

Cosplayers: Personality and Identity Survey

A Summary of the Responses

Chris Wildrick, cosplayer and associate professor, School of Art, Syracuse University
cwildric@syr.edu

The general intent of this survey was to delve into (1) what relationship, if any, exists between someone's personality and the characters they cosplay, and (2) what relationship, if any, exists between someone's social identity, in the sense of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc., and the characters they cosplay.

I collected 35 responses: approximately half were online, largely through Facebook cosplay groups; and half were in person at the Syracuse NY Comic Con at the Syracuse Fairgrounds; all were from the fall of 2018.

The information from this survey was previously presented at the 2018 conference for the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts.

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The Original Questionnaire

The exact questions from the original survey may be found on this page and the next. I have paraphrased them in the later slides.

Cosplayer Identity and Personality Survey

This survey is about cosplayers' identity and personality, both in and out of costume.

By filling out this form and returning it to Chris Wildrick, you agree that he may use your answers for his own academic and artistic work about geek culture. Your answers will be kept anonymous. Feel free to respond at any length.

For all questions, if the answer is yes, please provide specific examples when possible. Thanks!

Questions? Email me at cwildric@syr.edu.

1. If you have more than one cosplay, do they tend to have similar personalities? (For instance, all silly, all brooding, all maniacal.)
2. Do you tend to cosplay as characters with the same social identity as you? As characters with very different identities? A mix? ("Identity" meaning any community or group you identify with such as a particular gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, area of origin, class, social role, etc.)
3. Do you tend to cosplay as characters with the same personality as you? As characters with very different identities? A mix?

The Original Questionnaire

(continued)

4. Do you ever choose the characters that you cosplay because you wish your own personality/the way you act was more like the character's personality/the way they act?
5. Do the personalities or identities of the characters you cosplay affect the way you act, either while you are cosplaying or in real life? If yes, does that effect last for a significant amount of time after you have taken off your cosplay?
6. Do you act more confidently or socially-outgoing when you are cosplaying than you do in real life, regardless of the character? If yes, does that effect last for a significant amount of time after you have taken off your cosplay?
7. Do you ever play with the representation of your, or your character's, gender/sexuality (such as crossplay/gender-swapping)?
8. Do you ever use cosplay to change your perceived race, or the race of your character?
9. Are there any personalities or identities that you would like to cosplay, but you don't feel like you could do it for personal or social reasons?
10. Do you ever use cosplay to make a socio-political statement?
11. Are there other ways you activate or investigate your personality or identity, or the personality/identity of the characters you cosplay?

Answers to Each Question, by Percent

If there was a *clear* majority opinion, it is in **bold**.

If the vote was more evenly distributed, then the majority was not bolded.

Do you have similar personalities across cosplays?	60% yes	40% no	
Do they have the same social identity as you?	45% yes	38% no	17% mix
Do they have the same personality as you?	35% yes	41% no	24% both
Do you wish you were like your characters?	58% yes	30% no	12% sometimes
Does the character’s personality affect the way you act?	78% yes	17% no	6% sometimes
Are you more confident while cosplaying?	64% yes	30% no	6% sometimes
Have you crossplayed or genderswapped?	53% yes	47% no	
Have you cosplayed as a different race?	17% yes	76% no	3% not sure, 3% not yet
Have you ever not done a cosplay due to social pressure?	32% yes	68% no	
Have you ever cosplayed as social/political statement?	11% yes	89% no	

These responses are expanded upon in the following slides. In those slides, certain quotes were selected from the full set of survey responses because they seemed particularly insightful or representative of the other responses. I have not included every single quote, and have not copyedited them for spelling or grammar.

Do your cosplay characters generally all have similar personalities?

60% yes, 40% no

- Yes, I tend to pick heroic and adventurous characters
- Yes, they normally are heroes or introverted.
- Yes, they're usually refined men
- Most of my cosplays are villainous in some serious (non-comical) way
- Most of the characters I cosplay tend to be tragic heroines. The type of women that die fighting. I also gravitate towards women who use femininity as power, such as how Sailor Moon wields love and friendship as a weapon.

Do your cosplays share the same social identity as you?

