

PROS AND CONS: ANIME CONVENTIONS AND COSPLAYERS

by

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ABSTRACT

Pros and Cons: Anime Conventions and Cosplayers

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Among the brightly-hued convention (con) halls, people dressed in feathers, foam armor, and spandex pose for pictures with one another as cosplayers. Cosplay is a way for fans to present themselves and their group to the fan community on a con-wide scale. Originally, I planned to investigate how cosplayers navigate their identities as cosplayers and as members of mainstream American society and how do these two identities inform each other. I sought to understand cosplayer's identities as laborers within their cosplay groups. Using ethnographic research methods, I interviewed eleven participants and conducted participant observations. Cosplay is even more than identity and labor, that it is an exchange of interaction among groups. Through my research, I found that cosplaying is a social, group-oriented activity used as a medium in which to interact with a larger group – the con. On an individual level, cosplay is a hobby that is used as a means of expression and developing skills as well as forming bonds with others. Cosplay groups use their groups as a means to learn cosplaying skills like sewing or crafting props. It is a source of social interaction for all of my participants as well as a way to develop crafting skills and experience. On a larger level, it is a way that people choose to interact with the con; a way to express their love of a fandom.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The hall of the dealer's room at A-Kon was spacious with cement floors and high ceilings, so the voluminous noise would drift up and away from the dense crowd. People from diverse ages, backgrounds, and ethnicities packed the convention hall floor to see their favorite voice actors and animation artists, to go to panels like Iron Lolita or Web Comics 101, and to shop at the dealer's room and artist alley. The merchandise stalls in the main center were decorated with their wares, one even towered t-shirts to the convention center ceiling. Some stalls in the dealer's room sold swords, fake weapons, and costume parts as props for future cosplays. Some merchants sold stuffed animals of beloved characters, books, comics, action figures, and other collectables to profit from the enthusiasm of con-goers. The dealer's room was a mass of colorful goods and was jam packed with people shopping. I finally made it to the center of the dealer's room where the only thing covering the floor was a bright red carpet that expanded from one end of the center to the other.

The crowd thinned at the red carpet just enough for me to see what caused the large gathering. At the center of the crowd, I saw a gaggle of Japanese-uniformed schoolgirls and all of the Sailor Scouts¹ together, pantomiming exaggerated expressions. Nearby there was a stone-still angel living-statue who slowly stalked various con-goers, only moving when the con-goer had their back turned². This carpet is where cosplayers gather to exhibit their costumes and act like their characters. While cosplayers will pose and take pictures anywhere in the con space, the dealer's room has the most people gathered so the carpet is where many cosplayers gather to

¹ Sailor Scouts are a group of characters from the anime *Sailor Moon*. This anime is about a group of magical girls who fight evil villains.

² This angel statue is from *Dr. Who*, a long-running British sci-fi TV series about a time-traveler and is known as a weeping angel. This statue stalks its prey but can only move when that prey is not looking.

meet up with others and take pictures. Non-cosplaying con-goers flocked here to snap pictures of their favorites while other cosplayers posed alongside one another in mock-battles and other interactions. Cons act as a medium in which groups of cosplayers can interact and show support for the things they are fans of, like Sailor Moon or Dr. Who.

Cosplay was born through devotion to fandom. It combines the words “costume” and “play” to create a portmanteau that means to dress and act as a fictional character. In a similar way, fandom is derived from the words “fan” and “kingdom,” and is supposed to be a gathering of fans celebrating everything to which the fans are devoted. The goal of cosplaying is to be recognized as the character the cosplayer represents. Cosplay is specifically used for fictional characters and can come in many different forms, from hats and t-shirts that mimic the look of a character to extensive and detailed costumes complete with all manner of props to recreate the exact costuming of a character. The chosen character can come from any fictional media, although the most commonly cosplayed characters are often from American comic books.³

When I began working on this project, I thought that I would explore questions of cosplay identity. As I began my research, I found the interactions within cosplay groups, between cosplay groups, and with cosplayers and the con itself even more fascinating. Through my research, I found group bonds depend upon these interactions as well as the characters they cosplay and the con they choose to attend. For example, even though all fandoms are represented at an anime con like A-Kon (a popular anime convention in North Texas), most cosplayers choose to cosplay as characters from anime (film animation) or manga (comic books). In this way, the con changes who the cosplayer might choose to cosplay. Likewise, if the cosplayer’s

³ These characters include American superheroes like those from DC comics *The Justice League* or Marvel’s *Avengers*.

group wants to cosplay together, the cosplayer will probably change their cosplay to support the group.

I also thought that cosplayers chose their characters based on personal reasons, but I discovered that there is more at work here. All of the participants in my study chose their characters because they had some liking or connection to them, but that came in secondary to their social reasons for cosplaying. The sociality of cosplay as an activity eclipses any fondness for characters, as I discovered. I found that cosplaying is a social activity used as a medium in which to interact with a larger group (the con) as well as smaller cosplaying groups. Each person in their group contributes by using the resources available to them through their hobbies or occupations to help the group cosplay together.

Cosplay and the related cons are largely understudied in the U.S., and studying this cultural phenomenon led me to discover informal economies that exist among groups of cosplayers and within the cosplay community. I focused my studies on the American otaku (fans of Japanese comics and animation) fandom and the American comic book fandom because it was through the otaku fandom that the term “cosplay” developed for American audiences, and the comic book fandom is the largest cosplaying fandom in the U.S.⁴ Perhaps it is no surprise that the increase of movies based on comic books have increased while attendance at comic book conventions have increased.⁵ Similarly, interest in anime has increased exponentially over the

⁴ San Diego Comic Con: International, the largest American comic book convention, counted over 130,000 attendees in 2017, making it the largest fan convention in North America. It’s largest attendance count was in 2015 with just over 167,000 attendees. <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/entertainment/comic-con/sd-me-con-numbers-20170715-story.html>

⁵ San Diego Comic-Con’s attendance has increased from 300 attendees in 1970 to over 135,000 attendees in 2016, with their largest increases between 2005-2010 (27,000 attendee increase). It was also during this time that super hero movies like Spider-Man and the Batman series reboot became box office hits. <https://www.nyfa.edu/student-resources/the-rise-of-superhero-films/>, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-hc-comic-con-updates-by-the-numbers-san-diego-comic-con-1469118665-htmlstory.html>

last decade, also correlating with an increase in anime con attendance (Rich 2011). More people than in previous decades are being exposed to fandom, cons, and cosplay.

I took a Cultural Studies approach using the Birmingham School of thought to do my research. This approach views culture as the way in which people make symbolic meaning out of everyday things. Using this approach, I focused specifically on how cosplayers make meaning out of cosplay. Of special importance to this approach involves the study of subcultures. Cosplay grew out of a fan reaction to the import of Japanese comic books and animation, and developed into a subculture. Cons are a direct way of creating an institution for cosplayers. The cosplay community, through cons, organizes a way to cosplay through the regulation of community norms. It then fits itself neatly into a larger consumer culture through purchasing materials for cosplay, props, anime, manga, and other fan-related merchandise.

In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (2008), Dick Hebdige uses style to refer to the way people use things in a way that was not necessarily intended by their producers. Subcultures appropriate a new meaning based on the new use. In other words, everyday objects take on new meaning. Subcultures exploit consumer goods as a medium to express rebellion against mainstream culture. This is done by emptying them of their common significations and then attributing a new meaning to them (Hebdige 2008). The creation of cosplay costumes appropriates everyday items to be used as props and crafting costume pieces from available sources. The use of the item changes along with its significance to the cosplayer. This appropriation of different objects constitutes what Hebdige calls “bricolage.” Cosplayers who are less confident in their sewing skill will raid thrift stores and outlet centers to find clothing that can be modified for cosplaying. Likewise, cosplayers go to hardware stores to buy raw materials like copper piping and gears to create props. Paul Willis (2000) defines ethnography as an

approach to the social and cultural that accommodates an understanding of experience and creativity. It engages all human senses and intellectual faculties. Ethnography as a method of research reaches beyond practice and theorising to understand what is most human and usually is disregarded by some sciences. Thanks to its imaginative aspect, ethnography is more of an art, not simply a technique, and is a dynamic dialectic relationship between practice and theorising (Willis 2000). Through my own research, I sought to understand cosplayers and observe their interactions as they are. While I intended to find something that connected cosplayers to their characters, I found something more interesting while I observed them. As I did this study as an ethnography, my work began to show me that the meaning cosplayers found in cosplay was created through their groups and not necessarily by their character.

In this thesis, I argue that cosplay is a form of socializing with one's cosplay group, with other con attendees, and with the larger con. First, I discuss what cosplay is and overview scholarly literature on the topic. Then, I discuss my methods and my research sites. After that, I introduce my participants, and I show how cons and the perception of each con affects cosplayers' attitudes towards attending and cosplaying at that con. Next, I address cosplayers attitudes about cosplaying and characters. Finally, I relate how these factors affect cosplay.

II. WHAT IS COSPLAY?

Costumes have a long history of use in celebrations (Halloween, Mardi Gras/Carnival, Purim, the Lunar New Year, and the Day of the Dead), theater, and masquerade balls. The first recorded cosplay event in history took place in 1876, when the family of Jules Verne⁶ held a science fiction ball with 300 attendees who dressed in costume representing Verne's book characters (Plunkett 2016). Today, cosplay is also used in celebration, specifically at cons which celebrate fandom, in a continuation and evolution of costume-wearing. During the 1984 Worldcon⁷ in Los Angeles, Star Trek fans wore costumes to represent their favorite character or their own made-up characters. Japanese magazine journalist Nobuyuki Takahashi⁸ brought this idea to Japan in 1984, calling it "cosplay" (Jee 2008). This practice swept across Japanese fiction fandoms and soon, Japanese *otaku*, fans of Japanese comic books (manga) and film animation (anime), could even wear cosplay while shopping in Akihabara⁹. In the 1990s, anime and manga slowly gained popularity in the U.S., and cosplay traversed the Pacific to develop the new American otaku fandom (Kelts 2006, Minamida 2012, Sugimoto 2009). Unlike their Japanese counterparts, American otaku only wear costumes within cosplay conventions as it is not socially acceptable for adults to wear "costumes" in American mainstream culture (Okabe 2012).

To participate in cosplay, cosplayers create their interpretation of what a fictional character is or should be to them. Then they design a costume based on their interpretation of the character. While some cosplayers commission costumes from professional costume-makers,

⁶ Jules Verne (1828-1905) was a French writer known for his books on science fiction and adventure.

⁷ Worldcon is recognized as the oldest science fiction convention started in 1939. Its fandom base is the oldest fandom in America aside from the sports fandom.

⁸ Nobuyuki Takahashi was a journalist for *My Anime*, a Japanese otaku magazine. He first published the word "cosplay" about costuming and acting in 1983.

