressing our discussion further. Other times there was a shared awareness for each other's experiences. What each relationship afforded us both was a continuation of the environment which I created in our interview: an environment of openness, possibility and sharing. There were times when they would share events or ideas with me that inspired my research further, and yet, this was a happy coincidence, for, at the point where our friendship departed from the research relationship, I relinquished any expectation of them to continue helping me with my research.

Friendship is arguably the essential component to understanding any subculture, especially feminine adolescence and its relation to the subcultural fandom of Japanese media in the UK. Therefore, as a former anime fan myself, it was natural that I found myself within friendships that I had not intended. In light of Valerie Hey's ethnography of girls' friendships, Christine Griffin notes that "there is something significant in the tendency of adult women ... to collectively forget the passion and intensity of friendship between girls" (1998: 101). This was something that I had forgotten myself, becoming reacquainted with the nature of girlhood companionship through the intensity of my friendships with the individuals I had met. These connections that I made illuminated my research in ways that went beyond any vision I could imagine in my initial proposal. Together, we went on to realise a collaborative, participant-led exhibition for the Festival of Social Science in November 2019, entitled *The Secret World of Fangirls* (Thomas-Parr, forthcoming).

⁵³ Furthermore, they no longer considered themselves to be "into" anime or Japan as they once had been—a similarity that I shared as well, and perhaps the underlying sensibility which connected us together in our negotiation of our past and its impact on our present.

The Data, Coding and Analysis

As mentioned previously, I had several fieldwork books, all of which I transcribed electronically. This was the case for interviews which I recorded (on my phone, after three technical mishaps with dysfunctional dictaphones) and then transcribed electronically too. All data was password protected and participants were given pseudonyms. I organised information regarding participants in tables (interview duration, age, name, other information, trending themes). This was an intuitive project, and my coding was just as intuitive. MacLure (2013a; 2013b) discusses the apparent irreconcilability of coding and a poststructuralist framework, to which she suggests allowing for moments of “wonder” to come through during coding practice, prioritising “movement, becoming, difference, heterogeneity and that which exceeds ‘capture’ by language” (2013b: 164). That, while coding relies on (often hierarchical) classification—the sort that poststructuralism naturally aims to deconstruct – there is a means of organising and observing data in light of “assemblages” and “entanglements”. I applied this approach to my own coding practice. I was not searching to make grand, descriptive generalisations of the whole group (although certain prevalent themes did emerge). Rather, I was interested in selecting instances, similarities and motifs (no matter how minute they might seem) based on the “wonder” (MacLure, 2013b), potential and significance with which each discovery was imbued. I have designed this thesis so that certain tensions and reflections arise throughout. These irregularities—or “mad element[s]” (Deleuze, in MacLure, 2013b: 169)—as MacLure states,

confound the industrious, mechanical search for meanings, patterns, codes, or themes; but at the same time, they exert a kind of fascination, and have a capacity to animate further thought.

(2013a: 228)

MacLure discusses a way of observing data in light of the wonder it generates in us; not jumping to conclusions as to a specific answer it may provide, but rather, finding ourselves in a “liminal condition, suspended in a threshold between knowing and unknowing, that prevents wonder from being wholly contained or recuperated as knowledge, and thus affords an opening onto the new” (MacLure, 2013a: 228). The way that I discuss my data and findings here is presented in such a way so as to generate thinking in the reader. While I provide my own stances, they are more ambivalent than they are conclusive, aiming to inspire a consideration of any possible, deeper significance that each “mad element” may have.

Conclusion

To briefly summarise, the aim of this thesis is to use a range of methods (auto-ethnography, observation, interviews and media analysis) to philosophically explore how AFAB cosplayers emulate images of femininity as they are represented in Japanese media and what significance this might bear on social processes of becoming “spectacularly feminine” (McRobbie, 2009: 60) in the early 21st century. In this chapter, I discussed the various approaches (and the ethical, ontological and epistemological orientations underpinning them) that I employed in order to conduct this auto-ethnographic research on three cosplay-related feminine subcultures in the setting of anime conventions, where I attended more than 25 events across the country, engaging in each feminine subculture in a range of ways, from immersive cosplay to interviews to observations (both online and offline). I also reflected on my feminist objective of “doing research differently” (Pillow, 2003). This included my approach to ethical matters which included friendship as method (Tillmann-Healy, 2003), as well as my coding and analysis of the data itself. As a feminist-poststructuralist thesis, the ethos of feminism has permeated throughout the whole study from its research design to completion. Following my discussion in the literature review and this methodology chapter, it

is time to engage with the discussion of this thesis, in which I open with the following chapter on feminine pariahs.

Chapter Four: Pariahs of Femininity

Introduction

Adolescence is [...] the status a teenager is moving out of, [so] adolescent failings can be tolerated; but femininity is what a girl is supposed to be acquiring, so that any signs that she is rejecting rather than embracing the culturally-defined femininity are treated [...] as necessitating active intervention and urgent resocialisation.

(Hudson, 1984: 45)

All female subjectivities negotiate their identities in relation to hegemonic femininity (Schippers, 2007) as part of their coming of age. Those that fail to adopt an image of femininity that is ideal in the eyes of hegemony are castigated as feminine pariahs (Schippers, 2007). In my fieldwork, I came across four types of “subordinated femininities” (Schippers, 2007: 88): tomboys, “nerds”, neurodivergent and/or queer girls. These identities thwart hegemony’s ideal of the ideal female subject as someone who is feminine, heterosexual, hypersexual and neurotypical. In this thesis, I observe cosplay as a means by which feminine pariahs may superficially conform to the destiny expected of all female subjects, becoming the successful image of spectacular, hegemonic femininity and experiencing socialised empowerment as a result. Then again, regardless of whether female cosplayers fit into any of the four pariah categories of my selection, we might consider all female cosplayers as being pariahs of femininity in some form or other, given that “members of fandom are abject subjects” (Lunning, 2011: 75-76) and the pariah position is considerably abject. Indeed, behind the scenes, there was a trauma behind many of the individuals I met who confided in me. From the scars of bullying (“They’d set my hair on fire, they’d stub out cigarettes on my eyes... Then they’d spit on my hair to put it out after they set it on fire”), sexual abuse (“nine and a half out of ten [*lolita* J-fashionistas that I know have been sexually abused]. It’s really prolific”), attempted suicide (“Before I joined the maid café, each day was an effort not to kill myself. I used to daydream about the different ways I could do it”) and eating disorders (“I

was barely at school, I was so ill with anorexia that I almost died and doctors didn't think I would pull through it"). On top of this, many of the cosplayers that I met had range of ailments and disabilities, such as diabetes and auto-immune diseases, as well as anxiety and depression, ADHD, chronic fatigue and bi-polar disorder (see Mason-Bertrand, 2018: 217, for more of a discussion on mental health in the cosplay community). In terms of physical disabilities, there were many who engaged in cosplay in spite of the physical pain they endured. For example, Imogen had a rare autoimmune disease which affected her joints and bones. Dancing left her debilitated. Nonetheless, in spite of the pain, she still bore the characteristic smile of the maid who is youthful and pain-free as she danced on stage. In light of the severity of experiences that I had listened to, one might wonder why cosplayers would continue to push themselves in these ways. To me, the answer seemed clear: joining a maid café (or idol group) was a means of escaping all the pain (physical and mental) of being a (re)productive subject in a capitalist scape.

Notably, all four forms of pariah can be concealed under guises of femininity, which is where cosplay comes in. In short, I explore how cosplay may act as a hyperfeminine mask that conceals one's reality as a feminine pariah and serves to empower the individual as a hegemonically feminine ideal. The purpose of this chapter is to open up a discussion of these four areas of pariah femininities within the context of anime and cosplay fandom, laying the foundations of this thesis in which each participant may be viewed as transforming themselves, via cosplay, from a position of social derision into that of hegemonically-esteemed femininity, under a guise of fiction as inspired by Japanese media. Pariahs of femininity "simply do not exist in media culture" (Projansky, 2014: 1). The representations of hegemonic femininity that are widely available in the UK have already been colonised, seemingly inaccessible to certain girls. Yet redemption in the eyes of hegemony is available elsewhere in which becoming spectacularly feminine is a means of

becoming visibly recognised and powerful. If adopting femininity is critical for the female subject to come of age (Hudson, 1984), cosplay is an opportunity for a feminine pariah to finally achieve visibility and representation through donning that drag-like guise of femininity via cosplay, which is a means of realising a postfeminist, transformation-like makeover. At that moment where representation is met—where one temporarily enters the Symbolic—one comes of age.

Each section of this chapter observes one of the four elements of pariah femininities that I noticed during my fieldwork and how it related to the selected participants of this thesis.⁵⁴ However, it should be noted that each category is not able to be completely distinguished from the others as they are naturally imbricated in each other, revealing the nature of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and how it relates to practices of discrimination and socialised discipline. As a study which observes how, as socialised subjects, we all negotiate our identities in relation to the hegemonic ideal, I hope to bring an insight into an area of the anime convention, “paying sustained analytical attention to the many girls who fall outside a narrow definition of conventional girlhood” (Projansky, 2014: 1), or, in this case, what narrow definition of how a female subject should be.

Pariah Femininities

I hated high school, I absolutely despised it, the people were horrible to me. [...] A lot of people were mean to me because of my appearance, and like, my mentality as well. Like, I was—in the beginning of high school, I was quite optimistic and, like, happy. [...] I used to enjoy intensive research, so I would research things and then I would tell people about things I was researching and then they would think it was weird and like... gross. And then I got into things like anime and, like, obviously, people were like, “That’s so cringey” and then it was just spiralling downwards from then. I was quite angry by the time I got to year ten and eleven [age 14-16]. I was just angry. And people were

⁵⁴ In this chapter I reference interviews from maids, idols, cosplayers and other anime fans that I met and interviewed in a convention context. One criticism may be that I am conflating members of different cosplay groups together. Nevertheless, all participants were (at one point at least) fans of anime before they moved further into their subculture. In this way, all participants were connected in their being drawn towards anime as a medium that, as I observe later, resonates as though it is a sensibility.

just—just—they just didn't listen to me at all. Like, I would try to talk to someone and have conversations, and they'd put their headphones in and walk away [*voice cracks in sadness*].

(Martha, 18)

I wanted to begin my discussion with an excerpt from Martha's testimony (an idol cosplayer), who, like many of the participants of this study, encountered bullying at high school for "being different". It is part of my exploration of this chapter that observes how the gaze of regulation that we all meet as social(ised) subjects manifests as bullying and ostracisation, in which we eventually internalise this gaze, self-disciplining ourselves as part of our coming of age. As with all of the participants of this thesis, Martha was arguably a feminine pariah (Schippers, 2007) and regulated as such. For example, her preoccupations and intense fascination with what she termed "intensive research" is a trait that is not valued in women. Cosplay, by contrast, offered a community where Martha could experiment with her identity away from her ostracisation at school.

Mimi Schippers' concept of "pariah femininities" is a term used to refer to female subjects who challenge the idea of what an ideal female subject should be which ultimately affronts "the hegemonic relationship between masculinity and femininity" (2007: 95). As I show in this chapter, studying pariah femininities may provide insights into the negotiation of hegemonic femininity that necessarily shapes each girl's coming of age. Schippers states,

Hegemonic femininity is ascendant in relation to, what I suggest we call pariah femininities. I propose calling this set of characteristics pariah femininities instead of subordinate femininities because they are deemed, not so much inferior, as contaminating to the relationship between masculinity and femininity.

(2007: 95)

In patriarchal, capitalist society, a feminine pariah is a female subject who has no value because she is unable to be easily marketed towards (she has no value to capitalism) under a

rubric of heteronormalcy in which girls fit the image of femininity as it is symbolised and commodified (pink, dresses, make-up). Feminine pariahs are therefore dangerous and troublesome to the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler, 1990) and do not serve “a social order whose interest lies in domination” (Bartky, 1990: 42).

As “spectacularly feminine” as each cosplayer appeared to be, many participants did not see themselves as being conventionally feminine, especially in their daily lives. All participants in this thesis had been assigned female at birth in which the gendered label of girl and daughter inevitably shaped their experiences as children. As Samantha Holland and Julie Harpin state, in light of Driscoll (2002), “girlhood, and more specifically daughterhood, are always premised in relation to the future role; that is, what a daughter will become as an adult woman being key to any discussion” (2015: 297). Due to the fact that the society in which we live is entrenched in gender ideologies, all participants necessarily had to negotiate their identity in relation to their being assigned the position of future woman, in which (as I argue throughout this thesis) discourses of femininity, heterosexuality and sexualisation are the defining markers of womanhood. As Kearney states,

Considerable feminist research has shown that around the age of twelve, and often earlier, girls are encouraged by a variety of individuals and social institutions to privilege the traditional practices of femininity over all other activities available to them. Moreover, studies show that female youth of this age are encouraged to identify as heterosexual beings and to position procreation and the attraction of male attention as the primary goals of their adult lives. In fact, adolescence is the life stage when most girls’ experiences are increasingly narrowed and oriented toward such practices.

(2013: 5)

Adolescence, therefore, became a period in which each participant explored their gender identity in which, for many, anime and cosplay acted as a means of escapism. For this thesis, I chose to focus on cosplay as a playful, temporary means of adopting femininity (or, in hegemonic terms, a means of ideally conforming to their assigned gender at birth). I also

consider cosplay as providing an escape to one's position within a hierarchical dichotomy where pariah femininity is the abject relation to hegemonic femininity.⁵⁵ In this way, cosplay provides a means of attaining a hegemonically, spectacularly feminine image via an alternative, or “nerdy” means.

From another angle, we may observe each pariah femininity as being relegated to the world of childhood, disallowed from coming of age. For example, lesbian relationships between girls, tomboy behaviour and the immaturity attributed to female neurodivergent subjectivities are, in hegemonic terms, ideally “just a phase” of childhood.⁵⁶ Indeed, *all* pariah femininities, in some way or another, are presented as “just a phase” considering the fact that they need to be surmounted in order for the female subject to come of age in society. This bears certain significations for the subject matter of this thesis which observes cosplay as giving the means of becoming spectacularly feminine (adhering to that image of ideal, hegemonic femininity and coming of age as a result), while under the immature guise of the symbolic, girly *shōjo*. I go into this in more detail in chapters six, seven and eight which observes cosplayers who use the image of *kawaii* innocence to mask their maturity. Regardless, femininity (via cosplay) becomes a means of transcending one's pariah position and being able to experience what it means to become a hypervisible and hegemonically-recognised female subject through a character who embodies both aspects of Self and Other.

⁵⁵ Although I observe the ways in which participants presented themselves as feminine, for many, there was another side to their cosplay as well: they presented themselves as masculine as well. Indeed, while my focus of this thesis is on the ways in which femininity was embodied via cosplay, this is not to detract from the fact that the performance of masculinity was just as prominent too. I invite future studies to observe the ways in which Japanese media (and, increasingly South Korean media such as Kpop idols) representations are emulated via cosplay and dance performances, seemingly presenting an imaginary, alternative, “softer” masculinity than that which is associated with media representations of Euro-anglophone masculinities.

⁵⁶ Whitney Monaghan (2019; 2016) also observes how queerness is presented as “just a phase” of girlhood.

Before I begin my discussion it should be noted that this chapter is intended as a brief insight of each pariah femininity as opposed to an in-depth critical analysis of each participant's experiences—something which nonetheless necessitates further study.

Feminine Pariah Number 1: The Female Nerd

One of the most important foundations of this thesis is my addressing the concept of “nerd” and how it related to all participants of this thesis in their being a part of anime fandom and cosplay subculture (Winge, 2019). Indeed, as Raewyn Campbell observes, the term “nerd” signifies “unselfconscious enthusiasm, intelligence, pursuit of knowledge, obsessive interest, dwelling in the imaginary” (2014: 169). These were all traits that I came across in my meeting with anime fans (cosplayers) who shared a markedly enthusiastic interest in anime. However, “nerd”, with its associations of masculine subjectivity, bears certain gendered significations that are culturally disallowed in women and girls (Hendrix, 2017; Kendall, 2011). (Moreover, the girl nerd exists within a cultural and media context which uses her as a mode of transformation, ugly-duck style, into a vision of acceptable femininity, see Shary, 2002). So what significance does being a nerd bear in relation to pariah femininity? All participants in this study were arguably nerds in the assigned position of female. Therefore, under the lens of hegemony, they were feminine pariahs by default of having an interest in anime which is historically marked as a masculine subculture (Napier, 2007).

Campbell notes how the term nerd is undergoing a “process of coolification” from a formerly socially marginalised position into one that is “culturally visible and powerful” (2014: 169; Hendrix, 2017). Nevertheless, “males are more culturally credible as nerds than are women” (*Ibid.*). Campbell continues, stating that society

sees nerdy behavior as validated through its ability to fulfill certain requirements of “real” masculinity, and more importantly to reinforce

patriarchal legitimacy. [...] As male nerds are largely validated through conforming to notions of hegemonic masculinity, female nerds are unable to sit comfortably within this paradigm.

(2014: 170)

Indeed, female nerds are pathologised, not only in society, but within nerd subculture as well (Orme, 2016). This invariably affects girls' experiences of being a fan of anime or cosplayer in which femininity becomes a means of staking their territory away from the hegemonic masculinity of cisgender male anime fans. This came through in my interview with Sharice, who, as a black fangirl of anime told me about her experiences.

One thing which seems to slip under the radar is the perpetual marginalisation of black girls and women in the nerd community. [...] Growing up as a fan of anime in my teens, I always felt like I had to prove my “nerd creds” in a way that black boys wouldn't have to. It was almost like there was a hierarchy of nerds and gatekeeping that I had to negotiate in order to claim my space in the community. I kind of felt like an imposter or, like, a “fake geek”. Like, I'm playing catch up. [...] My brothers had every version of the gameboys—the Gameboy, Gameboy Colour, I think it was then Gameboy Advance and then SP, all of those. I know that if I had been given a Gameboy like my brothers I would have enjoyed it. And I probably should've kicked up more of a fuss, but I just didn't think that they were for me. It's called *Gameboy*. For fuck's sake, like. Do you know what I mean? Instead, I was given a Cabbage Patch doll. What am I supposed to do? Pretend to mother it? I don't even want kids. So your dolls didn't work, mum! [laughs]

Sharice's testimony shows that from an early age, she felt like an imposter in nerd communities, from anime to gaming. She told me of how boys and men repeatedly undermined her in encounters with them online and offline in nerd-marked (anime fandom and gaming) communities.⁵⁷ She said, “I think the fact that if you're a woman who exists in any geek space, your authority—or... You have no credibility just by virtue of being a woman.” Indeed, (black) girls have to carve their own territory (or to “claim” their “space” as

⁵⁷ Although I am unable to go into much detail in this thesis, Sharice led her own fangirl events which were aimed at bringing together geek girls with an emphasis on representing those who are non-white. She also had a stall at an anime convention with “nerdy nails” where anime fans could get their nails done with “nerdy” or “geeky” designs from anime series such as *Sailor Moon*. Nails are therefore one of the ways in which feminine territory may be staked within the context of masculine-assumed nerd subcultures.

Sharice said) for themselves away from both hegemonies of wider society and away from the hegemonies of nerd subcultures themselves (Hendrix, 2017). As Campbell observes,

It is significantly more difficult for females to satisfy taken-for-granted requirements for entry into the nerd sphere—female participation and involvement in nerdism, as well as female identification as nerd, is met with amplified scrutiny, surprise, and even hostility compared with their male counterparts.

(2014: 175)

Just as Campbell recognises that hegemonic masculinity is evident in nerd subcultures, my exploration in this thesis observes cosplay as a space where hegemonic femininity may also be forged. We might consider the label nerd as bearing significations of undesirability in girls and women, in which I observe how each cosplayer, arguably marked as a “nerd” for her enthusiastic interests in anime, was able to use the cosplay to become the image of hegemonically recognised spectacular femininity. Becoming recognised as acceptably feminine as a nerd therefore rests on feminising (or sexifying, as I explore in chapter five) the label, which works to subvert and redeem the abject undesirability associated with the position of nerd or geek. Performing femininity via cosplay is one of these means of redemption. In light of the overarching form of pariah femininity in this study, the nerd, I will now move into a discussion of the other areas that arose during my research which paint the necessity for each participant to use cosplay as a means of masking it, gaining recognition and coming of age as a result.

Feminine Pariah Number 2: The Tomboy

One of the central themes that came through in my interviews was the term “tomboy” which participants used to denote that they were not conventionally feminine. Tomboy, like nerd, became a signifier for each individual’s inability to fit into hegemony’s ideal of femininity.

Indeed, one of the most common images of the feminine pariah is the tomboy, defined by Halberstam as a “failure” in society (2011). Therefore, the tomboy, as a failure of femininity, presents a problem to the (re)productive heteronormalecy of capitalist society, whereas the “girly girl”, “a marker of the worst excesses of hegemonic ‘femininity’” and the “polar opposite” of the tomboy (Holland & Harpin, 2015: 293) is a success.

In this section, I reflect on how participants referred to themselves as tomboys and what implications this has for coming of age as a female subject. As a tomboy is commonly defined as a girl who displays behaviour that is associated with masculinity, she is a feminine pariah because she threatens the gender dichotomy in which masculinity is a trait of boys and men. Notably, tomboy is a phase that is only allowed in childhood. As Halberstam observes, the tomboy is a great threat to hegemony if she does not become feminine during adolescence. He states,

Female adolescence represents the crisis of coming of age as a girl in a male-dominated society. If adolescence for boys represents a rite of passage (much celebrated in Western literature in the form of the bildungsroman) and an ascension to some version (however attenuated) of social power, for girls, adolescence is a lesson in restraint, punishment and repression. It is in the context of female adolescence that the tomboy instincts of millions of girls are remodelled into compliant forms of femininity.

(Halberstam, 1998: 6)

Adolescence is a time in which the “tomboy instincts” of many girls become (self) regulated, suppressed and/or converted into that of the ideal feminine subject in order to come of age and have value in society. Kearney also recognises this in her observation of how “historically, teenage girls’ masculine traits have been disparaged and punished” (2013: 7). Any failure to become feminine is met with punishment (becoming an outcast and bullied by one’s peers).

In the sense of how the participants of this study used it, tomboy referred to an experience of a liberated, active, adventurous agency, “the spirit of curiosity and adventure... the freedom-to-be...” (Rice, 2014: 63), that is associated with the masculine subject position. I became interested in, not necessarily the fact that many identified as having been a tomboy, but rather, how the term “tomboy” encapsulated aspects of their experience which related to freedom and agency (limited to masculine subjectivity) which became disallowed during puberty:

If there was a dress, like, I would NEVER wear one, unless it’s cosplay. Some of [the dresses in *Love Live!* are] really ugly, but then I guess it felt like I was being the anime character, so it was different.

(Darsha, 14; from chapter eight)

I was kind of a tomboy. I was very, very different from a lot of girls [...]

(Kiara, 21)

When I was a child I was like a boy, I used to just play in the garden with wildlife and nature, getting all dirty in my bare feet, catching frogs and exploring with my dog.

(Kai, age 21; from chapter seven)

Yeah, I was pretty much a tomboy when I was growing up and I would *never* wear the colour pink. Now it’s my favourite colour. [laughs]

(Scarlett; from chapter five)

Oh my god, I am the most tomboyish ever. I am so terrible for it, but I, yeah I thought I had to be into makeup, and all you see on TV is all these really pretty girls who are all really slim and wear all this revealing stuff and you’re never really shown much else. It’s just like one or the other, it’s always one extreme. So I always felt that I had to do things to be normal—that I had to be a girl who was one that always had to be doing things to be normal—so I had to control my weird voices that just naturally happen and I couldn’t, like, be hyper about stuff, because that wouldn’t be normal. So I felt really pressured to just be normal. Less than being a girl, but at the same time obviously I’ve got girly things pressured onto me.

I didn’t feel like I was living when I was hiding my geeky side. I didn’t feel like I was here, I felt like I was doing things to be normal and it sucked. When I had to go to my friend’s hen-do the other month, I felt so out of place.

But I was determined not to, because it made me feel like I was when I was at school, where I had to hide who I was and pretend to be someone else—and I didn't like that, I felt really uncomfortable, so I deliberately, like, had as many geek references on me as I could and I just kept everything the same, didn't change my dress style or anything, and was like, "Do you know what, no. Yes, I'm going, but to do something I wouldn't normally do, but I'm not going to be pressured into being like all these normal girls." So I was surrounded by all, like, these girls who were just kind of standard girls, all doing their makeup and being like, "Look at how slutty my dress is," and I'm like, "Okay, great". I'm in, like, a Victorian petticoat now with, like, anime tattoos because I can't get rid of them. And I was like, "Eh!" [shrugs shoulders]. But it did worry me for a bit that I felt like I was going to be pressured to go back [to how I was in high school].

Kathleen, 25 (from chapter five)⁵⁸

Starting with Darsha, who cosplayed as a spectacularly feminine idol from *Love Live!*, as part of her testimony, she told me of how, as a tomboy, she would "never wear" a dress unless it was for cosplay purposes. This relates to what many participants told me in their interviews: as children they displayed the characteristics of tomboys; during adolescence they eventually began expressing femininity in a more conventional sense—such as liking the colour pink, as Scarlett's testimony shows above. Whether this was the case or not, I became intrigued by the possibility that each participant's interest in Japanese media and culture might reflect their negotiation of femininity, as my interview questions prompted them to consider their development from a tomboy into a more acceptably feminine subject. I also became interested in how each participant understood certain elements of adventure and agency to be related to being a tomboy such as climbing trees and exploring in nature (as Kai said). While I discuss her testimony in more detail later, Kathleen notes how her expression of femininity was different to the other women at her friend's wedding, where she opted to wear a Victorian petticoat instead of a "slutty" dress. The spectacularly feminine cosplayed appearance of each

⁵⁸ As a mini analysis of Kathleen's testimony, note how she had to camouflage and "hide" herself in various ways in order to fit in at school; how she "didn't feel like [she] was living" when she "had to do things to be normal". As Kathleen was someone who experienced a traumatic time of bullying at school, her attempts at fitting in were evidence of this attempt to escape the regulation that she experienced at the hands of her peers by conforming to hegemonic normativity. Therefore, Kathleen's experiences of alienation and fragmentation from her subjectivity illustrate the kinds of dehumanising socialisation that pariahs of femininity experience when they come of age.

participant and their experience of being tomboys painted a picture of coming of age as a female subject as being a negotiation of femininity. Cosplay, as potentially an alternative means by which tomboys may become feminine, therefore reflects the compulsory “choices” available to girls when they come of age in a postfeminist landscape (Gill, 2012; McRobbie, 2009).

Reflection 4.1

Tomboy Instincts

Serving tables as a maid at an anime convention, I was designated a table host to a tween girl, her best friend and her mother. Both girls, eleven years old, were into anime. In fact, as a convention taking place in the summer, it was evident that these girls were on the cusp of beginning secondary school where the discipline of gender hegemony becomes more pronounced during adolescence. The tweens told me that this was their first anime convention. In between serving them tea, I sat down and talked to them as part of my maid’s role. Emma was wearing a long, waist-length pink wig. “I’m into *kawaii chan*” Emma told me, showing a picture of a cat-girl with pink hair on her mum’s phone.⁵⁹

As a “maid-like” conversation starter, I asked them whether they had bought anything at the convention. Emma showed me a choker with a pink heart charm on it. She was particularly precious about it, mentioning it a few times and moving her wig aside from her neck to stroke its velvet texture. She said, “it’s something a bit different, ‘cause it’s not really what I go for usually.” She laughed, “It looks like I’m girly, with this [waist-length] pink wig. But at school—you wouldn’t believe it, but under this wig I have short hair. I’m actually such a tomboy.”

“So, really, it’s girly you’re cosplaying as, then.” I said.

“Yes, you really showed the boys up on sports day,” her mother said.

⁵⁹ Why do pink cat-girls resonate in the way that they do? As I describe in appendix 1.6, at a similar age to these girls, I was also captivated by a different image of a pink cat-girl from Japanese media. (Remarkably, the photo of Belle Delphine in fig. 5.7 shows her dressed as a cat-girl with a pink wig.) The symbolic discourses that relate femininity to the feline condition are evidently a trope of representation (Park, 2015). Does cosplaying as a pink cat enhance one’s femininity?

“I’m stronger than all the boys in my class!” she said proudly.

“That’s amazing,” I said, both as myself and the maid character I was performing, thinking inwardly,

“Make the most of it! Don’t ever change!”. Emma continued,

“It’s funny ‘cause my sister, when she had friends over at the weekend they were all doing a spa day, face masks, painting nails and stuff. *She’s* your typical girly girl. Whereas I was shut up in my room making cosplay pieces, getting glue and paint everywhere!”

Notably, Emma’s “girly girl” sister wasn’t sitting at the maid café table talking about *kawaii* chan. At that moment one of the maids called me away from my table and I got scolded for neglecting my duties at other tables. The conversation stuck with me for the rest of the day, where I reflected on what stood out to me as being significant: Emma, both a tween and tomboy, on the cusp of coming of age, had used her first experience of cosplay to dress as a feminine character with typically “girly” traits. Namely, long pink hair and a pink velvet necklace.

Rice notes how the term tomboy has changed over time to become more of a “fluid” concept:

“Girls today use the label but adopt a more fluid idea of gender by moving between “girly” and tomboy identities, describing themselves as “sometimes” and “sort of” rather than total tomboys” (2014: 92). This bears reference to what Victoria Cann noted in her study of girls,

The girls I spoke to often dismissed the cultural texts that they associated with ‘traditional femininity’, seeing them as things that other ‘typical’ girls might like, but not them. If alignment was made with feminine texts, this was either discussed as a ‘guilty pleasure’ or was performed with great exaggeration (‘fangirling’). On the whole ... girls’ cultural consumption is incredibly varied, but I argue that this is largely due to the patriarchal devaluation of the feminine.

(2015: 154-5)

The concept of tomboy is complicated by androcentric ideals and “girl power” in which

“patriarchal discourses dominate girls’ sense-making” (Cann, 2015: 154). Themes of

autonomy and agency associated with masculinity are now captured in the future girl's image (Harris, 2004). In my interviews with participants about their childhood, certain participants used the word tomboy to draw attention to the fact that they were not (or did not see themselves as) the conventional image of femaleness (i.e. femininity). Tomboys therefore epitomise the temporality of the feminine pariah state which is necessarily left behind when the female subject comes of age. As the following reflection explores, I became intrigued by the term tomboy as signifying a state where sexualisation is disallowed. Sharice's testimony below indicates this, in which she adopted the position of tomboy as a means of avoiding sexualisation from boys and men. Tomboy, as a position of pariah femininity, is therefore a means of self-preservation. However, as Sharice explains, she nevertheless encountered other forms of discipline and regulation by her peers.

Reflection 4.2

Sharice

As stated previously, the four areas of pariah femininities are necessarily imbricated in each other, with participants experiencing multiple pariah identities together via anime as a "nerd" subculture. As I explore in this section, becoming of age as a female subject is contingent on a process of negotiating a hierarchical dichotomy in which hegemonic femininity bears power and visibility. By contrast, pariah femininity is the Othered opposite of hegemonic femininity. As Bronfen states, "patriarchy needs to designate certain members of society as 'other', in order to stabilize its own power" (1988: 126).

Therefore, socialisation works to solidify hegemony in our conforming or inability to conform to its principles. To become the image of hegemonic femininity (i.e. successfully presenting oneself as a feminine, heterosexual, desirable subject) is to be validated (positively recognised) by the hegemonic order which takes the form of our peers in daily life who act as agents of discipline, working to regulate our behaviour and appearance until we fit the ideal, hegemonic mould. Any digression from this results

in our “discipline” (Foucault, 1995). With this in mind, I want to explore the testimony of one anime fan (and cosplayer), Sharice, who told me of her adolescent experiences growing up as an anime fan in which her experiences of discipline by others worked to alienate her from her own subjectivity.

[At high school] I wasn’t “cool” but I was *cool*, do you know what I mean? I wasn’t everyone else’s standard of cool, but I was fucking cool. And I think it’s those kinds of girls, girls who are, like, who find it difficult—‘cause school was not fun. It was difficult. Anime was fun. And all I would do was think about all the anime figurines I would buy when I had money. [...]

[At school] I was an outcast. Like, there were like girls in the year below me and above me... that would, like, call me Bounty and Oreo, ‘cause of the way I spoke, ‘cause of who I hung out with. And ‘cause I used to skate and I used to wear a hijab.

I would always wear these baggy jean shorts that used to belong to my dad I think and I just cut them. Always wore trainers, I just felt safe dressing like that. Like, I didn’t really like the attention. It made me very, very uncomfortable. But you know when you were that age, did you know what it was, did you actually register that this is actually misogyny and sexism? [...]

It was so fucked, man. The popular guys, one time, when I was in year 8 [age 12-13], I remember just sitting in PE waiting for my turn for the fucking BLEEP test,⁶⁰ the number one embarrassing thing. I’m a chubby, chubby girl, do not make me run. I had asthma. But like, this one guy, Sam, he came up to me—“Sharice, do you give head?” And I didn’t even know what that meant.

⁶⁰ The BLEEP test is a form of physical education assessment where high school children have to run from one side of the room to the other before the “bleep” sound bleeps in order to test their stamina and speed. If you do not get to the other wall before the bleep, you have to sit out and that is your bleep score. Sharice was out and waiting for it to finish when she experienced one of her first cases of sexual harassment.

I was just like, I don't know what to say, but the safest answer is "No". Then they started laughing and so it was just like, "...Sometimes?" And then they were like "Ooooh" and I was like, what did I just say, and it's just. Can't win. You can't win. You actually cannot win.

I really find it weird, 'cause like women are raising sons, mothers are raising men, so why do they all come out so fucked? But that's like a whole other thing. I could go on for hours. [...]

When I was younger I never felt attractive. I distinctly remember when I realised that someone who looked like me wasn't attractive. [...] I was in year eight I think, and realised that, "Oh shit, I'm ugly. I'm not attractive." Before that I was just like, "Oh yeah no, I'm a beautiful person." [...] It's so funny to say that, 'cause like, yeah. Like, all of the boys I liked, didn't like people who looked like—they didn't like me. They liked, you know, the smaller, whiter, chicks. Or the lighter chicks as well. And so I kind of like—I also developed quite early, like, I had boobs when I came out of the womb, and my butt's always been huge. And I hated the attention that I would get—the unwanted attention I would get from grown men. So I would wear massive hoodies, baggy fucking jeans. And then started calling myself a tomboy. But that wasn't really what I wanted to wear. Like, for years I was kind of, in my friendship group, I was like... like, hap- happy? Being the unattractive one? Like, the tomboy kind of... yeah...

Georgia: What did you want to wear?

Sharice: Cute shit I guess, I don't even think I even really thought about it. I just knew that I didn't want grown-ass men looking at me, and this is a way to make them not look

at me. And that was it. And then I also kind of, like, put myself above the rest of the girls in, like, that—because I was like, “Ah well, I dress like a dude, I skate, I hang with the dudes, they respect me”. As if that’s like I didn’t wanna fuck them. ‘Course I did! You know what I mean, but it was kind of like, “Yeah, I have loads of male friends.”—Who the fuck cares? [laughs]

[...] I think, black is a monolith for some people. I think that it’s wild that people think being black and listening to rock music are, like, mutually exclusive or that, like, “What, so am I like more of a black person if I listen to rap?” I don’t understand. That was the vibe. I was talking to another one of my really close friends, and she’s black too. We went to completely different secondary schools and she was talking about how she saw it as a compliment sometimes, and I was like, “Oh my god yes! It’s so fucked up!” We were just like, “Oh they’re calling us Bounty and Oreo. That means they don’t see us as black, and that’s good.” How fucked is that? There are layers to this, like, the self-hate ran so deep in secondary school. I remember thinking like “Okay, well, at least, like, I speak well.” Like, I put myself above the other black people who were bullying me for not being black enough, because of the way I spoke and the shit I did. Like, I had closer proximity to whiteness, and *I* saw that as something good. Fucking hell. [...] Um... but yeah. Sorry, I’m just talking about myself...⁶¹

Georgia: This is—

Sharice: That’s the point of the interview. I know. [laughs] Whoopsie. [...]

⁶¹ I chose to keep this part of Sharice’s interview in the thesis because of what it suggests. Her apology is a nod towards the fact that (black) girls and women are repeatedly remarked upon for the space that they occupy. Sharice had learned to self-discipline herself to the extent that she apologised for speaking too much when that was the point of the interview.

As Sharice's testimony shows, she had to negotiate her position as black and female in relation to the hegemonic order that designated her interests as being white and masculine (i.e. not suitable for black girls) and designated her position as a pariah of femininity, or an "outcast" as Sharice put it. At the beginning of her testimony, Sharice referred to "those kinds of girls... [who] find it difficult". Although she does not elucidate what exactly is difficult, her discussion alludes to it: Sharice is talking about being a girl who found it difficult at school, presumably because of how others judged and treated her. She was a feminine pariah. This is evident in her telling me that she was "an outcast"; her peers referring to her as "Oreo" or "Bounty" as a derogatory way of saying that Sharice was "white on the inside" because her hobbies and way that she presented herself were seen to be associated with white people. As Crawford & Hancock state, "'geek' and science fiction subcultures have tended in the West to be typically associated with whiteness" (2019: 92). Gatson & Reid also adhere to this view when they state, "The default fanboy has a presumed race, class, and sexuality: white, middle-class, male, heterosexual [...] We're being disingenuous if we pretend that these social forces do not exist and do not affect fandom interactions, with different effects in off-line and online fandom spaces." (Gatson & Reid, 2012). The message was made implicitly clear to Sharice: as a black girl, did not belong with her subcultural group of skaters and nerds; she was neither white nor male. Indeed, as scholars note, even the position of tomboy itself, as a construct of "white privilege" has historically been forbidden to black girls (Sentilles, 2018: 2). This bullying is just one of the forms that regulation and discipline takes, in which our bodies and identities become remarkable when we do not fit the stereotyped ideals of society.

Sharice's encounter with a disciplinary gaze is repeatedly gestured towards throughout her story, whether it was in being given a doll for Christmas (implicitly defining her role as female and a future mother) or being sexually harassed by the boys in her class (via a joke that targeted her because of her size, colour and gender) and worked to redefine hegemony's ideal image of the desirable female

subject as “smaller, whiter... lighter”. Then, being referred to as “Oreo” worked to solidify the hegemonic, stereotypical ideal that black identities are a “monolith”, disallowed from participating in activities that have been designated as white.

Feminine pariahs may be seen as transcending hegemonic expectations of their bodily and societal roles which is why they are met with the judgment and harassment that they experience. Sharice therefore had to negotiate her position as not belonging to hegemony’s stereotyped ideas of femininity or subculture, in which her experience of negotiating stereotypes informed her coming of age. Sharice was repeatedly made aware of her remarkability as black and female both of which marked her presumed inability to participate in certain “nerdy” or “geek” subcultures for the fact that they were associated with white men.

In regard to Sharice’s discussion of her sexual harassment, Sandra Lee Bartky (1982) uses Karl Marx’s theories of labour and alienation to observe woman’s position in society. She notes that, when the female subject is unable to exercise her full capacities as a human being (as women are disallowed from engaging in culture in the same way as men) it results in a fragmentation in and alienation from her subjectivity, in which, “The sexual objectification of women produces a duality in feminine consciousness” (de Beauvoir, in: Bartky, 1982: 316). In light of what participants told me about their experience of sexual harassment and bullying as teenagers, I began to see these elements of fragmentation and alienation as key to the process of becoming a woman in capitalist, patriarchal society. For example, Sharice told me of how, until year eight, she had felt like “a beautiful person”. However, after her experience of sexual harassment (notably, from when she was in year eight) and receiving “unwanted attention” from “grown men”, she began wearing “massive” clothing to hide her body, even though “this wasn’t really what [she] wanted to wear”. The ways in which we are remarked upon fundamentally shapes how we present and see ourselves. Sharice’s experience of sexual harassment and racism were both reflections of her existence as a subject in a society that is

underpinned by sexism and racism which sought to define her capacities via her regulation and remarkability. Moreover, her experience highlights the pressures that black girls face in regard to the premature erasure of their childhood. As Epstein *et al.* state, “Ultimately, adultification is a form of dehumanization, robbing Black children of the very essence of what makes childhood distinct from all other developmental periods: innocence” (2017: 6).

Although my experiences as a white girl would have been different from Sharice’s, her story resonated with me. I reflected on my memories as a teenager, how in my early tweens I was privileged not to have to hide my body until I was thirteen, because, until then, my underdeveloped, white, skinny body was still perceived as a child’s by the same scrutinising gaze that sexualised Sharice (see Halliday, 2018).⁶² Nevertheless, my eventual experiences of being sexualised and harassed (by boys and men), led to me hiding my body under baggy clothes as a means of cloaking all visible markers of womanhood.

In short, becoming a woman in patriarchal society is observably a case of learning to understand oneself as being the object of unquestionable sexualisation. How this relates to being a pariah of femininity is intriguing if we consider each identity of this chapter (tomboys, nerds, neurodivergent and queer girls) as being undesirable to that sexualising gaze. Sharice’s visibility as a tomboy was a means of protecting herself from the sexualisation that would be unquestionably afforded to her as a visibly feminine subject. She was “happy? Being the unattractive one”; “I just knew that I didn’t want grown-ass men looking at me, and this is a way to make them not look at me,” she said. If sexualisation is an opt-out process, then what measures do we have to go to as female subjects in order to express our femininity in a way that will still be acceptable in the eyes of society and yet, will not be sexualised? As I observe, Japanese fashion and cosplay are potential solutions to appearing in this way via the symbol of girlishness (see chapter six).

⁶² I discuss this in more detail in chapter eight where I observe idol cosplay as a means of experiencing the euphoria of their bodies, not for an objectifying gaze, but for themselves.

Feminine Pariah Number 3: The Queer Girl

the butch lesbian ... threatens the male viewer with the horrifying spectacle of the “uncastrated” woman and challenges the straight female viewer because she refuses to participate in the conventional masquerade of hetero- femininity as weak, unskilled, and unthreatening.

(Halberstam, 2011: 95-96)

As studies note (Crawford & Hancock, 2019; Lotecki, 2012), there is a large demographic of female cosplayers that identify as queer (bisexual, pansexual, asexual, gay). Crawford & Hancock observe, “around a half of the women interviewed suggested they were in same-sex relationships” (2019: 92). This was something that I noted in my observations as well. If I could go back and do the research again, one aspect that I would investigate more deeply would be the homosocial and homosexual elements that were so apparent during my research in the anime convention as a queer space. For example, during my fieldwork when I was shadowing a maid café, behind the scenes, one of the maids told me, “None of us here are straight, except Alex, and they’re ace [asexual]”. This reflected my wider observations of the demographic of participants that I met throughout all areas of each cosplay subculture in this thesis. A characteristic theme of the maid café and idol groups that I observed was homoromantic and homosexual relationships between the members (something which Choi, 2016 notes as being related to a *shōjo* sensibility), where cosplayers imagined themselves as part of a “ship”⁶³ between two characters, or in romantic/sexual relationships between cosplayers in their daily lives. Maid café and idol cosplayers would outwardly declare their love of “cute girls”, engaging in playful same-sex interactions such as hugging, kissing, holding hands and even playing the “Pocky (Japanese biscuit) game” (where two members

⁶³ “Shipping” is a practice of fan culture where two (or more) fictional characters are imagined as part of a romantic and/or sexual relationship. Shipping was popular in the maid cafés and idol groups I observed with certain members fantasising and imagining ideal pairs between the maid and idol characters that they were performing. In this way, Japanese media and culture (as well as cosplay) provides a space of representation for the negotiation of and identification with queer relationships in a way that has yet to be matched by western media.

put a Pocky stick between their mouths and nibble to the centre until their mouths touch). Although I did not actively ask idol cosplayers about their sexualities, the two idols that did volunteer their sexuality to me in an interview identified as pansexual and gay.⁶⁴ In another example, a lesbian couple (both cosplayers) invited me to a Pride event one week following a convention where we had met, in which one of the many similarities that stood out to me between the anime convention and this pride event was the familiar image of young tweens (female assigned at birth) wearing pride flags as capes. From this point on, I chose to assume the sexuality of participants as queer unless stated otherwise.

So what significance does this have in relation to feminine pariahs? Woman, in capitalist, patriarchal terms is ideally heterosexual. Therefore, lesbianism, just like tomboyism, in the eyes of society, is ideally a passing “phase” of girlhood (Monaghan, 2016; 2019). What became apparent to me is how certain spaces of cosplay were more open to a “lesbian continuum” (Rich, 1980: 648) than conventional UK society. This is potentially because both groups upheld the image of the *shōjo* (girl) in which lesbian relationships are often characterised in popular culture and society as temporary (Shamoon, 2012). Scarlett, from chapter five, identified as gay,⁶⁵ and yet, her image as a boudoir cosplayer was directed towards a heteromale audience (“Come here boy, who’s gonna break my heart and send me into a spiral of depression,” was the caption to an image of her posing on a bed in cosplay-related lingerie with a “come hither” finger). Scarlett’s presentation of herself as heterosexual in her boudoir cosplay was valuable for her cosplay business in which “likes” from a heterosexual male audience had the potential to become financially profitable.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Even though the boyfriend of one idol cosplayer (Hannah) was present during our interview, I did not make the assumption that she was straight.

⁶⁵ Scarlett posted along with the caption, “Hello, I’d like to remind everyone that I am the gay agenda”, a photo of her and her partner kissing while dressed in cosplay as Craig and Tweek from *South Park* (inspired by an episode where two characters are imagined by the members of their town in a homosexual relationship, which is presented as a satire of *yaoi* fan culture and shipping).

⁶⁶ In regard to masks of femininity, the term “postfeminist masquerade” seems applicable, in which McRobbie states, “The masquerade disavows the spectral, powerful and castrating figures of the lesbian” (2007: 725). As much as I observe cosplay as a means of embodying the hegemonically feminine, in what ways might cosplay be a form of the postfeminist masquerade?

Contrary to this, the lesbian, especially the butch (meaning masculine) lesbian, is framed as a pariah of femininity in her contamination of the heterosexual matrix in which “her masculinity becomes a block to heteronormative male desire” (Halberstam, 2011: 95). On top of this, the masculine lesbian is not productive to capitalist marketing schemes. Halberstam continues,

The butch [...] gets cast as anachronistic, as the failure of femininity, as an earlier, melancholic model of queerness that has now been updated and transformed into desirable womanhood, desirable, that is, in a heterovisual model. [...] While feminine lesbians, of the variety imagined within a hetero-pornographic imagination, are deployed in advertising culture to sell everything from beer to insurance policies, the masculine lesbian proves an anathema to consumer culture.

(2011: 95)

Therefore, both performing femininity and appealing to a heteromale gaze may be viewed as masks that transform queerness from a position of pariah femininity into one of hegemony. In a society that decrees heterosexuality as the marker of the successful doings of gender, the queer, especially butch, girl is a “failure of femininity,” a subject who goes against the chronology expected of female subjects who enter adulthood (as a linear progression of heterosexual relationships towards producing a nuclear family), thwarts the gaze of “heteronormative male desire” by not appealing to that gaze, and, ultimately, rejecting hegemony’s heteronormative ideal in which her value as a capitalist, patriarchal subject is marked by her ability to become an object of heteromale desire and “reproductive maturity” (Halberstam, 2011). Spectacularly feminine cosplay may therefore be a means of masking (or making palatable) one’s position as queer, which leads me into the next section of this chapter, the masking of neurodivergence.

Reflection 4.3

Passionate Friendships

There is one aspect that I feel is important to mention even though I cannot discuss it in more detail. As with the *shōjo* sensibility that informs *otaku* culture,⁶⁷ there is a particular area of interest which connects the two audiences of men in Japan and girls in the UK which pertains to *yuri* (represented homosexual relationships between girls in anime and manga). During my observations, I watched the interactions of many in which homosocial and homoromantic interactions between cosplayers. Sitting on each other's laps, touching each other affectionately, hugging and kissing, holding hands, doing the *kabedon* (where one person asserts their love/lust and dominance by cornering the other and putting their hand against the wall above their shoulder),⁶⁸ re-enacting homoromantic love scenes in photoshoots (Scarlett, from chapter five, did this with her girlfriend as characters from *South Park*), and of course, the Pocky Game.

As I previously related the phenomenon of Takarazuka to cosplay fanculture, Shamoons states, "As in girls' culture generally, Takarazuka celebrates purity and innocence in a homosocial setting that should not be confused with Western gay culture" (2012: 46). However, it is important to note that many of the anime fans that I met interpreted the "purity and innocence in [the] homosocial setting" of anime as a means of understanding their own identities as LGBTQ+ in the UK. For instance, the *Love Live!*-inspired idol groups and maid cafés I observed used cosplay as a means of imagining themselves as characters in homosexual pairings, or "ships" as they are commonly referred to in fandom. Many idols told me of how certain relationships between characters (that were perceived as queer) resonated with them such as Eli and Nozomi (from series 1) and You and Chika (series 2). As Heston (an idol cosplayer) and Becky (formerly an idol cosplayer) told me,

They do have a lot of LGBT moments in *Love Live!* and stuff, like the characters tell each other they love each other and it's very evident that You has a crush on Chika but

⁶⁷ I discuss this in more detail in chapter six.

⁶⁸ I also saw cosplayers doing the *kabedon* by kicking one leg up against the wall instead.

they don't say it... And same goes for *Muse*—Eli and Nozomi, they're the most iconic kind of duo which is also, I guess, why I love it 'cause it's got them undertones. People love *Jojo* [*Jojo's Bizarre Adventure*] for the same reason, 'cause everyone loves representation.

(Heston, 17)

A couple of the girls, especially in the first series, act like they're honest-to-god dating, but they never confirm it, they never do anything. There's a lot of gay baiting, or, queer baiting is the better term.

(Becky, 19)

What Becky called “queer baiting” refers to a marketing technique that some creators of media texts are perceived to use in order to attract a queer viewership as a marketable demographic, without actually representing the characters as engaging in any “confirmed” homosexual or homoromantic engagement with each other. This is an example of how the fans that I met in the UK interpreted anime within the discourses of western media, positing that the creators of *Love Live!* depicted these relationships between the characters as a means of drawing in queer audiences for financial gain, as opposed to what I saw as being for the purpose of titillating its (male, heterosexual) *otaku* fanbase which has a penchant for scenes of *yuri*.⁶⁹ (For example, one of the characters, Nozomi, gropes the breasts of the other girls against their will, as a means of calming them down. Is this queer representation or fan service? This necessarily illustrates the complicated ways in which *Love Live!* is read globally.). If the “patriarchal image of *shōjo*” according to Deborah Shmoon is “defined and mediated by a male observer” (2012: 10), then how might we see patriarchy being deconstructed and reappropriated by girls for their own gains and fantasies? This reflects the reality that young women ultimately have to negotiate their selfhood in relation to a phallogentric imagined ideal (Irigaray, 1985).

On another note, the relationships of the anime characters as well as the relationships of the idols cosplayers reflect the “passionate friendships” (Shmoon, 2012) of *shōjo* world in general, in which homosexual and homoromantic relationships become the marker of impermanence related to

⁶⁹ As Sugawa-Shimada states, “The *yuri* trope has been more often utilized in anime since the 2000s to depict a pure and innocent imaginary space of girls for (mainly) men to consume” (2019: 196).

feminine adolescence, seen to temporarily precede their inevitable heterosexual engagement when they leave the *shōjo* haven that education provides and eventually come of age (Choi, 2016). As Shamoan states in her work on Japanese literature,

Girls' culture [in Japan] was premised on the privacy of a homosocial world, but while the relationships between girls were often described using the language of love, those relationships were part of the transitory adolescent state and did not imply a lesbian persona.

(2012: 33)⁷⁰

This all lends itself to the depiction of a world in, as I discuss in chapter eight, the anime series, *Love Live!*, which is the ultimate fantasy of escapism for the men watching it (and, as I discovered, queer girls in the UK who are starved of representation in their national media). Shamoan, in her study of *shōjo* culture, observes “the way adults (particularly adult men) portray girls and the way girls' culture created a different image of girlhood” (2012: 3), *Love Live!* may be interpreted as being a re-appropriation of girlhood by young people themselves, nonetheless universally appealing across demographics. Regardless of the creators' intentions for *Love Live!* (and other anime series that are read by fans as queer), the series inadvertently becomes a means of lesbian representation that is starkly missing in tween and teenage media texts in anglophone media (namely, the US and the UK), in which it became a means by which the fans I met could identify with the characters and negotiate their own queer identities, in “the creation of an imaginary fantasy world in which the tensions and anxiety of heterosexual relations have been erased” (Shamoan, 2012: 47). In light of *shōjo* culture's emphasis of “purity and avoidance of heterosexual activity” (Shamoan, 2012: 3), texts such as *Love Live!* and other anime in the *shōjo* genre may appeal to girls' subcultures in the UK for their representation of romantic homosociality, or, “spiritual love between girls” as Shamoan (2012: 12) puts it. She notes that, “The

⁷⁰ Shamoan continues, “Japanese-language scholarship on prewar girls' culture tends to operate on the assumption that homosexual desires were part of the transitory state of adolescence and not indicative of a lesbian identity in the contemporary sense of the word” (2012: 34). This therefore reflects the transnational tendency for lesbianism to be relegated to girlhood as a temporary experience which precedes patriarchal control on entry to womanhood.

emphasis on girl-girl bonds represented the apotheosis of spiritual love in its purest form, that is, the intellectual connection between two unsullied souls” (2012: 57). Cosplay may therefore be considered as a spiritual escape from the abject which, paradoxically, is embedded in the figure of the *shōjo* that these cosplayers perform.

I came to view cosplay and anime fandom as hosting a “lesbian continuum” (Rich, 1980) which led to the experimentation and identification with imaginary homosocial and homosexual relationships between girls and young women: a spectrum of lesbianism. In light of the fact that the queer girl is a pariah of femininity in the eyes of hegemony, the fantasy spaces of anime with their *yuri*-like tributes, offer a space of representation with which queer cosplayers may identify and negotiate their own sexual identities. Indeed, becoming the image of the *shōjo* is seemingly an alternative means of embodying an ambiguous, ambivalent queerness under the guise of a *kawaii* girl. The anime girl acts as a figure where a lesbian continuum is expected as part of the discourses of anime where anime texts provide an accessible representation of femininity that is not defined by heterosexuality. Therefore, the figure of the *shōjo* arguably offers a means by which queer relations between girls are normalised and not disciplined, nevertheless under a mask of the spectacularly feminine.

Feminine Pariah Number 4: The Girl Who Has Autism

One of the key observations of my fieldwork was coming into an awareness that anime resonates with people who are neurodivergent or on the autistic spectrum. Discourses of autism code it as masculine, which has certain significations for girls and women. As Campbell states,

Extreme social incompetence is a trait commonly associated with male nerds [...] Such behavior has, in recent years, increasingly been diagnosed as Asperger’s syndrome. Indeed, a leading researcher on Asperger’s syndrome,

Simon Baron-Cohen, has posited that autism (the spectrum on which Asperger's syndrome lies) is an extreme form of the male brain. (2014: 173)

Campbell also notes how, in popular culture, female nerds are infantilised. Attributes associated with the nerd position “come across as immature and socially inappropriate” (2014: 173) which are disallowed in women, but are potentially more acceptable in the immature image of the *shōjo*. This leads me to consider that certain representations of girls in Japanese media may lend themselves better to the representation of female nerd, or neurodivergent, identities. Indeed, one of the underlying themes of my research was in meeting cosplayers who told me that they had autism or other ways of being that detracted from neurotypicality. Many times I saw how cosplay (and other subcultures related to anime fandom) acted as a space for people on the autistic spectrum. For example, in Sarah's maid café, all of the cosplayers had autism in which Sarah's goal of the café was to promote autism awareness. Sarah also pointed out to me that the creator of the famous anime and gaming franchise, Pokemon, was also on the autistic spectrum (Eldred-Cohen, 2018). Rachael Lefler and others (see BBC, 2016) observe the potential reasons why people who have autism are drawn to anime.

Many of us like [anime] because it's illogical, because it's crazy, because it's not anything like reality. Realistic fiction only serves to remind us that reality is sometimes awful. For autistic people who face many challenges in life due to their disorder and due to society not understanding them or their disorder well, a break from reality is sometimes highly desirable. Almost all the biggest and most popular anime involve allowing a person to feel as though they're able to enter and participate in a fantasy world. In this world, virtue and hard work are always rewarded, and any obstacle can be overcome with a positive fighting spirit. You can be a pirate, ninja, Pokemon master, even a grim reaper. The world of anime and manga offers unlimited possibilities that reality doesn't. And being active in the community by writing fan fiction, doing fan art, and cosplaying all help fans connect with these imaginary fun places in a way that almost makes them seem real.

(Lefler, 2020)

This is not to suggest that all fans of anime have autism. However, there are certain elements that Lefler alludes to which suggest the reason for why people who have autism might like anime, and this was something that was an emerging theme of my research with multiple participants telling me of their neurodivergence. As Lefler writes above, anime provides a fantasy world that is particularly digressive from reality and imaginary. Moreover, there is a certain emphasis on the narratives of popular animes on friendship. Many animes represent protagonists as moving from the position of the alienated into one of acceptance and power by their peers. Indeed, it generally conspires that it is a character's difference that is the root of their power. Lefler also notes that the facial expressions of characters are also exaggerated and "easy to read emotionally" (2020) which demonstrates social interactions that might necessarily be difficult for individuals on the autistic spectrum to engage in daily life.⁷¹ In addition, one of the themes that came through in my conversations with participants is that anime allowed them to experience their emotions and feelings more strongly. For example, as one participant, Grace, told me that Japanese media and culture, "makes you *feel* more". Anime potentially resonates more deeply with its fans because of its affect and aesthetic, both of which are tied to emotions, which suggests to me that anime is a neurological, highly affectual experience.

