

## “EXPRESSIVE RATIONALITY”: HABITUS AND FIELD IN A MALAYSIAN COSPLAY COMMUNITY

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### ABSTRACT

*Malaysian cosplayers, as a subset of Asian cosplayers, engage in a visually performative activity which raises the issues of ethnic and gender performativity, among other identity markers. This is further contextualised within an “everyday-defined” experience of identity, in which its formation is influenced by non-“social power” agents such as popular narratives (Baharuddin 1996: 18; Baharuddin and Athi 2015: 268). In addition, cosplayers are noted to be affected by global cultural flows. Given its relevance to studies of cosplay, I use Bourdieu’s framework of cultural capital to outline the components which make up an established cosplayer. Using a snowball sample, I survey several tertiary educated and employed Malaysian cosplayers regarding the cultural capital they use to navigate the intersections of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. I compare the responses of my sample to that of cosplayers from international forums, and to the content of emerging counter-hegemonic popular narratives. My findings suggest that cosplay can be viewed as a form of public theatre, comprising rational and expressive elements.*

**Keywords:** Cosplay, ethnic performativity, gender performativity, habitus, everyday-defined identity

## **COSPLAY AS A VISUAL NARRATIVE: MALAYSIAN COSPLAYERS AND THE “WORLD”**

Costumes are indispensable in constructing a narrative, be it a work of art or an individual’s own personal history. Viewed as an action, costuming both reveals and conceals—and recognises the way material goods shape the experience individuals have of their bodies (Hann and Bach 2014: para. 4). Cosplay, an abbreviation of “costume play,” is defined as the act of “wearing clothing or costumes and playing the act that resembles characters in mass media” (Paidí et al. 2014: 166). Cosplay can also be extended to include clothing design, fabrication, makeup, prop making, and other costume-related skills (Rosenberg and Letamendi 2013: 9). Bainbridge and Norris (2009: para. 1) meanwhile, posit that cosplay contains “habitus,” which is a crucial part of taking on a character through lived practices such as “gesture and attitude,” inhabiting a character physically and mentally.

There has been debate in the literature as to where the exact origins of cosplay lie. While costumes have been used in the theatrical arts since classical antiquity, much of the arguments list Japan and North America as the possible place of origin of cosplay (Winge 2006: 66). According to Leng (2014: 90), “the tradition of Renaissance masquerades where participants base costumes and performances on certain historical periods or genres has a long-standing history in Western culture,” while others such Bruno (2002: para. 2) state that the term “cosplay” emerged in Japan in the 1980s. Some claim that it started with the Star Trek fandom in the US in the 1960s, while others theorise that it began in Japan originally but was transmitted to North America through anime and manga fan clubs (Bruno 2002: para. 2; Ledoux and Ranney 1997; as cited in Winge 2006: 66). Finally, some believe that writer Takahashi Nobuyuki, who attended the North American World Convention in 1984 which featured cosplay, spread this practice in Japan upon his return (Winge 2006: 66). Notably, there are several differences between Japanese and North American cosplay, which are featured in the table below:

This suggests that cosplay may vary in its practice and audience reception. In Malaysia, cosplay arguably emerged as a legitimate subculture as of late 2002 when the first anime, comic and video game conventions were organised (Paidí et al. 2014: 169).

Table 1: Differences between Japanese and North American cosplay (Winge 2006: 73).

Aspect	Japanese cosplay	North American cosplay
Performance of character on stage	Often serious and imitates the character’s signature pose and motto	Often humorous
Premise	Limited to the convention area	May be extended beyond the convention area into more public spaces
Social acceptance	Viewed as a subculture, sometimes negatively	Viewed as a part of the mainstream
Availability of supplies	Specialised districts	Dealers at cosplay conventions

A cosplay community may be viewed as a type of fandom, which is defined by Jenkins (2002: 2) as “virtual communities” consisting of fans, in the way Anderson’s “imagined communities” (Anderson 1982) are conceived. “Imagined communities” here refer to the way members of the group collectively believe they possess a shared history and similar goals, regardless of whether they have met each other. Cosplayers today are digitally connected across geographical regions through the Internet. Within the globalisation paradigm, scholars have debated over the effects of cultural homogenisation through global mass media channels. The rise of prosumption and remix culture, however, have allowed for multiple interpretations of narratives, as well as subversions of established metanarratives. Given the globalising nature of cosplay, it fits into the current debates regarding individual identity amidst global cultural flows—such as the transformation or challenge of collective identity, where groups of people sharing a similar goal are concerned (Langman 2012: 135); a re-examination of the nature of geographical space and belonging (Humphrey 2012: 135); and rebalancing the flows of discourse between the North Atlantic and the Global South (Connell 2012: 185).

As a subset of Asian cosplayers who consume Western media, Malaysian cosplayers are noteworthy of study. However, this topic has been underexplored, with the exception of Paidi et al.’s 2014 study, framing Japanese cosplay in Malaysia as a subculture which is part of the mainstream culture rather than an attempt to subvert it. My study focuses on a community of cosplayers in Malaysia, who are digitally connected, of multiethnic but Asian descent, tertiary-educated, and are relatively affluent. I anticipate that as a growing practice crossing borders, cosplay has the potential to transform

mainstream attitudes towards fixed social constructs. As Paidi et al. (2014: 178) also noted, cosplay can contribute towards the cultural capital of Malaysia, and thus in this study I have explored the cultural capital which a Malaysian cosplayer possesses.

Malaysia has a multicultural social context, comprising several main ethnic groups, often classified as the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians (Hirschman 1986: 555); as well as the indigenous groups whose majority is the Semai (Arabestani and Juli Edo 2011: 6), and in East Malaysia the Kadazan-Dusun (Defense Language Institute 2015: 62). However, these categorisations have been said to be a legacy of colonial discourse, and thus in our post-colonial climate, it is pertinent to analyse the effects of such discourse by focusing on popular narratives, which include cartoons, songs, poems, and other unofficial discourse, of which cosplay can be considered a part of (Baharuddin and Athi 2013: 268).

### **Gender and Ethnic Performativity**

Two major social constructs influencing identity formation are race/ethnicity and gender.

