"Second Skin": The Relationship Between Cosplay and Gender Fluidity

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Abstract. This study adopted the interview method as its primary research method, based on theories such as Social Cognitive Theory and self-determination theory. Conduct a study on subcultures and gender from the perspective of gender expression; This study aim at the relationship between cosplay and gender fluidity, focusing on the phenomenon where certain cosplayers play the part of the characters that do not align with their own binary gender identity. After interviewing 12 different cosplayers, it was observed that some cosplayers choose "gender-fluid" cosplay as a means to fulfill personal needs. The high level of support within these anime cosplay communities makes cosplayers feel accepted, encouraging them to participate in such activities long-term and share their cosplay work online. Encouragement from cosplayers who share their passion motivates them to engage more actively in gender-fluid cosplay. It also helps them gain back some confidence in daily life and overcome their shyness, eventually creating a positive feedback cycle.

Keywords: Cosplay, gender fluidity, gender expression, identity exploration.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

As the world of humanities and arts continues to evolve, the tide of globalization has also opened up new avenues. Cosplay, an expression derived from the English term "costume play," is commonly known as a verb in the form "to cos." Hobbyists who participate in cosplay activities are typically referred to as "cosers" or "cosplayers." In the modern cultural environment, cosplay mainly revolves around costumes, trinkets, various kinds of props, and modern professional makeup techniques as its core presentation forms and content. Fans typically choose to recreate classic characters from anime, video games, and Japanese visual kei bands, as well as imitate and perform as specific characters from films and television shows [1].

From a cultural perspective, cosplay is one of the subcultural niche hobbies. In recent years, it has been showing strong growth trends in the global cultural market and has been popular with people of all ages. For the young adult population, anime and games are already a large part of their everyday culture and hobbies. Cosplay provides them with a wide range of experiences, from "viewing pleasure" to "real-world immersion." By personally engaging in role-playing, young people can deeply immerse themselves in the "anime world" they enjoy, gaining a strong sense of emotional and identity-based identity. For young people in the workforce and other adult groups, cosplay has become a way to unwind from the fast pace and high pressure of work and life, even "escaping the workplace" can be an effective way to follow one's passions and expand social networks [2].

Meanwhile, with the Internet's continuous update and social short-video platforms emerging out of nowhere, It has opened up broader space for the spread and development of cosplay culture. Cosplayers can share their creations on their personal social media accounts and share their thoughts with others who share the same passion, it has also attracted more people of different ages and backgrounds to join this community, further expanding the cosplay scene's reach and social influence, this has resulted in the subculture gradually emerging from its relatively niche community into the public eye, becoming a special , but not to be overlooked presence within modern multicultural groups.

This study focuses on content directly related to gender performance practices and does not provide a generalized analysis of the cosplay community, neither does it explore the anime and manga

industry and culture itself in depth, aiming instead to achieve more accuracy and profound research value by focusing on specific aspects.

1.2. Scope of the Study

This study mainly focuses on the cosplay culture community in mainland China, with research settings including two core fields: offline and online. Offline activities include big standardized anime exhibitions as the main observation points, includes CP Animation Expo Shanghai, BilibiliWorld, and other nationally influential events; online covers vertical communities like QQ groups, as well as entertainment and social platforms such as Bilibili, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu.

2. Research Methods

This study used in-depth interviews as a qualitative research method to comprehensively and deeply explore the views, experiences, and behavioral styles of certain groups within mainland China's cosplay culture community who choose "gender-fluid" cosplay. At the same time, selection standards were established for the frequency of participants' involvement in activities: participants must meet the "deep participation" requirement, meaning they must at least take part in one offline cosplay event per month and consistently post content (including photos, videos, etc.) on the main social media platforms like Douyin, Bilibili, and Xiaohongshu.This ensures they have rich practical experience and in-depth industry knowledge.

The research focuses on the gender expression level within cosplay behavior, specifically breaking it down into four core practice elements: costume selection, body transformation, posture performance, and photographic expression.Industry knowledge, this analysis focuses on the logic behind the cognitive understanding of characters and the development of subsequent practical thoughts throughout the whole process, from character selection to imitation practice, among fans. Therefore, in the interview outline design, a series of open-ended and semi-open-ended questions were carefully designed around the core topic of "self-expression and gender identity."These questions are designed to guide the interviewee in deeply reflecting on their behavioral motivations, psychological experiences, and social consequences; At the same time, through the question "How has this kind of cosplay influenced and changed your real life?", the author tried to understand the interaction between the interviewees' role-playing and their real identities. In addition, semi-open-ended questions such as "How do you balance your understanding of the character's gender and your own gender during gender-fluid cosplay?" were designed, to guide the interviewee into deeper self-reflection.

