

# Self-Identity and Needs of Cosplayer in Role Playing

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## ABSTRACT

Cosplay is a role-playing activity in which someone dresses and acts according to the character they are playing. The characters are taken from fiction, i.e. comics, movies, games, novels, etc. In Indonesia, many people attend cosplay events, while wearing costumes. They are called cosplayers. Previous researches have shown that cosplaying plays a role in the making of its practitioners' identities. The practice of cosplay, specifically for female cosplayers looking to discover a new part of their identity and express themselves, is in fact a valid way of forming their identities. Other researches have also concluded that cosplay is a form of identity escape and identity discovery. In addition, it acts as a facilitator of the need for competence that exists within every individual in pursuit of identity. From human development theory, it is well known that adolescence is a period formation of self-identity which, if unsuccessful, has lifelong consequences. This study aims to investigate the self-identity and the needs of cosplayers and is conducted using the qualitative method. A total of 6 active cosplayers were interviewed using in-depth interviews. The results show that there are needs cosplayers wish to meet through the cosplaying activity, but also that it does not facilitate the cosplayers in their pursuit of their own identities. Additionally, this research shows that cosplay plays a role in one's identity formation, but that it depends on the person's experience. The results of this study will provide insight, especially for clinical practitioners, to understand individual with cosplay preferences. This is also based on several studies showing that this preference is related to the personal identity that may encounter in their practice.

**Keywords:** *Cosplay, Cosplayer, Self-identity, Needs.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cosplayer is a term for individuals who carry out cosplay activities [1]. Cosplay comes from the words costume and play, which is an activity carried out by individuals who dress up and appear in public spaces as fictional characters from manga, anime, online games, films, or other popular cultural narratives [2][3][4]. It is considered an interaction activity between individual fans and characters who identify and reveal themselves, making it a means of escaping for a moment from reality and entering an imaginative world. This is a form of role/identity transformation from "ordinary people" to "superheroes", from "game players" to "players", and from "adults" to "children" [4].

In Indonesia, one of the big cosplay communities is Cosplay Jakarta, which consists of around 9,000 people based on Facebook's social media accounts. Within the community there are cosplayers, photographers, costume makers, and cosplay connoisseurs. Cosplayers in the community are between school students and those

who are already working [5]. In Jakarta itself, cosplay is dominated by teenagers who are in the stage of finding their identity, so they try to do interesting things and challenge themselves to achieve actualization [1]. This shows the number of individuals who show interest in cosplay activities.

When a cosplayer plays a character, these cosplayers change their identity. Cosplayers are cognitively engaged and committed and behave like the identity of the character they are playing. Therefore, cosplay can be seen as a pattern of play in various cultural contexts, facilitating change through themed games allowing cosplayers to take on multiple roles in the process of discovering self-identity and social connection [2]. Based on research by Fauziah and Aprilandini [1], cosplay is an opportunity to build new relationships, as well as a form of escape from self-identity, and a means of self-development.

Nichols [6] states that the practice of cosplay for women who want to explore and express a new part of their identity, is a way of diversion and to actualize their

identity. The character played is useful as a marker of the identity of the fan itself. In another study, Melea, Angelopoulos, Kotrotsiou and Bakouras [7] states that individuals who do cosplay shows characteristics dysmorphic and do not like their own identity, increased levels of depression, hostility and criticism of themselves or others. However, research by Abramova, Smirnova, and Tataurova [8] states that a strong identity is formed, which is based on perceptions of closeness, shared values, and communicative practices, viewing cosplay as a “brotherhood” with a high level of understanding and support. This shows that cosplay plays a role in self-identity in various forms. In this case as an escape, exploration, and actualization of self-identity.

A person's identity is formed from birth, a core task of development that takes place throughout life. Especially in the face of important changes that affect individual stability [9]. Based on Erikson's theory of development, the main and most important developmental task for adolescents is to solve identity crises and build a sense of self-identity [10]; [11]. However, cognitive development in adulthood provides a construct for self-understanding. Therefore, early adulthood is the right time to find out who he is [12]. It is a wonderful opportunity if individuals can be actively involved in exploring their identity but failing to overcome this identity crisis will have consequences that will last a lifetime [11].

Research conducted by Erçelik and Dost-Gözkan [13], it was found that there is a role for satisfaction of the need for competence (one of the indicators of basic psychological needs satisfaction (BPNS)) and close friends facilitate the pursuit of self-identity. This shows that the role of needs facilitates the discovery of an individual's identity. Based on the explanation above, cosplay is related to identity because it is an activity to play fictional characters. While the need has a relationship with the formation of self-identity. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the identity and needs of cosplayers.