⁹ Akihabara is an area in the Chiyoda ward in Tokyo, Japan. It is well-known as a center for pop culture and Japanese fashion trends.

which involves monetary compensation, most create their costumes either entirely on their own or by commissioning parts of their costume that are too difficult for them to make. Cosplayers find pieces of costumes at thrift stores and antiques stores; some even buy pieces of their costumes at army surplus stores. People purchase material at hardware stores almost as often as they buy them at fabric stores. Cosplayers strive for accuracy, detail, and creativity when they design their costumes. Costume-making is both time-consuming and expensive, no matter how a cosplayer develops their costume. While some cosplayers choose to buy or commission out a costume to a seamstress or artist, it still takes time to create and ship the costumes. In a similar manner, if the cosplayer chooses to create their costume themselves, the cosplayer may save some money on labor, but they must still pay for materials and invest more time into making it. Costume-making as a skill is also something in which cosplayers take pride in, which is only emphasized by the value they find in the opinions of others in regard to their work (Okabe 2012).

Each cosplay and cosplayer is unique, and even if they value accuracy, they are never identical to the actual character. Because of this, each cosplayer takes a licensed character and expands upon it, making the character the sole possession of the fan and of the fandom, no longer something exclusive to the company it is licensed to. Companies own the copyrights to the characters they have bought through hiring the artist that created them; however, by personalizing the character in the form of cosplay, that ownership is given back to the fans by way of personal interpretation (Madonia 2016). In this way, cosplay reclaims the characters they cosplay as intellectual property of the fans and as their own. In addition to personal reclamation of character through personalization, there is also a community reclamation of fandom from commercialism.

If a cosplayer is successful in their cosplay, con attendees (both cosplayers and non-cosplayers) will recognize the character and often ask to take pictures with that cosplayer in costume. This is what is considered successful for the average cosplayer. Some who want to test their skill will enter a cosplay contest, where the cosplayer is judged on their skills as crafters and actors. Cosplay contests are more the stages for professionals and artists rather than the average cosplayer.

The moment of shared identity with the character cosplayed is a milestone because of the singleness of the identity. The cosplayer becomes, for that moment, the fictional character. While not all cosplayers seek this kind of attention, it is a general goal for many cosplayers. Some dress up because they want to support their cosplay group and the group's collective aspirations while others simply want to wear their costumes without feeling out-of-place; however, the goal is still to become that character for the time spent in that costume. This recognition is the reason many cosplayers spend so much time, effort, and money on their costumes.

While their connection to the character can be indicated by the effort put into the cosplay, this is not always the case. Some put effort into a costume simply because the costume reflects their own work rather than the love they have for a character. Cosplayers cosplay for a number of reasons including: the aesthetic, the challenge of creating the cosplay, or for social reasons like group cosplays, where the group will all cosplay as characters from the same fictional universe. Success is largely dependent upon outside recognition of the character or characters cosplayed.

Conventions (cons) are often gathering places for cosplayers. Cons will often cater to specific large fandoms, but will also overlap to cover small areas of many fandoms. For example, Fan Expo is largely focused on comic book characters, but it is not uncommon to find anime characters there, but merchandise sold at cons will include multiple fandoms. For instance, it is

entirely possible to buy a Harry Potter book¹⁰ at Fan Expo, as well, even though you would be hard-pressed to find Harry Potter cosplayers there. All of the cons I attended as part of this study held a cosplay contest as well as panels of interest to cosplayers, like the panel called “Cosplay for Beginners.” Cons and cosplay are intertwined together; cons, privately owned and run by volunteers, use cosplayers as consumers and cosplayers use cons to show off their skills. Each con in my study sponsored two markets (dealer’s room and artist alley) that specifically targeted the fans and cosplayers as consumers of their fandom merchandise or fan-based artistic product. In a similar way, cosplayers use the con to market themselves as cosplayers by having the opportunity to show off their costumes and acting to others fans in the community.

¹⁰ *Harry Potter* is a very popular book series adapted into a movie franchise. It is about a boy who discovers that he is a wizard and is sent off to a special magical school.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cosplayers are largely understudied as they are a relatively new group. There is literature available on American otaku as a phenomenon and the work that documents the rise of Japanese popular culture among American fans as well as studies involving Japanese cosplayers, but there is little work done addressing specifically the cosplay community and how they express themselves through cosplay. The literature I discuss here highlights some ideas about culture and cosplay that I find very useful in creating a foundation for my research.

I view my research through the Birmingham School of thought, though a Cultural Studies lens. Because of that, I rely on interpreting culture and cultural objects as they are in their environment. The environment for subcultures is particularly important because subcultures, like the American otaku subculture or fandom, are largely reactionary to mainstream culture (Hall and Jefferson 2006). This creates a power imbalance where mainstream culture, the larger and more dominant force, can misconstrue the meaning of the subculture to its members (Hall and Jefferson 2006). This kind of influence on the perception of a subculture can also be detrimental to ethnographic research because the researcher is affected by the hegemony of mainstream culture (Hall and Jefferson 2006). Antonio Gramsci (1991) describes hegemony as the process through which dominant groups within society seek the support of sub-groups using institutions. The Birmingham School adapts Gramsci's concept to understand the role of culture in contemporary capitalism and society.

Hall and Jefferson (2006) also discuss the influence of capitalism on subcultures, particularly in the form of fashion, which is reflective of cosplay. Those in a subculture must be able to afford or have access to the clothing that make the subculture (Hall and Jefferson 2006), much like how cosplayers must be able to afford or have access or resources available to make

their cosplays. This is how markets, like those found at cons, develop to specifically provide for the needs of the subculture (Hall and Jefferson 2006), and the subculture participants must have some sort of leisure money to purchase their clothes (Hall and Jefferson 2006). This means that those who participate in the subculture must be able to afford it, creating a class dynamic for subcultures to fall into where those with less money will participate in subcultures where less money is required (Hall and Jefferson 2006). Cosplay can be expensive, regardless of whether or not the cosplayer buys one, commissions one, or makes their own. Only those who can afford can participate in cons as cosplayers, thus cosplayers are those with disposable income that can be spent on not only the costumes, but also con tickets and hotel rooms as well as merchandise or art bought at the various markets at the cons. There is an economic factor that decides who can and cannot be a cosplayer.

Cosplay is a hobby. Cosplayers work on their cosplays in their spare time as a leisure activity. Theodor Adorno discusses leisure as something that takes place during one's "free time." He argues "free time is shackled to its opposite," in which he means work (Adorno 2001:187). He writes that leisure is a product of capitalism and therefore cannot exist without capitalism. Leisure itself would not be a concept if work did not counter it. He argues that "unfreedom is gradually annexing 'free time,' and the majority of unfree people are as unaware of this process as they are of the unfreedom itself" (Adorno 2001:188). Relevant to this research, he also introduces the idea that our "free time" has merely become another thing for capitalism to monopolize (Adorno 2001:187). Cosplay and fandom provide an example of what Adorno (2001) discusses because cosplayers often create their own cosplay, use their free time creatively, and are fairly detached from commercialism, yet their free time is entirely devoted to an almost worshipful rendition of a character produced by capitalism. Furthermore, cosplayers

spend time and money at conventions reinforcing the Culture Industry's strength over our subjectivity where the Culture Industry is the commoditization of culture, creating a standardization of culture (Adorno 2001).

Originally, I was most interested in how cosplayers manage their identity as a cosplayer. In his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", Stuart Hall (1990) describes two definitions of cultural identity. The first describes similarities among people within a social group, and that these similarities have inspired social movements and encouraged social change that aim to shift power away from patriarchy, Eurocentric colonialism, and capitalism. The second definition includes differences between these groups by emphasizing the interaction of how history and society has impacted cultural identity within groups (Hall 1990). Cosplayers may only represent a small portion of the population, but through ideas learned through the study of identity within this group, other groups may form new ways to seek liberation from suppression in mainstream society and new insight into societal struggles. Through cosplay, groups find identity and freedom in its expression. Cosplayers choose their characters and create a costume based on that character. They have creative freedom while designing their costume and props. The only stipulation is that the cosplayer's character be recognizably similar to the original character.

Cosplay is relatively new to the mainstream. The popularity of cosplay has led costume companies like Party City¹¹ to call some of their costumes "cosplay." I take this to mean that cosplay is now a term in the mainstream,¹² although its meaning is effected by its context. In the American otaku cosplay community, cosplayers put in more effort and performance than simple costuming. The cosplay community also values detail and quality of the costume and props used

¹¹ Party City, a chain costume store, now calls some of its costumes "cosplay." <http://www.partycity.com/cosplay>

¹² The word "cosplay" was added to the Merriam-Webster dictionary in 1993. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cosplay>

for cosplay, thus cosplay costumes are not off-the-rack. They are custom. This leads me to wonder if, soon, cons will be populated with mainstream “cosplayers” that will kill the subculture. For this and other reasons, cosplayers are a subculture. The culture can die and may die soon because mainstream culture has gotten wind of it. This is the beginning of subculture death (Hebdige 2008).

Cosplayers form a subculture, albeit a dying one. Dick Hebdige (2008) describes subculture as being formed around the parameters of class and socioeconomic status, historical sub-context, mainstream media, and race. Hebdige also describes a certain trajectory that most subcultures follow: underground obscurity that dies when it becomes known and moves to mainstream. Among those within a subculture, it all begins with resistance, which mainstream culture sees as a radicalization. The mainstream reacts with fear, then skepticism, and finally anxiety. This attention from the mainstream leads to a commodification of the subculture from those valuing its looks and aesthetics. These looks, without any underlying values, are then copied into the mainstream as the subculture is absorbed back into another facet of mainstream culture. This is the figurative death of the subculture (Hebdige 2008). Once upon a time in the early 1990’s, cosplayers would bring their cosplays to cons separately and change into them there¹³. This was to avoid the stares and jibes of those not affiliated with the con. While I was visiting the cons for my research, people would come right off of public transportation in full cosplay, including props. In this way, cosplay and cosplayers have become more widespread and mainstream, thus cosplay is a dying subculture.

¹³ I learned this from a panel called A Brief History of Cosplay at AnimeFest in 2017. *Williams, Mike, and Clayton Threadgill. 2017. AnimeFest: 2017 Program Book. Dallas, Texas*

Unlike the mods and punks Hebdige (2008) studied, cosplay and cosplay culture is not necessarily a function of class, although creating a cosplay can cost both time and money, making cosplay an expensive hobby. Some cosplayers can save a bit of money by learning skills to craft their own costumes or props, but both learning skills and crafting take time. Cosplayers, rather than being rebellious of mainstream, are celebratory of Japanese pop culture (Rich 2011) and are different in that way. They are a subculture of fans, not of rebels, although they still show the basic signs of being a subculture in that cosplaying was once an underground movement. Cons were once very small and made up of a limited number of diehard fans. It was only recently that cons became a known thing in the mainstream and that the term “cosplay” began to morph into a term synonymous with costuming in mainstream society rather than the action-based definition used by those within the community.

The acceptance of cosplay by mainstream culture is also evident in the rise of such stores as ThinkGeek,¹⁴ which promotes the nerdy fashion line Her Universe.¹⁵ This fashion line designs and sells women’s clothing using fabric prints from different fandoms such as Star Wars, Star Trek, Dr. Who, and Studio Ghibli films.¹⁶ Her Universe sells dresses that can be used for everyday cosplay because they create clothing based directly on the costumes certain characters wear, allowing cosplayers to buy such easy cosplay conveniently. This diffuses the need for cosplayers to hire a seamstress, or spend time and money creating costumes themselves. According to Hebdige (2008), this marks the end of cosplay as a subculture set apart from the mainstream.

