

Marginalization within Nerd Culture: Racism and Sexism within Cosplay

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Cosplay, short for “costume” and “play,” is a form of expression where people dress as their favorite characters from comics, anime, video games, shows, and movies as a testament to their passion for their favorite properties (Rahman et al. 318). Cosplayers are typically members of the geek/nerd community, which broadly refers to those who are fans of science fiction, fantasy, anime, video games, and comic books (Hill 4). Although wearing costumes is a widely accepted social practice on Halloween, the same cannot be said for year-round cosplayers. Cosplay is often confined to the various geek conventions, as outside of these spaces, cosplayers are likely to be ridiculed and stigmatized (Ramirez 11). In some ways, geeks exist as a marginalized group, feeling that they are outcasts on the lower end of the social hierarchy in society, considered social outcasts for participating in fandom that is not widely accepted (Lockhart 11). Cosplayers, who, next to the major movie studios and celebrities, are the most visible geeks and therefore receive the most media attention at conventions (Jenkins 23) as well as the most scrutiny from those outside of geek culture. But even within a marginalized group there still exists a hierarchy of oppression, as Black people are often subject to racism, and women, sexism, within the geek community (Hill 20; Ramirez 61).

In America, many associate geek culture with White people, and many geek spaces such as comic conventions are predominately White and male (Jenkins 29; Lockhart 12). Also, due to a lack of representation within all forms of media, most characters from TV/film, video games, and comics are White (Ramirez 14). These two factors contribute to the higher level of scrutiny and racism that Black cosplayers receive (Hill 81; Ramirez 49). Black cosplayers are often met with racist

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The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 7, No. 2
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remarks, such as, “that character isn’t Black.” Beyond racism, women cosplayers are also subject to sexism (Hill 4). Since much of the media within geek culture is both male centered and created, female characters are often created with the male gaze in mind. These characters are often both scantily clad and have unrealistic bodies (Avery-Natale 79). From this derives multiple issues for women. On one end, if a woman decides to cosplay as one of these characters, they can be subject to unwanted and uncomfortable attention from male convention attendees. This can even escalate to unwarranted physical touch, so much so that some conventions post numerous signs stating that “cosplay is not consent” (Romano). Furthermore, since these characters are often animated and have unrealistic body types, female cosplayers are also subjected to more body shaming than their male counterparts are. Incidents like these, although not highly publicized, have been reported to different media outlets (Bever; Gooden).

Exploring marginalization within cosplay is of importance as it is a form of expression that is reflective of geek and popular culture at large. One can easily compare attitudes held towards minority cosplayers with recent controversies concerning increased diversity in popular geek-related properties. One prime example is the backlash the recent *Star Wars* trilogy has received for featuring mostly non-White male characters. A most prominent manifestation being the harassment actress Kelly Marie Tran received for her portrayal of the character Rose Tico. Tran, a Vietnamese-American woman, is the first woman of color to play a leading role in the franchise. Following her appearance in 2017’s *The Last Jedi*, Tran was subjected to an onslaught of racist and sexist comments online from fans upset with her character’s presence, ultimately leading to her temporarily deleting her Instagram posts (Martinelli; Moye).

Similarly, in 2019, controversy stemmed from the latest installment of the Pokémon games with the introduction of their first Black gym leader, Nessa. Although many fans of the series, especially Black fans, were excited to see more representation within the series, many were also bothered by her presence. This led to some fans creating racist fan art or game mods that depicted Nessa as White, and even as a monkey (Gramuglia; Ritzen; Weekes).

These are but two examples that display the negative reactions that often come with including more marginalized characters in geek properties. Those same strong feelings many fans hold about who they want to see represented in their favorite shows, games, etc. are not only directed at the specific property itself but also aimed

at other fans. As this study will prove, these negative attitudes are quite prominent in critiques of fan expressions, such as cosplay.

There is a dearth of work examining the cosplay experience, and significantly less acknowledging the marginalization of Black, female, and non-binary cosplayers. This study hopes to affirm the experiences of these cosplayers while simultaneously highlighting the levels of racism and sexism that exist within the geek community. In order to eradicate marginalization within the geek community, it is important to first acknowledge that it exists and bring these experiences to light. This study aims to provide an examination into marginalized cosplayers' experiences, highlighting why they chose to cosplay and the challenges they face as a marginalized group. This study will be conducted through the framework of co-cultural theory, which is used to examine the interaction between marginalized groups within a dominant society from the marginalized group's point of view (Orbe, "Continuing" 66; Orbe, "Laying" 159; Ramirez-Sanchez 90). The study will also incorporate the uses and gratification theory to examine cosplayers' motivations for choosing to cosplay.

