

3-8-2017

## From the Panels to the Margins: Identity, Marginalization, and Subversion in Cosplay

Manuel Andres Ramirez

*University of South Florida*, manuel1@mail.usf.edu

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From the Panels to the Margins: Identity, Marginalization, and Subversion in Cosplay

by

Manuel Ramirez

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Sociology  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Graham, Laurel, Ph.D.  
Cecil Greek, Ph.D.  
Kim Golombisky, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:  
March 2, 2017

Keywords: cultural capital, conventions, performance, race, gender, popular culture

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## **ABSTRACT**

In investigating the ways social actors experience and interact with mass media texts, I examine how cosplay, as a performative practice of identity in relation to popular culture, enables social actors to subvert and reproduce marginalization towards minority status groups. Theoretical arguments apply a constructionist framework in order to examine the participants' meaning making processes. The study addresses the following research questions: (1) what social function does cosplay serve for participants; (2) how do cosplayers perform race and gender; (3) how do cosplayers resist, negotiate, or reinforce race and gender-based marginalization? Drawing upon qualitative data gathered from observing two large metropolitan comic book conventions and from conducting nine in-depth interviews, the author forms two arguments. First, cosplayers are capable of both subverting and reinforcing marginalization. Second, the processes of identity-making, social capital, and social cohesion that promote cultural capital in cosplay are stratified along race and gender.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### INTRODUCTION

American popular culture, including television, film, video games, comic books, and other forms of entertainment, generally caters to the white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender male experience. Groups imposed with minority status including women, people of color, LGBTQIA, and people with disabilities often go under and misrepresented in popular culture. The American movie industry, for example, consists of writers, directors, and actors that are disproportionately white and/or male, often leading to content that reflects normative viewpoints while neglecting the experiences of groups with minority status (Erigha 2015). Fictional characters disproportionality depict majority groups, while the representations that do exist of marginalized groups are often problematic (Singer 2002). Particularly in the case of the increasingly popular superhero genre, men make up the majority of main characters, often presented as hypermasculine while women characters are hypersexualized and vulnerable in comparison (Avery-Natale 2013). Although examples to the contrary surely exist, American popular culture's shift to more positive, proportional representation has been rather slow. For instance, while Marvel Comics is increasingly developing characters with intersectional minority statuses such as *Ms. Marvel* (Kent 2015), Marvel Studios has yet to release a film with a woman as the sole lead role. It is only with the eventual release of *Captain Marvel*, their twenty-first production, that Marvel Studios will have a woman as the central character. Similarly, their

eighteenth production, *Black Panther*, will be Marvel Studio's first movie with a (male) person of color as the main lead.

Despite popular culture's slow progress towards more proportionate and positive representation, fans, particularly those who live marginalized experiences, must navigate cultural spaces that remain dominated by the traditional normative images of white, straight, able-bodied men. This is no more prevalent than in the fan convention, particularly comic book conventions. Comic book conventions are considered some of the most important sites of popular cultural production in the United States (Brown 1997; Jenkins 2012). Unfortunately, these conventions also tend to cater to a heterosexual, white, male audience (Pustz 1999).

The popularity of comic book conventions is a testament to how comic book culture has become embedded in our popular culture. According to Previews World, a popular source for comic book news and information, fans are given the opportunity to "meet and interact with other fans, publishers, and celebrities at conventions dedicated to comics, science fiction, fantasy, media, gaming, anime, manga, and other topics of interest" throughout the United States and Canada (2016). Fans attend these conventions in the thousands, many of whom wear memorabilia of their favorite characters or even "cosplay." Cosplay, short for costume play, is the act of dressing up in costume and performing as a fictional character typically from comic books, video games, television, and film. Despite their growing popularity in Western culture (Lopes 2009) and the growing body of scholarly research documenting this trend from East Asia and Australia (Bainbridge and Norris 2013; Gn 2011; Hjorth 2009; Lamerichs 2010; Peirson-Smith 2013), comic book conventions and cosplay have received little critical scholarly attention in the United States, including sociological attention. It is unfortunate that American sociologists have overlooked this growing phenomenon since comic book conventions seem to offer unique

opportunities for analyzing consumerism, popular culture, and, the focus of this study, the experiences, subversion, and reproduction of marginalization within popular culture.

Countless studies have analyzed representations of race, gender, class, and sexuality within popular culture. While some academics have studied the role of minority status among fans who navigate popular culture spaces (Orme 2016), there has yet to be a study that thoroughly investigates how race, along with gender and class, operates within cosplay and comic book conventions. The study's perspective is informed by Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies' constructionist framework that views dominant cultural images as significant but not determinant of interpretations (1973). In order to investigate how cosplayers perceive, interact with, and modify images of race, gender, and class, I observed two local comic book conventions and conducted nine in-depth interviews. Positioning the study in a larger scholarly dialogue, I review studies of identity related to comic book conventions and cosplay. I situate my arguments around a constructionist framework in order to contribute to sociological literature concerning popular culture, identity, and marginalization. By investigating how cosplayers perceive representations of race, gender, and class in popular culture, present race, gender, and class while cosplaying, and resist, negotiate, or align with representations found in popular culture, I contend that while cosplay and comic book conventions may be perceived to promote inclusion and acceptance, some social actors with minority status remain obligated to perform acts of subversion in the midst of persisting marginalization.

The arguments put forth in this study should not be confused as a criticism of any one individual or even group of individuals. Rather, I seek to expose the processes within popular culture practices that reinforce the deeply embedded social structures that are invisible to the unsuspecting social actor. If we, as social scientists, are to contribute to the dismantling of

oppressive social structures we must work to unveil the institutions that guide the trajectory of social relations. Rather than focusing on systems of oppression as simply an ideology or defect of individuals, I direct my attention to structures that allow subjugation to continue. I am not preoccupied by how racist an individual may be or how much blatant misogyny still exists at comic book conventions, even though these things are troubling; what I am most concerned with is how systems of oppression covertly permeate and inform the discourse and practices of social actors (Bonilla-Silva 1997).

The following chapters consist of a review of the relevant literature, summarization of the study's methodology, findings drawn from observations and interviews, discussion of the study's larger implications, and concluding statements. First, however, I review the historical context relevant to comic book conventions and cosplay.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **HISTORY OF COMIC BOOK CONVENTIONS AND COSPLAY**

Popular culture has played a pivotal role in shaping American society since the early Twentieth Century (Danesi 2015). An influential and at times controversial part of American popular culture has been the storytelling medium of comic books (Lopes 2009). Since the 1930s comic books have been a staple among young readers because of their affordability and vibrant original characters. As a result, comic books have been traditionally disregarded as juvenile literature. As popularity of comic books grew among young readers, so did fears that this medium was a danger to young minds. For example, in the 1940s and 50s it was widely believed that comic books were pornographic, impeding to literacy development, and damaging to children's eyesight (Lopes 2009). Despite a long history of controversy and economic challenges, the comic book, sometimes referred to as the "graphic novel," has persevered as a popular American medium. Today, comic book characters are some of the most successful properties in popular culture, as evidenced by the numerous comic book-based films and television shows released each year. Superhero movies make up four of the top ten highest domestic grossing films of all-time (Box Office Mojo 2016) while viewer ratings of the AMC television show *The Walking Dead* (based on the comic book series of the same name) surpassed ratings of *Sunday Night Football* (Entertainment Weekly 2016). Moreover, it is difficult to deny the seemingly unavoidable image of the superhero in the American popular culture landscape. From film, television, and video games to toys, rugs, and even everyday objects like bottle

openers, superhero logos such as the Batman imprint have touched virtually every facet of American life. The success of these and many other comic book properties has led major comic book publishers to be bought out by larger conglomerates. For example, the two largest comic book publishers, Marvel and DC, have been acquired by Disney and Warner Bros. respectively. Comic book culture's influence on American popular culture has become undeniable. This is further supported by the over two-hundred conventions held annually in the U.S. and Canada that are dedicated to comics, video games, film, and television of virtually all genres (Previews World 2016).

Humbly beginning in 1960s as small social gatherings, comic book conventions have offered fans and creators of mass media a chance to celebrate popular culture. Apart from comic books, fans indulge in artwork, video games, trading cards, film, television, celebrities, and virtually any form of entertainment. Conventions vary from small dealer-oriented shows, to small city-based conventions, to large regional conventions. Recently, large metropolitan convention centers capable of holding thousands of people in attendance have been increasingly popular venues for comic book conventions.

The first national comic book convention is credited to New York Comic Con in 1964 (Lopes 2009). Not long after, conventions started appearing in major U.S. cities such as Detroit, Chicago, Houston, and Los Angeles. San Diego's well-known annual comic book convention was first held in 1970 and rapidly reached a thousand attendees by 1972 (Lopes 2009). San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC) is now one of the largest popular culture conventions in the world with its attendance surpassing 130,000 people in a single day (Hanna 2014). While most conventions are much smaller in scope than SDCC, in 2016, Salt Lake Comic Con, Mega Con

(Orlando, Florida), Phoenix Comic Con, Wizard World Chicago, and New York Comic Con also exceeded 100,000 people in attendance.

Without a doubt, conventions are a big business. Large conventions have been found to regularly generate millions of dollars in revenue (Babka 2014). As a case in point, New York Comic Con has been averaging approximately fifty million dollars in revenue in the past few years (Kell 2015). Comic book conventions as a whole have seen steady growth over the past fifty years and are often credited for saving a dwindling comic book industry from collapse (Lopes 2009).

In the 1950s, due to a decline in romance and child-oriented genres and a growing hypermasculine (white) superhero genre, comic books started to be read less by women and children and more by white teenage and adult men (Lopes 2009; Pustz 1999). The shift in demographics among comic book readers was evident in the spaces of comic book conventions which weren't particularly child or woman friendly until well into the 1990s (Lopes 2009). Therefore, comic book conventions in particular, and comic book culture more generally, have been historically white and male-centric. This is in addition to the increasing costs of comic books and convention tickets which have made the culture increasingly inaccessible to readers from lower and working-classes. More recently, convention crowds have become increasingly diverse with a growing presence of women and people of color of all ages. However, conventions remain generally targeted to white middle-class families (Jenkins 2012).