However, there is little research that relates neurodivergence to cosplay and anime fans, especially those assigned female at birth. This is because autism is underdiagnosed in girls and women, which highlights it as being another form of pariah femininity. The neurodivergent girl is a feminine pariah because autism is culturally disallowed in girls and women for the fact that it counteracts with society's ideal of feminine desirability. As studies

⁷¹ Another point that Lefler (2020) raises which connected to my observations in my research was the fact that certain formal aspects of Japanese culture and linguistics might appeal to someone who has autism. This was something that I noticed, for example, in the maid café setting which had many rules and rituals to "break up" the limited time of the café slot, such as taking orders, engaging in the raffle, serving orders, performing, and then taking chekkies (polaroid photographs) following the meal. Everything had its place, and was meticulously on time.

show (Cridland *et al.* 2014; Alfano *et al.* 2006) autism may become more visible as children enter adolescence, “as the complexity of social relationships increase” (Cridland, *et al.* 2014: 1262), which leads to their feeling different to their peers. This leads to girls and women on the autistic spectrum masking or camouflaging their behaviour in order to fit culture’s normative, neurotypical definition of female subjectivity, which leads to stress, anxiety and depression (Lai, *et al.* 2017; Merrill, 2016). As Kathleen said, “I didn’t feel like I was living when I was hiding my geeky side”. This was another theme that came through in my interviews, with participants telling me of how they worked to hide aspects of themselves in order to fit in at school and avoid being bullied.⁷² As it was the case for two anime fans who told me that they were finally diagnosed with autism at age 25, I began to consider that this might be a widespread phenomenon in light of all the testimonies of those that I met who told me of their anxiety at having to “fit in”. For example, as Kathleen told me, she had to “control [her] weird voices” and she “couldn’t [...] be hyper about stuff, because that wouldn’t be normal. So [she] felt really pressured to just be normal”. As one of the key characteristics of camouflaging is “pretending to be normal” (Mandy, 2019: 1879; Wing, 1981), I began to consider the idea that many participants might be neurodivergent but were unaware of it. I even had to ask myself the same question, reflecting on my teenage behaviour that was arguably Aspergic, considering the exhausting lengths that I would go to in order to “fit in” and the anxiety and depression I suffered as a result of it.⁷³ As Lena told me, after being diagnosed with autism at 25:

⁷² As Kathleen said, “I didn’t feel like I was living when I was hiding my geeky side”. This was another theme that came through in my interviews, with participants telling me of how they worked to hide aspects of themselves in order to fit in at school and avoid being bullied. Abbie (in chapter six) also mentions this in her testimony, saying how there is “this massive amount of pressure to conform [...] I tried for a little bit in high school and I was absolutely miserable, depressed beyond words [...]”. These testimonies illustrate how becoming “normal” is more than an effort to be popular and fit in; it is a matter of survival in a world where no expression of digression from the hegemonic norm goes unchecked.

⁷³ Rather tellingly, my first thought rejected this idea that I might have autism because it felt like a threat against my ability to be feminine—which, in a scape dictated by hegemony where unwomanly women are condemned, admitting such a thing would be akin to social suicide.

I mean, it makes *so* much sense now that I think about it! It explains everything: anime, my time at school, my habits ... I just wish I'd been diagnosed like twenty years ago.

This is an area that I would highlight as being deeply necessary for further study for the fact that individuals assigned female at birth are persistently underdiagnosed with autism (Bargiela, *et al.* 2016), and yet, anime fandom seems to provide a space of resonance for those who see the world “very, very differently” as one participant, Kiara told me. While I can only go into so much detail about this here, I intend to publish elsewhere on this following the submission of this thesis.

Indeed, the camouflaging aspect of autism is particularly significant if we approach cosplay as being a literal form of masking or camouflage. As Will Mandy states,

Many autistic people feel obliged to pretend not to be autistic. They invest considerable effort daily in monitoring and modifying their behaviour to conform to conventions of non-autistic social behaviour. This phenomenon has come to be called ‘social camouflaging’, also referred to as ‘masking’, ‘compensation’ and ‘pretending to be normal’[...]. An example would be a teenage autistic girl purposefully studying the behaviour of a non-autistic girl at school, and then, over time, adopting her attitudes, dress, gestures and facial expressions, thus developing a persona to navigate social situations.
(2019: 1879).

I became intrigued by the possibility that Japanese media, with its exaggerated, potentially Othered depictions of femininity (see O’Brien, 2014), might in some sense become a textbook guide to learning how “to do” femininity, where cosplay becomes the means of putting this mimicry into practice. Indeed if we consider the idea that autism in girls is undesirable to a hegemonic gaze, then, in order to come of age (and be valued under the criteria of “reproductive maturity”), one’s neurodivergence needs to be masked effectively. Regardless, there is one factor of which I am certain: there needs to be more research to inquire further into autism and femininity, particularly cosplay and its potential to

camouflage, in which the context of the anime convention may be the most appropriate setting for such a study.

Reflection 4.4

Seeing the World Very, Very Differently

I think I just, sort of, I just see things very, very differently to other people. There's all sorts of people in this world, some people will be drawn to something that they find maybe interesting or pleasing. And I just, I think, with Japanese culture, maid cafés, Japanese fashion, Kpop, all that stuff, I just find it very interesting. When I'm interested in something, I want to learn as much as I can so I can, so I can share this with someone else, you know?

(Kiara, 21)

In my discussions of this research, the familiar question often arises in regard to the demographic of the group I was looking at: “Does this subculture attract a particular type of social class or race?”. The answer is no. Nor is there a one-track route into becoming interested in anime (Napier, 2007). What does matter, however, is one's perspective. As inspired by what Kiara told me in her interview, being an anime fan is a way of seeing “the world very, very differently”. However, as diverse as the fan culture of anime may be, I was interested by the fact that the representations of anime characters (as arguably visibly caucasian) might not be so diverse. Kiara was deeply affected by *kawaii* subcultures and anime—especially maid cafés. However, notably, as a black participant, Kiara was on the other side of the table, preferring to be an *ojou-sama* (a customer) rather than a maid.⁷⁴ Anime is a visual text that resonates aesthetically, affectually and almost inexplicably with certain people who become fanatic about it. Indeed, the act of assigning anime fandom and cosplay subculture to a particular identity group misses the point of its fandom. As I argue in this thesis, being an anime fan is contingent on resonance and perspective. That is, anime fandom, as a neurological, affectual experience, attracts anybody and anyone regardless of their race, class, gender, ability and anything else. Nevertheless, one's identity and

⁷⁴ Although I had met black and other non-white maid cosplayers during my research, I was interested to consider the idea that race may play a part in the dynamic of visibility, specifically, *who* is visible and how their bodies are read in a café setting. I discuss privilege and whiteness further in chapter seven.

background will necessarily shape one's experience of it. Access to resources through money lends itself to power and recognition (Hills, 2002). Therefore, the fans with more access to resources have more access to power. For example, in my conversation with an idol cosplay group I saw the leader look aside with dismay because, while the other members in her group could afford lavishly decorated *ita* bags, she did not have the money to buy one herself, reducing her power in the idol scene. Nevertheless, there were a range of different classes in the cosplay communities I observed.⁷⁵ As I observe in the following, not fitting the stereotype of nerd (white masculinity) and femaleness (femininity) is something that becomes increasingly remarked upon as part of a regulating process to remove any individuals who, in the eyes of hegemony, contaminate identity roles. The participants that I met transcended their hegemonically-assigned identity roles in their interest in a nerd subculture that is, in the West, relatable to the interests of cisgender, straight, white men.

One theme that I feel is important to mention is the way in which colour resonated with the majority of participants I met who all told me of how they were drawn to anime or *kawaii*, for its bright and diverse palette. Indeed, many participants were visually stimulated by the aesthetics and emotions that anime garnered. I considered, if anime attracts individuals who “see [and feel] the world very, very differently”—and an example of this lies potentially in its colourful aesthetics and the emotions that they evoke—if anime appeals to those who experience colours more vibrantly, then might the world, with its rules regarding gender, appear more vibrantly too? (See Appendix 1.4 for Anita's testimony).

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a brief overview of four areas that deserve scholarly attention concerning fans of anime (and by extent, cosplayers) assigned female at birth. I addressed

⁷⁵ Indeed, in a single maid café group, some members lived in council housing and received benefits, while one of their peers was enrolled at a private university with her parents' financial support. Girls from working-class families were as key a demographic as girls from middle-class families. Nevertheless, the girls from privileged homes were able to afford costumes which allowed them to gain their power and visibility as spectacularly feminine subjects more easily.

neurodivergence, queerness, tomboyism and nerdiness as being four elements that came through as themes in my interactions with participants, which come under the term “pariah femininities” (Schippers, 2007)—anything that might taint the hegemonic ideologies of what a female subject should be like. Following my observations and interviews at anime conventions all over the country, I felt so compelled to centre my thesis around this very subject: becoming feminine as a means of conforming to one’s social (hegemonic) destiny as a female subject. Given the discipline and regulation of feminine pariahs as they reach adolescence, femininity becomes the means of masking these traits in order to come of age (be empowered) hegemonically. A feminine pariah, in short, does not fit the ideal image of femininity, and, as a result, threatens to disrupt and contaminate the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) and “gender order” (Connell, 2003). In this chapter, I observed various subjectivities in the context of the anime convention that may be interpreted as feminine pariahs for the fact that they upset the gender dichotomy. I considered the significance of cosplay lying in the ability to embody the image of the spectacularly feminine which is so necessary for coming of age as a female subject in the eyes of society. I therefore laid the foundations for my observations of cosplay in further chapters as a temporary means of escaping one’s abject existence as a feminine pariah; a means of societal redemption by becoming spectacularly feminine.

As I explored, the tomboy is the expression of masculine behavioural traits that must be left behind when the female subject grows up. Queerness is also, in hegemonic terms, ideally a passing phase, in which the butch lesbian is particularly disruptive to the image of the female subject as being desirable to heterosexual cisgender men. The concept of nerd is related to a masculine positionality and therefore requires feminising (which is best achieved through sexification; see chapter five) in order for female nerds and “girl geeks” to become hegemonically recognised and visible. Neurodivergence, similar to the concept of the nerd, is

also associated with masculine subjectivity, in which girls and women subconsciously “camouflage” (Mandy, 2019; Dean *et al.*, 2017) such traits to become socially acceptable. Becoming feminine as an assigned-female subject is a matter of importance in order to, not only be accepted in one’s society, but to escape the threat to one’s well-being that hegemony imposes (in which each participant’s experience of bullying was evidence of this discipline). Becoming a woman, for many, is therefore an experience of dehumanisation, alienation and ostracisation, until they become accustomed to what is valued of them as female subjects in their society. So, how might these symptoms of pariah femininity be controlled, self-regulated (Foucault, 1995) and masked as part of the female subject’s necessary socialisation? This is where cosplay comes in, where, throughout this thesis, I observe the liminal conversion of feminine pariahs in that temporary space of hegemonic recognition, coming of age as a result. Cosplay therefore becomes a means of gaining social salvation in light of a hegemonically-orientated society where, for the assigned female subject, the “natural” and seamless expression of conventional, ideal femininity is absolutely necessary. With this in mind, I will now turn my attention to cosplay performances that arguably epitomise what it means to become hegemonically feminine.

Chapter Five: Cosplay and the Erotic



Fig. 5.1.⁷⁶

Introduction

For young women today in postfeminist cultures, the display of a certain kind of sexual knowledge, sexual practice and sexual agency has become normative—indeed, a “technology of sexiness” has replaced “innocence” or “virtue”.

(Gill, quoted in: Evans, *et al.* 2010: 118)

In the previous chapter, I explored the concept of “pariah femininities” as the denigrated Other of hegemonic femininity. By contrast, in this chapter, I observe hegemonic femininity and how cosplay may be used to embody it in the space of anime fandom and other alternative, “nerd”-related, pariah-marked subcultures. Indeed, the form of cosplay that I observe in this chapter is the means of transforming from that state of feminine pariah, the

⁷⁶ 5.1. Pikachu Nigri. “Queen of Cosplay,” Jessica Nigri, cosplays as the gaming and anime Pokemon character, Pikachu. Nigri rose to fame after a photo of her cosplaying as a sexy Pikachu went viral on the internet in 2009; “sort of a nerdy take on the ‘sexy animal’ costume so beloved of sorority girls” (HeavyMetal, 2015) which I explore later as an example of what I term sexification. The above photo is the reshoot she did, marking 10 years of her business and fame as a cosplayer.

nerd (associated with an alienated masculine subjectivity) into that which is hegemonically validated, using guises of the spectacularly feminine as the means to achieving it. I explore the phenomenon of boudoir cosplay—where female-presenting cosplayers engage in erotic photoshoots as characters primarily from anime and gaming series—as a form of redemption from one’s characteristically unfeminine (nerdy) interests via sexy justification, or “sexification” as I term it in this chapter. Sexification refers to the ability and choice to transform anything (from the mundane to the masculine) into feminised sexiness for social merit, pleasure and/or monetary gain as a female subject under the influence of a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007). Sexification is the commodification of sexualisation, provocative in that it is intended to provoke a response (laughter and arousal). However, it differs from sexualisation because it involves transforming from the mundane or masculine into something definable as “sexy” with its use of a certain set of characteristics pertaining to the spectacularly feminine (wearing a dress, heels). Indeed, sexification may be intended to provoke sexualisation. However, this is not its sole purpose. Rather, sexification involves taking the non-sexy and making it sexy in order to elevate the “erotic capital” (Winch, 2013: 24) of the wearer. In this chapter, I explore cosplay as an opportunity to play with and embody the power and validation which comes with being “hot” (Winch, 2013). From sexification (as the gateway to boudoir cosplay) to *ahogao* (an ironic facial expression of orgasm that has manifested from meme culture into cosplay), I explore certain instances in which sexy cosplay acts as a metaphor of (be)coming of age via becoming the (re)productive object of desire. As Goldman *et al.* state, “The formula, though self-contradictory, can be expressed quite simply: Self-fetishization supposedly offers women an avenue to empowerment” (1991: 335).

“Boudoir”, the French term for bedroom, bears significations of fantasy, allure and desire. Essentially, boudoir cosplayers are the “glamour models” of cosplay and nerd

subculture, taking the unsexy and making it ironically sexy. This necessarily informed my choice of photos for this chapter's title page, an image of Jessica Nigri's "sexy pikachu", where she cosplayed as a sexified Pokemon character. Nigri's cosplay business is framed around "boudoir" cosplay, where she engages in anime and nerd-themed erotic photoshoots. The above photo marked the ten-year anniversary of her cosplay business, initially started after a photo of her debut cosplay as a sexy pikachu at an anime convention in the US catapulted her to viral fame on the internet. Ten years later, Nigri's social media is thriving, with millions of followers, posts gaining hundreds of thousands of "likes" and an account on the website Patreon to which patrons "pledge" between \$1 and \$150 a month for "exclusive" content in return. As a platform where cosplayers and other creatives can turn their craft into a profession, Patreon is therefore a manifestation of the neoliberal climate of the digital age in which our ability to be productive is a marker of our worth (see Regner, 2020). Cosplay is Nigri's main form of income and an example of the potential financial gain available to female cosplayers, provided that they are willing and able to produce themselves successfully in a similar way. In this chapter, I discuss two of the cosplayers that I met who cited Nigri in their interviews, one cosplayer, Kathleen (age 25), was critical of Nigri, whereas the other, Scarlett (age 19), named Nigri as one of her biggest influences (and it became evident that multiple social media posts of Scarlett's imitated Nigri's). My analysis does not criticise these cosplayers, but rather, I use observations of their performances in cosplay to criticise the environment in which stark gender inequalities exist. This is part of my wider analysis of how cosplay reflects processes of coming of age in the 21st century in which patriarchal and capitalist gains are its markers. This contributes to my overarching argument that the female subject (be)comes of age in light of those persistently sexist ideologies made available to her in society, the media and social media.

The methods of this chapter are directed towards the scope of the internet and what I observed in this rapidly emerging phenomenon that is boudoir cosplay. This is due to the extent that boudoir cosplay is more firmly embedded in the internet (conducting boudoir cosplay in a public setting would not be acceptable) in which famous boudoir cosplayers may attend anime conventions and fan meets as a means of boosting their profile. Contrary to the following chapters which explore groups of cosplayers (maids and idols), this chapter is different in the sense that I primarily focus on one individual in particular, Scarlett, and the various insights that she inspired following our brief, eleven-minute interview. Scarlett regularly displayed herself online in ways that may be interpreted as sexualising and I became interested in how this activity was often bound with power and the search for identity. I observe how cosplay acts as a means of negotiating one's position as a validated female subject in contemporary society and what it might reflect on power and femininity in the contemporary digital age where, as Connell states, "women's bodies [are marketed] as objects of consumption by men" (2002: 6). In particular, I explore how "pornographic femininity is strangely idealised" (Negra, 2008: 101) and how this relates to what I witnessed of boudoir cosplay as being emblematically postfeminist. This chapter also acts as preparation for the rest of the discussion of this thesis in establishing the context surrounding female cosplayers today in which the hypersexual world of boudoir cosplay is presented as the most lucrative, accessible and recognised means of empowerment available to them.

Female Cosplayers

Certain acts gain more recognition than others along the lines of gender and this is reflected in cosplay subculture. As one anime fan posted on social media, "How can girls feel safe in an environment made to objectify them?"⁷⁷. This cosplayer recognised the normalised

⁷⁷ This comment was posted in one of the fangirl social media groups I was following as part of my research (in which the members were all aware of my presence as a researcher): "So a question I've been wondering is how can girls feel safe in an environment made to objectify them? I'm asking in regards to

objectification and sexualisation of female characters in anime and comics, as part of the wider scape of visual media in general (Gwynne, 2013). Moreover, this question may be applied to one's existence as a mature female subject, in which "it is culturally normative for women to be sexually objectified in all types of contexts" (Speno & Aubrey, 2018: 638). The anime convention is no exception to this. The following discussion of this chapter observes how the cosplayers I met used cosplay as a means of expressing and experimenting with their identities, sexualities and, in particular, their sexualised identities; all of which were bound with power. This brings to light the following question: if one's destiny as an emerging-woman subject is to be sexualised and objectified, to what extent are self-sexualising, subjectifying practices for monetary gain a means of taking autonomy and control over something that one has no choice? As Jessica Ringrose's states,

Western culture is being generally "sexualized" [...] more explicit sexual content is continually being "mainstreamed" through processes like the normalization of pornographic imagery and discourses into everyday life. (2011: 102)⁷⁸

Ringrose observed in her study of girls' blogs that western femininity is "epitomized through approximating the sexually commodified body, performing as a sexual object, and occupying the position of sexually desirable 'baby girl'" (2011: 104) and this is evident in cosplay subculture too.

The gendered aspects of cosplay are popularly recognised in the scholarship. On the whole, however, there has been little discussion directed towards how women and girls negotiate the sexualising choices offered to them through cosplay. What is especially lacking is a scholarly insight into the "sexy" girl nerd cosplayer. Sophia Lamp (2018) and Elizabeth

cosplay/dress up in general. The hypersexualisation of female characters in anime is marginally acceptable in cartoon form, but when expected to execute detailed and accurate cosplays it can be a minefield of insecurity for some!"

⁷⁸ See also: Evans & Riley (2010); Attwood (2006); McRobbie (2009); Gill (2009; 2008); Levy (2005).

Nichols (2019) open the discussion for cosplay and female empowerment, in which Lamp (2018) provides a quantitative insight into the relation between sexualisation and empowerment in cosplay, arguing for the two elements to be discussed as separate constructs.⁷⁹ I disagree with Lamp on this for the discussion in this chapter, given the fact that I observe sexualisation as a means of becoming empowered in hegemonic terms. I view sexualisation and empowerment as being imbricated in one another, particularly regarding neoliberal discourses of identity where sexiness is equated with capital.

Nichols' qualitative study observed that, "cosplay allows women to experience freedom and agency in a space where gender norms are fluid and relaxed, allowing for experimentation and acceptance" (2019: 271), focusing on the positive and creative ways in which women used cosplay as a means of "[challenging] existing models of appearance, either by demanding more diverse characterizations from creators, or by designing their own" (2019: 276). While it is undeniable that the anime community allows individuals to experiment with gender more freely than in wider society as well as rebel against constrictive power structures that they faced daily (which is characteristic to the nature of subculture as a whole as communities that are marked as resistant and different, see Hebdige, 1979), I want to discuss this particular side of cosplay that is starkly missing from academic scholarship, which I believe contributes towards the theories of sexualisation and technologies of sexiness that are the focus of debate in feminist scholarship (Gill, 2003; 2012; Evans, *et al.* 2010; Doull & Sethna, McRobbie, 2009; Spino & Aubrey). As Gill states, postfeminism frames sexualisation as active choice, representing

a higher or deeper form of exploitation than objectification—one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalised to form a new disciplinary regime ...

⁷⁹ As a Bachelor's thesis, Lamp (2018) only goes into so much detail. Although I necessarily needed to be discerning in my choice of studies to cite, her study is the only one I can find that specifically centres on cosplay, sexualisation and empowerment. There is therefore rather a large gap in the literature that my writing in this chapter hopes to contribute towards filling.

This representational practice offers women the promise of power by becoming an object of desire. It endows women with the status of active subjecthood so that they can then “choose” to become sex objects because this suits their “liberated” interests. In this way, sexual objectification can be presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects.

(2003: 104)

This is central to the exploration of this chapter in which cosplayers chose to present themselves as sexualised as part of their “liberated” agency. Lamp recognised this in her study of cosplayers as well:

women [sexualise] their bodies to give themselves greater social value ... [and] that in order to be worthwhile in society, they must appear attractive in the eyes of others—or specifically, men.

(2018: 5)

As Lamp found in discussions with participants, “Enjoyment of sexualization while in cosplay also related to a higher personal sense of power through empowered cosplay” (2018: 2). Existing research on feminine-presenting cosplayers thus tends to focus on the empowering and resistive practices of cosplay. By contrast, I observe how feminine cosplayers might empower themselves, not necessarily by resistive, liberatory measures, but by what appears to be a conforming to gender hegemony (Connell, 1987) as part of what is a necessary process of survival in a capitalist, postfeminist scape. I therefore explore empowerment as a process of exploitation, where, in being empowered (exploited) as a capitalist subject, one comes of age.

Reflective of the postfeminist “choices” (Gill, 2003) available to female cosplayers today as part of the “technologies of sexiness” (Evans, *et al.*, 2010) we might observe in relation to cosplay,

the ways in which contemporary sexualised, consumerist and neoliberal societies call forth a new feminine subject who ‘is incited to be compulsorily sexy and always “up for it”’.

(Harvey & Gill, quoted in: Gill, 2012: 486)

This is a contentious area of feminist debate where scholars attempt to criticise sexism and inequality while at the same time acknowledging that girls and women are active agents in the formation of their own identities in relation to the choices that society offers them.⁸⁰ The subject of this chapter, Scarlett, a professional boudoir cosplayer, was clear to emphasise in her blog that she was not creating pornographic material; she was a “model”. Indeed, as explicitly sexual as her social media posts were, they were normalised in the scape of the internet in which the reproductively mature female subject is valued as a sign and caricature of pornification, as the following image (taken from Jessica Nigri’s Instagram) illustrates:



Fig. 5.2.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Winge (2019: 143) discusses the forms of exploitation that female cosplayers commonly face by photographers and other fans which generally includes photographs being taken of them without their consent as well as propositioning them to take photos in the nude. This is important to note in light of the wider scape of cosplay and internet culture as being a space which actively expects women to shed their clothes and use their image without their knowledge or permission.

⁸¹ 5.2. A figurine of the Japanese anime character and franchise, Super Sonico. Jessica Nigri’s Instagram caption, “Help me drink my drank you dirty beef slut” epitomises the ironic misogyny that is widespread on the internet.

The above image depicts an anime figurine of the character, Super Sonico, in cow bikini cosplay, which is designed to sit atop a person's drink. Characteristic of the humour of internet culture, Nigri's Instagram caption reads, "HELP ME DRINK MY DRANK YOU DIRTY BEEF SLUT". This is just one example of the misogynistic, postfeminist humour that I observe throughout this chapter in which the ideal female subject is parodied as a sexual symbol. As I explore, cosplayers who emulate erotic images of anime characters become symbolic of a certain power in which sexiness is a sign for reproductive maturity and value.

If the internet is a "manifestation of patriarchy" (Driscoll, 2002: 276), then we may consider the contemporary symbol of value and recognition (which is necessarily rewarded by capitalist, financial gain) as being informed by what the internet values of women (in short, porn). Therefore, the female anime fan is faced with certain choices available to her in expressing her fandom, her identity and her power by engaging in cosplay. In light of what McRobbie calls "the postfeminist sexual contract" (2007: 718), my discussion focuses on how "the pronounced superficiality, theatricality and ironic knowingness of postfeminist glamour" (Kearney, 2015: 270) manifested itself via cosplay. I explore the presentation of each cosplayer on the internet (following my meeting and interviewing them in person in the anime convention) on various social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, TikTok, Tumblr and the like.⁸²

Overall, I observe how female cosplayers exist within a complicated and contradictory web of internet activity that actively expects pornographic material from women, which became reflected in their caricature-like erotic performances. This is in light of my theory that becoming successful online as a professional cosplayer (a capitalist subject) is marked by one's visibility (profile "views") and esteem ("likes"), both of which are readily available to the female cosplayer who adheres to the codes of hegemony by becoming

⁸² These are social media platforms that are popular in the early 21st century.

spectacularly sexy. While the activity of the cosplayers that I have selected may be problematic, my analysis is nonetheless intended to be compassionate in its critique, questioning “the choices women are offered... rather than critiquing the choices they make” (Doull & Sethna, 2011: 106). Each observation provides an insight into the various ways in which feminine-presenting cosplay is “[w]rapped in discourses of individualism, consumerism and empowerment” (Evans, *et al.* 2010: 114) and how “girls’ [and young women’s] doings of young contemporary femininity are multiplicitous and at points contradictory, unstable and reversible becomings” (Renold & Ringrose, 2011: 397). My criticisms are thus targeted towards the “wider structural constraints” (Doull & Sethna, 2011: 163) in which feminine presenting cosplayers became valued on social media. Therefore, the critical eye is to be cast towards the patriarchal environment which cultivates such activity, to observe the various contradictions, ambivalences and ironies inherent to modern feminine selfhood as a result of a duality bred from the (arguably dysfunctional) messages which our mediascape conveys.

Method

One of the most popular methods for observing sexualisation in the media is “content analysis” which involves codifying elements in images as they are represented to “measure” (and determine the extent of) sexualisation in the media (Gill, 2012). For example, Spino & Aubrey used the classification of sexualisation in their coding of images such as, “body exposure” and

staging techniques that women exhibit to appear sexually alluring: wearing provocative attire, displaying overtly sexual expressions (e.g., a smoldering look of desire, licking one’s lips), and sexual connotation (e.g., touching oneself suggestively, legs parted suggestively).

(2018: 627)

These were all elements that I noted in my observations of cosplayers' social media pages. However, coding images for their potentially sexualising content has its issues due to the fact that determining whether or how a photograph may be sexualising overlooks the nuances of meaning within it as well as the subjective, nuanced nature of interpretation. Such practices "ignore the difference between levels of meaning... and tell us little about the images they examine, except how frequently they occur" (Gill, 2012: 488). Gill (2012) calls for a more critical approach towards researching sexualisation and this is the offering that I intend to contribute. Contrary to observing quantifiable accounts of cosplayers, the methodology of this chapter is centred on the selected instances of two cosplayers that I interviewed and observed. Here, I choose to discuss one cosplayer, Scarlett, to feature more strongly than the others due to the fact her trajectory highlights the contradictions that seemed to be inherent to feminine-presenting cosplay and a postfeminist sensibility itself (Gill, 2007). As Gill states,

it is time to move away from the generality of "sexualisation" towards a greater level of specificity; more modest, local, contextually-rooted studies that may not be able to come down on one side or other in the polemical "sexualisation wars" but which can inform debate about the meanings, practices and experiences of phenomena understood as sexualised in particular settings, among particular groups, at particular moments, and with particular consequences.

(2012: 492)

My approach in this chapter may be considered "modest" in its discussion of specific social media posts and instances that stood out to me as being particularly significant in light of cultural understandings of womanhood as something that is sexually and symbolically defined. As opposed to a more quantitatively-driven study which discusses elements based on recurring and codified themes, the discussion of this chapter arose from the fascination it compelled in me, which adheres to the orientation of this entire thesis as one that emphasises its exploration of truth via my own intuition and subjectivity. I chose to differentiate from mass-content analysis in my approach, opting to focus on specific instances (as opposed to

generalising a sample) in which I considered what it might be about these images that reflect the ideological mechanisms that are seemingly embedded in our culture.

With Scarlett, following our brief interview, I observed her internet activity over the course of 3-6 months, which I documented in the form of screenshots, video transcripts as well as field notes. I returned to this data two years later when writing up my analyses for this thesis. The internet is a fast-paced machine, and 2 years marks a lifetime of change with the flows of hype and irrelevancy (in Deleuzian terms, the internet is becoming-irrelevant). Having such a temporal distance between initial data collection and writing had its strengths and disadvantages. For example, while I was able to witness the evolution of Scarlett over this time, I also found that she had deleted several of her posts, moving onto a new “brand” and a new image. Her Patreon level was now at zero. What had seemed so bountiful 2 years ago was now hollow. It reminded me of the old legends of lost and abandoned cities.⁸³ Such is the nature of power, how it feigns permanency but is destined to end—especially on the internet. The way I have arranged my discussion in this chapter aims to reflect this play between the two elements of hubristic, (re)productive empowerment (as garnered by a capitalist, pornified environment) and idle desolation in which I observed Scarlett (and Nigri) as wavering in between the two, as a necessary part of (be)coming of age. Now I will turn my attention to one of the persistent themes that I noted surrounding female cosplayers: the devaluation of their craft and the repeated evaluation of their bodies.

The Devaluation of Craft

In this chapter, I am particularly interested in cosplay’s ability to reveal the prevailing and seemingly ingrained sexist tendencies of society. One of these tendencies is the devaluation

⁸³ Scarlett’s words echo in the end of one of her YouTube videos where she was at the peak of her business: “I never thought that I’d get to this point to be honest. I never thought I’d be sitting here opening fan mail, thanking fans for just, supporting me, what I do. [presses lips together] so thank you, seri-[laughs] seriously, thank you guys, so much.”

of women's craft and artistry in which cosplay has the tendency to draw attention to the female cosplayer's bodily and sexual capacities, overlooking her craftwork. However, it is nonetheless important to note the complicated and contradictory web in which the decisions of female cosplayers lie.⁸⁴ Note the following caption, written by Nigri on one of her posts:

I am terrified of hitting one million subs[cribers] [...] What does one even do when that happens?! LIKE FOR REAL, I AM JUST A GIRL WHO DRESSES UP

Followed by the subsequent comments:

Commenter 1: Real talk, it's because you're smoking hot.

Commenter 2: It's simple... boobs. [...]

Commenter 4: Stop acting like you aren't aware that your boobs got you famous (crying laughing emoji x3).

Jessica Nigri's Instagram post bore the caption of her bio where she stated her inadequacies as a cosplayer in capital letters as, "JUST A GIRL WHO DRESSES UP" which illustrates the persistence in cosplay and culture for women's craft to be devalued, as furthered by the above commenters who wrote, "Stop acting like you aren't aware your boobs got you famous".

Apparently then, Nigri enjoys her acclaim of millions of subscribers because she has "boobs"—and successfully meets the criteria for desirability.

As Suzanne Scott noted in her (2015) analysis of the television show *Heroes of Cosplay*, male cosplayers were primarily represented in the scenes making and building costumes as opposed to the female cosplayers who were shown to be inept models. Scott states,

Although most of the show's titular heroes are women with the technical skills and equipment to fabricate elaborate costumes and props, the show routinely

⁸⁴ As Evans *et al.* state, the male gaze has become ingrained, "producing a narcissistic neo-liberal self-policing gaze, in which the contemporary woman does not seek male approval for her apparently 'freely chosen look'" (quoting Gill, 2010: 116).

constructs a narrative in which male friends and partners are presented as the unacknowledged technical brains and fabricating brawn behind their success. (2015: 149)

Thus *Heroes of Cosplay* ultimately reflects this in its “reify[ing of] the presumed place of the female cosplayers [...] as objects of the male gaze” (2015: 149). As one of the most famously visible and financially viable female cosplayers, Nigri’s Instagram bio nevertheless reads,

HOT GLUE+HOE DREAMS I don’t know what I’m doing.⁸⁵

This is the phrase that each of the millions of visitors of her profile will see: an assertion, “I don’t know what I’m doing”, which ultimately reflects the persistence in society of women downplaying their craft or talents, while playing up to certain limiting labels such as “hoe” (note the emphasis in capital letters).

As Scott notes, *Heroes of Cosplay* focused specifically on individuals who were looking to become professional cosplayers. So, if male cosplayers were more readily accepted for their financial gain through cosplay (“rarely interrogated about their capacity to professionalize their labor”) which was seen as a marker of their skills and artistry, then how might female cosplayers justify themselves as professional cosplayers, when their labour is “received and scrutinized differently” (2015: 148)? Scott’s words echo, “Too often, labor is marked only when it aligns with the interests of capital” (2015: 148). Therefore, in regard to the gendered interests of capital, cosplay is a craft that is validated in men, while female cosplayers are increasingly and more readily validated by their ability to be sexually appealing, which acts as a repetitive moulding and reiteration of their capacities (i.e. their bodies) via “likes” on social media.

⁸⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/jessicanigri/>

All of the cosplayers I met were artistically creative. For example, Scarlett had a separate YouTube channel dedicated to speed drawing, where only her hand was visible. This channel, in which her debut video had under 10 views, had significantly less public recognition than her boudoir-related content which had several hundreds of likes and over four thousand followers. Scarlett also made her own costumes in which, notably, the majority of them emulated Jessica Nigri's cosplays. However, after one of her earliest "big build" cosplays—a *Mad Max Fury Road*-inspired costume (where half of her face is covered with a mask, and she poses as though she is fiercely primed for battle)—received significantly less (64) "likes" than a more revealing costume with a more feminine pose (a cleavage-baring bikini top, kneeling demurely with a long black wig; the camera shot is tilted down increasing her innocent-like vulnerability which received "180" likes), I was curious that the two cases might be connected when Scarlett posted a couple of weeks later about her intent to stop making "big builds".⁸⁶ From now on, her cosplays would be bought (not made) preferably for her by her followers and "fans".⁸⁷ From this point, I observed Scarlett begin posting more content of herself as a self-defined *oppai* girl (which means big-breasted in Japanese), which is to say that, as time progressed, her posts became more sexualised and her "likes" increased. I began to consider Scarlett's relation to cosplay as potentially being an experience of coming into a position of the objectified, where the artistry of the costume that she had made came second to her body and how she wore it—now a part of her "algorithmic hotness" (see: Carah & Dobson, 2016). This is just one example of how cosplayers navigated the esteemed choices made available to them. The following testimony by one cosplayer, Kathleen, illustrates this moulding in action in which her feelings about her own capacities were continually eroded by a sexualising, policing gaze to shape her behaviour to its ideals.

⁸⁶ A "big build" is a cosplay which generally takes several weeks to complete. Big builds are a complex display of a cosplayer's craftwork and ability.

⁸⁷ In one of her fan mail videos at the peak of her popularity, she opens a Jigglypuff (a type of Pokemon) style bikini.

Reflection 5.1

Kathleen: “How I Got Into Cosplay”

The following story, taken from Kathleen’s interview, details how she got into cosplay, which came after a series of attempts at escaping objectification from her peers, wanting to be recognised for her talents, not her “looks”. Her story of how she got into cosplay may be seen as elucidating the argument that is characteristic of this chapter: cosplay, as a practice that is bound with the body, reflects the wider ideologies imposed on ourselves as bodies of value. It bears certain implications for the experience of becoming a woman as being an objectified experience. Kathleen’s testimony of being repeatedly viewed and validated as a sexualised body is evidence of the discipline and regulation the female subject repeatedly faces in daily life.

Kathleen: Cosplay is my massive escape. I love making nothing from scratch—I love making something cool or pretty from nothing. ‘Cause I don’t feel like I’m very attractive as a person in any way, shape or form. But I’m like “Hey, at least I can make pretty things”, and they make people happy. So, it’s become a total obsession of mine. I love it. It’s such an escapism, and I would never ever wear the stuff I wear for cosplay in, like, the actual world—I’d be like, “Oh gosh no, too much skin”. But when I’m in cosplay—“Well, this is what the character would wear, so I’m jumping in!” It’s a complete escapism and it’s a fantastic escapism. You can be whatever you want. And you can wear as revealing costumes as you want, and no one can judge you.⁸⁸

[...]

You’re cosplaying as a character. That’s what you’re doing, you’re bringing characters to life. Your body doesn’t matter and that’s something that should never matter. I

⁸⁸ Here, Kathleen’s view relates to Lamp’s (2018) discussion which observes cosplayers as being more likely to engage with objectifying behaviour than in daily life.

remember the first time I went into cosplay and I said I wanted to cosplay Tifa from *Final Fantasy* and someone literally turned to me and said, “You haven’t got big enough boobs to do it”. I was like, “That is not relevant”. And I made them see the error of their ways, ‘cause I was like, that’s ridiculous because—you know what’s unrealistic? The expectations put on women in anime. Okay, take *One Piece*. Every girl has giant breasts and tiny waists in that. The manga artist himself said, “I just like drawing that, so I draw it!”. But I could cosplay any of those characters and it wouldn’t matter. I haven’t got giant boobs and I don’t care, I can still do them. It’s—there are a lot of expectations on women to look a certain way through *every* media. And yeah, I love anime and that, but it is one of the things that puts me off anime. Because I am so bored of seeing giant-breasted, half-naked women and I’m like, “Oh my god. Show me a flat-chested, confusing girl-character please.” It’s just not good for the younger kids who don’t have any of the understanding or all that. They have this pressure put on them to look a certain way. And I always rebel against that.

[...]

A few years ago, I became a stand-up comedian. But I found that I got irritated very quickly. Because when I started out with it, for one show, I wore the hotpants [shorts] that I’m wearing now because it was, like, really hot summer. But that’s what everyone focused on. One woman heckled me saying that I was a prostitute and I took her down [with my retort]. After the show, she came up to me and I thought she was gonna bollock me. And she starts telling me I’m “too pretty” to be doing stand up and me being a prostitute and that. I noticed that, and then [afterwards, in the show] I won an award for “The shortest hotpants”. And I was like, “So not for my stand up skills? Just that?” I used to take the mickey out of it, but it’s like. I got really fed up. It sounds

really stupid but one of the reasons I got into radio from stand up is because I wanted to be known for my abilities, not for how I look. People were always like, “Legs for days” and stuff like that. And I’m like, “Yes, they’re long, I can’t help it. I’m a giraffe, leave me alone”. It was just—that’s what they focused on. I just wanted people to appreciate me for my own abilities. So, in radio, all people know is my voice, and what I’m talking about, and that worked pretty well for me. And then people saw what I looked like. And people were like, “What are you doing behind a radio mic?”. I was like, “Ah, noooo”, like, “Not *again*”. And then I ended up as a cosplayer. So now I’m like, “Hey everyone, look at me!” Totally the opposite.

Georgia: Do you think there is a pressure on female cosplayers to wear revealing cosplays?

Kathleen: I keep getting questioned on this. And I’m starting to think I show skin. I’ve started to think it. I always thought I was a very covered up cosplayer. I always tried to be. But I get asked about this so much lately, I think I’m not anymore. Like, a lot of cosplayers feel pressured to show skin. I was shocked when some thirteen-year-old girl said to me that she thinks she has to be half-naked in underwear and all that in order to be a cosplayer. And I was like, “What is this? No! This is wrong! You don’t! That’s like the opposite way of cosplaying—you’re going the opposite way, you’re getting less costume. This is the wrong direction”. And it’s the fact that that’s what kids see, so like, don’t—I’m not slating on any of these cosplayers or that ‘cause I—I respect every cosplayer for their craft but it’s like, Jessica Nigri, because she can’t do her big builds all the time—she wouldn’t be able to do something every month cause big builds take

time. So obviously she does revealing boudoir shoots and she's the biggest cosplayer, so kids are all seeing her and they're thinking, "That's what you have to do to be a cosplayer". And even Nigri herself says she doesn't like that. She doesn't like that idea and she doesn't know how to stop it. I'm like, "Stop showing your tits. Stop it. Start being clothed."

[...]

It's all you see. It's always scantily-clad women. And I always feel like such a freak. I love being covered up, I hate having too much skin on show. If you look at my cosplays, that sounds very different to what I do, but it's a totally different board game for me.

Kathleen's testimony illustrates the female cosplayer's condition: caught between the two values of perceived skill and bodily appearance, in which the latter is validated. Her story shows the type of discipline and regulation that erodes and moulds us as socialised individuals into making certain choices. For example, she discusses how, as a stand-up comedian, people repeatedly remarked upon her appearance, defining her as one of the three symbolic, patriarchal categories ("prostitute") which limits a woman's social position to her (hetero)sexual status (i.e. whore, mother or virgin—see Irigaray, 1985), when she "wanted to be known for my abilities, not for how I look". Depending on the context, Kathleen was treated differently from how she wanted to be seen, moving between different roles in order to avoid being objectified. I became interested that it might not be a coincidence that she, "ended up as a cosplayer. So now I'm like, 'Hey everyone, look at me!'". Might it be the case that cosplay acted as a means by which Kathleen could negotiate her objectification under the guise of a character? A means of disassociating from herself to meet the expectations of that gaze which

continually evaluated her as a (re)productive subject? Even then, in cosplay, she found herself being met with the comments of others, such as: “You haven’t got big enough boobs to do it”.

Kathleen was regulated by the gaze of her peers whether she was on stage, behind a radio mic, or as a cosplayer. Her body was remarked upon constantly. As much as Kathleen said “I love being covered up. I hate having too much skin on show”, cosplay became a “different board game” in the sense that she was “starting to... show skin”. Kathleen was repeatedly met with her expected capacities as a female subject in a patriarchal society in which her body was read as a spectacle of desire.

We might consider Kathleen as experiencing the regulation that moulds us into socialised subjects, insofar as one is disciplined (remarked upon negatively) when one fails to fit gender convention, and conversely, validated and rewarded (remarked upon positively) when one does approach a confirmation of society’s ideals. In being on stage as a comedian, Kathleen was the focus of this collective gaze in which her heckler reminded her of her “value” as a female body, serving to define the value of the collective via defining her individual worth. The heckler acted as the voice of hegemony which seeks to evaluate and regulate at all costs. In this way, we experience a repeated eroding of our selfhood to which (if we are socially in tune) will eventually submit ourselves and come of age as a result. The internet acts mechanistically and similarly to the heckler in the audience, where commenters or trolls remark with the first unconscious remark that comes to them. This repeated process of evaluation is our means of socialisation.

Sexification

In the real world, Halloween is when kids dress up in costumes and beg for candy. In “Girl World”, Halloween is the one day a year when *a girl can dress up like a total slut and no other girls can say anything about it.*

(Cady, *Mean Girls*)

I would never ever wear the stuff I wear for cosplay in, like, the actual world—I’d be like, “Oh gosh no, too much skin.” But when I’m in

cosplay—“Well, this is what the character would wear, so I’m jumping in!” It’s a complete escapism and it’s a fantastic escapism. You can be whatever you want. *And you can wear as revealing costumes as you want, and no one can judge you.*

(Kathleen, 25)

As the two quotes above suggest, cosplay, like Halloween, is a means by which girls and women can experience with the empowerment that comes with being sexy. Just as *Mean Girls* protagonist Cady observes in the quote above, the Halloween party is a space where “a girl can dress up like a total slut” without fear of judgement from her peers.

The anime convention is notably similar to the Halloween party in the sense that dressing up (cosplay) is expected among its guests.⁸⁹ What this chapter explores is the extent to which cosplay (both on the internet and at the convention) is similar to the stereotypical adolescent/adult Halloween party, in the sense that girls and women may use the mask of a fictional character to experiment with the (em)power(ment) that comes with being “hot” and “sexy”. Like Halloween, cosplay becomes a space of exploring a hierarchy of power that is contingent on “hotness” (Winch, 2013: 24) and heterosexual display. As the above excerpt from my interview with Kathleen shows, cosplay became a means of her acceptably revealing her body where otherwise (in the “actual world”) she would feel uncomfortable (“Oh gosh no, too much skin”). What might it be about the act of costume-wearing that justifies (even necessitates) the revealing of flesh, particularly in its feminine-presenting participants? And in what way might cosplay be a means of playing and experimenting with the hegemonically-envisioned feminine position (sexy)—something which the average tomboy (as Kathleen identified as in chapter four) may perceive to be a humiliating and subjugating process (Halberstam, 1998)? I use the term sexification to denote the popular activity of making something sexy for the purposes of dressing up and the endless potential for transforming anything into something sexy. This is where the Halloween fancy dress party

⁸⁹ This is something that Winge (2019: 141) also notes.

and the cosplay convention meet. Sexification differs from sexualisation in the sense that it takes a “normal” image and makes it the (spectacularly) feminine image of sexiness in often humorous and knowing (postfeminist), parodic and subjectified ways. Thus feminisation (or doing femininity correctly) becomes synonymous with sexiness in the context of the fancy dress party and, notably, cosplay.

Allison Winch defined the term “erotic capital” (2013: 24) which is determined by one’s ability to be “hot”. That is, for the most part, as represented in the media, female power and validation is determined by one’s ability to maintain a youthful sexiness, or, as Lunning puts it, “the power that comes from being pretty” (2011: 72). We might observe that “hotness” has become the value in which all idealised feminine identities are measured against in contemporary British society. The further away one becomes from being “hot” or “sexy”, the further devalued one becomes *on the level of image*. In terms of cosplay on social media, “erotic capital” manifests itself in the form of likes which serves to validate the sexified subject. For example, behold the following Halloween costumes:



Fig. 5.3⁹⁰

Generally, there is an element of ironic ridiculousness at play with sexification because often it involves making things sexy that could not or should not be sexy. Being sexy is a humorous

⁹⁰ 5.3 Halloween costumes and sexification. Woody, Buzz, Alien, Carrot, and Lobster. The possibilities of transforming anything (from the mundane to the masculine) into the feminine and sexy really are endless.

and subversive act that nonetheless redefines existing hegemonies of the female subject as ideally desirable (Connell, 2002). Therefore, sexiness is synonymous with being relevant, in which relevancy is equal to productive, capital success. Sexification shows us that anything can be made sexy under a certain logic, therefore, this is something that all women can achieve, provided that they work hard enough for it (Evans, *et al.* 2010). Becoming sexified is a means of flaunting one's sign-value as a female subject who is becoming of age, displaying one's power as a female subject insofar as power produces in its own image. This is something that I reflected on in my own experience as a teenager, observing the trend for the girls in my class to organise fancy dress-themed birthday parties. Every year, the theme was different (fairies, superheroes, farm animals, school girls from *St Trinians*), yet everyone's renditions were the same: feminised and/or sexified.⁹¹

Constituting what exactly sexiness is, is arguably one of the defining arguments in contemporary feminist debates (Lamb & Plocha, 2015; Gill, 2012; Ringrose, 2011). High heels and small, clinging costumes which reveal the ideal, normative, feminised postfeminist body—the model of sexification may be used to code sexiness. Cosplay is no exception to the rule of sexification (Nigri came to fame via a picture of herself cosplaying as a sexified Pickachu) because the characters one is cosplaying (the referents) need to be visible and acknowledged in order for the sexification and parody to work. Potentially, boudoir and erotic cosplay act as a means of re-shaping the nerd stereotype through sexification. This was something which I came to observe in those cosplayers who turned their hobby into a business which appealed to the male gaze. This is not to suggest that all female cosplayers engaged in this activity (some I met established businesses on models and builds which did

⁹¹ For my friend's sixteenth birthday she chose the theme, "cops and robbers", where everyone looked like they were on a hen night as naughty escaped convicts and sexy policewomen with miniskirts, shorts, stripy tops and handcuffs. I remember the cars tooting at us on our way to a restaurant as they drove past. Unlike my friends, I chose to dress up as a geisha—which was intended as an homage to my passion for Japanese culture. I now see this as my "choice" of dressing-up as something that was feminine (a figure that may be exoticised as the Other) but nonetheless lacking the explicit sexiness of the costumes that my friends were wearing.

not involve them shedding clothes for the camera). However, my reflection in this chapter is on that which I observed as being an increasingly popular, means of instant (or “insta”) validation, where one was able to tap into a sense of power and worth (getting “liked” and gaining recognition for one’s activity). The female subject is arguably destined to come of age when she first masters her moulding of her image into the vision of spectacular sexiness or hotness. Being able to do “hot” well is a marker of feminine achievement. Therefore, the ability to make anything sexy (for example, the sexification of anime, gaming and other nerd-related subculture) is a feat which demonstrates one’s worth in the eyes of a patriarchal, capitalist world where “sex sells”. Thus the sexified subject comes of age in the sense that she becomes the marker of socialised success, the figure of an ideology which others may emulate. However, coming of age in the digital, capitalist 21st century is never a finished process. Rather, one is indoctrinated into a cycle of validation where one becomes a commodity, in which the satisfaction of the audience (the one that values you) is never permanent, but focusing on the hype of one thing to the next. Lamp attests to this in her study: one professional cosplayer whose business was founded on Patreon donations became aware that “people had started withdrawing their funding specifically because she was not doing enough sexy cosplays” (2018: 6). Therefore, in order to remain valuable and relevant as a feminine subject in this world, one must continue to re-depict themselves in new, different, subversive and interesting ways in order to continue to be recognised for the power with which one is associated. Thus, one is forever becoming of age until, some way or another, the hegemony no longer values you as such: you age, or you opt to dissolve away from the spotlight.



Fig. 5.4.⁹²

As Jessica Nigri’s “Birdoir Shoot” shows, sexification parodies the woman’s body as a sexy object as her poses are arguably ironically and jokingly sexy (for the fact that birds are not generally considered as sexy). However, there is a limit to the sense of irony which becomes lost through repetition (McRobbie, 2009). Is irony even possible in a capitalist and internet scape, which reproduces on mass, diluting the very element that is so integral to being ironic? As Butler states,

Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony. (2006: 139)

Therefore, the parodic edge of boudoir cosplay can never be entirely subversive because the repetitive system of media and internet technology works to diminish any potential real irony.

⁹² 5.4. Jessica Nigri’s “birdoir” shoot. The sexification of birds.

As I explore, boudoir and erotic cosplay became the means of emulating such images in which the guise of feigned parody falls short.

Who is Jessica Nigri?

Q: What do you think about the trends that we're seeing on Patreon and people kinda pushing the boundary?

Nigri: [Sigh] I really like that girls are getting more and more comfortable with their bodies and I think girls should do that, because that's what they have, and if they wanna use it the way they wanna use it, they should do it [thumbs up], do whatever you want with your bodies, girls [spoken in an unserious tone; laughs nervously] Haha!

It's true [spoken earnestly]. No, I really do feel that way. It's super true, like there are so many people that have, like, paid off their entire college tuition, or like paid for their families' surgeries [...] it's amazing...⁹³

I want to move on to a more focused discussion of Jessica Nigri because she is one of the biggest female cosplayers on the scene in contemporary times. Nigri, the subject of the photo for this chapter's title page, is one of the biggest (and arguably most influential) female cosplayers at the time of this writing, with 4 million followers on Instagram. An active cosplayer since 2009, in 2020, she had approximately 3,200 posts on Instagram and 4.1 million followers. In the above interview, Nigri discusses her career which wavers between irony and, what seems to me, exasperation. She justifies the financial gains of boudoir cosplay citing cases where the cosplayers used the funds to pay for their college tuition or for "families' surgeries", advocating boudoir cosplay as a valid option for girls because their bodies are "what they have". Altruistic productivity and capitalising on one's assets thus justify the means.⁹⁴

⁹³ *Jessica Nigri - THE INTERVIEW* (2018).

⁹⁴ This is also the case regarding maid cosplayers who told me that they faced less scrutiny from others in public when they justified their cosplay as being "for charity". On another note, in chapter eight, I discuss the narrative of the anime *Love Live!*, where schoolgirls strive to become successful idols (i.e. the image of spectacular femininity) under the justification of saving their school from closing down.

On observing Nigri's social media profiles, there would be the occasional criticising comment such as, "Y'all give the female cosplay community a bad name" (commenter on Nigri's Instagram photo). Simultaneously on the pedestal of power, but nonetheless, subject to its control, Nigri epitomises feminine socialisation as the ideal neoliberal, postfeminist subject. As Bartky states,

Women have lost control of the production of our own images, lost control to those whose production of these images is neither innocent nor benevolent, but obedient to imperatives which are both capitalist and phallogentric. In sum, women experience a twofold alienation in the production of our own persons; the beings we are to be are mere bodily beings; nor can we control the shape and nature these bodies are to take.

(1982: 138)

Nigri's loss of control of her own image was hinted towards in Kathleen's testimony when she spoke of how Nigri did not "like the idea" that female cosplayers have to be sexy in order to be successful cosplayers. "She doesn't like that idea and she doesn't know how to stop it. I'm like, 'Stop showing your tits. Stop it. Start being clothed.'". However, for Nigri to "stop showing" her "tits", her financial gain and validation that she enjoys from being a symbol of sexiness would significantly decrease. Validation comes in the same symbol, the "like", which is contingent on one's estimation from different people. Particularly in capitalist terms and the quantifying scape that is social media, a "like" is a "like", and it does not matter where it comes from or who liked it. To get fast results, removing one's clothes is far easier than the perseverance of a craft which would otherwise go unnoticed and unliked by others. Thus the "boudoir shot" is a way to quickly build one's follower base by increasing one's value in the form of "likes" and followers. However, this is a repetitive process of reward that is contingent on one's continued participation. Nigri is therefore caught in a cycle in which she must continually perform to that gaze of erotic heteromale desire until she can do so no longer (either she retires at age thirty which she contemplates in the video, or she ages and

is no longer sexually viable and valuable as a subject). Vivian Gornick's words echo: "Inside most people, behind a socially useful image of the self, there is a sentient being suffocating slowly to death" (in: Goffman, 1988: ix). This is not just the case for Nigri, but, as I am tempted to argue, for all women in the media industry who become the image of sexiness. Once a woman has been valued at the level of desirability and youth, she is indebted to that image, to continue performing it until she can no longer. As such, we exist to titillate hegemony, mortgaging our body and our youth for empowerment, money and recognition.⁹⁵ Insofar as she is defined as a valuable subject (a commodity) of capitalism under the law that sex sells, Nigri comes of age via cosplay. Or rather, we might consider that Nigri is continually (be)coming of age via cosplay—a perpetual cycle of sexified reinvention until she can no longer participate in the cultivation of sexiness. Over 3,200 pictures and shoots; the internet still is not satiated. I thus became interested to observe capitalism and its alienating effects on female subjectivity. Whether Nigri is in control of her own image or not is a matter of neoliberalism (and beyond the concern of my argument here). What I am remarking upon, however, is how cosplay acts as a means of (be)coming of age by becoming the symbol of female value; here we are seen to come of age in the eyes of society, to become valuable commodities, exploited for our (re)productive potential.

Reflection 5.2

Revolutionary Woman or Skin-Tight and Sexy?

The following excerpt was taken from an anime convention, where I attended a maid café event, sitting at a table with six other members, three of them cosplayers from a different maid café. The head maid of the event makes an announcement: "As we posted on our Facebook, we will be having a cosplay competition. The winner will be announced at the end of the event."

⁹⁵ We do this until our image becomes so coagulated that we achieve the ultimate success in the form of a waxwork at Madame Tussauds, frozen in time at our most valuable, unchanging.

“Exciting!” Nina (19) smooths down their dress. A period costume with several layers, a sash, a brown cap and mud on their face as make-up.

“Who are you cosplaying as?” I ask.

“I am a revolutionary French woman from *Les Mis*,” they beam, gesturing towards their sash. “This is an authentic piece of one of the flags from *the* actual French Revolution.”

“Woah that’s amazing!” I said. “You’ll win surely.”

“Aw thanks, hun,” they flutter their eyelashes. Their girlfriend—neither a fan of anime or maid cafés—looks at me warily.

One of the members, Kelly (20), is late to the event. They are dressed in a bright blue, bustier thong leotard with pink fishnet tights, pink rabbit ears and bow around her neck, long brown-haired wig, pink markings on her face like digital whiskers, and high heels. When I ask, the table tells me that Kelly is cosplaying as the playboy bunny version of the character, D.Va from the game *Overwatch*.⁹⁶ (Later on in my research, another anime fan described the character of D.Va to me, “She’s everything a gamer guy wants: she’s pretty, she does guy stuff, she’s hot, she’s an idol, and she’s into AI—she creates robots and rides them and kills evil. If you want to cosplay as something that’s popular with guys, then go for D.Va”).

Back to our table and everyone is looking at Kelly, who is evidently the embodiment of someone “popular with guys”. A man in his early twenties walks past, calling out a reference from *Overwatch* to which they reply smilingly. Kelly’s same-sex partner shifts nervously next to them—aware of the attention they are receiving. As popular as D.Va is “with guys”, I did not think that Kelly was doing this to appeal to men. Rather, Kelly was enjoying the sense of empowerment and validation that came with embodying the hot vixen, of which D.Va is evidently a symbol.

⁹⁶ *Overwatch* was developed by an American (not Japanese) company. However, many conventions attract cosplays from media other than Japan. What links them all together is their popularisation by the internet.

Kelly scuffles past us to their seat on another table at the front. I find myself looking at Kelly too, wondering how it would feel for me to wear the same costume—“Would I have the guts to wear something as revealing as that? ...I should probably make the most of my youth while I have it... I’d have to wax though...” My mind wanders. Why did I suddenly want to wear something that otherwise I would not? Because Kelly was at the forefront of visibility and attention. They were hot and powerful and spectacular—the ultimate postfeminist combo.

Later on, our table discusses the planned event of the evening: the cosplay afterparty. Nina says, “I’m not sure whether to wear this—[*gestures to their Revolutionary French Woman cosplay*]— or change into one of my other skin-tight and sexy cosplays. What does everyone think?”

Someone on our table says, “I don’t know. Ask your partner.”

Nina turns to their girlfriend. “What do you think, babe? Should I wear this to the afterparty or change into something skin-tight and cute?”

“I’m not sure,” she says guardedly.

[...] The event is nearly over, as signalled when the head maid calls out, “*Minna-san!*⁹⁷ We’re about to announce the winner of the cosplay competition.” Everyone looks towards the front of the room, Nina included, taking a breath in. The head maid continues, “So, um, our maids have carefully considered everyone in cosplay [...] We have decided that the winner is... [pause] Kelly dressed as D.Va from Overwatch!”

The café cheers and claps. Kelly accepts their prize, posing for a photo before returning to their seat. The murmur of the room increases as people gather their belongings to leave.

“I’ve decided,” Nina says. “I think I’ll wear the skin-tight, sexy outfit to the afterparty, yeah...”

Analysis

⁹⁷ *Minna-san* is a form of address in Japanese to a group of people.

