GENDER/SEXUAL AMBIGUITY IN COSPLAY: JAPANESE YOUTH CULTURE IN ASIAN COMMUNITY

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CONTENTS

1. Introduction: Contextualizing cosplay in and outside Japan
2. Cosplay as fan practice
3. Gender ambiguity: crossplay vs. ‘trans’ cosplay
4. Sexual ambiguity: connections with other modes of fandom
5. Conclusion
1. CONTEXTUALIZING COSPLAY

Cosplay:

- Is a complex phenomenon
- Connected intimately with ‘fandom’
- Mixes embodied practice with digital text
- Has become a transnational mode of fandom, but has specific features according to region and culture

Cosplayers performing onstage at WCS 2012.

https://hyperjapancosplay.wordpress.com/2012/10/25/wcs-day-8-red-carpet-parade-and-world-cosplay-summit-championship/
Dressing up as characters from various texts is a worldwide fan activity.

But the practice known as ‘cosplay’ recognized by most fans as having a Japanese pop culture origin.

May in fact have had a Western origin – 1970s sci-fi/fantasy.

Japanese, Asian, and Western cosplay cultures have influenced one another to form today’s fandom.
Cosplay:
‘Costume’ + ‘Play’
or
‘Costume’ + ‘Role-play’

In Japan began 1970s/80s.

Compared to Western cosplay is somewhat ‘private’ and highly self-regulated.

Still, media and govt promotions have made cosplay a representative example of Japanese pop culture.

Prime Minister Abe cosplaying Mario in Rio, 2016.
Japaneseenesnss has cultural capital. For many cosplayers, its ‘main attraction lies in its ‘Japanese-ness” (Emerald King, 2013).
2. COSPLAY AS FAN PRACTICE: ‘AUTHENTIC’ APPRECIATION OR TRANSFORMATIVE WORK?

- A key value of mainstream cosplay: ‘authenticity’

- By contrast, many fan creations are thought of as ‘transformative’ – changing or adding to an original (See Transformative Works and Cultures journal)

- Causes tension in cosplay between being transformative/authentic.

- This can affect potential for transgressing gender/sexual norms in cosplay.
Why do people cosplay?

◆ To show love for a character by mimicking it perfectly
◆ To showcase their costume and makeup skills
◆ To make friends with similar interests at events and online
◆ To engage in dramatic performance
◆ To make money as a professional cosplayer
◆ To cause arousal (erotic/pornographic cosplay)
◆ To make a statement about or play with identity
3. GENDER AMBIGUITY:
CROSSPLAY AND ‘TRANS’ COSPLAY

- High percentage of female cosplayers in Japan. A lot of scholarship also focuses on women in cosplay.

- A common cosplay subgenre is known in English as ‘crossplay’: Cosplaying as a character of the opposite gender to the one you identify with.

- Crossplay raises various discussions about gender performance – let’s take a look at some.

FtM crossplay ‘Kadaj’ by Umibe

http://umibe.deviantart.com/art/Kadaj-554006235
FtM cross-dressing = ‘dansō’ (男装)

- Entirely normalized in cosplay world (Japan and overseas).
- Contrary to Japanese mainstream media, which is mostly MtF.

Why is dansō so common in cosplay? Are practitioners trying to make a statement about gender norms?
Cosplayer demographics: many popular male characters, more female cosplayers than male = dansō.

‘...in many cases, the leaning of cosplayers towards “dansō” probably happens unconsciously’ (Tanaka, 2009, 40), without any conscious wish to perform a “non-normative” role.

BUT, fascination with ‘ambivalent’ bodies in anime/game world. This is encouraged by and encourages dansō.
Popular dansō cosplayers tend to choose ‘beautiful boy’ or ‘bishōnen’ characters instead of hyper-masculine characters.

‘Armin’ by Ran. 
https://worldcosplay.net/ja/photo/1925609

Armin Arlert, Attack on Titan (2013-)
http://theclipartfairy1.blogspot.com/2013/06/attack-on-titan.html
This type of male character visual has spread throughout Japanese culture; has a long history but now part of ‘kawaii’ culture.

Demonstrates a fluid visual masculinity. But does this mean dansō cosplayers are making a comment on gender roles?

Some researchers say no. Instead, it’s about authenticity in cosplay,

where ‘[c]ommitment and adherence to the original character are important’.  
(Rahman, Wing-Sun & Hei-man Cheung, 2012, 326)

Female cosplayers are simply well-suited to playing slender, androgynous bishōnen boys.
Levi Ackerman,
*Attack on Titan*

“Levi” by Reika
https://www.facebook.com/pages/Reika/315573555144954
Dansō cosplay does not explicitly comment on women’s gender performance.

It does not directly criticize or even recreate images of dominant masculinity in Japanese society.

Instead, it displays a female-centric fantasy of an idealized masculinity.
- Seen in bishōnen images in various pop culture genres;
- And ‘cross-dressing’ masculinity in cosplay, Takarazuka, etc.
Characters from *Maiden Rose* (Inariya Fusanosuke, 2009-)
http://www.instagram.com/post/1835271839448669893_1395681317

*Rurōni Kenshin*, Takarazuka Theater (2016)
https://blog.goo.ne.jp/suzuka1583/e/6b8507d1e41072c83d1c0a98e298e37
MtF cross-dressing = ‘josō’ (女装)

- Rare in cosplay world (Japan and overseas).
- Is banned at many Japanese cosplay events.
- Even though Japanese TV variety shows often feature MtF.

