

COSPLAYERS' AND NON-COSPLAYERS' INVOLVEMENT IN FANDOM-BASED DRAMA

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Abstract

We examined cosplaying and non-cosplaying anime fans' involvement in anime fandom drama, along with potential mediators underlying these differences. Anime fans completed a survey that included measures of cosplay participation, engaging with others within the context of the anime fandom, need to belong, and involvement in fandom drama. The results showed that cosplayers reported greater engagement, higher need to belong, and more involvement in fandom drama than non-cosplayers. The association between cosplaying and drama involvement was significantly mediated by both frequency of engagement with other fans and need to belong.

Keywords: anime, cosplay, cosplayers, fandom, drama, need to belong

Introduction

Cosplay—a portmanteau of the terms “costume” and “play”—is the act of dressing up and role-playing as a character from an anime series, manga, video game, or story (Winge, 2006).

Cosplayers tend to choose characters who they see as being similar to themselves, while also representing idealized versions of themselves (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2018a). Cosplaying is one of the most visibly-recognizable and central fan behaviors associated with the anime fandom, despite the fact that only a minority (34.1%) of anime fans actually cosplay (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, & Gerbasi, in press-a). And, while cosplayers are, themselves, a part of the anime fandom, they have been shown to differ from their non-cosplaying anime fan counterparts on a number of psychological variables. For example, cosplayers, relative to non-cosplayers, report greater extraversion and openness (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2018b), are more likely to disclose being an anime fan to others, and score higher on measures of psychological well-being (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, & Gerbasi, in press-b). To date, however, there have been no studies quantitatively assessing whether cosplaying and non-cosplaying anime fans differ with regard to their involvement in drama—intra-fandom conflict and scandal.

Fan groups, like any other community, inevitably experience internal conflict and debate (DeDominicis, 2015). As a fan group, itself, the anime fandom, likewise, has its share of internal strife (Dunlap & Wolf, 2010). Prior research suggests that at least some of this conflict stems from, or often involves, cosplayers. In interviews with cosplayers, Hill (2017) observed that there is a social hierarchy within the anime fan community, often observable during cosplay contests, where some participants act in a critical or snobby way toward other cosplayers. Respondents within this research also acknowledged that unfavorable attitudes exist toward female cosplayers who ostensibly over-sexualize their cosplay. In interviews with a team of cosplayers, Lin (2016) noted that while cosplaying is often portrayed as fun and a relief from day-to-day stress, cosplayer drama, which included personality conflicts and unmet expectations, was evident among participants. Nestic (2013) describes cosplayer drama ranging from minor insults to long-standing grudges and rumors spread online. Drama, although rarely discussed in academic papers, appears to be widespread, both within the cosplay community in particular and across fandoms in general (e.g., furry fandom: Plante, Reysen, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2016). In fact, fans know drama and its implications well enough that Kane (2017) suggested that a cosplayer can become famous simply by starting drama with other cosplayers. Given the frequency with which drama arises in

interviews with cosplayers in prior qualitative research, there is reason to suspect that cosplaying (vs. non-cosplaying) anime fans may be particularly involved in fandom drama.

There are at least two possible reasons why cosplayers may be more involved in fandom drama than non-cosplaying fans: their greater engagement with the fandom in general, and their having a greater need to belong. Speaking first to the former point, while examining differences in motivations between cosplaying and non-cosplaying anime fans, Reysen and colleagues (in press-a) found that cosplayers rated all of the assessed motivations higher. The researchers interpreted this result as indicating that cosplayers are simply bigger fans of anime than non-cosplayers. Being a bigger fan means greater engagement with the anime community (e.g., watching more anime, having more discussions with others in the fandom, attending more anime conventions). To this end, insofar as cosplayers are more engaged anime fans than non-cosplayers, they will have more opportunities to both start and witness arguments and interpersonal conflicts between fans. Such a relationship would hardly be novel to fan groups, as an analogous relationship between engagement and conflict has been observed in other groups. As just one example, the number of hours an employee works per week is positively correlated with the extent of their interpersonal conflict with coworkers (Frone, 2000).