¹⁴ ThinkGeek is an American chain store that sell “geek culture” merchandise. It was founded in 1999 by Geeknet, a subsidiary of GameStop (<https://www.thinkgeek.com/>).

¹⁵ Her Universe describes itself as a fangirl fashion company. It was created online in 2010 and has since been bought as a subsidiary by Hot Topic, an American pop culture chain store. Her Universe has held a fashion show every year at Comic Con San Diego since 2016 (<http://www.heruniverse.com/>).

¹⁶ Star Wars, Star Trek, Dr. Who, and Studio Ghibli films are “geek culture” shows and films. Characters from these media are common subjects for cosplay.

Cosplay is a result of a cultural exchange between the United States and Japan, especially American otaku culture. In Roland Kelt's book *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U.S.* (2006), he discusses how America has been impacted by Japanese pop culture and how, in turn, America changes it and sends it back to Japan, only for it to be changed and re-imported again. This exchange has helped promote the popularity of anime and manga within the U.S. as well as developed the term and idea of cosplay (Kelts 2006). Cosplay in Japan has been studied extensively within the separate culture norms surrounding Japanese cosplay and the limitations set upon how, when, and where a cosplayer should cosplay. For example, Japanese cosplayers may not wear their cosplay outside the event (Daisuke 2012). They show up to the event and then change, much like early American cosplayers. Daisuke Okabe (2012) discusses these limitations in his ethnography involving several Japanese cosplayers. Japanese cosplayers are only allowed per outside social pressures to cosplay in certain locations including limiting photography of cosplayers to designated areas (Okabe 2012). Okabe (2012) also discusses the homemade and unique nature of the costumes due to the lack of mainstream availability of niche characters' costumes.

In a similar manner, American cosplayers limit their cosplay mostly to cons and also wear mostly homemade or pieced together costumes, which makes them like their Japanese kin in some ways. Unlike Japanese cosplay cons, American cons are not as highly organized or policed. Japanese cons are often much shorter than American ones, only lasting few hours rather than a weekend; however, Japanese cons are also held more frequently as opposed to the annual American cons (Okabe 2012). While American cons tend to take up many rooms, Japanese cons take up one large room, keeping all of the sales tables and picture posing areas together but in designated areas (Okabe 2012). This picture area is regulated by the con. Cons in Japan are also

private, as not all cosplayers want to be seen in their cosplay, while it is the point of American cons to be seen in their cosplays (Okabe 2012)¹⁷. A cosplayer can take photographs almost anywhere they want, social norms withholding (Williams 2016).

As with cosplay, otaku culture is a result of cultural sharing between America and Japan. Joseph Dela Pena (2006) is involved in a study involving otaku in Japan and America, and, although he does not limit his study to specifically cosplaying otaku, he does mention the value and devotion of cosplaying within the otaku fandoms, both Japanese and American. Cosplayers project the idea of a “performative mask” (Dela Pena, 2006:35) which is a core value of otaku across both cultures. The performative mask is the projection of the otaku’s sense of self in otaku communities both online and in person. The mask is used as a socially safe way to interact with others without the interaction becoming too personal (Dela Pena, 2006). Dela Pena discusses the otaku identity as a shut-in and consumer. While such stereotypes exist, they are more present in the identity of Japanese otaku than American otaku, who highly value social presence at cons (Dela Pena 2006). Even though both otaku cultures value community, American otaku value experiencing community more in person while Japanese otaku prefer a virtual community presence, much like that of American gamers (Dela Pena 2006).

Theresa Winge (2006) discusses the cosplay community and its social structures, claiming that cosplayed characters both represent the cosplayer and serve as a social mask to protect the user from direct social contact, which seems to go hand-in-hand with Dela Pena’s (2006) ideas. Winge (2006) argues that cosplay allows people who have a hard time with social interactions connect to one another while being able to hide behind a physical mask, leaving the character to be the only identity inserted into a social structure within a con (Winge 2006). In a

¹⁷ These differences have also been documented in travel blogs like:
<http://mystudyabroadjapan.blogspot.com/2013/06/japanese-anime-conventions.html>

way, it seems that American otaku aim to create a fantasy version of their Japanese counterpart's virtual world through cons.

While Japanese otaku culture created a layout for American otaku culture, it was America who spread Japan's otaku culture worldwide. Danielle Leigh Rich (2011) recounts her ethnography involving the national impact of Japanese pop culture on young American adults, influencing aesthetics and interests. Like Kelts, she also describes her ideas on the Americanization of Japanese pop culture, but unlike Kelts, she asserts that it was the American influence that pushed Japanese pop culture to be what it has become today, an international phenomenon with otaku in nearly every industrialized country. She focuses specifically on adult interest in anime and manga. Prior to the popularization of anime and manga in the U.S., cartoons and comics were directly associated with children and generally understood to be children's entertainment, but anime and manga, although some are child-friendly, target adults as well, presenting adult themes and situations. This kind of cartooning has been associated with art instead of children's entertainment (Rich 2011). This is important because 63% of cosplayers are young female adults (Okabe 2012). Otaku cosplay is a specifically adult activity and relates to adult sociability.

Other fashion-expressive fandoms like Bronies and Furies, who dress like anthropomorphic animals, use dressing as fictional characters from T.V. shows or original characters to express themselves (Roberts 2016, Robertson 2014). It is a medium for their fandom. Bronies do not often cosplay but will wear attire that is reminiscent of the show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, like rainbow-colored beanies and horse tails that attach to belt loops (Robertson 2014). Robertson (2014) found that Bronies would sometimes dress as a favorite pony or create an original character. Both the original characters and established

character ponies could be either female or male (or unspecified) although most Bronies who dressed as them were male (Robertson 2014). Furrries, on the other hand, dress as an anthropomorphic fictional character usually of their own design. They intend to express their connection with the animal as well as express a character design they have created (Roberts 2016). Roberts (2016) specifically found that Furrries most often have a deep connection with their animal outfit or “fur-sona.” This connection is both to their character as well as the kind of animal their character is (Roberts 2016).

Cosplay shares similarities and differences with both Furrries and Bronies in that cosplayers dress as fictional characters, yet unlike Bronies, cosplayers wear as accurate of costumes as they can and dress as established characters. Original character cosplays exist but are not recognized as they are not established characters. Cosplayers value detail in their costumes (Williams 2016) yet unlike Furrries, the characters that cosplayers play as are recognizable and established fictional characters from a series of books, movies, or T.V. shows. Furrries and Bronies often cosplay their own original characters. This situates cosplayers from any fandom in a unique category of their own because they use already created fictional characters to inspire a detailed costume to wear as well as act like that character (Rich 2011).

My literature discusses leisure time and the idea of hobbies, what it means to be a subculture, and how the cultural exchange between Japan and America created American otaku culture and cosplay. While this literature addresses the otaku fandom, Japanese pop culture, and cosplay, they do not address the function of cosplay groups as a means to learn skills and trade resources, nor do they address the con as both a social environment and a resource to cosplayers, specifically lone cosplayers looking for a group.

IV. METHODS

For this study, I conducted interviews, observed, and participated within the otaku cosplay community to answer my original research questions: how do cosplayers navigate their identities as cosplayers and as members of mainstream American society and how do these two identities inform each other? To find an answer for these questions, I decided to use ethnographic methods. In order to test my ideas about how cosplaying impacts identity, I observed and interacted with cosplayers at AnimeFest and A-Kon in both 2017 and 2018. I interviewed a total of eleven cosplayers that formed three main groups. By writing detailed field notes and describing my interactions and observations, I formed ideas about how cosplayers interact as cosplayers and as members of the outside community.

These three predetermined cosplay groups came from personal contacts and attended AnimeFest and A-Kon in 2017 and 2018, where I met up with them. One group consisted of Victory, Miguel, Jackie, Troy, and two others who declined to be interviewed. This group attended both A-Kon 2017 and 2018 and AnimeFest 2018. Jackie works for one of A-Kon's host hotels and so was able to provide me information unique to her experience working with the con. Erica and her husband, who also declined the interview, made up a second group. They attended A-Kon 2017 and 2018 and AnimeFest 2018. The third group I call Marty's group. The group consists of five cosplayers: Flower, Ms. Table, Mars, Tom, and Marty himself. They only attended A-Kon 2017. I also got to speak with a lone cosplayer named Anna. She attended both cons for both years.

Each cosplayer and cosplay group allowed me to attend the con with them to understand their experiences and ask them about cosplay, as well as to observe their interaction within the cosplay community. The cosplay group that I attended AnimeFest with was composed of friends

of friends who heard about my intended research; they expressed a willingness to allow me to spend time with them to observe and talk with them while at the con. The A-Kon group that I observed was the cosplay group of a peer of mine who also took an interest in my work. For both AnimeFest and A-Kon, I met with a group of cosplayers in their hotel room prior to the con opening and talked to them while I observed their costuming. I then went with them to the con and directly observed interactions these cosplayers had with other cosplayers, and other con attendees. Part of this study included interviews where I asked questions regarding the con or other interactions while there.

Interviews were either conducted at the cosplayer's home or in their hotel room at the con, and recorded on my digital recorder. The participant observation also happened in their homes while making their cosplay, in their hotel rooms at the cons, and on the con floor. I documented many of these interactions with a camcorder. Marty's group of five cosplayers were interviewed as a group while the other cosplayers were interviewed individually. This was because Marty's group felt they were too busy to be interviewed one at a time because we were at the con. All of my participants were between the ages 22-32 with 27 as the average age. Of my eleven participants, five were male and six were female. Seven participants identified as white, three as Hispanic, and one as Black. All but one cosplayer I spoke to was actively a part of a cosplay group. All of my participants attended either A-Kon, AnimeFest, or both.

Being a cosplayer affects aspects of the cosplayer's life outside of cons by giving the cosplayer a unique perspective of both how cosplayers experience cons and how they view life outside of cons with relation to their cosplay characters. Furthermore, cosplayers view their characters through a personal connection, as though the character has had an impact on their lives. Cosplay is something that must be planned for like a hobby, but it is also a social effort

where cosplayers consciously choose to cosplay according to their larger cosplaying network and their community. American otaku cosplayers attempt to incorporate aspects of Japanese pop culture or traditional culture into other areas of their lives.

Interview Questions

I asked about what cosplay means to them, what inspired them to cosplay, how they cosplay (including how they make or buy their cosplay), who they cosplay with, how cosplay impacts their life outside of the con, and how they feel they are situated within the cosplay community. Sample questions I asked are included in the appendix.

Research Sites

Cons are gathering places for fandoms. There are conventions for any fandom or hobby a person can imagine, but the cons I focus on here are the American otaku cons: A-Kon¹⁸ and AnimeFest¹⁹. Both conventions were weekend-long affairs that people from all over the region, and even internationally, attended. Some attendees I stood in line with exclaimed that they had driven here from Oklahoma, while an artist's business card declared her from Arkansas. RingDoll, a vendor at the Doll A-Kon market, came from South Korea while Shino Kakinuma and Toshio Furukama came to sign autographs from Japan. Preparing for the conference begins with the purchase of tickets.

