CONJUNCTIONS • TRANSDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF CULTURAL PARTICIPATION • VOL. 11, NO. 2, 2024

https://doi.org/10.2478/tjcp-2024-0015

This cosplayer has claws: The disruption and replication of gendered norms in cosplay communities

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INTRODUCTION

'Cosplay' is the abbreviation of 'costume' and 'play.' The practice of cosplay is both an artistic medium of craft and performance and a lively subcultural activity. Consequently, 'cosplayer' refers to someone who participates in the craft and performance of cosplay. Many fan and cosplay scholars have provided unique definitions of the craft; for example, Joel Gn defines cosplay as "a performance art in which the participant masquerades as a character from a selected film, television series, or comic book" (Gn 2011, p.583). Gn here presents a well-rounded definition of the term that resonates with earlier work by McCormick (1999) as well as more recent work by Lamerichs (2018) and Winge (2019). Drawing on Gn, I define cosplay as the act in which fans dress and perform as characters from popular media (namely, from film/television/games/comics), but I place more emphasis on the performative aspects of cosplay, which separates the practice from fancy dress. This distinction, furthermore, allows for much more diversity on the part of the cosplayer in terms of subject matter and creative outlet.

The findings presented in this article present a portion of my thesis, "Cosplay: Community, hierarchy, and the Acafan methodology" (Skentelbery 2023), completed at Keele University on March 15, 2023. My research, influenced by the work of Bainbridge and Norris (2009, 2013), Gn (2011) and King (2013, 2016), began optimistically. Initial data collected suggested that cosplay subcultures regularly create storms and disrupt the gendered norms of modern Western society by creating transformative spaces at fan conventions. My research, however, revealed that something much more complicated was occurring. My research findings, which combined auto-ethnographic participation and interviews, drew on a broad swathe of traditional audience scholarship, and post-feminist criticism. These data sets and theoretical frameworks suggested that there were in fact complexities and contradictions that exist within cosplay communities, and that cosplayer also replicated gendered and sexual norms. In this article, cosplays of DC Comics' iconic cat burglar Catwoman are the focal case study. Through the case study, in relation to Catwoman's long history across comics, film, and games, I examine how cosplayers not only create storms, but also replicate norms and gender power imbalances.

1: COSPLAY AND GENDERED PERFORMANCE

'Gendered norms,' in its simplest terms, refers to the ways in which men and women (in the dominant gender binary) are expected to present and behave on a day-to-day basis. Cosplay scholars have suggested that cosplayers, through their elaborate dress and performances, can threaten day-to-

day gendered norms. Cosplayer's playful attitudes toward gendered norms are most visual during gender play cosplay. The subversion and swapping of gendered codes has been commonplace in fan cultures as expressed both in fan art and fan fiction. In fan art communities, this act of altering a character's gender is called 'Rule 63,' referring to the internet group Anonymous's 'Rules of the Internet' list, a semi-humorous, semi-serious list of rules to help benefit online communities. Rule 63 specifies that "For every given male character, there is a female version of that character; conversely for every given female character, there is a male version of that character" (Lolrus 2018, no pagination). In fan fiction communities, 'gender swap' similarly refers to giving an existing character alternative gendered characteristics. Judith May Fathallah (2017) draws on work by Busse (2005) to reiterate that fan fic and slash fic (erotic fan fic) writers "explore and connect through sexualities outside of the heteronormative binary" (Fathallah 2017, 30). Both 'Rule 63' and 'gender swap' in fan art and fan fiction encapsulate a playful attitude toward the gender binary. Cosplay, like art and fiction, is an activity through which fans become active participants in the adaptation of characters.