In this observation, I was interested how the members of my table reacted to their friends' decision to cosplay as a playboy bunny version of the character DvA (from the game *Overwatch*). Until this event, Kelly's feminine-cosplays that I had seen were a maid character, the "little sister type", asexual and innocent. Kelly's DvA cosplay was different in the sense that it was intended as sexy. I was also interested in Nina's reaction, dressed as a revolutionary woman, they wondered whether they should wear their current *Les Mis* cosplay to the afterparty or change into "something skin-tight and sexy". Nina's final decision, to me, seemed motivated by the fact that Kelly won the cosplay competition, even though Nina had incorporated an original revolutionary French flag as part of their cosplay (as opposed to buying the complete costume on the internet as I presumed Kelly did). I was curious to consider whether, had Nina won the competition, would they have continued to wear their cosplay to the afterparty? To me, the message was clear: the spectacularly feminine, to the extent of sexiness, trumps all, especially where cosplay is concerned.



Fig. 5.5.⁹⁸

Scarlett

⁹⁸ 5.5. Sexification in Cosplay: The Bunny Girls of Overwatch. "There is a bunny girl variant of every female character. No one is entirely sure where it came from, but look on the internet and there will be a bunny girl variant. Bunny Girls get a lot of attention, and a certain kind of attention," one cosplayer told me.

I'm just a girl who likes cosplay
Just a thot that likes to dress up

(Taken from Scarlett's social media)

I first met Scarlett following a J-fashion masquerade, while we were waiting for her friend backstage (with whom I had arranged an interview). This was an encounter which led me down a rabbit hole of contradiction and ambiguity, which is specifically why I have chosen for my discussion of her to feature so strongly in this chapter. The different ways in which the cosplayers I met presented themselves on the internet, particularly Scarlett, seemed to me to epitomise those becomings of femininity and womanhood that are so heavily tied to the symbolic, in which “woman” seemingly becomes a caricature of hetero-masculine and pornographic desire (see *ahegao* reflection 5.3).

From what I witnessed of Scarlett in person, she was an assured, articulate, and self-defined feminist with an affable awkwardness behind her mask of confidence that she was cosplaying. Notably, Scarlett was wearing a maid costume. I asked whether she was in a maid café, “Oh no, I’m cosplaying from *Nekopara*,” she told me. *Nekopara* is an erotic Japanese game franchise where the characters are all half-cat half-girl (“catgirl”) maids. The game involves talking to the maids and has control options to touch their bodies, to which the characters respond with various shots of boob-jiggling and embarrassment. Evidently then, *Nekopara* is a game which is problematic for maid café cosplayers who assert that their performances are not for the erotic pleasure of others.⁹⁹ Scarlett was not part of a maid café cosplay group, however. Scarlett was a specific type of cosplayer who engaged in what she called “boudoir cosplay” and cited Nigri as her inspiration. Therefore, cosplaying as a maid added to her allure as a boudoir cosplayer which illustrates the complicated tensions and intentions underpinning feminine-presenting (and maid) cosplay. The following is an excerpt from our interview:

⁹⁹ I discuss this tension further in the following chapter. See Mezur (2017) and Sharp (2011) for an exploration of animalisation in maid cafés.

I was about sixteen when I was first introduced to cosplay. I was just really obsessed with it as soon as I saw it. [...] I found anime, which led me to cosplay, and I was just like, “Wow, you can express yourself in so many different ways”. So yeah, I just really fell in love with the whole thing of it.[...]

I work as a cosplay model which means I am independent and I basically run my own business and brand. I started it when I first turned eighteen and I’m gonna be nineteen next week. I’ve been doing it for a full year and it’s definitely been a journey. I attend conventions and I make my own costumes. I do a lot of photoshoots, I also have my own Patreon where people can pledge and support my journey and my career, and I do boudoir, cosplay boudoir images to post, and it’s a real passion of mine to mix lingerie and cosplay. [...]

Boudoir cosplay’s been around for a little while. A lot of the big cosplayers do it like Jessica Nigri—lots of big cosplayers, yeah they’ve all gotten into—all have started doing this um, boudoir-slash-cosplay, and it’s um, it’s amazing—it’s just so nice to mix two very girly elements and put them together. I’ve always wanted to be an underwear model, so when I got the chance to mix cosplay and fashion with underwear, I was like, “this is my true calling!” [laughs]

[...] I’m always talking about controversial topics because sometimes they just need to be spoken about. I speak about feminism and mental health. I speak about women’s rights and how obviously women are sexualised—especially in the cosplay community—I like to talk about things and I would hope that I can be a standing point for people in the future to be able to speak out about things. [...]

To me, feminism in the cosplay community means... a lot of respect. Obviously when a girl dresses up in something a little bit skimpy or something, respect is out the window. They come up and touch you, they'll take photos of you crudely and it's just—there's no respect there. And just because a woman is in a costume or dressed in a certain way—it doesn't mean you can do anything you want. And I feel like people need to be reminded of that because it seems to be getting less and less popular. The fact that we have to have signs that say "Cosplay is not consent" is disgusting.¹⁰⁰ I hope that women like me, who can speak about it, use their platforms to speak about this stuff can help people understand that—like, feminism isn't this scary thing full of crazy people. We're just asking for respect that everyone else gets. [...]

Obviously, cosplay is just costume-play: you dress up as a character, and that's it, that's the definition. And people seem to think it's like, no, you need to do it this way or this way or this way, and if you're not doing it the way they like it, they will be so horrible. They will troll you on the internet, it's disgusting, they send you hate mail—I've gotten tons of hate mail and comments and lots of things. [...]

I interviewed Scarlett for eleven minutes until her friend showed up (accompanied by her boyfriend), at which point the interview ended. As much as I wanted the interview to continue, I knew that the discussion I was interested in leading (which was necessarily personal) might not be appropriate for discussion in the current environment or company we had. Scarlett kindly offered to take part in a follow-up interview at a future date. However, due to her mental health, Scarlett asked if we could reschedule the interview of which I

¹⁰⁰ See Winge (2019: 155) and Lamp (2018) for more of a discussion on the "cosplay is not consent" campaign.

agreed would be a good idea. A follow-up interview did not come to fruition, despite repeated attempts to reschedule. Nevertheless, I found myself able to learn more about Scarlett via the way she presented herself on the internet. Scarlett had several social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, Patreon, Tumblr, Snapchat, YouTube) with several thousand followers on each account. Each platform offered a deeper insight into how she presented herself on the internet along with aspects of power and femininity, as well as highlighting certain contradictions with what we had discussed in person.

In our brief interview, Scarlett discussed her boudoir cosplay as an independent business and brand which she had started since turning 18, the legal age of adulthood in the UK. Scarlett was therefore the ideal image of the mature (already come of age) female subject, earning money (in a similar way to Nigri via Patreon) through posting images of herself in anime-themed lingerie (she told me of one of her first experiences of cosplay as a sexified version of Super Mario.) What I did not realise at the time of our interview was the extent of Scarlett's sexualised presentation of herself on the internet. One of her posts that stood out to me included a collage of her in lingerie, with a particular focus on her exposed, thong-clad buttocks, with the following caption:

Want to support this booty?
Pledge to my Patreon?
Follow my Twitter?
Get access to my nsfw content?¹⁰¹
Wanna get me something?
Wanna spoil me?
Wanna call me a cunt?
U can do all of this and MORE! With the link in my bio!

In her interview, Scarlett recognised how “women are sexualised ... in the cosplay community”, even though her business evidently profited from this factor. It became clear to

¹⁰¹ NSFW, “Not Safe for Work” is internet slang for material that should be consumed in private, such as porn.

me that Scarlett's identity as an independent businesswoman was framed around a postfeminist sensibility, illustrated by the disparity between how I understood Scarlett in our meeting (an outspoken feminist who opposed misogyny) as opposed to her hyper-sexualised internet persona. Evidently, Scarlett was appealing to a certain kind of gaze in order to fund her business, in which her posts became increasingly explicit with time. As much as I would have liked to have included Scarlett's thoughts on a few matters (as it is particularly important for me as a feminist researcher to represent the girls and women of this project in their own words), I was nonetheless offered an insight into her online presentation of self which was necessarily different from how I saw her in person. Online, she was a caricature of pornification.

Being the case that I was only able to interview Scarlett for eleven minutes, there are various gaps in my knowledge about her experience as a boudoir cosplayer. For example, I did not find out how much of a salary she earned for her cosplay, nor exactly how many patrons that she had or the demographic of her followers. While these aspects would certainly illuminate my presumed understanding of Scarlett, I was nonetheless interested in the way she emulated certain symbols. Scarlett shared her social media pages with me and said that she was happy for me to observe her as part of my research. However, while she was aware that I was a researcher, she was unaware of the fact that I would be following her activity in so much depth over the course of six months as part of my research. I had my concerns about observing someone online without their informed consent and there were certain aspects which I needed to consider, such as, to what extent were Scarlett's posts "intentionally public" (Eynon *et al.* 2008), and to what extent did my observations of her compromise her autonomy and safety?¹⁰² I was also concerned with how Scarlett's appearance in my thesis

¹⁰²All of Scarlett's social media accounts were visible to the public: she used her cosplay accounts in order to earn money. Some of her social media accounts were more personal, where she shared her thoughts and artwork. In the knowledge that my thesis is a piece which may be read by the public as well, my dedication first and foremost was taking measures to protect her anonymity and particular care over how I presented her. I thought deeply about the potential implications of every element of data I included and whether my discussion

might be objectifying, particularly as my inquiry was interested in how she knowingly presented her sexualised self online for the voyeuristic pleasure of others. Unlike my observations in other chapters, this is a very specific observation of one cosplayer I looked at. It does not reflect all perspectives and experiences of being a feminine-presenting cosplayer or even the full reality of empowerment that cosplay permits. However, I do believe that Scarlett's activity shines a light on a certain aspect of internet presentation which goes beyond cosplay, reflecting the relation of female subjectivities to internet spaces.

I can only provide a snapshot into what might be perceived as a period of transformation and experimentation in Scarlett's becoming of age, where she negotiated the choices available to her in light of an anticipated power, represented and offered by hegemony: she capitalised on her assets ("because that's what [girls] have" as Nigri said) via cosplay. The way that Scarlett framed herself online for financial gain (via Patreon where users paid her money for "exclusive content") represents the patriarchal value of woman on the internet. As a caption for a collage of Scarlett's most "liked" posts of the year read, "These are my most liked pictures this year. No reason for it, just yeah. Boobies."

As the nerd version of the pin-up girl, a "boudoir" cosplayer, she positioned herself for a voyeuristic gaze.¹⁰³ However, I did not see Scarlett as using cosplay to necessarily explore her sexual identity. Rather, she was using cosplay as a means of gaining money and recognition (power) as a means of becoming successful and valuable. This came through at certain points. For example, Scarlett's Patreon ranged from \$1 to \$1000 a month (notably higher than Nigri's limit of \$150), in conjunction with her posts on social media, such as "Give me something to wear so u can watch me take it off [wink face]" (with the hashtags,

of any of her posts would be able to be traced back to her. Therefore, certain elements have been changed and I do not go into detail about the different platforms where I observed her activity, as much as their designs shape our experience on the internet.

¹⁰³ Scarlett also used her platform as a means of expressing "body empowerment" and "body positivity". For example, she often referred to herself as #thicc (denoting someone who is not skinny) and quoting the viral phrase "thick thighs save lives".

“spoil me” and “sugar daddy”) and “I’m a broke-ass THOT please pledge to my Patreon”¹⁰⁴ as ironic appeals to make money. These, along with her erotic-themed “boudoir shoots”, her engagement with “the *ahegao* challenge”, and, her signature cleavage and tongue pose, worked to create a caricature-like image of what instant feminine power looks like on the internet.

Another aspect that I noticed, as I navigated between Scarlett’s social media profiles and her more personal social media pages, was that, in her daily life, Scarlett did not identify as the image that she was presenting for her boudoir cosplay business; she was neither heterosexual nor even a particularly sexual person. The following is a transcript from a video that she uploaded on the topic of “hating sex”:

I just thought I’d talk to you all about something today, it’s about sex. [...] Okay so recently, I’ve been getting a LOT of messages about, like, sex. And it’s like, you know what, I’m just gonna tell you all something: I don’t like sex. I know, I’m a criminal... I have to love sex—I don’t. I really don’t like it. And whenever I try and tell guys this, I’m like, “Look, I’m sure you’re lovely, even though you’re always asking me for sex... but I don’t want to have sex with you. Personally, I don’t really like sex.” And they’re like, “Babe, you just haven’t had it with the right person. Let me show you...” I’m like, “Eurgh [disgusted face] no. I don’t want you to show me. I know what I like, I know what I don’t like. What I don’t like is sex.” [...] I’m trying to work it out here... I’m allowed to like and dislike whatever I want. [...] Is it a sin to not like sex? Am I going to jail for this? I’m not gonna say I’ve never tried it. I’ve tried. Didn’t like it. [...] It’s disgusting especially when someone says that it’s not normal [to dislike sex]. What’s normal? There are loads of people who don’t like it? Get over it! [...] It’s something I literally got asked before I made the video, and I thought, I have to talk about this because I’m fucked off—it’s just disgusting. [...] I probably get messages like that everyday, and if it’s not every day then it’s definitely every week. [...] “Boys will act like boys” is no excuse. What is “Boys will be boys”? It doesn’t even make sense! [...] Do you categorise all boys as thirsty men? Please stop. Not everyone’s like that.

While cosplay allows for individuals to experiment with their sexual identities (Nichols, 2019; Lamp, 2018), it seemed that there was another dimension to Scarlett’s hypersexual

¹⁰⁴ “Thot” stands for “That ho over there”, in which referring to oneself as a hoe arguably epitomises subjectification: taking the position of the object, the Other, “over there”.

presentation of herself online. As Scarlett said, “Personally, I don’t really like sex”, in which, although she did not explicitly identify herself in this way, there was a possibility that Scarlett might be asexual. If Scarlett hated sex, then why, as one commenter on her social media asked, did she often present herself in a way that was so often sexually explicit? Scarlett responded:

Just because someone is seen as sexual doesn't mean they are [...]. I'm not a porn star or a cam girl; I'm a model. Sex appeal is one thing but people shouldn't get it confused.

Despite her explicitly sexualised and pornified appearance, Scarlett did not see her performance as being relatable to porn. Rather, she saw herself as a model and justified her activity as such. Moreover, Scarlett’s performance as a boudoir cosplayer generated contentiousness on her blog for the fact that, although she presented herself in a sexualised way, this was not to be interpreted as an expression of her sexuality, but rather, for profit. This is not to say that people who are asexual cannot express or experiment with their sexuality, or even engage in sexual performances or activities. However, Scarlett’s masochistic and misogynistic internet persona, where she adopted the positionality of “thot”, may be viewed as a means of gaining recognition quickly. Indeed, as she defended herself when she was criticised on her blog, “I’m only doing it to get likes”. The online activity that I observed seemed to epitomise what Gill (2007) refers to as the “agency pendulum”, further observed by Evans, *et al.* as two extremes in which “women who engage with the sexualization of culture are positioned as either cultural dupes (as a form of false consciousness) or as agentially engaged in their own liberation” (2010: 116). Scarlett’s performance was not necessarily about exploring or expressing her sexuality; it was about postfeminist feminine power which is characterised as hyper and heterosexual. In other words, Scarlett’s performances drew attention towards the fact that, for the female subject,

shedding one's clothes is a means of gaining fast-track access to success under the current hegemonic, capitalist terms that our society prescribes, where "likes" on social media equate to quantified success and eventually money. Scarlett's spectacle of sex was therefore emblematic of the "pornification of everyday life" (Gill, 2009: 141) in which she was not so much exploring the sexual, but rather, exploring the power (and monetary value) that came with presenting oneself as a sexual object as a feminine subject. Scarlett was exploring her identity as "strong and independent [and] empowered", as she described to me in her own words about one of her favourite characters to cosplay, Ryuko, from the anime *Kill la Kill*, in which the words of one of its character's echo:

If it means fulfilling my ambitions, I will show neither shame nor hesitation!
Even if I bare my breasts for the whole world to see, my actions are utterly
pure!

(Lady Satsuki, *Kill la Kill*)

The following analysis discusses *Kill La Kill* as bearing further insights into Scarlett's relationship with cosplay as well as reflecting cosplay as a coming of age process that is contingent on the body, femininity and power.

"Don't Lose Your Way": *Kill La Kill*

I really embrace the character that I'm cosplaying. If I'm cosplaying as the character that I particularly love, like Ryuko from *Kill la Kill*—love that girl so much. And whenever I wear her I just feel really confident and really like, strong—she's a very strong independent woman—I really like anime women who are very strong and independent—don't need a man. So yeah, whenever I wear a costume of one of those characters, yeah I feel so empowered. I'm like, yes, I feel good, this woman can handle herself and, yeah, I think it's a great feeling.

(Scarlett, 19)

Kill la Kill is an anime series which may be seen as representing the neoliberal and postfeminist choices available to women and girls (in the cosplay community) today, in which the theme song with the lyrics “Don’t lose your way” eerily echoes.

One of the laws of the diegesis of *Kill la Kill* decrees that certain elements of clothing bestow upon the wearer the ability to wield superhuman-like powers. Thus a hierarchy persists, ruled by those with the best threads. As indicative of her bitter demeanour, protagonist Ryuko Matoi, age 17, bites into a lemon on her way to Honnouji Academy on her first day as a transfer student. Ryuko’s apparent coolness starkly contrasts with the carefree, childish (and feminine) optimism of her new female friend, Mako, of whom Ryuko regularly plays the hero in rescuing her from being taken hostage by the school’s dictatorship-like committee. Ryuko is evidently a tomboy, in which she repeatedly displays an embarrassment at her body’s nakedness and sexual objectification (which the plot makes a case of reiterating in each episode). Nonetheless, as the series depicts, her sexualisation is absolutely necessary for her rise in power in order so that she may avenge her father’s death. The trajectory and transformation of this cynical teen reflects the fate which awaits all tomboys under a patriarchal authority.

Ryuko’s initial attempt to fight the school’s president (in order to receive information about her father) ends with her defeat. She retreats to the wasteland which is redolent of her inner desolation at being so weak. “If I only had more power!” she laments. Then, the ground swallows her up and she cuts her arm on her landing. Blood gushes from an open wound in her arm onto the floor. Ryuko shrugs it off and walks away.

“Wait... More... Give me more. More... I need more!” a voice hisses.

Looming behind her, a sentient, Japanese girls’ school uniform pins her to the wall, ogling her body with its yellow-slitted eye.

“Wear me!” the uniform gasps, “And feed me blood, I don’t want to go back to sleep! [...] Don’t be scared—put me on!”

Ryuko’s blood has had a magical effect in awakening the spirit of this school uniform of which Ryuko struggles under its grip. The proximity of the uniform and close-up of the framing, its vicious masculine voice seethes, “I’ll make you wear me by force!”

“Stop!” Ryuko cries out and the uniform wraps itself around her, the framing hides this scene from view in which it is evident as to what this scene is alluding to (along with the many other instances of the cinematography and narrative that depict Ryuko as being in a position where her male peers objectify or molest her).

“That’s better! A perfect fit!” The uniform screeches. Ryuko yells. She breathes and clutches her face before exploding into a sky bursting with sparkling stars.

During this scene, we can observe multiple layers of symbolism pertaining to the female experience of coming of age as one that is: taken by force (by a masculine power); a process of submission, transformation and luminosity as shown by the shimmering end to the scene (Kearney, 2015). “Senketsu”, the name of the sentient sailor uniform, is a seemingly masculine entity, marked by its low voice and controlling behaviour, to whom she must submit. In doing so, Ryuko is afforded a certain superhuman power, much like a magical girl. Indeed, characteristic to tropes of magical girl animes, the transformation sequence depicts fragmented shots of her bottom, chest and crotch, as she throws her head back in and cries out with an expression not so dissimilar to *ahegao* (see reflection 5.3). Ryuko doesn’t actively wear Senketsu; it forces itself on her. Moreover, the clothing barely covers her, leaving her body on display.



Fig. 5.6.¹⁰⁵

Ryuko: What kind of perverted outfit is this?

Senketsu: Whenever you put me on, whenever I am worn by you, that power will be manifested.

(Kill la Kill, Episode 2)

Ryuko is embarrassed and humiliated by the fact that she has to wear such an outfit, but nonetheless accepts it as a necessary sacrifice she must make to advance in her quest. As the episodes progress, she learns that, in order for her to receive the most power from Senketsu, she must willingly and unashamedly wear it, as her embarrassment at being so exposed results in her being unable to successfully wield its power. Therefore, Ryuko's experience is arguably one which reflects those technologies of sexiness to which the postfeminist, neoliberal subject is subjected: "discourses of empowerment and liberation imply that the

¹⁰⁵ 5.6. Ryuko's superpower unleashed. Ryuko's spectacular, sparkling transformation in her sexualising school uniform becomes a metaphor of empowerment. In this image, she looks forward in determination, cheeks burning in both embarrassment at her nakedness and feverishly at her blood's depletion.

woman pictured is presenting herself as an object through autonomy and ‘choice’” (Evans *et al.* 2010: 121).

Wearing the uniform becomes a process of negotiation that evolves as follows: Senketsu (as an anthropomorphised representation of patriarchal practices of objectification) forces itself on her against her will; Ryuko resigns herself to its force; in becoming aware of the power afforded to her by her willingness, she willingly submits. “I finally get it now. I need to get naked!” Ryuko has the realisation in episode three that in order to enjoy the full extent of the sailor *fuku*’s power,¹⁰⁶ she must remove her clothes willingly first. This is interesting if we consider the potential empowerment that a female cosplayer may receive in her willingness to shed her clothes via boudoir cosplay.

We might observe *Kill la Kill* as depicting “the luminosity of the self-sexualising young feminine subject” (Renold & Ringrose, 2013: 251), representing the “choice” of empowerment available to girls and women in cosplay: one that is contingent on revealing the flesh. Exposing flesh aside, Senketsu (meaning “fresh blood”) feeds off her flesh as well. Ryuko’s blood becomes the exchange for its power, hinting at the fertile (menstruating) female body as being the target of such a parasitic relationship, an insatiable cycle of validation in which one’s empowerment is reliant on that mechanistic force that empowered it. *Kill la Kill* therefore acts as a metaphor for coming of age—that is, becoming empowered—as a female subject in neoliberal, patriarchal society. It literalises the power that is woven into the very threads of the clothes we wear in which Ryuko is exploited as much as she is empowered. Was it a coincidence that this happened to be Scarlett’s favourite anime? Might Ryuko’s resignation to power via her body’s exposure have resonated with Scarlett in this way?

Reflection 5.3

¹⁰⁶ A *fuku* is a term for clothing in Japanese.

The Ahegao Challenge

Power, too, for some time now produces nothing but signs of its resemblance.

(Baudrillard, 2004: 374)



Fig. 5.7.¹⁰⁷

Belle Delphine became renowned for her *ahegao* renditions on Instagram. The picture of her above, in which her braces arguably enhance her juvenility, refers to what *ahegao* seemingly represents: an underage anime girl having her first sexual experience. In patriarchal terms, where the “loss of” virginity signifies a girl’s coming of age (Driscoll, 2002), these images are representations of coming of age frozen in that moment where she is perpetually (be)coming.

If hegemony had a face, what would it look like? In being a thesis that is interested in the different ways in which girls and women emulate representations of girls and women in Japanese media and culture, it is necessary for me to discuss *ahegao*. As it has been noted, “In 2019, the Ahegao face expression seems to be all over the internet, thanks to its viral combination of hot and funny.” (Champion Hoodie, 2019).

¹⁰⁷ 5.7. “Neko” (meaning “cat” in Japanese) *ahegao*. Emulating the *ahegao* expression is a provocative act, as epitomised by Delphine, who later went on to sell her “GamerGirl!” bathwater, marketed towards “Thirsty GamerBoys”, bottled at \$30. Five-hundred bottles sold out in three days.

This “hot” and “funny” played a large part in the posts that I saw of Nigri and Scarlett, which appealed to a misogynistic irony. Simply put, *ahegao* is a portmanteau of “a-he” (which is onomatopoeia for a panting sound, “ahe-ahe”) and “kao” (which means “face” in Japanese), reproduced online in the form of memes and the photos posted online by young women. As a “panting face”, *ahegao* refers to the expression of orgasmic rapture as popularly manifested in the faces of the girls in anime and manga pornography. I first came across *ahegao* on Scarlett’s profile, a photo of her, tongue lolling out and eyes rolling back with hashtag #ahegaochallenge. I explored the *ahegao* challenge further, coming across a trend in teenage girls and young women photographing themselves or filming themselves pulling the face, often followed by feigned embarrassment or regret. *Ahegao* is evidently the facial version of sexification in its transformation of a gawky image into something arousing. Both sexual and silly, grotesque and alluring, it is a simulation and referent of the pornographic. Thus the virtual imaginary becomes actualised with the simulation of simulated images, “substituting signs of the real for the real itself” (Baudrillard, 2004: 366). This is where the imaginary becomes hyperreal, with real girls emulating anime girls (as popularly imagined for the desire of heterosexual men)

Ahegao is a spectacle, to say the least; a spectacle of the spectacularly feminine, justified as humorous and subversive when arguably it is another reification of hegemonies relating to patriarchy such as the male gaze. Tongue-out, eyes-rolling, salivating, blushing, the image is a voyeuristic caricature, a sign of extremified pleasure:

Hallmark traits of the Ahegao, also known as O-Face, are rolled back eyes or a delirious look, a drooling mouth with an extended tongue hanging out, flushed cheeks and tears of overwhelming pleasure. [...] the face is often drawn deformed. [...] The hyperbolic ecstatic face is... a specific trope of Japanese adult animation, which symbolizes a loss of control.
(Champion Hoodie, 2019)

In the anime convention, I came across *ahegao* at a stall selling the following t-shirts:



Fig. 5.8.¹⁰⁸

In the words of McRobbie, “We are to witness a hyper culture of commercial sexuality” (2009: 18).

Ahegao T-shirts literalise the casualisation of porn in the digital age and are evidently a manifestation of “the ironic normalisation of pornography” (McRobbie, 2009: 17) in daily life. Self-deprecating and vulgar in its irony, the *ahegao* t-shirt is a metaphor for the internet age, with its on-mass repeated depiction of girl-like images drooling and frozen in their fit of perpetually aroused ecstasy, “ironically incorporated” (Gill, 2003: 101), in the distinctly casual form of a t-shirt.¹⁰⁹ Yet, the *ahegao* t-shirt makes use of images, not words, as its symbolism for sex, “[T]hese are only faces; they can’t be censored” (Champion Hoodie, 2019).

One particular thing of note is how the *ahegao* merchandise I came across depicted images of, specifically, anime girls from the captured climactic stills of anime porn (known as *hentai* by English-speaking fans). *Hentai*, an abbreviation of “*hentai seiyoku*”, meaning “abnormal sexual desires” (McLelland, 2006) is understood differently in the English-speaking and Japanese-speaking context. Therefore, while in English-speaking anime fan community *hentai* has come to signify the whole subgenre of erotic manga/anime on the whole, in Japanese, however, *hentai* is a specific category of *ero* (which

¹⁰⁸ 5.8. Ahegao t-shirts. Three t-shirts depict the perpetually aroused faces of anime girls.

¹⁰⁹ The *ahegao* t-shirt reminds me of Gill’s critical observation of the popularisation of t-shirts for women and girls in the noughties bearing pornified expressions such as “fit chick unbelievable knockers” (2003: 101; see also Evans, *et al.* 2010).

denotes “erotic”) manga/anime. Therefore, *ahegao*, as an ironic epitomisation of *hentai*, draws attention to the eroticisation of girls as a marker of anime as a cultural text that is both associated with Japan and the internet. As with anime’s tendency to exaggerate, the girls of *hentai* are arguably caricatures of the female orgasmic experience that has been the mystified object of the male gaze’s fascination, as if to say, “this is as good as it gets”. Defined as “extremely exaggerated face depictions of women's abnormal orgasms by unwanted sexual intercourse, hardcore BDSMs, rapes or other sex assaults”, the “Fucked Silly Face” or “Mind Break Face”, (Know your Meme, 2018) *ahegao* carries with it underlying messages of misogynistic intent. The face of *ahegao* is indeed feminine and paradoxical: a young girl, insatiable and hedonistic, goofy and sexy, childish and sexually knowing. Thus the anime girl becomes perpetuated as a symbol of sexual desire while simultaneously upholding a sensibility pertaining to meme culture. The following comments were written on Belle Delphine’s Instagram where she uploaded a photo of her doing *ahegao* (fig. 5.7):

Commenter A: Why do girls make this face? I know it’s from manga and anime, but why. It’s disgusting and repulsive!

Commenter B: Because most men will have sexual thoughts about that face, I find it weirdly arousing for a reason I can’t explain... fair to say most women on IG [instagram] do it simply because of horny ppl [people] dropping likes and joining their patreon. (Change my mind if that’s not the case)

Commenter A: Your[sic] right. Desperate guys who can’t get a girl and desperate girls who want to be Instagram famous. It’s disgusting!

Is the *ahegao* of an anime girl (and the cosplayer emulating her) meant to be seductive? Not necessarily, because the object of focus is so consumed by her own pleasure that she is unconcerned with appealing to the observer. In this way, the collage of *ahegao* girls might be viewed as representing both the objectified Other *and* hedonistic internet subjectivity. Nevertheless, it appeals to the masculine ego in the sense that a trope of *hentai* is of the girl who rejects the sexual. Thus her uncontained pleasure satisfies you, the

hetero-masculine viewer, as being the one who has succeeded in pleasing the underage girl against her will.

Making the face of *ahegao* is referential. It shows one's relevancy and knowingness of pornographic tropes. In this way, performing the *ahegao* expression is a cosplay of sorts, epitomising internet culture in its insatiable hedonism. Immature, bodily, uncontrollable, reactive, by emulating such images one is able to become associated with that which it symbolises and the power accruable through it: desire. If the anime girl is a symbol for sexual objectification, victimisation and subversion then how might this shape our understanding of cosplay in its enactment of that ideal? As Jean Baudrillard observed,

Whence the characteristic hysteria of our time: the hysteria of production and reproduction of the real. [...] What society seeks through production, and overproduction, is the restoration of the real which escapes it. [...] Thus the hyperrealism of simulation is expressed everywhere by the real's striking resemblance to itself.

(2004: 374)

Applying this logic to the *ahegao* meme in its repetition (both as the image being composed of multiple repeated expressions as well as being printed on mass on the *ahegao* hoodie/t-shirt) we may observe “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard, 2004: 365). *Ahegao*, in its epitomisation of “loss of control” thus acts as a zeitgeist of the internet age, in which the internet is ever hungry for sexualising images, particularly those of the feminine-presenting subject.

What's So Super About Sonico?

MILK SLUT!! [cow emoji x3]

Sonico is craving some white creamy liquid in her life won't you help her?!

Full selfie set on my patreon and milk fun and lewds on my snapchat!

I love cow girls kinda a fetish of mine read my whole blog about it

(Taken from Scarlett's social media)

In this final exploration of this chapter, I analyse one of Scarlett's posts which epitomises the symbolic reality of women on the internet. The above excerpt was taken from a caption on an

image that Scarlett uploaded of herself cosplaying as Sonico, tongue stretched out of her wide-open mouth, eyes rolling backwards, *ahegao*-style in a cow-print bikini. Sonico, the anime character, age eighteen, was originally created as a mascot for a Japanese video game and software company in which she became the face of a wider franchise of music, anime, manga, gravure and an internet radio show.¹¹⁰ Curiously, Jessica Nigri was her voice actor in an English dub of the anime (which gestures towards Nigri's standing as one of the most famous pioneers of erotic cosplay on the English-speaking side of the internet). The first episode of the *Super Sonico* anime series begins with the three members (of the band of which Sonico is a part) trying on swimsuits in a bedroom and commenting on each other's bodies with a variety of different angles and framing to display her breasts and buttocks. Sonico is notably embarrassed about her nudity but she declares that she will try her hardest to promote the band at the beach, after being told by her female band member:

Tomorrow [is] a valuable advertising opportunity. If you want people to show up to our next show we need to take advantage of every chance we get. That's why we have to use our assets to grab the attention of every person we run into.

(Sonico's bandmate, *Super Sonico* Episode 1)

Here is an anime that establishes itself from the very beginning as reflecting the wider ideology of girls and women to capitalise on their "assets" in order to gain recognition, where female power is contingent on an ability to be visibly, sexually and willingly appealing. The following image depicts what Scarlett opened in her fan unboxing video:

¹¹⁰ Japan has a gravure scene that is known for its glamour-style photographing of young girls and women.



Fig. 5.9.¹¹¹

Sonico nestles a straw between her breasts and legs, through which, presumably, her owner will “ironically” drink cow’s milk, as she is dressed in a cow-print bikini, with cow mini horns protruding from her head to match. Sonico may be viewed as a post-human/cow fusion of the female fertile body’s “productive as reproductive capacities” (McRobbie, 2007: 722). She is positioned in a way so that her butt and bust (the voluptuousness of both signify her fertility and femaleness) jut out appealingly for the hetero-masculine gaze. Her appearance as a cow bears reference to the dairy industry’s profiting from the female body which must be impregnated to be milked for its potential. In this sense, Sonico is exploitable in her youthful, fertile (sexy), feminine state—both in the form of a cow and a woman, notably two “disposable bodies of the global economy” (Braidotti, 2007: 70). Sonico thus becomes a caricature for the exploited body which is hegemonically valorised in capitalist society.

This image of Sonico was one that Scarlett emulated on her social media as part of advertising her Patreon. In one of Scarlett’s photos, she drinks milk through a straw which

¹¹¹ 5.9. Sonico figurine unboxed. Voluptuous bikini-clad Supersonico anime figurine straddles a phallic removable umbrella/straw between her breasts and legs. As half-woman/half-cow, this highlights the absurdity of our capitalist-scape in which the dairy industry profits from the fertile productivity of the female body (milk). She epitomises consumerism in her symbolic caricaturisation of the feminine and female body, exploited (“milked”) via her body. Sonico’s body is fragmented into its (re)productive parts in which the box displays two circles which highlight the two apparent selling points of the figurine (her breasts and bottom) in a calculating gaze not so dissimilar from the cattle-market vendor who sizes up the animal for its reproductive, meat/milk-bearing properties.

draws attention towards her lips and cleavage, as well as the phallic nature of the straw. Furthermore, the fact of it being milk completes the symbolic (sexy?) exploitation cycle in the sense that Scarlett, in her state as the esteemable vision of a fertile (sexually available) female body (i.e. the “glamour” model), is consuming the product of another fertile (sexually available) female body (i.e. the cow). Thus the irony of Scarlett’s actions (whether intended or not) come through in her photographic representation as “the young woman as a highly efficient assemblage for productivity” (McRobbie, 2007: 722). Emulating such an image is appealing in its ironic, implicit knowingness of and conformity to the gender hegemony which rewards the subject for subjecting themselves to its power with the temporary sense of empowerment it bestows. The power of hegemony thus lies in its ability to empower all subjects via their exploitation and submission to its laws—a choice with which we are all presented when we come of age.

Why might the symbol of Sonico resonate so particularly, enough for Scarlett to dedicate multiple posts and a video to her? Might it be because Sonico hints at the reality of one’s validation as a glamour model as being contingent on one’s youthful appearance and willingness to keep presenting the self as sexy (in which, in our internet age, “sexy” has become the buzzword for “relevant”)? This was something that I felt during my watching of Nigri’s interview which signalled a tired exit to the world of erotic cosplay: “I can’t wait to quit cosplay,” she says as a release, but then backpedals, “Don’t get me wrong, I love it but...”. Nigri was a productive citizen of the internet in which her self-exploitation was justified under neoliberal principles of “playing the system”. Hence Nigri, along with Scarlett and Kathleen, were invited to come of age via the ideologies of our society, capitalism and patriarchy and became empowered as a result.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I observed the sexualised extent of cosplay subculture and how postfeminism operates; “how the female sexual desire which seems so unbounded and expressive everywhere in the popular culture landscape, often operates merely in mimicry of sexist codes of exploitation” (Negra, 2009: 4-5). To be sexy, or desirable, then, is to achieve hegemony as a female subject. One becomes the symbol of relevancy, value and “reproductive maturity” (Halberstam, 2011), which are signified by erotic potential. Therefore, the moment that the female subject attains sexiness, she (be)comes of age in the eyes of capitalism and patriarchy. I observed boudoir cosplay as an example of this, in which (be)coming of age is maintained through one’s ability to frequently post new, relevant, ironic, and, above all, sexy, content on social media. I explored the different ways cosplayers negotiated and justified their craft, from body positivity to flagrant bids for power and money. In particular, I wanted to consider to what extent might the cosplayers I observed be viewed as becoming signs (symbols) of a certain power: the hegemonies of capitalism, which are arguably patriarchally rooted, bearing the characteristic markers of “active, confident and autoerotic sexuality” (Evans, *et al.* 2010: 115). I observed all of the above in light of my central pondering on discourses of selfhood and womanhood; coming into one’s position as a subject of value where the allure of capital shapes one’s choices. Nonetheless, appealing to the hetero-masculine gaze arguably becomes an alienating process where the emerging-woman subject becomes valued for her fertile/sexual capabilities as a body as opposed to her craftwork or skill (Scott, 2015; Bartky, 1982).

In light of *ahegao*, sexification and other sexualised performances that are visible in cosplay practice, I observed (boudoir) cosplay as a means by which female cosplayers can empower themselves instantly, insofar as empowerment is defined along the lines of patriarchal capitalism: money gain and recognition. As I argued, these two aspects of empowerment may be interpreted as the definitive markers of coming of age as a process of

socialisation, where the subject comes into their own value in society. That is, the ideal capitalist female subject never truly comes of age, but is continually bound to be becoming of age, perpetually appealing to what the collective hegemonic gaze “likes”. I thus explored the “value” of female bodies in cosplay and what it reflects of the hypersexualisation of culture. I observed the practices of selected feminine-presenting cosplayers in relation to the theory of “technologies of sexiness” (Evans *et al.* 2010) and what power there is to be gained by becoming, not only spectacularly feminine, but also to make a spectacle of oneself under the erotic guise as an anime character. Under capitalism, the ideal female body becomes inscribed with its potential (re)productive value, which is often hinted at strangely, symbolically and ironically. Becoming a symbol of this temporarily affords the subject and instant (“insta”) value.

Scarlett, Nigri, and Kathleen were not “patriarchal dupes” (Doull & Sethna, 2011: 163). They were making choices in light of what was repeatedly presented to them as not only desirable, but absolutely necessary in order to have worth in society, as manifested in the form of the “like”—the quantified value of contemporary times. The words of Hannah Gadsby echo,

Women are just as corruptible by power as men because, you know what fellas, you don't have a monopoly on the human condition, you arrogant fucks.

(*Nanette*, 2017)

Aspects of cosplay therefore reflect the current normalised pornification that proliferates on the internet. Through the trajectories of the cosplayers in this chapter, we can see these processes of negotiation that shepherd the socialised subject into a coagulation of the self, continually being re-evaluated for one's value, ever (be)coming of age. Boudoir cosplay is thus reflective of one's being subjected to a patriarchal, capitalist gaze in the sense that this

form of empowerment is contingent on one's exploitation by an insatiable system, and a willingness to be exploited at that.

Chapter Six:
Maid Cafés (Part One): De-Mystifying the Maid Café via *Shōjo*



Fig. 6.1.¹¹²

Introduction

In a capitalist, patriarchal scape where sex sells, the most productive, and therefore, valuable shape for a woman to take is of the sexualised, pornified subject. If this image is the most value that a female can have when she comes of age, then what other alternative might there be in the compulsory choice of spectacular femininity if one does not wish to be sexualised? In the last chapter, I explored the eroticised extent of feminine-presenting cosplay using discourses such as “technologies of sexiness” (Evans, *et al*, 2010) and “the pornification of everyday life” (Gill, 2009: 141). In this chapter, using the lens of *shōjo*, or girlhood artifice, I observe the opposite: cosplayers who refute their sexualisation via cosplaying the symbol of the girl as inspired by anime. I explore the following: through represented figures (such as the *shōjo* which I define in more detail in this chapter) pariahs of femininity escape hegemony

¹¹² 6.1. Two maids take a selfie together.

and yet, paradoxically, train themselves into its ideal image. In particular, I explore how individuals in maid café cosplay groups embody the aesthetics and personality traits that are associated with female anime characters, which are specifically girl-like in their performance. I explore this via the phenomenon of the *shōjo* (girl) as a symbol and sensibility that extends into the UK anime convention, and, as a result, the Japan-inspired British maid café. I have separated my discussion of this cosplay group into two chapters. Part one (chapter six) theoretically explores the *shōjo* condition and its theory, while part two (chapter seven) relates this theory to the performance and aesthetic of girlhood that I observed in the maid café, which I term “girl drag”. As previously noted, one of the central arguments that this thesis explores is the idea that success and validation in capitalist society is automatically designated to those subjects (particularly female) who espouse the values of “reproductive maturity” (Halberstam, 2011: 2). I focus on how each of three feminine-presenting cosplay subcultures negotiates this maturity, ambivalently or actively thwarting it and/or accepting it. The maid café provides an escape to those individuals who wish to deviate from these “(re)productive roles and responsibilities” that capitalism expects of its adult subjects (Galbraith, 2012: 96) via becoming the image of the girl. Nevertheless, becoming “spectacularly feminine” (McRobbie, 2009: 60) is an achievement expected of the female subject. While the cosplayers of my analysis in chapter five may be seen as donning the validated guise of feminine “reproductive maturity”, this chapter differs in the sense that maid café maid specifically avoids this in her place as an extension of the ambivalent and asexual *shōjo* (Treat, 1993). Becoming a maid may be viewed as a means of becoming a girl in the sense of how postfeminist discourses define girlhood through consumer culture, a realisation that I came to in my immersive participant observations at several maid cafés in the UK. The girl is consumed “into being” (Walkerdine, 2003: 247) using a variety of different consumer products such as accessories, clothing and make-up. Girlish behaviour

further this performance and semblance of being ideologically, youthfully, and above all, “spectacularly” feminine. In becoming a maid, the cosplayer adopts the guise of the girl and taps into a liminal ambivalence and childhood immaturity that the *shōjo* symbolically provokes and evokes. Indeed, the maid, as an honorary *shōjo* (girl), thwarts, confounds and confuses the hegemonic, patriarchal gaze—as something which is seen to target specifically women as opposed to the girl who “slip[s] in everywhere, between orders [...]” and “dualisms” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 277)—in her exaggeratedly girlish appearance and behaviour. Becoming and emulating the figure of girliness is not about entertaining a male audience, but rather, a means of retreat which thwarts its gaze (Monden, 2019; 2014a; 2014b). Nonetheless, maid café culture is necessarily and complicatedly bound to discourses of sexualisation and cannot be considered to fully escape or disavow the sexual elements which it purportedly rejects.

Maid Cafés Defined

Before I move into a discussion of maid café cosplayers in the UK, it is necessary that I first contextualise this phenomenon in relation to Japanese society where it first originated. Maid cafés, first conceived in Japan in the early 2000s, are rising in popularity, both globally and in the UK, as a result of internet technology. The longest-running maid café in the UK, still active at the time of writing, was established in 2011. As a niche within a niche, UK-based maid cafés are arguably distinguishable from anime conventions as much as they are embedded in them, with maid cafés becoming a common feature in anime conventions across the UK. Indeed, UK maid cafés are fundamentally inspired by maid cafés in Japan, which are themselves related to anime fanculture. As Baffelli & Yamaki (2018) note, Japanese maid cafés are particularly tied to Akihabara, an area of Tokyo which is seen to be the home of *otaku*—anime and manga enthusiasts. Maid cafés are an *otaku* phenomenon, originally

stemming from cosplay cafés in which its staff members, “maids”, dress up and perform as characters or anime archetypes. The maid café, like *otaku* subculture, is, as Patrick Galbraith states in his ethnography of maid cafés in Japan, “a direct extension of the logic of *shōjo* consumer culture, including the symbolic infantilisation and feminisation of those associated with it” (2011: 7). I explore this later, looking at the relation that *shōjo* bears to a childlike world where the socialisation of adulthood (and reproductive maturity) does not exist. This is one of the connections that links all three of my inquiries in this thesis together: how Japanese subcultures (maid cafés, idols, boudoir cosplay) are often associated with the leisure and pleasure of a heterosexual, male audience, and yet individuals in the UK re-appropriate it for their own purposes of playing with and imagining an alternative, empowered feminine self.¹¹³

Men in Wonderland

Before I engage with the maid café as an extension of *shōjo* (girls’) culture, it is important that I first establish the context surrounding maid cafés (which also necessarily informs my discussion of idol groups in the next chapter) as a phenomenon which relates to Japan’s particular social and economic situation. As a result of the changing gender roles in society, especially following the collapse of Japan’s Bubble Economy in the 1990s, the ideology of man’s role in the household as breadwinner was put into jeopardy. Scholars relate this as having had certain effects in Japanese society, such as an increase of single men living alone, a decline of the birthrate and a broken family system (Miyake, 2018; Kinsella, 2017; Nast, 2017; Allison, 2014). Maid cafés are incredibly lucrative businesses in Japan which are seen to cater towards this demographic of alienated men. Indeed, according to the scholarship of maid cafés and other girl-oriented media and spaces such as girl-idol (*shōjo-aidoru*) groups,

¹¹³ Maid cafés and idol groups have increasing numbers of female fans in Japan as well. However, it is undeniable that these girl-centred groups have an association with appealing to men in particular (Galbraith, 2013; 2012; 2011).

they are seen to be pacifiers of a contemporary masculine anxiety, with the girl acting as an escapism from the pressures of corporate life and the nuclear family (*Ibid.*; Galbraith, 2013, 2012; Galbraith & Karlin, 2012). Like the idol, with her youthful, girl-like and *kawaii* appearance, “the maid can play the roles of imaginary mother, sister, lover, friend” (Galbraith, 2012: 95), indulging the customer (termed *amae*) in the fantasy that he is returning home to his mansion after a hard day at work. As one idol, Rio, in Kyoko Miyake’s documentary, *Tokyo Idols* (2018) said, “My fans are like my children: I love them all equally. They’re the most important thing in my life. I am nothing without them”. Thus some men may be afforded a child-like feeling through the girl who embodies the missing feminine element in a society shaped around masculine, corporate productivity. Indeed, as the particularly and peculiarly male fascination with *shōjo-aidoru* in Japan is related to the girl’s symbolic escape from the coagulated rigidity of adult life (Galbraith, 2012; Tiqqun, 2001), the girl thus acts as an avenue of liberation to the alienated subject. She becomes a representation of childhood itself—a lost golden age of freedom from the productivity that is expected of adults in contemporary capitalist societies (Galbraith, 2013; Kinsella, 2014). As I argue in this section, Japan is not the only case where the symbolic girl offers a sanctuary from capitalist socialisation (i.e. modern adulthood). Rather, the symbolic girl resonates globally, as seen in the Japan-inspired feminine subcultures that I observed in the UK-based anime convention. Here, its members may be viewed as turning to the maid café as a means of escaping their daily, socialised existence as (young) adults.

The Symbol of *Shōjo*

Alice... is a girl in a sexual safety zone, the interspace between sexual unconsciousness and consciousness. Why do girls want to be androgynous? ... Alice’s state of consciousness gives us an insight about these things. In their transition from sexual unconsciousness to consciousness, girls are torn into two different sexes, masculine and feminine. What used to be undivided, or something that could be either earlier in their childhood is starting to be torn

asunder in themselves, in the form of a notion of sex that goes against themselves.

(Kanai, in: Aoyama, 2005: 54)

To have a deeper understanding of maid café and *shōjo* culture, we need to look towards arguably one of the most famous icons of girlhood liminality, Alice from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Indeed, as I argue in this section, it is no coincidence that Alice is the subject of fascination for many studies concerning girlhood and *shōjo* culture in Japan (Monden, 2014, Warren-Crow, 2014, Knighton, 2011; Aoyama, 2005; Driscoll, 2002). Alice was based on a real girl, Alice Liddel, with whom Carroll's relationship has been the subject of contention regarding whether it may or may not have been paedophilic. Notably then, this dynamic of girls and their fawned fascination by older men is also evident between the *shōjo* (such as idols, maids, and anime figures) and her *otaku* fans. However, there is, as I came to observe, another angle to the phenomenon. Although my comparison may be read as failing to take into account the nuances of each individual male fan, it is undeniable that the figure of the girl plays a huge part in Japan's media and economy (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012). Working to understand this uncanny relation between the two groups may offer a deeper insight into the phenomenon of maid cafés and the motivation for cosplaying at, or attending, one, whether in Japan or globally.

Catherine Robson (2003), observes the role that little girls played in the lives of certain Victorian literary authors. Rather than pathologising their interest, she explores their interest in little girls as being a psychological extent of their longing for a lost childhood. As she states,

Men from comfortable backgrounds in this period were more likely to have experienced a definitive break between those early years in a feminized nursery and their subsequent years in the wider world... On those occasions when paradise was imagined as the primary, lost stage in the journey of life,

rather than the sanctified home, then the perfect little girl formed its most apt symbol.

(2003: 8).

As Robson argues, the symbolism evoked by the little (white) girl resonated with certain male Victorian authors whose childhood was idyllic but the prospects and experiences of adulthood less so. With “its fraught constructions of masculinity, its obsession with loss, its rampant sentimentality, and its intense valorization of the little girl at the expense of mature femininity” (Robson, 2003: 3-4), there are potential parallels to be drawn between the two cultural contexts of Victorian literary authors and Japanese *otaku* subculture.¹¹⁴ Is it a coincidence that these men have turned towards girls as a means of escaping the abject reality of their social existence? And might the prevalence of subcultures surrounding the symbolic girl—or *shōjo*—reveal an anxiety towards the root of socialisation? That is, having to grow up, or come of age, before one is ready.

The symbolic girl is a means of divergence from the rigid and (re)productive hegemonies of capitalism (Kennedy, 2015; Jackson, 2010, Driscoll, 2002; Tiqqun, 2001; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Moreover, it is important to note that these are not real girls but rather fantasies of them; the girl has become a symbol which goes beyond her state. The crises of men aside, I wanted to explore the idea of the maid café maid as embodying a childhood longing which extended itself into the various feminine subcultures which I observed during my research. That is, if the girl is a means of escaping one’s reality as a(n emerging) adult, then performing as a maid might allow for one to revel in their girlhood a little longer (as much as men may regress to their childhood as well). In this sense, the symbolic girl was appropriated by a largely male audience (*otaku*), and then re-appropriated via the internet for the enjoyment of feminine subculture(s) globally. This perhaps explains

¹¹⁴ This is an argument that is hotly debated in the academic literature with scholars of *otaku* culture asserting that “the fascination with *shōjo*, the desire for young [girls by men is] not necessarily sexual” (Galbraith, 2011a: 99).

the controversies surrounding the maid as either: a man-made image used to satisfy heteromale desire—“the patriarchal image of the *shōjo*,” as termed by Shamoan (2012: 10)—or; something cute, innocent and feminine by nature for the enjoyment of all genders. As I argue, this is not a case of either/or, but rather, neither and both (Honda, 2010), which lends itself to the contradictions that underpin the very nature of the symbolic girl herself.

I am interested in this area where the symbolic *shōjo* meets the real girl. As Mari Kotani (2007) argues, it is in this gap between real and artifice where *shōjo* can be most effectively perceived. The maid café makes this gap particularly clear, especially for the fact that the maid cosplayers that I met were no longer girls; they were adults (formerly girls, as they had been assigned at birth) impersonating girls. In this way, girlhood became a form of anachronistic drag. In this first section, I explore the motivation for donning the guise of the symbolic *shōjo* as a means of emancipating the feminine subject from her reproductive and marital, patriarchal role, while, intriguingly, under the guise of female-marked, patriarchal-like servitude. Following this discussion, I will move into an exploration of girl drag in chapter seven.

Maid Cafés in the UK

Maid cafés are weird, but they're not sinister.

(Charlotte, “Maid Reiko”, 28)¹¹⁵

Maid cafés in the UK, for the most part, exist as pop-ups at anime conventions or are pre-booked events at a privately rented venue. Many are registered charities; I came across only one maid café which paid its members a wage for their work on its approximately eight days of events that happened annually. In fact, while maid cafés may be seen as a booming

¹¹⁵ All quotes and discussion, unless otherwise stated, are with the maids that I met in the UK who were all British nationals. All cafés and maid names are pseudonyms unless otherwise stated.

business in Japan (Galbraith, 2013), at the time of my writing there is no maid café in the UK which exists as a fixed (non-pop-up) establishment. In short, opening a maid café is generally not a money-making venture, but rather, we might consider them as aggrandised hobbies which bestow upon each cosplayer a sense of responsibility and purpose. This is not to say that the maid cafés in the UK did not make money; they did. But this type of business differed from maid cafés in Japan in the sense that Japanese maid cafés are open daily and available to members of the wider public (i.e. not a small group of dedicated fans who are aware of the nuances of maid café culture). Perhaps it might be more apt to call these groups lifestyle pursuits as opposed to cosplay, given the fact that, as Winge (2019: 139) notes, some cosplayers take offence when cosplay is referred to as a hobby.¹¹⁶ While my reflection in the last chapter looked at women who make money from cosplay, my focus in this chapter may be seen as its opposite in the sense that sexualisation goes against maid café ethos. Indeed, maid cafés “are not sexual” (Galbraith, 2011a: 1) in spite of the erotic symbolism of the maid. For example, as well as the figure of the maid being eroticised in the patriarchal imaginary, Galbraith notes that maid cafés in Japan originated from erotic games (2013). This is all part of a particularly complicated web in which the wider discourses surrounding the maid costume could be equally interpreted as both a symbol of *kawaii* (cuteness) and one of eroticisation.

One of the ironies of certain maid cafés that I came across was that its butlers and maids, in terms of their ages, were “forever seventeen”. It is an ambivalent state in which one’s final maturation is disallowed by one being still technically a child, a state that may be seen as liminality’s peak. However, the magic of this was somewhat undermined by the rules

¹¹⁶ Labels aside, there is a deeper sense of importance which goes beyond cosplay when declaring to others that one is part of a maid café or idol group. Arguably, anyone can say “I’m a cosplayer”; being a part of a maid café or idol group, however, has the added quirk-factor, stardom, exclusivity and hyperfeminine, *kawaii*-edge to its value.

of its recruitment: applicants must be aged eighteen or over to join a maid café.¹¹⁷ In this sense, all café members were legal adults performing as teenagers on the cusp of adulthood, on the liminal boundary of their coming of age. This lends itself to the fantasy of ambivalence and in-betweenness that the atmosphere creates.

The majority of the maid cafés I came across were founded and led by girls and women, which I came to refer to as the Maidtriarchy. A select few maid cafés were founded in conjunction with cisgender businessmen over the age of 30 who had the money to fund these projects. However, in those cases, the maids were rarely satisfied with the men’s input and tendency to create a space which objectified them. In these cases, many members decided to start their own independent café and/or form a maid mutiny. Many of the maid café founders I had met had never been to Japan, nor to another maid café in the UK before opening their own. Rather, the criteria for opening a maid café was contingent on one’s knowledge of maid cafés as learned through the internet and formed by an imagination of what one would like to create. Hence, maid cosplay, I would argue, is a subculture rooted in the internet. Opening a maid café could be as easy as creating a page on social media—and as difficult as obtaining a Food License. Indeed, some maid cafés, curiously, are not cafés in the sense that they do not serve food or drink, but perform dances or run events dressed as maids and butlers at conventions instead. As two maids told me,

All of the other “maid” cafés you know of are *not real maid cafés*. They are British girls who want to cosplay as a *kawaii* maid. None of those people have a background in business I’m afraid. If you want to know what a proper maid café is, then use @home as your reference.

(age 25).

Many girls get into this business because they just want to dress up and look cute. But it’s a whole lot more complicated than that and it needs to be taken seriously. I’ve had a lot of dropouts after the first event because, let’s face it,

¹¹⁷ This was not the case for all maid cafés, however, as I heard of cases where head maids had allowed 16-year olds to join. Another head maid, Sarah, had formed their own maid café at the age of 16, which went against the advice of the other head maids that they had asked prior to forming it. In short, while it was rare to see anyone cosplaying at an established maid café below the age of eighteen, it was not unheard of.

they just wanted to dress up in a maid's dress and they weren't willing to put in the effort where it was needed. Being a real maid is not fun and games.
(age 26).

Therefore, maid cafés are approached differently by its members, some of whom aspire for the “professional” image of maid cafés in Japan which are more than “fun and games”; others who join because they “want to dress up and look cute”.

Maid cafés in Japan generally offer the services of maids only. In British maid cafés, however, there are two distinct gendered roles for members to play: the maid (female/feminine-presenting) and the butler (male/masculine-presenting). Although in this chapter I do not go into detail about the maid café members' gender identities when they were out of role, I feel it is important to mention that, as strictly gendered as the maid café structure was, it attracted many individuals who were not cisgender; many members were genderfluid, nonbinary or transgender. (In one maid café I observed, out of 16 active members, 6 were cisgender, 7 were non-binary and 2 were transgender.)¹¹⁸ To me, it seemed like the maid café's fantasy was a means of making socialisation in a capitalist context (with its emphasis on a gender dichotomy, working a servile job) more palatable for individuals who were otherwise alienated from, or suffered anxiety as a result of, society. The following quote which refers to idols may equally be applied to maids due to the presence of the symbolic girl: “idols [and maids] present a fantasy of unalienated labor. The realities of fierce competition and strict control are minimized or disavowed” (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012: 202). Was it the case that, for some, being a maid and butler was simultaneously a way of being a functioning member of society as well as being a means of performing in an imaginary, playful, third-space which meets childhood? The example I like to use is the game “mummies and daddies” which we used to play at breaktime in primary school. There were three roles to play: mummy, daddy, and the baby. Play bears an important role in child psychology (Gray,

¹¹⁸ I would be interested in future research to more fully represent the gendered nuances of the maid café experience in the UK as my analysis of femininity can only provide a little detail of what I observed as a whole.

2011) in which children learn and negotiate the rules of their community, especially those which seem unjust and unfair. What I am alluding to is the possibility that the maid café, like the schoolyard, is a means of negotiating the seemingly unjust rules and mechanisms of our wider society. One of these includes the conditions of gender hegemony which hinders all individuals in different ways, some more than others.

Importantly, the UK is not culturally compatible with maid café culture, and this is evident in the reception that they received by the wider public (see Appendix 1.5). With the maid's appearance as being relatable to the eroticised "French maid" costume and her behaviour as being exaggeratedly girlish, maid cafés are demonised in UK society due to the fact that they are usually interpreted as having ties to fetish culture and infantilised sexualisation which is also contentiously tied to discourses of anime and manga (Galbraith, 2011b). Indeed, Stacey Dooley's documentary series, *Young Sex for Sale in Japan* (2017) particularly highlights the discord between depictions of girls in Japanese media and the moral panics surrounding girls in a British context.

