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THE WONDER WOMEN: UNDERSTANDING FEMINISM IN COSPLAY PERFORMANCE

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Feminism conjures divisive and at times conflicting thoughts and feelings in the current political climate in the United States. For some, Wonder Woman is a feminist icon, for her devotion to truth, justice, and equality. In recent years, Wonder Woman has become successful in the film industry, and this is reflected by the growing community of cosplayers at comic book conventions. In this study, I examine gender performativity, gender identity, and feminism from the perspective of cosplayers of Wonder Woman. I collected ethnographic data using participant observation and semi-structured interviews with cosplayers at comic book conventions in Florida, Georgia, and Washington, about their experiences in their Wonder Woman costumes. I found that many cosplayers identified with Wonder Woman both in their own personalities and as a feminist icon, and many view Wonder Woman as a larger role model to all people, not just women and girls. The narratives in this study also show cosplay as a form of escapism. Finally, I found that Wonder Woman empowers cosplayers at the individual level but can be envisioned as a force at a wider social level. I conclude that Wonder Woman is an important and iconic figure for understanding the dynamics of culture in the United States. In the era of #MeToo and TimesUp, Wonder Woman is a character that defies normative boundaries of gendered expectations.

For the Wonder Women of the world, whomever they are. I wish you luck on your search for truth, love, peace, and justice.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

Comic book culture has become increasingly prevalent in American society over the past two decades. Whether it is DC Comics, Marvel, or an independent publisher, there are stories that appeal to people of all ages. Within the comic book community there is a prominent sub-culture of cosplay, a rapidly growing art form. Cosplay, or costume-play, is performed by cosplayers who dress-up and emulate characters at comic book conventions throughout the United States and the world. It is an embodied performance, and within it cosplayers construct their own gendered identity of their chosen character (Morrison 2015). Despite the growing popularity of cosplay, little scholarly research has been devoted to understanding this population and art form. Through this work, I have built upon my own previous anthropological research on cosplay (Morrison 2015), to focus more specifically on cosplayers of the character Wonder Woman. As one of the most popular comic book characters since her origins in 1941, Wonder Woman is a household name. Through the performative nature of cosplay, I have attempted to understand the impact of this gendered character on those who wear her costume and the community around her.

In this research project I focused on advancing existing theories in gender performativity and gender identity, as well as feminist interpretations, in the analysis of cosplay. My primary research question was: To what extent do cosplayers embody or identify with Wonder Woman as a potential feminist icon? Although my own analysis suggests that Wonder Woman is a feminist icon, in this study I aimed to understand the extent to which the people who walk in her footsteps shared that belief, and if so, how they portrayed it. With movements such as TimesUp and

MeToo<sup>1</sup> gaining momentum, feminist perspectives and activism are needed more than ever.

Through this ethnographic research project, I call attention to feminist action in cosplay performance.

Through the course of this work, I begin by providing a detailed literature review of cosplay, comic book culture, and the theoretical frameworks through which I understand them. I then provide a brief overview the character Wonder Woman herself, before describing the methodologies of this research project. As a cosplayer myself, I also reflect on my own experiences in this area. The body of the research focuses on three core chapters, that while distinct, are also interrelated and will include some overlapping topics. The first chapter, “A Model for Empowerment, A Model for Feminism,” focuses directly on my primary research question, answering how the research participants understood the concept of feminism. The second chapter, “Will the Real Diana Please Stand-Up?,” focuses more directly on the identity of the Wonder Woman cosplayers, what it means to cosplay her, and how cosplay can be considered as a form of escape. In the third chapter, “The Community Around Her,” I examine the Wonder Woman cosplayers’ context, including how she is received by non-Wonder Woman cosplayers, as well as current influences on the larger cosplay community. Finally, I conclude with my scholarly contribution to the realms of feminism, anthropology, and cosplay. Overall, however, I have argued that Wonder Woman is an important feminist figure in the cosplay community, both for individual empowerment and self-identity, as well as comradery within the community.

