"Who I want to Be": Self-Perception and Cosplayers' Identification with their Favorite Characters

Dr. Stephen Reysen, Texas A & M University at Commerce
Dr. Courtney N. Plante, MacEwan University
Dr. Sharon E. Roberts, Renison University College, University of Waterloo
Dr. Kathleen C. Gerbasi, Niagara County Community College

Abstract

We examined cosplayers' perceptions of their favorite character representing their actual, ideal, and ought self as predictors of identification with the character. In a large-scale survey study, cosplayers rated the degree to which they identified with their favorite character and rated the extent to which the character represented their actual, ideal, and ought self. The results revealed that both actual and ideal selves were positively associated with character identification, while perception of the character as resembling one's ought self was not associated with character identification. The findings are consistent with prior research examining cosplayers' choice of character to cosplay.

Keywords: anime, cosplay, character identification, actual self, ideal self

Introduction

Many of us naturally become immersed in the media we enjoy, whether through interesting and engaging stories (e.g., Green & Brock, 2000); compelling, photorealistic graphics (e.g., Wissmath, Weiberl & Groner, 2009); or the sense of agency some media (i.e., video games) afford us (e.g., Ryan, Rigby & Przybylski, 2006). But perhaps one of the easiest ways to become immersed in and enjoy a piece of fiction is through characters with whom we identify (e.g., Van Looy, Courtois, De Vocht, & De Marez, 2012). Being able to see ourselves represented in a character can make them all the more interesting and compelling for us, although it does raise an important question: What aspect of ourselves is being represented by the character?

Research suggests that we have multiple self-concepts which can be reflected, including our actual self, which contains characteristics that we actually possess, our ideal self, which contains characteristics we would ideally like to possess, and our ought self, which represents characteristics that we feel obligated to possess (Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986). According to self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), discrepancies between these selves (e.g., actual vs. ideal) tend to be associated with undesirable emotional states (e.g., disappointment, sadness), with people generally being motivated to progress toward their ideal selves. Klimmt, Hefner, and Vorderer (2009) suggested that in identifying with fictional characters who possess these idealized characteristics, we can temporarily experience the positive emotions associated with moving toward our idealized selves. In the present research, we

explored the implications of this research for people who dress up as their favorite fictional characters and test whether the extent to which the characters represent their actual, ideal, or ought selves is associated with the extent to which they identify with the characters themselves.

A wealth of research has examined the nature of peoples' identification with individuals and with groups of people (e.g., Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Ashmore, Deaux, &McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Reysen, Katzarska-Miller, Nesbit, & Pierce, 2013). However, it is possible for people to identify with non-person concepts, including identifying with a favorite sport team, with a fan interest (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010), or with a media character (Reysen, Chadborn, & Plante, 2017). Identification represents a person's felt psychological connection to the object of interest and the degree to which that object is represented within one's own self-concept. Identifying with a character is akin to including the identity of the character into oneself. Events that affect the character also affect the self (Cohen, 2001; Klimmt et al., 2009).

Unlike most consumers of media, who may psychologically take on characteristics of a favorite character while watching a show or daydreaming about it, cosplayers strive both to visually and behaviorally take on a character's attributes in a very literal sense. Cosplayers are individuals who dress and act as a character typically from anime, manga, or video games (Winge, 2006), and are a subgroup predominantly associated with the anime fandom. Cosplayers invest a large amount of time and energy creating and displaying their costumes in a way that allows them both to express themselves and

to show other fans their devotion to a particular character (Rahman, Wing-Sun, & Cheung, 2012). Ahn (2008) notes that cosplayers chose particular characters to cosplay based on perceived similarities between the individual and the character. Rosenberg and Letamendi (2013) found that one of the top reasons for choosing a particular character is identification with some psychological characteristic of the character. Cosplayers choose characters they identify with, though it is worth asking what facet of themselves cosplayers see in the characters they play as. Qualitative research suggested that cosplayers chose characters they idealized (Hoff, 2012; Rahman et al., 2012) or who inspired them (Rosenberg & Letamendi, 2013), which allows them to become one with an idealized persona (Hill, 2017). Supporting this notion, in a large survey of cosplayers Lotecki (2012) found that cosplayers choose their characters largely based on the visual appeal of character, the character's personality, and the personal similarities of the character to the self.

Prior research suggested that cosplayers' character choice is based on both the extent to which they viewed the character as being similar to themselves and the extent to which the character represented traits that they idealize. To this end, it would seem to follow that characters who represent cosplayers' ideal self should be the characters they most strongly identify with. In the present research we test this possibility within a large sample of cosplayers.

Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to examine the association between cosplayers' perception of their favorite character and identification with their favorite character. Prior research suggested that cosplayers chose to cosplay a character based on both similarity to the self or a character that they idealized (Ahn, 2008; Hoff, 2012; Rahman et al., 2012). In the present study, cosplayers were asked to indicate the extent to which their favorite character represented their actual, ought, and ideal selves, and to indicate the extent to which they identified with the character. We hypothesized that perception of a character as representing one's actual self would be strongly positively associated with their identification with the character, as would the extent to which the character represented their ideal self. We had no a priori hypotheses regarding the extent to which a character represented a cosplayer's ought self.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Self-identified cosplaying anime fans ($N = 966$, 56% female, 2.3% other sex; $M_{age} = 23.44$, $SD = 5.99$) were recruited at A-Kon (an anime fan convention in Dallas, TX) as well as from online anime-related websites and forums. Self-identified cosplayers rated their identification with a favorite character that they cosplay as well as measures of the extent to which their favorite character represented their actual, ideal, and ought selves. All items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type response scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

Materials

Identification with favorite character. Three items ("I am emotionally connected to my cosplay character," "I strongly identify with my cosplay character," and "My cosplay character is part of me") were adapted from prior research (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010) and combined to assess identification with a favorite character ($\alpha = .89$).

Actual self. Two items ("This character represents who I currently am," "I am pretty comparable (similar) to this character") were combined to assess the perception that one's favorite character reflects one's actual self ($r = .64$).

Ideal self. Five items ("This character represents who/what I would like to become," "This character represents how I want to be seen by others," "I would be a better person if I were more like this character," "This character represents an idealized ("best") version of me," "This character represents the kind of person I hope to be like") were combined to assess the favorite character as an idealized version of the self ($\alpha = .90$).

Ought self. Five items ("This character represents the person people think I ought to be," "This character is someone that others feel I "ought to be more like"") were combined to assess one's favorite character as an ought self ($r = .71$).

Results

As a preliminary analysis, we assessed all zero-order correlations between the assessed variables. All of the variables were positively related to one another. Next, we examined the relative contribution of actual, ideal, and ought self as predictors of

identification (see Table 1). Actual, ideal, and ought self were entered simultaneously into a regression analysis as predictors of identification with one's favorite cosplay character. The perception of one's favorite character as an actual ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$) and ideal ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$) self significantly predicted identification, while ought self ($\beta = -.04$, $p = .193$) did not, $F(3, 962) = 211.11$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .40$.

Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to test whether the extent to which cosplayers perceptions of their favorite characters as resembling their actual, ideal, and ought selves was associated with their identification with the character. In line with our predictions, cosplayers who viewed their favorite character as similar to themselves and as an idealized version of themselves were also more likely to identify with the character.

The present findings are in line with existing qualitative studies on cosplayers, which have noted that cosplayers chose what character to cosplay based on either similarity to the self (Ahn, 2008) or because they idealized the character (Hoff, 2012; Rahman et al., 2012). Both actual self and ideal self are components of self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), which tends to focus on aversive emotional states associated with discrepancies between these selves. The present results suggest that cosplayers are motivated to seek out characters who represent both their ideal and actual selves, although it is worth noting that the beta weight for actual self was over twice the size of ideal self. This finding is in line with self-discrepancy theory, suggesting

that, above all else, people will be motivated to avoid the aversive state associated with strong discrepancies from their actual selves. Nevertheless, the findings also validate the prior qualitative research that idealized characters can also be appealing and lead to feelings of connection to a character. In contrast, seeing a character as representing one's ought self was not significantly associated with character identification, suggesting that while correlated with perceptions of the character as embodying one's actual and ideal selves, people do not generally tend to seek out and identify with fictional characters who represent traits they feel obligated to possess.

We should note two important limitations of the present research. First, this research is correlational in nature. As such, it is impossible to make claims regarding the causal direction of the associations observed in this research. Only with longitudinal or experimental studies can we find evidence for whether perceiving a character as representing one's ideal or actual self precedes one's sense of identification with the character or vice-versa. Second, the current research was conducted in English and drew primarily upon North American anime fans. Because of this there is no guarantee that the present pattern of associations would be observed in other (i.e. Japanese) cultures, where interdependent norms may well change the extent to which participants identify with a character who embodies their ought self. Future research would do well to replicate the present study in a cross-cultural context to test this possibility.

