

To be or not to be the queerest of them all: Investigating the Freedom of Gender  
Performativity within the Queer Space of Cosplay/Cross play

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Abstract

This paper examines freedom of gender performativity among Crossplayers and Cosplayers within the queer space in which they embody gendered identities. Cosplay refers to acts of role-playing based on characters from anime and manga, or Japanese animation and comic respectively. Crossplay, on the other hand, is similar to Cosplay, except that participants dressed up as characters that are of their opposite gender. While Cosplay is already regarded as a queer activity, Crossplay is observed as the queerest among the queer, as it defies the traditional gender norms in patriarchal country like Malaysia. This research is significant as both Malaysian Cosplay subculture (and Crossplay), which is increasingly popular, remained understudied, as well as issues with regard to the deviant aspect of gender performativity. Using data collected from in-depth interviews with eight respondents and four sessions of participant observation at various Cosplay events, the researcher observed interactions between Crossplayers and Cosplayers, and subsequently analysed the findings to provide insights into freedom of gender performativity within the queer space. Findings and analyses showed that, while the queer space provides a space for participants to construct their very own gender identity, it is not independent of the influence of the traditional gender dichotomy. As far as the discourse of gender is concerned, the queer space inevitably becomes hierarchical. While the queer space tends to create the illusion for non-participants to acknowledge the exercise of gender freedom, it by no means guarantees freedom of gender performativity.

Keywords: *Gender performativity, queer space, Cosplay, Crossplay, freedom of expression.*

1. Introduction

This paper examines freedom of gender performance among Crossplayers and Cosplayers within the queer space in which they embody gendered identities. Cosplay refers to acts of role-playing based on characters from anime and manga, or Japanese animations and comics respectively. Crossplay, on the other hand, is similar to Cosplay, with the exception of participants dress up as characters that are of their opposite gender. Both Cosplay and Crossplay are acts that non-participants would frown upon by the mainstream society because they are regarded as bizarre and they contradict individuals' everyday identity. Non-participants might even detest the act of cross-dressing by Crossplayers as well as their embodiment of feminine or masculine features, which are against the traditional gender male-

masculine and female-feminine binary. By examining interactions between Crossplayers and Cosplayers, this research attempts to discover the contesting elements that affect the performance of gender within the queer space. This research is significant as both Malaysian Cosplay subculture (and Crossplay), which is increasingly popular, remained understudied, as well as issues with regard to the deviant aspect of gender performance.

### *1.1 The rise of Japanese Cosplay*

Japanese popular culture has set foot in Malaysia since the 1980s, when Japanese dramas and anime occupied time slots in television channels (Juliana & Mustafa, 2012). The proliferation of other forms of popular culture such as manga, Japanese dramas and music also paved the way for elements of Japanese-ness to be incorporated into the lifestyle of many Malaysians (Yamato et al., 2011). The continued popularity of Japanese anime and manga has also contributed to the emergence of ‘Cosplay’ as a new form of popular culture. Cosplay, a portmanteau of the terms ‘costume’ and ‘role play’, is a realm where participants are allowed to express themselves freely and not be restricted by social norms. Participants who dress up and behave based on popular anime and manga characters becomes the manifestation of fictional characters in the life-form of humans not only in terms of garments but also ‘mannerism specific to the persona’ (Thomas, 2014, p. 34). Cosplay enables participants to have greater degrees of gender expression for its participants, known as ‘Cosplayers’. It allows Cosplayers to temporarily cast aside the identity that they carry in their daily lives when they embody anime and manga characters. They are given not only the freedom to choose characters that they wish to embody and also the freedom to use the characters to bring out the identities that are normally hidden from the public eyes.