Judith Butler envisioned gender as a performative act that is achieved through daily self-presentation in the book *Gender Trouble*. Similarly, race or ethnicity has a performative dimension (Hübinette and Räterlinck 2014: 501). In Malaysia, Philip (2003: 38) argues that constructions of identity, including ethnicity, performatively produce individuals as distinct racialised beings in a monolithic, internally homogeneous fashion. However, the author argues that the actual individual experience tends to be that of organic hybridity in which individuals are able to employ self-agency to mix and match social attributes (Philip 2003: 38). As cosplay too, is understood as a performative activity where members participate in “a play of performance before spectators” (Lamerichs 2010: para. 1.2), I conceptualise it as a “stage” where identities can be played out.

Because of its material aspect, cosplayers may face challenges in their practice, particularly where the “generalised other” of society acts as audience. Cosplay derives its ideal and material sources from narrative “worlds,” emphasising its visual attributes. Emulating the look of a character is an important, though not exhaustive part of successful cosplay. Often in fiction and its adaptations, a character is designed to possess a certain appearance such as hair colour, height, clothing style, etc., which indicates personality traits. However, when a cosplayer attempts to achieve visual precision (to appear

exactly alike) in cosplaying a character of a different physical appearance, the results can appear to be controversial. Especially where racial stereotypes are concerned, film costuming practices such as “blackface,” “yellowface” and “whitewashing” had raised ire in the past (Miller 2014: 12; Nesic 2013: 41; Parungao 2005: 3). The use of intensely applied “skin colour” was associated with racist undertones, as the result usually appeared patronising towards the subject.

Beginning in the early 20th century, the portrayal of Asian characters in Western-Hollywood movies tended to involve an actor of Caucasian descent in make-up. The make-up was designed to resemble the “yellow hue” of Asian skin. Movies such as the *Fu Manchu* series<sup>1</sup> portrayed Asian characters as caricatures, with heightened emphasis on “oriental” features (Parungao 2005: 3). Dr. Fu Manchu himself was a character designed to represent the threat of an Asian invasion of Britain during Victorian times (Wang and Underwood 2016: 2). At present, this stereotyping of Asian characters as villains continues to persist. In 2009, fans protested *The Last Airbender*’s casting of white actors as main characters, and the casting of Asian actors as villains (Lopez 2011: 431). As recent as 2016, there have been similar controversies ranging from the casting of a white female actress as an originally Asian character in *Marvel’s Doctor Strange*; backlash towards the potentially white casting for a live-action adaptation of Chinese legend *Mulan*; outcry over Caucasian actors appearing in a film about the Great Wall; and negative response towards a potential white actor playing Bruce Lee in a biopic. Even in Malaysia, a television parody of local US-based singer Yuna and global pop star Usher has been mired in controversy due to the parodists’ use of blackface.<sup>2</sup> As this practice has been condemned by global civil society as being politically incorrect, filmmakers now struggle with representations of race on-screen.

Meanwhile, where gender is concerned, appearance modification can be seen in instances such as “crossplay,” which is defined as cosplay involving dressing up as the gender opposite to the cosplayer’s own affixed gender (Winge 2006: 71); or “gender-swap,” which is “playing a different gendered character from oneself” (Hussain and Griffiths 2008: 48).

As costumers themselves, cosplayers negotiating the issue of visual precision would need to be aware of the ramifications of their methods. Thus, in order to become a successful cosplayer, inhabiting cosplay as a lived practice, one needs to have knowledge of the chosen narrative, the character, the ability to recreate the character’s appearance (using politically correct methods) through individual resourcefulness, be part of a social network (whether strong or weak ties) in order to be invited to conventions or engage

in themed photo shoots, and to be digitally conversant. Despite mentioning that cosplayers could come from any gender or ethnicity, these issues were not sufficiently explored by Winge (2006). Thus, taking all of the above into consideration, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Objectified Cultural Capital: In the Malaysian context, what constitutes a cosplayer, in terms of skills, knowledge, abilities, and beliefs?
2. Institutionalised Cultural Capital: Do social facts such as race, ethnicity, gender, or social class affect a cosplayer's presentation of their chosen character?
3. Embodied Cultural Capital: Within a global context, how do Malaysians, as Asian cosplayers navigate the intersectionality of narratives originating from the "West" and other regions, with regards to legitimacy of their portrayal of characters?

Cultural capital can be derived from a cosplayer's mastery of textual, material, and performative dimensions (Bainbridge and Norris 2009: para. 36). These are attributes also included in Winge (2006: 66)'s definition of cosplay (social settings, character and role-playing, and dress). In addition, the social structures visible in the source narratives comprise institutions such as gender, race/ethnicity, and social class. Paidi et al.'s study highlighted the possibility of achieving multiculturalism through cosplay (2014: 178), noting that it "contributes to the cultural capital of Malaysia." Finally, my three research questions above correspond to the three elements of cultural capital—institutionalised, objectified, and embodied. Thus, the theoretical framework chosen to encompass these social facts and phenomenological considerations is Bourdieu's framework of cultural capital.

### **Bourdieu's Cultural Capital and Field**

Bourdieu (1984: 23) first coined the term cultural capital to describe the worldview, life experiences, and lifestyle preferences of select groups of people demarcated by their relations to the means of production (Chan et al. 2016: 26). Applications of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital have been widely practiced in the study of class distinction as well as education (see Savage et al. 2013; Noble and Davies 2009; Bennett and Silva 2006, among others). The three aspects of cultural capital are the embodied—which are long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; the objectified—which is possession of cultural goods (such as books); and the institutionalised—which is the

legitimacy accorded to the other forms of cultural capital by social institutions such as education (Bourdieu 1986: 242; as cited in Chan 2016: 28).

Within cosplay, institutional cultural capital comprises one's inclusion into social institutions like the family, gender, ethnicity, education, career, social network, and depiction by the mass media. The objectified form of cultural capital consists of the individual's skills at costume-making (from design to execution) and experience. The embodied cultural capital meanwhile, includes the individual's ability to perform the character much like an actor would—to be able to portray all the nuances of the character's motivations, mannerisms, and actions in a premise that is not on stage nor on celluloid, and not necessarily contained within a “universe” or narrative. The embodiment of the character also has to include an element of interactivity, as audiences would be able to engage with the “character” removed from its immediate narrative “world.” It is thus possible to view cosplay as a kind of performance art.