45% yes, 38% no, 17% mix

- I tend to do them with different identities than my normal ones [white female]
- now that you mention it I do love cosplaying other gays lol
- Well, all the characters ive done are light skinned cuz i will not black face for cosplay, but im also intimidated of doing a “white version”, afraid I will get hate and backlash for doing a “colonized version” of a character. There are POC characters I do like but its best if i just don’t bother at all, period. Despite inhabiting a female body, ive cosplayed 6 male characters and 4 female characters. I don’t really have much of a social identity connection with the characters ive done. I cosplay them for different reasons.
- Now that you've mentioned it, I don't think I've cosplayed as someone who was my own ethnicity. Although I always question characters' identities when I'm watching TV or film, I don't really ask the same for the characters that I cosplay
- I exclusively cosplay female or non-binary characters (which matches, broadly speaking, my identity as a trans woman)
- I never really gave it thought, all my cosplays are guys but half are black half are white [black male cosplayer]
- I like a mix of identities because it’s fun learning the role
- No, most of them are born in a family with high social status, whereas I’m not
- Different genders (Sam Winchester), ethnicities (all of them)

Do your cosplay characters share the same personality as you?

35% yes, 41% no, 24% both

- No, I am a goofy, carefree person, but I cosplay as serious, driven people
- No, I like challenging myself and I get deep into character
- Yes, same personality... My alter-ego, the Me I would be if I lived in that fantasy world. The taker of risks and adventure I wish I could, but I can't do that in real life and still live responsibly.
- No, I don't limit myself to a personality similar to my real one (whatever that is). It depends on the effect I am trying to give on stage.
- I feel like all my characters are one part of my personality or hold a personality trait I wish I had more.

Do you wish you were like your characters?

58% yes, 30% no, 12% sometimes

- Yes, I cosplay as my role models, people I look up to and wish I could be
- Yes, it kinda balances me as a whole person
- Not really, I cosplay a lot of evil men
- No i chose them because i like the character or think it would be cool to dress up and portray that particular character.
- Absolutely! One of the main reasons i cosplay/love a character is because they possess qualities i wish i had myself.
- Of course! My character is just me but turned up to 12!
- Sometimes, because I would like to be a better person, like a superhero

Does your character's personality affect the way you act?

78% yes, 17% no, 6% sometimes

- More confident as Ghost Rider, more regal as Belle
- Yes, cosplay gives me more confidence and makes me act more cocky, I also don't joke around as much when in character
- Oh, yes! Hard to remember normal voice/behavior after, LOL!
- a bit. I still overall act as myself while in cosplay but will often make jokes with my friends as the character, or if approached by someone else (complimenting my cosplay, asking for a picture, asking who I am, etc) I'll often respond in-character if I can. it usually doesn't last outside of taking the cosplay off, but when I dress as Lup from The Adventure Zone her confidence does rub off on me for a little while.
- Of course they do. It's essential to remain in character while in a costume, except when off-stage. I drop the personality immediately when I'm not in public/on stage. There's no delay.
- Only while cosplaying, but it often makes me more aware of the similarities between our personalities I try to keep in character when the situation demands it but otherwise i'm usually the same in and out of cosplay.

Does your character's personality affect the way you act?

(continued)

- Just in cosplay, I'm an actor too so I can turn it off and on
- Yes, I try and emulate my character as much as possible, which yes, ends up lasting after I have taken off the cosplay, for better or worse
- Strangely enough, not really. I tend to think of cosplay as more of what I have to do to make my vision of the costume come to life - like how to sew a bustle or make a full-length skirt or where I'm going to get materials.
- Yes - I tend to present hostile body language during my Sith cosplay for example, which affects my body language for a few hours afterwards.
- Yes. When I'm Supergirl I feel like her. I want to be her. Sometimes I wear her cape at home to feel like her.
- [As a trans woman] I have trained myself pretty well to be congenial and respectful - at times it can be a relief being hostile, blunt, or confrontational in cosplay.
- Yes but only while in costume, and not even the entire time
- Sometimes, if I'm comfortable with my character's personality, I tend to act differently, and it has left a lasting effect in a few cases.

Are you more confident while cosplaying?

64% yes, 30% no, 6% sometimes

- Yes, being in cosplay gives me a confidence boost. I am naturally a bit outgoing, but the confidence boost lasts for the day
- Possibly—I worry less about judgment because I'm proud of what I've made
- Yes. Cosplay is like armor for me. Im way less shy because of it. When im all dressed up, i think im beautiful, people treat me like a celebrity for a day, and it will put me in a great mood. That alone makes me much more sociable.
- Yes I do. It does last too because the high you feel of people knowing oh hey you were so and so
- Yes. I use cosplay to train myself to be more social.
- Yes, I'm normally really shy
- Yes, and it does last a while

Do you crossplay/genderswap?

