

ISSUE

1

CHOOSE YOUR CHARACTER

The Motivations Behind Character
Selection in the Art of Cosplay



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Choose Your Character: The Motivations Behind Character Selection in the Art of Cosplay

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Digital Arts.

Johannesburg, 2025

Abstract

Most conventions and geek gatherings around the world will undoubtedly have at least a couple of attendees who have dressed in cosplay as various characters from popular culture. These cosplays range from instantly recognisable characters such as *Darth Vader* to characters that only the greatest superfans will be familiar with. They can be assembled from cardboard and regular clothes made a couple of days before the convention or be completely screen-accurate cosplays years in the making. With cosplay being such a diverse medium, this research aims to investigate the process that cosplayers undergo when choosing a character to cosplay. This research is also focused on cosplayers residing in South Africa and makes use of detailed and in-depth surveys and interviews with multiple members of the South African cosplay community to understand and classify the various aspects that play a role in the character selection process. This research makes use of discourse analysis to analyse the answers provided by participants, as well as the context of these answers to develop a deeper understanding.

Keywords: Cosplay, Fandom, Character Selection, South Africa

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation/thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Digital Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.



17th of February 2025

Ethics Clearance Number: **H23/06/11**

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Kirsten Reid. Kirsten, thank you for all the guidance over the past two years whilst working towards this moment of completion. Thank you for helping me get back on track when things seemed awry, for answering my questions that generally had fairly obvious answers, and for not only guiding me on this academic journey but for becoming my friend through this process.

I would like to thank my family who have always supported me and my academic pursuits even when they perhaps strayed from the norm. Thank you for all the encouragement and support along the way and for listening to me go on about things even though you had no idea what I was talking about. Thank you for asking questions that helped me to see things from a different perspective.

I would like to thank Zee and Talz, my two best friends who embarked on this Masters journey with me. Thank you for constantly being there, pushing me, and helping me to keep on going. Thank you for making the past two years of tutoring so much fun, helping me grow, and always being willing to joke and laugh about upcoming deadlines and boring seminars we had to sit through. Thanks for all the laughs, cries, and hours spent in the parking lot having deep meaningful conversations or doing photoshoots. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to have become greater friends with you through this process, and I hope this friendship continues for the rest of our lives.

Thank you to Kieran Reid also, for all your guidance over the years not only academically but also for teaching me what it means to be playful in life.

Thank you to every member of the Wits Digital Arts family who has made the past six years the greatest six years of my life. From games nights to exhibitions, game jams to painting days, playroom duty to marking, and of course boardroom and courtyard chats, these are memories that I will hold forever.

Thank you to Dr Oluwarotimi Randle for assisting and guiding me in the corrections phase of this research to ensure I made it over the line.

Thank you to my students who hopefully I taught as much as you have taught me.

Thank you to the participants of this research who gave up their time to share their stories with me.

Finally, thank you to the geek community. A group of people and community where a bullied, nerdy kid who liked watching Sci-Fi movies and pretending sticks were swords could find a home among brilliant, enthusiastic, and like-minded people.

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Prologue

As a child, I could often be found far off in a world of my own imagination. I was raised on oral tales and stories of characters such as King Arthur, Robin Hood, and Robert the Bruce by my grandfather. I would eagerly sit and listen to these tales and hang on to every word. I became fascinated with these characters and their adventures; swords being pulled from stones and merry men running through the forest helping those in need.

I listened to the tales of these great heroes, and in my play, I became them. Sticks became swords, hats became crowns, and these characters became real for me.

As I grew up, this passion for embodying characters only grew stronger. I began playing video games, reading fiction, and watching films, and my list of characters only grew. I broke my leg trying to replicate the moves of *Ezio Auditore da Firenze* from *Assassin's Creed*, I bruised many knuckles trying to fight with a lightsaber like *Luke Skywalker* from *Star Wars*, and I showed up to Sunday school with *Aang's* air-bending tattoos from *Avatar: The Last Airbender* drawn on with oil pastels.

I took any opportunity I could to dress up in character, school plays, themed parties and of course, Halloween which quickly became one of my favourite times of year. It didn't matter if I was the *Green Lantern*, *Frankenstein's monster*, or astronaut number 3, I was embodying a character and living the story.

Then everything changed when I was 15. A friend and I decided to attend a local convention focused on all things geeky, fandom, and pop culture. Video games, comic books, anime, anything you could think of, they had it all. Having heard of something called cosplay on the internet and demonstrated in the television show *The Big Bang Theory* we decided that it was only logical to attend this convention dressed in character.

We were both major *Star Wars* fans (and still are) and thus decided that it was with this fictional universe that we would attempt our first foray into the world of cosplay. We knew that we wanted our chosen characters to complement each other and began thinking of iconic *Star Wars* duos and pairs. Our first thought was of course *Darth Vader* and a *Stormtrooper*, but the budget and technical fabrication skills available to two 15-year-olds promptly halted that idea in its tracks. Our next idea was none other than the iconic doubles team of *Han Solo* and *Chewbacca*, although neither of us particularly felt like wearing a carpet for several hours in a crowded convention centre. We finally settled on the nemesis duo of *Han Solo* and *Boba Fett*, with me taking on the role of *Han Solo*.

We spent the weeks leading up to the convention spending every free moment working on our costumes trying to cram in as many details as possible and I even went so far as to learn *Han Solo's* iconic lines and practice the poses and swagger he was so well known for. Now that I

have talked up the level and quality of these costumes and perhaps exaggerated their calibre a fair deal, upon reflection looking back we were but two awkward teens wearing cardboard armour and messily sewn garments wielding sci-fi blasters made from an old microphone stand which I ‘liberated’ from our school’s tech room during a cleanout.

Finally, the weekend of the convention arrived, and we hit the convention floor. It wasn’t long before someone recognised us as the characters and asked for a photo with us, and with that the fire inside of me was lit.

The only photo that remains of that *Han Solo* cosplay is pictured below, and looking back at it almost a decade later it certainly is a humbling experience. I also know that the reasons I chose to cosplay *Han Solo* all those years ago are not the same as the reasons behind why I choose characters today. Those motivations and influences have evolved and changed just as I have grown and evolved as a cosplayer over the years.

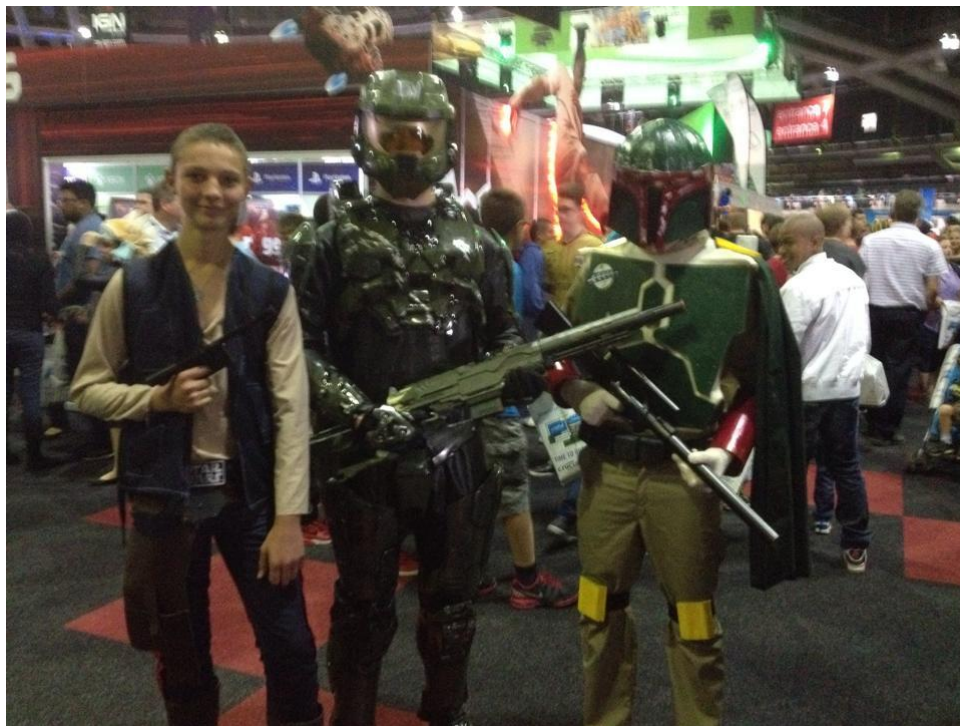


Figure 1 Myself and a friend cosplaying for the first time at the rAge Expo 2014 as Han Solo and Boba Fett pictured with a Master Chief cosplayer from the Halo video game series.

At the end of the convention, I went home exhausted, sweaty, and with feet aching from being crammed into boots two sizes too small for several hours – and I wouldn’t trade that feeling for anything in the world. The costumes were in no way screen or replica-accurate, but that didn’t matter because in wearing them, we were the characters. On that day I had become the character that had meant so much to me, I wasn’t the 15-year-old kid who was often bullied and had trouble talking to people, no, I was *Han Solo*, hero of the *Rebel Alliance*.

As the years have gone by my love for cosplay has only grown deeper, and with each year I find myself striving to build bigger, better, and more elaborate costumes to showcase, wear, and embody at these geek gatherings. When attending geek events, I often find myself drawn to other cosplayers and can easily spend hours talking to each person about cosplay. I find myself asking all sorts of questions - everything from “Where did you find these amazing rhinestones?” to “How on earth did you manage to make your axe light up?”. My favourite questions, however, generally relate to the character the person has chosen to cosplay, why they chose that character, and what that character means to them.

I have chosen various characters to cosplay for a myriad of reasons: *Commander Doom* from *Star Wars* because of my love for the character; *Lord Elrond* from *The Lord of the Rings* because of the character’s visual design; *King Arthur* from *SMITE* so that I could give myself a technical challenge.

Over time I have found that the answers to these questions are as nuanced as the cosplayers themselves. It is for this reason, that these are my favourite questions because the answers reveal so much about the person that may not have always been evident from the outside.

This research aims to focus on exactly that aspect of cosplay. What leads to cosplayers choosing certain characters to cosplay? Perhaps it is their love for a character, perhaps their ambition to learn a new skill, or maybe their character choice is limited by the skills available to them. Maybe their choice is a form of self-validation, an expression of who they truly are, or even a protest against societal norms and what people expect from them. Perhaps they think a character simply looks cool and desires to wear their outfit, or perhaps it is a combination of several aspects that make up this multi-faceted character choice.

Either way, by better understanding these motivations and influences of character selection and choice, we can better understand the members of our community, and on the whole, better understand how the members of this community engage with the beautiful art form and fan practice that is cosplay.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

“Cosplay means people who dress up as their favourite characters from film and television and especially anime, but it is so much more than that. These aren't just people who find a costume and put it on -- they mash them up. They bend them to their will. They change them to be the characters they want to be in those productions. They're super clever and genius. They let their freak flag fly and it's beautiful.” – Adam Savage

Cosplay. That word has appeared several times by now along with some descriptions and perhaps have a vague idea of what it is all about has started to form: putting on costumes and going to Comic Con. The questions remain however, what exactly is cosplay, what does it involve, why is it of interest, why do people dress as fictional characters, and why do they choose those specific characters?

These questions can be answered by first diving into the history, origins, and rise of cosplay.

The etymology of words is always useful for gaining understanding and insight. The term cosplay is a portmanteau of the words “costume” and “play” (or role-play). “The term cosplaying was coined in the 1980s by the game designer Takahashi Nobuyuki when he encountered the costuming practices of American fans.” (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 3). The original Japanese term was *kosupure* (コスプレ) which translates to cosplay (Plunkett, 2014). “Takahashi was floored by the kaleidoscope of attendees, who populated the halls with their wondrous looks. When he returned to Japan, he enthusiastically wrote about the trend in *My Anime*.” (Sarkar, 2016). Nobuyuki developed this term to describe the act of wearing a costume and ‘playing’ the character in an informal setting. Whilst the practice of dressing up as favourite anime and manga characters had been popular in Japan since the early 1970s there wasn’t a singular word to describe this practice (Sarkar, 2016). Takahashi settled on cosplay, the blend of costume and play, combining the two words for brevity’s sake (Plunkett, 2014).

However, even though the official term cosplay was coined in the 1980s people have been dressing up as their favourite characters for much longer. There is however some slight debate about who and what can be classified as the first cosplayer, and the first cosplay event. Some claim that cosplay has existed since at least 1876. In April 1876 the family of Jules Verne, a renowned sci-fi author known for classics such as *Around the World in Eighty Days*, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, hosted a masked ball. “Over 300 guests attended dressed as characters from Verne’s books.” (Plunkett, 2016). The debate in this being the beginning of cosplay however lies in the fact that some would argue that this was merely guests dressing for a themed party rather than an act and example of expressive fandom, Plunkett states “since it was a themed party, and not the result of expressive fandom, we can’t conclusively call it the world’s first recorded act of cosplay.” (Plunkett, 2016). Whether or not this is the origin of cosplay, one thing is for certain, people have been dressing up as science

fiction characters for almost as long as the genre has existed with Mary Shelley's work *Frankenstein* creating the foundation of the genre in 1818.

Following on from Verne's masked ball, in the early 20th century there are definitive examples of people practising what we today would classify as cosplay. *Mr. Skygack, from Mars*, is considered to be the first science fiction comic created by A.D. Condo in 1907 (Miller, 2013). The comic focuses on *Mr. Skygack* a Martian sent to Earth to observe humans and their practices. *Mr. Skygack* would go on to become the inspiration behind what many would classify as the first cosplay. In 1908, a mere one year after the creation and introduction of *Mr. Skygack*, Mr. William A. Fell, and his wife attended a masquerade skating carnival in the city of Cincinnati. "Mr. William A. Fell attended...in a full-body Mr. Skygack costume...his wife joined him dressed as another comic character Diana Dillpickles" (Plunkett, 2016). Their costumes and the appearances of these costumes were extremely well received by those in attendance as well as the original artist A.D. Condo himself who even recreated the appearance of these characters in cosplay in their unique cartoon style (Plunkett, 2016). An image of this cartoon recreation can be found below.



Figure 2 A.D. Condo's comic rendition of Mr. and Mrs. Fell cosplaying as Mr. Skygack and Diana Dillpickles

In 1910, two years after Mr. Fell's appearance as *Mr. Skygack* another cosplay of the very same character appeared. "A woman in Tacoma, Washington, took first prize at a masquerade ball dressed as her favourite comic character: the alien anthropologist." (Plunkett, 2016). An image of this cosplay as featured in newspapers can be found below. Additionally, the woman lent the costume to a friend, Otto James, to wear on the streets of Tacoma to advertise his ice-skating rink, however "James was arrested on charges of public masquerading, before being released on \$10 bail." (Plunkett, 2016). There must have been some interesting conversations in that holding cell. Perhaps even the question that is at the core of this research was asked: "*Why are you dressed like that?*".



Figure 3 A newspaper section depicts someone dressed as Mr. Skygack who has placed 1st in a masquerade competition.

Following on from the *Skygack* cosplayers, the next major contribution to the development and popularisation of cosplay can be attributed to Myrtle R. Douglas (also known as Morojo) and Forrest J Ackerman in 1939. Douglas was an editor of multiple science fiction fanzines and an active member of the Los Angeles Science Fiction Society along with her partner Ackerman (Culp, 2016). In 1939 the first ever World Science Fiction Convention occurred (also known as Worldcon). Douglas and Ackerman “attended the first-ever World Science Fiction convention (Worldcon) wearing “futuristiccostumes” straight out of the 1936 H.G. Wells movie *Things to Come*.” (Culp, 2016). Douglas designed, crafted, and created the costumes they wore which placed Ackerman in breeches and shoulder pads and Douglas in a ball gown turned romper and cape (Culp, 2016). An image of Douglas and Ackerman wearing their cosplays can be seen below.

Many convention goers and attendees were inspired by the acts of Douglas and Ackerman and in the years to come “costume contests became an annual tradition at Worldcon, drawing more and more participants with each passing year.” (Culp, 2016). It was this same convention,

Worldcon 1984, albeit 45 years later that Takahashi visited in New York and in doing so led to the coining of the term cosplay (Culp, 2016).



Figure 4 Myrtle Douglas and Forrest Ackerman cosplaying from HG Wells' Things to Come at the first Worldcon in 1939.

Ever since, cosplay and its popularity have been on the rise with cosplayers being in no short supply at any geek, fandom, or comic convention around the world, “Cosplay blazed through the geek fandoms that had sprung up in the wake of sci-fi, staking territory in fan groups devoted to fantasy, anime, comics, and gaming” (Culp, 2016). Cosplayers cosplay as characters from a wide range of fictional universes appearing in different forms and texts, “When cosplaying, fans of popular culture (e.g., television series, games, movies) produce their own costumes inspired by fictional characters.” (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 2). These fictional universes don’t even have to have existed for long before people begin cosplaying, as was the case of Sean Schoenke.

Schoenke was touted online as one of the first people to ever cosplay as the iconic masked villain of *Star Wars*, *Darth Vader*, when a faded photo was published online by Sean's son with the caption "the first person to cosplay Darth Vader" (Baver, 2017). Sean built his cosplay "over one week in the summer of 1977" (Baver, 2017), within a few months of the movie's release. Schoenke states they watched the film in the cinema 14 times to be able to replicate this costume as it was in the days before high-resolution images of characters were available online (Baver, 2017). Schoenke's cosplay of *Darth Vader* is pictured below.



Figure 5 Sean Schoenke in what is considered by some to be the first *Darth Vader* cosplay in 1977.

With a better understanding of the origins of cosplay and its evolution, it can already be seen that the motivations behind character choice can vary greatly from cosplayer to cosplayer. In the instances of Verne's party guests, their character selection was the result of limitations being enforced upon the guests at the specific event they were attending, "300 guests attended dressed as characters from Verne's books" (Plunkett, 2016). Next could be seen the motivations of the character selection of the *Skygack* cosplayers influenced by which characters were currently popular and trending and would be easily recognised by the public, "the costumes closely followed those of the comic characters made familiar to the public" (Plunkett, 2016). Douglas and Ackerman chose their characters based on the love and passion that they possessed for the genre of science fiction, "an active member of the Los Angeles Science Fiction Society" (Culp, 2016), and matching the theme of the science fiction event they were attending. Schoenke was motivated and influenced by popular culture and what was trending at the time

of making the cosplay, “it was just about out of the theatres. By that time, I’d seen it enough times. I could make me an outfit” (Baver, 2017). In the foundations and roots of this hobby and fan practice, there were a myriad of reasons for selecting various characters to cosplay as can be seen by these few examples mentioned.

When it comes to South Africa, cosplay is still new and niche compared to the rest of the world where people were dressing up in the 1970s, the 1910s, and even for some as early as the 1870s. It is quite difficult to pinpoint exactly how long cosplay has been around in South Africa but there are a few factors that may help point us in the right direction. Maggie Coetzee wrote an article for the Stellenbosch University Japanese Centre about South African cosplay and its fans. Coetzee states “The cosplay community in South Africa has existed for well over fifteen years” (Coetzee, 2023). Given that Coetzee’s article was published in 2023 this means that at an absolute minimum, cosplay has been around in South Africa since 2008.

Another avenue to pursue when seeking to quantify the start of South African cosplay is to look at the history of South African geek-focused events and gatherings. The *rAge Expo* is the oldest event of its kind in South Africa, “rAge is South Africa’s longest running video gaming, technology, esports, geek culture and digital entertainment exhibition” (rAge Expo, 2012), and having known multiple cosplayers over the years, many have spoken about their first cosplay experience being at *rAge Expo*, myself included. The *rAge (really AWESOME gaming expo) expo* first started in 2002 in Johannesburg South Africa and whilst it is impossible to prove, it is not improbable that there was perhaps at least one guest in attendance cosplaying in some manner or other. From this, it can be inferred that the South African Cosplay Community is approximately 23 years old with the rAge expo being the birthplace of South African cosplay. The below photo shows a brief glimpse into the birthplace of South African cosplay during the 2003 edition of the rAge expo.



Figure 6 One of the earliest photos of the rAge expo taken during the 2003 rAge expo. Perhaps the birthplace of South African Cosplay

In the above photograph it is quite difficult to spot any cosplayers, but just because they can't be seen doesn't mean that they are not there engaging in the broader South African geek community.

Undoubtedly cosplay and cosplaying has evolved and changed over time. From my own experience, the South African cosplay scene has changed, evolved, and shifted in the past nine years from when I first joined the hobby and community. It would be safe to assume that globally cosplay has changed and evolved from the days of Fell cosplaying *Skygack* and Douglas cosplaying from *Things to Come*.

I can perhaps provide some anecdotal examples of how the South African cosplay scene and community have evolved and changed. For instance, when I started cosplaying in 2014, whilst many other people were cosplaying as various characters from various fandoms, we were still in the minority compared to the total number of convention goers and those who would simply wear everyday normal clothes to these events. However, when comparing this to conventions I have attended more recently, the community has certainly grown, and in some instances I would say is even in the majority of convention-goers as compared to those in regular clothes.

Another anecdotal example of change and evolution is that of the types and styles of cosplays and costumes from when I first entered the community to today. When I started it was far more common to see people wearing cosplays that mostly consisted of fabric and sewn elements with perhaps small bits of armour here and there, and a couple of full armour cosplays. These days however it is not uncommon to behold many different cosplayers who have incorporated armour elements into their cosplays, whether they be full-on *Iron Man* suits or simply armoured shin guards paired with a ballgown as *Yennefer of Vengerberg*.

A final example of how the cosplay scene in South Africa has shifted over time is competitive cosplay in South Africa. When I first started cosplaying, there were only a handful of cosplayers that would engage in the *rAge expo* cosplay competition with the top cosplay accolade available to South Africans being the winner of the *rAge expo* cosplay competition. These days however, cosplay competitions draw large numbers of participants with cosplayers queuing for large amounts of time for the opportunity to take part in the *Comic Con Africa* casual cosplay competitions and registering months beforehand for the *Comic Con Africa Cosplay Championships*. Furthermore, the accolades don't just stop at these competitions. South Africa has so far had the opportunity of sending three different South African cosplayers to represent South Africa at the *World Cosplay Crown Championships*. And with three representatives at the *World Cosplay Crown Championship*, they have walked away with 2nd Place twice and 1st Place once, no small feat for a country whose cosplay community is approximately only 22 years old. These three representatives are pictured below in the cosplays in which they competed on the world stage.



Figure 7 South Africa's representatives to the World Cosplay Crown Championships. (Left to right) Kinpatsu Cosplay as a Sister of Battle (2nd Place), Jinxie Cosplay as Blood Priestess Bathory (1st Place), Ludus Cosplay as Aratak (2nd Place)

Even with these various ways in which the South African cosplay community may have grown, evolved, and changed over the years there are still some things which mostly remain the same. It is always a favourite game of mine and my friends to count some of the most common cosplays that you will generally see, such as *Harley Quinn*, *The Joker*, and generic *Jedis*. You

won't be able to leave a convention without seeing a number of these characters being cosplayed in some shape or manner.

When one chooses to attend a convention and decides that they will cosplay, they are faced with a difficult decision: '*Who will I cosplay as?*'.

This research sets out to identify, classify, and categorise the various reasons, motivations, and influences behind the choice of choosing which character to cosplay, whether it be for a themed event, a local geek convention, online Instagram fame, or one of the many other reasons that someone may choose to cosplay. This research aims to answer the questions behind the question: '*Who will I cosplay as?*'.

The Question and Aims that this research hopes to answer and achieve:

The below section outlines and describes why this research is of importance. It discusses the problem statement this research attempts to solve, the research question that has been formulated to provide answers that align with addressing the problem statement, and the overall aims and objectives of this research.

Problem Statement

Little research has been done on the South African cosplay community when looked at within the broader context of global cosplay research. Keyan Tomaselli wrote *Comic Con Africa (2022) Cosplaying Identities* (Tomaselli, 2022) which briefly touches on cosplay in South Africa. Tomaselli describes his experiences of encountering cosplay first hand at a South African convention, Tomaselli states "I was entering the comic world where individuals live in their own fictions" (Tomaselli, 2022). Tomaselli also states "The event was a carnival of diversity, of postmodern difference, of muted, but self-effacing exhibitionism, as most conventioners were amusingly playing a role of one kind or another... they were acting out fantasies." (Tomaselli, 2022). Tomaselli goes into detail describing the many various and different styles and forms of cosplay they encountered at *Comic Con Africa*, however little thought or comment is given by Tomaselli as to the reasons behind the diversity of costume choices. With Tomaselli describing characters ranging from *Casper the Friendly Ghost* to World War II soldiers (Tomaselli, 2022) it feels pertinent to discuss why these cosplayers chose their specific characters.

With such little research having been done previously on South African cosplayers, there is very little information about the South African cosplay community and how they engage and participate within the fan practice that is cosplay.

The problem statement is thus: With little information or research concerning the South African cosplay community, how can we better understand cosplayers in South Africa and their specific

engagement with cosplay as a fan practice and particularly their choice of characters to cosplay?

Research Question

Knowing that this research seeks to have a greater understanding of the South African cosplay community, coupled with my particular interest in knowing why cosplayers choose to cosplay as certain characters, we can formulate the research question. The research question will directly look at these choices of characters and by extension assist in better understanding the specifics of how South African cosplayers engage with cosplay.

The research question is thus: What are the motivations and influencing factors involved in choosing a character to cosplay?

This question can be further broken down:

1. How can we classify and discuss what are the most prominent factors and motivations involved when choosing a character to cosplay for South African cosplayers?
2. How can we compare these factors and motivations with pre-existing research that has been done on cosplayers around the world to identify trends as well as uniquely South African factors?
3. How can we develop a deeper understanding of the South African cosplay community in terms of factors related to their engagement with the practice of cosplaying?

Aims and Objectives

Answering this research question aims to:

1. To classify and discuss what are the most prominent factors and motivations involved when choosing a character to cosplay for South African cosplayers.
2. To compare these factors and motivations with pre-existing research that has been done on cosplayers around the world to identify trends as well as uniquely South African factors.
3. To develop a deeper understanding of the South African cosplay community in terms of factors related to their engagement with the practice of cosplaying.

The research that is done in this dissertation is of a qualitative nature. Basanta Kandel defines qualitative research as “Qualitative research collects, analyses, and interprets data by observing what people do and say” (Kandel, 2020, p. 2). They also discuss that qualitative research is concerned with “understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena ... within their social worlds” (Kandel, 2020, p. 2). Based upon this, it is fitting that this research falls within the scope of qualitative research as I will be observing and analysing the South African cosplay

community in order to better understand their behaviours, participation, and meaning within the social world of cosplay.

The following research is broken down into these sections:

The second chapter of this research deals with exploring and unpacking all the work that has been done by those who have come in seeking answers to the same question as this research, or perhaps those who have simply stumbled into some of these findings whilst investigating the many other aspects and facets of cosplay. These findings and their discussion are all contained within the Literature Review chapter of this research.

The third chapter introduces fandom, fan studies, and participatory culture. It discusses the relationship between fan studies and cosplay and why it is an appropriate theoretical framework for this research, and why participatory culture is an appropriate critical lens.

The fourth chapter is titled Methodology and Data Collection and discusses the two primary ways in which data was gathered for this research – Survey-based data collection, and interview-based data collection.

The fifth chapter looks at the results of the data collection from the previous chapter and then performs an analysis and discussion relating to these results and the meaning that can be inferred from them. This chapter is titled Results, Analysis, and Discussion. This chapter makes use of discourse analysis to analyse and interpret the answers and context to develop a deeper understanding, and hopefully answer the questions of this research.

The sixth and final chapter is the Conclusion which summarises the major findings and insights of this research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The study of cosplay and the cosplay community, its members, their practices, their engagement with the hobby, and most other facets related to the cosplay realm fall under the broader umbrella of fan studies. Fan studies have undergone at least three major waves of evolution and change since their conceptualisation and beginning in the 1980s as described by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and C. Lee Harrington (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2017). Here fans are first depicted as activists against the norm by groups typically othered and disadvantaged, “primarily concerned with questions of power and representation” (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2017, p. 2). The second wave depicted the parallels between fans and social hierarchies with a specific motivation on personal and individualistic motivations of fandom, “highlighted the replication of social and cultural hierarchies” (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2017, p. 5). The third and current wave focuses on fans being part of communities greater than their singular engagement with the fandom, and the relationship between fans and society on a larger scale, “third-wave studies have explored the *intrapersonal* pleasures and motivations among fans, refocussing on the relationship between fans’ selves and their fan objects” (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2017, p. 6).

Within these past 40 years of fan studies, only a small portion of these studies have been focused on the fan practice of cosplay, “A practice scarcely examined is cosplay” (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 1). Nicolle Lamerichs is a scholar of Fandom and Media Studies whose work largely explores various fan cultures, and the various facets associated with these cultures such as intermediality, affect, creativity and in particular costuming. Lamerichs also possesses a particular interest in and penchant for cosplay. Lamerichs states “Though the practice of dressing up at fan conventions is almost as old as the conventions themselves, it has scarcely been examined academically” (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 3). Lamerichs states that cosplay and costuming are often only mentioned as a small adage whilst discussing conventions, or as an introduction to the strange and “ritual-like practices” of fans (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 3).

Since Lamerichs published this article in 2011 there have been other academic works that have arisen that place a special emphasis on the academic study of cosplay and the various facets that make up this fan practice. These academic works are comprised of various pieces of academic literature ranging from journal articles, small research projects and published research findings to dissertations and theses showing that this aspect of fan studies is being looked at from various levels of academia. This research investigates the writings and findings of these various authors. This includes further writing done by Lamerichs in the field, as well as work by authors such as Reysen et al (Reysen *et al.*, 2018), Stoker (Stoker, 2012), Lome (Lome, 2016), McGeehon (McGeehon, 2018) and various others. Whilst cosplay has grown as an academic field, research relating to the specific question of this research is still limited. As such additional sources that were used include writings, posts, and research done by cosplayers. Whilst they may not be entirely academically robust, considering this is ethnographic research, these writings may yield some insight into the research as it is coming from members of the broader cosplay community. This chapter serves to examine and analyse these pre-existing

academic works that pertain towards the work and focus of this research, *The Motivations Behind Character Selection in the Art of Cosplay*. The structure of this chapter is guided by the motivations and influences identified in these pre-existing works with each section focusing on a specific motivation or influence.

Identity

It comes without surprise that in an activity wherein people make, wear, and perform character costumes and outfits, identity will be a theme that is extremely prevalent and present throughout.

Courtney Stoker is the author of various papers, articles, and conference presentations which all have a large focus relating to cosplay, geek culture, and fan studies. Stoker addresses identity whilst discussing the initial thoughts, feelings, and attitudes towards cosplay by people outside of the cosplay community. They state that amongst people outside of the cosplay community, and in society as a whole, cosplay is often perceived as the media represents it, as a community of people who are deviants, immature, need to be psychoanalysed, and are lacking in and/or searching for an identity, “point to cosplayers...as deviants...they’re immature...incapable of separating fantasy from reality” (Stoker, 2012, p. 1). They state that “a widespread belief that costuming is always primarily about identity” (Stoker, 2012, p. 1).

This perception by observers and the ‘audience’ in that cosplay is practised by those who are lacking and/ or searching for an identity may well have some heft to it. It is perhaps possible that cosplayers who are seeking their own identity may be drawn towards replicating characters with defined identities on the path to forging their own. Carlo McCormick agrees with this notion of cosplayers ‘trying on’ different identities. McCormick states “the majority of cosplayers girls in their late teens through twenties, the process of ‘becoming’ here seems a natural extension...of the way we find out who we are by donning different personae” (McCormick, 2007). Stoker however disagrees with McCormick and the concept of ‘trying on’ identities through cosplay. Stoker comments that this observation of young women being immature and lacking in identity, and thus leading to them engaging in cosplay to ‘try on’ identities is a “lazy leap of logic” and also states this argument is not supported by engaging with and speaking to cosplayers (Stoker, 2012, p. 2).