Previous authors have conceptualised cosplay in Malaysia as a subculture, but their focus was not to highlight the specific set of material and ideal abilities required to become an effective one. There is also a lack of study examining the ability of cosplay to function as a dramaturgical stage enabling a deconstruction of “authority-defined” statuses. The material attributes correspond to Bourdieu's notion of objectified cultural capital; the ideal attributes relate to embodied cultural capital; and the inhabitation of statuses is reflected in institutional cultural capital. Aside from these, cosplay is often mistakenly considered as a purely leisurely activity which is not profitable nor contributes to society—though I argue there is evidence that cosplay possesses a rational aspect and occurs in a specifically delineated locus of activity. This is what Bourdieu terms the “social field” (1990: 67), which entails “an historically generated system of shared meaning” (Iellatchitch et al 2003: 732; as cited in Walther 2014: 8) such as art, literature, music, science, etc.

Thus within the cosplay context, we can locate the individual based on their possession of habitus (Bourdieu 1977: 78) and capital (Bourdieu 1986: 241), within the praxis of their field (Walther 2014: 8):

$[(\text{habitus})(\text{capital}) + \text{field}] = \text{practice}$

Which in my study translates to:

$[(\text{character embodiment})(\text{skills and experience}) + \text{digital and face-to-face community}] = \text{cosplay}$

Habitus, which consists of the “embodiment of characters cosplayed,” interacts with capital which consists of “skills and experience,” and is located within the field of cosplay as a rational activity. These total up to form an effective cosplayer who is deserving of social recognition. Figure 1 depicts the cultural capital required for a cosplayer.

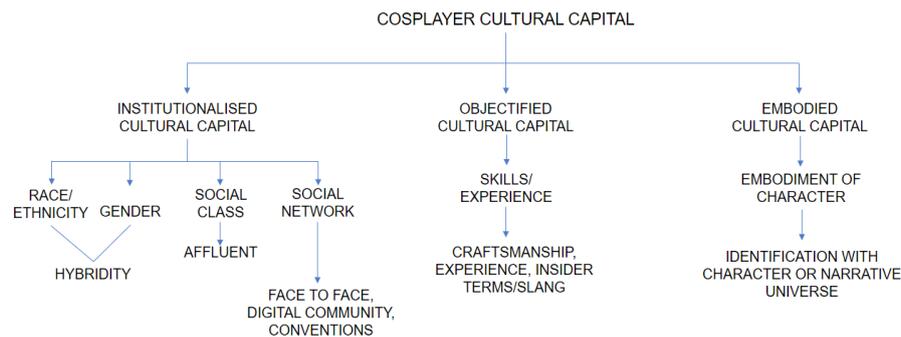


Figure 1: Cultural capital of an “offline and online” Malaysian cosplay community.

In Figure 1, institutional cultural capital is divided into four categories relevant to cosplay, which are “race/ethnicity” and “gender”—of which both undergo performative hybridity, “social class,” and “social network/capital.” Meanwhile, objectified cultural capital is made up of skills and experiences such as costume construction; and embodied cultural capital is made up of the cosplayer’s understanding of the character. As the final product of the performative aspect is most visible within the “race/ethnicity” and “gender” categories, this makes the focus on institutional cultural capital larger.

**Method**

Because of the nature of the research questions, which aimed to explore the cultural capital possessed by a community of Malaysian cosplayers; responses of the “generalised other” of spectators/participants within the global cosplay community; as well as the former’s awareness of issues regarding visual presentation in the global context, a mixed method research design was adopted. This aimed to triangulate the Malaysian cosplayers’ perspectives on issues in cosplay, along with voices from the globally-connected virtual community, as well as narratives from the producers’ perspective. Thus, I adopted a combination of data from an in-depth survey, international forum discussions, and a social dynamic analysis of popular metanarratives. The purpose was to produce both a producer and a consumer perspective—which I considered important given the landscape of “presumption” or “remix culture” which

permeates the digital sphere at present. The open-ended survey was designed to capture the phenomenological process of cosplay among my respondents, as it related to social institutions, material factors, and embodiment. The survey itself was an online questionnaire hosted on eSurveysPro, comprising 25 questions. The questions could all be answered in the online form itself, and because it was shared by J, it was also possible for the respondents to discuss it online with each other, enabling a “focus group discussion” environment. Respondents’ identifiable personal details were not collected to ensure their privacy. The term “they” is also used when respondents do not wish to be identified by a specific gender.

The questions comprised topics related to institutional cultural capital—such as the perception of the respondent’s friends, peers, and family towards their cosplay activities; the respondent’s view of cosplay in mitigating gender roles and ethnicity; their education, occupation, and how these intersected with their cosplay activities. Questions relating to objectified cultural capital included length of experience; existence of cosplay “superstars”; and those on routines, slang, and symbols unique to their fandom. Questions on embodied cultural capital included the cosplayer’s own life ambition; their favourite fandom and character; and the reasons for these. Questions on social capital included the size of the cosplayer’s cosplay network; while questions on economic capital involved the financial amount spent on producing a costume. Finally, they were asked about their perceptions of both the images from *The Hobbit* and *Ice Fantasy* provided below (Figures 2 and 3). Responses have been provided verbatim and have not been edited for typos or grammatical mistakes.

I gained access to the respondents of my in-depth survey, through J, a professional cosplayer who is also a professional performer. J has been cosplaying for more than ten years, constructs their own costumes and is highly regarded for their expertise, both in making costumes and for embodiment of character roles. J is also an actor, thus making them unique among cosplayers who are not necessarily professional performers. In total, eight respondents participated in this survey, who are profiled below. They are part of J’s social network, gathered through snowball sampling on social media. This network of cosplayers was chosen due to some of their senior members’ long-term participation in cosplay, both offline and online (which started in the Malaysian *Lord of the Rings* fandom since the early 2000s, having their own community website) and J’s ties to the local theatre scene. This made them veterans in the practice of cosplay and experienced in the process of accumulating cultural capital. On the continuum of dedication outlined by Winge (2006), my

respondents appear to be located at the category of “cosplaying to socialise and to have fun,” committed to achieving visual precision where possible, such as in clothing; but also accepting hybrid constructions of race/ethnicity and gender, contextualised in the cosplayer’s local experience.