Under the umbrella term cosplay, there are many different types of cosplay that cosplayers participate in. Examples include race-bending, which refers to the process of cosplaying a character who is not of one's own racial identity, and age-bending, a term that I coined after observing just how common it is for cosplayers to perform as characters significantly older/younger than themselves (Skentelbery 2019, n.p.). Most notably, there are two forms of cosplay that explicitly engage with gendered roles and codes: gender-bending, and crossplay cosplay. Gender-bending is the process of "taking a character who is canonically female and reimagining them as male, vice versa, or giving a genderless character gendered characteristic" (Aadahl 2018, n.p.). An example of gender-bending would be a woman adapting the male-coded costume of Han Solo from *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) to appear more feminine, such as by wearing a navy skirt instead of the navy trousers. Crossplay, on the other hand, "is far less easy to spot. […] The hope here is to not stand out as a different gender, to present themselves as the gender of the character as seamlessly as possible" (Aadahl 2018, n.p.). An example of crossplay would be a woman who has disguised their feminine figure to appear and perform as the masculine hero Han Solo.

Gender play cosplay is a practice I have an affinity with. During my research I engaged in my own crossplay of Sucy Manbavarian from *Little Witch Academia* (Yoshinari 2017). The construction of this performance saw me alter my own masculine features by shaving body hair, tucking genitals, applying makeup, constructing the costume, and performing the mannerisms of Sucy Manbavarian to appear as the young feminine witch. Gendered play and expression are the focus of my thesis and will remain the central focus of this article. The aim of this article is to examine not only the ways in which cosplayers create storms within the gender binary and gendered performance, but also the ways in which cosplayers mimic and themselves become subject to the norms of dominant gendered expectations.

2: GENDERED NORMS AND MEDIA: THE CASE OF CATWOMAN

In a contextual analysis of Catwoman cosplays, understanding the source material will aid analysis of how cosplayers adapt and play with the source character's gendered codes. Catwoman has a long history in the media, ranging from her first appearance in DC Comics' *Batman* in 1940s to television, film, games, and merchandizing. Across her expansive history, Catwoman has been revised and changed to meet the changing needs of Western societal gendered norms. Consequently, cosplayers who seek to replicate Catwoman have changed alongside her various iterations. Catwoman's long history in popular media and her many iterations have had a strong influence on popular media fandoms, making her a prime example for analysis in these contexts. Crucially, the character of Catwoman is highly gender coded, both in terms of her design and her narrative tropes. One can

even argue that Catwoman is a sexualized commodity, a statement I shall place in particular focus in this section.

From Catwoman's first depiction in DC Comics' Spring 1940 *Batman* issue as "The Cat" (Finger and Kane 1940), Catwoman design has lured the heterosexual male gaze. She is first depicted leaning back in a chair as though to invite Batman towards her. Catwoman's dress is drawn up to reveal smooth legs, guiding Batman's and the reader's eye. The design of her costume places emphasis on the sexualized female form, meeting the expectations of a primarily male heterosexual readership. Stephanie Orme notes that the portrayal of female bodies in comic books (and subsequently comic fandoms) has "a history of underrepresenting women and portraying them as hypersexualised and in gender-stereotyped roles" (Orme 2016, p.404–5). She continues, referencing the comic book writer Trina Robbins, that the "comic book industry's legacy of misogynistic portrayals of women reflects the circular logic of many writers and publishers – that comics should be written with male sensibilities in mind, because women are uninterested in comics" (Orme 2016, p.404–5). Orme here highlights assumptions and ingrained patriarchal ideals in the comic book industry.

Later iterations of Catwoman's character have maintained her sexualized femininity, but altered it for a more contemporary audience. In the *Batman* (Dozier 1966–68) television series, for example, Catwoman is seen in a slender sparkling black cat suit, emphasizing the feminine body figure of actresses Julie Newmar and later Eartha Kitt. Similarly, in the film *Batman Returns* (Burton, 1992), Michelle Pfeiffer takes on the role of Catwoman and is similarly depicted in a tight-fitting black body suit, now a glossy patchwork black evoking the aesthetics of goth subculture. The cat suit alludes to a dominatrix persona, something which is perhaps most explicit in the 1996–7 comic, *Batman*: *The Long Halloween* (Loeb and Sale, 1996–7), where Catwoman is depicted in a tight dark-purple body suit with tall black boots, silver jewelry, a whip, and a tail. The clothing is evocative of BDSM iconography, evoking a dominatrix. In addition to the costume, lighting throughout the comic is used to cast shadows which place emphasis on Catwoman's slender waist and large breasts, contrasting Batman's heavy masculine frame. Avery-Natale (2013), in their work on character design and reception in DC Comics, highlights that it is

