

Early College Academy

Cosplay is Not Consent

A Comprehensive Look into the Sexualization of Cosplayers

James Zimmerman

English Composition 121

Professor Dixon

11 November 2022

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever seen someone in a costume and wondered what they were doing? Well, they were probably in cosplay. The problem is that many cosplayers throughout history have been through sexual harassment and dealt with the trauma that can ensue because of unwanted sexual contact. I am a cosplayer and have had my fair share of harassment because of it. I have also researched this topic heavily to develop this argument. Cosplay is the act of dressing up as a character from any type of media. It is derived from the two words “costume” and “play” (“75 Years Of Capes and Face Paint: A History of Cosplay”). The most common media that people cosplay from is anime and comic books. However, I will primarily focus on the anime, videogame, lolita, and comic subcategories. For the sake of this argument, the term *sexual assault* will be defined as any unwanted sexually-oriented physical contact such as groping of the genitals or breasts, attempted rape, or coercion into sexual actions that have not been previously consented to. The term *sexual harassment* will be defined as any ongoing, unwanted sexual confrontation; this includes, but is not limited to, requests for sexual favors, upskirting, catcalling, stalking with sexual intent, etc. The topic of rape will be brought up later regarding sexual penetration of the genitals or oral sex that occurs when one party has not consented. All of the above involve one common factor: the lack of consent by one of the parties. *Consent* will be defined as an enthusiastic “yes” or evident approval to engage in sexual relations by all parties involved. Although cosplayers can be dressed in a manner one would consider sexual, more attention should be brought to the sexual harassment of

cosplayers because there is a long history of this occurring, it causes trauma to the victim, and it happens in various public spaces that no one tends to notice or stop.

BACKGROUND

As mentioned above, the history of cosplay is very complicated; however, it is gaining more traction and popularity as time goes on. Rhys McKay and Sally Clay state in their article titled “Cosplay 101: Everything You Need To Know About It.” that “the term was coined in the 1980s, the practice of cosplaying has its roots in early 15th century [carnivals] where people dressed up as objects, concepts, famous historical figures, or popular characters from fiction...” (McKay and Clay). Since it can be considered a historical activity, knowledge of its roots prove to be very important. Nevertheless, cosplay has progressed over the years into a so-called “nerd-fest” where fans of various art media can dress up as their favorite characters, go to meet-ups with other cosplayers and make new friends who already share similar interests. Cosplay does tend to be a lot of work since you generally have to make a costume or buy one, obtain a wig, do makeup, make props, etc. This can be a costly and time-consuming hobby that more and more people are finding beauty in.

Some cosplays tend to be sexualized way more than others; these characters are female and typically under 18. Not only is this highly problematic, but many of the cosplayers are very young and are both minors and under the legal age of consent in most states and countries. For example, the legal age of consent in Colorado is sixteen, whereas the average cosplayer is from the ages of eleven to seventeen.

Certain cosplays (some of which are pictured below) tend to be sexualized either by the cosplayer or by the people who create the characters, some people find it easier to justify that these cosplayers are getting sexual attention. Although some people find empowerment in sexualized cosplay, it does not always make them feel good about themselves to be sexualized by others (Lamp). Even if the character is quite sexual in nature, it does not mean that the cosplayer is trying to portray every single aspect of the character. Of course, one must address the cosplay subcategories that get sexualized the most.

