

Cosplay in the USA

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ABSTRACT

Cosplay, short for “costume play,” is the art of making and wearing costumes based on fictional characters, especially those from comics, television shows, and video games. Believed to have its roots in the American science fiction conventions of the 1930s, cosplay has now become a worldwide phenomenon. The purpose of this study is to trace cosplay’s history from its beginning to where it might go in the future, and also to investigate the reasons why people engage in cosplay. The current study surveyed an anonymous group of participants and found that cosplay is performed for a number of reasons, both going with as well as against the current popular theories of layered personalities and escapism, as postulated by prior research. This study will help in the understanding of cosplay’s position in history and society and its path into the future.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cosplay is a subculture of the popular mainstream culture in many different countries, with the largest followings perhaps being in America and Japan. Believed to have begun in science fiction conventions of the late 1930s, cosplay has now become a phenomenon worldwide. In America, it is remarkable for being an incredibly close-knit community, despite its fringe culture status. There has been limited documented research over the years to determine just why people cosplay, although no definitive answer has been reached. The purpose of this study is to examine the historical path of cosplay from its conception up through current times and on into the future, and, to investigate the current social perceptions of cosplays using an online survey.

The thesis is divided into five sections. The following section will include basic terminology and the parts of cosplay, the historical background of cosplay, and its modern context. Section 3 will detail the online survey including methodology of the data collection and its quantitative results. Section 4 will include the discussion while also looking at the qualitative results. Finally, Section 5 will draw conclusions from the results stated in the previous two sections.

2. BACKGROUND

Cosplay, the art of costuming based on a fictional character, has its roots in the science fiction conventions of late 1930s America. Now popular worldwide, its origins can be traced in each country through both fashion, pop culture, and cosplay itself, as it is a form of fashion and art, and it follows trends as well. In this section, first the basic parts and elements of cosplay will be described. Following will be the delineation of the historical path of cosplay, from its conception to the modern times.

2.1. Parts of Cosplay

Cosplay is the act of wearing a costume based on a fictional character, especially from a television program, comic book, or video game, and can also refer to the costume itself. Cosplays are worn by the cosplayer for various reasons, including photo shoots and conventions. Conventions are fan gatherings based around a specific fandom (the following surrounding a specific pop culture phenomenon, such as film or comic book) that fans come to celebrate their fandom and host various events about said fandom, such as discussion panels, how-to panels, and cosplay fashion shows, as well as selling fandom-related merchandise and art. Many conventions also host celebrities from their fandoms, including voice actors and authors, for events such as autograph sessions and question-and-answer sessions. The four basic parts of a cosplay are a narrative from which the cosplay is drawn, the cosplay itself, a setting in which to cosplay, and the cosplayers themselves (Lamerichs, 2011).

The narrative is simply a fictional work from which the cosplayer draws inspiration from for his or her cosplay. The narrative sources vary widely, from Western

sources like comic books and science fiction television programs, to Eastern sources like anime and video games, the most defining factor simply being a character the cosplayer has a connection of some sort with, be it emotional, physical, and so on (Lamerichs, 2011).

The cosplay itself consists of the subcategories costume, hair, makeup, and props. These are all the components that make a cosplay recognizable as the character on which it is based, although which is most important is typically up to what makes a character most recognizable. All can be handmade or bought (or a combination thereof). Also, the cosplayer can choose how true to stay to the original medium, for example, choosing to create a full Pokémon costume that looks like the original monster or instead a *gijinka*, or human-form Pokémon, which would take a Pokémon's most noticeable traits, such as its ears and tail, and transplant them onto what the cosplayer thinks the Pokémon would wear if human.

The setting in which the cosplay is worn can vary, from places like conventions to internet groups where simply a photo is shared. Other typical places include LARPs (live action role-plays, where fans gather to act out scenes either of their own making or from a pre-written source), school or community clubs, photo shoots, and special events, such as the Cherry Blossom Festival in Nashville (Lamerichs, 2013). It simply depends on where cosplayers choose to display themselves.

Perhaps the most complex of the four elements is cosplayers themselves, including both the actual cosplayers and the character they are portraying (Gunnels, 2009). Cosplaying can create a safe, anonymous environment in which the cosplayer can interact with others (Winge, 2005). Similar is the theory of anonymity as quoted by

Oscar Wilde in his essay, “The Critic as Artist”: “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.” It can also reveal things about the character of the cosplayer, such as practicality (choosing to do a character with his or her own hair and eye color versus one that would require a wig and contacts) and dedication (choosing to hand sew a garment or wig or buying an expensive one over cheaply buying at a Halloween tent). In respect to the character being portrayed, importance is laid on remaining in character when possible (Winge, 2005; Ogonoski, 2014; Lamerichs, 2011). This involves both acting in character when in public (for example, at the 2015 AkaiCon, I personally saw a cosplayer dressed as Maes Hughes from *FullMetal Alchemist* running around with a picture of his daughter from the anime and shoving it in the faces of passersby, keeping in character with his fictional counterpart) and posing in character for picture, which are all components keeping in line with a great cosplay, according to Cherazor, whose cosplay guide has been featured on multiple cosplay websites, including Cosplay.com (Cherazor, 2012).

To understand cosplay better, I created several of my own cosplays, from varying Western and Eastern media. I used various methods, including shopping at thrift stores and creating multiple unique pieces from scratch. Then I wore my cosplays to AkaiCon 2015 to see how others reacted to them. Finally I also conducted several photoshoots for my cosplays to capture my work. Detailed descriptions of the parts of cosplay and how they can be observed in my own cosplays as well as photographs of my cosplays can be found in Appendix C.