## **2. METHOD**

### **2.1. Research Participants**

The participants in this study were 6 individuals, consists of 3 women and 3 men who are active cosplayers on social media or at cosplay events.

### **2.2. Research Design**

This research is a qualitative research with a phenomenological approach, which is to describe the general meaning of several individuals on their various life experiences related to concepts or phenomena [14]. The data was obtained by conducting in-depth

interviews, to obtain details based on the experience of the participants.

### **2.3. Procedure**

Interviews were conducted using social media (such as zoom, google meet, whatsapp, and line) and based on the time agreed by the participants and researchers. Interviews were conducted online and recorded via a tape recorder. Before the interview started, participants were asked to fill out an informed consent and the interviewer asked for consent to record the entire interview session. The selection of interviews was conducted online because the research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **2.4. Data Analysis**

The data obtained were analyzed using the MAXQDA application with the following steps. First, the data obtained from in-depth interviews were compiled into transcripts. After that the transcript will be uploaded to the MAXQDA application and coding will be done. Coding is done by highlighting the participant's statement as a specific code. Second, the code will then be categorized by creating a subcode by selecting words/sentences/paragraphs that have a certain meaning from the highlighted statement. Third, using the interactive quote matrix facility to get an overview of a particular theme/category. Data interpretation is carried out based on the results shown from the interactive quote matrix facility.

## **3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

### **3.1. Self Identity**

The participants stated that cosplay is not being someone else, they are still being themselves. They realize that the character is just a fictional character, but they feel a physical or personality similarity that makes them feel connected and like the character. One participant, CMLP, described it by being able to be a different person but still being herself.

“[...] wow, amazing banget people, you can be a different person, gitu lho, but at the same time, it's you.”

In addition to CMLP, there was also DFH who revealed that cosplay activities did not play a role in shaping her identity, this was because cosplay was an activity that required the act of being someone else. Being someone else is meant to be a playable character. While it may be for others it may be different. DFH revealed:

“For myself, it doesn't really play much of a role, to know myself, that's why, precisely because, when it comes to cosplay, you must act like other people, that's how it is. That's the real danger. In my opinion, because there are some people who bring it up to real life,

overreacting people exist, but from myself, fortunate that for persuing my own identity, I don't think so."

However, there is one participant who has a different opinion, namely participant K. She stated that cosplay helped her learn to know herself. She got to know a lot of things, fun things and about herself. K further explained that cosplay helped her more in recognizing the things he liked. K revealed:

"I'm learning to know myself from cosplay, because I was actually in 2012, like I was bullied in elementary school, then like, mnn, I started, knowing Japanese things quite well, knowing myself, but cosplay can also know, Me from the start-- I have hobbies, for example I like K-Pop and Japan is like, oh, so this feels like fun, I see. Then, I can start to understand myself better, like that."

For participants who do not feel that the formation of their identity comes from cosplay activities, it can arise from other factors. One of the participants, VD explained that his identity is formed from his social environment. But this process is a process that is not realized when it takes place.

"For me it's from friends, but maybe, maybe it's from cosplay as well... can also friends, it depends on where the person approaches it. [...] something that is experienced by realizing it by itself, yes, that means sometimes we know that we are not aware of it, like, we learn that. Oh, it turns out I'm like this, that's it."

Based on the above, these cosplayers have differences based on their past experiences. Those who can explore through their social environment will feel that cosplay does not shape them. However, for individuals who cannot get this from their social environment, they will get it from other places, one of which is a hobby, namely cosplay. This can be due to the acceptance obtained by the individual.

Participants who feel themselves accepted in the cosplay environment than in other social environments feel more comfortable using cosplay as a form of exploration. Based on this, it is in line with the research results of Abramova, Smirnova, and Tataurova [8] that the understanding and support of cosplay activities forms a strong identity. But to know how strong the identity that is formed need further research. There are 3 factors that shape self-identity, namely family, peers, and the environment [12] [15] In this case, cosplay acts as a place for individuals to socialize with peers and an environment that provides a place for them to explore. This is also in line with Nichols' [6] statement that cosplay is a place to explore and express and actualize one's identity.

### **3.2. Needs**

Based on the results of the interview, it was found that there were 2 forms of need that emerged, namely

esteem need and belongingness. This need is not found in all participants, there are participants who only have one need, some have both needs.

The first type of need is the esteem need or the need for recognition or appreciation. This need was shared by most of the participants. This recognition or award can take the form of a desire to achieve something or praise for the character being played.

