

COSPLAYING WITH GENDER:
FREEDOMS AND LIMITATIONS TO GENDER EXPLORATION AT CANADIAN ANIME
CONVENTIONS

by

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the gendered dimensions of cosplay and cross-play at Canadian anime conventions. How do cosplayers use cross-play to explore gender identities at anime conventions? What limitations hinder cosplayers from feeling free to explore their identities at these events? Why do cis women and non-binary people assigned female at birth (AFAB) participate in cross-play? I use in-depth interviews with cosplayers, autoethnography, and textual analyses of convention anti-harassment policies to explore these questions. Cross-play at Canadian anime conventions is beneficial to queer, trans, and non-binary attendees as they are able to explore their gender presentations in unique ways. Yet, there are limitations to this freedom, particularly for cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers who experience negativity surrounding femininity and heightened sexual harassment. These findings broaden understandings of gender and anime fan practices and encourage convention organizers to update policies on harassment.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Cosplay, a portmanteau of “costume” and “play,” is the act of dressing up as a character from anime or manga (or any other source material). It is common to cosplay while attending anime conventions, although it is not mandatory for admittance. Furthermore, “cross-play” describes a cosplayer who chooses to dress as a gender or sex other than their own. While existing scholarship on cosplay has found many different reasons for its popularity, there is a paucity of specifically gendered analyses investigating cosplay and cross-play at anime conventions. Moreover, Canadian anime conventions have not been studied, as existing studies were conducted in the United States and Asia. In this thesis, I show that being able to cross-play at Canadian anime conventions is beneficial to queer, trans, and non-binary attendees who are able to explore and play with their gender presentations. Yet, there are limitations to this freedom to explore, particularly for cis women and non-binary people assigned female at birth (AFAB) who experience negativity surrounding femininity and heightened sexual harassment at these events.

Anime conventions are spaces where gender play is not only tolerated but anticipated by attendees. One of the forms of gender play common at conventions is cross-play.¹ This study utilizes interviews of eight cosplayers who participate in cross-play and attend Canadian anime conventions. Specifically, three of my participants identified as cis queer women, two identified as non-binary AFAB people, one identified as a trans/fluid woman, one identified as a cis gay man, and one identified as a straight cis woman. I also analyze some of my own cosplay experiences and convention anti-harassment policies, to better understand this gender diversity at

¹ This is not the same as “gender-bending,” when a cosplayer changes the canonical gender of a character and reimagines the character’s design.

anime conventions.

Anime refers to any form of animation that comes from Japan. It is usually based on *manga*, which are Japanese comic books, although some anime is based on light novels and some is original, without source material. A study done by Masuda, et al., stated that in 2016, anime and its related products earned roughly 767.6 billion yen outside of Japan, or 6.9 billion Canadian dollars (7). Moreover, anime is now being licensed in over two hundred countries worldwide.

With anime's global rise in popularity, it is unsurprising that anime conventions are also becoming more popular. Today there are over two hundred different anime conventions worldwide (Anime Convention Schedule). In 2018, there were over twenty anime conventions in Canada alone (Anime Convention Schedule 2018). Anime conventions are generally three-day events where fans can meet and participate in a plethora of different activities. The largest Canadian anime convention is Anime North in Toronto, which had over 34,000 attendees in 2018 (Anime North 2018 Information). At conventions, there are panels to attend, celebrities from the fandom to meet, market halls to find anime-related merchandise, and even dances or raves. One of the most popular things to do at an anime convention is to cosplay. Cosplayers will often work many months ahead of time to prepare their costume for a convention, as well as spend large amounts of money amassing different costumes.

People have been cosplaying since the 1960s in North America (Winge 66). Fans of science fiction and fantasy would dress as characters from *Star Trek* or *Batman*, as well as role-play with each other. As the demand for Japanese imports and media grew in the 1980s, more and more fans of anime and manga began attending science fiction and fantasy conventions (67). For example, at the 1980 San Diego Comic-Con, cosplayers dressed as characters from anime

and manga entered the masquerade (cosplay competition). As a result of this increased demand for anime and manga-related content, North American conventions began to include panels, guests, and activities that were anime and manga themed. Soon, fans started organizing their own conventions specifically dedicated to anime and manga.

Literature Review

There are many gaps in the research on cosplay and anime conventions. Notably, there are few studies examining the gender dynamics of these events. In particular, I have not found any research on the use of cross-play as a means of exploring gender identity. In undertaking this research, I wanted to understand why cross-play seems to be so popular among cis women and non-binary AFAB attendees. Also, there does not seem to be any scholarship on Canadian anime conventions. Most of the research has been conducted in Hong Kong, the United States and Japan. My research aims to put Canadian conventions alongside the existing scholarship pertaining to cosplay.

Research on cosplay is relatively new. Studies conducted in the United States, Hong Kong, and Japan discuss the sense of community one feels while attending an anime convention (Atkinson 119; Bainbridge & Norris 2; Hale 5, Gn 584; Peirson-Smith 86). Studies have also emphasized that many cosplayers work tirelessly to produce their costumes for conventions and that they spend exorbitant amounts of money to amass the appropriate materials (Hale 8; Peirson-Smith 89; Rahman et al. 322; Winge 65). Since there is so much time and work put into the making of these costumes, cosplayers often want to show off their creations. Researchers have discussed how cosplayers are likely to be stopped and asked for photographs and the feelings of celebrity associated with being photographed (Atkinson 126; Hale 9; Rahman et. al

332). Researchers also posit that cosplayers feel a sense of escapism while in costume. This can be done by taking on their character's personality (Atkinson 119; Bainbridge & Norris 3; Gn 588; Hale 8; Peirson-Smith 99; Rahman et al. 320; Winge 74). These scholars analyze the experiences of cosplayers "in-character," acting as they believe their chosen character would act while walking around at conventions.

One of the few scholars to explore gender and cosplay is Tiffany Hutabarat-Nelson, who offers a gendered analysis of U.S. cosplay and cosplayers in her 2017 dissertation. She argues that conventions offer a space for gender exploration and play, positing that cosplay destabilizes the gender binary by encouraging convention attendees to engage with different performances of gender (133). For Hutabarat-Nelson, the convention hall acts as a safe space to play with gender without fear of the consequences one might face outside in regular life (134). Since cosplay is a practice that is expected at anime conventions, attendees have also become accustomed to a greater gender variance at these events (135). My research builds on this idea of the convention hall as a safe space by presenting firsthand experiences of Canadian trans, queer, and non-binary cosplayers and how they have been able to experiment with their gender identities through cross-play. However, I also investigate the limitations to the safety to explore one's identity at these events.

In his ethnographic study of Dragon*Con in Atlanta, Georgia, cultural studies scholar Matthew Hale spoke with female attendees who cross-played to avoid sexual harassment and to avoid being photographed without permission (22). However, this was not the sole aspect of his study and was only briefly discussed. Alexandria Ellsworth's 2018 Master's thesis is the only study I've found that investigates cosplay and sexual harassment at anime and comic conventions specifically. She provides an in-depth study of sexual harassment at conventions in

different parts of the United States, and offers ways for conventions to improve their policies of sexual harassment. She posits that anime and comic conventions need to develop clearer policies on sexual harassment and that convention staff and volunteers need to be trained in preventative measures (48). My thesis builds on Ellsworth's conclusions by providing more recommendations for policy changes, particularly in regards to Canada's three biggest anime conventions. Additionally, I offer reasons for the heightened level of sexual harassment at anime conventions.

Scholarship on fandom describes the toxic masculinity sometimes present within fan spaces. For example, Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett analyze issues of sexism and other identity-policing prevalent within gaming fandom. They emphasize how video games have historically tried to exclude women by including only male avatar selections, or by including only female characters designed for sex appeal (76). In contrast, fanfiction is an area of fandom that is largely inhabited by women and queer-identified people (159). Fanfiction offers a space for marginalized groups to rethink their favourite geek content, as well as a reprieve from the toxic masculinity encountered in some mainstream fan spaces. Media scholar Benjamin Woo discusses the outcry from male fans about the more diverse cast of the new *Star Wars* films (175). Some fans went so far as to boycott the new films, stating that they were somehow part of an overarching feminist agenda. Importantly, he emphasizes how fandom and geek culture have long been seen as sites exclusively for straight white men (176), even though women and other marginalized identities have always participated in geek culture. These groups often participate in fandom in different ways in order to avoid the toxic masculinity encountered in the more mainstream areas of fandom. My research examines cosplay in anime conventions as one of those alternative communities, as it is largely inhabited by marginalized people who utilize

cosplay to explore their identities. Conventions seem to be a space where gender exploration is not met with hostility or backlash. Yet, I also showcase how toxic masculinity and sexism are still present in these spaces, even if gender exploration is mostly tolerated.

The Research

The popularity of anime conventions and cosplay continues to grow each year, and these events provide a space for many queer, trans, and non-binary cosplayers to explore their gender identities. This thesis aims to build on the existing literature on cosplay by focusing on these experiences. My research questions are:

- How do cosplayers use cross-play to explore and play with their gender identity at anime conventions?
- What limitations might hinder cosplayers from feeling free to explore their identities at anime conventions?
- Why are cis women and non-binary AFAB convention attendees in particular participating in cross-play?

In order to answer these questions, I conducted in-depth interviews with eight Canadian cosplayers who had participated in cross-play at least once. Participant ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-eight. Some participants had attended over twenty conventions whereas others had attended fewer than five. Some participants were avid cosplayers with over twenty different cosplays to their names and others had only completed five or fewer different cosplays. The majority of my participants identified as white and queer. Many of them are students or new graduates seeking jobs.

In addition to interviews, this project also relied on my own experiences as a cosplayer at Canadian anime conventions. I have been attending anime conventions regularly since 2013. During that time, I have attended fifteen different anime conventions throughout Canada, some on an annual basis. Moreover, I have done at least twenty-five different cosplays during this time.

Chapter Two details the methods and methodologies I used to conduct this project. These are important for contextualizing the rest of the thesis, as well as for myself as a feminist researcher. In Chapter Three, I argue that the queer, trans, and non-binary cosplayers that I interviewed experienced a positivity and freedom to explore gender identities at Canadian anime conventions. However, they also experienced limitations to this freedom to explore, specifically pertaining to certain identities and bodies. In Chapter Four, I show that cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers cross-play not only to explore their gender identities, but also due to the cultural devaluation of female anime characters and internalized negativity surrounding femininity. Finally, in Chapter Five, I assert that although anime conventions offer a space for gender variance and exploration through cross-play, cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers experience heightened levels of sexual harassment there, which is also a contributing factor in their decisions to cross-play. Overall, this thesis demonstrates that cross-playing at Canadian anime conventions is beneficial to queer, trans, and non-binary attendees who are able to explore and play with their gender presentations, but there are limitations to this freedom, particularly for cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers who experience negativity surrounding femininity as well as heightened sexual harassment at these events.

CHAPTER TWO: Methodology

Introduction

I am an active member of the cosplay and anime convention community. I have been cosplaying at conventions since 2013. My position within the community influenced not only my choice to study cosplay, but also how I conducted the study. In this chapter, I discuss the dynamics of being an insider of the community being studied and the pros and cons of using autoethnography in addition to interviews. I also discuss why I chose to use qualitative semi-structured interviews for this particular project. I then explain my recruitment methods and how I coded and analyzed the data. Finally, I present the demographic information of my interviewees. These methods and methodologies provided me with firsthand accounts of the gender dynamics found at Canadian anime conventions.

The Insider/Outsider

In this research, I am both an insider and an outsider. I have been involved in anime fandom since I was a child, and have been part of the Canadian anime convention community for the past six years. I have attended anime conventions all across Canada, have crafted over twenty-five different cosplays, and have even sold my wares in Artist Alley.² Thus, I have an understanding of how these events work, what sorts of activities occur, and how people tend to act. Moreover, I share an interest in anime and cosplay that allowed me to speak freely with participants regarding these activities. I am fluent in the lexicon utilized by convention goers, cosplayers, and people within the anime fandom.

² At most anime conventions, there is an area called Artist Alley where one can rent a table for the weekend to sell their goods. I have sold my handmade stuffed animals in Artist Alley many times.

However, I am also an outsider as I am a researcher who is studying and analyzing participants' behaviours. Moreover, I am new to Ontario, having lived in Western Canada my entire life. Although I am a member of the cosplay and anime convention community, I do not have friends or acquaintances at these events as I had never been to an Eastern Canadian anime convention before 2017. I did not know my participants before recruiting them to the study and I have not been in contact with them since conducting the interviews.

The question of insider/outsider is worth exploring. Is it better to be an "insider," someone who is a member of the group being studied, or is it better to be an objective "outsider," someone who is not a member of the group being studied? What happens when you're an insider but also an outsider? This is what human development and family studies scholar Bahira Sherif refers to as the 'partial insider' (436). She describes the partial insider as one who has background ties to the culture being studied, but remains an outsider as they are conducting research from an academic institution (438). There are certainly benefits to being a partial insider, but I must remind myself that I am not a complete insider and thus, I bring with me my own academic interests and understandings. One of the goals of this project was to bring anime conventions into the current scholarship on fan studies, particularly as it pertains to gender identity and exploration. However, I also wanted to be taken seriously as a researcher and to remain professional when conducting interviews.

After the interviews, I sometimes wondered if participants had held any information back from me. Perhaps they were embarrassed to share a certain experience? Perhaps they did not want to give the cosplay community a bad reputation by sharing a less-than-positive experience? There was even an instance where a participant was discussing a negative experience at a

convention, yet she refused to tell me the convention's name because she did not want the convention to come under scrutiny.

At the same time, I believe that my insider position within the community helped participants to open up during our interviews. They did not have to worry about having to explain convention lexicon or characters from a particular anime. I also ensured participants understood that I place a great deal of value and importance on the cosplay community. It is something dear to me and thus, participants' experiences were something I valued and took seriously. Even so, I could tell that there was some apprehension at times when it came to certain questions. One participant asked me off the record what was the point in studying cosplay? She worried that studying cosplay would lead to negative assumptions about the community as a whole by the academic world. This is something that I have grappled with and I understood her point of view. Yet, I explained to her that by taking cosplay seriously within an academic setting, I am aiming to validate it as something important and something that has many different layers that are worth examining.

Reflexivity

As a feminist researcher, it is important to take into consideration my own social position as I conduct research. This introspection is also known as 'reflexivity'. Feminist geographer Kim England describes reflexivity as "self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious *analytical* scrutiny of the self as a researcher" [emphasis in original] (82). That is, how do different facets of my "self" affect my own biases and opinions? Feminist researchers should investigate their race, nationality, age, gender, socioeconomic position, etc., as they undertake research endeavours (Rose 308). Reflexivity strives to diminish the power imbalance between

researcher and participant by making the relationship between the researcher and the research participant ‘visible and open to debate’ (Rose 309). My authority as a researcher should not be invisible; it should be acknowledged. During my research, I was constantly reflecting on my position as a cis, white, Canadian settler woman, with the means to attend university. These intersections of my identity contribute to my power as a researcher, as well as someone who benefits from the Canadian colonial project. However, my status as a woman could be seen as a hindrance to my research because I am conducting research in a largely patriarchal society where sexism is still prevalent, especially within academia.

Throughout my research, I made the effort to remind myself of my own social location and position in relation to the research being conducted. I was conscious of the fact that my participants were doing me a favour by participating and that I needed to respect their time and energy. I was patient with participants, as they sometimes took several days to respond to my emails. I only prodded with a second email when I had not heard from them in over a week. This was to respect their right to not reply, as well as their right to answer when it was convenient for them. Moreover, I made myself available for interviews when it was most convenient for participants. I offered them a wide window of times and dates and allowed them to select those times that worked best for them. I offered the option of conducting the interviews online via Skype or Google Hangouts to eliminate potential travel costs. The interviews themselves were never longer than an hour, and this was done as another way to respect participants’ time. At the beginning of each interview, I reiterated what they had read on the consent forms. I emphasized their rights as participants, including the right to stop the interview at any time, to not answer a question should they feel uncomfortable, as well as their right to anonymity.

Semi-Structured Interviews

I knew that I wanted to conduct qualitative semi-structured interviews for this project because I wanted to speak directly with members of the anime convention community. While I might have been able to get more responses from more participants had I conducted an online survey, participants might not have felt as free to discuss their negative experiences in that format. Moreover, I was able to gather more information than simply what was being said by noting the pauses and the emphases on certain words. I was also able to relate in person with my participants by sharing my own stories of cosplaying at anime conventions.

I chose to engage participants in semi-structured interviews that lasted, at most, one hour. By asking open-ended questions and not insisting that participants stick to a script, I hoped to create a sense of equity in the conversation. Participants were able to guide the conversations to areas they deemed to be important. Thus, I was able to get to ideas of importance according to my participants. Although the power dynamic was not completely erased, as this is impossible in a research situation, it helped to lessen feelings of intimidation and trepidation that potential interviewees might have had. I utilized an interview guide (see Appendix A); however, participants would often bring up ideas that I had not considered and some questions on the interview guide were not addressed. The interviews I conducted were more like informal talks between people with common interests. I had the sense that participants were able to let their guards down and engage fully in what they were saying. They seemed to feel comfortable and safe talking about their experiences with me.

When creating my interview guide, I was careful to think about how my questions could affect the type of answers I received. Questions needed to allow for participants to share stories

and experiences freely. I wanted to provide cues that would spark participants' memories and allow them to share the experiences they were most excited about.