2.2. Historical Background

Cosplay, far from typical costumes, is a portmanteau of the words “costume” and “play.” It is the fan practice of dressing up as a character from a fictional fandom for fan practices, such as conventions, photography shoots, and LARPs. A widespread, fast-growing sub-culture and industry today, cosplay is believed to have its origins in the science fiction conventions of 1930s America. The first credited cosplayer (widely believed to be the first cosplayer) is Forrest J. Ackerman, who attended the First World Science Fiction Convention in 1939 in his “tailored ‘futuristic costume’” – incidentally, he is also credited with coining the word “sci-fi” (Scholting, 2015). Costuming (for uses aside from the stage) is believed to have been brought to America along with Irish immigrants during the 1890s’ potato famine, as they brought the celebration of Halloween with them, including trick-or-treating in costumes such as skeletons and demons (Santino, 1982). In the 1930s, there was a movement to dress in extravagant (or faux extravagant, considering the Depression) clothes similar to those worn by actors and actresses on the silver screen, as this was the start of the Golden Age of Hollywood, although the usual fashion of the time was suits for men and a strong hourglass figure for women, especially those achieved by the use of corsets and shoulder pads. The Golden Age of Comics began in the 1930s as well, but superhero cosplays were not seen until later on (Phipps, 2015; Mears, 2013).

During the 1940s, there was not much documented cosplay. It is known to have continued through the decade, yet by 1949, the masquerade (a cosplay contest or ball, or sometimes both) still had not been implemented at WorldCon, the best known convention of the time. Fashions during this decade were still suits for men (although the specific

cut varied by the year) and either a tubular or bulky silhouettes towards the beginning of the decade and a more fitted, natural silhouette towards the end. Multiple outfits for specific times of day were very popular, although fabric was limited due to war-time rationing, and separates for women gained popularity towards the latter half of the decade. Also, the 1940s began the Golden Age of Broadway, including the Ziegfeld Follies revues, which were notable for the lavishly costumed chorus girls, called “Ziegfeld Girls” (Phipps, 2015).

The 1950s saw the rise of the masquerade at conventions, with many more fans dressing up for the competition, ball, or simply to wander the halls. Historical costumes based on Native American and Ancient Egyptian cultures are popular during this decade along with the science fiction and fantasy costumes that had been prevalent since the beginnings, as the conventions were mainly still science fiction-based. The first costumed mascots at Disney World appeared during this decade in 1955, although the Golden Ages of Hollywood, Broadway, and Comics all ended. The 1950s saw conformity and consumerism rise in mainstream fashion. Hourglass figures were once again popular for females, although, with the emphasis on conformity, the issues of body image began to come into play. Men once again mainly had suits for their fashion, and whole family matching clothes were popular. But, towards the end of the decade, the rise of teenage and subversive fashion (fashion radically different from what was considered mainstream) began: leather jackets for men and pedal pushers for women were popular.

This subversive trend that emphasized individuality in fashion also marked the rise of cosplay. This pattern of trends rising together would be seen every time subversive fashion began to make its way into the mainstream, usually through means of pop culture (Phipps, 2015).

The 1960s saw many of the same trends in cosplay from the 1950s continue, although cosplays from the Middle Ages were also popular. Nude cosplays also began to appear towards the end of the decade, although that was largely a trend of the 1970s (although this is perhaps due to the brief wave of nude fashion in 1964). There were simply more cosplayers during this decade than the last, with more females participating than in previous decades, as before science fiction conventions were heralded as a men's event. Fashion in general in the 1960s started off like the 1950s but quickly began to move away with the British invasion. Mod style was very "in," along with stripes for both genders. Women also began to show more skin, especially legs, and men began to move away from suits; turtlenecks were very popular for men. Individuality was the main theme of style late in the decade, along with the start of the hippie movement with its flowing and ethnic patterns, marking the next rise of cosplay (Phipps, 2015; Senti 2014).

The 1970s had a larger boom in cosplay than previous decades, especially with the advent of the San Diego Comic-Con, then called San Diego's Golden State Comic-Minicon. Masquerades often began to have small skits or runway shows as part of the judging criteria, and nude costumes were definitely on the rise for the female cosplayer, sometimes consisting of as little as body paint or super sheer fabric that did not physically (or visually) cover much. Star Trek and Star Wars were both highly popular

cosplays during this era; both included highly diverse casts and fairly simple costuming. More intricate and detailed cosplays were also the norm; even the nude cosplays were highly intricate. Superhero cosplays were also seen more during this time. Mainstream fashion was highly colorful and favored comfort over style for much of the decade; t-shirts, jeans, and khakis were highly popular, as was sportswear for both men and women. Tight pants were also popular for both genders, and unisex fashion began during this time. These tight pants and loud colors were mirrored in the cosplays of the decade, especially the superhero cosplays (at least when clothes were involved). By the end of the decade though, fashion moved once again towards the business end, with the abundance of colors being replaced by an abundance of textures instead (Phipps, 2015; Leaper, 2015; Miller, 2012; Lamerichs, 2013).

1980s saw the beginning of anime in cosplay in the United States, with the first documented anime (then called “japanimation”) inspired cosplays being from *Space Pirate Captain Harlock* (usually as Harlock himself). Star Wars, once again, was largely popular, most likely due to Episodes V and VI coming out in the earlier half of the decade. Women were once again modestly covered up in their cosplays. Masquerade and other contest rules were cemented in 1981 when WorldCon pioneered the three-tier contest system with divisions for amateur, journeyman, and master. The first CostumeCon was held in 1983, and the International Costumer’s Guild was founded in 1985. The word cosplay itself was coined by Nobu “Nov” Takahashi of Studio Hard in 1984 when he attended WorldCon and saw the masquerade. He wanted to encourage Japanese fans to copy these American practices, but the word masquerade in Japanese refers to an elaborate masked party like the masquerade balls brought to mind by

Phantom of the Opera. Fashion in the 1980s tended towards more conservative for women as more and more entered the work force, while more casual clothing for men became accepted far more than previously. There was a lot of variety in styles, as fashion favored the consumer. Big, teased hair was very in (in both street fashion and cosplays). The rise of MTV and branded products popularized younger fashion and shaped what many generalize as the 1980s today, although that is truthfully only a part of the decade (Phipps, 2015; Leaper, 2015; Winge, 2005).

