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In the summer of 2016 over 100,000 people gathered together at the Anaheim Convention center for the annual Anime Expo convention, a three-day celebration of all things anime, manga, and Japanese culture (Delahanty, 2017). Many attendees were dressed as characters from their favorite shows, video games, and comic books. This activity is called cosplay, “a portmanteau word that combines both elements ‘costume’ and ‘play’ together. While ‘play’ represents that it is one sort of performing activity, ‘costume’ implies that people need particular outfits and accessories to be a specific character” (Wang, 2010, p. 18). Cosplayers choose their characters from a multitude of sources, including Hollywood movies, Japanese animation, video games, comic books, and television shows (Lotecki, 2012). Fans who participate in cosplay often make their own costumes or purchase ready-made costumes of their favorite characters and perform as the characters at conventions and meet ups. In addition, some post photos online of themselves in costume (Okabe, 2012). The purpose of this study was to explore motivations behind participation in cosplay in the context of Deci and Ryan’s (2000) Self Determination Theory. Self-Determination Theory addresses motivations associated with needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence as a basis for human behavior. This study was conducted as part of a larger research study specifically targeting cosplayers that utilize Facebook Artist pages.

Self Determination Theory asserts that all human beings are motivated to fulfill three basic psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Furthermore, the theory asserts that the fulfillment of the three needs relates directly to one’s general well-being. Autonomy is described as the need to feel in control of one’s choices and behaviors, relatedness is described as the need to emotionally connect with others, and competence is the need to feel effective at completing tasks, goals, and developing skills (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Self Determination Theory also differentiates between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsically motivated behaviors are those that people engage in for the sake of pleasure and enjoyment. Externally based motivational behaviors are those that are, to some extent, controlled by external factors (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Extrinsically motivated behaviors are associated with lower feelings of relatedness, autonomy, and competence. Thus, intrinsically motivated behaviors may lead to greater well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Studies have shown that cosplayers participate in the hobby as a form of escape (Rahman et al., 2012), a way to express the love of a character (Lotecki, 2012; Taylor, 2009; Winge, 2006), as a form of gendered expression (Gn, 2011; Leng, 2013), and as a way to be part of a community of likeminded individuals (Wang, 2010), and as an expression of fandom (Bonnichsen, 2011; Okabe, 2012; Taylor, 2009). At the time of this study, no research had been...
conducted utilizing the Self-Determination Theory to explain motivations for individuals to participate in cosplay.

To address the research questions, semi-structured interviews were completed by 20 cosplayers who maintain Facebook Artist Pages. A population from which to recruit participants was generated by listing all Facebook Artist pages of cosplayers found via Google.com search results. Of the 269 recruitment messages sent, 20 cosplayers agreed to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted via Skype, audio recorded, and transcribed by the researcher for analysis. Using the emergent themes approach to coding, each interview was analyzed for general themes regarding their motivations to participate in cosplay.

From the initial round of coding 15 themes emerged. The themes were then split into two subsections and consolidated: reasons why they began cosplaying in the first place and reasons why they continue to cosplay. Participant’s motivations to begin cosplaying in the first place fell under three main themes: to be a part of a community (relatedness), as a creative outlet (competence), and because it looked fun (autonomy). Participant’s motivations to continue to cosplay fell under six themes: the creative challenge of making a costume (competence), to build new skills (competence), as a bonding activity (relatedness), to be able to don the persona of another character (autonomy), to express their fandom (relatedness), and to receive positive feedback on something they create (competence).

The primary motivations to participate in cosplay among the participants in this study were not consistent with other major published studies of cosplay. Rahman et. al. (2012), Lamerichs (2010), and Peirson-Smith (2013) all focused on the transformative aspect of cosplay and their participant’s motivation to participate in cosplay as a way to escape mundane life. The cosplayers in the present study were much more motivated by the creative aspect of the hobby, stressing the importance of challenging themselves to create costumes accurately and being able to share the fruits of their labor with others. This difference may be attributed to the selection of only Artist pages in the sample, thereby leaving out cosplayers that identify themselves as Public Figures, Actors, or Models and placing much more emphasis on individuals that create their own costumes. Future studies will need to explore why there is such a disconnect between the motivations conveyed by participants in previous studies compared to the motivations conveyed in the present study.