> the costume itself [which] is representative of the role the specific hero plays: […] Therefore, the female costume, which often accentuates the breasts and buttocks, represents the role of the female not only as hero but also as sex object, limiting her role as subject (Avery-Natale 2013, p.79).

Catwoman is therefore both a powerful female cat burglar and a sex commodity.

Renditions of Catwoman in the 1960s *Batman* television series, the 1992 film *Batman Returns*, and the 1990s comic *The Long Halloween* all display sexually powerful iconography, a design maintained in the video games *Batman*: *Arkham City* (Hill 2011) and *Batman*: *Arkham Knight* (Hill, 2015), where Catwoman is again depicted wearing a tight black body suit. In this case the suit is unzipped to reveal her cleavage, emphasizing her sexual feminine figure throughout the game. The notable addition here is that Catwoman is wearing a collar; unlike the dominatrix of *The Long Halloween*, Catwoman is presented as submissive, as if she were Batman's pet.

The consistency of Catwoman's design perpetuates social-gendered norms. In their influential 1944 article on the culture industry and mass deception, the critical theorists Adorno and Horkheimer emphasized sameness as a common thread:

> the permanent compulsion to produce new effects which yet remain bound to the old schema, becoming additional rules, merely increases the power of the tradition which the individual effect seeks to escape (Horkheimer and Adorno 2006, p.46).

In taking on characters like Catwoman, cosplayers consequently are commodifying their bodies and simultaneously taking on the expectation that they will uphold her value as sex object, with the result that they themselves uphold these dominant norms.

Replication and sameness are similarly present in post-feminist criticism, as in the work of Sara Banet-Weiser. In her 2018 book, *Empowered*: *Popular feminism and popular misogyny*, Banet-Weiser coins the term "popular feminism," which she defines by drawing on Hall's 1998 definition of 'popular' as a struggle for dominance. Banet-Weiser explains:

> the popular feminist recognition that vast gender inequalities still organize our cultural, economic, and political world is important, and necessary correction to the false optimism of post-feminism [which fails to recognize such power disparities] (Banet-Weiser 2018, p.20).

Conversely, popular misogyny, "while seemingly present in all areas of social and cultural life, is not spectacularly visible in the way popular feminism is. But like popular feminism, popular misogynistic practices exist along a continuum" (Banet-Weiser 2018, p.33). When confronting misogynies in popular media and cosplay replication, it is important to acknowledge that misogynies are a constructed and performed power. This is an argument seemingly absent from much of the cosplay literature, which favors the representation of cosplay as revolutionary.

3: COSPLAYERS CREATING STORMS

Cosplayers who engage with the character of Catwoman are engaging in a long history of different designs that uphold values of sexualized femininity. They thus have the potential to play with these pre-existing values. Henry Jenkins, in his seminal work *Textual poachers* (1992), argues that fans "blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, speaking of characters as if they had existed apart from their textual manifestations, entering into the realm of fiction as if it were a tangible place they can inhabit and explore" (Jenkins [1992] 2013, p.18). By blurring the lines between fact and fiction, fans challenge audiences' conventional relationship with popular media narratives. In turn, one might suggest that through the craft of costume and performance, cosplayers generate storms and challenge both gendered expectations of character and of social norms. Previous cosplay and fan scholarship suggests that the adaptive process of cosplay craft and performance does hold disruptive potentials. Bainbridge and Norris (2009) argue that there is revolutionary potential to cosplay. They claim that "Cosplay is not simply the fannish act of dressing up, but rather the act of 'queering' gender roles and stepping outside heteronormative behaviors through the assumption of fictional identities" (Bainbridge and Norris 2009, p.135). Cosplayers' playful attitudes, according to much cosplay scholarship, makes them revolutionary figures.

