

# “COMING OUT” AS AN ANIME FAN: COSPLAYERS IN THE ANIME FANDOM, FAN DISCLOSURE, AND WELL-BEING

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## Abstract

In the present study we tested the hypothesis that cosplayers experience greater well-being than non-cosplayers within the anime fandom in part because they are more likely to disclose their fan identity to non-fans. Anime fans indicated whether they engaged in cosplaying or not, and rated the degree to which they disclose their anime fan identity to non-fans, satisfaction with life, self-esteem, and depression. Compared to non-cosplayers, cosplayers reported greater self-disclosure and better well-being across a number of indicators. Mediation analyses revealed that the relationship between cosplaying and well-being was consistently mediated by disclosure, a finding in-line with existing research. These are discussed within the context of existing research, providing both a conceptual replication of past findings from related fandoms (i.e., the furry fandom) while also suggesting a myriad of possible directions for future research on the subject.

*Keywords:* anime, cosplay, cosplayers, well-being, satisfaction with life, self-esteem

## Introduction

As a general rule, membership in groups is associated with better mental and physical health (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). While this relationship is often discussed by researchers within the context of religious groups (Graham & Haidt, 2010) or groups of racial minorities (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999), there is little theoretical reason to believe that the association does not also apply to groups that, on their face, seem superficial or trivial, such as leisure or fan groups. Numerous studies show that sport fans who more strongly identify with their team report greater psychological well-being than those who do not (Wann, 2006). Such relationships make clear that leisure-based groups like one's fan community may well be more central to one's identity – and thus may play a greater role in their self-esteem and overall well-being – than other groups (Chadborn, Edwards, & Reysen, in press). We address the relationship between fandom participation and well-being among members within the same fandom – the anime fandom. Specifically, we compared the well-being of those who participate in cosplay – a self-expressive and social fan

activity – to those who did not engage in this activity.

### **Anime, Cosplay, and Well-Being**

Anime fans are people who have an interest in Japanese animation and manga (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, Gerbasi, & Shaw, 2016). While there are a multitude of ways this interest can manifest itself, including drawing fan art, attending conventions, and purchasing official merchandise, one of the most iconic is through cosplaying—dressing in costume as a character from an anime, manga, or video game (Winge, 2006). Past research suggested that participation in the anime fandom (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2017), and cosplaying within the fandom specifically, was associated with better well-being in fans, in part because cosplaying provided an escape from everyday stressors and an outlet for self-expression (Chen, 2003). Noting the sense of inclusion and community experienced among cosplayers, Kane (2017) suggested that cosplaying creates feelings of self-worth and ultimately improves fans' psychological well-being. Lin (2016) argued that cosplaying is an inherently social activity, fostering friendships that themselves improve cosplayers' psychological well-being. While these suggested mechanisms for the relationship between cosplay and well-being seem plausible, it is worth noting that none of the research in question quantitatively examined the relationship between cosplay and well-being relative to non-cosplayers, nor did they directly test their proposed mechanisms. We attempt to

overcome this limitation in the present study.

### **Stigma, Fan Groups, and Well-Being**

The detrimental effects of stigma or prejudice toward one's group on a person's psychological well-being have been well-established (Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014). But while much of this research has focused on stigma toward racial or sexual minorities, a comparable level of stigma and comparable detrimental effects on well-being may exist for members of stigmatized fan groups. Given the ubiquitous coverage of sport in mainstream media and its widespread fan base, sport fans are perceived by most to be the prototypical fan (Reysen & Shaw, 2016). Members of less-mainstream groups tend to be stigmatized for being different. For example, research shows that anime fans are largely stigmatized (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, Gerbasi, Mohebpour, & Gamboa, 2016; Roberts, Plante, Reysen, & Gerbasi, 2016). Qualitative accounts echo this notion. Chen (2003) suggested that cosplaying is stigmatized by mainstream Taiwanese culture, Ahn (2008) noted that Tokyo cosplayers avoid telling others that they cosplay to avoid prejudice, and Hoff (2012) argued that anime is stigmatized in Japanese culture, despite its popularity. In North America, a similar pattern of stigma toward cosplay was observed (Lotecki, 2012), with some fans pointing out that fan conventions present them with the only place where they can be themselves (Taylor, 2009). Thus, there exists a cross-cultural stigma toward members of non-mainstream fan groups,

including anime and cosplayers in particular, one which should have deleterious effects on the well-being of members of these groups.

