

Cosplay as Subculture: In Japan and Beyond

コスプレサブカルチャー：日本と海外

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Abstract

Cosplay (costume play) is a subculture that has become popular among youth around the world over the last thirty years. Cosplayers around the world engage with *anime* (Japanese animation), manga, and video games as a focus for the characters they idealize. There are constant factors within the community, and as cosplayers are influenced by the societies that they live in, their concept of what cosplay is differs from country to country. This article will examine the position of cosplay within the framework of subculture studies, in relation to *otaku* (passionate fan) culture and different fashion subcultures in Japan. It will also look at the differences among communities inside Japan and around the world demonstrating that regardless of the spatial distance between communities there remains many commonalities.

要約

コスプレ（コスチュームプレイ）はここ 30 年間で世界中の若者の間で一般的になったサブカルチャーである。世界中のコスプレイヤー達が、アニメ・漫画及びテレビゲームに登場する好みのキャラクターを演じている。コスプレイヤーのコミュニティには共通した特徴があるが、一方でコスプレの定義は居住するそれぞれの国の社会環境の影響を受けることで差異が産まれている。本稿はサブカルチャー研究の枠組みを用いて、コスプレと日本社会におけるオタク文化ならびにマンガ・アニメの流行との関わりを考察することで、その位置づけを明らかにする。さらに空間的な差異を超えて日本と海外のコスプレコミュニティの間に存在する共通点について考察する。

“Thirty years ago we were able to cosplay everywhere in this park.”

Quote from Koujin-T, veteran cosplayer in Japan, discussing the spatial limitations and increase in regulations limiting cosplay to only one building in Tsurumai Park, Nagoya, Japan.

Costuming is a common diversion found in some form in all human societies. Cosplay (costume play) is one form of this pastime that is unique in its qualities. It is difficult to state where and when cosplay originated; however, there is documentation of cosplay in the United States and Japan in the 1960s and 1970s. “Cosplay” (コスプレ) as a term was first used in an article coauthored by Nobuyuki Takahashi in the 1983 June edition of *My Anime* magazine (Takahashi, 2009). The expression became popularized after his visit to Los Angeles Science Fiction Worldcon in 1984 and cosplay has continued its spread around the world since then. Defining a group of hobbyists who are scattered worldwide is no simple task yet its notoriety with a significant section of youth today demands attention.

In this article I will introduce applicable themes within subculture discourse and demonstrate how cosplay relates to this structure. Some of the influences which define cosplay, youth fashion originating in Japan, manga and *anime* subject matter, and *otaku* (オタク)¹ culture will be explored. Cosplay is a global phenomenon and a subculture that stretches through internet communities and is reinterpreted in local societies. Use of the internet to trade photos and communicate with others is speeding along an international conformity in the identity of cosplay although many in Japan attempt to maintain a sense of “Japaneseness” in the cosplay of Japan. Teenagers from different countries grow to find something in the subject matter of *anime* and manga that they identify with, and through cosplay they look to Japan for the source of their fandom (Kelts, 2006, 30; Napier, 2005, 14). Japanese *anime*, manga, and game characters may be seen as foreign concepts by societies around the world but the subject material is ever-present in Japan, casting doubt upon the consistency of a subculture framework. In the birthplace of *anime* and manga, cosplay is experiencing popular growth and acceptance in some regards and social restrictions in others. Although differing methods and cultural restrictions exist within the global subculture; cosplayers from different countries share a common identity, similar tribulations, and a constant passion for the stories and images of the characters that they attempt to

embody.

A unifying interest for cosplayers is the *anime*, manga, and game culture of Japan from which many of their costumes originate. The characters that cosplayers personify are not limited to only Japanese characters, however, as the word “cosplay” can be used to refer to many forms of costuming besides those from Japan. More than eighty countries hold *anime*-related conventions, and with differing social values and development of the cosplay communities, many groups have unique characteristics. One does not need an event to be able to make a costume and take photos; in this respect it is nearly impossible to measure the global scope of cosplay. In most countries manga and *anime* are classified as foreign media, making cosplay a deviation from general society. Even in Japan where all are exposed to manga and *anime* in advertisements and through the media on a daily basis; cosplaying the characters is something that possesses a stigma and its dynamics are little understood by a majority of the population. As a social group that maintains its own set of specific traits, one method of examining the group is through the lens of subcultural studies.