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<sup>1</sup> MeToo and TimesUp are women’s movements that gained significant momentum in 2018. MeToo activists focus on creating a larger conversation about sexual violence and harassment, while building a “community of action” (Langone 2018). TimesUp is an action-oriented movement, within the larger umbrella of MeToo empowerment ideals, whose activists focus more directly on equity in the workplace (Langone 2018).

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Cosplay as a performance has been greatly understudied in academia. Existing research about cosplay focuses on its history and development in Japan masquerades and American Science Fiction conventions, as well as fashion design, however this scholarship neglects to consider the human and cultural perspective of the performers wearing the costumes. Of the literature detailed below, I attend to perspectives given by the fashion design and communications fields, the influence of American comic book culture from sociological perspectives, the concept of gender performativity from gender studies and anthropology, an introduction of feminist interpretations, and a history of the character of Wonder Woman as understood by the comic book industry.

Before discussing how cosplay has been studied, it is useful to begin with the definitions and cosplay's historical context. Cosplay is a combination term, fusing the words costume and play. The term has been a recent development in language use, rising with the growth of popular culture and attendance at comic book conventions in the past few decades. Cosplay researchers and fans frequently credit the origin of the term cosplay to Japanese reporter Takahashi Nobuyuki in 1984, who was awestruck at the costumes worn by Japanese anime fans at their masquerade (Winge 2006, 66; Bowan and Cline 2017, 3). While the cosplay of anime characters certainly exists in the United States, the term is applied more broadly to fans who develop the costumes of characters from various media such as comic books, video games, and film. As scholars of fashion design and communications, Rahman et al (2012, 321) note that cosplayers adopt the images of beloved characters whom they feel a connection to, resulting in costume design and often a performance of the characters' persona. It is common that a cosplayer chooses a character that they feel a personal connection to, so they are also reflected in the performance.

In many cases, when a cosplayer modifies the original representation of their chosen character it is “liberating” and “becomes a pleasurable, embodied experience” (Gn 2011, 584; Morrison 2015).

In many ways, the art of cosplay could be understood as a transformation of the self, by adopting a new persona. Joel Gn (2007), Rahman et al. (2012), and Theresa Winge (2006), each explain this understanding from the artistic perspective of fashion design and communications. Beyond simple expression of fandom, or being a fan of something, Rahman et al. (2012, 321) argues that cosplayers “imitate the personas of their adored characters and re-create an imaginative self in reality.” Each cosplayer demonstrates their dedication to the art of cosplay in a unique way, but those who refer to it as hobby or lifestyle are very precise and devoted in their work. Simply said, cosplay is often expensive. There are some people who are gifted in creating costumes out of thrift store clothing, but many cosplayers devote their significant amounts of time and financial resources to “the craftsmanship of extravagant and elaborate costumes, props, hair, and makeup” (Rahman et al. 2012, 322). Not all, but most cosplayers even learn specific poses or phrases for their characters, for photographing and performance. This transformation of the self leads to general notions of escapism out of the cosplayers’ lives. Some cosplayers choose their characters “in order to fulfill a role that is missing in their regular everyday life” (Rahman et al. 2012, 333). This action is extraordinary because it claims specifically that cosplayers take on a separate personal identity through their performance. This “escape from reality” lets cosplayers “momentarily leave behind their stresses, burdens, anxieties, boredom, and the disappointments of everyday life and enter into a fantasy environment” (Rahman et al. 2012, 33). I will revisit the need to use cosplay as an escape in the chapter focused on identity.

Through cosplay there is little beyond imagination and resources to make someone become anyone else they desire to be. Theresa Winge (2006, 72), a scholar of apparel and textile design, argues that the way a cosplayer dresses is essential for understanding their identity because it is how they “nonverbally communicate his or her chosen character and character traits.” As a cosplayer, there is a significant difference between being recognized by another convention attendee instantly and having to verbally explain who we are portraying. By choosing to mimic characters, communications scholar Joel Gn (2007, 588) posits that the body of a cosplayer is undergoing a “‘psychological transformation’, allowing the subject to sustain and participate in its own mental illusion.” This does not apply to all cosplayers; however, the general idea is relevant because it addresses how cosplayers in my research could relate to Wonder Woman more while in costume. Choosing who to cosplay becomes “an assertion of gender identity,” and creating the performance is “an expression of emotional attachment to the animated body” (Gn 2007, 589). This attachment to the animated character and the self, is exactly the phenomena I seek to understand.