### *1.2 Crossplay within Cosplay*

The rise of Crossplay is driven by participants who attempt to perform a reverse gender identity. While some did it merely to embody anime and manga characters of the opposite gender that they are attracted to, some used characters of the opposite gender as a means to bring out their hidden gender. The understanding of cross-dressing through Crossplay is associated by and seen as a transformation of aesthetics rather than an expression of the ‘self’ (Leng, 2013). In other words, a sense of appreciation for anime or manga characters is a motivation for Crossplay, just like Cosplayers. Crossplayers imitate feminine behaviour as a

form of artistic expression and their performances do not necessarily highlight the importance of gender identity. Taylor (2005) argued that Crossplayers strive to bring the idealised characters to life. As characters in manga and anime are often designed to have body figures that are deemed ideal by the mainstream beauty standards, Crossplayers who are of the opposite gender of the characters they embody will work hard to ensure their body meets the expectation. In other words, Crossplayers would attempt to achieve accuracy through the making of precise costumes despite the fact that the fictional characters are designed with unrealistic proportions. Similarly, Thomas (2014) argued that Crossplay exposes ‘the artificiality of gender’ and is often ‘manipulated for comical effect in the form of drag performances’ (p. 37). The ‘comical effect in the form of drag performances’ is referred to as a gender parody, as performers of such performances do not focus on bringing out the beauty of the original characters but ridicule them by accentuating gender heteronormativity and differences between male and female. With such a parodic performance, the intention of Crossplayers is aimed at mainly to entertain the audience. Crossplay, as compared to Cosplay, more clearly demonstrates that gender is constructed and never static. Crossplay therefore provides a platform for temporary liberation from pre-established orders (Thomas, 2014), which includes heteronormativity of gender. The practice of embodying characters of the opposite gender that previously only exists in the virtual realm of anime and manga can also be found in Malaysian Cosplay.

### *1.3 The gendered body in Crossplay*

While scholarship on Crossplay and Cosplay remains wanting, previous studies that specifically focus on Crossplay are relatively much lower than Cosplay. A study on male-to-female (M2F) Crossplay found out that the mimicry of feminine behaviour by male Cosplayers are merely a style of artistic expression, which is associated with their aspirations as a fan of an anime (Leng, 2013). M2F performance is argued to be apolitical, reasoning that it does not aim at highlighting or challenging the status quo of gender and sexuality. Though M2F Crossplay is frowned upon by mainstream society, highly successful Crossplay performances are often highly respectable within the Cosplay realm, especially when male Crossplayers possess female physique that could accentuate the femininity in them (Leng, 2013).

Thomas (2014), who studied gender in Crossplay, argued that the practice ‘exposes the artificiality of gender’ (p. 37) through ‘creative experimentation’ (p. 35). The display of masculinity and femininity reflects the character’s gender rather than that of the Cosplayers.

However, Crossplay is often related to the gender aspect of its participants, Cosplay is examined on its practices more holistically. In another study of Crossplay in Australia, King (2013) examined the motivation to perform M2F and female-to-male (F2M) Crossplay, and discovered that female Crossplayers select male characters based on their costume design and characteristics in the story. As for reasons not cosplaying female characters, respondents revealed that they are either uncomfortable with short dresses or opine that they do not have suitable body to embody certain female characters. In addition to that, Crossplay provides female an avenue to showcase their wig styling and dressmaking skills. The decision to Crossplay is mostly based on Crossplayers' attraction to the characters as well as their wish to fulfil their aspiration by earning respect from the audience. Comparatively, sex of the characters is found to be less significant.

On the other hand, King (2013) argued that M2F Crossplay is often regarded as a platform for cross-dress entertainments in the Australian context. Crossplayers generally do not see much of a difference between Crossplay and Cosplay but they do perceive Crossplay, especially a M2F performance, is more closely associated with humour and parody. This shows that the performance of femininity by male participants in Cosplay reinforces heteronormativity. This is coherent with arguments by Butler (1993), who reiterates that even though the mimicry of feminine behaviour 'destabilises the rigid boundaries of gender identity' (p. 97), such an act, at the same time, also emphasises heteronormativity, which in turn defines heterosexuality as a normative concept. Using drag performance as a case study, Butler (1990) argued that not every single cross-dressing performance is subversive in nature or challenges heteronormativity. Some parodied acts further reinforce the existing gender dichotomy instead. In another study in Bandung, Indonesia, Venus and Helmi (2010) argued that Cosplay practices play a significant role in constructing identity of 'self'. This phenomenological study found out that the practice of tailoring or modifying costumes without being influenced by peers gives them a chance to showcase who they are. At times, Cosplayers will embody fictional characters that do not entirely reflect their personality. Their capability of performing characters with personalities that they normally are not associated with helps boost their self-esteem, especially when they are appreciated by other Cosplayers. From this study, it is understood that Cosplay activities are closely associated with the construction of the 'self' identity.