A likely reason for the diversifying fan-base is that comic book conventions have become increasingly inclusive of varying forms of entertainment. At most conventions, fans are not limited to comic books and comic book related attractions. For example, fans can meet with creators and celebrities from popular movies and TV shows, some of which have no relation to

comic books or the superhero genre. Fans can also attend special events such as film screenings, table-top game tournaments, and speed dating. One of the conventions observed for the purposes of this study even had a “tattoo alley” where fans could get a tattoo from one of about thirty tattoo artists. Ironically, comic book conventions have become a place where most fans can celebrate the content of comic books without having actually read comic books (Jenkins 2012). Thus, so-called “comic book” conventions appeal to a much wider audience than merely comic book readers; conventions are hubs of American popular culture where any kind of fan can attend and appreciate media texts from multiple genres and mediums.

A popular form of fan expression, particularly at conventions, is “cosplay.” Cosplay is a performance of fan identity in which fans embody their character through altering their body features, dress, and behavior (Bainbridge & Norris 2013). Cosplay was originally popularized in East Asian cultures, most notably in Japan, as a way to celebrate Japanese animation (anime) and manga. Since the early 1990s, cosplay has also become popular in Western cultures, particularly in the United States (Pustz 1999).

Outside of Eastern cultural influence, cosplay in the United States can be traced back to as early as 1970 when fans dressed up as science fiction characters at the first San Diego Comic-Con (Bainbridge & Norris 2013). Costuming, however, has been part of American cultural practices since long before then. In addition to the annual traditions of Halloween, it can be argued that alternate iterations of cosplay have existed in the U.S. prior to comic book conventions in the form of Renaissance fairs and historical re-enactments where attendees often dress and act as people from particular historical periods. Similarly, cultural traditions around the United States such as New Orleans’ Mardi Gras often include dressing up in colorful garb as a major component of festivities. Cosplay, however, is different from most costuming practices in

that it commonly involves portraying fictional characters from film, television, comic books, and manga. Therefore, cosplay is an act that is more closely connected to popular culture than to any particular region's history or traditions.

### **CHAPTER THREE:**

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Cosplay is a presentation of fandom; a performance of dress and behavior that conveys “cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1986) to other fans within pop cultural spaces such as comic book conventions. Cosplayers express their knowledge of popular culture by “embodying the character, providing an accurate and authentic experience in terms of body features and behaviors as much as dress” (Bainbridge & Norris 2013:3). Although cosplay is not commonly an everyday practice, some cosplayers do spend countless hours, spanning over months and sometimes even years, crafting their costumes and preparing for the day they perform their cosplay. Cosplayers take advantage of internet articles, blogs, and videos dedicated to helping cosplayers hone their craft. Cosplayers can be considered “craft consumers” (Campbell 2005) in that their consumption of materials, production of costumes, and cosplay performance are expressions of identity. Cosplayers indicate which subgroups, or “fandoms,” they belong to through their cosplay (Brown 1997). Much like gender, cosplay is performative; it is a social process which works to construct and define one’s identity (Butler 1990). Cosplayers often work with others in creating their costumes and preparing their cosplay performance. Cosplay performances are collective creations in which cosplayers not only create costumes, but what the costumes mean. Meaning making, however, does not stop once the costume is completed. Cosplayers then present their costumed performances to audiences at comic book conventions, where then can walk around and take pictures with strangers in order to celebrate and express

their fandom (Jenkins 2012). Then, once a comic book convention is over, cosplayers can share pictures of their cosplay on social media, continuing the process of meaning making (Lamerichs 2010). Whether in the construction, performance, or sharing of a cosplay, cosplayers partake in performative processes in which their speech, actions, and behavior carry implications toward their identity.

Cosplay is often confined to certain spaces within fan culture (Bainbridge & Norris 2013; Lamerichs 2010; Peirson-Smith 2013) such as comic book conventions, comic book shop events and comic book movie premieres. It is not uncommon to find cosplayers taking numerous photos with convention-goers or even receiving praise at a cosplay competition where cosplayers compete for prizes and recognition. When cosplayers find themselves outside of these unique cultural spaces, however, they can often face social stigma (Lopes 2006; Peirson-Smith 2013). Despite, or perhaps due to, increasing media coverage of cosplay, including a competition-based reality television show called *Heroes of Cosplay*, cosplayers continue to be perceived as fanatical and immature (Lopes 2009). Hence, cosplayers are far more likely to experience ridicule and stigmatization outside of comic book conventions than they are within conventions (Lopes 2009; Gn 2011). That is not to say, however, that cosplayers do not experience stigmatization or marginalization within cultural spaces. It has been suggested, for example, that fans with minority status face situations of stigmatization and marginalization at places such as comic book conventions (Orme 2016).

Social actors are influenced by the media they consume. However, they also hold the potential to subvert hegemonic messages (Radway 1984), collectively acting as interpretive communities (Rindlof 1988) or textual poachers (Jenkins 1992). Research has suggested that cosplay carries subversive qualities particularly towards the performance of gender and sexuality

(Bainbridge & Norris 2013; Gn 2011; Peirson-Smith 2013). Some men may use cosplay as an act of subversion against traditional masculine norms that tend to frame dressing up as a feminine act (Peirson-Smith 2013). For instance, “Bronies,” male fans of the cartoon *My Little Pony*, have been found to explore the notions of gender by celebrating the feminine characteristics of the female, anthropomorphized characters from the show (Robertson 2014). Also challenging traditional gender expectations, women have been found to use cosplay as a vehicle to enter male-dominated spaces like video game culture (Hjorth 2009). Moreover, “crossplay,” the act of cosplaying as a character of the opposite sex, allows cosplayers to explore the fluidity of gender if not resist the constraints of gender expectations altogether (Hale 2014). The subversive potential of crossplay particularly, and cosplay more generally, may prove similar to what has been found of drag performers’ gender performativity (Butler 1996; Egner and Maloney 2015). Studies have also found that players of online video games such as *World of Warcraft* challenge gender expectations offline in addition to their online experiences (Stabile 2014). Like drag and video game avatars, cosplay offers opportunities of resistance to the dominant discourses of gender that reproduce the binary between masculinity and femininity (Gn 2011).

Similar to fan-created fiction, movies, and art, “cosplay motivates fans to closely interpret existing texts, perform them, and extend them with their own narratives and ideas” (Lamerichs 2010). But to what extent do cosplayers’ costumes and performances mirror a character’s traits? Do cosplayers actively seek to present an alternative version of a character and, if so, why? Do they intend to simply add on their own ideas without comprising what is recognizable of the character? Or do cosplayers seek to overhaul the character, revising the text to meet their needs and desires? Later sections address these questions, particularly in relevance to race and gender.

### *Dominant Images and Marginalization*

Prevailing images in mass media have been found to serve as justifications of minority groups' oppression, making stereotypes seem as though they are natural. For example, the image of the "welfare queen" in the U.S. has been a controlling image that attributed the country's economic problems to poor black women (Collins 2002). The welfare queen is just one of many examples of cultural narratives that are formed at all levels of social life, shaping everything from personal identities to public policy (Loseke 2007). Cultural narratives of race, gender, and class are greatly informed by the prevailing images found in mass media, influencing the power dynamics between social groups.

From a critical race perspective, stories exchanged through discourse are central to the reproduction of structural inequality. Contemporary racial hegemony, for instance, largely persists through colorblind ideologies. Everything from social discourse (Bonilla-Silva 2010) and politics (Omi and Winant 2015) to niche communities such as Lindy Hop dance groups (Hancock 2008) and craft beer breweries (Withers forthcoming) have been found to reproduce colorblind ideologies that dismiss the continuing significance of race and racism in the United States. These hidden forms of hegemony are significant because they have implications toward distributions of wealth (Oliver and Shapiro 2006) and the way social life is organized overall (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin 2014). Omi and Winant argue, "As hegemonic racial ideology, colorblindness has to be enforced, not only in state policies and court decisions, but in popular culture and everyday life as well" (2015:263). The current study examines comic book conventions as a site of popular culture in which dominant images are both subverted and reproduced through cosplay. Furthermore, viewing discourse as a driving component behind

structures of inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2010), I analyze the discursive strategies participants exert as they discuss, or avoid, topics of race in cosplay.

The stories that make up comic book culture have historically focused around white, straight male characters and have been created by an industry that is almost exclusively white, straight, and male (Lopes 2009; Pustz 1999). Although an increasing number of exceptions exist, the disproportionate representation of white, heterosexual males among comic book creators and characters is still an ongoing problem, not unlike the rest of mass media (Erigha 2015). These stories often misrepresent and underrepresent minority groups such as African-Americans (Erigha 2015; Singer 2002), Native Americans (King 2009), Latin Americans (McGrath 2007), LGBTQ individuals (Frohard-Dourlent 2012; Palmer-Mehta and Kellie 2005), and women in general (Avery-Natale 2013; Parasecoli 2014; Scott 2015). When depicted in mass media, minority status groups are often represented by stereotypical, two-dimensional characters. Additionally, minority status characters often serve the sole purpose of adding diversity to a cast. In these cases, the presence of minority status characters is more about lip-service for fans than creating positive stories (McGrath 2007). Arguments in intersectionality contend that increasing visibility of characters who are of color, women, LGBTQ, and/or disabled for the sake of inclusion alone is “tokenistic objectifying or “voyeuristic inclusion,” which can be as disempowering as total exclusion (Crenshaw 1991:1261).

The dominant images found in popular culture perpetuate the marginalization of the aforementioned minority groups, among others. Marginalization is the social exclusion or social disadvantaging of a group of people that is often perpetuated by institutions such as education, criminal justice, and mass media. In other words, marginalization carries the implications that particular groups of people “don’t belong” or are of “less value.” Minority status characters often

appear as minor characters that are supplemental yet inferior to the white male lead character (Avery-Natale 2013; Erigha 2015; King 2009; Palmer-Mehta 2005). Hence, whether underrepresented or framed as subordinate to a white male lead character, minority status characters are marginalized in their depictions in mass media.

Hegemony is not only reproduced in the appearance of characters, but their experiences, actions, and dialogues as well. In accordance with marginalization, minority characters, when represented, are at times normalized in their subjectivities. For instance, while a character may be of color, they may also have normative experiences like a middle-class background, heterosexual orientation, and masculine presentations. Diversifying a character by appearance while maintaining normative subjectivities indicates a more covert process of marginalization rather than progressive representation. Thus, while inclusion and diversity are important in media representation, it is not enough to simply alter the package; the contents must vary as well.