According to Table 1, the author selected 12 cosplayers as interviewees. The interviews were conducted using a mix of telephone calls and online communication via QQ and WeChat, lasting approximately 40 minutes to one hour each. This ensures flexibility and convenience in the interview process. To ensure the quality of interviews, detailed interview process guidelines have been prepared, covering pre-interview preparation, guiding techniques during interviews, and post-interview record -keeping and organization. During the interviews, non-leading questions were used to encourage respondents to freely express their views and feelings. Follow-up questions and clarifications were used to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the information. Following the interview, the interviews were promptly transcribed word-for-word, and the interview data was systematically coded and categorized using content analysis.

Table 1. Summary of Interviewee Personal Information.

Serial Number	Name of the interviewee	Gender	Age	Identity	Academic Qualifications	Location/Residence
1	JiaBei	male	32 ages	Luxury Goods Sales	Undergraduate - Bachelor's Degree	Changzhou City, Jiangsu Province
2	YinXing	male	22 ages	Tongji University	Undergraduate student	Yangpu District, Shanghai
3	XiaoPeng	male	20 ages	A university in Ningbo	Currently enrolled in a junior college program	Taizhou City, Zhejiang Province
4	YiYu	female	20 ages	A university in Henan	Undergraduate - Currently in 2nd year	Huixian City, Henan Province
5	XiaoSheng	female	21ages	A university in Shanghai	Undergraduate - Currently in the third year of undergraduate studies	Jing'an District, Shanghai
6	HuiHui	male	23ages	A university in Yunnan	Graduate Student	Lijiang City, Yunnan Province
7	LinHua	male	16ages	An international school in Shanghai	High school	Pudong New Area, Shanghai
8	SiSi	male	28ages	Sheet Metal Processing Programmer	Undergraduate	Hangzhou City, Zhejiang Province
9	LuLu	female	19ages	Nanjing Audit University	Undergraduate - 2nd year	Jiangyin City, Wuxi
10	XiaoQing	female	20ages	A college in Guangzhou	Currently enrolled in a junior college program	Guangzhou City, Guangdong Province
11	MaiMai	female	29ages	The Marketing Department of a Foreign Company	Master's degree	Chaoyang District, Beijing
12	Yuki	male	19ages	a certain university	Undergraduate studies	Not disclosed

During the data analysis stage, the author uses thematic analysis to conduct an in-depth repeatedly, the author identifies key themes and viewpoints, then classifies and summarizes them. For insexploration of the interview materials. by reading and comparing the interview content tance, under the theme of "Impact on Personal Gender Identity Boundaries," the author found that over half

of respondents believed gender-fluid cosplay would to some extend blur the boundaries of gender expression, but would not undermine their core identification with their biological sex.

3. Interview Summary and Analysis

3.1. Similarities and Differences in Interviews

In terms of common characteristics, respondents agreed that the anime/manga subculture and cosplay contribute to self-exploration (such as identity reconfiguration) and social growth (such as skill improvement,the positive value of community belonging, while highlighting that the validity of gender-fluid cosplay should be based on "role-playing" rather than "gender negativity."

In terms of acceptance dimensions within anime and manga culture, significant differences in emotional dependence were observed in respondents. Some participants see the anime world as a " mental fortress" to defend against real-world pressures, building psychological defenses through immersive experiences.For instance, Xiaoqing mentioned: "When my school pressure hits a breaking point, I find emotional release by rewatching *Hyouka*. This sense of immersion lets me escape my real-life struggles for a while." Such deeply dependent individuals often use anime and manga as a carrier for emotional projection, achieving self-medication through character identification.In contrast, another group tends to view the anime and manga subculture as a form of leisure and entertainment, which emphasizes "relaxing the mind" rather than "escaping reality." This difference not only reflects in the time invested but also the psychological motivations: the former seeks emotional fulfillment, while the latter focuses on entertainment experiences, together forming a multiple landscape of acceptance within the anime and manga subculture.Of course, a small number of participants explained that they engage in gender-fluid cosplay simply because, as fans of anime, they would like to express their enjoyment of these works through such role-playing activities. This is consistent with the findings described by Rechal Leng in his research.

In gender-fluid cosplay practices, the depth of participant engagement exhibits significant levels of variation.Core participants typically invested substantial resources in professional-level cosplay, including custom high-precision costumes, researching character makeup details, and even training in dance to master feminine postures. One long-term female character cosplayer shared: "To recreate the character from Arknights, I specifically studied Japanese makeup techniques and custom-made extremely realistic wigs and costumes." These deeply involved practitioners often develop systematic role-playing methodologies, elevating cosplay to the level of artistic creation. In contrast, casual participants may experiment with gender-fluid role-playing out of a sense of curiosity or treat it as an occasional social experience.This difference is not only reflected in the time invested but also in the cognitive dimension: the former views gender-fluid cosplay as a key avenue for self-expression, while the latter places greater emphasis on the freshness of the experience and its social properties.