*1.4 A clash of discourse: Queer theory and feminist theory*

While feminist theory examines issues with regard to gender from the perspective of comparison and competition between males and females, queer theory looks beyond the rigid structures so that the discourse of gender could be re-signified without restrictions of definitive power or knowledge that regulate and control life. Queer theory explains resistance to any form of normativity that has been structured, without spelling out resistance to any particular structure that have been established through dominant values and beliefs (Halperin, 1997). It by definition describes ‘a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance’ (p. 62). According to queer theory, individuals strive to break free from structures that were defined by the legitimate and dominant ones (Kirsch, 2000). The legitimate and dominant ones are those who hold the power to produce, or rather define the knowledge of truth. In the case of gender, the truth is determined by beliefs determined under patriarchy and those who produce this truth are those who desire to maintain male dominance within a social system. Drawing upon Foucault’s concepts of power and knowledge, Butler (1990) argued that representational politics must be avoided to deconstruct the stable categories that have been used as structural definitions for women. According to Foucault (1977), the ‘regime of truth’ emerges and dominates because of practices produced by the modality of embodiment of masculinity and femininity. This was why Butler (1990) criticised feminist theory, which strive to challenge the masculine culture yet choose not to break free from the gender binary. Feminist theory looks at struggles to liberate the sexual and gender identity of the female body within a male-dominating setting that has been historically defined (Hooks, 1984).

Clash of the theoretical understanding between queer theory and feminist theory appropriately formulated a framework that matches the focus of the current study. Queer theory and feminist theory each represents a stream of thought, with the former backs views on Crossplay as a practice that accentuates freedom of gender performativity without considering restrictions, and the latter supports gender performativity as means to challenge the gender norms. Contestation of the theoretical views will help the researcher better understand patterns of interaction among Cosplayers and Crossplayers and subsequently how their interactions influence the expression of gender in the queer space. Though the contestation between queer theory and feminist theory may pave a rather imprecise path in guiding the research’s direction, it also encourages a more comprehensive examination of the research focus. Therefore, highly

methodological or functionalist theories are not used as the theoretical framework for the study, as they tend to limit the interpretations on the dynamism of interactions.

## 2. Research Methodology

The researcher employed in-depth interview as the primary data collection method with 12 respondents - three were M2F Crossplayers, three F2M Crossplayers, three male Cosplayers and three female Cosplayers. The balanced combination was determined as such to generate diverse views on the expression of gender in the Cosplay/Crossplay queer space.

The sampling criteria are: 1) Respondents must have participated in at least two Cosplay events in the last two years. This is to ensure that they are still active Cosplayers/Crossplayers and their memories of the performance is not obsolete; 2) Respondents are 18 years old and above. They must be of the age of consent to participate in this study. This is to fulfil the requirements of ethics of research; and 3) Respondents should consist of members of Cosplay communities from different parts of Malaysia, so that data produced can fairly represent the different communities in the country. This is also to ensure that the researcher does not limit his respondents to just one particular Cosplay/Crossplay community. Four question categories are developed based on the reviews of literature and the study's theoretical framework. They are: influence of gender in Cosplayers-Crossplayers interaction, Crossplay as a gender performance, motivation to Cosplay/Crossplay and the blurring of gender lines.