Subculture and Social Framework

Research into subcultures has been complicated to define, particularly over the last forty years, as more studies have been conducted and outdated ideas are replaced. As human societies grow in complexity it has become important to analyze parts of society on a smaller scale. Gelder describes subcultural studies as problematic, “a somewhat fractured and probably rather fragile discipline... increasingly pluralist in its interests and extensive in its range” (Gelder 2005, 1). Regardless of the numerous nuances and complexity in the discourse, cosplayers remain a social group whose activities are not often noticed by greater society. As one part of a human social structure, the examination of subcultures such as cosplay can inversely cast light on the dynamism of culture itself. In this sense, the study of subcultures is one of a number of available methods in societal studies.

Research into social deviancy finds roots in the early twentieth century. It was not until the 1960s that theorists put forward concepts explaining how deviants attempted to normalize forms of unorthodox social activities. Becker (1963) maintained that deviant behavior was labeled as such by society, and social deviants were

considered outsiders. The acts of subcultural groups were labeled by general society as different thus locking the subculture into a process of “deviant amplification” (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004, 4). This was reinforced from within and without the subculture and maintained it as a minority grouping within society.

In the early 1970s scholars like Hebdige and Jefferson of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) ushered in a new era in social theory by looking at society in less concrete terms through the introduction of style, fashion, and the coolness of subculture groups. Dick Hebdige was a central figure in the CCCS and his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) introduced a paradigm shift in subculture studies. He looked at social groups like punk and reggae that possessed a cutting-edge style element. Companies picked up on the youthful fashion trends of these groups, and bringing them into the mainstream reduced the counter-culture stigma and in so doing, threatening their very existence. The semiotics and style of subculture was something that was new at the time. Although there are voices against the conformist codification of a social grouping by looking at their symbols, visual indicators play an important part in cosplay as a subculture today.

In Japan it was not until after World War II that a middle class emerged with the economic means to consume and partake in more Western leisure activities similar to other nations. It was at this time that *anime* and manga began to flourish and scholars such as Toshio Okada developed his narrative describing the consumption patterns of youth during the 1950s and 1960s (Okada 1996, 2008). An increase in the production of manga and *anime* during this period and the freedom to consume and recreate manga content through *dōjinshi*² provided for a new generation of Japanese youth. Their social activities found a new focus in 1975 with the advent of the Comic Market or Comiket (Kinsella 1998, 295). Okada began looking at the consumer phenomenon and the various generations of *otaku* youth (Okada 1996, 55-62). The social development of youth was quite different in Japan and Okada also noticed that although the young were finding a new sense of freedom, rock and roll, punk, and hippie subcultures were imported and unnatural in Japan. This cultural gap in the understanding of (sub)culture in Japan will be discussed further below.

(Post) Subculture

In contrast to the subculture paradigm put forward by members of the CCCS the term “post-subculture” began to be used in the 1980s denoting a movement beyond the more static concepts of previous studies. It is based on post-modernist theory and stresses the role of language, power relations, “fragmented and fluid identities, hybridity, [and] transience” (Gelder 2005, 12). In particular it questions the use of sharp classifications such as male versus female, straight vs. gay, white vs. black, and with regards to subculture, high class vs. low class. Post-subculturalism therefore considers realities to be plural and relative which holds meaning with the global nature of cultural studies as well as the nature of youth culture in Japan.

Groups examined under the auspices of post-subculturalism stretch the meaning of the concept of subculture to the point that it loses semblance of what it had been identified as until the 1980s—something spatially static with an eye on the local. With cosplay hobbyists spanning the globe propagated by the popularity of the internet, to focus on one region alone limits understanding of the global nature of cosplay. It is becoming possible to keep up with trends being set on the other side of the world; this is a special quality of online communities. One can be a part of a subculture alone in your room or by watching the same TV programs, making the field of subculture studies vast. Some groups studied maintain the hallmarks of semiotic values while others may be completely invisible to the viewer.