Before the interviews were conducted, I asked participants to read and sign a consent form (see Appendix B). This consent form provided information about the research project, their rights as participants, and information regarding their anonymity. Participants were informed that they could stop the interview at any time, they did not have to answer a question if they did not feel comfortable, and that they had the right to withdraw their information before January 31, 2019. Participants were given the option to be audio-recorded and each of them agreed. I informed participants that their names were to be replaced with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. All information I gathered was kept under password protection on my own personal computer. This information will be kept confidential and safe for the next five years and then deleted. All paper consent forms and notes taken will be shredded.

Autoethnography

Using autoethnography was something that happened naturally. I did not research the pros and cons of this method prior to beginning my project. I simply started relating my own experiences to those shared by my participants in our interviews. As someone who has been a part of the anime convention community for the past six years, I have experienced much of what my participants disclosed and I was able to supplement the information they provided.

Sociologist Barbara Laslett describes autoethnography as: "Life stories [that] are likely to present fuller pictures, thick description, ones in which the meanings of events and relationships are more likely to be told than inferred" (391). I assert that this is exactly what the use of autoethnography has done for my research. I am supplementing the knowledge provided by my

participants' interviews and filling in any missing details that an outsider to the community would not understand.

I am cognizant of the critiques against using autoethnography. For example, sociologist Paul Atkinson described autoethnography as narratives without social context and self-indulgent narcissism (339). While I can understand that using my own experiences might seem narcissistic to some, I would disagree that it is without social context. In fact, I am putting my experiences within a social context provided by my participants. There is also the concern that autoethnography lacks methodological rigour as it goes against traditional positivist ways of knowledge gathering (Wall 155). As a feminist researcher, I contend that bias exists in all research, no matter how rigorous one's methods may be. Instead of trying to remove bias as a positivist would do, autoethnography acknowledges that bias as something inescapable. Introspection becomes just another data source to use in the research.

It is my hope that in supplementing my participants' responses with my own experiences, I was able to provide a deeper analysis of the gendered dynamics of Canadian anime conventions. I contend that autoethnography can be an important feminist method when utilized alongside other more rigorous methods such as interviews.

Recruitment Methods

Before I could begin recruitment for this project, I needed to decide whether I would be sampling from both anime and comic conventions or solely rely on anime conventions. Both were events where cross-play was occurring and where gender exploration was accepted and encouraged. Yet, from my own experiences, I find that there is a greater gender diversity at anime conventions than comic conventions. Comic conventions have almost become mainstream with

the rise of “geek chic” and the popularity of superhero films. Therefore, a lot more families and members of the general public tend to attend comic conventions.

One of the main ways I recruited participants was by speaking to people at the anime convention in Montreal called Otakuthon in August of 2018. I was in cosplay while attending the convention, dressed as Lucoa from *Miss Kobayashi's Dragon Maid* one day, and Diamond from *Land of the Lustrous* the other two days. This was useful for meeting people as when I was recognized for dressing as a certain character, it was easy to begin a conversation and try to recruit the person for my project. Whenever I was stopped by someone to take my photo, or just to talk about my cosplay, I would casually bring up my research project to gauge interest. It was also easier for me to approach people. I am normally quite shy in large crowds, yet being in cosplay gave me more confidence to speak with convention-goers and obtain their emails for potential interviews. Moreover, I met one of my participants because she was dressed in the same cosplay as I was. She was kind enough to spread the word about my project to a number of her cosplay friends. I thus used the snowball sampling technique, whereby participants in a research study recruit other members of their social network to find research participants.

I also asked one of my friends in Vancouver if she could pass my study's information on to a few of her cosplay friends. I was able to get an interview from this and I am very thankful for her help. I also emailed the anime clubs at Carleton University, University of Ottawa, University of Toronto, and McGill University. Two of these clubs were kind enough to forward my recruitment letter on to their members and I was able to find one participant from this.

Coding and Data Analysis

Each of my participants consented to being audio-recorded. I transcribed each of the interviews myself. By transcribing the interviews myself, I was able to maintain the confidentiality of my participants, as well as uncover multiple different patterns spanning across each of the interviews. Moreover, I did not have the funds to send the interviews out to be transcribed by a second party. I did my utmost to ensure I was transcribing exactly what participants were saying. I wanted to ensure that participants' speech was not being altered.

I then coded for main patterns that would prove useful to my chapters. For example, I coded the words “community,” “cross-play,” “confidence,” “harassment,” etc. This was in order to easily return to these patterns and help create my table of contents. Moreover, I pulled out quotes that stood out as important to my research questions and that were the most emotionally resonant. I also chose quotes that stood out as different from what other participants were saying. These outlying quotes led me to investigate aspects of cosplay and gender play that I had not considered before starting this project. Notably, the sections on body positivity and on taking up space came about via quotes from participants that were significantly different than what other participants were saying.

Participants

I had three requirements of my participants for this study. The first was that participants needed to be eighteen years old or older as I wanted to ensure participants were legal adults who could choose of their own volition whether or not to participate in the study. The second requirement was that participants had attended at least one anime convention in Canada. There are many people who participate in cosplay without actually attending conventions. I am interested in the

dynamics that conventions offer, and thus I wanted to recruit participants who had attended a convention while cosplaying. Moreover, I am interested specifically in Canadian anime conventions as there is little to no research in this area. Finally, I was interested in speaking with participants who had done at least one cross-play. This was to be able to examine why participants choose to engage in cross-play as well as how gender play was received at conventions. For more details on specific demographic information, see the following table.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Occupation	# of Conventions Attended	# of Cosplays	Race/Ethnicity
Brooklyn	28	cis woman	pansexual	barista	^ 15	~ 20	white
Dania	18	non-binary	“not straight”	student	“6 or 7”	~ 20	white
Emilia	28	cis woman	bisexual	desk clerk	^ 12	~ 26	white
Jamie	22	fluid/trans woman	bisexual	technician at pharmaceutical company	“stopped counting after 5”	“5 or 7”	did not disclose
Lena	27	cis woman	straight	student	^ 25	at least 20	white
Pamela	21	cis woman	pan-romantic, demisexual	physical therapy technician	6	8	white
Taylor	18	non-binary	bisexual or pansexual	student	12	~ 50	white

Terrance	28	cis man	gay	software developer	“5 or 6”	5	white
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Conclusion

In choosing to conduct semi-structured interviews, I was able to obtain firsthand accounts from Canadian cosplayers and gain a better understanding as to what is going on at Canadian anime conventions. Moreover, using an autoethnographic approach, I was able to compare my participants’ experiences to my own as a cosplayer within the anime convention community. I would have liked to recruit more participants had time permitted. I would have also liked to recruit more people of colour to the study. Yet, the information provided by my participants was extensive, and the stories they shared were varied.

CHAPTER THREE: Freedom to Explore and its Limitations

“Even though I’m not dressed as myself, obviously, I feel like that’s one of the times where I feel most like myself. That I can really come out of my shell and just bare my personality out to the world one hundred percent.”

- Emilia

Introduction

Anime conventions are spaces in which participants are able to play with their gender presentations. There is a yearning to step outside of one’s established norms and to try out different identities. For the most part, attendees feel comfortable exploring different aspects of their lives while donning costumes of their favourite characters. This is particularly interesting when it comes to gender. One of the ways in which gender is explored at conventions is through cross-play, the act of cosplaying a character that is different from one’s assigned sex and/or gender. This is not to be confused with “gender-bending,” where a cosplayer alters a character’s gender to match their own preferred gender presentation.

Much of the literature available on cosplay describes the feelings of positivity, self-confidence, and community that anime convention attendees experience (Pierson-Smith 86; Rahman et al. 321; Winge 74). Yet, cosplay’s relationship with gender has been under-researched at anime conventions specifically. Moreover, the limitations to cosplayers’ self-exploration at anime conventions requires further research. In this chapter, I analyze the responses provided to me by eight anime convention attendees about their experiences cosplaying at anime conventions across Canada. I begin by investigating their positive experiences relating to cosplaying such as feelings of celebrity, feelings of self-confidence, and self-worth. Next, I analyze explorations of gender at anime conventions. Specifically, I analyze cross-play as a means to experiment with gender presentation for trans, non-binary, and gender-

fluid people. I also look at hyperbolic expressions of gender explored through cosplay. Finally, the limitations of self-exploration through cosplay at anime conventions is discussed. This includes negative feelings surrounding fat bodies and cosplay, as well as racial and economic limitations. I argue that although much positivity and self-exploration in terms of gender expression can arise from cosplaying, this freedom to explore is limited to certain bodies and identities.

Celebrity for a Moment

Walking into an anime convention while in cosplay can feel like walking the red carpet at a Hollywood event. Depending on the cosplay's quality and popularity of the character, a cosplayer can be stopped for photographs multiple times while trying to walk a short distance. This is the feeling of celebrity one can attain from cosplay. This section investigates this feeling of celebrity and how it relates to positive experiences among cosplayers. I contend that as cosplayers experience these feelings of celebrity and validation, they feel freer to explore certain aspects of their identities, specifically gender.

Several researchers have focused on cosplay as a sort of mini-celebrity experience (Atkinson 126; Hale 9; Rahman et. al 332). My own research has found similar results. Each of my participants expressed joy and excitement in being stopped and asked for a photograph or even just being recognized as the character they were cosplaying. According to cultural studies scholar Matthew Hale, being asked to stop for a photograph adds to one's "subcultural capital" at conventions (9).³ This subcultural capital equates to one's status at a particular convention or within the cosplay community as a whole. The more times one is stopped and asked for a photo,

³ Subcultural capital was originally described by Sarah Thornton in relation to club cultures and how young people's subcultural capital increases with their perceived "hipness" (26).

the more subcultural capital they accrue. This is known as “celebrity for a moment” (Rahman et al. 332). Certain cosplayers become well-known at conventions and are stopped numerous times because they are akin to convention celebrities. The cosplays that garner the most attention are normally those who have put in the most time and effort into certain costumes. For example, someone with a large prop weapon that they made themselves or someone in an intricate piece of armour from a well-known series is almost guaranteed to become a convention celebrity. These convention celebrities can often be found near the entryway to the event, or gathered outside in a seating area. The goal is to be seen by the most people possible, and in doing so, amassing subcultural capital among their fellow cosplayers.

However, I would argue that even cosplayers who have less subcultural capital than the “convention celebrities,” are still celebrities in the moment. Each time a person asks for my photograph, I experience feelings of validation and confidence. That is, I feel important and sure of myself in the moment. Being recognized for the character that I am trying to embody is a wonderful feeling, and being asked for a photograph only seems to cement these feelings. I would never be recognized by strangers on the street in real life, but at conventions, with each new person asking for my photo, the more I feel like a mini-celebrity.

Furthermore, the amount of people who stop and ask cosplayers for photos is often equated to the success of a particular costume. Many cosplayers have expressed that cosplay is not simply a hobby, it is a way of being recognized and admired (Rahman et al. 332). Emilia is a twenty-eight-year-old bisexual cis woman, who has been attending anime conventions since she was eighteen. She has been to Otakuthon, Montreal’s annual anime convention, each year since, as well as a couple other conventions.⁴ During this time, she has completed roughly twenty-five

⁴ These include Anime North in Toronto, the largest anime convention in Canada, and Mini-Comiccon de Montréal, a small annual convention in Montreal that is free to attend.

different cosplays. She described one of her cosplays relating to its unpopularity: “In all honesty, it wasn’t one of my more popular cosplays in terms of getting photos taken.” In this instance, she was cross-playing as Clear, a white-haired android, from the visual novel video game *Dramatical Murder*. At the time, *Dramatical Murder* was a niche game that was not very well-known.⁵ She felt that because her cosplay was not recognized by a lot of people, and because her photo was not taken as much as usual, this particular cosplay was not as successful as her others. This is not ubiquitous for all cosplayers, and sometimes characters are chosen even if they are not popular. This was true for one of my participants, Pamela. Pamela is a twenty-one-year-old pan-romantic demisexual cis woman who has been attending Otakuthon in Montreal annually since 2013. She has done eight different cosplays. This year at Otakuthon, she chose to do a cosplay of a character that was from a very niche game because this character had significance to her.⁶

It is common for cosplayers at anime conventions to have more than one cosplay planned for a convention weekend. An unwritten rule of anime conventions is that if a cosplayer is attending each of the three days, they should aim to have a different cosplay for each day. This is to increase the likelihood of being recognized by one’s peers, as well as demonstrating one’s commitment to cosplay. One of my participants took this unwritten rule to the extreme. Taylor is an eighteen-year-old pansexual non-binary student (they/them pronouns) who has been attending conventions for the past four years. In this short period of time, Taylor has participated in twelve anime conventions and has completed a staggering fifty different cosplays. At Otakuthon 2018, Taylor told me that they had four separate costumes on Saturday alone. They said it was difficult

⁵ It has since become one of the most well-known *yaoi* visual novel games of the past decade and will be discussed in Chapter Four.

⁶ She did not disclose the game or character when I asked.

and tiresome, but in the end it was worth it as they were able to embody so many different characters successfully. By preparing multiple different costumes for one anime convention, attendees demonstrate their commitment to the cosplay community, as well as increase the likelihood of being recognized.

Costume schedules are sometimes planned in accordance with how many people will be able to see their costume. Most of the big summer conventions last for three days and are normally from Friday to Sunday. The Saturday of a convention is generally the most-attended day. Cosplayers plan to wear their most elaborate costume or the costume they think will be the most popular on Saturdays. This all ties in to the idea of celebrity for a moment, in that cosplayers are actively pursuing the possibility of having their photo taken as many times as possible. Lena is a twenty-seven-year-old straight cis woman who has been attending anime conventions since she was a young teen. She has been to over twenty-five anime conventions in the past five years alone. She has attended some of the largest anime conventions in Canada including Anime North in Toronto, Animethon in Edmonton, and Otakuthon in Montreal. She estimates that she has done at least twenty different cosplays. She describes the Saturday of a convention:

You always save your most elaborate cosplay or the one you think will make the biggest impact for Saturday. Whether that be the cosplay you spent the most time on or maybe just what's popular at the time. Saturday is always the best day 'cause that's when the most people come to the convention so your cosplay will be seen by the most people too. It's usually the day you'll get more people coming up to you admiring your cosplay or asking to take your photo.

By wearing a costume they think will be popular on the Saturday of a convention, cosplayers at anime conventions hope to have the most people possible there to see them.

Convention celebrity status and recognition from peers is an important aspect for some cosplayers attending anime conventions. My participants have shown that there is a feeling of satisfaction in being asked for a photograph and in simply being recognized as the character they are portraying. There is a sense of pleasure in being able to embody one's character of choice and to be validated by people who are familiar with the character themselves. This amassing of subcultural capital leads to feelings of celebrity, and validation among peers. These positive feelings lead to feelings of acceptance within the anime convention setting. In turn, cosplayers feel freer to explore and to express themselves.

Self-Confidence and Self-Actualization

Dressing up in an elaborate costume, donning a brightly coloured wig, and stepping into a crowded convention hall might seem daunting to some, but to those who have experienced cosplay, it can be one of the most gratifying feelings in the world. I remember the first cosplay I ever did. It was a gender bend of Trafalgar Law from *One Piece*. Much like most of the main characters in *One Piece*, Law is a pirate. I changed his signature spotted jeans to spotted jean shorts, painted his pirate logo on a yellow t-shirt, and temporarily dyed my hair black. I purchased Law's puffy white hat online and the outfit was complete. It was my first attempt at making a cosplay. I was twenty-two years old and I had spent a month preparing to make my debut at the annual anime convention in Edmonton, Animethon. I can vividly remember the feelings of anxiety and distress I had driving to the convention that morning with my friends. I worried that people wouldn't like the costume, and that for some reason, people wouldn't think I

was good enough to cosplay. After overcoming the urge to return home and change into my regular clothes, I stepped into the convention hall. Immediately, those feelings of insecurity melted away. They were quickly replaced with a confidence I had never experienced in my life. People were stopping me, asking for my photo, and asking me how I'd come up with the ideas for my gender bend version of Law. People cosplaying other characters from *One Piece* would wave to me as I walked by, even though I had never met them before. From my own experiences, I know that cosplay can lead to self-confidence. This section analyzes the responses from five of my participants who expressed similar sentiments. I begin by looking at how cosplay can lead to self-confidence, then investigate the theme of self-actualization and self-exploration. By gaining confidence in themselves, cosplayers are able to feel like their "true selves," if only for the duration of the convention. This, in turn, can lead to a sense of freedom to explore certain aspects of their identities.

Among my participants, confidence building is one of the most agreed-upon reasons to cosplay. In one way or another, my interviewees expressed how wonderful it feels to be in costume at a convention and to have people appreciate their hard work. Terrance is a twenty-seven-year-old gay cis man who has attended six conventions and done five different cosplays. He describes his experience cosplaying: "It's a lot of fun. I love walking around, I love having people look at me. You know, being in cosplay. And getting enjoyment from it. It feels wonderful." He explained that when he is recognized as the character he is cosplaying, he feels he has succeeded. He wants others to recognize the work he put in, and when others recognize his chosen character, he feels confident and validated.

Cosplay can also be a means of developing confidence in one's body. Emilia spoke of her weight loss journey and how cosplay was a way of celebrating her achievements: "I finally

finished losing all of the weight that I wanted to lose. So, Panty [from *Panty & Stocking with Garterbelt*] was kind of a way for me to be one hundred percent comfortable with the body that I have now.” The series *Panty & Stocking with Garterbelt* follows protagonists Panty and Stocking, two fallen angels who are trying to get back into heaven. Panty is a promiscuous blonde who is known for having a lot of sex. She is slim and petite, the standard for female characters in anime. Moreover, Panty’s outfits in the series reveal a lot of skin. Emilia said she would not have felt confident cosplaying a character like Panty before she had lost the weight. This costume was a sort of prize for Emilia’s hard work. It is interesting that Emilia did not feel confident portraying a character like Panty before she lost the weight. This idea will be explored further in the section “Limitations: Body Shaming” near the end of this chapter.

