Transnational Girlhood in the Malaysian Cosplay Scene: Combining Islamic Identity and Japanese Cosplay

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The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Girlhood in Malaysia is visibly influenced by Japanese popular culture, particularly among Muslim girls who creatively integrate hijabs into their cosplay costumes. The anime and manga sphere has been widely embraced by Malaysians across genders and ethnicities. However, for Muslim girls, cosplaying in hijab often elicits mixed reactions within both cosplay communities and broader society, where norms of modesty are closely linked to religious and social expectations. This study investigates how Malaysian Muslim girls embody their identities at the intersection of Japanese cosplay culture and the religious and social norms of Malaysia, and how these negotiations are manifested in practice. Through hijabi cosplay, Malaysian Muslim girls reimagine Japanese femininity and perform identity within the bounds of faith and culture. Data were collected through interviews with and Instagram posts of six Malaysian hijabi cosplayers. Critical discourse analysis was used to examine how participants articulate identity and creative practice in the interviews. The findings indicate that, rather than striving for exact replication, participants prioritise religious considerations and engage in creative reinterpretations that reflect both Islamic values and Japanese aesthetic forms. The physical embodiment of cosplay is central to understanding how identity is translated (or mistranslated) into material expression. These experiences illuminate ongoing – and never resolvable – debates within the hijabi cosplay community regarding physical representation, identity, and religious boundaries.

Keywords: performativity, transnational, hijab, cosplay, Cool Japan

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Introduction

Japanese cultural influence has increased among Malaysians since the 1980s. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan (METI) established the Cool Japan Fund in 2013 to advance business development under the Cool Japan Initiative (Tamaki, 2019). Cool Japan includes Japanese food, fashion, and arguably one of its biggest highlights: Manga and anime (Condry, 2009; Tamaki, 2019). The anime and manga scene (animanga) has seen a fast-increase in popularity among Malaysians, with CosPlay-FUN Malaysia posting 46 scheduled events in 2013 (Yamato, 2016). Animanga conferences naturally bring us to cosplay as a participatory culture of fans (Jenkins, 2003). Jenkins asserted that fans, who are also consumers, take part in the "creation and distribution of media narratives" (2003, p. 554). In this light, cosplay is a form of participatory culture since fans dress up as anime characters, in which the cosplayer themself can choose how to reinterpret the characters they are cosplaying.

Cosplay is a term that fuses "costume" and "play" or "role-play", and is "used to describe the activities of dressing and acting as characters from *manga* (Japanese comics), *anime* (cartoon animation), *tokusatsu* (special-effect movies or television shows), video games, science fiction/sci-fi, and music groups" (Rahman et al., 2012, p. 318). However, there is a group within the cosplay community that is unlike the majority: These cosplayers, who are usually Muslim girls, do not cosplay with wigs, instead opting to cosplay with their hijabs. They are known as "hijabi cosplayers". Through modifying their costumes and reimagining their favourite characters, hijabi cosplayers construct a hybrid identity that merges elements of religious tradition with popular culture (Sari et al., 2025, p. 26; Venus, 2017).

Background

The hijab's primary role carries religious meaning, but in Malaysia it has shown to be part of broader cultural identity and aesthetic expression. Hassim and Khalid (2015) observed a blending of modesty and modernity within the Malaysian Muslim community with regards to the hijab, as noted through their research on a magazine called "Hijabista". Hijabista caters mostly to urban Muslim women and represents Muslim fashion. Even the name of the magazine itself is a mix of two words: "hijab" and "fashionista", proving that the hijab can be fashionable and trendy instead of just signifying piety. This is evident in Hochel's (2013)'s interviews with Malaysian Muslim women, in which women who veil, women who do not veil, and women who sometimes veil discuss what veiling means to them both from a religious and social standpoint.

The adoption of cosplay by young female Malay Muslim in many ways is an extension of this blend of piety and personal expression. Cosplay is a global practice that allows participants to explore identities and aesthetics, stepping into different characters while still reflecting who they are. With the continuous rise of Japan's cultural influence, a larger audience can access cosplay content online across physical state boundaries. When hijabi girls enter spaces like cosplay (which originates from Japanese popular culture), they bring a layered understanding of identity with them. Since Japanese and Malaysian Muslim cultures are different, navigating through these specificities while incorporating the art form of cosplaying Japanese characters requires more insight into the sensitivities of identities.