However, because the sample was small, the limitation of my study is that it cannot be extended as a generalisation of the entire Malaysian cosplay scene. As a snowball sample indicates respondents knew each other prior to the survey, there is also the likelihood of being influenced by each other’s opinions. Lastly, as it is not a stratified sample, the distribution of respondents according to institutional background such as ethnicity or gender is not representative of Malaysians or Malaysian cosplayers in general. Nonetheless, given the development of cosplay as an increasingly mainstream social activity, it may be possible for it to garner more institutional support in the future, perhaps evolving into a form of public theatre. Then, a large-scale study could be conducted to identify the extent of the cosplay population in Malaysia.

As for the internet forums, I took as my source the popular and long-established cosplay discussion board, Cosplay.com, “the world’s largest cosplay forum”<sup>3</sup> established in 2002. This forum is a place where cosplayers can meet virtually; post photographs of their cosplays, exchange feedback, network, and invite each other to events. The issue of negotiating one’s cosplay around social constructs such as race, ethnicity, and gender has been discussed widely on this forum.

Finally, for the case study, I focused on two sources of narratives—one emerging from the West, in which characters possessing a “Caucasian” appearance are contained; and another of Asian origin, in which characters possessing a “Asian”-hybrid appearance are contained. To fulfil the requirements of the former category, Lord of the Rings was chosen, as was its close visual contemporary, Ice Fantasy. The Tolkienverse is also a fandom that J’s social network is familiar with and has cosplayed. Aside from this, the Lord of the Rings and Hobbit trilogies have been screened in Malaysia and is easily identifiable by the public, thus making it a recognisable form of cosplay. I analyse these two narratives from the visual and social dynamic perspective, highlighting potential challenges for a cosplayer of Asian ethnic origin attempting to achieve visual precision.

The respondents belonged to the Generation Y age cohort.<sup>4</sup> Of the eight respondents who participated in the focus group interview, one identified as male, one as genderfluid<sup>5</sup> and biologically female, one chose not to disclose their gender, and the rest as female. In the case of respondents who did not wish to be identified by a particular gender, I refer to them using the pronoun

“they.” However, for those who do identify with a particular gender, I use the pronouns “she” or “he.” All identified with the Asian ethnicity, (except for the participant who chose not to disclose their affiliation) with the majority being Malaysian Chinese and one ethnic Malay. With the exception of one, all respondents had undergone some form of tertiary education, ranging from the diploma level up to the postgraduate level. There were two research students, two artists, two from the information technology industry, one from the auditing field, and one in the teaching field. Length of experience in cosplay ranged from between slightly over a year (at the time of this study) to nearly ten years. Some were currently cosplaying characters from Western-Caucasian narratives, and some from Japanese anime or video games.

## **Findings**

To establish the context for the findings described above, let us take a look at the following case study of two different source narratives, both of the fantasy genre. These are, as mentioned, one narrative where characters possessing a “Caucasian” appearance are found; and another where characters possessing a “Asian”-hybrid appearance are found. For the former, I chose the Tolkienverse, which includes narratives such as *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien; and for the latter, *City of Fantasy* by Guo Jingming. The former is a popular source of narrative for cosplayers, while the latter is a close visual parallel.

The world inhabited by the characters of *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* is called Middle-Earth. Its occupants consist of species such as Elves, Humans, Ents, Orcs, and Hobbits (Bogaert 2015). It was created by J. R. R. Tolkien in 1937.<sup>6</sup> These were then adapted into film by Peter Jackson with the *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* trilogies (Bogaert 2015). Subsequently, many other creative works have been inspired by the Tolkienverse.

Cosplayers are likely to pay much attention to the aspect of costume design. From the perspective of a cosplayer, one can note similarities between the visual detail of these two narratives, despite their different contextual origins. In an article in the *Malay Mail* dated 9 February 2016, the similarities between *Lord of the Rings/The Hobbit* and *Ice Fantasy* (TV adaptation of *City of Fantasy*) were mentioned.<sup>7</sup> The writer noted that the characters of *Ice Fantasy* resembled “Chinese elves” in a LOTR-ian universe “where only elves existed.” To elaborate further, let us compare the social dynamics in both universes—Tolkienverse and *City of Fantasy*-verse, which hold the narratives in place. The following is a comparison of the social constructs that exist in both “worlds” which bind characters to their social identity.



Figure 2: Thranduil from The Hobbit.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 3: Ka Suo from Ice Fantasy.<sup>9</sup>

Table 2: Comparison of social dynamics in two selected fantasy narratives (with reference to Saxey 2009, Farrell 2009, Moe 2016, and Melanson 2016).

Social fact/narrative	Tolkiense (LOTR/Hobbit)	Ice Fantasy (City of Fantasy)
Gender	Masculinity is expressive (Saxey 2006)	“Asian Masculinity” (Kam 2003)
Social class	Social, political, and economic issues explored through allegory (Melanson 2016)	Concentrated on the struggle within the elite
Race/ethnicity	Interracial friendships (Moe 2016) Colour and physical attributes used by Tolkien to differentiate good/evil characters (Rearick 2004)  Races of Hobbits, Men, Elves, Dwarves, Orcs, Half-Elven (Farrell 2009)	Contains two or more races, e.g., the “Ice” tribe and “Fire” tribe, who are distinguished by physical appearance. Has mortals and immortals.

These are the visual and embodied attributes in the narratives that a cosplayer needs to pay attention to. These may or may not differ from the social dynamics which are experienced by cosplayers outside of cosplay. However, as Bainbridge and Norris (2009: para. 14) argue, the fact that the cosplayer chooses the character to be cosplayed, represents a form of identity politics, in that they are aligning themselves with the chosen character. While it is certainly acknowledged that cosplayers are not living within a feudal society, their choice of positioning their characters within the continuum of social power may resonate with personal struggles. In addition, the performance of race/ethnicity or gender, which are forms of institutional cultural capital also affect their identification with the chosen characters.

Given its pre-eminence in developing the cosplayer’s own self-identification, the following section thus begins with the institutional cultural capital of my respondents, before covering the objectified and embodied aspects. Gender and race/ethnicity, which are subsets of institutional cultural capital, make up the visually performative aspects of cosplay.

## **INSTITUTIONAL CULTURAL CAPITAL**

This section answers the research question, “Do social facts such as race, ethnicity, gender, or social class affect a cosplayer’s presentation of their chosen character?”