Quantifying the boundaries of a social group as an integral part or separate entity from greater society is a matter that is central to research dealing with subcultures. Chris Jenks stresses that subculture cannot stand alone without society around it, and that we lose perspective of the greater culture through the tendency to focus a disproportionate amount of attention on subculture (Jenks 2005, 12). Gelder raises a separate point against the concept of post-subculturalism, stating that it is “as if subcultural identity is now more or less a thing of the past” (Gelder 2005, 1). He refers to Bennett and Kahn-Harris’s *After Subculture*, indicating the confusion in using the “post” prefix: “Although I would argue that subculture is an inappropriate concept to use in the analysis of contemporary cultural practice, it none the less illuminates some of the more difficult problematics of creating youth culture” (Gelder 2005, 14). Describing subculture as both “illuminating” and “inappropriate” presents a paradox

that is intrinsic with the subculture vs. post-subculture discussion; ultimately we are discussing the same social groups regardless of whether or not we choose to apply the suffix “post.”

(Post) Subculturalism in the Context of Japan

The inappropriate nature of the term “subculture” is also questioned by scholars in Japan. Hiroshi Deguchi maintains that the use of the term “subculture” is a Western concept which carries little implication in Japanese culture. He states that “subculture” in Japanese is a form of social imperialism subjugating society by setting unnatural boundaries through the discussion of “contents”³. Deguchi emphasizes that manga has been an art form since the Edo period (1603-1868) and his numerous examples drawing similarities to the manga of today offer a compelling argument (Deguchi, 2010). His message is a powerful one and indicates the central role that contents maintain in many parts of Japanese society.

According to Okada, the forcible opening of the ports by the black ships of Commodore Perry led Japan into a period of unnatural disruption which was ended in war and capitulation with the dropping of the atomic bombs. Through this culturally traumatic experience, *anime*, manga, and toys unique to Japan became an outlet of escapism and led to the *otaku* culture that exists today. Okada’s view of subculture was the Japanized versions of Western subculture. The import of hippie or punk fashions was something quite different to his concept of the progression of Japanese youth culture. Okada and Deguchi share the same message in that *otaku* culture is not a “sub” culture in Japan but in fact the dominant culture. (Okada, 1996, 365).

The argument that manga, *anime*, and *otaku* culture belong to Japan and are the dominant culture is compelling. Yet the different meaning that the term *otaku* holds in languages and societies around the world raises questions regarding the consistency of global (sub) culture. Outside of Japan *otaku* generally refers to someone who is a fan of Japanese *anime* and manga; within Japan *otaku* are considered members of the dominant culture. Adding another layer to matters, *otaku* can also carry negative stereotypes in Japan which I will deal with further below.

The subculture vs. dominant culture dynamic that is present in Japan’s case adds a unique facet to the examination of cosplay as a subculture. It is the interest in

manga, *anime*, and game “contents” however, that form an essential part of the identity of cosplayers and *otaku* alike. Both groups are known around the world with certain youths and whether they are referred to as a subcultural group or dominant culture they maintain unique qualities. The semiotic characteristics amongst cosplayers remain distinct and the relationship between *otaku* and cosplay is close and deserves clarification. To gain a better understanding of cosplay as a phenomenon it is important to recognize the meaning of (post)subculture and that a majority of cosplayers identify themselves as *otaku* while still maintaining a clear cosplayer identity.

Cosplay and *Otaku*

As most cosplayers consider themselves to be *otaku* it begs to question the relationship between the two. The definition of *otaku* will change from person to person; according to Hiroki Azuma it is “a general term referring to those who indulge in forms of subculture strongly linked to *anime*, video games, computers, science fiction, special-effects films, *anime* figurines and so on” (Azuma 2009, 3). This casts a wide net and could include other genres as well depending on the source. A relatively recent development in *otaku* material “contents” is the advent of the light novel which Deguchi includes in his own analysis of *otaku* culture (Deguchi, 2010).

From personal surveys with hundreds of cosplayers in Japan and abroad most cosplayers do indeed express affinity with *otaku*. However, there are some who do not and they will be clear about this so as to prevent confusion the relationship can be expressed in figure 1.