Literature Review

The literature for this research identified various motivations that cosplayers have for cosplaying. It also unveiled experiences of racism and sexism within the cosplay and geek community. However, most cosplay research does not focus on marginalization within the community, especially in terms of race. Most studies center upon either the history of cosplay or cosplay as a form of self and fan expression in general.

Cosplay Motivations. Cosplay scholarship has identified various motivations fans have for cosplaying in general, as well as for picking specific characters to cosplay. Cosplayers often choose to portray characters they feel they identify with to some degree (Grissom 111; McGeehon 58). Other cosplayers may choose characters whose designs they feel will pose a creative challenge to craft (Kane 161; Lamerichs par. 1.6; Rahman et al, 332). An overall greater sense of belonging to a community and developing friendships emerged as a common motivation for cosplayers (Grissom 112; Kane 172; Ramirez 25-6; Reysen et al. 34). Many cosplayers seek to utilize their cosplay to not only express their fandom but also as a form of self-expression, as it provides a sense of freedom and empowerment for them (Grissom 111; Kane 167; Lamerichs par. 5.2).

Some cosplayers identified that they obtained gratification from the smiles and enjoyment that their cosplay brought to others (Kane 165; Ramirez 32). For this reason, many cosplayers are motivated to choose easily recognizable characters and are further motivated to achieve a sense of authenticity in looking as much like the character as possible (Kane 165; Rahman et al. 326; Ramirez 34). The literature also revealed that many people are motivated to cosplay as a form of escapism, sometimes helping them cope with mental health issues, as it is a fun and enjoyable experience (Grissom 112; McGeehon 59-60; Rahman et al. 331; Reysen et al. 34).

Racism and Sexism in the Geek Community. Studies on race and gender within cosplay and the geek community at large identify that geek culture is a White and male dominated space (Orme 404, 414). As a result of such, women, non-binary, Black, and other non-White geeks experience marginalization within this space. Stephanie Orme conducted a study in which she explored the stigmatization that women who identify as geeks face when participating in the culture. In the study, Orme interviewed female comic book readers about their experiences in male dominated geek spaces such as comic bookstores. Participants reported feeling stigmatized by male geeks who tended to act as gatekeepers to the culture, making assumptions that women were less knowledgeable and thus unworthy of participating in a particular fandom. In fear of being stigmatized, some women exhibited a strategy of avoidance and steered clear of places like comic bookstores. However, other participants reported not feeling stigmatized and wore clothing that displayed their comic book fandom (411-3).

In the same study mentioned earlier, Ramirez also identified the levels of marginalization Black and female cosplayers face. Marginalized cosplayers expressed a lack of representation in characters in geek related properties in general as contributing to the limitations on their cosplay options. Female participants stated that most of the cosplay options for them are hypersexualized and that a lack of strong female characters to identify with exists. Conversely, male participants expressed not having an issue finding characters that they identified with. Ramirez noted that gender bending characters arose as a common strategy that women use to cosplay characters that they identified with (42-5).

Non-White respondents also expressed a difficulty in finding characters to cosplay. As most participants of the study expressed gratification from their cosplay being “accurate” and looking as much like the source material as possible, this same sentiment appeared to serve as fuel to further marginalize minority cosplayers (Ramirez 57). This level of marginalization manifested to the extent where some of

the White participants defended the use of blackface in cosplay while simultaneously placing limitations on the characters minorities can cosplay. Ramirez displayed how White cosplayers use the need for “accuracy,” or “canon” as some refer to it, to further marginalize minorities in multiple ways. Furthermore, Ramirez points out that if the accuracy of one’s cosplay creates access to greater cultural capital, it becomes more difficult for marginalized cosplayers to gain the same level of access (Ramirez 52).