Although marginalization pervades much of social life, social actors are capable of subverting the marginalizing images. As suggested by research on African-American girls' experiences with white toy dolls (Chin 2001), images that were once marginalizing may be transformed into something subversive. Similarly, research on working-class and nonwhite families has suggested that consumption may be integral to subverting marginalization and building a sense of belonging (Pugh 2009). Considering that social actors are capable of altering hegemonic meanings, I explore the strategies that cosplayers with minority status use to subvert their marginalized experiences.

### *Comic Book Conventions as Sites of Popular Culture*

Comic book conventions are large social gatherings where fans and creators of mass media consume and reproduce popular culture (Peaslee 2013). These conventions have been a part of American popular culture for over four decades and have grown steadily ever since. San Diego Comic-Con in San Diego, California, for example, is one of the largest popular culture conventions in the world with its attendance having surpassed 130,000 people in a single day (Hanna 2014). Today, aside from many smaller comic book conventions across the US, there are over sixty comic book conventions held annually that host tens of thousands of fans.

Comic book conventions have been described as “the major focal point of modern fan culture” (Brown 1997:17). Conventions offer fans the opportunity to gather and demonstrate their cultural knowledge of popular culture. In other words, conventions allow fans to acquire as well as express cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). The stories and characters that are celebrated at comic book conventions, however, are not simply works of fiction to be shared and then disregarded once the convention is over. The dominant images in popular culture that permeate through comic book conventions, much like cultural narratives (Loseke 2007), inform us of, and shape, our social world (Lopes 2009). At a more micro level, the dominant images reproduced at conventions, influence how we think about and interact with each other (Pustz 1999). More specifically, dominant images that circulate throughout popular culture reinforce social stratification of race, gender, class, and so forth. According to Collins, “an increasingly important dimension of why hegemonic ideologies concerning race, gender, sexuality, and nation remain so deeply entrenched lies, in part, in the growing sophistication of mass media in regulating intersecting oppressions” (2002:303).

Stories of white, masculine, heterosexual superheroes like Batman and Superman are not only popular, but representative of most lead characters in the superhero genre, by far the most popular genre in comic books and consistently one of the most profitable in film and television. Within conventions, images of superheroes such as Batman and Superman greatly outnumber images of characters that hold minority status. Products, banners, and even signs offering directions to convention events contain images of popular superheroes (Lopes 2009). Thus, comic book conventions contain spaces that normalize whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality while marginalizing minority groups. Whether or not fans perceive these spaces to be marginalizing has not been analyzed prior to this study.

Although dominant images of majority status characters pervade conventions, there are some creators and images that subvert and directly challenge the prevailing narratives. Independent and alternative comics, TV shows, and film, for example, more commonly present characters that are diverse, three-dimensional, and accompanied by other positive minority characters (Lopes 2009). Likewise, cosplayers' costumes and performances do not always align with the original race or gender of popular characters (Bainbridge and Norris 2013; Gn 2011; Lamerichs 2010; Peirson-Smith 2013). Therefore, dominant images, although prominent, do not go unchallenged. While some cosplayers uniformly replicate characters through their costumed performances, others strive to create original renditions that align more with their self-presentation than the source material. Whether subversive cosplays are intentionally counter-hegemonic is not always clear, however, they are subversive nonetheless.

Dominant pop cultural images and their messages can be ordered, classified, assigned and decoded within multiple "mappings" (Hall 1973). At the same time, however, "there exists a pattern of 'preferred readings'; and these both have the institutional/political/ideological order

imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized” (Hall 1973:7). Comic book conventions provide a unique social space where fans of popular culture can share encoded cultural messages of race, gender, and class while also carrying the potential to oppose dominant images by decoding them with alternate mappings.

Studies of comic book conventions have largely focused on how attendees interact with their surrounding cultural spaces. One study of film festivals and comic book conventions argues that producers and consumers are capable of creating meaning within and around festivals (Peaslee 2013). Regardless whether an attendee of a comic book convention is a fan, creator, vendor, or promoter, they all interact with others in meaningful and influential ways; even though celebrities and creators may have more power individually in these spaces, fans collectively hold just as much influence (Peaslee 2013). The present study focuses on a particular group of convention goers (cosplayers) with little interest in whether cosplayers or non-cosplayers have more power. What is of particular interest, however, are the ways in which cosplayers subvert and contribute to hegemonic conditions along race, gender, and class.

Cosplayers are capable of reproducing as well as opposing the dominant images that they embody through their cosplay performance (Hale 2014). Studies of cosplayers’ embodiment and performance of fictional characters at comic book conventions suggest that cosplayers are capable of engaging with and negotiating pop cultural texts (Hale 2014; Peirson-Smith 2013; Robertson 2014). The literature around cosplay as identity performance is mostly preoccupied with cosplays’ subversive potential, especially towards gender. The present study, in extending the literature, explores the nuanced experiences of cosplayers where cultural hegemony is at times explicitly challenged and in other cases implicitly reinforced.

### *Gaps in the Literature*

Cosplay is unique in that it allows social actors to be quite active in their interpretive work. Cosplayers are capable of completely reimagining the images they consume from popular media. For instance, cosplayers have been found to alter the identity markers of a character such as race, gender, and sexuality. Additionally, cosplayers may combine genres in presenting their characters. “Steampunk,” for example, is a style of cosplay that incorporates science-fiction, industrial, and post-apocalyptic aesthetics to a costume. A cosplay performance involves decoding, recreating, and performing dominant images found in popular culture. Therefore, along with the implications toward performativity, cosplayers transcend what it means to be an interpretive community (Rindlof 1988) or craft consumer (Campbell 2005).

Previous research has analyzed the representations of race, gender, class, and sexuality in comic book related popular culture and found that minority status groups are commonly misrepresented (Avery-Natale 2013; Frohard-Dourlent 2012; King 2009; McGrath 2007; Palmer-Mehta and Kellie 2005; Parasecoli 2014; Singer 2002). Little scholarly attention, however, has been given to how fans of popular culture perceive representations of race, gender, and class, especially within the spaces of comic book conventions. Out of the few studies that have examined how fans perceive representation of comic book-related images (Frohard-Dourlent 2012; Palmer-Mehta 2005; Scott 2015), none have analyzed how fans perceive representations of race or class specifically. The current study fills this gap in the literature by investigating how cosplayers perceive representations of race, gender, and class in popular culture in addition to how they subvert or reproduce hegemonic messages found in popular American media. By studying seemingly active participants in popular culture such as

cosplayers, social research can uncover the evolving methods of resistance among social actors in response to the increasingly hidden forms of hegemony.

Research on cosplay has yet to explore how race is performed and constructed, almost exclusively focusing on gender and sexuality (Bainbridge & Norris 2013; Hale 2014; Peirson-Smith 2013). Although these studies have suggested that cosplayers negotiate dominant discourses around gender, research has yet to study how dominant discourses of race are negotiated through cosplay. In addition to the absence of race in cosplay and popular culture studies, there is a lack of analysis on the intersection of race, gender, and class (or other forms of identity) in the performance of cosplay. Critical discourse around intersectional identities argues that to ignore intragroup differences would be to contribute to tensions between groups distinguished by race, gender, class, or sexuality (Crenshaw 1991). Although the current study does not claim an intersectional lens, it does strive to examine the ways in which race and gender overlap in informing the social processes of the participants. Cosplayers can come from backgrounds of varying professions, social-economic classes, ages, and races (Peirson-Smith 2013). People who cosplay are not simply men or women, black or white, but people with intersecting identities that, although overlapping, have unique social and historical contexts. The study acknowledges that to focus on one aspect of cosplayers' identities such as gender is to ignore the complexity that exists between social actors and their experiences with dominant images in popular culture. Therefore, future studies will need to offer further examination as to how race, gender, and class, along with other categories, act as intertwined facets of identity that inform and construct one another (Collins 1998).

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **METHODS**

Data were acquired by attending and observing two large comic book conventions in Florida and conducting nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews with cosplayers. The conventions were attended prior to conducting any interviews in order to acquire ethnographic data and gain access to initial participants. The rest of my participants were acquired through snowball sampling.

Observations were made on the Saturday of each convention because those days have the highest fan attendance. Both conventions took place in large convention centers that were capable of housing tens of thousands of attendees. The conventions' layouts and event schedules were reviewed beforehand to ensure efficient observation. The main hall, where most of the convention activity occurs, for each convention was open to fans for nine hours. However, conventions included events that took place after the main convention hall would close, such as special guest panels, costume contests, or "cosplay after parties." The researcher attended the costume contests at both conventions, each lasting roughly ninety minutes. Including time spent waiting in line for the conventions to open, approximately twenty-two hours were spent observing and taking preliminary notes. In between observing and taking field notes at the convention, cosplayers were approached to discuss participating in the study. Attending the conventions offered an opportunity to gather extensive observational data in addition to meeting and building rapport with potential interview participants.

My main interests of observation included the interactions between fans, the methods of costuming done by cosplayers, and the overall presentation of the conventions spaces. I took note

of how non-cosplaying fans approached and interacted with cosplayers. What costumes seemed to be getting the most attention? Were there any costumes that seemed popular among cosplayers? How did fans engage with the different activities at the conventions? These inquiries and more guided my investigation of the convention spaces. Overall, my main concern was not with the degree of inequality that existed at conventions or throughout cosplay, but with the covert forms of inequality that otherwise go unnoticed.

Nine cosplayers volunteered to participate in the study. Each participant agreed to one interview. To be eligible for the study, participants needed to be at least eighteen years old and have some experience with cosplaying at a fan convention. All but one participant reside in Florida, but all participants have attended Florida-based conventions including the ones observed for this study. Participants responded to demographic questions at the beginning of the interview such as gender, race/ethnicity, social-economic status, age, and years of experience with cosplay. Rather than being offered choices, participants were given blank spaces to respond to demographic questions however they wanted. Participants were of varying age, ethnicity, and cosplay experience. The youngest participant was twenty-two years old and the oldest was fifty-two. The average participant age was approximately thirty-two years old. Six participants identified as white, one black, one Asian, and one Hispanic. Five participants identified as men and four as women. The least experienced participant has cosplayed for one year while the most experienced participant has been cosplaying for over twenty-two years. The average cosplay experience between participants is about six years. For social economic status, five participants identified as lower-middle/working class and four identified as middle-class. No one identified as upper or upper-middle class.