Maid cafés are generally met with suspicion in the UK due to an unawareness of their practices and the fact that the image and behaviour of the maid explicitly draws attention to the line between innocence and sexualisation. Moreover, these attitudes exist within the UK's cultural attitudes and moral panics regarding paedophilia (McCartan, 2010; Critcher, 2002). The British-based maid café thus exists in between societal conceptualisations of the maid uniform as being informed by a masculine fantasy of the sexual; discourses on girls as being at-risk (Gonick, 2006; Aapola, *et al.* 2005; Harris, 2004) and; those culturally determined aspects relating to Japanese society. The contradictions that I explore in this chapter relate to an implicit revelling in one's position as the symbolic girl. What became intriguing to me was not so much whether the maid actually disavows or provokes sexualisation. Rather, I was interested in how, depending on the context, the maid's existence makes the very fact of her

sexualisation remarkable where otherwise, in the case of the normative position of woman in UK society, her sexualisation goes unquestioned. By becoming the maid, one enters a game of refuting their sexual(ised) destiny in which, as the evident embodiment of the symbolic and liminal girl, they are unable to be patriarchally contained.

Method

In 2019, for nine months, I conducted my ethnography at 8 separate maid cafés ranging from the South of England to the North of Scotland.¹¹⁹ I attended 13 maid café events (8 “slots” as a customer; 7 full days as a maid) as well as 8 rehearsals/dance practices. Maid café events usually consist of pre-booked slots with an allotted start and end time. An event can have as many as three slots on a day, with each one lasting between 1 and 3 hours.¹²⁰ I made it my effort to become acquainted with and observe as many maid cafés as I could. Although my calculations are easily contestable (for the fact that maid cafés readily appear as they disappear), there were, in total, 9 maid cafés which were active in the UK during the course of my research (from 2017-2019), with a new one opening as my fieldwork neared its end. By contrast, Japan has many established maid cafés. One maid café chain “@home” has nine cafés in Osaka and Tokyo. One of its buildings in Akihabara has seven floors, with 5 of them each hosting maid café experiences and one for buying @home merchandise. One of the benefits of observing so many maid cosplay groups in the UK was that I could more easily anonymise my participants. I observed every maid café that was active at the time with varying degrees of depth. Therefore, my discussion in this chapter could apply equally to any of them. Importantly, I was shown that, fundamentally, no maid café in the UK is the same as any other; all bear their own nuances and intricacies. However, there are certain similarities

¹¹⁹ To my knowledge, no maid cafés exist in Wales or Northern Ireland as of yet.

¹²⁰ Not included in these numbers is my attendance at four maid cafés in Tokyo (Japan) and one event at an anime convention in the Netherlands.

regarding the presentation and performance of hyperfemininity which I hope to make clear in this chapter.

My sole focus in this chapter is to observe how the context of maid cafés in the UK lends itself to an enactment of drag-like performances of girlhood and what significance this might have in light of the theories surrounding the concept of *shōjo*. What I do not focus on, however, is a more comprehensive overview of maid café practices in the UK as a whole. As much as I want to discuss the various cross-cultural encounters and intrigues that I stumbled across during my 9-month ethnographic exploration of this phenomenon, it is nonetheless necessary for me to stay close to the central inquiry of this study: femininity as a coming of age experience in the 21st century as visible in the UK-based anime convention. However, I hope to write a more comprehensive account of maid café culture in the UK following my submission of this thesis.

Reflection 6.1

What's in a Name?

As mentioned, I use pseudonyms for each participant as a means of concealing their identity. However, I feel that it is important to mention that it was very often the case with the individuals that I met (in all areas of cosplay subculture, particularly from the older teens onwards) that many cosplayers had a different name from the one that they had been given by their parents at birth. In the maid café, a person could have as many as five different names such as the following: their birth name or “dead name” (which the other members of the group would not refer to them as, however, sometimes they might refer to their prior knowledge of it to signify their depth of friendship or closeness—“I used to know them back when they were Michelle,” for instance—in a hushed tone); their chosen name by which people referred to them as usual; a nickname (perhaps inspired by a character or a reference to popular culture); and, of course, their maid or butler name which was subject to change over time. This list does not include the nicknames that

members assigned themselves, or were assigned by others, on the group chats either—often in-joke references, such as “Tesco’s own Jessica Nigri”.

There could be up to 3 active chats for one maid café at any one time (one chat for all members of the maid café; another chat for the posting of jokes, memes and sharing creations; one active chat for the upcoming event where members had been specifically assigned) to limit the cross over of messages so that important ones would not be lost. Therefore, I opened myself to the possibility of learning a new name each day, or realising that two people were, in fact, the same person. I was interested in what the significance of choosing one's name could bear in terms of identity, as trying out a new name like cosplay may be a means of reflecting a person’s inner soul or being—a means of escaping the identity and destiny that had been decided at their birth, and the responsibility borne by this. Of course, name play can be for the sake of fun and personal preference too.

Then there is the question of the names that the maids and butler chose for themselves. It became apparent that many members chose to either name themselves as a maid or butler in Japanese, or a fantasy name such as in the role play game Dungeons and Dragons. The non-Japanese names that I noticed tended to be names associated with privileged girlhood, royalty or mythology. Although this was not the case for all characters I came across, it was certainly one of the trends. In this chapter, I have chosen to reflect each person’s choice of their name. For example, if the pseudonym is a Japanese name, this reflects their choice of maid name. The point of the maid café is that each person emulates an anime character, which itself is a fantasy-orientated medium originating from and associated with Japan.

Maid Café Research

My original proposal for this research did not consider looking into the phenomenon of maid cafés (or idol groups) because I was unaware of their existence before entering the field. I intended to focus on female anime fans instead. When I came across a maid café for the first time at an anime convention, I had an unusual feeling of unease in my gut that I was intrigued

to explore further. Simply put, the image of the maid on her surface-level disturbed me because of her place as a servant to the master of a mansion (a man) who she “welcomes home”¹²¹ and serves in a hyperfeminine, infantile way, while wearing what appeared to be the kind of outfit that I associated with an erotic costume of masculine desire. At that time, it was apparent to me that the maid was some kind of embodiment of a pre-(and post)feminist heterosexual male fantasy both in her appearance (child-like, sexy) behaviour (submissive, feminine), and context (confined to the domestic sphere). As one of my friends, not a fan of anime or maid cafés, had remarked, “Maid cafés are essentially hooters for the Japanese”; the feminist researcher in me could not turn away from this semblance of an abomination.

While the scholarly literature on maid cafés asserts that the opposite is the case, that maid cafés are, for the most part, pure-hearted and child-like (Galbraith, 2013; 2011; Yamaki & Baffelli, 2018), much of the research on maid cafés (confined to Japan) still observes them from the position of the male customer (Galbraith, 2013). As a researcher exploring femininity via the context of Japanese media and conventions, I was interested to know the following: what motivates (British) individuals to become maids themselves in spite of the discourses surrounding the fetishisation of the maid’s image in the UK? And so, I followed my instinct and designed a plan to conduct research at several maid cafés, undertaking both roles of customer and maid myself.

Had I kept to my initial research plan of focusing on anime fans only, I would have walked past the maid café and suppressed my perturbed feelings about it, castigating it as another rendition of misogynistic internet culture. However, this was a feeling that I could not ignore, and, being the case that my orientation was framed around femininity and affect (in my aim to understand the affectual resonations of anime subculture itself), I decided that becoming a maid was the best way to explore my own ambivalent feelings surrounding it.

¹²¹ “*Okaerinasaimase*” is how maids greet their customers, which is a formal way of saying “welcome home”.

Just as my decision to become a maid was influenced by a certain (albeit negative) feeling, so too did I discover that affect (positively garnered by the aesthetic and sentiment of the maid café) plays a role in motivating individuals to become a maid or butler. Poppy (Maid Yuka, age 23) told me of how she first knew she wanted to become a maid: “I came across it on the internet one day and I thought, ‘Oh wow! I want to be cute like that!’” It was apparent then, that much like the aesthetic of anime and manga (and J-fashion) itself resonated with the fans that I spoke to (a resonance which, as I discovered in my interviews, often could not necessarily be articulated through words), so too did the maid café and its embodiment of *kawaii* (cuteness) evoke feelings of joy and wonder, under the Japanese term *moe* (Galbraith, 2015). *Moe* is defined as a sentiment, or feelings of adoration and love as evoked by a *kawaii* anime character (Sharp, 2011). This bears certain implications if we consider both maid café and idol cosplayers as becoming figures of *moe*, which may be considered as a subjectification of sorts, minus the element of explicit sexualisation. Indeed, becoming the image of *kawaii shōjo* may encompass the same sentiments of neoliberal, hegemonic empowerment bestowed upon the postfeminist subject, while at the same time lacking its normative explicit sexualised pandering to a male gaze. As Iseri states,

what we need to interrogate is, instead of differentiating liberated hyperfemininity from a ‘trapped’ feminine gender role, the problematic way in which *kawaii* femininity is celebrated is precisely by its visible difference (or distance) from what counts as natural femininity, exploiting ‘other’ bodies to the neoliberal and nationalistic discourses. Flexible femininity in Japanese *kawaii* culture is neither a sign of liberation nor progress, but rather constitutes the very site/sight where bodily flexibility is achieved within complicated power structures of Orientalism, nationalism and neoliberalism.

(2015: 142).

Evidently, these problematic aspects that the figure of the maid is seen to represent marked the point of ambivalence and unease that I initially felt before engaging so immersively in

maid cosplay.¹²² Indeed, my initial reaction towards maid cafés so different from, for example, Poppy, because of a difference in our interpretation: I saw the maids as embodying a sexualised and warped hyperfemininity which pandered to a paedophilic gaze; Poppy saw it as cute and empowering. Whereas ten years ago (as someone who felt her heart sparkle when she saw a *kawaii* and *shōjo* aesthetic in manga and anime) I might have seen it differently, in my position at the time, however, as someone who had departed the anime fan scene for several years, my perspective was notably different. The discussion which follows tracks my series of realisations which led me to consider the other side of this subversive coin. That is, the maid café is a feminine phenomenon which draws upon the imagery of girlhood to evoke feelings of child-like emancipation in both the maid and customer. This contributes towards my theory that becoming a maid temporarily thwarts womanhood—a means of what I term “reverse adultification”—while nonetheless adhering to the principles of femininity that is expected of the female subject. In order to properly understand this sensibility of maid cafés as an escape from maturity, I first need to define *shōjo*, in its being the basis of maid café culture (Galbraith, 2012).

The *Shōjo* Sensibility

Jinhee Choi formulated a theory of a *shōjo* (2016) and *sonyeo* (2009) sensibility that relates to girlhood in Japan and Korea, both of which bear a “predilection for exoticism, ephemerality, and sentimentalism” (2016: 179), where, as she argues, “sensibility... provides a concept alternative to “sexuality” (2009: 42). Moreover, she observes,

A brief historical survey of the formation of modern *shōjo* culture shows that across East Asia, there was a tendency towards transnational imagination and the development of homosocial relationships. These were considered an alternative social formation that could defy, albeit temporarily and

¹²² The type of *kawaii* femininity to which Iseri refers highlights certain power structures. This is the approach that I take in regard to maid cosplay as a form of feminine performance that exposes the normativity of interpreting femininity as a construct of desire.

symbolically, the patriarchy that enforces the heterosexual notions and threatens the viability of the *shōjo* and its elongation.

(Choi, 2016: 184)

It is this theory of *shōjo* sensibility that is applicable to both sites of maid café and idol cosplay. Indeed, the figure of *shōjo* as bearing the symbolic potential to defy patriarchy, embodying a homosocial, homoromantic and homosexual sensibility that nevertheless is spectacularly and pleasingly feminine to those with whom she resonates. As the scholarship surrounding both *shōjo* and girlhood recognise them as affective experiences (Honda, 2010; Swindle, 2011) with global and transnational effects, or, affects (Handyside & Taylor-Jones, 2016), the maid café (as with *shōjo* cultures as a whole, from J-fashion to idols) may be viewed as an example of this global resonance of a *shōjo* sensibility that I saw resonating with my participants who (re)experienced their feminine adolescence through its imagery. As I observe, *shōjo* is, in essence, paradoxical and complex which is what lends her so well to a sensibility of ambivalence and ambiguity that a person may feel towards their coming of age.

The Japanese term, *shōjo*, refers to more than its definition as the liminal period between girlhood and womanhood. It can also be used to define a genre of manga aimed at girls; a form of girls' culture; and the symbolic girl who proliferates in the digital 21st century. My interpretation of *shōjo* in contemporary Japanese popular culture is shaped by its etymological founding as an escape from socialised womanhood, in which I approach *shōjo* “as a mode of becoming a girl/woman” (Driscoll, 2002: 97). Indeed, as Choi states, “shōjo period or girlhood is often considered transitional as well as a transitory experience with an imminent end to it until one must take up the burdens of being an adult” (2016: 187). This bears certain implications for the subject of this thesis: coming of age in light of hegemony. The term *shōjo* originated in early 20th century Japanese society to refer to a girl who deferred marriage and pregnancy in order to continue her education (Shamoon, 2012; Takahashi, 2008; Madge, 1998), considered as having been an implicit rebellion against the

term *ryōsai kenbo* (meaning Good Wife, Wise Mother) which was promoted in Japan in the early 20th century. Shamoons states,

a new space opened for girls to develop socially and intellectually in ways that are quite different from the roles of childhood and motherhood, although the exact beginning and end of adolescence was and still is fluid. ... the word *shōjo* still has a lingering connotation of the elegance of the all-girls school and private space of girls' culture.

(2012: 2)

Therefore, we might approach *shōjo* as embodying the rejection of womanhood as it is defined patriarchally (i.e. defined by one's familial and sexual relation to men; as a social position that is not free). *Shōjo* was "Sparked by girls' resistance against their oppressive fates as females in traditional Japan" (Dollase, 2019: xi) and this is a sentiment which extends globally, as visible in fan culture of Japanese media and culture. The *shōjo* postpones adulthood in favour of an ambivalent betweenness. Like Alice (who may be interpreted as the female equivalent of Peter Pan), the *shōjo* never matures: she wavers. This is a sentiment that came through in the subcultures I observed in the anime convention, something which the maid café epitomises. Importantly, the figure of the *shōjo* is not an actual girl, but rather, the girl conceptualised, in which she appears as an "[ambiguously] pubescent female with the physical traits of a woman, yet one who still has the sexual naïvete and innocence of a child" (Treat, 1996: 280). Eiri Takahara writes that, "*shōjo* consciousness" is "freedom and arrogance" (in: Dollase, 2019: xiv). Indeed, we might consider the *shōjo* as bearing the right to be selfish and indulgent (Wakeling, 2011) which naturally lends itself to a movement away from the social (sexual) responsibility that is associated with coming of age as a female subject.

Theories surrounding the *shōjo* also posit her as an antithesis of productivity (Treat, 1993). As Treat notes, adolescence is "a period between childhood and adulthood during

which labor is trained for its role in industrial culture” (in: Driscoll, 2002: 290). *Shōjo*, by contrast, digresses from this period of adulthood that is marked by one’s productive labour in society (whether through financial or reproductive means). Therefore, becoming the image of the maid in her *shōjo*-likeness may be interpreted as an escape from the reality of socialised womanhood which is defined by its reproductivity. Nevertheless, what is intriguing to note is how the maid, in her position of hospitality (which is typically gendered as feminine), may be seen as in training for her social destiny under industrial labour as an adult. Indeed, we may consider cosplay as an extension of Treat’s definition of adolescence, namely, as a means of self-discipline in the sense of Foucault (1995), in which the subject moulds themselves into the socialised, productive ideal while nonetheless under the safety of the guise of cosplay as something that is intended as an escape from the sexualised reality of coming of age as a female subject.

Vera Mackie states that “*shōjo* culture is notable for its rejection of anything excessively masculine, and its horror of the sexual and reproductive body” (2010: 194). This is a sensibility which may be seen as extending into the maid café (as well as idol groups and *lolita* fashion). In particular, the theories surrounding *shōjo* has led me to wonder whether this may bear any saliency to what it might be that motivates certain individuals to become maids. That is, characteristic of the *shōjo* condition, the maid is a means of becoming symbolically feminine that is unable to be—or rather, *should not be*—sexualised in her state as the performative and aesthetic reification of girlhood. As Leila Madge states,

[T]his desire to be sexless among girls is not due to a fear or distaste for the physical condition of being female but reflects an ambivalence about having to grow up and, as a woman, assume a very distinct and confining role. This sexual ambivalence is related to the portrayal of themselves as children insofar as both reflect a desire not to assume one's gendered role. After all, early childhood is a time when one is not expected to be able to play a role and when distinctions based on gender do not exist to the extent they do for adults. (1998: 163)

If woman is culturally understood as the symbolic target for hetero-masculine sexual desire, then being sexualised is an inevitable reality for the feminine (emerging-woman) subject. By contrast, becoming the image of *shōjo* (embodying its sensibility of postponing womanhood), one may enjoy feeling and enacting the feminine while rejecting the sexualising gaze to which one becomes increasingly normatively subjected. As Poppy told me,

Being a maid allows me to explore this cute dimension to myself which I ordinarily can't [explore].

(age, 23)

Perhaps what Poppy meant by this is that becoming a maid is a way of expressing a certain kind of femininity (i.e. cuteness) which is generally not validated in mature female subjects in British media and society. In short, becoming the *shōjo* is a means of having one's cake and eating it: being autonomous, wilful, free *and* feminine. Being a maid is meant to be cute, not sexy—but, nonetheless, in a UK context, it is read as eerily sexy. Throughout my fieldwork, it became increasingly important for me to explore a theory of the symbolic image of the girl in Japanese media as having the ability to resonate with living girls and women precisely because she acts as an avenue into a perpetually liminal space that avoids the categorising, scrutinising, sexualising gaze of hegemonic, androcentric society. As Laura Abbott notes, “*Shōjo* culture grew out of a feminist need to escape confining gender roles, and was thus empowering for women” (2015: 25). However, what complicates it is that the *shōjo*'s image was appropriated, “dehumanized and manipulated to fulfill sexual fantasy and enforce behavior” (*Ibid.*). So how might a feminine subculture re-appropriate this image for their own cause? If *shōjo* is a means of expressing one's femininity away from a sexualised context, what might the implications be for someone who society defines as a woman, and yet adopts the guise of a girl as part of her hobby at a maid café? Moreover, what does it say about UK

society at large in the fact that maid cafés are largely seen as sinister? What I explore in this chapter is that, in becoming the figure a maid, the individual becomes the figure of the *shōjo* in all her complexity, effectively taking on what she represents: a “contradictory amalgamation of youth, femininity, innocence, budding sexuality and a sense of autonomy” (Monden, 2014b: 266).

Abbie

I want to begin my discussion with a testimony by maid café maid and *lolita*¹²³ fashion enthusiast, Abbie, because her perspective is one that particularly relates to my focus in this chapter: a tension between what Galbraith observes in the maid café as “unguarded innocence”—“The image of the maid is not an impure woman, but a pure child” (Galbraith, 2012: 94)—and attitudes towards women and teenage girls as being unquestionably signs for heteromale sexual desire. This is telling if we consider puberty as being the time when girls learn to guard themselves against a sexualising gaze. Abbie puts it well:

What I like to do is look at the difference between sweetness and darkness; things that are sweet on the surface, but underneath it's another story. Like, I'm in the *lolita* [J-fashion] community and on the surface it's all very cute and reserved, but all the women I know—the majority of *lolas* I know—have been sexually abused. And I don't just mean butt-grabbing, but full-on sexual abuse. It's insane, it's like nine and a half out of ten. It's really prolific. [...]

Lolita is massively empowering to me because, well, as a girl who has been

¹²³ *Lolita* is a form of J-fashion. However, intriguingly, it bears the same name as the (1955) novel, *Lolita*. This underlying signification of paedophilia is something which is characteristic of *lolita* culture as well as the maid café, in which the *lolas* I met told me of their irritation at having to repeatedly assert that their fashion had “nothing to do with the book by Nabakov”. In other words, it bore no association to the novel of the same name which represents a paedophilic relationship between a man and a girl—a theme which seems to proliferate discourses of Japanese media culture (Galbraith, 2011b).

around boys most of her life, I've been terribly mistreated by men—and I love men, this is not a damper on men at all but—*lolita* fashion helps me feel, like, feminine and beautiful without feeling sexy, if that makes sense? There is zero sexiness in *lolita*, and you need that sometimes—because I think there's a lot of pressure on women to always appear sexually appealing—and I don't need that all the time; I don't want that all the time, but I still want to feel, like, attractive in some way, and *lolita* does that for me. I can be feminine and elegant and beautiful without the need for the edge of sexiness. And the maid café stuff is an absolute outlet for me because, in my hometown, people would open-mouthed, rubber-neck stare at me for wearing a rainbow jumper, you know. I mean, like, I'm wearing a maid outfit right now but I'm around a convention so it's okay. People will look at everybody else, not just me. I want to be quirky in the way that I dress and the way I express all of the time but the pressure from having regular society staring at you and making comments about you—where it's loud enough so that they want you to hear—it's just like, I don't have the energy to manage that all of the time. So when I have something like the maid café to come to I can really go, like, crazy with my makeup and get all of my accessories all over the place, and I know that I'm not going to be in a stressful environment—even though the maid café is stressful to some extent—nobody is singling *me* out and staring at *me*.

Georgia: What do you think it is about Japan that is so appealing?

Abbie: That their focus—like, don't get me wrong there's plenty of problems—but their focus on aesthetics are much more on the youthful,

pleasing, kindly; childlike but not childlike. Innocence is the right word. It's not about being "a child"; it's about purity and innocence, without the puritanical. Whereas in the West we all focus on the changing of age and how you need to be a—again it's the sexiness thing—you need to be an object, you need to be, like, a woman, an adult and all of that shit—you need to stop wearing pigtails when you're not seven anymore—any age before that fine, any age after that, it's a fetish. You can't wear thigh-high socks any age past seven. Before that, fine—they're kids—after that, fetish. We absolutely fetishize everything and I'm not saying that Japan don't—they do—they just fetishize different things in a different way. They've got room in their culture for adult women to be cute and separately be sexy. We don't have that at home. If I'm wearing thigh-high socks I must be doing something fetishy. I must be wanting sexy attention. If I'm wearing pigtails, I must be into *stuff*. If I wear a lot of frilly stuff [I] must be an age-player or something like that, you know, it drives me nuts—

The kind of pressure is to, like, adhere to certain things at certain ages. Like the age thing really bothers me. I'm twenty-eight, I'm supposed to be married or engaged—probably most likely looking to have children now because by the time I'm thirty "that's too old to have kids". All of that stuff and I'm not supposed to want a bouncy castle, for example. It's not "normal"—I'm air quoting—to want a bouncy castle at my age in this country, and it's this massive amount of pressure to conform to the way that we're supposed to do things, and, just—none of that is me. I tried for a little bit in high school and I was absolutely miserable, depressed beyond words, and I tried to do it again in my early twenties, and I put all of my cute stuff in a box. I put all of my cute

clothes in a box and replaced it with normal stuff. I was absolutely miserable.

So yeah, you just kind of pop eventually—you just can't do it. [...]

I interviewed Abbie (Maid Mimi), age 28, following a maid café event where she served me as a customer. (Abbie's maid persona was *hime*, meaning princess, which is interesting if we consider the maid café as a rendition of the postfeminist narrative of “the tale of the kitchen maid turned princess” [Gonick, 2005: 49]. Indeed, the maid is simultaneously a kitchen maid *and* a princess.)¹²⁴ One of the original founders of her maid café years ago, Abbie was well-versed in her maid café routine as well as her other passion, *lolita* fashion. I selected this part of the interview because she reflects the main themes of this chapter regarding childhood, innocence, and feeling “feminine and beautiful without feeling sexy”. All of these aspects manifest themselves in the figure of the *kawaii* (cute) *shōjo* (girl). Moreover, Abbie's position reflected the views of many of the girls, women and gender non-conforming individuals I met at the anime convention, who voiced their exasperated reflections on the objectification, bullying and harassment they received in school and society and the subsequent repression, self-monitoring they adopted in response: “You just kind of pop eventually—you just can't do it”. Becoming a maid was an outlet for Abbie in the sense that she could engage in activities that were not appropriate for her to perform in society, free from the fear that she would be objectified (“nobody is singling *me* out and staring at *me*) and harassed (“I've been terribly mistreated by men”). Abbie wanted a space where she did not have the pressure to conform to ideals of social maturity and the maid café offered just that.

Maid cafés are the means of performing a girlish innocence. However, as Abbie recognised, this is something that is not considered age-appropriate for the mature female subject in the UK to engage in. Perhaps this is why maid cafés in the UK are widely viewed

¹²⁴ The *hime* (princess) persona is interesting to consider in light of the princess as a key figure of doing girlhood (Shannon, 2015). Abbie's *hime* persona, much like the personas of the other maids I met, worked to heighten her girlishness as a maid.

by outsiders as a fetish culture, as Abbie noted, any childlike behaviour and performance which is exhibited “beyond the age of seven” is viewed as a sexual perversion. Sexualisation and eroticisation are heavily embedded in maid café discourse, as much as its members assert that the café has no sexual implications of motives. In this sense, the maid café costume embodies the position of the girl who is repeatedly objectified and sexualised by her peers against her will when she feels otherwise about her own body comportment. As one maid told me,

Some people who aren't aware of maid café culture think that being a maid is something sexy or sinister—when it isn't like that at all! Being a maid is supposed to be something innocent. When I'm a maid I feel like I can be cute and goofy, which is a freeing feeling to be able to express a love of cute things without the usual pressures from society to be sexy. Like, being a maid is so freeing because there's no pressure to be cool or sexual. You can literally just be sweet and innocent.

(Poppy, 23)

Just as Abbie said in her interview, her wearing of *kawaii* clothes that were deemed too childish for anyone “past the age of seven” were a marker of her enjoyment in feeling innocent and pure “without the puritanical”; “feminine and beautiful without feeling sexy”. Moreover, her complaint—“If I'm wearing thigh-high socks I must be doing something fetishy. I must be wanting sexy attention”—marked her recognition that contemporary British interpretations of childhood and maturity (innocence and sexualisation), are informed by a “pressure... to adhere to things at certain ages”. It was something that I recognised in my participants in their experience of having to conceal their interests for fear of hegemonic discipline by others. This alternative, an ambiguous ambivalence is embodied by the figure of the *shōjo* who is so integral to the girlish maid café aesthetic.

Abbie's testimony makes her position clear: there is a regulating gaze which dictates the appropriateness of behaviour depending on age. Childhood is a temporary period of freedom away from the expectations of (re)productivity that is expected when one comes of

age in the neoliberal scape. As Abbie told me, when she became a teenager, she increasingly felt a pressure to distance herself from behaviour which might be considered childish in order to avoid bullying from her peers. She had to self-regulate her immaturity and grow up (Foucault, 1995). For Abbie, Japan represented femininity differently to her experience of growing up in the UK—“there's a lot of pressure on women to always appear sexually appealing”. While fully acknowledging that Japanese culture and society has its own discourses of fetish, Abbie’s testimony raises the question as to whether there is more room in Japan for a gaze—as opposed to a more explicit pandering to the sexual desire of the “male gaze” (Mulvey, 1989)—which reinvigorates memories and feelings of one’s childhood, effectively encapsulated by a *shōjo* sensibility. In other words, we might begin to see certain aspects of Japanese popular culture (particularly those which relate to *otaku*) as indulging a “juvenated” gaze (Hatch, 2015: 35). Japanese popular media culture (as providing an escape from the socialised pressures of modern, capitalist labour) potentially complicates the view of innocence as being designated to childhood and maturity to adulthood, and that of childhood being at risk of being warped by the sexualising world of adults. This understanding is therefore characteristic to mid-to-late 20th and early 21st century modes of understanding childhood innocence, which necessarily informs the sensibility surrounding maid cafés. Abbie turned to Japan to explore her selfhood and femininity via a different means. Her words epitomised what I had observed in my research and had experienced myself: a contentious relationship between maturity, femininity and mature femininity—and this is something that is embodied by the Japanese concept of *shōjo*.

Recognised by wider society as mature feminine subjects, cosplayers had to repeatedly assert that their appearance was not to be interpreted as being sexual—characteristics that, in being the position of a child, one does not have to state. Whereas, as Takahashi notes, *shōjo* “specifically indicates a young woman who is not

allowed to express her sexuality” (Takahashi, 2008: 115), the woman’s body is interpreted as sexual regardless of her intentions. In this way, performing the image of *shōjo* is “a space to exercise a freedom of sorts. It is an emotional demand for the right or allowance to be selfish” (Madge, 1998: 162). It seemed a possibility to me that maid cafés, *lolita* and other *kawaii* subcultures inspired by Japan (which use and revel in the symbolic image of the girl) might offer a refuge for women and girls to reclaim autonomy of their own bodies, to revel in a femininity that overrides sexualisation (Carriger, 2019). Certain girls’ *kawaii* subcultures, such as *gyaru* (see Iseri, 2015) may be observed as wavering between hegemonic and pariah femininity, rebelling against (and being reincorporated back into hegemonic gains of) “sexist ideals of feminine beauty” (Iseri, 2015: 144) through “theatricality, impersonation and transformation” (152). As Iseri notes, “*gyaru* culture resists the normative image of femininity by fiercely exaggerating it” in which “the political potential of *kawaii* fashion [...] might lie in [girls] attempts to transform what cuteness means and to create an alternative way to enjoy embodying femininities for no-one but themselves” (2015: 148). Monden’s (2014b) study also heeds this, with his argument that, contradictorily, the symbol of the girl is as much an “idealized construction imposed predominantly by men” as it is “manoeuvred by the girls themselves, thus making it an effective vehicle for women to display agency and creativity” (Monden, 2014b: 266). Abbott further illustrates this,

Essentially, *shōjo* wanted both the agency to desire, but without being desired themselves [...] This infantilized visage both sidesteps the responsibilities of adulthood, and bids to escape from being sexualized. Thus we have *shōjo*, the uncomfortable contrast of a young woman experiencing sexual maturity for the first time while expressing herself with the behavior and facade of a child.
(2015: 17)

This is something that I observed throughout my research, where *shōjo*-like cosplayers rejected sexiness in favour of a girlish and subversive innocence and sweetness. This

epitomised an ambivalence surrounding womanhood, while nonetheless being pleasingly feminine, something which I address in chapter eight as well. For Abbie then, Japanese (or, rather *shōjo*) culture provided an avenue for her to reclaim her femininity away from its hegemonic, patriarchal colonisation. Thus cosplay became a means of each participant taking control of their coming of age, albeit temporarily.

***Kawaii* and Reverse Adultification**

I think that was a big part of [my interest in] Japan, that they really appreciate beauty in their culture. Because they love innocence and youth—the cherry blossom—that's beauty to them, beauty is fleeting. [...] Poor girls have an expiry date.

(Grace, 26)

In this section, I consider maid cafés as a stance against the “adultifying” (Jackson & Vares, 2011: 700) or adultification of girlhood. The terms “age compression” and “kids getting older younger” spring to mind (Buckingham, 2011: 125; 2000), the former referring to the “practice in which women and girls in various media are compressed to an age in which they are most valued for their sexual function” (Speno & Aubrey, 2018: 625-626). As Abbie’s testimony indicated, in order to enact one’s role as a mature subject effectively, one’s childlike wonder must be crushed as part of the coming of age process, to be replaced with a deadened depersonalisation in order so that one may perform one’s duties as capitalist subject, just as the soldier in Foucault’s (1995) theory is broken and rebuilt. This arguably manifested itself in the form of bullying and regulation that the majority of the participants I interviewed received at high school for failing to enact hegemonically-esteemed maturity. Being a maid or *lolita* is about taking one’s power and autonomy back; reclaiming the agency once enjoyed as a child. In this sense, *kawaii* is reverse adultification, which subversively

fighters against the maturity that capitalism assigns its socialised subjects. As Ōtsuka, Ishihara and Miyadai state,

The aim of being *kawaii* was far from the notion of being isolated from one's sexuality, but rather was being used by one subculture of young people to declare their sexuality as children and their conscious refusal of the distinction posited by the main culture between mature adults and immature children.
(in: Madge, 1998: 161)

The *kawaii* aesthetic provides an ambiguous escape from the dichotomy of childhood innocence and adult maturity because of what the dichotomy suggests: that, on entry to adulthood, one becomes the focus of sexual maturity. However, there is a conception of innocence which predates modern conceptions of (feminine) adolescence. Hatch observes this in her study of early 20th century cinematic girlhood performance in stars such as Shirley Temple and Mary Pickford—the former who became famous as a toddler for adopting a sultry vamp-like character in *War Babies* (1932); the latter who impersonated children as a woman. Hatch argues that the conception of childhood innocence encountered a radical shift following the popularisation of Sigmund Freud's theories—as well as other cultural texts such as Nabakov's *Lolita*—which played a role in defining feminine adolescence via medicalised, psychosexual parameters (Driscoll, 2002). Although I appreciate that western philosophy has been shaped differently to Japanese philosophy and aculture, becoming a maid nonetheless means seamlessly adopting a symbolic, girl-like persona, arguably impersonating the pre-modern, pre-feminist, patriarchal understanding of an innocent child. The performance and aesthetic of maids may be viewed as bearing a representation of girlhood that existed before the conception of feminine adolescence and psychosexuality itself. Indeed, the 20th century saw a shift from the Victorian fascination with childhood into one which defined current attitudes towards adult relations and children as having the shadow of paedophilic intent. This shift in “the paradigm of innocence” (Hatch, 2015: 151) has

significant implications for the world of maid cafés as they are enacted and received in the 21st century. As Hatch notes, prior to Freud, the representation of girlhood in American cinema and culture was seen as something that could purify any adult. Rather than being interpreted as a sign that was “imperiled, vulnerable to adult desire” (Hatch, 2015: 151), performances of girlhood in the early 20th century invited a

juvenated rather than a pedophilic gaze; rather than being transformed into sexual objects, child impersonators were capable of transforming their spectators into innocent subjects.

(Hatch, 2015: 35)

This is something which we need to bear in mind if we are to properly understand the UK-based Japanese-inspired maid café. Hatch’s observation of a “juvenated gaze” (as emblematic of the Victorian model of innocence and childhood), I argue, is a sensibility evident in the aesthetic and performance of Japanese-inspired subcultures such as the maid café and *lolita* fashion in which the maid café cultivates a performance of girlhood which precedes the medicalised definition of feminine adolescence as something definable by its psychosexual and heterosexual relation to adult male desire. The modern day understanding of childhood as being something corruptible by adults is nonexistent in the maid café because it is a space where the concept of the adult, as (re)productive subject in a capitalist scape, does not exist (Galbraith, 2013). The sensibility of pre-modern childhood is therefore critically important to understanding the context of maid cafés and, ultimately, the motivations of those who attend them, both customer and maid alike.

Reflection 6.2

The following entries were taken from my field diary at two separate maid café events:

Field Diary 6.2a

One of the first things that hits you, when stepping into a maid café, is its scent. Like someone is softly punching you in the face with candyfloss boxing gloves. That’s the sickly sweet aroma of the 4th floor of @home in Akihabara, anyway. And I’m sure it would be the same smell of this maid café today in Edinburgh, if the maids were allowed their own oven. Today I am a customer at Mint Maid café, taking place in an anime convention in a music arena. The café takes place outside its doors, on a balcony room where all attendees pass as they enter. The buzz of excitement of the convention with regular exclamations and outbursts from its attendees. The queue to the café snakes. “Welcome to Mint Maid café!” the maids chant. Their voices are high-pitched and gentle; tiny bells jingle as they bow forward. Each group of customers is formally welcomed before being paired with their maid who guides them to their table. The walls have been decorated with pastel-coloured shapes: hearts, planets, stars—space-themed *kawaii*. Each table is decorated with glitter and shiny stars, little bubble-blowers with star shapes on the end of each wand, paper plates and galaxy-themed menus in their purples and blues. This maid café, like all maid cafés, is your six-year-old birthday party, and you’re invited.

Field Diary 6.2b

I go over to my chair and pull it out. “No, no, no, no, no, no!! Georgia-*sama*,” Maid Madeline exclaims in her Minnie Mouse-like voice. “You must let me pull your chair out for you!” She pulls the chair out and I sit down. I feel warm being doted on like this, and I struggle to remember the last time I felt this way. You need to surrender yourself to it though, otherwise it’s deeply uncomfortable. That’s *amae*, being indulged like a child.¹²⁵ Curiously, I feel like a child here, surrounded by the other customers (they’re children too). “Now you must, must, must not touch this. Only I can pour it for Georgia-*sama*,” Maid Madeline takes the teapot and pours my tea. She is the embodiment of perfection, remembering everyone's orders (without writing it down), and making everyone feel like they are special, addressing us by our names, calling us “*sama*” (the polite honorific in Japanese),

¹²⁵ See Doi (1973).

asking us what we like and making references to the frequent client's favourite animes and Kpop groups. Sitting at a table with the three others (one guy and one girl in their thirties; one girl in her early twenties) felt like primary school again. The food is like school dinners too. Not particularly delicious or copious (you are going for the service, not the food).¹²⁶ Then there's the ritualistic blessing of the food where each maid chants and you repeat, nursery rhyme style over your food and drink order, blessing it with magic to "make it delicious". Done while moving the hands in the shape of the heart, waving across the chest. The maid calls out and the customers repeat, mirroring her actions, like we did of the teacher in nursery school.

"Moe Moe! Kyun Kyun! Kira Kira! Pyun Pyun! Nyan Nyan! Oishi Kunare! Moe Moe Power Ping!"¹²⁷

At the end of the chant, everyone pushes their hands forwards (in the heart shape) towards the food item to bless it. And then claps their hands together. The Hairy Bikers were on the mark when they said that maid cafés were like "a mad kindergarten, but for everybody" (2014).

"Please refrain from walking around!" a maid calls out. (I should note here that the way she spoke was like a little girl, "refwain" instead of "refrain"; "fwom" instead of "from"). Madeline whispers through cupped hands: "If you need to go *wee wee* then raise your hand!" Conveniently, I do need to use the toilet. I raise my hand. A maid at another table (wearing cat ears) shuffles over and asks in a whisper what I would like. "Please can I go to the toilet?" I ask, and she nods. When I stand up she holds out her hand. I look around to check what she is looking for (does she want a tip?) but then she waves "come, come" with her fingers. Holding hands, she guides me to the back of the café where the toilet is. It reminds me of when I was five and one of the older girls at school did the same for me, insisting it because I was small and cute and it gave her purpose. Back then, I was annoyed because I wanted to (and knew full well that I could) go by myself: I was a big girl. Whereas now, I

¹²⁶ See Beffelli & Yameki (2018).

¹²⁷ The chant makes use of a mixture of onomatopoeic words and other phrases which translate to, "make it delicious".

found myself in the curious position of relinquishing the ridiculousness, surrendering to this nostalgic feeling of being doted on as though I were five years old again.



Fig. 6.2.¹²⁸

The above screenshot is taken from a video “Maid Café 101”, one of the videos that I was directed towards when I asked cosplayers about what being a maid entails. This screenshot is an example of the bedrooms and spaces that were shared with me during my fieldwork by the individuals I met, individuals in their early to late twenties with a passion for the *kawaii* aesthetic. From the image, you can see an assortment of pastel colours, pinks, purples, yellows and blues; Barbie posters; a mini keyboard; soft toys from Hello Kitty and My Little Pony to Care Bears, all delicately arranged on shelves—it’s a *kawaii* girls’ world, aesthetic and affective. Peachie stands in the middle, pastel pink accessories, pigtails, knee-high socks, heart-shaped frilly apron and bows. Notably, these are all objects associated with consumer girlhood. While I go into the aesthetics in more detail in the next chapter, it is important to note that this tween-like girlhood consumerism is one of the defining characteristics of the maid, where one can more effectively conceal their maturity under this *kawaii* mask.

¹²⁸ 6.2. Maid café 101. Screenshot from YouTube. This video depicts the bedroom as a *shōjo* haven away from the tyrannies of “reproductive maturity” (Halberstam, 2011: 2).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the *shōjo* image reified through maid cosplay; a symbol of the girl who evades sexualisation and the responsibilities of womanhood. So what are the implications for the girls and women that perform the figure of *shōjo* and embody a *shōjo* sensibility, particularly in the maid café? While there are multiple interpretations to be drawn from this, my focus in this chapter has viewed becoming the *shōjo* as a means of offering a respite from womanhood (as something which is understood, defined and validated in UK media and society as being sexual). Moreover, the *shōjo*, in her girlish guise, is unable to be acceptably sexualised and yet enjoys the pleasures of being “spectacularly feminine” (McRobbie, 2009: 60).

Maid cafés work to pacify, not solely a masculine anxiety, but rather, an anxiety surrounding the gendered and productive expectations of being an adult in capitalist society (Galbraith, 2013)—of whom women and girls are both part. As I was keen to explore, Japanese media and culture (like many other subcultures) potentially offer a temporary escape from the sexualising societal machine, indulging a sensibility of childlike wonder and creativity, which is especially apparent in the Japanese phenomena of girl-idol groups and maid cafés, with their “communicative ‘therapies’” (Sharp, 2011: 74). “The maid café is girl (*shōjo*) space” (Galbraith, 2012: 96) in which the image of *shōjo* and its culture has arguably been appropriated by and for an alienated masculine audience, being re-appropriated (or reclaimed) by feminine-presenting cosplayers in the UK. I suggested that this culture of alienation extends into the UK-based anime convention in which the maid, in her *shōjo* state, is notably symbolic. I will now turn my attention to *how* girlishness is enacted and embodied in the UK-based maid café in the form of girl-drag.

Chapter Seven: Maid Cafés (Part Two): Girl Drag



Fig. 7.1.¹²⁹

Reflection 7.1

Becoming Doll

If we think of *shōjo* or “girl” conceptually, *shōjo* refers to a juvenile existence prior to the adult female, that is, prior to the adoption of adult femininity. Within the system circumscribed by patriarchy, insofar as it secures future femininity, *shōjo* is a period when girls are protected and indulged, handled like dolls.

(Kotani, 2007: 57).

I want to begin this next section with a realisation I had on the morning of a maid café event, where Maddie (age 29) and I were getting ready to be maids at an anime convention event. This would be my fifth event shadowing as a maid, and I was becoming more accustomed to my routine for “dressing into character”. We were sitting together in the living room, each with our own sofa to lay out all the elements of our costume and make-up bag. Maddie puts on a playlist of YouTube videos

¹²⁹ 7.1. Immersive maid cosplay. This was one of the maid personas that I adopted as part of my immersive ethnography.

called “Dollightful,” a channel with 1.5 million subscribers which gives tutorials on doll customisation.¹³⁰ This tutorial showed a doll getting her hair “re-plugged” and face painted. Looking at my brightly coloured wig and Georgian-like painted face in the mirror, it occurred to me that, “We’re watching a video on customising dolls when we are basically customising *ourselves* as dolls.” I told my revelation to Maddie. She said nothing, brushing purple, glittery eyeshadow over her right eyelid. When I asked her about the doll tutorials she said, “Watching it just relaxes me”. I must admit, there was something soothing about watching the videos; I felt like I was eight years old again, doing girly things with my girly friend like playing with dolls and giving ourselves makeovers. We were doing girlhood, except we weren’t girls; I was 26 and she was going to be 30 the following year.

I was intrigued to explore this idea further, especially following the responses from my friends who remarked that I looked “just like a doll” when I showed them photos of myself as a maid. As Akita states, “the *kawaii* image for girls became a face with large eyes like a doll” (2005: 47). Therefore, dolls and *shōjo* (both figures of *kawaii* and girlhood) bear an uncanny connection to each other. The more doll-like we became as maids, the more we worked to undo our state as “non-girls” (Honda, 2010: 20). As Kehily & De Lappe observe,

Lolis [lolitas] wear clothes designed to de-emphasize the features of an adult female body; they use flattened bodices, high waists and full skirts with voluminous underskirts in order to conceal their bust and hips. They often wear their hair in ringlets with a bonnet, and make use of accessories, including aprons, small bags, stuffed animals or parasols. This style of dress is complemented by striking poses intended to evoke the illusion of a very young girl or of a porcelain doll. When posing for photographs, Lolis often stand with their knees together and toes pointed inwards and their heads inclined to one side; a stylization that embodies a regressed state of girlhood that is both innocent and knowing at the same time

(2015: 63).

Many of the maids that I met engaged with *lolita* J-fashion as well as maid cosplay and there are notable similarities between the two groups. Intriguingly, Kehily & De Lappe note that, “although

¹³⁰ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCitKV0ebZVbt2nIPihDGMQ>

Lolitas attempt to prolong childhood through the use of *kawaii*, they are striving to create the appearance of living dolls, rather than young girls” (2015: 64). In a similar way, I began to see maid café cosplay as a means of transforming the cosplayer into the doll-like symbol of girlhood, bearing her liminal and subversive characteristics. By becoming doll-like, the cosplayer exerts their power of becoming anachronistic, defying time and its hegemonic, patriarchal, time-bound logic.

In becoming maids, we became the dolls of our childhood. The games were the same, playing dress-up and inventing (domesticated?) scenarios, only, this time, *you* are the doll, the childhood doll of your dreams. You are both the doll and the girl who plays with her doll. As a maid, you customise her (yourself), dress her, accessorise her, decide her personality, her hair, and her background fantasy story—you become complete; *whole*. However, just as “Barbie was based on a German doll called Lilli that was sold as a sexy novelty for men” (Ensler, 2011), girls have to negotiate material that is designed for a masculine audience and make it their own, which is arguably the same for *shōjo* culture too. In essence, similar to the doll, becoming a maid is transforming something that is understood as being patriarchally designed for the erotic pleasure of hetero men into something for one’s own pleasure as a feminine subject. The normalised structures of socialised reality become perceptible, remarkable and abnormal in this way.

“She’s alive!”

With delighted horror I laughed at my own ghostly doll-like reflection in the mirror.

A Note on Immersive Participant Observation

My research on maid cafés was particularly immersive in the sense that, other than being a customer, observing performances in a convention context and interviewing members of maid cafés throughout the country, I also became a maid myself at several maid cafés. This allowed for a more personal insight into the workings of certain maid cafés as well as into myself and my own experiences of it. I include my personal experiences of undertaking the

role of the maid, with a particular focus on how it affected me as a result. Kimberley Hoang (2015), in her auto-ethnography of girls' bars in Vietnam, discusses the effect her research had on her, which she became aware of after she exited the field, such as the way she now shaped her eyebrows or walked down the corridors with a certain feminine gait. I also saw a change in myself. In short, my embodiment as a maid led me to feel more comfortable with certain elements of modern femininity (such as make-up, wigs and dresses), which, prior to the research I barely engaged in. Becoming a maid allowed me to negotiate femininity in a way that, before the research, I felt was beyond me. I began to see for myself what many participants had told me in their interviews: cosplay was a means of embodying a femininity that was completely alien to their daily subjectivities. For me, becoming feminine as a maid was a means of reconciling the objectified, unquestionable sexualised Otherness of femininity with my subjectivity as a socially-assigned emerging-woman.



Fig. 7.2¹³¹

¹³¹ 7.2 Before and after, ever becoming. My transformation from a researcher into a maid led to certain realisations throughout this research.

Gaining “insider” access to maid cafés was not easy—for starters, I had to submit an audition video of myself dancing.¹³² During my preparation, I told my friend that I was considering giving up on my study of maid cafés and focusing on my other subjects,¹³³ but she persuaded me to continue: “Keep trying!” she said. “When I was younger I wanted to be a maid, so I want you to succeed so that I can live vicariously through you! Now I’m old and past it,” she laughed. (She was two years older than me). When I asked what had appealed to her about becoming a maid, she said, “Maids are so cute, and I wanted to wear a cute dress and serve customers and feel cute too”. If being and feeling cute, then, was a main motivation and criteria to becoming a maid, this explained why I found it so difficult. I decidedly did not feel cute. My feelings about it were bizarre and visceral. What had I expected in designing this immersive research? That I would somehow be able to avoid my own personal horrors of being looked at? Why did I put myself forward in the first place? Was there a subconscious part of me that recognised that I needed to master the skill of becoming spectacularly feminine in order to have a hegemonically recognised existence?

As a teen (and honorary *shōjo*) I had taken comfort in my sexless, svelte appearance, which I felt most comfortable hiding behind baggy clothes. Now the reality was quite different. I thought about how my body had expanded in the last few years. In my mind, there would be no possibility of me wearing a maid dress in my voluptuous state without being interpreted as a symbol of sex. In order to mask the womanly reality of my body, I was going to have to exaggerate other elements of my behaviour and appearance. In other words, I needed to perform girl drag.

¹³² I had the informed consent of all members of the maid cafés that I approached to conduct research with them as a maid. I saw that the privacy of maid cafés was a means of safeguarding its members from the sexualising judgement of those who misinterpret the maid café. Therefore, I necessarily made myself accountable for representing maid cafés as honestly and sympathetically as I could.

¹³³ This was a friend that I had made in the field, see the methodology chapter for a discussion of Friendship as Method and its benefits.

Girl Drag

Has not girliness or shōjo-ness always been something exceedingly artificial?
(Kotani, 2007: 58)

Drag is so big in [the anime] community ‘cause drag is all about pushing past boundaries and expectations. Being the complete opposite of what’s expected of you.

(Kathleen, 25)

Reflection 7.2

Field Diary: I Look Like A Drag Queen

It’s 7.15am and we are getting ready together to be maids at an anime convention. This will be my second time serving customers, and today we have three slots. I am sitting with Kai on their hotel bed, make-up palettes with rainbows of colour, brushes, and bags filled with various eyelashes, glosses and glitters. There is a mountain of petticoats in the corner, blues, whites and pinks. Kai blots on white face powder with a puffer the size of an Olympic medal. Then, they take a brush of the same size, whisk it around a heart-shaped palette of different shimmering pinks and then dab it on each cheek.

I look at myself in the mirror.

“Is my make-up a bit much?” I ask.

“You can never have too much make-up on when it comes to the maid café,” Kai says.

“I look a bit like a drag queen,” I say.

“That’s the point. Being a maid is drag.”

This was one of the points during my fieldwork that shaped my outlook of the whole thesis.

As previously discussed in chapter two, cosplay is a form of drag. Bainbridge & Norris state,

Unlike other fannish dressing-up, cosplay is closer to drag. We would argue that it is not merely an act of becoming a particular character, or marking out a particular alignment, but of *disruption*. This is the “play” in “cosplay”, a play with identity and, more often, a play with *gender* identity.

(quoted in: Crawford & Hancock, 2019: 143)

This was the case throughout my observations in which the maid café is particularly drag-like in the sense of its exaggerated and excessive performance and aesthetics. The maid is a performance of femininity, specifically, a youthful, girl-like femininity.¹³⁴ One of the maid cafés I shadowed described themselves as a pantomime troupe because, “We never take ourselves too seriously,” as one butler said. As pantomime is a form of theatre where drag is a key part of its definition, I became interested that the maid café itself could be interpreted as a means of performative drag. In theatrical terms, it appeared to me that the maid café maid was not the dame, but rather, the principal girl.¹³⁵ As Peter Holland, writes,

The Principal Girl, the object of the Principal Boy’s desire, is herself a caricature of femininity, a fantasy of girlhood [...] Pretty but not beautiful, wholesome and innocent, the Principal Girl is the fantasy of the girl-next-door, the proper object of desire, even if she is a princess. The figure is de-eroticized: a focus not for sexual desire but for sentimentalized, non-sexual, romantic love.

(1997: 199)

These are all arguably elements which fit the image that the maid projects. With this in mind, the maid café’s definition of themselves as pantomime-like was arguably on the mark, with the role of maid coming to embody a role which predominates Japanese media culture: the *shōjo* and *otome* (girl and maiden). Drag, under the guise of cosplay, was, in Kathleen’s view (quoted at the beginning of this chapter), a means of fighting against and making visible oppressive gender structures, something which Butler alludes to in *Gender Trouble* (2006).

¹³⁴ Maid café cosplayers engage in “age bending”, a concept developed by Daniel Skentelbery in his forthcoming doctoral research on cosplay and gender. Available at: <https://readfnord.wordpress.com/2019/07/02/i-feel-twenty-years-younger-age-bending-cosplay/>

¹³⁵ The dame and principal boy are drag-based roles: the dame is performed by a man; the principal boy is performed by a woman. The principal girl, however, is non-drag in the sense that she is performed by a woman. Nonetheless, her performance is drag-like in the sense that it performs a feminine role which is necessary to the pantomime genre.

However, as Debra Ferreday argues, “it is not enough simply to claim that femininity is always a source of parodic pleasure” (2008: 49) to deconstruct hegemonic forces. Rather, for drag to have parodic saliency, it is important that it “works to destabilize the ways in which dominant feminine identities become normalized” (*Ibid.*).¹³⁶ In light of this, I cannot necessarily say that the maid cafés I observed, in their hosting of drag performances, were totally subversive. What they did subvert was compulsory maturity, wavering between lines of power. As Butler puts it,

drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes.

(2011: 85)

Being the case that the *shōjo* is “a site of ambivalence” too, this definition of drag fits the *shōjo* sensibility well. I read the girl drag of maid cafés as being potentially parodic in a UK context because it disturbs normalised attitudes towards gender and age, feminine maturity and innocence. Its disruptive subversiveness comes from the fact that adults (designated as such because they are above the age of eighteen) are mimicking a femininity that is denigrated as girlish. Just as Butler observed that the drag queen exposes the falsity of truth via imitation (i.e. the gender performance which we take to be true is revealed as artifice), so too, did many British maid cosplayers perform drag—in the literal sense that many of the individuals I met did not identify with the gender they had been assigned at birth (female).¹³⁷ As I will argue here, being a maid was a means of playing the role of the

¹³⁶ Butler (2011) clarifies her argument, drawing attention to the fact that not all drag is subversive. Rather, certain drag acts may unquestioningly reaffirm the heterosexual matrix.

¹³⁷ One of the mistakes I made was assuming that, due to their seamless performance of the hyperfeminine, that participants were comfortable with being referred to with feminine pronouns out of costume. This made me consider that some participants were just as uncomfortable presenting themselves in such a hyperfeminine way as I was. Potentially, cosplay allowed us to disassociate from our identities and embarrassment in order to parody femininity playfully.

spectacularly—sometimes grotesquely, in the sense of its performative and aesthetic excess—feminine in a way which subverted cultural understandings of stereotypical drag-queen performance as the performance of *mature* femininity (i.e. owning one’s sensuality and womanliness). The drag of the maid, by contrast, was distinctly girled.

Becoming a maid or *lolita* is an anachronism. Anachronism is defined as belonging to another, earlier, time. To be anachronistic is, as defined in the OED¹³⁸,

anything done or existing out of date... anything which was proper to a former age, but is, or, if it existed, would be, out of harmony with the present.

The maid café setting is an anachronistic rendition of innocence, termed anachronistic precisely because modernity designates innocence to childhood only. As a mature subject, acting or looking “like a girl” as a maid or *lolita*, is an aberration because you exist outside of regulated time. You are “out of harmony with the present” because the hegemonically-oriented present dictates that you and your body belong to the patriarchal system as a mature, (re)productive member of society.

In this chapter, I observe exactly how this girl drag is enacted in the maid café, and I do this by dividing it into three areas: Dress Like a Girl; Act Like a Girl; Dance Like a Girl. These three ways of achieving girl drag relate to both aesthetic (image) and performance (behaviour). This contributes towards my exploration of the British maid café as being a context which hosts the enactment of drag for those individuals (societally and bodily past the stage of girlhood) who want to play with being feminine without having to ascribe to the sexualising nature of womanhood. Each aspect of the discussion that follows is intended to elucidate the following argument: the more exaggerated one’s performance and appearance as a girl becomes (that is, the more “spectacularly feminine” and excessively girly one appears),

¹³⁸ <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/6908?redirectedFrom=anachronism#eid>

the more one is able to conceal their bodily reality and thwart the imposition of womanhood. By becoming the vision of girl-likeness with her symbolically subversive power, one can avoid the value-seeking gaze that exploits our bodies for their potential sexual profits. Ironically, maid cosplay is evidently under the guise of that subservient feminine laborer, the maid.

Dress Like a Girl: The Maid Uniform

The following image shows the variety of different forms a maid costume can take, under the rule that, “Only white frills and an apron are needed to look like a maid” (as it states above, under “Swimsuit”). It is a uniform which designates one’s role as servant, but also, the frills lend themselves to a *kawaii* and *shōjo* aesthetic. What might the frills and apron suggest symbolically? Is this a pre-feminist feminine servitude under the guise of *kawaii*? In terms of those I observed in the UK, the dresses resembled (of the below picture) dress 2 (“the miniskirt”) and dress 7 (“Japanese style”).¹³⁹

¹³⁹ I came across maid dress style 6 when I was in Japan, at an underground maid café in Akihabara.



Fig. 7.3¹⁴⁰

The maid dress is a costume which has its own discourses, widely interpreted (especially in the UK) as being something fashioned for hetero-masculine, sexual desire. Thus the individual has to appear exceedingly and spectacularly girly to uncannily override their

¹⁴⁰ 7.3 A guide to the different styles of maid uniform. Posted on a maid café cosplay group.

sexualised destiny. If one can master their appearance as a girl (to the extent that they are able to be perceived as cute and girlish while wearing something people generally consider to be related to lingerie) then, in essence, one beats the system that sexualises them against their will. The maid dress is both shapely and neutral, as Monden observes, it

highlight[s], even if implicitly, the complexity of women's subject position. That is, such a seemingly demure, youthful aesthetic, as exemplified by their “little girl dresses” can be perceived as a form of autonomy rather than endorsing links between feminine passivity and derogation. This point is especially important since the cultural construction of female appearance tends to be defined according to binaries premised on views of women’s sexuality. (2014b: 268)

In light of Monden’s statement, maid cosplay is evidently positioned in relation to these cultural constructions and definitions of womanhood, in which the more spectacularly girl-like one appears, the more that the illusion of girlhood is attained and maintained. However, this comes with its limits, much like how *lolita* fashion has its own rules by which its members strictly abide. Girl drag is executed in a variety of different ways, through enhancing one’s maid uniform and one’s semblance of a cute anime character to the elements of frills and ribbons, which Honda (2010) notes as being a key part of *hirahira*: the signs and symbols of girlhood. The costume as a whole consists of layering until one is the image of girlish perfection. It is a laborious process, as I found by donning the stockings, the shoes, the petticoats (there are multiple; the number you wear seems to correlate with the rise in your rank—the proof is in the “puffiness” of the dress), the dress itself, an apron (which you tie as a bow at the back), socks/tights, a bow on the collar (with an individual “soul” colour, which is a marker of your belonging in the group), a multitude of accessories, a wig, and, to top it off, the frilly headband. Then there is the make-up: powders, creams, false eyelashes, face glitter, sequins, lots of blush, bright eyeshadow, colour. And finally, one of the equally most important aspects of the maid outfit: the accessories.

