

*Costume, Culture, and Congruence:  
Identification and Representation of Self via Costume Play*

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**Abstract**

Some assume that “putting on a costume” allows you to dress as someone you are not. In his new photo-ethnographic book *My Costume, Myself: Celebrating Stories of Cosplay and Beyond* (Kirk House, May 2023), Endres argues that putting on a costume allows you to explore existing facets of your personality that often are muted. This essay takes a closer look at that publication and narrows the focus to ask, “In what ways can costumes be used to express and experiment with cultural factors like age, race, gender, sexual identity, body size, levels of ability/disability, and of religion?” Highlighting extant research in the book, those findings, stories, and photos from the publication which focus most on message displays of diversity and inclusion in self-identification are shared. Being Western focused, a brief discussion of global participation is included. Conclusions address the efficacy of costume use in personal and cultural display, and an observation on the balance between “appropriate and appropriation” in costume messages.

Keywords: Identity, Representation, Costume, Cosplay, Age, Gender, Orientation, Crossplay, Drag, Body Size, Disability, Religion, Cospositive

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## Introduction

The headline read: “A Black TikTok was accused of appropriating a Japanese character. Then she was banned.” VICE World News (Montgomery, 2021) tells the story of Mia Rios, a 23-year-old black cosplayer from California, who posted TikTok photos dressed as her favorite character - Asuka Langley Soryu from the popular Japanese anime *Evangelion*. Immediately, negative comments surfaced accusing her of culturally appropriating and fetishizing the character. One user blatantly said they didn’t like African Americans. Another user, claiming to be Japanese, accused her of sexualizing Japanese people. Rios told the reporter that, as a black woman in cosplay, she was made to feel like a “gross, disgusting, ugly monster.” One user, angry that she had “ruined” the character, suggested that Rios kill herself. (Endres, 2023, p. 99)

The paragraph above launches **Chapter 3 – Identity and Representation** – in Endres’ 2023 book *My Costume, Myself: Celebrating Stories of Cosplay and Beyond*. This essay shares segments of that chapter to ask, “In what ways can costumes be used to express and experiment with cultural factors like age, race, gender, sexual identity, body size, levels of ability/disability, and of religion?”



Image 1: Cover of *My Costume, Myself*

The book was published following approximately two years of archival research and numerous in-person (with photo shoots) and electronic interviews conducted across the United States (e.g., California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Minnesota, New York, South Dakota) and Japan. An interview/photo shoot was conducted in Tokyo with Nobuyuki Takahashi, a Japanese writer who coined the term “cosplay” in a 1983 article published in *My Anime* magazine. Takahashi graciously wrote the Foreword to the book.



Image 2: Nobuyuki Takahashi (left) with author Thomas Endres

Summarizing existing research, the book offers the following definition for costume: “*A conscious decision about clothing, recognizable as outside the everyday norm, that an individual wears in specific or public locales, in order to make a statement or send a message*” (Endres, 2023, p. 26). This definition includes not only cosplay as traditionally practiced at comic and fandom events, but other forms of clothing use including historical reenactment, celebrity impersonation, busking (posing for tips in public places), Renaissance Festivals, pin-up attire, personal embellishments to uniforms (as in Roller Derby), and even nudism.

In general, contrary to the introductory example, costume communities tend to be supportive and safe spaces for experimentation and creative expression. But, as Winge (2019) notes, there will always be “negative critiques from some peer Cosplayers when ethnic, gender, racial, and size lines are crossed or challenged” (p. 12). Let’s look at some of the more prominent examples, both positive and negative, of cosplay and cultural representation.

## Age

As a cosplayer in my sixties, this issue of identity is at the forefront of my mind. It is not, however, on the radar for most cosplayers. I’ve never met anyone who cares if a young person dresses as someone older, or vice versa. What little research that exists speaks mainly to the cognitive differences between the generations, and how that might impact our cosplay abilities. Harrington (2018), for example, reports that creativity “rises rapidly as a career begins, peaks about 20 years into a career (typically late 30s to mid 40s) then slowly declines with age.” By age 80, our creativity is allegedly half what it was in our peak (p. 235; citing Simonton, 2016). Admitting it is a generalization, he concludes that “the age-creativity curve appears to persist across cultures and throughout history” (p. 235). (Endres, 2023, p. 100)