All participants signed informed consent forms agreeing to be audio recorded for interviews. Participants were given the option to allow a photo of their cosplay to be included in the report. Every participant agreed to have a photo included in the manuscript. All photos included in the manuscript were taken and provided by the participants themselves. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed by the author. Pseudonyms were assigned and used throughout the study for confidentiality. In addition, general notes were taken at the end of each meeting to document impressions of the interview.

Interviews ranged from thirty-five minutes to one hour and thirty-three minutes. The average interview time was approximately one hour. Participants generally seemed comfortable in sharing stories rich in detail. In the event that a participant began to speak colloquially, I merely asked them to elaborate or clarify what they were describing. By expressing my familiarity with the topic but never having participated in cosplay myself, I was able to conduct interviews while maintaining enough critical distance in order to produce analyses.

Although I have attended a few conventions prior to conducting research for the purposes of this study, I have never participated in cosplay. This seemed to benefit me as a researcher because I developed a status that existed between outsider and insider. Whereas a researcher with no prior knowledge or connection to the culture may have had a more difficult time finding cosplayers who would agree to partake in the study to begin with, having basic knowledge as well as recent experiences with comic book conventions helped me build rapport with participants.

By combining first-hand accounts with interview data, I was able to contextualize participant experiences with my own observations. As a researcher, teetering between insider and outsider status allowed me to maintain a critical distance that would have otherwise been

compromised by having a personal connection to the subject matter or no connection whatsoever.

## **CHAPTER FIVE:**

## FINDINGS

### *Identity-Making, Relationship Building, and Social Cohesion within Cosplay*

Most of the participants interviewed revealed that it took hours of labor, spanning months, sometimes even years, to complete a costume. Participants, all of whom had fulltime-commitments such as work, school, and/or family, spoke of spending a majority of their leisure time preparing costumes in order to cosplay at a comic book convention. Even participants who bought individuals pieces of their costume already made or commissioned others to make the costume for them would express that cosplay was a time-consuming practice. For those who construct their own costume without outside help, cosplay can take up the entirety of their leisure time. Johnathan, for example, spoke of struggling to find the appropriate materials for his costume, “I spent months, maybe almost a year, trying to find just the right sequined fabric to start.” In addition to time, participants spoke of the financial cost of cosplay. Laura showcases this in saying:

A lot of my friends, we basically work to pay for our cosplays. It's what we do.  
It's a sad thing but it's what we do. It's what we love. I guess that's the biggest thing. It's funny because my family doesn't always see eye to eye with me and they're like, “I don't know if you should spend your money on that.” And I'm like, “but it's what I love.”

As Laura suggests, despite all of the labor, time, and money that is dedicated to cosplay, it is something that she is passionate about doing. Moreover, participants generally gave three reasons as to why they cosplay. First, to a varying extent, cosplay helps participants navigate the identity-making process. Second, cosplay provided participants with an opportunity to develop

social relationships. Lastly, cosplay presented participants with a greater sense of social integration or cohesion.

In crafting and performing a separate self, cosplayers felt that they were developing or reasserting their own identities. Kelly, for example, spoke of the differences between what she wears in and out of cosplay. She states, “I don’t wear dresses very often, and in cosplay I do wear dresses. And it’s a lot of fun wearing it in costume. If you try to make me wear a skirt or something during casual—it’ll take some mighty effort to put me in a skirt again.” For Kelly, cosplay offers her an opportunity to explore femininity without compromising her everyday gender presentation.

While a few participants spoke of cosplay as a hobby, others described it as an integral part of who they are. After three years of dressing up for conventions, Johnathan can no longer see himself without cosplay. He explains, “Now that this is a part of my life, I don’t ever want it to be not part of my life. It’s great. It adds an extra layer of wonderful things to do and things to think about.” Before cosplay, Johnathan enjoyed spending his leisure time performing in drag. After losing touch with the drag community, Johnathan stopped performing. But once Johnathan started cosplaying he no longer felt the need to perform drag. He did, however, find a way to incorporate his love for drag into cosplay, “My drag now is always going to be cosplay related. I don’t do drag just to dress up as a lady or go out to a nightclub. I will do a female character in drag for cosplay...So I don’t really do drag anymore other than to crossplay.” For Johnathan, cosplay provided the space to continue an old passion while exploring a new one. In comparison to Johnathan, Laura was also able to relive an older part of who she was:

It’s fun to have an outlet. I think that’s my favorite thing because I really didn’t, growing up, have anything. Like [acting] was my niche and having cosplay has

been really cool. I mean acting was great because I did four years of that in high school but it was like even then I didn't really feel like I fit. And now with cosplay it's like the best of both worlds. I get to dress up and I get to act. So it's pretty cool! So I found my niche. It's exciting for me to find my niche.

Laura explains that although she enjoyed acting, it did not provide her with a feeling of belonging. Once she started cosplay, Laura was able to combine her love for acting with a new hobby that gave her a greater sense of self-fulfillment.

As Laura's comments allude to above, participants were able to create relationships from participating in the cosplay community. As opposed to superficial relationships based on common interests, almost all of the participants were able to describe lasting, meaningful relationships that developed out of participating in cosplay and attending comic book conventions. Johnathan describes three of his closest friends whom he met at a convention:

I actually have a lot of friends that I have met through cosplay. There's three in particular, young ladies that I've met at my first Dragon Con. We have had a group chat on Facebook we've been going for almost since Dragon Con. It's been like three years now and they came to my wedding, you know. I talk to them almost every day. They're very near and dear to me. I consider them very close to me. Almost family at this point.

Jake aligns with Johnathan's idea of family, describing conventions as a way to bring friends closer together despite the long distances between them:

I mean it's a great time and it gives you that family atmosphere because everybody is looking forward to seeing you even if they travel from different parts of the state or even out of state that they're coming for the cons. You know, that may be the only time you see them once a year. But it builds up that comradery.

Robert describes cosplay as a shortcut to building lasting relationships:

We actually met those people and those people were cosplaying. And we just hung out with them. Now those people are some people that we actually go and cosplay with. It was actually pretty cool to think because I took the time and made something and took my time, effort, money, whatever, I made twelve new friends. Twelve new friends that I didn't have to work for... They wanted to be my friend because they understood how much effort it took to be there. I gained all the



*Figure 1: James in a group cosplay of characters from the series Attack on Titan (Photo provided courtesy of the participant)*

respect that I needed, years-worth of respect, just in that one second. So that was awesome.

Kelly talked about the ways cosplay helped her become more comfortable interacting in social situations. Whereas prior to cosplay Kelly did not see herself as outgoing, she now feels more confident with meeting new people. Kelly states, “Cosplay kind of helped me to connect to people that I wouldn’t normally talk to in a normal base.” Cosplay seemed to help some



*Figure 2: Describing herself normally as shy and reserved, Kelly poses confidently in her cosplay (Photo provided courtesy of participant)*

participants feel confident in interacting with strangers, which could then lead to building valuable relationships.

The relationships some participants acquired extended to the virtual world as well.

Melissa, for instance, said:

I'm probably a part of like twenty different Peggy Carter cosplay communities online, you know, where we share information and when we're researching different costumes or dresses that she's worn...most of [the online communities] are very supportive of us being strong woman. That's one of the big things. We see Peggy Carter as an evidence of that. Making it more mainstream.

The invention of the internet has contributed to a revolution in interpersonal contact and the ways we construct our social world (Zhao 2006). Online communications have been suggested to aid in social interactions (Hammick and Lee 2014). Research also suggests that online presentations of self are integral to the self-formation process (Gottschalk 2010; Zhao 2005). Melissa's experiences with online cosplay communities suggests that cosplay is no exception. Not only is Melissa able to build a broader cosplay network with social media, but she also expands on her own costuming and performing skills by exchanging advice with other cosplayers. Therefore, by supplementing engagement with the cosplay community through online interactions, Melissa is able to obtain social and cultural capital. Additionally, the online communities are supportive of Melissa's interests in a strong woman character. By working together with other fans online, Melissa is able to gain assistance with her identity-making. With the help of her online connections, Melissa can reassert her identity as a strong woman while continuing Peggy Carter's work of making strong women go "mainstream." Overall, online communities helped Melissa garner social and cultural capital in addition to gaining visibility in spaces that may be marginalizing to women.



*Figure 3: Melissa as Agent Peggy Carter (Photo provided courtesy of participant)*

Although Melissa was the only participant to discuss online interactions in-depth, most of the participants mentioned some form of internet use in conjunction with cosplaying. Participants such as Johnathan spoke of the enjoyment they receive when they post an image of their cosplay on a social media site such as Facebook, where even their non-cosplaying friends express their admiration. Participants' use of social media varied but one thing that was clear was that social media experiences, although beneficial and mostly positive, was second to in-person interactions, including meeting other fans at conventions and children at charity events.

Participants largely felt that by being involved in cosplay they were able to develop an increased sense of self-worth and connectedness to people around them. Participants largely felt

that cosplay was just as much about making others happy as it was making themselves happy. For instance, Johnathan believes, “The entertainment part is what I love about it because I find that... a lot of people forget that cosplay, it can be just for you, but for me it's about entertaining people and bringing smiles to faces and having people have that like, ‘wow that was amazing.’” Johnathan explains that taking a selfless approach to cosplay translates to a social connection that may otherwise be missed. Almost every participant (the participant with the least cosplay experience being the only exception) explained how they used cosplay to “give back.”

Participants’ interest in “giving back” was not limited to entertaining fans at conventions. Participants also took part in charitable organizations. Five participants described their charitable efforts with cosplay, most of which included visiting ill children at hospitals in costume. Laura says, “And with the hospitals we specifically went around and tried to find kids that were waiting in the waiting area to get their limbs put on or they were fixing to get treatment for something. And we kind of just hung out with the kids and talked to them a little bit and just tried to encourage them because they have rough lives.” Although most of the participants’ charity work involved visiting children, some participants raised money for other causes. Jake, a former marine, for instance contributed to veteran charities, “But we started doing charity work where we would show up in costume at different places whether it was at the VA to help with some of the veterans.” In describing his experience with charity Jake says, “When you can see that you are doing something for somebody else that's less fortunate it does leave that feeling that's kind of indescribable.”