¹⁸ A-Kon is an anime convention celebrated in north Texas beginning in 1990 originally called Project: A-Kon. It is North American's longest running anime convention. A-Kon counted 380 attendees in 1990 and 32,639 attendees in 2016. Maurstad, Tom (2003-05-30). "All anime, all the time; Convention offers round-the-clock immersion in Japanese animation". *The Dallas Morning News*. A grand total of 380 people attended the first Project A-Kon, way back in 1990. This weekend, more than 7,000 will flock to the Hyatt Regency DFW for the annual festival devoted to all things anime. Meanwhile, the number of vendors and exhibitors has jumped from a few to a few dozen.

¹⁹ AnimeFest is another north Texas convention celebrating anime since 1992. Along with A-Kon, AnimeFest is one of the oldest anime conventions in the country. Its original attendance was 105 people. In 2016, 10,751 attended. <http://www.animecons.com>

In 2017, a weekend pass for A-Kon, located in Fort Worth, from June 8th through June 11th, was \$80 which included access to all panels and shows, artist alley, and the dealer's room. It remained that price for 2018. Artist alley is where fan artists can sell handmade crafts while the dealer's room is reserved for officially licensed merchandise. A-Kon is held at the Fort Worth Convention Center in order to facilitate growing attendance numbers. Prior to A-Kon's move, the con was held at the Hilton Anatole Dallas.

AnimeFest, held from August 17 through August 20, charged \$40 at the beginning of tickets sales then they increased the price by \$10 every month until they sold out. AnimeFest also encourages that their attendees book a hotel room through their host hotel, the Sheraton Dallas. If rooms at the Sheraton become full, attendees are encouraged to book rooms at local, often cooperating, hotels. Each year, AnimeFest rents out all the ballrooms in the Sheraton Dallas as well as most of its conference rooms. These halls are then filled with cosplayers, non-cosplaying fans, vendors, artists, panel hosts, and various staff. Hosts put on panels and offer a wide variety of topics from Cosplay 101 to Anime for Parents. I even attended a traditional Japanese tea ceremony at last year's AnimeFest. Panel hosts run from celebrities to volunteers who help with morning yoga (Williams 2016). Alongside panels, attendees have access to a cosplay lounge (where cosplayers may adjust their costumes and take a break), a gaming room (for tabletop games), a video game lounge, and a theater that streams anime. There are also two separate marketplaces, one for local artists and fan art and the other for licensed vendors. AnimeFest is open all night, although most festivities stop around eleven. The anime theater runs all night.

Both AnimeFest and A-Kon are prime sites for cosplayers from the American otaku fandom because both cons specifically celebrate this fandom. These cons provided the perfect

locations for me to observe cosplayers and understand how cosplayers interact within their community as well as how they interact within their group. Between observing and participating in these cons and talking to my cosplay groups, I was able to understand the dynamic relation cosplayers have among themselves as a group and within the con. I chose these sites because of their size and location. There is a third con held in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex known as Anime North Texas (ANT). ANT is held during a weekend in the middle of November at the Sheraton DFW Airport, which is a much smaller venue. While ANT's popularity is increasing, it is still much smaller than A-Kon and AnimeFest.²⁰ I think that AnimeFest and A-Kon gave me accurate insight into interactions within the cosplay community as well as access to many different experiences related to cosplayers and cosplay life.

Limitations

My study is limited to local American otaku cosplayers who attend AnimeFest and A-Kon in 2017 and 2018. I was limited to the groups that volunteered to be studied and allowed me to watch them. My cosplayers are all from the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex, and the cons are held in Dallas (AnimeFest) and Fort Worth (A-Kon) so my results are locally based. Each of the cons only spans a weekend so longer immersion in the field is not possible without devoting years to observation and interviews.

In the future, I think it would be very interesting to map how cosplay groups may relate to one another and how groups may change between cons. I think it would also be interesting to observe the new formation of a cosplay group (like perhaps watching Anna more) to see both

²⁰ Anime North Texas (ANT) is a small convention that takes place in the conference rooms of the Sheraton DFW Airport in Irving, Texas. It is a three-day even, and a weekend pass is \$50 at the door. <http://animenorthtexas.com/>

how they form and how labor skills develop. It would also be interesting to be able to compare cons transnationally, as con culture may differ regionally. It may also be useful to document outsider's views on cosplay groups and cons to see if that has any bearing on group formation and cosplaying.

Personal Orientation

I am an unashamed insider to cosplay as I have cosplayed myself. This situates me as having a perspective that comes from also being a participant. The cons I attended were both in the DFW metroplex and are not representative of all cons or all anime cons. Similarly, I had a limited number of participants in my study so the cosplayers who participated are in no way representative of all cosplayers. Con regulations and environments change over time so the experiences in this study are not indicative of every con nor do I intend my work to be used as a meter for which to judge con culture.

I have been interested in cosplay since my final undergraduate year at the University of North Texas when I stumbled upon some pictures online of fantastic cosplay of my favorite video game characters. I had to wait three years to finally participate though because I lacked the finances to invest in cosplay. My first experience at a con was AnimeFest 2015 when my younger sister, already an avid cosplayer, let me come with her on a Sunday, using her friend's unwanted ticket. I knew that I wanted to try cosplaying and that the people who did such a thing were fascinating. I cosplayed at FanExpo Dallas 2015. I worked very hard on my costume, a character from the video game Journey. I was mistaken by nearly everyone as being a large pillow and blanket. It was watching the cosplayers around me that made me wonder more about this community. I am a cosplayer and therefore I am an insider to the community.

V. DESCRIPTION OF THE CONS

A-Kon

A-Kon is the third largest anime convention in the U.S. as of 2017 (Delahanty 2018). It was held in Dallas, Texas, at the Sheraton hotel until 2016, but was moved to the Fort Worth Convention Center due to massive growth in popularity and subsequently attendance.

Additionally, the Omni Downtown Fort Worth and Fort Worth Sheraton co-host the con. A-Kon and FanExpo held cons during the same weekend in 2016 where FanExpo, an American comic book convention, challenged A-Kon to beat their attendance record. A-Kon won by 3,000 attendees to total at 33,000, and FanExpo had many attendees defect to A-Kon²¹.

The people who attend A-Kon are fans or the curious, as occasionally some regular guests of the hotel will wander down into the con. Because of the expensive tickets upwards of \$40, the fans who find the con worth the price outnumber curious attendees. The atmosphere among the con participants is one of excitement with caffeinated energy. In the hotel lobby, cosplayers and other con attendees chat excitedly with one another. Some pose for pictures, while others enjoy a morning coffee together. People get to come together here to experience community with other fans. People can see cosplayers represent their favorite characters as well as experience events held for their specific fandom. The caffeine can be attributed to the small food stands that sell Monster and Rockstar energy drinks and the Starbucks in the lobby of one of the hosting hotels. The Starbucks even serves con-themed drinks, like the Princess Peach²² or the Mana Potion²³, available only for the length of the con. The line for this Starbucks

²¹ A-Kon had a total of 130,00 attendees while FanExpo Dallas had 100,000.

<https://animecons.com/news/post/1516/largest-north-american-anime-conventions-of-2017>

²² *Princess Peach* is the name of a popular character from Nintendo's Super Mario franchise, which is why Starbucks decided to give the name to their pink lemonade-based drink exclusive to A-Kon.

²³ Mana potions are used in role-playing video games to refresh magical abilities. This drink from Starbucks for A-Kon was bright green and based on a green apple flavor.

can be seen snaking down the corridor because of the excitement for these themed drinks. The idea of exclusive drinks is very popular among con-goers, even among those who commute to the con rather than stay at a hosting hotel. I spoke with a few commuter con-goers while in line here. They said they were in this line because they wanted to try the new drink. They had the option to go to another, less crowded Starbucks, but they came to this one to wait in line for a con-exclusive drink.

Another unlikely place for social interaction is the elevator. Although the Omni has four elevators, there is often a line to go up into the rooms. This line has no real regulations. There is nothing keeping a person from just pushing their way into an open elevator; however, the social expectations for a line are held. Everyone is expected to wait their turn. If they break these unstated rules, the small community of line-waiters speaks up. I watched someone get pushed out of an elevator for such an offense. The elevator ride is also interesting because people who do not know each other start conversations on panels, cosplays, fandoms, and even the delicious smell of food or the talent of someone balancing merchandise. These conversations seem to start with a compliment. To date, I have never been in a full elevator at a con where a conversation did not take place. These conversations are light-hearted and fun, much like the con itself.

While this con primarily focuses on the anime fandom, it also holds events for esports, tabletop gamers, video gamers, alternative fashion fans, doll collectors, artists, musicians, and actors. There are even panels for academics, like a panel entitled “God Help the Outcasts: A History of Gay-Coded Villains” which discussed the ongoing pattern of making male heroes overly masculine and male villains more feminine, and another named “Make Anime Great Again” which examine the link between Japanese anime and the alt-right. By discussing the

historical connection between Japan and German Nazis during World War II. These sorts of panels give the con a mindful atmosphere while also seeking to include a variety of interests.

A special phenomenon hosted by A-Kon's staff known as the Goblin Market. This event requires separate tickets, often purchased in advance, as it sells out quickly. The Goblin Market is actually more of a show than a strict market. Here, actors dressed as fantasy creatures from folklore, like ogres and elves, trade potions and charms for intangible things like hair color and smiles with their customers/audience. The participants and goblins barter for items in a dark, Victorian-themed street market setting. While this is not a real market, it should be noted among the markets at A-Kon because it still sells this experience, in addition to the trinkets, as a part of A-Kon and its market systems.

Somewhat like the Goblin Market, the Maid and Host Club are another separate "market" where participants may purchase tickets to enjoy the company of a maid or host while eating and drinking Japanese imported snacks and refreshments. The maids and hosts are played by actors who serve participants the food and drink as well as play their character as either maids or hosts in a manner that reflects maid and host cafes in Japan²⁴. This is similar to the Lolita and Steampunk Teaparty, where those who are fans of Lolita and Steampunk fashion can enjoy socializing at a tea party. The difference is that the Lolita and Steampunk Teaparty will not have maid or host characters, but rather specifically focuses on guests socializing with one another over a common interest. Like the Maid and Host Club, tickets for the Teaparty are frequently bought in advance as they often sell out early and are booked for specific days during the con.

The largest markets at A-Kon are the Dealer's Room and artist alley. The names for these places are a little bit of a misnomer as they both occupy the same space with a red duct tape line

²⁴ Maid and host cafes are a popular attraction in Akihabara, Japan, where the participant is served by a cute maid or a dashing host. http://nekosquared.com/?page_id=2583

separating them so the Dealer's Room is really slightly more than half a room and artist alley is the other half. They occupy the largest flat room in the convention center. In the Dealer's Room retailers sell officially licensed goods of all sorts to the various fandoms represented at the con. These goods cover a broad range of interests with each booth catering to specific fandoms. They do not, however, sell things for the doll fandom here since they have their own market, and, while they do have a few booths specializing in selling Japanese imported snacks and soft drinks, it is not as varied or leisurely as the Maid and Host Club or the Lolita and Steampunk Teaparty.

