

Chapter 3

Comic Con Communion: Gender, Cosplay, and Media Fandom

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ABSTRACT

The present research explores gender, cosplay, and media fandom in a media fan convention context. Researchers for the present study surveyed 227 attendees at two media fan conventions. As expected, convention attendees found the words “nerd” and “geek” to be badges of honor. Contrary to research expectations, women rated themselves higher as fans than men. Women did, as expected, see fandom as an escapism opportunity more so than men. Male cosplayers thought they looked more like their costume character, but female cosplayers thought they shared their character’s personality and were more likely to refer to themselves as “we.” Cosplayers were more likely to tie their fandoms to their friends’ enjoyment of it and to tie their fandom to sharing it with large groups of people more so than non-cosplayers. Cosplayers also rated their fandom as being a good time more than non-cosplayers and their fandom as improving their self-esteem more than non-cosplayers. Implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Participatory fans and individuals engaged in cosplay at fandom conferences are members of an under-investigated, yet quickly growing subculture. Increasingly, today’s media audience members seek more involvement related to their favorite movies, television shows, comic books characters, etc. Once stigmatized and relegated as “geeks” and “nerds,” these fans are not content to be passive consumers of media, but often take an active approach, engaging in endeavors related to their fandom. Two such activities are convention attendance and cosplay, literally “costume play,” dressing up and performing as their favorite characters (Gunnels, 2009; Lamerichs, 2010; Norris & Bainbridge, 2009). This study will investigate

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participatory fandom and cosplay, examining how media fans identify themselves, what motivates men and women who are media fans, and what motivates cosplayers who attend media fan conventions.

Media Fandom

To delve into research of media fandom, one must understand what is meant by the term. “Media fandom is the recognition of a positive, relatively deep, emotional connection with a mediated element of popular culture,” (Duffett, 2013b, p. 2). Media fandom blossomed almost from the time mass media – phonograph, film, radio – began (Duffett, 2013b). But to fully grasp the concept of media fandom today, one must consider the multi-faceted nature of the current state of fandom. Passionate fanbases surround TV shows (Koppa, 2006), movies (Duffett, 2013b), popular music (Duffett, 2013a), video games (Wirman, 2009), comic books (Schelly, 2010), anime/manga (Hills, 2002), and all other aspects of popular culture.

Much of our understanding of media fandom today can trace its history to science fiction fandom from the past. According to Coppa (2006), historians cite the origin of science fiction fandom as the reader letter section of *Amazing Stories* science fiction magazine, which began publication in 1926. Fans were able to communicate for the first time with each other as the magazine published addresses for readers who sent in letters. From magazine to the small screen, science fiction fandom would expand and evolve into media fandom with the introduction of the shows *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, which ran from 1964 to 1968, and, of course, the ubiquitous *Star Trek*, which ran from 1966 to 1969. Fans of these shows would go on to write fan fiction based their beloved characters, edit fan magazines (zines) dedicated to their favorite programs, and ultimately would find their way to fan conventions. “Media fandom, now a gigantic international phenomenon, clearly began life as a very small pool” (Coppa, 2006, p. 44).

Fan Conventions

If modern media fandom can trace its roots to science fiction fandom, then no doubt the modern media fan convention can trace its origins to the science fiction fan conventions of the past. The first science fiction convention was held in 1936 in Philadelphia, a small gathering of sci-fi fans (Kyle, 1993). Coppa (2006) noted that *Star Trek* fans originally found a home in traditional science fiction conventions. However, she pointed to a rift that developed between those fans and the sci-fi traditionalists who saw *Star Trek* as a low-brow interloper. The refugee Trekkies set out to find a home of their own, eventually establishing the first *Star Trek* convention in New York in 1972. This sense of belonging paired with a need to commune with kindred spirits appears drives the fan to the fan convention.

Events such as the Star Trek convention serve the needs of leisure fanatics in the sense of perfecting and further specializing their hobby or sport. However, the event also serves the fundamental purpose of providing a social environment in which to interact. Participants do this by meeting other like-minded people, swapping stories and memorabilia and singing “filksongs”. (Mackeller, 2006, p. 210)

Porter (2010) argued that *Star Trek* convention attendees say they are motivated by “fun,” such as meeting famous actors and artists, procuring autographs, or shopping for fan memorabilia (p. 164). However, she likened the experience more to a pilgrimage, with attendees seeking to revel in the deeper meaning and hope the show offers in terms of the betterment of humanity. The convention offers the fan an opportunity to commune with their fellow fanatics.

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