Reflection 7.3

Field Diary: The Accessories

One arm of a maid: Beads, pastels, rose bead bracelets, silk lace frilly cuffs, plastic pink flower vines twining from the wrist, two bracelets of large pearly white, pale pink and purple round beads, glitter spiral hair bobble, see-through glitter plastic ring with butterfly topping, acrylic nails with glittery pink nail polish and heart charms either pierced through the tips or glued on.

On the Neck: Pale pink buckle collar with rainbow shimmer heart dangle charm, two necklaces, one with plastic dog cartoon character, one with giant gem crystal. On Head: White wispy wig with pink and purple highlights, three-layered bows with bright shiny blue, glitter plastic bow top, pale purpley-blue large hair clips, pink sparkly mini crown, voluptuous pale yellow bow, giant fluffy pink and white cat ear headband, face gems.

Flowers, bows, pompoms, fluff, pink, frills, gems, bells, badges. These were the aspects which took the maid outfit to the next level of sparkle and spectacularity in which sparkle is a sign for girliness (Kearney, 2015). Indeed, we were essentially becoming caricatures of girlhood in the sense that, in a capitalist scape, girls are marketed towards and defined through consumer products (Kennedy, 2018; Yano, 2006). The next section relates this consumer *kawaii* to this image of artificially constructed (yet nonetheless lived in the sense that girls are consumers) girlhood that we adopted as maids. Thus I was able to reconnect with my girlhood through consumerism of *kawaii* objects and accessories. As Akita writes,

Kawaii objects (i.e artifacts) are often worn as extensions of one's body images, informing others of one's own charming nature and how one would like to be considered in the social world (McVeigh, 1996). *Kawaii* may be a mask, a "multi-toned masquerade, which can be both subversive and non-subversive, critical and non-critical, ambiguous and non ambiguous... [a *kawaii* mask that] is continually being redefined and modified as different political, social, and economic structures come into play".

(quoting Patel, Akita: 2005: 46)

A maid's accessories were like her badges and stripes. It was generally the case that the more accessories a maid had, the longer and more experienced she was as a maid cosplayer. I had no accessories when I began "maiding". After my first event, however, one maid gave me a charm, a *maneki neko* golden pin badge.¹⁴¹ Gifting each other accessories was an act of friendship and belonging in the group, reflecting the consumable nature of *kawaii* and its relation to girlhood. And while I could write just as much about the friendship aspects within the group, this chapter is limited to that aspect of girlhood that was symbolically represented by the maids that I met, in which their accessories and dress style was highly reflective of that. The more excessive one was in their accessorising, the more successful one was in their presentation as a *kawaii*, feminine caricature, which had the effect of detracting from explicit sexiness. Accessories were therefore a key component in the art of girl drag.

Hair and Girlhood

Fiona Handyside draws attention to the relation that long hair bears to girlhood. As she states, "Long hair and its malleability places the girl into a transnational and transracial culture of girl style; empowered modern girls display their hair" (2019: 357). This is apparent in both the transracial nature of anime and cosplay culture itself, with the wig signifying the artificially constructed nature of empowered femininity in a global, capitalist context. Notably, many of the cosplayers that I discuss throughout this thesis had short hair under their wigs. Indeed, while not all of the maids that I met chose to engage in wig-wearing, a large majority of those did.¹⁴² This necessarily added to the drag-like nature of cosplay in which wearing a wig was essential to completing one's temporary, spectacularly feminine guise.

¹⁴¹ *Maneki neko* is a cat bringing good fortune in Japanese culture.

¹⁴² All of the idol cosplayers that I met wore wigs as part of their cosplay. Indeed, as I discuss in chapter eight, one of the signs that an idol cosplay group was moving on from idol cosplay was in their decision to display their natural hair for their final performance.

Ponytails, waist-length strands, fringes, plaits, buns, bunches, there were a variety of different styles that one could choose for their spectacular maid persona. It became clear to me that the longer and more spectacular one's hair was, the more empowered and feminine one became, ultimately working to "reconcile power and beauty, independence and femininity" (Handyside, 2019: 358). I was unsure of what to do with mine; in the case of my first maid café, a 24-inch purple wig was recommended by my maid peers, as, "We don't have a purple-haired maid, so it would balance out the colours," they told me. During the first maid meeting, one of the maids sat behind me on the hotel bed and plaited my hair. It felt like I was back in primary school, where the girls would play hairdressers and plait each other's hair, placing daisy chains in it.

Since my actual hair was short, wearing a wig was so necessary for myself because having long tresses of hair would only add to my guise as a spectacularly feminine girl. On one event, I had remembered all elements of my costume, but alas, I had forgotten the key component: my wig. I considered my options: drive fifty minutes back to my accommodation, or, find another wig. Cosplaying without a wig was not an option for me as I felt that I could not effectively embody my persona as a maid without it; I felt naked and vulnerable until the wig was donned. It was this experience that led me to consider the wig as arguably the most important component of the maid costume—as important as the very frills that defined it. Hair therefore becomes the symbolically represented source of power for spectacularly feminine girliness: the "fairy princess ideal" (Handyside, 2019: 358).

Reflection 7.4

Field Diary: The Red Bloomers

It's day one of the event and we are getting ready. Nina (age 19) walks in from the bathroom with blood-stained bloomers.

“Has anyone got any spare safety shorts?” They ask. “Of all days, I got it today.”

“Safety” shorts are a key part of maid (and idol) cosplay, for the fact that many of the costumes consist of skirts and dresses that are above the knee and puff out. On top of this, many of the dances involve jumps and moves that could be potentially revealing. Safety shorts are therefore “safe” because they cover your bottom and thighs, away from the scrutiny of others.

None of us had any spare shorts, in which the colour white is the worst colour for occurrences like this. I remember having a similar worry which fled through my mind during one of the events. What if I got my period and bled through my bloomers?

“I’m bloated too, which is not a good look!” Nina says.

In the end, Nina chose to wear their bright pink pyjama shorts as safety shorts instead. There are certain improvisations that maids go through behind the scenes to make their characters’ “look” work. It made me think of how having the body of a woman is not conducive to being a maid. To be a good maid you need to be ethereal; beyond the human, abject body with its menstruating, bodily functions (Kristeva, 1982).

The Dress

At the first event where I was a maid, I borrowed a dress from Maid Maddie, “It’s a size 2L. It’s always best to choose a bigger size because it means you can move more when you’re dancing,” she told me. This maid café bought its dresses from a costume retailer in Japan, which often meant negotiating a more petite size market. For example, when I bought my own dress, I found that it constricted my chest even though I had selected one 3 sizes larger than my equivalent in the UK. 19-year old Nina, on the other hand, had come back from their year at university to find that their dress no longer fit their body. They were now “hENCH as fuck,” as the others in the group remarked. Cosplaying as a maid now left them with deep bruises in their upper arms from where the frilly, puffed shoulder cuffs had dug in. With all

this in mind, I thought about how the *kawaii* maid dress was not built for the figure of someone who was no longer a *shōjo*. But this did not stop the members from wearing their costumes. Many of the maids resorted to altering their maid dresses by unstitching the sides and padding it out with black t-shirt fabric (“so that it has more give,” as one maid told me).

Wearing the dress for the first few times was an uncomfortable (and itchy) experience—but this was the price that I needed to pay for “fitting in”, so to speak. It reminded me of the first time I tried on a bra as a tween. “You’ll get used to it,” mum said when I complained about feeling hindered and restricted. And just like the bra, I eventually became accustomed to all of the uncomfortable, confining elements of the maid dress; I even started to enjoy them. Yes, the petticoat was unwieldy and large, but there was something about it which made it, “impossible to walk down corridors without skipping,” as Kai put it. I felt like an angel-fairy-princess. There was something very satisfying to being complete in one’s uniform, almost like it was a coat of armour (Carriger, 2019).¹⁴³ The way that the uniform scooped and moulded my body was a discomfort that I grew used to. In fact, after a full weekend of being a maid at a convention, returning to the usual loose-fitting clothes that I usually wore felt weird. I had become accustomed to feeling tight and restricted, which became reflected in my daily dress of jeans and tops which clung to my figure (something that, before the research, I was keen to hide behind t-shirts and baggy trousers). Moreover, the common “wig migraine” of cosplay that I experienced (the wig cap and wig digging into my scalp) became my new normal, to the extent that I began to feel naked without it. Six months of performing the maid role, I began to wear wigs and make-up (albeit less colourful and more muted) as part of my day-to-day. My peers and family noticed it and remarked on it in ways that differed from how I was received in a convention context (see Reflection 8.8). I

¹⁴³ Like the J-fashion subculture *gyaru* (although, arguably aesthetically less extreme in most cases of the maid café cosplay that I observed) maid cosplay might be observed as “a strategic gender performance, depicted as not merely a masquerade but an even more aggressive armour, which is obviously the practice of the feminine but far from the normative” (Iseri, 2015: 145).

wondered, did my involvement in maid cafés have any correlation with my graduating from my rather neutral appearance into a more conventionally (note, mature) feminine form? Or was this just a marker of the inevitable as part of my socialisation into feminine visibility as part of the coming of age process? Regardless, as the following brief examples taken from my fieldnotes show, becoming a maid allowed me to embrace a spectacularly feminine side to myself that I would have otherwise rejected in daily life. I began to see becoming a maid as a means of playing with the more “girly” aspects that I had enjoyed as a child (dressing up as a princess, for instance) without having to ascribe to the more unpalatable aspects that I had associated with being a spectacularly feminine subject who comes of age in the eyes of society. That is, I was able to enjoy expressing myself in a way without feeling that it justified the inevitable and uncomfortable sexual objectification that I expected to receive by dressing this way. To me, it was at this point where it became clear that becoming a maid was taking back control over one’s feminine autonomy and anatomy, an exercise in control over one’s femininity as something that need not be synonymous with sexualisation. Furthermore, I began to consider the idea that my visceral disavowal of my femininity as a teenager had ultimately been rooted in my fear of being subjugated, objectified and turned into a sexual object against my will.

Dressing like a girl was pleasurable in the sense that, justifiably, you were doing it for yourself. We were able to exercise our capacities as girls without the fear of being looked at or objectified because, firstly, we were *kawaii* objects of *moe* as opposed to sexy objects of desire, and, secondly, even if we became the objects of a sexualising gaze, we were detached from our actual selves via cosplay. Indeed, if becoming a woman is a process of fragmentation and alienation (Bartky, 1982), then, potentially, we were taking active steps towards that by becoming temporarily alienated from ourselves via cosplay. Due to my experience as a maid, I began to see cosplay as a means by which I could become feminine at

will and distance myself from the consequences of it. Being a maid, just as being an idol cosplayer, was therefore the training ground for becoming spectacularly feminine free from the judgement and scrutiny (how old are you supposed to be; what kind of value are you representing) that are necessarily defined by your sign-value as an emerging-woman: being a sexual object.

Reflection 7.5

Field Diary Excerpts: Becoming Spectacularly Feminine, an Evolution

Month 1: First event

I had to use another maid's white face powder to lighten it and look more doll-like because, according to the maids, my foundation (usually worn for daily use) was "a bit too dark". Regardless of anyone's actual race, it's clear what role we are playing: the privileged white girl (as marked by her "posh" accent, princess-like dress and the fact that she lives in a mansion). White tips around the eyes to make your eyes seem larger and more ethereal. Sequins under eyes and glitter eyeliner, stickers for the face. A flick of eyeliner, a sweep of glitter, a glow of highlighter. I felt inadequate because all the maids are so well-put-together and I wasn't spectacular enough.

Month 3: Second event

Me: "I've put my foundation on, what comes next?"

Nel: "I dunno, I'm blagging it as much as you."

It made me realise that the lack of subtlety required means that you can't go wrong. There is no such thing as over-the-top. If you fail at make-up, it doesn't matter, because you're not you. You're a maid. You're supposed to be over-the-top. Hence girl *drag*. Wider society scrutinises womanhood for subtleties that are not required in the maid café.

Month 5: Fourth Event

Looking through my selfies, I can separate them into two categories: my “regular” self (no make-up, short hair), and my “research” self (drag-like make-up, spectacular wigs). I’ve noticed lately that there are now selfies that are in between these two categories. Selfies of myself in daily clothes with winged eyeliner, foundation and lipstick.

Month 5: At Home

I chose to wear make-up at home for the first time when my family was visiting. “I think one side is higher than the other,” my nan’s husband commented on my winged eyeliner. In fact, it was the talk of the party: my appearance. “Look at your hair, your eye make-up, which foundation do you use?”

And the question everyone fears on their appearance: “Is it real?”

You don’t have to worry about that in a convention context. Of course it’s fake: it’s cosplay! As a teenager I resented this attention and wanted to be invisible. Now I was strong enough to tolerate it.

Month 6: Sixth Event

I downloaded Snow (a beauty filter selfie app) unironically. Not for my maid character, but for me. I told this to Maddie.

Maddie: “Snow is great until you realise that you will never be as pretty as the filter you are using because, in the filter, you look like a doll. It’s horribly depressing.”

Before the event, I took so many selfies of myself (in maid form) this morning on Snow that my phone battery died. I had an electronic bus ticket on it too, but the driver waved me on even though I couldn’t show it to him. Was this because of how I looked? Are there special rewards and benefits to looking a certain way that makes me want to do it more and more?

Reflection 7.6

Maid Cosplay: A White Fantasy?

Continuing my reflection above in Field Diary 1, by far the majority of maid cosplayers that I observed in the UK were white. This has certain implications when we consider that, in the context of hegemony, certain bodies are able to become more visible and spectacular than others. Even though there were maids of colour that I met, they were still arguably performing a vision of girlhood that was underpinned by discourses of privileged femininity, in which, as Cherland states, “[For girls,] performing middle class [is] bound up with performing whiteness and performing femininity” (Cherland, 2005: 103). Indeed, *shōjo* culture itself emerged from the historical origins of middle-class, educated girls in Japan who looked towards Europe for fantasy and escapism: “Innocent, cute style (*shōjo-kei*) tended to be as covertly European and white in orientation as it was extrovertly asexual” (Kinsella, 2014: 134). Has white girlhood become a sign for asexuality and innocence then? The performances of maid cosplayers may be interpreted as engaging with a behaviour that exaggerates the performance of ideal femininity as something that is ideologically white, middle-class and “innocent” (a girl). That is, cosplayers were doing girlhood insofar as it is an ideological construct of a patriarchal capitalist agenda. Therefore, necessarily, maid cosplay in a UK context may be read as playing with a fantasy of the privileged neoliberal self in which whiteness is implicated. As Scharff states, “the neoliberal self, closely tied to the ability to consume, is distinctly middle class” (2014). So, in this way, performing the privileged girl (or maid) via cosplay is arguably a means of exploring one’s hegemonically-empowered identity as a neoliberal subject, which whiteness pervades. Performances which are culturally attributed to those who are “white, middle class, and female” are “culturally approved and culturally *required*” for girls in this bracket as a means of defining what it means to be ideologically feminine (italics in original, Cherland, 2005: 104). Therefore, cosplay “offer[s] white girls fantasies through which they can perform white (middle-class and female) identity” (Cherland,

2005: 109). Or, to take this further, *shōjo* culture offers a performative fantasy of the girl, such as Alice, who becomes the epitomised ideal of femininity in capitalist, patriarchal societies: rich and white, and yet, “innocent, vulnerable, and helpless” (Cherland, 2005: 104). Alice, herself a middle-class imagining of white girlhood becomes the figurehead of doing girlhood and doing femininity which is potentially why her symbolism is so pervasive in maid café and *kawaii* contexts.¹⁴⁴ However, in spite of the certain resonances that came through on my observations of maid cosplay as potentially evoking discourses of whiteness, this is necessarily troubled by the fact that these personas were notably derived from Japanese media which cannot be raced necessarily as white, but rather, hybridic. Therefore, insofar as whiteness is an ideological construct and performance, the cosplayers of this study may be observed as performing girlhood as a fantasy of innocence, class and “racial privilege” (Cherland, 2005: 109) in which whiteness has become implicated. Indeed, what is important to note is how the performance of innocence is characteristic to girl drag as a performative disavowal of sexualisation. Therefore, if the performances of the cosplayers of this chapter are to be read as white, then this hints at persistent discourses that associate innocence and girlhood together with whiteness. Ultimately then, the “whiteness” of cosplayers’ performances alludes to the seemingly omnipresent, uncanny symbolism of Alice as someone who both embodies and subverts that hegemonically-informed innocence in her place as a white girl.

Act Like a Girl

[A]s an adult woman entering the teenage world, I repeatedly had to confront the extreme physicality of this world. I had forgotten in my own adult socialization how much I had learned to control and contain bodily action. As

¹⁴⁴ I reflect on those instances where I interacted with two non-white maid cosplayers (one mixed race, one black). The former was well-established in her performance as an experienced “rich girl” maid persona executed to comedic effect (Maid Madeline in reflection 6.2). The latter was no longer a maid cosplayer after being ousted by her group. (Was this an example of exclusionary bullying in a maid cosplay context?) All of the other maids that I met were white (with the exception of two cosplayers from East Asian families and one South Asian). Arguably then, white cosplayers in the UK have more access to these performances of privileged femininity. Developing my research in the future, I intend to reach out to the maids of colour that I met and craft their respective testimonies in light of these factors.

I engaged more intimately with the teenage world I realized that I had to “unlearn” my adult body: I had to learn again to be more relaxed, to be “silly”.
(Bloustien, 2003: 9)

Gerry Bloustien, in her ethnographic study of girls, discussed her approach to immersing herself more fully in her research by “unlearning” her adult body, and this was something that I experienced myself. One of the aspects I had the most trouble with was developing a persona for the characters I embodied which necessarily had to be girl-like and exaggeratedly so. Indeed, becoming a maid presents an opportunity to become as multifaceted as an anime character, in which the range of personality types for girls are well-represented and plentiful. As PrincessPeachie says in her video, these are some of the different types of feminine personas available for maids to perform as based on tropes of anime: “Tsundere” (Harsh outside, soft inside); “Kuudere” (Cool type); “Imouto” (little sister type); “Nadeshiko” (ideal woman—mature, sensible, haughty, delicate, feminine); “Dojikko” (clumsy girl); “Bokukko” (tomboy/active agentic); “Dandere” (shy and aloof).¹⁴⁵ These were just some of the persona character types that I observed of maid characters on offer at each café—not just girls, but: witches, snow maidens, *yōkai* (supernatural apparitions in Japanese folklore), robots, cyborgs, delinquent gang leaders, demons, fairies, aliens, cat girls, dog girls,¹⁴⁶ gamer girls, greedy girls, idol girls, sword-wielding heroines, heiresses, the *shōjo* embodiment of space and time, the demon ex-lover of Marie Antionette. In terms of all the personalities, each one fitted into a dichotomy, usually under the category of “good” or “bad” at varying levels of contrast and extremity depending on the café. Notably, this adheres to discourses of girls as either good or bad (Miller & Bardsley, 2005). Good girl maids were kind, pleasant, agreeable, hardworking (the hardworkingness was true of all maids behind the scenes, as there is a lot of passion, time and effort put into creating and exercising a performance of one’s maid), sweet

¹⁴⁵ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnDh98wky9Y>

¹⁴⁶ As Sharp states, “The function of the animalized maid body in maid cafés is to evoke *moe* and *kawaii*” (2011: 74).

and had good behaviour and morals. Bad girl maids, on the other hand, had a hint of darkness to them, power-hungry, greedy, sadistic, superior, rebellious, stubborn, evil and cheeky (in a Disney villain-type sense—there was no swearing or references to drugs or sex. As one head maid told me, “If you don’t see it at Disneyland, you don’t see it at the café.”). Both roles worked together to produce a performance that was balanced and humorous: without the “good girl” maids, the “bad girl” maids had no one to taunt; the “good girl” maids needed someone to scold for being “bad”. Both elements served to define each side of the dichotomy via contrast, while nevertheless being examples of doing gender “correctly” as long as her performance and behaviour adhered to the vision of girlish femininity. Overall, the girly, drag-like ways that the maids behaved like were a means of reclaiming their autonomy and control over the way they wanted to be seen: *not* as sexual objects, but as autonomous characters with personalities that detracted from the one available role relegated to women in UK media: sexy.

Cosplayers told me that there are usually two approaches to constructing a maid or butler persona. The first is an extension of your own personality (“I’m me, but a little bit extra,” as Abbie told me); the second involves adopting a personality that differs entirely from yours. Moreover, many maids told me of how their character had evolved over time, their personality changing dramatically and their aesthetic along with it. I was intrigued by the possibility that one’s maid persona may reflect a subversion of one’s own identity, a means of negotiating one’s subconscious desires, and, above all, being able to perform a character that would otherwise be disallowed in conventional UK society. Indeed, all of the maids that I observed shared one similar aspect: girlish immaturity. This is arguably because maid personas are generally framed around character tropes in anime, in which the figure of *shōjo* is hypervisible.

Laura Miller defines *burikko* (a term that is idiosyncratic to Japanese society) as a contradictory performance of exaggerated girlish femininity which “downplays or masks the adult sexuality of the woman doing it” (2004: 160); “a defense mechanism of mature women put in situations that might stigmatize them sexually” (Abbott, 2015: 17). *Burikko* “typically involves an over-emphasized high pitch of the voice, but also includes feigned naiveté, stupidity, or innocence, and the use of toddler-like language” (Abbott, 2015: 17) in which performing this way might allow a woman to unseriously assert herself. These were all characteristics of what I witnessed in certain maid cosplayer performers, some of which were more exaggerated than others. Intriguingly, Abbott notes,

This type of performance [...] is a transformative bid of Japanese women to control the way they are sexualized at the price of being labelled inappropriately “immature.” A western comparison is tomboyism. (2015: 18)

If *burikko* is a hyperfeminine version of tomboyism, might there be any chance that the self-defined tomboys of my study might be seen as performing a form of *burikko* as a means of escaping from their positions as feminine pariahs? Regardless, it was apparent to me that performing this type of exaggerated girlishness served to exaggerate each maid’s *kawaii* (and *shōjo*) likeness, defying any potential sexualisation via their immaturity.

However, I am not sure if what I saw of the maids was a performance that could be defined as wholly *burikko* due to the fact that, although voices were slightly high-pitched and certain words were pronounced differently to evoke a certain childishness (“refwain” as opposed to “refrain”, for example), the extremity that I associate with *burikko* was somewhat muted in the performances I observed, with certain maids speaking in quiet voices, and certain mannerisms such as doing a bob with the knees when to say, “Thank you so much”, squealing and hiding smiles behind their manicured hands, or doing a pigeon-toed shuffle

run. Naivete and stupidity was only present in some of the maids insofar as it aligned with their characters (whereas the mildness and shyness of some of the other maids was redeemed by their exaggerated and bright *kawaii* appearance). One maid exaggerated the nervousness and incompetence of her maid character (such as having the inability to pour tea and apologising repeatedly) as a means of making fun of and playing on the social anxiety that she experienced in daily life. As I heard one maid (behind the scenes) say about one of the maids in another café with affection, “I love Maid Chichi, because she is such a dumb bitch.” Being a maid was therefore an opportunity to unseriously perform a feminine stereotype that is produced via hegemony (for example, the “dumb bitch”—a caricature of the feminine as a body with no mind or subjectivity) without suffering the consequences of actually being that persona. Moreover, the space of the maid persona afforded cosplayers the means of performing femininity while still being “goofy” (as I quoted Poppy previously) in which acting gracelessly feminine implicitly rejected the confinements of mature femininity.

I also came to consider acting “like a girl” as a means of being able to say and do anything one liked and getting away with it, due to being *kawaii*. In two particular maid cafés I attended as a customer, a handful of the maids were one or a combination of the following: bossy, obstinate, demanding, overly confident, narcissistic, argumentative, pessimistic, wilful, unguardedly rude and conceited. Here is an example of one of the more masterful improvisations of one’s narcissistic, leader girl maid persona, as demonstrated by Maid Boudica in a live-streaming Q+A:

Q: Who can answer our first question, let’s see, Maid Boudica can go first.

Maid Boudica: Well of course I can go first, because I’m number one!

Q: What are your favourite songs to perform?

Maid Boudica: Oh, that's a hard one, because I'm so GOOD at everything I do, it's hard to pick a favourite. [...]

Q: And what's your favourite game to play in the café?

Maid Boudica: I like it when somebody loses and then I get them to stand up and then shout that they're a *baka*. Because everybody is.¹⁴⁷

Incorporating the various tropes of anime in order to execute well one's maid character played to the humour of the café's audience. I also became interested in the fact that the types of personalities that the maids were performing would not be socially acceptable in women (both in the UK and globally). The *kawaii* appearance of each maid transformed her unsavoury or ugly behaviour into *moe*, in which all rudeness was forgiven because, as the image of *kawaii* girls, they were ultimately lovable. I therefore came to see being a maid as an opportunity to enjoy a subjectivity that is allowed in cute anime girls but disallowed in socialised women. In other words, taking on the guise of a girl in maid form allowed for an agency that one's status as an adult, in the subject position of female, would not permit, precisely because one's spectacularly *kawaii* and girly appearance and performance redeemed one's transgressions. This immature behaviour served to heighten the illusion of one's girlish immaturity and thus play the part well, lending itself to the performance of girl drag.

Reflection 7.7

Playing it Candid

Three maids stand together in front of another maid who takes photos of them with her phone. They huddle close to each other, swishing their wigs away from their faces and adjusting their dresses and petticoats. "Okay now, Sel, if you turn that way, that's it," the photographer maid directs them. The maids pose together, leaning on one another, kissing each other's cheeks, standing on one leg, the other

¹⁴⁷ *Baka* means "idiot" in Japanese, a trope of anime and Japanese media.

foot pointed with a bent knee. These maids are all posing pros. The scene continues for a few minutes until one of the maids turns to the others, saying, “Let’s try candid.” The others agree, and the absurdity begins.

This was the first time I’d ever heard of “candid” posing, in which the subjects of the photograph engage with poses and behaviour so as to make them naturalistic in the photo. The reality outside of the shot is less so. In this case, the maids all started contorting their faces as though they were ecstatically and joyously interacting with one another as though they were in a silent film. Apparently having the time of their lives, their mimed laughter and ecstasy was soundless. I’d call it “ghost posing” in the sense that it may look authentically real in the final photo, but in real life—well, it looks bizarre. There is no truth to this candidness; it’s all fake. In a sense, the candid pose mirrors our experience of the truth in daily, hegemonic life. Sure, the hegemonically gendered figures that are presented to us *seem* natural and real, but this is at a surface level. In reality, it is constrained and grotesque, a physical illustration of the attainment of self-discipline and restraint (Foucault, 1995). Just how candid is candid?

Dance Like a Girl



Fig. 7.4.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ 7.4. Two girls dancing a fan-made choreography of Hatsune Miku’s “Viva Happy”. Available at: <https://youtu.be/kiDwotppUX0>

There is a specific positive style of feminine body comportment and movement, which is learned as the girl comes to understand that she is a girl. [...]The girl learns actively to hamper her movements. [...] The more a girl assumes her status as feminine, the more she takes herself to be fragile and immobile, and the more she actively enacts her own body inhibition.

(Young, 1980: 153)

Iris Marion Young's seminal paper, "Throwing like a girl", brought to light the ways in which "Feminine bodily existence is an *inhibited intentionality*" (italics in original, Young, 1980: 146). As seen in the example of throwing, the female subject is inhibited in the way that she moves her body, not as a biological expression, but rather as a reflection of her socialisation as a female subject within a patriarchal society. Young's article focused mainly on "task-orientated body activities," (1980: 155), whereas I use dance as my point of focus: a means of bodily expression, of which its task purportedly is to express and entertain. The maid café employs dancing as a means of expressing the girliness of its maids: the more exaggeratedly girly the dance moves are, the more girl-like one appears, able to enjoy the subject positionality of a girl who is yet to be socially constrained. Intriguingly, the various dances that I observed in the maid cafés were—as much as Young's theory of body comportment applies (in that the moves were restricted)—paradoxical in their liberated-constricted movement. As I will explore, the dance moves were drag-like in their expression of girliness via dance. Nonetheless, there was an aspect of energetic liberation behind the dances, as though expressing the body as an agentic girl, who dances, pathetically yet free from the concern of the sexualising gaze of those watching her.

Dance performance was something which I had to engage with myself in order to become a maid and gain access to the inner world of maid cafés. As part of my audition, I had to learn and submit a video of myself dancing to popular Japanese vocaloid Hatsune Miku's "Viva Happy" (2015).¹⁴⁹ The dance had been pre-choreographed by female Japanese

¹⁴⁹ A vocaloid is the product of a Japanese-pioneered voice-synthesising software, programmed to sing. Popularised via the internet since the early 2000s, vocaloids often take the image of an anime *shōjo*.

fans of Miku, further performed by two Japanese girls in a YouTube video (pictured above). The video had been “mirrored” (flipped horizontally) by the user who had uploaded it, in order so that when viewers learned and copied (“mirrored”) the dance, they would be performing the routine as the original dancers did, as viewed on stage. One of the contradictions which I came to realise resonated with Young’s observations: in order to enact this *kawaii* dance effectively, I had to perform in an uninhibited (free) manner which was nonetheless restricted in its movements. My experience of dancing in the maid café reflected Young’s theory in its visible embodiment of the “three modalities of feminine motility”: “ambiguous transcendence”, “inhibited intentionality” and a “discontinuous unity with [the body’s] surroundings” (Young, 1980: 145). The following exploration has been developed from my fieldnotes of my experience of learning my audition dance and the struggles I encountered at performing this vision of girliness in the body of a woman.

Reflection 7.8

Learning to “Dance Like a Girl”

I clicked play and immediately searched for the mute button. The music was loud, wild and electronic. If an energy-drink was made into a song and infused with helium, this would be it. Whereas Miku’s high-pitched voice irritated me now, ten years ago this kind of exuberantly futuristic song would have filled me with excitement. Now it filled me with dread. The two girls dancing in the video were endearing in their girlish energy, exaggerated movements and comical expressions, like *kawaii* circus mimes. Watching the video was one thing, but imagining myself dancing it was another. Fast-forward two weeks later, after hours of practicing the routine daily. “It’s clear that you’ve learnt all the moves,” my sister Frida said after I showed her the fruits of my efforts. “But you need to stop dancing like a man and be more cute. Also—”

Frida: Some of your dancing is too sexy.

Me: So I dance sexily *and* like a man? How is that possible?

Frida: I don't know. But somehow you do it.

It was my Achilles heel in the whole arrangement: how was I supposed to be cute when I was far from it and felt ridiculous at the thought of it? Perhaps I had been cute as a girl. But just as burnt cakes cannot be restored to their original state of flour, sugar and eggs, so too was it impossible for me to revert to my state of girl. Or was it? While I had vanquished my girlhood long ago, the maid café became the means of facing and embracing it once more, as artificial as it seemed to me.

Sexiness was by default attributed to the body of the dancing woman, both by myself and by the others who watched me (Mulvey, 1989). And this is something that would have to be self-monitored and regulated if I was to avoid this sexualising gaze. I had to do the impossible: self-police my movements so that they would not seem sensual or draw attention to my physique AND dance like I was free from the woman's burden of worrying about being scrutinised and sexually fragmented.

As contradictory as my own dancing seemed (sensuous and masculine, apparently), watching the video more intently I noticed that there was also an element of contradiction to the way that the girls moved: both energetic and weak.¹⁵⁰ The dance, when done correctly, existed to hyperbolise one's girliness. But how might one exactly dance like a girl?

Dancing in such a fashion became a case of regulating my body's movements so as to be unsexualisable; sexless. Being the case that I was not petite, I had to try even harder to regulate my movements so that the curvature of my body and its aspects (notably, my ass and tits) were less visible. For example, throwing my arms and legs around was acceptable but swishing my hips and thrusting out my chest and bottom was not. Dancing was something I naturally did when I was uninhibited, so I

¹⁵⁰ Or, in the words of 14-year-old former idol cosplayer, Darsha, on the dancers of *Love Live!*: "pathetic".

had to force myself to regulate and observe every pose, disciplining my dancing so I would both adhere to and protect the asexuality of the image I was projecting. Foucault (1995) observed that the gaze of society acts as a form of self-discipline for the socialised subject. That is, being aware that one is being watched causes the subject to monitor their behaviour. As such, I was monitoring my behaviour because I was aware that the role I was playing needed to be cute. “When you run on the spot, you’re not actually running anywhere. Kick your bottom instead and turn your feet inward a bit. Flail a little” Frida instructed. I was used to running in the sense of it being a task of force and agility. This kind of running, however, would get you nowhere. But that was surely the point: running on the spot was a metaphor for the bound feminine subject who moves with futility. Regressing my movements in such a way, I felt stupid, infantile. I began to mock it, parodying myself as a pathetic girl. “That’s it, you’re getting it!” my sister said. “Change your facial expression though. That’s not cute at all.”

It was only through parodying an essentialised girliness that I was able to fully “get into role” for the maid café. That is, I had to become an artificial caricature of girlhood. Young remarks that the essence of throwing or doing like a girl lies in the fact that, “the whole body is not put into fluid and directed motion, but rather [...] the motion is concentrated in one body part” (1980: 143). Moreover, the feminine subject “tends not to reach, extend, lean, stretch, and follow through in the direction of her intention” (*Ibid.*). As energetic as the dancers in the video were, their movements detracted from a direction of agency such as when “the body aims at the accomplishment of a definite purpose or task” (Young, 1980: 140). My sister pointed out that, as large as the movements of the dancing girls seemed, they did not exaggerate the movement of their entire bodies. This was where the mistake lay in my dancing. Rather, it was only the movement of their limbs that seemed expansive—to a certain extent: their torso itself was statically bound like they were puppets on a string. These were all characteristics of the dance moves that I observed and adopted myself. For example, one

move involved running on the spot and punching the sky like a flailing cheerleader. Another included jumping so high your knees came to your chest, arms swooping back as though flying on the spot. And the hardest move of all: you had to smile convincingly while doing it. The helplessness of the moves was contradicted (or was it complemented?) by the eager-to-please, energetic nature of the girls.

“Lots of energy, but not ‘manly/masculine’ energy. Cute, over-the-top energy. The running move is directionless and goalless.” I wrote in my field diary and underlined three times. What is the significance of enacting such a bodily performance? Because to do so draws attention to the parody of girliness, a revelry in its practice which implicitly detracts from the bodily reality of womanhood. It is the covering of one masquerade by another. Most importantly, however, to perform such a dance is to express one’s joy at the state of being a girl. Although the movements of girl-drag are restricted—in the sense that they are characterised “by a failure to make full use of the body’s spatial and lateral potentialities” (Young, 1980: 142)—they are nonetheless liberated from the restriction one bears as a sexualised object. One thus declares their dancing body to be admired for its asexual qualities as opposed to being submitted to a gaze which automatically decrees that such movement is orientated for the heterosexual pleasure of men. Cosplaying as a maid is a means of displaying how unselfconscious (and unaware of being looked at) you are. In this regard, you reclaim your girlhood and defy what society decrees as that marker of womanhood. Thus your socialisation is thwarted temporarily.

I was reminded of a memory of mine, age nine, choreographing a dance with my six-year-old sister to “The Ketchup Song” (2002). We included the dance moves of butt slapping and hip wiggling because—well, they were funny. We laughed at ourselves and our silliness. And so we organised a performance for our parents, our uncle and his wife, thinking that they would laugh as much as we did. They did not laugh, and their expressions were

troubled. At the time I was disappointed that my dancing did not garner the comedic reaction that I had sought. “Why do men and boys get laughed at for dancing like this, but girls and women don’t?” I thought. The answer is, the sexual objectification of boys and men is less of a reality which is what makes it ridiculous and funny. My parodying of sexiness was no longer ridiculous because, marked by the fact that I was nearly ten years old, the possibility of me being acceptably perceived as an actual sexual object was, in reality, only a few years away, in which I existed among discourses where my “innocence” as a child was easily corruptible. It was then that I remember feeling self-conscious. Retrospectively, however, I can imagine the moral panic that the adults were experiencing at the apparent self-sexualisation of their daughters/nieces. Our performance might have been likened to that of the girl-star Shirley Temple’s performances as a sultry toddler which she performed to the amusement of her adult audience (in, Hatch: 2015). However, much like Kristen Hatch notes (2015) audiences at the time were endeared by Temple’s performances because, under the cultural imagination, it was impossible for her to be imagined as a sexual object. The comedy is found in her knowingly eroticised performance as a subject who is expected to be innocent of sexuality altogether, in her place as a little girl (Walkerdine, 1998). Nevertheless, understandings of girlhood, innocence and sexuality have changed since Temple’s time. My comical sensuality as a child became interpreted as a sexual potentiality against my will.

In light of my memory of parodying a sexiness that belies womanhood, my rendition as a maid was the reverse. I was the woman parodying the asexual hyperfemininity of girliness; the more exaggeratedly I could enact it, the more entertaining it would be to myself and my audience. This is something which developed the more I practised it. I learned seven dances in total.¹⁵¹ I broke down each video into the different poses and observed how each dancer exuded cute girliness. Some of the dance moves cheekily wavered on the line of

¹⁵¹ Some of the dances were from the anime *Love Live!* which demonstrates its affective *shōjo* resonance across the two cosplay groups of idol and maid café cosplayers.

sexiness. For example, there was a thigh-slapping move in one of the dances, or, in Viva Happy where the girls link arms and do the can-can. Indeed, the more girl-like one appeared, the apparent sexiness of one's dancing could serve to heighten one's subversiveness and cuteness. Rather than being interpretable as sexy, it is interpretable as fun and cheeky; a rendition of girl power. As playful and innocent as the dance moves appear when danced by its girlish subjects, the can-can nonetheless bears an association with France's cabaret scene, originally considered licentious for the fact that it revealed the dancer's bloomers underneath her dress. The maid dress included bloomers too, as part of its outfit. Was this a game of how many references to sexualisation could one make, in order so that one could disavow just that with one's performance of girlishness? (Extra points for the more ambiguously sexualised references one can make.) Indeed, the more contradictory you were, the better you played the part. Might the contrast between sexualisation and girlish innocence serve to reinforce one's girliness *and* simultaneously heighten the ideal of the spectacularly feminine?

“What's The Best Way to Learn a Dance?”

When I envisioned a maid's training, I imagined a base camp style of training, where each maid is moulded into the ideal cute maid. However, I received no training in the maid cafés that I shadowed. Rather, becoming a maid was a means of personally researching through browsing the internet and watching anime—homework which is actively sought by cosplayers, imagining and practising in one's spare time, usually alone and in one's bedroom. This became the case for myself, dancing in front of my laptop for two hours each night in the weeks leading up to a café event. One of the maids told me that she had no experience of choreographed dancing prior to joining the maid café. Five years later, she knew twelve dances and danced in more than half of the setlist for each event. Through the maid café then, she had trained herself in the performance of a certain femininity.

“What’s the best way to learn a dance?” I asked. She told me that her preferred way of learning a dance (a technique which was also adopted by the others in the group) was to,

Watch a mirrored video of the dance on loop constantly until I can’t think of anything else and the dance has seared itself into my brain. It’ll get to the point that I’ve watched the video so many times that I can actually see it in my mind without watching it. The problem is actually getting my body to do the dance. *That’s the hard part.*

And so I attempted this approach as well, trying to watch a dance video as many times as I could before learning it. Such an act lends itself to the obsessive-like passion that I observed in anime convention culture (which, incidentally, is also characteristic of people who have autism). Attempting to “sear” the video into my brain, I considered the following. As feminine pariahs, were we conditioning ourselves into becoming the ideological vision of hyperfemininity; going back in time and rewriting the past, becoming a girly girl to repent our tomboy sins? Was this a self-imposed aversion or “conversion” therapy?¹⁵² Was this the penance to pay for our years of not conforming in the first place; to relearn the basics of femininity as expected in girlhood, starting with dance?

Dance Practice

One of the uncanniest synchronicities of my research was the fact that one of the maid cafés I observed held their dance practices in a studio, “Dancing Little Starz”, for girls below the age of ten. Every weekend, the maid café members met together to practice their dance routines for convention performances after classes for the day had finished and the studio was empty. On one of the practices, we had gotten to the studio earlier than planned and there was a class in session. Girls, aged 5 to 9 were dancing to songs from *The Greatest Showman* and *Wicked*.

¹⁵² Conversion therapy is associated with religious extremist groups that employ invasive and damaging practices to force heterosexuality onto queer subjects; an attempt to condition the non-conforming into the hegemonic ideal.

We waited in the kitchen area by the entrance which was decorated with black sparkling streamers that hung in the doorway. The maids mimed and sang along quietly to the music as we heard the padding of small feet on the dance floor. Class ended and fathers came to pick up their daughters. The following is a description of the studio from my field diary.

Reflection 7.9

Field Diary: The Studio

Decorated on the walls are paper dolls and crayon butterflies. Pictures of little girls in their leotards smiling, hair in buns. There are photos of the current students as well as pictures of the girls who have “graduated” from the school. Glittery pom poms in a pile in the corner (like the pile of petticoats that followed us around on our maid café events in hotel rooms). Printed on the wallpaper is a pattern of camera flashes, red carpet, golden ropes and the black outline of male figures. It was a paparazzi wallpaper of sorts, emphasising the connection of stardom and dance performance. The wallpaper decorating the room says, “Awards night... and the winner is”; “Hollywood with the stars”. I found it curious that the pattern of the printed silhouettes were men in suits holding the flashing cameras, as though to emphasise the gendered gaze watching you as you practised dancing—watching the regular dancers, who were all girls. As a space where girls learned to dance, the wallpaper that surrounded them was implicit in its message: all eyes (of the male gaze) are on you, equated with celebrity and, above all, desirable for girls to achieve (Kennedy, 2018). One of the maids points to the corner of the dance room: “I can tell you for sure that that bright pink suitcase is full of Bratz dolls.” I look around, there are boxes of tiny tap shoes. Mini chairs. A chart of the girls’ birthdays. The signs of girlhood and stardom surrounding us as we learn our equally girly dances.

One of the maids came to practice wearing a pastel pink *fuku* (pleated, school-uniform style) skirt with pink shorts underneath and pink trainers, a maid café brand t-shirt and a long grey wig with white pom-poms and bunches, purple pastel nails. Another maid was applying her make-up with her

unicorn/mermaid-style brushes, colourful eyeshadow and pallets, bright pink/purple hair, black lace and fishnets suspended with a poofy black skirt and a frilly black top that said “witch” on it. We were surrounded by girly stuff everywhere, making ourselves girly too. Even the dance book (“the big book of dances”, where each maid cosplayer’s dances were listed) was rainbow-pastel themed, with the phrase “unicorns are real” printed on it. Given the fact that we were all between the ages of 20 to 29, was this the next stage in our postfeminist, *shōjo* coming of age? Ever becoming in our girliness.

But what of actual girls? For brevity, in this chapter, I have been unable to represent the many individuals that I met who wanted to become maids but were unable to because they were too young. I came across tweens wanting to found their own maid cafés but not having the means to do it because they did not have the money, independence, legal means, or parental support for opening a business (especially one where the aesthetic is potentially interpreted as being related to “kink” or pandering to a paedophilic gaze). This included the three members, age thirteen to fourteen, who told me of their plans to start their own maid café together, called The Lovely Pochi Maids; fourteen-year-old Aiden told me how they wanted to become a butler/maid duo when they were old enough which would reflect their gender identity; fifteen-year-old Chloe approached an anime convention organiser with her dream of opening a maid café together.

The most intriguing of stories I came across, however, was Isabel who founded a café when she was thirteen. She was ousted by the other members of the maid café group she created (online) when they discovered her age. One of the group members, Katie, aged 18, felt bad for her and said that they would form their own maid café together. This created a rift which resulted in two separate cafés, of which they both went in different directions both in style and aesthetic. Meanwhile, Isabel developed her maid character and the two worked together to build the café. One day, however, when Isabel was age 14, she deleted all her social media accounts and quit the café without telling anyone. It turns out that she was being bullied heavily at school. Isabel’s removal of herself from the group arguably

worked as a form of self-discipline to avoid the bullying. I hope to discuss this younger demographic of aspiring maids in the future, acknowledging that, as much as the demographic of maid café cosplayers were individuals in their twenties, the *kawaii* maid was nonetheless an image that resonated with tweens and teenagers too.

Dance is a practice that is related to girlhood. So, when I was present at the dance rehearsal, I was able to perceive this relation between a performance of girlhood artifice (by the maid cosplayers) and the lived elements of girlhood. The paradox of the *shōjo* sensibility lies in its ability to resonate with individuals beyond age and gender, and yet, being tied to the figure and positionality of a girl, is nevertheless inherently tied to these concepts.

A Final Word on Girl Drag

Shōjo is not something that is simply out there. Rather it is something performed, and the sense of performance is crucial to its construction.

(Kotani, 2007: 59)

In my focus on girl drag in this chapter, I observed certain performances in the maid café as reflecting cultural, neoliberal understandings of girlhood both in a Japanese and British context. By becoming the image of girls, maid café cosplayers embody a *kawaii* form of the spectacularly feminine that detracts from sexualisation: *shōjo*. In the sense of my research, I was inquiring into girlhood through the cosplayers I spent time with. The maid café was our way of experiencing an agency of girlhood via enacting tropes of girls as depicted in anime. I came to understand the motivation for becoming a maid as lying in the ability to tap into the freedom of one's child/girlhood; a way of escaping the societal restrictions of adult/womanhood by becoming a girl again temporarily. Contradictorily, I found maid cosplay to be restricting because I felt that I had to become the vision of *kawaii* perfection in order to execute my performance seamlessly. Then again, this was surely the point of maid

cosplay: to avoid one's abject existence by becoming perfect. I had to admit that I was relieved when I was observing a maid café as a customer (not as a maid) because I knew the effort involved in getting ready and the exhaustion of performing (both dance and improvising as a "larger-than-life" character). In this sense, I recognised that there was a "labor of cute[ness]" involved in maid cosplay, as Gabriella Lukacs (2015) defines in her study of idols. Indeed, maid cosplay, as the "labor of human contact and interaction" (Oksala, 2016: 284) fits under the rubric of "affective labor" (Galbraith, 2013).

Remarking on the gap where *shōjo* meets girlhood, there were certain uncanny points where the artifice of girlish performance came through, during those times I observed members of the maid cafés interact with little girls. Indeed, in maid cosplay, we became the object of adoration by many—particularly little girls.¹⁵³ For example, at one convention, the maids met Aisla (age 8) and her parents. Aisla was wearing a purple maid dress that she had made herself; cosplaying as a maid. The dress looked like the kind of princess dress that is available for girls to buy at the Disney Store. Was it the fact that we were adults (as opposed to actual girls) wearing these dresses that lended others to read us as sexualised?

"I'm being a maid all weekend," Aisla said. She bounced around with excitement, dancing, twirling and leaping.

"She's been going to ballet classes," Mary, Aisla's mother said.

"Oh wow, you're very talented," Selena (19) said. "Do you know first position?"

Aisla positions her feet; Selena (a dancer herself) mirrors her.

"And the hands?"

Aisla moves her hands into first position.

¹⁵³ At one convention a mother approached our group and asked, "Would it be alright to have a photo with you and the bairn?" Everyone said yes and we posed for a photo, the four-year-old girl beaming in the middle, surrounded by the "big girls" that were us. "What do you say, Lizzie?" her mum said. Lizzie turned around and said in a small and grateful voice, "Thank you" gripping her fingers together in a clasp, smiling, her eyes glistening. To be cute and adored by the cute and adorable: it was a cycle of *moe* in which the abject reality of mature socialisation did not exist.

“That’s perfect! And how about second?”

The two went through the moves of ballet and everyone applauded. Aisla was dressed like a girl, acting like a girl, dancing like a girl—an actual girl performing the vision of girliness. Selena (in spectacular maid form) was also dressed as a girl, dancing like a girl and acting like a girl. It was at this point where the artifice of one performance met the reality of another. An ambiguous, hyperreal spectrum of girlhood with two “girls” from age 8 to age 19 practising ballet together. A decade between them, *shōjo* came forth: actual girlhood and girl drag. Nonetheless the authenticity of the interaction was not drag-like at all. By seeing this interaction, I was able to observe the connecting element where girl meets *shōjo* as something which went beyond consumer aesthetic (dresses and glitter) and activity (ballet dancing). Rather, this was girlhood affect; a *shōjo* sensibility (Swindle, 2011; Choi, 2016). When Aisla was wearing her purple maid dress, she looked like any ordinary little girl who dresses up as a princess. To be dressed in such a way was unquestionable and a statement of normality in her state as a girl. Fast-forward ten years, and to be dressed the way Aisla was dressed would be seen as abnormal in conventional UK society. Listening to the stories of the maids I met, in terms of affect, there was little difference in dressing up as a maid as an adult and dressing up as a princess as a little girl: both were avenues of spectacular femininity that afforded the wearer a delight and pleasure in feeling feminine and spectacular.

Aisla, age 8, had been a fan of the maids since she was 5 years old. I spoke with Aisla and her mother:

I brought her to AnimeCon one year and she just fell in love with [the maids]. Kids are supposed to grow up too early these days, so I really think having the maid café means that Aisla can be a girl a little bit longer. It’s a way for her to be a child and to be able to act her age. Obviously, she’s nine now so she isn’t aware of the sexual connotations of maids just yet.

(Mary, Aisla’s mother)

Just as Aisla was able to revel in her girlhood “a little bit longer”, so too were the maids themselves. This was the bond between the maids and the little girls, with the maid café maid acting as the anime equivalent of the Disney Princess in her ability to be enchanting; the object of girlhood wonder. I saw myself reflected in the eyes of the little girls who looked upon me in maid form, remembering myself as a five-year-old, looking up at the teenage girls in my ballet studio when they played angels in the nativity show, how grand and beautiful they seemed. Thus, as much as I have discussed the surface level of becoming a maid (how girlhood symbolically and artificially manifests itself in the forms of objects and performances), the affectual resonance of becoming a maid necessarily bears implications in this complex web of girliness that goes beyond the focus of this chapter. As Kotani argues,

A gap between girls and their *shōjo*-ness must be inscribed somewhere. Otherwise we will be drawn into a hegemonic structure that simply makes girls into girls.

(2007: 60)

There needs to be a clear distinction between *shōjo* and girls for *shōjo*-culture to be read properly: “*shōjo*-ness is not a condition or result of being born or raised; it is the ability to understand culture that is the condition for becoming ‘*shōjo*’” (Kotani, 2007: 60). Although the term *shōjo* derives from its use towards girls, there is a difference between the two which is marked by ambivalence and artificiality. I have suggested in this chapter that becoming a maid makes clear this gap between girls and their *shōjo*-ness, because, similar to drag, becoming a maid draws attention to girlish performance and aesthetics. This came through at particular moments when I saw maids (legally-defined adults behaving like little girls) and little girls interacting together. This ultimately alluded to our becomingness in our state as *shōjo*-like dolls, frozen in and existing outside of time, unable to be evaluated by a hegemonic gaze.

Conclusion

It seems to me that the future symbolic will be one in which femininity has multiple possibilities, where it is...released from the demand to be one thing, or to comply with a singular norm, the norm devised for it by phallogocentric means.

(Butler, quoted in: Paechter, 2006: 262)

In this chapter, I observed the context of the feminine cosplay subculture, maid cafés, exploring how a *shōjo* sensibility and girl drag both manifest as the performance of girlhood by individuals over the age of 18. This is part of the wider concern of my thesis which is interested in how coming of age (or, becoming spectacularly feminine) is negotiated via cosplay. The recurring theme of this chapter, along with many others, is the factor of sexualisation which shapes many girls' experiences during adolescence. Here I observed that cosplayers adopt girl-like performances (in dance and acting) and the aesthetic of the spectacular girly (in dress and accessories) in order to transcend the bodily and social reality of women in a patriarchal scape. I also drew attention to the various contradictions underpinning the maid (and maid costume) as a symbol who wavers, *shōjo*-style, avoiding the responsibilities of adulthood (i.e sex and labour) while nonetheless using the very guise of an individual who contributes to the patriarchal, capitalist social machine as a servant, dressed in a costume that is widely associated with appealing to a hetero-masculine sexualising gaze.

Maid cosplay is an enactment of a fantasy of girlhood; a performance of girl drag. Socialisation (coming of age) in the 21st century might be considered a period where maturity is valued and emphasised, contingent on the death of immaturity. What I find interesting is that, regardless of how the maids felt about maid cosplay themselves, they nonetheless had to justify it as something that was not supposed to be an object of fetishisation as others presumed it to be. I interpreted this as a metaphor for the subject

position of the woman herself. Just as the maid dress was felt by participants to be cute but seen by others as sexy, we might interpret it as a means of taking autonomy over one's sexualisation, taking control over one's coming of age insofar as it is controlled by societally-ruled time; to temporarily disavow the pain of being a socialised adult. Maid cafés thus act as an escape in their reinvigoration of a child-like world in which the image of the maid (in her *shōjo* symbolism) becomes a means of accessing this. A masquerade of girlhood, cosplaying as a maid is one means of becoming a girl again; enjoying the agency and freedom that is associated with being a girl and refuting compulsory maturity in the name of (cos)play.



Fig. 7.5.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ 7.5. Two maids hold hands as they walk to their event.

Chapter Eight: Idols in the Limelight



Fig. 8.1¹⁵⁵

Introduction

I would be remiss to not dedicate a chapter to arguably one of the most hypervisible feminine cosplay subcultures that I witnessed at all of the anime conventions I visited, from the South of England to the North of Scotland and everywhere in-between: girls performing dances in gaudishly colourful outfits and wigs, as inspired by the Japanese anime franchise, *Love Live!*.

¹⁵⁵ 8.1 Circle of idol cosplayers. A group of nine girls in a spectrum of colourful, bright wigs and dresses stand in a circle. They reach their gloved hands (the green convention entry wristbands glowing on their wrists) and touch their fingers together forming a nine-pointed star. This image is especially evocative in its drawing together of many the elements of *Love Live!* which comprise this zeitgeist of liminal tweenhood: female friendship, spectacular femininity and stardom.

Of the cosplay groups, so far I have observed “professional” female cosplayers who enter a cycle of presenting themselves as sex symbols for profit and recognition. Moreover, I have explored maid cafés and how they operate as spaces where cosplayers may become the figure of the *kawaii* and liminal *shōjo*. This chapter draws together the discussion of the former chapters in my exploration of another girl-like cosplay phenomenon: idol cosplayers who use the symbol of the *shōjo* to achieve self-actualisation via recognition, visibility and power as spectacularly feminine icons. Japan’s idol system was made particularly visible to media consciousness in the UK when British-born Beckii Cruel, age fourteen, was catapulted to fame and fandom in Japan via a viral video that she posted on YouTube of her dancing (2009). The BBC Three documentary (2010) traced the phenomenon of Japanese society where girls become hypervisible and luminous as girl idols, only to disappear when they reach maturity—something which, as Cruel’s trajectory showed, was not only limited to Japanese girls (see also, *Beckii Cruel: Independent Idol*, 2013).

While the symbolic girl (*shōjo*) subversively evades any hegemonic value placed on her as an emerging-woman, the cosplayers of this chapter emulate forms of *kawaii* femininity that relate specifically to the position of the tween, in which the following words of Yano relate,

Is it *kawaii* as sexy or sexy as *kawaii*? I suggest that it is both. The link between the cute and the sexual in Japan develops around the figure of the *shoujo* (premarital female), a category that interestingly spans a wide range of ages, stereotypically bracketed as the “twens,” but nebulously extending on either end to include females from elementary school through high school ages.

(Yano, 2006: 213)

If the symbol of the *shōjo* (encompassing feminine adolescence) becomes the point where female sexuality becomes defined and inscribed, then we may use her to deconstruct patriarchy’s definition of womanhood as something that is defined by sexual parameters. In

this chapter, I observe how idol groups provide the means for feminine pariahs to gain recognition in a convention context, acting as a form of training for the cycle of transformation that is required to be validated as a female subject when she comes of age. In particular, I observe *Love Live!* as an example of the postfeminist rhetoric which provides insights into contemporary modes of female socialisation; a means of enjoying the esteem and power attached to becoming the image of ideal, spectacular femininity under the justification of self-improvement (Evans *et al.* 2010). Here, I observe *Love Live!* as another example of “the ways in which local and global discourses converge to produce normative and yet variable ways of doing girlhood within postfeminist culture” (Godfrey, 2018: 8). However, this chapter may be seen as different to the other chapters because these participants were under the age of 18 and thus experiencing their adolescence for the first time through their interest in *Love Live!* (as opposed to revisiting it in their early twenties via the maid café). The exceptions to this were two idol cosplayers (both age 18 and 20 respectively) who had been interested in *Love Live!* since they were 14-years-old, but did not join an idol group until they were 16 and 17-years-old. Nonetheless, both were in college and university (higher education), which lends itself to the *shōjo* sensibility as a period that prolongs girlhood (postpones the marriage and childrearing of womanhood) via education (see chapter six). I was surprised to find out the ages of certain idol cosplayers because they looked (and acted, under the guise of cosplay) like they were in their tweens. Thus *Love Live!* contributes to the blurring of the lines of age in which the figure of the *shōjo* (and feminine adolescence itself) encapsulates. I explore the tween’s relation to celebrity (Kennedy, 2018) via the idol in which becoming a celebrity is a form of self-actualisation and recognition without having to explicitly become the object of sexual desire. Instead, one becomes empowered in one’s channelling of the subversive, liminal girl who is excessively and spectacularly feminine through consumer products. Given the fact that I saw older teens (age

16 to 18) performing this femininity, I explore the idol as a form of femininity that is not appropriate for teenagers to perform in a UK context because of its apparent immaturity (it is more tween-like than teen). These cosplay groups may be observed as providing a means of gaining hegemonic power and recognition as an emerging-woman subject, while nonetheless specifically evading sexiness in spite of any unintended sexualisation that may be attributed to them or their characters.