Terry was by far the most experienced of all the participants with cosplay and charity. He claimed to have founded two cosplay charities with some of his cosplay friends. Terry now cosplays mostly for charity. He admits that between all of the charitable organizations he is

affiliated with, there are more opportunities to cosplay for charitable events than conventions in his area. However, Terry makes it clear that he prefers cosplaying for charity over conventions:

I'm at the point in my life where I'd much rather do it for charity and if I had to choose I would do it for charity and never go to a convention. If someone said, you could do one or the other, it would definitely be for charity... It can be incredibly draining. But like I said, nothing has been more rewarding. If I had one thing that I wanted on my tombstone it would be "did charity cosplay."

Terry admits that charity, especially events that involve terminal children, can be emotionally taxing, but is willing to leave conventions behind for the sake of helping others.

For participants who were involved with charities, they seemed as committed to charities as they were for their preparation for conventions. This suggests that cosplay is not exclusively for self-expression, but can serve as an altruistic tool ranging from entertaining spectators to fundraising for children in need.

Talking to the participants, it was clear that cosplay promotes identity-making, building relationships, and developing a sense of belonging through "giving back." Whether it be at comic book conventions, online, or at a children's hospital, participants are able to personally benefit from cosplay while also utilizing it as a tool to benefit others.

### *Achieving Cultural Capital through Identification*

Participants offered varying reasons for why they chose the characters they cosplayed. Participants spoke of the importance of sharing a resemblance with the character, sharing personality traits with the characters, admiration for the character and/or series, and favoring the

characters costume design. Some participants described the process of identifying with a character as instantaneous. In describing the first time he saw the character Eren Yeager in the animated series *Attack on Titan*, James responded, “That motherfucker. That’s me.” Similarly, when Melissa first saw Peggy Carter from the Marvel television series *Agent Carter*, she instantly admired the character and her costume design. “I’m just like—me. That’s me in the red hat,” Melissa said.

While participants had many reasons as to why they chose a particular character to cosplay, sharing a likeness with a character in order to be easily recognized by fans at conventions took priority in most cases. Participants suggested that there is significant connection between being recognized by other fans and having a positive experience at conventions. Johnathan shared, “I like to do characters that are easily recognizable and have a broad appeal because otherwise... for me, if I'm going to put all this effort into a cosplay I want people to recognize it. And I want them to be like, ‘oh that's really cool!’” Laura frames recognition as the entire purpose of her cosplay, “I know some people don't really care. But for me it's like, what's the point of cosplay if no one knows the character?” In the same vein, Jake rhetorically asks, “Why are you getting dressed up if you don't want to be seen?” These participants clearly argue that cultural capital in the form of recognition or identification is essential to a positive cosplay experience. Without being identified as the particular character they were cosplaying, participants would not expect to receive validation for their efforts.

In order to perform a cosplay that was as close to the original character as possible, some participants would conduct extensive research. The participants described their methods of preparation as “meticulous.” In researching a character’s costume, participants studied various sources in order to construct the most accurate costume possible. While some simply search for

images online as a frame of reference, according to Jake, some cosplayers buy original art for the sake of having authentic source material, “They try to find official character sketches and stuff like that to find every angle.” In comparison, a few participants mentioned the use of action figures as three-dimensional models of characters’ costumes. Terry, a fan of the Marvel superhero Daredevil, told a story about staying awake until three o’clock in the morning so that he could watch the release of Netflix’s *Daredevil* TV series. His plan was to skip to the episode in which Daredevil’s costume was revealed so that he could take reference photos for his cosplay. Terry explains, “I must have had fifty screenshots. Then I started using Microsoft Paint to highlight with bright yellow, like, this is obviously a seam, this is obviously a seam.” As previously mentioned, Melissa utilized online communities through groups on Facebook in order



Figure 4: Terry as Daredevil (Photo provided courtesy of participant)

to learn and share tips on costume construction. As part of the online community, Melissa shares information about each episode's costume designs. According to Melissa, the main purpose of the online community is to help each other make better cosplays. Whatever their method of research and preparation, participants worked tirelessly in order to harbor the cultural capital necessary to perform a successful and highly recognized cosplay.

Aside from the physical construction of costumes, participants also researched the intimate details of characters such as movement, speech, and personal information. Terry, for example, takes advantage of his background in martial arts to share the same movements of his characters. While cosplaying characters such as Nightwing or Daredevil who depend on acrobatic fighting skills, Terry says he will often pose in a technical fighting stance when asked for a picture in order to express the characters' martial arts prowess. In order to speak in the same Scottish accent as her character, Melissa practiced with a voice coach she knew from the local Renaissance festival. Laura, a former actress, enjoys researching her characters' backstories:

Basically I like to do research. That's my favorite thing in the world is to find the most background. So what makes a character think and do and everything? Why is the character... what ever happened in the background? So if there's not a background, I will create a background just so I can know in the back of my head when a kid asks me, "hey why did your hair turn white?" I will be able to answer that question immediately without hesitation.

For Laura, part of the accuracy of a cosplay is intimately knowing every detail about a character. Laura researches a character's background until she feels comfortable with interacting with fans, particularly children, who may inquire about her character.

Whereas some participants focused mostly on costume design, a majority of participants additionally prepared the performative aspects of their cosplay by aligning their movement, speech, and knowledge with their characters.

Participants generally described stories of recognition as moments of victory. The cultural capital they acquired from accurately replicating a character resulted in praise and validation. Jake's describes one of his fondest memories with cosplay being when he was complimented by celebrities for his cosplay of the Penguin, a villain from the *Batman* universe. Jake said:

When I did meet Adam West and Burt Ward and got my photo taken with them as the Penguin, they actually were impressed with the costume. Even the cigarette prop looks so real that the manager of the hotel pretty much almost cussed me out to put the cigarette out because he thought it was lit cigarette. So it's good when you get some of that recognition on there.



Figure 3: Jake Cosplaying as the Penguin. (Photo provided courtesy of the participant)

In addition to impressing the actors from the original Batman television series, Jake takes pride in performing such a convincing cosplay that he creates confusion amongst onlookers. Terry shared a similar story of being confused for the real thing, “I had a member of the set come up to me at NY comic con and told me that he thought that I was one of the stunt guys that had stolen one of the suits from set. Like he came up to me and put his hand on my shoulder like, ‘what are you...? Oh sorry.’” Johnathan explains that being mistaken for the “real thing” is what he looks most forward to. In some cases, he does not feel inclined to correct a fan’s confusion, “You know, for me I want people to look at me and do a double take. People have mistaken me for the actor a few times in the costume. Like one guy actually was like, oh I love you in Catching Fire and I was like, thank you. I didn’t correct him.” Being identified as their intended character, or even confused for the real thing, confirmed participants’ cultural capital.

Conversely, the participants’ biggest disappointments came when fewer people than expected recognized their cosplay, especially in cases in which participants felt that they put a substantial amount of effort towards preparing their cosplay. Robert shared a story in which he constructed a cosplay that included a heavy piece of wood that he spent hours crafting. He was disappointed when not many people recognized his cosplay, “I walked around, maybe, the entire convention and three people recognized who I was. And I’m like, I put so much effort into this and no one knew who I was.”

While a few participants happily recounted stories of their first time being recognized by only a small number of fans, they often pointed out that they much prefer more widespread attention. In describing her first experience with cosplaying at a convention, Rena initially said, “And being recognizable is actually like—one person recognized me as Viera from Final Fantasy Tactics. It was like, ‘can I take a picture,’ and

it was fantastic.” Later in the interview, however, Rena clarifies that even though any recognition can be validating, more is preferred:

And I think that’s a big part of being recognized and going to a convention and connecting with your fellow fans is, ‘oh-my-gosh yay.’ As opposed to showing up as an obscure character who’s been revamped a bunch of times in your own head, then maybe you’ll find one or two people. And that’s a good feeling when you find one or two people. But I feel like it would be an even better feeling if you found so many more people to connect.

Rena suggests being acknowledged by fans is significant to a memorable outing at a comic book convention. The less attention participants received from fans, the less cultural capital they held. Without wide recognition by fans, and the cultural capital obtained as a result, participants were less likely to build identity, social capital, and social cohesion. Given that participants suggest



*Figure 4: Terry's convincing portrayal of Batman (Photo provided courtesy of participant)*

that the widely sought after benefits of cosplay are largely dependent on the ability of one's cosplay to be recognized by fans, it is important to consider what inequalities may exist that prevent certain groups from attaining cultural capital. To begin exploring this further, the next section overviews what I discovered in observing comic book conventions and the conditions that contribute to the marginalization of fans with minority status.

### *White Heteromasculine Dominance and the Marginalizing Spaces of Conventions*

After observing the comic book conventions, two things were clear. First, the guests, events, and general attractions that conventions used to draw crowds were largely targeting white and heteromasculine consumers. Second, the actual audience in attendance did not reflect the same demographic the conventions seemed to be appealing to.

The spaces of the conventions generally reinforced the same white, heteromasculine images that dominate popular culture. There was no shortage of whiteness or heteromascularity whether it be the art displayed for sale in artist's alley or the guest celebrities in attendance. For example, in the official program of one of the conventions twenty-four out of thirty six celebrities pictured were white men. In this particular program, only eight women celebrity guests were pictured, three of them being women of color. Women, particularly women of color, made up a small minority of guest creators. Guest comic book creators at both conventions were overwhelmingly white males. As paid guests, including celebrities and creators, women were most frequently found in the "cosplay alleys," a place where fans can meet and take pictures with celebrity cosplayers. Almost all of the celebrity cosplayers at each convention were young white women. The only men celebrity cosplayers at either convention were Sexy Mario and Cecil Grimes. Even though he is a sexualized parody of the video game character Super Mario, Sexy

Mario appeared fully dressed. Cecil Grimes, known for cosplaying as Rick Grimes, a rugged sheriff from the series *The Walking Dead*, took pictures with fans as they fought off zombie cosplayers. With the exception of the Frost Sisters who cosplay as conservatively dressed Disney princesses from the movie *Frozen*, all of the women cosplayers wore tight-fitting and/or revealing costumes, a stark contrast from their male counterparts. This may suggest that even when the conventions seek to represent women guests, it is to cater to a presumed heteromale audience, creating a false representation of women for the sake of satisfying the hetero-male gaze.