Let's start with Lolita cosplays, the term "Lolita" is inherently unsettling, as most people who hear this term think of a book with the same title. We must distinguish the



Fig. 1 Rikka Takanashi Lolita cosplay

difference between the term "Lolita" and Lolita Fashion. Lolita is a term that is generally defined as a preciously seductive girl that is too young to have sexual relations but is attractive to men (Nguyen and Mai). Whereas Lolita fashion is simply "doll fashion" that utilizes puffy skirts and Victorian-esque accessories with a modern twist. This fashion does appear quite often, especially in more gothic-themed anime such as *Vampire Knight* and *Love, Chunibyo, and Other Delusions*. Figure 1 (left) shows an

example of a Rikka Takanashi cosplay from *Love, Chunibyo, and Other Delusions* (Takkeaya). Thus, when

people cosplay these characters, they are considered “lolita cosplays.” Authors An Nguyen and Jane Mai from the *Paris Review* state, “as a style, Lolita is different from other Japanese girl-centric street fashions because it draws from Western history, fairy tales, and children’s literature, creating a unique sense of cute[ness]” (Nguyen and Mai). This is true. Most people, when they hear the word “Lolita,” think about a book by Vladimir Nabokov or the film that was made years later. This book gave the lolita fashion trend a bad reputation as it sexualized a young girl who dressed in that way. Lolita Fashion is not inherently sexual by any means.

Many people cosplay from video games. If you have ever heard of *Grand Theft Auto*, you know that the women in many first-person games are not generally clothed in a way that would be deemed appropriate. Generally, this appeals to the game’s male audience so the game creators can generate more profit. Unfortunately, this can lead to a lot of misunderstandings about the intentions of the cosplayers who cosplay those women. Another example is in *Persona 5*, where the trio’s female character is dressed more provocatively than her male counterparts and quoted in a sexual context. For example, Ann Takamaki. She’s from the renowned videogame *Persona 5*, Takamaki’s “disguise” is a tight red latex suit that is very revealing in the breast area as seen in figure 2 (Shirogane qtd. in Zhong). This is proven to be highly sexualized when compared to the main character, who wears a full coverage trench coat, among many other layers as his disguise.



Fig. 2 Ann Takamaki Cosplay

Probably the most sexualized cosplays are the comic book characters. Superheroes and supervillains alike are known to have very tight leotards and other clothing that do not cover much. For example, *Wonder Woman*, *Harley Quinn*, and *Poison Ivy*, these characters tend to be the most sexualized female characters within the superhero and comic book universes. Most cosplayers stick to the canonical outfits of these characters, and people, specifically men, take this as permission to treat the cosplayers as sexual objects.

Finally, lets talk about anime. Anime is typically known as Japanese animation or Japanese cartoons. Most anime have specific animation styles and characters whose outfits tend to be memorable. A vast majority of female presenting characters are donned shirts or dresses that show a decent percentage of their breasts and their stomach; this is generally paired with short “schoolgirl” or “sailor” skirts. Therefore, it is easy to glance at a character and assume sexual things about the character without knowledge about their age or anything about their personality. This can become problematic over time due to the age of most women in anime being “high-school-aged” or even middle schoolers,



Fig. 3 Misa Amane Cosplay

based on the stylistic choices of the animators. Shown in figure 3 is a cosplay of Misa Amane, as you can see there is very little coverage in the breast area, this is shown in both the animation and the cosplay pictured above (Seals). It is important to note that the male presenting characters do not seem to have a similar problem. This can paint the anime culture as misogynistic and objectifying.

Sexual harassment of these cosplayers tends to happen in one of two places: online social media platforms and at conventions geared towards cosplayers. Cosplayers are said to have originated at a convention. So, what are conventions?

Conventions like Comic Con and Fan-Expo are places for cosplayers and non-cosplayers to engage with each other around a common interest or media they enjoy. In general, it is a place where art is sold, cosplay competitions are held, and you can meet the most significant people in the art and media world. This is all well and good, but it is a very easy place for someone to sexually harass or assault a cosplayer and get lost in the crowd. Therefore, offenders never receive due punishment for their actions.

