

# THEORIES AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROTEUS EFFECT ON COSPLAY

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The Proteus Effect has so far been used to elucidate the differences in attitudes and behaviors when moving from the digital or mediated platform to the physical. (Yee, Bailenson, Ducheneaut, 2009) However, there is evidence to suggest that a similar phenomenon occurs in the realm of cosplay.

In cosplay, the individual brings an entity from the digital or mediated world into the physical one, and then reifies that character's persona via affective play. Similar to dramaturgy, the cosplayer takes on the identity of a character, and performs closely to that character's canonical "script" and/or inserts personal interpretations into the performance. However, because Cosplay easily becomes an asemic medium in itself, the behaviors of the individual and the behaviors of the character may become intertwined. When someone cosplays, and their behaviors are enacted via their own interpretation, they are theoretically more willing to engage in actions that are closer to their character's normative behavior than their own. In certain circumstances, it is theoretically possible that a cosplayer, when performing, may be willing to engage in sexual or romantic activity outside or contrary to their normal proclivities. After completing a cosplay performance, it is possible that the behavioral effect of the cosplayed character persists into the "real" behaviors and actions of the cosplayer,

allowing the intertwined behaviors to continue. Shortly after, however, the effect of the cosplay's performance on the cosplayer's "real" behavior will deteriorate, and the behavior will correct itself according to its status prior to the cosplay performance. Arguing from a theoretical perspective, the author maintains this modified Proteus Effect phenomenon suggests that individuals who cosplay are more likely to engage in sexual activity or short, intense romantic relationships, relative to the duration spent away from cosplay activity. Future field studies to examine the place of this hypothesized variant in the "real" is currently under review and will be presented in later work.

In recent years, people around the world have developed ways to celebrate hobbies and created groups in which to celebrate those hobbies. These hobby groups have evolved from small meetups to annual, populated gatherings called conventions where people wear costumes and interact with others with shared interests that they may not have been able to meet in their daily lives. Such is routine for Comic-Con, where one annual event may generate billions in revenue and will boast attendance well over 130,000 (Comic-Con). With the size of these populations, it is challenging to focus on the individual without noting possible effects that may come from the

group. With that said, there are a number of large populations that could be studied, and this population specifically may not yield differences in affect compared to, for example, attendees of a football game (when controlling for age, socioeconomic status, etc.). However, the average attendee is not what a researcher would consider when examining a convention population; in truth, the population of Comic-Con can be split into two subgroups: People who dress as a character (cosplayers), and people who attend in plain clothing. It is very possible that there may not be a significant difference between these two groups, however there are few studies that have examined this difference, and fewer studies still that are currently available in English. Using the Proteus Effect, coined through the study of role-playing games and identity manipulation by Yee, Bailenson & Ducheneaut (2009), the aim of this literature is to examine the differences between these two groups from a psychological perspective, establish a manipulation that can be used to test the hypothesized differences between groups, and ultimately establish theories for future work to address in the realm of identity and fandom.

In the study by Yee et al. (2009), the researchers established the Proteus Effect, which states that when someone plays a role that is not themselves, their “normal” personality will take on traits of that role, and once that individual exits that role, they will continue to show signs of traits they had while in the role, is prevalent in online gaming culture. Using this theory by Yee et al. (2009), it can be inferred that identity development from putting oneself into the

costume of a character may create an effect similar to the Proteus Effect, especially from media where the person creates a character with which they can identify (Van Looy, Courtois, De Vocht & De Marez, 2012). The Proteus Effect was originally coined as a term to describe how someone’s in-game avatar or perception of themselves would affect their ability and confidence in face-to-face and online conversations. When someone’s character was tall or attractive, they were more likely to engage in (and be more successful in) aggressive diplomacy. This was inferred by the authors to be a result of those traits being conventionally alluring to members of the opposite sex and peers alike. Not only did these traits have an effect on the players while in game, but these traits also remained temporarily once the player logged off, leaving a short but significant “lasting effect” of the traits. This is where the term Proteus comes from, as Proteus was a shape-shifting Greek god, and the player’s personality also undergoes a change of shape.

Going beyond the original parameters of the Proteus Effect seems necessary when addressing a topic that takes place almost entirely offline as Cosplay is, but there are a number of parallels that must be considered before throwing the idea away completely. Both the Proteus Effect and this Cosplay effect begin in some form of media, and both involve the player being in the body of a character with whom that they identify.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It was considered a possibility that people who cosplay as a character they do not entirely identify as may still feel the effects of the Proteus Effect. It is with some anecdotal confidence that I say that, when a cosplayer dresses as a character they do not identify with, there is a higher likelihood of playing a parody

Therefore, using the Proteus Effect as a focal point for the theories discussed later in this paper is necessary for the time being, but future work will attempt to distance the present effect from the Proteus Effect.