The way the animated body is drawn has been subject to criticism, often by parents concerned about what their children read. Sociologist Edward Avery-Natale (2013) analyzed the societal implications behind drawing characters in gendered forms. Drawing guides on how to illustrate these characters have detailed notes for body shapes, musculature, breast size, and even particular traits based on appearance (Avery-Natale 2013, 75-76). The features of the female characters in comics draw heavy attention to sexuality in comics, often due to the pattern of unrealistic breast sizes in proportion to the characters’ bodies or the solitary hourglass shape their artists often give them. This accentuation of sexualized features, in both male and female

characters, makes them appear more as objects of desire than heroes or villains (Avery-Natale 2013, 79). While this is a poor portrayal of the wide spectrum of shapes and sizes of the female body, it is important to recognize as a trend that occurs mainstream comics, for the implications it may place on character performance. The female body is frequently viewed in comic works as a symbolic expression of femininity, depicting them as strong due to their superhuman abilities, but not to the point of having a bodybuilder appearance, for fear that it would detract from their femininity (Avery-Natale 2013, 81). This is a topic I will further discuss shortly in a separate discussion of femininity and the body. The way artists draw characters influences perceptions of the characters and impact how cosplayers adapt their images, and how their costume and performance is received by others.



Figure 1 Balance of Femininity in Harassment. "Wonder Woman" #279 © DC Comics



With regards to Wonder Woman specifically, Avery-Natale (2013) argues there is a negotiation of femininity further between the costumed identity of Wonder Woman and her alter-ego, Diana Prince. Avery-Natale claims that in the scene depicted in Figure 1, Diana allows her employment superior Phil to force himself on her, because if she revealed her true strength in pushing him away she would have sacrificed her secret identity (Avery-Natale 2013, 90). This puts the female superhero in an incredibly vulnerable position of balancing femininity and gendered expectations. For Avery-Natale, the use of an alter-ego gives the female superhero the ability to maintain femininity, while her hero form takes on more of a bodybuilding artificial femininity (Avery-Natale 2013, 91). To protect her identity, Avery-Natale asserts that Diana and Wonder Woman must choose her expressions of femininity carefully.

### Key Concepts & Theoretical Frameworks

#### *Femininity*

Gender studies scholars Christie Launius and Holly Hassel (2015, 191) define femininity as “socially defined principles associated with the feminine gender.” Theatre scholar Geraldine Harris (1999, 7) defines the term “feminine” as a “contested and unstable” category that requires further analysis. For the purpose of this study, femininity is a characteristic label, usually applied by others towards women, to police the gender binary. From a social constructionist perspective, femininity is defined in opposition to masculinity (Launius and Hassel 2015, 42). In other words, this position determines that what is not masculine is feminine, and that any characteristic must fit within the realm of the two opposing identities. Some of the commonly used characteristics to describe femininity include: passive, “catty,” sensitive, orientation toward others, physically

weaker, compromising, emotionally expressive, submissive, and nurturing (Launius and Hassel 2015, 43).

Many of these characteristics are perceived as negative attributes, at least by Western societies, which emphasizes that feminine attributes are constructed as less valuable. While these attributes are socially expected of women in the binary system, this does not mean that they are not applicable beyond women themselves. In fact, men, boys, and non-binary conforming individuals often face public mocking if they express any levels of femininity, because they are not exhibiting what is understood as the higher valued masculinity. Further, when women attempt to exhibit behaviors that are masculine, this results in what Launius and Hassel (2015, 44) term a gender double standard, or double bind, “whereby women adhering to or rejecting feminine gender norms, risking negative repercussions either way.” This gendered double standard reflects the harsh boundaries that the gender binary system enforces on feminine and masculine behaviors in Western society.