On the other half of the room, artist alley is packed with colorful booths set up by artists selling crafts they made, often in the form of fan art like artist prints and hand-made figures. Here, each booth is varied as to what it sells as the artist's interests may vary. Some booths contain hand-made plush dolls, others personally designed tarot cards, yet others sell coin pouches and 3D-printed articulated dragons in bright colors. Where the Dealer's Room booths had spacious walkways and booths a shopper could enter, the artist alley had narrow walkways so packed with people that a shopper would sometimes be stuck standing still, waiting on other people to move so that they could continue on their way. The artist's booths were more like stands where a shopper could only approach the front and not enter. Unlike the Dealer's Room, artist alley not only sells goods, but also commission themed products. Many of the artists accept commissions for artwork. To set up a commission, the artist and buyer will often exchange email addresses and the payment usually goes through Paypal upon the art's completion. In this way, artist alley is not only a place to sell goods and labor, but also to network with future clients.

As I briefly mentioned previously, there is also a sub-section of A-Kon that caters to collectors of ball-jointed dolls. The doll community is fairly small as the hobby of customizing them is expensive to get into; nevertheless, Doll A-Kon, as it is known, draws people from

across the U.S. A crafter selling wares told me that she makes the trip from St. Louis to Fort Worth every year for this convention. One vendor, Ring Doll,²⁵ makes their annual trip from South Korea, where their workshop is located. Even with its international and interstate appeal, Doll A-Kon only had seven sales booths set up, all aside from Ring Doll's were by artists and craftsmen. The Doll A-Kon market specifically catered only to doll collectors and artists so were separate from A-Kon's main artist alley.

One of the key events for the cosplay community at A-Kon is the cosplay contest, where cosplayers demonstrate their skill creating a cosplay to become a character to others. These cosplays are often judged on uniqueness, detail, and skill in performing that character. Participants are those who consider themselves the most skilled at creating their character and are usually artists (such as actors or costume designers) themselves. The contest is a large event held in an auditorium to accommodate the numerous onlookers.

While cons can appear to be glamorous and shiny under the bright lights and colorful fashions, there are other realities that face con organizers and sponsors like trashed hotel rooms and poorly-designed con policies. A hotel hosting A-Kon had to drain a bathtub filled with maple syrup and fix a hole in the stairway's ceiling that a cosplayer's prop busted through. According to the hotel staff I spoke with, A-Kon staff is hard to handle as well. The first year this hotel hosted A-Kon, they set aside a specific number of rooms for con staff. The organizer asked that the keys for these rooms be handed over to a volunteer, who had either lost them or gave them away to whoever asked for them. This story was relayed to me by one of the event coordinators for the host hotel. A-Kon organizers were understandably upset but placed blame on the hotel rather than the volunteer or the policies that they had created.

²⁵ Ring Doll is an established store that sells hand-casted ball-jointed resin dolls and accessories. The company is based in Korea but will ship its wares worldwide. <http://www.ringdoll.com/>

The following year, a top-tier organizer of A-Kon requested a suite to host an exclusive party for 15 people, which the hotel allowed upon the understanding that no more people would be allowed. The hotel later found that 30 people had been at the party, and the room had been completely trashed. The con organizer who hosted the party refused to be liable for the damages, according to the hotel's event coordinator, a friend of Jackie's. These instances are included in a long list of drama between hotel staff and con staff.

There is also conflict between con-goers and average hotel patrons. I witnessed drivers who were unused to pedestrians in this part of town nearly hit con-attendees at a crosswalk. One instance involving a drunk driver had the police called on him as he stepped out of his car in the middle of an intersection and tried to pick a fight with a cosplayer. The drunk driver fled once the cosplayer told him that the police were on their way. I witnessed this interaction myself. These kinds of conflicts dissolve the illusion of gaiety and mirth that cons project, grounding them as wild parties where things can, and inevitably do, go wrong. This new, more realistic perspective of the con has the ability to change the opinions of con-goers, who may use such interactions or knowledge to justify decisions to attend in the future. For one of my participants, knowing the gritty, intimate details of the behind-the-scenes convinced her to no longer attend because she (Jackie) works for one of A-Kon's host hotels. In this way, the con affects the cosplayer and their attitude about the con.

A-Kon is by far the largest con I attended for research. The panels, due to size, cannot usually facilitate personalized experiences with attendees. Often, if a panel is a question-and-answer-styled panel, those given the opportunity to question the panel are chosen via seat lottery. This is not the case for smaller cons like AnimeFest. Likewise, A-Kon panels cannot usually provide kits or craft projects for their attendees unless they impose a capacity limit to the panel.

While A-Kon and AnimeFest have similarities and differences, especially when it comes to size and locations, the people who attend each con are largely the same as they are all a part of a local otaku community. A-Kon is larger and draws larger names for autographs and music while AnimeFest is smaller yet more intimate, creating a more communal atmosphere. Their attendees are, most often, the same people who enjoy otaku culture and live in the DFW metroplex.

AnimeFest

AnimeFest is another anime/manga convention held in the DFW metroplex, although it is significantly smaller than A-Kon. Tickets start off at \$30 if you purchase a ticket at the beginning of the year then increase over the following months until they reach \$80 at the door. Organizers hold AnimeFest at the Sheraton Dallas in the hotel's conference center along with the Majestic Theater, which is nearby. Of the eleven cosplayers I interviewed, five of them prefer AnimeFest because of the smaller size. A smaller size means smaller panels with more one-on-one interaction between panel hosts and their audience. This is particularly useful in skill-based panels like Wig Styling for Beginners, a live tutorial on how to style wigs for cosplay, or action-based panels like Morning Bending with Toph²⁶, a yoga course. It also heightens the probability that panels like Miniature Painting, where guests may choose from a selection of scaled miniatures to paint and learn painting techniques, or the Plushie Workshop, where guests may choose a stuffed animal kit to learn to sew under helpful staff guidance, have the resources to accommodate all those interested in attending.

²⁶ Toph is a character from *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, an animated series by Nickelodeon. While not strictly an anime, many otaku are also fans of this series because of its reference to far eastern culture. Toph is a blind character who can “bend” earth.

AnimeFest boasts a robust artist alley. They have a wide variety of artist crafts available including prints, pillow cases, clothing, cosplay props, rave-wear, journals, zipper pouches, lanyards, keychains, stickers, bags, and plushies. Artist alley is in a separate room from the dealer's room, where licensed merchandise is sold. The dealer's room has much larger booths and sells all sorts of wares like t-shirts, figures, games, books, DVDs, collectables, and even imported snacks.

The very top floor of the Sheraton's convention center houses film screening rooms. Set up like a small theater, these rooms play anime 24/7 and are a great place to relax between panels. The rooms are cool and dark, playing anime both old and new, sometimes even debuting new Japanese-animated movies. There are three rooms reserved for screening, while the other rooms on the top floor are used for security headquarters and a medical aid room, although both security and aid volunteers can be found posted on other floors as well. The rooms on the third floor serve as a central base.

AnimeFest holds more audience-interaction panels than A-Kon, probably also due to its size. For this con, the dealer's room and artist alley are in separate locations. The dealer's room requires a badge-scan to enter while artist alley does not. I find this interesting because it allows people who are not a part of the con to shop from artists but does not allow them to shop the licensed merchandise. This is different from A-Kon, where both markets were held in the same massive room divided by a tape line on the floor, and all people must scan their badges to enter.

AnimeFest, like A-Kon, holds raves and after-parties as well, although theirs are closely regulated with security guards and several chaperone-like guardians stationed at the door and among the dancing crowd as well as by each water station. According to Anna, one of my participants, during last year's rave, someone spiked all the water jugs available to the dancers

with vodka, so this year, the con posted security guards to watch them and kept them stored outside the rave.

The cosplay contest for AnimeFest is a highlight of the con. Here, the audience is entertained by cosplayers playing their characters to music on the professional stages of the Majestic Theater in Dallas. This theater conveys a sense of grandeur through the high lofted ceilings and elegantly detailed interior that alludes to an old-world style. Here, cosplayers, most often crafters, designers, and artists, do their best to impress a small panel of judges by acting out small skits or doing a dance in line with what their character would do. Generally, both the audience and participant turnout is good enough to warrant the venue, with attendance increasing each year. Both AnimeFest and A-Kon are cons that facilitate social otaku, making them both mediums where cosplayers can interact with one another. AnimeFest's cosplay contest is even held in a separate theater nearby,²⁷ while A-Kon's is held in a large ballroom in the convention center.

Each con, with different atmospheres, provided a different backdrop for my participants to interact with. One of my participants works for a hosting hotel of A-Kon's so her interaction with this con is unique. I did not have any AnimeFest insiders among my participants, so I was not informed about AnimeFest in this nature. AnimeFest, as a smaller con, instead gave me more insight into my one lone cosplayer's ideas on cosplay.

²⁷ The Majestic Theater in Dallas is a theatrical venue that hosts bands and shows. The theater has also hosted A-Kon's cosplay contest since 2008. <http://majestic.dallasculture.org/>

VI. MY PARTICIPANTS

My participants were fairly evenly split between male and female. All of them self-identified as cosplayers, and I can confirm that I watched them each cosplay at least once during the cons. The average age of my participants was 27. Of my eleven participants, eight hold bachelor's degrees and two have master's degrees. The rest are enrolled in college-level courses. Their household incomes ranged from \$35,000-\$90,000. Most preferred to spend about \$300 to \$1000 on each cosplay. All of my cosplayers were a part of a cosplay group aside from one, Anna, who wished to find a cosplay group. All of my participants were part of both my interviews and participant observations.

*Troy Smith*²⁸

Troy invited me to his apartment before the con to conduct the interview. It was small with only one bedroom, but very tidy. I was asked to remove my shoes. We sat in the living room at a low table with a foot-heater underneath it called a *kotatsu*. Both the removal of shoes and the *kotatsu* point to a respect to Asian culture, where the removal of shoes when entering the home is a sign of respect to the home and the family that lives there, while the *kotatsu* is a traditional Japanese table used in winter for the family to huddle under. One wall had a bookshelf filled with books, and another wall had an entertainment center with a TV and several game systems. I recognized that there was a Nintendo Switch, a Nintendo Wii U, and a PS4. There was a map from the game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*²⁹ posted nearby. The room also contained various Chinese and Japanese trinkets, but not very much fandom merchandise outside

²⁸ All names are pseudonyms to conceal the identity of my informants.

²⁹ *Skyrim* is the fifth installment in the *Elder Scrolls* video game series produced by Bethesda. *Skyrim* is a sandbox game set in a medieval-like fantasy world where the choices the hero makes determine the path of the story for the player. <https://elderscrolls.bethesda.net/>

of the poster. In fact, there was very little else in the room at all. The decorations he had showed me his taste for far eastern culture as an otaku.