One salient difference between the two populations of Comic-Con is that one group dresses as a character of their choosing (the cosplayers) while the other group features individuals who attend in plain-clothes. One important distinction that should be noted immediately is that someone who is not a cosplayer may still dress in attire that celebrates a character, features symbols of that character, or directly quotes a character, but cannot be considered a cosplayer unless they are trying to emulate a character in both attire and action. Judith Butler describes identity as performative, and the way people act while living their lives is their way of performing their identity (Butler, 1997). This is true as well for the chasm between what makes someone a cosplayer and someone an attendee: People who cosplay perform their costumed identity (Rivers, Wickramasekera, Pekala & Rivers, 2016), while someone attending an event is performing their own identity among but remains notably separate from the cosplayer.

Following that performance, when the cosplay is removed, then, if the Proteus Effect is true-to-form, it will remain in the cosplayer's identity for a diminishing but significant amount of time. Although there are two performances that exist during this time, only one of the identity performances requires a change from one identity to

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of the character rather than keeping it true to form. However, this is something that would be best examined in future research.

another; the plain-clothes attendees would perform their own identity. A counterpoint could be argued as to whether wearing formal attire to a fancy party, where the actor is to act a certain way that matches their outfit, may also cause a difference in line with the Proteus Effect. Although this is very possible, the clear difference with that scenario and any other scenario that causes attire to match context and cosplay is that cosplay is generally a performance of an established character (Rivers et al., 2016), while the performance of attire-context effects is generally an expected norm.<sup>2</sup> Overall, there are a number of things that distinguish cosplay and that specific performative identity with similar but separate identities. As well, there are a number of possible ways that we can examine the difference from a psychosocial point of view, however it is particularly poignant to address the difference using an evaluation that affects people for long periods of time and involves strong and intense periods of emotion and commitment.

A common trait among nearly the entire population is the formation, upkeep, and success of a romantic relationship. Regardless of what present goals may be in an individual's life, whether someone has the goal of "settling down," "having a good time," or "ignoring the relational norm" and forsaking relationships altogether, a vast majority of people have already or will have experienced the desire to engage in a relationship. Although there have been

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<sup>2</sup> There is an argument that can be made for "OCs," or "Original Characters," however the counterpoint to that is that even original characters have ways that their creators expect them to react; a motivation created for the character exists.

correlates between cosplay and personality disorders such as histrionic personality disorder and narcissism (Cantone, Laudanno, Bellavita & Cotrufo, 2013), at the time of writing, there is no known evidence to suggest that a significant proportion of cosplayers are aromantic or asexual, and, as such, would not invalidate a potential study about engaging in or maintaining a relationship. As such, running such a study that holds the potential of having a strong rate of response among both cosplayers and non-cosplayers is currently the best way to evaluate an important difference between these two groups. As an added bonus to the present procedure, there is a body of data that presently exists among the non-attendee community, and any data that would be gathered in this study could be compared to data from other studies. Lastly, a future goal of this present research plan could be to examine how the culture of Comic-Con may influence relationships either positively or negatively. Comic-Con's growth, as mentioned previously, has blossomed into its own subculture, and with new cultures come new cultural norms, many of which have the potential to affect relationships. Discovering, researching, and bringing to light the differences between the non-Comic-Con culture and the Comic-Con culture would be an important finding for future research within this culture and within identity.

So far, the type of affect that this proposal wishes to examine has been somewhat unelucidated. It should be made clear that, when talking about affect and emotions that influence relationships, this does not necessarily refer to such emotions

as general happiness, anger or sadness that are in every part of a subject's daily life, but rather feelings, thoughts and actions related specifically to attraction.<sup>3</sup> In previous studies, functions of dress have been examined in their relation to personality (Lambert, 1972; Miller, Jasper & Hill, 1991; Rahman, Wing-Sun & Cheung, 2012), and replicating these studies with cosplayers is not as effective as applying a new theory influenced by past work. Relationship affection is a theory that has seen most of its study in the past few decades, and applying past knowledge to new contexts is always required to examine how generalizable certain theories are. Combining this examination of recent theory with new contexts is the logical next step for the growth of the field as a whole, and could lead to new results and expanded bodies of research. With that said, Comic-Con, which, like many fan cultures, has previously been viewed as a "taboo" subject where only certain groups of people go to express themselves (Fiske, 2011), the relationship norms may mirror non-Comic-Con society, or they may be wildly different. To the present knowledge of the researchers, there is no research to indicate one or the other at this time. With that said, a provisional study into the relationships and affect of Comic-Con, mediated by cosplay, is the most logical step forward. However, with such a large environment and so many people, it is careless to overlook the possibility of a moderating group-effect, especially because

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<sup>3</sup> These also are affected by cosplay, but it would be too far from the point to examine them as part of a procedure here.

there is extensive data to suggest that this effect may exist in this type of context.