There are certain limitations to bear in mind, considering that the data for this chapter could be used for the whole of this thesis in which I can only allocate so much discussion. There are many areas that I do not discuss, which are nevertheless key aspects of this subculture. I do not focus on the aspect of friendship, neither “passionate” (Shamoon, 2012) nor platonic, both of which play an important role in the dynamic of idol cosplay groups. Friendship was arguably the biggest, most important element to these cosplay groups and their members. Nor do I even go into much detail regarding the liminal luminosity of the performances themselves, as much as I would like to discuss these in light of the current scholarship that observes a luminous, “glowing girlhood” (Handyside, 2019b: 352; Kennedy 2018; Dobson, 2016; Kearney, 2015). What I do provide, however, is an overview and introduction to *Love Live!* and its influence on cosplay subculture, representing the voices and experiences of those cosplayers in those moments that I came to know them both on and off stage. This is part of my intention to sympathetically represent a feminine subculture that, similarly to boudoir and maid cosplay, exposes discourses of sexualisation in a contemporary British context, in which I observe the ways in which cosplayers negotiate their coming of age and femininity seemingly via an alternative means.

What is *Love Live!*?

Love Live! is an idol franchise comprised of many areas: a manga, games,¹⁵⁶ several anime series, films, albums and a plethora of merchandise. Moreover, the voice actors (“*seiyuus*”) who play each anime character effectively become idols themselves as they gain recognition from various television appearances to live performances. The franchise therefore exists across multiple spaces which necessarily shapes each fan’s experience of it. All of the idol cosplayers I met had varied ways of getting into the franchise and becoming inspired to join/form an idol group themselves. From avid gamers, to members who had not watched the anime but liked the dances, each person I spoke to existed on a spectrum of passion, from casual to ardent fans. Although I would like to dedicate a section to engage with each idol cosplayer’s experiences of “getting into” the series, an in-depth discussion is beyond the scope of this chapter. What I am interested in focusing on in this chapter instead is how *Love Live!* acts as an accessible means for teenagers and tweens to become acquainted with the spectacularly feminine.

I focus on two (out of the total existing three) *Love Live!* anime series in relation to what they reflect of the processes of self-making and tweenhood.¹⁵⁷ (The third series had not yet been released during my fieldwork.) My reason for analysing the anime (as opposed to the game) is due to the fact that the majority of idols I spoke to told me about their engagement with the anime series and how they identified with its characters, which I discuss

¹⁵⁶ There is a smartphone version of the game which is also popular with fans of the series to play, earning cards which display each girl in a different costume or theme (“Is it summertime? You bet a bunch of cards of the girls in bathing suits. Is it Halloween? Time for witch or demon outfits!”, as Julia Lee [2020] notes). Thus the girls of the series are collectibles “sets” in which fans may choose their “best girl” and support her by buying merchandise. Gameplay is centred on pushing a circle of buttons in rhythm to the songs of *Love Live!* accompanied by a music video of the protagonists performing. In 2020, I played one of the machines in an arcade in Akihabara, in which several of the shots focus on the girl’s dancing and miniskirted bottoms as they wiggle and bend over. Arguably, this titillation, as known as “fanservice”, necessarily complicates the different gazes that are at work in *Love Live!*. Notably then, the cosplayers of *Love Live!* that I met in the UK were responding to a text apparently designed by and for men under the mask of *shōjo*.

¹⁵⁷ Series 1, *Love Live! School Idol Project* has 26 episodes, (2013-2014); followed by a “spin-off” series, *Love Live! Sunshine!!* which also has 26 episodes (2016-2017). Both series have a special episode and a film (2015 and 2019, respectively). The third anime series (Perfect Dream Project) was released following the end of my fieldwork in December 2019, which is why I do not explore it in this thesis.

further later.¹⁵⁸ Both the game and the anime includes popular songs to learn, sing and dance (19 songs for *Love Live! School Idol Project*'s group, μ 's (pronounced "muse"), 25 songs for *Love Live! Sunshine!!*'s group, Aqours (pronounced "aqua"). At the time of this writing (2020), *Love Live!* is still immensely popular both in Japan and globally, even though the anime was first released in 2013. (For example, in 2020, I came across a whole floor of a games arcade in Akihabara dedicated to *Love Live!* gaming machines.) Seven years, in terms of the internet (and, by extension, the anime convention), is an eternity. And yet, *Love Live!* was one of the most visible group cosplays that I came across at every convention from the beginning to the end of my fieldwork. Indeed, it was specifically *Love Live!*; no other Japanese idol franchises were cosplayed as extensively, or even at all. When I asked one participant, Becky (age 19), how many idol groups were in the UK, she told me, "Hundreds. Like, if it was a big con you'd see about twenty [groups]; a smaller con, you'd see about five different groups."

Love Live! was so popular to the extent that groups would have to compete with each other to gain a space to perform on stage at the convention cosplay or talent contest—receiving the occasional eye-roll from other cosplayers because of how common *Love Live!* cosplayers were. As one idol cosplayer, Skye (age 16) said,

I feel like, because there's always idol groups at cons, they [the panel/stage organisers] don't want to give us more time [for a performance] because it's like, "Oh, it's another one of *them*" which is just—for our next con, we're meant to be doing a performance for half an hour which is like, "Oh yes! We finally get more than a minute!"

¹⁵⁸ Although the game was also popular among the cosplayers I met, I do not engage with a deeper analysis with this because, while I do believe that it necessitates further study, it requires more depth than I can offer. Moreover, my thesis focuses on specific anime texts as part of my discipline in film and media studies as opposed to games studies. Nevertheless, I recommend a future project to focus on this element of *Love Live!*, as well as the phenomenon of idol rhythm games as a whole which are becoming increasingly popular and lucrative (Raussi, 2017). For example, one maid cosplayer (age 21) told me that she and her boyfriend had spent enough money on the game's in-app purchases to fund an actual trip to Japan, which illustrates the popularity and, above all, consumability of *Love Live!*.

So what is the reason behind its long-lasting popularity? The answer, as I aim to explore, lies in its tapping into a sensibility of feminine adolescence (both of tweenhood and *shōjo*), providing an alternative to modes of becoming popular that are associated with tweenhood in the UK. That is, *Love Live!* represents the possibility of gaining “spectacularly feminine” (McRobbie, 2009: 60) self-actualisation via means that do not include heterosexual relations with boys and men. I became interested in how the characters of the anime all display feelings of inadequacy about becoming successful idols which is then, in turn, identified with and emulated by teenagers in the UK who form their own cosplay groups and perform dances in the anime convention. It seems to me that *Love Live!* provides an avenue of representation in which the awkward girl (feminine pariah) can achieve feminine visibility as a popular girl without the hetero, sexualised elements.

Method

Similar to maid café culture, *Love Live!* is a phenomenon of the *shōjo* sensibility. Therefore, this is potentially why the franchise resonates particularly with those in the midst of their *shōjo* liminality, or feminine adolescence. This necessarily made it difficult for me to connect with the younger fans for the fact that, as Honda (2010) argues, *shōjo* is a closed-off world to non-girls). While I was able to more easily engage with the *shōjo* artifice of the maid café, I felt that shadowing an idol group in the same immersive way (i.e. becoming an idol myself) was not appropriate for me to do. Furthermore, I know that, had a researcher been looking to interview me about my passion for Japan and anime when I was 12, I would not have been open to it.¹⁵⁹ Here was an impenetrable world of feminine tweendom that parents struggled to

¹⁵⁹ As a twelve-year-old I remember drawing manga-style characters in a small sketchbook during a train journey with my sister and mother. Another passenger (a man in his 60s) asked if he could look at my sketchbook. I glanced at him nervously, then looked at my mum and shook my head desperately, “No,” I mumbled. My mum then translated that to him politely. As Honda writes, no “non-girls” (2010: 20) are permitted into the world of *shōjo* (that is, the authentic world of *shōjo*, as much as the *otaku*, gendered male, might try to seize and recreate it).

understand, and they often were suspicious of any adult involvement with them, my presence included. As McRobbie & Garber noted in their study of girls' subcultures,

Girls negotiate a different leisure space and different personal spaces from those inhabited by boys. These in turn offer them different possibilities for “resistance”, if indeed that is the right word to use. Some of the cultural forms associated with pre-teen girls, for example, can be viewed as responses to their perceived status as girls and to their anxieties about moving into the world of teenage sexual interaction. One aspect of this can be seen in the extremely tight-knit friendship groups formed by girls. A function of the social exclusiveness of such groupings is to gain private, inaccessible space. This in turn allows pre-pubertal girls to remain seemingly inscrutable to the outside world of parents, teachers, youth workers and boys as well. Teenybopper subcultures could be interpreted as ways of buying time, within the commercial mainstream, from the real world of sexual encounters while at the same time imagining these encounters, with the help of the images and commodities supplied by the commercial mainstream, from the safe space of the all-female friendship group.

(in: McRobbie, 2000: 24-25)

The above observations related to what I perceived of idol cosplay groups, in which there seemed to be an underlying anxiety surrounding hetero-sexualisation and an emphasis on homosocial friendships as well as consumer culture. I had more access to the idol groups with members who were older in their teenage years (from age 16 upwards). In this sense, my research is only representative of a small portion of what is a much larger phenomenon to those cosplayers in their tween years who are experimenting with the visibility afforded to them in hyperfeminine cosplay. The younger tweens would have been “inscrutable” to me as a researcher had I not experienced this time myself, in which I intuitively sense that *Love Live!* is a means of “buying time”, while nonetheless acting as preparation for the world of mature, socialised femininity.

During my time in the field, I approached six *Love Live!*-inspired idol groups, who I saw performing on stage, huddling together in stairwells, practising dances and posing for photos together, running their own promotion stalls and leading dance workshops. As a

researcher in anime conventions, I could only observe and interview the most visible of idol cosplayers. However, I estimate that many more younger *Love Live!* fans and cosplayers slipped between the lines of obscurity, which lends itself to McRobbie & Garber's observation that girls are "present but invisible" (2003: 211) in subculture. To be visible was to be equated with that power, stardom, that permeates discourses of tweendom as the girl comes of age via stardom. To be seen as successful, all idol groups sought to perform on stage with nine members (the number of character positions available in *Love Live!*). Therefore, my interactions were necessarily with the most "successful" groups, for the fact that they had gained access to the stage and were highly visible in their performances; they had "made it" in terms of celebrity.

I chose to focus on collective idol groups as opposed to the lone *Love Live!* idol cosplayers that I saw, due to the fact that forming a group bore its own commitments, significations, motivations and dynamics that seemed to offer an insight into elements of postfeminism, feminine power, companionship, and becomingness—elements that are seen to be entangled with the state of being a girl, both tween and adolescent as she negotiates her coming of age (Driscoll, 2002). I saw more cosplayers than I approached, and even then, I estimate that I saw far less than what exists in total for girl fans of *Love Live!*, as the convention requires money to enter (up to £29 per day),¹⁶⁰ as do the costumes (some cost several hundreds of pounds). Therefore, I am only able to remark on those girls who were privileged enough to afford it, in which there is room for future research to observe how girls express their passion for *Love Live!* online.

Usually, I observed the performances and activities of approximately one to three idol groups for nearly every event that I attended, which included the long-standing idol groups that I came to know (who had been cosplaying as *Love Live!* idols for more than 2 years),

¹⁶⁰ See Bates (2017) for the ticket prices of MCM London, one of the largest conventions in the UK.

who made appearances at multiple conventions every year. Moreover, the idol group is not a static element; it is forever changing and fluid, with members founding, joining, dropping out, dissolving and repeating the process, changing characters and routines, similar to, and yet more liminal than, the maid café itself. Therefore, I find it rather contrived to precisely to quantify or document exactly how many idol groups I observed or spoke to as a whole because they thwarted any attempt to be captured or understood. I thus provide a snapshot of what epitomised the dynamically becoming and multiplicitous nature of cosplay and feminine adolescence.

The primary methods I employed for this chapter include observations, interviews and media analysis of *Love Live!* to observe how the anime represents femininity in ways that resonates with, and is emulated by, youths in the UK. For this chapter, I interviewed 14 idols from 6 different idol groups (in which one member, Becky, had founded and disbanded two idol groups) as well as Darsha, who was captivated by and cosplayed *Love Live!* from the age of 12 to 13, but was not part of an “established” idol group, although her friendship group was composed of members who were (she performed a dance routine in *Love Live!* cosplay with three of her friends at a convention talent contest). The majority of interviews (11 out of 14) were conducted with members of groups that were still running. Becky’s groups had been disbanded 3 years prior and Darsha was no longer interested in *Love Live!*. In 2019, I conducted 9 interviews which lasted between 20 and 40 minutes in length (shorter than desired due to the fact that members wanted to get back to their friends at the convention). However, when planning this chapter, I felt that I needed to represent the idols better in their own words, which I supplemented in 2020 with a further 5 interviews from members of another idol group (who I had observed from afar at a convention in 2019 while I was shadowing a maid café), in which each interview, over video call, lasted between 1 hour and 1 hour 30 mins. While I do recognise that the supplementary interviews are unable to be

classed with the original cohort of my fieldwork, I still want to include quoted excerpts from my interviews with them, because they necessarily add depth and clarity to the understanding that I already had. Nevertheless, I still came away with many unanswered questions (for example, what about the fans who cannot afford to attend anime conventions?), on which I reflect throughout this chapter.



Fig. 8.2¹⁶¹

In terms of how many hours of observation I conducted with idols, this is difficult to say, due to the fact that out of the 25 events that I attended as part of my fieldwork, there were multiple *Love Live!* cosplay idol groups per event (which does not include those who cosplayed without a group). Nonetheless, from the first convention of my fieldwork to the final, nearly 3 years later, I estimate that I had observed over 15 hours of idol interactions. For this chapter, I chose to focus only on physical observations (as opposed to online, social media) in the convention space because I was interested in the visibility, embodiment and

¹⁶¹ 8.2 Idol stall. An idol group holds a stall at a convention promoting themselves, selling personalised cosplay photos and fanart, with a raffle prize.

luminosity of the physical performance itself; the point where reality meets fantasy and each cosplayer came of age. Nevertheless, social media plays an important role in the formation and interaction between idol groups, in which I would be interested to see (or conduct) future research that captures this phenomenon more comprehensively.

The majority of my interviews that I conducted with idols were with those in their mid-to-late teens (14-17) who had been part of an idol group for more than a year (up to 3 years maximum), or who were no longer interested in idol groups anymore, such as Becky and Darsha who retrospectively reflected on their time as idol cosplayers. Being granted access to the older (age 16+) members of idol groups was due to their openness towards my presence as a researcher, in which the younger cosplayers were generally not available or willing to be interviewed. All I can provide is a brief and wavering insight into what I did see of the moments when cosplayers became hypervisible through their performances on stage; running stalls with hand-made merchandise promoting their groups, or; on the margins of visibility in their groups dancing on the stairwells, corridors, car parks, or grassy areas outside the convention space. *Love Live!* was present from the beginning of my research until the end, with my friend telling me of her 12-year old daughter's "obsession" with it; to seeing an idol group performance for the first time on my entry to the field at a convention talent competition where they won first place (see reflection 8.1); to seeing *Love Live!* idol groups at every convention I attended. After observing idols from a distance at three conventions, I decided to approach a table where a group of tween girls (age 12–13) was promoting their idol group. I spoke to one girl wearing a red, kimono-style, *Love Live!* costume and colourful red wig with two side buns. However, she seemed so perceptibly uncomfortable by my presence and my interest in her group (much like I know how I would have been at her age) that I decided that it might be better to turn my attention to other, older, subcultural groups instead (i.e. maid cafés and boudoir cosplay) for the time being. Nevertheless, *Love Live!* idol

groups were so popular and prevalent at every convention, there was something curious about them that I could not ignore. My friend invited me on a family trip with her twelve-year-old daughter and her friends where I was able to observe in more detail the elements of idol groups that I discuss in this chapter: friendship, power, agency, spectacular femininity, stardom, visibility, luminosity. Nevertheless, there was something closed-off about the younger tweens that protected itself from the scrutiny of adults: this was *shōjo* only.

The membership of the idol groups I met was wholly composed of individuals assigned female at birth. However, not all members identified as female in their daily lives, as with the maid cafés I observed, which, by contrast, offered the male/masculine option of butler. *Love Live!* only presented the option for female characters to be emulated, in which idol cosplay became the means by which members could enact femininity temporarily, as though in drag. In multiple cases, I spoke to members who told me of their intention to leave (or of their friends who had left) the group after coming out as transgender.

Idols in Japan

Similar to the maid café, the *Love Live!* originates from *otaku* subculture, known for its home in Akihabara in Tokyo. The Japanese girl idol has become a figure of scholarly interest in which much of the discourse surrounding idols in Japan is concerned with them as being an explanation and mitigation of the problems of men, relating to the economy, spiritual and familial fulfilment and masculine anxieties, often regarding a loss of childhood freedom (see chapter six for more of an explanation; Galbraith, 2012; Kim, 2011; Aoyagi, 2005). The idol's career is founded on a youthful femininity that has an expiry date, at which point, the girl "graduates" from her girlhood into womanhood, usually disappearing from the media gaze and becoming invisible. Evanescent fluctuations like this are characteristic to the

celebrity girl's condition worldwide.¹⁶² Of all the liminal infernos, the J-idol is particularly notable, in which the idol has come to be viewed as an image which goes beyond the lived reality of the girl subject herself (Galbraith, 2012). Again, this adheres to the existing feminist discourses that have the tendency to discuss women and girls in relation to (and as) alienated masculinities (Gill & Scharff, 2011). This chapter moves away from viewing the idol (and girl) in Japan as such, considering young people's motives for wanting to become an idol as reflecting their coming of age in an environment which is underpinned by a postfeminist and neoliberal sensibility (Gill, 2007). For example, is there a part of wanting to become an idol which is influenced by a narcissistic fantasy of becoming? Do many cosplayers actively seek to become an idol because they understand that this is a liminal time of their life where they may enjoy (and revel the experience of being in) an ethereal power associated with the symbolic image of the girl in the digital age? The figure of the idol may encapsulate a desire to capture and freeze one's youth, to preserve one's girlhood; to become an ethereal deity to be worshipped, idolised—in the full sense of the word. That is, cosplaying as an idol may be an opportunity to experience femininity as something that is pure as opposed to something that is abject, debased and existing solely for the pleasure of the assumed hetero-masculine subject.

Galbraith has written a comprehensive overview of the “idol as image” (2012: 185), arguing that the idol is similar to a manga character in which there is an emphasis on the idol's personality and capacity for development as opposed to beauty and/or talent.¹⁶³ Might this be why idols are attractive figures for pariahs of femininity to perform? Idols are arguably an accessible means of achieving hegemonic, feminine recognition and visibility

¹⁶² For example, in Italy, the girl star is likened to a meteor: a brief flash of brightness before disappearing into darkness (Hipkins, 2017).

¹⁶³ Galbraith noted one idol producer's criteria for the ideal female idol performer in Japan: she “must lack a strong sense of self and give her agency over entirely”; “the less beautiful and talented girl tries harder ... she has more room to grow and does not resist being produced” (2012: 192). There are obvious implications at stake here, in which the girl idol ideally lacks autonomy in an industry that exploits, controls and disposes of her once she reaches a certain age.

without having to fit society's conventional ideals. This was something that one participant, Sophie alluded to in her interview:

I didn't believe that I could be an idol because I didn't think I was pretty enough or skinny enough or talented enough, but I think it's having the friends that I do that makes me so much more confident. We're all so close and it's kind of like, I don't know how to explain it, because you don't realise until you meet a certain group of people how close you can become with them. And then like, you meet those people and then it's like, "Wow, we're like sisters or something." I think there's something special about having a big group of people that you can talk to about different things. And I think having that closeness in an idol group is really, really valuable. We've performed at conventions and had other younger girls come up to us and be like, "Woah you were amazing, that was fantastic, we want to start an idol group too," and it's so empowering to know that you're a younger generation's actual idol and not just pretending to be one. It's really so heart-warming. When you can think, "I made an impact on that girl's life, or that boy's life—or anyone's life really". [...] When you're an idol, you need to have the spirit for it, you need to have that burning passion for it, to make people happy and make people smile. Because it's fine to stand on stage and smile, but if no one else is smiling with you I think that's when you're not reaching your full potential as an idol. You need to step off stage and have people come over to you telling you, "That was the most inspiring thing that I've ever seen, that was the best thing, and I wanna do that, I wanna be that too," you know? I think that's what's most important at the end of the day.

(Sophie, 16)

For Sophie, being an idol went beyond her ideas of stardom as something that is superficial (contingent on being "pretty", "skinny" and "talented") which reflects the reality *otaku* supporters who identify with the idols and their inadequacies in this way (Miyake, 2018; Galbraith, 2012). In this sense, *Love Live!* becomes accessible to anyone, all that is needed is a costume and a group of friends to become the focus of visibility and attention. Cosplaying as an idol from *Love Live!* was therefore an opportunity to experience the visibility, power and influence of a star without having to adhere to conventional characteristics of female idols in a UK setting: being good-looking and sexy.

Indeed, the one aspect that leads to success as an idol relates to one's hard work and passion, which ultimately reflects socialisation (coming of age) as a neoliberal process contingent on affectual labour. Increasingly, the idol is likened to that of a spiritual idol that heals and energises the male fan (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012; Miyake, 2018). This is something that also extends worldwide, with many of the cosplayers that I met telling me about the healing properties of *Love Live!*. They felt purified by their involvement in a group as well as watching the anime series and live *seiyuu* performances. Therefore, idol cosplay, like maid café cosplay, was a means of temporarily purifying one's abject existence in becoming the image of self-actualised, spectacularly feminine perfection.

Love Live! is characterised by excess, possibly more so than any of the other cosplay groups I explore throughout this thesis. From the gameplay with its shimmering title screens and pulsating colours, to the plethora of costumes available to emulate in cosplay,¹⁶⁴ I became enthralled by how excessively and spectacularly feminine it is. Here I am interested in how *shōjo* wavers globally as a girlified essence that can be evoked in a variety of different outfits which blur boundaries, national borders and, notably, the perceived dichotomy between sexy and cute. While I can only go into so much detail on each element of discussion in this chapter, I am nonetheless intrigued by the self-actualisation of stardom which, as relatable to the trajectory of the tween in media discourses (Kennedy, 2018), becomes manifest in the luminosity and glow of the stage performance.

¹⁶⁴ There are hundreds of possible costumes to cosplay in *Love Live!*, according to the “*Love Live All Stars*” Website, there are 37 costumes for the μ's, Aquors, and Nijigasaki High School Club series, each with their own assigned performance or event. Of the 37 costumes, there are 9 variations of these sets, each for one of the 9 characters that make up the group at one time (out of 27 girl characters in total across the franchise). That makes over 300 costumes out of a potentially much higher (and, currently, endless) total, for the fact that it does not include all of the costumes that are available in the game (such as the “cyber awaken” costume that I saw cosplayed by two different idol groups in 2019), nor does it reflect every costume that I saw in the anime (for example, the wedding dress/tuxedo combo that is visible in the episode I explore later). *Love Live!* therefore, epitomises excess in many different areas, especially costumes, the engagement with which comes under the rubric of “doing femininity” (Paechter, 2006: 255).



Fig. 8.3.¹⁶⁵

Reflection 8.1

As a backdrop to my discussion in this chapter, at several points I will be exploring one idol group whose trajectory happened to coincide with the beginning and end of my fieldwork, of whom I observed several times. For example, on my entry to the field, the first convention that I attended (which took place in a community centre in a small town in England) had a cosplay talent contest where this group's performance won first place. The following year, I saw them performing again (at a convention based in a sports arena, on a large stage); running an idol workshop for convention attendees. The final year and final convention of my fieldwork, they performed again (same venue as the last, same stage), for the final time as a *Love Live!*-inspired cosplay group. Throughout each

¹⁶⁵ 8.3. *Love Live! All Stars*. How is the spectacularly feminine captured in this image? Luminosity, sparkle and excess on stage. Note the feathers which symbolically appear throughout both series of *Love Live!*. What might the feathers symbolise? I interpret them as denoting purity, deification. White and glowing, reminiscent of the wings of birds, or angels, after a first flight, this also relates to the protagonists' ever liminal, fledgeling-state. Becoming an idol then, is a means of experimenting with the "flight" of socialised validation as much as it is an experience of spiritual purity.

observation that I describe, I consider the evolution of the group from 2017 to 2019, where the ages of the girls with whom I became acquainted, changed from age 13/14 at the beginning of the research to 17/18 at the group's end before members of the group went to university. I observed it as a coming of age; not in the steady, chronological sense of a movement from girl to woman, but rather, this was a perpetual movement of becomingness, a wavering transformation from their ordinary existence as schoolgirls into the vision of the self-actualised, spectacularly feminine on stage. Thus, in their state as becoming-idols, they embodied the ideal neoliberal and postfeminist positionality in which contemporary girls are all destined to become indoctrinated.

My First Encounter with *Love Live!*: Andromeda Muse, the Debut

It had been six years since I had entered an anime convention; six years that I had been out of the “scene”. So I'd asked my childhood friend Julia (the person responsible for my introduction to manga and anime in the first place when we were both 11), to accompany me to my first event where I would be an “ethnographic researcher,” as daunting as the task had seemed to me back then. Now, both age 23, Julia was still in the scene of anime fandom (albeit less ardently than we had been as teenagers). From our arrival at the convention, several times she remarked on cosplayers of fandoms that were beyond my knowledge. Thanks to Julia, I became aware of what would form the central focus of this chapter—a cosplay phenomenon which I would stumble across from that point onwards at every convention I visited.

Being late to the convention, we decided to view what was left of the cosplay competition, slipping in through the door to a large hall, and awkwardly crouching down into a space on the floor where the other cosplayers (the majority of them white girls, mainly in their teens, 13-16 years old it seemed) were sitting, cross-legged. Chairs surrounded the sides of the hall where adults in their 40s-50s looked on, some of them with bemused or bored looks on their faces, which led me to think that they

had been brought here by their daughter. The scene resembled a school assembly, where the teachers (in this case, parents) had the privileged position of chairs at the sides, while we, the school children (cosplayers) sat cross-legged on the floor. There was one position that we could take that wasn't sitting on the floor: at the front-centre of the hall, the focus of the school, if we had something to present, or, in the case of this anime convention, a cosplay-related "talent". It was here that I was transported back to a memory of mine, age seven at an afternoon school assembly. One of the girls in my class, Lisa, had organised a dance choreography for her and her friends to perform in front of the school to the song, "Dr Jones" by *Aqua* (1997). In this case, there was more of a heteronormalcy to it for the fact that Lisa had dedicated the dance to her then-boyfriend, James Jones, which was a move that solidified them as the ideal couple of year 4, while also fortifying her in her place as one of the popular girls (did I mention that we were seven years old?!). I thought about what went into it, as many girls practised dances in the schoolyard to eventually realise their efforts by performing in assembly, becoming the focus of attention to all year-groups. Dancing in front of the school was a statement of gall and power as a girl, in which there was always safety in numbers (such as performing as a group of friends). Then there is the aspect of dancing itself which is notably feminine; a performance relatable to stardom.

Back to the convention, and the talent competition is in full swing. A troupe of girls (around 13/14, all white) performs a drama set of *Attack on Titan*, many in crossplay. The set ends, and the MC, a bearded man with a music system reading, "The World's Hottest Karaoke Machine", introduces the next set where another group of girls (again, age 13/14, all white) shuffle nervously onto the stage, wearing brightly coloured wigs and blue school uniforms with blazers, pleated skirts and bow neckerchiefs (a gesture towards the girls' school uniform in Japan). Two of the girls are wearing different costumes, however: blue and pink chiffon dresses which sparkle and shimmer.

"Oh, it's a *Love Live!* group!" Julia says, pulling out her phone. "I gotta tell my girlfriend about this, she's gonna be so excited."

I ask Julia what *Love Live!* is.

“It’s so cute and gay; I used to hate it, but after my girlfriend forced me to watch it with her, it’s actually quite funny and sweet. Your PhD is on girls, right? Well, you should really focus on that.”

The girls stand in their positions, waiting. Someone in the audience coughs, cutting through the silence. Then the music begins, vibrant violin strings and high-pitched anime voices piercing and ringing and echoing throughout the hall, the acoustics further lending themselves to a school assembly ambience. I recoil inwardly, *why were these voices so irritating now when they had never bothered me in the past?* (See appendix 1.6). One of the girls at the front of the stage wears a sparkling, iridescent, sheer dress, with mini skirt and bra combo, baring her belly as she dances in the joy and sensuality of the movement, uninhibited. She gazes forward, eyes glazed and smiling, as though she is in her own world. “Is she focusing on remembering the dance moves, or is she imagining herself as the character?” I wonder. As revealing as the costume is (it displays her midriff, shoulders and legs which is comparatively more revealing than the other members of the group who are fully covered in school uniforms and black tights), she is unconcerned by it. She seems unaware of and free from the worry that she might be considered a sexual object—the way it should be. Her stomach pokes out without the need for sucking it in or carefully manufacturing a contrived pose. Rather, she sways, spins, and mimes the words with a sense of revelry and magic; she is an expression of girlhood in that moment of liminal luminosity. It is as though the audience does not exist.

***Love Live!* The Narrative**

Love Live!, across its multiple anime series, centres on the storyline of nine girls who come together to form an idol group as a means of preventing their all girls’ high school from closing down permanently,¹⁶⁶ which is happening as a result of the declining birth rate in

¹⁶⁶ Notably, the space of education makes the existence of *shōjo* possible. Without this territory, the *shōjo* is forced to grow up via marriage and child-rearing. Therefore, the threat of school closures (which are key to the storyline in series one and two) in *Love Live!* symbolically gesture towards the end of *shōjo* itself. *Love Live!* therefore encapsulates an anxiety of maturation in which forming an idol group represents “buying time”

Japan. This is ironic if we consider the relation that the declining birthrate in Japan bears to the increase of single men living alone, who spend their disposable income on the franchises and merchandise of fantasy girls of anime, idol groups and maid cafés (as opposed to spending it on the conventional nuclear family).¹⁶⁷ Both series have the familiar focus on a group of nine schoolgirls who become idols together. In this way, reality mimics fiction with real schoolgirls in the UK forming their own *Love Live!*-inspired idol groups. In the first series, *Love Live! School Idol Project*, protagonist Honoka and her 8 friends form an idol group, called “μ’s” (a reference to the Greek mythology tale of the nine goddesses, known for their relation to the arts). It involves the girls all training together in a montage of extra-curricular activities (exercise, dance practice, costume selection, forming the bonds of friendship and the drama that comes with it), working towards their goal of becoming “successful” idols by winning the national competition (titled, “Love Live”) and gaining recognition to save their school from closing. Skye (16) summarises it as follows:

This is how I explained it to my mum, because I had it on the TV, and she was like, “What is that?” (She doesn’t watch anime, I’ve tried to get her to watch it multiple times but she was like, she doesn’t). I was like, it’s a group of girls, they get in a dance group to raise funds for their school, to get attention, ‘cause they’re just working to save their school because they all love their school so much and their friends, and they don’t want to separate. And they’re doing everything they can to keep it together, and then they just end up basically becoming big famous idols basically. [...] It’s a really emotional anime about girls who fight for their school and they go through loads of hardships together...

As Skye recognises, the narrative of *Love Live!* is contingent on the transformation of nine school girls into “big famous idols”, out of an altruistic necessity to “save their school” as

(McRobbie, 2000: 24-25) away from the mature world of adulthood; a desperate attempt to guard it by becoming the image of *shōjo* herself.

¹⁶⁷ The protagonists’ attempt to prevent the school from closing down (via their formation of an idol group) might be viewed as curing the symptom, not the cause. Indeed, if the idol herself is to be seen as connected to the decline of the population, then surely, becoming an idol as a means of preventing one’s school from closing—due to population decline—is akin to pouring petrol on a fire in order to put it out.

opposed to a desire for fame. We see the development of each protagonist as she transforms from an inept, inadequate and unconfident schoolgirl into that vision of self-actualised, spectacular femininity when she performs on stage with her eight friends. As I explore, the characters of *Love Live!*, in their becoming symbols of “reproductive maturity” (in terms of consumer practice as opposed to literal reproductive maturity, sex), may be seen as providing a fantasy-like means of becoming successful (of achieving self-actualisation) as a teenager, effectively coming into their value as a socialised, female subject while nonetheless maintaining their immaturity. *Love Live!* is therefore a way of gaining power (visibility and validation) as an emerging-woman subject that is not contingent on appealing to a (hetero)sexualising gaze, as much as it might be observed otherwise by outsiders to the franchise.

One aspect to bear in mind in regard to the narrative of *Love Live!* is what one founder of an idol group, Hannah (age 17) and Sam (her boyfriend, age 18) pointed out to me when I interviewed her:

Hannah: In *Love Live!*, there’s only like, what, one male? In the whole—

Sam: And they don’t even show his face! [laughs] Honoka’s dad, yeah you just see him from the neck down and that’s it.¹⁶⁸

Georgia: Only one?

Hannah: Only one male in the whole of *Love Live!*.

Hannah was referring to the first series; the second series also has no men in it. Simply put, no men exist in the diegesis of *Love Live!*, not even in the crowds that watch the performances as the characters dance on stage. The voices that call out are all female, telling the idols how beautiful they are. Perhaps the reason why there are no men in *Love Live!* is

¹⁶⁸ It should be noted that I gained consent from everyone who was part of the interview recording, Sam included. However, I have chosen not to list him on the participant list because the interview was centred on Hannah and her experiences.

because the intended male audience is presumably omnipresent. In this way, the anime acts as a means by which the intended audience can escape their socialised reality. Men do not exist, therefore, the problems and pressures of being a man do not exist either.¹⁶⁹ By contrast, what appeal might this have to the tweens and teenagers who imagine themselves in the roles of these idols in a girls' only world? Considering *Love Live!*'s long-lasting popularity, might there be a greater need for representations of (teenage) girls, who form uncompetitive, homosocial relationships with each other which exist in a world in which heterosexual relations with boys and men have no place?

Love Live! acts as a cocoon—characteristically, a world of *shōjo*—in which teenagers in the UK may imagine and explore their embodied identities via costumes and dance. Key to my observation are the two sides that the idol encompasses: the abject, imperfect, “goofy” girl who has to work hard to achieve perfection, and; the image of this perfection which is realised in those liminal moments of performing on stage as a group. This is evident across three sites: the anime character, the *seiyuu* (voice actress) and the idol cosplayer.

Love Live! is a means by which teenagers and tweens in the UK may subconsciously negotiate their societal roles away from the scrutinising, sexualising, harassment that they are likely to receive in wider society. The space of *Love Live!* is liberated and temporary, in which one's empowerment is experienced via hegemonic means (i.e. becoming a celebrity-like). A key aspect to consider when observing idol cosplayers through the lens of becoming of age concerns the following: achieving success as an idol (group) is simultaneously a means of mastering one's feminine socialisation (and enjoying the validation that comes with it) while nonetheless digressing from the reproductive maturity expected of emerging-women subjects in the eyes of society. The idol, therefore, as an

¹⁶⁹ Even in the live performances, the luminosity and focus of the girls on stage detracts from reality of the fans, shrouded in darkness, except for the glow of their *wota* sticks (*wota* is short for *wotagei*, a type of fan dancing and cheering). The fan effectively becomes the light stick, whose sole responsibility is to support the idol by increasing her luminosity as she dances on stage.

exemplary *shōjo*, is able to enjoy the power with which the hypervisible feminine subject is endowed, while nonetheless avoiding sexualisation. This lends itself well to a discussion of postfeminism, in which the tween is an ideal subject (Kennedy, 2018).

Notably, *Love Live!* the anime represents its protagonists (all girls between the ages of 14 and 17, which also matched the ages of the actual idol cosplayers that I met), in ways that are very different to representations of teenage girls in UK (and anglophone) media. Namely, these girls, as the performative image of hyperfeminine immaturity, do not experience in the plot's narrative anything to do with what is commonly associated with the teenage maelstrom. Not a single narrative in the anime's plot explicitly addresses the question of sex (homosexual or heterosexual), the (changing) body, the opposite sex or substance abuse of any kind—all of which have no space in this revelling of *shōjo* for this series which is tween-like in all but name.¹⁷⁰ Rather, these characters, as characteristic of the represented experience of the tween in the 21st century, all come of age via becoming the image of successful idols (i.e. stars). They work to produce themselves, in various processes of self-making, as self-actualised subjects, something which is realised in that liminal, luminous moment of performing on stage. It is this aspect of the narrative (which makes this form of self-actualisation accessible to feminine pariahs in the UK) which led me to make the connection between discourses of tweenhood and *Love Live!*.

Whether there is an underlying reason for *Love Live!*'s remarkable popularity with teenagers in the UK, I can only ponder. No other female idol franchise had so much of an effect at the conventions I observed. Might it lie in its representation of a liminal femininity that is both alternative to UK cultural understandings of womanhood and adolescence, and yet enjoys the feminine excesses associated with them?

¹⁷⁰ Is it evidence of *shōjo* or tweenhood discourse? Rather than polarising the two discourses, I am interested in the ways in which they relate to each other, particularly how the stardom of the tween becomes manifest in idol groups and the anime. Here I use the lens of tweenhood as an insight into how tweenhood might operate globally.



Fig. 8.4¹⁷¹

Becoming Tween

Notably, the types of femininities that I observed in *Love Live!* (and cosplayers emulating in response) are not acceptable for teenagers to perform in a UK context due to their immaturity. These characters are more tween-like than teen in their coming of age via celebrity as opposed to those practices which are associated with adolescent girls in the UK—namely, through experimentation with substances and experiences that are relatable to the world of adults. Moreover, the girls themselves are particularly immature which is denoted by their representation as anime characters (large eyes, undeveloped, unwomanly bodies, childish emotions and high-pitched voices). This was something that was recognised by two participants, Darsha (age 14) and Becky (age 19), who told me in their interviews that they were no longer interested in the series.

¹⁷¹ 8.4. Characters from the anime, *Love Live Sunshine!!*. Nine girls smile together in the image. It was the faces of these characters that unsettled me in the first place, with their seemingly forced smiles. Then again, I knew better than to judge the anime in this way for my intuitive recognition that, had *Love Live!* been around when I was a tween, I most certainly would have been captivated by this same image and, more than likely, would have been the leader of my own idol group too.

Darsha: Honestly a lot of the women in [*Love Live!*] are really pathetic, but I don't know why I love them so much! I don't know why they—like, all of them are just little girls basically, but um, maybe it's just, like, their clothes and stuff... ahhh I dunno... [...]

Georgia: Tell me a bit about Maki who you cosplayed.

Darsha: I think she was one of the less pathetic ones of the group. Have you watched *Love Live!*? [...] So, I don't know what you think about Maki, but out of all of them—'cause I was never girly, that's why my mum was so surprised when I got into it, she was like "What's going on with you? You were never like this before". I was quite a tomboy, so I liked the less girly characters and I think Maki was less girly than the others.

Darsha told me that she was unsure of why she became interested in *Love Live!* in the first place—it resonated with her in an inexplicable, affectual way. In light of the idea that our identities are formed in relation to our subconscious desires (Giddens, 1991), I began to consider the appeal of *Love Live!* as potentially being rooted in its spectacularly feminine and immature symbolism. Given the theory that when we enter adolescence we become increasingly aware of what society expects of us, *Love Live!* is both a way of embodying a spectacular femininity, while also resisting conventional, mature hegemonic femininity in a UK context. In this sense, as a self-defined tomboy, Darsha found a means of temporarily achieving a feminine guise via the character Maki, who was less girly than the other characters, but nonetheless, notably girly. This shows the choices that girls are given during feminine adolescence, out of a limited selection where femininity trumps all. This rhetoric of choice is something that I examine in due course. Becky's testimony also highlighted some key points:

Nico Yazuwa—I hate her—she pisses me off so much. It's the same with Rin in the first season, she's very childish as well, 'cause she acts like a cat. She goes "Nya! Nya!" She does that shit, and I hate it. It pisses me off, it's just so childish and it irritates me. Whereas when I was younger—like Nico shouts "Nico, Nico, Ni!" and her voice is extremely high-pitched [...] and Rin is like, she's so over excitable and she goes "Nya!" after almost every single sentence and it's so irritating—but to someone who's younger, they'd see that as funny.

Like, I saw that as funny until I grew up a bit. I think it's because I'm just... grown up. [...] I just understood the world more, and I understood people's boundaries more [...] my *own* identity. When I started to become comfortable with my own identity, I think that's when I started to realise that, "Hang on a minute, this stuff is extremely childish" [...] As I understood the world and myself more I got a better understanding of what's basically acceptable and what's not as a person. And if a person in real life is sat there going "Nya! Nya!" after every single sentence, I think you'd be a bit irritated. [...] As much as I find them childish and everything, they do have a place in my childhood essentially [...] I think the series itself is very special to multiple people because it is basically their childhood. For a lot of people, it's the first anime they ever got into. I obviously first got into it when I was fourteen, and I never really had a childhood... 'cause I had to grow up very quickly due to family issues, so I, um... obviously, getting into something slightly childish helped me experience a bit of a childhood... I guess that's it. [...]

As Becky's interview shows, part of her loss of interest in *Love Live!* was finding a newfound irritation with certain characters' immaturity; when she "grew up" and understood her "identity" more. Rather, the "childish" elements as embodied in the two characters, Nico and Rin (e.g. high-pitched voices, excitability, acting like a cat), were something that she had found funny as a tween; now, she found it irritating. The character she refers to, Nico, is particularly remarkable because, at 17 years old, she is one of the eldest members in the anime, *Love Live!*. However, her childishness and physical appearance make her seem like she is 12 years old, as opposed to a teenager in her final year of high school. Darsha also noted this in her interview, saying

My mum would always point it out. Like, if I wanted to cosplay as someone [from *Love Live!*], I'd be showing her the photo and she'd be like, "Darsha... no". She'd be like, "How old is she supposed to be?" [...]

The immaturity of the characters is therefore not hegemonically or culturally normal for teenage girls to perform in the UK. *Love Live!* provides a means of being feminine that is not mature and yet, is able to come of age (gain social value) via the spectacularly feminine. Indeed, in terms of the UK, the girls of *Love Live!* are inappropriate visions of teenage feminine selfhood for the fact that their *kawaii* demeanours present a visible alternative to the

cool, agentic, “phallic”,¹⁷² and sexual liberation that has been conventionally expected of adolescent girls in the UK since the Spice Girls defined “girl power” of the 1990s (McRobbie, 2007; Whelehan, 2000). Rather, these anime characters are shown to come of age (entering their value as socialised subjects) via working hard to become the image of spectacular, youthful femininity: idols. *Love Live!* represented an aspect of Becky’s childhood in which she was able to “experience a bit of a childhood” away from her experience of having “to grow up very quickly”. Did *Love Live!* finally lose its appeal for her when she felt ready to depart from the world of immaturity and childishness? It appeared to me throughout my observations and interviews that *Love Live!* was a means of exploring one’s feminine persona while also having the freedom to have fun, be childish, silly and “mess around” without the fear of being judged or harassed. As Skye, told me,

In school, I didn’t really talk a lot because I was like, “Oh, they’re gonna judge me, let’s stay back” [...] ¹⁷³ Well, my friends now are from the *Love Live!* group and we’re all really energetic—we just mess around all the time. So it was like, I’d see the characters *in them*. Because we play the characters, I see a lot of similarities in them. So it’s not like we *are* them, but we’re very similar.

Reflecting on the previous chapter, this relates to what one of the maids told me about the maid persona permitting participants to behave “goofily” as opposed to “cool and sexual”.

Skye also remarked that the protagonists of the *Love Live!* differ from the maturity expected of teenagers in anglophone cultures due to:

¹⁷² McRobbie uses the term “phallic girl” to refer to a feminine position that bears the superficial marks of “boldness, confidence, aggression and even transgression (in that it refuses the feminine deference of the post-feminist masquerade)” (2007: 732). If “[t]he phallic girl seeks to emulate male behaviour as a post-feminist gesture” (2007: 733), by contrast, the performances of femininity that I observe in each cosplay group seem more likened to the post-feminist masquerade, being a “mode of feminine inscription, an interpellative device, at work and highly visible across the commercial domain as a familiar (even nostalgic), light hearted (unserious), refrain of femininity” (2007: 723).

¹⁷³ Ella told me something similar: “I don’t really hang out with people from school when I’m not at school, ‘cause you’re not yourself when you’re at school, you have to fake a personality just to be accepted and to not be judged as much.” This illustrates the self-regulation that participants engaged with in order to avoid the discipline of the hegemonic gaze.

Obviously the cuter aspect, like, they're not, like, children, they're still, like, adults. Well, not adults, but older [than children], and they're not, like, always looking for relationships or that type of stuff. They're just sticking with their friends together. So I really liked that about it.

Skye noted how, even though the protagonists are “older” than “children”, their trajectories are not marked by heterosexual relations. Rather, the focal point of the series is friendship and gaining success as an idol group, as opposed to relationships with boys and men.¹⁷⁴ These observations are interesting if we consider the process of coming of age as a female subject as being relatable to (hetero)sexual maturity and social restraint. By contrast, the idols of *Love Live!* are able to revel in their emotional excitability; such emotions that are expected to become self-disciplined and suppressed in order to come of age in a hegemonic context. Therefore, via *Love Live!*, cosplayers can effectively come of age without becoming women as conventional society defines it as being an actively sexual(ised), mature experience. An idol cosplayer can revel in the freedom of their immaturity a little longer, while nevertheless practising the necessary skills for a socialised identity, which I explore further in relation to the following three areas: luminosity, stardom and the illusion of “choice”—all of which necessarily relate to the spectacularly feminine, tweenhood, and postfeminism. I became intrigued by the possibility that *Love Live!* might resonate with teenagers and tweens in the UK because it is a means of prolonging the experience of girlhood (similar to the maid café), engaging in gendered consumerism which is signified by tweenhood. It is therefore important that I observe the discourses surrounding tweenhood and how these might relate to *Love Live!* as providing a representation of girls who digress from the reality of womanhood while

¹⁷⁴ Aside from the goal of becoming successful idols, the narrative focuses on other plot points as well, all of which provide a backstory and development of each girl, in which as one participant, Priya, age 17, put it, the series had “some quite—not deep messages, but—inspiring messages in it”. For example, certain plot points focus on taking care of a dog; group members’ private home situations; one member’s fear of leaving the group because of a family decision to move out of town; feeling inadequate about wearing a costume or performing on stage. This is characteristic of the anime genre, “slice of life”, in which *Love Live!* may be categorised.

nonetheless training for their coming of age via becoming spectacularly feminine as the figure of celebrities.

Why Tweenhood?

[T]he ideal tween: female, young, white, middle class and caught in “a liminal moment of imagined girlhood” ([Kennedy, 2018:] 2). Through her “choices,” the tween continuously engages in a project of the self, one designed to bring her authentic self to the surface. She uses celebrity as a guide.

(Phillips, 2019: 914)

Tweenhood refers to a phase that the tween subject occupies, defined by its liminality between childhood and adolescence. As scholars note, the term “tween” generally signifies the ages between 9 and 14 and is characterised by the subject position and “consumer demographic” of girls (Kennedy, 2018: 14). Tweenhood occupies “a transitional stage in [the girl’s] lifetime” in which “the tween is assumed to be in the process of developing a sense of self” (*Ibid.*). Similarly, we might view *Love Live!* as offering tweens and teenagers in the UK a means of experimenting with their feminine identities, in light of what Linda Duits and Pauline van Romondt Vis observe of tweenhood:

At this age, girls are trying to find their position in society. The development from child to young adult is accompanied by exploring and experimenting with different identities.

(2009, in: Kennedy, 2018: 24)

Love Live!, bearing characteristic markers of tweenhood discourse, might be used as a way for teenagers and tweens in the UK to negotiate their position in society, which is necessarily ideally marked as feminine. I became interested in the idea of teenagers embodying this side of tweenhood; trying to find their position or “function” (McRobbie, 2009: 60) in society and how this might relate to the tween-like narratives of *Love Live!* and its tween-like

protagonists in their embodiment of “an idealized gendered, aged, raced, and classed identity in a liminal moment of imagined girlhood” (Kennedy, 2018: 15). Scholars of girlhood note “the features of tweenhood” as,

same-sex friendships, a concern with authenticity, the makeover as a continuous project of the self, the role of celebrity, and the prominence of a father-daughter bond.

(Kennedy paraphrased, in: Phillips, 2019: 914)

Minus the prominence of a father-daughter bond,¹⁷⁵ the above features are evident in the narrative of *Love Live!* and actual girls’ doings of idol cosplay. As I argue, idol groups are the embodiment of tweenhood discourse in terms of authenticity, friendship, stardom and consumerism (Kennedy, 2018) in which there is a wavering movement between the ethics of being a tween (“authenticity, friendships and honesty,” Godfrey, 2018: 8) to those of a more “hegemonic femininity” (Schippers, 2007). However, there is one element of tweenhood that is refuted by these idol groups: the girl as an ideally heterosexual subject. Indeed, *shōjo*’s representation of female companionship lends itself to a “lesbian continuum” (Rich, in: Shamoon, 2012: 34) that I observed both in the text of *Love Live!* and the cosplay groups that imitated it. It is in light of this that I will explore becoming an idol as a means of coming of age (i.e. becoming recognised and validated as spectacularly feminine through stardom) via a means which simultaneously disavows the symbol of woman as hyper and heterosexual symbol. Indeed, similar to my discussion in chapter five, the idol cosplayers of this chapter may be viewed as camouflaging the (denigrated butch) homosexual elements through their spectacular, *kawaii* feminine guises which mark a key relation between *Love Live!* and a sensibility of tweenhood.

¹⁷⁵ No men are visible in the narrative of *Love Live!*. Then again, arguably, the presence of the father is embodied in the intended male audience of the franchise, the *otaku*.

In order to understand tweenhood, we need to recognise the term tween is “not static in its meaning, but rather ... contested, shifting and dynamic” (Kennedy, 2018: 14). Regardless of participants’ actual ages (i.e. the idols I spoke to were teenagers over the age of 14, not tweens), I became interested in the idea of teenagers performing tween-like identities and narratives. Just as members of the maid café might be interpreted as a digressing from their position of adults/women (prolonging their girlhood) through adopting and performing a *shōjo* persona, might there be a possibility that the teenagers I met were prolonging their immaturity too? Or rather, was it a case of inadvertently thwarting one’s maturity via revelling in one’s liminal state?

On another level, I cannot necessarily say that *Love Live!* is a tweenhood media text. For example, the anime centres on protagonists who are not “real” tween girls, for the fact that they are animated teenagers between the ages of 14 – 17. Moreover, unlike tween media texts in the anglophones, *Love Live!* was not created for a “girl market” which is viewed as central to tween consumer discourse (see: Kennedy, 2018: 32; Driscoll, 2002) because the franchise was created for the *shōjo* sensibilities of Japanese men. Nonetheless, various themes come through in the anime’s plot and depiction of its protagonists that may be read as tween-like, particularly if we regard tweenhood as a liminal phase that is especially interwoven with celebrity. For starters, “[T]he tween is a construct of the postfeminist cultural context”, which Kennedy notes as being “the exemplary postfeminist subject” (2018: 15-16) who uses the financial and social gains of second-wave feminism to make choices that apparently reinvigorate sexism and patriarchy (and practices of neoliberal capitalism) under the guise of feminism.¹⁷⁶ The characters of *Love Live!*, as characteristic embodiments of the *shōjo* sensibility, offer a means of deferring the hetero-sexualised maturity expected of

¹⁷⁶ As I explored in chapter five, Scarlett arguably enacted postfeminism in her active choice of founding a business (second-wave feminism) where she gained money (capitalism) by removing her clothes for a male audience (sexism/patriarchy). In short, capitalism’s commodified understanding of feminism has produced postfeminism, which uncannily becomes a mask through which sexism may become manifest.

teenagers, while nonetheless becoming the image of self-actualised success (idols), which necessarily ties to the subject position of the neoliberal, postfeminist subject. Therefore, the protagonists of *Love Live!* come of age in a different way; similar to that of the contemporary represented tween, such as the American girl-idol icon, Hannah Montana, who comes of age as a celebrity (Kennedy, 2018).

We may therefore interpret *Love Live!* as an example of how a postfeminist sensibility operates and resonates globally in different capitalist scapes.¹⁷⁷ So how might discourses of postfeminism relate to tweenhood and, consequently, the idol cosplayer who may be seen as becoming tween-like in embodying its principles? The following was evident both in the anime and in the activity of the cosplayers I observed:

the visual markers of girliness (including pink, sparkle and signifiers of princesshood); ... same sex friendship and peer surveillance; and the rhetoric of ‘choice’ in the making of one’s gendered identity.

(Kennedy, 2018: 16)

These are all elements that are visible in both the media text and girls doings of *Love Live!* which reinvigorates discourses of tweenhood as visible in global media. Certain themes come through on watching the anime, which relate to Godfrey’s observation of the themes in tween media culture: “kindness, loyalty, friendship, honesty, and success through working together to overcome obstacles [...] the success of the individual becomes a shared success that validates the importance of the group” (2018: 16). This tween-like group dynamic and friendship played a key role in each idol group that I met in which every idol I spoke to cited friendship as one of the most important aspects of their idol cosplay.

¹⁷⁷ We may note the instances in which *shōjo* culture and postfeminism are alike (see Gwyne, 2013). Nevertheless, this is done in spite of the potential to conflate them with each other—that, even though *shōjo* historically preceded (and is culturally different to) the perceived cultural origins of postfeminism (i.e. western media), there are nonetheless notable similarities between the two, such as an anxiety surrounding ageing. Indeed, as Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones (2016) observe, postfeminism and girlhood appear across a variety of transnational contexts.

Another aspect of *Love Live!* that I see as specifically relating to tweenhood (postfeminist) discourse is the “consumption of celebrity” which is “an essential part of tween culture” (Kennedy, 2018: 14). *Love Live!* provides the represented (and thus identificatory) means by which girls can “consume themselves into being” (Walkerdine, 2003: 247). In essence, as Kennedy notes in relation to tween media texts, “tween popular culture uses celebrity as an allegory for growing up female” and, “the girl ‘becoming’ a woman is paralleled with the girl ‘becoming’ a celebrity” (2014: 225). *Love Live!* is similar in light of the narrative of the anime (and idol cosplayers’ lived experiences of becoming idols) where becoming successful as an idol group is relatable to becoming stars, serving as a metaphor for coming of age (attaining self-actualisation), which is never permanent or complete. Rather, *Love Live!* acts as a means of indoctrination into a cycle of self-actualisation, in which the ideal postfeminist subject is forever reproducing herself in transformative, make-over-like ways, forever (be)coming of age. Kennedy notes “the narrative of a perpetual makeover, addressing the tween as a self-surveilling subject who must continually work to retain an ‘authentic’ self as she progresses towards womanhood” (2014: 225). This is a central aspect of the *Love Live!* franchise that is brought to light by each cosplayer’s months of practising dances and vast financial expenditure (on costumes, make-up and accessories) which comes together in their performance on stage at the anime convention. Indeed, in the sense of Kennedy’s observations of tween narratives, unlike the conventional teen (who may be represented as experiencing and experimenting with heterosexual relations, drugs, alcohol, or even the changing, abject body), the tween produces herself as the ideal postfeminist, neoliberal subject through her engagement with celebrity and consumer practices. This is all visible in the activity of *Love Live!*-inspired idol groups, as well as the trajectory of the characters in the series, in which their becoming successful idols is equated with their coming of age.

In short, *Love Live!* presents the means by which teenagers in the UK can realise themselves as ideal neoliberal, postfeminist candidates in a capitalist scape (which nonetheless intentionally deviates from sex): they enter a cycle of transformation in which self-actualisation is a process which is never complete. The self-actualisation of these cosplayers as female (ideally, feminine) subjects is repeatedly and temporarily achieved in those brief moments on stage, which ultimately reflects coming of age in the 21st century as, not a definitive act or experience, but a cyclical wavering caught in a hegemonic machine.

From Feminine Pariah to Popular Girl

Many teenagers and tweens were inspired to join because of what the franchise represented in terms of its aesthetic; being a means of developing female companionships, and; performing in a way that made them feel liberated and free. Nevertheless, there were, as Becky identified it, other, more competitive aspects that led to some idol groups becoming more successful than others and gaining more visibility on stage. In this way, achieving the self-actualisation of the stage was contingent on “affectual labor” (Lukacs, 2015: 488), consumer practice, resignation to a rhetoric of choice and a hierarchy of competition. One participant, Martha, told me:

Some people like [*Love Live!*] for the cosplay and some people like it for the dance—they probably just want to get together and do something fun but—if you don’t know the people it’s harder. If you have an idol group where people are arguing and not friends it’s just not gonna work out, it never does. Like there was a time, I think it was probably about a year ago where there was a new idol group every week and then they never really made it past a month. Like, there’s only a few that really stick around, but like, people make new idols groups like every week, and hardly any of them actually [make it].

After several interviews, it became clear to me that each person's interaction with *Love Live!* could be as casual or as ardent as a person wished. However, many idols, who felt drawn towards it in some way, could not quite put it into words what it was specifically about it that appealed to them. What is it exactly that motivates a person to start their own idol group?

I think it's kinda the desire to want to *be* like them, I guess. Cause, I kinda had that thing as well, like, "Ah, I really wanna be like that", or the need to *experience* what they're experiencing, I guess?

(Ainsley, 16)

Ainsley's comment (above) interested me, regarding the idea of the idol group as a means of experiencing what the girls in *Love Live!* experience. So what exactly is it that the protagonists experience and how might this tie into the fantasies of real teenagers in the UK? I consider idol cosplay as a means of transforming from the place of feminine pariah (as someone who feels inadequate about their beauty or skill) into the vision of hegemonically-valued, feminine success—to experience what it is like to become the focus of attention, to be what hegemony defines as popular.

In our discussion of what it might mean to be popular and (hegemonically) feminine in a UK context, Skye told me:

If you say feminine in the UK it's like, big hair, big makeup, go get a boyfriend, wear really short skirts, skin-tight clothes, and—for me, like, I wouldn't say that I'm insecure about my body but I don't want—like, it's not a bad thing, if you wanna do that, go ahead, like, have the confidence!—but for me, I didn't like it.

I said to Skye that, as the characters in *Love Live!* also have "big hair, big makeup," "really short skirts" and "skin-tight clothes", might they arguably be similar to conventional ideals of femininity in the UK?

So, I feel like the *Love Live!* outfits are really flattering because of the big skirts and it's so fun to, like, swish around and stuff. Also the bright *colours*, it's so fun to play around with the colours. I think you've probably seen the jokes about the chav make-up, that, in my school, you have to have big eyebrows, big eyelashes. Like, wearing fake eyelashes to school! I was like, no, I'm not doing that. With Japanese fashion and make-up styles, [...] it's just accessible to everybody, especially with *decora* fashion, where they put all the colours and just fire everything on. It's like, the more the better, and the make-up is so fun and you can do it for any face shape or anything.