Cosplayers in Relation to *Otaku*

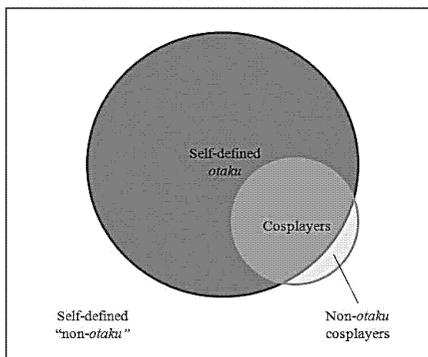


Figure 1. *Otaku* and Cosplayers

The graph illustrates that cosplayers make up a part of those who consider themselves *otaku* and how a great majority of cosplayers would describe themselves as *otaku*. A very small percentage of people who wear cosplay costumes regularly do not define themselves as *otaku*; they could be models, idols or singers. One informant who I shall call GM has been constructing robot costumes in Japan for ten years. He states that he does not want to fool others into thinking that he is an avid consumer of “contents” or that he is deeply knowledgeable about manga or *anime* story lines. In response to a question about why he does cosplay, GM replied that he doesn’t cosplay, he “costumes.” Setting aside self-identity terminology, he explained that he enjoyed costuming and going to events internationally to meet people who share similar past-times (GM, personal communication, November 2010). Personally, I consider his knowledge of *anime* and manga to be greater than other non-*otaku*. This can be attributed to the dominant culture aspect of *anime* and manga that he grew up surrounded by, and his general exposure to themes within “contents” through contact with other costumers. In addition, one can see that sometimes the differentiation between *otaku* or non-*otaku* may be a matter of one’s self-identity and thus depends upon personal discretion.

As one of the founding members of the Comiket event, Hiroshi Deguchi is an authority on what it means to be *otaku* in Japan. Like Okada, his approach to subculture is that the term is a foreign concept inspired by Western Christian culture. Manga is not a sub-partition of Japanese culture but considering that it has been prevalent for centuries it is (or should be seen as) an integral part of the dominant culture. According to Deguchi, “subculture” is a form of cultural orientalism and should be avoided. In his presentation given at Tokyo University in November 2010 Deguchi presented “contents” which feed the existence of cosplay in a way that had minimal delineation. His descriptions possessed a frenetic pace reflective of the way *otaku* data should be ingested—in a holistic way.

Deguchi’s definition of the material consumed by *otaku* is quite easy to understand in figure 2. We can see the strong interrelationship between the different factors that make up “contents” material. Many of the stories overlap and/or are repeated in other forms. For example, the *Gundam* series began over thirty years ago and currently includes many *anime*, manga, and video game series. Light novels from the series have also recently been published. Some of the manga and *anime* stories are the same;

Interaction of Material “Contents” with Related Genres

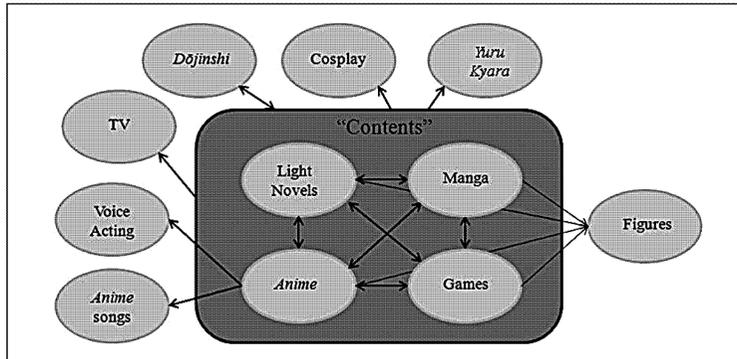


Figure 2. Based on Deguchi, 2010.

however, the game stories will often branch off into different playable scenes unique to other “contents” material. This branches out to other *otaku*-related merchandise and products (Deguchi 2010), and from karaoke songs to *dōjinshi* and figures, *Gundam* is more or less prevalent in all genres. Cosplaying a character from the *Gundam* series is implicitly dependant; if it were not for the existence of “contents” cosplay would not exist in the form we acknowledge it today. Figure 2 illustrates this relationship between “contents” and subsequently reliant genres. Further definition could demonstrate the influences between genres such as that of *dōjinshi* and figures upon cosplay. Nevertheless, through the graph we can better understand that cosplay is only a small part of greater *otaku* culture and ultimately relies on material “contents” for its subject material.

In general discussions regarding cosplay, a lack of understanding is common in Japan and abroad. Outside of Japan it is often completely unknown, and within Japan there is a conception of it as an antisocial hobby linked to its relationship with prevalent stereotypes of *otaku* culture itself. Misconceptions about *otaku* culture are rooted in news stories that periodically appear on the front page of newspapers. The *Miyazaki Jiken* was the first example of this where Tsutomu Miyazaki, (also known as the “*Otaku* Murderer”) was convicted of killing four young girls in 1989. Upon examination of his residence police found over five thousand videotapes of *anime* and slasher movies, and the intense media attention fueled a moral panic against *otaku*. “Amateur manga culture was repeatedly linked to Miyazaki, creating what became a new public perception, that young people involved with amateur manga are dangerous, psychologically disturbed perverts” (Kinsella 1998, 548). Little has changed over the

past 20 years as the same perspectives appeared with the more recent “Akihabara Incident” (Slater and Galbraith, 2011). By being consumers of the same “contents” material, cosplayer’s association with *otaku* runs deep and society’s preconceptions of *otaku* similarly influence interactions with cosplayers.

The Global Character of Cosplay

There are many factors that are constant amongst cosplay communities no matter which country they are found. Outside of Japan the *anime* convention serves as a gathering location for communities and often this is the first exposure that youth have to the hobby. There were over one hundred sixty *anime* conventions in the United States alone in 2010. It is hard to say exactly how many countries hold regular conventions; over eighty countries would be a conservative statement. These range from smaller events to the giant Comiket in Tokyo or ChinaJoy in Shanghai. Cosplay is not limited to Japanese manga and *anime* characters but can be from Western comic books, visual-*kei*,⁴ or other locally recognizable characters; this understanding of what cosplay is also depends on the person and country they come from. These global characteristics reaffirm the subcultural character of cosplay. Unlike *otaku*, who experience a shift from dominant culture in Japan to subculture abroad, cosplayers maintain a similar position as a group that practices its hobby in common gathering points no matter the country.

Spaces of congregation, materials and certain skill sets help define the cosplayer. Naturally, having the economic freedom to partake in the hobby is a fundamental prerequisite. As making costumes by hand has been the traditional standard, having access to a sewing machine is a necessity; in particular a lock sewing machine is highly valued. Although cosplay performances (masquerades) are common at most events outside of Japan, photo cosplay is equally predominant making cameras essential. This creates a demand for people who can take quality photos and an important partner to the cosplayer is the cameraman. Being able to alter pictures with programs like Photoshop are also valued skills for cosplayers. Touching up photos is common, particularly for those who have their own web sites and upload photos regularly. Over the last twenty years, online cosplay sites such as Cosplay.com, American Cosplay Paradise in the United States (www.acparadise.com), and Cosplay

Forum in France (www.cosplayforum.com) have become digital gathering spaces for cosplayers to share stories and images. More recently non-cosplay-centric spaces such as Deviant Art, Facebook, and Twitter have also become locations where cosplayers congregate. Makeup is another hallmark of the cosplayer and although females are more familiar with the products, male cosplayers too will use makeup to give their character a finished look. According to Marcela, a cosplayer from the United States, her fiancé who also cosplays uses makeup for his characters but she found that overall there was an aversion to using make up among male cosplayers in the US (e-mail communication with Marcela, September, 2011).

Findings in Chen's study on the cosplay community in Taiwan are consistent with the sensibilities of other communities around the world. Chen discusses fandom as a multicultural territory, in which "each fan community subscribes to its own unique media substances, values, and contexts". Although *anime* conventions can be seen as the creative focus for cosplay subculture, Chen maintains that cosplay is "the soul" of *anime* conventions and an important way for fans to express their adoration for a character (Chen 2007, 14-15). She notes another constant in cosplay communities in using the character's words, posing in the same way as the character does, and even thinking the character's thoughts.

As context changes with the country cosplayers live in, so do differences in perspective. Chen makes a point regarding character selection on the basis of the cosplayer's physique in Taiwan (Chen 2007, 19). In Western countries such as Australia and the United States there is a looser interpretation of a successful cosplay as there are *anime* and manga fans of various body sizes and cultural backgrounds. According to a conversation with Cory, a cosplayer from the United States who is living in Japan, more experienced cosplayers will focus on the quality of the costume construction and fabric used as opposed to physical similarities between the cosplayer and the character (Cory, personal communication, October 2011). Purchasing costumes is another concept that has seen change over the last 10 years. With many online locations becoming available to buy premade costumes, paying for a costume instead of the cosplayer making it themselves is gaining acceptance around the world. This may be the general trend for cosplayers going to have fun with friends at their local convention, however, most stage performances maintain in event regulations that all costumes must be handmade.

Although cosplayers hail from many countries around the world the characters they choose to realize are not always the same. Character selection is often determined by the global marketing practices of *anime* and manga companies resulting in irregularities in the exposure of titles in certain countries (Kelts 2006, 73). With the increased access to new titles through the internet, speed and uniformity of title recognition has changed. In a conversation with Linakkuma, a cosplayer from Hong Kong living in London, she explained that cosplayers in Asia was quick to recreate costumes from characters in new *anime* and manga titles as soon as they were released in Japan. In Europe she found about a one-year delay and North America was delayed by two years (Linakkuma, personal communication, July 2011). Cosplayers from different regions will dispute the accuracy of such a broad statement as there are cosplayers who are more in touch with current trends coming from Japan regardless of where they live. Nevertheless there is a recognizable gap in costume choices depending on the region.

Whereas in Japan dressing as characters from newly-released or soon-to-be-released manga or *anime* is seen as cutting edge and desirable internationally, nostalgic characters such as *Mazinga Z* or *Uchusenkan Yamato* (Star Blazers) are more visible at *anime* conventions are common in countries like Italy and Spain. In a similar way, characters from local or Western comics such as Superman, Batman, and Disney can be commonly seen at events in the United States and Mexico, but it is rare to see characters outside of the “contents” genre of manga and *anime* at events in Japan.

Cosplay in Japan

Cosplay subculture in Japan maintains many of the constants mentioned above yet the context of Japanese society makes for some unique qualities found nowhere else. Cosplay often takes place in one set location, and in Japan over the past twenty years these locations have shrunk spatially and temporally. Cosplay events are more numerous, smaller and traditionally more clandestine than events abroad. In discussions with Tatsumi Inui, the manager for Cure.com (the largest online community for cosplayers in Japan) there are as many as 4000 - 5000 events taking place every year throughout Japan and costing 2000 — 3000 yen per day to participate. Cosplayers in Japan are quick to costume new characters and this shift in style is

similar to other forms of fashion yet dependent upon the release and attraction of new *anime* series'. The speed at which characters are discovered by cosplayers in Japan is due to the rapid availability of *settei shiryō* (設定資料). These are reference pictures which show the *anime* or manga character from a variety of angles; making them the invaluable blueprints for creating a new cosplay costume (interview with Inui, November, 2011).

Special language such as “layer” (レイヤー, *reiya*) for cosplayers or “cameko” (カメコ) for photographers is used by cosplayers in Japan. (Tanaka, 2009, 36) According to one source, Akira, unique forms of cosplay exist in Japan such as “taku-cos” (宅コス) and “kao-cos” (顔コス) where cosplayers take photos of their costumes at home or close-ups of their faces have become prevalent (Interview with Akira, May, 2011). Cosplayers use these introductory methods if they are hesitant to attend public events or want to take their first steps in cosplay from the familiar surroundings of their own home. Knowledge of the characters and storylines from manga and *anime* are an expected standard as conversation amongst cosplayers and often focuses on character interpretation and accurate posing. These conversations are in a way a testing ground for whether the other is *otaku*, a cosplayer, or *ippanjin* (一般人).⁵ As a majority of cosplayers are between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five the use of computers and interacting online is as much a part of cosplaying as attending events on the weekends. Accessing and having profile accounts on cosplayer-specific social networking sites like Cosplayers' Cure (www.curecos.com) or Cosplayers Archive (www.cosp.jp) are standard. Name cards are common in general society in Japan and cosplayers take this to an extreme. Small card holder booklets are commonly used, sometimes containing twenty to thirty different types of cards with characters they have cosplayed on them. The reasoning behind this is that when meeting someone new the cosplayer does not want to disappoint them with a character on their card that is surprisingly different from the costume they are wearing at the time of meeting.

Cosmetics such as foundation, eye lashes, and colored contact lenses are other items that define the subculture and wearing makeup is standard for both male and female cosplayers in Japan. The breakdown of male to female cosplayers in Japan is different from other countries as 90% of cosplayers are female (Interview with Inui). Finally in the pursuit of reenacting a character to the best of one's ability, dieting or fasting is prevalent for male and female cosplayers. These hallmarks of the subculture

may be seen as predominantly symbolic concepts harkening to Hebdige's discourse on style and semiotics however they are factors which form the identity of the cosplayer.

To illustrate a more traditional cosplay event I will introduce one experience I had when visiting a local event in Nagoya, Japan. The event was held in Tsurumai Park at the Nagoya-shi Kōkaido. Built in 1930, the Kōkaido is a stoic four-storey building in Tsurumai Park. I went with a university colleague to meet with an informant who I will call Koujin-T, a male in his 40s who has been cosplaying off and on for twenty seven years. As my colleague and I drove into the parking lot we saw no cosplayers at all, and I commented (as Taylor notes) that you would usually see people walking around outside at an event in North America (Taylor 2009, 6). In fact we were not sure if there was even an event taking place until we approached the imposing building entrance and noticed people in costume moving around inside.

Upon entering the event location we were first confronted with a sheet detailing perhaps thirty or so rules of conduct. These were implicitly laid out for “cameko” or people (usually men) who come to take photos without cosplaying, although the rules also applied to the cosplayers. We were instructed on where the cosplay areas were and were warned not to bring dangerous goods, blades, or weapons into the premises. Among the regulations some of the more notable were:

- Replace the lens cover on the camera when not taking pictures
- Men cannot wear women's costumes
- Wear your identifying badge in a clearly visible location
- Ask permission to take pictures; taking pictures without permission is forbidden
- Do not take pictures of the event location without cosplayers in the picture
- Do not touch the cosplayers
- Do not bring in small cameras

Much is made of the strict regulations at events in Japan. Perhaps this can be attributed to an orderliness in a society where one is constantly reminded that there is very little space and one must refrain from *meiwaku* (迷惑) or imposing unnecessarily upon others. Comiket is the largest *dōjinshi* event in the world, where on paper 350,000 guests are in attendance yet unofficially these numbers may be as high as 500,000 over the three days of the event (Deguchi, 2010). Comiket is not only the

largest *otaku*-related event in Japan but also reputedly has the strictest rules. From my own experience at Comiket 78 in the summer of 2010 I was spoken to twice by event staff for standing in the wrong place and leaning on a wall.

As there were perhaps three to four hundred people in total at the event in Nagoya, I found Koujin-T fairly quickly and exchanged greetings. I promptly went to get changed and had a chance to look out over the balcony from the fourth floor cosplay area. When I encountered Koujin-T again later in the afternoon I mentioned that it would be nice to be able to use the gazebos and gardens of the park as a backdrop. To my surprise he stated that about 30 years ago cosplayers were allowed to cosplay in the park but were currently restricted to only the Kōkaido building (Koujin-T, personal communication, February 2011).

Not only are there limitations on space for cosplay in Japan but also on sexuality. Most events in countries outside Japan accept “cross-play” or dressing as a character of the opposite sex. It is generally seen as an intrinsic form of “play”; however, *Jōsou* (女装) or cross-dressing is much more stigmatized and forbidden at a number of events in Japan as was the case for the event I visited in Tsurumai Park. This is taken a step further at some events where only women are allowed to cosplay and male cameramen can only attend if accompanying a female. (Truong, 2010) Marginalization of cosplayers spatially and sexually in Japan is clearly imbalanced but can oppositely act as a reinforcing measure for subculture. Controls set by society and cosplay events themselves create what may or may not be seen by cosplayers as reasonable boundaries and can have the effect of pushing them further underground in search of more balanced environments.

Whether it is due to foreign influence or not there has been an increase in events where stage performances take place in Japan. Photo cosplay remains overwhelmingly dominant with 99 percent of all cosplay in Japan being centered on photos. According to Inui the relationship between cosplay and the stage has not been a part of cosplay’s development in Japan. However, the online entity Cure is playing a role in this shift in Japan with a series of Cure Cosplay Collection events that have conducted stage fashion show galas around the country (interview with Inui).

For approximately thirty years in Japan cosplayers have gathered in popular locations to take part in grass roots cosplay events. As general society in Japan has begun to recognize the power of Japan’s pop culture around the world over the last

few years, (McGray, 2002, 49) a number of events have emerged that are organized by non-*otaku* industry related companies or government entities. The World Cosplay Summit which started in 2003 in Nagoya, Japan, has been joined by China-Cos in Tottori Prefecture, Asia Beat in Fukuoka, and Kobe Cosplay Collection in Kansai. Stage performance cosplay in Japan does not exist at traditional cosplay events in Japan in the masquerade form that can be found abroad. The newer style of events listed above do have stage performances and perhaps it is the visits of non-cosplaying organizers to events in other countries which inspired a new perspective on what activities to include in their event schedules. These events present new venues for cosplayers who have traditionally viewed clandestine gatherings as the least imposing on general society. By attending events that are not of the traditional format cosplayers in Japan are facing new choices in how to cosplay in Japan.