My central research question is: How does a Malaysian Muslim girl negotiate and embody her identity at the intersection of Japanese cosplay culture and the religious and social rules of Malaysia? This question opens discussions on performativity and cultural navigation, all

happening within a digital, globalized space dominated by girls. The thesis statement of this chapter is: "Through hijabi cosplay, Malaysian Muslim girls reimagine Japanese femininity and perform identity within the bounds of faith and culture".

Literature Review

This research draws from three key frameworks: Transnational girlhood, gender performativity, and Cool Japan.

Transnational Girlhood

Transnational girlhood is discussed by Catherine Vanner (2019). Transnational feminism, or transnational girlhood, is the culmination of decades of feminism and girl studies. According to Vanner (2019), "A transnational person, action, or idea is connected to various nation-states and contributes to all these spaces, highlighting an experience of mobility across states while recognizing the ongoing power of national borders" (p. 116). Transnational feminism came out of global feminist views that usually only diffuse one dimension of feminism, which does not cover the enormity of feminism in the case of those who are non-Western, Third World communities. In short, international feminism favours "universalized models of women's liberation that embraced Western concepts of individuality and modernity" (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Mendoza, 2002; Vanner, 2019, p. 117). This has trickled down into girlhood studies, especially since girlhood studies navigate a tension between highlighting girls' agency and acknowledging the structural and systemic forces that limit it (Jiwani et al., 2006).

The limitations of transnational girlhood studies become clear when examining contexts like Indonesia. Marissa Saraswati (2018) argues that Indonesian girls are often absent from girlhood studies because they are either desexualized as children or excluded from frameworks centred on Western experiences. This exclusion stems from stereotypes that exoticize Global South girls and from Western-centric narratives of "girl power" that fail to reflect local realities.

Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity was introduced in their book *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which they posited that gender is not a fixed category. Butler wrote:

> … 'the body' appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself… But 'the body' is itself a construction, as are the myriad 'bodies' that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender… How do we reconceive the body no longer as a passive medium or instrument awaiting the enlivening capacity of a distinctly immaterial will? (Butler, 1990, p. 12)

This passage is highlighted to show how the body is viewed in relation to gender performativity. Butler questions the notion of the body as a neutral or natural vessel that merely reflects identity. Butler contends that the body is not an empty canvas upon which meaning is inscribed; rather, it gains social intelligibility through the repeated enactment of cultural and social norms, especially those concerning gender. In essence, the body acquires significance only through gendered performance, which renders it recognizable and comprehensible within society.

Butler wrote that gender is a continuous process that does not have an origin nor an end (Butler, 1990; Salih, 2002). What is certain is that our bodies have been gendered since the beginning of their social existence, and there is no existence outside the social realm (Salih, 2002, p. 62).

Cool Japan and Kawaii Aesthetics

Cool Japan, as a governmental initiative to maintain its presence and influence on the international stage: "Rather than being confined to food, anime and pop culture, it has the potential for unlimited expansion to encompass a variety of fields, reflecting changing global interests" (Cabinet Office, n.d.). After World War II, when Japan had to reinvent their image from a country that committed many acts of terror, they shifted from a masculine to a feminine image, as evident by its now-famous kawaii culture. Amanda Azzi calls this "an infantilized, robotized form of femininity through animanga" (2021, p. 6). In addition, the usage of large eyes in animanga becomes a telling sign of the love-hate relationship Japan has with the West: "This singular adoption of large eyes represents both a mockery and admiration of Western eye shapes to equally challenge their discriminatory practices and content with broadly imposed European beauty standards" (ibid., p. 13).

In another case, Miller (2011) discusses how Cool Japan commodifies femininity and patriarchal control under the guise of cultural promotion. By highlighting how the government uses *kawaii* as a marketing tool, it reduces complex forms of girl culture into superficial, male-defined images of idealized femininity. These representations exploit Japanese girls' images for global consumption and commercial gain. However, there are groups of girls who subversively engage with *kawaii* tropes, attempting to challenge gender norms and reclaim the aesthetics' power. Miller contends that Cool Japan's *otaku*-driven ethos continues a historical pattern of female objectification, masking patriarchal ideologies behind the facade of national branding and cultural coolness.