Cultural constructions of feminine characteristics are not only limited to personality features but have also been described as physically how the visual body looks in both structural and cosmetic appearances. Launius and Hassel (2015, 127) observe that “feminine beauty ideals are often not created by women themselves” and that these “norms differ by race and class.” In her discussion on women bodybuilder physiques, gender scholar Anne Balsamo argues that the juxtaposition of significantly muscular women, with long hair and breasts “creates a gender ‘hybrid’ that invokes corporeal codes of femininity as well as of masculinity” (Balsamo 1996, 44). Balsamo (1996, 48) provides a definition of the feminine body, given by judges of bodybuilding contests, as “in regard to muscular development, it must not be carried to the

excess where it resembles the massive muscularity of the male physique.” This exemplifies the social constructionist perspective that assumes the feminine-masculine binary as the norm. The judges’ definition also adheres to qualities like “physically weaker” that was described as feminine by Launius and Hassel, because less musculature equates with less physical strength.

The body has been traditionally recognized as feminine in Western thought, predominantly due to the biological action of birth, but it is relevant to all human experience (Mascia-Lees and Black 2017, 88, 103). Due to this, the body has become a source of gendered discourse. How the body appears in various forms becomes a point of inquiry about sex and gender and what it means for humanity. From Judith Butler’s perspective, the assumption that “gender and sex are biological facts is testament to how deeply our ideas about gender and sex are embedded in the discourses of gender found in different societies” (Mascia-Lees and Black 2017, 69). Thinking about the body as a discourse itself there are several ways to approach understanding the body. For the purposes of this research, it may be useful to narrow bodily discourse to two main concepts: 1) the body as a canvas for art, and 2) embodiment. Cosplays are worn on the body as an alteration to appearance, in some instances this can be viewed as a creation of the body – a development of the body on the artists “own terms” (Mascia-Lees and Black 2017, 91). Even more interesting, however, is the ability of the individual to express embodiment. Gender anthropologists Mascia-Lees and Black (2017, 92), define embodiment as “the idea that the body and mind work together in a process that operates in every human activity,” where the body is “no longer seen as an object but as a subject itself acting in the world.” What is unique about this form of bodily discourse is the ability to think of the body outside a binary structure.

### *Gender Identity*

Gender identity is a highly complex term, however it can be understood as “a person’s gendered sense of self;” whereas gender display is “a presentation of the self as a kind of gendered person” (Launius and Hassel 2015, 28, 192). Gender identity and gender display are the ways in which individuals express their own constructions of gender, and thus gender identity and its display are inherently unique on an individual-basis. Societal constructions of gender may attempt to regulate feminine or masculine gender displays, but the identity is held within. Self-identified labels used today include cisgender, trans, men, women, gender fluid, and many others, and gender identities fall along a spectrum of reality, not into categorized boxes. The key takeaway from gender identity, is that it is how we view our own genders.

The role of gender identity is at the heart of cosplay as a performance. Judith Butler (1988, 519), a gender theorist who developed gender performativity theory, promotes analyzing gender through embodiment and how “bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.” Butler’s ideas (1988, 520) on performative gender identity are reliant on a social audience and often “the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.” Additionally, Butler (1988, 525) argues that the embodiment of gender allows for individuals to “actively embody and, indeed, wear certain cultural significations,” which is also important in this study because it may help to explain why women cosplayers choose specific costumes for their selected characters.

In my own undergraduate thesis research, I argued about the role of gender identity in cosplayers of three DC Comics characters that have been designed as hypersexualized “femme-fatales.” Femme-fatale archetypes generally refer to the sexually alluring criminal woman, a

different type of femininity. In this former research, I concluded that the women who adopted the identities of these characters through their cosplay performance related to the characters on a personal level, fulfilling roles that they may not be able to experience in their own gendered lives (Morrison 2015, 84-86). The women in my previous study often found ways to reinvent the characters within their own gendered identity, as an expansion of themselves. For example, one participant who cosplayed the comic character of Catwoman remarked that that wearing the costume “is a symbol of a temporary identity” (Morrison 2015, 80). When she is in-costume, she shares the gender identity of the character, but when the mask comes off, she reverts to her normal self. This relationship between identity and performance is pivotal to understanding the embodiment of a character.