The 1990s saw a huge variety and rise in cosplay as what is now labeled as geek culture (where those who had been traditionally been labeled as intelligent but socially inept were the positive center of attention) gained more prevalence around the country with movies like *The Matrix*, where hacker Neo became the main hero. Anime and manga were being imported more and more, with staples like the *Gundam* franchise, *Dragon Ball Z*, and *Sailor Moon*. Science fiction costumes were still popular, but were supplemented with the mechas (larger-than-life humanoid robots, like those of *Transformers*) from Japan. Super heroes were also popular; many animated super hero series came out during the 1990s, including *Batman: The Animated Series* and *Spider-Man*. Commercial cosplay also started to trend at the end of the decade, with cosplay specific industries, such as pre-styled wigs and costumes, beginning to rise. Grunge was the mainstream fashion for the country in the early 1990s, with flannel shirts and holey jeans, although more colorful styles existed as well (they just were not as popular). Hip hop fashion dominated the media with its urban style, although rave fashion with its bright extravagance took the scene by the end of the decade. Fashion in this decade was more influenced by music videos than designers (Phipps, 2015).

2.3. Modern Cosplay

Looking at the modern era of cosplay, from about the early 2000s or so when it joined both Urban Dictionary (2003) and the Oxford English Dictionary (2008), it is clear that cosplay has definitely risen from being simple costume-wearing to a multi-faceted conglomeration of ideas, both physically and in the reasoning behind it.

In the material world, entire industries have sprung up around cosplay, from companies that produce custom-order mermaid tails to photographers who focus solely on cosplay (Rais, 2015; Bergforth, 2015). And while these companies may not be mainstream, they still make quite a fortune on cosplaying goods; for example, a replica weapon can cost upwards of one hundred dollars, yet be made of a only few feet of wood; a plush animal companions can cost over forty dollars, while most stuffed toys found in typical American stores tend to cost less than twenty (prices sourced from jList.com, ToysRUs.com, and Amazon.com). These companies have sprung up to feed the ever growing desires of the rising multitude of cosplayers nation-wide, like EZCosplay, an online store with a wide variety of cosplay costumes, props, and accessories from both western and eastern media, or Fizzy Fairy Apothecary, which carries bath bombs and perfumes in scents based on various fandoms (items sourced from EZCosplay.com, Etsy.com).

And as for the reason for the rise of cosplay, there are quite a few. The most basic is, perhaps, dressing up simply to dress up, much like Halloween. But there are usually more involved reasons as well. Cosplay can give a sense of community, as it is, first and foremost, a group activity (Bonnichsen, 2011). Without being able to react and see reactions, the cosplay is simply a fancy costume. This community does not have to be

physical, though it often times is, such as with clubs and conventions; there is a thriving online community of cosplayers as well. Many of this online community share cosplay photographs and tutorials on their respective groups' sites, helping to spread the word of cosplay and lowering the difficulty for new persons to enter their world. Sometimes the online communities will meet together in real life as well, to strengthen ties between members and feel a sense of "shared community" with others that share interests that may not be seen as socially acceptable to many, such as a 501st Legion of Storm Troopers in California, a large group of adults who get together dressed as Storm Troopers (Gunnels, 2009). Another form of cosplay groups is a family that cosplays together, such as a mother and daughter, a pair of siblings, or a romantic couple (Wilson, 2015).

Aside from a sense of community, cosplaying can also help a person to generate a sense of self. People at once can have several identities in place, such as the selves they are at work and the selves they are with immediate family (Lamerichs, 2011; Gunnels, 2009). Cosplay just becomes another "layer" to a person. What kind of layer it is, though, varies by person. It could be a layer of escapism, becoming a type of person he or she could not be in everyday life, such as a caterer becoming a senate warrior fighting for justice, fulfilling one of the caterer's fantasies (Ogonoski, 2014). Cosplayers could simply be displaying their love for their chosen media or specific character similar to sports fans wearing jerseys and face paint. A person could choose to cosplay a character he or she identifies with on a personal level, such as a character who has had similar experiences or held similar opinions.

Other times, cosplayers can have the character they dress as identify with the cosplayers themselves, instead of the other way around, by “bring[ing] something of their own, such as elements of their own appearance, into the cosplay” (Lamerichs, 2011). A common example of this is reversed gender cosplays, or “crossplays” such as an all male cast of *Sailor Moon*. Other personal touches can be as simple as fabric choice for a cosplay of a character in a black-and-white or cel-shaded medium (Deppeler, 2014). Sometimes, characters can be brought completely out of their story into a crossover story or alternate universe, like the various animated characters who attend Hogwarts in the internet fandom of “Rise of the Brave Tangled (Frozen) Dragons” or dressing a Pokémon gijinka in gothic lolita style.

Cosplay companies bring their own identity into their work as well. For example, Wonderland Studios was simply a photography studio that the creator designed for convenience, but she decided what girl wouldn’t want to be “Catwoman, Wonder Woman, Harley Quinn, or Poison Ivy,” regardless of if she cosplays or not, and therefore she stocked those costumes for any customer to wear and photograph. Now, Wonderland Studios is one of the better-known studios for cosplay photography, mainly through word-of-mouth (Howell, 2015). Other, more serious, stories exist for cosplay companies as well. Purple Rainbow Tails creates custom mermaid tails for each customer, with over half of the proceeds going to Transkids Purple Rainbow Foundation, as the creator of Purple Rainbow Tails wants “to help transgender kids, like her[self], feel positive and accept themselves” (Rais, 2015).

To summarize, cosplay is believed to have begun with the science fiction conventions of the late 1930s, and it slowly gained prevalence throughout the decades,

experiencing a boom each time subversive culture was more than a fringe culture. It truly gained speed in the 1970s and has continued on through today, where cosplay is seen as more than just crazy kids dressing up. Cosplay today is used as an industry, a hobby, a social group, and a means of spreading social messages all in one.

Following through the historical path of cosplay, this thesis aims to trace cosplay's possible path into the future as well. The crucial questions to be asked are:

1. Why do people cosplay now?
2. What is important to a cosplay?
3. Where do people think cosplay may go in the future?

To answer these questions, an online survey was created, the details of which will follow in the next section.

3. SURVEY

The questions posed at the end of the previous section will be addressed both quantitatively and qualitatively using an online survey. This section will include the methodology of the survey and results obtained.

3.1. Methodology

3.1.1. Participants

Participants were solicited via various postings on the social networking sites of FaceBook and PokeMini to receive a diverse sample. Also, voluntary participation was solicited via email from students taking Japanese language classes at Middle Tennessee State University for the same reason.