In addition to this Stoker also addresses comments made by Bruce Sterling wherein Sterling claims “You’re probably young, and, being young, you have some identity issues. So while pretending to be a fireman, or a doctor...you should try on a few identities that are totally impossible.” (Sterling, 2008). Stoker highlights the condescension towards and dismissal of cosplay by Sterling that it is merely for people with and figuring out “identity issues”, “people who are just playing dress-up, merely figuring out “identity issues”” (Stoker, 2012, p. 2). Stoker states that cosplayers do not reflect the views of Sterling and McCormick, but rather cosplayers are multi-faceted. “It is creative and interpretive. It is much more than merely copying someone else’s work” (Stoker, 2012, p. 2). Whilst I agree with Stoker on the fact that cosplayers are

multi-faceted and there exist many different reasons as to why one may engage with cosplay, I also believe it is completely remiss of Stoker to disregard the role that cosplay may play in crafting one's identity. Just as no two cosplays are the same, neither are two cosplayers and it would be perfectly reasonable to assume that there is perhaps a portion of cosplayers out there who use cosplay as a way of crafting, creating, and finding their own identities through embodying others. In part this research sets out to determine if there is any merit to identity playing a role in the character selection process.

Stephen Reysen, Courtney N. Plante, Sharon E. Roberts, and Kathleen C. Gerbasi, set out to evaluate the extent to which characters represented the self of a cosplayer (Reysen *et al.*, 2018). Each of these four authors involved in this study and paper are academics whose work is primarily situated in the fields of fandom and fan studies, identity studies, as well as the furry fandom and how these all interact. Whilst the furry fandom is slightly different to the cosplay fandom, there are perhaps some similarities that can be drawn between them such as the acts of crafting or wearing a costume and performing as a different identity or character. Reysen *et al.* state "one of the easiest ways to become immersed in and enjoy a piece of fiction is through characters with whom we identify" (Reysen *et al.*, 2018, p. 1). "Being able to see ourselves represented in a character can make them all the more interesting and compelling for us" (Reysen *et al.*, 2018, p. 1). This aspect of seeing oneself as the characters and the opportunity presented for inserting oneself into the narrative through cosplay may also allow for a deeper connection and participation within the fandom and with the character. It may also be possible that for some cosplayers it is easier for them to see themselves as a character that is already similar to them and that they share traits with, "cosplayer's character choice is based on...the character as being similar to themselves and the extent to which the character represented traits that they idealize" (Reysen *et al.*, 2018, p. 2).

Reysen *et al.* discuss the concept of multiple different self-concepts with those being "their actual, ought, and ideal selves" (Reysen *et al.*, 2018, p. 3). The actual self reflects the characteristics and traits "that we actually possess", the ideal, the characteristics and traits that ideally we "would ideally like to possess" and the ought self being the characteristics "we feel obligated to possess" (Reysen *et al.*, 2018, p. 1). Reysen *et al.*'s research found that the favourite characters cosplayed by the participants had a strong correlation to these different self-concepts, with the cosplayers largely seeking out characters to cosplay that strongly represented their actual and ideal selves, "cosplayers who viewed their favourite character as similar to themselves and as an idealized version of themselves were also more likely to identify with the character." (Reysen *et al.*, 2018, p. 4). In this case, the identity, personality, and traits of these characters could have a major influence on how a cosplayer chooses their characters. Reysen *et al.* also note that the largest sample related to characters that represent the actual self and align with self-discrepancy theory. They state that "above all else, people will be motivated to avoid the aversive state associated with strong discrepancies from their actual selves" (Reysen *et al.*, 2018, p. 4). Whilst this may be the case with some cosplayers, there may be other cosplayers who embrace cosplaying as characters who possess traits and qualities that are not in line with their actual or ideal selves. I believe that this may be quite

prevalent in the case of cosplayers who have cosplayed as villains and antagonists from various source materials. For example, cosplayers who cosplay characters such as *Darth Vader* or *The Joker*, it would be the hope that these cosplayers do not see evil and villainous traits of these characters in either their actual or ideal selves, but rather are drawn to cosplaying these characters for various other reasons. The act of cosplaying villains and antagonists is not discussed in the work of Reysen et al.

Elween Loke is an academic in media and communication studies whose work is related to both cosplay and gender studies. Loke discusses the relationship between cosplay and gender. Whilst this aspect will be discussed in greater detail in a later section, they state that the action of donning and wearing a costume “gives cosplayers an opportunity to embrace an identity that may or may not appear in their daily lives” (Loke, no date, p. 1). This notion of exploring different identities suggests that cosplayers may choose characters to cosplay whose identity is one they are not familiar with and will make their character choice based on this exploration. This exploration of identities may be similar to the metaphor used by McCormick as mentioned above that cosplay can be a way of “trying on” (McCormick, 2007) identities. This opportunity to explore identities one is not familiar with may play a role in the character selection process.

Abramova et al. state that the act of cosplay creates “a spectrum of new identities” (Abramova, Smirnova and Tataurova, 2021, p. 99). Abramova et al. go on to describe the use of cosplay for gender exploration and gender identity which once again reinforces the idea that cosplayers use different characters to explore various identities that may be familiar or new to them, and in doing so shape and mould their own identity, “choose roles irrespective of their sex and gain new insights into gender identity” (Abramova, Smirnova and Tataurova, 2021, p. 99). Once more this notion of identity discovery, creation, and affirmation is present.

Debapriya Choudhury discusses that cosplayers, by changing between costumes and cosplays, can effectively “slip in and out of identities by switching between costumes and perform their persona by enacting the ‘play’” (Choudhury, 2015, p. 4). This in turn can help individuals to “redefine, discover, stretch and enhance their own sense of identity” (Choudhury, 2015, p. 4). Choudhury also states that the aim of cosplayers often is not to become a look-alike of the character they are cosplaying, but rather “to effectively express themselves and the identity they generate in this process via the costume” (Choudhury, 2015, p. 11). They also pose the question, “are we not constantly constructing and subverting our malleable identity by expressing ourselves through switching between various costumes and characters?” (Choudhury, 2015, p. 9). In cosplay, it would be completely impossible to fully and 100% take on and perform the identity of a character. This task would prove difficult for even a highly skilled actor. Cosplayers may find themselves choosing characters whose identity and personality contain aspects and traits which they would wish to fuse with their own and allow their ideal self to become their actual self which aligns with the findings of Abramova et al.

Naniek Poerwito-Setijadi states that cosplayers create for themselves “artificial identity by imitating the character not only through the costumes but also the actions” (Poerwito-Setijadi,

2012, p. 109). Furthermore, they claim that whilst cosplaying, “cosplayers negotiate their identities simultaneously between their own selves and the self of their fiction characters” (Poerwito-Setijadi, 2012, p. 115). This aspect of a negotiated or hybrid identity may lead to cosplayers seeking out characters to cosplay who possess identity traits which they may wish to possess themselves in seeking their ‘ideal self’.

From these above sources and examples, a strong relationship exists between the performance and act of cosplaying and a cosplayer’s identity, and in some cases impacts and influences the various characters that cosplayers choose to cosplay. The role that identity (both that of the cosplayer and that of the character) can play in the character selection process could be of great significance. The identity of a chosen character may allow for a cosplayer to explore new identities, forge new aspects of their own identity, as well as affirm and proclaim their identity through this experimentation and exploration.

Character Identification

Character identification is an aspect that strongly relates to identity as discussed in the previous sections. The idea of the actual self was discussed with cosplayers seeking characters that most closely relate and align with their actual self (Reysen *et al.*, 2018, p. 4). This section will dive deeper into examining these aspects of character identification. This idea of character identification could relate to many ways in which a cosplayer may see themselves in character. This could perhaps be in terms of physical traits of identification, as well as more ethereal traits.

Lamerichs describes their experience of cosplaying for the first time. In this description, they state how their sister chose to cosplay as *Quistis* from *Final Fantasy VIII* because their sister felt that they connected and “really identified with Quistis” (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 4). However, the rest of Lamerichs’ group also cosplaying from the *Final Fantasy* series chose their characters to cosplay for various other reasons (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 4). From Lamerichs’ personal experiences recounted here, different cosplayers will have different reasons and motivations for choosing their characters to cosplay, even in cases where the characters originate from the same source materials. Lamerichs’ sister was driven by an identification with the character as opposed to the other members of the group.

Reysen *et al.* describe how when cosplaying, “cosplayers strive both to visually and behaviourally take on a character’s attributes in a very literal sense” (Reysen *et al.*, 2018, p. 2). This choice of character is often determined by characters where a cosplayer particularly identifies with specific attributes and/or traits of the character, “top reasons for choosing a particular character is identification” (Reysen *et al.*, 2018, p. 2). Reysen *et al.* also state that “identifying with a character is akin to including the identity of the character into oneself” (Reysen *et al.*, 2018, p. 2), reinforcing the link between character identification, personal identity and character selection. What is important here that Reysen *et al.* have mentioned is that the identification with a character can be either visual characteristics such as hair colour

or facial likeness, or perhaps behavioural characteristics such as a character that is typically cheerful or brooding. It is also possible that a cosplayer may only identify with either visual or behavioural characteristics, they do not necessarily have to identify with characteristics in both categories.

Abramova et al. found that a large percentage of their research participants chose to engage in cosplay because of a “desire to play the roles of favourite characters” (Abramova, Smirnova and Tataurova, 2021, p. 101) with whom they identified. This desire to play the roles of the favourite characters also related to the participants’ “desire for self-expression and self-development” (Abramova, Smirnova and Tataurova, 2021, p. 101). Once more this shows a desire by cosplayers to embrace and embody those characters whom they can see themselves as.

Poerwito-Setijadi describes how identification with a character is influential in the choice and selection of characters to cosplay. Poerwito-Setijadi states that many times, fans and cosplayers “can portray figures they idolized...become a person other than what they are” and in doing so identify with this character or figure that is of importance to them (Poerwito-Setijadi, 2012, p. 115). What Poerwito-Setijadi is stating here is that it is through the process of cosplaying a character that is idolised by the cosplayer that the process of identifying with the character can take place. Through cosplaying a shift can occur from idolisation to identification.

Robin Rosenberg and Andrea Letamendi, two clinical psychologists with a particular interest in cosplay and the related psychological aspects, set out to learn more about the related psychological motivations of cosplay. Rosenberg and Letamendi found that some of the major reasons and motivations for engaging in cosplay were related to liking a character and identifying with a character, whether that be physical or psychological attributes (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 12,13), “the top three out of four reasons were identification with some aspect of the character” (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 16). Furthermore, Rosenberg and Letamendi also found that identifying with the psychological attributes of a character was also a large influence in the specific selection of a character to cosplay (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 13). From Rosenberg and Letamendi’s work, we can see once again how they discuss identification with both the physical and psychological aspects of a character, or as Reysen et al. classified them, visual and behavioural characteristics. “Similarity between the cosplayer and the character increases identification” (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 16). Rosenberg and Letamendi however place more emphasis on the identification with the psychological aspects. This may be because cosplay places a large emphasis on altering how a cosplayer visually presents themselves and thus identifying physically and visually with the character is not as important as identifying psychologically and behaviourally.

Zachary McGeehon is an academic in the field of communication studies. In their work they found that a large percentage of their participants cosplay as a form of character identification, with many participants stating their affection towards certain characters that they have

cosplayed, or certain aspects of the character that they have identified with and resonate with them, “those paired motivations included:…character identification” (McGeehon, 2018, p. 16). Some of McGeehon’s participants wished to honour and “pay tribute to a character that means something special to me” (McGeehon, 2018, p. 16). What is interesting to note here is McGeehon’s mentioning of the fact that these cosplayers identified with the characters to such an extent that they felt the best way to honour these characters was by embodying them and bringing them to life, so to speak. This level of identification and adoration for a character no doubt influenced their choice to cosplay these characters over characters that they did not perhaps feel as connected to.

An additional motivation that Lamerichs mentions is that certain cosplayers tend to gravitate and “lean toward certain character tropes” that they may identify with (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 10). This could include cosplayers typically always cosplaying a specific type of character such as lordly characters or cute/ kawaii girls (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 10). This identification with certain tropes of characters may relate to both the physical and psychological identification as mentioned previously. It may also relate to the fact that certain cosplayers are drawn to consuming and engaging in similar types and genres of source materials, which this research will seek to investigate.

From these above sources and examples, character identification, whether that be physical or psychological identification, is another one of the influences on the various characters that cosplayers choose to cosplay and will be investigated.

Character Visual Design

The visual design of the characters and the way they are depicted, their outfits, and their props, can certainly be influencing and deciding factors when it comes to choosing a character to cosplay.

Lamerichs describes her motivations and journey towards cosplaying as the character *Effie Trinket* from the *Hunger Games* movie trilogy. Lamerichs states that the visual design of this character was a large influence on their choosing to cosplay as this character. The layers of make-up, bright pink clothes and frilly umbrella were a stark contrast to the gritty and grey background and aspects of the film, “the first shots of the movie were gritty, grey and realistic, her appearance stood out” (Lamerichs, 2014, p. 1). The character’s design made her stand out. Lamerichs goes on to call the dresses and outfits of the character “outrageous but fashionable in their own way”, something that drew Lamerichs to the character (Lamerichs, 2014, p. 1). For Lamerichs the visual design of the character was incredibly important in their choice to cosplay as *Effie* because the visual design was purposefully done in such a way as to greatly contrast with the rest of the film and its themes. It was this purposeful design of contrast that made the character stand out to Lamerichs and made them want to cosplay as them.

Rosenberg and Letamendi probed into the reasons for choice of character and choice of costume. With regards to the visual design of the character, Rosenberg and Letamendi found that participants often chose their characters and costumes based on “some physical characteristic” of the character as well as how they as the cosplayer would look whilst wearing the costume (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 5). From this point made by Rosenberg and Letamendi, we can see that the visual design and physical attributes of a character are important in the character selection process, particularly when it comes to the cosplayer visualising how they will look when physically embodying the character and how the visual design will function in the real world on their bodies.

Lamerichs whilst discussing her first cosplay experience states that one of her friends chose to cosplay as *Ceres* from *Final Fantasy VI* “because of the complex design of the ball gown that Ceres wears...she saw this as a sewing challenge” (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 4). This aspect of the visual design of the character was chosen specifically for the technical challenge it presented, these technical challenges will be covered in a later section, but it can be seen from this that there is a link between the visual design of a character and the challenges and complexities involved in creating the costume of a character. The cosplayer was drawn to cosplaying as a character whose visual design was more detailed, intricate, and complicated.

From these sources and examples, the visual design of a character and how they are depicted could be a major influence on the choice of a character for several reasons. This could include how the costume relates to the overall narrative that is being presented and the role that costume plays in storytelling. It can also include how the cosplayer would feel with the physical costume of the character being on their own body. Furthermore, the visual design of a character is strongly related to the technical level of complexity in creating and fabricating a costume.

Fandom Representation

With regards to choice of character, the literature so far has focused primarily on attributes of the character that may draw cosplayers to them. However, it may be the case that characters are chosen not because of who the actual character is, but rather because of the fictional world or fandom which they hail from and exist within.

Lamerichs provides a good example of this in her retelling of her first cosplay experience. As already mentioned above Lamerichs and her friends chose to cosplay as characters from the *Final Fantasy* universe and each person chose different characters to cosplay for different reasons. Lamerichs states that the member of their group who chose to cosplay as the character *Tifa* from *Final Fantasy VII*, “had invested months...still she was mostly neutral about the character; she enjoyed talking about her experiences of the game and her passion for the entire cast of *Final Fantasy VII*” (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 4). Lamerichs discusses how this particular fan, even though they were cosplaying a character which they didn’t feel any particular draw or connection to was still extremely passionate about the overall *Final Fantasy* fandom and universe (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 4). In this case, the cosplayer did not possess any level of

identification with the character, neither was it one of their favourite characters, but rather it was their enjoyment of the source material that motivated them to cosplay as the character. In doing so they were able to declare their affinity for *Final Fantasy* and their existence within the fandom and fan base.

Additionally, Abramova et al. discuss that one of the motivations of cosplaying in general is the desire to be “physically present in places connected to their objects of adulation” (Abramova, Smirnova and Tataurova, 2021, p. 99). Abramova et al. state that through cosplaying, cosplayers can “display fandom identity” and association with particular fandoms and texts (Abramova, Smirnova and Tataurova, 2021, p. 99). Drawing from this it can be extrapolated that the motivation to cosplay as a certain character can simply be influenced by the fandom/ universe origin of that said character, not because of the character themselves, but because of the existence of that character in the fictional universe and the connection that will be forged between the cosplayer and the fandom through cosplaying this character.

Lamerichs states that through the process of cosplaying, “the relationship towards the media text is solidified” (Lamerichs, 2014, p. 4). This further emphasises the fact that character selection can be influenced by the cosplayer wishing to deepen their relationship with a specific fandom and represent this fandom in a public manner or space.

Gender in Cosplay

Cosplay is fundamentally tied to how individuals visually and physically present themselves. One of the facets and aspects of cosplay and character portrayal that can be linked to their experiences is gender. The gender of a character or a cosplayer can play a large role in the selection of a character to cosplay.

Gender, as explored by theorists such as Judith Butler, is understood not as a fixed identity but as a performative construct created and sustained through repeated performances: “Gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be.” (Butler, 2002, p. 33). This understanding of gender as an act, rather than an inherent characteristic, aligns closely with the performative nature of cosplay, where participants adopt and reinterpret gendered traits. Rachel Leng discusses the work of Butler in relation to cosplay and states “gender is a socially constructed concept that is not based on biological sex, but mere reiterative acts.” (Leng, 2013, p. 96). Yuchen Yang discusses how Butler’s notion of gender being performative contributes to a constructed gendered self that is created through cosplay, whilst discussing characters Yang states “we often strive to embody them in such a way that our gender displays can be read as expressions of our innate essence” (Yang, 2022, p. 19). Through practices such as cross-play and gender-bending (which are explored and defined in more detail below), cosplayers engage in acts that challenge and deconstruct traditional conceptions of gender, providing fertile ground for analysis through gender theory.

Whilst in cosplay many cosplayers cosplay as characters whose gender aligns with their own, there are however two other avenues wherein a cosplayer may cosplay as a character with a gender different to their own.

These two avenues are Cross-play and Gender-bending. Leng defines cross-play as “Crossplay is a subset of cosplay; crossplayers similarly participate in costume-play, except they dress up in costumes modelled after characters of the opposite gender.” (Leng, 2013, p. 89). Leng describes cross-play as cosplaying a character whose gender is different to that of the cosplayer. In their work, Leng does not provide a separate definition of gender-bending but rather uses the two terms interchangeably. A cosplayer going by the name of Sunlit Cosplay made a blog post discussing the differences between these two terms. Whilst a blog post is not necessarily the most robust academic source, it is insightful from the fact that it provides insight into the definition of these terms from a member of the cosplay community. As a member of the community, they likely have discussed these terms with other community members and are providing their definitions from their own experience of practicing these forms of cosplay. They define cross-play as “Crossplaying is when a cosplayer is representing themselves as a gender other than their own to match the canon gender of the character.” (Sunlit Cosplay, 2015). This definition of cross-play aligns with the definition provided by Leng. Gender-bending however is described as “when a cosplayer changes the gender of the CHARACTER [sic]. Usually this is changed to match their own gender.” (Sunlit Cosplay, 2015). From this definition of gender-bending, it is the process wherein the character’s gender is altered to better match that of the cosplayer.

Whilst there may be a myriad of reasons a cosplayer may choose to engage in cross-play or gender-bending, Courtney Stoker provides a few reasons. In the instance of gender-bending, Stoker refers to it as, ‘Femme Cosplay’ referencing specifically female cosplayers who cosplay as feminine versions of male characters. Stoker states that this may be done to critique and question the role and purpose of women and female fans and characters within a fandom. The characters they choose, the costumes they craft, and how they present themselves in these fandom communities are asking the questions “Where are all our female heroes?” and “How does fashion affect the roles women have in our fandom?” Stoker states (Stoker, 2012, p. 5). Stoker also states that Femme Cosplay forces us to question the naturalness of femininity when cosplayers choose to perform and portray an exaggerated version of it. Stoker says, “If I have to wear a corset, a bra, and makeup to make my female body look feminine, how natural can femininity be?” (Stoker, 2012, p. 5). Stoker’s discussion of femme cosplay and genderbending and the point that it makes about women in fandom is an intriguing one.

Gender-bending, or the practice of adapting a character’s gender to match one’s own, aligns with broader feminist and queer critiques of gender. Jack Halberstam highlights the disruptive potential of nonconforming gender expressions, noting that “when and where female masculinity conjoins with possibly queer identities, it is far less likely to meet with approval. Because female masculinity seems to be at its most threatening when coupled with lesbian

desire, it is important when thinking about gender variations...not simply to create another binary in which masculinity always signifies power.” (Halberstam, 2018, p. 28).

In the context of cosplay, this subversion becomes even more pronounced as cosplayers not only challenge traditional gender norms but also assert new interpretations of gendered identities. By blending Halberstam’s analysis with Stoker’s critique, gender-bending can be understood as a radical act that not only critiques societal gender expectations, but also empowers participants to explore their own identities in a fluid and creative way.

With regards to cross-play, Stoker states that the purposes behind taking on a character and presenting as a character with a different gender to your own are more concerned with the purposes of queering a specific fandom. In addition, cross-play assists in challenging the role that gender can play within fandoms, communities, and our everyday lives. Stoker also discusses how cross-play enables us as observers to question the naturalness of gender when it can be mimicked with relative ease and a high degree of accuracy. Stoker poses the question “How natural can masculinity be when you can’t recognise a woman dressed as a man?” (Stoker, 2012, p. 5). The activity of cross-play may also be linked to a cosplayer’s identity and how they see themselves, and through cross-play, they are allowed to experiment and negotiate their own gender identity in a safe ‘sandbox’ so to speak.

Cross-play highlights the performative and fluid nature of gender identity. Butler’s assertion that gender is “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 2002, p. 179) underscores the ways in which cross-play challenges the idea of gender as natural or inherent. The performance of gender can be used for experimentation and exploring aspects of one’s own identity.

Similarly, Elween Loke states that within the realm of cosplay, members of the cosplay community “are not necessarily conformed to the gender dichotomy” (Loke, no date, p. 1). Loke goes on to explain that in the process of donning a costume cosplayers are given the unique opportunity to “embrace an identity that may or may not appear in their daily lives” (Loke, no date, p. 1). As Stoker says cosplay allows us to question the naturalness of masculinity and femininity (Stoker, 2012, p. 5) Loke says that cosplay and cross-play allow us to “blur the line” that exists between masculinity and femininity in the dichotomy of gender (Loke, no date, p. 1). Furthermore, Loke states that the cosplay realm has created and facilitates a space which allows cosplayers the ability and freedom to “demonstrate gender ambiguity”, as well as the costumes themselves facilitate the embodiment of queerness (Loke, no date, p. 3). Cosplayers thus may choose their characters to cosplay based upon how these characters will allow them to experiment with their own gender and gender portrayal through these practices of cross-play and gender-bending.

Loke’s discussion of cosplay as a space for embracing gender ambiguity resonates with Elizabeth Grosz’s theory of embodiment, who states “the body is incised by various forms of adornment. Through exercise and habitual patterns of movement, through negotiating its

environment ... and through clothing and makeup, the body is more or less marked, constituted as an appropriate, or, as the case may be, an inappropriate body, for its cultural requirements.” (Grosz, 1994, p. 142). Through cosplay, participants can alter their bodies through the forms of adornment which challenge the binary understandings of masculinity and femininity.

Lamerichs on the topic of gender says that when it comes to choosing characters to cosplay, cosplayers are more “liberal with gender” (Lamerichs, 2014, p. 6). Lamerichs also discusses the appreciation for cross-play and cross-dressing in cosplay, cosplaying as something different to our gender norms (Lamerichs, 2014, p. 6). This reinforces the idea that within the cosplay community, the idea of gender and how it is portrayed is more open and flexible, and thus cosplayers may choose to use this safe space to experiment with gender by choosing characters to cosplay that would allow for this experimentation.

Naniek Poerwito-Setijadi states that through cosplay, cosplayers can temporarily “forget their age, sex, class and location” through the process of donning a costume and new identity (Poerwito-Setijadi, 2012, p. 108). Furthermore, Poerwito-Setijadi says that through the donning of a costume and the performance of a character through cosplay, cosplayers “will then have to negotiate their identity as their individual or personal self” (Poerwito-Setijadi, 2012, p. 3). Once more this construction and negotiation of personal identity through cosplay is connected to the experimentation of gender and how it is presented.

From these above-mentioned cases, the gender of a character as well as the gender of a cosplayer are key factors involved in the selection process of choosing a character to cosplay. By situating cosplay practices within the framework of gender theory, it becomes clear that cosplay operates as a dynamic site for critiquing and reimagining identity. Some of these practices include choosing a character whose gender mimics one’s own for gender confirmation and character identification as well as choosing a character with a different gender to one’s own either to critique aspects of gender representation or gain a new experience through the assumed identity. The performative nature of cosplay reflects Butler’s concept of gender as an act, while the subversive practices of cross-play and gender-bending echo Halberstam’s and Grosz’s critiques of binary forms. Ultimately, cosplay may provide a space for individuals to challenge societal expectations, experiment with new forms of identity, and embrace the fluidity of gender in ways that are both personal and communal.

Race in Cosplay

The aspect of race in cosplay has many different facets to it including things such as racism, exclusion, privilege, and appropriation all of which can have a part to play in influencing the choice of character a cosplayer may choose to cosplay.

Bryan Jenkins is an academic in the fields of communication, culture, and media studies. Jenkins conducted research primarily amongst black geeks into how they engage in geekdom.

Whilst discussing the aspect of cosplay, one of the questions Jenkins asked pertained to how they choose characters to cosplay. One of the primary responses Jenkins received was that cosplayers choose characters that will allow them to be easily recognized by the public and those in attendance at events where cosplays would be worn, as it allows them to “receive the satisfaction that derives from being recognized” (Jenkins, 2020, p. 164). Jenkins however also states that some of their participants expressed a desire to cosplay lesser-known characters (Jenkins, 2020, p. 164). Jenkins posits that “marginalized cosplayers are less likely than White males to seek out easy recognizability for the characters that they cosplay” (Jenkins, 2020, p. 164). Jenkins also suggests that marginalized cosplayers find more joy in cosplaying as characters “who are not typically in the spotlight”, but rather on the sidelines or in supporting roles (Jenkins, 2020, p. 164). Jenkins further states that there could exist a correlation between these two aspects in that people from marginalized groups, people who often feel unseen, relate to and want to cosplay and bring the spotlight to these characters that are often overlooked (Jenkins, 2020, p. 164). This aspect of marginalised cosplayers choosing to cosplay as characters that are not as well known or popular could be for several reasons. One of these may perhaps be that the bodies and likenesses of marginalised peoples and groups are not often depicted as the leading characters in media, as Jenkins states “much of the media within geek culture is both male centred and created” (Jenkins, 2020, p. 158). It could also perhaps be an aspect of not wanting to draw attention and focus to oneself out of fear of judgement and harassment towards them for depicting a popular character with a race different to that of the source material, as one of Jenkins’ participants states “a lot of cosplayers get labelled as “Black” or “nigg@” [sic] versions of their cosplay” (Jenkins, 2020, p. 166).

One of Jenkins’ participants, when questioned if they feel racism exists within cosplay stated that they believe it does and went on to further describe how cosplayers who are not white are often labelled as the “Black Version” of their cosplay (Jenkins, 2020, p. 166), highlighting how cosplayers of colour may be discriminated against by other cosplayers or fans. Another participant describes a situation wherein they were talking with a black cosplayer who was cosplaying as *Catwoman* when a group of white males walked past and made comments saying “Catwoman wasn’t black and you need to cosplay one of your own characters” (Jenkins, 2020, p. 166). Trying to defend the *Catwoman* cosplayer, the participant (cosplaying as *Patriot*) was told to mind their own business and labelled as a “fake *Captain America*” (Jenkins, 2020, p. 166). These occurrences of racism within the cosplay community may affect the characters chosen by cosplayers to cosplay. Perhaps after experiencing or witnessing a situation such as the one mentioned above, cosplayers of colour may be reluctant to cosplay as characters whose race is not similar to their own. When these incidents occur, the cosplayer is no longer protected by the *magic circle*¹ of cosplay and fantasy but rather is faced with very real and serious issues. Given that these situations may result in very real-world aftereffects for the cosplayers, it is

¹ The magic circle is a term first introduced by Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Huizinga, 1950) and then later popularised and expanded upon by Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen. The term is commonly used when discussing games and play and describes a space wherein the regular rules and reality of the world is suspended. The play that occurs within the magic circle is protected and shielded from outside interference and real life/ world consequences (Zimmerman, 2012).

perhaps a very important aspect that cosplayers of colour must consider when they are choosing their characters to cosplay.

Poerwito-Setijadi previously stated that cosplay allows one to forget their “age, sex, class and location or nationality”, however does not mention that cosplayers are able to forget their race when cosplaying (Poerwito-Setijadi, 2012, p. 2). Cosplayers are perhaps far more conscious of their race than their gender because it is perhaps easier to subvert the visual portrayal of gender than it is for race as well as the issues related to shifting the visual appearance of race.

Rio Small describes some of the various ways in which race can play a role and have an impact on cosplay. Small begins by stating that historically “geek culture as a whole has had an emphasis on whiteness” and shown favour towards white geeks (Small, 2018). They also go on to state that being a person of colour who engages in geek activities and geek communities often “comes with a price” (Small, 2018). This price that Small mentions may be like those situations of racism and harassment as mentioned by Jenkins. Also, the favour and privilege shown to white geeks over geeks of colour may play a role because of the variety of white representation in characters in popular culture as compared to characters of colour as Jenkins mentioned (Jenkins, 2020, p. 158), there exists a white privilege in cosplay because of the sheer multitude of choices for characters with lighter skin tones. White cosplayers could perhaps have a wider choice of characters without any of the fear of cosplaying certain characters that cosplayers of colour may have.

Small agrees with participants of Jenkins’ research who state that cosplayers with a darker skin tone are often labelled as the “Black Version” of their respective characters (Small, 2018). Small also claims that POC cosplayers are subject to “death threats being sent online because you’ve “ruined” a character for someone” (Small, 2018). Small also describes a situation wherein they cosplayed as *Dante* from *Devil May Cry* and the comments they received were incredibly critical and hurtful towards the fact that they were a different skin tone to *Dante*, such as “Dante looks burnt” however completely brushed over the fact that they were also a different gender to the character in the video game, showing that race may be more of a limiting factor in character selection than gender (Small, 2018). Small highlights some of the problems that a cosplayer of colour may face when cosplaying as a character whose race is different to their own and points out how the change in race was of far greater concern to the audience than the change in gender of the character.

Small also discusses the issue of “Blackfacing” or “Brownfacing” or the more generic term “Raceface” (Small, 2018). They state that it has been a hot topic in the cosplay community for quite a while with some cosplayers altering their race for the performance of characters and likening it to things such as “painting yourself blue or adding prosthetics such as elf ears” (Small, 2018). Small states that for these cosplayers they are trivialising the struggle, pains, and hardships long associated with being a person of colour for the sake of performance and that it is entirely disrespectful, “to wear something that affects some people’s lives in such a negative way...I question where people find the respect in that” (Small, 2018). What Small is

highlighting here is the double standards that exist within the cosplay community when it comes to race. Cosplayers of colour are afraid to cosplay as characters whose race does not match their own, however, some white cosplayers engage in historically racist and painful practices such as blackface without any of these fears simply for the sake of performance.

From this, it can no doubt be seen that with our race being tied to our identity and how others visually recognise us whether in our normal lives or in costume, a character's or a cosplayer's race may have an influence on the choice of character selection, especially for cosplayers of colour who may have to face real life issues because of this.

