

EXPLORING SELF-CONCEPT AND COMMUNICATION STYLES AMONG COSPLAYERS IN SOCIAL CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to uncover how cosplayers in Balikpapan, East Kalimantan, construct their self-identity and communication style through cosplay practices. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten active cosplayers for at least one year, participant observation at various cosplay events, and literature studies on self-concept, identity formation, and symbolic interaction theories (Harris, 2022; Taylor & Dawson, 2021; Smith & Wallace, 2023). Thematic analysis of interview data and field notes identified four main findings: (1) identity negotiation through cosplay names and chosen characters; (2) self-transformation and increased self-confidence since the first cosplay experience; (3) development of self-concept strengthened by community appreciation; and (4) a more open communication style within the community but limited by stigma outside the community. These findings suggest that cosplay is not just entertainment, but a transformative medium for self-exploration, social skill development, and creative network formation. Despite the challenges of social stigma, participation in cosplay has been shown to increase self-confidence, communication skills, and facilitate professional opportunities in the creative industry. Further research is recommended to explore the long-term psychological impacts of cosplay in various cultural contexts.

Keywords: *Cosplay, Self-Identity, Communication Style, Phenomenology, Cosplay Community, Symbolic Interaction*

INTRODUCTION

Cosplay, short for "costume play," is a form of performance art originating from Japan that has gained global recognition. It involves individuals dressing up as characters from anime, video games, movies, and comics (Pushkareva & Agaltsova, 2021). Over time, cosplay has transcended its niche origins, becoming a worldwide cultural phenomenon with dedicated communities in various countries. As Japanese culture continues to rise in popularity in Indonesia, cosplay communities have grown, contributing to the broader creative industry (Rahman, Liu, & Cheung, 2012). The cosplay community consists of a group of people who are fond of pursuing acting arts activities in imitating the style of dress, behavior, and speaking style of the character who is the object of imitation (Santosa & Yuliana, 2024). This phenomenon has attracted the attention of various parties because it involves unique psychological, social, and communication aspects in cosplayers' social interactions with their communities and the general public. In the world of cosplay, the costumes chosen by cosplayers to portray certain characters embody their identity. The costumes they choose can show the characteristics of the characters they play; without them realizing it, these characteristics have merged and blended with their identities (Santosa & Yuliana, 2024). Studies indicate that cosplay is a platform for identity negotiation, allowing individuals to explore and redefine their identities through performative processes (Stanich, 2023). Moreover, cosplay provides individuals with opportunities for self-expression and confidence-building through social interaction and community participation (Baudin & Chavez, 2025).

The ability to temporarily assume an alternate identity has been found to contribute to increased self-esteem and psychological well-being among cosplayers (Crawford & Hancock, 2019). Previous studies have examined cosplay from various perspectives, including its role in identity formation, creativity, and community building. For instance, research has shown that cosplay allows individuals to experiment with different identities, allowing them to express parts of themselves that may not be visible in their everyday lives. In addition, cosplay communities foster social integration by creating supportive environments where members can share their experiences and validate each other's efforts (Santosa & Yuliana, 2024). Adiratna (2024) stated that cosplay is different from costume activities such as live-action roleplay. This cosplay activity is tied to the characters and stories contained in it. Therefore, costumes are a supporting element, while storylines or interactions are the main thing in cosplay. Winge (2006) states that cosplayers dress up and wear costumes like in Halloween events and spend a lot of money and time making, buying costumes, and learning the typical poses and dialogues of the characters they will play. Winge (2006) added that while often associated with entertainment, cosplay also serves as a significant form of self-expression and social interaction. Cosplayers embody fictional characters and engage in the process of identity exploration, where the characters they portray may reflect various aspects of their identity. Gideon (2014) explained that cosplay can be used to train confidence to be proficient in public speaking, as well as a forum for self-courage to display expressions that are not visible in real life and to represent the alter ego. In addition, cosplay can also be a form of trauma venting, the search for popularity and existence, and a place to create a new identity due to social needs or demands (Smith, 2009).