### **Social Class**

To locate the position of cosplayers within mainstream society, another application of Bourdieu would be useful. Hills (2003: 21) applied Bourdieu’s discussion of “fandom,” where he outlined four levels of fandom participants according to position in the social hierarchy. According to this categorisation, existing fandom participants would largely consist of the “dominated fraction of the bourgeoisie,” while those who wish to become fandom participants but lack capital, would consist of the “petit bourgeoisie.” Both are subcategories of the middle class. Although Malaysians do not identify strictly with social class (Carstens 2014; in Chan 2016: 53), nonetheless it is helpful to imagine where the majority of cosplayers might be situated within a socio-economic division of society. My respondents spent on average between RM201 to RM500 on material per costume. The average monthly disposable salary in Malaysia is RM3,500. Thus they spent at maximum one seventh of the average Malaysian monthly disposable income, in estimate. Certainly, it is acknowledged that in my sample, the majority of respondents possessed full-time jobs (mostly white-collar ones such as teacher, audit assistant, IT personnel, or graphic designer) or were currently enrolled in tertiary education. They were also centred within urban areas and did not mention having financial difficulties. Their cosplay participation was enabled by their positioning within the middle class. It is likely that there might be economic barriers for individuals of lower income groups to participate effectively in cosplay, especially to achieve visual precision. This includes both finances and leisure time. However, I will not attempt to generalise that cosplay is strictly a middle-class activity, as its very nature implies resourcefulness and a DIY ethos. At the same time however, this quashes negative public perceptions that cosplayers are “idle” or “unemployed,” as my sample of long-time cosplayers show that they are in fact gainfully employed, which in turn facilitates their expenditure on costumes. In addition, there are instances of full-time cosplayers who earn income (break-even profit at most, with the exception of a few “superstars”) from their appearances at events. This partially confirms Winge (2006: 68)’s observation that cosplayers may come from varied educational backgrounds and occupations.

## **Race/Ethnicity**

My respondents acknowledged the challenge of achieving visual precision in cosplaying characters from Western-Caucasian narratives, which have been legitimised by their portrayal on-screen by Caucasian actors. They agree that Western-Caucasian characters are more recognisable. In this case, the use of makeup helps them achieve visual precision. They also claim a preference for a modification of the character, resulting in hybridity. Finally, they acknowledge there is racism involved, where there exist cosplayers who judge each other based on the disparity between the cosplayer's own skin colour and that of the character.

My first respondent is a female Chinese Malaysian, “often mistaken for being American through speech and for being Japanese through appearance.” She has been cosplaying for ten years, and spends between RM201 to RM500 per costume. She is tertiary-educated and is a freelance graphic designer/illustrator/art teacher.

Racism is still active among cosplayers, and different colour skin cosplayers are being judged when cosplayer a character fairer or darker than their own. Some wow, some boo. As for me, it is efforts and love of a character that counts best.

The second respondent chose not to identify with any gender or ethnicity, and is an audit assistant with tertiary education. They have cosplayed for four years and also spend between RM201 to RM500 per costume.

I understand the hardship to looked “real” as the character. But for me, I don't really mind it. I've seen dark skinned people cosplaying asian characters and still looked great in the costume. I don't really mind at all.

Within the forum Cosplay.com, the concept of “cosplaying a character of a different race” was also explored. This conversation thread was started by a cosplayer who wished to play a certain character of a different skin colour to their own physical one, but was worried about the social ramifications of doing so. It also featured a discussion of a German cosplayer who managed to accurately capture the look of a character, Michonne from the *Walking Dead*—and was heavily lambasted for her use of makeup. The discussants on this thread pointed out it would be better not to alter one's skin colour because at present “anything even resembling blackface, yellowface or brownface will get you in trouble.” Another discussant mentioned that the act of applying

makeup to resemble skin colour “exoticises and fetishises” the character’s race. Others mentioned that certain cosplayers only choose to cosplay characters whose skin colour already matches their physical one. Some also agreed that a good costume would be recognisable regardless of the cosplayer’s physical attributes, indicating hybridity.

The diversity of races in fantasy narratives mirrors this issue. Given that fantasy worlds such as the Tolkienverse were conceived in the West, and has been adapted into cinema where the casting of actors is largely white, the legitimised image of these characters are recognisable as Caucasian. As the Tolkienverse map and landscape also resembles Europe, the imprint in the viewer’s minds would be led towards an imagination of a Western-Caucasian universe. However, this is subverted in Ice Fantasy, where the characters possess a hybrid image of “Western-Caucasian elves” played by Chinese actors. The resulting image appears to have a Pan-Asian bent. In this way, the characters’ visual appearance is no longer dichotomised as either “Western-Caucasian” or “Asian.” This may suggest that cosplayers need not struggle anymore with achieving visual precision.

Digital spaces also allow for the development of discourse, as can be seen in Cosplay.com. There is in fact, such a phenomenon as “postcolonial cosplay” which takes place as a response to the phenomenon of “steampunk cosplay,” which is set in the golden era of British imperialism during the Victorian period (de Bruin-Molé 2015). For instance, sub-genres such as “alternate empires” are created in order to celebrate that other civilisations, including Asian ones, co-existed with the British Empire during this time period (de Bruin-Molé 2015: para. 9). In the case of Ice Fantasy, it provides a Pan-Asian visual parallel to that of the Tolkienverse, reducing the visual hegemony of one type of ethnicity over another. The findings support Miller (2014: 2)’s assertion that “cross-racial cosplay can function as a political movement for the visibility of bodies of colour, in popular culture media.” The case of Malaysian cosplayers negotiating the cosplay of “Chinese elves” opens up a new interpretation of cosplay that is based on hybridity of appearances.

Scholars such as Ibrahim (2004: 116) and Baharuddin (2001: 357) highlight that the construction of race and ethnicity in Malaysia is largely influenced by colonial conquest of “epistemological space.” The effects of British colonisation in which occupational groups were divided according to essentialist notions of race and ethnicity have lingered in the public consciousness, and is seldom questioned (Baharuddin 2001: 358). During the colonial administration, this “ethnic interpellation” had replaced notions of class consciousness, where Malaysians were led to identify with racial or

ethnic groups instead of social class (Ibrahim 2004: 120). This “divide and rule” colonial discourse also resulted in a general consensus that “whiteness is superior” among Malaysians (Abdul Aziz 2016: 7). However, cosplay represents a dramaturgical stage where such anxieties can be overturned, as cosplayers are able to insert their own interpretations of socially constructed concepts such as race and ethnicity through the practice of hybridity. This can be done through the subject’s engagement in the translation of discourse in performing a particular race (Tate 2015) through popular narratives such as cosplay.