Another place, among many others, is social media platforms like *Instagram*, *TikTok*, *Twitter*, *Tumblr*, and more. This can take many forms, like sexualizing comments left from anonymous accounts and unsolicited DM's, amongst so much more. Many people choose to block the perpetrators and move along with their lives. This works sometimes, but other times, people are more persistent and make new accounts to harass a cosplayer. This is one reason why cosplayers tend to quit cosplaying, even though it is a source of joy for them. Some of the comments cosplayers receive in their inboxes for a fun video of them dancing are genuinely hurtful and disgusting. An example was someone in my *TikTok* comment section saying they wanted me to watch them masturbate without my consent. I did not recognize or know this man and his profile made it easy to guess he was in his mid-forties. I was thirteen. This, of course, is not the only example of the comments that cosplayers receive on social media, but this one is explicitly problematic in nature.

RECURRENT ASSAULT

Unfortunately, the harassment and sexual assault of cosplayers are widespread. Whether online or in person, every cosplayer I have met has been harassed or assaulted at some point while engaging in this community. A personal cosplayer friend of mine, Sawyer Nestor, was at a convention in Ohio where she was trying to take pictures of her Midari Ikishima cosplay when a grown man assaulted her. She reported, “I didn’t say anything because why would I?” (Nestor). Sawyer was fourteen years old at the time. Of course, this does not only occur in Ohio because when I went to Fan-Expo Denver in the summer of 2022, I was also assaulted. My cosplay included a short skirt with tights underneath. While in the concession line, an adult man took a photo from up my skirt. Neither of us contacted any staff members because it would have been a case of hearsay and because there was no staff to be found in these specific areas. Alexandria Ellsworth held a bunch of interviews that yielded results like “participants mentioned how often staff was not available or easy to find. Participants also discussed how less serious sexual assault offenses...tended to happen in highly populated areas of the anime and comic convention” (Ellsworth). We were not alone in this sentiment because most cosplayers do not report the “less serious” sexual offenses. After all, we are normalized to it, or there could not be anything done about it. Not only have cosplayers throughout history been harassed in person, but many of us have been harassed online. Sexually geared comments on video and picture platforms like *TikTok* are notorious for this, so much so that a lot of cosplayers have to turn off their comments. Many news articles and police reports on the harassment of cosplayers have come to no avail. Sukhibir Cheema’s news article states that

“Pui Ting, who was cosplaying at the festival on May 16, 2022, was approached by an unknown man...the man had been stalking her on Instagram for four months.” (Cheema). Not only was nothing done about it, but Pui Ting was blamed for it by the police. This is only one form of slut-shaming that cosplayers deal with on a daily basis. Not only was she harassed at her own photobooth and stalked through social media, but the police did nothing about it and blamed her for it, saying that she deserved it. In another personal interview that I conducted with Keila Kimizuka, she said that she “stopped [cosplaying] for a while because of weird and inappropriate comments...It is hard to hear people say things that alter an activity that the person really enjoys” (Kimizuka). Since cosplay is enjoyed by so many, it is not a surprise that there would be a lot of backlash, but that backlash is still very discouraging. Even though Keila has experienced mostly online harassment and comments, they are still just as harmful as in-person interactions.

TRAUMA TO THE VICTIM

Not only is sexual assault and harassment generally terrible, but children are impacted by this a lot more than one may think. Especially in the cases of Pui Ting and Sawyer Nestor, being blamed for assault and feeling helpless afterwards has more negative impacts than people think. Nestor reported feeling dirty and bad about herself after her assault took place, but the worst part is that she thought it was her fault because her cosplay was “too revealing,” even when it was a red sweater vest and a button-up (Nestor). The National Child Traumatic Stress Network writes the following: “teen sexual assault is often not disclosed to anyone for many years. Some people may never disclose” (“Why

