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Understanding Gender Identity Among Women Cosplayers of the Gotham City Sirens

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UNDERSTANDING GENDER IDENTITY AMONG WOMEN COSPLAYERS
OF THE GOTHAM CITY SIRENS

by

AMBER R. MORRISON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Anthropology
in the College of Sciences
and in The Burnett Honors College
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Thesis Chair: Joanna Mishtal, Ph.D.

Abstract

As popular culture has an increasing presence in America, so do its various sub-cultures. One of such sub-cultures is the world of comic book fans known as cosplayers. Cosplayers dress-up and emulate characters at comic book conventions throughout the United States and the world—a practice known as cosplay, also described as costume-play. Despite the growing popularity of cosplay, little is known about this population. In this research, I set out to answer the following research question: why are women choosing to dress-up and embody these characters (the Gotham City Sirens) when they are often viewed as oversexualized. In order to answer my research question, I focused on women who chose to cosplay characters from the Gotham City Sirens – Catwoman, Harley Quinn, and Poison Ivy – who are frequently depicted in “glamorized” or hypersexualized illustrations. My data collection included participant observation, literature review, and semi-structured interviews. Recruiting participants from local Central Florida comic book conventions, I conducted 19 in-depth semi-structured interviews with the women cosplayers about their perspectives on the characters and their cosplays. My findings derived from the analysis of the interview narratives identified three emerging dominant themes – sexuality, body image, and personal identity. Based on this research, there is a concluding realization that empowerment and self-reflection are prevalent in women cosplayers. These are important findings because they are essential to the understanding of how gender identity is perceived in cosplay. When cosplayers connect with their characters on a personal level, often empowerment and self-reflection are the outcomes; due to the connection they foster with the character for the sake of performance.

Dedication

For female cosplayers everywhere, may you have fun and enjoy what you do.

For Dr. William Locasico, for being my constant source of inspiration and motivation in the field of anthropology, and for Dr. Joanna Mishtal, for her unwavering support and advice.

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Introduction

In the pop-culture world of today, a significant portion of the public has become invested in “geek culture,” or more specifically the world of comic books. This is evident from the immense popularity of comic based films and television shows setting extremely high viewing records. Such shows as *The Walking Dead*, *Arrow*, and *The Flash*, and movies such as *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *The Dark Knight Rises*, and *The Avengers*, all can be traced back to comic book roots. Further, many fans from these franchises gather at comic conventions, popularly referred to as comic-cons throughout the year in celebration of the stories and characters that they come to love. Some fans even choose to dress up and embody these characters, as a sort of homage to the characters. This research project focuses on these fans, those who choose to emulate the fictional characters that have captivated so many audiences. Because there are many characters in the comic universe and equally many fans emulating them, this study focuses on DC Comics, because of the researcher’s personal knowledge and experience, in particular the specific characters known as the Gotham City Sirens.

The Gotham City Sirens are a team of villainesses – Harley Quinn, Catwoman, and Poison Ivy – from the Batman franchise. More specifically however, I am interested in why women choose to dress up as these three comic women and in what ways they identify with them. These questions are significant because these characters are often described as sexually suggestive criminals, and are some of the most popular characters represented by women “cosplayers,” therefore offering interesting question in this study related to gender identity and expression. Cosplay is the art of dressing up to emulate characters from comics, or any other

pop-culture media, performed fans. Additionally, cosplayers attend comic book conventions to display their admiration for their chosen characters.

This research is significant because it contributes to anthropology and social sciences of gender by examining contemporary expressions of gender identity. This study also addresses an emerging and therefore understudied population of cosplayers, around which there is a growing cultural interest. In fact, there is very little research directly dedicated to this sub-culture of cosplayers, and particularly from the research perspective that incorporates questions of how cosplayers personally identify (or do not identify) with their characters.

Literature Review

Cosplay, the melding of the words costume-play, has grown significantly with the rise of the science fiction and comic genres in popular culture with rapid attendance growth at conventions which focus on comics. The term cosplay has been identified originating with Takahashi Nobuyuki in 1984, who was enthralled over costumed Japanese anime fans at the masquerade and coined the term cosplay to denote this population of fans (Winge 2006:66). In the past decade, major successes in the film and video gaming industries with DC Comics and Marvel Entertainment for superhero films and Skybound entertainment have brought comics back into popular media. Cosplayers, the people who take on the image and usually the persona of characters who they are passionate about or feel some genuine connection to, have increased with the comic industry (Mosse 1966:33-34; Rahman 2012:321).

I would like to narrow down this phenomenon even more however, by focusing on the cosplay of three specific characters and their alter-egos from DC Comics: Dr. Harleen Quinzel who becomes Harley Quinn, Dr. Pamela Isley who becomes Poison Ivy, and Selina Kyle who becomes Catwoman. These characters were chosen because in the experiences at comic conventions in the past as some of the most popular characters chosen by female cosplayers; as well as, extensive personal knowledge of the comic adaptations of the characters. Typically the three characters are shown together in a group of cosplayers, who see themselves as depicting the Gotham City Sirens. *Gotham City Sirens* was a monthly 26-issue comic series by DC Comics, published from June 2009 to August 2011, which focused on these three characters coming together as a team. What is interesting however is that unlike most superhero comics, this comic series brought together two super villains and an anti-hero, who are all described as “deviant femme fatale characters,” – in other words, highly sexualized criminals. This research study aims to understand what the underlying motivations are behind the choice to cosplay these women characters, who in their comic setting are seen as highly sexualized criminals. Cosplayers who are fans of these characters generally modify their portrayal based on the characteristics that they admire within them

because they see a correlation to themselves and the character in some way. In many cases, when a cosplayer modifies the original comic representation of their chosen character it is “liberating” and “becomes a pleasurable, embodied experience” (Gn 2011:584). Based on these concepts, this study wants to explore the overarching theme of gender identity and roles. The women cosplaying these characters have used cosplay to identify with these women, but it also causes them to reflect upon themselves and what they understand it means to be women within their sub-culture of comic fans (Rahman 2012:321).

From the outsider perspective of the community dedicated to comic book fandom, stigma is a common theme. Stigma, meaning the way in which people disapprove of others for a particular reason, in this case interest in comic books, is a frequent concern for the comic subculture. Even in the origins of comics back in the 1930’s, many people have criticized comics for how they could affect children, often ignoring the wide adult audience (Lopes 2006:388, 401). In particular, there was a brief period of time in which this relationship between children and comics was promoted, eliminating several aspects drawing adult readers. This was due to The Comics Code, originating in 1954, which got rid of adult themes; until there was a resurgence in “underground” comics, and adult content was a strong focus (Lopes 2006:402-3). Even more interesting on the topic of stigma in the comic book community, however, is the presentation the fan image. Fans within the comic book community, as well as other fan-based groups, often find themselves victim to being stereotyped into the “geek” role and seen as not adapting to the “normal world,” due to their dedication – despite any personal abilities (Lopes 2006:407). As the comic book community grew over the years, fans have become more noticed particular with the introduction of comic book conventions and the growth of media representation, and as a result the ever-present stigma is slowly diminishing as interest in the community becomes more acceptable to the general public.

Over time, many people have criticized the way in which comic book characters are drawn. Instructional drawing books on how to draw these characters have specific guidelines for body shapes, musculature, breast size, and even particular traits based on appearance, such as the creation of a “sultry”

female character” (Avery-Natale 2013:75-6). Attention to specific features for the female characters in comics are what draws a lot of notice, with regards to sexuality in comics, whether it is unrealistic breast sizes or the common hourglass shape they are given. Regardless, the costumes of these characters almost always are driven to accentuate sexualized features, making them appear more as objects of desire, rather than heroes or villains (Avery-Natale 2013:79). While many people may feel that this is a poor portrayal of the wide spectrum of shapes and sizes of the female anatomy, it is important to notice the trend being created for the female body type in mainstream comics. Often, it is regarded in comic works as expressing femininity, showing them as strong, but not to the point of having a body builder appearance, because they feel it would detract from their femininity (Avery-Natale 2013:81). It is also important to take note of the shifting roles of female characters in comparison to their male counterparts. In the older comics, women were created a little more realistically in appearance, but treated lesser than men; whereas nowadays, women are treated more equally in comics, but they are often more objectified in their representations (Avery-Natale 2013:90). Thus, in appearance and representation over time, women have been placed into a dilemma having one way or the other, but not both.

Beyond the pages of comic books however, are the participants of this study: the women choosing to dress-up as comic characters. In many ways, the art of cosplay can be seen as a transformation of the self, by adopting a new persona. Beyond simple expression of fandom, cosplayers “imitate the personas of their adored characters and re-create an imaginative self in reality” (Rahman 2012:321.) While there are always varying degrees of dedication to the art of cosplay, most who would call it a hobby or lifestyle are very specific in their work. Spending enormous amounts of time and money, many cosplayers will devote these time and funds to extreme “detail – the craftsmanship of extravagant and elaborate costumes, props, hair, and makeup,” and some even learn specific poses or phrases for their characters (Rahman 2012:322). The uniqueness of the hobby of cosplay is interesting as it promotes the general ideas of escapism into the cosplayers’ lives. According to Rahman, some

cosplayers choose their characters “in order to fulfill a role that is missing in their regular everyday life” (Rahman 2012:333). If true, this is extraordinary because it contributes to the idea that cosplayers are taking on a particular identity in their performance.

In the realm of cosplay, there is little beyond imagination and resources to make anyone become anyone else they desire to be. Choosing to dress in a particular manner is an essential tool for cosplayers because it is how they “nonverbally communicate his or her chosen character and character traits” (Winge 2006:72). There is a significant difference between being recognized by spectators instantly and having to explain who is being portrayed in the costume. The illusion of a different identity being created by cosplay is astounding, way beyond the ideas of modification and fantasy. By choosing to mimic characters, the body of a cosplayer is undergoing a “‘psychological transformation’, allowing the subject to sustain and participate in its own mental illusion” (Gn 2007:588). While this may be an exaggeration when applied to all cosplayers, the general idea is still relevant because it addresses how these women are establishing new fictive identities in their costumes. Costume and character selection in cosplay grows from “an assertion of gender identity” creating the performance as “an expression of emotional attachment to the animated body” (Gn 2007:589). This argument Gn makes here is essential to this study because it will bring into question why these women are choosing these particular characters, or what is it about them that the women are drawn to.

Turning more specifically to the characters in question, Harley Quinn, originally Dr. Harleen Quinzel, has become one of the most popular comic women of the decade. Several companies, particularly those associated with popular culture such as Spencers and Hot Topic, have an overwhelming presence of merchandise for consumers to be able to dress up and be just like Harley. Whether comic fans or not, many people are drawn to Harley for her upbeat, jester, personality; but as many fans are well aware, she is also prey to an on-and-off abusive relationship with the Joker. In the art of fan fiction, many fans bring this transition from being a psychiatrist to a criminal, and her abusive relationship, to the

forefront as a source of liberation and of subjection, respectively (Roddy 2011:8). This is an interesting perspective because it suggests that leaving her educated profession to don a costume and pursue a life of crime, all to win the love of her “Puddin,” the Joker, is rational.

The character of Catwoman, like Poison Ivy, is known specifically in relation to her sexual appeal. Created in 1934, as The Cat, she evolved over time such as being a hair dresser and a thief; but in the 1980’s reinterpretation by Frank Miller, she became “a former prostitute who specialized in S&M” (Whaley 2011:3, 11). This interpretation took a darker turn on the history of Catwoman, by emphasizing her more criminal attributes, and linked it to her sexuality. Many more recent adaptations of Catwoman, prefer to describe Catwoman to be an anti-hero, because while she may be a criminal in some regards, often she follows an individualized morality in her actions. There has also been controversy over the years with regards to race for Catwoman, and while it does not highly reflect on the overarching theme of sexuality, there is in reference to her portrayals by Eartha Kitt and Halle Berry. Eartha Kitt was on the *Batman* television series in the 1960’s, and because of the historical implications of that time period, the relationship between Batman and Catwoman was not portrayed as it had been before, instead of innuendos, there were criminal plots (Whaley 2011:9). By stepping out of the confines of being a sexualized object, the character of Catwoman became more complex within the show. Yet, in other interpretations, the character of Catwoman still has her own identity, despite being sexualized into a second sex category (Weldon 2014:38).

Within the Batman continuity, most of the villains have suffered some sort of tragedy, significant event, or hardship to make them become criminals. Through the various origin stories of Catwoman, Poison Ivy, and Harley Quinn, their criminal transformation is a reaction “against their victimization by seeking revenge” (Weldon 2014:43). These women, always portrayed as having extreme beauty, use this beauty to seek their revenge in a “femme fatale” role. The “femme fatale” is known for her use of seduction, while being vulnerable to it herself, but still maintaining “a high degree of knowledge” (Kotani

2007:56). While not as relevant to most of Harley Quinn's portrayals, due to her devotion to the Joker, it is highly relevant to Catwoman and Poison Ivy. For Catwoman, the way she draws Batman to her, makes him question certain aspects of justice and his own judgment. In the case of Poison Ivy, her origin story and powers are completely founded upon the idea of a "femme fatale" role. Problems with their love lives, cause these women to take on the "femme fatale" role by fostering "thoughts of jealousy, hate, and revenge that lead to criminal activity" (Hales 1996:104). In the instance of Poison Ivy, she furthers the role by using her pheromone aromas to seduce men into committing crimes for her – fulfilling the aspect of the role that the crimes happen "because of or for a woman" (Hales 1996:105). These women, particularly Catwoman and Poison Ivy are being modelled after this specific role, and it is likely that the women cosplaying them are aware of that aspect in their performance.

To focus back in on the concept of cosplay in the performance itself, it is important to understand the role of gender identity within the performance – an aspect this study will seek to explore thoroughly. Judith Butler addressed this idea in her performativity theory. More specifically she describes gender through embodiment and how "bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler 1988:519). What Butler appears to be arguing is that there are certain aspects that create the appearance of gender for the individual, and that by portraying these aspects the individual is creating their gender identity. When referring to the concept of cosplay, Butler's ideas come into play heavily as her ideas of a performative gender identity are reliant on a social audience. According to her idea, often "the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (Butler 1988:520). With this in mind, women cosplayers are likely to construct a similar gender identity based on their selected character, and then follow-through and believe it for the analysis of the social audience. Additionally, Butler argues that the embodiment of gender allows for individuals to "actively embody and, indeed, wear certain cultural significations" (Butler 1988:525). This idea is also important because it may help to explain why women cosplayers choose particular costumes, culturally,

for their selected characters. These ideas mentioned as part of Judith Butler's performativity theory will be instrumental in the understanding of gender identity among women cosplayers of the Gotham City Sirens.

Character History

An important part of the background to this research study is the historical context of the material that these women cosplayers are drawing from when they choose to cosplay as these characters. Therefore, below is a historical overview of each of the characters, with relevant information – discussed in order of creation and then at the end as their appearances altogether.

Catwoman

Within the literature review of this paper, Catwoman has already been introduced at length, however it is still important to give a brief overview before delving into the historical appearances of the character and any significances this might hold. First and foremost it is essential to note that there are two prevailing origin stories that cite the beginnings of Catwoman/Selina Kyle. The first describes her as a girl who ran away at a young age, continued to live on the streets, and pursued thievery. The second, less common yet still well known, is that her beginnings emerged from prostitution (Newell 1989). Regardless, Catwoman serves as an anti-hero figure, and source of questioning of morality, love, and identity for Bruce Wayne/Batman.