## Race

Unlike ageing, the identity issue of race is a major one in Western culture. When it comes to cosplayers of color dressing as lighter-skin characters, the hostility they receive is nothing short of prejudice and racism. “Cosplayers of color are often forced into an uncomfortable space, one where they are confined to either a limited number of characters who look like them who have appeared over the years, or stepping outside their racial group and into a different one, tasked with reimagining the character at the same time” (Liptak, 2022, p. 100). (Endres, 2023, p. 101)

Though darker skinned cosplayers can choose from the same broad pool as everyone else, Kirkpatrick notes that, “For people of color to traverse racial boundaries by cosplaying as white characters is to traverse literature and media that seeks to make us invisible” (2019, [1.2]). And such decisions are often accompanied by backlash. It’s unfortunate, but Western cosplayers often deal with such narrow-minded questions as, “Is it okay to have a *black* Batman?”



Image 3: Black Batman with Catwoman (modeled after 1960s character played by black actress Ertha Kitt), and white Batman

Conversely:

While it should be perfectly acceptable for a cosplayer of color to embody whatever character they want, white cosplayers need to consider impacts due to long-standing systemic inequities. Liptak (2022) concedes that “performing arts has a long and unfortunate history when it comes to race.” Understandably, Liptak’s view is that, even if the person is trying to present an accurate portrayal, the social impact and history of the practice outweighs their good intention. (Endres, 2023, p. 103)

## Gender

Skin tone aside, few areas have received as much attention in cosplay studies as the topic of gender. Of course, the term gender is broad and covers a lot of areas. For most, it refers to one's psychological orientation more so than the sex one is assigned at birth. It is a social construction more than a physical one. (Endres, 2023, p. 105)

Rosenberg and Letamendi (2018) conducted a study of 929 cisgendered cosplayers; that is, cosplayers whose gender identity matches their assigned sex at birth.

They wanted to find out if either sex was more or less extroverted/introverted than the other. In the general population, studies have found, women tend to be more extraverted than men. When it comes to cosplayers, Rosenberg and Letamendi found no difference between the sexes. All fell within the "normal" range between the two extremes. It suggests that female cosplayers tend to be more *introverted* than the general female population, while male cosplayers tend to be more *extraverted* than the general male population. They suggest that women are more accountable to fashion, make-up, and objectifying standards. Those women less extraverted than the norm seek out a safer space to be viewed. Men, on the other hand, are not used to such objectification in the real world. Guys might need to be more extraverted than the norm to feel comfortable dressing up in costume. (Endres, 2023, pp. 105-106)

Beyond that, in both the research and in actual practice, cosplay and gender boundaries begin to blur. Winge (2019) begins by pointing that the cosplayer's "corporeal body presents challenges in maintaining a perceived gender or expected physiques within the hyper-gendered costumed body" (p. 160). In other words, the over-sexualized and/or excessively muscular body types we see in the source material cannot be duplicated in real life. (Endres, 2023, p. 107)

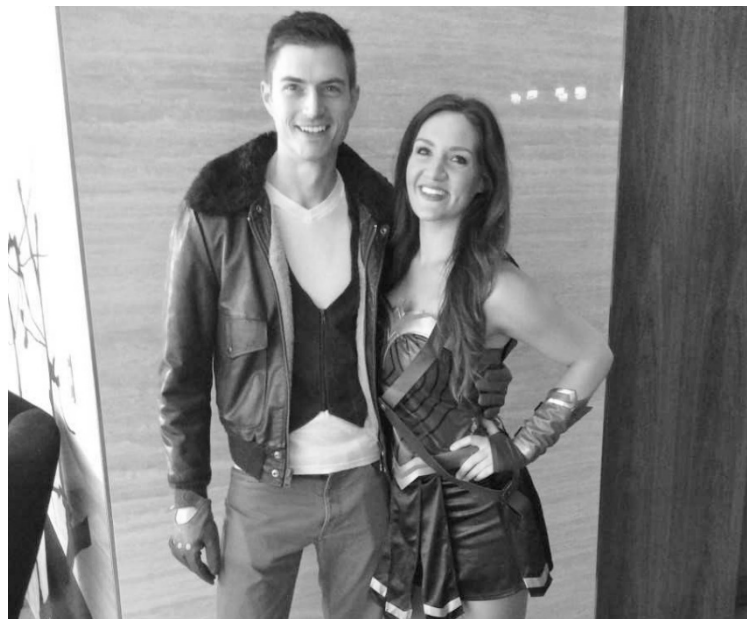


Image 4: Gender-matched portrayal of Wonder Woman and Steve Trevor

A similar caveat comes from the work of Gn (2011) who downplays the impact of cosplay and gender politics. He argues that gender politics is actually a rarity in cosplay, and that



most costume decisions, regardless of gender, are made simply because a person is attracted to a particular character. Beyond that, he points out the gender issue gets blurred with non-human variables like characters being elves or aliens. He says we shouldn't worry about gender portrayal of fantasy figures, since it cannot be understood in human terms. While Gn makes a good point, the book's stance is that gender decisions and portrayals can make a statement, and often go a long way toward making some cosplayers feel at peace with themselves.