Body Positivity

On the topic of race, gender, and character visual design in cosplay, it is also pertinent to discuss body positivity.

Wood-Barcalow, Allewa, and Tylka state that "At its inception, body positivity reflected a value system of enjoying a positive relationship with the body." (Wood-Barcalow, Allewa and Tylka, 2024, p. 6). They also state "body positivity's online social media presence ... attempts to promote body acceptance through celebrating body diversity and encouraging individual-level respect and care for all bodies." (Wood-Barcalow, Allewa and Tylka, 2024, p. 6). From this it can be understood that body positivity is the promotion and acceptance of all bodies in a positive manner regardless of their appearance.

A phrase that is often encountered in cosplay spaces and communities is 'Cosplay is for everyone'. Obmann states that what this statement tries to express is "the attitude of the community to be inclusive and open to diversity, and the willingness and commitment to include any fan that wears a costume." (Obmann, 2021, p. 30). This expression by the statement aligns with body positivity ideas expressed by Wood-Barcalow et al.

Lome notes "although body positivity is an increasingly common catchphrase in online communities as well as at conventions, my research showed that cosplayers still encounter misconceptions as to whether people can cosplay characters of different genders, races, heights, weights, and so on." (Lome, 2016). Prejudices exist within the community even though cosplayers are free to cosplay as any character they like. Lome further states "This policing and prejudice, as well as sexual harassment, defeats what cosplay is about." This further emphasizes the fact that allowing cosplayers to cosplay as whoever they wish regardless of physical factors will better promote what cosplay is truly about.

The notion of cosplay is for everyone and body positivity may play a role in allowing and motivating cosplayers to choose to cosplay as characters whose physical appearance and traits are different to their own.

Roleplay

Up to this point, the literature has mostly discussed the costuming aspects of cosplay and briefly touched upon the performance aspect. This next section covers the more playful aspects involved in cosplay, primarily the act of roleplaying and performing as a certain character. This section will also discuss how this performance and play may 'play a role' in the character selection process.

For a large number of cosplayers, their motivation to cosplay is driven by the play and roleplay aspects and opportunities that are afforded by the art form as stated by Stoker, "they cosplay to interact with other fans and cosplayers, to play with a character and embody them" (Stoker, 2012, p. 4). Many of Stoker's participants stated that for them cosplay is about becoming the character and truly embodying them through means of acting and roleplaying with other cosplayers and fans. These participants stated that "cosplay is often not about a well-crafted costume, but a well-crafted persona" (Stoker, 2012, p. 4). The persona of the character that they will be embodying is of utmost importance leading to it playing a crucial role in the character selection process. Cosplayers may be drawn to cosplaying as characters whom they feel they will enjoy performing the most. This could perhaps be characters that are popular or have popular phrases, mannerisms, and ways of interacting with people that would make it enjoyable to cosplay as them and perform. A character that instantly springs to mind for me in this situation is *Captain Jack Sparrow* from *The Pirates of the Caribbean*. In my experience the character of *Jack Sparrow* is one I have often seen cosplayed in person as well as online, and often the cosplayers have taken the time to perfect the characters' signature walk, way of speaking, and how they interact with people and the audience.

Similarly, Poerwito-Setijadi describes how when cosplayers perform a character through cosplaying, they are turning themselves into that character. They act as the character would, they imitate the poses, moves, phrases and actions of the characters, they react how the characters would in certain situations, and they assume the whole identity and mannerisms of the characters, they "act accordingly to imitate the character" (Poerwito-Setijadi, 2012, p. 110). In doing so they can negotiate a new identity for themselves which is a hybrid of their own identity and that of the character they are portraying, "negotiate their identities...between their own selves and the self of their fiction characters" (Poerwito-Setijadi, 2012, p. 115). These traits and identity aspects which they wish to assume from the character are of great importance to them, and thus the specific traits possessed by a character, and the cosplayer's ability and desire to roleplay as them and assume these traits are of great importance in the character selection process.

The aspect of role-playing and performing the character is perhaps an incredibly important aspect when choosing a character to cosplay as. Not only will they be performing these characters for themselves, but also for the audience and fellow cosplayers who may interact with them as if they truly are the characters whose costumes they are wearing. This research will further investigate the role played by roleplay in the character selection process.

Pragmatic Motivations

The next section discusses how cosplayers acquire their cosplays, through making them, buying them, or a combination of both. This section also discusses what is required to create or buy these costumes, and how pragmatic reasons and motivations may have an impact on the characters chosen to cosplay.

Many cosplays and costumes are “self-made” (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 6) with many hundreds of hours being poured into the creation and fabrication of these costumes. Along with many hours being spent working on costumes, they can also often incur high material and tool costs to bring these creations to life in a manner that is pleasing to the cosplay and at a standard which they believe is good enough for public display and performance. Stoker states “screen accuracy is limited to those with a significant amount of time and/or money” (Stoker, 2012, p. 5). The alternative to crafting a cosplay from scratch is to either buy it from a cosplay retailer or custom commission, both of which can often be quite expensive, especially when combined with additional costs such as shipping and import fees.

Stoker addresses this aspect; they state that often a screen-accurate cosplay is limited to those with a significant amount of time and money to invest into the costume. Stoker states that “even “cheap” costumes that aren’t “accurate” can cost up to \$100” (Stoker, 2012, p. 5). This may in turn lead to cosplayers choosing to cosplay as characters with more simple designs and outfits due to limits in terms of funds and time. These associated high costs could also lead cosplayers to perhaps cosplay certain versions of a particular character, that they feel drawn to for other reasons, with an outfit that would be more financially viable for them to cosplay as.

Rosenberg and Letamendi asked their participants about factors influencing their choice of costume. 15 responses selected “the amount of time I have available” and 13 responses selected “the cost of creating the costume” (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 16). These findings once again reinforce the fact that both the monetary and time budgets available to a cosplayer play a role in the character selection process and that these aspects can lead to cosplayers choosing certain characters over other characters because they would be more attainable.

Rosenberg and Letamendi also found that 25% of respondents spend less than \$100 on a cosplay, 30% of respondents spend \$100 - \$199 and the remainder spend over \$200 on a cosplay (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 12). The majority of respondents spend more than \$100, however, all of the participants were aware of the costs associated with their costumes indicating that it is still a factor they pay attention to (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 12). This consciousness of how much money these cosplayers can put towards a cosplay shows that the financial aspect is quite important in cosplay with cosplayers being aware of how much they are spending. The amount of money they are prepared to spend on a cosplay may well influence the quality of the cosplay, but also the chosen character.

These pragmatic motivations and physical influences of time and money may play some role in impacting the choice of character selection, based upon how much time a cosplayer has available to work on their cosplay, as well as the disposable income and funds they are able and willing to commit to cosplay.

Technical Challenges

Cosplay is often associated with competitions as well as performances and displays, “fans usually wear their costumes...during particular events at conventions (e.g. competitions, fashion shows)” (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 3). Doubtless, when people are involved in these sorts of situations where their work is on display and up for critique, they will want to put their best foot forward to truly showcase their skills, abilities, and what they can do.

Setting a certain technical challenge for oneself may be an influencing factor in choosing which character to cosplay. Perhaps a more ornate design to challenge and improve upon embroidery skills, or a warrior character to hone the skills of creating replica weapon props.

Lamerichs whilst describing her *Final Fantasy* cosplay group mentions the cosplayer who chose to portray *Ceres*. They chose to cosplay as *Ceres* partly because they craved the complexity and challenge that the outfit of the character presented to them. “She saw this as a sewing challenge” and wanted to give themselves the challenge of recreating the intricate ball gown that the character wears to practice and demonstrate their skill and prowess in this area (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 4). From this example provided by Lamerichs, we can see that the choice of character here was motivated by a character that would allow the cosplayer to improve upon and truly demonstrate their sewing and needlework skills. The character was chosen specifically to cater towards showing off the level of their skills.

Lamerichs describes a similar situation regarding themselves. One of the influencing factors in Lamerichs choosing to portray *Effie Trinket* from *The Hunger Games* was because of the sewing and “to challenge myself in the art of dress making” (Lamerichs, 2014, p. 2). The choice to cosplay as *Effie* by Lamerichs was motivated and influenced by the opportunity that it would provide to Lamerichs to put their technical sewing and dressmaking skills and abilities to the test. This allowed Lamerichs the opportunity to level up and improve upon their skills by choosing to cosplay as this character. This however was not the only reason that Lamerichs chose to cosplay as *Effie*. Earlier it was discussed how Lamerichs was drawn to cosplaying as *Effie* because of the visual design and aesthetic of the character and the role of this visual aesthetic in the narrative. From this, it shows that it is often the case for many cosplayers that there is not only a single factor that plays a role in the character selection process, but rather several factors all interlinking and coalescing to influence the character selection process.

Lamerichs also states that many of their research participants expressed a desire for technical and creative challenges when making cosplays and cosplaying. This leads them to rather opt

for characters with more interesting and complex visual designs over characters that they have greater personal connections to, “they may love some characters but seek a creative challenge as well and will ultimately settle for interesting visual designs” (Lamerichs, 2014, p. 6). From this information presented by Lamerichs for certain cosplayers, their choice of characters is influenced by the technical and creative challenges presented far more than they are influenced by factors such as a personal connection or relationship with the character.

From these examples, the challenges provided by the technical aspects of creating a cosplay, and the skills required and involved can be influencing factors that could play a part in tipping the scales in favour of one character over another for a cosplayer to cosplay as.

Character Interpretation

Another aspect that could influence the choice of character that a cosplayer chooses to cosplay is the freedom that is allowed to cosplayers to interpret, reinvent, and redesign a character.

Stoker states that cosplayers, when making their costumes, sometimes make interpretive decisions. These interpretations and interpretive decisions can be the result of the cosplayer having “strong opinions about characters and the media they are fans of” (Stoker, 2012, p. 4). Cosplayers may choose to cosplay as certain characters because they want to use the opportunity of cosplay to express their thoughts and opinions of certain characters, as Stoker says “their interpretations occasionally manifest in their costume choices” (Stoker, 2012, p. 4). These cosplayers can express these thoughts and opinions by having the freedom and choice as to how these characters are depicted and presented through their individual and unique performances of these characters. They can choose to highlight or gloss over certain aspects, traits, and facets of a character as they wish and as they feel is important to them.

Stoker states that these interpretations and changes may be minor such as “showing cleavage because you interpret a character as a flirt”, or including a prop or accessory that they believe to be iconic and necessary for the character (Stoker, 2012, p. 4). These changes may be larger and thus alter the character in more severe ways such as reimagining the character, “a superheroine version of a character might suggest that a cosplayer believes that character to be hero” (Stoker, 2012, p. 4). As can be seen from these examples, the cosplayers may have certain views and opinions of these characters and feel that the best way for them to depict and proclaim these views of these characters is through cosplaying them in their interpretations.

Stoker also discusses how many cosplayers interpret the *TARDIS* from *Dr Who* as female and as such create and wear cosplays depicting the *TARDIS* as a human female, “many female fans cosplay as the TARDIS...they don’t, generally, cosplay as a box, but instead re-interpret the TARDIS into a dress” (Stoker, 2012, p. 4). Stoker says the style of feminine clothes they use to represent this ranges from mini-skirts to Victorian-era dresses, as the *TARDIS* is after all a time machine (Stoker, 2012, p. 4). Here the cosplayers are using the freedom and expression

of cosplay to share their thoughts, opinions, and interpretations of the *TARDIS* with the rest of the *Dr Who* fandom. They chose to cosplay the *TARDIS* because it would allow them to interpret and represent the character in a way that was meaningful to them and that they wanted to share.

I can testify to this phenomenon of the *TARDIS* being represented in cosplay as a woman from personal experience. I was able to witness this femme portrayal of the *TARDIS* when I was fortunate enough to meet the actor John Barrowman who portrayed the character of *Captain Jack Harkness* in the *Doctor Who* television show at Comic Con Africa in 2023. To my delight, he had donned a custom-designed and made *TARDIS* dress for all his stage appearances and photo opportunities. In this case John Barrowman made a very intentional choice both in the character they had chosen to cosplay, as well as how they cosplayed them. They wished to declare by their actions to the rest of the *Dr Who* fandom that they interpret and understand the *TARDIS* to be female by wearing a *TARDIS-inspired* dress, an article of clothing typically associated with women.

In addition to portraying the *TARDIS* in a dress, the dress itself also featured a version of the LGBTQI+ pride flag bedazzled onto the dress, and John carried a fan in the colours of the pride flag. These choices of how to portray and represent the character further emphasise the cosplayer's ability to interpret the character in a manner of their choosing. As Stoker said cosplay can be used to express the "strong opinions about characters and the media" that they are fans of (Stoker, 2012, p. 4).

Below can be found an image depicting John Barrowman cosplaying as the *TARDIS*.



Figure 8 Myself and two friends posing for a photo opportunity with John Barrowman wearing a TARDIS inspired dress at Comic Con Africa 2023

Social and Community

Many cosplayers make their choice of character based on their social groups, their friends, and who they are cosplaying with at these conventions. In my own experience, my first cosplay was chosen to be part of a duo with the friend I was cosplaying with.

Lamerichs describes how during their first foray into cosplaying they cosplayed with a family member and some friends. As a group, they cosplayed various characters from the *Final Fantasy* video game series. Whilst there are a plethora of different characters within the *Final Fantasy* universe, the character Lamerichs chose to cosplay was in some way influenced, and limited to that universe, by their social community and who they were cosplaying with at the convention, “A friend of mine had made me an Aerith costume...she hoped we could enter the costume competition...really wanted to participate with a Final Fantasy act” (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 1,2). From this example given by Lamerichs, we can see that their choice of character to cosplay was largely influenced by the characters that were chosen by the rest of their friend/cosplay group. They had agreed to attend the convention together and as such felt that their cosplays should be of characters who all originate from the same fandom and fictional universe, thus influencing them to cosplay as a character from *Final Fantasy*.

Rosenberg and Letamendi found that a number of their participants chose their character and cosplay based on what cosplays the other members of their cosplay group were wearing with 19 respondents selecting “what other members of my cosplay group are wearing” as a motivating factor (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 5). Rosenberg and Letamendi also found

that from their participants the large majority of them cosplay multiple times a year with other people, and more often than not they co-ordinate and decide on their cosplays and characters together stating “48% of respondents coordinate their costume with others between 2 and 5 times per year, and 21%...more than 5 times per year” (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 7,8). Once more we can see that the characters being cosplayed by the friends/acquaintances of a cosplayer may play a large and significant role in influencing the characters chosen by a cosplayer to be cosplayed. They are motivated by the social and group aspects of cosplay.

These choices to cosplay as a group from the same fandom or fictional universe may be for a myriad of reasons such as: Wanting to get group photos of their characters interacting together. Meeting a celebrity associated with the fandom and wanting to do so in costume and in character, wanting to demonstrate your fandom and feeling as a part of something larger, not wanting to cosplay alone, or numerous other reasons.

We can see that the group and social aspects of cosplay may play a large role in influencing how cosplayers choose which characters they are going to cosplay.

Literature Conclusion

From the above analysis of the pre-existing research in this area, there are several reasons, all of which can influence the choice of a character to cosplay. These influences and reasons are all complex, deep, and multi-faceted, and several of them could be in play at once when influencing a cosplayer. As seen in the instance of Lamerichs choosing to cosplay as *Effie* from *The Hunger Games* it is often not only one factor at play, Lamerichs cosplayed *Effie* “to show my attachment to the movie, and to challenge myself” (Lamerichs, 2014, p. 2). These factors work together to inform and influence the choices of a cosplayer, it is likely that as this research continues, it will be found that oftentimes it is the case that a cosplayer has multiple different reasons, motivations, and influences which they consider when choosing a character to cosplay.

The remainder of this research seeks to ascertain whether these influences are also true for the South African cosplay community, whether they differ in any way, and if there are any other influences not mentioned above, or unique to the South African cosplay community and scene.

Chapter 3 – Theoretical Underpinning – Fan Studies as a Theoretical Lens

Introduction

It would be remiss to go any further in this research without dedicating a chapter towards the field in which this research is situated. That field is of course fandom and fan studies. This field of fan studies will also serve as our theoretical framework and lens.

Henry Jenkins describes how the word ‘fan’ has its origins in and derives from the word ‘fanatic’ (Jenkins, 1992, p. 12). Jenkins states that the word ‘fan’ first appeared in the 19th century describing the followers of professional sports and soon evolved to include more forms of observer based entertainment, “expanded to incorporate any faithful ‘devotee’ of sports or commercial entertainment” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 12). This description of the “faithful devotee” seems an apt way to describe people whose time and efforts are dedicated to the entertainment forms which they consume and participate in beyond the ordinary consumption.

These efforts of the fans that go beyond the simple consumption of the media is the notion of participatory culture that Jenkins describes. Jenkins states that fans are “active producers and manipulators of meanings” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 23). Fans do not passively consume media, but they actively engage in it. Liao, when discussing the power fans have, states “Fans gain more power...they have become more active in producing and distributing derivative work on the internet by their selves” (Liao, 2021, p. 89) showing how fans are active in the creation of content based on their fandom, not simply these passive consumers. Jenkins states “Fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media.” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 23), Liao agrees with this as they state “Fans actively use cultural products to create secondary art works, performing them online in order to create self-idealized identities and characters” (Liao, 2021, p. 90), their identities are formed by the fandoms they actively participate in. Jenkins also states that “fans’ response typically involves not simply fascination or adoration but also frustration and antagonism, and it is the combination of the two responses which motivates their active engagement with the media.” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 24). Here we can see why fans choose to engage with media, both from fascination and frustration, as well as how they participate and use their chosen media to construct their social and cultural identities.

With this greater understanding of what fans are and participatory culture is, it becomes more evident why fan studies is an appropriate critical lens for this research. Cosplayers are fans of various types and forms of media who go beyond the simple consumption of the media in a passive manner. Rather their participation as fans within the fandom is active as they seek to bring the media into the real world through building costumes and role-play. Cosplayers are not merely viewers of media; they become creators, innovators, and interpreters by crafting and performing characters.

Fan studies as a lens will help to understand how cosplayers serve as active participants in their fandoms. It will allow a better understanding of how their participation facilitates their personal shaping and interpretation of media. Through this theoretical framework it can be better understood how these cosplayers select their characters and engage with the media in a participatory way.

Historical Background of Fandom Studies

The early writings of fandom in media and academia often had an overly negative view and portrayal of fans. It was mentioned earlier that the term ‘fan’ is derived from ‘fanatic’ (Jenkins, 1992), a word which immediately conjures up ideas and thoughts of crazed, obsessive zealots. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides several definitions for the term ‘fanatic’, of which two stand out and could relate to these early negative views of fans. These definitions are “Such as might result from possession by a deity or demon” and “person filled with excessive and single-minded zeal” (‘Fanatic’, 1894).

Joli Jensen writes “The literature on fandom is haunted by images of deviance.” (Jensen, 1992, p. 9). It is easy to see why the early literature of this field was of an overly negative view when looking at the initial meanings and definitions of the terms. Jensen describes how for long periods scholars drew distinctions between fans and aficionados and that a cultural hierarchy existed (Jensen, 1992, p. 20). This was primarily dictated by the media or object in question, Jensen writes “What is the basis for these differences between fans like ‘them’ and aficionados like ‘us’? ... The object of the aficionado’s desire are usually deemed high culture: Eliot (George or T.S.) not Elvis; paintings not posters.” (Jensen, 1992, p. 19). Jensen highlights this point of what media was classed as high culture and acted as the dividing line of who are the fanatics. They further state that in early literature “the real dividing line between aficionado and fan involves issues of status and class” (Jensen, 1992, p. 21). They also mention “if the object of desire is popular with the lower or middle class, it is fandom (or a harmless hobby); if it is popular with the wealthy and well educated, expensive and rare, it is preference, interest or expertise.” (Jensen, 1992, p. 19).

Having discussed these negative connotations of being a fan in early fan studies literature, Jensen ends by saying “I believe what it means to be a fan should be explored in relation to the larger question of what it means to desire, cherish, seek, long, admire, envy, celebrate, protect, ally with others. Fandom is an aspect of how we make sense of the world, in relation to mass media, and in relation to our historical, social, cultural location” (Jensen, 1992, p. 27). From this statement by Jensen, we begin to see a more positive light being shone on fans and that the answering of these other questions of what it means to desire, envy, celebrate etc. by looking at fans, situates fan studies as a well-suited critical lens for this research of examining the motivations of character selection.

Jenkins’ work shifted the view of fans from crazed fanatics to active agents who actively engage with media and texts. Jenkins states “fans cease to be simply an audience for popular

texts; instead they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings.” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 24). In the context of this research, we can look at the textual meanings that are constructed and circulated through the process of cosplayers actively participating in the fandom and engaging with the texts.

Jenkins also introduces the concept of fans being these ‘textual poachers’ who shape and reinterpret the texts and media to suit their own needs, “Like the poachers of old, fans operate from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness.” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 27). This idea of fans being poachers using the texts for their own interpretation to better fit their ideas and narratives is particularly relevant to cosplay. Cosplayers, through their craft ‘poach’ these existing characters and transform them into tangible and wearable art that reflects the designs of the original texts and media, as well as their own personal interpretations and adjustments. This prime example of active participation further cements the benefits of using fan studies as our lens for this research.

Participatory Culture and Cosplay

At the heart of modern fandom lies the notion of participatory culture where the lines and boundaries are blurred between producers and consumers, as described to us by Jenkins, “Fandom here becomes a participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community.” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 46). This participatory culture suggest that fans are not passive consumers, but they are active agents who produce and share their own unique and new interpretations of texts and media. Jenkins defines participatory culture in his later work “Participatory culture: Culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content.” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 290). This active participation once again blurs the lines and allows and enables fans to become creators who can contribute to the media landscapes they love through their participation and creation.

Cosplay as a fan practice epitomizes this form of active participation as fans construct and don costumes, roleplay, and perform the personas and identities of characters from media and texts which they have an affinity for. The act and participation of cosplaying involves aspects of innovation and interpretation, a remediation of texts. The cosplays that are designed and crafted is the medium which cosplayers choose and use to express their engagement with and affinity for a particular text. This active participation practice of engaging in cosplay aligns greatly with the participatory culture that Jenkins describes. Jenkins describes the production of “new content” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 290) by fans and this new content is created as the characters of books and screens are transported from their fictional worlds into our reality through cosplayers creating and donning costumes. Due to this alignment between cosplay and participatory culture, once again it can be seen how and why fan studies is an appropriate lens for better understanding this practice.

With our world currently existing in the ‘Internet Age’, digital platforms have greatly expanded participatory culture in cosplay. Paul Booth states “One key characteristic we can witness in digital fandom is how fans’ use of technologies brings a sense of playfulness to the work of active reading. The work that fans put into creating fan fiction, fan blogs, fan videos, fan wikis, or other fan works can all be boiled down to the fact that they are fun to share.” (Booth, 2010, p. 12). Fans make use of these digital technologies, platforms, and online spaces to share their creations, collaborate with other fans, and gain feedback on their fan creations. Cosplayers make great use of these online spaces with many cosplayers sharing their costumes on social media, and sites such as *YouTube* having many videos related to cosplay, be it tutorials, showcase videos, or convention vlogs. The cosplay community thrives on these digital interactions of idea exchanging and building networks that transcend geographical boundaries. These online spaces and digital technologies highlight the collaborative and playful nature of participatory culture that Booth describes (Booth, 2010, p. 12). In these spaces fans do not only create but also distribute and engage with one another’s work.

This further emphasizes the appropriateness of fan studies as theoretical lens for this research.

Fan Identities and Communities

Fan studies also offer insights into how fans use media to construct personal and collective identities. Cornel Sandvoss states “the object of fandom... is intrinsically woven with our sense of self, with who we are, would like to be, and think we are” (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 96). The fandom a cosplayer is cosplaying from is connected to their identity and sense of self and the character they choose to represent this identity may be crucial to how they understand their sense of self in regard to the fandom. They can explore aspects of their own identity and align themselves with a larger community of fans.

Cosplay is also not always a solitary activity. It is a deeply social activity rooted in community interactions. Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington discuss how fandom fosters a sense of belonging through shared interests and collective practices, “fandom was automatically more than the mere act of being a fan of something: it was a collective strategy, a communal effort to form interpretive communities.” (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2007, p. 2). Cosplayers often exhibit their cosplays by wearing and performing them at events such as conventions and meet-ups as well as in digital spaces such as forums. This community and these sites of interaction allow cosplayers to exchange ideas, collaborate on projects, and support one another’s creative endeavours, and form these “interpretive communities”. These social spaces are crucial to understanding how community-building is central to the cosplay experience and to fandom more broadly.

The Fan-Producer Relationship

One of the key aspects and crucial parts of fan studies is the evolving relationship that exists between fans and media producers. Jenkins discusses how fans negotiate their engagement with media texts, finding a balance between the original source and their own creative reinterpretations, “Fans reject the idea of a definitive version produced, authorized, and regulated by some media conglomerate. Instead, fans envision a world where all of us can participate in the creation and circulation of central cultural myths.” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 256). Cosplayers may face tension as they strive to remain true and faithful to the characters they are cosplaying, whilst also bringing their unique interpretations and performances.

This dynamic reflects what Mark Duffett describes as fan labour or labour of love, “The non-commercial nature of fan culture is, for many fans, one of its key characteristics: they are engaged in a labour of love... and if they produce or promote media culture, it is often on a not-for-profit basis.” (Duffett, 2013, p. 57). Cosplayers may invest significant time, energy, and resources into crafting elaborate costumes, often with little financial reward but immense emotional fulfilment. In doing so, they contribute to the visibility and longevity of media franchises, further reinforcing the participatory nature of their fandom.

Furthermore, when discussing the relationship between fans and producers, Jenkins states, “Consumers...are asserting a right to participate in the culture, on their own terms, when and where they wish. This empowered consumer faces a series of struggles to preserve and broaden this perceived right to participate” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 169). This highlights the active role of fans in reshaping media dynamics, challenging the control exerted by producers. The fan works that are produced by cosplayers, may play some small role in shifting and adjusting the text.

By understanding this relationship between the fans and producers, it may be possible to glean greater insights into the character selection process.

Fan Cultural Capital and Hierarchies in Cosplay

The concept of fan cultural capital, rooted in the notion of cultural capital as defined by Pierre Bourdieu provides an additional lens to understand hierarchies within cosplay communities. Bourdieu defines cultural capital as “accumulated labor... which, when appropriated... enables [individuals] to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor.” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241). Bourdieu identifies three forms of cultural capital: embodied (skills or knowledge), objectified (material objects), and institutionalized (formal qualifications or recognition), (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). Huang in developing a deeper understanding of Bourdieu’s work and differentiating cultural capital from the Chinese term *Guanxi* makes use of the definition provided by Webb et al.: “Cultural capital is slightly different. Webb, Schirato and Danaher define it as: A form of value associated with culturally authorized tastes, consumption patterns, attributes, skills and awards (Webb, Schirato and Danaher, 2002, p. x).”

(Huang, 2019, p. 45). Furthermore, Huang states “Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital and habitus help us better understand an individual’s behaviour and performance.” (Huang, 2019, p. 49). The value that is gained from this cultural capital helps in understanding the practices and behaviours of cosplayers, and how Bourdieu’s three different forms of cultural capital play a role in a cosplayer’s behaviour.

In cosplay, embodied cultural capital manifests as crafting and performance expertise, skills, and techniques, while objectified capital includes the physical costumes that are worn, and the institutionalized capital would include competition prizes/placings and large followings on social media or fan bases. As Lamerichs explains “The process of sewing the costume and guaranteeing its authenticity is therefore very important. The costume is a cultural product that can be admired at a convention.” (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 6).

These forms of capital are often markers of status, and the costumes may serve as markers of skill and dedication leading to unspoken hierarchies within the community. Experienced cosplayers may choose technically challenging designs, using craftsmanship as a way to earn recognition, “Fashion shows...allow fans to earn praise for their sewing skills” (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 6) highlighting the importance of technical mastery in achieving status. At the same time, cosplayers may face judgement based on their ability to accurately embody a character, as “cosplayers are usually judged according to body features and behaviour” (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 13). It could be speculated that cosplayers who naturally are closer to the characters commonly presented in media regarding factors such as race, gender, and body type may have an easier time garnering recognition for their work and gaining more cultural capital compared to others.

Novices, lacking such capital, may feel limited to simpler designs, while skilled cosplayers select intricate characters to reinforce their elevated status. This cultural capital may lead to the unspoken hierarchies and various ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups within the community.

Understanding these hierarchies may reveal how fan cultural capital impacts motivations, identity, and inclusion within cosplay, offering valuable insights into its role as a fan practice, and furthermore how it influences and plays a role in the character selection process.

Critiques of Fandom and Its Social Implications

While fan studies celebrate the creativity, participation, and agency of fans, it is also important to consider some of the critiques of fandom. Jenkins states “media corporations do indeed market to fans, target them for program merchandizing, create official fan organisations that work to regularize audience responses, and send speakers to conventions to promote new works or to squash unwanted speculations....the media conglomerates do not want fans who make demands, second guess creative decisions and assert opinions; they want regular viewers who accept what they are given and buy what they are sold” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 285). Fandom isn’t

purely about creativity but reinforces consumerist behaviours. In the case of cosplayers, they may invest heavily in materials, merchandise, and convention tickets, all of which contribute to the profitability of the media industries which they seek to engage with critically.

Matt Hills also states, “The fan’s emotional investment also results in (and is compounded through) an attention to detail” (Hills, 2002, p. 4) highlighting the emotional investment and energy that fans place into the fandoms they are part of, as such they are giving a great deal of themselves for a fandom, their emotional energy. For cosplayers, this emotional energy may be in the form of pressure to achieve accuracy with their costumes and meeting expectations of character portrayals especially considering the emotional energy given to the fandom by other fans who may interact with their cosplay and have certain expectations of the cosplayer.

Whilst fandom can be empowering, it can also place significant emotional and financial demands on fans, which complicates the narrative of fandom as purely liberating.

Conclusion

Fan studies, when applied as a theoretical framework can provide valuable insights into the fan practice of cosplay. By viewing cosplay through the lens of participatory culture, it can be better understood how cosplayers engage with media texts, not simply as passive consumers, but as active creators.

Fan studies allow the exploration of motivations, identities, and community dynamics at play within the cosplay world, offering a deeper understanding of how fans use media to construct their cultural and social identities.

Through this framework, this research aims to uncover the ways in which cosplayers select their characters to cosplay, craft costumes, and engage with fandom in participatory and creative ways, thus contributing to the larger conversation of fan studies and participatory cultures.

Chapter 4 - Methodology and Data Collection

Introduction

This chapter details and describes the various processes and methodologies that were used to conduct this research and collect data, as well as justify why these methodologies were the most appropriate for this study.

This research is of a qualitative nature and makes use of an ethnographic framework. The use of ethnography is further discussed and justified in the following section. The primary data collection methods used were surveys and interviews, both of which are further expanded upon in later sections.

Looking back, with the aims and objectives of this research being to classify and discuss the most prominent factors and motivations involved in the character selection process for cosplayers, the selected methodologies will be beneficial for gaining insight into the lived experiences and personal motivations of the participants of this research.

This chapter will also discuss the analytical framework that is being used, the ethical considerations of this research, and some of the limitations of this research.

Research Design & Approach

This research is situated within the realm of ethnographic research as it dives further into the world of cosplay. It strives to learn more about the people who inhabit this liminal space that exists on the border of two worlds, reality and fictional worlds made real.

Harris and Johnson beautifully describe ethnography and ethnographic research as “a portrait of a people” (Harris and Johnson, 2000). This research is drawn to this description for both its simplicity and the beautiful meaning it creates in comparing the study and knowledge of a people to a work of art. This is quite apt considering the research is studying and delving into a community of artists, creative thinkers, and people who wish to express themselves. This perspective by Harris and Johnson is well-suited to studying the South African cosplay community – a subculture that exists at the intersection of personal identity, artistic expression, and fandom culture.