Catwoman is one of the oldest characters in Batman history. Her first appearance, originally as the Cat, was in *Batman* #1 in 1940. Catwoman has changed significantly since her creation – from jewel thief with no particular costume or rules to a skin-tight leather suit zipped low with a whip accessory, diversity within the character is apparent. Selina Kyle as Catwoman

has appeared in countless issues of comics since the 1940's many of which include her various self-titled series in 1989, 1993, 2002, and 2011, as well as several issues of different Batman series, one-shot side stories, *Catwoman: When in Rome* from 2004, and her role in *Justice League of America* in 2013. From the beginning through the comics of today, Catwoman has always struggled with a sense of moral ambiguity.

Catwoman has also played a huge role in the film industry. Before getting into the numerous film appearances however, it is worth noting her roles in the video games *Batman: Arkham City* in 2011 and *Batman Arkham Origins: Blackgate* in 2013. Catwoman is also a constant source of art in statue, figure, and other merchandise forms for DC Comics. Catwoman was also a core character in television shows such as *Batman: The Animated Series* and the classic live-action *Batman* television show of the 1960's, where she was portrayed initially by Julie Newmar and then later by Eartha Kitt and Lee Meriwether. Additionally, she served as a background character for the origin of the Huntress in the 2002 television show *Birds of Prey*.

Much of the popular public knowledge and interest in Catwoman was likely to evolve out of her theatrical adaptations however. There were three major actresses within the past three decades who have brought Catwoman to life. The first, was by Michelle Pfeiffer in *Batman Returns* in 1992, where she begins as a shy and lonely woman turned vengeful and confident. While received poorly, the second was Halle Berry in the 2004 release of *Catwoman*. It was heavily critiqued for changing the story and the undermining the role of Batman in her life. More recently and successfully, was the version put forth by Anne Hathaway in *The Dark Knight Rises*, in 2012. Hathaway's Catwoman was a strong and confident version, who dabbled in thievery and decisions in morality. These three women are the just a few of the ways in which

Catwoman has been brought to life, and when combined with the numerous other appearances of Catwoman since 1940, it is no wonder that she is such a prevalent character within the cosplay community.

Poison Ivy

Poison Ivy made her initial debut in *Batman* #181 in 1966. Her alter-ego, Pamela Isley is described in her origin story as a successful and highly intelligent botanist; however, the origin is how she became a villain is different depending on individual writers. There are two dominant origin stories for Poison Ivy though that are worth discussing in brevity. The first is that a young Pamela loved gardening in her greenhouse with her mother, but both of them were abused by the father in the family, and after her mother passed away early on, Pamela harbored a resentment against men. The second and more prevalent origin story argues that during lab research, Dr. Isley was seduced by her colleague, Dr. Jason Woodrue. Ill-intentioned, Dr. Woodrue injected Pamela with a serum rendering her poisoned by chlorophyll.

Since 1966, Poison Ivy has been a recurring villain in the Batman rogues gallery, with additional appearances in series such as *Suicide Squad*, *Birds of Prey*, and *Wonder Woman*. She has also appeared in more individualized comics such as *Batman & Green Arrow: The Poison Tomorrow* in 1992, *Batman: Poison Ivy* in 1997, and *Batman & Poison Ivy: Cast Shadows* in 2004. Further, several collectible statues and figures have been modelled after her. Described as “a seductress whose allure mixes overtones of sex and death,” Ivy has a strong power over how women are represented in comics (Simonson: 2007, 122). When she is not pursuing her own agenda of revenge and ecoterrorism, Ivy also is seen in various formats as the best friend of Harley Quinn. The pair became close after the comic book event “No Man’s Land,” during

which the Joker tied Harley to a rocket and fired it into Robinson Park – where Ivy saved her from the rubble. Their close friendship has been chronicled in the *Harley and Ivy: Love on the Lam* in 2001, *Gotham Girls* in 2002, *Harley and Ivy* miniseries in 2004, *Batman: The Animated Series*, *Batman: Vengeance* in 2001, *Batman: Arkham Asylum* in 2009, *Batman: Arkham City* in 2011, the 2000 and 2013 *Harley Quinn* series, and so much more. The demonstration of their unique friendship, and in some interpretations relationship, is also an important factor to take into account for Ivy's character because it shows a completely different and more compassionate side, which can be juxtaposed to her relationship with men.

While Poison Ivy as a character is far less popular amongst the public than Catwoman or Harley Quinn, she remains well-known, particularly among female fans. This is likely due to the poorly-received 1997 film, *Batman & Robin*. While many people, or at least in retrospect, hold disdain for the film, it is one of the only examples of the character of Poison Ivy in a full-length film, particularly a live action one. While she did have a cameo in the 2014 animated film, *Batman: Assault on Arkham*, she had no lines and played an extremely minor role with little screen time. In *Batman & Robin* however, Poison Ivy, played by Uma Thurman, was a central antagonist for the film – alongside other popular Batman rogues gallery figures, Bane and Mr. Freeze. The film followed a similar origin story for Dr. Isley to the one previously mentioned involving Dr. Jason Woodrue, which led to her rise as a new person and source of contention between the Dynamic Duo. Regardless, this motion picture is a necessary component of discussion when referring to the history of Poison Ivy, particularly because it does a good job of displaying the abilities and personality of this important character.

Harley Quinn

Harley Quinn is one of the most popular comic women of today. She debuted on the television show *Batman: The Animated Series*, in the episode entitled “Joker’s Favor” which originally aired on September 11, 1992, written by Paul Dini and illustrated by Bruce Timm. Unlike Catwoman and Poison Ivy before her, Harley Quinn was not introduced in the comic form until after her appearance on television. Similarly, the character Renee Montoya was introduced in the same series, but was not as successful in capturing as much attention. This is likely from the appeal that Harley’s character provides, unlike Detective/Officer Montoya. Initially, the draw for Harley was to see how someone could form a relationship with the Joker, one of the oldest and most popular Batman villains; however, the character was so well received she became introduced further into the Batman rogues gallery and in comic form.

Aside from appearing in several more episodes of the show, Harley’s first comic appearances were in *Batman: Harley Quinn* and *Batman Adventures: Mad Love*. Within the comics, it describes Harley’s origin story as a young psychiatrist who began working at Arkham Asylum. She then found her way into having the Joker as her patient, fell desperately in love with him, and then donned her own villainous persona to help him escape. Harley made several other appearances in other *Batman* and *Suicide Squad* comic titles, but received her own self-titled series in 2000, which ran for 38 issues, and again in the current series that started in 2013. Over the years there have been several statues and figures released of Harley Quinn as well.

In 2002, there was a live-action version of Harley Quinn/Dr. Harleen Quinzel in the television series *Birds of Prey*, where Mia Sara portrayed her as the main antagonist of the series. While only briefly for one line, the character of Harley also appeared for one line, voiced by

Tara Strong, in the current television series *Arrow*, in the episode entitled “Suicide Squad.” The role of Harley Quinn on the Suicide Squad has been a more recent adaptation of the past few years, but it has helped boost her adaptability as more than a sidekick to the Joker. As part of the squad, Harley had a central role in the 2014 animated film, *Batman: Assault on Arkham*. Finally, Harley also has had a role in the Batman video game franchise, and it is the likely cause for the majority of her popularity. She appeared in the lesser known *Batman: Vengeance* in 2001, but is more known for her roles in *Batman: Arkham Asylum* in 2009, *Batman: Arkham City* in 2011, *Injustice: Gods Among Us* in 2013, and the upcoming release of *Batman: Arkham Knight*.

The Gotham City Sirens

Aside from their individual roles as characters, these three villainesses have come together a few times in particular. Originally, they all appeared in the 2002 miniseries *Gotham Girls*, and in the web-series of the same name. This series also included other DC Comics women, such as Talia al Ghul, Zatanna, Batgirl, and Renee Montoya. The true match-up and origin of the team title, however, comes after the events involving the three of them in the Hush story arc from *Batman* and end with the series entitled *Gotham City Sirens*. This series lasted for 26 issues from 2009-2011, written by Paul Dini and illustrated by Guillem March. In this series, Catwoman, Poison Ivy, and Harley Quinn decide to team-up and work more cohesively to further themselves. While there are individualized plots throughout the series that are very important to the understanding of the dynamics of the trio, it is important to remember that it ultimately ended in their division because they simply could not continue to function on a group level, there were simply too many personal complications.

Despite the end of the comic series, the issues were reproduced in trade paperback form, and are being re-reproduced this very year, due to overwhelming popularity of the series. As a result, the general name stuck, and has served as a classifier when referring to all three of the characters. Further, although the series itself had ended there was a slight revival within the 2011 videogame *Batman: Arkham City* and the issue #7 “Arkham City Sirens” of the 2012 comic series *Batman: Arkham Unhinged*. Within *Arkham City*, there is a sub-story for the player to follow through, playing as Catwoman. In her story she has an interaction involving the protection of a plant for Ivy, because of their history, yet Catwoman turns to thievery instead and neglects the plant. This causes Ivy to become violent with Catwoman and for Harley to intervene between the two of them as she often did in *Gotham City Sirens*. While the game is constrained to a limited exploration of the story, the comic issue continues on and finishes the particular story, and the title wittingly plays off of the original series for the three, within a new context.

Regardless, the overall role of the Gotham City Sirens has shown some of the most popular women in DC Comics in the forefront of character examples. It is from this source material, and all others previously discussed throughout this section that have served as an inspiration to the women cosplayers to be discussed in the sections to come.

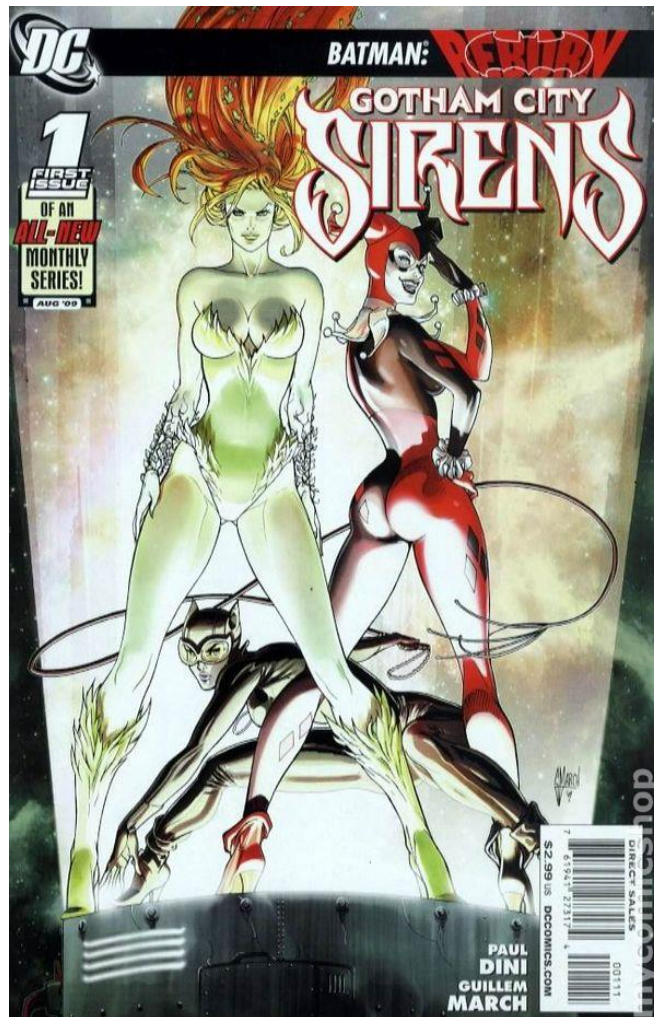


Figure 1. Gotham City Sirens #1. TM and © DC Comics

Methodology

The primary methods of collecting data was at comic book conventions through participant observation and semi-structured interviews. For the participant observation, I conducted observations of cosplayers at conventions, while participating in cosplay of a character unrelated to the characters being studied but within the topic area of the study, and within the DC Comics continuity. Prior to seeking out participants, I submitted a successful proposal through the IRB of the University of Central Florida. My IRB approval number is: IRB # SBE-14-10314. The interviews that were conducted had a set list of five open-ended questions, with several pre-planned potential probes, for the participants to respond to over a span of 30-60 minutes. The sample size was 19 women cosplayers.

Participants in this study were be women cosplayers performing the three characters of the Gotham City Sirens, who agreed to be interviewed about their roles. All participants were recruited by a face-to-face or e-mail invitation and given a consent form for their keeping, with verbal permission granted for the interview. Professional cosplayers who have performed the chosen characters who were in attendance at particular conventions, were contacted through the event managers for an invitation to be interviewed. Participants were not compensated for their involvement. Included participants were women of any ethnicity, who have done a cosplay of the characters Catwoman, Poison Ivy, or Harley Quinn, or their alter-egos, Selina Kyle, Pamela Isley, and Harleen Quinzel, respectively. Excluded participants were men, women who attended the convention but did not do cosplay of the selected characters, and minors under the age of 18.

At comic conventions, people interested in anything related to science fiction and comic culture attend to be immersed in an atmosphere of peers who share their interests in comics and vendors who cater to their interests. This applies to the research because practically all conventions attract cosplayers. As comic conventions are the location that cosplayers can perform on their unique type of stage, it was the essential location to interact with them. As a result, all of the interview participants for this study were

discovered at local central-Florida comic book conventions. Whenever they were unable to speak in-person, due to time constraints, e-mail interviews were conducted instead. All of the responses given by these participants were recorded by an audio recorder or held within an e-mail account, with permission of participants. All interview narratives are stored securely on a password-protected computer.

Reflexivity & Participant Observation

As with many anthropological studies, this study involved the research method of participant observation. This means as a researcher, I personally delved into the subject of the study by doing as the members of the community being studied do. Participating myself has thoroughly enhanced how I have come to understand the perspectives from my participants' interviews (Dewalt, Dewalt, Wayland 2000:263). For this study in particular, it resulted in me taking on my own cosplay character persona, donning my own mask.

Participating in cosplay allowed me to experience many of the common aspects that go into the whole process. This began with character selection. While I have a great interest in many comic characters, I had to narrow it down based on resources for making my costume, as well as my own determination as to whether the costume should be a replication from the source material or my own creation. Additionally, I felt it necessary not to choose a character that would have any influence over the three being studied, but was still within the DC Comics universe. Therefore, the character I selected was the Huntress, as portrayed by Jessica De Gouw on CW's *Arrow*. I did not expect that there would be any influence of my character choice of the Huntress on the research participants because her character rarely interacts with the Sirens. While she is depicted as an anti-hero figure like Catwoman, and is sometimes explained as the daughter of Catwoman and Batman, the particular version of the character I opted to cosplay is unrelated to

the cosplayers' choices. The importance of choosing a character that holds little or no influence in relation to the characters being represented by other cosplayers means that were likely to be no issues of character relationships for cosplayers committing to a persona. By taking on a cosplay of little influence to those of my participants, I sought to minimize my role as the interviewer.

For the Huntress design, I chose to follow as closely as possible to create an exact replica of the costume. As a result, I spent countless hours analyzing images, and the three episodes in which she appeared, and searching for key elements of the costume. Honing in on the fine details of the costume was a necessary aspect to make the character instantly recognizable to other convention goers, such as the choice of make-up, purple accents on the jacket, and gold buttons on the sleeve cuffs. Furthermore, several small alterations had to be made to the costume to accommodate my size and the materials available. As the character on the TV show had a full costuming department to create and implement the design, it was much more difficult for me to procure elements of similar resemblance.