3.1.2. Materials

The materials were a nineteen-question survey, accessed through Google Forms (see Appendix A). This allowed participants to remain anonymous. The first five questions were demographic in nature. The next fourteen questions inquired about participants' knowledge and background in cosplay, as well as venues in which they followed cosplay, what is important about cosplay, why people cosplay, and where they thought cosplay would go in the future. IRB approval (Appendix B) was obtained before conducting the survey.

3.1.3. Procedure

The survey in full was piloted by two individuals, one who cosplayed herself, and one who did not cosplay but knew what it was, to report on the survey's coherence and clarity. Their results were not included in the final total, but rather were used to determine whether or not the survey and its corresponding spreadsheet were in working order and also if each of the questions could be easily understood. Once the pilot testers responded positively, the survey was released via status updates on two different Facebook accounts, one for personal use and one for gaming, and on the chat board of PokeMini under a personal account. Participants then had a period of a month to respond (as the survey was posted, not solicited directly). Results were recorded in a Google Spreadsheet. Also to be noted, demographic questions were not numbered in the actual survey.

3.2. Results

76 participants responded in total. 46 participants were between the ages of 18 and 25, 10 between 26 and 30, and 19 over the age of 31. 50 participants were female, 18 male, 6 transgender, and 1 agender. 66 cited their nationality as American (see Figure 1 on page 18), although 69 are currently located within the United States. 36 participants were undergraduate students, 7 in some other form of university or graduate school, with the rest citing other careers or responsibilities as their main occupation.

Following the demographic questions, the questions concerning cosplay were asked. The first question asked if participants knew what cosplay was, which 66 did. The following three questions asked if participants cosplay, and if they did cosplay, for

how long, and if they did not cosplay, if they ever would cosplay. 49 participants had cosplayed before, although the length of time varied from over 20 years to as little as one weekend. Those who did not cosplay were divided in about half as to whether or not they would cosplay.

Next participants were asked where they followed cosplay and were able to select multiple items from a list. 54 responded at conventions, 35 on blogs, 26 on general cosplay websites, 21 on personal websites of cosplayers, 6 at fashion shows, 4 in magazines, and 7 at other venues (mentioned specifically were FaceBook and YouTube); these are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Where Is Cosplay Followed?	
Conventions	54
Blogs	35
General Cosplay Sites	26
Personal Websites of Cosplayers	21
Fashion Shows	6
Magazines	4
Other	7

Participants were then asked if they made their own cosplays, how important it was for cosplays to be handmade, and how hard it was to make cosplays. 39 of the participants made their own cosplays, and most agreed it was toward the harder end to make cosplays, although the importance of making cosplays by hand varied greatly (see Figures 2, 3, and 4 on pages 18 and 19).

The following question asked participants what they thought influenced a cosplay the most. 40 responded the original media, 9 the style of cosplay, 5 the time period of the cosplay, 4 the materials available, and 3 other (see Table 2 below). The last three questions were qualitative in nature, and will be discussed in the following section.

Original Media	40
Style of Cosplay	9
Time Period of Cosplay	5
Materials Available	4
Other	3