## Crossplay

The most popular way to blur gender lines is via *crossplay*, sometimes referred to as gender-bending, in which the character and the cosplayer mix and match gender portrayals. Famous cosplayer Yaya Han (2020) offers that, when men crossplay, it is quite often done as satire and humor within the ranks. When women (and men not doing it to be funny) gender-bend, she claims, it allows one to be “queer-positive and celebrate gender fluidity;” and that the experience is both empowering and freeing (p. 118). (Endres, 2023, p. 111)

Tompkins (2019) argued that cosplay is not controlled by the typical societal discourse about what is or is not permissible for each binary sex category. As such, she believes that crossplay is not “undertaken as a form of parody or gender-exaggeration but rather aims for an authentic transformation of a mundane, gendered body into a cross-gender body of a mediated character” [1.2]. She considers crossplay a healthy subversion of heteronormative bodily and gendered practices, and a “relatively safe way for individuals to experiment with their bodies, gender performativity, and identity” [3.3]. She also argues that, despite advances, we still exist in a patriarchal society. As such, “when a self-identified woman dresses as a male character, this act may arouse less scrutiny than when a self-identified man dresses as a female character” [3.5]. She suggests that going from female-to-male is seen as “moving up the gender hierarchy.” As a result, she discovered, women tend to feel empowered by crossplay, but men feel disempowered.

So, is crossplay political? The answer is...it depends. For some, it is important exploration, and for others it is just another costume. (Endres, 2023, p. 112)



Image 5: Crossplay of Captain America

That would be the case for Carleen Rose, who cosplays as Captain America. Her husband Kenny Bush joins her as Cap's best buddy, Bucky "Winter Soldier" Barnes. Carleen (2022) explains, "I've seen some really amazing gender-bent cosplay on social media, but when I was putting together my Captain America cosplay, it didn't truly occur to me that I was gender-bending." Kenny adds, "I had no particular reaction to Carleen's choice in character, I felt we were just choosing something fun to do together that was away from the normal choices and obvious. I feel anyone can gender-bend a character that they feel embraces them or a character that speaks to them. That is the essence of cosplay." (Endres, 2023, p. 113)

Their rationale is consistent with the research observations that decisions are often based on attachment to the character, and that it is easier for females to cosplay as males than vice versa. Based on my personal observations, this accounts for a significant portion of crossplay encountered at events. The few male-to-female crossovers I've witnessed (e.g., bearded Wonder Woman) are done for humorous effect. *(See how crossplay is handled in drag communities below, in Grace Villa's Costume Conversation).*

### **Sexual Identity**

After attending numerous cosplay and fan events, Clyde (2021) said of the settings, "I have discovered what I call a queer ethos, in which gender fluidity and same-sex romance serve as signifiers of an authentic self, pure love, and a practice of radical inclusivity" (pp. 1050-51). She goes on to commend all participants, even those who do not consider themselves part of the LGBTQ+ community, for their inclusivity and open-mindedness, claiming they hold their own "nominally normative sexuality" in a "noncommittal limbo," identifying as "basically straight" or "coincidentally cisgendered" (p. 1050-1051). That is, they don't make a big deal of their heterosexuality.

This inclusive setting is recognized by Liptak (2022), who notes that cosplay allows one to present themselves as they choose, regardless of the gender or orientation of the character they portray. He admits that it is not perfect, and that trans and non-binary cosplayers are not completely free from discrimination or harassment, but at least "it is an environment in which changing one's appearance is the norm" (p. 103). If you want to test drive an unexplored facet of your personality, a Con is the ideal environment. (Endres, 2023, pp. 115-116)

*(For additional insight, see Jonathan Alexandratos' Costume Conversation below.)*