While the spaces of the conventions seemed to be white and male dominated, fans appeared to be much more diverse and representative of the area's general population. Both conventions were located in large metropolitan cities in Florida where there are large populations of black and Hispanic communities. Without exact quantitative estimations, fans seemed to be of proportional gender, race, age, and ability status (for instance, I noticed a few wheelchair bound fans at both conventions). Even though the fans observed for this study may be more representative of the cities' demographics than most comic book conventions are nationwide, these two Florida-based conventions illustrate the increasingly diverse fan base of comic books in particular and fan cultures in general. This may also suggest that regardless of the privileging of the white, heterosexual man experience at conventions, fans of varying identities will not necessarily refrain from being in attendance and participating.

The sample utilized for this study also reflects the growing diversity of fans that attend comic book conventions. While four of the nine participants were white men (Johnathan, Jake, James, and Terry), one male participant was Hispanic (Robert), two were white women (Melissa and Laura), one was an Asian woman (Kelly), and one was a black woman (Rena). By no means

is this a representative sample; however, like those who attend conventions, neither is it monolithic or solely represented by majority status individuals.

My observations suggest that comic book conventions largely contribute to the marginalization cosplayers with minority status experience. The following section explores the participants' perceptions of and responses to representation in mass media.

### *Experiences with Marginalization in Media Representation*

Participants discussed the lack of representation that limits who they can cosplay as. Rena states, "That's one of the frustrations for a lot of women cosplayers, is like, 'Where are the characters that I can cosplay?'" When asked about her views on the representation of women in comic books, her main source material for costumes, Laura points to a lack of representation but is especially bothered by the shortcomings of representations that do exist:

Honestly it drives me nuts. I'll go on rants but I won't do that. I don't like the fact that a lot of female characters in comic books don't have clothes so it's like you can be a female character or you can gender bend a character and actually get to wear clothes. So I'm like we need to get more females out there that actually have nice outfits on.

For Laura, cosplaying a woman character typically means having to wear a hypersexualized or objectifying costume. Laura feels that she must cosplay as female versions of originally male characters in order to bypass the limited options available among woman characters. Although gender bending offers a temporary solution, Laura proposes that the long-term solution to her problem is varying, non-objectifying representation of women.

Melissa suggests that it may be more difficult for women to identify with a woman character than it is for men to identify with a man character: “I don’t think it’s hard to find those characters. I think if you look in any of the comic universes, the fantasy, Star Wars, Sci-fi—there’s always strong females. It’s finding the ones you identify with...” Melissa’s suggestion that “there’s always strong females” speaks more to their mere existence than their abundance since earlier in the interview she suggests strong women characters have yet to go “mainstream.”

When asked what challenges they face when searching for or deciding on what to cosplay, the men in the sample expressed no troubles with finding characters. For Terry, the only issue is not having enough money to cosplay all of his favorite characters, “You know, and I could sit there going, man I would love to do that. Man, I would love to play



*Figure 5: Robert as the werewolf/grandmother from The Little Red Riding Hood fairy tale (Photo provided courtesy of participant)*

dress up like that. It gets to a point where you have to say, okay take a deep breath. How are my bills?” Similarly, Jake’s only challenge is limited funds, “I kind of do things half-ass with mine. Many of it has to do with budget. Some folks have a lot more money and put a lot more detail in. I just have to do what I can.” When asked what advice he might give new cosplayers who may have trouble finding a character to cosplay, Robert says, “So, I mean, there’s always an infinite number of comic book characters that you can be if you wanted to do that.” The men of the sample largely did not acknowledge an issue with representation. Furthermore, when asked about their previous cosplays, they were able to list off numerous characters. Jake, for example, prepared me a literal list of his previous cosplays, which included twenty-two characters. In comparison, Melissa, a woman cosplayer with about the same years of experience as Jake, has only cosplayed as five different characters.

All participants were able to describe a character they identified with. However, participants of minority status were more likely to discuss having challenges with finding characters they would want to cosplay as. Rena, the only black woman participant, seemed to find it the most challenging to find characters she felt comfortable with cosplaying. Rena is fairly new to cosplay, having only cosplayed at one convention so far. She says, “...one of the deterrents to cosplay for a really long time for me was, like, trying to figure out characters who I could resemble.” Rena continues, speaking specifically about her experience as a woman, “I’m a rather thin person, I’m willing to say. And I don’t have the confidence to cosplay half of the women characters that I see because most of them are almost naked in some way shape or form.” Here we see that Rena shares Laura’s concerns with representation. For Rena, the lack of

representation of women of color in comics, video games, and film in particular coupled with the hypersexualization of women characters in general deterred her from initially entering cosplay.

Given that media representation and convention spaces may be marginalizing to cosplayers with minority status, how does the cosplay community reproduce or resist the marginalizing process of fans with minority status? The following section explores the ways participants explicitly promote acceptance and unity within the cosplay community yet contribute to structures of marginalization through their individual practices.

### *Explicit Inclusion, Implicit Exclusion*

Although participants framed cosplay as an accepting and tolerant community with no rules as to who or how you should cosplay, participants made it clear that they prefer to cosplay as characters that make them identifiable to fans.



Figure 6: Rena cosplaying as a video game character (Photo provided courtesy of the

Jake, even though agreeing with the popular sentiment that cosplayers should have the freedom to dress as any character they choose, prefers to cosplay as characters with whom he shares a resemblance. In his own words, “But I can probably never play a wood elf because of my body frame. Not that it's necessary, because cosplay is all shapes and sizes. It doesn't matter. But for me, wanting to at least look half way, that's just my choice.” Jake argues that despite cosplay being an accepting community, he is self-conscious of his body size and feels the need to avoid cosplaying as characters that do not already match his body type. Johnathan, who also values inclusion, explained:

In the cosplay community it is a very sensitive subject for people to be able to cosplay whatever they want. And I agree. I completely agree. But personally I want to pick characters that I can emulate to almost 99.9 percent. I want to feel like people look at me and they're like, he's almost that character! So that's a big part of it too.



*Figure 7: Johnathan cosplaying as Woody from Disney's Toy Story films (Photo provided courtesy of participant)*

Like Jake, Johnathan believes cosplayers should feel free to cosplay any character, yet he personally prefers to perform as a character that he can identify with and, perhaps more importantly, be identified as.

After sharing a story of being told that she was too old to cosplay as a Disney princess, Melissa passionately said, “So when I have other people that say, well I’m too big to play that character, or I’m not the right color to play that character, or I’m a guy and I can’t play that character. I’m like, shut the F up, you can play and be whatever you want to be.” While Melissa also reinforces the idea that cosplay should not be preoccupied with total accuracy, she otherwise seeks to create accurate portrayals of characters by using a voice coach to better sound like one of her characters and spending months trying to find a specific hat for another character. Although participants strongly believed that cosplayers should not feel pressured to resemble their characters, they consistently spoke of their personal preference to perform an accurate presentation of their characters. Participants asserted that cosplayers should feel free to do what they want; that there should be no rules. There are, however, unspoken rules that cosplayers must follow if they are to achieve cultural capital.

Discussions of race varied amongst participants. While some cosplayers avoided the conversation of race, others expressed an understanding of the sociohistorical implications of race relations. Jake, for instance, said, “Now the other thing for different races or anything like that, I don’t pay any attention to that. I mean I see other people do it. I’ve never really focused or actually took notice so much of it because I don’t take notice of other races or so forth. I mean to me everybody is all about what they are inside.” When beginning to mention race in cosplay, Melissa begins to redirect her point,

“Remember cos-play has the word “play” in it. So it should be fun. I like to see different colored people playing different colored—I wanted to paint myself green and, you know, be a Romulan or an Orion slave girl. I’m like, ‘it doesn’t matter.’ It’s a character. It’s all fantasy. So I think it’s great.” Similar to Melissa, James brings up the importance of having fun when discussing race, “Race. My opinion on that, my perspective, not opinion, is that—cosplay whoever you want to, you know? If you feel more comfortable applying makeup to better represent the character, do so... I just think that those tensions that we’re dealing with right now bleed into that and I think that it’s unfair. Because we shouldn’t have to worry about “the rules.” You know, we’re just having a good time.” In the case of Melissa and James, cosplay should be about fun and not concern itself with “rules.” In both instances however, Melissa and James are specifically defending white cosplayers who cosplay as characters of color. Melissa and James do not explicitly express an understanding of the history of blackface or racial inequality in general. Nonetheless, when asked about race, they are mostly concerned with defending the experiences of white cosplayers.

In contrast to Jake, Melissa and James, Johnathan and Terry do not seem to avoid the discussion of race. Furthermore they express that they are aware of the history of racial inequality in the U.S. In his interview, Terry expresses his understanding of sociohistorical conditions by admitting he benefits from white privilege.

I understand that race is a huge worldwide, historical issue... I do believe in White privilege. It’s a thing. Do I do my best to be the best person I can be and help out my fellow brothers and sisters no matter their color? Yes. Absolutely. Do I get cut a lot of slack in society just because I happen to be male, Caucasian and

middle-aged? Yes. Yeah. Absolutely. It sucks. It's not my fault. I can't help it. But it exists. And I disagree with anybody who thinks there's no such thing as White privilege.

Despite Terry's knowledge of racial inequality, he unknowingly asserts limitations on cosplayers that do not resemble their characters. To make his point about the importance of accuracy, Terry compares cosplay to Santa Claus, "If you took your child, your precious child that you love, to see Santa Claus around Christmas at the mall, wouldn't you want it to be the best Santa Claus ever... Do whatever you want, but me personally, I would like to keep the illusion and the magic as much as possible." Even though Terry asserts that other cosplayers should not feel obligated to choose characters that match their appearance, he places value on the ability to create an "illusion" with cosplay by accurately portraying a character. In his view, specifically in the context of cosplaying for children, cosplayers should strive to be as similar to the source material as possible. It seems that creating the "illusion" of your characters not only leads to more recognition, but potentially more self-fulfillment, particularly in cases of charity work.

In Johnathan's case, it seems that being identified by fans takes priority over the possibility of offending other fans. The following excerpt, for instance, suggests that Johnathan doesn't mind performing what could be considered blackface in order to accurately portray a character. He says:

There's like a lot of African-American or Indian or people of color characters that are out there that people have cosplayed. If they're not of that descent or they're Caucasian or they're just white and they've darkened their skin to look like that character. And there's been a lot of... basically black people are calling it

blackface. And while coming from a historical perspective I understand. I'm in the minority where I don't view it as that at all because if I was to cosplay a character that was of a different ethnic origin than myself I would want to do that exact same thing because I would want that accuracy. And it's not about mocking or being disrespectful, it's about being true to the character.