Margaret LeCompte and Jean Schensul describe ethnography as “A systemic approach to learning about the social and cultural life of communities” (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010, p. 1). LeCompte and Schensul state “Ethnography takes the position that human behaviour and the ways in which people construct and make meaning of their worlds and their lives are highly variable and locally specific” (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010, p. 1).

Furthermore, LeCompte and Schensul provide a few situations of where ethnographic research is appropriate, suitable, and should be used. LeCompte and Schensul say Ethnography should be used to: “Document the process”, “Identify and describe unexpected or unanticipated outcomes”, and “Answer questions that cannot be addressed with other methods or approaches” (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010, p. 41,42). Based upon these criteria it feels appropriate to use ethnographic research for this research since we are seeking answers and outcomes from the participants of the community that there is no way of predicting or anticipating because these individuals are all unique and nuanced in their own ways with different stories and lived experiences.

Based on these definitions of ethnography and ethnographic research I believe it to be apt that this research falls within ethnographic research as we attempt to learn about the social and cultural life of the South African cosplay community.

As mentioned above this ethnographic research is of a qualitative nature based on the definition of qualitative research by Kandel, “Qualitative research collects, analyses, and interprets data by observing what people do and say” (Kandel, 2020, p. 2). Harris and Johnson’s idea of ethnographic research being “a portrait of a people” (Harris and Johnson, 2000) couples well with qualitative research being focused on “giving due emphasis to the meanings, experiences and views of all the participants” (Kandel, 2020, p. 2). Ethnographic and qualitative research go hand in hand and are a good fit for this research as we attempt to develop a greater understanding of the people of the South African cosplay community.

In this study, surveys and interviews are not just standalone tools but integral components of an ethnographic approach. The survey provides broad ethnographic insights by capturing diverse perspectives within the cosplay community, while the semi-structured interviews function as ethnographic conversations, allowing participants to narrate their experiences in their own words.

Data Collection Methods

In conducting the data collection aspect of this research, I decided to use a two-pronged approach to ensure that I gathered as much useful, useable, and valid data as possible. I designed and carried out two separate data collection methods each with separate aims and outcomes for each to serve various purposes in the grander scheme of this research.

These two data collection methods used are each outlined in greater detail in this section, explaining the various nuances and purposes of each method and how the questions were designed to accompany each of these methods. However, in a general sense, these two methods of data collection can be described as follows:

- The collection of data was facilitated through the process of a wide range survey to a large number of participants to gain broad insights into this research.
- The collection of data was facilitated through the process of in-depth interviews conducted with a smaller number of participants to gain more detailed insights and delve further into various facets of this research.

These two data collection methods of surveys and interviews are expanded upon in the following section which details each of these methods, their associated attributes and why they were chosen for this research.

Survey

When discussing the use of surveys in this research it is important to first define what a survey is in the context of a research tool and methodology. Groves *et al.* define a survey as “a systematic method for gathering information from (a sample of) entities for the purposes of constructing quantitative descriptors of the attributes of the larger population of which the entities are members” (Groves *et al.*, 2011, p. 2).

From this definition we can understand that surveys are a process of collecting data and gathering information from a sample of a community or population to extrapolate this data in a manner that can assist in forming a better understanding and wider knowledge base on the greater population.

This definition provided to us by Groves *et al* mentions that surveys are used when looking for quantitative descriptors (Groves *et al.*, 2011, p. 2). This research is not quantitative but rather qualitative which raises the question of whether surveys are still an appropriate tool to be used in this research. In answer to this, Braun *et al* discuss the benefits of surveys when used as a qualitative research tool, “qualitative surveys seek to harness the potential qualitative data offer for nuanced, in depth and sometimes new understandings of social issues” (Braun *et al.*, 2021, p. 2).

Braun *et al*’s discussion of qualitative surveys is focused particularly on surveys that are administered online via the internet. This is appropriate for this research as it was my intention for my surveys to administer using the online platform Google Forms.

When discussing the types of results and benefits that can be gained from the use of surveys as a qualitative research tool, Braun *et al* state “Because participants respond by typing responses in their own words, rather than selecting from pre-determined response options, fully qualitative surveys can produce rich and complex accounts of the type of sense-making typically of interest to qualitative researchers” (Braun *et al.*, 2021, p. 2). These “rich and complex accounts” can lead to a better understanding and data set by allowing the participants the freedom to create their own answers rather than choosing from a list of pre-generated and

curated responses. It would be wrong and remiss to assume that all possible character selection motivations could be identified and included before the circulation of the survey. This would take away the autonomy of the participants to truly describe and discuss their lived experiences and thoughts on topics presented to them in this instance. As we want the participants to go into as much detail as possible when discussing their character selection motivations these qualitative surveys are well suited to the aspect of deeper exploration. Some of these areas of deeper exploration that Braun *et al* mention could be delved into include “participant’s subjective experiences, narratives, practices, positionings and discourses” (Braun *et al.*, 2021, p. 2). These aspects when examined may contain invaluable information for this research when looking at character selection motivations.

The definition that is provided to us by Braun *et al* for a qualitative survey is a survey that “consists of a series of open-ended questions, crafted by a researcher and centred on a particular topic. They are self-administered, with questions presented in a fixed and standard order to all participants.” (Braun *et al.*, 2021, p. 2). During the data collection process of this research, many of the questions that will be included will be open-ended to allow for those unique insights and viewpoints of the participants to be discovered. It is this format of qualitative surveys that will be administered to the participants of this research due to the unique insights and viewpoints that are observed when using qualitative based surveys as a research tool.

The use of surveys as a data collection tool allowed for a broad range of diverse participants in this research which would hopefully encompass more unique answers and insights into this diverse community. This approach of qualitative surveys aligns with the ethnographic framework, as it allows for the collection of diverse narratives that reflect the nuanced, lived experiences of South African cosplayers. This is done so as to enhance the depth and credibility of the findings.

The survey went through various phases and iterations before it was in a final version that could be shared amongst potential research participants. A final version of the questions that were asked in the survey can be found in Appendix A of this research.

To dive into this world of cosplay and begin investigating and unpacking the core question of this research – Why do people choose the characters they do to cosplay – I knew that I would first have to establish a baseline understanding. I could not just rely on my own experiences as a cosplayer in South Africa, particularly as a Cis Heterosexual White Male whose personal experiences may be completely different to those of the larger population of South Africa and by extension, the South African cosplay community. I needed to understand that my privileges and biases may have informed and impacted my personal experiences in a manner completely different to those of my potential research participants.

To create this baseline of understanding of my research participants, I designed and structured several questions in the survey that would help me to better understand the who, what, where, when, why, and how people engage in cosplay. Once this baseline had been established, the

process of asking questions more directly related to the research question could begin. These directly related questions closely aligned with the motivations that were discussed in the Literature Review portion of this research.

Survey Administration

I decided that the best way to distribute the survey was via digital means. This would allow me several benefits over administering the survey via hard-copy pen and paper versions of the survey. These benefits included:

- The ability for research participants to complete the survey in their own time when it best suited them.
- The ability to gather research from a much larger number of participants and thus have a much larger sample size to use when analysing the data.
- The ability to gather research from participants spread throughout South Africa and not only limited to the city I reside in.

The digital survey was facilitated by Google Forms.

To distribute the survey, I made use of several channels to reach out to my target audience and request their involvement with this research.

The first of these channels involved me making both a Story and a Standard Instagram post on my personal cosplay Instagram account. I knew that many other South African cosplayers followed this account of mine and thus would see my call to be involved in the research. These posts consisted of some details regarding the research and its purpose, as well as a URL link to allow potential participants to complete the survey.

The second channel I used to distribute the survey consisted of posting in various South African cosplay and geek-related Facebook groups. Like the Instagram posts, they included information and details regarding the research, as well as a link to complete the survey. The various Facebook groups in which I made these posts include:

- *Cosplay South Africa*
- *Comic Con Africa's Cosplay Central*
- *Cosplay Gauteng*
- *Friends of Comic Con Africa*

The final channel I made use of to distribute my survey involved talking to South African cosplayers at Comic Con Africa 2023 and providing them with a card with a QR Code to complete the survey at their convenience.

In total the survey received 49 responses. This sample size may be a limitation of this study as it does not account for the experiences of each person in the South African cosplay community. This is discussed in greater detail later.

The survey also included a section which allowed survey participants to volunteer to be involved further in the study during the interview process. Participants who completed this section of the survey were then used to identify interview research participants.

Interview

James P. Spradley states “Ethnography is the work of describing a culture... Rather than *studying people*, ethnography means *learning from people*.” (Spradley, 1979, p. 3). This understanding from Spradley that we are not simply studying a group of people but learning from them, ties in well with the words of Irving Seidman, “I interview because I am interested in other people’s stories. Most simply put, stories are a way of knowing.” (Seidman, 2006, p. 7). These authors discuss learning from and knowing a group/people in greater detail through the processes of interviewing, which is what this research hopes to achieve, to develop a deeper understanding of the South African cosplay community and their fan practices. These interviews can be utilised to discover the world of cosplay from the perspective of the informant, which, whilst being unique for each informant, can lead to identifying common threads and experiences.

Seidman describes a style of interviewing that uses primarily “open-ended questions”, “Their major task is to build upon and explore their participants responses to those questions. The goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study” (Seidman, 2006, p. 15). This style of interviewing is well-suited to this research due to how it allows participants to formulate their own narratives through the semi-structured/guiding questions posed by the interviewer. This will allow participants to discuss and go into as much detail as they would like when answering certain questions, as well as allow for possible unforeseen answers, statements, or insights to reveal themselves during the interview process.

Giampietro Gobo and Andrea Molle discuss the work of Spradley in relation to ethnographic interviews and states “its purpose is to reveal the cultural meanings used by actors and to investigate aspects of the culture observed.” (Gobo and Molle, 2016, p. 181). From this, ethnographic interviews can be used to facilitate a deeper understanding of the cultural and social practices of the group of participants.

With the nature of this research being particularly concerned with cosplayers and their own individual experiences which influence their habits and practices, ethnographic interviews as a research tool are well suited to this purpose. These interviews will allow a glimpse into the personal lived experiences of the participants to truly learn from and understand the choices they make during the character selection process of cosplay.

From the outset, the information gathered during the interview process was meant to build upon the information that had already been gathered during the survey data collection process. As such, many of the questions that were asked during the interviews were like those of the survey. This allowed me to go into much greater detail in certain areas and truly probe into certain topics to a greater degree than the survey allowed me.

Whilst I had designed a set of interview questions before the interview process had started, there were several times that I asked questions which were not included in this set of questions. This is because, during the interview process, I didn't want the participants to feel as though they were just answering many 'Yes and No' questions. Rather I wanted the interview to flow more so like a fluid conversation with the questions there to guide the flow. As such many of the questions were designed and crafted to be quite open allowing the participants to go into as much or as little detail as they would like. Naturally, this conversation-like process led to me asking them follow-up questions based on their answers specific to them. I also found that there were some questions I thought of during the interviews that I had previously failed to consider or think about, and I tried to also ask these questions in the remaining interviews that I conducted afterwards.

A full list of the questions which I compiled before the interview process began can be found in Appendix B.

The questions I created were split into four main categories which can be described as follows:

- Questions relating to the participant and their background with cosplay and the hobby.
- Questions relating to how the participant engages with cosplay and their practices whilst participating in the hobby.
- Questions relating specifically to how the participant chooses the characters which they cosplay.
- Questions relating to being a cosplayer and cosplaying in South Africa.

With each of these various groups of questions I hoped to probe into various aspects related to the main objective and question of this research, as well as foster an environment to allow the participants to speak freely and in doing so "reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study" (Seidman, 2006, p. 15). The primary purpose of the interviews and the interview questions was to gain deeper insights and understandings of those gained during the survey process.

In addition to the pre-designed questions I had going into the interviews, there were also some ad hoc questions I found myself asking as the conversations were flowing. Some of the ad hoc questions I asked throughout the interview process which were not originally part of the interview questions are as follows:

- *Are you ever drawn to cosplay characters that already bear a resemblance to you such as similar hair or facial features, etc?*
- *Do you ever choose to cosplay as a character because you feel it will be a 'level-up' from your previous cosplays?*
- *Have you ever witnessed or been subjected to discrimination or insults because a cosplayer's race does not match that of the character a cosplayer is cosplaying?*
- *If you had an unlimited budget of time and money, who would be your dream character to cosplay as?*
- *Have you ever wanted to make a new cosplay of a character you have previously cosplayed as?*
- *Do you ever choose to cosplay a character because of their recognisability and how iconic they would be to other members of the fandom?*

Due to the nature of the interviews being primarily conversation-like, many other questions arose and led to points of discussion. These above-mentioned questions were however ones that came up often and felt of certain significance to this research.

Interview Participant Selection

To identify interview participants for this research, various criteria were used. Questions were included in the survey asking participants whether they would like to participate further in this research in the form of interviews. From the participants who responded yes, further criteria could be examined to determine participants.

Skill Level: One of the initial criteria for interview participants was having an even spread across the three main skill levels (Novice, Intermediate, and Master). Of the 8 interviews that were conducted, 3 were novice, 3 were intermediate, and 2 were master. Only 3 survey participants identified their skill level as master, thus a lower number of interview participants. This spread of different skill levels would provide insights from different experience levels within the community.

Survey Answer Length: In addition to using skill level to identify interview participants, the length of answers given to survey questions was also used. Participants that had answered the survey questions with longer and more detailed answers were favoured more than participants that mostly responded with short or one-word answers. This inclusion criterion was used to hopefully identify participants that would more likely go into greater detail during the interviews and thus provide more insights for the study.

Serious and Casual Cosplayers: Another factor that was considered when selecting participants to interview related to whether these cosplayers considered themselves serious or casual cosplayers, as well as competing in cosplay competitions. An even spread was wanted to ensure that not only serious cosplayers were being interviewed or vice versa but rather seeing the

viewpoint from many different cosplayers who engage with cosplay at various levels of dedication and commitment so as to ensure a broad range of diverse responses.

Failures to consider: It is important to note that there were some factors that may have proven useful when identifying interview participants, however due to a failure to include these questions in the survey, they could not be used. These are demographic factors such as the age, race, and gender of the participants. This would have aided in ensuring a more even spread and variety of participants. A recommendation for future researchers would be to include these demographic based questions for a better quality of research.

With these various inclusion and exclusion criteria being used, various participants could be identified that ensured an even spread of participants so that the research and results would reflect a more holistic view of the South African cosplay community.

The participants were as follows:

- Ahtohcos
- Claire Cosplay
- ArcticFoxx Cosplay
- Julia Smythe
- Leeron Green
- Lady Robzy
- Toonibug
- Psycadillo

Interview Administration

The interviews were done digitally for two primary reasons: Firstly, it allowed the interviewing of participants who were in other areas of South Africa at a time that was suitable for them. Secondly conducting the interviews digitally allowed access to various tools that would make the data recording process much simpler.

The interviews were conducted online using the Microsoft Teams conferencing software. An audio recording of the interview was made using the OBS recording suite software. These audio recordings of the interviews were then transcribed using OpenAI's Whisper, a neural network capable of recognising and transcribing English speech with a high level of accuracy and robustness.

Throughout the various interviews, I also made notes with pen and paper in my notebook to highlight interesting aspects and to remind myself to go back to certain parts and highlight areas of the interviews that I thought to be pertinent.

Analytical Framework

This research makes use of discourse analysis when examining the results of the surveys and interviews. Discourse analysis is employed in this research because of its capacity to conduct a detailed examination of how research participants construct their identities, experiences, and perceptions through their language. James Paul Gee states “language has a magical property: when we speak or write, we design what we have to say to fit the situation in which we are communicating” (Gee, 2004, p. 10). In the context of cosplay, language is central to how cosplayers articulate and express their motivations, experiences, and connections to characters. Discourse analysis enables a focus not only on the content of what is being said but also on the broader social practices that shape and are shaped by this language. Using discourse analysis, it can be examined how participants describe their motivations for selecting characters, which in turn reflects how they negotiate identity and identity through fandom.

Discourse analysis will be applied to the surveys and interviews conducted, analysing the language that is used by the participants when expressing their relationship with cosplay and how they engage with the character selection process. This approach enables understanding not only the explicit content of their responses, but also the implicit meanings, identities and social norms which are embedded in their words. Norman Fairclough states “discourse constitutes the social” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 55) and “discourse is shaped by relations of power and ideologies, and the constructive effects discourse has upon social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 1). This approach emphasizes how language reflects and constructs social identities, power dynamics, and cultural norms, making it particularly suitable for exploring the ways participants articulate their experiences and motivations.

By focusing on the nuances of language and the ideologies embedded within it, discourse analysis provides a critical lens to uncover the deeper meanings in the participants’ responses. By examining the participants’ linguistic choices and patterns, this research seeks to uncover the ways in which cosplayers’ narratives reflect their creative identities, social connections, and most importantly their character selection motivations.

As Jenkins states about fans being “active producers and manipulators of meanings” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 23) fans use their participation within a fandom and culture to express their thoughts and create meaning. Discourse analysis pairs well with the theoretical lens of fandom studies as the research will be looking into the meaning and language used by participants in order to understand their lived experiences and meaning conveyed through their participation and active production in the fandom.

This research also made use of thematic coding which as described by Williams and Moser is “Coding in qualitative research is comprised of processes that enable collected data to be assembled, categorized, and thematically sorted, providing an organized platform for the construction of meaning” (Williams and Moser, 2019, p. 45). I made use of manual coding

methods as described by Williams *et al.* “read and re-read interview transcriptions, field notes and associated data sources involved in the data collection searching for thematic connectivity leading to thematic patterns...color code aligned themes” (Williams and Moser, 2019, p. 48). This colour coding and ‘pen and paper’ manual coding allowed me to identify common trends and answers to various questions, and as such gain insights into what motivations were common and uncommon in the character selection process.

Ethical Considerations

To conduct these surveys and interviews ethical clearance had to be obtained from The University of the Witwatersrand. The ethical clearance certificate that was granted for this research can be found in Appendix C of this research.

As part of ensuring the ethicalness of this research participants were provided with research information letters providing context to the participants of the research and what was expected of them, as well as consent forms which were completed by each participant. This ensured that participants were freely and willingly taking part in this research of their own accord. For the survey participants the information sheet and consent form was a part of the digital form the participants completed.

The surveys did not require participants to disclose their name or details if they did not wish to and only required them in the event they wished to volunteer for the interview process. All survey responses discussed in the analysis of this research have been done so in a way that protects and does not disclose the identity of the participants. With regards to the interviews, when completing the consent form, participants could select if and how they would like to be identified, either by their name, their cosplay alias, or by a fictitious non de plume providing participants with the agency of how they wished to be referred to. Participants could also choose to give permission for images of their cosplays to be included in this research.

To ensure this research was ethical only participants over the age of 18 could participate. I also made sure to be cautious and delicate when discussing sensitive topics such as race and gender and ensured that I did not push participants to answer questions they did not want to answer.

As a researcher embedded within the cosplay community, I recognise that my own experiences and positionality may shape both my interactions with participants and my interpretations of their responses. To mitigate potential biases, I adopted a reflexive approach by ensuring diverse participant representation, as much as possible, using open-ended questioning to allow for unfiltered perspectives, and critically engaging with discourse analysis to identify implicit assumptions in both participant narratives and my own analytical lens.

Limitations

Upon reflecting on this research there are some limitations that if they were not present may have resulted in more robust study and research findings. Some of these limitations include:

- The sample size of the research participants. Having more respondents to the survey and potentially more participants in the survey would have resulted in a broader range of responses from a more diverse community. This may have resulted in findings that reflect a large portion of the South African cosplay community. This could have potentially been improved by allowing a longer period for survey responses as well as more advertising and promotion of the survey.
- Some of the questions could have perhaps been structured and written in such a way as to probe into more specific areas of this research and avoid being so broad. One such example is the question *How does time and money impact your choice of which characters you choose to cosplay?* This question could have been more specific such as asking do cosplayers specifically not cosplay certain characters because of how expensive they would be, etc.
- The survey questions should have included more demographic based questions. Including these questions would have allowed a better understanding of the demographic of the participants and how this relates to the broader demographic of South African cosplay community. It also would have allowed the ability to draw and examine various relationships between these demographic factors and the various factors that play a role in the character selection process.
- A potential limitation of the discourse analysis used may be that it relies heavily on the interpretation of the researcher which may have introduced bias into the work from my own personal experiences and understandings.

This concludes the discussion and description of the methodologies, research tools, and research design and approach methods used in this research. The following chapter analyses and discusses the results gathered during the data collection process.

Chapter 5 – Results, Analysis, and Discussion

The following chapter aims to analyse and discuss the results of the data collection aspect of this research, as well as present the findings. This chapter will be split between the results of the survey and the interview. It will follow a format of discussing the process behind asking the question, the results and then analysis.

Survey Data Results

The total number of participants who responded to the survey was 49 (N). Whilst this is still a fair number of participants, more were expected due to the size of the cosplay community in South Africa. For example, the Facebook group *Cosplay South Africa*, which this survey was promoted on, has over 4200 members.

The questions and results of the surveys have been arranged thematically here with similar and related questions being grouped together to identify trends, patterns, and commonalities.

Cosplay Experience

One of the first questions asked of participants was: *How long have you been cosplaying?*

It was my hope in asking this question that I would be able to understand whether a participant was still relatively new to cosplay and cosplaying, or whether they were someone who had been engaging with cosplay for a fair amount of time. I believed that this information would be useful in that not only would it show me the average amount of time most of my participants had been cosplaying for and thus understand the community better on the whole, but also it would allow me to see and identify if there were any trends or patterns between people who had been cosplaying for more or less the same amount of time. It would also allow me to see if any differences existed between those who were ‘veterans’ of cosplay and those who had just begun. Furthermore, it would allow me to see if the length of time a participant had been cosplaying had any impact or influence on the characters that these participants have chosen to cosplay. Perhaps even show whether these various motivations and influencing factors changed as a cosplayer spent more time cosplaying or whether they stayed the same throughout their cosplay journey.

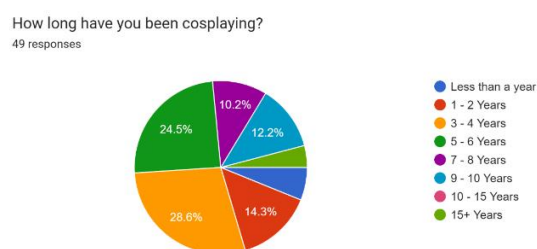


Figure 9 Pie chart showing responses to the question: *How long have you been cosplaying?*

From the results of this question, most of the participants have been cosplaying for between 3 and 4 years followed by those who have been cosplaying for between 5 and 6 years. The smallest group were those who have been cosplaying for more than 15 years with only 2 participants selecting this option. The next smallest group were those who have been cosplaying for less than a year with 3 participants selecting this option. From these results, it could be seen that most of the participants had been cosplaying for a minimum of 3 years thus showing that they had a fair amount of experience cosplaying. The survey was not comprised of group of participants who were complete beginners, nor only cosplay veterans. Therefore, most of the data collected during the survey would be from cosplayers who have likely cosplayed several different characters and thus may have different motivations and influences when they chose their characters to cosplay.

Cosplay Acquisition

To better understand how cosplayers choose their characters, a better understanding of how the participants attained their cosplays was required. Whether this was through a process of making and creating the cosplays themselves or purchasing the cosplays.

One of the questions asked was *Do you make or buy your cosplays?* The question was multiple choice and allowed participants to select an option that their cosplays are a combination of buying cosplays as well as making them themselves.

In asking this question, it was the intention to understand whether participants purchased cosplays that were ready to be worn, or whether they crafted the cosplays themselves. Oftentimes cosplay is closely associated with the physical making and crafting of the cosplay and all the associated accessories, as Lamerichs says “The costumes fans wear are usually self-made, though in some cases they are purchased” (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 6). It was the hope to understand from the participants whether this was something that they engaged with or merely bought their cosplays and being the character and wearing the costume was of higher importance than the crafting aspect that is associated with cosplaying. It was also of interest to see whether the method of obtaining a cosplay (purchasing or crafting) had an impact on the characters that people choose to cosplay, as certain characters may not have associated cosplays readily available to purchase, or some cosplays and characters may be too complicated to craft and build from scratch.

Do you make or buy your cosplays?

49 responses

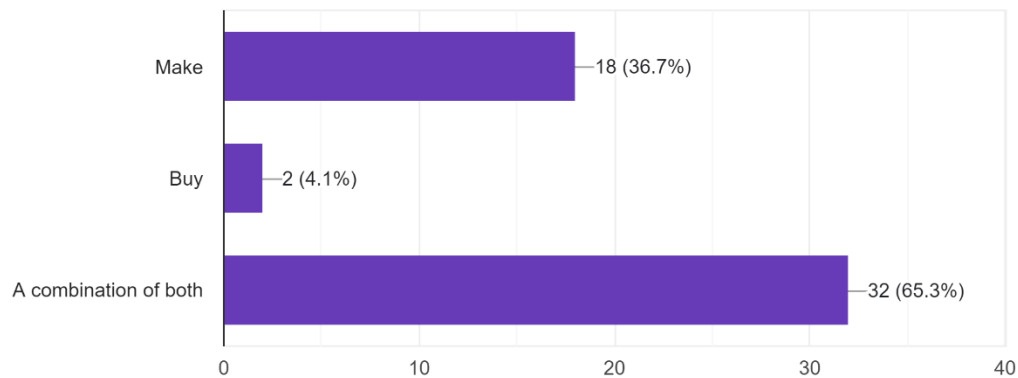


Figure 10 Bar chart showing responses to the question: Do you make or buy your cosplays?

From these responses, most of the respondents' cosplays are a combination of both bought cosplays and cosplays which they make themselves. It is also possible that these participants use a combination of bought and made elements within a single cosplay such as making garments and buying a wig to achieve a character's look. It can also be seen that there is a larger number of participants who make their cosplays than buy them, this could be because **when making a cosplay there is more freedom when it comes to choosing a character** as opposed to buying where they are limited to whichever characters have cosplays that are readily available to buy.

When looking at the participants who exclusively buy their cosplays it was found that they have only been cosplaying for 1 – 2 years. Thus, their choice to buy cosplays could be related to what would be easiest for them or a lack of fabrication skills to create other cosplays. Those who only make their cosplays ranged from cosplayers who have been cosplaying for less than a year to cosplayers who have been cosplaying for 10 years. However, the majority of those who make use of a combination of buying and making ranged from those who have been cosplaying for under a year up to those who have been cosplaying for more than 15 years.

With this knowledge, I also wanted to understand the aspects of time and money and how they related to the process of acquiring a cosplay.

A question included to discuss the time aspect of cosplay was *How many hours do you typically spend working on a cosplay?*

This question was accompanied by multiple-choice answers with varying time intervals with the first option being *less than 10 hours* and the final option being *150+ hours*. As this was a

baseline question, it was the hope that it would provide insight into how the participants engaged with cosplay and specifically how much time they have and would be willing to dedicate towards working on a cosplay and bringing a character costume to life. This question was also chosen because the time that a cosplayer spends making a cosplay may affect the characters that cosplayers cosplay. This may be because certain characters may require more time dedicated to creating their costumes if they are more complicated or have more intricate and detailed designs as opposed to simpler characters which may require less time dedication.

How many hours do you typically spend working on a cosplay?

49 Responses

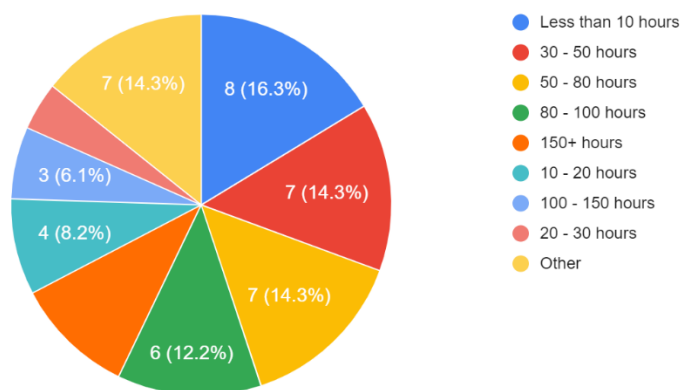


Figure 11 Pie chart showing responses to the question: How many hours do you typically spend working on a cosplay?

From the responses to this question, most of the participants spend less than 10 hours working on their cosplays. This was followed by those who spent 30 – 50 hours and 50 hours working on a cosplay. There were also a significant number of participants who stated *other* and, in their responses, stated that the number of hours varies greatly depending on the character whom they are creating a cosplay for. This aligns with the findings of Rosenberg and Letamendi who say “The average time spent preparing a costume was 44.16 hours” (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 12). This understanding of how many hours a cosplayer can spend creating and putting together a cosplay may influence the choice of character as certain characters may require more time due to the complexity associated with creating the character’s outfit and costume.

Those who spent more than 100 hours ranged from cosplayers who had been cosplaying for 3 – 4 years up to those who had been cosplaying for 10 years. However, those who spent 20 hours or less consisted mostly of cosplayers who had been cosplaying for less than 3 years although there were a few cosplayers who had been cosplaying for longer periods. On average it was seen that **the longer a cosplayer had been cosplaying, the more likely they were to spend more time working on a cosplay. This increase in time may allow cosplayers to take on more complex characters and more intricately involved cosplays.** It is worth noting that many of the more experienced cosplayers were the ones who expressed that the time was different for each different cosplay and that some may require more time than others.

Whether a costume is bought or made, there is still a monetary aspect involved. This could be from purchasing materials to craft garments and accessories or purchasing garments and costumes that are premade. For this reason, the survey included the question: *How much money do you typically spend on a cosplay?* This question was multiple-choice with the first option being *Less than R100* and the last option being *R5000+*, with other varying interval options between.

Not only would this question assist in a better understanding of the participants and how they engage with this hobby, but it would also help to understand how much money they would be willing to dedicate towards bringing a character to life. This would also help in understanding character choice and selection as some characters may require expensive materials, techniques, and tools to accomplish them compared to some characters which could be achieved as closet cosplays from garments and items that a cosplayer already owns.

How much money do you typically spend on a cosplay?
49 Responses

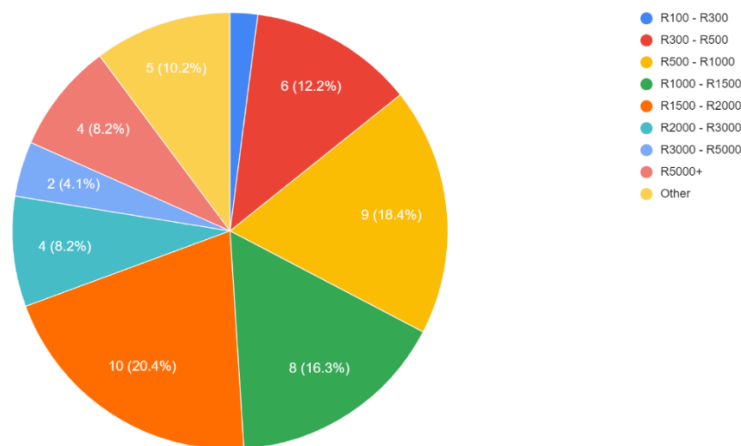


Figure 12 Pie chart showing responses to the question: *How much money do you typically spend on a cosplay?*

From these responses, most of the participants spend between R500 and R2000 with smaller portions of the participants spending more than R2000 or less than R500. Several participants stated that the cost is dependent on the character and varies each time. This leads to a better understanding of the role that money plays for the participants when they are engaging in the hobby of cosplay as this may be a factor that could influence how they choose their characters to cosplay.