### **Body Size**

Ours is still a narrow-minded culture, however, and those under or over normative weight ranges often remain a target for ridicule.... Winge (2019) comments that body shaming negatively impacts the cosplay subculture in significant ways. "In most instances, both female and male Cosplayers evaluate primarily female Cosplayers more harshly than their male counterparts" (p. 144). The most disturbing part of that evaluation is that females are a disproportionate target. Winge mentions several satirical memes and comics which suggest that large men can portray characters without criticism, but women are held to higher and different physical standards. She concludes, "There is a distinct difference how females 'of size' (i.e., larger body

types) are treated compared to males with similar body types” (p. 145). (Endres, 2023, pp. 116-117)



Image 6: Plus-size anime cosplay

### Ability/Disability

Individuals with physical and developmental disabilities, ranging from autism and other forms of neurodivergence, to missing limbs and reliance on wheelchairs, frequently find Cons a supportive place.

Despite the prevalence, however, very little research exists on the topic. Instead of relying on outside resources, it seemed best to communicate directly to those cosplayers who are differently abled. (Endres, 2023, pp. 117-118)



Image 7: Wheelchair cosplay (Camire and Khan)



In the book, interviewees include Jenny Schumaker (hearing impairment), Quianna “Ace” Camire (impact of wheelchair; photo, left) and Angèle Khan (visual impairment; photo, right). The most powerful interview was with Samantha Nord (*see Costume Conversation to follow*).

## Religion

Issues addressed in the book include topics like Christian uses of fandom and fan fiction, and the use of fandom to provide a metaphor for faith beliefs, e.g. equating *Star Trek* to organized religion.

## Hijabs

Perhaps the most challenging integration of faith belongs to Muslim cosplayers. In particular, female followers of Islam are required to keep their hair covered in public by wearing a hijab (“veil”). Dachs and Harman (2020), using the acronym HCP to refer to the hijabi cosplayer, provide details about the Hijabi Cosplay Gallery (HCG), an online community with 15,000 members in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. Advice given includes reminders to avoid characters that are too sexy, or are related to non-Muslim mythologies (e.g., angels, demons). Dachs and Harman also report that Muslim cosplayers feel like ambassadors for their religious views. “HCP are not passive recipients of meanings from the popular culture, market or Islamic faith. Rather they are proactive negotiators that assemble signs and symbols to create their self-identity” (p. 46). (Endres, 2023, pp. 122-123)



Image 8: Hijab Cosplay

This is definitely the case for Rawan Bardmi. Originally from Jordan, she has lived in the United States since she was three years old. She has attended Cons for almost a decade, and this day she was adorned in a Hogwarts robe, carrying a wand, and wearing a scarf with the Deathly Hallows. When asked, which comes first, the hijab or the costume, she told me she picks the character first, and then figures out how to meet the headwear requirement. As noted in the research cited above, Rawan feels like an ambassador for her faith. She is happy to bring awareness and understanding to others. “Sometimes people shy away from an event like this, or wearing a costume, because a lot of – especially – superheroes might be scantily clad. I think it’s

important that you can show up and be part of the community, even if you look a little different, or try to find a way to blend in the religious aspects, and still have fun.” (Endres, 2023, pp. 123-124)

### **Sample Excerpts From Costume Conversations**

Each chapter of the book concludes with three in-depth interviews labeled “Costume Conversations.” Thick description accounts are provided for each interviewee. What follows are brief excerpts from the three Costume Conversations at the end of the “Identity and Representation” chapter.

#### ***Costume Conversation: Gracie Villa a.k.a. Jaskier From “The Witcher”***

Rapid City, South Dakota. Having been born in South Dakota myself, I’d been waiting to ask her my first question. *Where* do you go to cosplay? After all, the state of South Dakota, which covers over 77,000 square miles [*approx. 200k square kilometers*], has a population less than 900,000. Compared to my interviews with New Yorkers (8.5 million people in 306 square miles [*approx. 800 square kilometers*]), one can only assume the opportunities are few and far between. “It is not easy, I can tell you that much,” Gracie exclaims. If cosplay events are a challenge to find, imagine how difficult it can be to exercise her true passion – drag. Gracie is an avid drag *king* (female who does male impersonation). Gracie then fills me in on some of the finer points about drag outfits. She wears a binder (currently worn with her Jaskier costume) to flatten her breasts, and a packer to fill out her shorts. “Drag queens tuck and drag kings pack.”