### *Gender Performativity*

In her examination of performativity through a gendered lens, Butler argued that "gender is not something we have in an unchanging, essentialistic way but rather something we *do* repeatedly, continuously throughout our lives" (Ahearn 2017, 185). Emphasizing that gender is something we do acknowledges the performative aspect of gender, by establishing an action. She further contributes that "performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity as well" (Butler 1988, 528). Society has expectations of what is the norm of a gender, and those who do not fit the mold are subjected to the cruelty of the society that constructed the expectations to begin with.

I also want to reflect on Butler's perception of gender performativity and drag performance. Like Balsamo's description of femininity, Butler believes in corporeality in performativity. She justifies these thoughts in the following statement: "the performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance" (Butler 1990, 187). Here, Butler recognizes a linkage of sex and gender, but to emphasize how the difference between the two in the gendered performance of drag is accepted in its own social atmosphere. It is important to also note that from Butler's perspective on gender performativity, the binary bodily discourse reproduces the body as heterosexual by divisions of what is "natural," while performance has the ability to disrupt the confines of this heteronormative sexuality (Butler 1988, 524).

Butler argues "If gender is performative, then it follows that the reality of gender is itself produced as an effect of the performance," where "we not only see how the norms that govern reality are cited but grasp one of the mechanisms by which reality is reproduced and altered in the course of that reproduction" (Butler 2004, 218). If I am understanding her perspective accurately, it seems that she is arguing gender can be produced in different ways, such as genders outside the binary, through performance, but that these gender performances must be done within the socially constructed reality and repeated until acceptance occurs. While many of Butler's arguments about performativity are acknowledged here, each is informative in understanding how cosplayers are accepted as gendered performers within their community.

Keith McNeal, a psychological anthropologist, completed an ethnographic study of drag performances in an Atlanta club. McNeal contends that gendered performances are a "ritual

performance and highly patterned interactions that take place therein may be able to tell us something about people that they themselves cannot" (McNeal 1999, 366). Drag shows, like cosplay, are not typically seen outside of a specific setting, which is likely because "cultural performances must always be confined to special times and places" (McNeal 1999, 346). This acknowledges a limitation for cosplay performance at comic conventions it is not a constant performance. McNeal further critiques that "contemporary feminist theory and feminist anthropology have taught us that no social actor is ever un-gendered" (McNeal 1999, 350). Within performance gender has a role, regardless of the gender of the actor themselves.

Linguistic anthropologist Teri Silvio (2010) claims that in animation there are voice actors who bring life, gender included, into their performance of their character(s). The relationship between the voice actor and the animated character becomes much like puppet master and puppet (Silvio 2010, 429). Silvio acknowledges the embodied nature of performance and argues that it is a mode for identity construction – as "subcultural identities" (Silvio 2010, 423, 434). The concept of a subcultural identity is important to the study of cosplay because it acknowledges the limit of the identity construction to the performance. Silvio further suggests "embodied performances of masculinity and femininity do not simply materialize and reproduce preexisting social roles, but, over time, construct the identity categories of man and woman" (Silvio 2010, 424). These ideas of femininity create the women characters in animation based on the preexisting constructions of the user or actor.

### *Feminist Theory*

To inform my research, I used feminist theory on a broad scale. Feminist theory is a transformative style of research and seeks to address social change or justice. Another key aspect for feminist theorists, is to draw attention to how intersectional differences influence social contexts (Hesse-Biber 2014, 20). Much like the field of anthropology, feminist scholars are reflexive about their own experiences and how they influence the field. This can partially become a case of auto-ethnography, as “the researcher uses personal lived experiences as the source of ethnographic data” (Buch and Staller 2014, 112). Although I will address this further in my methodology, my own inclusion in this study is minimal. I am not a Wonder Woman cosplayer, and the shared reflections of my cosplay experiences are included when relevant to my participants’ narratives.