Figure 1: Nationality

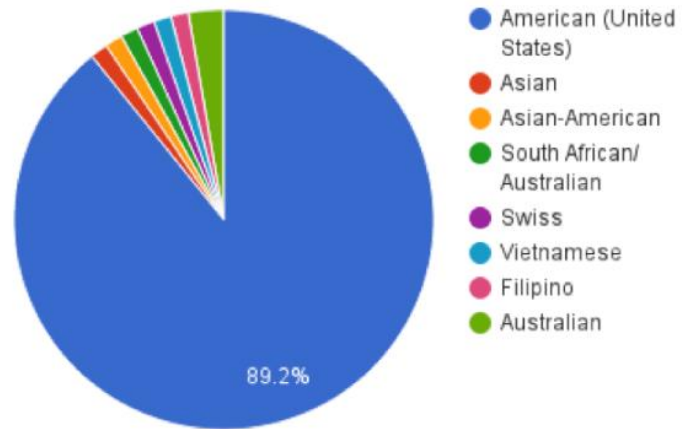
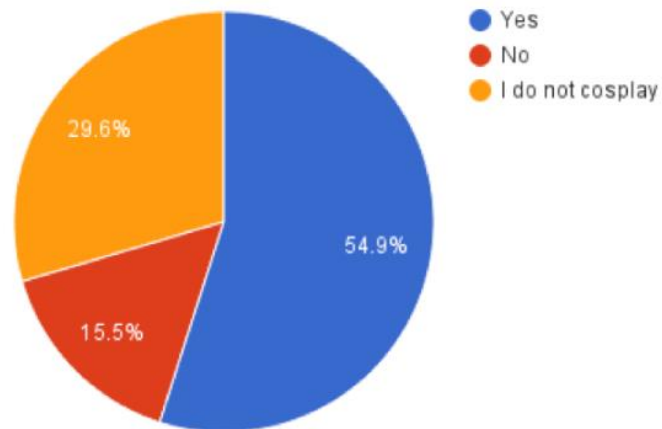
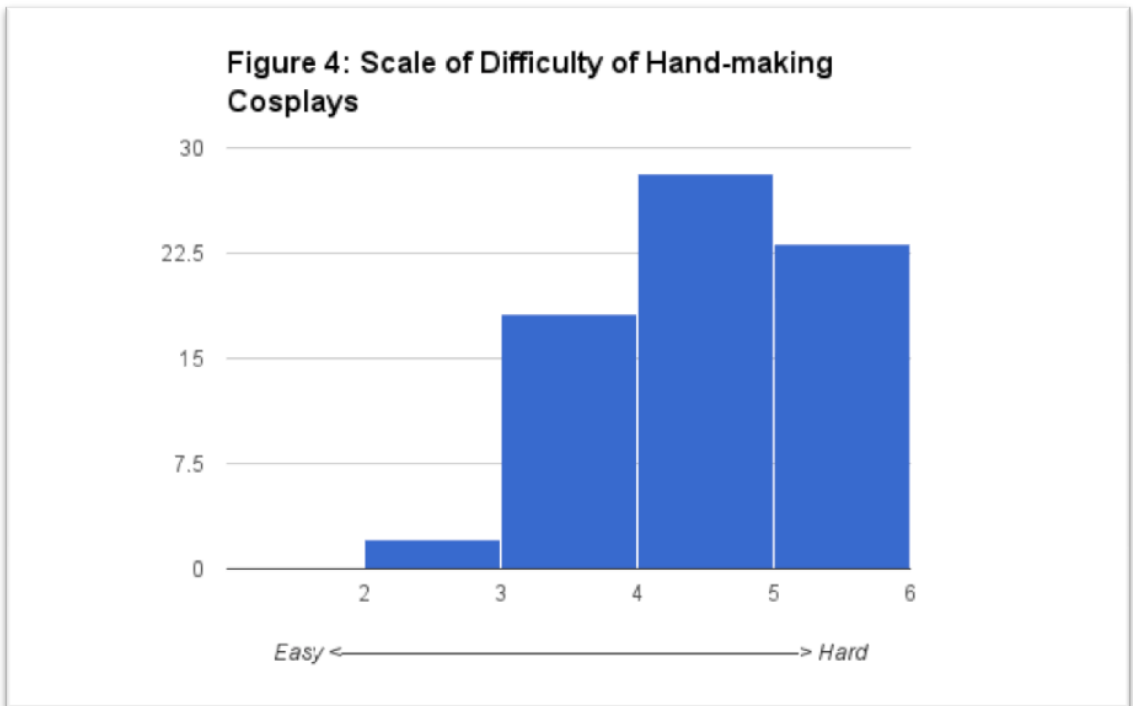
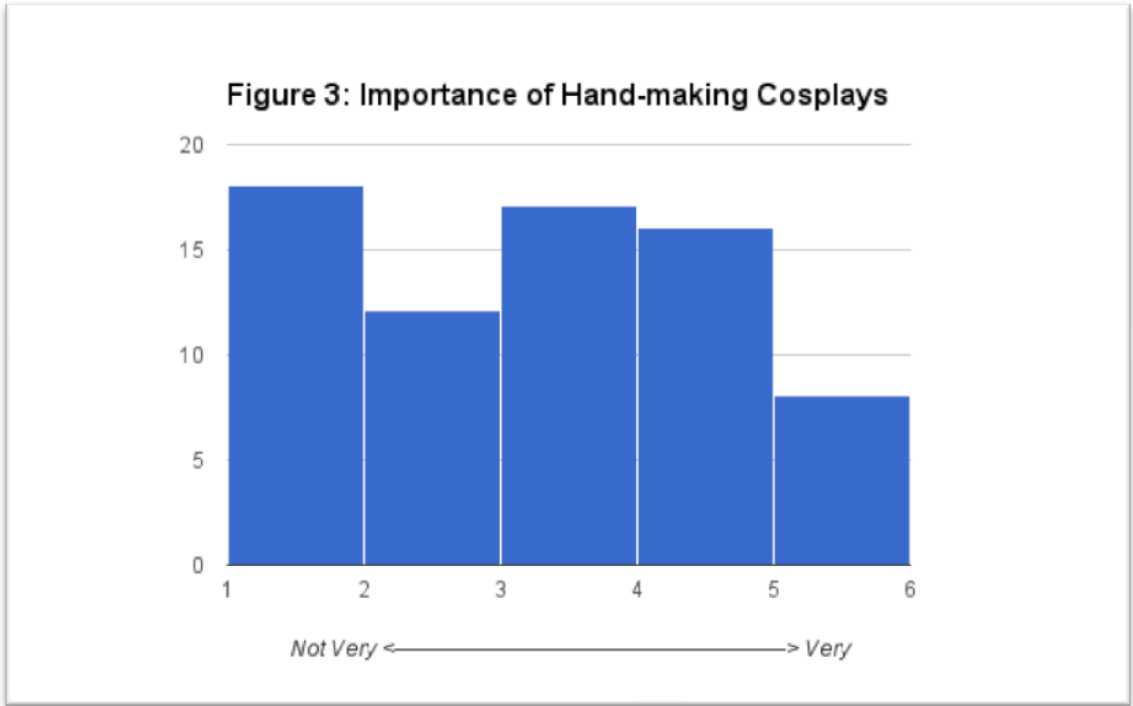


Figure 2: Makes Own Cosplays





4. DISCUSSION

This section will discuss the results of the more qualitative survey questions and the implications of applying various theories, including multiple layers of identities, escapism, and sense of community, on them.

The first qualitative questions I will jointly discuss are the questions asking those who participated in cosplay their reasons for participation and the question asking why participants believed people in general invested so much in cosplay. Their reasoning was largely concordant with the theories referred to earlier, that of a sense of community and various senses of self. The responses were divided about in half between the two spectrums. Those who responded that cosplay created a sense of community cited more specific reasons like the supportive nature of the cosplay community and the sense of acceptance for an interest not typically found among their peers, similar to the mentioned online help groups and the 501st Division mentioned previously. The joyous convention atmosphere was also noted, something I myself have experienced quite a bit. Con-goers I have just met have lent me super glue and safety pins after overhearing me complain to the people with whom I had originally come, and the atmospheres are generally quite cheerful, especially when fans see their favorite character brought to life for the first time. When I wore my Nyan Cat cosplay to AkaiCon this past summer, I had multiple little girls come up to me and ask about my tutu, a phenomena I also experienced during my photo shoot. And as for the general acceptance, my last convention group consisted of a Catholic schoolgirl, one of my guy friends, my guy friend's transgender boyfriend, and me. And we all got along perfectly well, and that is just (highly heterogeneous) one group!

The other half of the participants who mentioned cosplay as some sort of sense of self were a bit more divided on their answers, some citing escapism quite clearly, while others mentioned trying on a new identity or using a new identity to express themselves, while others still cited cosplay as another layer of their personality that simply could not be worn at all times (either due to societal norms or the general likes of their friend group). All three of these reasons have been referred to previously, although there was blurring between the lines of assuming a different identity for the day and that identity being another facet of the individual. The responses were clearly different on these two points, although assuming another identity had far more responders than the separate layer did. This leads me to believe that, instead of there being a majority of cosplayers who cosplay to let up some pent up part of themselves as previous research suggests, that more cosplayers simply enjoy the release of acting and the feeling of safety that anonymity provides (as anonymity was mentioned a few times in these responses as well).