Gap in Research

It is evident that while cosplay has been studied repeatedly, most focus on hijab cosplay overseas in a Western-centric society. For example, Gittinger (2018)'s research drew from hijabi girls all around the world, with mention of the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom. Even though Gittinger used Butler's theory of gender performativity as well, she looked more towards the physical, real-body performativity rather than the digital one. In a way, this chapter will then attempt to fill in the spaces between these two studies to map out how the digital girl body is being performed through hijab cosplay online.

As mentioned in the literature review section, hijab cosplay has also been studied in Southeast Asia, but mainly in Indonesia. In Malaysia, the cosplay scene has been studied by Eriko Yamato (2016, 2020) in a broad way that encompasses not just cosplay, but also Japanese anime fandom. As such, there is still a gap in research on Malaysian hijab cosplay to understand this phenomenon from a local standpoint. The intersection of Japanese and Malaysian Muslim cultures demonstrates how transnationality operates through the fusion and reinterpretation of cultural elements, producing a distinct subculture of girlhood, especially online. Furthermore, within this space, the distinction between performance and performativity becomes crucial, as performativity increasingly defines the embodiment of hijabi cosplay identity.

Methodology

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) by Fairclough (1995) explores how language reflects and reinforces power and ideology in contemporary capitalistic society. It views power not only as unequal relationships between speakers but also as control over how texts are created, circulated, and understood within specific social contexts. Through vocabulary, grammar, metaphors, and genre, language can promote dominant worldviews while marginalizing others. In integrating discourse analysis with social analysis, CDA combines three frameworks: analysis of discursive occurrences as examples of sociocultural practice, analysis of discourse practice (text production, distribution, and consumption), and analysis of (spoken or written) language texts (Fairclough, 1995, p. 2). Through these analyses, CDA shows how discourse both maintains and challenges social hierarchies, especially during periods of cultural and economic change. This approach allowed me to explore how these girls use language to construct ideas of self and belonging.

For this chapter, online interviews were utilized to grasp a more detailed picture of hijab cosplay. Six hijabi cosplayers were chosen from Instagram, where they posted their cosplays on their respective accounts. The interviews took place over Microsoft Teams, and the data were analysed using CDA. These data bring insight into how identity is both performed and perceived in digital spaces.

Findings

Table 1
Participant's Preferred Name, Age, and Duration of Cosplaying

Participant	Age	How many years they have been cosplaying
Rainy	24	8
Hana	23	3
S	28	3–4
Anon	26	5
Kaida	24	3–4
Luna	33	3

The Malaysian Muslim girls mentioned how their religious identity is the most important aspect they hold on to, despite all of them being very active and passionate about Japanese cultural influence. All of them started their cosplay journey wearing the hijab, which means that none of them has experienced cosplaying in public *without* the hijab.

There were a few words that kept coming up in the interviews. One of them was "comfort" or "comfortable" and is usually used when discussing their choice of clothing in cosplay, or the poses they strike in their photos. Comfort here does not just mean a state of physical ease; instead, it also encompasses the emotions tied to their religious and cultural upbringing and values:

> Luna: Like when I think about cosplay, will this character – Will I be able to wear this? Will I be **comfortable** in this? As in **comfortable** for me physically and **comfortable** for, you know, for my belief – Like will I be **comfortable** wearing this?

Another common word is "modesty". However, one girl, Anonymous, mentioned it twelve times in one interview. She is ethnically Indian but has been a Muslim since birth. She is also the only interviewee who does not don the hijab that mimics the hair of the characters she cosplays. The fullest extent she has gone to cosplay with regards to the hijab is to match the colour of it to the character's hair colour.

> Anonymous: (Directly after her quote above) But in terms of, yeah, in terms of my **modesty**, that hasn't changed… I've always, like, made sure whatever I'm wearing, it's always still **modest**.

When discussing the reactions of their family members and of the wider animanga fan communities, the interviewees brought up their struggles and past experiences that are slightly more negative. All of them recounted mixed reactions from their family members upon discovering the girls' love for cosplay, using phrases such as "doesn't really understand", "Japanese is not our culture", "in the beginning they were a bit sceptical", and "[my mom] was so confused". Most of the girls would slowly gain some level of support from their parents and siblings, especially after reassuring them that they still practice Islamic religious teachings even in cosplay, while Rainy is the only one whose family members were still against her cosplaying despite repeated attempts to convince them that she has not abandoned her religion and culture. As a result, Rainy had to keep her cosplay a secret from her mother for around three years after she found out.

When asked about the progression of hijab cosplay, they mentioned some of the body parts that are difficult to cover up. These included the thighs and bosoms, and some interviewees brought up specific characters they initially wanted to cosplay but decided not to due to the nature of the character being too sexually portrayed in its original Japanese media. However, the exposure of most female characters did not deter some interviewees, as they found creative ways to cosplay the characters without compromising their own personal religious values. One interesting part of the interviews were when I asked them their opinions on two aspects: cross-dressing, and skin-coloured innerwear. Most of them rejected cross-dressing except for Anonymous, while all of them did not agree with donning on skin-coloured innerwear except for Kaida.

Table 2

Participants With the Number of Times They Used Words Relating to "Comfort" and "Modest", As Well as Their Takes on Cross-Dressing and Skin-Coloured Innerwear

Participant	"Comfortable/comfort"	"Modest/modesty/modestly"	Cross-dressing	Skin-coloured innerwear
Rainy	2	0	Used to cross-dress, but archived post and now appreciates gender-bending more	Believes that it's better to avoid because from afar, innerwear that may not be your skin-tone might still be mistaken as you showing your skin if it's skin-coloured
Hana	5	3	Reject (mentioned not supporting a Muslim cosplayer for cross-dressing, but didn't "attack" her or dm her)	Doesn't wear them (opting for black or white)
S	1	0	Used to cross-dress, but now will rethink her cosplay choices (I assume she now prefers not to cross-dress)	Wear black and white
Anon	4	12	Doesn't see a big issue with it because she still wears the hijab	Wear black and white, believe skin-coloured inner isn't allowed in Islam
Kaida	1	0	Doesn't cross-dress (gender-bent Nanami)	Wears them even in her daily life, so she thinks it's ok to wear them in cosplay too (but the colour of the innerwear is different from her actual skin tone) Uses the word "disrespectful" when talking about how other hijabi cosplayers view her with regards to Islam

Luna	6	0	Decides to "stay away" from it because she still has a lot to learn about Islam and cannot say whether it is totally okay to cross-dress or not ("I don't feel strongly about it")	Favours white-coloured inners (doesn't wear skin-coloured ones)
Total	16	15		

Discussion

Performance Versus Performativity in Hijabi Cosplay

It is necessary to first distinguish between performance and performativity, both from the perspective of cosplay and within the framework of girlhood. A performance, according to Butler, is an act of playing or assuming a role. This understanding presupposes a subject who exists prior to the act, and this subject is the one who performs. Performance, therefore, can be regarded as an individualistic expression, centred on the subject's unique experience. This is evident in the observations above, where each interviewee showcases a distinct interpretation of hijab cosplay. Yet, as several interviewees acknowledged the influence of other hijabi cosplayers as references or inspirations, it becomes apparent that cosplay performance also operates within a collective dimension. It is not solely an individual act but one embedded within a communal network of shared practices, aesthetics, and discourses.

This is where performativity becomes crucial. Performativity, as Butler theorizes, refers to the repetition of socially encoded habits, gestures, and rituals through which identity is constituted rather than merely expressed. It does not presuppose a pre-existing subject; rather, the subject emerges through the reiteration of acts. When we look at the embodied practice of veiling in Islamic cultural contexts, it can be understood that the individual does not exist as an independent subject before the act of veiling. Rather, it is through the repeated religious and cultural practice of wearing the veil that the person's identity is formed and shaped. Hijab cosplay, then, may be understood as an extension of this process: a performative effect of veiling that affirms Butler's argument that "you as a subject do not create or cause institutions, discourses and practices, but they create or cause you by determining your sex, sexuality and gender" (Salih, 2002, p. 10). In this sense, hijab cosplay emerges from the interaction between the religious and cultural meanings of veiling and the performative practices of fandom. Through this process, the hijab functions as a symbol of identity and as a medium through which that identity is performed.

The distinction between performance and performativity is further reflected in the evolving nature of the interviewees' cosplay practices. Both Rainy and S, for example, described having previously cosplayed male characters directly, but later chose to "gender bend" these portrayals. This shift underscores that hijab cosplay is not a static or fixed identity; rather, it is a fluid and ongoing process of negotiation. It does not strictly reproduce the original character's

behaviours, costumes, or gestures but instead integrates elements of the cosplayer's own identity and subjectivity. As such, hijab cosplay constitutes a continuous process through which cosplayers navigate personal comfort, modesty, and creative expression.

Rainy herself articulated this evolution, stating that she is becoming "more open" to liberal interpretations of cosplay and hijab cosplay. She reflected that while she once adhered rigidly to certain beliefs, "[people's] views change", and she now approaches character selection with greater flexibility rather than strict boundaries. This does not suggest a complete transformation in how she embodies the performativity of hijab cosplay but rather demonstrates that the practice itself resists fixed categorization. While individual interpretation remains central, hijab cosplay is sustained and shaped by a broader community of practitioners whose shared practices continuously redefine its contours.

Japanese Femininity and the Embodiment of Girlhood

Japanese anime frequently constructs femininity along two dominant archetypes: the *kawaii* girl, characterized by youthfulness and cuteness; and the mature, hyper-feminine woman, defined by sexual allure and bodily display. In examining the interviewees' interpretations of these gendered portrayals, most expressed a preference for embodying the *kawaii* aesthetic over the more overtly sexualized form of femininity. Characters such as Nezuko Kamado and Anya Forger, both canonically depicted as young girls, are often reinterpreted by the cosplayers through playful makeup, expressive poses, and exaggerated facial features that accentuate a sense of girlish innocence. The use of visual markers such as blush lines and enlarged eye effects further exemplifies their efforts to reproduce this stylized version of Japanese *kawaii* aesthetics.

It is noteworthy, however, that Nezuko's character also possesses an alternate demon form that represents a more adult embodiment of femininity, marked by physical maturity and accentuated curves (exposed cleavage). Nezuko represents a dual embodiment of Japanese femininity, encompassing both ends of the gendered spectrum: the *kawaii* innocence associated with young girls and the sensual, adult femininity often expressed through the display of the female body. This sexual element is something that hijabi cosplayers consciously avoid or reinterpret in their own portrayals to align with modesty norms and cultural sensibilities. They choose to portray Nezuko in her human form, emphasizing the *kawaii* dimension of her character rather than the sexualized aspects of her demon persona.

In Malaysia, femininity is conventionally framed through modesty, restraint, and moral propriety; thus, certain Japanese portrayals of femininity may appear incompatible or uncomfortable for hijabi cosplayers to embody. Hana, for instance, recounted that her parents initially disapproved of her participation in cosplay, believing that Japanese culture was "not their culture" and fearing that immersion in it might exert a negative influence on her values.

Hijabi cosplayers navigate these cultural and ideological tensions by reconfiguring the aesthetics of femininity within their performances. Rather than emphasizing sexuality or bodily display, they often redirect attention toward expressions of maturity, confidence, or emotional depth through their poses and character interpretation. This negotiation is also evident in their costume adaptations, where modest redesigns replace revealing elements from the original character designs. Through such reinterpretations, they construct a hybridized form of girlhood: One that synthesizes Malaysian Muslim notions of modest femininity with the globalized visual culture of Japanese cosplay.

Consequently, the form of girlhood performed by hijabi cosplayers in this study aligns more closely with the aesthetics of *kawaii*, associated with youthfulness and approachability, rather than with the mature or overtly sexualized femininity prevalent in mainstream Japanese media. Through the selective adaptation of *kawaii* aesthetics, these cosplayers produce a distinct, localized articulation of girlhood that bridges global pop-cultural imagery with Malaysian Muslim sensibilities.

Digital editing skills play a crucial role in enhancing and rearticulating these localized interpretations of Japanese femininity. Given that the *kawaii* aesthetic in animanga is often conveyed through visual effects and exaggerations that are difficult to replicate in real life, hijabi cosplayers frequently employ digital tools to reproduce or simulate these stylistic features. Through photo and video editing, they extend the expressive possibilities of makeup and posing, enabling a mediated performance of *kawaii* that bridges the visual language of animanga with the material and cultural constraints of lived embodiment.

The Sensitivity of the Female Body

Cosplay is an artform that is deeply body conscious. It is all about embodiment: How the body is dressed, posed, and seen. For hijabi cosplayers, this becomes a careful balancing act. They're visible online, often to large audiences, yet they're conscious of boundaries around exposure, modesty and anonymity.

For many hijabi cosplayers, cross-dressing and costume choices become key points of negotiation. Most avoid fully cross-dressing, instead reinterpreting male characters in ways that still retain a feminine presence. Similarly, skin-coloured innerwear is often rejected, as it can give the illusion of exposure; black or white layers are preferred instead. These creative decisions reveal how embodiment in cosplay is both a moral and aesthetic balancing act, carefully shaped by cultural and social values. This reflects how agency and self-expression can exist within, not despite, social expectations.

In addition, it is important to note that even the sensitivities are constantly changing within each interviewees' view: Some things may have been more acceptable in the past, but now they try to avoid it for fear of crossing boundaries set by their religious and cultural background. This is evident in Rainy's and S's account on cross-dressing, where they used to cross-dress but decided not to anymore. On the other hand, Anonymous mentioned that she does not feel any strong rejection towards cosplaying in a masculine way, because she still dons the hijab. We will study this point further in the next section on the fluidity of the hijab as symbol, but it also showcases that as sensitive it is to show, and at the same time, hide, the female body, sometimes the body is symbolically reduced to the presence of the hijab, which may then uproot the sensitivity of the female body based on Anonymous' standpoint.

As alteration is a crucial step in embodying performativity for hijabi cosplayers, there lies a problem with over-alteration. To give an example, Xilonen, a character from the game *Genshin Impact*, wears an outfit that shows a lot of skin. Hijabi cosplayers who are cosplaying her go through vigorous changes in the outfit to fit their own interpretation in a modest way.

Hana, one of my interviewees who experienced this, mentioned it being her hardest cosplay because of the difficulty in having to almost totally alter the outfit. In her research of Xilonen's hijab cosplay aesthetics, she highlighted another cosplayer's interpretation of Xilonen as unrecognizable. The result of performativity of the other cosplayer here has failed to a certain

extent because Hana doesn't identify with it despite taking on a similar identity. According to Butler, performativity is bound to fail because it is a repetition of something unstable, which in this case is Malaysian-Muslim girlhood within the cosplay context.

The skin tone is one of the focal points in the interview with Anonymous and Hana. They both mention being more tanned-skin, which makes cosplaying fair-skinned characters risky in the sense that it invites unwanted criticism on the colour of their skin from others. Hana decided to ignore hate comments targeted at her skin tone because she did her best and "wants to be happy" with her cosplay. Similarly, Anonymous recounted an experience in which she had a friend who recommended only dark-skinned characters for her to cosplay because she should cosplay as "someone who looks like her". The girl's body is in many ways scrutinized not just for the size and shape, but also for the colour of their skin. In short, everything about the girl's body is sensitive, and cosplay has also shown a side in which the body is always put in the spotlight.

The Fluidity of the Hijab as Symbol and Style, and the Omnipresence of Makeup

The hijab in hijab cosplay takes on new meaning. In daily life, it may symbolize faith or belonging within the Malaysian context. However, in cosplay, it becomes part of the character design itself, integrated into the visual aesthetic rather than placed on top of it. This distinguishes the normal cosplay wig with that of the hijab, because while the wig comes with the costume of the cosplay as one package, the hijab is initially not associated with the costume yet is reworked to be integrated into the cosplay as seamlessly as possible. This flexibility shows how the hijab operates as both symbol and style. It's adaptable and expressive, acting as a bridge between Malaysian and Japanese cultural worlds. Thus, the hijab becomes part of the character, not separate from it. By reimagining characters through the hijab, these cosplayers also subtly reshape the representation of Muslim women in global fandom, expanding what cosplay can look like.

What's interesting here is the difference in how certain forms of expression are accepted or rejected. For instance, skin-coloured innerwear is often seen as inappropriate because it's thought to simulate exposure. Yet, styling the hijab to look like hair is accepted, even celebrated, as a creative choice by the cosplayers. This shows that while the hijab can become a space where faith and creativity coexist, total creative freedom is, and can still be, bounded. The broader rules around how the female body should be shown continue to limit how far that creativity can go.