## Gender

Cosplay is an avenue for individuals to experiment with their presentations of gender. While the majority of cosplayers may cosplay characters of the gender they are affixed with, I chose to interview my respondents about their experiences with “crossplay” given the focus on how gender is a performative act.

The first respondent below is a female Malay Muslim tertiary-educated kindergarten teacher who has been cosplaying since May 2015. She feels that her friends, peers, family and the public are generally positive towards her cosplaying. She only spends up to RM50 on a costume. She agrees cosplay is a way to escape traditional gender roles. Because she is required to cover her *aurat*, or practice modesty, she is creative in her use of scarves and cowls as hair. A desirable cosplay experience for her involves recognition, especially when a little girl recognised her Batman cosplay and wanted to take a photograph, but felt shy, upon which the girl’s mother said “Batman is a girl too, so don’t be shy.” An undesirable response meanwhile, was when a person approached her saying she is “not Batman, but Batgirl.”

As Female Thranduil, I just imagine myself as a Queen with a Kingly Elven attitude. Regal, a bit snobbish and untrusting of the normal folk, people would say I’m in the character. Most of the cosplay I have are my own interpretation of gender. such as Batman and Thranduil, I used shawls as cowls and long hair yet for some people they usually say that I’m creative at creating illusion of hair which is fine with me because I’m a Muslim woman covering my *aurat* (my modesty).

A second respondent is a male Asian tertiary-educated IT support staff who claims that ethnicity and nationality do not matter since he cosplays masked characters. He has been cosplaying for two years. He claims that originally

his colleagues thought his cosplay was “some kind of time-wasting childish hobby,” but when they saw his Deadpool costume they became impressed. He spends between RM201 to RM500 per costume. He eventually cosplayed a gender subversion of Deadpool—Maidpool—a combination of a maid costume with the Deadpool character. He did not elaborate much about gender save to say that doing so felt normal.

Dressed up as Maidpool—combination of Deadpool with maid costume. Feels normal.

While some have experienced crossplay, others have yet to, but are mostly open towards their own and other cosplayers’ likelihood in participating. However, they also note that it appears to be more socially acceptable for women to cosplay as men, and not so much the other way around. Loke (2016: 18) who studied the phenomenon of crossplay in Penang, Malaysia, found that it is “frowned upon” by non crossplay cosplayers and mainstream Malaysian society. Similarly, in the United States, Leng (2014: 103) demonstrated that attitudes towards male-to-female crossplay are generally less tolerant. Nevertheless, some of my respondents agree that cosplay provides an outlet to escape traditional gender role expectations.

This concurs with Truong (2013: para. 1)’s conception of gender as an “achieved” status (following West and Zimmerman 1987). In Truong’s research, he found that a male cosplayer crossplaying a female character was able to embody a different form of femininity than that in “normal cross-dressing.” Others viewed crossplay as part of a challenge they were keen on. These cosplayers also believed that daily social identities are not “ascribed” but achieved on an everyday basis. As argued by Butler (1990: 142), gender is achieved by one’s daily choice of self-presentation rather than a “pre-existing” self prior to the “cultural field that it negotiates.” Thus, my respondents experience identity formation from the “everyday-defined” approach, in which social realities are experienced and “redefined, reconstructed, and reconstituted” (Baharuddin 1996: 18).

On Cosplay.com, there is a conversation thread dedicated to both “gender-swap,” and an entire sub-forum dedicated to “crossplay.” The former refers to the act of changing the gender of the character, while every other attribute of the character remains the same. The latter refers to a cosplayer who is biologically male cosplaying a character who is biologically female, or vice versa. In the crossplay sub-forum, there are threads on how women can accomplish the look of a male character, and how men can accomplish the look of a female character. Topics such as chest binding methods, creating curves,

obscuring the hips, waist, and posterior; and shirtless cosplay are discussed. These discussions are geared at achieving a more convincing performance of gender. It is created based on the assumption that there are no barriers to achieving the look of any gender regardless of the cosplayers' own physicality.

### **Social Network/Social Capital**

Social capital is a term developed by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), Putnam (2001) and Coleman (1988), to indicate an individual's resources based on the opportunities enabled by the number and type of people they know. Bainbridge and Norris (2009) conceptualise cosplay as form of social networking. Hills (2002; as cited in in McCudden 2011: 12) notes that scholars who have used Bourdieu's theoretical framework in studying fandom have focused only on cultural capital and have ignored social capital. Similarly, McCudden (2011: 60) addressed this concern by emphasising the importance of social capital in creating fandom hierarchy. Hence, my study included the element of social capital which manifests as the cosplayer's social network.

The social lives of my respondents did not only revolve around cosplay, but was balanced out in other areas such as work and study. Their social network consisted of cosplayers and other friends, which they interacted with both online and offline. In terms of membership of the overall virtual-physical cosplay community, they reported that it was very large, to the point of not being able to recognise everyone in person, and as far as the digital world could stretch.

My first respondent is a female Chinese Malaysian who works in information technology (IT). She is tertiary-educated and has cosplayed for ten years, also spending in between RM201 to RM500 per costume. The majority of her friends are cosplayers and they do meet up for other interests. She lists a few cosplay "superstars" in her community such as "A" or "YS". She notes that her cosplay circle has grown so large that she cannot recognise everyone she knows.

If Malaysia wise, it is pretty big now. I used to be able to recognise almost everyone in 1 event, now I can't even find most of them. As for my own circle, I would say moderate. I have some close ones and some acquaintances so it's a mix.

My second respondent is a genderfluid Chinese Malaysian postgraduate researcher. These respondents have been cosplaying for a year and spends between RM50 to RM100 per costume. They balance their life with cosplay

well, in that cosplay enhances their professional confidence, but they feel challenged when colleagues and superior misunderstand cosplay. While they have a mix of cosplay and non-cosplay friends, they believe they mix better with cosplayers and cosplay supporters. For them, cosplay is about meeting fans from similar fandoms and not about being famous. Their network is:

As big as the internet and who is on which fan page, and who I know in real life.