I myself am one who enjoys acting more than revealing some hidden side of my character, as is my brother, who is my frequent cosplay companion. We are not some hidden ballet dancers with overly cheerful or overly grumpy aspects, respectively (although I do have a ballet background, I do not have some repressed desire to take up ballet again). We simply have theatre backgrounds and enjoy the rush of improvisation; both of us have been on numerous improv teams for many years as well as have been in a number of plays. While I know theatre backgrounds are not necessarily the norm for many cosplayers, I feel that it is worth mentioning that the majority of my friends (and my brother's) who cosplay do come from theatre backgrounds. And in considering the

acting aspect of cosplaying, it is more related to the escapism aspect of cosplay than the separate layer aspect, as acting is essentially becoming another character entirely, not stripping away parts of the self (although that does occur in some cases when roles closely resemble the real life of the actor). By becoming another person entirely, the cosplayer would, in a sense, “escape” from his or her life for a small time before being able to safely return to the daily norm without any lasting consequences, aside from, perhaps the mess glitter leaves, as it does not vacuum under any circumstances unfortunately.

Cleaning woes aside, the next of the qualitative questions I will be focusing on is what participants viewed as the most important part of cosplay. Once again, responses were divided, although in rough thirds this time, between the costume, the cosplayer, and having fun (although this third aspect also overlapped with the previous two). The costume response was to be expected, although various parts of the cosplay were cited as being important, mainly materials. The cosplayer response was far more varied, however, with reasoning such as resemblance to character and personal connections to a character being mentioned, though the ability to keep in character was by far the most mentioned of this group. This aligns with my theory about cosplayers enjoying the thrill of acting as someone else for a time; if a person cannot keep in character, the costume becomes simply a fancy costume (or worse – if the cosplay is a street clothes version of a character, it can become completely unrecognizable). The “having fun” response is in line with the sense of community referred to in previously in this section, as many of these responses specifically mentioned having fun with friends or with others from their

favorite fandom, meaning that they saw fun as an activity to be experienced as a group, not merely something that can be experienced on your own, as many fan-specific activities are (such as fanart or fanfiction).

The final qualitative question I will address is the question of cosplay's future, to which the responses were overwhelmingly positive. Less than ten responses were even slightly negative (with those being more in the vein of "cosplay will simply remain as it has been"). The positive answers almost all stated that participants believed cosplay was a growing industry and would start to become more mainstream, a few even stating that the rise of "geek culture" was responsible for cosplay's current rise in popularity (this rise, as mentioned previously, began in the 1990s with movies such as *The Matrix*). This trend in growth could also be related to the trend towards individuality in today's fashion. As noted earlier, cosplay always seems to crop up more in decades when individuality and subversive fashion are the norm, like the 1950s, 70s, and 90s (and also, it seems to crop up every other decade, as it is the 2010s now, and cosplay first appeared in the 1930s).

To summarize, participants were dividing in about half for the reasons they cosplayed: either to have a sense of belonging to a group or to have a sense of self (which was further divided into a sense of escapism, the majority, or trying a new identity). For the part of a cosplay that was most important, most participants responded "having fun" in conjunction with one of two other answers: either the cosplay itself (more specifically,

materials used) or the cosplayer (more specifically, the ability to remain in character while wearing a cosplay). Finally, the vast majority of participants responded positively when asked about cosplay's future, mainly stating that it would be a growing industry. The following section will look at conclusions that can be drawn from these discussions.

5. CONCLUSION

I propose that cosplayers do not necessarily cosplay to reveal some hidden part of themselves, as is the current predominant theory, but do so instead for a combination of the theories of a sense of shared community and a sense of escapism by acting as someone else for a short while, and possibly also for the thrill of acting (although not too many responses to my survey mentioned that specifically, it is definitely something that many cosplayers I have spoken with at conventions and also professional cosplayers have mentioned). But this needs to be taken with a grain of salt, despite the fact that cosplaying by nature is a group activity, it promotes individuality first and foremost (in the United States at least) by letting cosplayers express their own individuality with their spin on the character, and it must be remembered that each individual will have slightly different reasons for cosplaying within each larger umbrella division.

The survey created for this study mainly examined general trends and perceptions of a small population sample. As a next step, I would like to focus on investigating the more personal and individualistic side of cosplayers. I would like to take a closer look at why people cosplay from different fandoms (aside from the fact that they like said fandom) to see if there is any psychological reasoning behind it. It would also be interesting to conduct a cross-sectional study by including cosplayers residing not only in the United States but also those in other countries such as Japan, Great Britain, Thailand, the Philippines, and Australia, to name a few. This will enable me to conduct a contrastive analysis of perceptions (both general and personal) of cosplayers that go beyond international borders.

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Appendix A: Survey

Cosplay in the USA

To research the path of cosplay through history and where it is going in the future
There are no associated risks with this survey, and it will benefit by providing information on a lesser known topic.

This survey is completely anonymous.

Shelby Flatt, sf2t@mtmail.mtsu.edu, Mini code 72meh

* Required

Informed Consent *

Participating in this project is voluntary, and refusal to participate or withdrawing from participation at any time during this project will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private but total privacy cannot be promised, for example, your information may be shared with Middle Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board. In the event of questions or difficulties of any kind during or following participation, you may contact the Principal Investigator as indicated above. For additional information about giving your consent or your rights as a participant in this study, please feel free to contact the MTSU Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918

I am 18 or older and have read the above information and my questions have been answered satisfactorily by project staff. I believe I understand the purpose, benefits, and risks of the study and give my informed and free consent to be a participant.

Age

- 18-25
 26-30
 31 or Older

Current Location

- United States
 Other:

Nationality

- American (United States)
- Other:

Occupation

- Undergraduate Student
- Graduate Student
- Other:

Gender

- Male
- Female
- Transgender

1a. Do you know what cosplay is?

- Yes
- No

1b. If yes, briefly define:

2a. Have you ever participated in cosplay>

- Yes
- No

2b. If yes, for how long and why?

2c. If no, would you ever participate? Why or why not?