Speaking to the second reason why cosplayers may be involved in more fandom drama than non-cosplayers, prior research (Reysen et al., in press-a) has found that cosplayers feel a greater sense of belongingness within the fandom than non-cosplayers. Related to this point, psychologists have argued that people have an innate need to belong to groups, which motivates them to seek out and form stable and caring interpersonal connections with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Various lines of research have shown that those with a high need to belong seek out social relationships and aim for harmonious interactions. For example, those with a greater need to belong show selective memory for social events (Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000), are motivated to listen to their friends' emotional disclosure (Hackenbracht & Gasper, 2013), perceive greater consensus of opinions on important issues (Morrison & Matthes, 2011), are more sensitive to social cues (Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004), and cooperate more in a public goods dilemma task (De Cremer & Leonardelli, 2003). While these findings seem to contradict the proposed relationship between the need for belonging and the conflict associated with fandom drama, social rejection, which diminishes a felt need to belong, is associated with anger and aggression (Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006; Richman & Leary, 2009). For example, one's desire to be accepted may be associated with

bullying behavior in adolescent boys and girls (Olthof & Gossens, 2008).

In short, cosplayers are hypothesized to be both more engaged in the fandom and to have a greater need to belong to the anime fandom than non-cosplayers. This, in turn, may motivate them to seek out drama in service of making new friends or defending themselves against social ostracism while giving them ample opportunity to experience drama.

Present Study

The purpose of the present research is two-fold: To examine whether cosplayers are more involved in fandom-based drama than non-cosplayers and, if so, to test two possible mediators of this difference. Anime fans, sampled at an anime convention, completed measures assessing whether they participate in cosplay, the frequency of their interactions with other anime fans, their felt need to belong, and their involvement in anime fandom drama. Based on numerous qualitative reports of drama in the cosplayer community (Bonnichsen, 2011; Hill, 2017; Lin, 2016; Nestic, 2013), we predict that cosplayers will report greater involvement in drama than non-cosplayers. We also predict that the difference between cosplayers and non-cosplayers with regard to drama involvement will be significantly mediated by both frequency of engagement with the fandom and with their felt need to belong. These predictions are grounded in work

showing both that cosplayers are more motivated and involved in the anime fandom than non-cosplayers (Reysen et al., in press-a) which, in turn, should provide them with more opportunities to observe or participate in interpersonal conflicts and research showing that those with a high need to belong—which should include those who are more invested in the group—should also experience greater conflict due (e.g., a greater motivation to forge new social connections, Leary et al., 2006; Richman & Leary, 2009).

Method

Participants and Procedures

Self-identified anime fans ($N = 378$, 51.6% female, 1.4% other sex; $M_{\text{age}} = 25.63$, $SD = 7.46$) were recruited at AnimeFest, an anime fan convention in Dallas, TX. As part of a larger study of the anime fandom, participants responded to whether they participated in cosplay ($n = 168$, 44.4% participated in cosplay) and completed measures assessing their engagement with other anime fans, their felt need to belong, and their involvement in fandom drama. Unless noted otherwise, participants rated items on a 7-point Likert-type response scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

Materials

Engagement with others. To assess engagement, a single item (“This past

year, how often did you talk with friends about anime”) was rated on an 8-point scale, from 0 = *never* to 7 = *many times each day*.

Need to belong. A single item measure of need to belong (“I have a strong ‘need to belong’”) was adopted from Nichols and Webster (2013).

Drama involvement. We constructed a five-item measure (“Drama is part of the anime fandom,” “I have been caught up in fandom drama,” “I can’t seem to avoid drama in the anime fandom,” “When drama unfolds in the anime fandom I tend to watch,” “Drama is part of the fandom as a whole, not just a handful of individual anime fans”) to assess participants’ involvement in fandom drama ($\alpha = .73$).

Results

As a preliminary analysis we first conducted a MANOVA with cosplayer (vs. non-cosplayer) as the independent variable, and engagement, need to belong, and drama involvement as dependent variables. The omnibus test was significant, Wilks’ $\Lambda = .89$, $F(3, 374) = 14.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .106$. As shown in Table 1, cosplayers rated their engagement with others, need to belong, and fandom drama involvement significantly higher than non-cosplayers.