Troy sat across from me at this table fidgeting with his hands. Troy, age 27, is a medium-built man with sandy brown hair and a light, freckly face. He was wearing a Fallout 4³⁰ t-shirt and some grey basketball shorts. During the interview, Troy seemed largely uninterested, especially at the beginning, but as I started asking questions that pertained to his experiences within a cosplay group, he seemed to become more engaged and began telling me more details about his cosplay group's members.

We left Troy's apartment to venture down the hall to a small storage closet. This closet contained a white fabric wardrobe. It was from this wardrobe that Troy produced his Ezio³¹ costume. Both the costume and their accompanying boots were heavy. The costume also included a plastic hidden knife that would eject outward from the wrist in an assassin style. Troy (understandably) did not want to wear the cosplay for the interview because of the trouble it would take to put it on because of the number of components. A detail I observed about cosplayers is the incredible detail they create in their costumes. His cosplay was an elaborate piece composed of several separate articles of clothing and props. It was comprised of a tunic, breeches, boots, sash, a belt with several pouches and a large buckle, a half-cape, and Ezio's signature hood. Troy carefully assembled his cosplay to be just like the character has in the game. I never realized how heavy some costumes are until I held the hanger holding his costume. Importantly, during the interview, it seemed like Troy was not actually interested in cosplay or

³⁰ Fall Out 4 is, much like the footnote above, the fourth game in the Fall Out series also by Bethesda. As is Bethesda's signature, Fall Out 4 is also a sandbox game. Unlike Skyrim, Fall Out 4 is set in a post-apocalyptic world. <https://fallout.bethesda.net/>

³¹ Assassin's Creed is a three-dimensional platform and stealth game produced by Ubisoft. In this game, the player is an assassin who goes on a series of missions stealthily kill their opponents. <https://assassinscreed.ubisoft.com/game/en-us/home>

even in being a fan, but rather he seemed more interested in doing these things because this is what his social group does to attend cons.

I saw Troy at both A-Kon and AnimeFest. At both events, he was not in cosplay, trading a costume for t-shirts depicting video game characters each time. He told me that he reserves “going-all-out” cosplays for his group and only when his group needs him. This year, his group chose to dress in steampunk fashion³² rather than cosplay, something that did not interest him, and he decided not to cosplay without them. He told me one of his main reasons for coming to cons like these is the shopping. He likes to buy unique items from the artist alley and collectables from the dealer’s room. This, according to him, justifies spending a weekend at a con. I walked around the con dealer’s room with him for a while. He would occasionally point out a favorite anime character or a particularly exciting shop. At one point, he mused that he would like to cosplay as a Hylian Guard from the Legend of Zelda³³ video game series. He then went on to say, “... but I think I would only do it if I could get others to do it with me, like be a line of guards. That would be fun. Like from Hyrule Warriors.” Troy seemed to me to enjoy cosplaying, but reserved it only for his group and refused to cosplay without them.

Erica Roberts

I walked down the long hall at the Sheraton Dallas, host hotel of AnimeFest, until I reached the right room and knocked on the door. Erica opened the door. This hotel room had two queen-sized beds and a large window that looks out over the Dallas skyline. The curtains were drawn open, letting bright sunlight in to illuminate the room. The room was also connected to

³² Steampunk fashion is an anachronistic take on Victorian-era fashions like bustles, top hats, and corsets.

³³ The Legend of Zelda is a franchise created by Nintendo in 1986. It is a game that revolves around dungeon diving and collecting tools to aid the hero (the player) in saving the princess from the bad guy. The most recent addition to the franchise offers a more open format and encourages exploration. <https://www.zelda.com/>

another similar room. The doors connecting these rooms were both open. In the bathroom, I could see that the sink countertop surface was barely visible under palettes of make-up and foam heads with wigs on them. This hotel room was littered with cosplay pieces with props on the floor and costumes on the bed. Erica sat herself on the bed closest to the window. She wore a Harry Potter dress with the Marauder's Map printed along the bottom. Erica, at the age of 22, was short and slim, with olive-toned skin, dark curly hair, and thick black-rimmed glasses. During the interview, she found the animal crackers I had packed as a snack in my bag and promptly took them to eat them. She insisted on the crackers as "payment" for the interview in a joking manner -- my audio recording, subsequently, has munching noises. She showed me her Sailor Moon cosplay, which was simple. It consisted of a dress (one piece), a wig, and a pair of boots. What struck me most was her excitement in cosplaying (the act) and her reluctance to cosplay alone as she discussed how group cosplays were more fun.

I met Erica again in the dealer's room at A-Kon, where she was not in cosplay. She said she wanted to do a cosplay with her husband, but she had not been feeling up to making one lately. Her husband was nearby, browsing a bright merchandise booth in a Bloodborne³⁴ cosplay. It was the same one I had seen him in at previous cons. I asked her if she was planning to do Sailor Moon again, but she said that she did not know how many of her Sailor Scouts (an anime about a group of magical girls) would be willing to participate with her as a group. She told me then that she really wanted to work on a Homestuck³⁵ cosplay that she wanted to do with another

³⁴ Bloodborne is an action role-playing game developed by Sony for their PlayStation 4. It is a game known specifically for its gameplay difficulty. <https://www.playstation.com/en-us/games/bloodborne-ps4/>

³⁵ Homestuck is a popular webcomic authored by Andrew Hussie about a group of friends that need to create a new universe. <https://www.homestuck.com/>

cosplay group related to her husband. She said that this group related to her husband was also at A-Kon cosplaying the Teen Titans³⁶.

Erica's original group no longer wanted to cosplay together as Sailor Scouts, so Erica sought out another group with similar cosplay interests. She chooses which group to cosplay with according to what they cosplay as and whether or not she would like to participate. In this way, several cosplay groups can be connected as they share members. While Troy only cosplays with one group of friends, Erica has at least two with whom she cosplays. Groups can change by con theme or by interests, and the sharing of members creates an interconnected web of groups that have connections with one another. These groups also provide a larger web of resources available to the cosplayer. For example, when Erica cosplays with her other group, she has to sew her own cosplay because her other group does not have an amateur seamstress that holds a monopoly on the group's sewing projects like Victory, a member of Erica's group. Erica's other group has access to more prop-making tools like table saws and welding torches, so that group can help her develop better props. The group a cosplayer chooses to cosplay with influences how the cosplay comes about due to the resources the group can provide.

While I was wandering the dealer's room at AnimeFest 2018, I recognized Erica's husband in his Bloodborne cosplay and went up to say hi to him only to find Erica cosplaying along with him. Both were cosplaying characters from Bloodborne. While I chatted with Erica and her husband, two other cosplayers dressed as Bloodborne characters approached them to take pictures together. Erica and her husband did not know these other cosplayers previously. This turned into a major photo shoot and ended up with Erica and her husband leaving to hang out with their new-found acquaintances. This is a way cosplayers meet each other and develop

³⁶ Teen Titans refers to a group of teenage super heroes created by DC comics. The Teen Titans are a subject of comic books, movies, and TV series. <https://www.dcuuniverse.com/>

friendships. This is not the first time I witnessed something like this happen, where strangers will become con-friends with others from their fandom. It is so common, both AnimeFest and A-Kon will hold unofficial fandom photoshoots in various meetup locations across the con weekend. At these shoots, cosplayers will interact with one another the same way their characters would interact while taking photos but also chat about their fandom with other fans while the camera is not running.

Jackie and Miguel Nevarez

Jackie and Miguel got engaged at FanExpo Dallas while I was conducting my research. Jackie happens to work at one of the hotels hosting A-Kon in downtown Fort Worth so I had the privilege of meeting her again there with Miguel, now her husband. Miguel, a very tall man with dark hair, was dressed similarly to Troy in a video game t-shirt. Jackie was still dressed in a button-down shirt and knee-length skirt, her work attire as she had recently left work. When I met them near the tabletop gaming room, Jackie was talking about the con to Miguel. She sounded excited because one of her workmates at the hotel was setting up the steampunk ball for later that evening, and she had gotten a sneak peek at the decorations and vendor stalls.

In a previous interview at FanExpo Dallas in 2017, Jackie had commented that she felt that the American comic book fandom's cosplays were less sexualized than the American otaku fandom's cosplays. She said:

I've never been to A-Kon, so it's more of a feeling, but I feel like those who go to A-Kon are ... Well, anime, like... Comicon (Fan Expo) is a little bit of everything. Horror, gaming, sci-fi, pop culture, art, everything. Anime is strictly anime. And I feel like those who dress up, they're hardcore obsessed with anime, and they are more authentic, and if you've ever watched anime, it can get a little ... they are risqué, they can get a little raunchy, a little

sexualized. And, it's not that you don't see that at this con, but you are less likely to see that at FanExpo than you are at A-Kon because a lot of the characters are ... I mean, it depends on the character too, but I have a feeling ... A lot of people take dressing up as an excuse to be sexy. And A-Kon is definitely one of those things where it's not hard to find a character where you can sexualize yourself. And I mean props to them, but I don't want people looking at me like I hang out out there, and it's like, "I wore a full-length ball gown, I'm not anime. I'm not opposed to anime, but you probably won't see me dressed in a little school girl skirt that goes just past my ass."

Jackie, at first, does not like A-Kon or otaku and passes judgement on what she thinks A-Kon is like prior to ever attending. Jackie also emphasized that both she and Miguel did not want to be associated with the otaku fandom because of the over sexualization of women's characters. Over the course of a few months, Miguel introduced Jackie to his favorite anime. She eventually came to have her own favorites. Now, as they both perused the gaming room, she said that anime fans and anime cosplayers are not like she had thought. She said she liked A-Kon and its attendees. She also specifically brought up her previous interview and said she had changed her mind. She said, "I always thought that anime people were more freaky than this. They actually pull off their costumes with taste."

Jackie, Miguel, and I walked the con halls together for a little while. Miguel and I played a game of identifying as many anime characters as we could while we walked. During this time, I asked him about why Jackie seems to dislike anime, since he is himself a fan. He said, "It's not that she dislikes anime. She and I watch anime at home together. I just think that the crowds overwhelm her and that she is too close to the grittier part of this con. That's what ruins it for her." Miguel later said that if she did not attend A-Kon in the future, he would not go either, even though he is a fan. That Miguel would give up attending a con because Jackie no longer wanted to attend with him demonstrates the social nature of cons.

I ran into Jackie again at the end of A-Kon while she was working at the hotel. At this time, many con-goers were checking out of the hotel because it was Sunday, the last day of the con. She said that her opinion of the con had changed yet again because she found out that someone had filled a bathtub in one of the hotel rooms with maple syrup. She said that it looked like A-Kon attendees were particularly messy and many of her rooms were trashed. She said that there were also a few incidents where rooms were packed beyond capacity and that one room produced ten bags of trash when cleaned by housekeeping. Jackie only has experience with A-Kon guests as she works for one of the hotels that hosts A-Kon thus the only information I have about how con-goers treat hotel rooms is from Jackie's limited experience. This experience, however, still left a startlingly negative impact on Jackie that marred her con experience, which also affected Miguel's take on the con.