Gender fluidity, as a topic of controversy, brought forth differing cognitive frameworks between interviewees. From the original core definition of gender fluidity, a person's gender identity or expression is not always fixed; it flows like liquid, shifting with time, context, and changes in self-perception. Gender is not determined by biology but transforms with social, cultural, and individual preferences. In other words, "gender fluidity"-style gender expression is stimulated by society and other factors and differs significantly from the term "transgender." Generally, transgender individuals include those whose gender identity opposes the sex specified at birth. Therefore, for transgender individuals, once they identify as non-binary at a particular moment, their gender identity is unlikely to be easily altered by external factors. In contrast, gender fluidity involves simply bringing oneself into the opposite gender for a period of time, rather than representing a lifelong personal identity.

When addressing the relationship between "gender fluidity" and cosplay, respondents also demonstrated subtle differences in their perceptions. YiYu emphasizes cosplay's function of "leading self-exploration," arguing that gender-fluid role-playing helps individuals discover hidden traits without determining their real-life identity. He notes: "By playing female characters, I discovered my more sensitive side, but this doesn't mean I identify as female." This perspective treats cosplay as a

cognitive tool, highlighting its inspirational role rather than its determinative influence.In comparison, Xiaoqing and Xiaosheng hold the view that "role-playing is separate from reality": they draw a clearer connection between virtual roles and real identities, thinking that "after taking off the cosplay costume, I still clearly know my biological sex." This difference reflects various approaches to understanding gender boundaries: the former believes cosplay can help blur cognitive boundaries, while the second emphasizes the stability of real identities. that together, they form diverse perspectives on understanding gender fluidity. To conclude, the co-existence of commonalities and differences reflects the multifaceted nature of anime and cosplay culture. The commonalities suggest that regardless of participation depth, individuals can achieve personal growth and social connection through these practices, while the differences highlight the individualized nature of cultural engagement. Differences in emotional dependence may relate to individual psychological needs, while variations in participation depth reflect trade-offs between interest and resource investment. Diverse understandings of gender fluidity further illustrate how the same cultural phenomenon can trigger entirely distinct cognitive frameworks among different individuals, offering an important key to understanding subcultural complexity.

3.2. Analysis of Interview Research

In the practice of "gender fluidity" cosplay, interviewees experienced a journey from initial misunderstanding to gradual understanding and participation. For instance, Xiaoqing and Xiaopeng initially questioned why males were cast as female characters. Later, through contact with the practice, they discovered the core understanding: "role-playing ≠ identity." Wearing female clothes and acting as female characters is a reduction of the role, not a negation of one's biological sex. After removing the cosplay costume, they still clearly recognize their own gender. This finding provides crucial evidence for understanding the relationship between cosplay and gender fluidity. Additionally, the study revealed that participants often break through traditional gender role limits through costume, makeup, and pose during role-playing, enabling self-expression and identity exploration. This breakthrough is not only reflected in character selection but also in the reinterpretation and redefinition of gender roles.

This practice has an impact on gender boundaries, primarily in terms of blurring gender expression and expanding cognitive boundaries. As the notion that "gender is fluid" suggests, humans cannot abandon their biological nature, but through social, cultural, and individual influences, one can change their constraints defined by the "binary system." However, these constraints do not undermine participants' core identification with their biological sex [3]. On the other hand, by separating role-playing from reality, participants can investigate diverse possibilities for gender expression while respecting their core identity. The idea is essentially "exploring through role-playing while maintaining a grounded sense of self in reality."

From a community and societal perspective, the anime/manga subculture provides a safe space for "gender fluidity" cosplay through respect and inclusion [2]. By rejecting unnecessary labeling and stereotypes, enthusiasts can focus on personal growth. As a "testing ground," the inclusive practices of this subculture not only promote diversity in gender expression but also positively influence gender perceptions in real society.

In terms of commonalities, participants agreed that anime culture and cosplay offer positive value for self-discovery and social growth. Their understanding of gender-fluid cosplay ultimately centers on the " reasonableness of role-playing," rather than a rejection of their own gender identity. Differences emerged in the emotional dependency on anime culture: some viewed it as a psychological source of strength, while others treated it as a hobby. The depth of engagement with gender fluidity cosplay also varied—some consistently portrayed female characters with significant effort, while others occasionally experimented or participated purely for experience. Interpretations of gender fluidity differed in details: Yiyan emphasized "guiding self-discovery rather than defining identity," whereas XiaoQing and Xiaopeng more explicitly distinguished "role-playing from real-life gender identity."