Despite the harmful effects of belonging to a stigmatized minority group, it should be noted that anime fans nevertheless choose to remain anime fans. This is a sign that there may be mechanisms in place to buffer or protect individual fans from the detrimental outcomes of stigma, such as social support that may outweigh the costs of being a fan. Unlike other minority identities such as race or physical disability, being an anime fan is a concealable identity. Past research that examined individuals with concealable stigmatized identities showed that members of these groups could selectively disclose their identity to others as a means of reducing stigma. Of course, this solution is not ideal, as the anxiety associated with identity concealment can be physically and psychologically taxing (Meyer, 2003). Nevertheless, having a community of like-minded others around which one can express themselves genuinely without fear of reprisal or stigma is related to positive psychological well-being (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). In the context of fan groups, this has been observed in groups such as furies—fans of anthropomorphic art and cartoons (Plante, Reysen, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2016)—who experience greater self-esteem and life satisfaction to the extent that they are able to disclose their furry identity to others (Mock, Plante, Reysen, & Gerbasi, 2013; Plante, Roberts, Reysen, & Gerbasi, 2014). It is feasible that, compared to non-cosplaying anime fans, cosplayers may report greater psychological well-being than non-

cosplaying anime fans, to the extent that the close-knit cosplay community affords these anime fans in particular the social support needed to feel safe in disclosing their stigmatized anime fan identity to non-anime fans.

### **Present Study**

The purpose of the present study was to test whether, among self-identified anime fans, cosplayers experience greater well-being than non-cosplayers, a difference mediated by the degree that cosplayers (vs. non-cosplayers) disclose their anime fan identity. Participants, all anime fans, indicated whether they engaged in cosplay, the extent to which they disclosed their anime identity to others, and completed multiple measures of well-being (satisfaction with life, self-esteem, and self-reported depression). Prior research showed that the strategy of concealing one's stigmatized identity is associated with lower well-being, unless one has the social support needed to comfortably disclose their identity (Beals et al., 2009; Meyer, 2003; Mock et al., 2013; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). Prior findings also suggested that cosplaying is associated with greater well-being (Chen, 2003; Kane, 2017), in part due to the social support and community formed through such activities (Lin, 2016). We hypothesized that cosplayers will report greater well-being than non-cosplaying anime fans, and that this difference will be mediated in part by the extent to which they disclosed their fan identity to non-anime fans.

## Method

### Participants and Procedures

Self-identified anime fans ( $N = 3,122$ , 68.2% male, 1.4% other sex;  $M_{\text{age}} = 23.25$ ,  $SD = 6.64$ ) were recruited at A-Kon (anime fan convention in Dallas, TX) and from online anime-related websites and forums. As part of a larger study of the anime fandom, participants indicated whether they participated in cosplay ( $n = 1,074$ , 34.4% participate in cosplay) and completed items related to identity disclosure and well-being. Unless noted otherwise measures used a 7-point Likert-type response scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

### Materials

**Disclosure.** Five items (“Please rate the degree to which you disclose your anime identity to non-anime...” “family” ( $M = 4.77$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ), “friends” ( $M = 5.36$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ), “work peers” ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ), “work supervisor(s)” ( $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ), “strangers or new acquaintances” ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ )) assessed the degree to which participants disclosed their interest in anime to others ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

**Well-being indicators.** Three indicators were included in the present study: satisfaction with life, self-esteem, and self-rated depression. A single item (“I am satisfied with my life”) was adapted from prior measures of satisfaction with life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Lucas & Donnellan, 2012). A single item (“I have high self-esteem”) was adopted from prior research (Robins, Hendin, &

Trzesniewski, 2001) to assess self-esteem. Two items (“I often feel depressed,” “I often feel like life is meaningless”) were adapted from a prior measure (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) to assess self-rated depression ( $r = .57$ ).

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

We began our analysis with a MANOVA, entering cosplay status as the independent variable and disclosure and the indicators of well-being as dependent variables. The omnibus test was significant: Wilks'  $\Lambda = .94$ ,  $F(4, 3117) = 48.70$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .059$ . As shown in Table 1, cosplayers, compared to non-cosplayers, reported higher disclosure, higher life satisfaction and self-esteem, and lower self-rated depression. To examine whether disclosure mediated the relationship between cosplaying and well-being, we next conducted a series mediations with Preacher and Hayes' (2008) SPSS macro (95% confidence intervals, bootstrapping with 20,000 iterations).

### Mediations

**Satisfaction with life.** The sample comparison between cosplayers and non-cosplayers (0 = non-cosplayer, 1 = cosplayer) predicted disclosure ( $\beta = .23$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and satisfaction with life ( $\beta = .11$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Disclosure also predicted satisfaction with life ( $\beta = .15$ ,  $p < .001$ ). When disclosure was included in the model, the association between sample comparison and satisfaction was reduced ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $p < .001$ ),

and the mediation was significant as indicated by the absence of zero between the 95% confidence interval (CI) at the  $p < .05$  (two-tailed) level (CI = .091 to .161).

**Self-esteem.** The sample comparison predicted self-esteem ( $\beta = .05, p = .004$ ) and disclosure predicted self-esteem ( $\beta = .17, p < .001$ ). Including disclosure in the model reduced the association between sample comparison and self-esteem ( $\beta = .01, p = .432$ ) with a significant mediation (CI = .104 to .179).

**Self-rated depression.** The sample comparison predicted self-rated depression ( $\beta = -.04, p = .034$ ) and disclosure predicted depression ( $\beta = -.12, p < .001$ ). Including disclosure in the model reduced the association between sample comparison and self-rated depression ( $\beta = -.01, p = .526$ ) with a significant mediation (CI = -.128 to -.063).

## Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to test the hypothesis that cosplayers in the anime community experience greater well-being than non-cosplayers, a difference mediated in part by the extent to which cosplayers self-disclose their anime fan identity to non-anime fans. As predicted, cosplayers reported both greater disclosure and greater well-being than non-cosplayers. Also as hypothesized, self-disclosure mediated the relationship between sample comparison (cosplayers vs. non-cosplayers) and indicators of well-being. The results support the notion that cosplayers are more open about their anime fan identity, something that may protect them from the

detrimental effects of anxiety associated with concealing a stigmatized group identity.

The present findings are consistent with existing research on cosplayers, which suggested that cosplaying is, for many anime fans, a source of psychological well-being (Chen, 2003; Kane, 2017; Lin, 2016). Anime fans (Reysen & Shaw, 2016; Roberts et al., 2016), and cosplayers in particular (Ahn, 2008; Lotecki, 2012), are stigmatized due to their fan interest, but they are also concealable identities. Consistent with past research (e.g., Beals et al., 2009), to the extent that cosplayers were more able to disclose their fan identity – possibly due to having a greater sense of social support due to the community surrounding their interest – they experienced greater well-being than non-cosplayers. These results largely mirror work on individuals with other concealable identities (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009; Mock et al., 2013).

While we posit that the difference in disclosing between cosplayers and non-cosplayers may be due to a greater sense of social support and community which, in turn, may make cosplayers feel more confident and resilient in the face of rejection from non-anime fans. However, there is insufficient evidence in the present study to assess this possibility. Another possible explanation may be that cosplay, due to its highly recognizable and visible nature, may force cosplayers to disclose their fan identity to non-anime fans, simply because of the increased attention they receive from non-anime fans when in costume (i.e., at conventions). This may give them practice interacting with non-fans and

improve their confidence and ability to disclose to non-fans with positive results. Another possibility that exists is that cosplayers are motivated to improve their self-confidence and self-esteem through cosplaying, a possibility consistent with existing research (Benino, 2014). In other words, unlike non-cosplayers, cosplayers may see their fandom-related activities as a means of improving themselves, which could yield both differences in disclosure – due to confidence on the part of cosplayers – and greater well-being due to concerted self-improvement efforts. A final possibility is that cosplayers (vs. non-cosplayers) may already have better well-being and confidence. Ultimately, there is insufficient evidence to test any of these possibilities in the present study. Future studies aiming to conceptually replicate and extend the present research would do well to include measures that assess all of these possibilities.

The results of the present research compliment past qualitative research regarding cosplayers (e.g., Lin, 2016), but are limited. First, the survey and recruiting were both conducted in English. As such, individuals who do not read English were unable to participate. Given qualitative work (e.g., Ahn, 2008; Taylor, 2009) suggesting that cosplaying is stigmatized by mainstream culture regardless of country examined, there is little reason to expect dramatically different results for cosplayers in other countries. Future research should explore the present relationships in a cross-cultural fashion. Second, the present research relied upon short, self-report measures. The self-report nature of the

measures means the introduction of desirable responding as a source of error in the measures – with participants possibly feeling pressured to indicate that they feel happy and satisfied with life. More objective ratings (i.e., ratings from friends or assessments from a clinician) may prove valuable in future replications of the present research. It would be useful to employ more multifaceted, nuanced measures in the future. While it is unlikely that the present results were simply an idiosyncrasy of the specific measures of well-being, given that three different measures were used, it would be helpful in future studies to employ longer, more nuanced measures that could better assess different facets of well-being (i.e., relational, physical, social) to improve our understanding of the possible underlying mechanisms driving the observed effects. A final limitation of the present findings is their cross-sectional nature, which limits our ability to make causal claims about the direction of the observed effects. It is possible that cosplaying precedes disclosure temporally. However, there is no way to distinguish this possibility from the reverse possibility with the present data. Future research may examine the present question within a longitudinal design in order to more directly test the direction of the relationships between cosplaying, disclosure, and well-being.

In conclusion, the present study tested the hypothesis that cosplayers experience greater well-being than non-cosplayers within the anime fandom in part because they are more likely to disclose their fan identity to non-fans. The results of mediation analyses supported these claims

across three different indicators of well-being. These are discussed within the context of existing research, providing both a conceptual replication of past findings from related fandoms (i.e., the furry fandom) while also suggesting a myriad of possible directions for future research on the subject.

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Table 1  
*Means (Standard Deviation) of Cosplayers versus Non-Cosplayers*

Variable	Cosplayer	Non-Cosplayer	<i>F</i> (1, 3120)	<i>p</i> -value	$\eta_p^2$
Disclose to Others	4.54 (1.41)	3.85 (1.41)	168.49	< .001	.051
Satisfaction w/ Life	4.94 (1.63)	4.53 (1.68)	41.17	< .001	.013
Self-Esteem	4.34 (1.81)	4.15 (1.73)	8.31	.004	.003
Depression	3.13 (1.68)	3.26 (1.69)	4.51	.034	.001

*Note.* Responses ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.