To examine whether engagement with other fans and need to belong mediated the relationship between cosplaying and drama involvement, we next conducted a multiple simultaneous mediator analysis using Preacher and

Hayes' (2008) SPSS macro (95% confidence intervals, bootstrapping with 20,000 iterations). As shown in Figure 1, the sample comparison between cosplayers and non-cosplayers (0 = non-cosplayer, 1 = cosplayer) predicted engagement ($\beta = .30, p < .001$), need to belong ($\beta = .18, p = .001$), and drama involvement ($\beta = .11, p = .029$). Engagement ($\beta = .21, p < .001$) and need to belong ($\beta = .25, p < .001$), in turn, both predicted drama involvement. When engagement and need to belong were included in the model as mediators, the direct association between sample comparison and drama involvement was reduced ($\beta = .01, p = .895$), and the indirect mediational pathway was significant as indicated by the absence of zero within the 95% confidence interval (CI) at the $p < .05$ (two-tailed) level (CI = .170 to .409). Examination of the separate indirect pathways revealed that both engagement (CI = .078 to .275) and need to belong (CI = .047 to .212) were significant mediators of the relationship between cosplaying and drama.

Discussion

The two-fold purpose of the present research was to examine whether cosplayers reported greater involvement in fandom drama compared to non-cosplayers and to test two mediators of this potential relationship. As hypothesized, cosplayers engaged more with other anime fans and were more involved in fandom drama than non-cosplaying anime fans. We also found,

as hypothesized, that cosplayers' greater engagement with the fandom and a greater felt need to belong mediated the relationship between cosplaying and drama. The results suggest that cosplayers, compared to non-cosplaying anime fans, are highly engaged and seek social relationships, both of which predict becoming entangled in interpersonal conflicts.

The present research adds to a growing body of quantitative research examining cosplayers (e.g., Reysen et al., 2018a, 2018b). Qualitative reports (e.g., Bonnicksen, 2011; Hill, 2017; Lin, 2016) have suggested that there is drama within the cosplayer community. Moving beyond anecdote and individual reports, the present research validated these reports with quantitative data from several hundred convention-going anime fans, showing that cosplayers do report greater involvement in drama than non-cosplayers. It is worth noting, however, that the mean rating of drama for both groups was below the midpoint of the scale. As such, while cosplayers may deal with a greater proportion of fandom drama, they do not perceive themselves as involved in excessive or extreme amounts of drama.

Based on past research suggesting that cosplayers were bigger fans of anime and were motivated to participate in the anime fandom primarily to satiate needs for belongingness (Reysen et al., in press-a), we expected cosplayers to report both greater engagement with other fans and a greater need to belong. The results not only supported this

hypothesis, but also found that engagement and need to belong mediate the relationship between cosplay and drama involvement. These findings suggest at least two possible explanations for fandom-based drama, as greater engagement with other fans provides more opportunities for fans to become involved in fandom drama, while highly engaged fans are likely to care deeply about contentious issues within the fandom and feel a greater need to defend themselves and those who hold their position. Given prior research showing that people with a high need to belong often engage in relationship-building behavior (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hackenbracht & Gasper, 2013), cosplayers may paradoxically become involved in drama as a means of forming new social connections or resolving conflicts between others. It is also possible, however, that individuals who desire to be accepted, such as those who have faced social rejection, may be motivated to start new conflicts (Leary et al., 2006). Further research is needed to disentangle whether the cosplayers in the present study are getting involved in intra-fandom conflict as the source of the conflict itself or as a means of trying to put an end to it.

The present research is limited by the measures used, sampling frame, and study design. Speaking to the former point, we used single item scales to measure engagement and need to belong. In future studies, a more nuanced and multifaceted assessment of these

variables may provide additional information about the nature of the factors predicting drama involvement. While the need to belong single item has been validated in prior research (Nichols & Webster, 2013), longer measures would nevertheless be preferable to improve the validity of the measure. Moreover, the drama involvement measure, while tapping into various facets of drama involvement, did not distinguish many possible facets of drama. In the future, the scale should be revised to include items assessing the source of the drama and further elaborating on the participant's role in the drama—as the origin of it, an observer of it, or as an amplifier for it. Speaking to the second major limitation of the present research, the participants in the present study included anime fans from a single convention in the U.S. Given the limited geographic sampling frame, the results may not generalize to anime fans in other cultural settings outside of this single convenience sample. Lastly, the present study was quasi-experimental, and correlational, and, therefore, does not provide causal relationships. Although it would be difficult to randomly assign anime fans to be cosplayers or not, future research may examine whether social ostracism, a method to induce need to belong, enhances willingness to engage in interpersonal conflicts.