In-depth interviews are then triangulated with participatory observations, whereby the researcher participated in four events from January 2015 till September 2015. The four events are: Penang Anime Matsuri – Summer Party 2015, Cosplay Invasion IV 2015, Penang RAYCO Cosplay Gathering 2015 and Bon Odori Festival 2015. Though all were held in Penang, participants who took part in these mega events flocked in from all over the country, with Cosplayers and Crossplayers from west coast cities such as Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur and Melaka.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### *3.1 Against the others: The 'Southeast Asian Unity*

The Cosplay/Crossplay queer space in Malaysia is not independent of queer spaces in other countries in the Southeast Asian region. Malaysian Cosplayers and Crossplayers were able to source support from the extensive bet work with their Southeast Asian counterparts. While the rise of Cosplay owes its origin to Japan in the far north, respondents unanimously agreed that

their exposure to the practice of Cosplay in Malaysia began from neighbouring countries like Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. In this instance, geographical proximity, instead of cultural proximity, plays a crucial role in unifying the community. The differentiation of the Cosplay/Crossplay queer space in Southeast Asia from that of the queer space in East Asia reflects a form of social stratification, whereby prestige is the determining factor. From the Southeast Asian point of view, East Asian Cosplayers and Crossplayers strive to accumulate prestige, diverting attention of the original fans of anime and manga to their personal status as celebrities. Southeast Asian Cosplayers or Crossplayers neither markedly pursue a para-social relationship with their East Asian ‘celebrity’ counterparts nor regard themselves as their fans or followers. The reason behind could be that there are no motivating factors that steer them towards fandom. According to Jenson (1992), individuals rely on fandom as a ‘chronic attempt’ to address the ‘absence of community, incomplete identity, lack of power and lack of recognition’ (p. 17). These descriptions do not seem to fit Cosplayers and Crossplayers in Southeast Asian countries, whereby they have cultivated a sense of belonging through their regional network. They also perceive that they possess the power to define their identity and are recognised within the community. Thus, they do not see the necessity to take on the fan role and chase after the East Asian celebrity Cosplayers and Crossplayers.

### *3.2 Perceived ‘Japanese-ness’ sanctions gender performances*

Findings suggested that the ‘Japanese-ness’ in Cosplay and Crossplay is conceived as the main component that sanctions the freedom for Malaysian participants to perform their genders. While respondents at face value unanimously concurred that Japanese-ness does promote freedom of expression, they encountered the problem in spelling out what ‘Japanese-ness’ is or what does it refer to. The difficulty to determine its nature can be traced back to the discourse of *Nihonjin-ron* (日本人論), or ‘discussions about the Japanese’. Dale (1986) referred Japaneseness as ‘the myth of uniqueness’, which is used as a main theme in developing a national culture during the post-war period. It was used to distinguish Japan from foreign countries, especially those from the West. However, it was criticised for pushing all Japanese citizens to adopt ‘a national culture’ despite the fact that the country was socially and culturally diverse (Befu, 1993; Dale, 1986). It also means that the notion of Japaneseness cannot be accurately defined. Enthusiasm towards *Nihonjin-ron* then subsided in later decades but the expansion of its idea continued to flourish in the mass media despite of unstable and vague

notion of Japaneseness. In the context of the current study, Japaneseness can generally be associated with the popular culture built upon Japanese anime and manga. Therefore in general, the perception of Cosplayers and Crossplayers towards Japaneseness is established based on their knowledge of anime and manga. Using the general association between Japaneseness and popular culture formed through appreciation anime and manga, Cosplayers and Crossplayers construct a new understanding by linking the two components with freedom of expression. The idea of Japaneseness is so ambiguous that it has conveniently created a platform for participants to freely relate it to freedom of expression. In addition, flexibility in the embodiment of anime and manga characters in Cosplay/Crossplay also justified the statement ‘Japaneseness promotes freedom of expression’. The perceived ‘Japaneseness’ by Cosplayers and Crossplayers is used to accentuate the freedom of expression in the queer space. This mentality is established to create a statement against the mainstream, to strengthen the boundaries of their queer space and prevent external influences from invading. This can be associated with Halberstam’s (2005) argument, that the production of this queer space provides a platform for the production of queer counterpublics, whereby counterpublics are ‘formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment, and this context of domination inevitably entails distortion’ (Warner, 2002, p. 63).