Many of my participants spoke of the confidence that comes from being someone else while cosplaying. Dania is an eighteen-year-old “not straight” non-binary student (she/her pronouns) who has been attending conventions since she was thirteen.⁷ She estimates that she has done about twenty different cosplays in that time. She described cosplay as:

Feeling like being a completely different person. It kinda feels like, there’s an extra layer of confidence... It’s a whole new ball game. I feel like I’m a better version of me, I guess? Like the most charismatic, the most outgoing version of me when I’m dressed up as a certain character.

Cosplay allows Dania to act in a manner different from her everyday self. She feels like a “completely different person” but, at the same time, she feels like a “better version” of herself. She describes herself as a shy and quiet person in real life, but at conventions while in cosplay, she is able to come out of her shell.

⁷ When I asked Dania about her sexual orientation, she responded with “not straight” but did not go into more specifics.

For Pamela, cosplay allows her to let her guard down: “I’m surrounded by all of these other people who are also huge nerds and I feel like I can just kind of like relax and be myself.” She feels safe because she is among people who share her interests in nerd culture and anime. This feeling of freedom to be to true one’s self is common among my participants. Emilia also shares this feeling of being able to fully express herself only while in cosplay: “Even though I’m not dressed as myself, obviously, I feel like that’s one of the times where I feel most like myself. That I can really come out of my shell and just bare my personality out to the world one hundred percent.” It’s interesting that Emilia feels she is “most like herself” while in cosplay. She feels confident to allow her personality to show, and she feels that she will be accepted in the convention space for who she really is.

While some cosplayers feel like their true selves while in costume, others view it as a means of escape from their everyday lives. Cosplay allows cosplayers at anime conventions the chance to momentarily create an alternative identity that is more exciting than their true self (Rahman et al. 334). For example, one of my participants, Brooklyn, uses cosplay to escape her daily life. She is a twenty-eight-year-old pansexual cis woman who has been attending anime conventions since 2008. She annually attends Otakuthon in Montreal and Anime North in Toronto. During this time, she has completed at least twenty different cosplays. For Brooklyn, cosplay has been a means of escapism:

When you’re in cosplay at a convention, I find it’s like... a way of escapism. 'Cause most of the time I’m like, my life is boring... I hate how I look, I can never wear anything but my work uniform six days a week, this sucks. So when you’re wearing something like cosplay you’re like I’m not me anymore, I’m *this* and this is just really cool.

By escaping her “boring” everyday life via cosplay, Brooklyn allows herself to slip into a character’s persona and experience a different, more exciting life. In this new life she is no longer herself. Without having to actually change her lived daily reality, she can experience what it is like to live as someone else. By dressing as a fictional character, she is able to don an “assumed identity” and temporarily set her inhibitions aside (Taylor 23). She is able to wear an exciting outfit, meet with others who share in her passion for a particular character or series, and, in doing so, she escapes her daily life for the duration of the convention.

Overall, my participants feel that their self-confidence is improved by cosplaying. Moreover, some cosplayers at anime conventions feel like they are able to be their truest selves while in costume. They feel able to escape the mundanity of their daily lives by temporarily embodying a favourite character.

Cosplaying with Gender

By building positivity, self-confidence, and community, cosplayers at anime conventions feel safe to explore certain aspects of their identities, including gender. This section investigates different ways in which my participants have played with their gender presentation at anime conventions across Canada. I begin by looking at how cross-play is a regular, accepted occurrence at anime conventions. Next, I examine the role cross-play and gender play have with two of my non-binary participants. I then analyze cross-play as a means of experimentation with gender for Jamie, a trans woman. Finally, I look at Emilia’s hyperbolic feminine gender presentation via cosplay.

Walking through the halls of an anime convention, one is met with a wide spectrum of gender identities. These range from cross-play, gender bends, and hyperbolic gender

presentations to people dressed in everyday attire. Lena estimates that, of her at least twenty different cosplays, more than half of them have been cross-plays. She describes the reception to her cross-playing as:

An acceptance of like that's the character and that's what the character looks like and you've done a great job of that. It was never like "Oh, you're not the right sex to be playing this" or whatever, it was always just "Your cosplay looks awesome!"

Cross-play is a normal part of the convention experience. It comes down to whether or not one's costume is well-put together and whether the cosplayer embodies the character they are portraying. The cosplayer's sex is not called into question. Thinking about why gender play is so prevalent at anime conventions, Emilia offered:

Anime subculture in general started as such a niche, underground thing. And I think when that happens, when people are pushed underground, they sort of create their own community where they all accept one another and are more open to different dialogues than things would be in normal society.

Since anime was already seen as something outside of "normal society," other practices deemed to be outside societal norms were accepted in these spaces as well. Thus, cross-play is accepted as a common practice within the convention space.

With gender play being so common at anime conventions in Canada, it is unsurprising that non-binary and trans people might utilize this space to explore their gender presentations. For participants who identify outside the gender binary, cross-play can be especially useful. Dania (she/her pronouns) detailed how she was able to explore her gender performance through cosplay: "As someone who identifies outside of the gender binary, it's like I can have the best of both worlds a little bit. Where, I can, in a safe place- I can sort of explore what I like [about

different gender identities], what I don't like about certain presentations.” Dania's day-to-day attire is normally neutral leaning towards feminine. However, by cosplaying different male characters, she is able to explore the more masculine side of her gender presentation. She feels that she can safely try out different presentations, and she feels confident in this exploration. The convention setting allows her the freedom to explore her gender presentation and to decide which aspects of that presentation she likes.

Gender play through cosplay can also help with feelings of dysphoria. This was the case for one of my non-binary participants, Taylor (they/them pronouns). They are very interested in idol anime. This genre of anime follows a group of girls who dream of becoming, or are already, pop singers known as idols in Japan. *Love Live!* is an idol franchise that is popular among idol anime fans, Taylor included. They are able to explore a more feminine gender presentation through cosplaying the idol girls of *Love Live!* and other idol anime. Taylor's usual attire is neutral leaning towards masculine, but they prefer to cosplay overtly feminine characters. They explain that:

Most of the time I tend to go the female route which is like my biological sex. So I find it easier to pull off, but I found it more challenging to cosplay people of my original gender. But I find that the more and more comfortable I get, the easier it is and the less dysphoria gets in the way. So it's actually helping me reduce my dysphoria and be more comfortable in my own skin I find. It's kind of a positive thing.

By choosing feminine characters, such as the idol girls of *Love Live!*, Taylor feels that they are confronting feelings of dysphoria associated with dressing as their assigned-at-birth sex. It is “easier to pull off” even though dressing as a female character can cause feelings of dysphoria for Taylor. They find this gender exploration to be positive and even helpful to their daily

experiences of gender identity. They are able to explore their gender presentation in a space where exploration is encouraged and accepted.

Moreover, cosplay can also be a tool to help deal with feelings of gender dysphoria experienced by trans people. Jamie, a bisexual fluid/trans twenty-two-year-old woman who has attended roughly eight anime conventions, has exclusively done cross-plays.⁸ Although Jamie is fluid/trans, she told me that she still considers cosplaying as a female character to be a cross-play. She explained how cross-play allowed her to try out a female gender identity for the first time: “[The cross-play] became an expression of who I wanted to be. And when I started I wasn’t really sure about myself... I knew what I liked. I liked being fancy and dressing up a little bit.” It was through cross-play that Jamie was able to first explore her feminine gender identity. The convention setting offered Jamie a space in which gender play is accepted and even encouraged.

As Emilia speculated earlier in this section, people who attend anime conventions seem to be “open to different dialogues than things would be in normal society,” specifically concerning gender. As a result of this openness to “different dialogues,” what would be considered abnormal in society becomes something accepted and welcomed at these events. Similarly, film scholar Laura Horak describes YouTube as a space that allows some trans people to “construct the ways that their bodies are looked at and heard” (581). This is a digital space where personal stories and spectacularity are accepted and encouraged. Vlogs allow for the ongoing process of “(re-learning), testing, [and] evaluating” one’s gender (Raun 376). Moreover, these videos can connect people from different geographical locations. Anime conventions are similar spaces in which trans people subjectively present their bodies as they wish to be seen and heard. The physicality of attending an anime convention is interesting in itself as one’s entire

⁸ She told me that she stopped counting after her fifth anime convention and guesses she’s attended roughly eight in total.

body is being presented, whereas on platforms like YouTube, the person posting the video can choose how to display their body to the audience. It seems as though both YouTube and conventions could be spaces in which trans people can test and evaluate their gender presentations. Yet, attending an anime convention is not free as is watching a video on YouTube.⁹ There are economic factors that play into creating a costume and physically going to the convention. I will return to these limitations later in the chapter in the section “Limitations: Economic Factors.”

When I asked Jamie how she chooses a character to cross-play she said: “Since I plan to pass with most of my cross-plays, [choosing a character] has a lot of limitations with clothing.” She specifically chooses characters whose outfits hide aspects of her anatomy that could be read as masculine. For example, she avoids characters with low necklines as she does not wish to show her Adam’s apple or her flat chest. In choosing characters with outfits that hide these aspects of her body, she has been able to “pass” while cross-playing at conventions. She expressed great pride and joy in her being able to “pass” among her fellow cosplayers and attendees. She also joked about times where people had complimented her cosplay and were surprised by her masculine-sounding voice. The reactions were not negative. Jamie said she was once asked for a photo by a man and when she agreed, the man said: “I can’t believe that someone this cute can’t be a girl.” Jamie found this comment to be amusing and left it at that. Similar to trans vlogs on YouTube, Jamie is testing her gender presentation through her cross-play (Raun 376). She is evaluating her gender performance by being seen and heard by other attendees.

⁹ YouTube is free with the caveats that you must have access to the Internet and a device on which to watch the videos.

Cosplay also allows for the exploration of hyperbolic gender presentation. By this, I mean convention attendees are able to explore their gender in an over-the-top fashion when compared to their daily gender presentations. To Emilia, cosplaying offers the chance to explore her feminine identity. She describes cosplay as a means of exaggerating her already feminine presentation:

It's just kind of intensifying the feelings that I already have during normal life. So since I dress very feminine outside of the cosplay world, when I pick a cosplay it's usually very frilly, and girly, and pink, and cute because I just wanna explore that side of me a little bit more in a way that I don't normally get to do in real life.

She identifies strongly with her feminine gender presentation, but in everyday life she feels uncomfortable wearing overly frilly and girly outfits. She explained that wearing a big pouffy dress to work would most likely garner unwanted comments and stares. It would also be considered inappropriate, and could be construed as unprofessional. Thus, she chooses characters to cosplay who are extremely girly and cute. For example, one of Emilia's favourite characters is Nico Yazawa from *Love Live!*. In the series, Nico and the other idol girls get to wear a multitude of different elaborate outfits ranging from sailor suits, beach attire, and cheerleading costumes. In choosing to cosplay characters like Nico, Emilia is able to fulfill her desire to present as overtly feminine in a setting where she feels safe to do so. Her exaggerated femininity is not seen as strange to other convention goers and she feels confident in her gender performance. However, cosplaying as an overtly feminine character has its downsides as well. This will be discussed at length in chapters Four and Five.

Gender exploration and play is something to be expected upon entering Canadian anime conventions. Cross-plays, gender bends, and hyperbolic expressions of gender are commonplace.

This freedom to explore one's gender presentation through cross-play can be especially useful for non-binary and trans people. Anime conventions are offering a space where feelings of dysphoria can be dealt with and where gender presentation can be tested and relearned.

An Achievable Utopia for Gender Fluidity?

Through speaking with my participants, and by attending numerous conventions myself, I have come to understand anime conventions as spaces where different gender presentations coexist harmoniously. That being said, it is worth examining what is happening socially when people put aside their presupposed notions of gender for a common passion. What does this say about the potential transformative power of anime conventions?

The anime convention community could be described as an imagined community. Political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson's definition of the imagined community comes from his description of nationalism in which "members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Media studies scholar Henry Jenkins applies Anderson's idea of imagined communities to describe online fan communities. In the online world, fans are able to meet people who share common interests, share information amongst each other, and build a community. Jenkins then furthered this idea by explaining the imagined community as a preparation or dress rehearsal for the way culture could become in the future (134). This shared knowledge and self-definition is what Jenkins terms the "achievable utopia." This is a space where collaborators are practicing for an imagined future of tolerance.

In this vein, anime conventions could be seen as achievable utopias of gender fluidity. At these events, attendees are able to play with their identities and discover new aspects about

themselves in a safe space where this sort of behaviour is not only tolerated, but actively encouraged and anticipated. Anime conventions offer a space in which attendees can practice their gender presentations which may guide the ways they eventually present themselves to the outside world. Moreover, this could be a rehearsal for a future in which a wide variety of gender expressions is socially acceptable and encouraged. Participants are engaging in a hopeful imagining of what a tolerant future could look like, and they are enjoying this freedom to explore. Notably, Lena described the experience of cross-playing as eye-opening in terms of gender expression:

Whatever you feel comfortable in is what you should go for. I never felt uncomfortable dressing as a guy... You've just gotta do what makes you feel comfortable and what makes you feel happy going through life. So I think at a lot of conventions it's really nice to be like I can do this for a day and no one's gonna question me about it. And it sort of helps me understand what people must feel going through life, you know, having to question this stuff not in a convention setting.

Lena identifies as a cis woman, yet she thoroughly enjoys cross-playing. She has become more conscious of the experiences of others who might be exploring their own gender identities in real life, outside of the convention. Most importantly, she knows that no one is going to ask her why she is dressed as a male character at a convention. During these events, it is common knowledge that cross-playing occurs. Attendees are (unwittingly or not) imagining a future in which crossdressing and other gender non-normative acts are considered socially acceptable.

Dania had a similar feeling about self-exploration at conventions: "I dressed up as [a character] and I thought 'I like being perceived this way'... It allows you to explore in a place where you don't have to commit. You're being weird in a place where weird is normal." I think

Dania's phrase "being weird in a place where weird is normal" truly exemplifies conventions as achievable utopias of gender fluidity. Attendees are able to be "weird," that is, exist outside societal gender norms, in a place where this is deemed acceptable. Moreover, through the ritualization of conventions and cosplay practices, these so-called "weird" acts are only normalized further. Attendees know that they will be able to participate in this achievable utopia on an annual basis. This repeated practice is ever-changing, following trends within the community, and allowing for more and more exploration of identity with each new anime series and character. However, there are limitations to the tolerance of identity exploration within the cosplay community. The following sections delve further into these problematic areas.

Limitations: Body Shaming

Anime characters' body types are normally thin and/or muscular. It is rare that an anime character has a fat body, and if they do, they are often the villain. There are exceptions such as Itaru Hashida (Hack) from *Steins;Gate* or Chouza Akimichi from *Naruto*, who are both fat, non-villain characters, but, for the most part, stereotypes regarding fat bodies prevail throughout the medium. With a disproportionate amount of thin characters in anime, it is not surprising that plus-sized people cosplay thin characters. This section investigates whether or not fat bodies are offered the same freedom to explore as people who choose to explore non-normative gender presentation.

Emilia's story of weight loss was discussed in the section "Self-Confidence and Self-Actualization." She felt comfortable cosplaying a thin character only after losing weight. I gleaned that she would not have attempted such an outfit before the weight loss. Certainly,

feeling comfortable to cosplay Panty had an impact on Emilia's self-confidence, but what does this say about fat bodies cosplaying canonically thin characters?

Taylor believes that cosplaying can help develop body positivity. They have grown more confident in their physical appearance via cosplay. Taylor feels that cosplay is a way of developing body positivity and confidence:

I think cosplay is really good for developing body positivity. I've totally developed more confidence in my body from, you know, getting used to showing it off? Or getting used to putting it in different outfits? So I find that it's really good to kind of get your body used to being out there.

It is worth noting that Taylor is petite and slim. Nonetheless, they have gained self-confidence by wearing different costumes and showing off their body at conventions.

At Canadian conventions, people of all shapes and sizes partake in cosplay. Taylor describes this as "cospositivity" or "body positivity." They claim that: "[Acceptance at conventions] is getting better and I'd say it's mainly because of the spread of cospositivity." "Cospositivity" is a growing trend within the anime convention and cosplay community, particularly in North America. A portmanteau of "cosplay" and "positivity," this is a hashtag movement spread by cosplayers mainly through websites like Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook. The movement is focused on encouraging people of all races, shapes and sizes, genders, and ages to participate in cosplay (#Cospositivity). Cospositivity advocates for diversity instead of exclusion within the cosplay community. Although this seems to be taking off online, when I went to the policy page for Anime North, the largest anime convention in Canada, there was no mention of cospositivity (Convention Policies). There was a statement against physical and sexual harassment, but there was nothing about verbal harassment, racism, or sexism. However,

the “Harassment” section of the policy page for AniRevo in Vancouver included: “Unwelcomed comments about a person’s appearance, age, religion, race or sex; Anything that induces embarrassment, endanger a person’s safety, or demoralize other’s sense of self-worth” (Rules & Regulations). I will examine convention policies at length in Chapter Five.

In Japan, there seems to be less leniency surrounding who is allowed to cosplay. According to media studies scholar Daisuke Okabe, Japanese cosplayers feel pressured to be young, beautiful, and thin should they wish to be successful in the cosplay world (37). Okabe’s informants told her that, ideally, people should stop cosplaying once they reach thirty years of age. Youth seems to be an important consideration for cosplayers in Japan. Moreover, cosplayers need to fit with the body type of the character they are cosplaying. This emphasis on youth and being thin is pervasive at Asian anime conventions and cosplay culture. However, it would be naive to assume that body-negativity is only common in Asia. Body policing is still happening at anime conventions in Canada.