Uses and Gratifications Theory. Uses and gratification theory seeks to explain people’s motivations for, and satisfaction received from, using various forms of media (Chung and Kim 14). The theory is concerned with how mass media, whether a particular outlet such as television or specific content on that outlet, meets and satisfies the needs of audiences (Katz et al. 510). This theory is also effective for studying new media and why one may choose to navigate to utilize social media as a source of news versus more traditional means (Baran and Davis 210). While this theory is typically used for examining media consumption, this study will utilize it to examine cosplayers’ motivations for cosplaying and what sort of gratification they receive for doing so. Although the researcher was unable to locate studies explicitly utilizing this theory for cosplay, the literature identified various motivations and gratifications for cosplayers. Considering that the literature lacks the experiences of marginalized cosplayers, this leads to the following research question aimed at determining if there are any additional motivations marginalized cosplayers hold that differ from White and male cosplayers: What are Black/female/non-binary cosplayers’ motivations for cosplaying?

Co-Cultural Theory. Co-cultural theory, developed by Mark P. Orbe, is a communication theory that seeks to explore how “non-dominant” members interact with “dominant” members of society. A number of distinctions exist that could define one as a co-culture, such as race/ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion and class (Orbe, “Laying” 158). Studies utilizing co-cultural theory identify and categorize the strategies associated with a co-culture’s communication practices with the dominant culture. The strategies are: emphasizing commonalities, developing positive face, censoring self, averting controversy, extensive preparation, overcompensating, manipulating stereotypes, bargaining, dissociating, mirroring, strategic distancing, ridiculing self, increasing visibility, dispelling stereotypes, communicating self, intragroup networking, utilizing liaisons, educating others, confronting, gaining advantage, avoiding, maintaining barriers, exemplifying strength, embracing stereotypes, attacking, and sabotaging

others (Orbe and Roberts 295-6). Each of these strategies holds an expected outcome of either assimilation (fitting in), accommodation (maintaining one's cultural identity while participating), or separation (staying amongst one's own). Furthermore, each of these strategies can be viewed as either aggressive, assertive, or nonassertive (Orbe, "Laying" 170). This study seeks to define cosplay, and geek culture at large, as a co-cultural group, leading to the following research question: Is Cosplay a co-culture?

Ruben Ramirez-Sanchez expands co-cultural theory by identifying how a co-culture can have a separate co-culture within it. Existing as one of the few studies to apply the theory in this manner, Ramirez-Sanchez identifies punk rock fans as a co-culture, with Black punk fans existing as another co-culture within that group (96). In similar fashion, this study seeks to identify Black, female, and non-binary cosplayers as a co-culture to the cosplay group, as Black people and women exist as marginalized groups in society in general. Therefore, the following research questions aim to excavate the experiences that marginalized cosplayers have that White males do not, as well as how these cosplayers communicate with the dominant culture: What role does race/gender play in the cosplay experience; and, how do Black/female/non-binary cosplayers engage with the cosplay community at large?

Method

This pilot study utilized a qualitative questionnaire intended to test questions that may be included in future, more extensive questionnaires that would be part of a larger ethnographic study. The participants responded to an online questionnaire containing 17 questions inquiring about their motivations for and experiences while cosplaying. Every question was posed in an open-ended format, allowing the participants to make their responses as long as they saw fit. To ensure a diverse set of respondents, the questionnaire link was posted in three separate online geek forums that exist as primarily Black, but inclusive, spaces. These include a chat group associated with a nerd podcast hosted by Black women, a Meetup group for nerds of color, and a Facebook group associated with a predominantly Black geek convention. The questionnaire was open for one week, during which an intended minimum of 10 respondents was met. This study sought to not exceed 15 participants to allow for a more thorough investigation of the detailed responses. Please refer to Appendix A for a list of the questionnaire questions. To protect the

privacy of the participants, the following names included in the study are pseudonyms.

Data Analysis and Discussion

A total of 11 individuals responded to the questionnaire. Of these, six respondents identified as Black and five as White. Seven respondents identified as women, two as men, and two as non-binary; none of the respondents identified as White men. Table 1 below provides more details on the participants' demographics and their responses. From these results, the following 11 themes emerged about cosplay motivations and experiences of marginalized groups.