For one example, during an interview with XiaoLu, she explained that her interest in the anime subculture began in elementary school when she watched *Your Name*. This work gave her her first taste of the appeal of anime. She then went deeper into the anime world through older series like *Date A Live* and *K-On!* , and in her second year of junior high, she got hooked on *Arknights* because the female character *Amiya*'s qualities—like trustworthiness and gentleness—stood in stark contrast to what she felt was missing in real life. During high school, the preparation for college entrance exams left her with little common ground with peers. Otaku culture became her "utopia" and social lifeline. Through platforms like Bilibili and Tieba, she connected with like-minded friends, gradually overcoming her sense of loneliness in the real world.

She also mentioned that her decision to choose cosplay was inspired by the welcoming attitude toward cosplay within the Bilibili community. She said frankly, "I don't have any other talents, but cosplay only requires money and passion to participate, which makes it feel very low-barrier to me." When selecting characters, she favors roles like *Noah* from *Blue Achieve*.By cosplaying Noah, she gained likes and comments from fans on Bilibili, experiencing a sense of belonging and confidence. At offline anime exhibitions, she earned more acceptance by embodying the character's personality while staying true to herself during interactions with fellow cosplayers.

Cosplay has brought about a remarkable transformation in Xiao Lu's personality. She recalls, "I used to be very insecure and overly concerned about others' opinions, but through cosplay, I gradually found my confidence." This confidence comes from her ability to improve her outward self-image through makeup and costume coordination during role-playing, gradually learning to appreciate her own unique charm. At the same time, within the community, she gained more positive feedback through interactions with other cosplay fans, gradually getting rid of her self-defeating mindset. Moreover, cosplay has helped her make many friends. This sense of belonging has made her increasingly cheerful and confident in real life.

When Xiaolu faced the question of "experiencing 'gender fluidity' through cosplay," she expressed her unique perspective. She believes: "Transgender cosplay embodies gender fluidity. Cosplaying at different times and venues leads to varying self-awareness." This understanding gradually led her to adopt a more open attitude toward gender expression and sexual orientation. She stated: Before, I couldn't understand men cosplaying female characters, but now I think it's perfectly fine—if they enjoy it, they should give it a try." Through her gender fluidity cosplay practice, she discovered that feedback from different communities varies in how helpful it is for exploring gender identity. the inclusiveness of the anime/manga community provides a more relaxed space for gender identity exploration, but she also faces challenges in the real world.

Xiaolu's experience represents a group of young people who use cosplay as a medium for constructing self-identity and conducting gender exploration. Her journey from interest to practice, and from self-doubt to self-confidence, reflects the positive role of the anime and manga community in providing emotional support and identity spaces. It also offers a living case study for understanding how gender fluidity is expressed within youth culture [3].

4. Research Findings and Analysis

In this study, the authors used self-determination theory and group behavior theory as the primary theoretical frameworks. Self-determination theory and social learning theory help us understand how cosplayers explore gender identity driven by their intrinsic motivation[4], while group behavior theory explains how community norms and culture influence this exploration process [5]. Based on this, the author proposes Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2, which correspond to the effects of individual internal motivation and external environmental factors, respectively.

First, the internal drive: The basic reason lies in one's own need for identity exploration. First, Hypothesis 1—the identity exploration hypothesis—points to the individual's internal motivation. In "Self-Determination Theory," it states that people have three fundamental psychological needs: "autonomy," "competence," and "relatedness"[6]. Gender-fluid cosplayers engaging in gender-fluid

performances embody a kind of "self-determined behavior" that fulfills both the need for autonomy (freely exploring identity) and the need for ability (successfully portraying another gender). Therefore, the "identity exploration" mentioned in Hypothesis 1 itself serves as a powerful motivation driving individuals toward more frequent and in-depth gender-fluid expressions [6]. This suggests that individuals uncertain about or exploring their gender identity are more likely to view cosplay as a valuable tool for self-exploration. For them, cross-gender cosplay is not merely about imitating a popular character, but an opportunity to "try on" different gender identities and experience varied gender expressions within a safe, fictional context [7]. Consequently, the intrinsic need and motivation driving such role-playing are inherently stronger, leading to higher frequency and deeper immersion. This acts as the "engine" of the behavior.