The policing of bodies at Canadian anime conventions is commonplace within the cosplay community. In contrast to Taylor, other participants expressed feelings of wariness when it came to body acceptance at conventions. Brooklyn was quite adamant that body positivity and cosplay are not synonymous as of yet. She described to me a time when she and a friend were walking home from a convention in cosplay:

I was cosplaying from *Supersonico*... This guy like rolled down his window and started screaming at us like “oh you’re dressed like babies” and his friend was like “not just babies, but *big* babies” so I was like “Is he calling me fat? I don’t care whatever.” But you know, it is hurtful. You get people who do that.

Brooklyn sounded almost apathetic as she told this story. She was used to people “who do that,” that is, people who police her body in cosplay. She seemed to think that the men who called out to her were not convention attendees, but she had no way of knowing for sure. Moreover, she did not divulge whether this was a regular occurrence when she is out of cosplay. However, throughout our conversation, she implied that this was happening at the anime conventions she attends.

Some of my participants felt that body type was a hindrance when it came to choosing certain characters to cosplay. For example, Lena talked about feeling uncomfortable cosplaying female characters due to the fact that anime characters are notoriously small in stature: “A lot of those characters are like size double zero or negative two or something and like it doesn’t exist... There’s still a bit of body discrimination sometimes [at conventions].” Brooklyn even stated that being overweight “defeats the purpose” of cosplaying certain characters: “I mean there’s Rin [from *Free!*] that I really wanna do but like... I don’t wanna be a fat Rin, you know? That would defeat the purpose of *Free!*” *Free!* is an anime following muscular teenage boys who are part of their school swim teams. For Brooklyn, cosplaying a character from *Free!* and being plus-sized would hinder the embodiment of the character. She does not feel that she could adequately embody Rin’s character being a plus-sized person as he is a fit and muscled boy.

Overall, there remains much to be researched when it comes to body positivity and body shaming at conventions. This was something I had not really considered before starting this project, and so I did not ask many questions pertaining to this topic. I would like to investigate body shaming at conventions in more detail in future research. But based on what I’ve found from my interviews, there does not seem to be the same level of freedom for different body types as there is for gender expression.

Limitations: Racial Crossing

Canadian anime conventions tend to be overwhelmingly white. Moreover, white attendees are cosplaying characters from a Japanese medium. This does not mean that all anime characters are meant to be Japanese or even Asian. Certain series are set in what is meant to be a fictional version of a European country. For example, *Full Metal Alchemist* takes place in the fictional country of Amestris which mirrors Nazi Germany. The two main characters in this series are both blonde with fair skin. Yet, a large number of anime series take place in Japan or other Asian countries. This would mean that many white cosplayers are cosplaying canonically Asian characters. However, anime characters are highly stylized, with large eyes, varying hair colours, and unrealistic bodies (Fennell et al. 442). Instead of viewing anime characters as a particular race, they could be viewed in a particular style of figuration. If this is the case, white cosplayers who attend anime conventions would not necessarily be depicting Asian characters, they would simply be portraying characters drawn in a specific style. In this section, I am going to briefly investigate the limitations of race in terms of cosplay.

Of my participants, only Pamela brought up feeling uncertain choosing a character who did not match their skin tone. For my other participants, race did not factor into choices about which characters to cosplay. Notably, out of seven white participants, only one brought up feelings of discomfort regarding cosplaying characters of colour.¹⁰ Pamela explained that she was worried about potential backlash should she cosplay as a non-Asian character of colour:

There are a lot of characters I appreciate who are not white that I wouldn't feel comfortable cosplaying just because- I mean I love and appreciate this character, but like that's the kind of

¹⁰ One participant, Jamie, did not wish to disclose her race or ethnicity.

place where I would be worried about backlash. Maybe someone getting like confrontational about it because I am a white person cosplaying a character who is not white, you know?

She says she would feel uncomfortable cosplaying a character “who is not white.” Yet, she does not have an issue cosplaying characters who are canonically Asian. For example, she cosplayed Minami from *Yuri!!! On Ice* who is a canonically Japanese figure skater. But should Pamela choose to cosplay as a black character, she would feel uncomfortable. This seems to be the general consensus for white cosplayers as it seems to be acceptable for white cosplayers to cosplay canonically Asian characters from anime at conventions, but it would be unacceptable to cosplay a non-Asian character of colour.

There are non-Asian characters of colour within the medium of anime, but these characters are few and far between and are sometimes blatantly offensive. For example, in the popular series *Dragon Ball*, there is a character named Mr. Popo. He is drawn with black skin and large red lips that resembles blackface makeup. So the choice becomes to either cosplay an offensive depiction of a person of colour, or to cosplay a character with light skin. Does this mean there is room for racial crossing?

Unfortunately, this doesn’t seem to be the case. If a cosplayer with light skin dresses as a canonically dark-skinned character, this could be seen as white washing (Hutabarat-Nelson 95). If a cosplayer with dark skin dresses as a canonically light-skinned character, their costume might not be deemed “accurate” to the character. This can lead to derogatory comments and harassment. For example, Krissy Victory is a black cosplayer from the United Kingdom who has a large following on Twitter (@KrissyVictory). She has faced discrimination as a person of colour cosplayer and is now an advocate for black cosplayers. In an online opinion piece, she described occasions where has been told that her skin colour “ruined the cosplay” when she

cosplays canonically light-skinned characters (Victory). To say that her skin colour “ruined the cosplay” is to say that someone of colour should not be cosplaying a character that has light skin. This policing of skin colour is disturbing to say the least. Anime conventions might indeed be “utopias” for gender exploration, but they have a long way to go in terms of racial acceptance.

The racial limitations at play at anime conventions require more research. The unspoken acceptance of white cosplayers portraying canonically Asian characters is something that should be investigated further. I would be interested in researching the reasons why Canadian anime conventions are so predominantly white. What is the white fascination with Japanese popular culture? Moreover, it would be interesting to examine racial crossing and cosplay in greater detail.

Limitations: Economic Factors

Attending an anime convention and participating in cosplay are not necessarily cheap activities. A weekend pass to Otakuthon in Montreal or Anime North in Toronto costs \$60 CAD. This allows access to each of the three days of these conventions. If one is travelling to the convention, there are also travel costs to consider. This is all excluding if an attendee is going to cosplay or not. As discussed in the section “Celebrity for a Moment,” some cosplayers plan to do more than one cosplay per convention. This is by no means enforced, as cosplay is a voluntary activity. Regardless, coming up with three different costumes can be a pricey ordeal. This also depends on the intricacy of the costume. I could not find an article describing the cost of cosplaying at an anime convention specifically. However, in a *Forbes* article discussing the costs of New York Comic Con, the prices of cosplay ranged from \$75 to \$2,400 USD (Bergstein). The costumes detailed by the article were very elaborate and featured armour, props, and customized

items which can increase the price of a cosplay significantly. My most recent cosplay, Diamond from *Land of the Lustrous*, cost me less than \$100 CAD, and that included buying a wig online. The design of the character was simplistic in that they wear a white collared t-shirt and black shorts. However, to some, even a cheaper cosplay can be inaccessible on top of all the other costs associated with attending an anime convention. I did not ask my participants about the prices of their different cosplays, but this is something I would like to investigate in further research. It should be noted that two of my participants are students and one of them, Taylor, has done over fifty different cosplays. What amount of their income is going towards creating these costumes? Are class and other economic factors significant limitations to attending anime conventions and participating in cosplay?

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how cosplay at Canadian anime conventions can lead to feelings of positivity, self-confidence, and community. One can become a celebrity, if even for a moment, escape the mundanity of daily life, and even self-actualize. It is through these positive experiences that cosplayers are able to explore and play with their gender presentations via cross-play and hyperbolic gender expression. Attendees know that gender exploration is a normal occurrence at anime conventions. Therefore, it becomes possible for non-binary and trans people to utilize cosplay as a means of actualizing their desired gender presentation in a space where this is accepted and encouraged. Additionally, through the ritualization of cosplay practices and the tolerant attitude towards gender expression at conventions, anime conventions could be seen as achievable utopias of gender fluidity. These are places where people can imagine a future in which crossdressing, exaggerated performances of gender, and a variety of gender identities

become socially acceptable. Unwittingly or not, convention attendees are practicing for a more tolerant future.

Although there are many positive aspects to cosplay and cross-play, there are still limitations that require attention. Cosplayers' bodies are policed and some plus-sized attendees feel self-conscious about choosing certain characters to portray. Race seems to be a limitation to cosplay at anime conventions. Non-Asian people of colour cosplaying canonically light-skinned characters sometimes face discrimination because of this. Furthermore, the economic factors involved in cosplay and anime conventions requires further research. As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, although much positivity and self-exploration in terms of gender can arise from cosplaying at anime conventions, this freedom to explore one's identity is limited to certain bodies and identities. Are anime conventions truly achievable utopias? Perhaps for gender fluidity and expression, but there remains a lot of work to be done should these spaces hope to become safe for all who attend. Body type, race, and class all seem to be factors that can limit one's access to the cosplay community. In the following chapter, I examine the limitations surrounding femininity, and the unnerving situations that can arise when cis women and non-binary AFAB people choose to cosplay as a female anime character.

CHAPTER FOUR: Playing with Masculinity and the Devaluation of Femininity

“You get treated differently [when cosplaying a male character]... I dunno people just think that you’re cooler.”

- Dania

“When I dress like a guy my cosplay is being taken more seriously. In the sense that, like, if a guy does come up and want my picture it’s ‘cause I’ve done a good job.”

- Lena

Introduction

Certainly, anime conventions appear to be spaces in which gender experimentation is accepted and even encouraged. Yet, after speaking with my participants, I found myself wondering, why do so many cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers in particular participate in male cross-play so frequently?¹¹ In this chapter, I will be focusing on the responses of my cis women and non-binary AFAB participants and the reasons they engage in male cross-play. I will analyze interview responses from four cis women cosplayers and one non-binary AFAB cosplayer who regularly attend anime conventions in Canada. They include Lena, a straight cis woman; Brooklyn, a bisexual cis woman; Emilia, a pansexual cis woman; Pamela, a pan-romantic demisexual cis woman; and Dania, a queer non-binary person.¹² These participants had a variety of different reasons for choosing to dress as male characters.

To begin, I examine how male anime characters have historically been viewed as the most popular characters and how female anime characters have been devalued in the medium

¹¹ I have chosen to investigate cis women and non-binary AFAB together in this section. This is not to group them as the same identities, nor is it meant to prioritize birth-assigned sex over present gender identity. This is due to the similarity of responses from both groups.

¹² The participants Jamie (a trans/fluid woman), Taylor (a non-binary person), and Terrance (a cis gay man) do not appear in this chapter. Jamie’s reasons for her cross-play were solely focused on experimentation with her gender presentation. Taylor’s reasoning for cross-play also focused on their experimentation with gender presentation. Terrance had only done one cross-play, the reason for which was not revealed in our interview.

itself. I then look at how cross-play can be a defence mechanism for cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers trying to avoid potentially unnerving sexualized attention from straight men. Next, I analyze the genre known as *yaoi* or “boy’s love,” its popularity among women in the anime fandom, and how this informs cross-play. I then investigate participants’ claims that cross-playing as a male character allows them to “take up more space” and be “taken seriously” in the convention setting. I conclude by analyzing the internalized sexism apparent at anime conventions, as well as the potential subversive power of gender bending male characters. I assert that cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers are not cross-playing only because they want to play with their gender presentation. The devaluation of female anime characters within the medium as well as the anime convention community and internalized negativity surrounding femininity can also lead cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers to cross-play as male characters.

Popularity of Male Characters

Within the medium of anime, there is a multitude of different genres. These range anywhere from romance to fantasy, comedy, erotica, and horror. There are seemingly limitless possibilities when it comes to genres, storylines, and characters. It has been posited that the wide landscape of anime genres offer a place to explore gender identities (Fennell et al. 443). Yet, many popular anime centre on male protagonists. Female characters are underrepresented, overtly sexualized, or underwritten. This is certainly the case across multiple different media from many regions, not just anime (Collins 293). However, anime is created in Japan which still remains a largely patriarchal society (Fennell et al. 443). It is then unsurprising that there is an entire genre of anime dedicated to and advertised to young boys. This genre is called *shonen* and some of the

most popular anime in Japan fall into this category. In each *shonen* series, the male protagonist sets out on an adventure to become “the greatest.” He has companions along the way but the story focuses on his quest and the things he must overcome to accomplish his goals. The female characters are often depicted as less competent than their male counterparts. Conversely, *shojo* anime are created for and advertised to girls in Japan. The stories follow a lead female character on an adventure usually with a cast of supporting characters alongside. Although the premise of a *shojo* anime might sound similar to that of a *shonen*, they differ in that a heterosexual romance is often the goal of the main protagonist in a *shojo* series, and female characters are often ditzy, clumsy, or meant to be viewed as silly. Even in a series like *Sailor Moon* where the female protagonist is tasked with saving the world from destruction, much of series’ time is spent on Sailor Moon’s quest for love. This is not to say that the pursuit of love is unimportant, but series advertised to girls are dominated by this one narrative whereas series advertised to boys are not.

This section will focus on the popularity of male anime characters and how this ties into male cross-play. I contend that because male anime characters are generally given more value and are more popular within the medium, cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers might be more inclined to choose these characters over female characters.

Historically, the most popular anime series such as *One Piece*, *Naruto*, and *Bleach* have been in the *shonen* genre. These popular series reinforce stereotypical gender norms. For example, the gender dynamics in *Bleach* reinforce the idea of men as more dominant than women, even though the female characters in *Bleach* are fighters and warriors (Fennell et al. 448). The storyline focuses on Ichigo, the male protagonist who is given soul reaper powers from a female character, Rukia. Notably, two of the main story arcs in *Bleach* focus on Ichigo rescuing the main female characters. One of these female characters, a large-breasted woman

named Orihime, is romantically obsessed with Ichigo. It is common within *shonen* series that even when female characters are warriors, ninjas, or fighters, they are still relegated to the sidelines, and are often dressed in extremely provocative outfits.

Shonen manga and anime are overwhelmingly popular in Japan. For example, *One Piece*, a *shonen* series about a group of pirates, is still the number one most read manga in Japan as of 2018 and it began circulation in 1997 (Loo). One needs simply to look

Rank	Estimated Sales in Period	Title	Author	Publisher
1	3,110,049	<i>One Piece</i>	Eiichiro Oda	Shueisha
2	2,997,049	<i>Attack on Titan</i>	Hajime Isayama	Kodansha
3	2,769,915	<i>The Seven Deadly Sins</i>	Nakaba Suzuki	Kodansha
4	2,523,071	<i>Haikyuu!!</i>	Haruichi Furudate	Shueisha
5	2,516,768	<i>My Hero Academia</i>	Kōhei Horikoshi	Shueisha

Image 4.1. Screenshot of manga sale rankings in Japan from November 2017 to May 2018 from article by Egan Loo from *Anime News Network*, animenewsnetwork.com/news/2018-05-31/top-selling-manga-in-japan-by-series-2018/.132243

at the rankings of manga sales in Japan to understand *shonen*'s popularity (Image 4.1). Each of the top five manga on this chart are *shonen* series. Each follows a young boy or teen on his quest to become "the greatest." Four of these manga are authored by men,¹³ and each of these series has one or more male protagonist(s). Although there are female characters within each of the series, they are not the pivotal roles. When the top five manga in Japan (and the anime based off these manga) feature strong male protagonists with interesting abilities and storylines, it seems unsurprising that cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers might choose to portray male characters from these series.

When I asked Lena to choose her favourite cosplay out of the at least twenty that she has done, she chose Levi from *Attack on Titan*. She explained that not only was Levi an interesting character, he was one of the most popular characters in the cosplay community at the time (as well as today). *Attack on Titan*, a *shonen* series set in a dystopian future where humanity is

¹³ Haruichi Furudate, the author of *Haikyuu!!*, has not disclosed their gender. Fans speculate that the author is a woman.

forced to live within walled communities to avoid being eaten by monsters, is the second most popular manga in Japan at the time of writing. Since the corresponding anime aired in 2013, the militaristic uniforms of the series have been pervasive throughout the anime convention circuit. Among the characters of *Attack on Titan*, Levi is often chosen as the most popular among fans (POLL: “Attack On Titan”). If cosplayers at anime conventions are trying to garner subcultural capital, it would be logical that attendees would want to cosplay a popular character, even if this character does not align with their sex assigned at birth. The more recognizable a cosplayer’s character, the more likely they are to be stopped for a photo. When I asked Lena why she was more likely to choose a male character to cosplay, she had a few different reasons, but one of them was:

Choosing a popular character is, like, a big factor because you get more recognition for doing a popular character. The vast majority of popular anime have been *shonen* which have male protagonists. So male characters seem to be the better choice.

This is not to say that Lena is only interested in cosplaying popular characters. This was just one of the contributing factors in her decision to cosplay Levi. He was widely recognized and a character that garnered much attention from convention attendees.

Choosing a popular character is also a way to build community and friendships at anime conventions. By dressing as a character from a popular series, one is more likely to find other cosplayers from the same series. For example, Dania’s favourite cosplay was Sasori, a villain from *Naruto*, a *shonen* series following a group of ninjas with a largely male cast. Dania described the year she chose her cosplay in terms of the popularity of the anime series from which her character came: “I was cosplaying Sasori from *Naruto* and that was the coolest year to cosplay 'cause *Naruto* had just come back *really* strong and there was so many *Naruto* cosplayers

and we all did a big meet up... ” These “meet ups” are sometimes organized by the convention itself if the series is popular enough. Pamela’s favourite cosplay was Minami from *Yuri!!! on Ice*, a series about male figure skaters. She talked about how good it felt to meet with other *Yuri!!! on Ice* cosplayers: “I met so many of the other *Yuri!!! on Ice* people, we did all these photoshoots, I mean you just meet these great people and you have fun together.” The year she chose to cosplay Minami was the year that *Yuri!!! on Ice* came out and it was very popular. If the most popular series are comprised of male characters, and if cosplaying characters from these popular series means attending meet ups and other series-specific events, it stands to reason that cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers at anime conventions would choose to cross-play.