Within the Comic-Con context, there is something else that should be noted aside from the individual and dyadic models that will be discussed later in this piece. It would be an exceptional sight if someone was able to declare a Comic-Con presently taking place if only a single attendee were to make an appearance. Comic-Con is in more ways than one a gathering; it is a grouping of likeminded individuals with similar interests as well as a conglomeration of many different groups brought together with a similar ideal. It would be without due diligence for any researcher to ignore the extreme outlier the presence of the “other” would have on the actor and their partner. The “other” is often some type of third-party force that has some effect on both the individual and dyad in question, and in the Comic-Con context, the “other” is every individual that exists outside the focus of the study. Edward Diener completed two studies involving costume and attire that focused on the difference between people alone and people in groups (1976, 1979). In his study on Halloween and inhibition, the act of being part of a group causes disinhibition, and as a result people are more likely to be a part of some predicament or neglect some rule they would normally follow if they saw themselves as an individual. This is further replicated in the 1979 study where attire is used to separate participants and confederates into groups, with those participants in similar attire forming a group separate from the confederates who were given the task of dressing purposefully different.

Additional evidence comes in the form of a study of people who consider themselves a part of the furry population; individuals who saw themselves as part of that group and who engaged in activities within the population not only identified strongly with that fandom, but also identified similarly with other furies among the global population (Plante, Roberts, Reysen & Gerbasi, 2014). This draws a number of parallels to the effect believed to take place at Comic-Con, and it gives evidence as to the existence of a group effect as a result of the cosplay vs. non-cosplay dyad, where groups will separate based on their believed belonging to one group or another. The conclusion to draw from this is that, because of the group effect, people are more likely to engage in new relationships or actions that may affect existing relationships as a result of this lowered disinhibition. As mentioned previously, people have differences in affect as a result of being in cosplay (Rahman et al., 2012; Miller et al., 1991) or in a new or unique environment (Bacon, 2009), or when surrounded by people in varying dress (Lambert, 1972). However, when adding the noted effect of being part of a group (Diener, 1976, 1979; Plante et al., 2014), these effects may shift or be magnified to a significant degree.

For the structure of this research, there are a number of studies that would need to be completed to answer the questions posed earlier in this piece. The first study, which would examine the population and ethnography of the Comic-Con population, would take the form of a survey sent out to as many people as possible that attend

Comic-Con or both attend and cosplay at Comic-Con. Using measures of commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992), relationship satisfaction (Funk & Rogge, 2007), and sociosexual orientation (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008), as well as measures to examine certain interests that actors have in their partners wearing cosplay or actors with cosplay that they themselves wear, analysis can be completed using APIM dyadic modeling to see what correlations and effects each of these measures suggest. However, doing this analysis would not address the group effect implied with work on disinhibition, therefore the next logical step would be to have cosplayers complete a survey both in and outside of a group, and non-cosplaying attendees completing a survey both in and outside of a group.

According to a meta-analysis by Bond & Titus (1983), it can be confidently said that the effects of being present in a group or completing measures alone are enough for there to be some scrutiny tested in this fashion. This would then be entered into and analyzed in a 2 x 2 ANOVA comparing group effect as well as cosplay effect to resolve the theory whether or not there is an interaction effect or main effect of groups. Finally, a longitudinal study beginning with dyads that began their relationships at Comic-Con would take place and, controlling for such factors as age and gender, seeing which dyads dissolve their relationships and which maintain them would be the ultimate goal; this would include constant evaluation of how the dyads maintain their hobbies and how cosplay may play a role in their relationship and/or sex lives, and what kind of parallels

non-cosplaying dyads have in their choice of hobby.