Notably, the characters of *Love Live!* are spectacularly feminine on stage only. By contrast, at school, they appear as ordinary schoolgirls. Potentially, this offers a more accessible representation as compared to cultural norms of femininity in the UK where girls wear fake eyelashes to school (i.e. they have to present themselves as spectacularly feminine in all contexts). In *Love Live!*, however, the spectacularly feminine has its place: the stage. Elsewhere, its protagonists are represented as unconfident and unspectacular. This lends itself to depicting an image of (be)coming of age that is cyclical, contingent on wavering between the two points of awkwardly incomplete to the resolute wholeness as evoked by the stage performance. Moreover, Skye noted that a key aspect of J-fashion is its relation to excessiveness: "the more the better". While conventional femininity in the UK might be predicated on a certain level of excess ("big eyebrows" are within limits), the excessive elements of, say, *decora* fashion and idol cosplay are excessive to the extent of drag. By default, this means that anyone can take part because it is not necessitated by ideals of refined (and subtle) beauty. Rather, this drag-like excessiveness is unable to be read as "natural", emblematic of girls' fashion cultures in Japan such as *gyaru*, acting as an affront to any assumed heteromale pleasure that may be gained from it (Iseri, 2015; Kinsella, 2014). *Love Live!* therefore presents an accessible means of achieving the hegemonic power ascribed to the spectacularly feminine in ways that may also be read as subversive and rebellious, in which becoming an idol is not reliant, or even informed by superficial elements such as being

pretty. Indeed, the spectacularly feminine of *Love Live!* has its place, namely, on the stage. As such, spectacular femininity is more concretely represented as a transformation that is separate to the daily identities of each character, which lends itself particularly well to cosplay as a form of drag as well as reflecting the cycle of each idol's (be)coming of age.

Reflection 8.2

The Mean Girls of Anicon

I'm waiting in line for the convention's maid café, and I happen to witness the activities of a group of *Love Live!* cosplayers. Nine girls, who could be anywhere between the ages of 12 and 16,¹⁷⁸ dressed in brightly coloured, shoulder-bearing, body-clinging, shining PVC, with poofing-skirted minidresses. Ruffles, cat and bunny ears; varying styles and colours and lengths of wigs: one with long blue pig-tails ending at the waist; another with black bunches and fringe; a blonde ponytail styled wig; it goes on—all of them were wearing wigs. The whole group is unable to be overlooked or ignored because there is a mass of them, so colourful, all in the same matching “set”. They are luminous, literally: their dresses and headsets are decorated with LEDs that light up. Light-up bunny and cat ear headsets. Talk about spectacular.

“Do the pose, do the pose!” one girl with light up cat ears in blue shouts to her friend, a girl—bunny ears, pink dress—who stands in front of the camera. Hands under chin; switching to peace sign fingers; leaning forward, winking to the camera; shoulders back, knee forward. The other girls call out support to her, waiting their turn to be photographed.

A woman in her forties (presumably one of the girls' mothers) holds her phone up, taking photos of the group and directing the girls as they pose and smile. “Come on, girls, get together! Okay, now one at a time.” This is one of the rare occasions that I've seen a parent throw themselves on board with the

¹⁷⁸ After I introduced myself to them, I learned that the members were between 15-18, notably a lot older than I had thought.

girls' efforts so fully. Many of the parents that I actually saw and spoke to at conventions were flummoxed at their teenage/tween daughter's newfound interest in anime and cosplay (telling me, "I don't get it myself, but if it makes her happy that's the main thing").

I think about how this scene curiously matches the part in *Mean Girls* where Regina George (Rachel McAdams) poses for photos in a playboy bunny outfit before she goes to a Halloween party (I also note the significance of Halloween in chapter five) where her mother (Amy Poehler) holds the camera and encourages her adoringly and vicariously.¹⁷⁹ The woman in front of me photographing the cosplayers has a similar vibe going on, "Move to the left a bit, hun," she instructs the girl in the centre ("I'm not like a regular mom, I'm a cool mom, right Regina?"). Notably, in the film, *Mean Girls*, McAdams was 25 at the time, playing a 16/17-year old. This reflects the tendency in anglophone media for adults in their twenties (even thirties) to play the role of teenagers. These cosplayers, meanwhile, actually *are* teenagers, playing the role of teenage anime girls.¹⁸⁰ Even the dresses themselves, made from shiny PVC, remind me of the sexified, red PVC Santa dresses that the four "mean" girls wear for their dance performance at the Winter Talent Contest in front of the school—there it is again: dancing in front of the school, showing their talent, much like the cosplayers themselves were performing on stage earlier.

And yet, there was an awkwardness and vulnerability to some of the girls, quivering smiles, unconfident poses, eyes on the floor with quick glances upwards, sighing before their turn to pose, huddling close to their friends. (Nevertheless, the giggling and excitement mostly masked these aspects.)

Another photographer joined the party—a man (late forties) with a comb-over stands in front of

¹⁷⁹ Even though I do allude to this text a lot in this thesis (far more than any other anglophone media) I find that *Mean Girls* provides an apt commentary on the postfeminist coming of age practices in "girls' world", where the teenage protagonists experiment with power, femininity, and hotness through consumerism and bitchy competitiveness (the kind of power available to us at a hegemonic level). I saw this as somewhat resonating with what I saw in cosplay.

¹⁸⁰ What complicates the age matter further is the fact that the anime characters of *Love Live!* look, sound and behave like young children, yet nevertheless, are apparently in their late teens. This lends itself to ambiguous discourses of tweenhood where, "consumer media has managed to combine innocence and edge in the tweenies phenomenon: alongside the pink 'girlness', it incorporates micro-mini skirts and shorts, heavy makeup, and slogans such as Hello, my name is Hottie" (Brookes & Kelly, 2009: 601).

them and takes photos on his humongous camera. The cosplayers were in the positions of power and visibility now, enjoying the fantasy and pleasure of becoming symbols of the ideal feminine—in essence, stars on a redless carpet with one man playing the role of paparazzi. The girls all take it in turns to have their photo taken before shuffling to arrange themselves in front of him for a group photo. I think about what they're experiencing. They are the hypervisible focus of attention.

Also, what is it about all these men in their forties and fifties and sixties at anime conventions with huge cameras which have a sort of gravitational force about them? I necessarily had to check in with that aspect of myself who wanted to protect these girls from any predatory gaze that might harm them (an accusatory thought towards the photographer: “What’s he going to be doing with these photos later?”), while also knowing that the convention and the group dynamic of nine provided a relatively safe space to indulge in an activity like this, away from the moral panics of British society.¹⁸¹

Immaturity and Sexualisation

One of the recurring themes in this thesis is an interrogation of the symbolic state of woman as definable by sexual objectification. Each chapter observes how sexualisation was consciously or unconsciously thwarted, subverted and/or accepted by the individuals and groups that I observed. The idol cosplayers I met, like the maid cosplayers of chapter six, did not see themselves as appealing to a sexualising gaze. Rather, they were unknowing and indifferent towards it or rejected it entirely. While there are certain aspects of the idol's costumes that might lend themselves to discourses of sexualisation, nevertheless, the reality is more nuanced for the idol who experiences the wearing of her costume both on and off stage. I highlight the various contradictions imbricated in the figure of the girl which naturally lends itself to a dichotomous wavering of sexy and cute (*kawaii*) which is part of the subjective

¹⁸¹ Many idols pointed out to me the group cosplay allowed for an added barrier of protection from judgement and harassment: “knowing that I’m not going to be alone, ‘cause it’s kind of like a, group thing, it’s kind of like a safety in numbers thing” (Becky, 19); “if you act as a unit then people are less likely to be horrible because, you’re together” (Martha, 18).

negotiation of one's feminine identity in relation to a sexed ideal. Is it the *kawaiification* of sexy or the sexification of *kawaii*? Regardless of the answer, this lends itself to an ambiguity that is upheld in the *shōjo*'s image. Indeed, as Yano notes, *kawaii* (relatable to the *shōjo*) lends itself to a discussion of tweenhood due to its “re-inscribing slippery boundaries between child and adult” (2006: 207) and this is also clear in *Love Live!*. As one participant, Quinn (age 18) noted, *Love Live!* was different from female pop groups and idols in the UK, because they did not present themselves as actively sexy,

I'm quite a tomboy so... Like, a lot of the girls [in *Love Live!*] are cute. I'm not feminine or girly at all, so it's a way for me to be like that without the sexy part. *Love Live!* is really girly but without being sexual, whereas a lot of the stuff we see in the UK shows femininity as being the opposite of that, you know... having to be sexy with your chest all out and... stuff. I dunno, but I feel like *Love Live!* is different from that.

The cosplayers I met saw *Love Live!* as a means of expressing their femininity in a non-sexualised way that differed to conventional femininities in UK media and society. Nevertheless, Quinn also recognised that outsider's perceptions differed from the cosplayer's themselves, often mistakenly read as sexual by their peers who judged their performance as hypersexual and appealing to a paedophilic gaze.

A lot of our parents'll, you know, they'll see the costumes, some of them are, like, maid costumes or schoolgirl outfits—and they'll immediately think that it's something fetishy. They don't understand that, 'cause, they can't see it beyond a UK viewpoint where everything a girl or woman does is supposed to be sexual.

Quinn's testimony is particularly revealing in their understanding of the UK as a context that reads “everything a girl or woman does [as] ... sexual”. In the case of the idols I met, they understood *Love Live!* as being specifically “not sexy” in spite of what might be coded as

sexy or fetishising by their parents. Just as Darsha’s mother asked, “How old is she supposed to be?”, it draws attention to what is unspoken: a figure that is potentially sexualised as a child or actively appealing to a paedophilic gaze. Therefore, cosplaying as a *kawaii* idol ultimately exposes the discourses of normative sexualisation that are undercurrents of the UK. Regardless of how these images of girls are interpreted outside a UK context, the idols I met envisioned themselves as being the image of *kawaii* (as a sign for immaturity) as divorced from sexiness. As Ainsley said,

We basically become the character. ‘Cause when we’re dancing on stage we’re technically acting as the characters. We have to think of facial expressions and movements, like, things that our character would do while dancing, that kinda stuff. The vibe that the character would emit, we try to recreate that while dancing on stage. So for Nico, she’s rather playful, but also playfully cute as well. So on stage, I’d do more things like winking—or, attempt winking—and stuff, and just, you know, doing the cutesy stuff on stage to look more convincing. Nico has her signature hand pose, it’s like the hand sign language for, “I love you”, [...] and yeah, head tilts are a thing as well. So it’s like, head tilt, plus, wink—that adds more cuteness to it for the facial expressions and the acting [...] For the UK—or I’d say more western style—say like, for female idol stuff in the West, I feel like they’d go, they’d aim for the more sexy type. Erm, ‘cause, I dunno, that’s just the vibe I get. I just feel like they aim for sexy whereas in Asia, they usually, they aim for cute or pretty. [...]

As Ainsley shows, there are various ways of performing the *kawaii shōjo* to bring each idol character to life. While the act of winking can be read as knowingly appealing to a sexualising gaze, in the case of Ainsley cosplaying as Nico, the performance was intended as “cute” and “playful”. Furthermore, Ainsley’s use of the term “vibe” is of particular interest when discussing patterns of difference between certain media cultures. Indeed, as much as I attempt to avoid an essentialist stance that compares UK media culture to Japanese media culture (erroneously dichotomising them as either cute or sexy), it is nonetheless evident that there are certain patterns and discourses of representations which resonate differently from other cultural media contexts, in which Ainsley’s term “vibe” is apt. Ainsley recognised that

the *shōjo* figures in anime and idol culture acted as a framework of *kawaii* which would dictate the “vibe” of femininity that was being performed. In this case, as opposed to a vibe of sexiness that is commonly found in a UK media context, the vibe of *Love Live!* (due to the character’s positions as figures of *moe*) is centred around *kawaii* cuteness. Skye’s testimony also bears a recognition of this, where *Love Live!* is seen as actively presenting an alternative to “being sexy”:

We don’t take it in a sexual way, we’re like, “It’s so cute that they’re matching and things!” [...] We respect the characters and we’re not paying attention to, like, “Oh can you see up her skirt?”. We’re like, “No! Look how cute that is!”. For people that don’t watch anime, being sexy is all that they’re gonna know: “That’s what I have to be”. You don’t have to be that, you just need someone to introduce them to different styles and cultures and things. [...] Japan is different because of the cuter aspect to it.

For Skye and Ainsley, like many idols, Japanese media and cosplay acted as a space that could be separated from UK discourses of feminine adolescence and mature femininity where “sexy is all that [they] know”. In this sense, to girls in the UK, Japan appears as an alternative in the rhetoric of choice (becoming feminine) where one opts to become feminine via *kawaii* (cute) as opposed to feminine via sexy. My discussion of these points is not to draw away from the fact that these images of *shōjo* may be just as sexualised within a Japanese or global context. Rather, what is important to consider is how these representations of girls inadvertently act as a space wherein British cosplayers may autonomously negotiate the sexualised reality of their femininities as they come of age.

In light of *Love Live!* as a girls’ only world, I was interested to explore becoming an idol as being a way for teenagers and tweens to revel in and explore the liminality of their bodies, experiencing a euphoria that is unconcerned with the hegemonic Other, because that gaze, associated with a predatory, heterosexual matrix, does not exist in the world of *shōjo*. Indeed, one of the themes that came through in my interviews with idols was that they were

performing on stage for themselves as opposed to framing their performance around pleasing a heteromale gaze—something that they only considered after an unanticipated experience.¹⁸² For example, as Skye told me,

One person said that they saw this guy in the audience who pulled out his phone and was, like, videoing under [the] skirts [of members of another idol group], and I was like, “Oh...”. It made me wonder, what if someone did that to us? So it’s kind of scary, but I still do it because it’s fun.

As Skye’s testimony shows, she did not expect to experience sexualisation, nor was this her motivation for becoming an idol out of a desire to appeal to that gaze. Skye’s testimony highlights the main theme that I understood in all the idol cosplay groups I met: the members were uninterested in appealing to a sexualising gaze. Ella’s (age 16) testimony also referred to this:

We’re not wearing it to impress people, we’re just wearing it ‘cause we like to wear it. And most [girls in the UK wear revealing clothes] to impress guys and all that. A lot of the modern world, girls [...], like, you’re trying to impress, you’re trying to, like, fit in, and you’re almost, like, obsessed with your looks, whereas in *Love Live!* they’re kinda just, they’re not obsessed with their looks. They’re there to have fun and enjoy it and be different.

For Ella, cosplaying as an idol was not supposed to “impress guys” or “fit in”. Rather, she noted how the characters were less self-conscious of (“not obsessed with”) “their looks”. Characteristic of tween media texts, the protagonists (and cosplayers) were interested in having “fun” (Kennedy, 2018). Ella continues:

¹⁸² This is not to say that pleasing oneself as a postfeminist subject is to be considered mutually exclusive to pleasing a heteromale gaze, but rather, the cosplayers of *Love Live!*, in their emulating of characters that are more tween-like than teen, evoke that contradictory postfeminist element in their positions as ideal postfeminist subjects.

We always wear safety shorts under the skirts just in case, but I've not really had anything bad [happen], except for this one time at a performance where this one guy in his twenties kept following me and asking me personal questions, like, where I live and stuff. At the time I was like 15. I just don't like the fact that... we might be dressed up as—like, our outfits could be revealing but that doesn't give you permission to, like, come up and ask us weird stuff and follow us about and that. Like, we're happy to take pictures, but we don't want you to be creeping up on us. We're still minors at the end of the day. We're really just performing for the fun of it. We're wanting to perform so *we* can have fun. We don't really care much if people are wanting to come watch us. Like, we don't really want creepy types of people coming to watch us, 'cause if they're wanting *that* aspect... [pause] We're just wanting to have fun, just get up and do our thing...

Ella's testimony reflects the sensibility of idol cosplayers in the UK: "We're wanting to perform so *we* can have fun. We don't really care much if people are wanting to come watch us". Indeed, I began to see the audience as being secondary to the experience of dancing on the stage, where the idol's motivation to appear and perform in *Love Live!* cosplay is reflective of the *shōjo*'s position as being self-interested and ignorant of the hegemonic Other. Experiencing sexualisation in idol cosplay was something that Skye had not considered until she encountered a story about someone "creepy" (in Ella's words). It brings to mind the first idol performance that I witnessed (see reflection 8.1). Whether or not this performance of the idol cosplayer centre stage was an experiment with her sexuality or an expression of her bodily autonomy and liminality is incidental. Rather, what is remarkable is how *Love Live!* operates as a space where girls feel free to express themselves in this way, without fear (or with less fear than usual) of being objectified or harassed. *Love Live!* cosplay becomes a sanctuary away from the scrutinising, sexualising gaze that dictates the daily experience of the female subject once she is seen to no longer be a child. I therefore came to see the popularity of *Love Live!* as lying in its provision of an alternative space of becoming spectacularly feminine that otherwise does not exist in a UK context. *Love Live!*, in its represented narcissism (in the sense that the characters and cosplayers are so immersed in and

fascinated by their own *shōjo* world as opposed to a superficial obsession with how they might be perceived by outsiders), presents a means of exploring one's liminal state as tween in the sense that the tween is able to achieve femininity without the same level of unquestionable sexualisation that the teen (more visibly a woman) encounters. Indeed, what is important to note is that, in light of what the cosplayers I met told me, the existence of the audience was not for them to be looked at. Rather, it existed solely as an accessory to the group's self-actualisation, fulfilling the dual dynamic of the idol and the audience in their reconstructed mimicry of *Love Live!*. The testimonies of idol cosplayers illustrate the rift between outside perceptions of their performances and their own perceptions of themselves. *Love Live!* Ultimately provides an alternative (non-sexualised) means of achieving the spectacularly feminine in which the apex of this self-actualisation becomes realised in that moment when each cosplayer effectively becomes the star on stage.

Reflection 8.3

Andromeda Muse, The Second Performance: One Year Later

I sit in a row of fold-down, blue, plastic chairs of an arena, among the groups of cosplayers overlooking the stage in front. As we wait for the next performance, the audience talks excitedly (again, the most notable demographic is teenage girls, clustered in groups). A girl (mixed-race, around age 12-14) in a red, flowery *Love Live!* kimono sits in front of me with (I'm guessing) her mother. Another girl (white, the same age) waves excitedly to the group of girls (all white) sitting behind me as she heads towards another group of (mainly white, teenage) girls on the end of the row, sitting at the front. She hesitates, "I really want to sit with you but..." she gestures towards the latter group, "I've got my idol group over there".

"It's okay," her friend says, "We can hang out after".

"Aw, but I really want to hang out now".

Her friend looks at the two girls who are sitting next to her, “We can always move?”

They nod and move to sit among the rapidly expanding occupied seats of female-cosplayers, at least seventeen of them huddled together, a cluster of coloured stylised wigs, poofy skirts, bright-coloured jackets, glittering make-up, and *Ita* bags.

The MC, dressed as the superhero character, Deadpool, speaks into the microphone, voice booming, “Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to the main stage, our wonderful anime group, [...] look at them, they’re so cute!” he coos, “Please welcome Andromeda Idols!”.

The idols (all white, in their teens) tiptoe and skip up the steps onto the stage, arms stretched out and waving towards the audience. Members of the group of girls beside me stand up and lean over the barrier to call out to the performers their adulation. One girl on stage smiles bashfully, taking a step backwards and pushing her purple wig fringe behind her ear.

“Hello everyone, we are Andromeda Idols and welcome to our show!” a girl with an orange short wig, presumably the leader of the idol group, speaks into the microphone (that’s another thing that’s changed since last year: besides the stage, they have microphones—not for singing, however, as the girls will all be miming). The group, all girls with different coloured wigs, wear pink and white frilly skirts which puff out. The leader continues, “These lovely people beside me are our members and we are going to introduce ourselves. So I’m Honoka, also known as Bella.”

She hands the microphone to the idol standing next to her. “Um, hi, I’m—” she stutters quietly and abruptly stops when the group of girls in front of me screams, jumping back, hands to her ears, beaming shyly. Each member introduces themselves and the character they are playing from *Love Live!* in a rushed tone, sentence slurring, with body language that is visibly uncomfortable. It seems as though this is many of the girls' first time speaking into a microphone and being on a stage in this way. When the fangirls in the audience in front of me call out their love for the performers, three of the

girl-idols laugh nervously, fanning their necks with their hand, manicured nails. After each girl has spoken awkwardly into the microphone, the leader declares: “Our first song is Wonderful Rush.”

The lights lower; the music starts and the squealing begins. The Andromeda Idols have certainly levelled up in the year that I last saw them: they are atop a stage, with lighting, and the music booms from huge speakers. The introductory music lowers, and a hushed excitement surrounds me. The girls take their positions, frozen and kneeling with peace-sign fingers in their Japanese-style school uniforms. Behind them is a large, projected image of the *Love Live!* anime characters. This is the point where 2D meets 3D; fantasy meets real. Waves of anticipation emanate from the group of teenagers that sits near me. Some can hardly contain themselves, gloved fists squeezing in front of their mouths, looking towards their adjacent companions and jumping up and down, yelling out, “I love you, Emma!”; “Go Taryn!”; “Wooo!”. Indeed, this mirrors the scenes from the anime itself in which the sole supporters of the protagonists are their female friends in the audience. *Love Live!* has come alive, with each anime character embodied as one of the nine girls dancing on stage.

The familiar high-pitched anime voices sing in Japanese as the girl in the middle puts her hand on her hips, posing with her other hand raised pointing, and then leaping up in a hop, the ruffles on her petticoat and skirt shuddering. The other girls join in, a mass of hopping, skipping, bouncing, jumping and shuffling from side to side, their arms waving up, punching out, reaching up and grabbing, pulling back, swinging up, meeting their hands with each other and then springing into a line formation, with the expression on their faces of the anime girls they are channelling coming to life. Drawing through the air in liquid motion, fingers burst out in the shapes of fireworks—flowers blooming—the expression of each dancer elated and bright; a vivacious energy and synchrony (although, at times, the former might compromise the latter) exuded through movement. Miming the lyrics of the song, the high-pitched vocalisation, each member skips forwards and gestures her part, ending with a signature pose. One member clutches her palms to her heart, dipping her head to each side cheerfully. One girl

crooks her knee forward and winks at the crowd, to which the group of teenage fangirls beside me call out in delight, thrusting their glow sticks forward in characteristic *otaku* style, shouting, “Oi! Oi! Oi!”¹⁸³

The Illusion of Choice

As Handyside states, “Girls are caught in flux in a system that simultaneously praises them for aiming for power and achievement, while containing them within very narrow ideas of how girls should look, behave, and perform” (2019a: 113). *Love Live!* and its performative renditions by cosplayers also presented the means of “power and achievement” as contained within a tween-like discourse of ideal femininity. Both the anime and cosplayer’s renditions of *Love Live!* makes clear an “illusion of choice” that girls need to make in order to achieve visibility and recognition, coming of age as a result. Kennedy argues that,

[T]he possible identities offered by tween popular culture are apparently available to be tried on and tested out as young girls “find themselves”. Significantly, however, these are identities that need to be bought: the different “choices” of femininity (and feminism) are offered as commodities to be consumed...

(2018: 140)

Indeed, *Love Live!* may be viewed as “prepar[ing] girls for their future place in teen and female culture by teaching them how to be the neoliberal subjects of postfeminism through the emphasized rhetoric of choice” (2018: 140). The illusion of choice is a key debate within feminist scholarship because of what it suggests about the processes of self-making in which girls and women may engage, presented as an option or “choice” that contributes to their

¹⁸³ Regarding the above observation, what struck me as especially intriguing was the audience who had come to support the group: rows of groups of teenage girls, cosplaying as *Love Live!* themselves, who were waving their glow sticks, *wota*-style, in the way that is stereotypically associated with Japanese men in their late 30s and 40s who chant at idol concerts in Japan: the *otaku*. The movement and worship was the same, but the demographic was different. As the above excerpt shows, *otaku* subculture, as being informed by *shōjo* culture itself (Galbraith, 2013) reveals itself in various ways in different contexts, the UK anime convention being just one example of its global outreach.

place as neoliberal subjects in a capitalist society (Zaslow, 2009; Budgeon, 2003). In terms of coming of age, becoming feminine is the “choice” that the female subject is compelled to make. As Kennedy notes,

The tween is the ideal subject of neoliberalism, in that she must reflectively construct her self by successfully choosing from a range of identity options whilst maintaining authenticity, all of which require constant self-surveillance and self-work.

(2018: 21)

So far, I have argued that *Love Live!* provides a means of gaining self-actualisation (coming of age by default), no matter how inept or how inadequate a cosplayer may they feel about themselves. As I observe, realising self-actualisation via the stage is contingent on engaging in this rhetoric, or illusion, of choice for the fact that one must adhere to its properties in order to gain access. That is, performing as an idol group at a convention is a competitive process in which the luminosity and glamour of the stage is allowed only to a select few who effectively embody the spectacular femininity of *Love Live!* in aesthetic and performance. There is an allusion to be made between the popular 90s girl group, the Spice Girls, and the protagonists of *Love Live!*, in light of Driscoll’s (2002) observation that fangirls related to the Spice Girls through identificatory practices as part of a wider collective that shares ideals of (spectacular) femininity, female friendship and empowerment. Indeed, the Spice Girls, “composed of five female performers each representing a different manufactured identity” (Zaslow, 2009: 3) is particularly relatable to *Love Live!* for the fact that the idols I spoke to gave their motivations for choosing their character to cosplay based on two criteria: aesthetic (style) and personality (identity), in which one was necessarily embedded in the other. Both of these areas (aesthetic and selfhood) naturally relate to the postfeminist illusion of “choice”. Representations of *Love Live!* and the Spice Girls reify the “choices” available to emerging-women, offering representations of female identities that are different and

individualistic. Nonetheless, each member is a version of femininity embedded in a group dynamic (see Fig. 1.1).

Similar to Driscoll's observation of the identificatory practices of girls' culture, part of one's enjoyment of *Love Live!* is in choosing one of the nine characters to embody via cosplay, each of which is unique with her own personal style and identity. For the majority of idols I spoke to, their choice of which character to cosplay as was informed by being drawn towards the aesthetic and/or personality of their character(s). As Ella told me:

With Maki, I chose her because I liked her colours, but with Ruby it feels like I'm like her because she's shy, and I'm shy around people and, I don't know, I just got attached to her character and the way her character development happened through the anime. [...] When I'm at school and when I'm in public, I'm quite shy, and [...] in the anime she goes from being shy to a school idol, I feel like that's helped me, like, me being shy to being with friends and being able to perform on stage.

Like the Spice Girls, *Love Live!* is a means of identifying with one's favourite or "best" girl. Everyone is assigned their own colour and outfit which evokes the personality of the character they are performing. In this sense, the selfhood of the character is embedded in the costume that she wears. Skye told me,

It's a lot to do with their personalities. [...] I feel like, in *Love Live!*, they portray their different styles in the outfits [...] Mainly it's just subtle things, so, maybe a member has a choker on to show that they're a bit more edgy. They all have their different bits but when you put them together it's like, "Oh, they're all together cause they're all matching", so it's really nice to see that.

As Skye mentions above, each character's personality is evoked through the costumes that they wear.¹⁸⁴ This also lends itself to a comparison with the Spice Girls in which the costumes and appearance of each member (for example, sports' wear for Sporty Spice) are seen to reflect the "essence" of each member (Lemish, 2003). As Lemish states,

¹⁸⁴ Each member of the Spice Girls, while individualistic and independent in her own right, is a different vision of the same feminine ideology. *Love Live!* is no different, although, notably, the girls are more immature than the Spice Girls who voice what they "really want" in relation to heterosexual relationships. The girls of *Love Live!* do not assert themselves in this way.

All these varieties of femininity are presented ... as possible and legitimate modes, each with its own identifying characteristics of behavior, facial expressions, clothing, hairstyle and accessories.

(2003: 20)

Love Live! cosplay is therefore an identificatory process by which teenagers in the UK can embody and perform their preferred feminine persona out of the options available (i.e. nine girls from either series), thus coming of age as the idols that they emulate do. The group dynamic of *Love Live!* may be seen as performing the role of socialisation, gradually shepherding each member into the vision of spectacular femininity, as a practice of confidence and capability. This illusion of choice manifests itself in the costumes, in which “choosing” to wear one of the franchise’s highly feminine, often revealing, outfits is presented as a necessary step to achieving the self-fulfillment of the final dance performance, effectively becoming an idol by looking the part. Each costume presents each member of the group independently, and yet nonetheless all costumes and characters are part of a “set”. If we consider coming of age in terms of self-actualisation—a postfeminist fantasy of the reclamation of self (Negra, 2008) then *Love Live!* presents self-actualisation as being available to all, provided that the protagonists (and the cosplayers emulating them) are willing to go to the lengths to be successful. However, this necessarily bears its own problems, as one idol cosplayer (age 18) told me, “I had body dysmorphia, I wouldn’t do it at first, I had to force myself to wear the costume”. Becky’s testimony also draws attention to this,

[laughs cynically] Best way to describe it: it’s incredibly toxic. You’ve got nine people with all different viewpoints, all different identities, all different everything, coming together because they want to. But they have no reason to keep together, other than wanting to go and, essentially, gain attention, by performing together. [...] There is always some kind of idol group performing at a convention. And the easiest way to say it, it’s toxic, cause there’s a lot of jealousy. The body issues of one particular person may not be shared by

another person, yet there's the argument of, "We must all be in the same set". It'll tear a group apart, because there's always one person who doesn't feel comfortable showing skin. And there's also the argument of, "Who takes which girl?" Once one girl is taken another person may not join because that was their favourite character. So there's a lot of clashes.

We might observe the rhetoric of choice that manifests in the form of costume as reflecting practices of self-discipline that need to be completed in order to come of age. In particular, for a group of idol cosplayers to be legitimised in their performance, all members need to be part of a "set" (matching outfits) in which some members may be more willing to wear revealing outfits than others. For one member to refuse is to forfeit the success of the group because, in order to gain access to the stage (and the self-actualisation that comes with it), each cosplayer needs to be coherent with the group. Therefore, succeeding as an idol group (and coming of age via the stage) is contingent on an underlying pressure to fit the image of the spectacularly feminine by correctly donning the costumes that the anime represents—monitored by "peer surveillance" (Kennedy, 2018: 16).

The illusion of choice is also reflected in the diegesis of both anime series, where the characters, Rin and Umi, initially stand out as being uncooperative in the group because they do not wish to wear a (short) skirt. Nevertheless, after persuasion from the other members in the group, they eventually conform to wearing the prescribed, spectacularly feminine outfit—and they enjoy it. As Skye noted:

Umi, she wasn't a big fan of the short skirt and Honoka and Kotori spoke to her, they were like, "if you're not comfortable, you don't have to". But, they found out that it wasn't the skirt, it was her confidence, so they, like, hyped her up and were like, "You can do it" and then she ended up having a great time.

Indeed, instead of being presented as unwilling to conform, the experiences of Rin and Umi are presented as a matter of "confidence", as Skye recognises. In this sense, becoming

feminine (and thus coming of age) is available to anyone, provided that they are willing to discipline themselves. Therefore, the group dynamic lends itself to this aspect of self-surveillance where even the shyest of girls can experience becoming the focus of attention and luminosity; to experience, in essence, a feminine power as it is defined in postfeminist terms as the result of a makeover transformation. Similar to the anime, I came across members of idol groups who felt less comfortable wearing costumes than other members.

There was one outfit I didn't really like, I didn't like the way I looked in it, I just don't look good in it. [...] Everyone really liked the set and I didn't. But we did it anyway because everyone else liked it. We're not just going to say "no" if only one person doesn't like it, because at the end of the day that's just not fair.

Ella (above) told me how, even though she disliked a costume, she decided to wear it for the group because not complying would result in a disharmony in the group's "set", affecting their ability to succeed (and experience their self-actualisation) on stage. One transgender cosplayer told me that he had to "force" himself to wear a costume even though he felt dysphoric, a feeling which was echoed in many interviews. So what significance might this have, the fact that some members of the group have to sacrifice their comfort for the success of the group by wearing revealing and spectacularly girl costumes? It seems to me that this acts as a metaphor for the lived experience of the female subject who has to accept and wear her body (as though it were a "revealing" costume) under the acknowledgement that she may be sexualised against her will. That is, coming of age as a female subject is an experience of entering the sexualising scrutiny of others from which *Love Live!* simultaneously acts as a respite as well as a preparation on the cosplayer's own terms as part of the postfeminist rhetoric of choice.

Reflection 8.4

Love Live! Analysis: The Skirt

In the episode “A New Me”,¹⁸⁵ we see the character Rin “transform” (see the lyrics of the song below) from a tomboy into the vision of feminine cuteness, with a little help from her friends who encourage her. At the beginning of the episode, Rin is nominated as the leader of the group for a performance where she will become the centre (one of the most visible positions on stage). This leads to Rin’s feelings of inadequacy being exposed, where she tells the others about not wanting to wear a skirt for their performance. After encouragement from her peers, Rin continues to decline, saying:

Rin: I’m different. I’m nothing like an idol

Hanayo: I’m even less like an idol

Rin: That’s not true, you’re cute and girly

Hanayo: What? You’re even cuter!

Rin: That’s not true!

This conversation is typical of the characters of *Love Live!*, many of whom feel inadequate over their ability to perform and be cute. It conspires that Rin has a complex based on bullying in primary school where “people would make fun of her for wearing skirts,” as Hanayo tells Maki. “Now that you mention it, I’ve never seen her wear a skirt other than the school uniform”. As the designated temporary leader, Rin must wear a dress at their performance on stage. This dress is different from the other members who will be wearing suits as part of a bride/groom style performance.¹⁸⁶ Rin looks on in horror as Nozomi holds up a pink and frilly dress with a huge pink bow at the back. “There’s no way

¹⁸⁵ Series 02, Episode 05 *Love Live School Idol Project!* (2014).

¹⁸⁶ I did not see any groups online or offline cosplaying as this set, potentially due to the fact that tuxedos are less popular to cosplay than their spectacularly girly counterparts and, potentially, the fact that this “set” is a nod towards the hetero-nuclear ideal of socialised womanhood: marriage.

that will look good on me, look how short my hair is,” Rin pleads. “I wouldn’t look good in such girly clothes.”

Later on in the episode, the members decide amongst themselves to surprise Rin before going on stage. While Rin thought that she had successfully nominated another member to wear the dress in her place, the other girls push her towards wearing the dress, which is presented as an act of compassion because, as it conspires in the plot, this is Rin’s secret longing: to become feminine and wear dresses. In the next scene, a spotlight floods her with light on stage, the camera tracks up from the ground to show Rin wearing the pink and white frills (the vision of *shōjo*), holding a bouquet and a headdress resembling a bride’s veil. The audience (all female) cries out, “so cute,” and “she’s beautiful!” Rin thanks them and introduces the other members of her group confidently, “Check us out at our cutest!”. The song begins:

The time has come to meet the moment
I’ve been waiting for
Is it right for me to feel so happy?
This path I walk guided by the light
Leads to the future and is full of hope
Anyone can be cute
I’m sure anyone can
Even I can... transform! [...]

(Song: Love Wing Bell)

As the song continues we see a later shot of Rin twirling and practising cute poses in front of her bedroom mirror before she leaves the house in a pink dress. Did being at the forefront of visibility as a hyperfeminine idol enable her to change her tomboy ways and embrace a new feminine style? Later on, Rin joins her friends wearing a pink, white and yellow frilled dress. Everyone looks up with surprise and delight, smiling at her for her newfound courage. “Let’s practice again today!” Rin shouts, *moe*-style, curling her fist over in characteristic *kawaii*, “*nyan*” style. The episode ends.

Analysis

When I watched it as a teenager, *The Stepford Wives* (1975) haunted me. Women being brainwashed into creepy visions of ideal femininity. I had feared for myself as well, particularly when I saw my friends opting to wear miniskirts to school when the new term for year nine (age 13-14) started. Would I be the only girl left who wore trousers, or would I eventually conform as well?

For Rin, it becomes clear that wearing a dress is a matter of “confidence”, something which is also true for the character of Umi in the first season, who refuses to wear a “short skirt”. The anime series does not consider the option of the tomboy girl who genuinely does not want to wear a dress. As the song lyrics say, “anyone can be cute”. *Love Live!* thus provides a model for being feminine that is possible for anyone to adopt, especially tomboys and the inept at doing femininity. Replace “can” with “will be”, and we have a scenario that is not so dissimilar to *The Stepford Wives*; only, the brainwashing manifests itself as active choice (Gill, 2007).

We can observe how *Love Live!* offers a means of identification on multiple levels, for the fact that the characters themselves feel inadequate at being able to produce themselves as the spectacular image of celebrity, the idol. In this way, *Love Live!* becomes accessible via identificatory practices in which pariahs of femininity (i.e. those tomboys who dislike presenting themselves as feminine), like Rin, realise their subconscious longing to become feminine (just as hegemony wishes, conveniently). Overall, the illusion of “choice” which manifests itself in idol groups (and in feminine-presenting cosplay as a whole) reflects the coming of age experience of the female subject: she actively chooses to become feminine within a context in which femininity (for the female subject) is compulsory.

Moving On

To be fair, it gets really hard to keep going with the [idol] group when people start moving off to uni or like going to new stages in their life? It's like, right now I feel like I'm kind of like moving and transitioning from being a college student/high school student to university and it's like, [sighs], I dunno, it's a lot of change—I'm moving out and everything, it's just a lot of change all at once.

(Martha, 18).

Unlike the maid cafés I observed (some of which had been running for 6 years and with no intention to disband), there seemed to be more of a definitive end to the idol groups, each of which could last between 2 weeks and 3 years. The longest-running groups tended to disband, not because of divisions or conflicts in the group but, at the point when certain members became a certain age and moved on, whether to university, changing city, or losing interest in the series.

For Skye, the idol group was founded on friendship, therefore, when her older friends started leaving and moving away, she did not want to continue the idol group without them. In this way, the idol group is *shōjo* in nature, acting as a liminal moment during the members' teen years, as long as they are in education. Once members started leaving their hometowns to go to university, this was often a signal of the group's end, as I saw with Andromeda Muse, the trajectory of whom I had witnessed throughout my fieldwork. Before I conclude this chapter, I want to dedicate a section towards considering the ephemerality of these groups, and the ways in which I noticed them disband which is revealing of becoming of age in the 21st century. That is, as opposed to the final "graduation" performance of idol groups in Japan (where the idol prepares to move on and become invisible in the public eye, effectively leaving her life as an idol—and a girl—behind) the cosplayers that I observed in the UK did not necessarily graduate in the same way. Rather, as I explore in the observation below, the "final" performance of Andromeda Muse was remarkable in two senses: comparatively to the other idol groups that I observed who faded into obscurity or disbanded suddenly with no final performance, and; due to the fact that this graduation was more of a rebranding, where the members stated that they would be changing the image of their group from *Love Live!*-inspired cosplay into something less specific, notably, in the style of Kpop girl groups.

Notably, the femininity expressed by South Korean girl groups is more mature than the girls in *Love Live!*. Yet, the femininity that is performed is nevertheless girl-like. While I would be interested to consider the subcultural impact that the two media cultures of Japan and South Korea have on youth subcultures globally, this necessarily goes beyond the focus of this thesis. However, I will ask the following: might the representations of young women in Kpop provide another alternative means of mastering one's spectacular femininity that is so necessary for societal recognition and value as a female subject in the 21st century?

Reflection 8.5

Andromeda Muse: One Year Later, The Final(?) Goodbye

It is the final convention of my fieldwork, and once again I sit among the groups of teenage cosplayers here to support Andromeda Muse in their third year of performing. The members enter the stage, however, unlike before, they aren't wearing the bright and excessively colourful costumes of *Love Live!*. Rather, they're wearing outfits that might be likened to the clothes that idols from South Korean girl groups wear, black skirts (pleated and plain, no petticoats of puff), buckles and chokers, pastel pinks, blacks and whites. Notably, no one is wearing wigs. Moreover, when they begin performing, the dances are by Kpop girl groups, such as Twice and ITZY.¹⁸⁷ The dance moves, while still being characteristically feminine, lack the *kawaii*, "childish" elements of *Love Live!* (i.e. no jumping or flailing). The moves are all flowing, forceful and directed in their femininity, slightly more mature in their coolness, nonetheless with flashes of girliness. Was it the case that the group was moving on from *Love Live!*? Evidently, it was, as the leader, still gasping for air from their final dance took the mic:

We've prepared these speeches as some of you might be aware, this is Andromeda Muse's last performance together, for the perceivable future [*sobs*] I'm already crying! What the hell! Um... And we thought that we'd prepare some speeches to tell each other how much we love each other and how much we cheered each other throughout our... many years [*gasps,

¹⁸⁷ The remaining dance numbers are Japanese. However, it is sung by a woman with a remarkably lower voice than the high-pitched levels of *Love Live!*. Mid-way in the song is a fusion between the traditional Japanese music aesthetic with EDM or dubstep, in which, although Japanese, this mash-up style of music is more able to be likened to the genre of Kpop than of J-pop.

sobs*] so, I'll pass it to Gemma to start.

Each member holds a piece of pink card and reads from it, thanking each member in turn (“my speech is to Bethany. Honestly, thank you for all your hard work and dedication, you always put so much thought into everything” [*hands the mic over, crying*]). However, the members of Andromeda Muse do not thank the audience as it is characteristic for idols to do so in Japan. Rather, they thank each other, solidifying the group in its *shōjo* insularity. The next idol takes the mic,

Erm, my speech is for Lea, I'm so glad to have met you three years ago, even if it led to me seeing my poor wig and makeup.¹⁸⁸ However, back then you were still very supportive and caring even though I wasn't that great. You've given me so much confidence and helped me to improve and I can't say [*cries, laughs*] how thankful for that I am [*laughs, sobbing*] I know even though we're going on hiatus we'll still stay in contact and be really close friends, thank you. [*cries*]

The leader holds Lea as she cries, hugging her and weeping (which is uncannily similar to one of the final episodes of *Love Live!* [episode 11, 2014] where the members all wait for their train in the setting sun, crying and hugging each other in the news that their group will disband).¹⁸⁹ One idol cosplayer runs off stage, crying. The microphone gets passed to the next cosplayer:

Um, my speech is for Nancy, I've known you for so long it feels like we came out of the womb together, which is gross [*laughs*]¹⁹⁰ but when you suggested three years ago a *Love Live!* group, I was ecstatic at the thought and I rush-bought everything, and it was the best choice I've ever made in my life. Because three years on, I'm stood here on stage with not only you but all these other fantastic members who I can't thank enough for the amazing times that we've had and all the performances and [*cries*] to finish the speech I offer you a surprise with a little something, a goodbye gift if you will.

¹⁸⁸ Thanks to the idol group, this cosplayer was able to more effectively discipline herself into the image of femininity, in which mastering make-up and wigs is part of “Tween-hood’s transformative processes of becoming-feminine” where “the tween has already begun the cycle of consumption and of never-ending self-surveilling transformation” (Kennedy, 2018: 140).

¹⁸⁹ This was the episode that idol cosplayers cited as one of the most emotional episodes in the series which made many of them cry. On observing the episode, certain elements evoke the finality of this idol group’s end, as well as marking the end of the protagonists’ girlhood (or *shōjohood*), marked by the setting sun over the sea.

¹⁹⁰ Disgust at the abject body is characteristically *shōjo* (Lunning, 2011).

The music begins, and she starts singing in Japanese while crying. The group all hold each other and sway. After the last chorus she says “join in!” and the cosplayers in the audience join, singing and swaying. The song ends and everyone cheers. “We have a couple more speeches left, sorry”. The remaining idols tell their speeches to each other, huddling together and crying. The leader takes the microphone and says the well-known catchphrase of *Love Live!* “For the last time, Muse, *musikku, starto!* Thank you, *ganbatte!*”

After the cheers die down, the murmurs of conversation rise as the spotlight is lifted and the idols exit the stage, hugging each other a final time in the wings. [...] On exiting the convention, I see more groups of similar young people, dancing choreography in groups on the steps outside the convention. However, these are not the dances of *Love Live!*, or even of Japanese idol music. These are the Kpop idol groups, a scene which has also permeated the anime and cosplay convention. I watch the dancers, a mix of short hair and BTS official hoodies, baggy trousers, t-shirts—outfits that are notably worn by boy bands of Kpop—or conversely, long hair, with bright pink ombre highlights, skirts and buckles, chokers—the style of Kpop girl-bands. In what ways might Japan and South Korea provide a means of becoming feminine (and masculine) that is interpreted by young people as providing an alternative to conventional gender performance in the UK, and, more widely, the US and other Euro-anglophone countries?

Conclusion

Love Live! represents teenage femininities in ways that notably differ from how teenage girls are widely represented in anglophone media texts. As my task in all chapters is to explore (im)mature femininity and power (i.e. what kind of girlhood/womanhood does contemporary society and media value, and how is this reflected in certain subcultural practices at the

UK-based anime convention?), I observed *Love Live!*-inspired idol groups as a means by which feminine-presenting cosplayers can gain power and recognition within the (relatively) safe space that is the anime convention. Similar to my exploration of maid cosplayers in chapter seven, the members of *Love Live!* idol groups acted like girls, danced like girls and dressed like girls (insofar as they were imitating a hyperfemininity as represented in Japanese media). However, the difference between the maid café and idol groups lies in the fact that these were *actually* girls assigned-at-birth. Nonetheless, the type of girlhood that they were performing would likely be interpreted as being too infantile for what may be culturally understood in the UK (and other English-speaking countries, such as America) as being the “normal” behaviour of teenage girls. *Love Live!* is an anime that represents teenage girls who are able to be freely immature. Coming of age as an idol cosplayer is not related to sex, drugs or a tumult of hormones; by contrast, it is related to success, hard work, creativity, teamwork and friendship. Insofar as “self-determination, success, and empowerment [are] primary markers of contemporary girlhood” (Godfrey, 2018: 13), these are particularly tangible elements in the plot of *Love Live!* and the act of being an idol. In other words, we might consider *Love Live!* as representing an appealing alternative to being a typical adolescent (or emerging-woman) in the UK which nonetheless still adheres to gendered codes of consumer femininity found in sparkle and luminosity. This feminine guise acts as a means of masking the underlying queer aspects of *Love Live!*-inspired cosplay that detracts from the expectation of hegemonic femininity as appealing to the desires of heterosexual boys and men. As I explored, cosplayers experience their tween-like (be)coming of age via *Love Live!* which is necessarily informed by discourses of neoliberalism and postfeminism. Therefore, *Love Live!* cosplay is another one of the ways in which a seemingly alternative femininity associated with Japan has been appropriated by a feminine subculture in the UK for their own fantasies

and desires, which necessarily pertains to that neoliberal means of coming of age, self-actualisation.



Fig. 8.5.¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ 8.5. Group hug. A group of cosplayers hug each other following their performance as an idol group.

Chapter Nine: Conclusion

In light of the existing literature that presents cosplay as a female-dominated subculture (Crawford & Hancock, 2019; Winge, 2019; Mason-Betrand, 2018), this study inquired into assigned-female-at-birth, feminine-presenting cosplayers in the UK. Based in the discipline of girlhood studies, I observed the ways in which individuals and groups emulated symbolic images of girls in Japanese media such as manga and anime, all of which were redolent of the spectacularly feminine (McRobbie, 2009). This doctoral thesis has been a journey of exploration on the wavering and contradictory relationality between discourses of femininity and sexualisation in which sexualisation (as the hegemonic reification of capitalist and patriarchal desire) is the persistent factor which defines the contemporary female subject's coming of age. As I have explored throughout this study, as social subjects our socialisation is circumscribed by a hegemony of gender (Connell, 1987). My analysis of cosplay illuminated the complicated, awkward and problematic relations that neoliberal identities bear to feminist agency and politics, bringing into question the nature of what motivates us to act as social actors and the double-sided nature of our assumed autonomy. To what extent do our actions demonstrate our autonomy and value within a hegemonic machine? And are the choices that we make mere reflections of the force that determines them in our affect-navigated desire to belong?

My discussion also showed that the guise of the spectacularly feminine is shaping the nature of girls' subcultures, where girls are transforming from their former observed state as present but invisible (McRobbie & Garber, 2003) into present and hypervisible. Nevertheless, this hypervisibility is afforded only to those who succeed in their spectacularly feminine guises via cosplay—notably those who have financial access to the resources and platforms and those who fit a criteria of privilege associated with middle-class whiteness. Therefore, the hypervisibility of certain cosplayers is not necessarily reflective of girls' fan cultures as a

whole which are persistently undervalued and trivialised in anime-related fandom and cosplay. Therefore, we might ask, if girls are visible insofar as they are spectacular via cosplay, then are girls really becoming more visible? While the spectacularly feminine is presented as a means by which all female-presenting agents may become recognised and represented, it also draws attention to the nature of recognition and to whom it is afforded—notably those who produce themselves as embodiments of those restricting ideals of image (biased in favour of whiteness and thinness) and consumer capitalism (social class).

My central aim in this thesis was to reflect on three cosplay groups and the ways in which individuals became spectacularly feminine. My aims of this study were:

1. To provide a context and lay the foundations for further studies into feminine-presenting cosplay subcultures such as boudoir, maid café and idol group cosplay.
2. To explore (via feminine-presenting cosplay subcultures) the social necessity and means of becoming spectacularly feminine as a female subject.
3. To consider, in light of Japanese media and cosplay, how bodies, or rather, gendered identities, become through their relations with images (Coleman, 2008).
4. To reflect on my own experiences as a former anime fan and the experience of becoming feminine through cosplay.

I have used cosplay as a case for exploring each of these objectives, in which, as I have shown throughout this thesis, cosplay subcultures—commonly found on display in the UK at anime conventions—are spaces in which individuals may play with gender, their identities,

and their gendered identities. Looking primarily at cosplayers who were assigned female at birth, I considered the experience of the subject who negotiates the socially-assigned label of “girl” as they grow up, in which, during adolescence, womanhood becomes increasingly implicated. Through cosplay, I interrogated the notion that it becomes a matter of compulsory social obligation for the female-assigned subject to conform to ideals of femininity in order to avoid peer regulation and achieve their coming of age—which necessarily marks their indoctrination into a cycle that works to redefine and represent hegemony through their actions and behaviour. Using feminist, poststructuralist theory as my framework, I observed cosplay as a means of enacting self-discipline (Foucault, 1995), in which technologies of self mould the subject into the image of ideal femininity. On top of this, this study was underpinned by transcendental-empiricism, an ontology which embraces paradox as its means of understanding; acknowledging the contradictions and tensions that underpin the nature of truth. Therefore, it is necessary for these tensions to extend into this chapter, forming a conclusion that at points may be read as inconclusive.

As I discussed throughout this thesis, cosplay literalises the drag-like essence of hegemonically-defined femininity. On top of this, these drag-like performances of femininity have the potential to uncannily subvert the heterosexual matrix in their excessiveness (Butler, 2006). Whether or not cosplayers thwarted hegemony with their feminine display was not the crux of this thesis, but rather, it was to observe how this play with gender reflects our becomingness as subjects in relation to patriarchal, capitalist desire. Indeed, as I observed, one of the contradictions of spectacularly feminine cosplay lies in its existence as play which can be used to parody and trouble certain hegemonic norms, while nonetheless implicitly solidifying these ideologies via repetition. This ultimately presented the core argument of this thesis: we all come of age in light of those (hegemonic) discourses made available to us via media technology. From this, the internet is making other cultural discourses of gender

available in which Japanese media seemingly represents alternative, hyper-girlled femininities that nonetheless adhere to a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007).

I have represented the accounts of cosplayers to add a deeper, more diverse, dimension to the scholarship of cosplay studies, working to immerse myself in certain subcultures that are unknown or demonised in a British context. My study has also been a methodological exploration of immersive, feminist auto-ethnography and ethics in the context of anime conventions and cosplay subculture, in which I recommend future research to continue this exploration using these methods. I outlined this project's methods in chapter three, discussing the ethics of conducting a feminist auto-ethnography in a convention space, something which, prior to this research had not been considered in an academic study. Feminism lends itself well to reflective and reflexive processes which were particularly appropriate for this study that I framed around my subjectivity and intuition, from fieldwork to the discussion of data. I pursued those areas that I found compelling, in which I engaged in a spectrum of immersive approaches such as engaging in maid café cosplay myself, to observing idols dancing from afar at a convention performance; from in-depth interviews lasting over an hour, to a short eleven-minute interview that inspired a series of rabbit-hole observations on the internet. All methods of this thesis worked to show feminist approaches as a way of doing research differently (Pillow, 2003) in which my study contributes towards feminist theory and empirical scholarship of feminine subcultures in the UK.

In chapter four, I applied the theory of pariah femininities (Schippers, 2007) to what I learned about participants, their experiences and their identities which I related to the four positions of pariah femininity: nerds, tomboys, queer and neurodivergent girls. Each of these positions are defined as pariahs for their being related to masculine subjectivity, the display of which is permitted as a temporary phase of girlhood but increasingly disallowed on the approach to womanhood. I observed feminine-presenting cosplay groups as providing a

means of masking these pariah feminine identities via the guise of the spectacularly feminine. In this sense, cosplay acts as a metaphor for coming of age as a pariah of femininity in capitalist, patriarchal society: one learns to camouflage and conceal their behaviour as a means of self-discipline (Foucault, 1995), becoming empowered via hegemony as a result. This chapter established the ground for the following chapters which observed three distinct cosplay groups and the ways in which the spectacularly feminine, or hegemonic femininity (Schipper, 2007) was embodied.

In chapter five, I observed the extent of self-empowerment via hegemonically feminine guises, in which boudoir cosplayers used sexification, the transformation of the mundane into a spectacle of sexiness, for financial gain and recognition. Becoming the object of desire is the realisation of hegemonic empowerment, but can other forms of hegemonic femininity exist without being sexy? This has been a key question that I considered throughout the thesis as a whole. Evidently, boudoir cosplay is a manifestation of neoliberal empowerment which is a source of contention in debates of feminism. For example, it becomes dubious as to whether the asserted autonomy of cosplayers (who engage in boudoir cosplay) is nonetheless underpinned (and undermined) by their willing subjection to the domineering force of hegemony. Exploring examples of symbolic femininity in anime characters and memes (such as *ahogao*), I explored the theory that gaining empowerment via hegemony as a female subject is a process of exploitation which ultimately reflects out positions as social(ised) subjects in a patriarchal, capitalist scape dictated by images. This chapter ultimately observed the pornified and caricature-like extent of femininity and sexualisation via cosplay, using a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007) as my lens.

By contrast, chapters six and seven adopted a lens of a *shōjo* sensibility to observe how maid café cosplayers re-appropriated the image of spectacular girliness from *otaku* subculture in Japan. Following my method of immersion in maid cosplay groups, I explored

how maid café cosplayers fought against their sexualisation by performing and appearing as doll-like girls. Here I considered the symbolism of the girl (*shōjo*) and her ability to disrupt hegemony by wavering in-between its structures (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). I concluded that, by using the guise of uncanny girliness, cosplayers were able to anachronistically and perpetually suspend their coming of age, both adhering to social expectations of domesticated femininity while nevertheless digressing from their sexualisation. I observed maid café cosplay as being the means of simultaneously escaping the abject reality of their position as feminine pariahs, while also avoiding the symbolic abject reality of womanhood. In this sense, maid cosplayers were perpetually (be)coming of age, subverting their unquestionable sexualisation by donning the guise of the innocent (pre-psychosexual) girl with drag-like, feminine excess. As much as I worked to honour the views of participants who asserted that their engagement with maid cosplay was completely divorced from discourses of sexual desire and fetish culture, there is, regardless, that tricky element of paradox that existed beneath the surface of cosplayers' actions and intentions. *Kawaii* (cuteness) bears a paradoxical relation to fetishism, where discourses of sexualisation are compulsorily embedded as a result of a hegemonic, patriarchal logic. Cosplayers disavowed their fetishisation, yet it is the very nature of the capitalist machine in which we are part to fetishise commodities—particularly those that are spectacular (Mulvey, 1996). The fetishised extent of cosplay therefore reflects the fetishising gaze of hegemony as opposed to cosplayer's own motivations. This, perhaps, is a reflection of the nature of *kawaii* which is, in itself, intrinsically contradictory—a knowing wink behind a cute face.

In chapter eight, I explored another example of *shōjo* (or girlification) via cosplay: girl-idol groups as inspired by the globally popular anime franchise, *Love Live!*. Using the lens of tweenhood, I explored the ways in which cosplayers in their adolescence (be)came of age via the stage, achieving self-actualisation in those moments where they were most

luminous and spectacular. Both the anime *Love Live!* and idol cosplayers performances of this text reflect discourses of the tween as the ideal postfeminist subject, who comes of age via celebrity and fulfills her role in a rhetoric of choice (Kennedy, 2018). Similar to maid café cosplayers, idol cosplayers refuted their sexualisation through adopting the guise of the *kawaii* (cute) *shōjo*. I am interested to ask, when one's (pariah) difference is completely masked by the spectacularly feminine, might that recognition be somewhat hollow? Then again, this alludes to the nature of hegemony itself as a hollow power. The repetitive moulding and self-discipline that was involved in each idol cosplayer's vying for the stage resulted in both the empowerment of the cosplayers involved as well as the reinvigoration of a postfeminist, neoliberal agenda. Hence tweenhood became an apt lens of observation, in which I found myself in that familiar, troubling place as a feminist researcher which was further complicated by my history as a girl who would have, had *Love Live!* existed at the time, very likely created her own idol cosplay group.

Evidently then, in this thesis I have explored how coming of age as a female-assigned subject is dictated by discourses surrounding femininity and postfeminism. As I discussed, certain girl-like femininities, as represented in Japanese media, present an alternative to British media, in the compulsory choice of becoming the successful image of the spectacularly feminine. So what implications does this bear for the contemporary female subject? There is one conclusion in particular that came through in all sites of this thesis' discussion: femininity—and feminine adolescence, as the social process of becoming a woman (Driscoll, 2002)—is persistently dictated by discourses of sexualisation and, increasingly, pornification (Gill, 2009). During adolescence, it becomes increasingly necessary for the female subject to become the image of ideal femininity as dictated by hegemony: hyperfeminine, hetero, and, above all sexually desirable in aesthetics and behaviour. Japanese media, in which the *shōjo* is embedded, provides a means of postponing

the hetero, hypersexual elements, while also providing a space for individuals to train themselves in the art of feminine mimicry and masquerade that is so necessary for becoming a woman. Hence cosplay emerges as a space of feminine negotiation, wavering in-between, via a youthful becomingness as encapsulated by the figure of the *shōjo* who digresses from her destiny of socialised womanhood.