Cosplay's playful attitude can be seen in the case of gender-bend cosplaying such as that of Catwoman by Kyle [name changed for anonymity] posted to a cosplay group on the social media site Amino. (Since my research findings were collated, the group has now disbanded.) Kyle's cosplay post showed a masculine body mimicking the costume and stature of the feminine-coded character. Cosplayer Kyle wears the iconic black body suit and goggles associated with Catwoman's design in the game *Batman*: *Arkham City* and *Batman Arkham Knight*. The tight black body suit with open zip reveals the chest and places an emphasis on the player's sexualized body, evoking a dominatrix-like character in line with the on-screen characteristics of Catwoman. While there are alterations to Catwoman's design in Kyle's cosplay, notably the lack of a whip and no makeup, the construction of Kyle's costume, combined with their performance, which sees them lean toward the viewer with a wry grin, remains loyal to the source character. Leng suggests that when a cosplayer mimics the

appearance and mannerisms of a character that belongs to another gender that isn't their own, cosplayers "challenge hegemonic norms about masculinity and femininity, but also [work] to facilitate the construction of new modes of fan identity and creative expression" (Leng 2013, p.92). In adapting their masculine physique to mimic and perform femininity, Kyle's performance could be interpreted as creating storms and challenging how the masculine body ought to be presented. Bainbridge and Norris similarly argue that such playful attitudes with identity codes by cosplayers make them "a playful agent of change. The high regard given to cosplayer's traversal moment as it crosses gender, race, or reality can be seen to offer an optimistic creative and social movement" (Bainbridge and Norris 2013, p.35). Kyle's performance received several positive comments, each alluding to the gender play taking place: in these comments, the attention placed on the masculine body, merged with feminine clothing and mannerisms, was highlighted as exotic and was valued.

In extension of Bainbridge and Norris's notion that cosplayers can traverse reality, Nicolle Lamerichs, in her book *Productive Fandom* (2018), draws on Callois to explain how "cosplayers engage in pretend-play, or *mimicry* as Callois (1961) defines it, as a category of play in which reality is transformed into an alternative scenario" (Lamerichs 2018, p.204). Cosplayers here are not creating new realities, but, rather, greater emphasis should be placed on "play" to suggest that cosplayers can at least imagine new possibilities and potentials for gendered expression, even if only momentarily. In the case of Kyle's cosplay of Catwoman, Kyle's act of playing with Catwoman's iconography and installing the feminine-coded costume onto their masculine body not only highlights the limitations of normative-gendered expectations of dress, but additionally subverts audiences' expectations of who Catwoman is or can be.

Kyle's subversion of gender in turn subverts the narratives associated with Catwoman's sexuality. In the long history of Catwoman, she has frequently been a love interest for Batman; if Kyle extends this narrative, a queer reading of the character also emerges, challenging heterosexual norms through the implications of a homoerotic relationship. The analysis here, is not to pass comment on the cosplayer's sexuality, but rather on the narratives that is signified by their play. Such play with sexuality through fan creativity is not an uncommon occurrence, notably in fan art and fiction. Dennis (2010), in his examination of how online fan spaces offer adolescent fans opportunities to express and explore LGBT identities, observes:

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

In the case of gender-bending and crossplay cosplayers, cosplay can be an invaluable process of self-expression and experimentation. My interview participant Brock (who went by they/she pronouns but additionally expressed that they were questioning their identity) told me that they primarily created masculine crossplay cosplays, such as Dipper and Bill from *Gravity Falls* (Hirsch, 2012–16). Brock shared how crossplay cosplay

> has always been more fun […] to experiment with what I think that I might be underneath all of this. Outside social pressure, and all of that. […] At a convention people treat me differently when they think I'm a man (Brock 2019).