The process of putting together the costume itself was difficult, mostly because of the materials being used, and my poor ability as a seamstress. Several pounds of material had to be sewn, hot-glued, spray-painted, and even hammered onto a thick and long leather coat. The mask itself had to initially be traced onto paper, then onto a thin piece of leather, cut out, stained black, dry for two days, then molded and glued onto a plastic form to hold shape, and stringed to stay on my face. This example of the mask is just one of the elaborate processes that went into making a piece of the whole ensemble. As an experienced cosplayers I was aware that dedication to detail in cosplay is essential, in particular when attempting to portray lesser known characters. As such, the night before I debuted the costume, I still had several last minute details to handle,

such as hand-sewing a purple fabric lining into the entire inside of the jacket. My dedication to ensuring these details meant no sleep until the following night.

Unfortunately, extreme dedication to the costume also led to some difficulty. Some materials refused to stay held together, and led to several temporary fixes throughout the use of the costume. Further, the character does not wear glasses, and I do, nor did I have access to contacts at the time, so while in costume I had very limited vision. Eventually I resorted to spray-painting the frames of a secondary pair of glasses to the same color as the mask so that it would not be as noticeable, as could easily be removed when posing for pictures or competing in cosplay contests.

At each convention the costume, and myself by wearing it, received a lot of attention. Several people wanted pictures with and of me, some asked me questions about the process of making the costume or about my views on that version of the Huntress on *Arrow*, while others simply stared from afar. Regardless, I felt very watched throughout each convention attended. Particularly when I decided to enter a cosplay contest.

The experience of the cosplay contest was very interesting and simultaneously anxiety inducing. Everyone who entered was divided into two simple categories – adults and children. Many cosplay contests, especially those at larger conventions, are divided further into categories such as group, steampunk, and anime/manga.¹ During the sign-up process, cosplayers were to

¹ Group Cosplays consist of three or more cosplayers portraying a similar theme; such as, an ensemble cast of a film being represented in cosplay. Steampunk can be considered a genre. It is used in literature, costumes, film, video games, as well as several other formats. Steampunk costumes combine traditional comic characters' costumes with elements from the Industrial Revolution Era – often by using accent items such as gears or goggles. There are several types, including themes of the Victorian and Industrial Eras. Steampunk seeks to present these themes in an alternative-history using representative elements. Manga and anime are the Japanese equivalents to comics and cartoons in America; however, in Japan they are a significantly more popular genre for all ages.

write their character name, personal name, and give a brief description of their character. Once all of the entries were collected, the contestants lined up backstage. First the children went on stage, and then the adults. If legible, the written description were read by the MC of the contest, and if not, he made his own elaborations. When called, each contestant walked onto stage and displayed elements of their costume. It is also highly encouraged at all cosplay contests to say some sort of catchphrase or act out a short skit to display your role as the character for the judges and audience. Once all of the contestants made their way through, the judges deliberated over a few award categories and then made their announcements to the crowd.

I did not win the contest, nor did I have any intention to, the purpose of participating was to be immersed in the whole experience, as a way to approach my research holistically. It was an interesting experience, both the contest and casual convention interactions. In particular, I could not help but notice how some of the other cosplayers were viewed. Some female cosplayers were receiving a significant amount of interest in their costumes, particularly those who were leaner in appearance and wearing more revealing outfits. This observation tied directly into my concerns within this project. Does body image play a central role in cosplay? Are female cosplayers and the characters they portray sexualized, and if so, how was this understood? These were the questions roaming through my mind, as I participated in the very practice itself.

While I chose to focus on women cosplaying as the Gotham City Sirens, it is important to note that men and transgender and transsexual individuals also participate in cosplay. Men are often held to a different standard of qualifications in the public than women, but still there is this consistent expectation for a character to be displayed a particular way by the non-fan convention goers. Further, there is the adoption of “gender-bent” cosplay more recently, in which a man

could portray a female character as a male character, and vice versa. For example, one of my friends cosplayed a “fem-Riddler,” meaning she was portraying a female version of the popular Batman villain, The Riddler. The transgender and transsexual community is also present in the cosplay community, and because cosplay allows the performer to “be” anyone they desire, these individuals are given the unique opportunity to express themselves whomever they wish.

Through my participant observation experience, I also learned the role of social media in cosplay. Stephen Amell, the leading actor in *Arrow*, the show from which I chose my character, asked cosplayers to submit pictures that he could compile and share over the popular social media website, Facebook. I submitted a picture of me and a fellow friend in cosplay of characters from the show, and it was posted to Amell’s photo album. While the image received over 300 “Likes” from Facebook users, and some compliments, there was initially a lot of criticism posted, specifically regarding my weight. Since then the negative posts have been taken down by Stephen Amell, but some of those that were posted read: “Who fed Vayne?,” “Fatplay,” and “Omg. If you’re fat you can’t wear a suit that symbolizes a fit and healthy person.” This aggressive commentary struck me as the result of the relative anonymity that social media allows. Further, the final comment mentioned above symbolizes and perpetuates the very stereotype that many people believe must embody the portrayal of a superheroes. While many other cosplayers I associated with and interviewed for this research project believe that no matter what you look like in size, skin tones, hair, etc., cosplay allows people to become anyone they desire.

In retrospect, the experience of my participant observation cosplaying the Huntress was an extraordinary experience. I was able to experience first-hand all of the struggles – financial,

mental, and physical – that come with making a costume. Further, I understood how it feels to take on a different persona even if only temporarily, as well as the commitment and confidence that requires. While I often felt watched by passerby convention goers, it was interesting to see the reactions that arose from what I put forth for the public to see. Finally, I was able to directly feel the struggle of social media reactions. Relative anonymity allows for a wide-open forum of opinions, positive or otherwise. Regardless, experiencing cosplay for myself was an extraordinary learning experience. Figure 2 below shows my cosplay at Ocala Comic Con, in Ocala, Florida on June 28, 2014.



Figure 2. My cosplay of the Huntress, as portrayed by Jessica de Gouw in Arrow.

Popular Perceptions

In addition to the representation of Catwoman, Poison Ivy, and Harley Quinn in comics, video games, television, and movies, it is also important to consider the influence of the media on public opinion about these characters. Sometimes media publicity is beneficial to sales for DC, but other times there have been negative reactions from the public. Before analyzing the material provided from interviews, it is useful to consider current media representations of the Gotham City Sirens.

To address the negative perceptions first, in September 2013, DC Comics announced a talent search contest, where they were allowing fans the opportunity to have their art immortalized in comic book form. This particular contest required to draw Harley Quinn in four scenes: “one standing atop a building during a lightning storm; one of her sitting in an alligator pond wearing raw chicken; one of her standing in the mouth of a whale; and one of her nude in a bathtub... with toasters, blow dryers, blenders, appliances all dangling from above.” (Sieczkowski 2013:1-2). These four scenes are depictions of near suicide attempts by Harley, and while it is argued by the creators of the comic that the contest was for that it was meant to be a satirical jest, it was not received that way. DC and the team working on the book eventually released statements attempting to explain their rationale behind the contest. However, fans and the media alike felt DC had gone too far, heavily voicing their opinions in articles and social media forums, particularly because the contest was announced three days prior to National Suicide Prevention Week, which normally takes place during third week in September. There were several official responses by the American Psychiatric Association, National Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and National Alliance on Mental Illness, as well as an outpouring of

criticism on social media (Sieczkowski 2013:2). DC had failed at an opportunity to send a positive message of suicide awareness, and instead attempted to make light of the situation, by making a joke of a serious issue affecting many people (Sieczkowski 2013:2). Instead, series artist Jimmy Palmiotti took to social media, via Facebook, to express his discontent with the reception of the contest (Sieczkowski 2013:2).

Another example of negative public reactions to DC's representation of one of the Sirens was the announcement via the social media website Twitter, on January 30, 2015, of a new "Catwoman Fantasy" statue designed by Luis Royo, sculpted by Shin Tanabe, and produced by Yamato USA.² The 13-inch statue has Catwoman on a Gotham City rooftop, appearing in her normal tight catsuit, which has now been torn all over to resemble what is generally viewed as a more dominatrix-type of outfit, therefore further attributing sexuality and violence to the character (Figure 3). This idea is reinforced by the manner in which she holds her whip taught. One Twitter commenter compared the outfit to the "bondage gear," in which Catwoman wears in her dominatrix origin, of the 1991 comic *Catwoman: Her Sister's Keeper*. This particular origin story, however, is one of the few times Catwoman is represented in this way; instead, she is more frequently described as being a prostitute or a runaway in her origin. Another Twitter commenter, male, said: "Please stop turning all of your women into whores." This pattern of disappointed commenters continues throughout the post, with no response from the company who posted it initially or DC Comics.³

² Please see website:

http://www.wbshop.com/product/catwoman+fantasy+limited+edition+statue+by+yamato+batssfig16.do?ref=FBWB150129&utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=FBWB150129. Accessed January 30, 2015.

³ Please see website: <https://twitter.com/wbshop/status/561271648783855616>. Accessed January 30, 2015.

In a much better light for DC Comics, Harley Quinn has reached extreme levels of fame, even amongst people who have never read any comics. Harley Quinn often attracts a wide audience. The popular young adult retail chain store, Hot Topic, even has a specific section in their online catalog entitled the “Harleen Collection” and is celebrating Harley and *Mad Love* throughout the entire month of February (2015). There has also been a lot of discussion in social media regarding the fact that there will finally be a live-action Harley Quinn in the feature film for *Suicide Squad* in 2016. The Australian actress Margot Robbie, known for her previous role in the recent feature film *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), has been selected to play the role (France 2014:1-2).

The final recent surge in popular interest has been about the DC Bombshells line. DC Comics company created 20 different covers for their comic series in June 2014. Each cover had a different woman from the DC Comics Universe, as designed by the professional digital illustrator Ant Lucia, in a 1940s-1950s pin-up style (Truitt 2014:1). Since then, the popularity of these Bombshells have skyrocketed, releasing several other types of products: pint glasses, wallets, buttons, ceramic mugs, t-shirts, lip balm, fragrances, robes, posters, statues, and a calendar. The three women in my research study here are included in this Bombshell collection. Poison Ivy is designed in a completely green skin tone, wearing nothing but lingerie and several tattoos, in a kneeling position, surrounded by plants (Figure 6). Harley Quinn has a similarity to an aviation pilot in her appearance; however, she is wearing significantly less clothing, but maintains her classic white face paint (Figure 5). Catwoman’s Bombshell appearance is outside of a bank vault, holding a diamond, with a fashion style similar to Audrey Hepburn. She is wearing a short black dress, slit up the side, with a clearly visible garter at the top of her thigh-

high tights (Figure 4). These statues, due to their pin-up design, are shown in highly sexualized ways, and their popularity continues to grow. It is this phenomena that will be the first topic of discussion in the understanding of women cosplayers – sexuality.



Figure 3. "Catwoman Fantasy" statue designed by Luis Royo). TM and © DC Comics

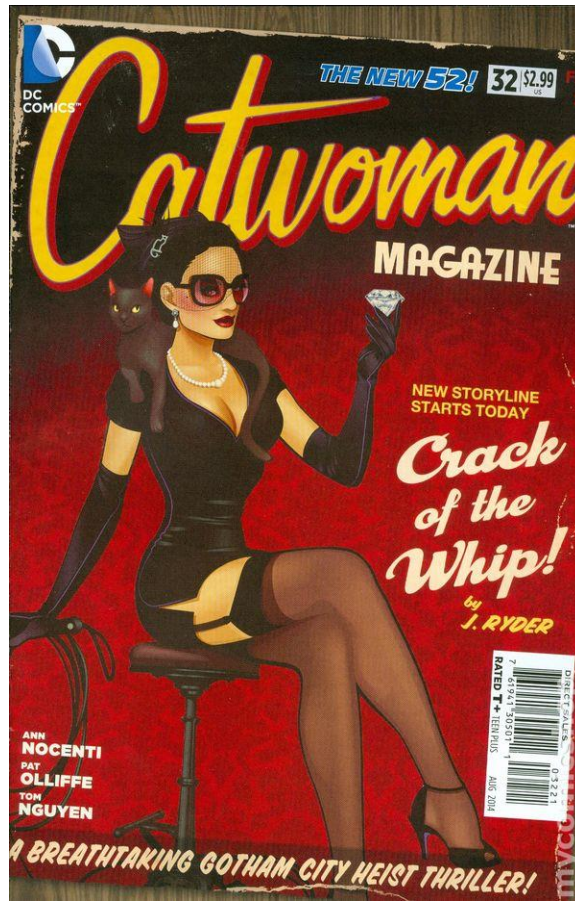


Figure 4. The Catwoman Bombshell variant cover from Catwoman #32. TM and © DC Comics

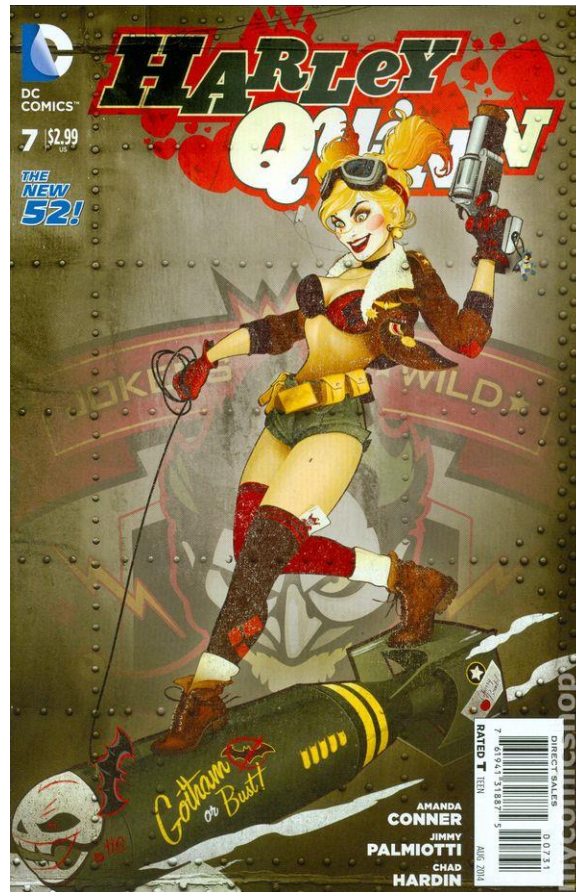


Figure 5. The Harley Quinn Bombshell variant cover from Harley Quinn #7. TM and © DC Comics

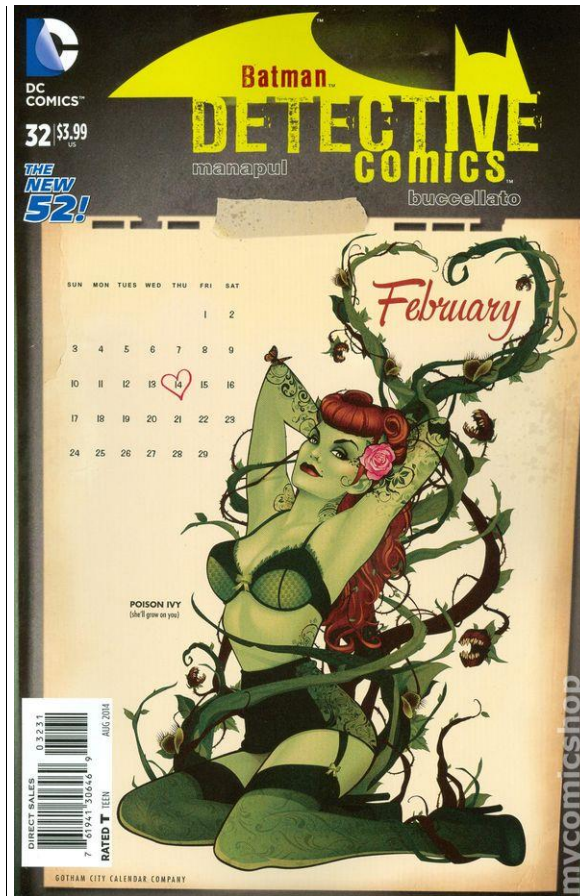


Figure 6. The Poison Ivy Bombshell variant cover from Detective Comics #32. TM and © DC Comics

It is also important to notice the role of women creating the stories for the comics themselves. Tim Hanley, an online blogger, has become well-known for his “Gendercrunching” column, which focuses on the statistical proportion of women who work as writers and artists in the comic industry. From his November 2014 column, DC Comics had an average of 9.8% and Marvel Comics had 10.8% (Hanley, 2014:1). Considering that women are becoming more interested in comics, it would seem that these percentages should be higher, but unfortunately they are not. Writers such as Gail Simone, one of the most popular female comic writers thus far, consistently advocate for a greater prevalence of strong female creators and characters, as well as an increase in the ethnic diversity of characters. Although, it does appear that DC Comics is

trying to gain more of a female audience by the recent success of the *Harley Quinn* series in 2014 by Amanda Connor, and the upcoming releases of the new *Starfire* and *Black Canary* series in June 2015, both with at least two women on their creative teams. An increase in gender and ethnic diversity, in both creators and creations, would be a tremendous addition to comic books, because it will allow for a wider diversity in comic book development, and the fans will then draw new perceptions from this change.