Besides this, there are conventions held in Malaysia, mostly in capital city Kuala Lumpur, which act as avenues for cosplayers to meet and display their costume-making skills and character embodiment, as well as to interact with fans. One such convention is the annually held Comic Fiesta, which is described as:

[...] one of Southeast Asia's largest and longest-running animation, comics and games (ACG) event. We gather tens of thousands of comic artists, illustrators, cosplayers and fans of the culture every year.

Some Malaysian education institutions also support cosplay, such as local private university, HELP University which organises the annual Cosplay, Comics, Anime and Games Exhibition (C2AGE). This indicates that cosplay is viewed as a legitimised part of the mainstream youth culture. Similarly, Paidi et al. (2014: 178) note that cosplay is not deviance, but a subset of the mainstream Malaysian society. However, the actual extent of cosplay in Malaysia is hard to gauge, though attendance at conventions may provide a rough estimate, which Comic Fiesta (2016) claims is in the “tens of thousands.”

## **OBJECTIFIED CULTURAL CAPITAL**

Having explored the social dynamics relating to my respondents' lives and character choice, I now answer the research question, “What constitutes a cosplayer, in terms of skills, knowledge, abilities, and beliefs?”

### **Skills**

Winge (2006: 67) outlined four basic components which make up a cosplayer's repertoire. These are the cosplayer themselves, social settings, a chosen fictional character, and dress—which include hair, costume, makeup, and accessories such as weapons (Winge 2006: 67). Research is also necessary

regarding the character, especially with concern for detail; and is achieved by a close reading or viewing of the text (Winge 2006: 68). The depth of research would be guided by the goal of the cosplayer—which Winge (2006: 68) categorised as ranging from those who wish to participate to socialise and have fun, to those who are “obsessed” with the chosen character, as are those in between.

In my sample, the ability to achieve visual precision was given much importance in determining the status of a cosplayer in their community. This included the material aspect such as attention to detail, e.g., “appealing craftsmanship” as well as the cosplayer’s physical appearance such as having a “pretty face” or “six pack” or cosplaying “the most recently popular characters.” This suggests that cosplay stresses the visual factor behind self-presentation. My respondents did not take this aspect too seriously however, stressing that ultimately “having fun” was the ultimate aim.

Other skills included the use of slang, such as “costest” which meant testing makeup, costumes, and props for a new outfit; “photog” which meant photographer; or “noob” which meant newbie. Some slang were more specific, such as “chimichanga” for the Deadpool fandom. In-jokes were also known to be told within the specific fandom. The first respondent is the cosplayer who works in the field of IT.

I would say maybe “saikang” for helpers during photoshoots. “Taobao it” which means just buying your wig, costume of taobao or online in general “send it to aunty to sew” which means send the costume to your tailor (whoever your connection is).

The second respondent is the cosplayer who dresses as Maidpool.

Chimichanga, taco, merc with the mouth.

However, some cosplayers also gained recognition for their social networking skills, such as being helpful to other cosplayers. The third respondent is the audit assistant:

There are several cosplayers who deemed to be “stars” but most of them are worthy for such title. In my opinion, to be a star, you must have the “it” factor. It could be how awesome your cosplay looked like, due to prop making and level of details, taken into pictures or videos. Or also they went into competition after competition and emerged as an attraction whenever they performed. It doesn’t depend

on looks thoroughly. Plus, if fellow peeps adore *ya*, you can be a star also, for a good reason of course.

On Cosplay.com, cosplayers share photos of their works-in-progress, consulting each other for feedback and advice. For example, cosplayers advocate doing a lot of research of the time period if attempting historical costumes. Some forum members are particularly helpful, posting tutorials on how to make specific costume types. In this way, cosplayers get to pre-empt the audience's response towards their costume construction, and learn from others' experiences.

There is no discrimination based on seniority of experience, though having more experience certainly helps the cosplayer to improve, based on trial and error. Cosplay also has a creative aspect because the process and materials of costume-making are left entirely to the cosplayer. It appears to be an instance of DIY culture, although it is not intended to defy the norms of mainstream society, unlike subcultures such as punk.

## **EMBODIED CULTURAL CAPITAL**

This section answers the research question, "Within a global context, how do cosplayers navigate the intersectionality of narratives originating from the "West" and other regions, with regards to legitimacy of their portrayal of characters?"

### **Embodiment of Character**

As earlier outlined, Winge (2006), Lamerichs (2010), and Bainbridge and Norris (2009) stress the importance of habitus in the performance of cosplay. Habitus can be best be acquired by a thorough understanding of the character, which in turn stems from personal identification. In general, my respondents chose to cosplay the characters in fandoms they identified with. Some were enthralled by the narrative since a younger age and developed a liking and understanding of the character. It also depended on whether they felt they could interpret the character.

My first respondent is the audit assistant who claims they grew up playing the video game which they now cosplay:

I grew up playing The King of Fighters, and many SNK games in fighting genre. I took up KOF as an alternative to Street Fighter, and ever since then I enjoyed playing KOF because of its unique set

characters and storylines. My favourite character from the series is Kyo Kusanagi, because he has flaming fighting techniques! And he looked cool as well.

My second respondent is the freelance graphic designer/illustrator/art teacher who has been admiring the character Rinoa Heartilly from Final Fantasy since it first debuted in 1999.

Respondents were also asked about their perception of the visual similarity between the Tolkienverse and Ice Fantasy characters. Generally, respondents were excited about the phenomenon, noting that there were indeed similarities, but as expected, their trained eye for detail caught differences.

The following respondent is the art teacher, who perhaps unsurprisingly noticed the artistic detail:

Design and concept is similar, but there are properties that differentiates the two apart from crown, side characters, costume details and weapons used. Given both is popular, they can be sometimes mistaken and also easily told apart who they are and where they are from.

My second respondent is the IT professional:

...can easily say I love both? If it's about their race I would say why bother poking at this area? Cosplays are for everyone. If in terms of the details and quality of costume? Well... Thranduil definitely won in there but doesn't mean the *Ice Fantasy* set is any less amazing.

This issue was problematised on one Cosplay.com thread. The thread starter asked if one should “act like the character you are cosplaying,” claiming they did not do so and whether that made them a bad cosplayer.

Responses indicated that there was no absolute need to, and that it was the cosplayer's own prerogative, although it is “probably a good idea for the camera when someone takes a pic.”