It is clear that there is a privileging of male characters within anime as medium and also within the anime convention community. Many cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers are choosing to cross-play as male characters for the simple fact that these male characters are more popular and are oftentimes given more interesting storylines. Even in stories where female characters are considered strong, such as the example of *Bleach*, they are still often relegated to damsels in distress or are underwritten in general. Gender has factored into the decisions these cosplayers made with regards to which characters they would portray. The popularity of male characters in series with majority male casts have lead cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers to cross-play over cosplaying underwritten female sidekicks or love interests.

Unwanted/Unnerving Attention

It would be too simplistic to say that cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers only choose to cross-play as male characters because these characters are more popular. There are several popular anime series that feature strong female leads. Series such as *Sailor Moon* and

Cardcaptor Sakura feature female leads with well-developed characters and interesting storylines. Walking into an anime convention, it is also quite common to see cosplayers dressed as female characters from *shonen* series or other anime series with male protagonists. Moreover, cosplaying female characters in revealing outfits is not uncommon. In Chapter Three, Emilia spoke of the confidence and pride she felt when she cosplayed Panty, a character known for her revealing outfits and sexual prowess. It can feel liberating to dress in a sexy outfit and to be admired. Yet, when being looked at in cosplay there seems to be a thin line between being feeling sexy and feeling uncomfortable.

To better understand the fine line between feelings of sexiness and feelings of discomfort, I have to first explain the anime term “fan service.” In anime, the term fan service is used to describe images meant to elicit sexual excitement and interest that are usually irrelevant to the overarching storyline (Lamarre 58). For example, a fan service shot might focus on a character’s nearly exposed breasts, or be angled so that the viewer can see the character’s underwear, so-called “panty-shots” (Russell 107). Fan service can be found throughout most anime series. For example, in a *shonen* series like *One Piece*, most of the main characters are male. There are main female characters such as Nami and Robin, but their main function in the series is to be looked at by the male audience. There are series such as *High School of the Dead* that are entirely fan service-based. The point of the series is to be fan service, the plot comes second. Moreover, there are specific angles and shots used to present fan service to viewers which can be found in non-fan service series and fan service series alike.

Fan service shots are most common with female characters where the camera angle is positioned to objectify their bodies. This is what feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey refers to as “to-be-looked-at-ness” (11). The female characters have little importance to the story being told.

They are there to be looked at by the male protagonist and the audience. It was only recently with the advent of series such as *Free!* that fan service directed at women became more mainstream. Although fan service directed at women includes similar camera angles, for example focusing on the male characters' exposed muscles, the male characters are usually the protagonists and if there are female characters in the series, they are relegated to the sideline. This contrasts with fan service shots directed at men in which women are objectified and the series' male protagonist gets to look at them alongside the audience.

Cosplaying a fan service character can be a lot of fun. For example, during last year's convention season, I chose to cosplay as Lucoa from *Miss Kobayashi's Dragon Maid*, a series following the daily lives of girls with dragon attributes living in Tokyo. This series features an almost entirely female cast, but it could be argued that most of the series is "fan service." The character I chose to cosplay, Lucoa, is known for having disproportionately large breasts and a somewhat ditsy demeanour. She is the epitome of a fan service character. My cosplay experience as Lucoa did indeed feel liberating and fun. I had stuffed my bra to unimaginable lengths and was wearing only a tank top and shorts. I enjoyed the positive feedback on my appearance in the revealing outfit and it made me feel sexy. When I was stopped and asked for photos, it was generally from male convention goers. I appreciated the compliments and the discussions of *Dragon Maid*. Later, I was approached by a man who, at first he said he loved my character, then admitted to having never even heard of *Dragon Maid*. It was then that those good feelings turned to feelings of unease. I suddenly felt unsafe. I was alone and he was among a group of male

friends who began taking my picture without asking.¹⁴ The situation had quickly gone from one of liberation to one of unease and discomfort.

In his ethnographic study of Dragon*Con in Atlanta, Georgia, cultural studies scholar Matthew Hale spoke with female attendees who cross-played to avoid harassment and to avoid being photographed without permission (22). My own research has found a similar occurrence among cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers at Canadian anime conventions. This section will investigate how uneasy it can sometimes feel to cosplay a female character. I contend that these instances of uncertainty and unease have, at times, led cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers to cross-play as male characters. Cross-play becomes a sort of defence mechanism against unwanted and unnerving attention male attention.

When I asked Dania if there were specific cosplays where she was harassed more than others, she responded: “*Absolutely*. I find the more feminine that you are dressed, the more likely you are to get harassed. When I’m dressed as female characters I get harassed a lot more.” Lena mirrored this experience of discomfort when she cosplayed as a female character in a revealing outfit:

When I did Nami [from *One Piece*] and it was like I’m wearing a bikini top and low rider jeans. Why did they want my photo? Was it because they liked Nami as a character or was it because they liked Nami in a *different* way. That sort of weird thing. So I think that when you cross-play, it sort of avoids that whole scene.

¹⁴ Taking a cosplayer’s photograph without asking is generally frowned upon at anime conventions. Anime North’s policy page states: “Please be considerate and ask first before taking pictures of guests, con staff, other attendees or the general public.” (Convention Policies).

Lena's emphasis on the word "different" was alluding to the nature of this unnerving attention. I asked her if she thinks this happens to other cosplayers who choose to portray female characters (particularly female characters dressed in revealing outfits). She answered with a story about a woman she had seen who was dressed as Yoko Littner from *Gurren Lagann*. In the series, Yoko is depicted wearing a bikini top and shorts (see Image 4.2):

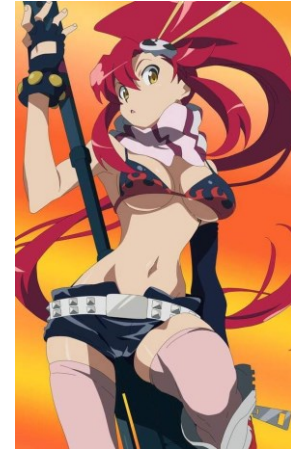


Image 4.2. Digital image of Yoko Littner from *Amino*, aminoapps.com/c/saikoplus/page/blog/meet-the-champions-yoko-littner/B6dw_p6swu5pkEkvY0LKDK2nw5MggZF8aM

You see the girl dressed up as Yoko from *Gurren Lagann* and then you see the crowd of men, you know, surrounding her trying to get her picture. Maybe taking her picture without asking... And you know, they don't really want her picture 'cause she did a great job with her cosplay. They want it for other reasons

which is kind of uncomfortable. But I guess that's the bonus about cross-play.

Lena's description of men surrounding a cosplayer and taking her photograph without permission is intimidating. Her pause after speaking about this was purposeful. She was trying to assert how uncomfortable these occurrences can be. To avoid a potentially unnerving situation and still be able to enjoy the convention experience, Lena chooses to cross-play. This is what she meant by "bonus about cross-play." Lena means that when she cross-plays, she does not have to worry as much about feeling unsafe. Even though Lena is straight and enjoys some kinds of male attention, the thin line between positive and negative feelings has lead her to prefer cross-playing. By embodying a male character, Lena feels she does not have to worry about discomfort and unwanted attention from male conventions-goers. She also receives positive feedback from female convention goers which I discuss further in the following section, "*Yaoi*."

These feelings of unease and discomfort seem challenging for my participants to explain. Dania, Lena, and Brooklyn each described feelings of unease from being photographed while cosplaying a female character. Dania described cosplaying female characters: “When I cosplay female characters I almost never get attention from any of the female convention goers. And I might get some... male attention...” Dania’s pauses were heavy. When I prompted her to elaborate on what kind of “male attention” she might receive, she simply shrugged and rolled her eyes, as if she were saying “you’ve been to a convention, you know what I mean.” Lena was a bit clearer in her explanation of the discomfort sometimes felt while cosplaying a female character: “Guys can take weirdly sexual pictures, what are they using these pictures for, you know?” I asked Lena to clarify, but she did not provide an answer as to what she thought those pictures were being used for. Brooklyn shared this sentiment as well stating that: “It feels creepy posing for *those* kinds of photos.” Each of these participants expressed unease or discomfort at being photographed by male convention goers in certain instances. It is precisely those instances that interest me. Where do cosplayers draw the line between positive feedback on a costume and this creepiness factor described?

This is comparable to how I felt when dressed as Lucoa. There were very few women stopping to ask me about my cosplay, the majority were men. Brooklyn spoke of what she anticipates when she dresses in a revealing outfit at a convention: “It really does bring out those predatory instincts in guys, 'cause it’s like they’ve never seen a woman in years? So they start drooling over them all the time.” These “predatory instincts” will be addressed at length in Chapter Five, focusing on what happens when unnerving situations escalate to those of harassment and sexual harassment. For the purpose of this chapter, it shows Brooklyn’s feelings of unease at being photographed by men while cosplaying a female character in a revealing

outfit. Cross-playing as a male character has become a defence mechanism for cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers at anime conventions to avoid potentially unnerving situations.

Yaoi

Another influence on the choice to cross-play male characters is the popularity of *yaoi* or “boys-love.” This genre usually follows two *bishonen* (“beautiful boys”) as they fall in love with each other. These series often feature explicit sex scenes and even in series without explicit sexual imagery, there is an erotic feeling throughout. The sex scenes are slow and “luxurious,” featuring slim, “elfin” figures (McLelland 277). *Yaoi* manga are predominantly written by women for a female audience (276). There are publications in Japan specifically advertised to gay men, but these are not considered *yaoi* as their content is drastically different, often including well-muscled men engaging in forceful intercourse where the masculinity of the characters is emphasized (279). *Yaoi* and its related commercial products are popular in Japan, bringing in over two billion yen (roughly in 24 million USD) in 2010 (Zsila et al. 2). In fact, in Japan a term was coined specifically to describe the women who love *yaoi*. These women are known as “*fujoshi*” meaning “rotten girl” and this term has changed from an insult to a self-mocking monicker among *yaoi* fans.

In 2003, Tokypop, a manga publisher in the United States, released three *yaoi* manga for the first time in North America and their popularity was immediate (Wood 394). *Yaoi* manga can still be found in North American bookstores. There is even an annual “Yaoi Con” in Santa Clara, California, that began in 2001 (Zsila et al. 2). Thus, it is not surprising to find many Canadian anime convention attendees engaging with *yaoi*. It is quite common for *fujoshi* to cross-play as their favourite characters from *yaoi* series. Moreover, anime that are not explicitly labelled

as *yaoi* but are targeted to a female audience are popular choices for cross-play. These series are often referred to as “*fujoshi* bait” as they are labelled as a genre other than *yaoi* but have explicit *yaoi* undertones and are often very popular among *fujoshi*. This is something akin to queer baiting where a piece of media will hint towards a queer relationship or character, but it is never explicitly stated. For example, *Free!* is often considered a *fujoshi* bait series because of the underlying *yaoi* plot lines. The series is full of fan service shots of the main cast in swimsuits, as well as scenes hinting at “more than friend” relationships. Yet, the series is categorized by its production company as “slice of life, comedy, sports, drama, and school” (MyAnimeList). *Fujoshi* bait series often follow an ensemble cast of *bishonen* who are close with one another, but their relationships are presented as friendships only. According to one fan, these are series that “still have fan service where the [male] characters have some strong emotional bond and where we can scream at the screen ‘SHIP IT!’” (Bubblebishie). That is, these series present different characters that viewers can pair together, even if the pairing is not a canon relationship.

Each of the four cis women¹⁵ I interviewed have cross-played as a character from a *yaoi* series or a *fujoshi* bait series. In this section, I investigate the link between *yaoi*’s popularity and cross-playing male characters. I assert that since many *yaoi* fans are cis women, cross-playing as a male character from a *yaoi* or *fujoshi* bait series offers a means of receiving positive attention from women. Moreover, cross-playing a character from a *yaoi* series offers queer women a means of being admired and fawned over by other women. This is potentially welcome attention

¹⁵ This section will focus solely on the experiences of four cis women participants. Neither of my non-binary AFAB participants mentioned *yaoi* or *fujoshi* bait series in their interviews.

compared to the unnerving attention they might receive from men by cosplaying as a female character.

Unlike manga targeted at male audiences (straight or gay) that depicts the male protagonists as hyper-masculine, the male protagonists of most *yaoi* series are drawn in an almost androgynous and feminine manner (Wood 397). It is not uncommon to see men with flowing hair, long eyelashes, plump lips, and other traditionally feminine qualities in these series. (Image 4.3 offers an example of a typical *yaoi* series and its characters.) Perhaps this androgyny and softer masculinity makes it easier for cis women and non-binary

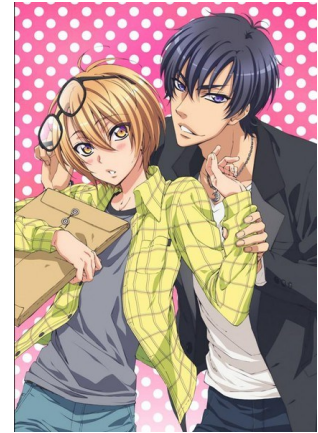


Image 4.3. Digital image of Izumi and Ryouma from *Anime News Network*, animenewsnetwork.com/encyclopedia/anime.php?id=15846

AFAB cosplayers to accurately cross-play these characters. Brooklyn even asserted that: “Because you see so many girls doing cross-plays that you’re like wow, they look even better than guys doing it.” If women are more accurately able to embody male *yaoi* characters, it would make sense that many cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers purposefully choose to cross-play. This also could be part of the defence mechanism for averting unwanted male attention discussed in the previous section as straight male convention attendees are less likely to recognize a character from a *yaoi* series.

In 2013, a group of friends (two cis women and one trans man) and I went to Animethon in Edmonton as characters from the video game *Dramatical Murder*. In this game, the player makes choices for the protagonist, Aoba Seragaki, as he chooses between four potential male suitors. Aoba has long blue hair, a petite frame, and the voice-actor who plays him has a soft voice. I was amazed to discover that three of my eight study participants had independently cross-played characters from this game. Brooklyn had cross-played as Aoba, Emilia as Clear

(one of Aoba's suitors), and Lena as Koujaku (another of Aoba's suitors). Emilia spoke of her experience dressed as Clear, accompanied by her partner, Sarah (a cis woman), who was dressed as Aoba: "Fangirls loved it! Especially paired up with the Aoba and everything, they went nuts." I can mirror these sentiments having cross-played as Aoba with three of my friends playing Aoba's suitors. As we walked around the convention hall, we were stopped by girls squealing with delight in seeing Aoba with his boyfriends. Emilia spoke in a fond way when she brought up the attention she received from fangirls. It was different from how Lena and Brooklyn described being stopped by groups of men. I posit that by dressing as a character from a *yaoi* series or *fujoshi* bait series, queer women ensure that the attention they receive will largely be from other women, since these series are so popular among women in the anime fandom. They know that, in general, straight men are not interested in *yaoi* and thus will be less likely to approach them in cosplay.

Taking Up Space (To be Taken Seriously)

I remember Dania's interview vividly in that one of her responses really stood out to me. I asked her why she enjoyed participating in cross-play and she began by giving me some of the answers discussed previously. She felt that cross-play helped her experiment with her different gender presentations since she is non-binary. She also felt that cross-play helped her avoid unwanted male attention. She then paused and offered me another reason for enjoying cross-play:

I like the sort of stature that you get, you can be a lot more intimidating you can really get like into it. I like cosplaying Sub-Zero [from *Mortal Combat*] 'cause he's very much like cold and passive, not really saying anything but like very imposing, very tall. I think it's more about

like creating a bigger presence. It's like when I cross-play it's 'cause I want people to sort of... I want my space in the room to grow sort of metaphorically.

Dania's ability to "grow metaphorically" is linked to her embodying a male character. As I discussed previously, female anime characters are often objectified and relegated to the sidelines of the most popular anime series. That is, they are taken less seriously than their male counterparts. If female characters are not being taken as seriously by convention goers, cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers may choose to get around this by cross-playing as a more intimidating, physically larger, male character. However, I think this is also tied to women's constant struggle to claim their own agency and space in society. This section will focus on how cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers utilize cross-play to be taken seriously at a convention. I contend that this is linked to society's overall devaluation of femininity.

In a way, to be "taken seriously" as a cosplayer equates to taking up space within the convention community. A cosplayer puts themselves on display and seeks approval from other cosplayers and attendees. This approval is quantified in the number of times one is stopped for a photograph by other attendees, but it could also be measured by the feeling of agency one gains in personifying a particular character. Lena talks about being taken seriously: "When I dress like a guy my cosplay is being taken more seriously. In the sense that like if a guy does come up and want my picture it's 'cause I've done a good job." It is interesting that Lena feels she is only being praised for doing a "good job" when she is stopped for a photograph by a man while cross-playing a male character. This is contrasted with when she cosplays a female character and she feels she is only stopped for a photo because her body is more exposed. Does being taken seriously in the cosplay community equate to only cosplaying characters who are seen as

inherently masculine? Why does Lena not feel as though she is being taken seriously when she cosplays as a female character? Why does the approval of male cosplayers seem to hold more weight?