Why is josō uncommon in cosplay?
Is it more closely connected with gender/sexual identity than dansō?
Are crossplay trends in Japan changing?
Lower number of male cosplayers overall.

Dominant gender norms around clothing/makeup assert great influence on josō cosplayers.

False equivalency that ‘cross-dressing’ = ‘gay’ still exists in Japan and many other Asian countries.

This plus lingering discrimination against LGBTQ outside entertainment industry concerns many male cosplayers.

Until recent years, josō was more about comedy than ‘passing’.
Josō ‘passing’ cosplay
‘Hatsune Miku’ by Nora912
http://nora912.hatenablog.com/entry/2015/06/09/220032

Men’s and women’s commercial costumes:
Non- ‘passing’ cosplay
http://kosupureel.seesaa.net/article/304441350.html
Josō ‘passing’ cosplay
‘Sailor Moon’ by Rondole

Non-‘passing’ josō
‘Sailor Neptune’ by Leobane Cosplay
https://www.reddit.com/r/sailormoon/comments/8de5mp/sailor_neptune_crossplay_by_leobane_cosplay_3/
Retaining traditionally masculine gender markers makes comedic crossplay extra ‘playful’.

Less concern with authenticity, more with transformation.

Declines to engage seriously with normative gender/sexual binaries.

This can highlight constructed or problematic nature of such norms.
‘Trans’ cosplay

- A tiny minority compared to standard crossplay.
- Not very visible in Japanese or overseas communities.
- BUT is deeply important to its practitioners.

- Self-defined as cosplayers who are transgender, transsexual or another form of ‘gender variant’.
Trans cosplayer Hiromi:

"It made me feel ‘natural’"

(Yahoo! Japan News, Feb 1, 2019)

https://headlines.yahoo.co.jp/hl?a=20190201-00000004-yonnana-soci.view-000

‘Trans-Cosplayers’ Deviantart community

https://www.deviantart.com/trans-cosplayers/gallery/
Mainstream crossplayers’ gender/sexual cosplay performance is fluid and playful – not integral to their identity.

But trans cosplayers are not ‘playing’ with gender.

Cosplay is a space in which they can express their ‘true’ selves.

Mission statement of transgender cosplay group ‘TG-Cosplay’
https://www.deviantart.com/tg-cosplay
Some trans cosplayers find crossplay problematic: its popularity and playfulness defeats trans cosplayers’ serious mission.

Cosplay can be an act of fannish devotion, but also a gender statement of the utmost personal and political significance.
4. SEXUAL AMBIGUITY:
CONNECTIONS WITH OTHER MODES OF FANDOM

- Difficult to study modes of fandom in isolation: they all interconnect.

- Cosplay is influenced by many other media, including transformative works by fans.

- In Japan (and elsewhere), cosplay practitioners are often fans of the ‘boys love’ genre of manga, anime, and fan comics.

‘Maiden Rose’ BL cosplay by Tian Jiang

https://worldcosplay.net/photo/4893638
Bishōnen show gender ambiguity in BL

*Song of the Wind and Trees* manga (1976-)

*Yu Yu Hakusho* fan manga (*dōjinshi*) (1997)
Cosplaying BL original texts

Cosplay of BL manga *Junjō Romantica* by Choko

https://www.kadokawa.co.jp/product/321804000455/

https://www.cosp.jp/view_photo.aspx?id=11719801&m=319306
Transforming ‘straight’ media

Levi and Erwin, 
*Attack on Titan* anime

Kodansha

BL (yaoi)
Levi and Erwin fan comic
Unknown author
‘Levi x Eren’ *Attack on Titan* BL cosplay by Haru

https://www.cosp.jp/view_photo.aspx?id=9557975&m=264767&o=1
Cosplay based on fan works

BL Attack on Titan cosplay based on BL fan art

“Talk to me Clean”
Ori Cosplay International
https://www.patreon.com/OriCosplay?ty=h
Gender of cosplayers impacts sexuality of BL performance

Female x female cosplayers:

Boys Love?
Female homoeroticism?

Attack on Titan cosplay

Double Tap
https://twitter.com/orico714/status/556955621178605568
Male x female cosplayers:

Boys Love? Straight?

Kuroko’s Basketball cosplay

Unknown cosplayers

Male x male cosplayers:

Boys Love? (female fan-oriented)
Male homoeroticism? (gay man-oriented)

*Kuroko’s Basketball* cosplay

KumaQi熊祁 & 夕楼76

https://twitter.com/kumaqiii/status/532829285757620224
Male x non-gender-specific cosplayers:

Crossplay?
Trans cosplay?

Boys Love?
Straight?
Something else?

Attack on Titan cosplay

“EruRi Week RED #06”
Ori Cosplay International
http://m.worldcosplay.net/member/Delusor/cosplayer/photos?page=3
5. CONCLUSION: TRANSFORMATIVE FAN PRACTICES IN ASIA AND BEYOND

- Japanese pop culture and fandoms have spread within and beyond Asia. Fans in different regions adapt cosplay and BL for their own specific purposes:
  - **South Asia, India**: BL/cosplay = a ‘safe’ space to envisage sexual desire without highly policed female bodies.
  - **South Korea**: BL cosplay has close connection with K-pop fandom. Recently fans are engaging more with LGBTQ issues.
  - **China**: BL images used not only as commentary on repression of sexuality but also on politics.
European countries have their own cosplay cultures with their own specific features. They also share some key similarities with Japanese fan cultures.

By comparing fan cultures, we can more clearly see gender/sexual issues that are unique to each society, and which pressing problems transcend national borders and concern us all.
REFERENCES


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THANK YOU