With regards to money and cosplay experience, there was an even spread with both beginner and experienced cosplayers spending small and large amounts of money. Although most cosplayers tended towards a more median budget, several cosplayers emphasised that it is **completely dependent on who they are cosplaying**.

Following on from this, the following question was included: *How does time and money impact your choice of which characters you choose to cosplay?*

This question was included to understand from the participants how practical constraints such as time and money (both resources which are often limited) influence the characters they choose to cosplay and portray. Some participants may lean more towards certain characters over others because they are realistically more achievable with the time and money that they have available to cosplay with, this research wanted to ascertain if this was the case. This was also a useful question to include specifically given the context of this research being in South Africa where many people don't have large amounts of disposable income to freely put towards hobbies such as cosplay.

Concerning time, several participants discussed how they are sometimes limited in the complexity of the character they wish to cosplay because of the time that would be required to create the cosplay. One participant stated, *"If I do not have time, I would rather do a casual cosplay or an easy 'stock' character"*, from this response this cosplayer may be inclined to cosplay as a character that is perhaps not very complex depending on how much time they have available to create the cosplay.

Another participant stated, *"Time impacts which cosplay I choose in terms of difficulty, I won't choose a cosplay I feel is very difficult if I have limited time"* **From these two responses cosplayers who have time constraints lean more heavily towards choosing characters who are simpler to create.**

On the other hand, some participants stated that time does not impact their choices and that they are willing to make the time if it is a character whom they want to cosplay. One participant stated, *"The bigger and more impressive the cosplay, the more time and money I'm willing to invest in it"*. This cosplayer is motivated and influenced by other factors to choose their characters however the aspects of time and money do not play any role in that decision-making process for them.

With regards to money, many participants discussed how **money was often a big deciding factor in choosing their cosplays because of the costs associated with cosplaying.** Regarding the cost and materials to create a cosplay, one participant stated, *"Money is definitely a factor so I tend to stay away from characters that would require EVA foam armour or expensive niche props"*. This cosplayer may be motivated to cosplay characters whose outfits do not include any form of armour as this would be too expensive for them to create.

Another participant stated that with the cost involved in cosplaying a character, they may put that character off for a while until they have adequate funds to cosplay as that character. Another participant distinguished the cosplays they buy and those they make and how money affects them differently. The participant stated, *"Money impacts what cosplays I buy because*

they are usually far more expensive than the ones I make.” This cosplayer **may then be limited to cosplaying as characters whom they have the skills to create themselves** rather than being able to cosplay as characters whom they may not be able to make a cosplay for.

There were however some participants who stated that money is not a very large concern when choosing their characters. A fair amount of participants discussed how they create a budget for their cosplays when starting a cosplay, as well as space out the creation of the cosplay over some time so that it is not a large cost all at once but rather spread out. Another participant stated, *“I strive to spend as little money as possible and find creative ways to stay frugal in each cosplay.”* This cosplayer may find cheaper methods and materials to create a cosplay of a character and **does not let the financial barrier affect their choice of character to cosplay.**

From this above discussion, how a cosplayer acquires their cosplay can be quite nuanced and that the time and money a cosplayer is willing to put towards cosplaying a character is often very dependent on who the character is and that that choice has been influenced by other factors. **Time and money can both often be constraints and may in some cases limit the character a cosplayer can cosplay.** This aligns with Stoker’s statement when they say “Screen accuracy is limited to those with a significant amount of time and/or money” (Stoker, 2012, p. 5) further reinforcing the fact that certain characters may be inaccessible for cosplayers with limited time and money thus leading to this being a major motivation in character selection for some cosplayers.

Skill Level and Seriousness

Cosplay, as with many other hobbies and practices, has varying degrees of skill and different skill levels amongst the participants. It was for this reason the survey included the question: *How would you classify your skill level in regard to cosplay?* This question was structured to understand the participants overall cosplay skill, as someone may possess a high skill level in make-up artistry but a much lower skill level in sewing. This question aimed to determine overall what level they consider themselves to be. This question included multiple choice options with those options being *Novice*, *Intermediate*, and *Master/ Professional*. The question used these three terms as these are the three main classifications of cosplay skill levels in South Africa used at South African cosplay competitions. This question was included in addition to asking how long participants have been cosplaying as it may be the case that just because a participant has been cosplaying for many years, does not mean they are an intermediate or master level cosplayer, and vice versa, a relatively new cosplayer may be considered a master or professional.

It was the hope in including this question that this study could identify whether the skill level of a cosplayer impacted and influenced the characters they chose to cosplay. Perhaps novices are intimidated by overly complex and detailed characters from fear of their skills not being able to do the character justice and would rather wait until they have levelled up their skills to

attempt that character. Perhaps master cosplayers may want to attempt characters that will allow them to showcase the true extent and prowess of their skills in certain fields.

How would you classify your skill level in regards to cosplaying?

49 responses

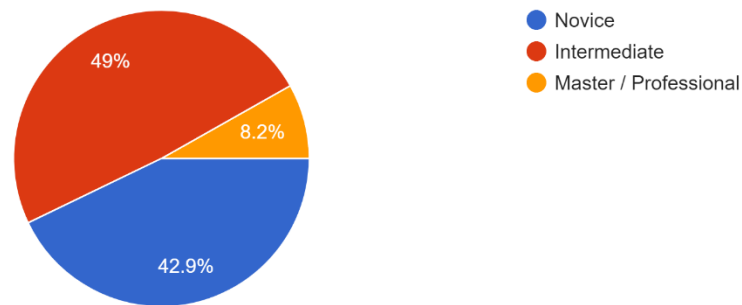


Figure 13 Pie chart showing responses to the question: How would you classify your skill level in regards to cosplaying?

Most participants classify themselves as Intermediate followed closely by Novice with those who classify themselves as Master/ Professional making up the smallest number of participants.

Two of the Master/ Professional cosplayers have been cosplaying for 7 – 8 years and the other two for 9 – 10 years. These cosplayers have been cosplaying for a large amount of time. The novices on the other hand mostly consisted of those who have been cosplaying for less than 2 years with a few who have been cosplaying for more. Two novice cosplayers have been cosplaying for more than 10 years, however, their classification as a novice may indicate that even though they have been cosplaying for many years they don't dedicate as much time to levelling up as other cosplayers do. The intermediate cosplayers were spread across all ranges of experience. From this, the usual trend is **the longer a cosplayer has been cosplaying the higher their skill level is.**

To understand the impact of a cosplayer's skill level, the question was asked: *Does your skill level have any influence on the characters you choose?* Most participants discussed how their skill level does influence their character choice in some way with many mentioning that they **don't feel comfortable with certain skills or techniques and thus they avoid cosplaying characters where that would be required.**

One of the participants said, *"Yes, if a character is too hard to cosplay, being that I cannot make the cosplay with the skills I currently have then I will not cosplay them"*. Some participants also mentioned how they would like to cosplay a character at a certain quality and feel they don't yet have the required skills to create the cosplay to the standard and quality that they would be happy with. One participant said, *"Yes, as I won't choose a character that I feel*

I would not be able to make at the quality I would want it to be". This aligns with Jenkins discussing cosplaying and skill level where they state "some cosplayers opt for characters that prove to be a crafting challenge, while others opt for costumes they can more easily pull off" (Jenkins, 2020, p. 164). This further reinforces the notion that skill and difficulty level is a contributing factor when choosing a character to cosplay.

There were however some participants who stated that their skill level does not influence their choice, such as one participant who said, *"No, I often take on cosplays that are way above my skill level, but I find it a challenge to learn, improve and upgrade my cosplays"*. For some cosplayers, their skill level in creating cosplays concerning the complexity of creating a certain character's outfit, is a factor that influences their choice of character with them leaning towards characters whose outfits would be within the scope of their skills. Thus, it can be inferred that in general **the longer a cosplayer has been cosplaying the more advanced and complicated their cosplays may be due to their skills being at a higher level.**

Another question included related to being a serious or casual cosplayer with the question being: *Would you consider yourself more of a casual or serious cosplayer?*

This question was included to understand the attitude towards cosplay from the participants. Did they consider cosplay as something light-hearted that they just did for fun and enjoyment or was it something that they took more seriously for purposes such as competitions or attempting to make a career out of cosplay and turn a profit from their cosplay-based activities? Cosplayers who cosplay simply for their enjoyment and more casually may choose characters for different reasons as compared to more serious cosplayers who compete and earn money from their cosplay efforts.

Would you consider yourself more of a casual or serious cosplayer?

49 responses

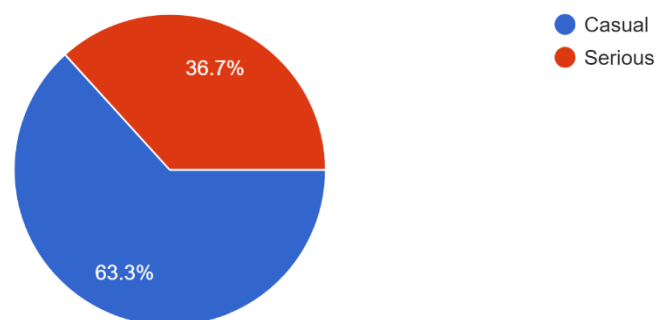


Figure 14 Pie chart showing responses to the question: *Would you consider yourself more of a casual or serious cosplayer?*

Most of the participants identified themselves as casual cosplayers as opposed to serious cosplayers.

With regards to the cosplayers, there was no distinct trend between how long a cosplayer had been cosplaying and whether they considered themselves a serious or casual cosplayer. Although of the participants who did identify themselves as serious cosplayers, only five of them had been cosplaying for 4 years or less indicating that the more serious cosplayers had been cosplaying for longer periods.

To better understand how being a serious or casual cosplayer may impact the character selection process, the survey included the question *Please elaborate on your answer above, why you chose that option and if it influences the characters you choose to cosplay and how.*

Those who identify as casual cosplayers say that they do so because cosplay is not a job for them, and they mostly cosplay for fun and enjoyment. Some of those who consider themselves more serious cosplayers state that this is the case because for them cosplay is a form of income whilst others consider themselves serious because they dedicate all their free time to cosplaying and constantly improving their skills and cosplays. One cosplayer stated that they consider themselves a serious cosplayer and concerning their choices of characters, *“It definitely compels me to want to make bigger and more detailed costumes.”* Most respondents said that **being either a serious or casual cosplayer does not affect their choice of characters** or did not mention anything about character selection in their responses.

From this, the classification of being a serious or casual cosplayer does not have much influence on the character selection process for most cosplayers, as compared to the influence of skill level.

Cosplay Competitions

The survey also included questions specifically related to the role played by cosplay competitions in the character selection process.

In South Africa, there are several types of different cosplay competitions, and this research aimed to better understand from the participants whether they participate and if this in any way informs or influences their choices when it comes to choosing a character to cosplay. The question included in the survey was as follows: *Do you compete in cosplay competitions?* Followed by: *If you answered yes to the previous question, how does this impact or influence your choice in character?* There are several different cosplay competitions in South Africa hosted at different events, with each of them drawing a large crowd at their respective events. Some of these different cosplay competitions include the *Comic Con Africa Cosplay Championships* which acts as the African qualifier for the *Crown Championships* hosted yearly

in Chicago, the *Comic Con Africa* and *rAge Expo* casual cosplay competitions, the *Medieval Fayre* Fancy Dress competition, and many others.

Do you compete in cosplay competitions?

49 responses

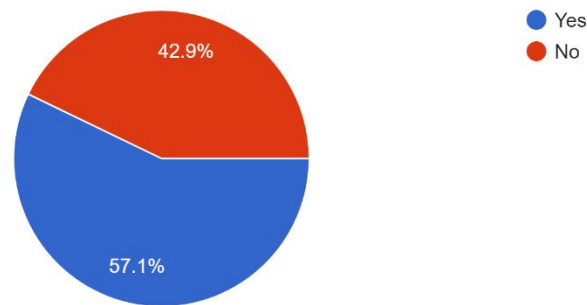


Figure 15 Pie chart showing responses to the question: Do you compete in cosplay competitions?

Most of the respondents do compete in cosplay competitions. The question however failed to ask whether these were casual cosplay competitions or more formal competitions such as the *Comic Con Africa Champions of Cosplay* which is perhaps an oversight on the researcher's part.

There didn't appear to be any trend between the duration that a cosplayer had been cosplaying and whether they competed in cosplay competitions but rather there were participants from all durations of cosplaying that both did and did not compete in competitions.

With regards to the influence competitions have on character choice, the overwhelming response to this question included many participants discussing how they will typically choose a character that is complex and intricate and will challenge them and truly allow them to showcase the full extent of their skills and abilities. Some of these responses included "*Technical difficulty is a major consideration in this respect*", "*This absolutely impacts choice of character. The character chosen must be interesting to look at with lots of details and materials, it must be executed with flawless technique*", and "*I like to do a challenging character to test myself and learn more skills*". These responses show us that the **technical complexity of a character is an important factor for those who compete in cosplay competitions**. The notion of choosing complex characters for competitions pairs well with Lamerichs' discussion of choosing characters to challenge oneself, "She saw this as a sewing challenge" (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 4) with competitions being the moment where a cosplayer would wish to challenge themselves and demonstrate the true extent of their skills and prowess.

Another aspect mentioned was the comfortability and movability of the costume to enable the cosplayer to perform the character on stage during the cosplay competitions, as well as the personality of the character and how that can be performed and portrayed on stage. This aligns with a participant of Lamerichs' work who stated "physical discomforts make the outfit a burden...you are more concerned with your wig than the fact that you are walking there as Grell" (Lamerichs, 2015, p. 145) showing that the comfortability of a costume can be an influencing factor on character selection.

From this, if **a cosplayer intends to enter cosplay competitions that factor does play a role in influencing how they choose their character**, particularly in terms of choosing a character with **adequate technical complexity** that will allow them to **fully demonstrate their skills or perhaps level up their skills**.

Engagement in Cosplay

This research also aimed to develop a deeper understanding of how cosplayers engage in the hobby of cosplay and whether any of these insights may contribute to deepening the understanding of character selection.

A question included in the survey was *Why do you engage in the hobby of cosplay?* This question was structured to require a long format written answer to avoid guiding participants to certain answers. It also allowed the participants to discuss aspects that may not have been included if multiple-choice options were used.

From asking this question, it was the hope to learn what it was about cosplay as a hobby and as a fan practice that drew people towards it. Oftentimes cosplay is associated with children and as something rather juvenile. As this research was solely limited to cosplayers over the age of 18, this research aimed to explore and better understand the reasons why adults would dedicate their time and money to this hobby. It was also the hope that understanding why people engage with cosplay would assist in understanding the motivations behind why people choose certain characters to cosplay as.

The most overwhelming response to this question was the fact that cosplay allowed the participants to be creative. 18 of the 49 participants mentioned that they engage in cosplay because it allows them to express their creativity and be creative. Some of these responses included "*cosplay is a way to express my creativity*" and "*I use cosplay as a creative outlet*". The creative and artistic expression and enjoyment that is derived from the act of cosplaying is quite important to many cosplayers. This could result in some cosplayers perhaps **choosing who they are going to cosplay based on how much creativity cosplaying that character would yield for them**.

The 2nd most popular response as to why they engage with cosplay related to participants enjoying the process of making and crafting the costumes and cosplays with 16 participants discussing this factor in their answers. This included responses such as “*Looking at a character and building it from scratch is the most satisfying challenge when you succeed*” and “*I like sewing and generally making outfits*”. This aspect of making and crafting cosplays and costumes may play a role in the character selection process particularly when dealing with motivations such as the technical challenges associated with creating a cosplay as well as time and monetary constraints. This is both regarding demonstrating one’s skills and prowess or perhaps being limited with what would realistically be achievable for a cosplayer to make.

The below table displays the various motivations to engage in cosplay as described by the participants. It also states how many participants mentioned these aspects in their answers to this question.

Table 1 The various motivations as to why participants engage in cosplay and the number of participants who mentioned them.

Motivations as to why participants engage in cosplay	Number of participants (N = 49)
Allows for creativity and creative expression	18
Enjoys the costume-making process	16
Allows them to become someone else	12
Social and community aspects of cosplay	8
Makes the characters real for them	7
They enjoy the process of dressing up	6
Do it for fun and enjoyment	5
Do it to showcase their love for a fandom	5
Allows them to learn new skills	5
Use cosplay as a form of escapism	4
Do it to bring joy to others	4
Allows them to interpret characters in a new way	3
Allows them to combine different skills	3
Cosplay as a form of self-expression	2
Cosplay to attend conventions	2
Cosplay heals their inner child	2
Have a passion for sewing	2
Have a passion for acting	2
Improves their confidence	1
Acts as a stress reliever	1

In addition to the two previously discussed motivations of creativity and costume crafting and how they may influence character selection, there are perhaps a few more motivations from this list that may play a role. Aspects such as becoming someone else, making a character real, and doing it to showcase their love for a fandom could all play a significant role in influencing how a cosplayer chooses whom to cosplay as. The results of this question do strongly correlate with those of Rosenberg and Letamendi asking a similar question, with their top three reasons

being “Fun”, “Because I like the character”, and “A vehicle for creative/artistic expression” (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 12).

It is possible that each of these various motivations to engage in cosplay, may in some way influence the characters that are chosen as many of these reasons are in some way related to characters in media.

As Jenkins describes, participatory culture transforms consumers into creators and “active producers” who are actively shaping and reinterpreting texts (Jenkins, 1992, p. 23). This is evident in the responses from the participants who discussed how crafting their own cosplays allowed them to connect more deeply with their chosen characters and fandoms, moving beyond simple admiration into the realm of active participation.

Major Motivations

With the crux of this research focussing on the motivations and influencing factors during the character selection process, the survey included several questions that directly targeted this question.

One of these questions was *What was your first cosplay, and why did you choose that character to cosplay as?*

This question aimed to establish an understanding of which characters and what types of characters people chose to cosplay as for their first cosplays. It aimed to see if there were any similar trends in the types of characters people chose as their first such as more simplistic or casual characters or if the opposite was true. It was also the aim to explicitly ask participants why they chose this character to cosplay and what it was about this character that drew them to cosplay them. Not only would this assist in answering the main question of this research, but it would also help in understanding how these participants engage with cosplay, and their foundations within this hobby.

The responses to this question included a wide array of characters spanning various video games, comics, movies, television shows and even some original characters. The reasons as to why they chose these characters were also quite varied. Below can be found a table listing the various reasons why they chose a certain character to cosplay, as well as the number of participants who mentioned these aspects in their responses.

Table 2 Motivations and influences behind choosing a character when cosplaying for the first time, and the number of participants who mentioned them.

Motivations and influences behind choosing a character when cosplaying for the first time	Number of participants (N = 49)
Possessed a fondness and love for the character	19
It was relatively easy to cosplay as the character	14
Because they loved the fandom the character is part of	10
They identified with the character	7
Thought the character's visual design looked cool	4
Chose the character based on the convention they were attending	3
Had a desire to be the character	3
Hoped it would improve their confidence	3
They possessed a physical likeness with the character	2
To fit in with what their friendship group was cosplaying as	2
Thought it would be a fun challenge	2

From these various motivations described by the participants, we can see that **oftentimes several motivations and influences are working together when it comes to choosing a character** to cosplay as. It is not always just one reason behind the choice just as Lamerichs described when discussing their motivations to cosplay as *Effie* (Lamerichs, 2014, p. 2).

When it came to choosing a character for the first time, the most common influence was that the cosplayers felt a love and particular affinity towards the character they chose. Whilst many of the participants stated that they loved the character it may be the case that this love can be even more nuanced, such as the aspects of the character they loved; their personality, their backstory, their outfit and how they looked. Some of the responses related to loving the character included simple responses such as “*Bendy from Bendy and the Ink Machine. I loved the character.*” As well as more detailed responses such as “*Korra from Avatar: The Legend of Korra. I absolutely loved her as a character, and as I was a timid and shy teenager, I wanted nothing more to be as confident and cool as she was.*” From this response, what they loved and admired about the character was their personality and charisma that they hoped to emulate and attain through cosplaying this character. Here the cosplayer chose to cosplay as a character that represented their ideal self as described by Reysen *et al.* **The character possessed certain traits which they found to be desirable and thus hoped to attain these traits for themselves through cosplay** (Reysen *et al.*, 2018, p. 4).

The 2nd most common motivation related to how easy it would be to cosplay as this character. It is understandable that for first-time cosplayers this would be a major concern and influence as at this stage they perhaps did not possess a large array of skills and experience required to cosplay as characters that were more complicated and involved. A cosplayer who cosplayed as *Peter Parker* for their first cosplay stated, “*I chose it because it was easy to emulate with casual clothes and a few additions*”. In the case of this participant, it is also likely that the cosplay did

not cost them large amounts of money as they were making use of basic casual clothes that they perhaps already possessed. This aspect of saving money may have also played a role in choosing to cosplay as *Peter Parker*. Another participant who cosplayed as *Moirra* from *Overwatch* stated that they chose *Moirra* because it would be the easiest *Overwatch* character for them to cosplay as and they were limited to a character from *Overwatch* because the rest of their friend group were cosplaying as *Overwatch* characters.

Overall, there was quite a varied range in responses as to why the participants chose their first character and once more the fact was highlighted that it is often not only one motivation or influence involved in the character selection process.

A core question included in the survey was *What are your main considerations, motivations, and influences/influencing factors when choosing a character to cosplay?*

This question is at the core of this research and would allow the research participants to go into as much detail as they would like when being asked how they generally choose characters to cosplay. The survey included this broad question in addition to the targeted questions to better understand which factors, motivations and considerations first came to mind without the question being asked about a specific factor.

This question was similar to the question above asking the participants about their motivations in choosing their first character to cosplay. However, when looking at the various responses there was instantly a recognisable difference between their answers to how they chose their first character and what they consider, motivates, and influences them now when choosing characters. The range of influences became much larger and much more varied as well as went into niche considerations and influences that play a role when choosing a character to cosplay.

Table 3 Influencing factors, considerations, and motivations that play a role in the character selection process and the number of participants who mentioned them.

Influencing factors, considerations, and motivations that play a role in the character selection process	Number of participants (N = 49)
Possessing a love or liking for the character	21
A feeling of being able to relate to or connect with a character	18
Possessing a love or liking for the visual design of the character	14
The opportunity to learn new skills as well as push themselves to outdo and level up on their previous cosplays	11
Sharing a physical likeness with the character and considering the physical traits of the character and their own	7
A love for the fandom	6
If it is within their ability to create the cosplay	6
Whether they feel they will be able to embody the character	5
How comfortable it will be to cosplay the character	5
To bring a character to life through the process of cosplaying	4
How complex the design is and how complicated it will be to create	3
What the cosplayer's current interests are	3
They are drawn to cosplaying certain tropes and types of characters	3
Whether they are excited about the process of creating the cosplay	3
Whether they have access to the correct tools and materials that they would need to create the cosplay	3
The total physical size of the cosplay	2
How modest the character's outfit is	2
If the character is niche and less well-known	2
The impact and wow factor of the cosplay	1
Whether a cosplay of the character is available to purchase	1
The character was suggested by others for them to cosplay	1
Whether they are part of a cosplay group	1
If the cosplay will be used as a competition piece	1
Whether the character is currently trending or popular	1
Whether they are familiar with the media from which the character originates	1

The above table summarises the various responses to the question regarding the influences, motivations, and considerations that play a role in the character selection process. Whilst this table reflects the responses and the number of participants who discussed these aspects in their answers it is possible that the number of cosplayers who consider these aspects is higher. Some participants may consider these aspects when choosing a character but forgot to mention all these aspects in their responses during the survey.

The most popular response was possessing a love for or liking the character which aligns with the motivations and influences mentioned above when choosing a character whilst cosplaying for the first time. One participant put it very plainly when they stated, *"First I'll have to like the character"*. As this is the most mentioned motivation it is likely that for many cosplayers this is perhaps one of the first things that comes to mind when choosing a character to cosplay. Upon deeper consideration it makes sense that a cosplayer would want to like the character

they are cosplaying considering they will be dedicating time and money towards the cosplay and perhaps most importantly **they are choosing to present themselves as this character, it should be a character whom they like.**

The next biggest factor was the cosplayers feeling that they were able to connect with and relate to the characters, whether that be their personalities or their stories. One participant stated that being able to relate to the character was incredibly important and overshadowed other aspects of the character, *“Relatability to the character, do I connect with the character. I think this is most important thing, rather than choosing the main character cause they’re the main character, it’s picking a character that you connect with. [sic]”* Similar responses by other participants highlight just how important it is for them to connect with or relate to a character to be able to cosplay them. **These feelings of being able to connect with the character and relate to them may play a role in the process of performing and embodying the character as there are aspects which are familiar to them.**

The third largest aspect was that of the visual design of the character. One of the participants stated that this may be the only factor they consider when choosing a character to cosplay and that for them visuals were the most important. They stated, *“I love character design, if the character makes my jaw drop, I’ll probably end up cosplaying them even if I don’t play the game or watch the series they [sic] originally from.”* Another participant simply said, *“If I like the way it looks”*, from these responses it can be understood that the visual design and visual depiction of a character is an important aspect to consider for some cosplayers. Cosplay is very much a visual medium in the way in which cosplayers alter their appearance to appear as someone, not themselves and thus that **appearance and visual depiction is an important aspect to consider.** This agrees with what Rosenberg and Letamendi discuss with many of their participants expressing an affinity for the visual design of characters and that being a motivating factor to cosplay them (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 5).

Whilst there were many varied responses to this question (as listed in the above table) some of the notable ones that stood out included:

Sharing a physical likeness with the character. Whilst multiple participants discussed this aspect, they were for different reasons. One participant mentioned having similar hair to a character as they don’t enjoy wearing wigs, whilst another stated that their body type is quite important because they feel they are ‘chubby’ and don’t want to cosplay any character who shows too much skin or has tight fitting clothes. For both these cosplayers, their choices are related to a matter of comfort and **comfort in their bodies and thus they seek out characters whom they share a resemblance with.** The number of participants who consider this aspect now has also grown from when they chose their first character to cosplay.

They are drawn to cosplaying certain tropes and types of characters. Some of the tropes or types of characters described included strong female characters, villains, confident characters, and characters who are very gritty or raw. These cosplayers may be drawn to **constantly**

cosplaying the same styles and tropes of characters because it is what they are most familiar with and what they find easiest to portray and perform when in character.

The character was suggested by others for them to cosplay. Oftentimes cosplayers will receive cosplay suggestions from others as to who they should cosplay for a myriad of reasons. A participant mentioned this in their response and said, *“If my partner or a close friend suggests a character they think I would pull off great”*, what is interesting about this response is the cosplayer specifically mentioned that this is an influence when it is suggested by their partner, or friends as opposed to being mentioned by perhaps other convention attendees or fans on social media. This influence and motivation is intriguing as it may lead to **cosplayers cosplaying a character that they have perhaps never had any connection with** or perhaps even heard of, yet they may **cosplay them because of the connection they have with the individual who suggested the character**. This could perhaps also be likened to choosing a character to fit into a cosplay group with friends.

Many of these findings align with those of Rosenberg and Letamendi when asking the top reason for choice of character with answers including “how I will look in costume”, “material I have handy or can easily obtain”, “what other members of my cosplay group are wearing” (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 5).

Overall, the motivations grew both in number and in diversity from those that were originally mentioned when choosing a character for the first time. It also becomes evident that there is **no single answer that is true for all cosplayers but rather the motivations and combination of them is unique and diverse for each cosplayer**.

With many cosplayers often cosplaying more than one character whilst engaging in the hobby the research aimed to understand if cosplayers have different motivations for different characters that they choose to cosplay. Most participants stated that they do indeed consider different aspects regarding the character they are considering cosplaying. Some of the different considerations that were mentioned include whether the cosplay is intended to be a casual cosplay, a cosplay to wear at a convention, or perhaps even a competition piece cosplay. They will consider different aspects for each such as the ease of a casual cosplay, the comfort of a convention cosplay, and the complexity and skill required for a competition piece cosplay. Another participant mentioned that they choose some of their characters based on nostalgia whilst others are chosen based on what they are currently interested in and engaged in. From this, with an almost limitless number of different characters in media for cosplayers to choose from the **motivations and considerations for each character could be quite varied**.

As Liao states, “Fans actively use cultural products to create secondary art works...to create self-idealized identities” (Liao, 2021, p. 90). This is evident in the responses from several cosplayers who selected their characters based on a personal connection and a deep feeling that they truly relate to and connect with a character, as well as those who stated they wish to be

like certain characters. This aligns with the idea that cosplay is a medium through which individuals explore and express identity.

Building on from this, a question asked of the participants was *Do you feel that these considerations, motivations, and influences have changed in any way from when you first started cosplaying?*

This question was included to understand from the participants who have been cosplaying for a while. Firstly, if they felt their motivations to choose certain characters had changed in a way. Secondly, to understand how they felt they had changed from when they first started and how this impacts how they cosplay now.

Most participants stated that they felt their motivations and considerations hadn't changed much since they first started cosplaying, however, some participants felt they had changed. One participant stated, *"Yes. I just picked an easy character. Now I make them easy."*, showing that their consideration of their skill level has adjusted over time.

Another participant also discussed how when you become more involved in the cosplay community you learn more about what to avoid when cosplaying. One participant discussed how taking part in competitions has changed their motivations because when taking part in a competition they want to cosplay something that will challenge themselves. Some of the participants also mentioned how as they have grown older and become more involved in cosplay, they have learned to be more sensitive to certain things such as avoiding cultural appropriation or cosplaying from problematic source materials.

While there are many cosplayers whose motivations and considerations have remained mostly the same throughout their cosplaying journey, there are **some cosplayers whose motivations and influences have grown, evolved, and expanded during their time cosplaying.**

From looking directly into these motivations, many of them align with those discussed in the literature review section of this research. It is also seen that some motivations broadly apply to many cosplayers such as loving a character or feeling a connection to them, although some only apply to a few cosplayers such as the 'wow factor' of the cosplay. Nevertheless, **these motivations, whilst only experienced by a handful of cosplayers, are just as important as the more blanket motivations.**

The Purpose of a Cosplay

With many cosplayers having different reasons for why they engage in cosplay, it is possible that the purpose of what one intends by cosplaying may play some role during the character selection process.

Included was the question *How does the purpose of a cosplay impact your choice of character?* As the researcher I asked this question as I know from both personal experience as well as informal conversations with other cosplayers before that not all cosplays are purely done to wear for fun at conventions. There are several other reasons why a cosplayer may cosplay a character, and I felt that these reasons may impact the choice of character. Some of these different reasons may include making a cosplay specifically for a competition, making a cosplay for content creation purposes such as tutorials and social media posts, or making a cosplay for a paid promotional event such as a film premiere or video game release.

Some of the responses to this question included participants stating that if it is specifically for a group cosplay it may lead to them choosing a certain character or if it is for a themed event then they will choose a character that matches the theme. The most overwhelming response to this question however related to the aspect of the cosplay being used as a competition piece with many participants stating that **for a competition piece, they would choose something more complex and intricate with a large wow factor.**

With regards to the purpose of the cosplay, it is possible that the event that the cosplayer would be wearing the cosplay to may play a role. The survey included the question *Where do you typically wear your cosplays? Does this impact or influence your choice of character?*

This question was included to better understand the types of events and locations where the participants would be portraying these characters through their cosplays. To understand whether the specific events and locations had any impact on the characters they chose to cosplay, such as medieval-type characters to attend fantasy/medieval fairs, or comic book heroes to attend comic conventions.