To conclude, the present study found that cosplayers were more engaged with other fans, reported a higher need to belong, and were more involved in

fandom drama than non-cosplaying anime fans. The association between cosplaying and fandom drama was significantly mediated by both frequency of engagement with other fans and the need to belong. Given the potential for drama to be both a destructive and ameliorating force within fandoms, future research examining fandom drama, its precursors, and the types and styles of engagement, which may moderate its effects, is warranted.

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Table 1

Comparisons between Cosplayers and Non-Cosplayers on Assessed Variables

Variable	Non-Cosplayer	Cosplayer	$F(1, 376)$	p	η_p^2
Engage	4.50 (1.72)	5.55 (1.68)	35.79	< .001	.087
Belong	3.67 (1.92)	4.35 (1.87)	12.17	.001	.031
Drama	3.31 (1.30)	3.60 (1.29)	4.82	.029	.013

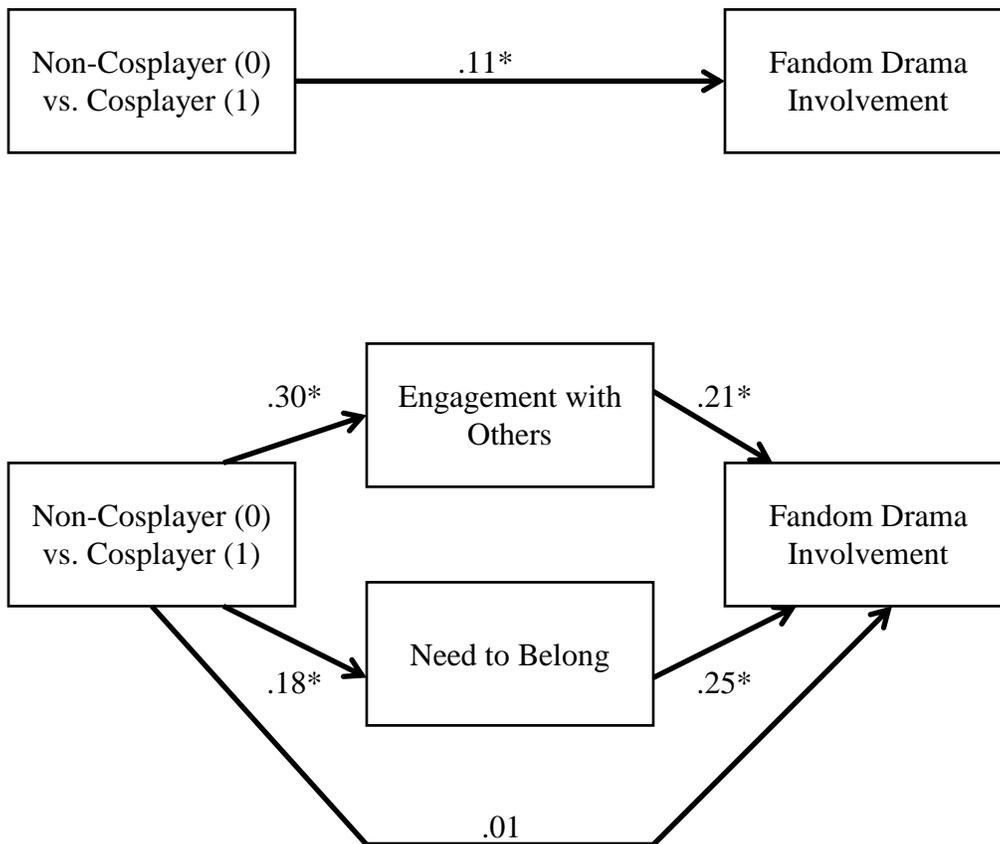


Figure 1: Engagement with other fans and need to belong mediating association between cosplaying and fandom drama involvement.