With the past data, some hypotheses can be inferred. For one, the belief is that cosplayers will have a higher sociosexual orientation than non-cosplayers because cosplayers tend to be more open about their body and identity (Chen, 2007; Gilligan, 2012; Leng, 2013; Rosenberg & Letamendi, 2013). As well, it can be inferred that couples where only one partner is a cosplayer may have higher relationship satisfaction, because couples that have their own hobbies have higher couple satisfaction (Crawford, Houts, Huston & George, 2002). Further, couples can decide how much they want to make cosplay a part of their relationship, but, because cosplay generally takes dedication to create and maintain (Hill, 2017), many couples may just see it as an inevitable or main part of their relationship rather than something that is only occasionally visited or mentioned. With that said, there is an inclination that cosplayers will have a higher sociosexual orientation score than a couple satisfaction score, simply because, if sociosexual orientation has the hypothesized effect, then it is an effect that cosplayers are ready to associate with their group, while couple satisfaction only applies to an immediate relationship.<sup>4</sup> Lastly, the belief is that, if sociosexual orientation (the propensity to desire or have positive feelings toward casual sex) is higher, and if couple satisfaction (the reported happiness of a relationship) is also higher, cosplayers may have little to no

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<sup>4</sup> A possible moderator of this would be amount of time spent cosplaying vs. the amount of time spent in a relationship.

difference with non-cosplayers due to the correlations of the two other scales with commitment. Cosplayers may also have lower commitment than non-cosplayers because of the hypothesized higher score on the sociosexual orientation inventory; a higher score implies a desire to have multiple partners. Ultimately, this is tentatively based on the data that may be received in each study; however, given the past literature, even if the effect is not particularly strong, the effect may still have some propensity toward our hypotheses. With these different stages of analyzing the cosplay population, there are bound to be a number of risks or confounds that may become apparent during data collection, but a few confounds are already evident prior to engaging in the procedure.

In doing studies that are considerably new or novel, a number of unforeseen confounding variables have the potential to invalidate parts or even the entire study. It is a boon that, after spending time in the studied population, that some of the confounds or risks can be addressed in this proposal. One of the principal worries is that the hypotheses may be considerably off because this population is much different from other studied populations; well over 90% of sociocultural studies are done in university populations (Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010). As a result of this, any hypothesis formed may be inherently flawed because the population is psychologically different. Another possible confounding variable is the sensitivity of this population; although there is presently (to my knowledge) no scientific evidence to assert the emotional sensitivity of a cosplayer or

non-cosplayer, because of Comic-Con's longstanding status as a taboo subject, the realm of Comic-Con developed its own protective space. As a result, introducing measures that have the potential to be seen as discomforting to its members (such as questions from the Sociosexual Orientation Index [SOI-R; Funk et al., 2007] or questions of past, perhaps traumatic, relationships), may be potentially harmful or viewed as such.

Finally, and this was mentioned briefly prior, this population differs in more ways than just education and socioeconomic status (Henrich et al., 2010), but if true random sampling is to be done, then age must also be factored into the analysis. Particular care must be taken when sampling to avoid individuals who are not of consenting age, as well as people who have had experience in relationships, so much so that previous relationships may taint future relationships. Individuals who are in their midlife may not be apt for sampling. Ultimately, the prime sample would be individuals between 20 and 35; both men and women would be in their prime age, will still be able to conceive, will still be relatively attractive to partners of the other sex (Kenrick & Keefe, 1992), and will have some experience in adulthood. This may be less of a confound than a note to make when completing a study, but, when considering how people view themselves as some other identity while in costume, a group, or while attending some event, it is something to take especial care of. Although there is a number of variables that may go so far as to deter possible research, and including the lack of knowledge about the Comic-Con

population, research has so far appeared to tiptoe in the shallow end in the pool of fandom and Comic-Con academia. However, this does not mean that the research should not be completed; this shortcoming creates more reason for the research to be done. Understanding a key population in the constant journey to decode the complexities of identity, as well as questions and correlations about both subculture and relationship affect, is simply the requirement for explorations into the unknown.

Overall, there are a number of considerations that can be made when it comes to the topic of Cosplay. The Proteus Effect by Yee et al. (2009) is a powerful conduit for the theories around Cosplay, but it does not capture exactly the theories in this literature. The fact of the matter remains that, although the theory itself has significant applications to what cosplay is, its bases in the virtual space hinders its ability to transcend onto a topic like cosplay and overall seems like a placeholder for what the theory on cosplay would be. However, without any tangible data to show an effect that parallels the claims of the researchers, the Proteus Effect is the prime channel to create these theories. As a result, many of the theories presented in this piece must be considered implications of the Proteus Effect on Cosplay. This does not cheapen the Proteus Effect nor the topic it is being used as a lens to investigate, however, because it is hard data that shows the effect may be replicable. The subject of Cosplay is fascinating for a number of reasons, but its lack of study coupled with its immense, recent growth and the societal effect it

carries creates a need for further examination to be done.

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