Of the 49 respondents 45 of them stated that they typically wear their cosplays to various geek events that are hosted in and around South Africa. Some of these geek events included *Comic Con Africa*, *Comic Con Cape Town*, *ConECT*, medieval and fantasy fairs, and movie premieres. For the **most part**, the participants stated that **where they are wearing the cosplay typically does not influence their choice of character**. There were however **some participants who said that this is a factor which they consider.**

The first of these aspects that some participants consider is the theme of the event that they are attending. One participant whilst discussing this aspect stated, *"If it is medieval themed, it would make no sense for a robot to be there."* Another participant mentioned that particularly when they are attending movie premieres they want to cosplay as a character from that movie so that they will match the theme of the event. **For some cosplayers, the event, and the theme of it certainly have some sway over the characters which they choose to cosplay.**

Another aspect that some participants mentioned about their character choice and how it relates to the event was concerned with the comfort and ease of wearing the cosplay. One of the

participants said, *“I usually pick characters that aren’t dressed too warmly as it’s usually very hot at CCA”*. Comic Con Africa (CCA) typically occurs during September in the South African spring. This cosplayer found that the **typical weather of the event influenced their choice of character so that they would not become too hot or uncomfortable**. Another participant said, *“The design should be comfortable to be in for most of the day”*, this cosplayer is motivated to **choose characters that will be comfortable to wear for long periods**.

Some participants mentioned that they chose their characters based on what would be popular or easily recognisable at the event. One of the participants said, *“I will typically try to wear something easily recognisable”*. This cosplayer would be **more motivated to cosplay characters that are more common and often shown in media than niche characters** that perhaps only a few people may recognise or be familiar with.

Another interesting aspect that one participant spoke about was the matter of how easy it is to transport the cosplay as they often travel to attend cosplay events. They stated, *“I travel for this and at the moment I prefer quantity over size, so large builds aren’t practical at the moment.”* For these reasons, this **cosplayer may be influenced to rather cosplay characters that consist mostly of fabric items and garments as opposed to characters with large amounts of armour and large props**.

One participant also spoke about how when cosplaying a character whose outfit is slightly revealing they are concerned about being ‘slut’ shamed by the other convention goers, and as such must think of alternate ways to cover themselves to avoid this. This fear of being judged and shamed may cause some cosplayers to **avoid cosplaying as characters that are perhaps more sexualised with revealing outfits**.

With regards to where the cosplays are worn 13 of the respondents stated that they are often worn for social media purposes such as TikTok and Instagram. These respondents however didn’t mention any aspects of wearing the cosplays for social media that affect how they choose their characters.

Many cosplayers’ choices are certainly impacted by the purpose the cosplay will serve. In the case of those competing in competitions characters with complex and intricate aspects are favoured over characters with more simplistic designs. Theming of an event also plays a role with cosplayers choosing characters related to the theme as well as cosplayers choosing characters that will be comfortable in multiple aspects for certain events.

Age, Race, and Gender

With cosplay being a very visual medium, and specifically one wherein cosplayers simulate and emulate the visual appearances it is worth discussing three factors which contribute towards physical appearance and how people are perceived and viewed by others. The three

factors in question are age, race, and gender. The question asked of the participants was as follows: *Do you consider yours or a character's age, race, or gender when choosing a character to cosplay?* The question allowed participants to select as many options as they would like from a list relating to their own or a character's traits. The following question prompted participants to elaborate if they had selected any of these options and considered them when choosing a character.

The survey included this question to better understand the role that a cosplayer's personal visual characteristics play in the character selection process. Sometimes in cosplay there are instances of cosplayers of colour who have been discriminated against because they have cosplayed as traditionally white characters and this research wanted to understand whether this was something they considered and if they chose characters whose race was closer to their own out of fear of this discrimination. This research also wanted to understand whether white cosplayers also considered their race when choosing characters to cosplay or was this something they didn't have to consider due to the high popularity and presence of white bodies in mainstream and popular culture and media. Also, with crossplay and gender-bending both being common in cosplay, this research aimed to understand how the participants view gender and the role it plays when selecting a character to cosplay. It also aimed to understand the role of age in character selection and whether participants were more likely to cosplay characters similar in age to themselves or use makeup and other techniques to alter the appearance of their age.

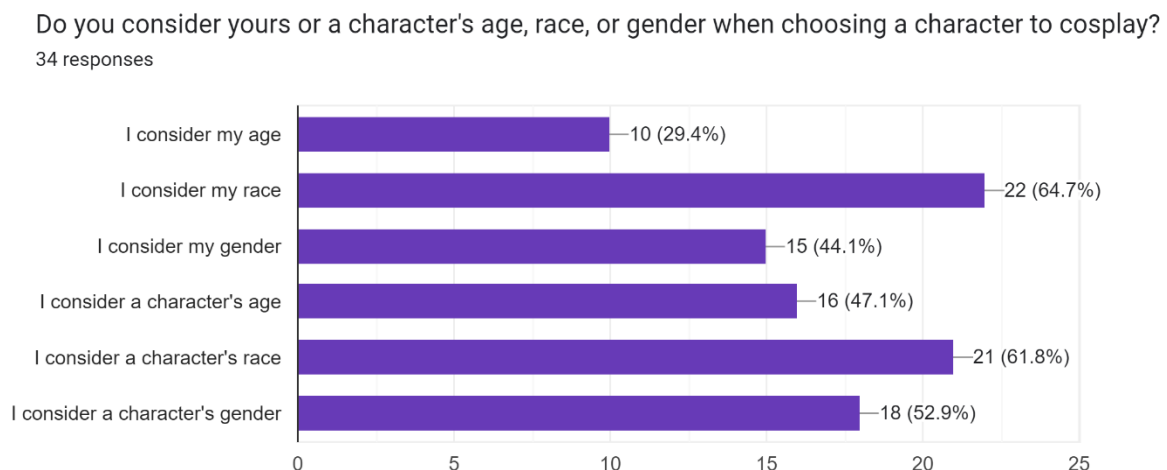


Figure 16 Bar chart showing responses to the question: *Do you consider yours or a character's age, race, or gender when choosing a character to cosplay?*

The first notable point to infer from these responses is that of the 49 (N) total responses to the survey, only 34 participants selected at least one of the options in this question. This shows that

15 of the participants do not consider either their age, race, or gender or that of the character when they are choosing a character to cosplay. These participants freely choose their characters due to other motivations and influences with age, race, and gender having no impact on this process.

Of the 34 responses that were received the overwhelming factor that these participants consider is that of their race (22 participants) and that of the character's race (21 participants). This was then followed by considering the character's gender (18 participants) and the character's age (16 participants). 15 participants consider their gender and only 10 participants consider their age. **69% of the total participants in this survey consider at least one of these factors when they are choosing whom to cosplay.**

Each of these factors is discussed in more detail below.

Age – All of the survey participants were over the age of 18, and those who discussed age as a factor in their decision-making process mostly discussed staying away from cosplaying a character who is a minor. **These participants were clear in that they didn't want their portrayals of these characters to be interpreted as sexualising a minor.**

One participant stated, "*With my body type and doing a young enough character to be accused of sexualising them [sic]*", this participant was very clear that they would steer clear of characters who are minors to avoid these accusations. Another participant also said that they do not want to portray a minor character that is presented desirably or sexually in the media they originate from.

Some participants stated that they also consider their own and the character's age to make the cosplay more accurate and relate more to the character such as the participant who stated, "*I try to not do characters that are super old and stick with the ones that are a similar age to me*". This participant's consideration of age is different from how the other participants consider age when choosing a character, showing that even within this one facet of character selection, there can exist nuances which are different for each cosplayer.

Whilst age is a factor that wasn't discussed much in the literature portion of this research, it is a factor that plays a role for some cosplayers, particularly with many cosplayers avoiding cosplaying characters who are minors.

Race – There were a significant number of responses discussing the consideration of race when choosing a character. Several participants discussed how as white cosplayers they tend to stay away from cosplaying as characters who are people of colour, have darker skin tones, or are a race that is different from their own.

Some of these participants mentioned that they do this to avoid judgment or accusations from the community such as the participant who stated, *“I’m honestly kinda [sic] scared of cosplaying someone with a dark skin tone because people will tear you apart because of it”* or another participant who said, *“I don’t want to be accused of whitewashing a character or doing black face”*. **These participants are motivated by fear of the judgement and repercussions that they may face if they cosplay as a character of a different race from their own as white cosplayers.**

Other participants who are white cosplayers stated that their **motivations to not cosplay as characters whose race is different to their own was out of respect for other cultures**, as well as **being aware of the white privilege that exists within geekdom** where the depiction of white bodies in media outnumbers those of other races. One participant stated, *“I am a white person, so I stay away from characters with different skin tones. I don’t do anime cosplays either because of this reason. We have enough white characters to choose from.”*, another participant said, *“I am aware of the fact that as a Caucasian person, it is insensitive for me to choose certain characters, especially if there are ample other Caucasian characters to choose from in the properties I love”*.

Furthermore, a participant stated, *“I am very careful with race, it is important to respect different races and cultures paired with it. Last thing I want is for my hobby to offend someone or be insensitive”*. These cosplayers’ consideration of race is tied to **being respectful of cosplayers of colour and aware of the lack of representation of bodies of colour in media and fandom.**

Another participant who is a person of colour stated, *“I naturally consider my race as Asian characters aren’t as prominent in television and games so I sometimes think about how I would look as a character of a different race.”* This cosplayer’s considerations are tied to how they will be perceived due to a lack of representation of their race. **A fair amount of the participants mentioned that race is a tricky and sensitive issue when it comes to cosplay and choosing how to portray certain characters showing that this is a major influence in the character selection process.**

These results align with Poerwito-Setijadi when they discuss how cosplayers are often very conscious of their race when cosplaying (Poerwito-Setijadi, 2012, p. 2). This consciousness of race can play a major role for many of the cosplayers during the character selection process, however, these roles are motivated by different things. Some are motivated by fear, others by respect, and others by feeling underrepresented in fandoms and popular culture.

Gender – With regards to considering gender when choosing a character, many of the participants stated that they prefer cosplaying as a gender that matches their own and thus are drawn to characters of the same gender as them. Some of them did state that if they do want to cosplay a character whose gender is different to their own, they will generally opt for gender-

bending the character so that the character appears as the same gender as them rather than altering the portrayal and presentation of their own gender.

Some of these statements include, *“I generally won’t play a male character unless I genderbend him”*, and *“I consider my and the character’s gender to decide if their character design could lend itself to a genderbend costume.”* Other participants however stated that they solely want to cosplay characters who are the same gender as them and do not want to engage in genderbending such as one participant who wrote *“I do not like genderbending and will always cosplay a male character.”*

With regards to cross-play and altering the appearance of one’s gender, only two participants mentioned this with one participant stating that *“I would consider cosplaying a masculine character but only if the design can somehow obscure my feminine features without making the outfit uncomfortable to be for the whole day, for example I would not cosplay a bare-chested masculine character.”* This cosplayer is negotiating the portrayal and appearance of gender between that of their own and that of the character in a way that is comfortable for them. **The gender of a cosplayer and the gender of a character can play a role in the character selection process in multiple different ways for different cosplayers.**

The literature of this research discussed how gender can often be quite fluid concerning cosplay and presentation (Poerwito-Setijadi, 2012, p. 2) (Lamerichs, 2014, p. 6). The results of this research however do not fully align with this with only a small number of participants engaging in cross-play. This however is not to say that this is not a factor for South African cosplayers, as the participants of this research could not represent every member of the South African cosplay community.

South African Factors

With this research being specifically focused on the South African cosplay community, the research also needed to include questions that probe into this area. The first question posed to the participants regarding being a cosplayer in South Africa was: *Do you feel limited as a cosplayer in South Africa?* As the researcher I included this question because both from my own experiences as well as casual conversations with other cosplayers, we have often felt that there are several factors associated with living in South Africa that limit and negatively impact how we cosplay. The research aimed to understand if this was the consensus held by the participants. The research was also seeking to understand if any of these limitations impacted the characters that South African cosplayers choose to cosplay. The survey also included the follow-up question: *If so, what way do you feel limited? Does this impact your choice of character?*

Do you feel limited as a cosplayer in South Africa?

49 Responses

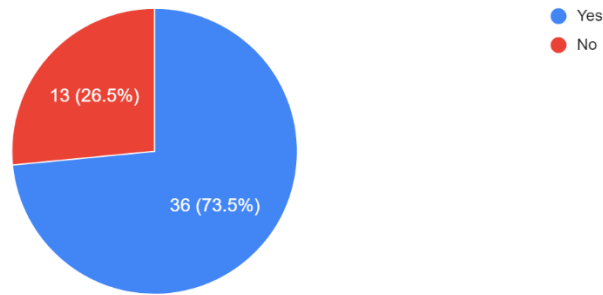


Figure 17 Pie chart showing responses to the question: Do you feel limited as a cosplayer in South Africa?

The overwhelming majority of South African cosplayers feel limited by being a cosplayer in South Africa.

Many participants stated that they feel limited by the cost and availability of certain tools and materials in South Africa. Some of these responses include, *“Not having enough supplies such as worbla or foam clay or even fabric choices compared to the rest of the world.”*, *“Less resources available such as wigs, eye contacts, EVA foam. I choose characters I know I can pull off with what I have around me.”*, and *“Supplies to make cosplays are not readily available and even just completed cosplays are hard to come by without having to buy internationally”*.

For many South African cosplayers, the high cost and availability of certain materials is quite a concern and impacts the characters they can cosplay.

Another concern for some participants related to the number of events and opportunities for cosplayers in South Africa. One participant stated *“Unfortunately the culture in South Africa is one of expecting to pay in exposure. So many companies would offer opportunities and be distraught if you charge a fee.”*, whilst another participant said, *“Lack of events and opportunities locally.”* Another participant perhaps provides the reason for this when they state, *“I feel like cosplay is still such an unknown thing in South Africa”*. These South African limitations may play a role in influencing a cosplayer during the character selection process.

The next question relating to being a cosplayer in South Africa was fairly broad and simply asked the participants: *Do you feel there are any uniquely South African factors that influence which characters you choose to cosplay?*

It is worth noting that only 45 of the total 49 (N) participants responded to this question.

Do you feel there are any uniquely South African factors that influence which characters you choose to cosplay?

45 responses

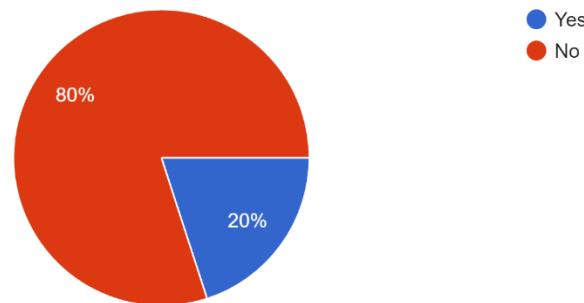


Figure 18 Pie chart showing responses to the question: Do you feel there are any uniquely South African factors that influence which characters you choose to cosplay?

Whilst many participants felt limited as South African cosplayers, those who feel that there are uniquely South African factors that influence their character choice are in the minority.

Those who answered Yes, described these factors. Once more the aspect of access to materials was raised by several participants and this lack of access may impact their ability to cosplay certain characters.

The aspect that many participants mentioned in their discussion was that of Load shedding (*Load shedding is an energy utility's method of reducing demand on the energy generation system by temporarily switching off the distribution of energy to certain geographical areas* (Western Cape Government, 2019)). One participant stated, *"I feel that load shedding is most likely the largest factor. Needing electricity for heat guns, sewing machines, printers, glue guns etc."* This participant is highlighting how a reduced amount of electricity available may prevent a cosplayer from using certain tools when making a cosplay and as such this limits their capabilities. **This limitation of capabilities because of load shedding may cause cosplayers to choose certain characters over others because they may be more achievable when working under these constraints.**

Another aspect many participants mentioned was the South African weather, and particularly high temperatures during certain times of the year. One participant said, *"I need to consider the intense heat experienced in certain cosplays in the heat of the venue."* **This aspect could lead to cosplayers choosing characters whose outfits would be better suited to higher temperatures thus impacting their overall character choice.**

Overall, there are several factors related to living in South Africa that may play a role in the character selection process. **Most of these factors manifest as constraints and limitations and can hamper how cosplayers engage in cosplay.** This can result in South African cosplayers perhaps **choosing characters that are more simplistic due to the high cost that would be associated with more complex and intricate characters.**

From the survey data collection there were many motivations that aligned with those discussed in the literature review of this research, and some that appeared organically in the data collection process. The following interview data results aims to discuss in more detail some of these aspects and motivations and delve deeper than the survey could.

Interview Data Results

The interview data results are divided into four thematic groupings of related questions, with the groupings being: The participants background as a cosplayer, How they engage with cosplay, The character selection process, and Experiences as a cosplayer in South Africa.

Background as a cosplayer

The first section is related to the cosplayer and their background. Not only would this allow a better understanding of them as a cosplayer and the cosplay journey that they have taken to get to this point, but it would also allow myself as the researcher to build a rapport with the participants in the hopes that they would be more willing to open up in later questions and allow the interview and conversation to flow more freely.

I began by asking the participants to tell me a bit more about themselves and their backgrounds as cosplayers. I was intentionally vague with this first question as I wanted to also use it as a baseline to understand how forthcoming they would be when answering the questions. Would they be participants who freely gave extensive detailed answers, or would they be more reluctant and require more probing, easing and targeted questions to open-up to me? In my interviews, I found that I had participants on both ends of this spectrum and several in between.

Whilst many of the participants went into detail with this first open question, there were some who required more targeted questions to allow an understanding of their background more clearly. I also hoped that these questions may in turn lead to them being more open and going into greater detail in later questions. Most of the interviews consisted of a combination of open-ended questions and targeted questions to allow the interview to flow like a conversation. The targeted questions included, relating to their background, were as follows:

When did you start cosplaying? It was the hope that this question would develop a better understanding of how long they had been engaging in this hobby and whether they were still new to cosplaying or a ‘veteran’ of cosplay. Understanding how long they had been cosplaying

would be helpful to better understand the kinds of answers and information the participants would provide (for example participants who had been cosplaying for much longer likely have done more cosplays and may go into more detail and have more anecdotes and stories to share than someone that was still relatively new to cosplay).

The next question asked of the participants was: *What was the reason that you first got into cosplaying?* Not only was this question included to allow a better understanding of their background and how they became a cosplayer, but in some instances, it was directly related to the core question of this research and how cosplayers choose the characters that they cosplay as in the instances of cosplayers who started cosplaying out of a desire to be one particular character. This question also helped me to understand why people started cosplaying, and as such helped to further the flow and fluidity of the interview as I built this rapport between myself and them.

Following on from this I began to probe into the main question of this research whilst still strengthening the understanding of their background as a cosplayer. The question asked of them was: *Who did you cosplay as for your first cosplay and why did you choose this specific character?* Not only did this question provide insight into their motivations for choosing characters to cosplay, but it also informed me of what these motivations and influences were the first time they cosplayed and built upon the answers to this question asked in the survey. This first experience of cosplaying and how they chose their character may have influenced and formed the foundation of how they cosplay now, and by extension how they choose their characters.

The next question related to the background of the participants before they started cosplaying, and specifically how this influenced their first experience and the first character that they chose to bring to life. The question asked of the participants was: *Were there any particular skills you possessed coming into the cosplaying hobby, and do you feel that these skills or lack thereof influenced your choice of the character you chose for your first cosplay in any way?* This question aimed to identify whether they had any prior background or experience in a related field that may have assisted them in getting started with cosplaying. This question aimed to develop an understanding of whether these skills or absence may have in some way influenced which character they chose to cosplay.

The final question asked of the participants for this section relating to their background as a cosplayer dealt with the evolution of how they cosplay now and how this was influenced by their first experience of cosplaying. The question posed to them was: *Do you feel that your first experience of cosplaying and the character you chose to cosplay, in any way influenced and impacted the way in which you engaged in cosplaying from that point onwards?* Did they continue cosplaying the same types of characters? Were they constantly trying to 'level-up' and improve upon what they had previously done? Did they cosplay from the same fandoms and franchises? Had their first experience completely altered their viewpoint and understanding of cosplay for better or for worse? What was the journey they went on from their first cosplay to

the current day, and how did this impact who they were as cosplayers, by extension how do they choose characters to cosplay?

As these questions were asked and discussed in an open conversational manner, the results will not be presented as answers to each question but rather a discussion for each participant highlighting and discussing noteworthy points that arose during the conversation.

Ahtohcos began their cosplay journey by cosplaying as *Thrall* from the *World of Warcraft* series at Comic Con Africa in 2019. When asked why they chose to cosplay as *Thrall* they stated “*I’ve played World of Warcraft pretty much my whole life. I’ve been into Blizzard games all my life and I admired Thrall for where he came from, what he did.*” Ahtohcos’ motivation to cosplay as *Thrall* was their love and admiration for the character, as well as wishing to demonstrate their existence in the fandom as a fan of *World of Warcraft*, much how Abramova *et al* state that cosplayers through cosplay can “display fandom identity” (Abramova, Smirnova and Tataurova, 2021, p. 99). Ahtohcos said they had no cosplay-related skills before starting work on *Thrall* but afterwards felt that they wanted to improve and level up, “*I think there was a lot of things that I wanted to improve on. I wanted to go bigger, do more things, learn more skills*”. The admiration for *Thrall* aligns with Poerwito-Setijadi notion of cosplayers “can portray figures they idolized” (Poerwito-Setijadi, 2012, p. 115).

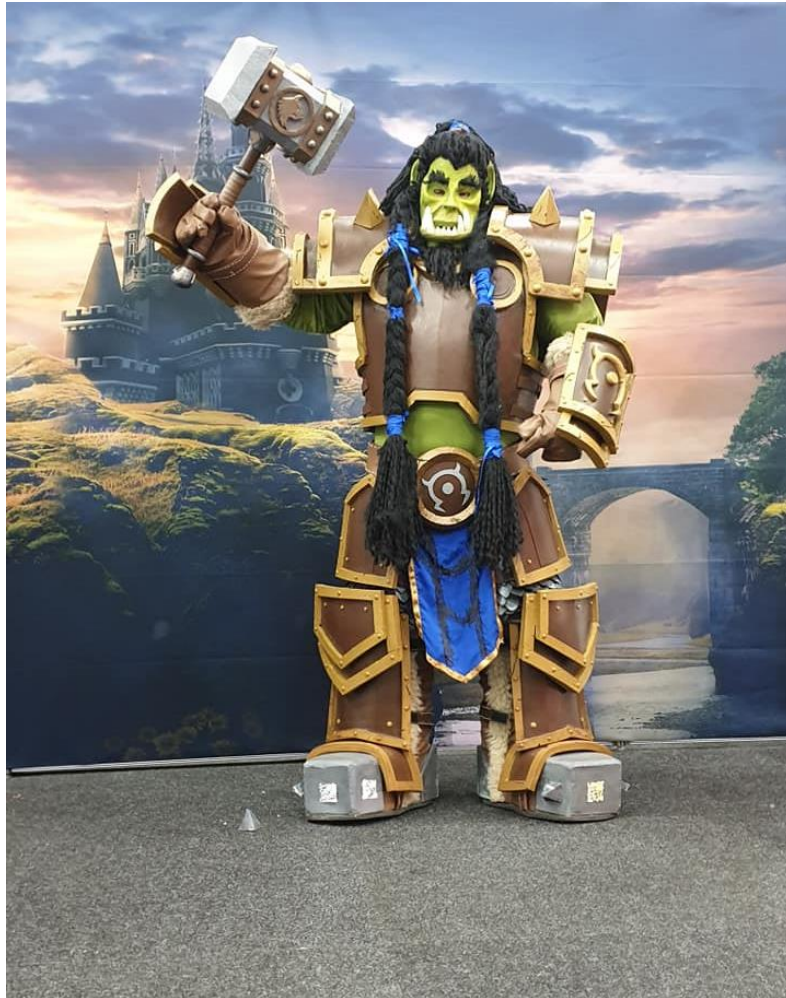


Figure 19 Ahtohcos cosplaying as Thrall from World of Warcraft at Comic Con Africa 2019

Another participant whose first cosplay was from a video game was Toonibug. Toonibug began cosplaying in 2014 at the *rAge Expo*. With the *rAge Expo* being dedicated to gaming Toonibug thought their cosplay had to match the theme of the event and that only video game related cosplays would be accepted. Toonibug said *“Honestly, I didn’t know any other games at the time except for Sims”*, with Toonibug having decided to cosplay as a *Sim* they thought they also wanted to put a twist on it, *“I didn’t just go as a Sim. I went as a naked Sim, and I wore a large sandwich board out of cardboard that was all blurred pixels.”* The incredibly positive reception that they received for this cosplay spurred them on to continue cosplaying which was aided by their background as a make-up artist and fashion designer. Toonibug’s initial motivation to cosplay as a *Sim* was the theme of the event they would be attending in cosplay.

Leeron’s first cosplay was of *Solaire of Astora* from the video game *Dark Souls*. When asked why they chose *Solaire* they stated *“I was really into Dark Souls ... I like the positivity of this guy and then he has a tragic end, it’s a little bit relatable.”* Reysen *et al* stated that “top reasons for choosing a particular character is identification” (Reysen *et al.*, 2018, p. 2) which is the

case for Leeron as they found the character relatable and could identify with them. Leeron also mentioned how they do not enjoy large crowds of people, but *Solaire's* design included a helmet and felt that their face being covered could act as a security blanket for them when interacting with crowds at *Comic Con Africa*, this could perhaps align with participants of Rosenberg and Letamendi who stated “Escapism” as a top reason for engaging in cosplay (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 13). Leeron said that they are still drawn to cosplaying as characters with helmets because of what it affords them when interacting at conventions. Here it can be seen that Leeron’s character choice was influenced by wanting to show their love for a particular fandom (*Dark Souls*), relating and identifying with the character, as well as a cosplay that would afford them a level of comfort and security.



Figure 20 Leeron Green cosplaying as Solaire from Dark Souls

Lady Robzy also chose their character because they felt that they were relatable and able to identify with them. Lady Robzy’s first cosplay was of *Daenerys Targaryen* from *Game of Thrones*. Lady Robzy stated “I tend to cosplay as characters that have a dark storyline to them, and I pity them. I feel empathy for them, and I see myself in them or a part of me.” As Rosenberg and Letamendi stated “similarity between the cosplayer and character increases identification” (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 16). They also stated that *Game of Thrones* was very popular when they started cosplaying. Lady Robzy’s choice was motivated by character relatability and identification as well as what fandoms were currently popular and trending at the time and a character that people would recognise easily. Lady Robzy cosplaying as a

character that was popular at the time can be likened to the *Skygack* cosplayers described by Plunkett who chose to cosplay as “characters made familiar to the public” (Plunkett, 2016).

Psycadillo chose their first character to cosplay as to be *Korra* from *Avatar: The Legend of Korra* at *rAge Expo* in 2015. Psycadillo says “*I thought the character design looked really cool, but I think it was more the character I wanted to emulate rather than the costume ... I wanted to be her rather than dress up as her.*” This aligns with Reysen *et al* discussion of the ideal self and “cosplayers who viewed their favourite character as similar to themselves and as an idealized version of themselves were also more likely to identify with the character” (Reysen *et al.*, 2018, p. 4). Psycadillo wanted to fully embody the character of *Korra* and by wearing the same outfit as her they were able to achieve this. Psycadillo says that whilst they were watching the show at the time, they had been wanting to start cosplaying and *Korra* seemed like a relatively easy character to cosplay with their limited skills at that time, as Jenkins says some cosplayers “opt for costumes they can more easily pull off” (Jenkins, 2020, p. 164). They also hoped to gain the confidence of the characters through cosplaying them. They also believe that their first experience of cosplaying as *Korra* has shaped how they have cosplayed since often being drawn to cosplaying as strong, independent women who strive to do good. Psycadillo cosplayed *Korra* because they were influenced by the media they were currently enjoying, the ease for them to make the cosplay, and a desire to bring the character to life and embody them.

Claire Cosplay chose *Black Canary* from *DC Comics* as their first cosplay because a friend introduced them to the character and they instantly wanted to cosplay them, “*I saw her and I thought, wow, what a badass.*” Much like Lamerichs cosplaying *Effie*, “the first shots of the movie were gritty, grey and realistic, her appearance stood out...outrageous but fashionable in their own way” (Lamerichs, 2014, p. 1). From this introduction to the character, they began researching her, reading her comics, and getting fully immersed in the character before they cosplayed her. Claire Cosplay ended up creating two different cosplays of this character. Their motivation was spurred on by initially falling in love with the visual design of the character which led to them becoming more invested in the character.



Figure 21 Claire Cosplay cosplaying as Black Canary from DC Comics

ArcticFoxy's first cosplay was of *Ichigo* from *Tokyo Mew Mew* when they were only 6 years old. They said, "*I thought she was really cute, and she was bubbly, and I just really liked her character in general because she was so funny and relatable.*" As Abramova *et al* state some cosplayers choose characters because of a "desire to play the roles of favourite characters" (Abramova, Smirnova and Tataurova, 2021, p. 101). ArcticFoxy loved the design of the character as well as the character's personality and wanted to emulate that, which is what influenced them to cosplay as *Ichigo*.

Finally, Julia Smythe cosplayed for the first time at *Comic Con Africa* in 2018 as a chorus dancer from *Captain America: The First Avenger*. When asked why they chose to cosplay as one of the chorus dancers they said, "*I was in the middle of my second year of fashion design school and I thought, well, it's a completely sewing-based project, it should be done in a week.*" Rather than being motivated by taking on a technical challenge, they wanted a character that would be relatively easy to create, much like many of Rosenberg and Letamendi's participants

who selected “the amount of time I have available” as a large influence on their character selection (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 16). They also said they chose the character because they enjoyed the *Captain America* film, but they didn’t want to engage in cross-playing a male soldier for their first cosplay. They didn’t choose a single dancer to cosplay but rather their version or interpretation as there was more leeway with that, much like how Stoker states “interpretations occasionally manifest in their costume choices” (Stoker, 2012, p. 4). Julia’s first choice of character to cosplay was motivated by the skills they already possessed before starting cosplay as this would ease the process of making the cosplay. They were also motivated by the gender of the character and the freedom it would allow them in their interpretation. Cosplaying their own version of one of the dancers may have also allowed for self-insertion into the narrative and role-playing, as Poerwito-Setijadi discussed a negotiated identity through role-playing as cosplayers “negotiate their identities...between their own selves and the self of their fiction characters” (Poerwito-Setijadi, 2012, p. 110).



Figure 22 Julia Smythe cosplaying as a Chorus Dancer from *Captain America: The First Avenger*

From these discussions with the cosplayers discussing their histories as cosplayers, a greater understanding of how they first came to be involved in cosplaying and more so the stories behind their first character choice was gained. This created a foundation of understanding for the rest of the interview but also provided insights into the core of this research.

There were many parallels between the motivations that were discussed here and those that were mentioned during the survey responses. Particularly aspects such as liking a character or connecting with them, as well as wanting to display their membership of a particular fandom and their existence within it, as well as character identification and identity playing a large role in character selection.

Engagement with cosplay

As with the previous section I began by first asking an open question to get the conversation flowing regarding this topic and then followed up with some of the more specific questions to probe into in this section.

The first open question was as follows: *Please tell me about how you engage with cosplay and your practices whilst participating in the hobby.* The previous section had already established a background understanding of them as a cosplayer, but this section aimed to further understand what cosplaying is to them, the role this hobby plays in their lives, and how they engage with it. With cosplay being such a multi-faceted hobby with each person's experiences and ideas being as unique as the different costumes they wear; I wanted to understand what each person's unique cosplay world looked like.

Following on from this first open question in this section there were several more targeted questions asked in the case that they were not answered at first in the open question. The first of these more specific questions was: *Why do you choose to cosplay?* This question was asked of the participants to understand what the driving force at work was which made them want to engage with cosplay. Out of all the hobbies and fan practices available out there for a person to choose from, what was it that made a person choose to dedicate their spare time and income to a hobby such as cosplay? Not only would this question assist in better understanding the participants, building a rapport, and furthering the conversation, but it may also help to answer the main question of this research. Perhaps the motivations for wanting to cosplay and why people choose to cosplay, are linked to how and why they choose certain characters when cosplaying.