In phenomenological studies, an individual's experience in cosplay can be attributed to the self-concept and communication style they develop. A person's self-concept reflects how individuals see and understand themselves in social interactions (Yuniasih, Siregar, & Marhan, 2023). The social environment very quickly influences a person's self-concept. The role of childhood has a significant influence on determining the success of individuals in self-actualization. Innate factors do not form self-concept from birth but are learned and formed through individual experiences and interactions with others. Through this interaction, individuals will discover their identity, develop a self-concept, and establish relationships with the world (Walid & Hartono, 2015). Individuals can display a different identity from everyday life in the cosplay community, affecting their communication patterns and social acceptance. Some studies show that cosplayers experience a change in self-concept after joining a community, where confidence and self-expression increase (Miranti & Kahija, 2020). In addition, the communication style of cosplayers in their community has unique characteristics, considering that interaction occurs not only through verbal communication but also through visual symbols displayed through costumes and character expressions (Mulyana, 2000). Based on the symbolic interaction theory of George Herbert Mead, there are three key elements in explaining the process of forming a person's self-concept, namely through the mind, self, and society (West & Turner, 2017).

The concept of mind is a person's ability to use symbols with a general social meaning. Language is a system of sharing verbal and nonverbal symbols with a generally agreed meaning. By using language and interacting with others, individuals can develop the mind. The concept of self is the ability of individuals to reflect on themselves from the perspective of others. A person's self will be formed by looking in the mirror of others (looking-glass self). Society is defined as a network of social

relationships that create humans. Individuals are involved in society through actively and voluntarily selected behavior (Junitasari & Akalili, 2023). This research focuses on the cosplay community in Balikpapan, East Kalimantan, Indonesia, which presents a unique context due to its distinct social and cultural landscape. As one of the major cities in Kalimantan, Balikpapan has undergone rapid urbanization and increased digital access, enabling global cultural trends like cosplay to be embraced locally. While existing studies highlight cosplay's role in identity formation, creativity, and community building, limited research has examined the cosplay community in smaller cities like Balikpapan, Indonesia. Much of the literature focuses on urban centers such as Jakarta or Bali. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by investigating how cosplayers in Balikpapan construct their self-concept and develop communication styles within their unique social environment.

The choice of Balikpapan as the focus of this research is driven by its status as an emerging hub for creative industries in East Kalimantan. As the city becomes more interconnected through digital platforms and local cosplay events, there is increasing interest in global pop culture (KaltimKita.com, 2023). Although smaller than those in major cities, Balikpapan's cosplay community provides a valuable opportunity to study how individuals in non-metropolitan areas adapt and develop new social identities (Kaltimku.com, 2024). Furthermore, the city's diverse demographic, comprising indigenous populations and migrant communities, offers an interesting backdrop for understanding how cultural hybridity influences the development of cosplay as a form of self-expression and communication (TribunKaltimWiki, 2022).

Despite its growing popularity, little research has been conducted on how cosplay influences communication styles among its participants. Communication within cosplay communities is characterized by verbal and non-verbal cues, often shaped by the characters portrayed (Kiling & Kiling, 2015). At the same time, cosplayers face challenges related to societal stigma and perceptions of their hobby, which may affect how they communicate outside of the cosplay environment (Yuniasih, Siregar, & Marhan, 2023).

Drawing on George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism, this study examines how cosplayers negotiate their identities through symbolic representations, performative interactions, and social acceptance. By understanding how cosplay influences self-concept and communication, this research contributes to the discourse on subcultures, identity construction, and social integration in the modern era.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore how cosplayers develop their identities and engage in communication with their social environments. By adopting a phenomenological framework, the study aims to provide a deep understanding of how cosplayers utilize symbolic interaction to construct their identities and adapt their communication strategies to various social contexts (Harris, 2022; Taylor & Dawson, 2021). Methodology: Data collection involved in-depth interviews with ten cosplayers who have been active in the community for at least one year. The participants were selected based on their involvement in the cosplay community, either as event participants, content creators, or online forum members. The interviews were structured with open-ended questions, focusing on themes such as how cosplay influences self-concept, boosts confidence, and shapes social interactions. Additionally, participatory observation was conducted at cosplay events to examine non-verbal communication, including costumes, gestures, and expressions. Field notes

documented natural interactions between cosplayers and their audiences, offering insights into how cosplayers negotiate their identities in different settings. A comprehensive literature review complemented the research by comparing the findings with existing theories on self-concept, identity formation, and symbolic interaction in cosplay culture (Smith & Wallace, 2023).