Even though Johnathan is aware of the historical context of blackface, he suggests that an accurate cosplay is worth running the risk of being offensive. Johnathan continues:

It's just... and I... people use the example like aliens. Alien characters you paint your body a different color... And they're like, well that's not a real person. I'm like, I understand but you have to look at it through that lens that even though, yes, being African-American is a real thing, if I'm going to portray an African-American character I'm going to want to darken my skin to look African-American otherwise what is the... no one is going to know who I am.

Johnathan's comments suggest that in spite of being presented with historical context of blackface and the distinction between Alien and human characters, he values his experience with being identified by fans over reinforcing racial power dynamics.

For cosplayers of minority status, creating this illusion often proves to be more difficult. For instance, Laura described the issue of representation and how it affects her ability to empower the girls she does charity for:

I would love for them to create a comic that is a lady character that has like crazy powers like Superman or something like that, that would be something for girls to look up to. Because honestly, there's not a lot for little girls to look up to and that's frustrating for me because I'm trying to find characters that I like but then

also to represent to little kids. Like if I'm going to a hospital I want to have a character that little kids can look up and go wow you're really cool, I want to be like you when I grow up.

Laura suggests that the lack of strong woman characters limits who she can cosplay, particularly when it's for the purposes of charity for children.



*Figure 8: Laura cosplaying as a Disney princess at a children's charity event (Photo provided courtesy of participant)*

According to participants, there are no, nor should there be, any rules to cosplay. There are, however, unspoken rules that some participants seem to reproduce through their individual actions. Although some participants are explicitly accepting and tolerant of all backgrounds and identities, they unknowingly implement rules to cosplay that marginalize cosplayers with minority status. Inferring from the participants' responses, it seems there is a pressure to perform a cosplay that is true to its source material. If cosplayers are unable reproduce a cosplay that is popular, identifiable, and/or reflective of their "true" social positionality, then they are less likely to acquire cultural capital.

If cosplay serves as a vehicle to receive validation, but to receive validation you must look like the characters that you are cosplaying, then cosplayers who do not look like the majority of characters in the media will have a much more difficult time achieving the validation that is so sought after in cosplay. Keeping with that, cosplayers of minority status may be less likely to experience the benefits of cosplay, such as identity-making, social capital, and social cohesion, because they face more challenges with achieving a cosplay that is "accurate" or recognizable. Thus, access to cultural capital is stratified by race and gender within the social practice of cosplay.

Some participants use democratic discourse to argue that all cosplayers should have the same opportunities (e.g. white cosplayers should be allowed to cosplay as black or brown characters), yet in doing so, they fail to recognize the structural inequalities that impose on cosplayers with minority status. "Acceptance and tolerance" remains something that is said rather than done; lip service that falls short of being realized. If access to cultural capital in cosplay is stratified by race and gender; how do cosplayers with minority status achieve cultural

capital? The last section of the study's findings overviews participants' strategies to subvert the marginalization they experience in cosplay.

### *Subversion Strategies*

Participants spoke of strategies to overcome limitations they faced with media representation and visibility within comic book conventions. One particularly popular strategy among women participants was gender bending in which they cosplayed a "female version" of a male character. Laura explains:

So I think gender bending is great idea because like I said there aren't a lot of characters for girls to cosplay as. So more often than not, what we have to do is we have to find a guy that we're like and we're like, oh well let's do this. So like my sister, all of her cosplays thus far have been a guy that she's gender bent except for Rey. That is the only one. Because she can't find a cosplay that she likes because there aren't that many options out there. So I think gender bending is great.

James, a white male, describes a female friend who favors gender bending because it allows her to wear a less revealing costume while maintaining femininity, "Sometimes it is done out of comfort level... like we have a friend who she always does gender bent characters and I think it's just more because she doesn't know how, or feel comfortable cosplaying as a boy." This may suggest that gender bending offers cosplayers more freedom in performing gender. Cosplayers can construct a costume that is more suitable to their gender identity rather than to follow gender norms rigidly. Gender bending also offers women the opportunity cosplay as characters they admire or identify with, despite the character's sex or gender presentation.

While all of the participants spoke positively about gender bending and other strategies of subverting character identities, those who actually utilized these strategies also believed that they would be better off if they had more characters they could identify with from the start. Rena said, “Wouldn’t it be cool to be able to have more characters to select from that are really well known and not have to say- oh this is a gender bend character.” Rena suggests that the solution may lie with a more proportional representation of minority characters, particularly of women and women of color:

I think that it’s good that a lot of revamps are happening so that you don’t have to do mental gymnastics to connect with different characters... I think that it’s really great that Ms. Marvel has been revamped as a young Muslim woman. I think that Thor being revamped as a woman is fantastic. I think that the new, like the new Ironman is going to be a 15-year-old black girl. You know, I think that that’s fantastic.

While some cosplayers like Johnathan do gender bending, race bending, and crossplay out of enjoyment, others like Rena perform subversion strategies out of necessity. In order to navigate the challenges they face within cosplay and popular culture, such as a lack of representation, cosplayers with minority status utilize subversion strategies to achieve the identity-making and social and cultural capital they otherwise may not have access to. But as Rena suggests, subversion strategies may require more emotional labor than in cases of “traditional” cosplay. Rena’s use of the phrase “mental gymnastics,” in comparison to Johnathan’s positive experience with crossplay, might suggest that being a cosplayer with minority status may require more emotional labor than that of, say, a white man. Considering the additional emotional labor cosplayers with minority status

may experience, cosplayers with majority status may have an advantage in acquiring the cultural capital that is needed to access identity-making, social capital, and social cohesion.

In the following, I expand on the conditions of marginalization within the cosplay community as experienced by the study's participants. I argue that the experiences, actions, and discourses uncovered in the findings connect to larger systems of oppression, such as racial hegemony, patriarchy, and the capitalism.

## **CHAPTER SIX:**

### **DISCUSSION**

Participants made it clear that cosplay meant more to them than a mere hobby. Cosplay served a social purpose for participants. Once Johnathan started cosplaying he realized he could have all the fun he had with performing drag and more. Laura values cosplay for allowing her to relive her passion for acting in addition to helping her build more relationships and give back to people in need. Generally, cosplayers experienced a deeper understanding of their identity, made more connections and built more relationships, and developed a sense of social cohesiveness by “giving back.” Given that social cohesion among American communities may be on the decline (Putnam 2001), it is reassuring to think that social actors are capable of building communities such as cosplay in order to regain social capital. Unfortunately, the cosplay community is not exempt from the systems of stratification that permeate social relations.

Participants readily asserted values of acceptance and tolerance in describing the conditions of the cosplay community. However, their (particularly white participants) methods in seeking validation from other fans did not illustrate a community in which cosplayers with minority status had an equal opportunity to experience the full benefit of cosplay. The discourses that many of the white and/or male participants shared acknowledged yet ultimately dismissed the structural conditions that limit the success of cosplayers who are women and/or of color. Jake, Melissa, and Terry argue that

cosplayers should not be limited in their presentation yet set limits on either themselves or specific groups of cosplayers. Johnathan goes to the extent of excusing white cosplayers of blackface because it may help them garner recognition from fans. In this case, the resistance to any “rules” in cosplay benefits majority status cosplayers seeking to cosplay minority status characters more than minority status cosplayers seeking to cosplay majority status characters.

The participants’ ability to acknowledge racial inequality yet dismiss it as something that is inconsequential to cosplay aligns with color-blind ideologies. For instance, Johnathan and Terry’s priorities of preserving an illusion with cosplay defends white cosplayers and stigmatizes cosplayers of color. In their discussion of race, Johnathan focuses on defending white cosplayers’ ability to perform as characters of color, while Terry suggests that it is problematic for a person of color to cosplay as a character traditionally seen as white. As illustrated by the recent backlash against the black Santa Claus at the Mall of America (NPR 2016), Terry’s concerns are part of a larger state of white fragility (DiAngelo 2011). Johnathan and Terry’s simultaneous acknowledgement and discrediting of sociohistorical context resembles “the past is the past” discourse that is often used in color-blind racist discourses (Bonilla-Silva 2010).

Still, other participants like Jake avoided discussions of race altogether. By taking on color-blind discourses, or avoiding the conversation of race, participants contribute to the contemporary forms of hegemony that lay implicitly embedded in social structures and everyday practices. As suggested in previous research, cosplayers may dedicate themselves to accuracy and authenticity (Bainbridge & Norris 2013). However, as the present study suggests, in striving for accurate portrayals of fictional characters,

cosplayers, like Lindy Hop dancers (Hancock 2008) or craft beer brewers (Withers forthcoming), are capable of preaching inclusion and acceptance while inadvertently reproducing patterns of exclusion and intolerance through discourse and practice.

Although it can be argued that conventions are much more “family and female friendly” now than they were at their conception (Lopes 2006), my observations suggest that these pop cultural spaces remain largely focused on a white heteromasculine experience, somewhat aligning with the suggestion that conventions are mostly directed towards white middle-class families (Jenkins 2012). This is further supported by the growing number of fan groups and fan conventions that are almost exclusive to men, such as the “Brony” phenomenon (Robertson 2014).

The data gathered from interviews suggests that social actors, particularly those of minority status, are largely aware of the disproportionate and problematic representation that can be found in the media. Melissa generally, but Laura and Rena in particular, argue that representation limits the experiences of cosplayers who are women and/or of color. Even though they embrace the utility of subversion strategies, Laura and Rena suggest that more a positive and proportionate representation of characters along race and gender is required in order to improve the experiences of cosplayers with minority status.

Despite the marginalization resulting from media representation, social processes, and discourse, cosplayers utilized subversion strategies in order to better access cultural capital. Although subversion strategies may potentially be transformative (Scott 2015), participants like Rena and Laura stated that they would prefer that these strategies be options rather than necessities in striving for visibility and validity in cosplay. Only briefly explored in this study is the implications of online communities towards the

access of cultural capital. Melissa suggests that her participation in online communities greatly benefits her in gaining cultural capital. Future research may then want to investigate how the use of online resources also serves as a subversion strategy and tool in seeking cultural capital.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN:**

### **CONCLUSION**

Cosplay, as a performative practice popular among comic book conventions, is a social act that, according to the participants in this study, allows for identity-making, building social connections, and experiencing social cohesion. However, the findings suggest that cosplayers with privileged identities may have fewer challenges in achieving these positive outcomes than cosplayers with marginalized identities. While some cosplayers, particularly white, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgender men, can cosplay as one of a number of positive, well-known characters, fans whose bodies are not as well represented in popular culture may need to do “mental gymnastics” in order to be successful in spaces of popular culture.