Don't They Tell? Teens and Sexual Assault Disclosure"). This can cause a lot more mental stress due to letting the assault fester and shame and guilt that follow. Accepting that something like this has happened to you is a huge undertaking. Not only can it make someone feel bad about themselves, but it can also cause developmental problems in the child or teenager's brain. In the article titled "Immediate and Long-term Impacts of Child Sexual Abuse," the authors state that "Severe child maltreatment- including early and sustained sexual abuse-may interfere with the child's development of a sense of self" (Briere and Elliott). Since most cosplayers are from the age of twelve to seventeen, most still qualify under the law as children or at least as minors. This can cause a lot of stress on the child, manifesting into depression and anger problems, and if it festers long enough, it can lead to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). *PTSD* is defined as "a mental health condition that's triggered by a terrifying event — either experiencing it or witnessing it" ("Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) - Symptoms and causes"). Events such as sexual assault and sexual harassment can cause someone, especially a child, to develop PTSD. PTSD is a condition that can impact someone's entire life. It can limit employment opportunities and pose difficulties interacting in many social settings. As Paola Barriaga said "trauma can be expressed on the job as absenteeism, increased distraction, task avoidance, accidents, loss of motivation, irritability with co-workers, and increased conflict" (Barriaga). A lot of the aforementioned occurrences can cause termination by the employer.

PTSD is not the only result of sexual harassment towards minors; it can also lead to various depression and anxiety related disorders that the victim has to live with for the rest

of their lives. For example, I stopped cosplaying Junko Enoshima from Danganronpa in 2021 after receiving messages from a follower who said they knew where I lived and would come over so they could see my breasts in person. Shortly after this encounter, I gave up cosplaying that character and was diagnosed with a severe anxiety disorder. This anxiety disorder gave me paranoia that that person knew where I lived and panic attacks over the thought of them coming to my house. This is just one example. In addition, some of my cosplayer friends (who chose to remain anonymous) mentioned that during their time cosplaying, they developed depression because of the daily degrading and sexually explicit comments they found in their inboxes.

NO ONE STEPS IN

When assault happens in person, it is often brushed off. Why is that? Some claim that since the anime and gaming community is primarily male-dominated, a specific gender euphoria comes from people assigned females at birth existing in the scene. Christopher Lucas wrote in his dissertation that “the gendered oppression that women experience at cons also necessitates a gendered theoretical approach” (Lucas). He talks more about how the role in so-called “men’s spaces” not only empowers female cosplayers but puts them at a severe disadvantage overall. Men’s spaces are generally referred to as any place in which the male population dominates other gender identities, including most anime, videogames, and comic book spaces. Sure, a female cosplayer can feel very empowered by being able to cosplay their favorite superhero, but there is no absence of men in the scene discrediting and sexualizing them.

In order to put this more into perspective, let us talk about Halloween. “A study done by Colorado State University shows that Halloween weekend accounts for 5-7% of sexual assault cases reported all year” (Cropper). Coincidentally, there are a lot of anime conventions in the fall. If the 5-7% of sexual assault cases that get reported are because the people are in costume, Comic-Con has an average of 150,000 attendees. Calculating this implies that 7,500 to 10,500 attendees get assaulted or harassed between the four days of Comic-Con alone. Of course there is a big distinction between Halloween and Comic-Con and these numbers may not apply to Comic Con in the same volume. Especially due to the huge sample size of places in which assault on Halloween occur. Assault occurring on Halloween can have various different causes, including but not limited to, bars, Halloween parties, domestic assault and more. However, once looking at a study done at Comic Con, the numbers start to align in a more sinister fashion. The study yielded the following information: “thirteen percent reported having unwanted comments of a sexual nature made about them at conventions—and eight percent of people of all genders reported they had been groped, assaulted, or raped” (Suess). Applying this to the 150,000 attendees of Comic Con, close to 9500 people attending the convention reported sexual commentary and 1200 reported a “more serious” sexual crime. Once added together, there were 10,700 reported sexual harassment or assault cases at Comic Con. Which is not far off from the original Halloween and Comic Con comparison. Although one can not compare Halloween and Comic Con’s sexual assault reports without more information about the different complexities of both, the numbers of both studies do align.

The official website for Fan-Expo states within their policies that “threats, threatening language, or any other acts of aggression, violence or sexual harassment made toward or by any attendee / exhibitor / staff will NOT be tolerated” (“VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT POLICY”). However, since most people do not report the assault because of a lack of evidence, as previously stated, the staff members are hard to find. So, how are people supposed to get help when someone has been harassing them?