Attitudes about Sexuality and Sexualization

Sexualization of female images and characters is often a concern within the popular media. The growing prevalence of more revealing or size-distorted bodies⁴ is consistently making headlines in news and social media. In the comic book industry, women are often shown as very slim, large-breasted, with their clothes frequently covering very little of their bodies. At the same time, this creates an identity and historical archetype of how the female character should be represented (Keating 2012:1268). When looking to the fans, however, it could be possible that over time there has been a desensitization to the visuals of the human body, or the regard that these images are only natural. In addition to the questions of how the body is depicted, the costumes that the characters are wearing are also important in conveying the character's degree of sexualization. Whether a character is covered up more or less by the costume may often influence the viewers' perceptions. For example, in the image below, Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy are shown having a casual conversation, and yet they appear to have enlarged and exposed breasts, as well as exposure to the midriff and undergarments (Figure 7). The lips and facial expressions also suggest a commonly used "sultry" look seen in female comic book characters (Avery-Natale 2013: 75). The casual tone of the conversation makes the image appear routine in the eyes of the reader. Further, the depiction of Catwoman in the 1966 *Batman* show revealed little exposed flesh in her costume, but was still viewed as this sultry-type character.

⁴ For example, social science analyses document how normative notions of femininity, body distortions, and sexualization are embodied by Barbie dolls, leading to an unrealistic body and beauty image among girls and young women (Bilsel Engin 2013).



Figure 7. Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn in casual conversation, from Batman: Arkham Unhinged #7. TM and © DC Comics

Specifically drawing on the interview narratives from the cosplayers in this study, I will discuss the concept of sexuality as the participants perceive and understand it. In this chapter, I argue that the dominant perspective in the narratives reveals that the cosplayers acknowledge and are aware of the fact that the characters are portrayed as over-sexualized, be it in their appearance or personality characteristics. However, this awareness was also accompanied by criticism with some cosplayers voicing their viewpoints on how this sexuality can make them feel like a target during the performance of their cosplay. But at the same time, they accept the

sexualization as the way that the characters are designed and how it “must be.” I will begin by examining how the cosplayers’ narratives reflect the recognition and convey critiques of the sexualized nature of these characters, before moving on to discuss how their individual cosplays were affected because of it.

Character Sexuality

Across the cosplayers’ perspectives there was a dominant position that the characters they chose for cosplay are written and drawn in their comic form in a sexualized way, but these perspectives were not uniform and varied based on the cosplayer’s interpretation from character to character and the different versions of the same characters. While some of the women do not agree that the character is sexualized, their viewpoints still highlight why they feel that way, and demonstrate the variation of perspectives amongst cosplayers. The key feature to recognize throughout these narrative excerpts however, is the “why” – the reason why women cosplayers feel the characters they choose to embody are indeed sexualized.

For example, Katelyn, a cosplayer of Catwoman, felt that there was an extreme focus on the character as a sexual object. Recalling specifically Catwoman’s historically romantic relationship with Batman, as well as the more recent Arkham City and New 52⁵ costume designs, Katelyn explains:

[T]here are many instances where she seems like she’s just there to be Batman’s love interest. She is often degraded to nothing but a sexual object and I hate that. ... She is there to build his character up and so give him something to care about. ... I would change the way Catwoman is often used as a sex object and love interest for Batman. ... She loses a lot of the traits that make her interesting because now she is the damsel for him to save. ... I would also think that her cat suit would be more practical if not constantly zipped down to where you can see her cleavage. That just leaves her more

⁵ The New 52 refers to the re-launch by DC Comics in 2011, where they started 52 different monthly comic series anew, in a sort of clean-slate maneuver.

vulnerable than necessary. ... I don't believe that she is overly sexualized but I still feel sexualized when cosplaying her because of a portion of the community that attends conventions (Katelyn, interview 10/5/2014).

From the beginning of this excerpt, Katelyn's apparent frustration is growing out of the feeling that the character of Catwoman is dependent on Batman, and exists for his sexual purposes.

While Catwoman does have a few of her own comic book series, and other adaptations, she almost always overlaps in a relationship story arc with Batman. One such example would be in the *Batman: Hush* storyline (Loeb, Lee, and Williams 2009:76). In this particular comic arc, Catwoman and Batman's relationship comes to fruition for the "kiss" scene – which has reached popularity with small-scale statue replications, t-shirts, buttons, messenger bags, etc. (Figure 8). Although this relationship is a core part of this comic arc, it falls apart by the end, as it always does. This recurring relationship failure throughout the Batman franchise, which is continually repeated by writers of the characters, is possibly the root of the frustration that Katelyn conveyed during the interview. Katelyn's description of this relationship makes Catwoman appear to be weak, and in need of a male counterpart, who is attracted by the visual vulnerability expressed in her costume. Rather than being sexualized as a character in entirety, Katelyn is arguing that the sexualization of Catwoman is coming from being an object of desire for another, which she also expresses in her cosplay of the *Batman: Arkham City* version of Catwoman.



Figure 8. "The Kiss" from *Batman: Hush*. TM and © DC Comics

A similar frustration was expressed by Deedra, another Catwoman cosplayer. Deedra's perspectives were complicated and at times contradictory throughout her narrative: "I appreciate the many artistic interpretations over the years, and despite the debate of the oversexualization of female comic characters, I've not see that happen with Catwoman... I wasn't overly thrilled with the Catwoman in the New 52 relaunch. I only caught the first issue, but instead of being a liberated woman, she seems to be there for fanboy fodder and nothing more" (Deedra, interview

7/30/2014). Here, Deedra acknowledges that there is controversy over the sexualization of the characters, but claims to not see Catwoman that way. This could be due to the fact that Deedra is a cosplayer of Golden Age Catwoman, who was much different than the more modern interpretations, as this version of Catwoman appeared mostly in the 1950s. In the 1950s version, Catwoman appeared in a long purple dress and cowl with a green cape, as opposed to her more current zipped-down catsuit and goggles wardrobe (Figure 9). It is likely that Deedra's initial point is therefore based on her experience as Golden Age Catwoman, because when she discusses the most recent version, the New 52, of Catwoman, she expressed her disdain for the blatant "fanboy fodder." Here she is referring to the ending of the first issue of the current Catwoman series, in which Catwoman is shown having sex with Batman (Figures 10 and 11). The images are very graphic for something that could easily be obtained by younger audiences and could in fact be perceived as pornographic (Rubin et al 1982:48). During the interview it was apparent from the tone of Deedra's disdain that she is offended by the most recent visual of sexuality in Catwoman, as opposed to the more conservative classic version she is accustomed to portraying.

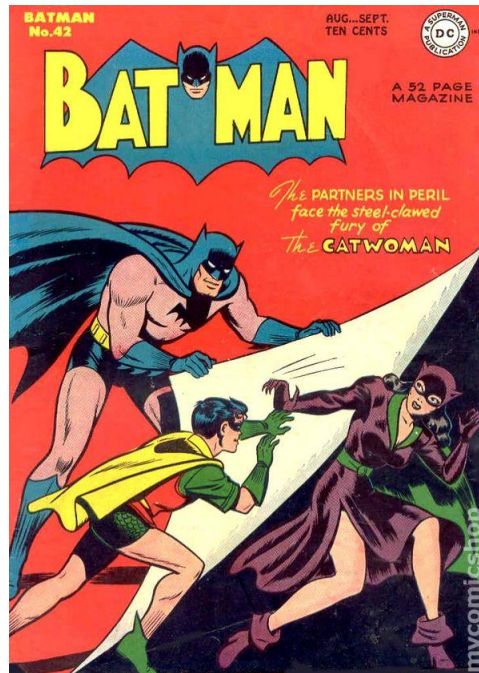


Figure 9. Batman #42, showing the Catwoman costume Deedra emulates. TM and © DC Comics



Figure 10. The scene from Catwoman #1 referred to by Deedra. TM and © DC Comics.

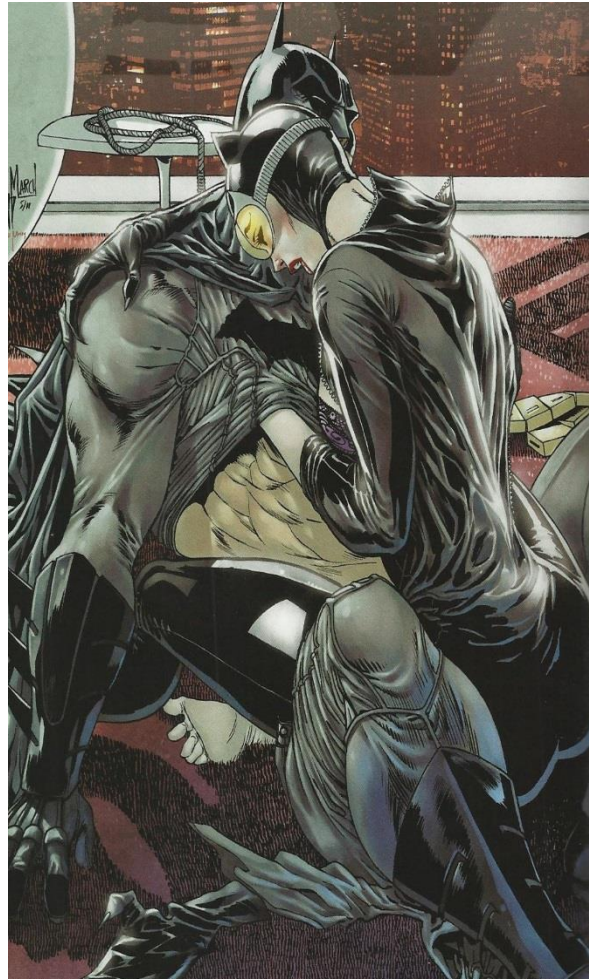


Figure 11. The scene from Catwoman #1 referred to by Deedra (continued). TM and © DC Comics

Among the cosplayers of Poison Ivy, Ellie expressed more direct sentiments in her narrative. Unlike Katelyn and Deedra, Ellie discussed Ivy's superpower abilities, with a brief mention of her physical appearance: "Ivy is one of the few comic women I would say is a good representative of women because despite her looks, she is a really unique individual. ... Ivy is a highly sexually-charged character. ... she can control men with her sexual appeal" (Ellie, interview 8/2/2014). When Ellie uses the expression "despite her looks" she is referring to earlier comments she made in the interview about Poison Ivy's sexualized appearance. This expression is important because it is emphasizing that Ellie is looking past the imagery shown for her

character choice into something deeper. Elli is drawing on the superpower abilities of Poison Ivy, to wield pheromones and toxins to lure men to do as she requests. Ellie is arguing that this is where Ivy's sexuality innately lies however, because of her necessary performative nature to attract others for her own gain.

The same concept of control and ability, through the use sexuality, was expressed in an interview with Dawn, another Poison Ivy cosplayer. Dawn also addresses the idea of sexual orientation in the interview: "[Poison Ivy] was very in control of her sexuality... wasn't fawning over every man but instead; she was in control... she is still often degraded to nothing more than a sexual object... I also don't enjoy that her possible bisexuality or pansexuality is completely written off as a joke" (Dawn, interview 10/4/2014). In comparison to Katelyn's perspective about Catwoman, Dawn still describes Poison Ivy as a sexual object, but at the same time she does not see her as a damsel-like character or in need of male companionship. Similar to Ellie, Dawn argues that the ability to manipulate pheromones allows Poison Ivy to be in control of her own sexuality. The final comment that Dawn makes regarding sexual orientation is frequently brought up amongst fans of Poison Ivy. The exact comic book she is referring to, as she discussed during the interview, is in the current comic book series of *Harley Quinn*, issue #2 (Conner, Palmiotti, and Hardin 2014:10). This issue contains a joke that mocks Ivy for her sexual

interest in Harley (Figure 12). Dawn perceived the joke as insensitive. Instead of celebrating Poison Ivy's sexuality for what it is, Dawn viewed it as objectified.



Figure 12. The scene described by Dawn in *Harley Quinn* #2. TM and © DC Comics

The third group of cosplayers investigated in this research portray Harley Quinn, which is a very different character with regard to sexuality. Almost in every case, interview responses about her sexuality are dependent on the version of the character the cosplayers chose to represent. With regards to Harley's classic costume, designed by artist Bruce Timm in 1992, she is shown entirely covered in a skin-tight jumpsuit and hood, in harlequin jester-style. The participants in this research varied in how they understood Harley's sexuality. For example, Brittany and Ashley, both Harley cosplayers, see her sexuality as represented in this costume

from different perspectives. Brittany argues that “[e]ven when the person is doing Comic Book Harley – which is literally every inch of her body is covered except her face – she’s still super sexualized” (Brittany, interview 9/5/2014). This understanding comes from Harley’s interactions with the Joker (which will be discussed based on her interview later), or she might feel this sexuality to be due from the design of her body within the costume. In contrast, in Ashley’s perspective Harley Quinn’s sexuality is more dependent on public reception as she argues that “[t]here is never anything innately sexual about what she wears, these things are sexualized based on who is viewing her” (Ashley, interview 8/14/2014). Ashley believes that the costume is not what makes Harley Quinn perceived as a sexual character, because she is covered completely, but rather it is how the public interprets her character that makes her sexualized. These two differing perspectives are interesting because they are addressing the same character within the same costume, and yet these narratives reveal how these representations are interpreted and experienced by cosplayers.

Other cosplayers have argued that in comparison to the classic Harley Quinn look by Bruce Timm, later incarnations of the character have resulted in more sexualized appearances. This observation is reflected in the interview narratives of Anne and Samantha. Anne, a professional plus-size cosplayer, often makes costumes of her own design, to combine her personal fashion-sense with patterns across Harley’s various versions. In Anne’s narrative, she describes Harley’s sexuality by noting: “I do think it is interesting that Harley seems to be going more BDSM in style with the leather corsets and latex” (Anne, interview 6/28/2014). Anne uses the acronym BDSM in her statement, which stands for bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism. The implication Anne is making is that by adoption these more sexually-driven

appearances, her character is becoming more sexually charged by association. Anne's statement expresses how this newer ostensibly sadomasochist version of Harley is transforming the character into an object of sexual fantasy, and as a result will continue to be viewed as sexualized in both design and cosplay performance (Rubin et. al 1982:49).