In conclusion, we examined cosplayers' perception of their favorite characters as embodying their actual, ideal, and ought

selves and the extent to which this predicted their identification with the character. The results revealed that perceptions of the characters as embodying both actual and ideal selves uniquely predicted identification with the character. The results are in accordance qualitative research suggesting a similar tendency for cosplayers to be motivated to play as characters they both feel similar to and idealize. Given the time and energy cosplayers devote to this activity and the importance of cosplaying for their well-being and self-concept, further research is warranted to better understand how decisions – such as who to cosplay as – may affect the outcomes of cosplaying.

References

Ahn, J. (2008). *Animated subjects: Globalization, media, and East Asian cultural imaginaries* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (UMI No. 3311139)

Ashforth, B. E., Harrison, S. H., & Corley, K. G. (2008). Identification in organizations: An examination of four fundamental questions. *Journal of Management, 34,* 325-374.

Ashmore, R. D., Deaux, K., & McLaughlin-Volpe, T. (2004). An organizing framework for collective identity: articulation and significance of multidimensionality. *Psychological Bulletin, 130,* 80-114.

Cohen, J. (2001). Defining identification: A theoretical look at the identification of audiences with media characters. *Mass Communication and Society, 4,* 245-264.

Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000). The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of public narratives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 79*(5), 701-721.

Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review, 94,* 319-340.

Higgins, E. T., Bond, R. N., Klein, R., & Strauman, T. (1986). Self-discrepancies and emotional vulnerability: How magnitude, accessibility, and type of discrepancy influence affect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 51,* 5-15.

Hill, N. L. (2017). *Embodying cosplay: Fandom communities in the USA* (Unpublished master's thesis). Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Hoff, E. W. (2012). Cosplay as subculture: In Japan and beyond. *Tokai Gakuen University Bulletin: Humanities Research, 17,* 149-167.

Klimmt, C., Hefner, D., & Vorderer, P. (2009). The video game experience as "true" identification: A theory of enjoyable alterations of players' self-perception. *Communication Theory, 19,* 351-373.

Lotecki, A. (2012) *Cosplay culture: The development of interactive and living art through play* (Unpublished master's thesis). Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario.

Rahman, O., Wing-Sun, L., & Cheung, B. H.-M. (2012). "Cosplay": Imaginative self and performing identity. *Fashion Theory, 16,* 317-342.

Reysen, S., & Branscombe, N. R. (2010). Fanship and fandom: Comparisons between sport fans and non-sport fans. *Journal of Sport Behavior, 33,* 176-193.

Reysen, S., Chadborn, D., & Plante, C. N. (2017). Activism, character

identification, and frequency of watching *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. *AASCIT Journal of Psychology, 3,* 12-16.

Reysen, S., Katzarska-Miller, I., Nesbit, S. M., & Pierce, L. (2013). Further validation of a single-item measure of social identification. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 43,* 463-470.

Rosenberg, R. S., & Letamendi, A. M. (2013). Expressions of fandom: Findings from a psychological survey of cosplay and costume wear. *Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media, 5,* 9-18.

Ryan, R. M., Rigby, C. S., & Przybylski, A. (2006). The motivational pull of video games: A self-determination theory approach. *Motivation and Emotion, 30,* 344-360.

Van Looy, J., Courtois, C., De Vocht, M., & De Marez, L. (2012). Player identification in online games: Validation of a scale for measuring identification in MMOGs. *Media Psychology, 15,* 197-221.

Winge, T. (2006). Costuming the imagination: Origins of anime and manga cosplay. *Mechademia, 1,* 65-76.

Wissmath, B., Weibel, D., & Groner, R. (2009). Dubbing or subtitling? Effects on spatial presence, transportation, flow, and enjoyment. *Journal of Media Psychology, 21*(3), 114-125.

Author Note

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Address correspondence to Stephen Reysen, Department of Psychology, Texas A&M University-Commerce, Commerce, TX, 75429. E-mail: Stephen.Reysen@tamuc.edu

Table 1

Means (Standard Deviation) and Correlations between Assessed Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	Mean (*SD*)
1. Identification	--	--	--	--	4.03 (1.83)
2. Actual Self	.61**	--	--	--	3.89 (1.65)
3. Ideal Self	.51**	.63**	--	--	3.72 (1.67)
4. Ought Self	.32**	.45**	.65**	--	2.58 (1.66)

Note. ** $p < .01$.