This notion of being taken seriously as a cosplayer is reminiscent of the ways in which some women in the workplace use strategies to be seen as more masculine in order to be taken seriously. For example, feminist geographer Nancy Worth conducted a study of millennial women in Canada and the ways in which they deal with workplace gender inequality. Ultimately, the goal was to be “taken seriously” (1309) by their coworkers and one of the ways in which this was accomplished was by toning down stereotypically feminine qualities (1308). Some women took on more traditionally masculine traits to be recognized as competent in their positions. This downplaying of traditionally feminine characteristics speaks to the still present sexism in the workforce. Moreover, it ties into the idea of feminine traits as less valuable than masculine traits. Research has demonstrated that women who were identified as dressing in a “sexy manner” were perceived as less competent for a high-status job (Graff et al. 765) and that sexualized women were often thought of as less intelligent (766). These negative ideas surrounding femininity have made their way into the anime convention community. To put it simply, Dania explained: “You get treated differently [when cosplaying a male character]... I dunno people just think that you’re cooler.” But why do people think that one is “cooler” as a male character?

Internalized devaluation of femininity in Western society is not something new. Activist and transfeminist author Julia Serano discusses the ways that femininity gets associated with frivolity in her book *Whipping Girl*. She posits that in a patriarchal society, women are taught to take up feminine traits but these traits are then given less importance than masculine traits in an attempt to maintain patriarchal power (327). Traits such as “being emotional” have negative

connotations, and it is generally women who are seen as emotional in society (326).

Interestingly, feminine traits are also sometimes devalued within feminist circles as femininity is often blamed for enabling sexism (332). Some feminists insist that should women wish to be taken seriously, we must give up our lipstick and dresses and instead opt for more masculine traits. I argue that this negativity surrounding feminine attributes presents itself at anime conventions and within cosplay communities. Should a cosplayer wish to be taken seriously by their peers, it would seem that femininity must be cast aside. Cross-play then becomes an attempt to navigate this internalized negativity surrounding femininity.

Gender Bending as a Reclamation of Femininity?

As described in the previous sections, there are many reasons cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers participate in cross-play. Yet, cross-play can be exhausting work. Notably, it can be physically taxing to try and alter one's body for a day at a convention. When I asked what could hinder them from doing a cross-play, both Lena and Brooklyn described the difficulties involved in cross-playing certain male characters. For women with large breasts and hips, it can be quite uncomfortable to do a cross-play, especially if the character they choose reveals his chest or other areas of his body that can be read as male. For example, Lena told me about the time she cross-played as Koujaku from *Dramatical Murder*. Koujaku wears an open kimono that exposes part of his chest:

I think back to taping my boobs when I did Koujaku... I have like vivid memories of being in the shower and having liquid blisters all over my chest 'cause of the taping process. And it's just so uncomfortable, like it's something you only get to do for two hours and then you have

to go and rip it all off 'cause it's so uncomfortable and I think that's what's stopping me from a lot of like those open chest [outfits].

To accurately embody Koujaku, Lena had to physically tape her breasts to the side to give the illusion of pectoral muscles. Moreover, she could not risk her nipples showing as this would have been considered indecent exposure.

Brooklyn shared her discomfort not only in having to bind her breasts to cross-play, but in the fact that her hips are “too wide” to adequately portray a male character:

I've never liked that I'm a pear shape and it's very hard to pull off guys. 'Cause I mean, their hips are so narrow and mine are like blah. And then there's finding like the right binder.

'Cause so far, the only binder that's worked for me that's really compressed my chest enough is one that I'm like “I can't breathe, this is not good.” So I mean, there's being big-busted and being big-hipped that has made it difficult for cross-play.

It is interesting to note that Brooklyn is bringing up the issue of body size again. This ties back to Chapter Three's section “Limitations: Body Shaming.” Brooklyn expressed discontent in her cross-plays because she believes she does not have the right body type to accurately embody a male character. Her “pear shape” is hard for her to hide, specifically her hips. This leads me to wonder if women with smaller chests and slimmer hips receive more attention and positive reactions to their cross-plays than someone who has a body that can be read as female. I would like to research this idea further.

I bring up the difficulties faced by women who cross-play to demonstrate the level of dedication that can be required to accurately embody a male character. If cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers do not wish to cosplay a female character, nor do they wish to cross-play, gender bending presents an alternative strategy. Gender bending is when fans change the

canonical gender of character. For example, my first cosplay was a gender bend of Trafalgar Law from *One Piece*. I chose to do a gender bend of Law because he was my favourite character at the time and because he was popular. I was uncomfortable attempting a cross-play for my first cosplay experience, so I chose to remake the character to fit my female body. Emilia spoke of gender bending as a potential gateway into cross-playing more regularly: “I think [gender bending] is a great way to bridge the gap. You still get to represent a male character that you really enjoy or really appreciate but in a way that makes you comfortable.” While I agree with Emilia that gender bending is a kind of “bridge” to cross-playing, I also think it is something more than that. I contend that by reimagining a male character as female, gender benders are giving importance to femininity, if in a small way. Certainly, the gender dynamics of the convention space itself do not change by simply gender bending a character. Yet, there is something to be said about the potential power of changing a character to better match one’s personal gender identity.

According to fan studies scholar Kristina Busse, women have been creating their own fan content since the days of *Star Trek: The Original Series* (105). These women wanted more information about their beloved characters and when they were denied this information, they began creating it themselves. In bending the gender of a male character, cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers are actively engaging with the source material and changing it to suit their own identity. Gender bending in itself requires rethinking the original character’s outfit and appearance. There are a few rare instances of canonically gender bent characters in anime. For example, in *Mr. Osomatsu*, an episodic comedy series following a group of twenty-something male sextuplets, there is a segment called “*Joshimastu-san*,” translated to “Miss Girlymatsu.” In this recurring segment, the male sextuplets are depicted as women. Yet, for the most part, fans

must create gender bends for themselves. Oftentimes there is fan art of the gender bent character and cosplayers will take inspiration from these drawings. Emilia told me that she was interested in doing a gender bend of Shoto Todoroki from *My Hero Academia* because: “the fan art that I’ve seen of [gender bent Shoto] is just so cute so I’m like I could do that.” The work of redesigning Shoto’s character has already been done for Emilia and she could craft her cosplay based on the existing fan-made designs. The fan labour put into altering the gender of characters is of great interest to me. Unfortunately, addressing gender bending in depth is outside the limits of this project. I would like to investigate gender bending further in future research and the reception of gender bent cosplays. In her doctoral dissertation, Tiffany Hutabarat-Nelson described negative reactions on internet forums to gender bending such as confusion and disgust which she ties to “implicit biases towards traditional norms” (17). What does it mean for gender bending to be met with negative reactions when my participants contend that anime conventions are spaces to experiment with gender presentation?

Conclusion

Although there are many potential benefits to cross-play such as gender play, experimentation, and dealing with body dysphoria, male cross-play might not be as simple as it appears to be. Cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers consider many different factors when choosing to cross-play. Male characters are more prevalent in the most popular series and cross-playing a male character from a *yaoi* series can garner positive attention from fan girls. This is particularly attractive to queer women cosplayers who might be seeking female attention. Cross-play also acts as a defence against unwanted male attention. It would seem that cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers attending anime conventions walk a thin line between enjoyment and potential

discomfort. Dressing as a female character in a revealing outfit can lead to feelings of pride and also positive attention from male convention goers. Yet, this positive male attention can quickly turn into something that feels intimidating or unnerving. I will discuss this aspect of cosplay and anime conventions in the following chapter where I investigate what happens when these creepy interactions turn into harassment. For the purposes of this chapter, I return to my initial assertion that negativity surrounding femininity at anime conventions is consciously and subconsciously influencing cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers in their decisions to cross-play. This is not necessarily surprising since femininity is undervalued by society in general. However, as described in Chapter Three, anime conventions are spaces where gender exploration and play are seemingly accepted and normalized occurrences. It's interesting that femininity is still seen as less important or serious in a setting such as this.

CHAPTER FIVE: Sexual Harassment at Anime Conventions

“I totally expect to be harassed and touched at least once.”

- Taylor

“I mean you can imagine, you know, being a man, I’m never harassed by people.”

- Terrance

Introduction

In the last chapter I described how cis women and non-binary AFAB participants sometimes use cross-play as a means to avoid unwanted male attention. In this chapter, I examine harassment of cosplayers in more detail. I will not be discussing cross-play in this chapter as each of the stories of harassment shared by cis women and non-binary AFAB participants occurred while they were cosplaying female characters. I begin by presenting the stories shared by five of my participants about their experiences with sexual harassment at anime conventions. They include Terrance, a gay cis man; Brooklyn, a bisexual cis woman; Emilia, a pansexual cis woman; Taylor, a pansexual non-binary person; and Dania, a queer non-binary person.¹⁶ I then look at the possible reasons for the heightened amount of sexual harassment reported at anime conventions. Next, I investigate the harassment policies of three of the biggest anime conventions in Canada to see what is being done to prevent and deal with harassment. Finally, I offer some recommendations of changes that could be made to these policies. I posit that although anime conventions offer a space of gender exploration and play through cross-play, there are still many risk factors to attending these events, specifically relating to harassment of attendees. As the popularity of these events grows, convention policy makers need to address the issue of harassment in greater detail

¹⁶ The participants Jamie (a trans/fluid woman), Lena (a straight cis woman), and Pamela (a pan-romantic demisexual cis woman) do not appear in this chapter. Each of these participants reported knowing of the problem with sexual harassment at anime conventions, but they had not experienced it first hand.

to ensure safety and enjoyment of their attendees.

Stories of Sexual Harassment

It was not until my fourth time attending Animethon in Edmonton that I was sexually harassed. I was doing a gender bend of Makoto Tachibana from *Free!* and so I was wearing a one-piece swimsuit. I was standing and posing for a photograph with a man who then proceeded to grab me from behind. I remember feeling shocked and not knowing what to say. It was over before I could even tell the man off. I looked around to alert a convention staff member, but the man had already rejoined the crowd of attendees. Looking back, I'm not sure that I would have even felt comfortable disclosing the incident had there been a staff member present. I had heard numerous accounts of friends and peers being sexually harassed at anime conventions while in cosplay, but I had yet to experience it for myself. Sexual harassment at anime conventions is not an uncommon event. In Chapter Four, I discussed how cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers seem to be more likely to be harassed when dressed as a female character. To avoid this harassment, many of them choose to cross-play as male characters. In this section, I examine the stories of my participants who have experienced harassment while dressed as female characters.

When I asked Terrance (the only cis man who participated in my study) if he had ever felt uncomfortable or unsafe at an anime convention, he paused to think before answering. The question seemed to confuse him. He responded by asking: "Unsafe... In terms of?" I clarified that I was asking whether he had ever experienced harassment of any kind while attending an anime convention. His response was: "I don't think I've ever felt unsafe in terms of the ways people have interacted with me. I mean you can imagine, you know, being a man, I'm never harassed by people." Although Terrance seemed almost blasé in the way he said this, his words

had a great impact on me. Here was someone who was not concerned about his safety, someone who attended conventions and did not expect to be harassed.

There was a trend among my cis women and non-binary AFAB participants regarding sexual harassment. Each of them had witnessed or experienced sexual harassment in one form or another while attending a convention and while in cosplay. This is not to say that cis men and other genders are not sexually harassed at anime conventions. In her thesis investigating sexual harassment at conventions, Alexandria Ellsworth found that one of the six men in her study had been sexually assaulted,¹⁷ compared to fifteen of the twenty women who participated having experienced sexual assault (27). Ellsworth's study mirrored my own results in that women experienced sexual harassment more frequently than men.

According to my participants, unwanted and unnerving attention can lead to unwanted touching. This touching can be something as seemingly harmless as a hug. For example, Brooklyn recounted different instances of male convention attendees coming up to her and trying to hug her: "They came over to me and try to give me a hug and when I'm in a situation like that I'm just like ok, please don't touch me, leave me alone." For the most part, Brooklyn assured me that people would respect her wishes of not wanting to be touched. A hug might seem innocent, yet one must remember that going up to a complete stranger and hugging them would absolutely not be tolerated in regular everyday life. Why is it then tolerated at anime conventions?

From what my participants disclosed to me, a lot of the sexual harassment happening at anime conventions seems to be occurring when cosplayers are stopped to have their photograph

¹⁷ Ellsworth uses the term "sexual assault." I have chosen to use the term "sexual harassment" as that is what was used among my participants. Specific uses of the term "assault" did not come up in my interviews.

taken. Notably, this happens when a man stops a cosplayer and asks to have his photograph taken with them. Brooklyn described this tactic:

So generally, it's people who take advantage of you in photos to grab you. And they know that you'll probably not make a scene so they just do it without asking. And you're just standing there like what do I do? And then you have guys who wanna hug you and it's like uh you just came and asked me for a picture, I hardly know you.

I asked Brooklyn if this had ever happened to her. She said it had not happened to her personally, but she recounted a story that happened to her friend while she was the one taking the photograph:

My friend's had her ass grabbed in a photo and then the guy came up to me and was like "Oh, can you take it again" and then he grabbed her ass again. She's like "[Brooklyn], did you not see that he grabbed my ass?" and I said "Well no, his hand's behind you, how am I supposed to see? Why didn't you say something?" And she's like "Oh, I didn't wanna make a scene" and I'm like "Make a scene or not, he's not allowed to touch you!"

This feeling of uncertainty and of not wanting to "make a scene" is similar to what I experienced when I was grabbed while having my photo taken. Emilia shared a story in the same vein as Brooklyn and I:

I was dressed up as Pochao from *Super Sonico*. If you're familiar with it, I was dressed up as her beer maid costume which is like this bright blue maid outfit sorta thing. So, a guy had asked me for a photo, to take a photo with him. I said, "Yeah! Sure, why not?" So he gives the camera to his friend and we're posing to take the photo and he reached over and grabbed my ass while we were taking the photo. And at that time I froze up, I didn't know what to do, like my freeze instinct kicked in. I didn't want to make it into a big deal. But I felt like, afterwards,

I felt a little bit sick almost. Like I told my friend “I don’t wanna be here anymore, I just wanna go home.” I had heard of that behaviour before and my friends have complained about it too, and I always believed them. The first time it happened to me it really kinda shook me to the core.

It is understandable that Brooklyn and Emilia “froze up” after being touched without giving their consent. Being asked to have one’s photograph taken while in cosplay is normally a fun experience that can lead to feelings of self-confidence and even celebrity. In these instances, a situation that would have usually resulted in positive feelings results in feelings of shock, disgust, and disbelief.

Some of the attendees being harassed are minors. Many pre-teens and teenagers attend anime conventions and participate in cosplay. Generally, parents or guardians are not required to attend conventions with minors over a certain age. For example, Anime North only requires parents to attend with children younger than thirteen. Otakuthon and Anime Revolution’s policy pages do not include rules as to what age children are allowed to attend on their own.¹⁸ Children and teenagers of any age are permitted to explore the convention alone. Taylor, who only recently turned eighteen, shared their story:

I know a lot of people who are underage, like under the age of eighteen who cosplay that have been harassed and it makes me feel super sick. But for me personally, I was about sixteen I

¹⁸ Anime Revolution is more commonly known as AniRevo, and I will be referring to it as such for the rest of the paper.

think? I was wearing Krul from *Owari no Seraph* [Image 5.1], she's the one with long pink hair. Basically her skirt is very short, right? So someone asked to take a picture with me and they put their hand up my skirt... I kind of just turned him and was like "I'm not ok with that." Later on, another guy proceeded to pick me up, bridal style, holding me underneath my skirt.

Taylor told me that they sought help from one of the convention organizers but by the time they returned, the man who had touched them was gone. Taylor did not find out whether the man was ever expelled from the convention. Dania also recalled a time in which she was sexually harassed as a young teenager:



Image 5.1: Digital image of Krul Tepes from *Owari no Seraph* Wiki, owarinoseraph.fandom.com/wiki/Krul_Tepes

At one convention there was a guy, he was in his forties at least. He got kicked out for inappropriately touching some of the people when they were taking photos with him. I was unfortunately one of them. It was, it was a nightmare, I was like fourteen. I was sort of like "I'm gonna forget this happened" and then I later found out he got kicked out.

Dania did not go into detail as to the specifics of what happened to her and I did not press her for more information. I could tell by the way she was talking that this story was hard for her to share with me. I was interested to hear that the man was removed from the convention as many times this is not the case.

What I find most interesting about these cases of sexual harassment is that my participants each expressed, in one way or another, a previous knowledge that these sorts of things happen regularly at anime conventions. As mentioned previously, before experiencing sexual harassment myself, I had heard numerous stories from different friends who attend

conventions. It appears to be accepted as something that just happens sometimes at anime conventions. In my interview with Taylor, they outright said what many attendees already know:

Taylor: I totally expect to be harassed and touched at least once.

Me: You go into a convention expecting to be harassed?

Taylor: Ya, which is pretty terrible. But I know a lot of girls who always prepare themselves for the situation. I just think of me and my friends getting ready in the hotel room being like “Ok, we gotta be careful, we gotta make sure we have each other’s backs” ‘cause our butts are exposed. I guess the main reason we went in with the expectation is ‘cause it’s happened to us in the past.

With so many instances of harassment, and the outright anticipation of being harassed for certain attendees (namely cis women and non-binary AFAB attendees), I began wondering whether these incidents were being reported to convention staff.

When I asked my participants whether they had reported these incidents to convention officials, the majority answered that they did not. Survivors of sexual harassment and assault often choose not to disclose the event to the authorities. Criminal justice scholar John Sloan and his colleagues reported that in the United States, only 25% of sexual victimization of college students was disclosed to the authorities (157). Moreover, if the victim of sexual harassment and/or assault was not raped, their likelihood of disclosure was even lower as they believed their victimization would not be seen as important enough (Fisher et al. 9). One of the factors influencing survivors to remain quiet is the fear of not being believed. According to political scientist Bonnie Fisher et al., across all victimization categories, 81.7% of college women survivors did not wish to disclose to police because “the events were not serious enough” (26). In

approximately 20% of incidents, victims did not disclose to police because they lacked concrete proof (26). They were also afraid of reprisals, embarrassment, and shame (32).