The following question dealt with a more practical and physical aspect of cosplay. It relates to how cosplayers attain the costumes of the characters whom they are cosplaying. The question was as follows: *Do you make your own cosplays, buy them, or a combination of both?* The answers to this question would help to better understand how the participants acquire their cosplays, and how they engage with cosplay as a hobby. It would also help to understand

whether the physical aspect of cosplay and costume creation from crafting, sewing, foamsmithing etc. was important to them or whether they focused primarily on the performance aspect of cosplay and wearing and embodying the character. This question was useful and meaningful to include not only for understanding how they engage with the hobby but also because of the insights gained regarding their costume acquisition and how it relates to how they choose their characters to cosplay. For cosplayers who buy their cosplays, their character choice may be impacted and limited by this factor to characters whose cosplays are readily available for purchase, whereas cosplayers who make their own may have greater freedom in choosing their characters. It was this aspect of cosplay acquisition that would provide valuable insight and understanding.

The next question was another question relating to the practical aspects of cosplay and was intended for the participants who make their cosplays. This question was as follows: *How much time do you typically spend working on a cosplay?* This question was included to further the understanding of their engagement with cosplay, as well as further the conversation of the interview and determine whether time played any role in character selection.

The following question was also targeted at the participants who make their cosplays and related specifically to the skills and techniques which they utilise when making a cosplay. *If you make your own cosplays, what kinds of skills and techniques do you find yourself most often utilising and incorporating into your costumes?* This question aimed to build an understanding of their engagement by becoming familiar with the types of costumes they make and what skills they have in their arsenals to bring a character to life. Did they typically make use of armour-making techniques such as foamsmithing, or perhaps garment construction using sewing and embroidery? The skills a cosplayer has available to them and the skills they use most often may play a role in influencing the types of characters they choose to cosplay. Perhaps cosplayers who mostly sew, stay away from characters with lots of armour pieces in their designs and vice versa.

Moving on to another aspect of cosplay, the research aimed to investigate the role that money plays in this hobby for the participants. Firstly participants were asked if they ever receive money or financial compensation for their cosplaying activities. The question was as follows: *Do you ever receive any form of monetary compensation for your cosplay-based activities? This could be in the form of commission payments from making cosplays for clients, contract payments from making/ performing cosplays for specific activation events such as video game or film releases or other similar promotional events, or payments for character appearances at functions such as birthday parties etc.* This would help to understand from the participants whether, for them, cosplay was more of a hobby or an income stream. This distinction between hobby and income stream may play a role and have an impact on how they choose their characters to cosplay. Perhaps there was more freedom of choice of characters for those who do it mostly as a hobby, whilst those who do it as a form of generating income may be able to cosplay more detailed, intricate, and complex characters because of the role that finances play in their engagement.

The next question also related to the financial and monetary aspects of cosplay, dealing specifically with the costs involved with cosplay and cosplaying. The question was as follows: *How much money would you typically spend on a cosplay costume?* This question was important to ask as it would indicate how much money the participants are willing to put towards this hobby of theirs, and by extension the lengths they are willing to go, to bring a character to life. This question related to the main question of this research as the money one can put towards cosplay and acquiring a costume may have an impact and influence on which characters they choose to cosplay due to the cost of materials and costumes. Some characters may be too far out of their budget range to cosplay as, or perhaps they are committed to cosplaying a certain character no matter the cost.

It would be interesting to know whether there existed any overlap between cosplay and the everyday lives of the participants. For this reason, included was the following question: *What is your day job/ profession? Do you feel that this line of work in any way impacts how you engage with cosplay, and if so, how?* This would allow a better understanding of whether cosplay as a hobby, was a separate aspect of their lives, or perhaps whether it was woven into the other aspects in some form. Perhaps their day jobs provided them with skills that were beneficial towards cosplay such as sewing, computer-aided design, or other forms of artisan trades, or acting. Or perhaps their day jobs were linked to other aspects of fandom and geek culture. Perhaps their day jobs were so far removed they required cosplay as a sense of escapism. Each of these aspects may play some role in influencing their choices of characters to cosplay.

The final question included in this section was to probe specifically into the topic of this research relating to the influencing factors of character selection. Due to the nature of the interviews flowing like a conversation, the previous questions often led to the participants describing how these factors influenced their choice of characters. The interview included this question if not all the questions or conversations led to these links and connections being made between these aspects of engagement and the characters which they choose to cosplay. The question was as follows: *Do you feel that any of these above-mentioned aspects of your engagement with cosplay influence the way in which you choose which characters to cosplay, and if so, how?* This question would allow the opportunity to discuss in greater detail any of these aspects and how they influence and the role they play when it comes to the participants choosing which characters to cosplay.

Regarding why they chose to cosplay and why they engaged in this fan practice. Psycadillo said *"I love making these characters. I love embodying them ... There's something nice about changing up the person that you are and being able to adopt someone else's personality."* This aligns heavily with Stoker stating "they cosplay to...play with a character and embody them" (Stoker, 2012, p. 4). ArcticFoxy said, *"When you've finished a cosplay you see it all come together ... the character has come to life, and you really enjoy personifying the character while you're in costume."* These two cosplayers are motivated by becoming, embodying, and

personifying the character. This likely indicates that **they will be drawn to cosplaying characters whom they wish to emulate and embody.**

Ahtohcos however is motivated for other reasons to engage in cosplay, they stated, *“I don’t think I’m into cosplay just to dress up and play the character. For me, it’s more related to the skills that I learned doing it.”* Ahtohcos is driven by their desire to learn new skills and use cosplay as a creative outlet. Much like how Lamerichs describes a cosplayer choosing a particular character because “she saw this as a sewing challenge” (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 4). They care about the craft and creation aspect of cosplay so they **may be drawn to characters that will facilitate a broader use of skills and techniques.**

Claire Cosplay expressed that they cosplay to demonstrate their fandom, *“Some people make fan edits, some people make fan accounts, and this is just how we express being fans.”* As Lamerichs says, for some cosplayers through cosplay “the relationship towards the media text is solidified” (Lamerichs, 2014, p. 4).

With regards to making or buying cosplays several of the participants have both brought and made cosplays and stated that the choice to make or buy depended on the character or event they would be attending. Toonibug mentioned that they will often buy certain cosplays of certain characters such as body suit cosplays if they need them quickly for a certain themed event that they hadn’t planned for or had much notice to plan for. Leeron says they often buy certain elements to complement the rest of the cosplay they are making to save time. This reflects the results of the survey where most participants made use of both bought and made elements in their cosplays. Once again, this choice between making and buying could play a role in the character selection process.

Many of the participants expressed how time can often be a major issue when it comes to the process of making a cosplay, and that the time they spend on a cosplay is influenced by many different factors such as, whether it is for a competition, is it something casual, is it something they plan on wearing more than once, how complicated is the costume to make. Conversely, the time a cosplayer has available to make a cosplay could influence the choice of character which could impact the answers to these listed questions. Several of the participants mentioned that they are only able to work on their cosplays over the weekends and sometimes at night. They are limited to how much time they can feasibly dedicate to this hobby as other things in life have to come first.

With regards to skills and techniques, there are many different skills and techniques listed by the cosplayers that they often make use of when cosplaying, some of these skills include foamsmithing, sewing, make-up, wig styling, 3d printing. A common thread that each participant discussed was their desire to learn more skills and upgrade the skills they already had and constantly improve the quality of their cosplays. These cosplayers could be seeking to upgrade their skills and learn new skills to cosplay as characters that are perhaps currently outside of their skill range. Psycadillo mentioned that they are often drawn to cosplaying

characters with armour so that it will highlight their skills and proficiency when it comes to armour-making, *“When I watch movies, the second someone comes out in a suit of armour, I immediately start thinking, how can I make that?”* Once again, this desire to upgrade one’s skills may lead to cosplayers choosing to cosplay as characters with more complex or intricate designs or consist of techniques that they are perhaps not as familiar with as Lamerichs mentions (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 4).

A few of the participants mentioned that they sometimes receive monetary compensation for their cosplays for things such as promotional events, movie premieres and character appearances. Those who perform these services said that when doing this there is often less freedom in choosing who to cosplay because you have been hired to cosplay a specific character as requested by the client. Psycadillo mentioned when cosplaying a character to promote Netflix’s new show *Jupiter’s Legacy* they had more choice for the character, *“They gave me free rein to pick any character from the show and I chose the character based on the outfit, not so much the character.”* However, when working with Ubisoft they had more guidelines for who to cosplay, *“They usually tell me to do the most recognisable version of the character.”* We can see that when it comes to cosplaying for profit, particularly for a client there are often restrictions which influence the character a cosplayer can cosplay.

Regarding the cost of cosplaying many of the participants said that it entirely depends on the character and through the interviews there were various answers ranging from R200 – R300 to make a cosplay, all the way up to R6000 – R7000 to make the cosplay. Some of the cosplayers did express that there are certain characters whom they have delayed cosplaying because of how expensive they would be to cosplay, such as Julia who said, *“I really want to do one of the abyss mages from Genshin Impact, specifically the cryo mage, but there’s a lot involved in it and would cost a fortune.”* We can see that cosplayers are very conscious of how much they spend on their cosplays and that the financial aspect can become a limiting factor during character selection. This also links to the South African factors discussed earlier, how often tools and materials in South Africa can be quite expensive which may limit the characters some cosplayers can cosplay. As Stoker says *“screen accuracy is limited to those with a significant amount of time and/or money”* (Stoker, 2012, p. 5).

From these discussions, there is a better understanding of how the participants engage in cosplay and how this engagement impacts and affects the character selection process in multiple different ways. There is also an understanding of some of the motivations as to why the participants take part in cosplay, and how this in turn can influence the characters they choose.

The character selection process

Once more this third section of questions began in much the same manner as the two previous sections, by first asking an open and broad question to the participants relating to this section of questions. The open and broad question in this case was: *Please tell me about your process*

of how you choose which characters to cosplay. As with the previous open questions I first allowed the participants to freely answer the question with whatever first came to mind without guiding them in any specific direction. This section of questions was designed to specifically dive into the influences and motivations behind character selection, as such several other questions were prepared as a follow-up to this broad question to ensure the gathering of as many details and insights as possible in this section.

The first of these follow-up questions dealt with characters that the participants had previously cosplayed. To first understand their cosplay history, characters chosen, and reasons for this before delving any further into this section. The question posed to the participants was as follows: *Which characters have you cosplayed in the past? Why did you choose to cosplay these specific characters?* Participants were encouraged to think back to various cosplays they have done since they started cosplaying, not only characters that they have recently cosplayed. Also, whilst discussing these characters and cosplays I enquired of the participants whether there were perhaps multiple reasons, influences, and motivations that led to them cosplaying a certain character. This helped to understand the participants better by familiarising myself with which characters they had chosen to embody before and the myriad of reasons behind this embodiment.

Following on from asking the participants about characters that they had previously cosplayed, it was deemed beneficial to ask them about characters which they wished to cosplay in the future. The question asked was: *Which characters do you plan to cosplay? What is it about these characters that makes you want to cosplay as them?* Beyond just knowing which characters they wanted to cosplay one day; I hoped to understand what it was about those characters that drew them to them. To know whether there was any correlation and similarities between the characters that they had previously cosplayed and the characters they wanted to cosplay.

Furthermore, whilst discussing future cosplays with the participants, there were two more questions that whilst hadn't been included beforehand, occurred during the first interview and were then included in the conversation during this section. The first of these questions related to asking the participants why they hadn't yet cosplayed these characters on their 'cos-plans' list. Were there any specific factors such as skill level or ability preventing them from cosplaying as these characters or was it simply because the list of characters is so long, and they could realistically only cosplay a certain number of characters? The next question posed related to future cosplays was: *If you had an unlimited budget of time and money, what would be your dream character to cosplay and why?* This question would develop an understanding from the participants which characters they would want to cosplay and why, when void of barriers such as time or money restricting them.

The next question dealt with the specifics of choosing a character. The question posed to them was: *How do you typically decide on which characters you choose to cosplay?* This would allow an understanding from the participants when faced with a list of characters whom they

have already decided that they wish to cosplay, what are the different influencing factors and motivations that will cause them to choose one character over a different character.

The next question related to the purpose of the cosplay and whether that played any role in how the participants chose their different characters. The question asked was: *Do you find yourself choosing to cosplay certain characters for specific purposes?* Discussed were some examples such as conventions or events that have certain themes associated with them such as sci-fi-themed events, or events relating to a new release of something within a certain fandom such as movie premieres. This would help determine whether theme and purpose played any sort of role in the character selection process, or whether that was secondary to the cosplayer's motivations and influences.

The next question related to the visual design of characters and whether that played any role in causing a cosplayer to choose a certain character to cosplay. The question asked of them was: *Are there specific factors you look for in a character or their design when deciding on which characters to cosplay as?* This would show if they were ever drawn to certain characters because of how the characters have been visually and physically depicted in their respective media, or alternatively had they steered clear of certain characters for this very same reason. Perhaps some cosplayers chose characters to cosplay because of certain traits such as lots of intricate armour in their design because that is what they prefer to make, or complex fabric garments for those who prefer sewing. Perhaps they chose certain characters because of the challenge they provided in the complexity and intricacies of their design.

Furthermore, participants were also asked about characters who have more than one outfit in their various depictions. The question asked of them was: *If you have decided that you want to cosplay a certain character, but that character has multiple different looks and outfits, how do you choose which to cosplay?* Beyond the personal motivations and connections to the character, this would help to understand the role of the visual appearance and design of a character in this process. When the same character has different looks, what influences and motivates a cosplayer to choose?

Following this discussion relating to the visual design of characters, participants were asked about the role of the source material and the textual origin of the characters in influencing their choice of characters. The question asked of them was: *From which source materials do you generally find yourself cosplaying as characters from?* This question did not limit the participants to name specific fictional universes such as *Star Wars* or *My Hero Academia* but also allowed groups of different genres and mediums of source materials such as video games or comic books for mediums and science fiction or fantasy for genres for example. This question would allow a better understanding of the role that these groupings and source materials played in the character selection process. This question may also relate to the aspect of fandom representation through cosplay if perhaps a cosplayer cosplays multiple different characters from a text or source material to show their affinity towards it.

The next question was very strongly connected to the identities and physical traits of the participants themselves. This question related to the relationship between a participant's and a character's age, race, or gender and the role this relationship plays. The question posed was as follows: *Does age/ race/ gender have any influence on the characters that you do or do not cosplay as?* With this question, there were several aspects to dive into and unpack in the discussion with the participants. With regards to race, I hoped to understand from the Caucasian participants whether they were aware of any white privilege or freedoms allowed to them in cosplay because of the colour of their skin and how this impacted their choices of character. From the participants who were people of colour, I hoped to understand if there were any boundaries or limitations that existed when it came to them cosplaying and choosing characters, and the impact that these boundaries and limitations have. Concerning gender, I hoped to unpack and explore both gender-bending and cross-play. To understand the role played by a cosplayer's and a character's gender, and in particular, what occurs when those genders do not align.

The next question related to the competitive scene of cosplay in South Africa. Cosplay competitions are often a major aspect of many conventions and draw in many cosplayers, whether for more casual competitions or much larger and serious competitions. I hoped to understand from the participants whether this was an aspect of cosplay they engaged with. I asked: *Do you ever participate in cosplay competitions? If so at what level, how long have you been competing, and why do you choose to participate in competitions?* With this question, I hoped to understand what it was about cosplay competitions that drew cosplayers to them, or alternatively, what it was that made cosplayers not want to compete. I also hoped to understand their practices of engaging with competitions as well as understand if the competitions themselves have any influence over the characters that cosplayers choose to cosplay. Did they simply enter competitions with cosplays of characters that they had chosen for other reasons, or did they choose characters specifically with the thoughts of competing in mind?

The last question of this section is related to a participant's skill level. Firstly, participants were asked to classify their skill level as either novice, intermediate, or master. Following on from them classifying themselves, they were asked: *How does your skill level influence your choice of character?* This would help to understand from the participants whether they felt that their skills had any influence on the characters they chose. Perhaps they didn't cosplay certain characters because of a fear that their skills were not good enough to pull off the character at a standard they would be happy with. Perhaps they saved certain characters until they felt that they had levelled up their skills enough, or perhaps they cosplayed whoever they wanted, and the quality and level of their skills had no sway or influence on choosing their characters.

With this section discussing the core question of this research, the results of these questions have been grouped together with similar themes and trends. These thematic groupings are discussed below.

Character Affinity and Fandom Representation

Many of the participants have cosplayed characters because they felt an affinity towards the character or the source material for various reasons stating that they love or like certain characters. As Abramova *et al* stated cosplayers cosplay because of a “desire to play the roles of favourite characters” (Abramova, Smirnova and Tataurova, 2021, p. 101).

One of these participants was ArcticFoxy who cosplayed as the character *Jinx* from *Arcane* based on *League of Legends*. They first chose *Jinx* because of how much they liked the show and the character, “*I chose Jinx because I was obsessed with Arcane when it came out and she was my favourite character.*” They also mentioned that they felt it was an easy starting point for completely making a cosplay.



Figure 23 Arctic Foxy cosplaying as Jinx from Arcane

ArcticFoxy has also cosplayed as two characters from the video game *Genshin Impact* with those characters being *Yanfei* and *Keqing*. They chose both of those characters because, at the time of cosplaying them, they were their favourite and main characters in the game, like Abramova *et al* mentioned (Abramova, Smirnova and Tataurova, 2021, p. 101). Their cosplay of *Keqing* was bought because they felt intimidated by all the details in the outfit and trying to replicate that. With *Yanfei* they felt the costume wasn't too complicated to make compared to other characters from *Genshin Impact*, “*I think it was a good starting cosplay to do from the video game, since the other characters are even more detailed.*” Here once again it can be seen that multiple motivations are in play at the same time.



Figure 24 (Left) ArcticFoxy cosplaying as Keqing from Genshin Impact



Figure 25 (Right) ArcticFoxy cosplaying as Yanfei from Genshin Impact

Another cosplayer who was drawn to cosplaying a certain character because of their affinity for the character was Ahtohcos. Ahtohcos cosplayed another character from *World of Warcraft* in addition to *Thrall* with this character being *Baine Bloodhoof*. They chose this character because they feel they are drawn to characters that visually look cool and are not very mainstream, as well as their love for *World of Warcraft*. Their affinity for this character lies in the visual design and complexity of the character as well as their affinity for the fandom and source material that the character originates from. This aligns with Rosenberg and Letamendi's participants who chose characters based on "some physical characteristic" (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 13) and Abramova *et al* notion of to "display fandom identity" (Abramova, Smirnova and Tataurova, 2021, p. 99).



Figure 26 Ahtohcos cosplaying as Baine Bloodhoof from *World of Warcraft*

One of the characters that has been cosplayed by Psycadillo is that of *Wonder Woman* from *DC Comics*. Psycadillo's motivations to cosplay as this character once again relate to the love that they had for this character, their personality and everything that this character stands for. As Reysen *et al* mention "the character represented traits that they idealize" (Reysen *et al.*, 2018, p. 2).



Figure 27 Psycadillo cosplaying as *Wonder Woman* from *DC Comics*

Claire Cosplay's affinity towards certain characters is linked to the sentimental aspects related to the characters. Claire Cosplay cosplayed *Velma* from *Scooby Doo* because of their sentimental, nostalgic attachment to the character and the show, "*I feel like I love nostalgia so a lot of the cosplays I want to do are from my childhood.*" It was this childhood connection to the show and character that made them want to cosplay as *Velma* and demonstrate their affinity towards and place within the fandom.



Figure 28 Claire Cosplay cosplaying as Velma from Scooby Doo

Another character whom Claire Cosplay cosplayed was *Mavis* from *Hotel Transylvania* because they liked the goth aesthetic and design of the character. They said they were not necessarily the biggest fan of *Hotel Transylvania* but something about the character just spoke to them. Here their affinity was related to the visual design of the character and there were very few other factors that played a role in this specific character selection process. This can be likened to Rosenberg and Letamendi's participants who selected "some physical characteristic" as a consideration when choosing a character to cosplay, they are drawn to an aspect of the design (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 13).



Figure 29 (Left) Claire Cosplay cosplaying as Mavis from *Hotel Transylvania*

Figure 30 (Right) Claire Cosplay cosplaying as Mia Wallace from *Pulp Fiction*

Claire Cosplay also had an affinity for *Mia Wallace* from *Pulp Fiction* because of how popular *Pulp Fiction* is, “*Everyone knows Pulp Fiction, I just felt drawn to her.*” The popularity of the character is what drew them to the character and prompted them to cosplay them. Much like Lady Robzy choosing *Daenerys* as their first cosplay because of how popular the source material and show was.

One of the cosplays Julia has done is *Captain Amelia* from *Treasure Planet* which they cosplayed because they have always been a fan of the movie and the character. They also had a fondness for cats, as well as Emma Thompson, the voice actor of *Captain Amelia*. Each of these various factors led to Julia cosplaying *Captain Amelia* because of this affinity and love they had for the character and the source material like Claire Cosplay and Ahtohcos with their respective cosplays and fandoms.



Figure 31 Julia Smythe cosplaying as Captain Amelia from Treasure Planet

Furthermore, two other characters that Julia has cosplayed are *Megara* from Disney's *Hercules* and *White Blood Cell* from the anime *Cells at Work*. With both characters, they liked the characters but also liked their designs and aesthetics and thought they would be relatively quick to make. They were particularly drawn to them because of both their love for them as well as their interest in the visual designs of each character. Once more this shows multiple motivations and influences present at the same time for a particular character.



Figure 32 (Left) Julia Smythe cosplaying as Megara from Hercules

Figure 33 (Right) Julia Smythe cosplaying as White Blood Cell from Cells At Work

From these examples a major influence in the character selection process is whether the cosplayer has an affinity towards a certain character, but also that this affinity can be caused by various aspects ranging from the character's personality to the visual design of the character and representing themselves in the fandom of a particular source material. These findings align with those of Lamerichs, Abramova *et al*, Rosenberg and Letamendi, McGeehon, and Stoker who discuss these aspects in their work.

Character Relatability

In the surveys, many cosplayers chose their characters based on whether they could relate to the character.

One of the interview participants who consider this to be a major aspect for them is Leeron.

Leeron chooses their characters mostly by how relatable they find the characters with their most common cosplay being the character *Tanjiro* from the anime *Demon Slayer*. They found that the character can sometimes be quite emotional the way they are portrayed in the manga and anime and resonated with that. This connection with the character enables them to feel that they will be able to accurately portray the character. As Reysen *et al* state "one of the easiest ways to become immersed in and enjoy a piece of fiction is through characters with whom we identify" (Reysen *et al.*, 2018, p. 1).



Figure 34 Leeron Green cosplaying as Tanjiro from Demon Slayer

Similarly, Lady Robzy says that a lot of the characters they have cosplayed before are characters with tragic pasts and that is what drew them to cosplaying as them. Some of these characters include *Usopp* from *One Piece*, *Gamora* from *Marvel Comics*, and *Jughead Jones* from *Riverdale*. They feel they can relate to them and thus will be able to portray them. As Rosenberg and Letamendi state, a major reason for choosing a character is “identification with some aspect of the character” (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 16).

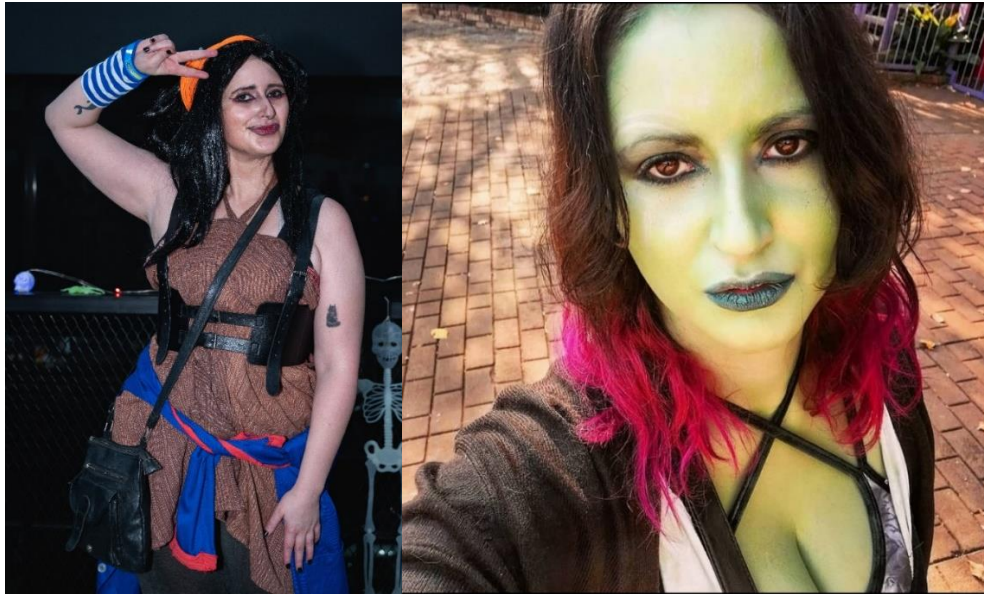


Figure 35 (Left) Lady Robzy cosplaying as Usopp from One Piece

Figure 36 (Right) Lady Robzy cosplaying as Gamora from Marvel Comics

Similarly to character affinity, cosplayers are drawn to these characters whom they feel they have traits in common with and thus will be able to portray them in a manner that would be true to the character.

Character Resemblance and Requested Characters

Cosplayers with large followings are often suggested certain characters by their audiences to cosplay because they may bear a resemblance to them.

One cosplayer who experienced this was Toonibug. Toonibug cosplayed *Lady Domitrescu* from *Resident Evil Village*. “I was asked to cosplay Lady Domitrescu because so many people said I looked like her.” Toonibug expressed that they had no familiarity with the game but cosplayed the character because of this resemblance and many fans requested the character from her.

It was discussed how Pscadillo was drawn to *Wonder Woman* because of the love they had for the character, but also when the movie was announced many people saw the resemblance between them and the character. “All of sudden I had people bombarding me with messages telling me I needed to cosplay Wonder Woman.” A similar situation occurred with the character *Kassandra* from *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*. With choosing *Kassandra* they had been lifelong fans of the *Assassin’s Creed* video game series. When *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* was announced at E3 they felt that they bore a very similar resemblance to the character with many of the same features. They also said, “She looked like a complete and utter badass, so capable, so confident, so cocky.”, and it was this that made them want to cosplay her.

Lamerichs recounts a cosplay of their own stating “I felt I could look like her easily” (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 13). In this instance it was not an audience requesting the character of them based on their looks, but their own choice because of the ease provided by already sharing physical traits with the character.



Figure 37 Psycadillo cosplaying as Kassandra from Assassin's Creed: Odyssey

Psycadillo has become known for their cosplays of *Wonder Woman* and *Kassandra* but felt that people began to expect her to cosplay certain characters and that was something that they wanted to change up and thus decided to cosplay as *Elizabeth* from *BioShock Infinite*. “*Elizabeth* was a character that absolutely no one asked for from me. I felt like in a way, I was reclaiming that guilt that I think a lot of people who are in the higher tiers of cosplay feel. People are pressuring them to do a certain character or produce a certain quality of cosplay.” Here Psycadillo strayed away from what their audience had requested of them and instead cosplayed a character from their own volition which demonstrates that even for a singular cosplayer, different characters have different motivations.



Figure 38 Psycadillo cosplaying as Elizabeth from Bioshock Infinite

Competitions and Technical Challenges

Throughout this research, it has been discussed how many cosplayers participate in cosplay competitions and that often this leads to them choosing characters that are more detailed, and complicated, and provide a greater technical challenge to them. The interview participants of this research were no different.

One such example was Toonibug. Toonibug cosplayed as *Lilith* from *Diablo IV* at *Comic Con Africa 2023*, and they did it purely because they wanted to challenge themselves. “*Lilith was purely for the challenge. I have never played Diablo. I don’t know the character. I did it purely because I saw this character and thought she was gorgeous and such a creative challenge to build.*” The choice of cosplaying a particular character was completely motivated by the competition aspect and the technical challenge that the character provided. Much like Lamerichs who wanted “to challenge myself in the art of dressmaking” (Lamerichs, 2014, p. 2).



Figure 39 Toonibug cosplaying as Lillith from Diablo IV

There does however exist a difference between the levels of cosplay competitions. Some cosplayers take part in more formalised competitions such as the *Champions of Cosplay* held at *Comic Con Africa* whilst others take part in casual cosplay competitions. Those who take part in the more formalised competitions say that the competition aspect impacts their choice of character as they want to do something that showcases their skills to the highest ability. However, those who take part in the casual competitions simply enter the competitions with whichever character they happen to be cosplaying.

Julia mentioned they have seen a trend internationally with cosplayers competing in large competitions opting for characters with high levels of detail such as the character re-designs done by artist Hannah Alexander. It was one of Hannah Alexander's designs that Julia competed in and won the Master's Category at *Comic Con Africa* in 2022. They chose to cosplay Hannah Alexander's re-design of *Yennefer* from *The Witcher* because of all the detail and complexity involved in the design and the technical challenge presented.



Figure 40 Julia Smythe cosplaying as Yennefer from *The Witcher*

On the topic of skills influencing the characters chosen by a cosplayer, once again we can analyse an example from Leeron. Leeron attempted a cosplay of the character *Artorius* from *Dark Souls* but was unable to complete it because their armour-making skills were not to the level that they would have liked them to have been, but they hope to still one day cosplay *Artorius*. Here we see an instance where the technical skills available to a cosplayer were a hindrance and ultimately prevented them from cosplaying a particular character.

From these examples, both the technical skills one has available to them and the opportunity to exhibit one's prowess at certain technical skills can be major influences on choosing characters to cosplay, which aligns with the work of Lamerichs, Stoker, and Rosenberg and Letamendi.

Ease of cosplaying

With cosplaying oftentimes being an incredibly complicated hobby that is both time and money consuming, cosplayers are often finding ways of making things easier for themselves.

One example is Toonibug cosplaying as *Jack Sparrow* from *Pirates of the Caribbean*. They say that cosplaying as *Jack Sparrow* is a regular and a favourite, but they only started cosplaying as *Jack Sparrow* because they already happened to have the costume, "*I did that one purely because I had the costume. It was a Halloween costume that my husband wore for a Halloween party years ago and I had held onto it. I just kept upgrading it and it became a very regular and popular costume that I take to conventions.*" The choice to cosplay this character was purely motivated because of the cosplayer's access to the costume and the ease to cosplay them.

Toonibug has also cosplayed a lot of characters that have red hair simply because they already had a high-quality red wig and wanted to get as much use as possible out of the wig. Some of these characters included *Tauriel* from *The Hobbit*, *Jean Grey* from *Marvel Comics*, and *Ariel* from *The Little Mermaid*. They said, “*The only reason why I chose those characters was because I had the wig. I thought how do I get the most use out of such a high-quality, gorgeous redheaded wig?*” Here once again the character choice was motivated by the ease of cosplaying these characters.

Dream Cosplays

From discussions in the interviews, it became clear that many cosplayers have dream cosplays that they would like to attempt one day.

Toonibug has already achieved that goal of their ‘Dream Cosplay’. They cosplayed the *Angel of Death* from *Hellboy* as their love letter to cosplay because it was always their dream to create that cosplay. They felt with the first *Comic Con* taking place in South Africa they wanted to do something that had a large wow factor to it. Here they were motivated by the impact that this character and costume would have on the audience in attendance.



Figure 41 Toonibug cosplaying as Angel of Death from Hellboy

Julia discussed their dream cosplay which would be to one day cosplay as *Christine Daaè* from *The Phantom of the Opera* because they love the design and intricate details involved in her ballgown dress. They also mentioned wanting to cosplay as *Godzilla* because they love the character but also to level up their skills, but they have not started it yet because of the high costs that would be involved in taking on a project such as that.