Non-cosplayer event organizers run the risk of alienating the event fan base if not presenting activities in a manner which agrees to the sensibilities of the subculture. In order to appeal to the *otaku* and fan base in Japan, these new “society run” events have begun to employ cosplayers themselves to play an integral role in organizing or advising in event operations. With attractive and often free venues, cosplayers attend these new format events showing new possibilities for the subculture. There is a fundamental shift occurring with the cosplay community in Japan and with Japanese society in general by recognizing the cultural value of the subculture. What impact these new developments will have remains to be seen.

Conclusion

We call cosplay a global subculture but the differences in cultures, and the influences on how cosplay is done in different countries, leads to difficulties in making generalizations about what constitutes cosplay. Local sensibilities need to be taken into account while considering the global nature of the hobby. With a long history of supportive analysis, the study of subcultures provides a useful framework for understanding this youth culture phenomenon. Through the economic freedom of youth today there are many different forms of social deviancy and related others here to position cosplay amongst them. One great challenge to understanding global cosplay is the differing nature in the local environment. There are cultural and social

influences in different countries where *otaku* culture is commonly unknown. Conversely, the overwhelming prevalence of *anime* and manga in Japan demonstrates that *otaku* culture is an integral part of the dominant culture. In relation to *otaku* culture cosplay maintains its subcultural character within Japan and abroad. Cosplayers share a common identity and regardless of differences or the societies they find themselves in, they recognize others as being a part of the same group.

The popularity of cosplay continues to grow around the world yet cosplayers in Japan are facing greater isolation from society. Where cosplayers in other countries are permitted—from within the cosplay community and general society—to move about in public while in costume; in Japan this standard is moving in the opposite direction where the space for cosplayers is slowly being taken away from them. Perhaps it is the foreign aspect of cosplay in countries outside of Japan that allows for more freedom whereas in Japan social stigma marginalizes cosplayers. New styles of social events may play a role in shaping the way that *otaku* culture is consumed in Japan and make cosplay more “visible” by general society.

In a world that is increasingly smaller with online communities and connections it is yet to be seen if these connections will have an effect on the cosplay of Japan. With a perhaps freer interpretation of who can cosplay—and where—these online connections may have an influence on Japanese cosplay interpretations. On the other hand they may not. If we look at other tendencies in Japan this difference is cherished and promoted—as with the trend to segregate women from men on rush hour subways to limit sexual harassment. No matter how great the movement of sexual equality is outside of Japan this sexual segregation is accepted as a plausible remedy to what has become a socially intolerable problem—Japanese society has accepted this method to deal with the issue. In a similar manner, the strict event regulations and gender limitations placed on male cosplayers could very well be accepted as the method that Japanese society uses to manage matters. Regardless of adversity cosplayers continue to make costumes, to make oneself look as close to their dream character as possible. According to Akira this “is the greatest compliment that a cosplayer can give to the manga creator.” It is a freedom that no regulation can limit.

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Endnotes

¹ *Otaku* is a loanword from Japanese that is used in many languages within *anime*/manga fandom to describe consumers of Japanese *anime*, manga, and video-game related merchandise. In Japanese the term is used more broadly and refers to someone who is passionate about a certain subject, hobby, or topic. The term *otaku* is actively used in many languages today, including English, Spanish and Italian.

² *Dōjinshi* are unofficial manga or novels created by fans. The stories are often based on the characters from popular *anime*, manga and video games. Storylines take place between official scenes from the source material, allowing fans the freedom to imagine a wide variety of fantasy scenarios.

³ "Contents" is an English term originating from the software industry describing material used in computer programs. It is used in a broader sense in Japan where it can refer to material used in media in a wider sense, from film to store merchandise. Deguchi uses it to refer to the material found in manga, *anime*, games, and light novels that leads to creation in related genres.

⁴ "Visual *kei*" is a movement among Japanese musicians that is characterized by the use of make-up, elaborate hairstyles, flamboyant costumes, and often, but not always, combined with androgynous aesthetics.

⁵ *Ippanjin* roughly translates as "general person." With regards to the cosplay community in Japan the term is used for non-cosplayers.