3. What are the venues of cosplay that you follow?

Check all that apply:

- Conventions
- Fashion Shows
- Magazines
- Blogs (such as Tumblr, Instagram, and Pinterest)
- Websites (such as Cosplay.com)
- Personal Websites of Cosplayers
- Other:

4. Do you make your own cosplays?

- Yes
- No
- I do not cosplay

5. How important do you think it is for cosplays to be handmade?

1 2 3 4 5

Not Important at All Very Important

6. Is it easy or hard to make a cosplay?

1 2 3 4 5

Easy Hard

7. What do you think influences cosplay the most?

Check only one:

- The Original Medium (Television Program, Video Game, Comic, Anime, Manga, etc...)
- Current Fashion
- Time Period of Cosplay (Steam Punk, Renaissance, etc...)
- Availability of Materials
- Style of Cosplay (True-to-Original, Period, Furry, Gijinka, Parody, etc...)
- Other:

8. What is the most important part of cosplay (e.g. costume, character, cosplayer, etc...) and why?

9. What is the significance of cosplay to you (e.g. hobby, business, etc..)?

10. Why do you think people invest so much time, money, and effort on cosplay?

11. How do you envision the future of cosplay in America?

Submit

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

Appendix B: IRB Approval

IRB
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
 Office of Research Compliance,
 010A Sam Ingram Building,
 2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd
 Murfreesboro, TN 37129

**EXEMPT APPROVAL NOTICE**

8/3/2015

Investigator(s): Shelby Flatt
 Department: Foreign Languages and Literatures
 Investigator(s) Email: sf2t@mtmail.mtsu.edu
 Protocol Title: "Cosplay in the USA"
 Protocol ID: 16-1003

Dear Investigator(s),

The MTSU Institutional Review Board, or a representative of the IRB, has reviewed the research proposal identified above and this study has been designated to be EXEMPT.. The exemption is pursuant to 45 CFR 46.101(b) **(2) Educational Tests, Surveys, Interviews, or Observations**

The following changes to this protocol must be reported prior to implementation:

- Addition of new subject population or exclusion of currently approved demographics
- Addition/removal of investigators
- Addition of new procedures
- Other changes that may make this study to be no longer be considered exempt

The following changes do not have to be reported:

- Editorial/administrative revisions to the consent of other study documents
- Changes to the number of subjects from the original proposal

All research materials must be retained by the PI or the faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) for at least three (3) years after study completion. Subsequently, the researcher may destroy the data in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity. IRB reserves the right to modify, change or cancel the terms of this letter without prior notice. Be advised that IRB also reserves the right to inspect or audit your records if needed.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board
 Middle Tennessee State University

NOTE: All necessary forms can be obtained from www.mtsu.edu/irb.

Appendix C: Original Cosplays

To understand further the parts of cosplay, I created three different cosplays of my own this summer. I then wore them each to a convention to see reactions to them, followed by a photo shoot to try to capture the image and personality of each character.

The first cosplay I created was pair of Nyan Cat (modeled by myself) and Tac Nayn (modeled by my younger brother), as illustrated in Images 1, 2, and 3 below. They are the hero/villain pair from the side-scrolling game *Nyan Cat*, which was my **narrative**. As the game consists of nothing but the cats leaping through space to a simple tune, I had a lot of creative liberty to do what I wanted with each **costume** design. For Nyan Cat, her tune is cheerful and upbeat, and her background is stars and sparkles, so I based my costume design off a romantic tutu (as opposed to a stiff classic tutu) to imitate her trail of rainbows with the overall effect trying to imitate the freeness and happiness of Nyan Cat by calling up the freedom and lightness generally found in the prima ballerinas of romantic ballets. For Tac Nayn, his tune is discordant (it is actually Nyan Cat's tune backward) with a red background dominated by skulls. To keep with the dancing theme of Nyan Cat but still retain Tac Nayn's disharmonic feel, I based his costume design off the costumes my brother wore to be Bert Healy in *Annie*, as Bert Healy was a tap dancer during the Great Depression (within the world of the musical). This way the dancing would still be prevalent, but with a bit more grit and realism. This pair was photographed in the atrium and courtyard of the Factory at Franklin, as, again, there is no real definitive **setting** for either cat. The dancing theme was chosen for these cosplays as both my brother and I (as the **cosplayers**) are dancers, specifically tap for my brother and ballet for me, as well as actors in both theatre and improvisational troupes. The characters we

attempted to portray were exaggerations of the base personality traits visible in the game: for Nyan Cat, cheerfulness and for Tac Nayn, discord, displayed as frustration and dispute with Nyan Cat. It is important to note, that, of the three cosplays I created, this one encountered by far the most difficulty: my brother ended up being allergic to the specific combination of latex paint (a type of rubber-free acrylic paint) and polyester in his pants, and so was unable to wear his costume for periods of time longer than ten minutes (the photo shoot was shot in increments with my brother on Benadryl, and I went alone to the convention dressed as Nyan Cat, making it far less obvious who I was); the cat ears I ordered from China were lost in the mail and the replacement ears did not come until the second week of October (hence why my backup headbands are the ones in the photos); and the heat interacted poorly with the paint in the costumes (while the pants and vest of Tac Nayn were typically okay as they lay flat unless my brother sits, which he was not allowed to do in them, the Pop-Tart that was originally Nyan Cat's top was unusable due to the wrinkles and cracking, causing me to wear my backup leotard instead). Mail order is a very common part of cosplays, especially with wigs and specialty shoes, as is heat at summer conventions, so these are problems faced by other cosplayers as well.