The importance of the setting of the convention center highlights something about onlookers' expectations inside and outside of the convention space. Brock expresses that in day-to-day life, there are expectations socially imposed which Brock feels that they must follow, meaning that they will

present and act in certain ways to avoid being confronted by potential consequences from others. The location of the convention center however, is a site which is free of these social expectations, the convention center is a place where Brock can actively play and experiment with gendered codes. Ideas of fan sites as safe environments that permit cosplayers to play and experiment are a recurring notion in contemporary cosplay scholarship, and one that supports claims that cosplay can create storms that go against day-to-day expectations of gendered expectation (outside of the fan convention).

Settings such as the fan convention or online cosplay forum offers a safe environment in which cosplayers can express themselves and remove themselves from the consequences of day-to-day norms. They are free there to play with gendered expression that may attract ridicule or critique elsewhere. Escape from social norms is a central argument made by Geczy, Peirson-Smith, and Mountfort in their book *Planet cosplay*: *Costume play*, *identity and global fandom* (2019). Geczy et al. suggest that:

> the theme of escape from, and control over, self and everyday reality is often cited as a key motivator for cosplay practice. This operates as an aid to the creative process that is visibly expressed through the making and wearing of a spectacular costume (Geczy et al. 2019, p.185).

The very setting of the fan convention is an environment that transgresses dominant expectations.

Cosplay communities have developed a deep association with fan conventions, as observed in the works of King (2013), Hale (2014), and Winge (2019). This has reinforced the reputation of fan conventions as safe and inclusive spaces in which one can experiment with identity codes without consequence. For Geczy et al., "cosplay events temporarily disrupt and invert everyday life with 'the suspension of hierarchical precedence' through sanctioned, playful activity that is a creative display and outlet for emotions" (Geczy et al. 2019, p.185). For Kyle, their own cosplay was shared online in a cosplay group which similarly offers a safe space in which to play and experiment with gender. Lee (2018) draws attention to the impact of Western media on Korean popular culture (and vice versa), highlighting the importance of online spaces for fans: "Social media have also provided a space where transnational fans can meet like-minded people, expand their fandom by using it for their own cultural productions, and spread it to a wider audience" (Lee 2018, p.366). Kyle, in their online post, gives a strong performance conveying Catwoman's character. The direct address to the viewer combined with the lean forward is not only a seductive look in keeping with Catwoman's character, but is also symbolic of the relationship between Kyle and the viewer: the angle of the body and the direct address appear to invite engagement (through likes and comments).

This section has highlighted three ways in which gender play can be a disruptive force. First, gender play cosplay disrupts the dominant gender binary. Second, cosplayers' play with a character's gender disrupts pre-existing narratives associated with the character; in the case of Catwoman, Kyle alters the character's sexuality. Finally, cosplayers create environments which exist in person at the convention hall and online in social media forums. These are safe environments which go against the norms of day-to-day life.

These three ways in which cosplay can be read as disruptive all come back to the one crucial attribute – that cosplay is about the individual, and how each cosplayer wishes to express themselves and interact with others.

4: COSPLAYERS REPLICATING NORMS

The previous section has presented the ways in which cosplayers can subvert gendered norms and create storms – a presentation that is in line with much existing cosplay scholarship. But the

cosplay community is more complicated than has previously been documented. There is a side to cosplay which has been less discussed, and this is the ways in which cosplay replicates norms and perpetuates dominant social values. When one considers the history of Catwoman and its links with misogynist sexualized ideals, questions emerge around whether cosplay can always be the revolutionary practice that cosplay scholars have suggested, or whether the medium's attention at replicating character consequently results in maintain the social norms presented in popular media. A man dressing as Catwoman might be read as revolutionary against gendered norms; yet in their attempts to mimic and become these characters, cosplayers are adopting the values of their overtly feminine and sexualized characters.