These dream cosplay characters are often motivated by various factors that lead to cosplayers choosing them such as the technical challenge presented by them, or the overall design of the characters.

From these discussions with the participants, it is possible to grasp a better understanding of just how complicated, nuanced, and unique the character selection process can be for different cosplayers. Furthermore, there are often multiple motivations and influences at play at the same time. Many of the motivations that were discussed in this section also strongly correlate with examples already seen mentioned in the survey data as well as described in the literature portion of this research.

Experiences as a cosplayer in South Africa

The final section of questions in the interview were those related to being a cosplayer specifically within South Africa and a South African context.

Similarly, to the three previous sections of questions, this section began with an open-ended question relating to cosplaying in South Africa. The question was as follows: *Please tell me about your experiences as a cosplayer in South Africa*. Without diving headfirst into anything too specific, I wanted to uncover what aspects and facets of South African cosplaying first came to mind for the participants and to delve deeper from there. I also hoped to understand from the participants whether their thoughts associated with cosplaying in South Africa leaned mostly toward positive aspects or negative aspects. This question was followed by more in-depth questions probing into specific areas.

The first of these follow-up questions was designed to better understand the landscape of South African geek gatherings and those attended by the participants, and if these were events that they typically cosplayed at. The question asked was: *Do you attend any conventions or fan gatherings such as Comic Con, rAge Expo, Medieval Fayre, Free Comic Book Day etc?* In this list of examples, I included some of the events I was familiar with but also asked them to list any others as there may be events which happen in other parts of the country which I am not familiar with. I also hoped to understand whether the participants attended multiple different events or stuck to a singular event of their preference. I believed that understanding the types of and specific events which the participants attended may assist in better understanding the South African ‘stage’ for cosplay and places in South Africa where cosplay is normalised and

expected. By extension, this understanding of the South African ‘stage’ may be useful in understanding the influences and motivations of character selection.

The next question related specifically to the community aspect that exists within cosplay. Participants were asked: *Would you consider yourself a member of the South African cosplay community, and if so, how do you engage with and participate within the community?* I hoped to better understand the social aspect of cosplay and the role it plays. Not only would this provide greater insight into the South African cosplay scene, but it may also provide information about how community and socialising through cosplay can impact character choices. Perhaps certain characters were chosen by cosplayers to fit into group cosplays with their friends and other members of the community. I also hoped to understand if there were perhaps any reasons a cosplayer may choose not to engage with the rest of the community and the impact that this has on their engagement with cosplay.

Following on from this I hoped to understand if there were any restrictions or limitations related to living in South Africa that impacted how cosplayers cosplay. The question asked was: *Do you feel that there are any factors related to living in South Africa that limit how you engage with cosplay and how you practice this hobby? Please describe how these factors have impacted you.* As a cosplayer in South Africa, I personally have often felt frustrated due to a lack of access to certain materials and tools, load shedding, and various other factors related to living in South Africa. From this question, I hoped to understand whether the participants and other South African cosplayers shared these frustrations, as well as others that may not have affected me before. I hoped to understand if these frustrations play any sort of role in how South African cosplayers choose which characters they cosplay.

Relating to the limitations of cosplaying in South Africa, I also hoped to understand if there were any stigmas or judgment related to being a cosplayer in South Africa. I asked the participants: *Being a cosplayer in South Africa, have you ever experienced any form of stigma related to being a cosplayer?* I hoped to understand from the participants how their engagement with cosplay was perceived by people who are not cosplayers and their reactions to it. This would provide a better understanding of how a South African observer audience reacts to cosplay, and if this reaction by the audience in any way impacts or influences the way cosplayers choose their characters to cosplay.

The final question in this section was intended to address any aspects I may have missed or been unable to explore with the previous questions relating to character selection. The final question of this section was as follows: *Do any of these above-mentioned factors have any influence on the way in which you choose who to cosplay as?* This question would allow the participants to go back to any previous points that they wished to discuss in greater detail.

Regarding the spaces wherein the participants practice cosplay many of the participants mentioned events such as Comic Con Cape Town and Comic Con Africa, rAge Expo, Medieval

Fayre, movie premieres and various geek events and gatherings. This aligns with the events that were mentioned by the participants during the survey.

Most participants stated that they consider themselves to be part of the South African cosplay community and engage in events such as meetups. The only instances where participants mentioned this aspect influencing their character choice was regarding group cosplays. However, some did say that they have distanced themselves from the community after personal bad experiences with certain members of the community. It is unlikely that this will have any impact on how cosplayers choose their characters.

Many of the participants highlighted several factors related to living in South Africa that (they feel) sometimes limit their cosplay potential they feel. The first aspect that many of them feel is an issue is the access to certain tools and materials in South Africa. They state that oftentimes these tools or materials are difficult to find, or they are quite expensive and inaccessible due to them having to be imported from other countries. They feel that without access to these tools and materials, they are not able to create cosplays to the best of their ability because they are being hampered by this inaccessibility and thus are reliant on finding alternative methods or forsaking certain characters.

Another aspect many found to be an issue is load-shedding and how it impacts their ability to make cosplays when they already have limited time. Not having electricity for certain periods of the day not only causes them frustration but also hinders them from creating cosplays to the best of their ability due to limiting when they can use certain tools. This reduction in time available to make cosplays could influence the characters cosplayers choose to cosplay as discussed earlier.

These grievances and limitations reflect the opinions of the survey participants in that there are multiple aspects related to living in South Africa that may limit their ability to cosplay and thus impact the characters they choose.

Major Findings: Key Motivations and Influencing Factors

This section discusses and summarizes the key findings from the results analysis. What are the key motivations and influencing factors for cosplayers when choosing a character to cosplay.

Identity

Stoker disagreed with McCormick and Sterling about the relationship that exists between cosplay and identity. Whilst Sterling and McCormick discussed how cosplay can be used as a way of trying on identities in an effort of self-discovery, “we find out who we are by donning different personae” (McCormick, 2007), Stoker disregards this. From the data that has been

collected in both the surveys and interviews of this research, it would be remiss to say that there are no cosplayers who use cosplay as a way of trying on new identities. Several of the research participants mentioned that they felt themselves drawn to cosplaying certain characters because of traits and aspects of the character's identity that they hoped to incorporate into their lives. Psycadillo was drawn to cosplaying *Korra* because they admired her confidence and strength, and they hoped by cosplaying this they could begin to forge anew their identity with these traits they so admired. Similarly, ArcticFoxy expressed many of the same sentiments, as did multiple survey participants. These cosplayers were able to create the hybrid self as described by Choudhury by combining their actual selves and their ideal selves to truly explore and negotiate their new identities, as Choudhury stated through cosplay cosplayers "redefine, discover, stretch and enhance their own sense of identity" (Choudhury, 2015, p. 4).

The overwhelming motivation that many cosplayers mentioned for choosing their characters was that they liked and loved the characters. It was the personalities and identities of the characters that they were drawn to and that they hoped to emulate and bring to life. As Poerwito-Setijadi states "cosplay does not function as a simple form of escapism...but that it is instead an important field for the creation of identity" (Poerwito-Setijadi, 2012, p. 109).

It can be said without a doubt that the identity of a character and the identity of the self, play a major role during the character selection process.

Character Identification

Both Lamerichs and Reysen *et al.* discuss how cosplayers are often drawn to cosplaying characters that they identify with, as Reysen *et al.* state "top reasons for choosing a particular character is identification" (Reysen *et al.*, 2018, p. 2). This identification can either be a physical identification with the character such as similar features or identifying and relating with the character's personality and seeing a portion of themselves in the character. This feeling of relating to and connecting with a character was an incredibly common trend seen among the participants of this research. As one participant said, the most important thing for them when choosing a character is do they relate with the character and if the answer to this is no, then they do not cosplay as that character.

With regards to bearing a physical likeness to the character, many cosplayers felt drawn to cosplaying these characters because of the ease of cosplaying them because there were fewer things that they would have to change or alter to pull off the look of the character. Such as Psycadillo who bore a resemblance to both *Wonder Woman* and *Kassandra*. This physical likeness was one of the major influences for both these characters. A survey participant also described that they gravitate to characters who look like them because of the ease that they provide.

When a cosplayer identifies with a character, whether that be personality-wise or a physical resemblance, they are often motivated to cosplay the character, and this aspect plays a role in the character selection process.

Character Visual Design

With cosplay being an incredibly visual-based medium and relating to how one alters their visual appearance, the visual design of a character plays a major role in the character selection process. Many of the participants of this research expressed how they are often drawn to characters because they ‘look cool’. Toonibug discussed this when they discussed their choices to cosplay as *Lilith*, they thought the design was cool with lots of intricate details and they fell in love with the design. 14 survey respondents stated this as a motivation.

The visual design and its complexities can also be daunting for some cosplayers and sway them against cosplaying the character.

The visual design of a character and how they are presented without a doubt plays a role in the character selection process which aligns with the findings of Rosenberg and Letamendi with many of their participants selecting “how I will look in the costume” or “physical characteristic” as a major motivation (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 13). Lamerichs also described a very similar situation regarding their choice to cosplay as *Effie* from *The Hunger Games* (Lamerichs, 2014, p. 2). This strongly aligns with many of the participants who gravitated towards certain characters because of how they looked and appeared, thus showing that **the visual design of character and its influence in how a cosplayer will look is a major motivation for many cosplayers.**

Fandom Representation

Lamerichs described how sometimes a cosplayer will choose to cosplay a character not because of the character, but rather because of the fictional world that the character originates from and the connection that the cosplayer has with this fictional world, “she was mostly neutral about the character...her passion for the entire cast of Final Fantasy VII” (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 4).

Many of the participants of this research stated their love for a particular fandom as a major reason for choosing a character to cosplay. Some participants discussed how even though they didn’t particularly love a certain character they still cosplayed as them because of the love that they bore for the fandom and source material the character originates from. 10 survey respondents stated this as a reason for choosing to cosplay a character.

Several of the participants mentioned that through cosplaying certain characters they can connect with other members of the fandom through displaying their fandom in the form of cosplay.

Ahtohcos bases many of their cosplays on this factor due to them being a fan of the *World of Warcraft* franchise. They often cosplay from this fandom and franchise because of the love that they have for it, but also to show and demonstrate their existence within that fandom. This was a major consideration for them that they would not cosplay a character where they did not feel a connection to the fandom or universe.

Representing and declaring one's fandom through cosplay is an aspect that plays a significant role in the character selection process.

Gender

Butler stated that “gender proves to be performative” (Butler, 2002, p. 33) and Leng building on from this describes gender as being a social construct not based on biological sex, but rather “reiterative acts” (Leng, 2013, p. 96) and that cosplay is a space wherein these acts can take place leading to the formation of gender identities. Stoker discussed gender bending and cross-play as a way of discussing and critiquing the role of women and the representation of gender in fandom (Stoker, 2012, p. 5).

However, in this research, it was mostly found that those who do gender-bending or cross-play characters are drawn to cosplaying the characters for other reasons and gender-bending or cross-play is simply a means to an end. There were also no participants who discussed gender identity formation, expression, or experimentation with gender through cosplay. This however does not represent the views of all South African cosplayers as it is possible that there are South African cosplayers who cosplay characters with different genders as a way of negotiating their own gender identity, these cosplayers simply may not have participated in this research.

During this research, it was found that some participants do consider their and a character's gender when they are choosing whom to cosplay as. It was found that most participants who cosplay as characters whose gender is different to their own, rather engage in gender-bending characters than crossplay. These participants discuss how easy and comfortable it will be to change the character's gender to their own. Some participants said that they would not cosplay a character whose gender is different from their own even if they love the character, whilst others do not let this stand in their way such as Leeron expressing a desire to cosplay *Malenia* from *Elden Ring* because of the technical challenge associated with it.

Gender does play a role and have an influence on the characters that cosplayers choose to cosplay.

Race

Race is something that is inherently tied to our visual appearance and perception, yet cosplay is focused on the changing, altering, and costuming of our visual appearance, how does race

impact this? Poerwito-Setijadi stated that it was difficult for cosplayers to forget their race when cosplaying like they do with other aspects such as age, and sex (Poerwito-Setijadi, 2012, p. 2), and Jenkins described some of the real-life aftereffects of cosplaying as a character whose race is different to one's own (Jenkins, 2020, p. 166).

In this research, it was found that many South African cosplayers are cognisant of race when cosplaying. Many white/ Caucasian cosplayers mentioned that they mostly stay away from cosplaying as characters whose race is different from their own out of respect, but also partially out of fear for how their cosplay may be interpreted for erasing characters of colour. Cosplayers of colour discussed how they often won't let race stand in their way from cosplaying a character if they feel connected to a character because of the lack of representation of their race in media, such as the survey participant who mentioned when discussing race as a factor: *"If I like the character I'll cosplay it and not a single one of these factors would affect the decision."* This contrasts Jenkins who states "marginalized cosplayers are less likely...to seek out easy recognizability for the characters that they cosplay" (Jenkins, 2020, p. 164). This perhaps demonstrates cosplayers also taking agency and choosing their characters for character reinterpretation.

It is also a positive worth noting that during the interviews none of the cosplayers of colour had ever encountered any instances of racism or discrimination relating to them cosplaying as traditionally white characters. South Africa having a diverse population may be more accepting of cosplayers of colour as opposed to other parts of the world such as where Jenkins' participants were from, this however could be an entirely new route of study and research.

Race is a major consideration when cosplayers are choosing who to cosplay.

Roleplay

Stoker and Poerwito-Setijadi both discuss the play aspect of cosplay and how many cosplayers are drawn to cosplay and cosplaying certain characters because of the freedom of play and performance that is awarded to them through the process of donning a costume. Stoker states "they cosplay to interact with other fans and cosplayers, to play with a character and embody them" (Stoker, 2012, p. 4).

Many of the cosplayers involved in this research expressed their desire to embody characters through cosplay and bring them to life, as well as they had a desire to be the character. Some cosplayers even discussed how they are drawn to characters whom they think they will enjoy portraying and performing. These cosplayers discussed how they will sometimes choose certain characters to cosplay because they feel that they will enjoy the aspect of performing these characters, acting them out, and interacting as these characters with others. Some participants also mentioned they won't cosplay characters whom they do not want to embody or perform.

With roleplay being a major aspect of cosplay, we can see that it does play a role during the character selection process.

Time and Money

Rosenberg and Letamendi found from several of their participants that time can often be a rare commodity when attempting to create a cosplay of a character (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 13). They also found that time was a major influence in how their participants chose their characters because of time constraints.

A similar trend was found among the participants of this research who also expressed how time limitations can often influence who they will choose to cosplay because they want to create a cosplay to a certain standard. Many participants also expressed how this factor can affect them when their free time dedicated to this hobby is impacted and limited by factors such as load shedding, such as one participant who said, *“Time impacts which cosplay I choose in terms of difficulty, I won’t choose a cosplay I feel is very difficult if I have limited time”*. Some participants did however state that if it is a character they truly care about they will dedicate as much time as is needed to create the character even if it means missing certain deadlines such as conventions.

Many of the participants expressed they would not choose certain characters if they felt they would not be able to accomplish or finish the cosplay in time for a certain event.

Whether a cosplay is bought or handmade, there is a financial aspect and cost that is involved. Like the aspect of time, Rosenberg and Letamendi discussed how this can often be a limiting factor for many cosplayers (Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013, p. 13).

Similarly, several participants in this research described that money can often be a major concern when cosplaying due to the high costs involved, particularly in South Africa where many materials are more expensive due to import fees and such. As one participant said, *“Money impacts what cosplays I buy because they are usually far more expensive than the ones I make.”*. Some participants did say that they do not let money get in the way of them cosplaying certain characters, whilst others said that it is a major influence in who they will cosplay because certain characters, particularly those with more complex designs, are more expensive to cosplay.

In general, it was seen that most cosplayers try to find cheaper alternate frugal ways of creating cosplays so as not to incur a high cost, as opposed to forsaking a character entirely because of the costs involved.

The constraints of available time and money do play a role in the character selection process for some cosplayers.

Technical Ability

Lamerichs spoke about how sometimes cosplayers are drawn to certain characters because of the complexity and challenge that would be involved in the process of bringing the cosplay to life (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 4). This relates to both demonstrating one's technical ability as well as levelling up one's skills to a certain level to demonstrate expertise.

With the participants of this research, it seemed there were two major manners in which the technical complexity of a character's design may influence the character selection process. Some cosplayers felt intimidated by the complexity of certain projects and opted to put those characters aside until they felt that their skills were at a level high enough to attempt the cosplay of that character. Whilst others gravitated towards characters with complex designs to showcase their skills particularly those who engage in cosplay competitions.

This was demonstrated both by Julia and Toonibug who were motivated to cosplay certain characters such as *Yennefer* and *Lillith* because of the technical challenge that was provided to them by creating these cosplays, as well as the fact that they would be competition pieces.

The technical challenge that is presented by cosplaying certain characters can sway a cosplayer's choice one way or the other, perhaps prompting them to cosplay the character to show expertise or staying away from a character due to lack of skills.

Character Interpretation

Stoker discussed how cosplay can be used by a cosplayer to reinterpret how they perceive a character to be (Stoker, 2012, p. 4).

Unfortunately, there was very little discussion by the participants concerning this aspect of cosplay. This could be due to it not being a major factor of consideration for South African cosplayers, or perhaps a fault with the line of questioning during the surveys and interviews.

At this stage, it cannot be said to what extent character interpretation plays a role in the character selection process.

Social and Community

Lamerichs described that often cosplayers can find themselves cosplaying certain characters to form part of a cosplay group with their friends/ peers who are also attending an event (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 1).

Several of the participants of this research described how they had sometimes chosen certain characters because of this very situation, even if they had no other motivations to cosplay as a particular character. This also relates to several of the participants who expressed that their choice of character was motivated by friends or partners suggesting the character for them to cosplay.

Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington describe fandom as “a communal effort to form interpretive communities” (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2007, p. 2). This is reflected in the responses from participants who frequently choose characters based on group cosplays which demonstrates these fandom based interpretive communities being formed and allows a better understanding of how this plays a role in the character selection process.

Many of the participants also expressed that they are actively involved in the South African cosplay community and that they find this beneficial not only for making friends but also for sharing advice and forming part of a community of like-minded geeks.

The social and community aspects can play a role in the character selection process from the point of view of group cosplays and particular fandom meet-ups with cosplayers cosplaying as characters from these fandoms for the meetups.

South African Factors

The aspects of load shedding as well as the lack of access and financial barriers to certain tools and materials in South Africa was an issue that was discussed frequently by many participants. Many participants felt that these factors limit their ability to cosplay and create cosplays, and in turn, influence their choice of which characters to cosplay.

Additionally, many participants also felt that there is a lack of geek-centred events in South Africa and this lack of opportunity to cosplay can, in turn, influence their character choice.

It can be said that South African cosplayers are often limited in their cosplay ability because of these factors and that they can often impact the choice of character because of these limitations.

Conclusion

This concludes the presentation, analysis, and discussion of the results of this research and the major findings of which aspects, motivations and influences play a role in the character selection process for South African cosplayers.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

This chapter concludes the research by summarizing the key findings, discussing their significance, and reflecting on the research process. It also offers recommendations for future research and outlines potential areas of further exploration within the study of cosplay, particularly in a South African context.

Summary of Findings

The research demonstrated that the motivations behind character selection in cosplay are complex and multifaceted. No singular factor determines why a cosplayer chooses a particular character; rather, the decision is shaped by a variety of influences, both personal and external. Key findings from the research indicate that:

1. Personal Affinity and Connection to the Character

- A deep emotional connection to a character or the source material is one of the most significant motivators for cosplayers. Many cosplayers choose characters they admire, identify with, or have nostalgic attachments to.

2. Aesthetic and Technical Considerations

- The visual appeal of a character, costume complexity, and the challenge of crafting a particular outfit play a crucial role in character selection.
- Some cosplayers seek intricate designs to test their skills and demonstrate craftsmanship, particularly when participating in competitions.

3. Social and Community Influence

- Group dynamics and social connections within the cosplay community influence character selection.
- Cosplayers often choose characters that fit within a group cosplay or are recommended by friends or fellow enthusiasts.
- Fandom-based interpretive communities play a role in shaping costume choices and fostering collaboration.

4. Time, Budget, and Accessibility

- Financial and time constraints significantly impact character selection.
- Many cosplayers adapt or modify their character choices based on the affordability of resources, and the time required for costume creation.

5. Identity and Representation

- Factors such as race, gender and body type influence character selection, with some cosplayers gravitating towards characters that reflect aspects of their own identity, while others embrace the opportunity to embody characters that challenge societal norms.

6. South African Contextual Factors

- Unique challenges within South Africa, such as limited access to material, financial constraints, and infrastructural issues (e.g. load shedding), affect cosplayers' ability to create and showcase their work.
- A lack of geek-centred events in South Africa reduces opportunities for cosplayers to showcase their characters, impacting their selection process.

These findings highlight the depth of decision-making involved in cosplay character selection and demonstrate how cosplayers navigate various personal and social influences to engage with the fan practice.

Reflection on the Research Process

As with any research endeavour, certain aspects of this study could have been refined to yield even more precise insights. Key reflections include:

- **Survey Design Improvements**
 - Some questions could have been structured to elicit more specific responses. For example, instead of asking how time and money impact character choice, a more direct question such as *“Have you ever decided against cosplaying a particular character due to the cost of materials?”* would have provided clearer data.
 - Future research could also integrate a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data for a more comprehensive understanding.
- **Expanding Demographic Considerations**
 - Including more demographic based questions related to race, gender and socio-economic background would have allowed for deeper analysis of how identity intersects with character selection.
 - This could also provide insights into potential disparities within cosplay communities.
- **Exploring Untapped Themes**
 - Some fascinating topics emerged during the research that were beyond the immediate scope of this study. For example, the intersection of cosplay and digital platforms (such as Patreon and OnlyFans), the role of cosplay in professional branding, and the relationship between cosplay and performance art could be valuable areas for further study.
 - Additionally, the link between cosplay, identity expression, and gender dynamics in a South African context remains a largely unexplored but highly relevant topic.

Contributions and Future Research Directions

This research contributes to both **cosplay studies** and **fan studies** by providing insights into the nuanced factors that drive character selection among South African cosplayers. While much research on cosplay has focused on Western and Asian contexts, this study broadens the discourse by highlighting the experiences and challenges unique to the South African cosplay community.

Future research could expand on this study by:

- Conducting **comparative studies** between South African cosplayers and cosplayers from other regions to analyse cultural differences in character selection.
- Investigating the **impact of digital communities** and social media on cosplay choices.
- Exploring the **economic implications of cosplay**, including how cosplayers monetize their craft and the role of corporate sponsorships.
- Examining **cosplay as a form of activism**, particularly in relation to gender, race, and LGBTQ+ representation in fandom spaces.

Final Thoughts

Cosplay is a deeply personal and expressive art form that allows individuals to embody characters they love, challenge societal norms, and engage with a broader fan community. As Adam Savage beautifully described:

“Cosplay means people who dress up as their favourite characters from film and television and especially anime, but it is so much more than that. These aren't just people who find a costume and put it on -- they mash them up. They bend them to their will. They change them to be the characters they want to be in those productions. They're super clever and genius. They let their freak flag fly and it's beautiful.” – Adam Savage

Throughout this research, it has become evident that cosplay is not merely about donning a costume—it is a form of personal expression, community engagement, and fan identity construction. While each cosplayer’s journey is unique, the motivations and influences behind character selection reveal a shared passion and dedication to the art of bringing fictional characters to life.

As cosplay continues to evolve and grow, so too will the discussions surrounding it, providing ongoing opportunities to explore its impact on identity, fandom, and popular culture.

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Glossary

- Closet cosplay – cosplays of characters that are assembled primarily from garments and items that cosplayers already have in their closets.
- Cosplay – The act of portraying or performing a character from various forms of popular culture and media through wearing a costume.
- Crossover – Cosplaying a fictional character but reimagining their visual design to fit within a different fictional universe.
- Crossplay – Cosplaying a character whose gender is different to the cosplayer's gender in such a way that the cosplayer's appearance is altered to closer match the gender of the character.
- Disney bound – A method of cosplay that involves creating an outfit inspired by Disney characters using regular clothing items.
- Foamsmithing – A popular method of armour construction in cosplay using EVA foam, glue, and heat shaping techniques to replicate armour and props.
- Furry – An individual with an interest in anthropomorphic animals, who creates fursonas and identities of themselves as these animals as well as wears costumes of these animals.
- Gijinka – Cosplaying non-human subjects such as animals and Pokémon in a human version.
- Gender bend – Cosplaying a character whose gender is different to the cosplayer's gender in such a way that the character's appearance is altered to closer match the gender of the cosplayer.
- Isekai – A subgenre of anime defined by a character being transported to a world different from their own and having to find their way in this new world.
- Mashup – A cosplay that involves combining two different characters, generally from two different source materials.
- OCs – Original characters, cosplays based on characters created by the cosplayers themselves. These original characters can exist within pre-existing fandoms or fictional universes such as *Star Wars* or *Dungeons and Dragons*, or from fantasy universes created by the cosplayer.

Appendix A

Below can be found the questions included in the online survey portion of this research.

1. How long have you been cosplaying?
 - a. Less than a year
 - b. 1 – 2 years
 - c. 3 – 4 years
 - d. 5 – 6 years
 - e. 7 – 8 years
 - f. 9 – 10 years
 - g. 10 – 15 years
 - h. 15+ years
2. Why do you engage in the hobby of cosplay?
3. What was your first cosplay, and why did you choose that character to cosplay?
4. Do you make or buy your cosplays?
 - a. Make
 - b. Buy
 - c. A combination of both
5. How many hours do you typically spend working on a cosplay?
 - a. Less than 10 hours
 - b. 10 – 20 hours
 - c. 20 – 30 hours
 - d. 30 - 50 hours
 - e. 50 - 80 hours
 - f. 80 - 100 hours
 - g. 100 - 150 hours
 - h. 150+ hours
6. How much money do you typically spend on a cosplay?
 - a. Less than R100
 - b. R100 – R300
 - c. R300 – R500

- d. R500 – R1000
 - e. R1000 – R1500
 - f. R1500 – R2000
 - g. R2000 – R3000
 - h. R3000 – R5000
 - i. R5000+
7. How does time and money impact your choice of which characters you choose to cosplay?
 8. Where do you typically wear your cosplays? Does this impact/influence your choice of character?
 9. What are your main considerations, motivations, and influences/ influencing factors when choosing a character to cosplay?
 10. Do you consider yours or a character's age, race, or gender when choosing a character to cosplay?
 - a. I consider my age
 - b. I consider my race
 - c. I consider my gender
 - d. I consider a character's age
 - e. I consider a character's race
 - f. I consider a character's gender
 11. If you selected any of the options above please elaborate.
 12. Do you feel that these considerations, motivations, and influences have changed in any way from when you first started cosplaying?
 13. Do you have different motivations and considerations for different cosplays?
 14. How does the purpose of a cosplay impact your choice of character?
 15. Do you compete in cosplay competitions?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 16. If you answered yes to the previous question, how does this impact or influence your choice in character?
 17. Do you feel limited as a cosplayer in South Africa?
 - a. Yes

- b. No
18. If so, what way do you feel limited? Does this impact your choice of character?
19. Do you feel there are any uniquely South African factors that influence which characters you choose to cosplay?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
20. If so, please describe these factors.
21. How would you classify your skill level in regards to cosplaying?
- a. Novice
 - b. Intermediate
 - c. Master / Professional
22. Does your skill level have any influence on the characters you choose?
23. Would you consider yourself more of a casual or serious cosplayer?
- a. Casual
 - b. Serious
24. Please elaborate on your answer above, why you chose that option, and if it influences the characters you choose to cosplay and how.

Appendix B

Below can be found a sample of the guiding questions I utilised during the interview process of this research.

1. Please tell me about yourself and your background as a cosplayer.
 - a. When did you start cosplaying?
 - b. What was the reason that you first got into cosplaying?
 - c. Who did you cosplay as for your first cosplay and why did you choose this specific character?
 - d. Were there any particular skills you possessed coming into the cosplaying hobby, and do you feel that these skills or lack thereof influenced your choice of the character you chose for your first cosplay in any way?
 - e. Do you feel that your first experience of cosplaying and the character you chose to cosplay in any way influenced and impacted the way in which you engaged in cosplaying from that point onwards?

2. Please tell me about how you engage with cosplay and your practices whilst participating in the hobby.
 - a. Why do you choose to cosplay?
 - b. Do you make your own cosplays, buy them, or a combination of both?
 - c. How much time do you typically spend working on a cosplay?
 - d. If you make your own cosplays, what kinds of skills and techniques do you find yourself most often utilising and incorporating into your costumes?
 - e. Do you ever receive any form of monetary compensation for your cosplay-based activities? This could be in the form of commission payments from making cosplays for clients, contract payments from making/ performing cosplays for specific activation events such as video game/ film releases or other similar promotional events, payments for character appearances at functions such as birthday parties etc.
 - f. How much money would you typically spend on a cosplay costume?
 - g. What is your day job/ profession? Do you feel that this line of work in any way impacts how you engage with cosplay, and if so, how?
 - h. Do you feel that any of these above-mentioned aspects of your engagement with cosplay influence the way in which you choose which characters to cosplay, and if so, how?

3. Please tell me about your process of how you choose which characters to cosplay.
 - a. Which characters have you cosplayed in the past? Why did you choose to cosplay these specific characters?

- b. Which characters do you plan to cosplay? What is it about these characters that makes you want to cosplay as them?
 - c. How do you typically decide on which characters you choose to cosplay?
 - d. Do you find yourself choosing to cosplay certain characters for specific purposes?
 - e. Are there specific factors you look for in a character/ their design when deciding on which characters to cosplays as?
 - f. From which source materials do you generally find yourself cosplaying as characters from?
 - g. Does age/race/gender have any influence on the characters that you do/do not cosplay?
 - h. How does your skill level influence your choice of character?
4. Please tell me about your experiences as a cosplayer in South Africa.
- a. Do you attend any conventions or fan gatherings such as Comic Con, rAge Expo, Medieval Fayre, Free Comic Book Day etc?
 - b. Do you ever participate in cosplay competitions? If so at what level, how long have you been competing, and why do you choose to participate in competitions?
 - c. Would you consider yourself a member of the South African cosplay community, and if so, how do you engage with and participate within the community?
 - d. Do you feel that there are any factors related to living in South Africa that limit how you engage with cosplay and how you practice this hobby? Please describe how these factors have impacted you.
 - e. Being a cosplayer in South Africa, have you ever experienced any form of stigma related to being a cosplayer?
 - f. Do any of these above-mentioned factors have any influence on the way in which you choose who to cosplay as?

Appendix C

Below can be found my ethical clearance certificate:



Research Office

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

R14/49 Jackson

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

PROTOCOL NUMBER: H23/06/11

PROJECT TITLE

Choose Your Character: The Motivations behind
Character Selection in the Art of Cosplay

INVESTIGATOR(S)

Mr B Jackson

SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT

Wits School of Arts/

DATE CONSIDERED

23 June 2023

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE

Approved
Risk Level: Low

EXPIRY DATE

23 August 2026

DATE

24 August 2023

CHAIRPERSON

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J Watermeyer", written over a horizontal line.

(Professor J Watermeyer)

cc: Supervisor : Dr K du Preez

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR(S)

To be completed in duplicate and **A SIGNED COPY** returned to the Secretary electronically. Unreported changes to the application may invalidate the clearance given by the HREC (Non-Medical)

I/We fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to submit an amendment of the protocol to the Committee. **I/we agree to completion of a regular progress report. For Minimal and Low Risk studies, this is due annually on 31 December. For Medium and High Risk studies, this is due twice annually on 30 June and 31 December.**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "B Jackson", written over a horizontal line.
Signature

25 / 08 / 2023
Date

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES