

## Conference Paper

# Cosplay As a Youth Subculture: The Factors of Choice and Identity Formation

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### Abstract

The article addresses the establishment and peculiarities of cosplay as a youth urban subculture in modern Russia. Cosplay is referred to as a subculture created by young people specifically for themselves, which, in a sense, defines it as elitist as long as it is aimed to form a relatively closed community. The authors demonstrate the possibilities of conducting a sociological analysis of cosplay by means of methodologies of sociology of recreation, sociology of game, sociology of communication and sociology of subculture, which supports a multidisciplinary approach to understanding of new practices in youth subcultures. The study actualizes the problem of constructing a new type of identity through subculture, while enhancing such aspects of cosplay as values and norms, and culture and behavior. The subculture analysis relies on the results of multi-methodological, empirical research in sociology: a mass survey (n=496) and in-depth interviews (n=10) conducted in 2018 with cosplayers in Russia. The techniques of on-line survey and face-to-face interview were used. The study reveals basic motives of cosplayers at the stages of entering the subculture and subculture affiliation; addresses the criteria of self-identification as cosplayers and characterizes the attitude of their immediate environment to the choice of this specific subculture. The low level of identifying cosplay with subculture and the absence of opposition to mainstream societal norms and values is one of the most significant conclusions, which corresponds to growing urban tolerance towards displays of subcultures, the rise of cosplay positive connotations in mass media and reference groups. Furthermore, cosplayers give recreational and communicative components of cosplay priority, thus making cosplay a cultural and ludic “hybrid phenomenon”. This study is one of the pioneering ones to research cosplay in Russia, which accounts for its particular relevance and salience.

**Keywords:** cosplay, subculture, motivation, playisation, recreation.

## 1. Introduction

International sociology assigns young people a special place in the system of social reproduction: according to several authors, this population group’s biological, social and cultural flexibility enables researchers to reveal a variety of societal changes and to demonstrate them by means of a unique lifestyle.

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The methodology of the study derives ideas from sociology of culture (subculture in particular), sociology of game and playisation of society, and regards cosplay as a recreational activity and communicative space. The multidisciplinary approach provides an opportunity to use combined methodology in order to conduct a sociological analysis of cosplay in Russia.

In accordance with the above-mentioned scientific approaches, youth subcultures are characterized by a number of identification attributes, including a way of life and a lifestyle, dominated by social and cultural needs, and a particular set of semantic and phraseological means that are used to label information. When once popular subcultures are studied, some existing at present phenomena, which can no longer be classified as subculture as such, are left behind.

Based on the idea of an increasing number of cosplay fans in Russia, the main aim of the study is to research the motives prompting to choose this particular subculture out of all variety of youth subcultures, and the reasons to identify oneself with the movement.

## 2. Methodology and Methods

The societal structural transformation in post-Soviet era resulted in the changes to socialization agents and the deformation of value and norm-based regulation mechanisms. Young people in modern Russian reality are deprived of relevant, socially regulated mechanisms to form social behavior patterns. Therefore, they have to turn to alternative sources of vital function, and a youth subculture is among them.

Youth subcultures act as socializing environments, offering teenagers and youngsters to choose the most suitable part of culture and fill in communicative gaps formed as a result of a conflict with their social environment. D. Peeples, J. Yen and P. Weigle [6] consider the advent of the internet as a cultural shift as it offered stigmatized communities space for virtual communication, while youngsters were able to reach their peers with niche interests.

In our study cosplay as a subculture is regarded as esoteric, romantic and escapist, urban and fan subculture, created by young people for themselves. In a sense, it can also be considered elitist, as it is aimed at creating a virtually closed community, with a limited participant number and no pronounced ambition to achieve mass membership. Its distinctive feature is its inability to fit into conventional culture (i.e., mass culture in contemporary world), which makes cosplay is a compensatory mechanism, whose function is to counterbalance the leveling out pressure of the masses.

Cosplay as a leisure activity is defined as youngsters' practice of choosing how to use their free time, enabling them to meet their recreational needs and interests, as well as communicating with other social communities within the space of common recreational activity.

In terms of communication, cosplay is a conscious process of interaction among cosplay movement participants in order to transmit or exchange information by means of established in cosplay semiotic systems and staging procedures.

And finally, cosplay as a game is referred to as cosplayers' social and stage activity intended to construct and reenact the practices and spaces of hyperreality in order to satisfy youngsters' spiritual and social needs.

Within the framework of materials referring to cosplay as a game, there is a conflicting issue of cosplay essence. In some of them cosplay is defined as a phenomenon affirming the priority of the external over the internal, the border over freedom. E. Samoylova believes that cosplay phenomenon is becoming essentially important in modern culture as it acts as an element of binding a person's identity, his/her ego, whose typical feature in modern reality is fragmentation [10].

Moreover, cosplay creates a spectrum of new identities. For instance, cosplay communities accept and use both crossplay, and gender-oriented cosplay. According to E.G. Nichols [5], it enables the participants to choose their roles irrespective of their sex and gain new insights into gender identity. O. Rahman et al. [7] broaden the concept of crossing identity frontiers in cosplay: thanks to this joint activity, cosplayers can briefly escape reality and immerse themselves in their own creative world. This appears to be a new form of identity and social role transformation.

One of the major discussions is linked to cosplay virtualization. Some authors maintain that while participating in cosplay, youngsters escape reality and everyday problems. L. Zabokritskaya and T. Oreshkina illustrate how cyberspace creates new communicative norms and rules, which transform social relations [12]. Information technology is developing with a much higher speed in comparison with youth information culture, which brings on conflicts and risks among youngsters.

Other researchers, however, argue that it greatly depends on the participants' degree of fanaticism. L. Zubernis и K. Larsen distinguish the desire to be close to celebrities as one of the trends in modern "fame-saturated culture" [13]. Lately the desire to be physically present in places connected to their objects of adulation was acknowledged as a growing sign of virtualization in the real world. Thus cosplay is becoming a way to form physical environment where one can display fandom identity and collaborate with other fans.

According to other researchers, cosplay can inspire, revive interest in the national or a different culture, and develop community affiliation. S. Bender и K. A. Pepler [1] consider that cosplay can be contrasted with standardized formal models of learning as an excellent example of connected learning, when people are the ones who design learning linked to their interests.

While continuing this discussion, N. Lamerichs [3] describes cosplay as costume designing culture which has outgrown the institutional competencies of the theatre and is challenging the theatre monopoly in costume design. Cosplay originated in the carnival as a free form of game, a perfect embodiment of freedom. Cosplay is closely connected to the carnival space of the fan convention cosplay festivals, a special type of cosplay, spiritually uniting total strangers, as their participants claim.

Cosplay, consequently, is becoming a new type of subculture having a pronounced space and time restriction with the minimal degree of presence in everyday communicative practices in non-cosplay environment. Cosplay is realized by cosplayers' social and stage activity, aimed at the construction or reenactment of hyperreality practices and spaces in order to meet spiritual and social needs of young people. As long as the cosplayer cannot always stay in the chosen image, a borderline character of temporary identity and communication emerges. As G. Crawford and D. Hancock demonstrate [2], cosplay promotes a better understanding of the modern nature of subcultures as "intangible forms of consumption": they are no longer constantly present in everyday practices or constantly visible. Hence, we also regard cosplay as a "borderline situation" of real ontological space communication and the space of the narrative world.

The empirical database of the study comprises the materials of the sociological research led by the authors in 2018. Primary information was collected by means of an on-line survey in the Russian Federation and the countries of the CIS (N=496 respondents), and a focus group interview among cosplayers in Yekaterinburg (N=10 people). Additional information was drawn from the popular youth social medium Vkontakte, specifically the data of RusAnimeFest group, which monitors cosplay festivals in Russia and the CIS. The main objective of the study was to research cosplayers' motivations at two stages: firstly, when the decision to join cosplay movement was taken and, secondly, while young people continued to participate and started to identify themselves with the subculture.

Yekaterinburg is a typical Russian city, a cultural, industrial and research center, located in Central Urals, on the border of Europe and Asia, and has all characteristic features of youth subcultures in Russia. Thus, the sample is representative for almost all Russia.

### 3. Results / Findings and Discussion

While considering motivational (intrinsic) reasons for participants to join cosplay, three groups of factors can be distinguished. The first group comprises two leading factors, which is a desire for self-expression, self-development and a desire to play the roles of favorite characters. These motives exceed the following group by a wide margin and represent from 51 to 56% of respondents' answers. The dominant motives to engage in cosplay are somewhat different for Russian and Western participants. While Russian cosplayers emphasize the ideas of self-realization and development, their Western counterparts accentuate the hedonistic nature of the activity. Thus, a study carried out in the US (S. Reysen et al. [8]) revealed the predominance of entertainment motives, escape from everyday life, eustress and aesthetic value.

The second group, gaining from 21 to 27% of answers, comprises the motives to communicate with similar lifestyle participants, or find their own lifestyle, or desire to learn more about cosplay.

The third group of motives comprises those scoring less than 20% of respondents' answers, which makes them the least significant (engage in the same activities as one's friends, replay situations seen in films / comics / video games, pass the time).

TABLE 1: Reasons to join cosplay

Criterion theoretical framework	Factor	% of respondents
Sociology of recreation	A desire for self-expression and self-development	56.0%
Sociology of game	A desire to play the role of favorite characters	51.0%
Sociology of communication	Willingness to communicate with people with similar lifestyles	26,8%
Sociology of culture	A desire to learn more about cosplay	25.2%
Sociology of culture	An ambition to find one's lifestyle	21.8%
Sociology of communication	A desire to share friends' activities	17.1%
Sociology of game	A desire to reproduce situations seen in films / comics / video games	16.9%
Sociology of recreation	A need to fill one's leisure time	14.5%

It should be noted that complex motivational structures are characteristic of contemporary young people and of the practices they choose, which results in the contradictory nature and motivational hierarchy of young people's activity (A.V. Starshinova [11]).

An essential moment of our study was the question on identity addressed to the respondents, implying not only their self-awareness inside the movement, but also their perception of a common trait uniting cosplay participants. According to the data

provided, it can be inferred that the predominant aspect in perceiving and evaluating cosplay by its participants is its recreational and ludic capacity: 79% of respondents consider cosplay a community of like-minded people, sharing their views and interests, as for outsiders, they tend to leave the community fast enough. 61% also point at the variety of unconventional situations reproduced by the participants, which enables them to boost their creative potential and try themselves out in different roles. Communicative and subcultural aspects, referring to the need for variety in leisure and communication with different people, appeared less significant.

It is essential, however, that the value of these aspects is different in what has been studied as components of cosplayers' motivational sphere. Thus, while comparing motives at the stage of subculture selection and those pertaining to willingness to stay at the stage of active participation, we have discovered that there is a significant evaluation change in the significance level of a particular aspect. First of all, there is an increase of relevance in communication and subcultural aspects: an opinion about other participants' attitude to cosplay is highly approximated to their own motives in the choice of this activity. A strong identity is formed, which is based on the perception of closeness, similar values and communicative practices, seeing cosplay as a "brotherhood" with high levels of understanding and support. This idea is stressed by A. Lotecki [4]: fan cultures are able to fill in the gaps of acceptance, generated by diminishing practices of meaningful interactions and a decline in community spirit in contemporary societies.

The attitude to cosplay was measured not only through participants' own evaluation but by means of their interaction with the immediate environment (relatives, friends) regarding their involvement in cosplay.

The first aspect of researching attitudes to cosplay was linked to the awareness of the immediate environment (family, relatives and close friends) of the respondent's involvement in cosplay activity. The predominant majority of cosplayers (83%) answered that they did not keep their participation in secret. Nevertheless, a certain number (17%) were concealing the fact to a greater or a lesser degree — a relatively small group of respondents claimed that only some people of their immediate environment were aware of their cosplay activity, while a really small number of respondents were keeping their activity low-key or hiding it completely. Half of respondents quoted their fear of relatives' reaction among the reasons to conceal their participation in cosplay: "I'm afraid I'll be accused of wasting money", "because when something bad happens in life all my relatives blame it all on cosplay", "I don't want any mockery", "it's all rubbish for them", "because for them it's all "childish behavior" — and I'm supposed to be "grown-up". A significant number of respondents motivate their behavior as not willing to let their next

of kin know about their hobby, with the reason of being uncertain about the stability of their choice among these motives. They say: “I don’t let them into my interests”, “I don’t tell them about my hobby”, “I wasn’t really keen to tell, I’m a novice here so I don’t want to say anything before the time comes, maybe my interest will wear off”. Among relatives that most often disapprove of youngsters’ interest in cosplay are grandparents. This fact is quite logical, as the older generation is more susceptible to drastic changes in both the appearance and behavioral patterns of young people.

TABLE 2: Attitude to cosplay of respondents’ family, relatives and friends (% of respondents)

	Approve		Disapprove		Direction of evaluation	Cumulative percentage within category b
	Partly	Fully	Partly	Fully		
Mother	47.0	14.5	12.6	25.9	+23.0	100.0
Grandmother	11.2	22.6	24.4	22.4	-13.0	80.6
Father	22.5	25.8	1.5	22.4	+24.4	72.2
Siblings	23.6	15.4	9.9	13.8	+15.3	62.7
Close friends	16.4	4.5	1.5	1.7	+17.7	24.1
Grandfather	2.0	4.1	7.6	8.6	-10.0	22.3
Aunts	5.2	6.8	0.8	5.2	+6.0	18.0
Wife / husband	9.8	4.5	0.8		+13.5	15.1
Uncles	0.9	3.6	0.8	6.9	-3.2	12.2
Girlfriend / Boyfriend	6.1	0.5		1.7	+4.9	8.3
Godmother / Godfather	1.2	0.9			+2.1	2.1
All relatives	23.1	6.8	6.2	3.4	+20.3	39.5

a. Direction of evaluation is calculated as the difference of the number of supporters / non-supporters of cosplay activity

b. Cumulative percentage shows the number of cosplayers who have mentioned this category of immediate environment

Among supporters of cosplay (half of the respondents have such relatives), 72% are interested in success and achievement; 58% provide help in costume design and offer advice; 42% help financially; 20% attend events and are active supporters; and 17% help to stage performance or even participate in cosplay together (9%).

## 4. Conclusions

The study brings us to the conclusion that in evaluations of cosplay the leading approach, with some reservations, is recreational, ludic approach comes second, followed closely by communicative one, while subcultural is less pronounced. The most interesting finding is the controversy between theoretical approaches, where researchers support subcultural approach, while in participants’ perspective, it appears

to be the least relevant. It is noteworthy that according to cosplayers, their lifestyle and the system of values are similar to most people, therefore, they do not oppose themselves to society. Another significant idea is that cosplay is strongly restricted both in terms of time and space, where participants practice their activity but it is not spread beyond. In this way it is almost impossible to recognize cosplayers in everyday activities, hence participants do not identify with their movement as a subculture.

To sum up, having studied the phenomenon of cosplay from several perspectives, we can conclude that cosplay comprises features of different spheres, therefore it would be more productive to research this phenomenon from the standpoint of multiple paradigms.

In this study we have carried out a comprehensive analysis of young people's attitude to cosplay phenomenon. Speaking about the attitude of society towards cosplay, the following peculiarity can be noted: the higher is the involvement of family members into cosplay, the lower is the level of approval. Cosplayers rarely keep their activity in secret. As long as they feel unwilling to inform their environment of their cosplay involvement, they do it for fear of facing a negative reaction.

These are the most significant factors to promote cosplay, according to respondents: attracting more participants, increasing involvement on the part of mass media, gaining popularity in cyberspace, and raising awareness among previous generational groups. According to A.M. Ryabinina's study [9], there are several trends in contemporary Russia: improved coverage in mass media, where cosplay is portrayed in positive light as an independent movement, and a growth of positive connotations in public opinion. Half of the survey respondents also believe that cosplay will attract more young people, and 25% think that the next generation of cosplayers will find it easier and anyone will be able to give it a try it at almost no time and money expense.

We can predict that cosplay will continue to develop but will probably find a different niche in our society, while dividing into two explicit "professional" and "amateur" segments (by analogy with dancing). As for the former group, this will be an elitist part of participants, professionally competent and taking part in competitions. As for the latter, it will be reserved for all other participants, including new teams and individual members. More societal strata will become aware of the phenomenon, information will be less clichéd, resulting in the reduction of negative vision in non-cosplay environment.



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