While she loves doing both cosplay and drag, she recognizes significant differences between the two. “Cosplay is something I do for fun. Drag is more of a serious matter at times. Drag kings are a lot newer than drag queens, so I feel like drag kings have something they need to prove.” Fortunately for drag king Gracie, both the drag and cosplay communities have reacted positively to her gender play. Both activities, Gracie believes, are excellent environments to explore gender boundaries. She knows that drag was easier for her since she’d already been accustomed to male cosplay. But in cosplay, Gracie also enjoys wearing the frilly Lolita costumes. How does she decide? “It’s honestly what I feel like in the morning. I wake up, ‘Okay, am I going to be more feminine today, or am I going to be more masculine?’” On that topic, Gracie admits that, on the gender identity scale, she is a bit of a chameleon. “I don’t identify as non-binary, to just throw that out there; it really depends on who I’m with.”

I asked Gracie if she had anything else to add. She did. “One of the biggest things with me is Cosplay Is Not Consent. I cannot say it enough. Always ask before you take pictures. You never know what someone is running from, or trying to protect themselves from. It’s like all the consent that you have to sign to take pictures of your children. Do the same at a convention. Always ask. And if they say no, don’t be a butt about it. Cosplay is for everyone. Cosplay is not consent. Don’t be a jerk.” (Endres, 2023, pp. 127-133)



Image 9: Gracie Villa

### ***Costume Conversation: Jonathan Alexandratos a.k.a. Non-binary Star Fleet***

Non-binary storyteller Jonathan Alexandratos and their partner, Tracy Bealer, are no strangers to comic cons and fandom. Both currently teach literature and culture courses at their respective universities in New York, where Jonathan is also a playwright and renowned authority on vintage toys.

To begin, I ask Jonathan to explain their costume. It starts with a red *Star Trek: The Next Generation (TNG)* skant (a short-sleeve tunic akin to a mini-dress), black pleather pants, gold go-go boots, and a “non-binary bunny communicator pin.” The outfit is important to them because “it plays with gender in a way that I think is really fun and important and validating. I was reading things about the *Star Trek* skant specifically, and how it’s unisex. That was actually a liberating view - a utopian future where people are able to wear clothing that may clash with the cis heteronormativity of now. We can maybe make that utopia now, if we just start to empower people to wear what they want to wear, whether or not it goes with socially constructed gender norms. That let me wear what I am on the inside, which is someone who gets a lot of joy from expressing their gender in a way that they were not raised to, but in a way that feels very natural.”

“From there,” Jonathan continues, “it was just the question of, how do I incorporate that into my day-to-day? Costume is like the reference, and the day-to-day is like, ‘Well, I can’t be that *extra*, so I’ll just take little bits of that; little wisps, little pieces of the cosplay, and just carry that with me, and use that for strength and courage.’”

Jonathan has come to terms with those voices from the past, and is confident in the face of other resistance. Most important, they understand the need for advocacy. “With younger folks I’ve talked to, especially younger non-binary folks, in many cases I’m the first adult they have seen that has validated non-binary identities. And that means a lot to them, at least as far as what I’m told. Because now, that person has a significantly reduced chance of suicide, that person has a significantly reduced chance of negative self-talk, and all those things that can happen when you’re growing, when you’re a teenager, and you’re trying to figure out where you place yourself in this world of adults. And that gives me a lot of happiness to think about that.” (Endres, 2023, pp. 134-140)



Image 10: Jonathan Alexandratos

### ***Costume Conversation: Samantha Nord a.k.a. Lady Deadpool and Lady Loki***

Sam has Holt-Oram Syndrome. Because the congenital disorder often includes both limb disfigurements and corresponding heart ailments, it is more commonly referred to as Heart Hand Syndrome. A rare disorder, occurring in less than 1 in 100,000 births, Sam is frequently left feeling alone with her health issues. “There are accommodations that I use in the bathroom that are not common in the United States. I only recently found out that bidets are a lifesaver for me. People are finally starting to get it, but they’re not common over here, and I had no idea how much that would be helpful and useful for me, and how much pain and trauma that would have saved me as a little kid growing up.”

At this time, her primary costumes are the two she brought along: Lady Loki and Lady Deadpool. Lady Loki, she reminds me, is simply Loki. “Loki’s character is



gender-fluid, both in the comics and the historical mythologies. And they're a shapeshifter, so having short arms shouldn't be an issue. For some people it might be, but it shouldn't be, because the character *could* conceivably have short arms."