There are many possible reasons one might choose not to disclose sexual harassment or assault at an anime convention. In a convention setting where crowd sizes are normally large, it is easy for an assailant to slip away undetected. By the time a victim were to report the offence, the perpetrator could be long gone. If survivors are fearful of not being believed, this lack of tangible proof might be influencing them to remain quiet. Survivors might not want to relive the trauma, or they might feel embarrassed or ashamed. Additionally, victim demographics could be influencing the decision to disclose or not.

My participants' stories have demonstrated that there is a problem with sexual harassment (particularly of cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers) at anime conventions in Canada. It has gotten to the point where attendees are anticipating being harassed. This leads me to question why there is so much harassment occurring at these events.

Why So Much Harassment?

If attendees of anime conventions are expecting harassment to occur, the question then becomes: Why is there so much sexual harassment at anime conventions? My immediate response to this question ties into the fact that society is still largely patriarchal and that sexual harassment is simply a by-product of a larger systemic problem. Yet, that does not adequately account for the amount of sexual harassment occurring at conventions. I posit that other factors are contributing to this heightened amount of harassment. In this section, I begin by investigating what I refer to as “waifu culture” which creates a sense of possessiveness of anime characters among fans. Next, I discuss how fan service and portrayals of female anime characters contribute

to these feelings of possession. I end with a discussion of the confidence one can feel at anime conventions and the potential for emboldened actions this confidence might be causing.

Within anime fandom, the claiming of a particular character as one's "waifu" or "husbando" is a popular activity. The words "waifu" and "husbando" are plays on the Japanese pronunciations of the English words "wife" and "husband." When an anime fan feels a particular affection towards a certain character, they sometimes refer to them as their waifu or husbando. There is a feeling of entitlement to that character, like the character belongs to the one who claimed them. It is not uncommon to have a list of waifus and/or husbandos from different series. Interestingly, the claiming of waifus and husbandos is not limited to any one particular gender. That is to say, it is not only straight cis men who are claiming waifus. Yet, when it comes to sexual harassment and assault at conventions, straight cis men are the ones who, for the most part, are perpetrating these acts.

In her thesis, Alexandria Ellsworth posits that men may already feel entitled to women's bodies from societal expectations and cues, and that this may be "exacerbated with cosplay as women are no longer viewed as a person but as a character" (12). Thus there is a feeling of entitlement to women's bodies because of this claiming of fictional characters as waifus (47). I agree with Ellsworth's assertions relating to the dehumanization of cosplayers who choose to dress as female characters. I contend that feelings of entitlement to a character are heightened even further when this character is deemed one's waifu. It is within this "waifu culture" that some of the problems with sexual harassment and assault at conventions arise.

In their blog post discussing their experiences with waifu culture, The Afictionado¹⁹ defines a waifu as: "a fictional character you claim ownership of, usually in a romantic/sexual

¹⁹ I am using they/them pronouns for The Afictionado as they make no mention of their pronouns on their blog.

way.” They state that this practice is not problematic because the character is fictional and no harm will come from loving a fictional character. But they then contemplate what this culture is teaching young boys and teens:

As much as I hate to play into the stereotype of nerds not knowing how to talk to girls, it hasn’t set [young boys] up with a very good basis for interaction, has it? Embedded in a culture of loving and claiming, [they] may think it’s perfectly fine to express possessiveness over a real girl, whether it means getting

angry at a classmate for not returning his affections... or harassing cosplayers. (The Afictionado)

Thus, seeing a cosplayer portraying a waifu or beloved character might be activating those feelings of entitlement and ownership. The cosplayer is then no longer seen as a human being, but as the fictional character they are portraying.

In Chapter Four, I discussed how anime series often include fan service characters. These characters are positioned at certain camera angles to expose certain body parts for the elicitation of sexual excitement and titillation. For the most part, fan service characters are female, although fan service directed at women is becoming more popular. I bring up fan service again as it ties into waifu culture. Many of the waifus being claimed by anime fans are fan service characters. Moreover, female fan service characters are often positioned as obtainable goals for male protagonists. For example, there is an entire genre of anime called “harem” in which a young man finds himself surrounded by multiple fan service female characters.²⁰ The female characters



Image 5.2. Digital image of characters from *Heaven's Lost Property Forte* TV poster from *MyAnimeList*, myanimelist.net/anime/8407/Sora_no_Otoshimono_Forte

²⁰ “Reverse harem” anime where a female protagonist finds herself surrounded by multiple male characters do exist, but they are far less common.

are there to be watched by male viewers who can then imagine themselves as the male protagonist of the series. Series such as *Heaven's Lost Property*, a popular harem anime from 2009, often include a cast of cute girls in revealing outfits with distinctive appearances and a male protagonist who is plain in design (see Image 5.2). This is to better allow male viewers to imagine themselves as the male character engaging with a harem of sexy girls. Female characters in these series are there to be possessed and won by the male protagonist.

Another possible factor contributing to heightened sexual harassment at anime conventions could be what I call “convention confidence.” In Chapter Three, I investigated how cosplaying at an anime convention can lead to feelings of heightened self-esteem and confidence. These are certainly positive aspects to cosplaying and conventions. However, I wonder if this convention confidence is leading some people to feel emboldened in an environment where they already feel safe. I return to Alexandria Ellsworth’s thesis where she states that conventions are “safe spaces” for nerds and geeks of all genders (1). At conventions, they are able to express themselves in ways that they might not feel comfortable in everyday life. Moreover, conventions are spaces where they are not bullied or harassed for enjoying nerdy hobbies, but are instead surrounded by others who share in those passions (2). Cosplaying then allows them to take on a character’s persona for the day or weekend. Conventions might offer a confidence to act in ways that “nerds and geeks” might not feel comfortable doing in the regular world. This also ties into what The Afictionado said about socially isolated boys not knowing how to interact with girls in a productive manner. If a man who is engrossed in anime fandom and waifu culture attends a convention where he is supported and emboldened by his peers, perhaps this could lead to him interacting with cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers in an inappropriate manner. This could be a potential factor contributing to the amount of harassment seen at conventions.

There are many possible reasons for the heightened sexual harassment occurring at anime conventions. The line between the fantasy and reality is sometimes blurred at conventions where cosplayers are perceived as the fictional characters they are portraying. It is common knowledge among attendees that harassment happens at conventions. So what is being done by convention organizers to protect their attendees? To answer this question, the following section investigates the policies of three of Canada's biggest anime conventions.

Convention Policies Addressing Sexual Harassment

The stories of my participants, as well my own experiences, indicate that there is an ongoing problem with sexual harassment at anime conventions. It has gotten to the point where some attendees of anime conventions anticipate being sexually harassed and have devised strategies to avoid unwanted attention and touching, as discussed in Chapter Four. Preventing sexual harassment should not solely fall on attendees. I want to understand what conventions organizers are doing to protect cosplayers. It is not my intention to demonize convention organizers. My aim in this section is to better understand what is being done and what more could be done in terms of creating a safe space for anime conventions attendees. To begin, I examine the calls to action surrounding sexual harassment at conventions that occurred in the United States and how they helped shape current policies. I then examine the policies of three of Canada's biggest anime conventions — Anime North in Toronto, Otakuthon in Montreal, and AniRevo in Vancouver—to see how sexual harassment is handled at each.

Before examining specific convention policies, it is important to understand how policies against harassment came about. In the United States in 2014, the “Geeks for CONsent” activist group began to call for stricter policies against harassment at comic conventions (Dockterman).

This movement was organized and led by attendees (particularly women who had experienced harassment) and was met initially with apathy from San Diego Comic-Con, one of the largest annual comic conventions in the United States. Convention organizers believed that their policies sufficiently addressed the issue of sexual harassment at their event but attendees were adamant that things needed to change.

Another important activist group that seeks to end sexual harassment at conventions is Cosplay is Not Consent. This group started in 2013 on Facebook with the mission statement: “to empower fan convention costume enthusiasts (aka “cosplayers”) to SPEAK OUT against inappropriate social behavior of a sexual and/or stereotypical nature for themselves and fellow fans... cosplay is NOT consent!” (Cosplay is NOT Consent). Signs that read “Cosplay is Not Consent” (See Image 5.3) can now be found at most Canadian conventions.



Image 5.3. Cosplay is Not Consent sign from FanExpo in Toronto by Mackenzie Allen, ryersonian.ca/cosplay-is-not-consent-at-toronto-comic-con/

Although I was unable to find any sources specifically describing Canadian movements against sexual harassment at conventions, it is interesting to note that prior to 2012, the policy pages of Canadian anime conventions were not paying much attention to sexual harassment. For example, using the Wayback Machine, I looked into Anime North’s policy page going back to 2012.²¹ This was the furthest back the Wayback Machine had documented for this convention. They did not have a section on harassment at the time. In fact, Anime North claimed that the issue of harassment was not something that occurred at their event:

²¹ I will discuss Otakuthon’s policy changes (or lack thereof) later in this section. AniRevo’s policy page was not available before 2017 at the time of writing. I searched on the Wayback Machine using the URL: <https://summer.animerevolution.ca/rules-regulations/>.

We share your concerns about the most sensitive issues, like harassment and pay close attention to potential trouble. Anyone who thinks they may have a problem is encouraged to approach us at any time for help, though in the five years Anime North has been running, we've never had any notable incidents. (Convention Policies 2012)

This sentiment that there had been no “notable incidents” demonstrates convention organizers’ naivety as to what actually transpires at their events. Harassment was not being reported and thus, they believed that it did not exist. Thankfully, harassment policies now exist on convention rule pages. In 2014, Anime North added an entire section of their policy page dedicated to harassment (Convention Policies 2014). Yet, these policies are not perfect. This became clear to me as I began examining these conventions’ current policies.

Anime North is Canada’s biggest annual anime convention with roughly 34,000 attendees in 2018 (Anime North 2018 Information). It is a three-day event held at the Toronto Congress Centre and International Plaza Hotel in May. On the policy page for Anime North, there is a section dedicated to harassment. Here are some of the rules outlined by the convention, including three bullet points about unwanted touching:

- Congoers who believe they are being harassed should immediately make it known in a clear, unmistakable way that the attention is unwelcome and as quickly as possible approach any con staff member for help in dealing with the situation.
- Intentionally touching anyone without their permission can be considered assault and may result in police involvement as well as loss of membership badge without refund and removal from convention space.

- Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault are legal distinctions that are outside the scope of Anime North to decide and will be left to the authorities to take appropriate actions.

(Convention Policies 2018)

There are some positive elements to Anime North's policies. For example, I think it is a good idea to explicitly state that touching someone without their permission could be considered an "assault." This shows that the convention takes reported cases of harassment seriously. However, these policies put pressure on the victim to get the attention of a staff member. As mentioned previously, this can be challenging at times, especially at an event like Anime North where staff are spread thinly across a large venue. Moreover, by the time staff is notified, the perpetrator could be long gone into a crowd of over 34,000 people. Anime North puts even more pressure on congoers by asking them to "immediately make it known" that they are experiencing harassment. As Dania, Taylor, Emila, and I experienced, in the moment of harassment, one can go through a sort of "freezing," a sense of not knowing what to do. There is also the fear of "making a scene" that my participants discussed. This policy put forth by Anime North does not seem helpful in these instances. The third bullet point stating that it should be left to the authorities to take "appropriate actions" needs clarification. If the victim of harassment or assault wants to involve the police, that is their prerogative. However, this statement is written in a way that removes responsibility from the convention itself.

Otakuthon is Canada's second largest annual anime convention with roughly 23,000 attendees in 2018 (Otakuthon 2018 Information). It is a three-day event held at the Palais des Congrès in Montreal in early August. Their policy page (offered in both English and French) is limited in their handling of harassment. Using the Wayback Machine, I went to Otakuthon's policy page from 2010 when they introduced the word "harassment" to their policy (Convention

Rules 2010). Interestingly, their policy on harassment has not changed since then. At the top of the policy page, there is a line that explains: “Attendees who violate these rules may be subject to expulsion from Otakuthon without refund, and may be banned from attending all Otakuthon events in subsequent years” (Convention Rules 2018). There is only one bullet point related to harassment that reads:

- The following behaviours are considered unacceptable without prior consent of the recipient: hugging, glomping,²² back-slapping, kissing or other unwanted physical contact. This also includes unwanted advances or other similar forms of behaviour considered to be harassment. (Convention Rules 2018)

It is good of the convention to go into specifics as to what sorts of behaviours are unacceptable without prior consent. This is helpful in letting attendees know that even something as seemingly innocent as a hug without consent is still considered harassment. Yet, I would argue that this policy is lacking in a lot of other details. For example, there are no specifics about what an attendee should do if they experience harassment. Throughout the entirety of the rules set forth by the convention, harassment of attendees is only given these two sentences. For a convention of its size, Otakuthon’s policy page is lacking information regarding harassment. This lack of policy makes it seem as though the convention does not take sexual harassment seriously or that they do not believe it to be a significant problem for their attendees.

The last convention I investigate is AniRevo. AniRevo is a large annual anime convention with roughly 12,000 attendees in 2014²³ (Anime Revolution 2014 Information). It is a three-day event held at the Vancouver Convention Centre in late August. Their policy page

²² “Glomping” refers to the act of running up to a person and hugging them. This is usually an intense hug and is often by surprise.

²³ No attendance data past 2014 was readily available at the time of writing.

begins by explaining their “Three Strike Rule,” which states that attendees will be expelled from the convention should they violate three of the conventions policies (Rules & Regulations). Depending on the nature of the violation, the authorities may be notified. The policy page describes harassment and assault as follows:

Physical assault or abuse; Unwelcomed comments about a person’s appearance, age, religion, race or sex; Anything that induces embarrassment, endangers a person’s safety, or demoralizes other’s sense of self-worth; Undesired physical contact; Provocative actions to encourage negative and hostile environments. (Rules & Regulations)

The policy page also adds that: “Attendees should not hesitate to ask staff or volunteers for assistance if they feel or see others uncomfortable due to harassment or danger of assault.” The inclusion of comments about a person’s “age, religion, race, or sex” in their definition of harassment is very important. As I discussed in Chapter Three, body shaming, racism, and sexism are recurring problems in the cosplay community. This line of policy shows that the convention is seeking to create a safer space for attendees with different identities. AniRevo’s policy regarding attendees seeking staff assistance is worded in a constructive way. By allowing attendees to go to a staff member even if they feel they are in “danger of assault” shows that the convention is trying to minimize potential instances of sexual harassment and assault. Anime North’s policy is much less supportive of the victim, stating that victims “should immediately make it known in a clear, unmistakable way” that they are experiencing harassment. This puts significant pressure on the victim to announce their situation to the crowd, whereas AniRevo encourages victims to seek help if they so desire. The policy also encourages attendees to take action if they witness someone else being harassed. However, much like Anime North, the onus is still put on the victim to come forward if they experience harassment. Additionally, the “Three

Strike Rule” left me with some questions. For example, I could not find any information regarding severity of offences. If someone is caught touching another attendee without their consent, would this still only garner “one strike”? Is touching someone without their consent on the same level as, for example, “sleeping in the convention area,” which is also against convention policy (Rules & Regulations)? The policy page does not indicate how convention staff keep track of the offences aside from marking the attendee’s convention badge with a strike.

It is clear that there remains room for improvement with regards to Canadian anime conventions and their policies of sexual harassment. Certainly, these conventions have come a long way from 2012 when no policies were stated whatsoever. Yet, current policies do not seem to be lessening instances of sexual harassment and this demonstrates that additional changes need to be made. In the following section I offer some recommendations.

Policy Recommendations

Evidently, Canadian anime conventions’ inclusion of harassment policies in their rules and regulations is not enough to stop the harassment that is happening at these events. Sexual harassment at conventions continues to be a problem. What can conventions do to decrease the risk of sexual harassment? In this section, I put forward some suggested alterations and additions to convention harassment policies. I begin by presenting Alexandria Ellsworth’s recommendations for convention policy changes and my thoughts on these suggestions. I then offer some of my own ideas for convention policy changes, including: more training for convention staff, clearer policies relating to sexual harassment and assault, clarification on policies regarding children attending conventions alone, creation of a designated “safe space” for

victims of harassment and assault, the inclusion of other forms of harassment in policies, altering policies that include police action, and updating convention policies more frequently.

Ellsworth suggests creating a sexual harassment and assault team that is trained to deal with sexual harassment and assault at conventions (2). This team would undergo specific training related to intervening in situations of sexual harassment and assault as well as LGBTQ+ sensitivity and victim support (44). She suggests that this team should not be made up of existing convention staff and volunteers. Instead, it should be an independent group of members so as to avoid potential bias from convention organizers relating to policies. This team would be in charge of enforcing the convention's policies for sexual harassment and assault and it would be up to this team to report any reported or witnessed cases of sexual harassment and/or assault. She states that the team would be allowed to photograph incidents should they not be able to intervene, and when they are able to intervene, they should gather as much information about the incident as possible.

Ellsworth's idea of a specific sexual harassment and assault team is worth considering. I agree that potential bias would be limited by having a team consist of people independent from convention staff and volunteers. Yet, I assert that before a convention spend the money funding an entire team dedicated to the prevention of sexual harassment and assault, the first step should be ensuring training for all staff and volunteers. This would send a clear message to each person working at the convention that sexual harassment and assault will not be tolerated and it is up to everyone to be aware of the problem, as well as enact preventative measures.

