

Ethnography Study of The Effects of Cosplay on Physical Image

Ever have had the feeling when seeing a character in a work of fiction such as video game or an anime and wishing to be able to dress up as them, replicating how they looked? It could be whether to show love for the character or because liking how their character design looked. This is essentially what cosplay is. Cosplay, short for costume play, is a hobby that has gained a lot of traction around the 2000s. The hobby is people dressing up as their favorite characters and replicating their appearances. This could be characters from anime, manga, video games and comic books for examples. People often cosplay during conventions such as San Diego Comic Con for example. Cosplay can also be used in photoshoots, both amateur and professional from photographers who specialize in cosplay photos. It has become a very popular hobby that has gained more and more acceptance since it is a hobby open to anyone to join in and nerd culture being more accepted by the general public. I myself first learned of cosplay from a close friend and looking up further info about it online from numerous social media posts and YouTube videos. It ended up piquing my interest. I believe that cosplay does affect how a person sees themselves and how it can be for the positive for how someone views themselves.

The main question for this paper comes from the fact that cosplay is a hobby that is about using one's physical appearance and how they present themselves. Most fictional characters are drawn and designed in stylized ways such as physical proportions, outfits and hair that is more stylish and hues a little closer outside of reality. This could be for example hair that is not a natural color like blue or a fancy outfit such as long ball gown. The question asked is how cosplay affects how a person sees themselves when in costume. I had asked how it affected how they saw themselves and their own personal experiences with the hobby.

To begin, I needed to find a way to conduct research for information on my question. I decided that since this is based off of people's thoughts and feelings, the best course of action would be to ask cosplayers themselves for their opinions. Plan A was I went on Reddit on the r/cosplayers thread and ACParadise Forums, a forum site dedicated to cosplay. On both sites, I made accounts and posted the following:

“Hello, I am currently conducting an auto ethnography research for one of my college courses in which we write a paper for subculture that is based around a pop culture phenomenon. For my paper, I am asking the following question: How does cosplay effects how you see yourself physically when you are in costume? Please say info on what type of characters you cosplay as and how it effects your own physical perception of yourself.”

However, I ran into complications that prevented me from getting the info I needed. I was unable to get my post approved on Reddit due to the system to prevent spamming and was unable to get help from the mods because they do have many posts to filter through. As for ACParadise, I got nothing though the bottom of the post did say people did see the post. This could be because there was not lot of conventions this season due to current situation and did rely on people on the internet checking the posts.

Given I knew there was a possibility this could happen, I decided to do Plan B which was interviewing cosplayers. I know a few cosplayers from Anime Oasis, a local anime con in Boise, Idaho. Anime Oasis is the main local convention in the area for local cosplayers and other enthusiasts to meet up. The time in between swapping plans also allowed me to better reevaluate what to ask to get more valuable and relevant information. For the interview, I asked the following questions:

- 1.How did you get into cosplay?
- 2.Which type of characters do you mainly cosplay?
- 3.What draws you towards certain characters?
- 4.How do you view yourself physically when in costume?
- 5.What is the general feeling and emotions you get when in costume?

I chose these questions because they do not sound intrusive and are much more polite than what I had typed up for the forum post. I felt also these questions could really help me get the perspective needed. This perspective being how it affects them which ties back to the main question but, also the emotional part of the hobby. I primarily interviewed a cosplayer I know who I will be referring to as Cosplayer A for the sake of anonymity.

From what I could gather from the research is that it can give people a sense of confidence when dressed up as their favorite characters. While cosplayers cannot change things biological physical features, they can still wear cosplay as the character regardless if they are physically like the character. This could be for example someone cosplaying as a character of the opposite gender. The confidence comes from putting on the costume and stepping out into the public with it. Cosplayers make the choice to dress up as the character regardless of what someone says about them when in costume. It allows them to feel more comfortable in their own body by wearing these costumes. It can be a huge confidence boost for people who may not be sure of how they look. A huge core tenant of the hobby from what I can gather is body positivity and accepting people of all different backgrounds such as gender, ethnicity and weight.

Essentially anyone can join in and not feel afraid to if they are not exactly how the character looks. In fact, cons have panels about spreading the positivity of appreciating your own body

when in costume and not being ashamed of it. To quote Cosplayer A: “Cosplay brings out a more confident side of me and I overall feel more comfortable with myself. With each new costume or alteration to older ones I feel myself growing as a cosplayer. It’s a great feeling.” I had also once attended a panel that was based around body positivity in the cosplay community and had chatted with the three cosplayers who had ran the panel. They mentioned how they how they don’t care if they don’t look physically like the character, they feel happy with how they looked when in costume.

Cosplay also allows cosplayers to feel closer to the fictional character that they do cosplay as. Fans of series tend to get attached to the characters and often have a favorite. Cosplay can be a way of showing love to a specific character and or series. It allows this sense of closeness with the character. Pop culture centered around telling a story or being character focused often have the audience become close and attached to the characters. People tend to choose these characters they became attached to throughout the story as way to both honor them and show their love for that character. In a way, it shows love and a new component of interacting with a piece of pop culture by dressing up as said character.

What a person looks for in a costume varies from person to person. Cosplayer A had mentioned that one of the reasons they choose along with liking the character’s personality was wondering if they would be comfortable wearing the costume for half a day. Comfort is important since it is still wearing clothing. Some people look for how practical a costume is since wearing a skirt and jacket is much easier to wear than say a big princess gown. Some look for harder costumes as a challenge for them to craft and make. Some characters do wear revealing or suggestive costumes which may be another factor into choosing costumes since everyone has different levels of comfort.

Trying the hobby, myself, I can see this perspective. I am not a super slim person and I do not look like exactly like the characters I chose to cosplay as. However, there was something positive when I did dress up as the character that I got close to when I enjoyed said pop culture item. I one time wore a costume of the character Madoka Kaname from the anime Puella Magi Madoka Magica. The costume involved wearing a pink frilly dress and a wig of pink pigtails. While initially took some time to fit into the costume, there was this sense of accomplishment and confidence in wearing such a pretty costume and in that moment, I felt like the character. I felt pretty and confident which is always a good feeling to have when presenting oneself physically. I had also really enjoyed said anime and I felt like I was still interacting and engaging with said series even though I had watched every episode of it. Like wearing had me still engaging with said anime.

The message that seems to be sent by it is that cosplay can be a positive experience for those in the hobby. It can be a huge boost to one's confidence to put on a costume and be able to be physically comfortable with both themselves and as the character they are cosplaying as. People do not need to look like the character exactly like them physically to still enjoy the hobby. It's a way to also show love for a pop culture item and the characters in it by being able to engage with the pop culture further even long after they have stopped interacting with it. Fictional characters are designed in ways that usually are distanced from reality so to be able to recreate can be a satisfying experience for someone and help bring out a bolder side with its positive effects.