Over the span of the following year, she decided that she no longer liked A-Kon after dealing directly with con organizers. Both she and Miguel say that they will not attend again, preferring instead to cosplay at FanExpo Dallas and other American comic book fandom cons. This evidence supports the idea that a cosplayer's perception of a con can affect how they interact with the con and how they convince their cosplay group to interact with the con.

Victory

I met Victory originally as a friend of Jackie's. Victory is a self-proclaimed amateur seamstress, and she created a costume for Jackie of Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* as well as one of the Sailor Scouts from *Sailor Moon*. To create the Belle costume, Victory spent a couple over-night trips at Jackie and Miguel's house so that she could try pieces on Jackie when the need arose. During this marathon costume creation, I met her for the first time. She was sitting

on Jackie's kitchen floor, surrounded by gold pieces of fabric that would eventually become Jackie's Belle ballgown. She talked me through the costume's construction as Jackie sat on a nearby couch, watching. She pinned pieces together inverted and then held them up to the light, saying, "I like taking on projects that challenge me, although since I have a pattern for this, it shouldn't be too hard." It was good that it would not take too long because Fan Expo Dallas, the con she planned to wear it to, was only two days away.

Victory loves to cosplay, create her own cosplays, and tries to attend every con she can, even if she has to go alone. That she would go alone is uncommon among my participants. When I met her in the evening at A-Kon, she had been cosplaying all morning and had retired to wearing steampunk fashion for the steampunk afterparty. She excitedly talked about how she made her steampunk pieces and emphasized how much fun she had making them. She generally has a love for the physical creation of the costume and the attention she receives while in cosplay, but has very little attachment to the characters themselves. She will most often cosplay with Jackie, Miguel, and her own husband, although only she and Jackie will do group cosplays together often. Their husbands have their own characters that interest them.

Victory seemed to enjoy the steampunk after party at A-Kon as she perused the vendors and took pictures at the photo booths. She laughed as she spoke with some of the shopkeepers and complimented others on their outfits. Afterwards, she said she liked meeting other people who also dress in steampunk (to my understanding, this was her first time trying out this alternative fashion). She said she would be interested in participating in other steampunk gatherings such as local steampunk community picnics or the Steampunk meet-up at AnimeFest.

As an amateur seamstress, she told me that she feels a direct connection with the compliments people give her on her cosplay-making as it is her work on display as opposed to

someone who commissions out their cosplay costume. This leads to anxiety for her on the quality of her costumes, especially if she has to make multiple costumes in a relatively short amount of time. “That’s kind of why I like steampunk now. I don’t really have to work as hard to make these,” she says as she gestures to her garments.

Prior to attending A-Kon, Victory had never before met other steampunk enthusiasts. Attending the steampunk afterparty at A-Kon gave her the opportunity to meet people with similar interests, thus creating an environment where Victory and her group could interact with other groups, even out of cosplay. Cons are a social medium for fan groups to come together and meet others, connecting people across groups.

Marty’s Group

Marty and his group do not often do group cosplays, but still cosplay individually at the same con. Marty welcomed me into his group’s hotel room early one morning at A-Kon. When I walked in, it was still dark in the room. Only one person was awake and showering. Marty had gone down to Starbucks to get some coffee for Flower, his fiancée (i.e., the person in the shower). Shortly after I arrived, the room began to stir. Someone rolled out of bed and began to rummage for parts of the day’s cosplay. The lights were still off so from my perspective, it looked like dark shadows rising from the depths of the room. Another shadow popped out from under the desk, where she had been sleeping. We shall call her Ms. Table. Unfortunately, because of the chaos in the room while getting ready, I was not able to talk to everyone there individually, but rather had a group conversation with them. Ms. Table claims that she likes sleeping under the desk and volunteered for the position because she said she found it cozy. She

showed me the camping mat and sleeping bag she'd set up there. She then showed me her cosplay for the day as Steven Universe³⁷. She said that they had all gone to the rave the night before and so were sleeping in a little today.

Tom, another person in the room, showed me his Robin³⁸ costume that he was planning to wear after he had showered. At this point, Flower was in front of the bathroom mirror putting on makeup. She was planning on wearing a steampunk outfit today. She instructed Marty to show me the cane she made on for it. It was a long metal pipe with valves and gauges on it. It looked stunning and well-built. While Marty showed me his merchandise haul from the day before, another man rolled out of bed. After waking up a bit and securing his place in line for the shower, this man, Mars, showed me his very detailed cosplay of Master Chief³⁹ with LED lights in the helmet and realistic weaponry attached to the belt. Marty also showed me a similar cosplay from Destiny⁴⁰ using some of the same techniques to create realistic props for his cosplay. Marty and Mars told me about how they swap ideas and even props with each other to create their cosplays. Mars likes to work on miniature figures and has access to tools that Marty does not so trading helps them get items that would be difficult to obtain otherwise.

Marty and Flower also brought cosplays of Asuna and Kirito from Sword Art Online⁴¹ for a private photo shoot, where Marty and Flower hire a professional photographer to take pictures of them in their cosplays. In the anime Sword Art Online, the characters Asuna and

³⁷ Steven Universe is a series aired on Cartoon Network about gem-based aliens that live with a half-human boy named Steven Universe. It is particularly noteworthy for its LGBTQ+ themes. <https://www.cartoonnetwork.com/>

³⁸ Robin is Batman's sidekick. Batman is a main super hero from DC comics. <https://www.dcuuniverse.com/>

³⁹ Master Chief is the main character in the Halo video game series. Halo is a sci-fi first-person-shooter video game series produced by Microsoft. <https://www.xbox.com/en-US/games/halo>

⁴⁰ Destiny is very similar to Halo, although the player is able to choose from varying fighting styles to play. It is produced by Activision and Bungie. <https://www.destinythegame.com/>

⁴¹ Sword Art Online is a manga series adapted into an anime about people who are trapped in a role-playing video game. Both the manga and anime were popular enough to inspire spin-off series based off the original premise. <http://www.swordart-onlineusa.com/>

Kirito are a powerful fighting duo who fall in love with one another. These characters are significant to both Marty and Flower as they watch the series together and the relationship of the characters on the show reminds them of their own relationship.

Marty, Flower, Ms. Table, Tom, and Mars all constitute one cosplay group as they cosplay and attend cons together. They also share their skills and resources with one another to achieve the desired looks for each of their characters, making cosplay something facilitated by the group. While they may not always cosplay characters from the same anime together, they still help each other develop costumes and props. In this way, cosplay is a social activity that uses the con as a medium for cosplaying.

Anna

I met Anna through Troy. She loves anime and is not a big fan of American comic books so she only attends A-Kon and AnimeFest. When I met up with her at the Starbucks at A-Kon, she was not in cosplay. She says she does not cosplay often because she has no one to do it with and does not really think she has time to make a costume, but often finds herself on Etsy⁴² and Amazon⁴³ browsing cosplay costumes and props. While we stood in line, waiting for our coffee, she pointed frequently with excitement at cosplays she recognized, occasionally leaving to ask for a picture. She told me she attends cons for the merchandise, artist prints, and the panels on artwork, although she also loves cosplay and cosplaying. She even recently bought herself a sewing machine in an effort to learn to create her own cosplays. Most often, she buys her

⁴² Etsy is an online selling platform that promotes artists, crafters, and small businesses, although anyone can create an online store on their website for a fee. This is a popular place for those who sell in the artist alley to set up a more permanent shop.

⁴³ Amazon is a massive online buying medium that serves many distributors of all sorts of goods. Some distributors sell pre-made cosplays that can be lightly altered for a more tailored costume.

cosplays from a commission website as she knows no one who can make them instead. After she received her drink, she hurried off to a Sewing 101 panel to learn to make her own costumes. This is an example of how the con can also provide resources, like learning a skill, similarly to cosplay groups although on a larger scale.

I ran into her again at AnimeFest and, while taking a break in the 3rd floor lounge, she told me about her feelings on cosplay:

Cosplay to me is being able to become someone different for a day, being able to express your interests without having to say a word. I wanted to start cosplaying when I saw the amazing costumes people made, being able to promote a manga and anime that I like and connect with others who also like the same. When I started attending cons, I was encouraged by other cosplayers who liked the same stuff I liked. My favorite part about cosplaying is being complimented on what I wear and being able to strike up easy conversations with those who have the same taste in manga or anime. Cosplay, it makes me become so much more immersed in the experience. It gives a feeling of camaraderie and belonging here.

This pull of cosplay and cosplaying inspired her to learn more about sewing even though her resources to learn were limited. What is particularly interesting is that the con provides basic seminars on cosplaying skills to help people like Anna. In this way, cons can be a resource to those interested in learning cosplay skills and act as an alternative to learning skills from group members.

VII. IDEAS ABOUT COSPLAYING

I coded their interviews into five categories: how they made their cosplay(s), their cosplay group or groups, why they chose their character(s) for each con, their beliefs about the con(s), and their beliefs about other cosplay groups. Nine of the eleven preferred to make their cosplay as opposed to commissioning them or buying them. All ten cosplayers who were a part of cosplaying groups expressed a preference to cosplay together as opposed to alone, although they had no problem with changing who their group members were. The lone cosplayer, Anna, even expressed the want to be in a group even though she had never been in one before.

Social Reasons to Cosplay

When I began my research, I thought that cosplayers chose their characters based on personal reasons and was determined to discover how personal identity played a part in character selection. I discovered that there is more at work here. All of my cosplayers chose their characters because they had some liking or connection to them, but that came in secondary to their social reasons for cosplaying. Furthermore, their interactions at and with the con factors into each cosplay as cosplay is a form of con interaction itself.

Most cosplayers discussed how they would only cosplay in a group or that they cosplayed because their friends were also cosplaying. Those not specifically group oriented at least preferred to cosplay in a group or with others. Those like Victory or Anna, who occasionally cosplay alone, still value the group as a part of cosplaying. Troy talks about his friends that cosplay with him and how he views cosplaying as social time. “Before a number of them (my friends) moved down to Austin for work, they used to go to cons every year, and we used to hang out every single weekend, essentially. So, just to keep it going, we were like, ‘Yea, why not, we’ll just make a big party out of it, stay at the hotel, hang out, go over the con for a few

days, and just chill.” He expressed multiple times during the interview that, although he spent \$400 on his cosplay, he has no actual attachment to his character, he just “sent the measurements off, and forgot about it until it came in.” Costuming and acting are not the most valuable components of cosplay, but are rather secondary to the sociality of the event of cosplaying. The group participating together is more important than the cosplay.

Erica, on the other hand, loved her character, as she loves many of the characters she chooses to cosplay. She said, “My friends really wanted to do Sailor Moon as a group of all of the Sailor Scouts, and I was picked to be Sailor Moon so my husband could be Tuxedo Mask, and it was something that I really loved as a child, so I was very excited to do it.” She describes herself relating to her character because both of them are “horribly insecure but also kind of cheerful, so that’s me in a nutshell.” Even Erica says that her motivation “is just to go along with my friends. I really don’t have any strong attachment to it or anything. I’m more just going along with what they’re doing. It’s fun to do when you’re around a group of people who you’re having fun with. That’s more so my motivation.” This makes sense because when I saw her at AnimeFest, her cosplay complimented her husband’s cosplay.