While cosplayer Kyle received some praise from fellow fans, they also received criticism and harassment on their online post. The comments suggested that Kyle's cosplay was lazy: some explicitly criticized Kyle for not wearing makeup and for not having shaved their chest. One explanation for the criticism is that the unshaved chest and absence of makeup was not screen-accurate: screen accuracy, in this circumstance, refers to how closely a cosplayer can mimic an on-screen character. Cosplayers who can reproduce screen-accurate costumes are generally considered much more valuable to the cosplay community: according to Lamerichs, "cosplayers may be criticized for failing to fully reproduce their character's appearance, even when these failures are due to such factors as body size or medical necessity" (Lamerichs 2011, 4.4). Notably, in addition to technical ability, screen accuracy is often highly sought after by judges in cosplay competitions.

If screen accuracy is so highly valued within the cosplay community, this would suggest that there is a replication process in operation, rather than a creative or disruptive one. The masculine cosplayer Jason [name given] interviewed by *Nerd Caliber* (2013) at the convention C2E3 in 2013 took on the look of Catwoman from the film *Batman Returns*: the costume was a glossy cat suit, fitted with padding to replicate the feminine figure and complete with gothic stitching and makeup as seen on screen. During the interview, the following exchange occurs:

> Interviewer: "What made you decide to come out to C2E2?"
> Jason: "I figured why not. I can pull off the Catwoman costume so why not?"
> Interviewer: "You can pull off Catwoman very well, if I may say so"
> Jason: "I've pulled a lot of people"
> Interviewer: "Yeah, yeah. Myself included to be honest."

The exchange highlights the importance of a cosplayer's body working with the cosplayer's chosen character as a valued attribute (valued in this case both by the crossplay cosplayer and by the interviewer onlooker). In her post-feminist critique, Rosalind Gill (2017) suggests that in our complicated cultural landscape, "the requirement to self-surveil has also been amplified by social media" (Gill 2017, p.617). Gill's emphasis on the "requirement" to monitor oneself is crucial here. One might suggest that in Jason's case, Jason is hyper aware of how they will be perceived and how audiences will interact with them. In spite of Jason's crossplay cosplay being highlighted as successful in the interview, the video received several critical comments. These included: "has a problem playing" – "because it's a guy, give him some credit," and "my cosplay Catwoman costume is better." All of the comments degrade Jason's costume, either for the disconnect between the masculine body and the feminine costume, or, in the final comment, for a more abstract subjective reasoning. Cosplayers who engage in performance will always be subject to the personal expectations and values of individual onlookers. Thus, both Jason and Kyle's crossplay cosplays were at one and the same time both successful and unsuccessful in conveying the feminine-sex-object (in Kyle's case) and the dominatrix (in Jason's case) aspects of Catwoman simultaneously.

A recurring term that cosplayers who play with gender, including myself during my own crossplay cosplay of Sucy Manbavarian, are frequently confronted with is "trap." The term is a homophobic slur referring to a man who dresses as a woman to lure the gaze of heterosexual men. While the term has been reclaimed by some queer performers and cosplayers, its use here is complicated because multiple readings can be taken from it. The term "trap" is, first, a criticism, suggesting that such engagement in crossplay is done maliciously. Yet the use of the term also suggests that the crossplay cosplay was successful and that Kyle succeeded in appearing as Catwoman and that the consequence is that Kyle is subjected to the heterosexual male gaze. During Jason's interview for *Nerd Caliber*, the interviewer remarks toward the end of the video that "I can see the effort you've put into this [the crossplay]. And like I said, you fooled me from a distance. But hey, that's more credit to you." The "fooled me" here, much like the term "trap," is referring to the interviewer mistaking the masculine Jason for being a woman, "fooled" by the feminine codes of Jason's cosplay.

Whilst Kyle and Jason have masculine figures, by taking on the image of Catwoman they also take on the mantle of sexual object – and this renders them subject to becoming the sexual object of Catwoman for the heterosexual male onlooker. Skeggs (1997) highlights that even in everyday fashions, there are pressures on the individual to present themself in a particular manner:

> appearance is simultaneously and across time a site for pleasure and strength but also a site of anxiety, regulation, and surveillance. The feeling of looking good can also be lost if it is not continually externally evaluated (Skeggs 1997, p.107).