There is one notable limitation in my conclusions, however. What about the cosplayers who present themselves as both masculine and feminine, or, solely masculine? While my exploration may be observed as observing what is evidently a fluid playfulness to a rigid extent, this is in reflection of my overarching argument which has been informed by the gaze of hegemony which represents gender to us in coagulated, dichotomous terms. The reality, however, is far more ambiguous and unable to be contained. Cosplay, for the participants of this study, became a means of playing with the hegemonic power that is the social currency of contemporary times both in conformity and in resistance. Throughout this study, I have been intrigued by the ways in which, as fluid and unstatic as our identities may be, hegemonic power nonetheless seeks to capture, solidify and conceptualise us at the height of our (re)productivity, which, in turn, works to (re)define the power and value of hegemony. We (be)come of age in light of hegemony because, as social subjects, we compulsively serve our purpose of continually redefining its power through our choices, our actions and our will.

Although I have been unable to inquire into masculinity via cosplay with this hegemonic lens (for example, how does hegemonic masculinity manifest via cosplay?), I am interested to see the directions in which this might take in a future research project of similar intent; a study that observes the ways in which ideals of hegemonic masculinity are embodied and/or battled against via cosplay. Moreover, in what ways might Japanese media (and I would recommend South Korean media as well, particularly those individuals who are inspired by Kpop idol groups) be interpreted by young people in the UK as representing an

alternative to gender hegemonies in the “West”? How do representations of gender as found in global media culture provide both a means of escape from and conformity to those ideals of gender that are so necessary for us to become as social actors within our own societal contexts? These are matters that I shall leave for consideration as the scholarship on cosplay continues to grow, as much as the subculture itself expands. As the practices of cosplay and attending anime conventions require money, it would be in the interest of future research to focus on the classed aspects of feminine-presenting cosplay. Moreover, in what ways might non-white cosplayers’ experiences of performing as idols and maids be shaped by hegemonic discourses? More work needs to be done on younger cosplayers, particularly tweens who play a large role in the demographic of cosplay and anime fandom. Although I engaged with this age group as much as I could, this thesis nonetheless reflects the comparative ease of accessibility with cosplayers aged 16 and above. Nevertheless, I have opened up a space which invites future scholars of girlhood (and boyhood) to inquire into anime fandom and cosplay further.

In light of the pandemic, when conventions and cosplay events have been cancelled, what is the direction of cosplay studies and how are cosplayers engaging with each other online? Future research may examine the part that social media plays in cosplay subculture, in which apps like Tik Tok and Instagram are the markers of these trends at this time of this study’s completion in 2021. On approaching nearly five years since the preparation for this research began, Japan’s media representations of girls and their subsequent mimicry by cosplayers in the UK has provided us with a range of matters for consideration. While the questions to my answers continue to grow, my concluding thought is this: in what intriguing forms will the spectacularly feminine manifest as next?

Appendices

Appendix 1.1

Participant Overview

Note: Some information has been shortened to maintain the anonymity of the participant, due to the fact that certain cosplay subcultures are more niche (and, therefore, participants are more likely to be identified) than others. Other information (such as sexual orientation) has been omitted if unknown. Participants have been listed here for their being named and quoted (from conversations to interviews) as part of this research.

Abbie, age 28, is white and bisexual. A cosplayer at a maid café for several years, she is also a *kawaii* enthusiast and has been into *lolita* J-fashion for over 10 years. [Maid café cohort]

Ainsley, 16 is a white, transgender idol cosplayer. Since coming out as transgender, at age 15, he is looking to move on from his *Love Live!* idol group and start a male-orientated idol cosplay group. [Idol cohort]

Anita, age 19, white, has been a fan of anime since she was a girl. In our interview, we discussed the evolution of her interest in anime. [Miscellaneous cosplay/Anime fan cohort]

Becky, age 19, white and homosexual, has been fanatic about *Love Live!* since her tweens. At one point she owned around 30 different *Love Live!* cosplay outfits and she founded two separate idol groups. She says that she fell out of interest with *Love Live!* around the time she entered university, however. [Idol cohort]

Charlotte, white, age 28, has been a maid café cosplayer for several years. She has her own independent wig business inspired by J-fashion and is also a fan of gaming. [Maid café cohort]

Darsha, age 14, has one white parent and one south-Asian parent. She became interested in anime when she was 12, in which she was particularly enthusiastic about *Love Live!*, cosplaying as one of the characters with her friends. Now she is no longer interested in *Love Live!* or anime as much as she used to be. [Idol cohort]

Ella, 16, is a white, cisgender, and female idol cosplayer. [Idol cohort]

Grace, 25, straight, cisgender female, has South-East Asian parents and has been a fan of anime since her early teens. Now a fan of Kpop, she told me that she still appreciates Japanese culture and media, but feels as though she has moved on from anime. [Miscellaneous cosplay/Anime fan cohort]

Hannah, 17, white, cisgender, female, is an idol cosplayer who founded her own group when she was 14. [Idol cohort]

Heston, 19, is a white, queer, transgender maid café and idol group cosplayer. He has two characters, a butler and a maid, which he chooses to cosplay as depending on how he feels on the day. Some days are more dysphoric than others, he told me, which makes cosplaying as a maid an uncomfortable experience for him. [Idol cohort]

Jamie, 25 is transgender and gay. He has been a fan of anime and the “magical girl” genre since his tweens. [Miscellaneous cosplay/Anime fan cohort]

Janine, 21, is a white, pansexual, non-binary cosplayer who has been a fan of anime since her teenage years. [Miscellaneous cosplay/Anime fan cohort]

Kathleen is a white, cisgender, female 25-year-old cosplayer who has been a fan of anime since her tweens. [Miscellaneous cosplay/Anime fan cohort]

Kai, age 21, is a white, homosexual, non-binary maid café cosplayer. [Maid café cohort]

Kelly, age 20, is a white, homosexual, non-binary maid café cosplayer. [Maid café cohort]

Kiara, age 21, is a black, cisgender female fan of anime, maid cafés, *kawaii* j-fashion and Kpop. [Miscellaneous cosplay/Anime fan cohort]

Lena, 24, white, cisgender, female and homosexual has been a fan of anime since her tweens. [Miscellaneous cosplay/Anime fan cohort]

Maddie, 29, white, cisgender, female has been a maid café cosplayer for several years. [Maid café cohort]

Martha, white and queer, is an 18-year-old idol cosplayer and fan of anime and Dungeons and Dragons. She says that, as she is moving to university, she is moving on from her idol cosplay group. This is something that was a characteristic of *Love Live!* idol groups, dissolving once members reached a certain age. [Idol cohort]

Nina, age 19, white, gay and non-binary, has been a maid café cosplayer and fan of anime for several years. [Maid café cohort]

Poppy, age 23, white, cisgender, female has been a maid at two maid cafés (one following the other) for several years. [Maid café cohort]

Priya, age 17, has Asian parents and is a fan of *kawaii* aesthetic and J-fashion as well as a member of a *Love Live!* group. She incorporated her hijab as part of her idol cosplay. [Idol cohort]

Quinn, age 18 is a white, queer and non-binary idol cosplayer. [Idol cohort]

Sarah, age 17, white and genderfluid, is a maid café cosplayer who has autism. They have been a fan of anime since their tweens and want to use the maid café as a space to generate awareness of autism. [Maid café cohort]

Scarlett, 19, is a white, cisgender, female, homosexual boudoir cosplayer with her own independent business on Patreon. [Boudoir cosplay cohort]

Sharice, 24 is a black, cisgender, straight, female fan of anime, gaming and other alternative, nerd-related subcultures since her tweens. She often engages in cosplay, but, for the most part, our interview focused on her experiences growing up as a fan of anime. [Miscellaneous cosplay/Anime fan cohort]

Skye is a white, 16-year-old member of Galaxia Idols and has been into *Love Live!* since she was 11. [Idol cohort]

Sophie, age 16, white, cisgender, female and pansexual, has been an idol cosplayer since her early teens. Also an avid dressmaker, she had made maid café dresses for her friends in maid cafés. Her idol costumes were bought, however. [Idol cohort]

Appendix 1.2

(Intended as an accompaniment to chapter one)

Conventions in the UK: What to Expect

For those who have not experienced going to a convention—either cosplay, Japanese culture, anime, manga, or any visual medium-related convention in the UK, the following is intended as a brief overview.

“Con” season generally begins in late spring lasting until Autumn. However, this is not to say that there are no conventions all-year-round; there are generally Halloween, Winter and Valentine’s-themed events too. Conventions, now an increasingly popular and lucrative franchise (with entry tickets ranging from £5 to £50 for a day or weekend ticket) which can take place on one day or multiple days. The majority of popular conventions take place during the whole weekend, often beginning on Friday and ending on Sunday. Convention organisers arrange a variety of activities to attract convention attendees such as guest speakers, themed panels and competitions. Conventions will happen in the most curious of locations too. Music and football arenas, historical buildings, hotels, libraries, bookshops, universities, sports centres. I remember waiting in line for a convention with cosplayers outside a football stadium after a match had ended. Football fans filing out in groups of men in their 30s to 50s looking cosplayers up and down with a contemptful, jeering curiosity. The cosplayers looked away awkwardly, turning away from the gaze that objectified them, which notably reflects the wider scrutiny that cosplayers face outside the safety of the anime convention walls. Namely, the gaze of hegemony that calls out difference as a means of reasserting its power.

During my fieldwork, I noted the following themes which occurred across multiple conventions and became the trend for what to expect at a convention:

Inside

- **The Stalls:** anime fans are big consumers (Crawford & Hancock, 2019), so the size of the stall section generally reflects this in being one of the largest areas of a convention setting. There are rows of tables for art-makers, entrepreneurs promoting groups, projects or initiatives, independent artists, anime and fan-related merchandise tables. Colourful pastel posters with *Steven Universe*, *Sailor Moon*, *Pokemon* fanart; *kawaii*-themed badges with phrases such as “sushi rolls not gender roles”; artists just beginning their business promotion and more established artists with groups hovering around their table (“I’ve been following them on Instagram and I love their stuff!”, one of the convention attendees tells me when I ask them); cosplayer commissioners who hand-make costumes; idol groups and maid café cosplay groups with handmade merchandise promoting their group. Stalls are big business and are one of the many points where the virtual meets the real, where online, independent fan-based artists can sell their “merch” and meet people in real life. At every mid-range to larger convention, I saw one or two stalls with queer pride-themed merchandise, including a variety of flags (such as pink, blue and white of the transgender pride flag or rainbow pride flag). It was also a regular occurrence to see young teenagers or tweens in groups of twos or threes tie these flags around their necks. Speaking to the stallholder, he told me that pride flags are an “easy seller” because once one young person in their group has one, their friends want to join them. Necessarily reflecting the neoliberal commodification of (gender/sexual) identity, the superhero cape-like flag also arguably becomes cosplay as well, in the proud display of one’s gender or sexual orientation.
- **The Stages, Performance Areas and Panels:** either taking place in designated rooms or stages with rows of chairs among the buzz of activity, these are areas where anime fans and cosplayers gather to watch the spectacle of other anime fans, cosplayers and invited guest speakers. This is the

area where Jessica Nigri (of chapter five) might be invited to speak about her business and experiences of cosplay. J-fashion catwalks, cosplay masquerades and talent contests are the chance for cosplayers to enter the limelight of the stage and become the figure of spectacularity. This was the make or break point for the idol groups that I met (chapter eight), who would realise their ambitions together via their performance on stage in the talent contest, cosplay masquerade, or, if they were well-established, a slot in the stage line-up all for themselves. This equally applied to some of the maid café cosplayers that I came across, who travelled the country performing dances and improvised skits to the humour of their audiences. Panels consist of a long table of cosplayers or anime fans discussing topics, having an audience Q+A, or even improvised chats as characters from series, such as a Harry Potter one that I observed. Information panels may include “How to design your own maid café character”; idol dance workshops, “*Lolita J-fashion 101*”,¹⁹² and even a panel on *hentai* (a term relating to anime pornography, see Mark McLelland, 2006).

- **Maid Café Area:** It is becoming increasingly common for conventions to have a maid café. Maids and butlers are based on anime personality tropes, so the café is a way of exploring the fantasy world of anime through improvised engagements with *kawaii* maids, who perform dances and serve food and drink. The maid café is the niche within the niche of the anime convention. Maid café events may also happen outside of a convention context. However, generally, a maid café will debut in a convention setting because the convention has both the safety of the convention “paywall”—you need to pay to enter, therefore, outsiders who are unaware of the rules of maid cafés are less likely to access it and intimidate the staff and customers.
- **Food hall** (or a food truck outside): Serving chips, hotdogs, burgers—the usual junk food. A lot of cosplayers that I met subsisted on a diet of energy drinks and takeaways during conventions.

¹⁹² See Crawford & Hancock (2019: 41) for a comparison between *lolita* and cosplay.

However, a trend that I noticed was for cosplayers to use the convention as a time for fasting, as I was regularly told by cosplayers how they had not eaten in a day because they were too busy, excited and/or nervous to eat. This is one of multiple aspects that leads me to make an allusion between anime fandom and cosplay as a spiritual experience (which I briefly touch upon in this thesis). I would be intrigued to see a future study on eating habits, dysmorphia and cosplay, as it seemed to me that the convention is a time of purification, where cosplayers can temporarily attain perfection. Hence, fasting tends to factor into this too.

Outside

- Gathered on the stairwells, floors, doorways, sofas and quiet places “outside” the convention setting, cosplayers sit in groups, laughing, chatting, debating plotlines and theories of their favourite series, watching and “mirroring” YouTube videos in group dances, particularly J-idol and Kpop idol dances, taking photos and filming each other. These are the outskirts of the convention.

Bonuses (in special cases)

- A cosplay swimming pool party area. Bikini-clad cosplayers pose for photos with lighting equipment and umbrellas and high-tech cameras. This is where female cosplayers get their “Patreon fodder” (as one anime fan told me), taking multiple shots of themselves at a single event or location to post new content during less busy periods of the year. Cosplayers dressed as Princess Peach, DvA from *Overwatch*, Dragon Maid—they’re all in bikini-themed cosplay, photographing each other. One cosplayer is holding a long white light, almost half the size of her, like a glowing staff. Another has a photographer’s umbrella. Princess Peach bikini cosplayer holds a small plushie of the character Yoshi. The girl poses, pointing foot, hand caressing face, looking demurely to one side. No one can get past them and into the pool because they’re blocking all the stairwells in. “They

need to keep to the shallows because they can't get their wigs wet," one cosplayer told me. "What would happen if they swam?" I asked. "Their costume would be ruined probably. And the photos would look *bad*." Where do they get these swimsuits from? "Probably customise them. Or get them online." There's a market for these things now thanks to the internet.

- **The After Party:** becoming increasingly common. You can expect anything, from the blaring raucousness of high kicks, congas and jump splits of a wild, hedonic revelry of cosplayers, to something more like an awkward school dance with a lone Buzz Lightyear shuffling in the centre of a more-or-less empty, echoing hall, holding a can of Sprite.

The set up of the convention is organised for mingling, socialising and making a spectacle of oneself as much as possible. Various "meets" are organised by online groups, where cosplayers can meet the friends that they have made on internet forums and social media in real life. As Darsha (age 14), an idol cosplayer told me:

It probably wasn't even that safe, like, you know on Instagram, all these *Love Live* groups and stuff meeting up with people. When I think about that now, that was not the best idea, because they could've been anyone. Luckily they were really nice people that I'm still friends with, but like, yeah, it's probably something I should've thought more about at the time.

The anime convention's reputation as a "safe space" away from the harassment of outsiders, is necessarily contingent on trust between cosplayers, acting as the bridge between reality and the virtuality of the internet in which both are imbricated in each other.

Appendix 1.3

(Intended as an accompaniment to chapter two)

Of Images and Illusions

We are living in a world defined by value, which is to say that we are living in a world defined by lack. Our contemporary human selfhood is directed towards anticipation and desire, of which image technology and the internet serves to exacerbate. From an early age, our society conditions us with the rule that our value stems from something outside us, in which we measure ourselves against this as a means of feeling powerful, good and worthy. The camera's conception indicated and instigated an evolutionary step forward in humanity in which we became further estranged from the metaphysical in our captivation by the physical. The photographic image, although originally intended as a scientific measurement/tool to "represent 'life as it is'" (Bordwell, et al, in: Standish, 2005: 20), has, in light of the media at least, evolved to represent "life as we desire it." Yet we place our truth on photographic images, as the phrase, "Pics or it didn't happen" suggests. An element of objectivity is contained by camera technology: "the camera never lies". However, the camera—just like our own perspective—is fundamentally singular in its (in)sight. It cannot capture the minute, subtle, vibrational and molecular changes within our state, nor the essence or entirety of our being; only our appearance as the arrangement of particles reflecting light.

In respect to our negotiation of nascent internet technology (and our relatively nascent existence as a species), we might consider ourselves as placing our worth on how we appear as a body in images and daily life. We live in a digital age where essentialised images of the human body proliferate both on and offline. Lauren Greenfield, in her photographic observation of girls and women, noted how, "In our time, the body has become a measure of self and a measure of goodness and perfection" (2009). The contemporary self is primarily defined and valued through the regulation and display of the body: to appear as a reification of ideologies pertaining to beauty and worth ("because we're worth it") is to be

valuable and valued. Just as we are consumers, we may also consider ourselves as commodities.

Becoming of age is a process of becoming valuable, and, in order to be “rewarded,” the subject needs to adhere to certain principles that society “merits”. This bears certain significations for adolescence as that process where conformity to society’s ideals of gender is ideally met. If “[c]elebrity has become “a metaphor for value in modern society”” (Marshall, in: Rockwell & Giles, 2009: 205), then we may look upon instances of celebrities in the media (and social media) as an example of how value is defined in the present day.

In society, we may observe an imbalance where (what once may have been) a spiritual and metaphysical negotiation of one’s place in the world has become subsumed by consumption and identification with material form. Our existence is something that I would term as being “formaphysical,” where selfhood is entwined with mediated images which reify desire through the regulated body. As Greenfield states, “[w]hen you are taught from a young age that your body is what gives you value, it becomes imperative to preserve that value” (in: Ohikulare, 2017). In this case, we may view the preserving of value as being deeply connected with how we (re)present ourselves in, for example, a selfie posted on social media. As image technology progresses, we will continue to be reminded of the fact that, as much as an image may bear a liking to us, we are, fundamentally, not the images we take to be ourselves. The mediated image, whether a magazine cover or a snapshot on Instagram, crystallises a moment in time that is tangibly intangible, becoming immediately dated the second it has been taken. Is image technology then, a futile effort at seizing the present moment that can never be fully captured, especially by technology?

We now have the technology to place ourselves up for evaluation by the collective. The internet serves to make us remarkable. In the contemporary human world as we know it, we experience our existence as “mere representations” (whether as an image or in our social interactions). If images are “about the pleasures of looking” (Poole, 1997: 17) then we are living a hedonistic existence. Never

before has the human mind been so surrounded by images of its body in various imagined, idealised and remarkable positions and forms, and it is having an irrevocable effect on our consciousness as a species. Just as Narcissus discovered his own reflection in the water, so too have we become enamoured by ourselves (and our bodies as image-shells) in technology, photographs, and moving images. This is an age in which we have fallen into the pool of our form's reflection – the ego-machine that is the internet – and we are drowning in distortions and idealisations of the human body. Narcissistic, superficial and self-absorbed, we are living in an age of self (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Internet and media technology have only exacerbated the hegemonic logic of woman's symbolic existence as a sexual vessel. Naturally, this affects those members of the social machine who are sensitively aware of this dysfunction. Adolescence becomes a time of compulsory negotiation of the power and validation that is available to one's successful adherence to their gendered-symbolic reality.

The human psyche has been irrevocably shaped by the photographic image, of which, thanks to the internet and digital media, it is on the cusp of shattering into a new consciousness.¹⁹³ Nevertheless, our fraught desire to make more of ourselves necessarily precedes the realisation that we are inherently more than we take ourselves to be.

¹⁹³ Paradoxically, never before have we been so connected and disconnected from each other and ourselves.

Appendix 1.4

(Intended as an accompaniment to chapter four)

Anita

I wanted to share the testimony of one cosplayer that I met, Anita, which I feel illustrates the enthusiastic perspective of the anime fans and cosplayers that I met and their ability to see the world colourfully, enthusiastically, and “very, very differently”.

Anita: My first anime that I watched, I was around about, what, eight/nine years old? And I still remember it, it was on the Skybox and the channel was 626, ‘Popgirl’ and the anime was *Mew Mew Power*.¹⁹⁴ That was the first one that I found myself that my brothers hadn’t watched before and erm I watched that. And I saw the characters and I was AMAZED by it, and I used to do like the whole stances [*does mew mew pose*] and all that as well. And after I watched the last episode of the English version, I tried to find out if there were any more, and I found the original Japanese version—*Tokyo Mew Mew*—and it had all these other episodes that the English version didn’t. So I watched that, and that’s how I kind of got hooked on to subs and dubs, on the website KissAnime.com and it would say “recommended for you” so I’d keep on clicking and clicking and on my YouTube, all my recommendations were animes, and so far there hasn’t been a genre I haven’t turned down yet. So I’m up for watching any anime.

Georgia: When watching anime, what is it about it that you like?

¹⁹⁴ *Mew Mew Power*, or, *Tokyo Mew Mew*, is an anime/manga series about a group of superhero girls, in which the protagonist is a cat girl, emblematic of Japan’s *moefication* and animalisation of *kawaii shōjos* (girls), see Sharp (2011).

Anita: It makes you laugh. People'll say it's just a cartoon but you're looking at the details as well. I remember times I'd watch *Tokyo Mew Mew* and try to draw one of the characters. With anime, you're pretty much just watching art come to life, and you see all the colours, stuff that wouldn't normally go in a western cartoon. With Japan, it's more imaginative, like watching imagination come to life. Like, that girl's hair is green! And she'll wear that, look crazy, she can get every boy you can imagine and they will always have fun. And no one will make fun of them. In real life, you don't get that. But in anime, the girl character is like the most awesomest character you've ever seen, she will take *nothing* from nobody [she won't tolerate anything] which is, like, fun to watch. And when you were little, seeing that gave you that courage where you could do anything. [...]. The first time I cosplayed, I was shaking like a leaf. I was worrying that someone would say that "Your hair is wrong", or, you know, "She doesn't wear it like that" or probably go through every little detail that was wrong with my outfit and tell me how I'd disgraced that character, so I was really worried about that. But actually, when I went, someone would turn around and go "Oh my god, it's Yuki from *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*, You look amazing! You look exactly like them!" and the encouragement would just go up and up. So, like, you'd walk around here and people you wouldn't even know would call out to you, "I love you in that anime", it's like [I feel] "Yaaay!" [*clutches heart in glee*]. You walk around, like, buzzing!

Georgia: Which characters are you drawn towards cosplaying?

Anita: Um, I do like the cutesy versions but I also like the strong lead females that people don't see [in western media], where she doesn't need anyone to rely on, she can

do it, she may be a girl but she's not fragile. She may look cute, but when it comes to actually sorting things out, she can do it. It's also the energy of the character that you cosplay. Today, I'm trying to be a character that is moody but it's difficult because I constantly smile. She doesn't show a lot of emotion, she keeps it inside. Usually, I like the more bubbly outgoing characters but it's not going to stop me from trying to cosplay this, cause I like the outfit!

[...] In art in my secondary school, we watched *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle* in class, and that's one of the ways I found Studio Ghibli. I'd try and draw them but most of the time I'd be so captivated and intrigued by what was going on [the visuals], even though I'd watched it already a dozen times and I knew what was coming, I couldn't take my eyes off it. [...] If there's a character in a certain pose or with an expression, it makes me want to draw it. [...] When you read a manga, you'll see the detail of each facial expression, everything, you can see a character's heart and soul in their eyes. Like, I can read a manga book and the character's looking, say anxious or nervous, and I'm doing the same reaction to it as I'm reading it! It's like I'm with her, and her at the same time. It feels like you're right beside it. You see what they do, they bring stories to life, so it encourages you so much to try and bring your own creativity and own story to life.

[...] Everyone will say to you, "Oh, anime and manga, it's basically a cartoon". But if you do your research, there's literally so many differences, and most of it is in the art and in the way it's shown and made. In [western] cartoons, it's more two-dimensional whereas in anime, I find they bring it to life on the screen, and, like, you see there is more concentration on that—bringing it to life. In [western] cartoons they just add colour, animate it and that's it, there's your cartoon. You don't get as much emotion as you get in anime. I know in most animes, the original manga artist gets involved with it and draws

the basic sketches as well, to show the anime team what their vision of it looks like. If a character's face doesn't look right, then they'll be able to change it.

In one way, anime and manga was my escape from—um, it's not meaning to sound as depressing as it does but um it was um [*pause*]. My dad loves his rock and roll, my mum loves her [...] my brother loves his games, my other brother likes writing and basically I had nothing that was my own, I normally just watched everyone doing their thing and it's like, that's cool but I want something that is MINE. So when I saw all these anime characters brought to life, it was like I was sucked into their world. I could watch a whole season in a day, thinking it was only a few episodes, and completely lose track of time, 'cause you get lost. Also, anime and manga was a thing that appealed to me more than anyone else, where I liked the storylines and I would continue watching it, and if there was a second season, I'd do that. Also, I'd watch the subbed and dubbed versions. Don't get me wrong, dubs are amazing, but you have different jokes in the subbed versions. Like, you hear two voice actors of different nationalities bringing the story to life.

Even though it's on a screen, you become a part of their world—you see what the characters get up to and think, I want to be on that adventure with you! When you're older, you still feel the admiration that you felt when you were little, you can watch an anime you might not have watched in YEARS and it could be the silliest thing, for example, *Tokyo Mew Mew*, like most people would think, "Oh it's just a bunch of girls in animal costumes trying to save the world". But it's more than that. When you see Mew Ichigo transform before she saves the world, you do the whole [*makes mew sound*] 'mew mew' pose with her, you do the actions as well. When they're calling on their

weapons, you join in with them! At one point, when they were transforming, I'd always do the transforming with them.

Georgia: Which character from *Mew Mew Power* was your favourite?

Anita: It would have to be Mew Ichigo, yeah. 'Cause she best describes most girls, where um, she's a clutz, she loves her sleep, she has a crush on a boy that she doesn't have the confidence to ask out. And also, she brings most girl's emotions (that most girls keep inside) to life. Like, you can feel and see all her emotions all at once. If she goes into town and trips over, most people here [in England] would laugh at you and you'd feel awful, but Mew Ichigo laughs at herself. It's more like, the confidence, the strength she has to do anything like that, makes me feel like, I can do that! I can look like an idiot and it's fine! Sort of stuff like that.

[...] In anime they have these messages like, "Be yourself! If you're an idiot, be an idiot!" I haven't seen one anime character that can go up to a person and say "You're weird" and not be a bit crazy themselves. Yeah, you see like the bullies and like if you see a bunch of girls at a school anime or like there's a girl that's new or something, or someone who they find odd, and they might try and bully her, but you see the strength in her eyes and at some point eventually puts them in their place. And that gives you the courage to do the same, say a bunch of people come up to you and say, [in a deriding voice] "You like anime", and you can say back, "Yeah I like anime, and you like painting your nails until the sun comes up".

Some girls who are into manga don't know how to come out of their shells just yet, but with anime, it shows you gradually the development of its characters and you gradually

yourself do it along with them. In some ways, you want to be that character—she doesn't take any crap from no one so it's like, I can do that! In one way, you imitate them. I've done it when I was little where, um, you have to hold your head high. If someone's there looking down on you, you might as well hold your head high and do what you do. I've done that several times [*laughs meekly*]. Do I look like a complete twit trying to do it? Yes...

[...] Anime is for, like, the people who... are tucked away and then need like an outlet, that's where anime comes in. Anime was an outlet for me. That's what I love about anime conventions, you get to meet other wacky people! You get to meet people just by chatting away. I used to be scared because I was the only person in my class, in my group of friends that liked anime, so it's not like you could turn round to someone and talk about it. But like, here, in one way, you feel like you're at home because you don't have to pretend to look interested or pretend to understand what anyone else is saying. Like, with your school friend if she's talking about fashion, I don't have a clue about it and most of the time I have to nod, smile and agree. But if it was to be the other way around she would come out and say, "I don't have a clue what you're talking about with this anime". But here, a conversation can come out of nowhere. You might hear a snippet of someone else's conversation and you can just join in with them and people don't turn around and say, "excuse me, this is a private conversation", it's not like that. People will say, "you're a lunatic too!"

Georgia: In what ways does the convention differ to everyday life?

Anita: In one way, you're not the only crazy person there. I can see people that, at one point I would've been nervous walking around by myself in an outfit, but I've seen people that can be themselves having fun with it. At a convention, you're being what you want to be and you're okay being who you are, and when you see everyone else, they're the same, we're anime geeks, we're nutters and we're proud of it! It's like how you are deep down but you can't say it in front of your friends at school, cause they won't understand it. Here you can shout out "I'm absolutely bonkers!" and everyone will cheer with you. [Looks around the room] Well, I doubt anyone would now... It's just that here, everyone comes out of our shell and it feels awesome.

[...] At the beginning of an anime there's a shy girl and you see her grow into a strong, confident character. And you think, I want to be like her, I want to do something. Like, people will say I'm weird, but from her I can learn to love and appreciate the way I am. And if they don't understand it, it's their loss. And when you see people see those characters they take on the same mindset. They're not trying to become the character, they're trying to follow the same path as the character who mirrors or relates to themselves. I found that, I'd see a shy character, you'd see her and think, "She's me". She'd get nervous about the same things as me, you'd think, "She's me! How can she do this?" And then you'd watch and see her grow and become strong and do stuff that she normally wouldn't do, like stand up for herself and what she believes in. It's like, "If she can do it, then why can't I?"

Appendix 1.5

(Intended as an accompaniment to chapter seven and eight)

“What’s This All About?”

Sarah, a non-binary participant, was running their first maid café event and they were worried that no one would show up because they had unknowingly scheduled it on the same day that Pride was happening. On this day, the event took place in a small town, lower-class suburban area in the North of the UK, on a hot and sunny Bank Holiday weekend. In a social club booked through Sarah’s mother (who was friends with the club's owners) we arrived at 11am to set up. It was a large building with two entrances and a gravel car park. Curiously, out of the thirteen events that I had shadowed both as a maid and customer so far, this would be the first to take place in an area which was not in an anime convention or rented café (of which both were shielded from the outside world). Rather, I could not think of a more unlikely place in which a maid café event could take place. In terms of aesthetics, the inner interior had a British pub-like aesthetic with wooden-tiled floors, ruby red carpets, brown wallpaper and brass handles with a stage at the back. The architecture of the building itself led to a curious opening up of the maid café to the outside world, termed “normies” by the café members. The social club consisted of two large rooms, with a bar in the centre, windows open to both sides. The side that we had access to had been transformed into a maid café as best as the members could by rearranging the tables. Pokemon-themed food and drink were arranged on three tables carefully like a school bake-sale. On the other side of the bar was the opposite room where a handful of men in their forties were sitting watching the football match on screens next door.

Occasionally, our eyes would meet theirs through the window gap of the bar to our room where ourselves, dressed as colourful, frilly-clad, imaginary creature-themed maids bounced past holding trays of Pokepops and Jigglypuff-delight.¹⁹⁵ The dichotomy between the “outside” world and the maid café

¹⁹⁵ There is a distinct sound of the maid dress petticoat, like a soft cheerleader’s pom pom and bean bag bobbles.

was especially apparent here. One of the beer-drinking men called out, “Alright, Tinkerbell” and the other men laughed. The maids and butlers shuffled nervously, pretending not to hear or see those who was evidently listening and watching us.

Little boys (the sons of the families on the other side of the bar) around ages of six to nine peered through a gap in the window of the door to the maid café, opening it occasionally so see what was going on inside. The reason for established maid cafés to arrange the setting in this way is because anime convention attendees are most likely to be aware of maid café culture, or be more open towards the idea of it. The maid café is a niche within a niche, and so these hidden and are chosen for the reason of protecting the members and attendees from the judgemental gaze of a wider society that is not aware of maid café culture, a gaze that immediately castigates such activity as being sexual, moreover, sexually perverse and paedophilic. To me, the bar—which divided both sides of this community centre—seemed to be between two extreme entities: the anime-style, *kawaii* maid café and the football-watching, beer-drinking fans of the premier league.

“It’s a disaster!” Sarah exclaimed. “This is the worst thing, to organise your first event and have no one show up!”

While this was not exactly true, there was a distinct lack of people which the size of the room made all the more evident. Meanwhile, next door, numbers were picking up and the buzz of the game could be heard from the room. There were more maids and butlers than there were customers, who were mainly family and friends of Sarah (their father, sister, sister’s friend and 90-year old grandmother). Other than that, a friend of the maid café (a guy in his late teens dressed as Ash from Pokemon), and a tween girl and her mother came along briefly (the girl was a fan of anime and *lolita* and, after seeing one of the maids on the bus, had begged her mother to take her along after they went to Pride).¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ The mother told me: “I don’t get it at all, but she [my daughter] likes it, so I bring her to these things. Some of it isn’t cheap though. What was that thing I bought you for Christmas, hun? That expensive dress, loli-what’s it called?”. “It’s called *lolita*, mum”, her daughter said, rolling her eyes.

At 3pm, just before the maid café members decided to pack-up and go home, a woman came in through the door from the pub-side and strode over the table where the maids and butlers were standing. She was wearing a rugby t-shirt with two badge-pins attached: one a St George flag badge; the other a badge with the phrase “Stoke, Forever in my Heart”. She comes over with an aggressive look on her face and a tone in her voice like she wants to have an argument, she looks us all up and down in our colourful maid dresses.

“Excuse me but what are you? I don’t get it. I don’t get what you are. What you’re about. And obviously when you’ve got little kids running around who disappear ‘round here, so I want to know what’s going on. What’s all this is about?”

Suddenly, I felt like I was in a reality television series at the point just before an argument “kicks off”. She looks around at who she can talk to. “Who is in charge here?” her eyes blaze. Sarah and the other maids and butler all shrink into silence. Everyone’s eyes dart to the ground.

“Go on, you tell them, Georgia.” Catherine, Sarah’s mother, says. “You’re doing the university whatsit on all this.”

The rugby-tee mum looks expectantly at me while I attempt to explain what on Earth this all is. I tell her as best as I can, how maid cafés are becoming a lot more popular recently, and many of them run charity events like this. (One of her sons, around seven years old, eyes-up the cakes on the table. “Do you want a cake?” Catherine asks. The boy looks up, expressionless. “Go on, have a cake, it’s free. Have a choccy—Emma, where are the choccy thingies?”)

“So this is a charity event then?” The football mum says.

“Yes,” I reply. “Sarah knows a bit more about this as it is their café.”

Sarah shuffles in their place not looking up. I don’t want to place the pressure on them at explaining (as the tension is still palpable), nor do I invite any of the others to step in. Indeed, as Sarah told me, one of the main qualities that all members of the café shared with each other was that they were on the autistic

spectrum. So, having to explain what “all this” was to a threatening stranger was, for them, a no-go. So I continue:

“We have a website if you would like to look it up. But yeah, maid cafés are quite innocent. Like Japanese Disneyland.”

The mother, still suspicious, looks satisfied enough and returns to the other room where the bar is. I can feel the maids and butler all sigh in relief. [...]

Speaking to Catherine later that day she tells me, “You know, a year ago Sarah wouldn’t have been as chatty or confident as she is now. She wouldn’t have talked to you at all, she was that shy. So I think this maid café’s been a great thing, really. She’s opened up so much. At first, I didn’t get it myself, what it all was. But I saw how happy it made her so I just went along with it. And I met all the friends she’s made and I can honestly say that every one of them is just lovely.”

I was still considering what had happened previously, with the other mum; how *we* had all looked on the other side of the bar to the football fans watching their matches. We knew how they looked: scary and threatening. Our room was open to that gaze, just as cosplayers are subject to that gaze outside the convention. It reminded me of what a maid from another café had told me: “If anyone says anything to us—like, if anyone tries to start anything, we just tell them that it’s for a charity. Then they go, ‘Oh a charity?’ [*feigns pleasant surprise*] and they’re totally different then.”

I thought how curious it was that a maid café should be first received as something sinister, fetishy and creepy, but when justified as a charity event it suddenly becomes okay. This is interesting if we consider the idea of charity work as something that is a marker of productive, neoliberal identity.¹⁹⁷ That is, maid cafés are only acceptable in a UK context if they are seen to be contributing towards something, in which the costumes become a sign for fundraising dress-up as opposed to dressing up for pleasure (in which the immediate interpretation of that pleasure is considered a fetish).

¹⁹⁷ This also relates to how Jessica Nigri justified boudoir cosplay in the previous chapter, as something which can be done to earn money to help their families or better their education, or, in this case, to give to charity.

Originally, I cut this excerpt out of the thesis because it somewhat digresses from my discussion on the “spectacularly feminine”. However, I felt it was important to show the cultural gap and the context in which maids in the UK are performing. Then again, the whole scene itself was illustrative of something. The mother was performing a certain kind of feminine identity in protecting her young children from what she interpreted as some sort of seemingly erotic, uncanny and girl-like abomination. Had this maid café been performing a culturally normative femininity (by UK standards), I assume that the reaction would not have been the same (shown by the fact that the mother was so protective of her children: “I don’t get you are. What’s all this about?”). Therefore, the maid costume simultaneously refutes sexualisation while also drawing attention to it, as being, not only spectacularly feminine, but remarkably so in its difference to what is considered normal in the UK. In this sense, the maid costume becomes a canvas on which certain discourses are projected where it was apparent that the maid café cosplayers were coming from the viewpoint of seeing the maid dress “very, very differently” compared with someone who was not aware the *kawaii* aesthetic and *shōjo* sensibility.

Appendix 1.6

Let's Talk About Voice

The matter of voice and vocalisation has a particular presence throughout this thesis, bearing intriguing insights into the nature of feminine expression and its relation to anime-related cosplay. For example, in chapter eight, I reflect on my irritation felt at hearing the high-pitched anime girl voices in the *Love Live!* soundtrack; in chapter seven, I note how certain maid cosplayers spoke in stereotypically girly ways, from the physical pronunciation of words (“refwain”) to speaking softly in quiet voices. Notably, Jessica Nigri of chapter five was also the voice actor of the character Sonico in the English dub version of the animated series (as pictured in figs. 5.2 and 5.9). Along with this, O’Brien, in her (2014) study, discussed how girls on YouTube altered their voices to appear like anime girls. Rather uncomfortably, I remembered a certain phase that I went through around the age of fifteen, altering my voice so that it would be softer and more high-pitched, in emulation of one of my favourite anime characters at the time. My friend’s brother called me out on it (“Why are you trying to sound like Tohru from *Fruits Basket?*”) ¹⁹⁸ and, from that point on, I ceased my peculiar behaviour. Hence, my revulsion several years later upon hearing the familiar high-pitched voices during this research, an inward cringing which I now interpret as having been in response to remembering one of the many skeletons in my feminist closet.

Voice and identity are interconnected—our means of self-expression in the literal sense. So what significance does it have when cosplayers emulate the hyper-girly voices of anime characters? And how might femininity, or rather, *shōjo* (girlhood) manifest as a voice? The answer to these questions may be more adequately addressed when we approach the concept of *kawaii*. As Driscoll notes, “*kawaii* is popularly associated with girls, especially when inflected with a rising exclamation as a total description of an object” (2002: 296). Keith & Hughes, in their study of Japanese idol girl groups, note how J-idols

¹⁹⁸ *Fruits Basket* (1998-2006) is a popular anime and manga aimed at girls. It was my all-time favourite series throughout my teens and I see it as playing a fundamental part in my adolescence. Perhaps this is why I find myself gazing over at the space the manga and DVD collection still occupies on my bedroom shelf. I have not read or watched the series for several years, yet I am unable to bring myself to sell them on.

bear “vocal characteristics that connote feminine youth and innocence” (2016: 476). The high-pitched voices of anime girls are evidently aural reifications of *kawaii*; vocal doings of girlhood. Certain elements of vocal expression are historic to the development of femininity in Japan, in which high-pitch and low-volume are markers of politeness and the ability to be appealing. Keith & Hughes state,

[J-idols] employ a distinct set of vocal techniques that distinguish them from adult Japanese female artists, from other East Asian pop artists (such as Korean pop), and from Western pop artists. This characteristic vocal sound, and its accompanying words and physical gestures, is a learned rather than innate behavior, which constitutes a performance of girlhood.

(2016: 474)

As a performance of girlhood then, might the *shōjo*-style voices of anime enhance the spectacularly feminine, girly element, as a reification of *kawaii* or, perhaps, “sparklefication” (Kennedy, 2015) in voice form? Or is this the case where cosplayers “submit to being girled” (Warren-Crow, 2016: 1114), “sonically embody[ing] feminine youth as performed primarily for the male gaze” (Keith & Hughes, 2016: 478)? In her observations of feminine vocalisation in reaction videos online, Heather Warren-Crow notes how “high pitch...is associated with femininity as well as adolescence” (2016: 114). In this sense, the miming or mimicking of a spectacularly girly anime voice, serves to reassert both the girl drag of the maid cosplayer and the idol-likeness of the *Love Live!* cosplayer. Furthermore, as Warren-Crow observes, there are certain vocal expressions that are frequently associated with young women in the Anglophones, such as vocal fry and upspeak (“Fry is a low vocal register with a creaky timbre, while upspeak is an intonation with a rising pitch at the end of a declarative sentence” [2016: 116]). By contrast, the erratic wavering of the *shōjo* anime voice is markedly different to vocal fry which may seem monotone and controlled by comparison. If vocal fry and upspeak are potentially attempts at vocalising a smoky, feminised (nonetheless youthful) “hotness”, might, then, miming the high-pitched voice of the Japanese anime character as an idol (or changing the pitch and volume of one’s voice as a maid) become a means of expressing an alternative, immature femininity? When the leader (of the

cosplay group Andromeda idols) chose to sing, rather than mime, a song at her group's final performance, did this indicate that she was ready to move on from the mimicry of girls' anime voices (which, curiously, are not the voices of girls at all, but of Japanese women in their twenties) into expressing her own voice, albeit in Japanese language? In this regard, miming became an uncanny manifestation of a sort of feminine masquerade: not expressing one's own voice, rather, the hyper girly voice of a patriarchal fantasy spoken through silent mouth movements.

Appendix 1.7

(Intended as an accompaniment to chapter eight)

Otaku Only?

Being an auto-ethnography, I would like to include a memory of when I was 12 to 13 years old. During this time, my world had recently been opened up to the world of *shōjo*, a manga genre aimed at girls, or so I had thought. *Tokyo Mew Mew* (2000) was one of these titles that captured my eye, with its colourful characters, a group of girls who had superhero-like powers and their own assigned animal which they turned into as part of their magical girl transformation. The protagonist was a cat-girl called Ichigo (meaning “strawberry”) who, when not a schoolgirl in her daily life, wore a pink, thigh and shoulder-baring mini dress, and a magic wand to match.

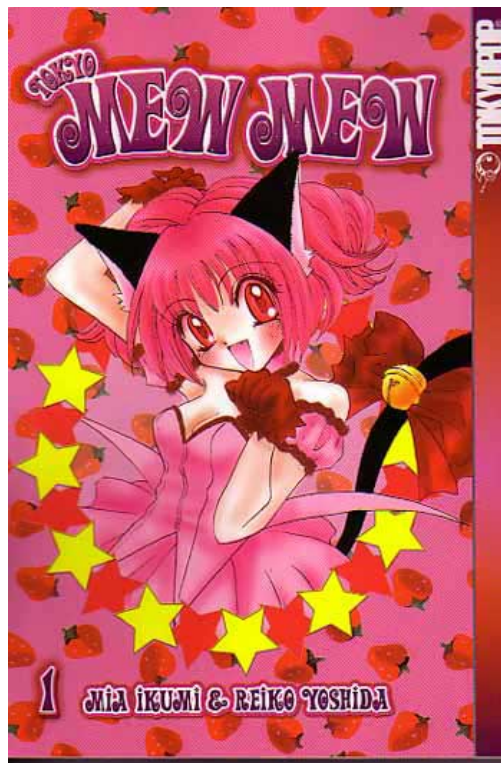


Fig. 10.1¹⁹⁹

Above is an image of the first volume in the manga series that I felt affectually drawn towards as a tween. What was it about it that was so appealing? Was it the colours; the strawberry/star aesthetic; the

¹⁹⁹ *Tokyo Mew Mew* (2000).

bright pink, *kawaii*-verging-on-sexy costume? And what about the cat ears, tail, bell and “nyan” pose? There was something about those bright, wide and soulful eyes of the girls in anime and manga which mystified me throughout my adolescence, that I could never fully explain, nor can I fully understand it now. The point is, manga and anime texts like this made me feel a certain way, particularly as I entered puberty because of the alluring ethereal (dare I say) Otherness of these *shōjo* heroines. Was there something in the fact that this manga, which centres on the pubescent-like transformation of its superhero characters, resonated with me at that point when I was arguably at my most liminal? That is to say, in what ways might my captivation with texts like these be motivated by a subconscious awareness of the transformation that awaited me?

I remember my impression of the manga crumbling the first time I introduced it to grown-ups, however. Before then, I’d fiercely guarded my passion for manga and anime in secret. That was the extent of my love for anime and manga: it was sacred and unspoken. On the day that I opened the door to my secret world, a family friend, Jane, was visiting. She had *actually been* to Japan and lived there. After hearing her stories of what Japan was like—as I could only imagine in my young mind that dreamed about a distant land of fantasy, which lends itself to the escapism offered by anime to its intended Japanese audience—I finally felt confident enough to talk about my obsession (and it was genuinely an obsession given the fact that I devoted all my spare time to fantasising about it).

“Georgia is really into Japan at the moment,” my mum told Jane, curiously aware of my recent captivation by the country, its culture and its media. I ran up to my room and brought down a copy of *Tokyo Mew Mew*, the pink cuteness reeking from its front cover. Flipping through the pages briefly, Jane remarked, “Ah I’ve seen these before, the type of cheap, pornographic comics that salarymen buy at the combini for 500 yen”.²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ *Tokyo Mew Mew* is considered *shōjo* manga (aimed at girls). However, I can understand why my friend may have reacted in the way that she did, for the fact that there is little difference between those anime/manga texts which are designed for men and those that captivate girls (see: Sugawa-Shimada, 2019).

To put it simply, this was not the reaction that I had expected when I handed over my sacred, girly book. My world shifted. *Cheap. Pornographic. Men.* The words echoed in my mind. “Why would *men* want to read this?!” I remember thinking in alarm. The realisation that something so cute and innocent could ever be of interest to anyone other than a girl like me made me feel embarrassed; mortified by the idea that this book that I had cherished so dearly might be associated with sexual desire. “How horrific”, I thought, characteristic of the *shōjo* herself.

With this memory in mind, I knew better than to judge certain texts such as *Love Live!* in the same way. Indeed, with the adult perspective that I bear now, I can see where Jane was coming from (even though *Tokyo Mew Mew* is a *shōjo* manga series written and illustrated by two women). Ten years later, I found myself watching *Love Live!* with a very different reaction to how I might have experienced it if it had existed when I was a tween. I felt repulsed by the girls’ unrealistically high-pitched voices and creepily orgasmic-like facial expressions. However, rather than judging it so, it became a strange, reflexive experience where I became aware of myself as lacking the *shōjo* sensibility that had once infiltrated my world as a *shōjo* candidate (feminine adolescent) myself. I wondered what it was about my perspective that had changed since, knowing that, although I had changed, this did not diminish the ways that other girls may appreciate certain *shōjo* texts. It brought to mind what one participant, Jamie (age 25) told me about his favourite anime character, Sakura, from the anime *Cardcaptors* (2000).

I think almost all (magical girl) anime is written from the perspective of the male gaze. When you get down to it, there does become an element of creepiness. As a child, when I first started watching *Cardcaptors*, that’s how I enjoyed it. That’s part of my enjoyment now. But at the end of the day, Sakura’s ten, and there’s always the weird, like, slight upskirt shot. Which is, like, “Okay, I was ten when I enjoyed this, but you were thirty when you wrote this and animated it.”

Similarly, the girls of *Love Live!* are associated with their intended audience of Japanese men in which certain elements of the cinematography lend themselves to a “male gaze”. However, as a “pure and

innocent imaginary space of girls for (mainly) men to consume” (Sugawa-Shimada, 2019: 196), is there any wonder that it captivates girls in similar intriguing ways?

Regardless of their intended audience (or how that intended audience is assumed to be) certain representations of girls and young women in anime and manga resonate with girls globally, and, in my experience, as well as those who I met and interviewed, they are not read as sexual texts by other *shōjos* (girls in the midst of their adolescent liminality and becomingness), with whom its signs resonate in a different, potentially spiritual way (see Honda, 2010). Rather, the draw of these texts is the *shōjo* figure herself, both and neither (Aoyama, 2010); a wavering of sorts.

Therefore, as easy as it would be, I knew not to judge *Love Live!* with my current cynicising gaze (which is quick to recognise sexism and sexualisation in its varying forms). Indeed, looking for what might resonate with girl fans beyond the simplistic level of sexualising the girl’s body for heteromale pleasure may grant us a deeper level of understanding of the phenomenon of idols as a whole. So why do girls in the UK reappropriate these images? In my eyes at least, my gut feeling is that captivation with *shōjo* was founded on a subconscious negotiation of my adolescence. That is, the figure of *shōjo* brought me a sacred territory where I could revel in a femininity that was unbothered about pleasing a heterosexual gaze. As I had always considered myself as a bit of a “late bloomer”, *shōjo* was the means by which I could digress from what was societally expected of me in order to work it out for myself first. *Shōjo* brought me those aspects which had been socially disallowed: time and space away from patriarchal evaluation; an ability to define my world, my body, and my femininity for myself away from the scrutiny of my (re)productive capabilities.

Appendix 1.7

Ethics Approval Confirmation

1.

PROJECT TITLE: A cross-cultural examination of feminine adolescence in Japan and the UK,
APPLICATION: Reference Number 014947

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 13/07/2017 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 014947 (dated 12/06/2017).
- Participant information sheet 1032097 version 1 (12/06/2017).
- Participant information sheet 1032096 version 1 (12/06/2017).
- Participant information sheet 1032094 version 1 (12/06/2017).
- Participant consent form 1031796 version 1 (06/06/2017).
- Participant consent form 1031795 version 1 (06/06/2017).

2.

PROJECT TITLE: Feminine Phenomenon: A study of girlhood in the UK
APPLICATION: Reference Number 016588

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 23/10/2017 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 016588 (dated 11/10/2017).

3.

PROJECT TITLE: Maid in Britain: An Ethnography of Japanese-style maid cafes in the UK
APPLICATION: Reference Number 018035

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 04/05/2018 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 018035 (dated 15/03/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1040135 version 1 (21/02/2018).
- Participant consent form 1040136 version 1 (21/02/2018).

4.

PROJECT TITLE: Anime Fans in the UK: Creative Practices and Identity
APPLICATION: Reference Number 022913

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 03/10/2018 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 022913 (dated 29/09/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1051738 version 4 (29/09/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1051311 version 2 (29/09/2018).
- Participant consent form 1051312 version 2 (29/09/2018).

Appendix 1.8

Consent Forms and Information Sheets

Information Sheet

Project title: Anime Fans in the UK

Hello, my name is Georgia and I am a PhD student at The University of Sheffield. My research is interested in the experiences, perspectives and creative expression of girls, women, transgender and non-binary individuals who have a passion for the aesthetic, culture and media related to Japan.

I would like to know more about how individuals become interested in Japanese culture and how does it inspire and empower them. For example, how are they inspired by Japanese culture to draw, make costumes/fashion, blog, edit videos, dance/sing, form their own idol groups - anything!

You are invited to take part in my project, where I would like to interview you about your experiences and interests in Japanese media. I have designed a question sheet which may answer any questions you have about my research. If you could look over it, and, if this is something that you would like to be a part of, sign and return the consent form, I would be very grateful.

If you have any questions at all, I will be very happy to answer them.

My phone number is: _____

And my email address is: _____

Best wishes,

*Georgia Thomas-Parr
School of East Asian Studies
The University of Sheffield*



Why have I been chosen?

Japanese cultural and anime conventions usually attract people who are interested in Japanese culture. You have been chosen for an interview because I think that your thoughts and perspectives will be really helpful for my research on people with an interest in Japanese media.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still change your mind at any time. You do not have to give a reason for this.

If you are under 18, I also need to have permission from your parent/guardian.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will take part in a (either individual or group) interview which will ask about your interests in Japanese media. The interview will be recorded via dictaphone. The interview can be as long as you like, anywhere between twenty and forty five minutes to complete. You can pass on any questions if you wish. This interview should be a one-time participation only. However, in the case that I would like to do a follow-up interview, I would like to be able to contact you over the next 12-months by email.

What do I have to do in the interview?

I am going to ask you about your interests in Japanese culture and whether it inspires you to create. I may ask you to talk about certain aspects of this in-depth. Please participate as you would like. You can pass on any questions if you wish.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

This research project is not designed to cause you any disadvantage or discomfort. No potential physical or psychological harm or distress is expected.
If there is a question that you feel uncomfortable answering, you do not have to answer it.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

While there are no immediate benefits of taking part, it is hoped that your contribution will help me progress with my PhD, of which I will be most grateful.

What if something goes wrong?

If you have any complaints about the project you can contact myself or Dr Kate Taylor-Jones (see contact information below).

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that I collect about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. Data will be anonymised, and any data collected about you in interview will be protected by passwords, or in a locked space. The data will be used for my doctoral thesis which will possibly be published as a book. You will be given a pseudonym which means that you will not be identifiable in any of the material associated with this project.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

Your answers will be recorded and analysed by myself, and all the records will be stored in a form protected by passwords or in a locked space.

What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research project's objectives?

The information collected from you will be about what interests you about Japanese visual culture. This information is important to my project which is interested in what it is about Japan that particularly appeals to girls and women in the UK.

Who is organising and funding the research? Who has ethically reviewed the project?

I am organising the research which is being funded by the Economic Social Research Council (ESRC). This project has been ethically approved by the School of East Asian Studies department's ethics review procedure and approved by the University of Sheffield's Research Ethics Committee.

Contact for further information:

Lead Researcher: Georgia Thomas-Parr

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Project Supervisor: Dr Kate Taylor-Jones

Address: _____

Email: _____

Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Title of Research Project: Anime Fans in the UK

Name of Researcher: Georgia Thomas-Parr

Please tick box to confirm:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet, entitled 'Anime Fans in the UK' explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

2. I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that they are free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should my child not wish to answer any particular question or questions, they are free to decline.
(Researcher contact number: _____)

3. I understand that my child's responses will be kept confidential. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my child's anonymised responses. I understand my child's name will not be linked with the research materials, and they will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.

4. I agree for the data collected from my child to be used in future research.

5. I agree for my child to take part in the above research project.

Name of Parent/Guardian Date Signature

Lead Researcher Date Signature

Participant Identification Number for this project: _____.

Once this has been signed, all parties will receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants.

Information Sheet

Project title: Maid in Britain: a Study of Japanese-style Maid Cafes in the UK (and Japan)

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish.

Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information, and take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

What is the project's purpose?

As part of my PhD, I am doing a 12-month research project on anime fans, idol groups and maid cafes. With your permission, I would like to join you and the team of maids to see what being a maid is really like.

What is my role in your project?

If it is okay, I would like to work alongside you as a maid to see what the maid job involves. What I learn and experience during my time will be used towards my project. During my time, I don't need you to do anything except be yourself and maybe help me with my roles and duties as a maid. This is all new to me so your help would be really appreciated!

Are there any disadvantages or benefits to me being part of your project?

My involvement in the maid cafe is not intended to cause disruption or discomfort to you in any way. While there are no immediate benefits of taking part, it is hoped that your contribution will help me progress with my PhD, of which I will be most grateful.

What if something goes wrong?

If you have any complaints about the project you can contact myself or my supervisor, Dr Kate Taylor-Jones (see contact information below).

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that I collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. Data will be anonymised, and any data collected about you in interview will be protected by passwords, or in a locked space. The data will be used for my PhD which will possibly be published as a book at a future date. You will not be identified or identifiable in any of the material associated with this project.

What type of information do you want to find out from me and why is it so important to your project?

I would be really interested to know your thoughts and experiences on what it is like to be a maid in the UK. For example, how did you first become interested and what does it feel like to be a maid? I hope that during our time together we will be able to talk about things like this so I can gain a better understanding for my research.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

Results of the research will be written in my PhD thesis and it is hoped that I will one day publish a book from this.

Who is organising and funding the research?

I am organising the research which is being funded by the Economic Social Research Council (ESRC).

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved by the School of East Asian Studies department's ethics review procedure and approved by the University of Sheffield's Research Ethics Committee.

Contact for further information:

Lead Researcher: Georgia Thomas-Parr

Phone: _____

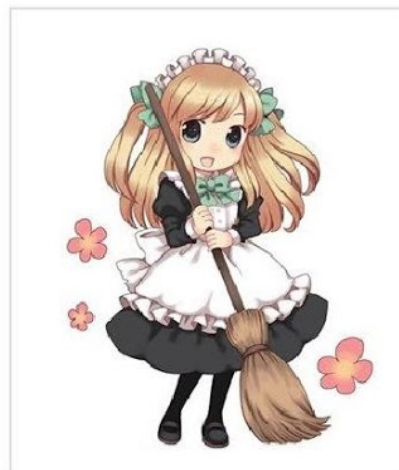
Email: _____

Project Supervisor: Dr Kate Taylor-Jones

Address: _____

Email: _____

Thank you for



your consideration

Consent Form



Title of Research Project:
Maid in Britain: a Study of Japanese-style Maid Cafes in the UK

Name of Researcher: Georgia Thomas-Parr

Please tick box to confirm:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet, entitled '**Maid in Britain: a Study of Japanese-style Maid Cafes in the UK**' 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. (Lead researcher contact number: _____)
3. I understand that my information 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 I will not be identified or identifiable 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 and any publications that result from it.
5. I agree to take part in the above research project.
6. The researcher may like to be able to contact you over the next 12 months with any follow-up information. Please leave your email address here if you consent to this:
Participant email address: _____
Social media (optional): _____

_____ Name of Participant	_____ Date	_____ Signature
_____ Lead Researcher	_____ Date	_____ Signature

Participant Identification Number for this project: _____.

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