Samantha, a professional cosplayer who is known mostly for her uniquely designed Harley Quinn cosplay, also runs a costuming store in Jacksonville, FL, and takes a lot of her knowledge about Harley from the *Batman: Arkham* series. While to a lesser degree of specificity, Samantha makes a similar argument to Anne: "Harley's outfit has gone from a full-hooded suit to a two-piece and fishnets over the years. Seems every time a new game comes out they try to get sexier than the last one" (Samantha, interview 8/14/2014). The "game(s)" that Samantha are referring to here are *Batman: Arkham Asylum* and *Batman: Arkham City*; in which, Harley's costume appearance has shifted from a "sexy nurse" outfit to leather pants and a corset (Figures 13 and 14). Samantha is arguing as well, that the costumes impart this version of sexuality in Harley Quinn, and that her appearance is the factor of recognition.



Figure 13. Harley Quinn as depicted in Batman: Arkham Asylum. TM and © DC Comics.



Figure 14. Harley Quinn as depicted in Batman: Arkham City. TM and © DC Comics

Gender scholar Erin M. Keating, in her article “The Female Link: Citation and Continuity in Watchmen,” argues that gendered characters must act within a traditional scope in comic books to be recognized successfully (Keating 2012:1269). In simple terms, this means that

characters such as Harley Quinn, Poison Ivy, and Catwoman must follow a particular pattern or stereotype when being written. Keating expresses this idea by discussing the works of Roger Sabin, who describes comic women as ““either plot devices (there to be rescued) or sex symbols (all plunging necklines and endless legs).”” From the description by Sabin, it is understandable why these women cosplayers may view their respective characters as being sex symbols in their comic forms. For example, the more recent versions of Catwoman, as explained by Katelyn and Deedra match both qualities of being a “plot device” and a “sex symbol,” by Sabin, because Catwoman is shown as having a damsel-like relationship with Batman and as frequently appearing with the majority of her chest exposed. While Catwoman is just one example of this, it is relevant across all three of the Gotham City Sirens, as described by the participants.

Sexuality in Cosplay

Across all of these interviews the recognition of Catwoman, Poison Ivy, and Harley Quinn as being perceived as sexual characters has been clear. While the degree of sexualization is different for each, as well as the reasons – be it story-based or costume-based – the acknowledgement itself is still present. Some of the narratives placed the responsibility for the degree of sexualization on the public perception, which is an essential question to address. The acceptance of this recognition of sexuality and what the cosplayers gather from it is equally important to consider. How do cosplayers experience and understand the sexualization of the characters that they are bringing to life? If the cosplayers themselves are sexually objectified at comic conventions, then how do they react to it?

For example Katelyn (discussed earlier), the Catwoman cosplayer, spoke in more assertive manner when the interview turned to whether or not she feels sexualized while doing cosplay. She argued: “I can still be objectified while cosplaying her and that’s not my fault or the character’s fault. That’s the community’s fault. That’s something that people need to realize is not okay. It makes people not want to go to these things and it makes everyone very uncomfortable and feel violated in the end. No one should have to feel like that whether their character is fully clothed or not” (Katelyn, interview 10/5/2014). This was a sensitive issue for Katelyn, as she frequently talks to fellow cosplayers at comic conventions about this situation. Unfortunately, Katelyn did not describe a specific scenario, in which she felt this form of victimization, but she nevertheless perceived it. From her perspective, regardless of the character’s sexuality in the original source material, it is the responsibility of the public at comic conventions to reign in on sexual tensions and innuendos. This is interesting because rather than arguing against the character design, or her own costume choice, she is placing the full blame on the ways that the public views and treats her.

Deedra ascribed her perspective of dealing with sexuality in a different manner than Katelyn. Instead of blaming the community for any unwanted sexual tension, Deedra relates back to the character: “I think she’s so iconic in that she issues her own sexuality as just another weapon in her arsenal ... I think the fact that she’s an object of sexual desire is inconsequential. That just happens to be the case” (Deedra, interview 7/30/2014). Deedra appears to be arguing that using sexuality like a weapon is a form of empowerment within the role of Catwoman. Therefore, for Deedra sexuality can be interpreted as a form of empowerment, and this trait is embodied through her cosplay of Catwoman. It is interesting that she views Catwoman’s

potential for being a sexual object as “inconsequential” however, because it appears contradictory to her previous argument. Deedra’s analysis is making a fine distinction in which she is accepting Catwoman’s sexuality as is and sees it as having utility, but on the other hand disregards being “object of desire” as meaningful.

Ellie drew similar conclusions as Deedra concerning the idea of empowerment. With specific reference to her costume – a replication of the 21 inch Premium Sideshow Collectibles statue, designed by artists Stan Lau, Kris Anka, Dylan Forman, and sculpted by Mark Newman – Ellie remarked on the feeling of sexuality in the costume: “The costume is so revealing and is a constant source of attention by other convention goers, but I also feel like I embrace this sort of sexual vibe that her character exudes because when I’m in that costume ... I don’t think it’s necessarily a bad thing, because it feels empowering” (Ellie, interview 8/2/2014)(Figure 15). For Ellie, the attention that the public gives her at conventions is a source of empowerment she derives from her costume, which she believes in by adopting the role of the confident Poison Ivy. While Ellie describes earlier in her interview narrative that she is generally a shy person, adopting this persona through cosplay has allowed her to experience a more extraverted sense of sexuality because it is a role that she performs. She accepts this sexualized role because of the empowerment she feels behind the façade of playing the character.

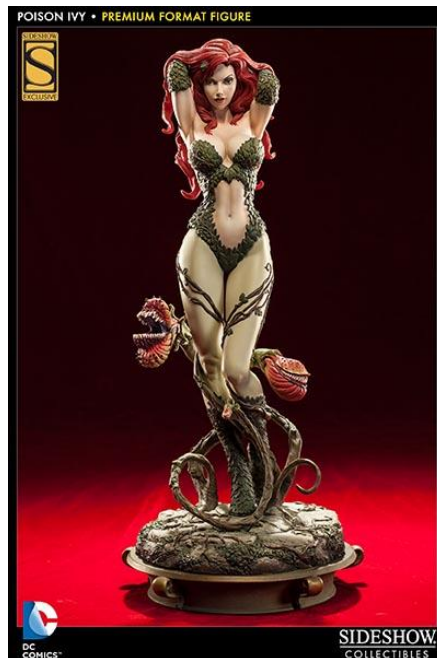


Figure 15. Poison Ivy Premium Sideshow Collectibles statue. TM and © DC Comics

Like Katelyn, Dawn also attributes some blame toward the community over feelings of sexual tension, but she explains how a less concealing costume is justified in the case of Poison Ivy. In the following interview excerpt, Dawn explains her understanding of sexuality in Poison Ivy cosplay:

She's all about being closer to nature and what's closer to nature than being practically naked. She doesn't really care what she looks like and she feels great. ... She is definitely very overly sexual... This can cause a lot of problems when cosplaying her because there are men in the nerd/geek community who seem to think that when a woman cosplays certain characters, she is asking for the perverse and downright creepy attention... A lot of the time, they're objectifying me and they get angry when I don't like their advances... I don't want to feel shunned or uncomfortable because of some creeps who think they own me when they really don't (Dawn, interview 10/4/2014).

When Dawn describes Ivy as “closer to nature,” she is referring to Poison Ivy’s own interpretation of self as “Mother Nature.” Ivy sees plants as her children and when they suffer, she can feel it, which, according to the story line, is likely due to the chemical incident altering her DNA to adopt plant-like qualities. Often this affliction causes Ivy to want to retreat from

human life and rid herself of human possessions, including human clothing, so that she can feel one with nature. Unfortunately, as Dawn notes in the interview, trying to represent these more revealing Ivy costume designs can result in a significant amount of undesired attention from the public at conventions. She does not feel that her desire to embody an authentic look for Ivy should be interpreted as a desire for sexual advances. As Dawn is clearly illustrating in this situation there appears to be a disconnect in the understandings between the cosplayers' desire to dress in whichever attire they prefer, and the audience's acceptance of cosplay "as is" without further assumptions about the intentions of the cosplayer herself.

The views offered by Brittany, Ashley, and Tess in their narratives on Harley Quinn cosplay further echo the idea that sexualized characters can be acceptable to the cosplayers, but is received in a vastly different way by the public. Ashley argued in her interview that "there shouldn't be this view that being sexual is a bad thing, it's about as human as it gets" (Ashley, interview 8/14/2014). From her perspective, sexuality should be accepted by everyone as the way things are, that it is innate, regardless of how others perceive it. This view is aligned with the segment within the US feminist movement known as sex-positive feminism, discussed and debated in gender scholarship since the 1970s. This perspective, developed in depth by the anthropologist Carole Vance, argues that sex-positiveness promotes sexual freedom and a breaking down of political correctness in terms of sexuality (Stein and Press 1985:211). However, my research participants, Brittany and Tess are more aligned with the idea that the public is the determinant of how their cosplay is sexualized. Brittany expressed sorrow as she explained during the interview: "Unfortunately I think in today's world if you're a female cosplaying a well-known, or sometimes not well-known, female there will be someone there to

sexualize it” (Brittany, interview 9/5/2014). In Brittany’s view, it is troubling that no matter who she cosplays, she is likely to be sexualized. Tess, another Harley Quinn cosplayer, related the same sentiment: “I feel like female cosplayers are sexualized anyway no matter what they do ... as a cosplayer I feel sexualized, like my body is not really more than an object, rather than a person who is genuinely a fan of the comics” (Tess, interview 9/14/2014). Tess’s tone during this part of the interview reflected a sense of defeated frustration. While her personal knowledge and admiration of Harley Quinn is key to her desire to cosplay, she feels jaded by the fact that her interests in the nuances of this character are undervalued by the public eye and reduced to a narrow focus. Her frustrations with the feeling of the public sexualizing her cosplay are apparent.

The idea of comic women being considered as sex symbols or as being sexualized is not a new concept. To return to the discussion of the work by Erin M. Keating, she argues that a woman can “transform(s) herself into a sex symbol as defined by the masculine gaze. She still performs according to the ‘superhero as a sex symbol’ archetype” (Keating 2012:1271). This discussion applies to what has been said by several participants about feeling sexualized as a result of the public gaze. The characters that the women in my study portray have been described as “sex objects,” and so by taking on that role and maintaining the identity, Keating appears to be arguing that the sexual attention cosplayers receive is a result of displaying oneself as a sex symbol. To further support this claim, Keating asserts that “[i]dentity becomes recognizable only by representing previous culturally accepted identities” (Keating 2012:1269). In other words, as other convention goers are recognizing the characters of the Gotham City Sirens in cosplay, they have a preconceived identity of the characters’ appearance and personality, as it has been established in the comics, and so that identity transfers to the cosplayers.

In this chapter I have argued that the narratives of the participants in this research consistently recognize the sexualized nature of the characters they choose to cosplay, however their understanding and interpretations of this aspects of the characters were varied and complicated. These women are acknowledging the presence of sexuality in Catwoman, Poison Ivy, Harley Quinn and their cosplays of them. However, in some circumstances the cosplayers believe that the sexualization of the characters should not always be viewed cynically, nor are they fighting against it when they do perceive it negatively. Several of the women argued that while the characters themselves may not be particularly sexualized, they feel sexualized by the public when cosplaying them. This objectifying treatment arises out of the perception by the community, rather than the original designs created by DC Comics. A few of the women specifically spoke against how they believe they are being viewed by other convention attendees. Across the narratives sexuality is consistently acknowledged and yet, rather than condemning it, many accept, and a few even describe embracing it as a source of empowerment.

Understanding the Relationship of Cosplay to Body Image

In addition to questions of sexuality, the second dominant theme that emerged from the interview narratives was the perspective of the cosplayers on body image. The body itself, is central to the art of cosplay because it serves as the canvas (sometimes more literally) for cosplayers to unleash their creations. In this chapter, I will discuss two key areas of interest. The first, that many cosplayers choose their costumes based on how certain versions of the character the cosplay make them feel. Selection of costume is dependent upon personal reception and understanding of the character. The second, is that often cosplayers will alter existing costumes or create an original design of their own, but within this there is a link to self-esteem and confidence. Through these discussions, I will argue that the embodiment of these characters has a profound effect on the cosplayers themselves.

While briefly mentioned a few times before, the idea that the image of the body itself is often sexualized, especially in female characters, is particularly relevant to the contents of this chapter. Sheri Graner Ray, in her studies on gender in the gaming industry, establishes the term “glamorized” when referring to female character body design (Graner Ray 2003: 118). This term is an excellent description of how character design appears in female characters, particularly with regard to physical, sexually oriented, features of the body. Graner Ray, however, goes one step further by comparing the female characters to their male counterparts: “male avatars are not hypersexualized in the same way that female ones are: they do not walk around with erections and signal constant sexual receptivity” (Graner Ray 2003:118). Further, she states that the musculature on male characters could potentially be viewed as “symbolic sexual characteristics, they are simultaneously able to represent more general, nonsexual power” (Graner Ray 2003:

118). Therefore, as a result of a way in which male and female characters are presented, in games or comics, the body becomes viewed as an object of dominance or submission. Graner Ray would likely agree, based on her statement that the ability of male characters to have this nonsexual power often places them in a more dominant role, and it is reflected in the formation of their body. Whereas female characters are shown in a less muscular role, with their more sexually oriented features highlighted, placing them in a more submissive role (Avery-Natale 2013:79).

The Importance of Design in Relationship to Body Image

Each character within the Gotham City Sirens has a rich history of variation. While this is mostly due to the fact that no single author or team of artists has an exclusive claim to the characters, and so they have been reinterpreted by many teams. It is also due to the duration of existence of the characters – with Catwoman’s creation in 1940, Poison Ivy in 1966, and Harley Quinn in 1992. For example, Harley Quinn has been in existence a relatively short amount of time compared to Catwoman and Poison Ivy, but there is just as much variation in the versions of her design due to sheer popularity. From her original classic design by Bruce Timm, to the individually different costumes in the *Batman: Arkham* series, and her current roller-derby inspired costume, Harley’s design has seen a tremendous shift in costume over two decades of existence. Design and personality has also radically changed in the character representations due to fashion styles over time. As mentioned in the discussion of Deedra’s narrative, the Catwoman costume of the 1950s was significantly different than the current design seen in the New 52 interpretation. A similar trend can be seen in Poison Ivy’s original design looking like “Peter Pan” character – with a green slim-fitting body suit, green tights, and green “elf” shoes; which

later transitioned to more simplistic torso-pieces and heels. Regardless, all of the variations in the costumes are attributable to the design teams that create them, but what matters here is how the cosplayers perceived the designs. Some versions have more sway over personal taste, and as such have influence in the art of cosplay, and ultimately the choice of the character.

To begin with Catwoman, I will return to my interviews with Katelyn and Deedra. When asked about the costumes more specifically, Katelyn responded that she “would like to design more practical outfits. ... Catwoman has a lot of designs to choose from but they’re all quintessentially the same in the end” (Katelyn 10/5/2014). The costume similarity and impractical nature that Katelyn is referring to is one and the same, Catwoman is often shown wearing a skin-tight catsuit, the majority of her breasts exposed or significantly enlarged, and a cat-ear cowl. While there are exceptions, such as the classic 1950s Catwoman, a few outfits in which her chest is covered up, and the use of goggles is employed instead of a cowl, Katelyn’s frustration is still relevant. She is asserting the need for new design, one that is radically different than its predecessors, but a costume still successful for the life of an anti-hero. While there is no specific costume for an anti-hero character, the term is often used to describe Catwoman’s role in the struggle of good vs evil.