One example of a participant who has this esteem need is CMLP which is directed at awards in competitions related to cosplay. In addition, he has a desire to become an international cosplayer, to represent Indonesia as a cosplayer. This is also shown by the many participations of CMLP in cosplay competitions to achieve their goals. CMLP states:

"[...] My motivation studying hard for the first time was to win the competition. Because I also want to get certificates, charter, trophies. [...] I really wanted to be an international cosplayer from the start, I mean, I could go outside, be invited by other countries, to be in the world of cosplay, be a cosplayer, that's my goal. [...] representative from Indonesia, if I was called to be a representative from Indonesia, I would be very proud."

Another participant, CK, has the same desire as CMLP, although according to him, he is still new to the world of cosplay. CK does cosplay based on her desire to be famous and become an international cosplayer. He wants to be known for his cosplay as a male cosplayer. Unlike CMLP, which fulfills the esteem need, begins with a cosplay competition, CK does it through social media. CK uploads the results of his cosplay through social media by regularly uploading the results of his cosplay.

The second type of need is belongingness. DFH participants learned from their friends that they are closed individuals, difficult to socialize with other people. Cosplay provides a place to make new friends and moreover it becomes easier to socialize.

"[...] I just realized that right, I was told by a friend, I used to be that introverted, I don't want to do that, you know, dealing with other people like that. It's like, okay, I'm with my game, like that... Then with that cosplay, with me doing that cosplay, I can find new connections, new friends, something like that"

Apart from that, participant K felt that cosplay gave him a place where other people could not be seen as strange for his hobby. Cosplay provides a place for him to meet people who have fun like him. He feels that cosplay is a place where he should not be like his daily life outside of cosplay.

"but if it's cosplay, it's probably new, because I know these people share the same hobby as me, and they won't judge me on my hobby, so I'm happy. So I can be kinder to people who know, already know about

cosplay. [...] oh this is like a place I belong and, a place I can be fully myself, like that.”

Based on the results of the interview, it was found that the need was divided into 2, namely esteem need and belongingness. Esteem need by the participants is based on desires such as being famous, winning competitions. Meanwhile, belongingness is based on the existence of a place that makes them comfortable in acting, wearing costumes, and socializing about their hobbies.

No relationship was found between needs and self-identity in all participants. Needs based on interviews are the motivations of these cosplayers. What they want to achieve, earn, or keep keeps them cosplaying. This is contrary to the research results of Erçelik and Dost-Gözkan [13] that needs play a role in the pursuit of self-identity. However, this still needs further research.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Cosplay doesn't shape their identities, it's because they know who they are. However, these participants said they did not rule out the possibility that other cosplayers could be cosplaying consciously or unknowingly. It was found that the participants had different attitudes towards themselves. By choosing the characters they play, they have things in common with themselves, such as body shape and personality. Let them not become someone else, express themselves in a different way. This shows that there is a difference in the results of the study by Melea, Angelopoulos, Kotroliou and Bakouras [7] indicating that cosplayers exhibit personality disorder traits and dislike their identity, increasing the level of depression, hostility, and self-criticism. or others.

Perhaps this is because the age of the participants was not limited to adolescence, which is at the stage of development which is at the stage of searching for identity. In the next study, one might look at age-restriction to adolescence to see more definitive results.

Each participant expresses themselves through cosplay activities. The selection of characters, their motivations are chosen based on what they like and have in common with them. The label they call themselves cosplayers also distinguishes them from others, being a form of identity for themselves. Therefore, it is similar to the concept of self according to VandenBos [16], that self is a psychological feature of an individual that is not tied to other, aspects of the individual self. artificially makes an individual (or group) unique and distinct from others. others, as well as regarding the continuum of the individual.

In addition, in this study, it was found that there were needs to be fulfilled, namely esteem needs and belongingness. Esteem need is based on the participants

who have a great desire to get the appreciation or recognition of others. Then there is belongingness, this is described by finding a place and peers that make them feel comfortable and welcome. Research on the needs of cosplayers has yet to be found, so there is no comparison with previous research. Further research is needed to look at the role of cosplayers' needs.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Cosplay plays a role in one's identity formation, but that depends on the person's experience. Every individual has different experience that facilitate them in pursuing their identity. For cosplay, this is more likely an alternative more than main factor. This shows that hobby facilitating in pursuit identity, but this need further research.

Other finding in this research is needs that cosplayer wish to meet through the cosplaying activity. There are two needs, esteem need and belongingness. These needs emerge based on what they get and what they want to achieve from cosplaying. Based on the interviews, these needs do not facilitate the cosplayers in their pursuit of their own identities.

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