53% yes, 47% no

- No, I like to stay close to the original character's design and personality
- Yes, often. I [white female] have cosplayed as many male as female characters, and have been a characters of a different sexuality
- Rarely—no problem cosplaying as guys (I am a girl), not a fan of genderswap
- I [Asian female] always cosplay as male character, and make it the way it is [i.e., doesn't genderswap it]
- Yes, I love doing that! [white female]
- yes I'm a cis female but I've cosplayed a few guys before. I wore a casual form of one of my cosplays (Prompto from Final Fantasy XV) just out to the mall before for kicks and had a lot of fun when I 'passed' and got called sir lol... I'm confident in my gender but messing with it from time to time is fun too
- Yes. Even if they're gay/straight in a show, I usually cosplay with someone else [illegible] ship
- Not really. I may take photos of my character with another female character for shipping type photos, but i dont actually portray my character as a lesbian.

Have you cosplayed as a different race?

17% yes, 79% no, 3% not yet

- I mostly dress as Japanese characters, so as a [white male] American it changes the character's race
- I am Asian, but I always do white characters, or brown, but usually not my race
- I'm white so I tend to not cosplay characters visibly of other races.... even if I did I of course would never darken/alter my own skin colour (save for, y'know, when I've been blue/red/green haha). I realize it's fine to cosplay characters not of your own race, such as a black person dressing as Sailor Moon, but as a white person I feel like I'm taking away from representation if I were to cosplay someone that's already a POC.
- No. I would never adjust my skin tone to appear as a different race. And since im white, im afraid of getting bullied if i dress as a non-white character.
- No, but I would if it's done respectfully. We are just playing characters like an actor.
- Um I guess if the character is maskless I have to [as a black male playing a white character]
- Species? Yes. Race / Ethnicity? Never.

Ever not do a cosplay due to social pressure?

32% yes, 68% no

- No, except scantily-clad young women (I am 56)
- Yes some I think I don't have the body for
- Yes, I would love to cosplay some of the more buff shounen characters, but do not feel that I can do so in good faith, even though I go to the gym, and know that I am fit enough to do so
- I've wanted to cosplay several characters of other races before, such as Korra from Legend of Korra, but ended up overall feeling uncomfortable with the idea. I wouldn't judge others who did this though unless they ended up blackfacing/changing their skin colour in some way.
- There are some women I'd like to cosplay but I'm a trans man and I'm not secure enough to do that yet
- I would like to cosplay as Shuri from Black Panther but im not black, so I just leave it alone.
- Not really. Cosplay for me is definitely more about channelling my creative energies and surprising myself with what I can do with fabric.
- Yes, there are some characters I don't think I would look good enough as
- I tend to stay away from more sexy or feminine characters because I'm shy and it wouldn't match me
- I would like to cosplay as characters of a different race, but I don't

Have you ever cosplayed as social/political statement?

11% yes, 89% no

- No. I keep politics out of cosplay. Cosplay should just be fun and nothing more.

Any Other Comments?

- It allows me to safely explore my own hang ups about presenting intelligence and being scared of being found lacking or being seen as arrogant (some characters that reflect this are Starscream, Wheatley from Portal 2, Ishimaru from Danganronpa, and The Riddler)

A Brief Analysis

I want to emphasize that this survey had a small sample size, and the results should be seen with that in mind. However, there were a few interesting trends:

- People often cosplay aspirationally—that is, they cosplay as characters that they wish they were like.
- People don't necessarily cosplay as characters who share their own personality or social identity.
- People are often affected by the personality of the character that they are cosplaying as, and often gain a confidence boost from doing so, which often lasts for at least a short time afterwards. In a few cases, they use cosplay as a strategy to increase their confidence and social skills over the long term.
- A number of people, notably both male and female, have body image concerns that are significant enough to stop them from cosplaying as a particular character.

A Brief Analysis

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- A majority of cosplayers have engaged in genderswapping or crossplaying.
- There is a clear consensus that altering one's race by manipulating one's skin tone is tantamount to black face/race face, and is inappropriate at best.
- However, the respondents seem to perceive non-Asian people cosplaying as Asian characters (as often happens with anime/manga characters) as being less problematic than white people playing black characters.
- It is seen as common and accepted for nonwhite cosplayers to race-bend white characters.
- A number of white cosplayers are interested in playing a character of color but don't, because they don't know how to do so in an appropriate manner.
- Despite the fact that a lot of people have played with either gender or race in their cosplays, they largely do not see this as a political statement, but instead simply as what they want to do for personal/artistic reasons.