### *3.3 A stratified queer space*

Sense of belonging wavers when interactions take place between Cosplayers and Crossplayers in the absence of external pressures, or the ‘non-queer space’. At the surface level, this can be regarded as an evidence of gender subversion, whereby female or femininity has attained a superior position as compared to male or masculinity, but by looking deeper into this issue, the cream of the crop are nothing but a product of female objectification. This understanding is reflected on the concept of ‘male gaze’ proposed by Mulvey (as cited in Trier-Bieniek, 2015), whereby ‘women’s “to-be-looked-at-ness” defines their on-screen job of fulfilling male desires’ (p. XV). In other words, the acceptance and practice of male gaze in Cosplay in the fan culture serves the patriarchal function of female objectification.

Another issue that weakens the sense of belonging is none other than gender stereotypes. Besides dealing with criticisms outside the queer space, Crossplayers are also subjected to harsh judgments among themselves and general Cosplayers. Their Crossplay would only be deemed successful when the embodiment of costumes, the body gestures, mannerism and body



feature reflect the original anime and manga characters they portrayed. For Crossplayers, the body frame of a man and women would determine the success and failure of their performance, and subsequently govern their status in the community. The relationship between Cosplayers and Crossplayers becomes nothing more than just a formal one. Their interactions are merely built on the evaluation of performance and would only take place within the queer space. While it is argued that gender dichotomy is culturally constructed, in this case, the biological body is not something that could exist independently without gender (Golombok & Fivush, 1994). In other words, the body is inseparably tied to gender. As patriarchal influence reinforces gender norms, the body has to conform to them inevitably. Therefore, Crossplay is still by and large incapable of challenging patriarchy beyond the boundaries of its queer space. Cosplayers and Crossplayers, though remained as fans of Japanese manga and anime, would return to their everyday identity. When they no longer carry the identities of Cosplayers or Crossplayers, the sense of belonging would then disintegrate. This, however, does not mean they had relinquished their identity as Cosplayers. As Cosplayers return to their everyday identity in the patriarchal society, gender stereotyping and discrimination resume.

#### 4. Conclusion

The dynamism of participants' gender performances in the Cosplay/Crossplay queer space is constantly determined by the contesting elements of perceived freedom of expression and the struggle to maintain the gender hierarchy. The perceived freedom of expression within the queer space, as agreed by Cosplayers and Crossplayers, inculcates a sense of belonging to counter social norms. It binds them together without considering various aspects that might disrupt the solidarity. However, within the queer space itself, the sense of belonging disintegrates when participants perceived they are safeguarded within the queer space. Within a safe environment, Cosplayers and Crossplayers are no longer in need of allies to act against the external forces. Thus, problems re-emerge when gender becomes a controversial aspect that challenges the pre-established notion of 'freedom of expression'. This is because, within the queer space itself, participants' mentality is still by and large bound by the traditional gender dichotomy. This causes the supposedly structurally-free queer space to inevitably become hierarchical, thus relegate it to merely an ideal mirage that Cosplayers and Crossplayers conveniently use to convince outsiders without acknowledging its existence. Consequentially,

participations' gender performances become more self-regulated and driven to fulfil certain criteria in order to move up the hierarchy.

Clash on the theoretical understanding between queer theory and feminist theory is evident in the context of Malaysian Cosplay/Crossplay. While queer theory provides a framework to look at the ideals of queer space but does not consider the penetrative influence of gender norms. This is why Green (2007) and Slagle (2003) criticised queer theory as epistemologically incommensurable, and that it is incapable of steering researchers away from the existing social categories in their analyses. While queer theorists may criticise feminist theorists for stressing on the structural comparison between genders, this study shows that such gender structures cannot be neglected because it is deeply rooted in the existing society till the extent that members of the society could not seek refuge within the queer space that has been overly idealised. Nonetheless, using queer theory as a reference point helps explore contesting elements that affect gender performances more freely and allow rigid gender structures to emerge as an outcome of the study.

This research mainly provides general insights into the interactions between Cosplayers and Crossplayers. To expand this area of scholarship, researchers could examine interactions between gendered participants more specifically, such as male and female Cosplayers, or M2F and F2M Crossplayers would also be significant to study the Cosplay/Crossplay queer space on its own, by examining how it is 'created' and maintained by the sense of belonging among participants against the external environment. Outcome of the proposed studies might provide justifications for queer theory and feminist theory to consolidate its theoretical discourse in this area of study.

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