COUNTERARGUMENTS

Some might try to discredit my claim by saying that it does not happen much in the cosplay community, therefore there is no real problem. Although not every single cosplayer gets harassed, a shocking number of people are still harassed in public spaces that are supposed to be safe. Conventions should not have to put up banners and signs saying “*Cosplay is not Consent*” to keep their attendees safe. Out of the 150,000 people that attended the four days of Comic-Con alone, 10,700 people being assaulted or harassed is still absurd and should be considered unacceptable.

Another argument I have heard is that a certain character is known to act in a lewd way during a show or game, and therefore, the cosplayer should be okay with “playing the part” or being “in character.” Regardless of how the character acts or presents themselves, there is no reason to project that on a real person. When you are talking to someone dressed as a specific character, you are not talking to the character. Cosplayers are human beings with human emotions and should not be treated like two-dimensional characters. However, some cosplayers are comfortable acting “in character” or roleplaying as long as

you have their consent. Afterall, “every cosplayer is different and just like actors at Disney World expect attendees not to grope them, cosplayers should be able to have the same standards” (Maurer).

Another rebuttal I have heard is that the only cosplayers that get harassed are the conventionally attractive ones that are used to it anyway, so there should not be a problem with a comment. This is also very untrue. Due to the fact that just because someone find’s a cosplay attractive, they do not automatically gain the right to do whatever they want. Even if they knows that this cosplayer has been harassed or assaulted before, it does not undermine the severe mental and psychological impacts that certain comments and actions can have on them, even if they have become “desensitized” to it. Desensitization does not mean consent, just like clothing and characters. Nonetheless, not all cosplayers that get harassed are conventionally attractive. Cosplayers of all types are harassed in public places, regardless of how “attractive” society deems them. To gate-keep the experiences of others to simply those who are attractive negates the reality of the subject.

CONCLUSION

After we look at all the negative backlash people get for cosplaying, one may wonder, is it truly worth it? The answer is yes and no. Cosplay is meant to be a fun activity for many people to enjoy and a hobby that connects people worldwide. I have met some of my best friends through cosplay. However, some of these friends quit cosplaying because it got too mentally draining for them to deflect all the hate comments and sexualization in the community. Overall, cosplaying should be a fun hobby that does not involve the mental

stress that causes people to quit something that they love doing. Even in an ideal world where people can enjoy the things they want without worrying about sexual assault, we must take a moment to think about all of the cosplayers that have been sexually assaulted in their time with the community. With the harassment being as recurrent as it is, we should focus more on that than if that cosplayer is sexually appealing. Think of all the psychological damage that has been caused to people who cosplay because of being sexually assaulted. Does being able to see a small quantity of cleavage from your favorite character warrant that? We need to focus more on whether we step in or not as a society. I know that if someone had stepped in when I got upskirted, I would not have spent so much time blaming myself for what a man decided to do. So, if you see a cosplayer being harassed, step in because you can help fight this problem. The next time you see someone cosplaying your favorite character, ask for consent to get a picture and have a conversation with them. Who knows? You could make a friend.

Works Cited

Barriga, Paola A. "Embracing the Reality of Trauma and its Impact in Career Development." *National Career Development Association*, 1 March 2022, https://www.ncda.org/aws/NCDA/pt/sd/news_article/424713/_PARENT/CC_layout_details/false. Accessed 17 November 2022.

Print:

Briere, John N., and Diana M. Elliott. "Immediate and Long Term Impact of Child Sexual Abuse." *ResearchGate*, University of Southern California, June 1994, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/15393977_Immediate_and_Long-Term_Impacts_of_Child_Sexual_Abuse.