They also mentioned that it would be preferable when interacting with a fan, although there is no obligation to remain in character the entire time. This is echoed by my respondents who, while making effort to embody their character of choice, state that ultimately the aim of cosplay is to “have fun.”

## **CONCLUSION**

Malaysian cosplayers, as a subset of Asian cosplayers, are made up of multiethnic members of Asian descent. As can be seen, cosplayers perform in face-to-face settings such as in gatherings with friends or cosplay conventions, and extend their interactivity to digital worlds such as in Cosplay.com. Attendance at a convention such as Comic Fiesta helps them acquire an audience, as well as exchanging social contacts. They need to be sufficiently affluent though not necessarily wealthy. My respondents were after all, professionals or were studying to become one.

Collectively, they face the challenge of achieving visual precision when cosplaying characters who possess legitimised Caucasian images, such as in the case of the Tolkien-movie verse. This is especially so in the example of visual narratives such as movies, unlike textual narratives which can be open to visual interpretation. Narratives are the source of cosplayers' performances and in turn are channels for forming one's "everyday-defined" social reality. Thus, elements of race/ethnic and gender performativity are particularly important in the complete embodiment of a cosplayer. For instance, our respondent can change from a mild-mannered lady to Batman, a tough masked hero of the opposite gender. The mask obscures any physical connotation of race, while the fictional setting of the character is not associated with any particular ethnicity or way of life. Where visual social facts are concerned, cosplayers' attitudes towards race/ethnicity and gender suggest an acceptance of fluidity and hybridity, much like Connell (2012)'s description of globalised society. A sense of humour is also situated in the cosplayers' acknowledgement of "super-diversity" (Vertovec 2007), which enables deliberate subversions of original characters, such as in the case of the male cosplayer cosplaying Deadpool as Maidpool. Ultimately, cosplay also acts as a visual stage where cosplayers are able to engage in a dramaturgical reinterpretation, subversion, or reinvention of identity.

Thus, we can conceive of cosplay as a specific social field which requires its own unique cultural capital. While the process of acquiring these may be practiced rationally, the performance of the end product takes on an expressive quality. Described in Bourdieusian terms, we derive the following:

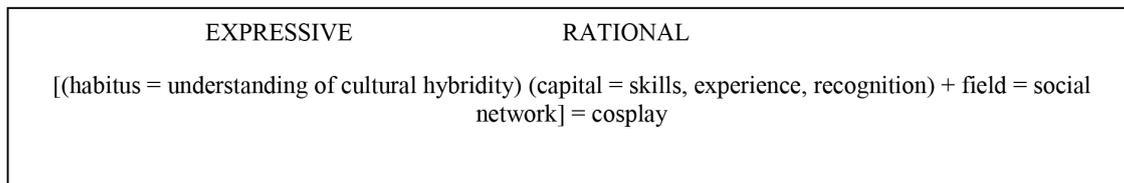


Figure 4: Expressive Rationality as demonstrated by Malaysian cosplayers

Based on this case study of a specific cosplay community in Malaysia, cosplay can be conceptualised as a practice which carries a specific habitus, which is an understanding of the transitivity of ethnic and gender-based performances at an “everyday-defined” level. This suggests that akin to theatre, this performance can be changed on a daily basis depending on the context. It is not anchored to an assumption of an “authority-defined” position, such as having to match one’s affixed ethnicity or gender to the character played on-screen. This is especially crucial given Malaysia’s pluralistic society (Ibrahim 2004). This habitus informs the use of capital, which in this case is the specific set of skills, such as costume construction, to complete the “front stage performance.” These occur within a specific field of activity which includes cosplayers who act as both performer and audience, their institutional agents—family, peers, and colleagues, the general public (such as at conventions) and the Internet. Recognition comes when the audience demonstrates a positive response towards the performance of the character—such as acknowledging the accuracy of the costume. As a performative practice, it has the potential to ameliorate fixed social constructions of gender and ethnicity.

## NOTES

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- 1 Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu, YouTube video, 1:21:09, from a film distributed by Paramount Pictures on 10 August 1929, posted by HarveyKent, 12 November 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytZDepcxjMA> (accessed 1 May 2016).
- 2 To which Yuna chastised the television programme and strongly criticised the use of blackface. “Astro show apologises over blackface parody of Yuna-Usher clip,” *Malay Mail Online.com*, 5 August 2016, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/astro-show-apologises-over-blackface-parody-of-yuna-usher-clip#gtZOWocGWqfy177v.99>. (accessed 10 August 2016).
- 3 This is Cosplay.com’s tagline.
- 4 According to Masnick (2012) of the Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies, Generation Y birth years can be “anywhere from the mid-1970s when the oldest were born to the mid-2000s when the youngest were” (cited in Bump, P., “Here is when each generation begins and ends, according to facts,” *The Atlantic.com*, 25 March 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/03/here-is-when-each-generation-begins-and-ends-according-to-facts/359589/> [accessed 16 June 2017]).
- 5 “Genderfluid” was the term used by my respondent. It can be understood as “a presentation of self that challenges gender binaries of dress and expression while maintaining one’s gender assigned at birth” (Alfrey and Twine 2016). Some also prefer to use the pronoun “they.” Booker, L., What it means to be gender-fluid, *CNN.com Edition*, 13 April 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/04/13/living/gender-fluid-feat/index.html> (accessed 16 June 2017).
- 6 Books by J. R. R. Tolkien - The Hobbit. *Tolkien Library*, <http://www.tolkienlibrary.com/booksbytolkien/hobbit/description.htm> (accessed 1 May 2016).
- 7 Ice Fantasy TV drama is overrun by Chinese elves (video). *Malay Mail Online*, 9 February 2016, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/showbiz/article/ice-fantasy-tv-drama-is-overrun-by-chinese-elves-video> (accessed 1 May 2016).
- 8 Source: The third and final “Hobbit” movie is being re-named “Battle of the five armies.” *Bibliomantics.com*, <https://bibliomantics.com/2014/04/24/the-third-and-final-hobbit-movie-is-being-re-named-battle-of-the-five-armies/> (accessed 19 September 2017).
- 9 Source: Ice Fantasy. *AminoApps.com*, <http://www.aminoapps.com/page/k-drama/371880/ice-fantasy> (accessed 30 March 2017).

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