Data Analysis: The analysis followed a three-step process: data reduction, thematic presentation, and conclusion drawing. The initial stage involved transcribing the interviews and identifying relevant statements on self-expression and communication styles. Thematic analysis was employed to categorize the data into themes such as the transformation of self-concept, confidence-building through cosplay, and the impact of social acceptance on identity formation. This analysis helped uncover patterns in cosplayers' experiences, offering insights into the ways these experiences shape their identity and communication strategies (Brown, 2024). **Ethical Considerations:** Ethical protocols were carefully followed in the study. Participants were informed about the research purpose and gave both verbal and written consent before interviews and observations. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and participants were informed they could withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. This ethical approach ensured the research adhered to high standards of respect for participants' privacy and autonomy. By analyzing these themes, the study aims to deepen the understanding of cosplay as a unique form of self-expression and social communication. It also explores how cosplayers manage their identities in a range of social settings (Harris, 2022; Taylor & Dawson, 2021). The findings have the potential to expand knowledge on the role of cosplay in identity formation and social interactions within community-based activities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Compared to other studies, this study stands out in the phenomenological approach used to delve into the cosplayer experience in depth. Focus on self-concept and social communication also makes a new contribution to understanding how individuals build their identities through cosplay. Another uniqueness of this study is the qualitative approach that provides deeper insights into the personal experience of cosplayers rather than just looking at cosplay from the perspective of popular culture. Many previous studies have only highlighted cosplay as entertainment or part of the creative industry. However, this study further explores how cosplay can be a medium for self-reflection and strengthening social identity. In addition, the study showcases how the cosplay community has a distinctive communication system and strong symbolic interactions. For example, one of the informants, NV, stated that cosplay gives her a space to express an identity that she cannot always display in her daily life: "When I play the character I play, I feel more confident and can be more open in socializing. I do not always feel that in the work or family environment." This shows that cosplay is a hobby and social media that supports the development of individual identities.

The study also found that the experience of being a cosplayer has a long-term impact on how individuals perceive themselves and build social relationships. Some cosplayers even mention that being involved in the cosplay world helps them overcome social anxiety and improve their real-life communication skills. As revealed by RZ, "I used to be nervous when speaking in public, but after appearing in cosplay events a lot, I became more accustomed to the public attention and felt more comfortable interacting with new people." Another uniqueness of this study is how cosplay can serve as a safe space for individuals to channel their creativity. In this study, it was found that many

cosplayers developed additional skills such as artistic makeup, costume-making, and acting techniques, as expressed by SW, "Before cosplay, I did not know how to sew or make costumes. Now I can make my own and even help other friends who want to try cosplay." This shows that the world of cosplay can be an interactive and supportive learning space. With these findings, this study provides a broader perspective on how cosplay functions as a form of artistic expression and a mechanism for building self-identity and strengthening social communities. Therefore, this research is expected to be a reference for further studies on the relationship between identity, communication, and popular culture in the modern context.

Cosplayer Identity and Motivation

One of the most fascinating aspects of the cosplayers' identities is their choice of cosplay names, which often reflect their connection to the characters they portray and their personal interests. Each cosplayer's name is a symbolic marker of their identity within the cosplay community, offering a sense of belonging and helping to establish a unique persona. For example, FR chose the name "Mitsuki," inspired by a character from *Naruto*, because of her admiration for the moon, which symbolizes beauty and purity. This connection to the character of Mitsuki reflects not only her passion for the anime but also her personal journey to finding beauty and confidence. Similarly, SN went with the name "Alles V," a play on the character V from the popular K-pop group BTS. She chose this name to express a personal connection to the group, showing how cosplay names can reflect an individual's interests outside anime or gaming. These names are more than just labels; they are part of a more extensive symbolic language that helps cosplayers express their identities and passions. The choice of cosplay names is also significant because it allows cosplayers to create an alter ego or persona beyond their everyday life. By adopting these names, cosplayers can embody a character that resonates with them on a deeper level, which helps them transcend the limitations they may feel in their real-life identities. This connection to their cosplay name becomes integral to how they view themselves and how the community sees them.

Furthermore, the first experience with cosplay plays a crucial role in shaping cosplayers' motivations and self-perception. For many cosplayers, their initial foray into cosplay is a transformative experience that marks a key moment in their personal and social development. FR shared that her first cosplay experience was driven by her passion for makeup and costume design. However, after participating in her first cosplay event, she realized it was not just about the costumes or the characters—it was about the confidence and self-expression she felt when she brought her favorite character to life. Cosplay allowed her to express a side of herself that she had never been able to in her everyday life. This new form of self-expression became pivotal in shaping her identity and boosting her self-confidence. SN also shared a similar sentiment, saying that she initially felt insecure about her appearance, believing she did not meet the "standards" set by the anime characters she admired. However, after attending several cosplay events and receiving positive feedback from other cosplayers, she realized that the most important aspect of cosplay was enjoying the experience and embracing her role as part of a larger community. This realization helped her form a more positive self-concept and made her more confident in herself.

For RZ, his initial motivation for trying cosplay stemmed from the encouragement of friends. At first, he was hesitant, but after his first event, he felt a sense of freedom in embodying a character and expressing his passion for anime. This

experience helped him overcome his initial social anxiety, and it became a transformative part of his journey as a cosplayer. The recognition he received from the community further motivated him to continue cosplaying, which allowed him to develop stronger social skills and confidence in his interactions with others. These personal experiences highlight the powerful impact of cosplay on an individual's self-identity. By choosing a cosplay name and experiencing their first cosplay event, cosplayers often undergo a transformative process beyond simply portraying a character. They gain confidence, build social connections, and enhance their communication skills, all contributing to their personal growth. With its support and shared passions, the cosplay community provides a unique environment for individuals to express themselves and develop a more profound sense of identity, ultimately helping them grow both within the community and in their personal lives. Embodying a character allows cosplayers to break free from the limitations of their everyday lives and experience new forms of self-expression that they might not have been able to achieve otherwise. Thus, cosplay becomes a creative outlet and a platform for personal and social transformation.

Cosplayer Self-Concept

Self-concept is an important element in a person's identity and develops through social interaction. Based on the results of the interviews, most of the cosplayers interviewed have a background as fans of Japanese culture since childhood. They choose to participate in cosplay as a form of self-expression, where they can bring their favorite characters from anime, manga, or games to life.

FR, one of the cosplayers interviewed, stated that cosplay gives freedom of self-expression: "I love anime character makeup, but I have never been out of the house with that look. I feel more confident when I cosplay because I can show a different side of myself." This statement reflects how cosplay can build identity and increase a person's confidence. The phenomenology in this study reveals that cosplayers' self-concept develops through personal experiences and interactions with their community. Most cosplayers initially feel hesitant or insecure due to visuals and body shape. However, through their experience in the cosplay community, they become more confident and accept themselves for who they are. For example, DB says, "It feels mixed, more relieving. At first, I was curious. He was initially pessimistic because of his large body size, but it turned out that his shirt size was there. So I am optimistic and want to adjust to that character." SN, another cosplayer, also revealed that cosplay provides space for a person to experience new experiences and form a more positive self-concept. "I was initially unconfident because I felt that my appearance was not up to the standard of anime characters. However, after participating in the event several times, I realized that the most important thing is how I enjoy my role in cosplay and have a fun experience." This shows that cosplay can be an effective tool in increasing confidence and forming a more positive self-concept. In addition, SG added that cosplay also gave her a new perspective on how she perceives herself. "I used to feel inferior with my performance. Nevertheless, after cosplaying, I realized that identity is about physicality and how we present ourselves in the characters we play. I feel more confident and enjoy the world of cosplay even more." This confirms how interaction within the cosplay community can help individuals better accept and understand themselves.

Herbert Mead's symbolic interaction theory explains that self-concept is formed through interaction. Cosplayers in this study show that they build their cosplay identity based on appreciation and recognition from the community. Every time they attend an

event and receive praise or support from fellow cosplayers and visitors, they are increasingly motivated to explore their identity in the cosplay world further. person's identity is formed through the symbols and meanings given by his social environment. Cosplayers use a variety of symbols in their interactions, including costumes, accessories, and body language that reflect the characters they are portraying. DB said, "When I wear the costumes of my favorite characters, I feel like I am part of that world. People responded more enthusiastically to me as if I were that character." This shows that cosplay is not just a hobby but also a form of nonverbal communication that has meaning for the community. In the cosplay community, symbols such as costumes, makeup, and attributes of the characters they play become part of their identity. Their interactions with others at cosplay events often reinforce their self-concept. They feel that the recognition given by others to the character they play validates their identity as a cosplayer. For some cosplayers, the cosplay experience also opens up opportunities to expand their skills in makeup, costume making, and building confidence in social interactions. One of the informants, SW, said, "I used to be shy and rarely talked to people I did not know. However, after becoming a cosplayer, I became more courageous in talking to many people, both fellow cosplayers and event visitors. I learned a lot from this experience, and it has also helped me in my daily life." This statement shows that the cosplay experience can have a broader impact on an individual's social life, not just limited to the cosplay community. Overall, the results of the interviews showed that cosplay has an important role in shaping a person's self-concept. Through the experience of interacting in the cosplay community and the appreciation they receive, cosplayers develop in the way they see themselves. This phenomenon also shows that self-concept is not fixed but can develop through social experiences and individual reflection on how they want to present themselves in the real and cosplay worlds.

Cosplayer's Communication Style with Social Environment

The communication style of cosplayers with their social environment varies, depending on whether they are within or outside the cosplay community. The results of the interviews showed that most cosplayers identified themselves as introverts. However, in a cosplay environment, they feel more comfortable interacting because they are among people who share similar interests. SG mentioned, "I feel more free to speak in the cosplay community. Because everyone here has the same interests, there is no awkwardness or fear of being judged." This suggests that cosplay allows individuals to explore communication more openly than their daily interactions outside the cosplay community. However, there are noticeable differences in their social interactions outside the cosplay community. Some cosplayers mention that they are not always open about their cosplay identities in everyday life due to fear of social stigma. SP stated, "My family does not know I am a cosplayer because I live outside the city. I am afraid they do not understand and instead give a negative assessment." SW also added that although she feels comfortable in the cosplay community, she rarely talks about this activity in the work and family environment. "I was afraid of being considered childish because I played a role like a fictional character. Nevertheless, in the cosplay community, I feel accepted and can be myself without fear of being judged negatively."

In addition, AL explained that in cosplay events, he can talk more confidently with others because they have similar interests. "I am usually shy, but when I cosplay, I find it easier to talk to people. Because we have the same topic, so there is no awkwardness." This shows that cosplay can also be a medium that helps a person build communication skills. Communication within the cosplay community is limited to face-

to-face meetings in the event and actively occurs through social media. Cosplayers often use platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Discord to share experiences, interact with fellow community members, and organize upcoming cosplay meetings and events. The dynamics of communication in the cosplay community show that there is openness, where cosplayers can speak more freely compared to their interactions in the social environment outside of this community. However, they also face challenges, such as people's stereotypes towards cosplay, which sometimes make them hide their identity in their daily lives. Overall, the cosplayer's communication style with their social environment depends on the context and audience they are dealing with. In the cosplay community, communication is open and inclusive. It supports self-expression, while outside the community, there are social stigma constraints that make some cosplayers choose to keep their activities secret. Cosplay not only has an impact on the individual who does it but also on the broader social environment. The community contributes to introducing Japanese culture and popular culture in general through cosplay events. Cosplay events held in various cities are an attraction for the general public and also creative industry players. Sometimes, cosplay events even support the local economic sector by selling merchandise, costumes, and accessories that support this hobby-based creative industry.

In addition, cosplay is also a means for individuals to build social networks and develop interpersonal skills. Many cosplayers feel they have a supportive community and share experiences with fellow fans. Participation in these communities allows individuals to improve their communication, teamwork, and artistic skills that can be applied in various fields outside of cosplay. However, there is still a stigma against cosplay in some circles. Therefore, further education is needed to accept cosplay as part of a positive cultural expression. One of the main challenges is the assumption that cosplay is only for children or that participating adults are not taken seriously in real life. Cosplay involves various professional aspects, from costume-making and makeup techniques to acting arts that require high skills. Many cosplayers have succeeded in making this hobby a profession, either as fashion designers, accessory makers, or even performers at various international events. In addition to public perception, another aspect that needs to be considered is the influence of cosplay in daily life. For some individuals, cosplay can provide greater confidence and open up new career and social opportunities. This shows that cosplay is not just a form of entertainment but can also function as a medium of learning and self-development. Thus, socialization efforts regarding the positive values of cosplay need to continue to be carried out so that more and more people understand that cosplay is not just a game but also a part of a culture that can support self-expression, creative skills, and broader social interaction. Campaigns highlighting the positive aspects of cosplay, such as its contribution to the creative industry and the career opportunities it can generate, can help change the perspective of people still skeptical of these activities.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into the interplay between self-concept and communication styles among cosplayers. The findings suggest that cosplay is a transformative platform, enabling individuals to express suppressed aspects of their identity. Through community participation, cosplayers develop self-confidence, refine their social skills, and navigate societal perceptions. Furthermore, communication within the cosplay community is marked by verbal and non-verbal expressions, deeply influenced by the personas cosplayers embody. However, social stigma and external

judgments outside this subculture challenge identity negotiation. Overall, this research contributes to understanding cosplay beyond mere entertainment, recognizing it as a social and psychological phenomenon that facilitates self-exploration and interpersonal engagement. Future studies could expand on the long-term psychological impacts of cosplay, particularly in diverse cultural settings.

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