Cheema, Sukhbir. "Malaysian cosplayer lodges police report against a stalker. Gets victim-blamed instead." *Mashable SEA*, 18 May 2022, <https://sea.mashable.com/life/20343/malaysian-cosplayer-lodges-police-report-against-a-stalker-gets-victim-blamed-instead>. Accessed 15 November 2022.

Cropper, Isabella. "My Costume is NOT Consent" initiative sparks sexual assault awareness during Halloween." *The Towerlight*, 1 November 2021, <https://thetowerlight.com/my-costume-is-not-consent-initiative-sparks-sexual-assault-awareness-during-halloween/>. Accessed 15 November 2022.

Print:

Ellsworth, Alexandria. "I'm Not Your Waifu: Sexual Harassment and Assault in Cosplay, Anime & Comic Conventions." *ucf stars*, 27 August 2018, <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/5945>. Accessed 15 November 2022.

Kimizuka, Keila. *Personal Interview*. 14 November 2022.

Print:

Lamp, Sophia. "The Sexy Pikachu Effect: Empowerment and Objectification in Women Who Cosplay." *Eagle Scholar*, 2018, https://scholar.umw.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1268&context=student_research. Accessed 15 November 2022.

Lucas, Christopher M. "'This Isn't for You, This Is for Me': Women in Cosplay and Their Experiences Combatting Harassment and Stigma." *Marshall Digital Scholar*, <https://mds.marshall.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2150&context=etd>. Accessed 15 November 2022.

Maurer, Jay, *Personal Interview*. 17 November 2022.

Print:

McKay, Rhys, and Sally Clay. "What Is Cosplay: The Truth About The Cosplay Phenomenon." *Who Magazine*, 22 March 2021, <https://www.who.com.au/what-is-cosplay>. Accessed 14 November 2022.

Nestor, Sawyer. *Personal Interview*. 12 November 2022.

Nguyen, An, and Jane Mai. "Lolita Fashion: Japanese Street Fashion and Cute Culture."

The Paris Review, 25 May 2017,

<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/05/25/lolita-fashion/>. Accessed 15 November 2022.

"Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) - Symptoms and causes." *Mayo Clinic*, 2022,

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20355967>. Accessed 16 November 2022.

Seals, Rebecca. "Misa Amane cosplay! (@rebeccaseals) : r/deathnote." Reddit, 2 March 2022,

https://www.reddit.com/r/deathnote/comments/t4tisu/misa_amine_cosplay_rebecca_seals/. Accessed 17 November 2022.

Print:

"75 Years Of Capes and Face Paint: A History of Cosplay." *Yahoo*, 24 July 2014,

<https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/75-years-of-capes-and-face-paint-a-history-of-cosplay-92666923267.html>. Accessed 14 November 2022.

Suess, Liz. "Survey Shows Con Harassment is a Problem." *The Mary Sue*, 23 July 2014,

<https://www.themarysue.com/numbers-dont-lie-comic-con-sexual-harassment-is-a-huge-problem/>. Accessed 17 November 2022.

Takkeaya. "Takanashi Rikka cosplay : Gothic Lolita ver. by Takkeaya on DeviantArt."

DeviantArt, 17 September 2013,

<https://www.deviantart.com/takkeaya/art/Takanashi-Rikka-cosplay-Gothic-Lolita-ver-399550829>. Accessed 17 November 2022.

“VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT POLICY.” *Fan Expo*,

<https://fanexpohq.com/uploads/Violence-SexualHarassmentPolicy-9efc71b1568575a7f98ecf3bb41896e3.pdf>. Accessed 15 November 2022.

Print:

“Why Don't They Tell? Teens and Sexual Assault Disclosure.” *The National Child*

Traumatic Stress Network |,

https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/why_dont_they_tell_teens_and_sexual_assault_disclosure.pdf. Accessed 15 November 2022.

Zhong, Iris. “Featured Cosplay EP85: Persona 5.” *Superpixel*, 22 October 2022,

<https://www.superpixel.com/article/256028/featured-cosplay-ep85-persona-5>.

Accessed 17 November 2022.