For Deedra, fashion was equally important to practicality. With a well-established interest in the older interpretations, she described: “I might give more of a nod to her lesser-known past costumes, instead of the usual skin-tight black outfit now. ... I will agree that her older costumes weren’t necessarily practical. They were more decorative as opposed to functional. It’s hard to be a cat burglar with a cape and dress. ... The 60’s versions on the TV show have always been my personal favorites. It was decorative AND functional” (Deedra,

interview 7/30/2014). Deedra's interest in the older costumes is evident, but perhaps the reason she prefers the dress on Catwoman as opposed to the catsuit is simply introspective regarding which costume she would feel most comfortable in. A cat-suit is much more restrictive, and often is made of leather, which would get fairly warm when walking around a convention, whereas a dress would allow for more free movement and the ability for more bodily access to air for cooling. When Deedra expresses her appreciation of the costume worn in the 1960s *Batman* television show, by actresses Julie Newmar and Eartha Kitt, it is likely due to appreciation of the historical representation of the character. Julie Newmar and Eartha Kitt wore a type of leather catsuit, which was glittery and fashionable for the time, but it served as one of the early models for Catwoman's appearance.

Colleen, a Poison Ivy cosplayer, addressed directly the idea of choosing outfits and characters. She argued "I mostly choose characters because of their outfits and fun things I can do with them" (Colleen, interview 7/20/2014). For Colleen, image is very important. If the outfit is appealing, or can be transformed in an enjoyable way, than the character is selected. This is interesting, because from this description, the ideas of sexuality or personal identity would seem unimportant to Colleen with regards to character selection. When citing why she chose her Ivy cosplay, Colleen said "I mainly chose Ivy because I had red hair at the time. ...I too am into plants and gardening and all things herbal" (Colleen, interview 7/20/2014). The reasons Colleen cites for her cosplay of Ivy are simple and enjoyable, and as a result the costume was personally preferable. In contrast, Dawn, another Poison Ivy cosplayer, had a different perspective. Unlike Colleen, she did not express a desire to change the costumes for herself, she accepted the costumes as is in order to benefit from the confidence inherent in this costume: "I don't think I

would change a lot of her designs because when I cosplay her, I want to feel her confidence. I can learn to be that comfortable in my own skin and that's something that every woman needs" (Dawn, interview 10/4/2014). From this statement, Dawn is asserting that the image of Poison Ivy is something that can instill confidence in others, and is the reason why other women should adopt her image.

When addressing Harley Quinn, with a focus on body image, the responses were much different. Anne, a plus-size Harley cosplayer, wanted to see her own body-style transformed onto the character: "I think it would be nice to see them as maybe bigger girls with a little bit more cushion" (Anne, interview 6/28/2014). When Anne says "them," she is referring to the Gotham City Sirens altogether, not just Harley Quinn, and she is calling for a greater bodily representation. In their current form, the characters are designed with a thin body-style, Anne is suggesting that there should be some design that incorporates a more realistic body image. Speaking from personal experience, it is more difficult to find accurate costumes when shopping in plus-size, often it results in imaginative original designs. I suggest, that Anne is arguing for greater bodily diversity as a campaign for a greater presence of source material for plus-size cosplay – particularly for women who desire to make their costumes exact recreations.

Choice of costume had a different role for Harley Quinn cosplayer, Ashley. Rather than following a particular simple design or one officially designed by DC Comics artists, Ashley opted for a challenge:

(It lead me to picking a much more intricate design - I picked No Flutter's Victorian Harley design - that I could challenge myself with. ... The costume I created was completely impractical but it was beautiful and a fun way to portray a favorite character. ... Her *Arkham* costumes from the video games allow for a bit more movement but the most practical would have to be her *Injustice* Insurgence outfit but even then her costume is always a little restrictive. ... You see tons of girls at conventions that throw their hair

in pig tails and wear red and black and call themselves Harley and I wanted to stand out from that (Ashley, interview 8/14/2014).

Ashley's costume choice originated out of a fan-art design, and she sought the costume out for its originality in concept, level of difficulty, and its attractiveness. She acknowledged other costumes for their practicality in design, yet moving around in the giant gown implemented in her own cosplay would be extremely impractical for Harley's gymnastic skills whilst living a life of crime. Anne chose to do such an intricate design to stand-out from the "tons of girls at conventions" though, she did not want a practical or simple design, she wanted to be recognized for the character, but also recognized as unique.

Throughout these interview excerpts, the women described their interests in the designs of the characters with respect to body image. While body image highlights the body itself, this analysis is more incorporative of the costumes as well, because costumes are often chosen with how they will appear on the body in mind. Frequently the character will have an impact on the cosplayer, because of the options available for costume. If recreation is either not an option, or simply not preferred, then cosplayers take other measures. More often, cosplayers can be seen as taking ideas from the designs of characters and twisting it into something completely new. These alterations and unique character representations can even reflect upon the idea of body confidence or imbue body confidence on the cosplayer herself.

Body Confidence and Costume Ingenuity

To feel comfortable in a costume, cosplayers frequently make use of their own imagination and talents. When performing a cosplay, these women are putting their bodies on display, in costume, for others to observe and scrutinize. While many cosplayers decide to cosplay as an activity to do with their friends, or simply as a homage to the character itself,

people may feel self-conscious when it comes to their own bodies. Rather than remaining as they are, several women told me about different fitness regimens they followed in order to feel “worthy” enough to don the costume of their favorite villainess. Others, used their talents in tailoring to make costumes more realistic for their body-types or personal interests. As with every aspect of cosplay, each woman makes her own distinguishable choices when it comes to how chooses to display herself.

For Deedra, the 1950s Catwoman cosplayer, there is an importance placed on how the costume will appear on her own body. In her narrative, she said: “I try to strike a balance between having the costume suit and flatter me physically, while still maintaining accuracy” (Deedra, interview 7/30/2014). From this statement, Deedra is referring to making slight alterations to a near recreation of the 1950s Catwoman costume, because the alterations would make her feel more comfortable and attractive to others. However, because she does not want to stray from the appearance of the costume too far, she only makes minor accommodations to the costume. For example, the 1950s Catwoman wears a long purple dress, with a long slit up the legs of the dress. Deedra could decide if she would prefer a shorter slit on the dress, or if she would like the dress to be tight-fitting or loose.

Sonia began doing her Catwoman cosplay because of a costume party, to which she was invited. She enjoyed herself so much that she turned cosplay into a hobby and began to make her own designs and alterations: “I had been told that I looked like Anne Hathaway’s version of the character so I accepted and ordered a cheap costume online. After the event I decided that portraying Catwoman was fun and chose to start ‘upgrading’ my costume” (Sonia, interview 11/3/2014). Sonia’s initial costume choice was not out of specific love of the character, but from

bodily similarity. Only after she assumed the role of the character did she enjoy the idea of transformation into Catwoman. Since then, Sonia has actually cosplayed several different characters that she has grown interested in, but every time she has altered her costumes in a way that was a fun enhancement to the costume, sometimes resulting in unique original designs of her own.

Body confidence was a source of great importance to Ellie, the Poison Ivy cosplayer of the Premium Sideshow small-scale statue.⁶ As a plus-size cosplayer, she struggled with feeling comfortable in such a revealing costume, but it was her dedication that brought her confidence: “Even though I’m a bigger woman, I worked really hard on that costume. I spent a lot of time trying to tone-up some muscles at the gym, ate a little better, forced myself through at least 50 sit-ups every morning... all because I wanted to feel comfortable in that costume. ... That costume made me feel like I could be Ivy” (Ellie, interview 8/2/2014). In order to get to that level of confidence and comfort, Ellie put herself through a strict health regimen. This costume was so important to her, as a cosplayer, that she was willing to change her eating habits and exercise much more frequently. This level of dedication is not uncommon for many women cosplayers, and it is likely related to the way that they compare their own bodies to the bodies of the characters they wish to portray.

This idea of body confidence also carried on in the Poison Ivy cosplay of Barbara, who was the youngest of my participants, at 18. Her level of confidence had to do specifically with her legs: “I wore it with green tights because it was closer to the animated series Poison Ivy but later in the year when I was more confident in myself I wore it with nude colored tights bringing

⁶ Please refer back to Figure 15, in the previous chapter for the image of the statue.

it closer to the Neal Adams design. But the design I chose was picked because it would be the most flattering to my body type while still remaining accurate to the character” (Barbara, interview 8/14/2014). Barbara wanted to maintain a sense of accuracy by doing a recreation, but in her understanding of the relationship between small details of the design and her own body confidence, her recreation altered to a completely different design of Poison Ivy, by simply switching to different colored tights. The Ivy version with the green tights kept Barbara’s legs more hidden, this can be seen from the image of Poison Ivy from *Batman: The Animated Series* below (see image 16). However, when she transitioned to nude colored tights, this was a direct result of her growing confidence as the nude color left her legs more exposed. Maintaining comfort, but accuracy, is important to Barbara in her cosplay, and so her cosplay evolved alongside her own body confidence.



Figure 16. Poison Ivy, as depicted in *Batman: The Animated Series*. TM and © DC Comics

Rachel, a lawyer’s assistant and a Poison Ivy cosplayer, saw the character as her chance for being inventive. Rather than following any particular design, she desired to create her own original idea: “(Ivy) was my first venture in doing more than just assembling store-bought pieces... I could create my own costume and get away with it not being screen accurate – sure

enough my Ivy bra, belted boy shorts, and green tights have a lot of people saying ‘oh I love this version of Ivy!’” (Rachel, interview 11/3/2014). Rachel’s decision to create something new allowed her to experiment with different clothing elements. When her costume creation was received well, she continued to experiment and design with other characters because of the source of validation she received from public approval. This validation gave her the confidence to pursue her costume designs further, because it allowed others to view her ideas on bodily display.

Brittany, the Harley Quinn cosplayer, had a similar approach to body image as Ellie. Like, Ellie, she too saw a value in a health-conscious lifestyle adaptation for the sake of cosplay: “I began last MegaCon eating better and working out and attempting to get in shape for cosplay reasons. ... get to a point that I feel like Harley when I’m in Harley cosplay. She is carefree and isn’t walking around self-conscious. To be able to do that I need to not feel self-conscious in my costume. ... For my main Harley costume I’m actually taking elements from every Harley costume. I want it to feel like me, instead of me trying to emulate a specific version of her” (Brittany, interview 9/5/2014). Adaptation of her body, for the sake of her Harley cosplay, was clearly important to Brittany, despite the fact that she did not appear to be even a little bit overweight. According to her statement, she did it in order to take on Harley’s “carefree” attitude, which according to Ellie, would require bodily confidence. Interestingly though, there is a slight contradiction in her statement when Brittany says she does not want to “emulate a specific version of her,” because adapting to her attitude is still a form of emulation. Nevertheless, Brittany’s desire to change her body for her cosplay is still the key part of the

statement, because she finds it essential to make bodily changes for her role as Harley Quinn, rather than remaining as she is.

For Anne, Samantha, and Tess, their Harley Quinn cosplays involved their own creations, but for different reasons. Anne, felt like she had no other option than to be inventive with her costume, because of her size: “I’m plus-size and the traditional costumes are not plus-size friendly, so you have to be creative with the designs while also keeping the core of the character” (Anne, interview 6/28/2014). As female comic characters are almost always drawn with a thin-body style, the costumes often reflect similarly small sizes, and so Anne does not give up on her desire to cosplay the character, instead she transforms the ideas of the original costumes into new designs that she feels will appeal better to her body-style. By maintaining key elements of the character she justifies her costume decisions, just as Tess does in her statement: “If I had the time, I’d really enjoy making my own costume. Cause if you have a couple aspects of her like the blonde hair or the face paint, everyone’s gonna know who you are anyway because Harley’s such an identifiable character” (Tess, interview 9/14/2014). For Tess, these key elements are what make the character clearly legible for others. As long as cosplayers fit within the thematic details of the character, she feels there can be a significant amount of liberties taken in costume design. Finally, Samantha, has found costume creation to be an enjoyable experience, but only after an initial recreation: “I often like to do a character recreation the first time I do a costume. Helps to get to know them before branching out and changing their clothes. You need to get a good handle on their style” (Samantha, interview 8/14/2014). Samantha’s belief here is that by embodying the character as is, and coming to a firm understanding, only then will she alter the

appearance. This appears to be a way for Samantha to pay respect to Harley's history, before making something new.

The desire to alter the appearance of comic book characters applies beyond cosplay, and relates to the original content as well. As Edward Avery-Natale describes, in his research on embodiment in DC Comics, there are specific codes that must be followed when drawing comic book characters. According to the drawing guide by Wizard Entertainment that Avery-Natale explored, "men should be drawn with a standard 'v' shape and women with a classic hourglass figure" and "female characters were coded for breast size, ranking images from those with breasts that are almost unobservable to 'extra-large'" (Avery-Natale 2013: 75). The original body shape portrayal described by Avery-Natale is unrealistic, as many of the women I interviewed would agree, because not every woman has the classic hourglass shape. Further, the mentioning of breast size is interesting because although there is a guide for variation, that is not what is represented in the majority of comic book illustrations. When Jodi Picoult, the renowned novelist, served as a writer for Wonder Woman, arguably the most well-known female comic character, in 2006, "she requested that the character's breasts be reduced in size to make her more realistic, but her request was denied" (Avery-Natale 2013:75). This rejection suggests that there is a size and shape requirement and expectation for female characters in comic books, but as Graner Ray expressed in her work, these images are often "glamorized," and because of this many cosplayers are required to alter their costumes to their own body types (Graner Ray 2003: 118).

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed the dominant theme of body image. Body image begins with the design of the characters in their comic book, film, and video game forms –

how they are drawn, if there is a particular shape to their body, and what features are potentially “glamorized.” This image is then perceived by the fans who then choose to dress-up as the characters and take on their roles in cosplay. If the image is perceived as unrealistic to body size, often cosplayers will alter the costumes to one that is more befitting. Although cosplayers will often create their own costumes for the sake of ingenuity as well. The cosplayers have to reflect on their own body image in comparison to the body images of characters when making their costumes, because they must adapt to what they will feel the most comfortable in. There is more to cosplay than an understanding of sexuality and body image however, as the next chapter will explore how personal experiences and connections to the character and to the role are important to the performance.

Identity: As Explored in Relation to Character Connectivity and Cosplay

In addition to themes of sexuality and body image, my third major theme that emerged from my research is the concept of “personal identity” as related to cosplay and the identification between the cosplayers and their characters. Beyond each jester mask, catsuit, or green body paint there are women, with diverse reasons for donning their costumes. In this chapter, more specifically, I will explore how these women have established personal connections to the characters they perform, as well as, how they may or may not distinguish their own identity from that of the character. Identity itself is a complex and multi-faceted concept, branching into ideas of gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, amongst other forms (Conley 2008:30). Identity is important to this thesis because it is the foundation of understanding why these women are cosplaying these characters. The participants’ willingness to be so open with me in their discussions, allowed for me to delve deeply into how they come to view the characters, themselves, and cosplay.

Personal Connections

Many of the women that I interviewed for this thesis drew strong personal connections to the characters they were cosplaying. The nature of this connection ranged from admiration to a deep bond develop with the character and consisted of a reflection of an event in their personal lives. In particular, this pertained to the reoccurring abusive relationship that Harley Quinn has with the Joker, and how some cosplayers saw a similar situation reflected in their own relationships. For the cosplayers of Catwoman, it is often a question of morality. Although there are norms, rules and laws that make up our society, what is moral can vary within a culture or society. Likewise, the cosplayers in this research understood morality is never perfectly clear.

For the sake of this thesis, morality can be defined as a person's "sense of right and wrong." The women who choose to cosplay Poison Ivy often relate to her heightened intelligence and environmental prowess. Cosplayers of Poison Ivy often employ Ivy's intelligence in their cosplay roles, but occasionally they transform it into a source for empowerment. With each cosplayer however, there is a different connection; no two cosplayers share the same exact reason for choosing their specific costumes and characters.

Deedra, the Catwoman cosplayer, compares herself to the mysteriousness and spontaneity of Catwoman. In her narrative, she describes "[y]ou never really understand her, she comes across as enigmatic. I've been told you never know just what to expect with me, and that's something I've always seen in Catwoman" (Deedra, interview 7/30/2014). As Deedra is explaining, Catwoman is a frequently a free-agent type of character, meaning she does what she desires, when she desires to. This ability to behave however she likes adds an air of mystery, and the unknown, which Deedra relates to. Deedra, when introducing herself, described herself as somewhat of a "free-spirit," and while she outlined several of her other cosplays, she felt it necessary to focus on the similarity of this free-spirit personality between her and Catwoman, as she is hinting to in her statement above.

Another Catwoman cosplayer discussed earlier, Katelyn, had much more to say when talking about how she relates to Catwoman. Katelyn, finds Catwoman to be a source of inspiration, as well as a figure of thought on morality. Throughout her discussion she describes:

My decision to cosplay Catwoman is actually because I grew up with her. ... I really loved seeing a strong female character that could hold her own and still get the man. She was really inspiring to me. I think Catwoman's independence is something I really connected with. ... I also loved that she was more neutral. Yes, she helped the good guys but she still had a bad side to her. I don't see morality as black and white and neither does she. ... even though I see all this grey, I often still end up choosing a lot of things that

might be considered ‘good’ in our world because I like to help people, but I find myself struggling with certain topics (Katelyn, interview 10/5/2014).

Katelyn’s connection to the character of Catwoman is evident by the way she describes her own feelings of independence. It is interesting how she describes Catwoman as being present in her maturation, because of her later comment on morality. Specifically, Katelyn’s mentions during the interview that the Catwoman she knew growing up was portrayed by Michelle Pfeiffer in Tim Burton’s *Batman Returns* in 1992. Pfeiffer’s Catwoman was a strong, vengeful, and playful version of Catwoman. Throughout the film, after Catwoman’s initial transformation, she struggles with desiring to murder her boss for attempting to do the same to her, plotting with a crime-lord, saving victims of misfortune, and establishing love for Batman. If this version of Catwoman had a strong role in Katelyn’s life during her more formative years, perhaps the idea of Catwoman was a source of influence in Katelyn’s own development in “morality.” This interpretation could be evident from her description of how she and Catwoman both express a moral grey-area. For Catwoman, this grey-area is often seen as her acting in her own interests, often breaking the law, yet she occasionally saves citizens in trouble throughout Gotham. In an example from the comics, Catwoman can often be seen in this independent manner, with which Katelyn identifies. Catwoman’s independent spirit stems from her internal moral compass, and often it tests social bounds. Figure 17, seen below, shows Catwoman, diving off of a rooftop, leaving Batman behind, proclaiming that she is in control of her own life. This image is a clear representation of what Katelyn is explaining in her narrative as a source of connectivity, that Catwoman has the right to choose in her independence, and when it comes to her relationship with Batman. Her decision to leave him alone at the end of the issue, is indicative of her desire to make her own decisions and remain free, rather than be confined by a relationship, or even

partnership, under Batman's more law-abiding morality. This image is important because it serves as a moment of breaking away from Batman, to be independent, like Katelyn prefers.

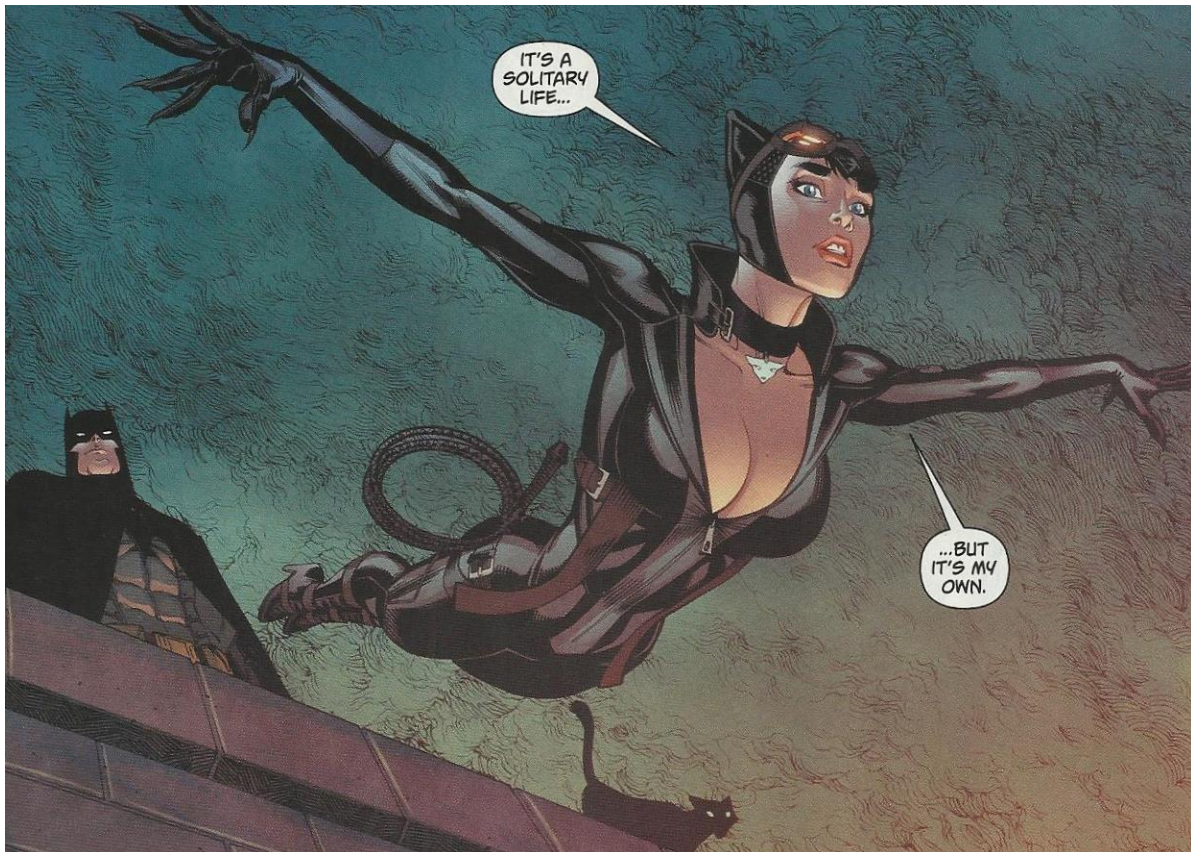


Figure 17. Catwoman diving off of a building in *Batman: Arkham Unhinged* #7. TM and © DC Comics

When assessing connections to the character of Poison Ivy, both Barbara and Dawn draw interest in her intelligence and passions. Barbara feels connected to Ivy by the similarities they both exhibit in intelligence and independence: “Ivy is the Siren I get compared to the most. She’s intelligent, speaks with a high vocabulary, and is fiercely passionate about the things she believes to be worthwhile. We both share a similar sense of independence as well as a very selective sense of nurturing and caring” (Barbara, interview 8/14/2014). For Barbara, sharing these similarities with Poison Ivy is what connects her to the character and allows her to perform the

role. One example of the traits Barbara describes for Poison Ivy below (Figure 18), in which she is being compassionate to an islanders pleas to help her family's farm, after working wonders on revitalizing the island. This example displays the type of "true character" to Poison Ivy that Barbara and so many other women interested in this character identify with.



Figure 18. Poison Ivy interacting with a younger girl in *Batman: Poison Ivy*. TM and © DC Comics

Dawn more personally related to Poison Ivy based on her experiences growing up. Throughout various comics, several writers have shown that Poison Ivy had a difficult time in childhood, frequently having to watch her mother be domestically abused by her father. While Dawn believed that her parents did not have as severe relationship problems, or any violence, she

did connect with the hardship Ivy had to endure: “She could do her own thing and that was fine by her; she didn’t need love or anyone. That’s what made me want to cosplay her. I was drawn to her character. ... Poison Ivy, as Pamela Isley, came from a not-so-great home and family life, much like myself. I relate to that. I also relate to wanting to be more and do more, maybe in a STEM field like Dr. Isley, or in other ways” (Dawn, interview 10/4/2014). Relating to similar struggles in her home life, Dawn saw comfort and familiarity in the role of Poison Ivy, as well as a way to express her own intelligence. Being able to draw on these similarities is what connected Dawn to Poison Ivy and fueled her desire to perform a cosplay of her. However, this reaches much further than similarities when Dawn expresses her interest “to do more.” Here Dawn is hinting at a notion of empowerment with Dr. Pamela Isley as her role model. It is not surprising that Dawn would be interested in Dr. Pamela Isley as a role model, because prior to the incident that turned her into Poison Ivy she was an accomplished botanist. By doing more, and in a STEM field as well, Dawn is outlining her interest in looking beyond her own troubled past, and creating a better future.

Samantha, Tess, and Ashley—all Harley Quinn cosplayers—attribute their connection to the character by her relationship to the Joker. Samantha, like Katelyn and Barbara in their Catwoman and Poison Ivy cosplays, felt a connection to Harley’s independence. However, like many other Harley Quinn fans, she felt this independence was hindered by her relationship to the Joker which was violent and cruel. Samantha describes Harley’s relationship as causing her to go out-of-touch with herself, and instead but she believes the Joker wants: “I like the storylines where she is a bit more independent and part of the DC Sirens and not so driven crazy by her love for the Joker. ... I think everyone can identify a little with sometimes falling in love, going

crazy and losing themselves a bit” (Samantha, interview 8/14/2014). In the case of Harley Quinn, the “going crazy and losing themselves a bit” Samantha mentions is directly in relation to Harley’s transformation from Dr. Harleen Quinzel, the psychiatrist, to Harley Quinn, side-kick and girlfriend of the Joker. After the relationship with the Joker (who violently broke-up with Harley) she formed a close bond with Poison Ivy who rescued her from the crashed rocket in which the Joker had launched her. As a result of this friendship and time away from the Joker, Harley became more independent in nature. For Samantha, this post-Joker Harley Quinn is preferred, but she feels it is important to remember Harley’s past as identifiable as well. To further illustrate this point, below I have provided two brief examples of what Samantha is describing – how Harley could have moments of insanity in her love for the Joker and the beginning of her friendship with Poison Ivy and her subsequent independence (Figures 19 and 20).



Figure 19. Harley trying to catch the Joker's attention in *Batman: Mad Love and Other Stories*. TM and © DC Comics



Figure 20. Harley being rescued by Poison Ivy, after being launched in a rocket by the Joker, as seen in DC Comics Presents: Harley Quinn. ™ and © DC Comics

In Figures 19 and 20 above, the two images portray two different points in Harley Quinn's history, to which I feel Samantha was connecting. Figure 19 depicts Harley in lingerie, trying to capture the Joker's attention sexually, while he is trying to design the perfect way to destroy Batman (Dini and Timm 2009:21). The playful nature of Harley's play on words is an example of what Samantha describes as the Harley who is "crazy in love" with the Joker. Only a few panels after Figure 19 in the comic Joker locks Harley into the dirty basement with their pet Hyenas (Dini and Timm 2009:26). Figure 20 takes place when the Joker decides he has had enough of Harley Quinn in his life. As a result, he launches her in a rocket, which ends up landing in Robinson Park, where Poison Ivy is hiding. Ivy then finds Harley in the rubble, as shown in the image, and they quickly become friends (Dini 2014:100). Figure 20 is indicative of the beginning of Harley's independence from the Joker, and it is this moment that I believe Samantha sees as the beginning of a more quality version of Harley Quinn.

In her narrative, Tess connected with Harley Quinn in a reflective manner. Aside from having a similar personality, she drew on personal experience with a past relationship in explaining her relationship toward the character. She describes her relationship as follows:

She gets emotionally attached very easily as you can tell by the way she fell in love with the Joker. She's also very quirky, but I am able to collect myself in a way that she isn't, but I do have my own quirks. ... I was in a relationship that was less than desirable and it kind of left me feeling like I was alone. ... I understand that she just wants to be loved. And now that I'm in a different relationship I can definitely see how getting out of that one was the best thing for me and I wish that the comic writers would be able to get her out of that too (Tess, interview 9/14/2014).

While series such as the *Suicide Squad*, the *Gotham City Sirens*, and even the old and current *Harley Quinn* series, aim to have Harley break away from the Joker, he always has a way of coming back into her life, often causing chaos, violence, and inevitable heartbreak. This cycle of how Harley is always coming back to a toxic relationship is the issue that Tess is describing in the end of her statement. Tess was able to get out of her relationship, but she is frustrated by seeing Harley not be able to escape hers completely. An example of this inability to escape can be seen in the "Death of the Family" storyline in *Suicide Squad*, where the Joker captures Harley, and proceeds to torture her mentally and physically within this story (Figure 21).

Tess's frustration at the situation is nothing new, many other fans in the community have voiced issue with the relationship. While Joker and Harley are one of the most recognizable couples in DC Comics, many readers take issue with the extent to which the Joker abuses Harley, both physically and mentally. However, I believe that is why her incorporation into the *Suicide Squad*, as well as the other more independent roles, became more important to fan readership. These titles gave the introduction to a more independent-style Harley Quinn, for women, such as Tess, to connect with. In Figure 21 below, the Joker has returned, after being presumed dead.

Once he learned that Harley stole what was left of his face, which had been cut off and stored in the Gotham City Police Department, he returns and captures her at Deadshot's funeral. Once he has her alone, he has her bound and proceeds to abuse her verbally and physically, but Harley still tries to put up a fight. He describes how he made her who she was, and then in the image below, he proceeds to tell her that she was not the first, and definitely would not be the last. This image of Harley being held prisoner, on what is presumably the remains of other "Harley's," is haunting. It is likely that Tess, would be opposed to this victimized depiction of Harley, and would be pleased when Harley survives the Joker's sadistic torture.



Figure 21. Harley Quinn being tortured by the Joker in Suicide Squad Vol.3:Death is for Suckers. TM and © DC Comics

Ashley, like Tess, came from a troubled relationship that was not conducive to her well-being. Although she did not divulge specific details in her interview, for personal reasons, Ashley stated that she was in an abusive relationship with an old boyfriend. For her, Harley's relationship with the Joker was something she latched onto, as an example of how women could be shown in popular media as victims. Ashley further believed that showing victimization was not acceptable. Her statement shows her understanding of this issue as follows:

Harley has always been abused by the Joker, both physically and mentally, and it brings to light an issue that is prominent. In the newer [comic] issues she left the Joker upon realizing that what was happening was wrong and it's a good lesson to those who go through the same thing. It gives them something to relate to in media that normally doesn't view abuse victims as more than a side quest. ... Harley's motives are generally pure. In her new series, she assaults a man who is dragging a very pathetic looking dog behind him because she feels the dog is being treated unfairly (Ashley, interview 8/14/2014).

Ashley does not condemn the existence of the relationship as a source of negative comic book material, but rather she connects with it and interprets it as sending a positive message of how women should not be treated. This is a rather unique connection that Ashley draws, but at the same time it is a powerful one. Ashley's personal experience tied her to the character, and allowed her to view the character in a role model form. Ashley's interpretation appears to be that Harley is a champion against abuse, as a result of her own, because of the example she describes at the end of her statement. In the scene Ashley describes, Harley becomes violent with a man after seeing how he is abusing his dog, and by sympathizing she is preventing further abuse (Figure 22). From her statement, it is clear the experience of the victim is very important to Ashley's connection and understanding of Harley Quinn. In Figure 22 below, as Ashley describes in her statement, Harley is witnessing an instance of animal abuse. In the image, a dog is being dragged behind his owner, and after he exchanges teary-eyed looks with Harley, Harley

grows angered and decides to approach the owner of the dog. This sympathetic and activist-like approach is what Ashley sees in Harley.