Crossplay cosplayers are subject to evaluation and, in the case of adopting the sexual object that is Catwoman, they are subject to misogynist norms. Kyle's crossplay cosplay of Catwoman can be read both positively and negatively by viewers. Cosplayers and fans more broadly will judge cosplays based both on off-screen accuracy and whether personal, individual expectations of character and/or gendered norms are met.

The dual narratives that emerge between consumers and media industries, especially online, are reflected in Hester Baer's (2016) suggestion that with "the rise of digital media, the body has taken on further significance as a site of both self-representation and surveillance, not least with regard to gender identities and gender norms" (Baer 2016, p.19). In many ways the physical body has become entangled with its online body (or bodies). Self-representation relies on a surveillance of oneself, but also on the surveillance of others, as groups collectively decide good and bad tastes of accuracy, and attraction. Given these dual readings and purposes, if a cosplayer fails to meet an individual spectator's expectations and values, the cosplay may become subject to criticism. Yet when masculine cosplayers taking on feminine characters meet the spectator's expectations, they can become subject to sexual objectification and harassment. In Kyle's case, many spectators saw them take on not only Catwoman's costume, but also her role as an on-screen sexual fantasy.

Sexual harassment is an unfortunately common occurrence in the cosplay community. This suggests that cosplay does not transgress the norms of heteronormative sexuality and the objectification of w omen. S elina [name a nonymized] i s a feminine cosplayer who produced a screen-accurate cosplay of Catwoman from *Batman*: *Arkham City* and uploaded images of their cosplay online. These were subsequently shared and distributed across multiple fan sites, such as on FIZX, in an article entitled 'Best of Catwoman Cosplay' (2014). Selina's cosplay sees them in a figure-hugging body suit; additionally, their makeup is bold, and they hold Catwoman's iconic whip between their teeth, again evoking a sense of the dominatrix. Christopher McGunnigle, in his 2018 paper on gender-swapping cosplay, expresses concern that "the hypersexual codes often seen in female superhero cosplay" have "increasingly been met by the sexual harassment of comic con audiences" (McGunnigle 2018, p.169). Sexual harassment in the cosplay community leads some

cosplayers toward gender-bending, but in Kyle's case it would seem that even cosplayers who play with gendered codes – through, for instance, crossplay cosplay – cannot escape harassment.

During my own cosplay of Sucy Manbavarian, I too was heckled on the convention floor, wolf-whistled and called "faggot." Similarly, my interview participant Brock recalled an occasion in their Dipper crossplay cosplay when:

> a couple of feisty 16/17-year-olds tried to get me to engage with whatever kind of play they're interested in […] I try to defuse the situation, I try and say, "Hey, remember I am wildly older than you. It's not cool."

These experiences reinforce popular misogyny, illustrating that cosplayers are not always, as previous cosplay scholarship has suggested, removed from hegemonic norms. In the preceding section I observed that cosplay spaces online and in person were generally considered safe spaces; Orme (2016), however, speaking in relation to comic shops, has suggested that

> 'Geek' masculinity imposes its own gender norms and stigmas, insisting that real men should enjoy traditionally masculine activities such as sports, not comic books. This rhetoric of masculinity […] leads geek men to then construct the artefacts and practices associated with geek culture as masculine culture. (Orme 2016, pp.405–6)

While the commenters on Kyle, Jason, and Selina reinforce certain misogynist hierarchies and by doing so they legitimize patriarchal power hierarchies in the cosplay community. When cosplayers take on these popular characters, they momentarily embody a popular artifact and its values. In one sense, Selina is an example of popular feminism, proudly displaying her feminine (dominatrix) powers. Yet conversely, she can also be seen to conform to the expectations of the heterosexual male gaze. These multiple readings exist simultaneously: they capture contradictions within subcultural and dominant structures of power.