Ellsworth also puts forward ideas shared by her participants regarding convention policies relating to sexual harassment and assault. For example, her participants brought up the need for more security or staff in less populated areas during conventions (43). I have already

touched on the fact that conventions are in need of more personnel, particularly the larger conventions such as Anime North. If having more personnel is not financially feasible or enough volunteers do not sign up, perhaps personnel could be better allocated. Just as Ellsworth points out, there are oftentimes areas of the convention that do not have any personnel. If sexual harassment and assault are occurring in these areas, it would be difficult to get help from convention personnel. Ellsworth's participants also asserted that staff should be better educated in topics such as victim blaming (43). I agree that this should be included in training for all personnel. Should a victim choose to disclose their experience of sexual harassment, personnel should be trained in how to respond, and specifically, should not blame the victim for what happened to them.

If sexual harassment and assault are to be taken seriously by convention organizers, one of the biggest changes that needs to be implemented is taking the onus off of the victim alone. As mentioned previously, reporting of victimization is quite low, thus convention organizers might not be aware of the amount of harassment and assault taking place at their events. To put all the pressure on the victims to report their experiences of harassment is not going to solve the problem. The conventions need to be more proactive in their approaches. Certainly, Ellsworth's idea of an entire team dedicated to preventing harassment and assault would be ideal, but in the interim, preventative training and intervention for existing staff would be a good place to begin.

Additionally, I argue that conventions need to make it clearer to attendees that harassment and assault are taken seriously. For example, while AniRevo's "Three Strike Rule" is a good idea in theory, it should not apply to serious offences such as harassment and assault. If an attendee sexually harasses or assaults someone, they should be expelled from the convention. This would demonstrate that the convention takes harassment and assault seriously and that there

are tangible consequences for engaging in these inappropriate behaviours. Attendees need to understand that sexual harassment and assault will not be tolerated and perpetrators will be punished accordingly.

Furthermore, there needs to be clearer rules regarding children attending conventions. While I understand that some children (particularly queer and trans children) might wish to use conventions as reprieves from their parents or guardians, there should still be some form of policy regarding the age at which children can attend conventions alone. Perhaps instead of specifically stating that a parent must attend with the child, conventions could allow for children under the age of thirteen to be accompanied by any person over the age of thirteen. This allows more freedom for the child to attend a convention without their parents present. It is not my intention to limit children under thirteen from attending conventions, I simply want to ensure that they are safe and taken care of at these events. This is something convention organizers should take in mind when creating their policy pages.

I also suggest offering a designated “safe space” for victims at some of the larger conventions. Perhaps the convention could even have a trained counsellor on hand. In Berlin, this idea has already been implemented for their annual New Year’s Eve celebration at Brandenburg Gate. In a *Washington Post* article about the idea, journalist Rick Noack explains that Berlin decided to take preventative measures after “mass sexual assaults occurred on New Year’s Eve in several German cities two years ago.” The “safe zone” is a white tent near the perimeter of the event where victims of sexual assault can go to seek medical attention or to speak with a psychologist should they wish. The decision to include this safe zone was criticized by some as “accepting sexual violence as a reality of life,” yet experts of sexual assault prevention praised the idea as a means of making the reality of sexual assault a more public and

visible issue instead of keeping it out of the public eye. Something similar could be offered to victims of sexual harassment and assault at anime conventions. Although I realize that it might not be financially feasible for some of the smaller conventions, I do think that this could be a good idea for the larger conventions. This would not only offer a reprieve for victims, it would help to make the problem of harassment and assault at conventions more visible to all who attend.

Of the three anime conventions I investigated in the previous section, only AniRevo mentioned forms of harassment aside from sexual harassment. Their section on harassment includes “unwelcomed comments about a person’s appearance, age, religion, race or sex” (Rules & Regulations). This is something that should be present on the policy page for each convention with additions relating to a person’s sexuality and/or ability. In Chapter Three, I discussed how fat shaming and racism are still present within the cosplay community and it surprised me to find that two of Canada’s largest anime conventions had not addressed these issues in their policies. This is an easy addition to a policy page to try and make the convention space more inclusive.

Both Anime North and AniRevo mention involving the police depending on the nature of the offence. I assert that these policies should be altered to allow for the victim to make the decision. I understand that convention organizers do not necessarily feel capable of dealing with these sorts of incidents, particularly when it comes to deciding if laws have been broken. However, as stated previously, there are many reasons for which a victim might not want to involve the police including reliving the trauma, fear of not being believed, and victim blaming.

Finally, anime conventions should consider updating their policies on a more frequent basis. This would help to not only cover the conventions legally, it also demonstrates to the convention-going community that organizers care about their safety. Although in-depth

discussions with convention organizers was outside of the scope of this project, I would be interested to speak with them in future studies regarding how often policies are reconsidered and updated.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment at anime conventions is a problem that needs to be addressed. Each of my cis women and non-binary AFAB participants reported experiencing and/or witnessing sexual harassment in some form while attending an anime convention. Even Terrance, the only cis man who participated in my study, was aware that harassment was a problem for women attending conventions. Moreover, the policies put forth by the conventions themselves do not seem to be hindering harassers. There is a lot of pressure put on the victims of harassment to come forth and get the attention of convention staff. The conventions themselves should be taking responsibility for the safety of all their attendees. Yet, amongst my participants, there was still a sense of optimism. For example, Dania said:

Back when I first went in 2013, nothing was done about creepy behaviour, cosplay mishaps were rampant. But the last couple years, especially this year, there were a lot of signs everywhere saying “Cosplay is not consent, if you be weird, we will call security.”

Emilia shared this sentiment:

A man approached us and said, “Listen I’m one of the bodyguards at the convention. If you see anybody wearing a label like this- if you feel uncomfortable at any point, come and tell us and we’ll remove the problem. And he specifically said “because cosplay is not consent and we want people here to feel safe and welcome.”

It is clear that some steps are being taken compared to even just a few years ago. Thanks to activist groups such as Geeks for CONsent and Cosplay is Not Consent, conventions have added policies regarding sexual harassment and assault. Yet, these policies tend to put the responsibility on the victim, rendering them unhelpful in many situations. Although anime conventions and cosplay offer a space to experiment and play with one's gender presentation, there are certainly caveats to this freedom, particularly when it comes to the freedom of cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers.

CHAPTER SIX: Conclusion

Anime conventions provide a space in which attendees can explore and play with their gender identities. One way this is accomplished is through cross-play in which a cosplayer dresses as a character whose gender and/or sex is different from their own. This practice is beneficial to queer, trans, and non-binary cosplayers who are able to use cosplay to explore their gender identities in a space that welcomes gender exploration. Yet, there are limitations to this freedom, particularly for cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers who experience negativity surrounding femininity as well as heightened sexual harassment at these events.

This study used feminist methodologies to conduct qualitative semi-structured interviews with eight participants, combined with autoethnography of my own experiences doing cross-play and analyses of the anti-harassment policies of Canada's three biggest anime conventions. In Chapter Three, I investigated the positive aspects of cosplay and cross-play. My findings aligned with much of the existing scholarship that presents cosplay as a means of building community, gaining self-confidence, and allowing for a sense of escapism (Atkinson; Bainbridge & Norris; Hale; Gn; Peirson-Smith; Rahman et al.; Winge). Each of my participants was quick to assert the positive feelings they associated with cosplaying and how much they anticipated attending their next convention. For my trans and non-binary participants, cosplaying at anime conventions was also a means of gender exploration that allowed them to experiment with their presentation in a space that anticipated and tolerated gender diversity. For Jamie, cross-play was a means of dealing with her body dysphoria.

Using Henry Jenkins' concept of "achievable utopia," I described anime conventions as an achievable utopia for gender fluidity where attendees can practice gender presentations that

may guide the ways they eventually present themselves to the outside world. Moreover, these conventions could be a rehearsal for a future in which a wider variety of gender expressions is socially acceptable and encouraged. Participants are engaging in a hopeful imagining of what a tolerant future could look like and they are enjoying this freedom to explore. Yet, anime conventions are not achievable utopias for all identities as there remains discrimination surrounding body size, race, and femininity.

Negativity surrounding femininity was discussed at length in Chapter Four. Although there are many potential benefits to cross-play, the decision to cross-play as male characters might not be as simple as it appears to be. Cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers consider many different factors when choosing to cross-play. Negativity surrounding femininity at anime conventions is one of the things influencing cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers in their decisions to cross-play, both consciously and subconsciously. Even though anime conventions are spaces where gender exploration and play are seemingly accepted and normalized occurrences, femininity is still seen as less important or serious in these settings.

Finally, in Chapter Five I examined the heightened levels of sexual harassment present at anime conventions. Each of my cis women and non-binary AFAB participants reported experiencing and/or witnessing sexual harassment in some form while attending a Canadian anime convention. Even Terrance, the only cis man who participated in my study, was aware that harassment was a problem for women attending conventions. The policies put forth by the conventions themselves do not seem sufficient for preventing harassment. Sexual harassment limits the freedom to explore one's gender at these events, particularly for those who choose to cosplay as feminine characters.

Future Research

This project had certain limitations. Notably, I was limited by the number of participants I was able to interview, the funds available to attend more than one anime convention, and the time allotted to complete my research. However, I was able to interview eight Canadian cosplayers who provided me with in-depth responses. Through their interviews, I realized that there were numerous elements pertaining to anime conventions that I had not expected. In this section, I discuss some ideas for future research. As studies related to anime conventions are relatively new, there are many routes that could be taken by scholarship on gender and cosplay.

My participants brought up several limitations to cosplaying, even though gender exploration was accepted and even anticipated at conventions. I am curious as to why gender play is so widely accepted, while cosplayers are still being policed due to other identity markers. As discussed in Chapter Three, I had not given much thought to the body policing that goes on at conventions, particularly when it comes to plus-sized people cosplaying canonically skinny characters. This policing was brought up by both Brooklyn and Lena who felt that plus-sized cosplayers were discriminated against for cosplaying skinny characters. Similarly, I had not anticipated the policing of cosplayers' race. In Chapter Three, I also discussed how non-Asian people of colour often experience discrimination and harassment when they choose to cosplay light-skinned characters. Race was only brought up by one of my participants, Pamela, who said she, as a white person, would not feel comfortable cosplaying a character of colour. Yet, she has cosplayed characters who are canonically Asian in their respective series, such as Minami from *Yuri!!! On Ice*. There is a strange double standard at conventions where white cosplayers are seemingly allowed to portray canonically Asian characters. Is Asian racism not taken as

seriously as other forms of racism at these events? Are white cosplayers able to explore their gender identities more freely than cosplayers of colour?

I did not ask my participants to disclose the costs of their cosplays. Yet, cosplay is not a cheap hobby. Are economic factors limiting participation in cosplay culture? How much are cosplayers willing to spend for a weekend's worth of entertainment? How does whiteness factor into the economics of conventions?

In Chapter Four, I briefly investigated gender bending as a potential reclamation of femininity in convention spaces and the cosplay community. I was unable to find much scholarship specifically analyzing gender bending as a fan practice. Gender bending should be studied further as it is an interesting fan practice that is common among cosplayers. More research is needed to further explore my supposition that gender bending could be a way to reclaim femininity in the convention setting, as well as how much time and effort one is willing to put into creating a gender bent character.

As I investigated the convention policies regarding sexual harassment for three of Canada's biggest anime conventions, many questions arose that I did not have time to pursue. For example, how do Canadian anime conventions create their policies for harassment? Is it a group effort or is it left to just one person? How often do convention policy makers actually review and alter their policies? Is it only after an attendee complains that policies are altered? Although outside the scope of this research project, the detailed analysis of anime convention policies and policy makers is something that is worth pursuing.

Moreover, the heightened levels of sexual harassment at anime conventions, particularly the sexual harassment of cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers, requires further investigation. As I discussed in Chapter Five, I was only able to find one study that specifically

researched sexual harassment at conventions, and another study that only briefly mentioned harassment while in cosplay. Ellsworth's thesis and Hale's ethnographic study of Dragon*Con proved useful in my analyses, yet many questions remain. Is sexual harassment equally common at anime conventions and comic and sci-fi conventions? Are there examples of cosplayers who have stopped participating in the convention community due to sexual harassment? How can convention organizers make their events safer for their attendees?

Final Words

There remains much research to be done in terms of gender, cosplay, and anime conventions. Despite the limitations to this study, I have demonstrated there are positives associated with cosplay at Canadian anime conventions. Specifically via cross-play, some Canadian queer, trans, and non-binary cosplayers benefit in terms of gender exploration and play at anime conventions. However, there are limitations to the freedom to explore. Cis women and non-binary AFAB cosplayers experience negativity surrounding femininity, fat bodies are policed, and people of colour are discouraged from cosplaying fair-skinned characters. Sexual harassment is commonplace at conventions and the convention policies are not adequately dealing with the problem.

It is my hope that this research will help to better illuminate some of the gendered dynamics of anime conventions in a Canadian context and how cosplay can be used as a means to explore one's gender presentation and identity. Yet, I wonder what it says about society at large when non-binary and trans people have to rely on cosplay and conventions to try out different gender identities, spending exorbitant amounts of money on costumes to do so. Are these achievable utopias of gender fluidity truly indications of a future in which gender

exploration is commonplace outside the confines of the convention hall? I encourage future researchers to continue to engage with cosplay and gender exploration at anime conventions, as well as other fan practices that encourage gender diversity. There is much to be learned in this community. As Dania so eloquently put it, “[Cosplay] allows you to explore in a place where you don’t have to commit. You’re being weird in a place where weird is normal.”

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Demographic Questions:

- 1) How old are you?
- 2) What is your occupation?
- 3) How many conventions have you attended?/how many different cosplays have you done?
- 4) What is your sexual orientation?
- 5) What is your gender?
- 6) This study will be looking at multiple different intersections of identity. Do you identify with a particular race/ethnicity?

Questions:

- 1) How did you first become involved in the anime convention community?
- 2) How/why did you first start participating in cosplay?
- 3) Describe the steps you take to prepare for an upcoming convention/set of cosplay.
- 4) What does it feel like to be in costume?
- 5) What has been your favourite anime convention so far and why?
- 6) What is the usual reception at anime conventions to your gender bends and or crossplay?
- 7) Describe a typical day at an anime convention for you. Do you attend panels, contests, autograph signings, etc.?
- 8) Was there ever a time when you felt unsafe in your cosplay at a convention? If so, please describe that situation.
- 9) Do you participate in any other cosplay-related or anime-related communities? If so, what are they and how do they compare to conventions?

- 10) Have you ever worn your cosplay outside of a convention setting? If so, where was this and why? What was the reception to you wearing your cosplay?
- 11) Out of all the cosplays that you have done, which is your favourite and why?
- 12) Are there any cosplay ideas you would like to do, but you feel like you can't pull them off?
Why not?
- 13) If someone came to you wanting to join this community, what would you tell them about the pros and cons and how to get started?
- 14) Do you think your experience cosplaying has any impact on your sense of your gender/sexuality in real life? If so, what? If not, why not?

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form



Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Gender Play Through Cosplay at Canadian Anime Conventions

Researcher(s):

Victoria Lemmons

MA Student

Women and Gender Studies Carleton University

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Purpose of the Research:

My research project seeks to investigate gender expression and identity at anime conventions in Canada, focusing on cosplay and cosplayers. I want to understand what factors contribute to participants freely expressing their gender and sexual identities seemingly without fear of reprisals. My research question is as follows: What factors lead to the large gender variance and gender expression present at anime conventions in Canada?

Procedures:

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do an interview. The interview will take place in a safe and convenient location of your choice. It can also be conducted online using Skype or Google Hangouts if this is more convenient for you. The interview will last approximately one hour. You will have the option to be audio recorded. In the interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences at anime conventions and your experiences participating in cosplay (dressing as different characters from anime and other media).

You will fill out a consent form before the interview. During the interview, you have the right to refuse to answer any questions. After the interview, you will have the option to review and revise the consent form. The consent form allows you to state clearly your wishes on how your interview can be used by researchers in the future and contains options for confidentiality.

Funded by:

This study is not funded.

Potential Risks:

There are no known risks for participating in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can:

- Stop participating at any time.
- Withdraw your information at any time before January 31, 2019.
- Not answer a question that makes you feel uncomfortable.

Potential Benefits:

There is little research (especially within a Canadian context) on anime conventions and the gender politics at play within these events. This knowledge could lead to a greater understanding of how people feel about gender expression in their daily lives. It could also be beneficial to convention organizers in their efforts to create a safe space for gender play.

Confidentiality/Anonymity:

All information gathered in this study will be kept confidential and is for research purposes only. The interview will be recorded and transcribed by the researcher. All data collected from the study, including recordings and transcriptions, will be on a password-protected laptop. The laptop will be kept locked in the researcher's home. Once all data is organized and combined, your name will be replaced with a pseudonym and your name will be removed from the data. All researchers involved with this project will follow Carleton University's Ethics Research Policy. This information will be kept for five years following the end of the project for future research/publishing reasons.

Right to withdraw:

Your participation is voluntary, and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. There is no penalty for withdrawing from the study before January 31, 2019. You will get a copy of this form. Your name or identifying information will not be in any published material emerging from this research. Pseudonyms will be used to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

Questions or Concerns:

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researcher using the information at the top of page one.

Questions or Concerns about Ethical Conduct:

This project has been approved on ethical grounds by Carleton University's Research Ethics Board on July 11, 2018. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the Research Ethics Board at ethics@carleton.ca.

Documenting Consent:

By signing this form, I have read and understood the description provided. I have had an opportunity to ask any immediate questions and my questions have been answered.

I consent to participate in the research project. ____YES ____NO

I consent to being audio-recorded: ____YES ____NO

Name: _____

Date: _____

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