Figure 22. Harley viewing animal abuse in *Harley Quinn* #1. TM and © DC Comics.

The Cosplay and the Cosplayer

One of the most important aspects, throughout all of the discussions in this research, is how these women view their identity while they are performing a cosplay. Asking questions such as, “Do you feel like you are the character?” or, “Are you just yourself under a mask?” This question gets at the root of identity and identification when it comes to cosplay. When cosplayers

believe they have truly taken on the identity of a character, they will often take on many of their character's attributes. This is common knowledge amongst cosplayers, that often they are still invested in the character beyond the costume. For all purposes, when they take on the identity, while they are at the convention – they *are* Harley, Ivy, and Catwoman in all interactions while performing cosplay.

On the subject of being the character as themselves, Katelyn and Deedra, the Catwoman cosplayers, had opposing opinions. Deedra felt that while she shares similar traits to Catwoman, that she nevertheless maintains a separate identity. For her, the costume is the dividing line between reality and fiction: “while I admire and connect with some of Selena’s traits, and I enjoy playing her, in the end, it’s still just a costume and I have my own identity when the mask comes off” (Deedra, interview 7/30/2014). This costume differentiation is important, because it is a symbol of a temporary identity.⁷ I argue, that similar to the way that all comic book heroes and villains have alter-egos, Deedra is expressing her awareness of the person behind the mask. In her case however, it is not Selina Kyle under the mask of Catwoman, but Deedra herself.

Katelyn both contradicts and agrees with Deedra in her statement. She agrees by still having her own identity when she takes off her costume. However, she strongly feels that her own personality is one in the same with Catwoman: “Even if I wanted to separate her personality from mine, I couldn’t. I cosplay the character because I relate to her and people seem to think I look like Miss Kyle. ... I bring a part of myself to the role just as much as I bring Selina Kyle to the role. And I think that’s part of being a cosplayer. You adapt to the role, but you’re still there.

⁷ The concept of temporarily performing an identity has been explored in other research, particular in regards to cross-dressing. This body of work further argues that gender identity is a fluid concept (Garber 1997).

It's a lot like acting in a lot of ways" (Katelyn, interview 10/5/2014). Katelyn, whose education and experience in theatre studies helps her to understand the importance of roles and relating to the character for portrayal. She identifies strongly with the role of Catwoman, and because of it she feels a deep personal connection to the character, but she is still aware of her own presence behind the mask.

Ellie and Liz, Poison Ivy cosplayers, were also retrospective when it meant taking on their roles. For Ellie, this reflection was more important for recovering from personal strife: "In my cosplay, I find it very powerful, emotionally, to emulate Ivy as much as possible. ... I think *becoming* Ivy made me really look deep into myself" (Ellie, interview 8/2/2014). Her emphasis on "*becoming*" is important because for her, while she is in costume for all intents and purposes she is Ivy. Taking on this role, causes Ellie to harness her emotions in a positive way, because it makes her aware of who she feels she really is beneath the mask. Liz was not as critical of herself in her Poison Ivy cosplay, instead she sees the endeavor of cosplay as more of a fun experiment. Within her narrative, she said: "I definitely take on the persona of the character when I dress up as them. It's fun to let go and act a little different, though I always end up mixing a bit of myself into the role play" (Liz, interview 10/25/2014). While she enjoys taking on the identity of the character, she does not see it as a distinct transition into the temporary identity that Deedra describes earlier. Instead, she believes that melding her own personality into the performance is inevitable.

Sarah, Brittany, and Samantha also had diverse perspectives with regards to identification with regards to their Harley Quinn cosplays. Sarah specifically sees her cosplay performances as "a role": "I see her being like me as in she's kinda bubbly and easily agitates people. ... I cosplay

characters so I can identify as someone else and play a part as you could say. I don't cosplay as me, I cosplay the character as if I were performing on a stage" (Sarah, interview 9/2/2014).

While she sees a similar personality as a necessary component for an effective performance, for her it is still a role. As long as Sarah remains in costume, she will consider herself Harley Quinn.

Samantha expressed a different opinion from the other women, from her experience. Instead of feeling like she had to take on the role as her own identity, she simply expressed that her requirement is only interest in the character. Within her narrative she said: "I always have to at least like the character, but I don't feel the need to *be* them" (Samantha, interview 8/14/2014). Her emphasis on "*be*" is important for the understanding of her comment because it hones in on the idea that she does not feel the need to be Harley Quinn, in terms of personality when she cosplays. For her, being in the costume itself is sufficient. I feel Brittany's comment, however, expresses the feeling of most cosplayers succinctly as she said: "I think it's hard to separate oneself from *cosplay* and *cosplayer* because to do it justice you should be able to feel like the character you put on" (Brittany, interview 9/5/2014). Like many of the women before her, Brittany agrees that melding the personality of the character into the cosplay is what makes the cosplay. In her opinion, the role of the cosplayer *is* the role of the cosplay.

Throughout this chapter I have sought to explain how women cosplayers find themselves identifying with the character they portray, on an emotional level. This can be seen in the discussion on personal connections, where the women compared their own lives to the characters – including examples of living an independent life, being in damaging romantic relationships, having a "rough" childhood, and experiences of abuse. Further, the women described how they feel when they officially don the costume – for some it meant acting out a role, for others it felt

like much more than that. In all of these cases however, the women portraying the Gotham City Sirens often have strong and specific underlying reasons for choosing to cosplay the characters, frequently stemming from their own stories.

Conclusions

Within this thesis, I have sought to explain why women cosplayers frequently choose to cosplay Catwoman, Poison Ivy, and Harley Quinn, collectively known as the Gotham City Sirens. These characters are often labelled as belonging to the “femme-fatale” archetype, or as sexualized criminal deviants. It has been my goal to understand why these women seek to portray the Gotham City Sirens, and how view their “femme-fatale” role. I have determined three general thematic trends across the narratives of the participants in this study: (1) attitudes about sexuality and the sexualization of the characters, (2) understanding of the relationship of cosplay to body image, and (3) identity in relation to character connectivity and cosplay. With regards to sexuality, many of the women acknowledged that the characters are often portrayed as overly sexualized beings, but they did not always perceive this sexualization negatively. In terms of body image, the women often felt the need to alter or create their own costumes to exemplify the characters, rather than exclusively wearing official brand-name costumes or exact replicas. Finally, in the discussion of identity, the women detailed how their personal situations in life allow them to feel connected to the character, and because of this connection they felt aligned with the character in the art of cosplay.

While the study of comics, comic book characters, or cosplay, may seem a small sub-culture within the vast popular culture, but this research has shown it to relate to larger issues experienced by young women. One such issue is that cosplay can serve as a sense of empowerment. For example, when embodying the role of a particular character some women in this study drew on the character and her costume to gain confidence in their own body image.

Further, the findings also showed that the abusive relationship of the Joker and Harley Quinn can be perceived as a potential example for activism against dating violence.

A second issue larger issue of interest in the culture at large is how young women cosplaying often become the subject of gaze and scrutiny from the public. From the perspective of gender, this problem allows women the opportunity to formulate their own understanding of the issues like the sexualization of women's bodies; as well as, how they cope with the male or other "predatory gaze" when portraying a character that is often seen as hypersexualized. Cosplay therefore provides an important chance for individuals to consider their own identity, perspectives, and experiences by reflecting on these larger issues.

This project contributes to the anthropology scholarship because it deepens the understanding of identity, which is a complex concept with many interpretations. In anthropology, understanding humankind throughout time is essential. As our world rapidly changes toward greater social media use and other forms of sociality and interactions, there is a growing presence of popular culture in daily life, and conversely subcultures such as the cosplaying community take up greater importance. As such, popular culture has begun to influence us, in ways we might never have imagined. The art of cosplay, is an expression of fans of popular culture to display themselves in homage to characters who have influenced them in some manner. This performance is a more recent cultural practice that has been researched very little thus far. As such, this research will hopefully be fruitful in explaining a new subculture emerging out of popular culture by people of all ages today.

The study of cosplay also contributes to other areas of scholarship. Foremost, there have been many places throughout this research where ideas from psychology, sociology, and in

particular gender studies could have substantial knowledge to contribute to the understanding of the dominant themes of sexuality, body image, and personal identity. In the area of gender studies, this project contributes an understanding of how women view themselves and the portrayal of women in the comic book industry. This research also aligns with the theory of performativity, as explained by Judith Butler. Butler argues that embodiment of gender is important because it helps individuals to “actively embody and, indeed, wear cultural significations” (Butler 1988: 525). This concept of performance pertains to cosplay because when the women are wearing their costumes they embody their characters based on how they are culturally recognized within the comic book industry.

With regards to the analysis of costumes and the performance itself, theatre and fashion design research would also be applicable. The original source material for the cosplayers to draw inspiration – comics, video games, film, and other media – have applications in the fields of literature, graphic design, art and art history, and film studies. How these characters are designed and manipulated into different interpretations across several mediums contributes to all of these fields mentioned. With regards to cosplay applying to literary elements, there is a parallel idea through the concept of “escapism,” because cosplayers, like many characters in novels and comic books, are “fulfill[ing] a role that is missing in their regular everyday life” (Rahman 2012:333). In the art and design oriented academic fields, there is an additional relevance of how the comic characters are originally drawn, because their image will become the model for inspiration for cosplayers (Avery-Natale 2013:75).

Throughout this research I have spoken to several women about their cosplays of the Gotham City Sirens, and while their words have provided exceptional insight into the art of

cosplay, there is always room for improvement. Unfortunately, restrictions of budget only allowed me to travel to a few comic book conventions throughout my research, many of which were small and local; because of this my access to willing participants was limited. A future research study on this topic should include a larger sample of cosplayers, in order to gain more varied opinions in terms of sexuality, body image, and personal identity – perhaps other characters could be explored as well. The depth behind each cosplayer is substantial and much can be learned from a larger study about this subculture and its participants. Although it may seem like there is no clear reason to dress-up as a beloved character, this research has proven otherwise. Behind every costume, behind every mask, there is an individual with a unique story to tell.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

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IRB APPROVAL LETTER



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 301
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: UCF Institutional Review Board #1
FWA00000351, IRB00001138
To: Joanna Zofia Michal and Co-PI: Amber R. Morrison
Date: May 20, 2014

Dear Researcher:

On 5/20/2014, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Exempt Determination
Project Title:	Understanding Gender Identity among Women Coworkers of the Gotham City Sirens
Investigator:	Joanna Zofia Michal
IRB Number:	SBE-14-10314
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRES so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 05/20/2014 09:08:37 AM EDT

IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM
APPENDIX B:
CONSENT FORM



EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH

Title of Project: "Understanding Gender Identity among Women Cosplayers of the Gotham City Sirens"

Principal Investigator: Joanna Mishtal, PhD, UCF Department of Anthropology

Co-Investigator: Amber Morrison, Undergraduate Anthropology Program H.I.M. Candidate

This serves as an invitation to be a part of a research study. You are welcome to leave the study at any time you wish.

This research is being conducted to understand the role of gender identity for women cosplayers who are portraying the Catwoman, Harley Quinn, Poison Ivy, or their alter egos at comic conventions, and to understand more about the topic areas of gender and culture.

What You Need To Know About a Research Study:

- 1) The details of the research will be explained to you.
- 2) Participation in this research is completely voluntary.
- 3) It is your choice to participate. If you decide you do not want to participate it will not be held against you.
- 4) You can choose not to participate, please do not feel pressured into the interview just because you were asked.
- 5) Even if you agree to participate now, you are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time.
- 6) You are welcome to ask as many questions as you would like before making your decision.

Participation in the Study: As a participant in this study you will be asked a series of open-ended questions in an interview. These questions will focus on your opinions on the topics presented.

Location: Interviews will be done in a quiet, more private area within the convention location, or if more convenient through Skype.

Time Required: An average of 30-60 minutes will be utilized for an interview. Participants will be asked if they can accommodate this interview time frame.

Photography and Audio: All participants will be asked if they may be audio recorded during their interview. Participants have the right to decline, in which the interviewer will then take hand notes. Participants may also be asked permission to have their picture taken for costume illustration purposes only.

Confidentiality Agreement: All participants will be assigned a fictitious name or number to represent them, unless they specifically request otherwise.

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study.

To report a Problem or Ask a Question: If you have any concerns involving this research study or your involvement in it, please contact Dr. Joanna Mishtal, Faculty Supervisor, Department of Anthropology at (407) 823-3797 or by email at jmishtal@mail.ucf.edu, or Amber Morrison, Undergraduate H.I.M. Candidate at the UCF College of Sciences at AMorrison346@knights.ucf.edu.

IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint: Research at the University of Central Florida involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (UCF IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. For information about the rights of people who take part in research, please contact: Institutional Review Board, University of Central Florida, Office of Research & Commercialization, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901.

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT
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INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT



INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

Title of Project: "Understanding Gender Identity among Women Cosplayers of the Gotham City Sirens"

Principal Investigator: Joanna Mishtal, PhD, UCF Department of Anthropology

Co-investigator: Amber Morrison, Undergraduate Anthropology Program H.I.M. Candidate

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I'm Amber Morrison from the University of Central Florida, and I'm the Co-Investigator for a research for project titled: "Understanding Gender Identity among Women Cosplayers of the Gotham City Sirens." I will be conducting an interview with you about your experience as a woman cosplayer of one of three characters, Harley Quinn, Catwoman, Poison Ivy or one of their respective alter-ego personas. All of the information you give me will be confidential – I will not ask you for your name or any information that could identify you. The interview is voluntary and it will take about half an hour. I would like to start now; may I?

Interview #: _____
Research Site: _____
Date: _____
Time: _____

Questions:

- 1) What has led to your decision to do a cosplay of (enter character name)?
Probes:
(If for love of character): What led to your particular costume design?
(If for the desire to dress up): What appealed to you about the character of (enter character name) over others?
- 2) Are there traits that you identify as a part of yourself, that you also see in (enter character name)?
Probes:
Do you see physical resemblances between (enter character name) and yourself?
Do you see personality similarities between (enter character name) and yourself?

- 3) Are there any concerns about the representation of (enter character name), in terms of representing women in comics have you know of?

Probes:

Do you feel she is overly sexualized?

Do you feel her personality is misrepresented?

Do you feel she is more than a criminal?

- 4) What would you change about the comic, film, and video game adaptations of (enter character name) if you had the chance?

Probes:

Would you make her a hero instead of a villain?

Would you make her costume more practical for fighting or leave it in its current design?

- 5) How has your cosplay of (enter character name) made you rethink the character design for yourself, or have you preferred to maintain a separate identity between you and your cosplay of (enter character name)?

Probes (Choose one based on character choice):

What virtues do you see in Ivy?

Have you sympathized with Harley's constant desire for companionship with the Joker or not?

Have you felt the struggle of Catwoman to balance what is right and wrong or do you not really relate to that aspect of her?

- 6) Do you have any further comments that you would like to address?

If yes, listen, and then continue on with final statement.

If no, continue with final statement.

Thank you very much for your time. Please don't hesitate to contact me if there's anything else that you would like to add that you have not had a chance to say during this interview. Here's my contact information.

APPENDIX D: PERMISSION FOR IMAGE USE
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PERMISSION FOR IMAGE USE

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