Makeup holds a similar position as the hijab in this sense: It works primarily to beautify the cosplayer, yet it is also used to simulate the facial features that they do not have. Since makeup is an essential component of cosplay, the interviewees stated early in the process that honing their makeup techniques improves their cosplay over time. However, since makeup has been traditionally associated with femininity, it is a testament to the enduring social practices upheld by patriarchy in which women and girls must beautify themselves to increase their own self-valorisation.

Ultimately, these hijabi cosplayers engage with performativity within the framework of Japanese femininity, but they re-shape it through their own cultural and religious identities, thus finding agency and creativity within the boundaries that define them.

Community, Surveillance, and Soft Power

Butler states that performativity is reliant on society and community on norms. Online cosplay communities offer both support and regulation, where members often uplift one another and offer advice, but they also comment on what's seen as "appropriate" or "in character". This shows that unspoken rules within the communities are socially produced and are not a natural fact. This dynamic reflects what Butler describes as the social regulation of identity: The idea that who we are is always formed in relation to others.

One example is through Hana's recount of an interaction with another fellow hijab cosplayer. One of the members in her hijabi cosplay group wanted to cosplay as a male character without gender-bending, even though she still does hijab cosplay.[1] Hana approached her to persuade her otherwise, but the girl declined to follow her advice. Hana wasn't angry with that girl but decided not to support her posts regarding male characters in hijab cosplay. This example presents a picture of how communities work to ensure that everyone has a degree of understanding and compliance to the norms upheld by others in proximity. Surveillance makes it possible for members to pinpoint the deviant of the group before deciding further steps to address any possible issues.

The hijabi cosplay community isn't exclusive to Muslims; it often welcomes non-hijabi cosplayers and even non-Muslim peers. There is an online Hijab Cosplay Online Contest that took place until the 30th of June 2025, in which one of the clauses allows for non-Muslim participants, and even mentioned providing hijab cosplay guidance for them (Hestella, 2025). This is a testament to the success of hijab cosplay in its transnational cultural exchange, and its acceptance by the online community. This inclusivity produces a kind of soft cultural power: a blending of physical and digital aesthetics that goes beyond boundaries, showcasing creativity as a form of shared understanding as the hijab can be worn without needing one to be Muslim. The hijab now becomes a transcultural element that exists both inside and outside religious context.

The interviewees view online hijabi cosplayer communities with equal positivity and negativity, as they understood the need to conform to others' expectations in terms of hijabi cosplaying or risk being seen as the deviant within the group. This balance shows an awareness of community standards and the consequences of crossing them. As Butler stated in their book *Gender Trouble*, the question is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat and even displace the gender norms that enable the repetition itself. Identity here is collective, shaped through community dialogue.

Conclusion

To conclude, hijabi cosplay in Malaysia illustrates how **e**mbodiment, performativity, and cultural negotiation intersect in transnational digital girlhood. Through repeated acts, such as wearing the hijab, styling costumes, posing for photos, these young women are not just mimicking Japanese characters. They're performing selfhood by enacting who they are through creative practice. Their participation challenges narrow views of both culture and fandom, offering instead a picture of plural identity, one that is, to a certain extent, flexible, confident, and deeply transnational. However, the fluidity of this embodiment shows a lapse in how

[1] Hana used the words "with male hair in hijab styling", which can only be translated to hijab styling that does not employ the illusion of long hair to enforce the feminization of the cosplay.

girlhood is traditionally viewed and understood, as cultural and gender scripts fail in its implementation through hijab cosplay. Hijabi cosplay portrays how global culture can be embraced while staying grounded in one's own social and religious world within the performativity framework of digital girlhood.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Ahmad Fuad Rahmat, my PhD supervisor, for guiding me through this paper, and for proof-reading this work. Many thanks to Dr Joanne Lim and Dr Natrah Noor who provided important insights into my research. My gratitude extends to associates from the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and the SUNY/CUNY Southeast Asia Consortium (SEAC), whose discussion on this subject helped me polish my ideas regarding digital girlhoods.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly and Quillbot, AI-assisted writing software, were used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly and Quillbot, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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