In this section of the paper three key phenomena have been observed: First, cosplayers seek to mimic their chosen characters, and failure to do so can lead to criticism from other cosplayers and the wider fandom. Second, cosplayers will adopt the values of their chosen characters: Catwoman cosplayers will become both a powerful cat burglar and a feminine sexual object of desire. Third, sexual harassment in the cosplay subcultures helps to perpetuate misogyny and social-gendered norms. This latter phenomenon can occur when someone takes on a feminine character regardless of their own gender/sexuality.

These three areas might at first be read as challenging the dominant arguments in cosplay scholarship as presented in my previous section on 'Creating storms'. But rather than rivaling existing scholarship, the aim of this paper is to highlight the complications that exist in the cosplay community and broader popular fandom. In particular, this article acknowledges that while cosplayers do create storms that challenge dominant norms, especially concerning gender normativity, they also frequently replicate dominant gendered norms and perpetuate popular misogynies.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Section three, on 'Cosplayers creating storms,' examined the case study of Kyle's crossplay cosplay of Catwoman and presented the ways in which cosplayers create storms and challenge gendered and sexual norms. I proposed three key observations, all of which are in line with existing cosplay scholarship. First, gender play cosplay disrupts the dominant gender binary. Second, cosplayers play with a character's gender disrupts pre-existing characters narratives. Finally, cosplayers create

environments which exist outside of dominant cultural structures. Subsequently, section four on 'Cosplayers replicating norms,' complicated the existing cosplay literature, contributing new materials to the field of cosplay scholarship by drawing on broader cultural studies literature and post-feminist criticism. Section four concluded with the following three conclusions. First, cosplayers seek to mimic their chosen characters. Second, cosplayers will reproduce the values of their chosen characters which can perpetuate gendered and sexual norms. Third and finally, sexual harassment in cosplay subcultures helps to perpetuate misogyny and social-gendered norms.

I have examined two conflicting data sets. One of these is associated with cosplay scholarship, and argues that cosplay is a transformative medium, a medium which can be used to challenge gendered and heterosexual norms. The other data set, in contrast, illustrates cases where cosplayers replicate and uphold popular misogynies and gendered hierarchies, and where cosplayers who fail to maintain these social rules can be met by criticism. Therefore, I acknowledge that the cosplay community is both revolutionary and normative in the multitude of performances and engagements that individual cosplayers (and the broader community of fans) are capable of.

To conceptualize these two competing components which make up the cosplay community, for parallelism, I therefore draw on cosplayer and scholar Lamerichs' notion of 'networks of production' (2018) as well as Banet-Weiser's notion of 'networks of popular feminism and misogyny' (2018).

Lamerichs suggests that "media fans have a shared lingua franca and social protocols. However, they also have hierarchies that result in part from their interpretive and creative competencies" (Lamerichs 2018, p.30). Lamerichs points out that fans and cosplayers develop their own unique structures, while simultaneously adhering to hierarchies represented in popular media. Similarly, Banet-Weiser acknowledges: "the fact that the globe's biggest companies now pander to feminist ideas, however distorted or market-driven they may be – that encourages and validates popular misogyny" (Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. 169–70). Because misogyny is the dominant cultural norm, its visibility is very low and unnoticed. Explicitly visible misogyny exists, however, in reaction to the feminist media which seeks to destabilize the misogynist norm. These are two opposing values, which each sustain the other in a seemingly endless network of opposing values and discourses. The same has emerged in the concurrent data sets collected in this study.

To conclude. Crossplay cosplayers like Kyle who play with gender expectations see a masculine body momentarily embody the popular sexual artifact, in this case of Catwoman. In one sense, this cosplayer's performance disrupts normative gender roles, as the masculine body takes on a powerful feminine dominatrix. Yet conversely, the cosplayer might be seen to conform to the expectations of the gendered norms in playing with them. Given that both normative and subversive perceptions exist simultaneously, cosplayers therefore exist in networks of contradiction which perpetuate an ongoing dialogue of agreeing and conflicting values.

Cosplayers are both a revolutionary agent of change, yet simultaneously subject to the manipulative powers of the popular media industries which perpetuate dominant power relations.

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