Comic book conventions provide a social space where fans of popular culture explicitly and implicitly reproduce and resist systems of oppression based on race, gender, and class. Although cosplayers show that they can play with identity performance with the use of subversion strategies, their costume construction and cosplay performance is often confined implicitly by the need to present accurate portrayals of characters. Cosplay, despite promoting values of acceptance and tolerance, reproduces race, class, and gender inequality by privileging middle/upper-class, white, and/or masculine bodies. Cosplayers with more resources and cultural capital have more opportunities to receive the most recognition and validation from other convention goers. Sociohistorical implications of race are erased through ideologies of colorblindness. Masculinity is often rewarded more than expressions of femininity, and the feminine expressions that are most valued are ones that satisfy the heteropatriarchal gaze through hypersexualization. Participants, particularly those that benefit from a majority status, even when

aware of structural issues, suggest that issues involving race, gender, and class will dissolve as long as they are ignored. Unfortunately, when hegemony based on social stratification goes unaddressed, it is often reinforced rather than phased out (Bonilla-Silva 2010). However, cosplay also offers the tools to challenge and deconstruct the same systems it reproduces. Participants have shown that cosplay carries subversive qualities that resist power structures, as suggested in other studies (Gn 2011; Hjorth 2009; Peirson-Smith 2013; Robertson 2014; Scott 2015). Thus, cosplay and social practices at comic book conventions overall can be considered a racial project that can both challenge and reproduce racial formation (Omi and Winant 2015).

This study is limited by its small sample size. Although the participants varied in age, racial and ethnic background, gender, and class, the findings produced from the sample should only serve as insight to an emerging area of sociological study and by no means be viewed as representative of the experiences of cosplayers in the United States or elsewhere. Further investigation is needed in order to analyze how other systems of oppression, such as ableism, operate in pop cultural spaces.

This thesis serves as an entry point for the study of race, gender, and class based marginalization in the cosplay community and an extension of academic work on the functioning of systems of oppression in popular culture. Future research should seek to extend the current findings by conducting more extensive ethnographies of comic book conventions and the cosplay community, including online interactions. I advise future researchers on this topic to consider how structures of domination, such as white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy, operate within spaces where social actors perform counterhegemonic, subversive practices. Colorblind racism, microaggressions, hypersexualization, ableism and all covert forms of hegemony must first be uncovered before being undone.

By investigating how cosplayers perceive representations of race, gender, and class in popular culture in addition to how they interact with and perform popular culture images, I argue that comic book conventions and fan practices therein are stratified along the lines of race, gender, and class. The implications of this study suggest that more research is needed in order to further explore the ways in which dominant images in popular culture influence fans. While this study extends research on fans' strategies of decoding messages in popular culture, it also begins to unveil how the sites and practices that reproduce popular culture also function to reproduce social stratification based on race, gender, and class. Even though comic book conventions and cosplay promote self-expression and social cohesion, fans with minority status experience unique challenges that contribute to their marginalization. Nonetheless, social actors that experience subjugation rarely go without creating methods of resistance. Cosplayers are no different in that they craft subversion strategies in order to gain visibility in an otherwise marginalizing space. In order to truly embrace values of acceptance and tolerance, popular culture must unmask the hegemonic ideologies that covertly persist within our institutions and social practices.

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## **APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. How would you describe cosplay?
2. What does cosplay mean to you?
3. How and when did you first become interested in cosplay?
4. Can you tell me about your first cosplaying experience at a convention?
5. Can you describe to me your most recent experience with cosplaying at a convention?
6. What is a typical day of cosplaying like? Can you describe to me the preparation that goes into it?
7. Can you talk about a “good” or “bad” cosplay you may have seen at the last convention?  
What does a “good” cosplay usually consist of?
8. What do you enjoy most about cosplay?
9. What do you enjoy most about the environment of comic book conventions?
10. How do you choose a character for your cosplay?
11. What is it about a character that influences you to cosplay as them?
12. How important is it to resemble the character that you are cosplaying as?
13. Have you ever cosplayed as a human character that you didn’t look like?
14. Tell me about your favorite character to cosplay as and why they’re your favorite?
15. Can you tell me about other cosplays that you have seen that have impressed you or stuck with you for some reason?
16. What kinds of characters would you not cosplay as? Has there been a character in which you wanted to cosplay but ultimately decided not to?

17. How closely do you impersonate the character while cosplaying? Do you alter your voice, body movement, or behavior in any way?
18. How important is it that your cosplay character is well-known or popular?
19. Do you ever cosplay outside of conventions? If so, how might it be different or similar to cosplaying at conventions?
20. Do other people help you decide what character to cosplay as? How do they influence you?
21. Did you ever experience a time where you wanted to cosplay as a certain character but was pressured or influenced to not cosplay as them?
22. What was your most well received cosplay at a convention?
23. Can you tell me about the cosplay community and how you communicate with other cosplayers?
24. Do you ever share tips or advice with other cosplayers, whether online, at conventions, or otherwise? How have other cosplayers helped you?
25. What gender do you identify as?
26. What race/ethnicity do you identify as?
27. What is your age?
28. What is your occupation?

## **APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM**

### **Informed Consent to Participate in Research Involving Minimal Risk**

**Pro # 00026249**

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You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. This document is called an informed consent form. Please read this information carefully and take your time making your decision. Ask the researcher or study staff to discuss this consent form with you, please ask him/her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand. The nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and other important information about the study are listed below.

Researchers at the University of South Florida (USF) study many topics. In our study, we are interested in learning about the various methods that cosplayers conduct in creating and performing their cosplay in addition to how they interact with others at fan conventions. To do this, we need the help of people who agree to take part in a research study. There are no known risks to those who take part in this study.

We are asking you to take part in a research study called:  
Cosplay, Conventions, and Identity Construction

The person who is in charge of this research study is Manuel Ramirez. This person is called the Principal Investigator. However, other research staff may be involved and can act on behalf of the person in charge. He is being guided in this research by Dr. Laurel Graham.

The research will be conducted at the Tampa Bay Convention Center (during Tampa Bay Comic Con), Orange County Convention Center (during MegaCon), and mutually agreed upon locations for permitted interviews.

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### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to:

1. to explore the complexities of human interaction and its relationship to mass media and popular culture.
2. to meet the requirements of a Master's thesis in Sociology at the University of South Florida.

### **Why are you being asked to take part?**

We are asking you to take part in this research study because you are someone who is experienced with cosplay and attends comic book conventions.

### **Study Procedures:**

If you take part in this study, you may be asked to do two things. You may choose to do neither, only one, or both of these things:

1. You may be asked to:
  - have your photograph included in this study and any future publications based upon this study.
  - Do you give permission to have your photo included in any documents related to this study?
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No
2. You will also be asked to complete one informal interview with Manuel Ramirez.
  - Interviews will be audio recorded. Only Manuel Ramirez will have access to audio recordings of interviews. Your information will not be identifiable because your name will never be recorder or labeled in anyway besides this form which will be kept private. In all other cases, you will only be identified by a pseudonym. Recordings will be saved on the lead researcher's computer and will remain private. Taped interviews will be maintained no longer than five years and will then be completely erased and destroyed.
  - We will discuss your experiences with cosplay and attending comic book conventions. Interview questions will pertain to your experiences with cosplay, comic book conventions, and popular culture in general. You will also be asked demographic information such as your race/ethnicity, gender, age, and occupation.
  - Interviews will be informal and open-ended and will most likely last at least thirty minutes but no more than two hours. You will be able to end the interview at any time if you feel the need to.
  - You and I will mutually agree on a time and location for the interview.
  - After the interview is completed, you may be contacted for further information through email.
  - Do you agree to be audio-recorded for an interview?
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

### **Total Number of Participants**

About forty individuals will take part in this study at USF.

### **Alternatives / Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal**

You do not have to participate in this research study.

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study.

You may decide to no longer participate in this study at any point. If you wish for your interview and/or photo to no longer be included in the study, you may contact the lead researcher and inform them of your decision.

### **Benefits**

We are unsure if you will receive any benefits by taking part in this research study.

### **Risks or Discomfort**

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

### **Compensation**

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

### **Costs**

It will not cost you anything to take part in the study.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

There is no known conflict of interest to this study.

### **Privacy and Confidentiality**

We will keep your study records private and confidential. Certain people may need to see your study records. Anyone who looks at your records must keep them confidential. These individuals include:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator and study coordinator.
- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study, and individuals who provide oversight to ensure that we are doing the study in the right way.
- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates this research. This includes the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Florida Department of Health, and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP). The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, including staff in USF Research Integrity and Compliance.
- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and its related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, staff in the USF Office of Research and Innovation, USF Division of Research Integrity and Compliance, and other USF offices who oversee this research.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your name. We will not publish anything that would let people know who you are.

**You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints**

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, or experience an unanticipated problem, call Manuel Ramirez at (813) 407-3551.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at [RSCH-IRB@usf.edu](mailto:RSCH-IRB@usf.edu).

**Consent to Take Part in this Research Study**

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

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Signature of Person Taking Part in Study

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Date

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Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

**Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent**

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in their primary language. This research subject has provided legally effective informed consent.

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Signature of Person obtaining Informed Consent

---

Date

---

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

## APPENDIX C: IRB APPROVAL FORM



RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE  
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669  
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4795  
(813) 974-5638 • FAX (813) 974-7091

May 26, 2016

Manuel Ramirez  
Sociology  
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**

IRB#: Pro00026249

Title: Cosplay, Conventions, and Identity Construction

**Study Approval Period: 5/26/2016 to 5/26/2017**

Dear Mr. Ramirez:

On 5/26/2016, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below.

**Approved Item(s):**

**Protocol Document(s):**

[Study Protocol IRB # 26249 V1 4.17.2016.docx](#)

**Consent/Assent Document(s)\*:**

[IRB consent form IRB # 26249 V1 4.17.2016.docx.pdf](#)

\*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review

research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval via an amendment. Additionally, all unanticipated problems must be reported to the USF IRB within five (5) calendar days.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kristen Salomon', followed by a horizontal line.

Kristen Salomon, Ph.D., Vice Chairperson  
USF Institutional Review Board