Participant	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Age	Years Cosplaying	Attends Conventions?	Feels Connected to Cosplay Community?	Experienced Racism?	Experienced Sexism?	Believe Racism/Sexism Exists in Community?
Tasha	F	Black/ Caribbean	25	4	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Taylor	Trans (fluid)	White	37	20	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Shea	F	Black	46	2	No	Yes	No	No	Inconclusive
Josh	M	Black	28	2	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Hayley	F	White	47	5	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Carol	F	White	66	4	Yes	No	No	No	Yes*
Jamal	M	Black	50	4	Yes	Yes	Yes	No*	Yes
Jordan	Genderqueer	White	23	8	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Brandy	F	Black	22	1	Yes	Yes	No	No*	Yes
Amber	F	White	34	19	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Nia	F	Black	45	20	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 1. Participant Demographics and Experiential Questions Responses

Motivations for Cosplay

Theme 1: Cosplay is Fun and Great for Connections. Several uses and gratifications themes emerged from the respondents as to why they choose to cosplay. The majority of the responses aligned with the literature in that Black people, women, and non-binary people did not exhibit any distinct motivations for cosplaying from those of White men. Taylor stated that they cosplayed because “when I was a teenager it was just amazingly nerdy and fun. Still is!” Nia expressed that “it just makes me happy.” Both respondents expressed that they found cosplaying to be a fun and enjoyable experience. Jordan said that they find that “Cosplay is a powerful icebreaker because you're wearing your artwork and interests for the world to see. It's really easy to make friends and geek out over

anime and embroidery. It breaks down a lot of initial barriers, and I feel immediately close to people I've spoken only briefly to in-person a few times." Beyond just being fun, Jordan is discussing how cosplay is also great for making connections

Theme 2: Why I Choose to Cosplay Particular Characters. As in the literature, many people stated that they choose the characters they cosplay to receive the satisfaction that derives from being recognized. In response to being asked some of her favorite characters to cosplay and why, Brandy stated "X-men, Avengers, Sailor Moon. (Character recognizability)." While some respondents, such as Brandy, chose easily recognizable characters, others opted for lesser known options for a bigger payoff. Jordan stated they "also like cosplaying lesser known characters like Princess of the Crystal from Mawaru Penguindrum, because people who have watched the show get really excited to see a rare cosplay from it." Jamal stated that he also likes cosplaying lesser known characters, but for a somewhat different reason. He said his "main favorite is Patriot from the Young Avengers because of the character's story and history. Plus, you don't see many people portray a lot of black superheroes that aren't mainstream." These findings could suggest that marginalized cosplayers are less likely than White males to seek out easy recognizability for the characters that they cosplay. Furthermore, it also suggests that they find more joy in showcasing characters who are not typically in the spotlight. There could be a correlation between marginalized groups, who may often feel unseen, relating to and wanting to spotlight characters that are normally overlooked.

Theme 3: Difficulty Level. Also consistent with the literature is that some cosplayers opt for characters that prove to be a crafting challenge, while others opt for costumes they can more easily pull off. Josh stated that he "can do without a lot of specialized parts, like Sith or Scarlet Witch." On the opposite end of the spectrum, Jordan finds it fun "to talk shop with other cosplayers while wearing more elaborate cosplays, because we get to gush over each other's sewing and embellishment techniques." These comments showcase that cosplay motivations based upon crafting skill level can vary depending on personal preference.

Theme 4: Diverse Cons as a Safe Space. Although not originally intended to be an aim of this study, participants' choices in conventions to attend arose as a point of interest. All except for one of the respondents attended geek conventions. Several conventions came up for various reasons, which included the specific fandom (i.e. gaming, anime, etc.) that the convention was tailored to, fun activities, great for

cosplays, and great vendors. Three cons, MAGFest, BlerDCon, and New York Comic Con (NYCC), all appeared multiple times and mainly because of their accepting and diverse environments. Taylor expressed that they attend “MAGFest, because for a gaming convention it has an atmosphere that is the opposite of the normal toxic gaming community. It's inclusive, accepting, and laid back. BlerDCon, an intersectional convention for the minority community of the fandom. Everyone there is just awesome.” Brandy listed “AwesomeCon, BlerDCon, NYCC. Local, very diverse, easily accessible.” BlerDCon also appeared in Nia’s comments as she stated she “will always remember being at the first BlerDCon. It was such a warm, friendly welcoming environment where I didn’t feel out of place.” These comments suggest that marginalized cosplayers favor these more diverse conventions and value them as a safe space for them to participate in geek culture.

Cosplay Experiences for Marginalized Groups

Theme 5: Cosplay as a Co-Culture. In defining cosplayers, and geek culture in general, as a co-culture, existing research on the subject already defines it as a subculture (Hill 19; Lamerichs par. 2.1; Orme 406). It is important to note that the term co-culture is synonymous with subculture, except that it is intended to remove the negative connotation and acknowledge the diversity of cultures (Orbe, “Laying” 158). Although they have transitioned into terms of endearment, “geek” and “nerd” historically have been used in a derogatory sense intended to ostracize a particular group of people for their interests and appearance (McArthur 61). Participants’ statements are consistent with the literature showing that cosplay, and geek culture at large, is a co-culture within the larger society. Brandy said she felt that “some people see it as childish to dress up in costumes as a hobby.” Similarly, Nia expressed that “to many non-cosplayers, it’s a weird thing kids do or people with no life do. They don’t understand the time and passion that can be involved in even the most simple and basic cosplays.” These comments highlight how participants often feel misunderstood and considered to be childish by those outside of the geek community.

Theme 6: Marginalized Cosplayers as a Co-Culture within a Co-Culture. Consistent with Ramirez-Sanchez’s work, the results of this study support the idea that Black, female, and non-binary cosplayers exist as a co-culture within a co-culture. All except for one of the respondents agreed that racism and sexism exist within the geek community, which means that White male cosplayers operate as

the dominant culture within the cosplay and geek community. When asked if she felt that racism and sexism exists within the geek community, Tasha replied “yes. [...] White cosplayers have continued to defend blackface as appropriate. A lot of cosplayers get labeled "Black" or "nigg@" versions of their cosplay.” Tasha’s comments indicate that Black cosplayers are subjected to racism within the community. Nia also agreed, replying “hell yes!!! Men in general, and White men specifically, think they know everything about what I’m doing and need to explain it to me or criticize how I’m doing it.” Beyond just race, Nia expresses how being a woman also makes her subject to discrimination. Responding to the same question, Taylor stated “100% absolutely. POC Cosplayers get far more shit, same with trans. [...] Female cosplayers who show even a bit of skin get called sexually derogatory terms. Sexism, racism, ableism, ageism, it's all over the place in the cosplay community.” Taylor’s comments add that trans and other groups are also marginalized within cosplay. All of these comments support the notion that non-White male cosplayers are a co-culture within a co-culture.

It is important to note that the one participant who did not answer yes to the question also did not answer no. In fact, her response did not answer the question at all and therefore, it was denoted as inconclusive.

Theme 7: Personal Experiences of Racism Within the Community. Although almost all of the participants felt that racism exists within the geek community, only two of the six Black participants reported having experienced racism. Jamal recounted the following story:

I remember meeting a Black cosplayer ... cosplaying as Catwoman (Jim Balent version). [...] A group of White dudes (or boys) walked past her and made comments that Catwoman wasn't Black and you need to cosplay one of your own characters. I was in my Patriot cosplay and before they walked by, I walked in front of them and said they need to apologize for that comment! One of them said, you need to mind your business you fake Captain America homeboy!

Jamal’s story provides not only a personal account of experiencing racism while cosplaying, but also bearing witness to racism expressed at another Black cosplayer. Nia also shared a personal experience with racism while cosplaying, stating that “before I had a child, I did Morticia Addams and was told 1) I wasn’t sexy enough and 2) ask why I would cosplay Morticia when I was Black.” Nia’s experience is one in which she was subject to both racism and sexism simultaneously.

It is possible that two factors influence the low levels of racism experienced by the respondents. The first is the low level of experience the Black cosplayers in this study hold. With the exception of Nia, who has been cosplaying for 20 years, the remainder of the Black participants have been cosplaying for less than five years, and many of them only for one or two years. In addition, one of the Black cosplayers has not attended a convention yet. It is likely that this low level of interaction cosplaying at conventions has kept the participants from encountering racist experiences with cosplay. The other factor lies within the conventions the participants have attended. As previously mentioned, many of the participants stated that they attended very diverse and Black-centered conventions. One could posit that it would be less likely that Black cosplayers would encounter racism in inclusive spaces.

Theme 8: Personal Experiences of Sexism Within the Community. Of the nine non-male respondents, five explicitly stated having experienced sexism while cosplaying. The participants were asked if they've ever encountered any inappropriate verbal or non-verbal interactions while cosplaying. Nia stated "yes, luckily only some leering and it's disgusting. It makes you feel violated when you just want to have fun and hang out with friends." Taylor's comments agreed with Nia's as they expressed "all. The. Time. As a genderfluid person I have heard some whispered laughs, I've had people ask me 'what am I' and try to reach under my skirt. Some photographers won't shoot me (mostly middle aged cis white males)." Amber shared similar comments as she "had to deal with a lot of 'cosplay is not consent' (inappropriate touching) from men as well as challenges that I'm not a real gamer because I like certain types of games and not others." The responses are consistent with the literature in that non-male cosplayers are often objectified and subject to sexual harassment and assault within the community.

While Brandy stated that she has not experienced sexism in response to the question that asked it directly, she later explained experiences in which she felt somewhat objectified that would say otherwise. The first was in response to being asked if she ever experienced any inappropriate non-verbal behaviors while cosplaying, in which she replied she's "had men take pictures of me that I haven't seen since. That makes me a little uneasy. But nothing wildly inappropriate." The second comment addressed the feedback she received from posting her cosplay pictures online. Brandy said that her online postings receive "overall very positive feedback! Mostly "sexy" from male audiences but generally very positive from everyone." This would suggest that it is possible that a level of internalized sexism

exists that some non-male cosplayers experience, thus making them dismiss some sexist interactions.

Marginalized Groups Co-Cultural Reactions

Taking into consideration the various strategies co-cultural groups utilize when interacting with the dominant culture, three communication strategies become apparent in the participants' responses.

Theme 9: Confronting. Confronting is an aggressive co-cultural strategy in which the user asserts their voice at the dominant culture (Orbe, "Laying" 169; Orbe and Roberts 296). In his story about his racist encounter while cosplaying, Jamal chose to confront the aggressors and demand an apology for their racist remarks. He stated he "walked in front of them and said they need to apologize for that comment! One of them said, you need to mind your business you fake Captain America homeboy! I said first of all, son, I'm 49 years old and I'm n your home boy, second of all, unless you have the balls to cosplay or even put on a costume, don't talk down to those who do have the balls. [...] I said apologize to her." It would appear that participants who choose the confronting strategy are opting to directly challenge the dominant culture to claim their space within the culture.

Nia and Taylor also describe opting to confront aggressors in racist and sexist interactions. Taylor spoke about how they've "had two people attempt to reach under my skirt, many try to hug me without asking, a good share of dirty looks. For the looks, I just stare back at them and make them feel uncomfortable knowing I see them and don't care, for the touches, I forcefully separate them from me." Nia referred to a situation in which she overheard someone making comments about her race, stating "it wasn't said directly to me—someone muttered about 'damn niggers trying to play white characters.' When I turned around to confront the person, no one knew or heard anything." Her comments show that even though the racist comments might not always be direct, marginalized cosplayer may still opt to confront it directly.

Theme 10: Avoidance. Other participants opted to use strategies that were less direct than confronting. In response to a male Sailor Moon cosplayer who, according to Jordan, has a tendency to harass female cosplayers, they "blocked him immediately, but many of my friends have been harassed and bullied by him on multiple accounts." This can be seen as an example of the avoiding strategy, in which one chooses to maintain a distance between themselves and the dominant

culture, typically by instituting ways to prevent interaction with dominant group members (Orbe and Roberts 296). Sexual harassment became so bad for Amber that she adopted an avoidance strategy as well. Amber commented that “touch. Touch was so often a problem that I stopped taking pictures with people in plain clothes. They could photograph me, but not pose with me.” These results suggest that some female and non-male cosplayers adopt measures that prevent them from being harassed and assaulted by the dominant culture, while still allowing them to participate in cosplay.

Theme 11: Communicating Self. It would seem at times even Jamal would opt for a less confrontational approach, as he and Taylor also used a communicating self strategy. This strategy involves marginalized cosplayers interacting with the dominant culture in a manner that showcases their high self-esteem (Orbe, “Laying” 168; Orbe and Roberts 295). Jamal said that “being in the Navy, I can let things roll off my back, because I will not reward ignorance or stupidity with my precious action or response!” Regarding their experience with racism and sexism while cosplaying, Taylor commented that “it doesn't bug me that much in the long run, because I'm very comfortable and happy with who I am, but it happens.” This would suggest that, at times, marginalized cosplayers choose to take what some may call the “high road” and not give any of their energy to racist and sexist remarks from the dominant culture.

Conclusion

The results revealed that marginalized cosplayers typically adopt strategies with the aims of accommodation (confrontation and communicating self) and separation (avoidance) when interacting with the White-male dominant culture within the geek community. Accommodation strategies are ones in which co-cultures are opting to maintain their own cultural identity while still participating in the culture (Orbe, “Laying” 170-1). Sometimes these manifest in the participants directly confronting the dominant culture about their harassment; other times they choose to ignore negative comments and refuse to let it lower their self-esteem. Another tactic, which was only adopted by the non-male participants, was avoidance. This suggests that for some women and non-binary cosplayers, it is best to separate oneself as much as possible from the dominant culture when cosplaying, as they are less likely to encounter harassment and assault when not interacting with men. Not present in the responses are any strategies that represent assimilation as an aim. This would

suggest that Black, female, and non-binary cosplayers are largely uninterested in taking on the dominant culture's standards to participate in the culture.

This study helps to better expose the experiences of marginalized cosplayers. Adding to the growing list of literature that discusses the marginalization of women and minority cosplayers, and members of the geek community at large, will assist in highlighting the need to transform the geek space so that it becomes more inclusive. Often cases are made about the need for more diversity in media, and this study provides an example of the harm this lack of diversity generates. Although cosplaying should be a fun and enjoyable experience, what this study shows is that that is not always the case for marginalized cosplayers. As previously demonstrated with the negative reactions to more diversity in major franchises like *Star Wars* and Pokémon, these same attitudes persist and replicate in more interpersonal settings, such as at geek conventions, forcing marginalized cosplayers to adopt various strategies to either confront or avoid both verbal and physical harassment. Black and women cosplayers have to navigate and cope with the negative attention that their mere presence unjustly generates that those of the dominant culture likely do not even think about. The continued silencing of marginalized voices allows racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression to persist. This study is one of a few that is actively engaged in pointing out and dismantling oppressive structures in geek culture.

Further research that seeks to expose the levels of racism and sexism that exist within the geek community is recommended. Something that appeared within this study that was not an original area of attention was the propensity of the respondents to attend diverse conventions. Many participants listed these conventions as some of their favorites, and the inclusive environment as a major factor as to why. This calls for more research into the positive attributes of having more conventions that intentionally aim to be diverse and de-center White males.

This study faced a few limitations, the main limitation being that it was conducted by way of an online questionnaire. By using this manner of data collection, it was difficult to extrapolate more context from the respondents, as some gave only one to three-word answers at times. The researcher was unable to follow up for clarification with any answers that were unclear, Brandy's aforementioned response being a primary example. The online questionnaire format also made it much more difficult to extrapolate co-cultural communication strategies, as most respondents did not go into much detail about how they interact with the dominant culture. An additional limitation was the lack of experience in

predominantly White and male spaces of the participants. Future recruitment processes should seek to hear from Black and other marginalized cosplayers who hold more experience in less diverse conventions.

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Appendix A

List of Questionnaire Questions

1. What gender do you identify as?
2. What race/ethnicity do you identify as?
3. What is your age?
4. How long have you been cosplaying?
5. Why did you start cosplaying? What sort of satisfaction do you receive from doing it?
6. Who are some of your favorite characters to cosplay? Why?
7. Do you think non-cosplayers understand the cosplay community? Why or why not?
8. What are some of your favorite conventions to attend? Why?
9. Do you feel connected with the cosplay community? If so, how do you engage with other cosplayers?
10. Do you participate in cosplay contests? Why or why not?
11. Please describe any standout experiences you've had while cosplaying.

12. Have you ever been left out of a group photo for a particular character you were cosplaying? If so, how did you feel about the experience?
13. Have you ever experienced racism and/or sexism while cosplaying? If so, can you share a little bit about the experience?
14. Have you encountered any inappropriate non-verbal behaviors (touch, eye contact, etc.) while cosplaying? If so, can you describe the experience?
15. Have you encountered any inappropriate verbal comments while cosplaying? If so, can you describe the incidents?
16. Do you post your cosplay pictures online? If so, what are some of the positive and/or negative comments you've received? How do they make you feel?
17. Do you feel racism/sexism exists within the geek community? Why or why not?