Second, external catalysis: community inclusivity is a key condition. It is a closed community where cosplay culture possesses distinct connotations and characteristics compared to mainstream culture. However, this distinctiveness and exclusivity foster a sense of belonging and group identity among its members. The cosplay community is a classic example of a "collective." Collective Action Theory posits that individual behavior is systematically influenced by group interactions, behaviors, and culture [8]. Internal motivation alone is insufficient; the external environment determines whether this desire can be successfully realized. This is the hypothesis articulated in Hypothesis 2—the Community Acceptance Hypothesis. No matter how strong a cosplayer's desire to explore may be, if they feel or anticipate potential ridicule, rejection, or attacks from the community, they are likely to become anxious and suppress their intentions. Conversely, a highly inclusive community provides a safe space and catalyst. It makes cosplayers feel accepted and encouraged, allowing them to set their worries free and release their desire for exploration in a more relaxed, confident, and positive state, forming a mutually reinforcing relationship [9]. This closely resembles social cognitive theory, where stimuli placed upon an individual can cause them to gain or lose certain behaviors. It emphasizes how external factors shape an individual's gender role [5]. In short, these two hypotheses outline a complete process: Hypothesis 1 (Internal Exploration) answers "Who is more likely to do this?"—those in the process of exploring their gender identity. Hypothesis 2 (External Acceptance) answers "Under what conditions do they dare to do this?"—within a community environment that makes them feel safe and supported.[10]

Therefore, gender fluidity expression in cosplay is the result of an interaction between an individual's internal need for exploration (Hypothesis 1) and the community's external environment of inclusion (Hypothesis 2). An encouraging external environment effectively stimulates and supports behaviors driven by internal motivation, enabling cosplayers to freely and fully experiment with and explore gender expression. It is the intersection of the cosplayer's inner desire to explore (Self-Determination Theory/Hypothesis 1) and the community's atmosphere of encouraging exploration (Social Influence Theory/Hypothesis 2) that most effectively sparks positive and frequent gender fluidity expression.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of Research Findings

Through this study, the author not only gained deeper insights into the psychological experiences and social impacts of the "gender-fluid" cosplay community but also provided new angles for understanding gender expression and identity in contemporary youth culture. Findings reveal that cosplay, as a subcultural practice, provides individuals with a safe, controlled space for gender expression, helping them explore and build multiple gender identities. meanwhile, the study also highlights cosplay culture's possible role in advancing gender norms transformation, offering valuable insights for related research and practice.

Using interviews, the author verified the hypothesis set at the beginning of the study: some cosplayers who choose "gender-fluid" cosplay do so for personal reasons, fulfilling their own needs. Moreover, the high level of acceptance within the anime cosplay community makes these cosers feel

embraced and accepted. This encourages them to engage in such activities long-term and share their cosplay works online. Subsequently, receiving encouragement from fellow cosplayers within the community further motivates them to participate more actively in these cosplay events. This process also helps them regain some confidence in their daily lives, reducing their shyness and timidity. Thus, a positive feedback loop is formed.

5.2. Review of Findings and Correlations

The research findings are consistent with the objectives of this study, suggesting that the concept of "gender fluidity" can be effectively applied to cosplay fans within this field. It addresses the issue of this group of cosplayers not being defined or categorized within existing classifications of cosplay communities in reality. This also guides future research toward more detailed exploration, deepening existing understanding of subcultural cosplay communities. It fills a gap in gender studies by applying the concept of "gender fluidity" to contemporary widespread hobbies.

5.3. Research Limitations

However, this study still has certain limitations. During the interviews, the selection of interviewees was not as diverse as originally thought. Most participants identified as heterosexual, while the remaining either stated they were unsure of their orientations or did not disclose them. This limitation hindered the collection, organization, and analysis of interview data, making it impossible to ensure the accuracy of all findings. Consequently, insights into the motivations and experiences of other sexual orientations within this group regarding "gender fluidity" cosplay were not available. Simultaneously, during interviews with different participants, a very small number exhibited attitudes quite different from others. For instance, some stated that while they engage in cosplay, they do not consider themselves part of the cosplay community. They also expressed no particular feelings about their "gender-fluid" cosplay, describing it simply as "changing clothes and applying makeup."

To overcome the limitations of this study, future research will improve the research structure through multidimensional approaches. Regarding sample selection, the authors will expand the research scope to include other sexual orientations. By employing community-targeted recruitment methods, diverse groups such as homosexuals and pansexuals will be incorporated. In terms of sample selection, the author will systematically collect data from participants of diverse orientations regarding their motivations, subjective experiences, and perspectives on engaging in "gender fluidity"-style cosplay. This approach will address the current limitations in sample representativeness and enhance our understanding of group awareness within this field.

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