Jackie cosplayed as her favorite character, Belle, from *Beauty and the Beast*. When I asked her why she wanted to cosplay Belle, she said, “Belle’s always been my favorite character. I’ve wanted to do her for a while now... Because she likes books. I like books. It’s as simple as that, and her hair’s brown.” While it may seem here that Jackie cosplayed Belle on a whim, it was really based on a group decision, and her cosplay was a result of group action. Victory, her groupmate, created her cosplay by hand because their cosplay group decided to cosplay Disney characters so both she and Victory chose Disney princesses. Jackie may view cosplay as an individual decision, but its practice, even her choice, is still founded in the group.

At A-Kon, Marty and Flower chose to cosplay characters that they had a close connection to because of the significance they place on the anime the characters came from and the relationship between the two characters. Their connections to their characters also represented their connection to each other because of these relationships. “I have strong connection with Kirito,” Marty told me, “And she (Flower) usually plays Asuna with me.” Even though they each have a strong connection with their individual characters, the cosplay is more about the social interaction between Flower and Marty.

Because I originally intended to link personal identity with cosplay, I found that cosplayers pick their characters for simple reasons, not necessarily because they form a very personal connection with the characters, but rather they like some trait inherent in the character. Moreover, personal character selection is not nearly as important as social bonds with the group. For example, Miguel, during Fan Expo Dallas in 2017, used his cosplay as Prince Adam from *Beauty and the Beast* to propose to Jackie, who was in her Belle cosplay. Although he chose to be Prince Adam, he chose this cosplay because Jackie was cosplaying Belle and his group was cosplaying other Disney characters, not because he had any special connection to Prince Adam. Miguel, when asked how he relates to Prince Adam, said, “I have my own princess.” I took this to mean that he chose this cosplay so he could be Belle’s prince.

Overwhelmingly, every individual emphasized cosplay as being a particularly social event. Troy’s complicated cosplay made it necessary for “the group members [to] help me out and try to get some of these things attached to the costume because it’s not easy by myself.” Even the physical act of putting a cosplay on is social.

Making and Buying: The Devil’s in the Details

My participants were split down the middle for those who bought versus those who made their cosplays, although those who made their costumes did not make the entire costume themselves; for instance, some had a seamstress friend make it for them, another social aspect of cosplay.

Me: “How much time do you normally spend on your costumes?”

Jackie: “I’d say I’d spend maybe about two days with her. She takes about a week to a week and a half to make them custom.”

Me: “Was the all-nighter an exception?”

Jackie: “No, she still had to work on it after the all-nighter, so it was still the same length of time. Well, we had to go pick out patterns that would closely resemble what we wanted. I had to try to remember which Belle I wanted to do. Then we had to pick the fabric. If there’s not enough at one store, you have to decide whether or not you are changing the fabric or you’re blending them together, which we ended up blending together to get a more, I guess, depth-looking costume as opposed to a solid color. Then from there, the actual putting it on and re-evaluating it as you go along, and tweaking it. Like, adding more to, what’s it called, the petticoat, so it was bigger and I felt more like a belle. But I wanted big and poofy. I think that was about the process. Trying it on all the time. Trying it on inside out, so that she could pin it. And me,

I'm like, "I don't know if I like this. It's inside out, I see strings everywhere."

Erica and Jackie had their cosplays made by Victory (who also made her own) while Troy and Miguel had them made by online stores. Even though Troy and Miguel bought them, they still had to send out their measurements, and each had their cosplay made to fit them.

Miguel:

In this case, I was like, 'Oh, well I'm going to do Prince Adam.' So it took me about a minute to search on Amazon and a couple more minutes to take my measurements. It was coming custom from China, but it was still only about a week and a half from when I had ordered it.

This is something that distinguishes cosplay from costuming. Costumes are typically ready-wear sized products (sized from XS to XXL) while cosplays are created to fit the cosplayer; however, because of the rise in con attendance and the participation of cosplaying, many cosplay outfitters have a general pre-made garment that is tailored to the buyer's specific size. This is interesting because both are still considered custom and therefore still cosplay. This does not matter within the group. Some choose (often by lack of time, skill, or resources) to purchase a cosplay from an online store while others prefer to make them. Making versus buying affects the individual's interaction with their group. The makers are more involved with their group in the creation aspects of the cosplay while buyers, while still participating in cosplay, do not have the same connection to the group since they are not a part of the crafting experience.

Cons in Relation

Cons play a role in cosplay. Cosplay is not only a group activity. It is also a way that people interact with cons. It is a way to feel included by a group of strangers and to interact with a fan community. Anna said that it “gives a feeling of camaraderie” with other cons-goers and other cosplayers. Cons also act as a resource to learn new skills related to cosplay like sewing, prop-making, or wig-styling as well as a place to be exposed to new ideas like Victory’s interactions with steampunk fashion or those who attend lecture-styled panels like “God Help the Outcasts.”

If a cosplayer no longer likes a con, they can choose not to interact with that con through cosplay and just attend in streetwear or alternative fashions, if they choose to attend at all like Jackie and Miguel. The decision to cosplay at a con takes into account the cosplayer’s view of the con. Jackie’s opinion of A-Kon varied rapidly over the course of a year due to the experiences she had both attending and working at the con. Her experiences also affected Miguel’s interaction with the con. Her experiences were a result of having insider knowledge of the con’s destructive wake.

All of my cosplayers attended cons to cosplay at in the first place, making cons the environment to cosplay at and socialize with other fans. The style and set-up of the con dictate, to a degree, how cosplayers interact with the con through available resources and the impact the con has had on the cosplayer. Cons are instrumental in shaping cosplayers and cosplay groups. In this way, cons act as an intermediate for cosplay group interactions.

The Labor of the Group

Cosplay groups trade their labor with one another. Marty and Mars would swap ideas and goods (props) with each other to create their cosplays. Mars likes to work on miniature figures

and has access to tools that Marty does not, so trading helps them get items that would be difficult to obtain otherwise. In a similar way, Jackie would trade sushi for Victory's labor in working on her cosplay. The sushi Jackie traded to Victory is from a local favorite place frequented by their group. Sushi is significant because it is a form of fairly widely-available Japanese food. There is value in displays of Japanese culture within the group, much like Troy's shoe policy and his *kotatsu*. Eating sushi together is one such display. As Jackie also works for a con-hosting hotel, she was also relied upon for her discounts and insider knowledge. In a way, Jackie barter the valued cultural and social experience of sushi and her con discounts for a hand-made cosplay costume that she would have not been able to make by herself.

The individuals in a cosplay group help each other put together their cosplays, sometimes even helping each other dress. Troy said to me in our initial interview, "Typically, I come to these cons with a group, so the group members help me out and try to get some of these things attached to the costume because it's not easy by myself." This highlights the desire for having a group with which to trade labor and other services. Anna, who did not have a group, expressed the desire for community and had to attend skill panels on her own as she did not have a group to rely on to either teach her cosplaying skills or trade for a cosplay. From my research, I understand that cosplaying is a social, group-oriented activity used as a medium in which to interact with a larger group that is the con.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Cosplay is meaningful to cosplayers because it is a way to interact with others. As such, the study of cosplayers provides a contribution to research on subcultures in the Birmingham School tradition of Cultural Studies. It is of social importance to consider the group in choosing a cosplay or learning cosplaying skills. It is also important to consider the con as a larger group where smaller cosplay groups interact with one another and other con attendees.

The method I use to do my research relies on interpreting cosplay through cosplay groups and cons, which constitute the environment for cosplaying. Cosplaying came about as a reaction to fandom and in opposition to mainstream fashion. Over time, con attendance has increased exponentially, leading to more cosplayers and therefore a market for cosplay. Even though con attendance has increased, there is still a power imbalance where outside groups make judgements based on how they think cosplayers and cons will behave. This affects cosplayers' perception of the con, like Jackie who changes her mind on participating in A-Kon.

My participants also relayed to me that cosplay is an expensive hobby. The cosplayers I spoke with spent \$300 to \$1000 on each cosplay so they must have enough disposable income to compensate for that amount plus the \$80 cost of a ticket, whatever they choose to buy at con markets, and often a hotel room. Even if they choose to make their cosplay, they must be able to afford the materials (like fabric) and resources (access to a sewing machine) to make the costumes and necessary props. One of the reasons cosplay groups come together is to share resources and learn skills that can help benefit their cosplaying. This also means that cosplaying keeps out those who cannot afford to make, buy, or commission a cosplay. Only those with enough disposable income can participate in this hobby of leisure, this subculture.

Through my research, I found that cosplaying, dressing and acting like a fictional character, is a social, group-oriented activity used as a medium in which to interact with a larger group that is the con. Both the cosplay group and the con support and cultivate cosplay in slightly different ways. On an individual level, cosplay is a hobby that is used as a means of creative expression and developing skills as well as forming bonds with others. Cosplay groups use their group as a means to learn cosplaying skills like sewing or crafting props. While cosplayers tend to choose characters they like to cosplay as, they will forfeit cosplaying that character if their cosplay groups needs them to choose someone else.

On a larger level, cosplaying is a way that people choose to interact with the con - a way to express their love of a fandom as well as a way to express their support for their cosplay group. If these two reasons are ever at odds, the group will usually come first. Cons, in turn, provide valuable resources not always available within a group, like learning art skills or wig styling techniques. They also provide a meeting space to cosplayers and other con attendees so that fans and cosplayers can take pictures together and interact with one another.

Cosplaying is a source of social interaction for all of my participants as well as a way to develop crafting skills and experience. Cosplay is a way for fans to present themselves and their group to the fan community on a con-wide scale. Each character chosen by the cosplayer can be chosen for a variety of reasons, but the group is more important than the actual cosplay. The con acts as a place where interactions between cosplay groups or even individual cosplayers can take place. Cons are important to cosplayers because they can demonstrate their learned skills and learn new skills as well as socialize with other fans.

In the future, I think it would be beneficial to map how cosplay groups may relate to one another and how groups may change between cons over a longer period of time. This may help

track group hierarchy and order, which could then provide more clarity in what groups value in group members and why some cosplayers struggle to find a group. It would also be interesting to observe the different markets at cons, as this is where fandom meets consumption both with artists and licensed dealers. It would be fascinating to investigate the world of the con from the standpoint of an artist, as they are often fans themselves.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW SAMPLE QUESTIONS

What is your favorite anime? Why?

What inspired you to cosplay originally?

How long have you been cosplaying?

Can you tell me about your first cosplay experience?

Can you tell me about how you get your costumes?

How much time do you spend on making or ordering your costume?

Do you participate in group cosplays? Who with?

How has being a cosplayer made your life different outside of cons?

How has being a cosplayer affected your perspective?

How does cosplay affect your life?

Does how you see yourself affect your cosplay?

How has cosplaying changed your experience within cons?

Are there parts of cosplay culture that affect your life outside of cosplay? If so, how?

What advice would you give new cosplayers?