As for Lady Deadpool, her reasoning is equally convincing. "Deadpool is a fantastic representative or symbol for the disabled community. It's easier to fit the canon of a character like Deadpool, who regenerates, when you have anatomically different features, like in my case, shorter arms." Please notice in the photo of Sam as Lady Deadpool, she is wearing a pair of severed arms at her waist. Thus, you are given the distinct impression that her arms are now regenerating back out of her shoulders. "The Deadpool characters represent disability in a very unique way. They are disabled with the ability to be fully capable. You are presenting that full capability and the disability at the same time. The fact that they are regenerating characters means that, if you are missing limbs, or you're in a wheelchair, it still fits the character – because the character could be healing from an injury or from a battle. For me, I guess, I like being perceived and accepted in that way. It's a kind of win when it happens. And I got that positive response the first time I put on Lady Deadpool." Sam pauses after this sentence, and then adds the most moving words I heard in any of my interviews. "I kind of felt like I fit somewhere, in a way like I'd never felt like I fit anywhere else." (Endres, 2023, pp. 141-147)



Image 11: Samantha Nord as Lady Loki (left) and Lady Deadpool

## Conclusions

As noted, as a majority of the research and interviews come from the United States, these are Western-centric views. The Appendix to the book examines international studies from a



variety of countries including Australia, China, Czech Republic, Greece, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, South Korea, Russia, and Taiwan. There is no one-size-fits-all conclusion, as results ranged from very broad-minded (e.g. Australia - “Cultural, ethnic, and gendered performativity is celebrated rather than undermined,” Hjorth, 2009, p. 23) to more conservative outlooks (e.g. Indonesia - cosplayers “are still considered as clowns in the community and their own friends,” Erningsih, 2019, p. 32). Though quite generalized, it appears that questions of race are less worrisome around the globe. Usually, that is because a majority of attendees at events come from similar ethnic backgrounds. In a study of cosplay in Malaysia, Yamato (2020) notes that “ethnicity appears not to be very important” (9.3). Why? Because everyone is Malaysian. Thus, the answer to the question, “Is it okay to have a *Malaysian* Batman?” in Malaysia is, of course it’s okay. And expected. That said, Asian cosplayers only rarely dress up in Western costumes. They tend to select Asian characters, not just because they are close at hand, but also based upon “axiomatic, or at least familiar, reference points” (Mountfort, Peirson-Smith, and Geczy, 2019, p. 151). While race is generally a non-issue, portrayals of gender and sexuality may become hot topics. Countries characterized by religious conservatism, for example, are less likely to see a great deal of gender flexibility.

From a Western perspective, it may seem that, once you get past the nay-sayers, one is free to dress however they wish. The book – and thus this essay – argues for that conclusion. With one proviso. Pay attention to the question “appropriate or appropriation?” If your costume choice ventures into territory outside your age range, body size, biological sex, skin color, and the like, double check to make sure you are not co-opting or making a caricature of someone else’s culture.

For example, look at the photo of the three Muslim Indonesian women wearing rented kimonos (to match their hijabs) and posing outside a Buddhist temple in Tokyo. I asked my wife, who is Japanese, if this was acceptable. She enthusiastically defended the women, arguing that they were learning about her culture and being respectful of it. I then asked, what if the woman in the rental kimono had a big blond wig, and was hiking the hem up to show off her fish-net stockings and stiletto heels? Sexy kimono? That, she informed me, would not be appropriate.



Image 12: Muslim women in kimonos at Buddhist temple

With that distinction in mind, here is how the chapter on Identity and Representation ends:

Life is not perfect in cosplay culture but, all things considered, it is an open and supportive community. More and more Cons are embracing the *cospositive* movement, which embraces participants of all demographics and identities. Liptak (2022) laments that slut-shaming or sexual harassment, “an internalized misogyny that seeks to control women’s behavior” (p. 111), still exists – but that’s sadly true worldwide. It is not endemic to Cons. We still have a way to go, but things in cosplay seem to be heading in the right direction.

While superheroes might have a secret identity, the cosplayer of today need not keep their identities hidden. The cosplay community is by and large an inclusive one. Stories of hate and harassment still exist, but the trajectory of cospositivity moves ever upward. As long as you’ve been thoughtful about portrayals, you can cosplay as whoever you want. No matter how old you are, the color of your skin, the gender that you are - or want to be - or wish to portray, whatever your body size, your level of ability or disability, or the faith that you practice, you will be welcomed here. Yes, haters gonna hate but, with any luck, those negative voices will diminish as the collective cheers of support grow in celebration of the multiple identities present. (Endres, 2023, pp. 125-125)

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