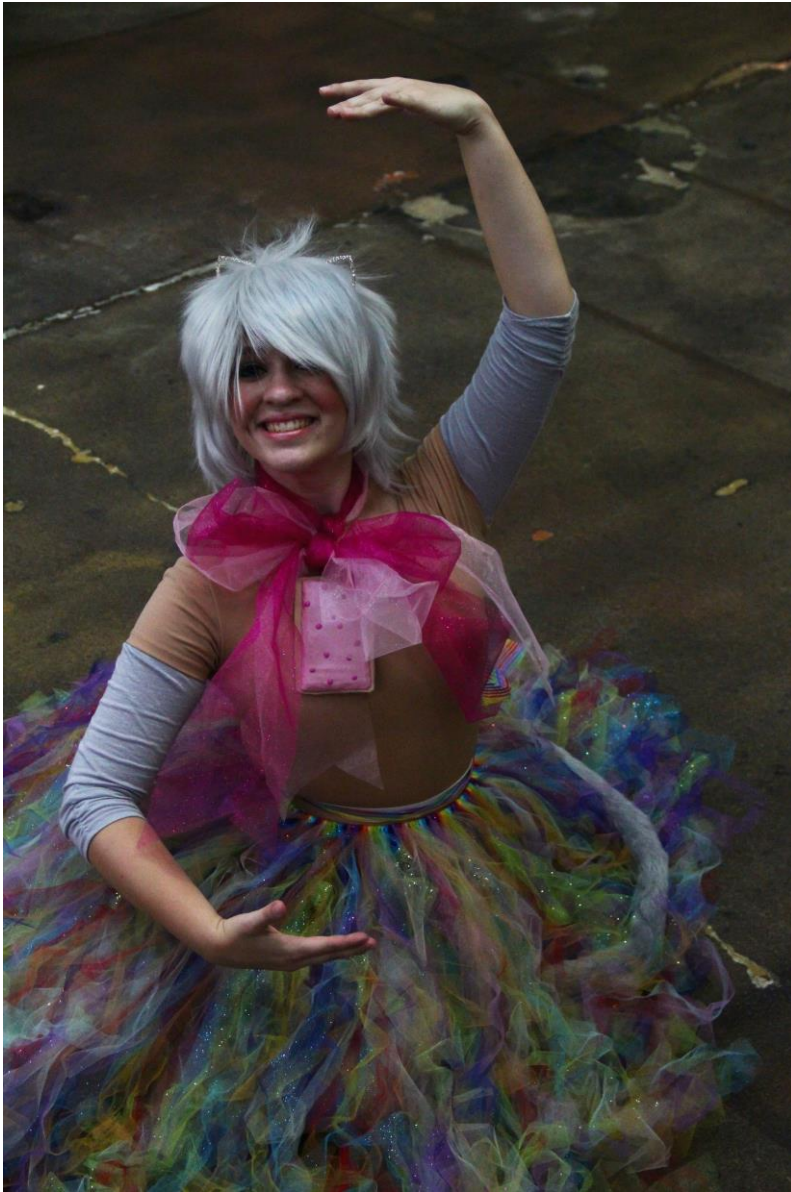
Image 1: Nyan Cat and Tac Nayn Ballroom



Image 2: Nyan Cat and Tac Nayn Squabble



Image 3: Nyan Cat Tutu Spread



The second cosplay I helped to create with my cosplay partner, Kaelin Michelle Bastin (who is also usually my photographer), was the pair of female John and Sherlock, based on the BBC's *Sherlock*, which is the **narrative**. The **costumes** were created through a combination of Goodwill clothing and clothing found in our parents' closets and based specifically off the outfits in the episode "A Study in Pink." This photo shoot was also done at the Factory at Franklin, although a filter was applied to the photographs to match the filter of the program to try and mimic both the apartment and crime scenes from the show for the **setting**. The main reason that these cosplays were chosen for each **cosplayer**, aside from the show being one of our favorites, had to do with a joking comment that someone had made about our heights (as the difference between our two heights is comparable to John and Sherlock's). And although there was no deeper reason behind the selection, we have both started to role-play our respective characters since we created the cosplays. Images of these cosplays can be seen below in Images 4 and 5.

Image 4: 221b Baker Street (“A Study in Pink”)



Image 5: Mind Palace (“A Study in Pink”)



The third cosplay I created was Kurusu Syo from *Uta no Prince-sama*, for whom I recreated many of his outfits (of the five created, I have shown three below), meaning I selected my **narrative** from multiple media of *UtaPri*. I recreated **cosplays** of his outfits from the “Otokogi Zenkai” (“A Sudden Burst of Manly/Chivalrous Energy”) CD cover (Image 6), the outfits from both the “Magi Love 1000%” music video (Images 7 and 8) and “Canon” music video (Images 9 and 10), the school uniform (summer version) from the visual novels, and a casual outfit based on his street cloths in the anime. For the **settings**, various locations around Historic Downtown Franklin were used, including the stairs at Fourth Avenue Church of Christ, to mimic the stairs from the “Canon” video, the fountain and garden at Five Points to mimic the gardens from the school (seen in both the anime and visual novels), and an outdoor picnic table, based on the episode in the anime where the boys are seen leaving school to write music and relax. The reason I as a **cosplayer** chose to cosplay Syo was, again, a joke made about my height when Kaelin Michelle and I were looking over the *UtaPri* character lineup. Syo was by far the shortest of the Starish band, and Kaelin Michelle already had a Jinguji Ren cosplay, who is one of the tallest two boys.

Image 6:
“Otokogi Zenkai”
Disc Cover

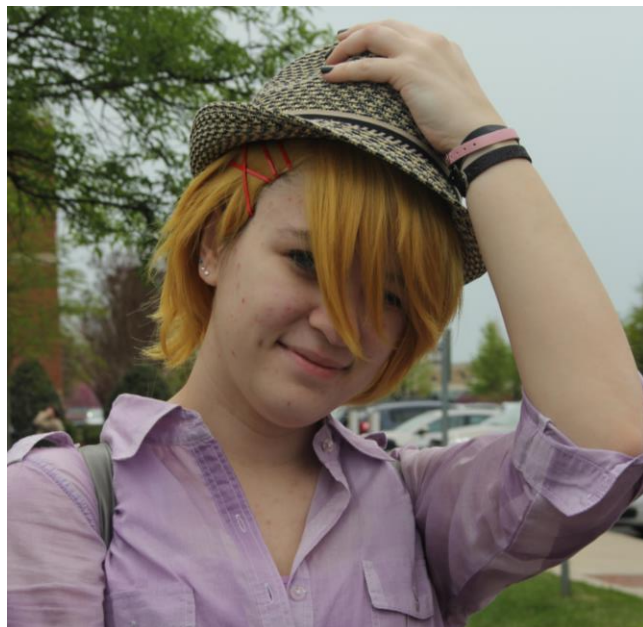


Image 7: Syo in the Gardens



Image 8: 1000% Love Pose



Image 9: Bobby Pins from the Mirror



Image 10: Writing “TRUE WING”