### Wonder Woman

The history of Wonder Woman and her character in the literature is also relevant for understanding this research. Wonder Woman is the most recognizable female comic book character in the United States, created in 1941 by a psychologist and co-inventor of the lie detector, William Moulton Marston (Figure 2)(Simonson 2007, 39). Easily identifiable “Wonder Woman’s red, white, and blue costume with its stylized golden eagle calls to mind the flag and American values ... she has become America’s iconic superhero” (Simonson 2007, 17, 57). The character of Wonder Woman has often been portrayed with patriotic symbolism, fighting to bring peace to humanity.





Figure 2 First Cover Appearance of Wonder Woman. "Sensation Comics" #1 © DC Comics

While different interpretations of the character emerged over the years, in the most common Wonder Woman origin story Queen Hippolyta of Themyscira created a clay sculpture of a little girl and begged the Greek goddess Aphrodite to bring her to life. The child named Diana grew up and trained on the island of all women Amazon warriors. The island is hidden from the rest of the world, until an American spy pilot in World War II, Steve Trevor, crash-landed there. Diana then leaves Themyscira to join the war effort. In many adaptations

Themyscira is also referred to as Paradise Island. Throughout the *Wonder Woman* comic book series and tie-ins, Diana forms alliances with fellow heroic icons Batman and Superman and joins the Justice League. She utilizes bullet-proof bracelets, a golden lasso of truth modelled after Marston's lie detector, and in later versions an invisible plane, as she fights many villains throughout the series, including Greek gods and reoccurring rival Cheetah, who coincidentally was a former anthropologist (Simonson 2007, 57).

The character of Wonder Woman had a much deeper background in its original creation. In his recent book, Noah Berlatsky (2015), a writer on comics and culture, aimed to expose the more hidden origins behind Wonder Woman and her creator. According to Berlatsky (2015, 8), in his psychological work, Marston developed his DISC theory – dominance, inducement, submission, and compliance – and he applied it to his creation of Wonder Woman. Marston's DISC theory is demonstrated in the recent biographical film *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women*. Throughout the years that Marston wrote the comic, bondage, extreme violence, and other related imagery were frequent topics. Wonder Woman could be seen chained or subduing others with her own lasso on a regular basis. For Berlatsky (2015, 26), “The fact that *Wonder Woman* is about sex and submission does not mean that it is worthless, just as the fact that romance is (arguably) about sex and submission does not mean that it lacks insight, feminist or otherwise.” Berlatsky recognizes the value in interpreting the character from a feminist perspective and the messages behind her development, and asserts that “for Marston, women are superior to men precisely because they are more loving and more submissive” (2015, 18). What is more important to note, however, is that as historian Jill Lepore describes in her own historical account of Wonder Woman, “Marston insisted that Wonder Woman had to be chained or tied so

that she could free herself – and, symbolically, emancipate herself” (Lepore 2015, 202-203).”

Marston believed in the power of Wonder Woman, because of what he believed about women.

After Marston’s death in 1947, the character was stripped of her super abilities and new storylines were created to display Wonder Woman as having greater agency in leisure. This new interpretation provoked a critique by prominent feminist, Gloria Steinem, who then put Wonder Woman in her classic costume on the first issue cover of *Ms. Magazine* in July 1972 (see Figure 3), where she argued for the return of Diana’s costume and powers for an empowering character (Berlatsky 2015, 3; Simonson 2007, 27). While the extent of bondage decreased in the comics since Marston’s time, including through the revival at Steinem’s request, there will always be criticisms of its intentions. Berlatsky proposes, for example, that “images of disempowerment, then, may be popular with women because they mirror women’s actual disempowerment” (2015, 13). What Steinem, and many of the readers throughout Wonder Woman’s history, identify with however, are more likely the questions of how the character can break free and overcome what seeks to limit her.

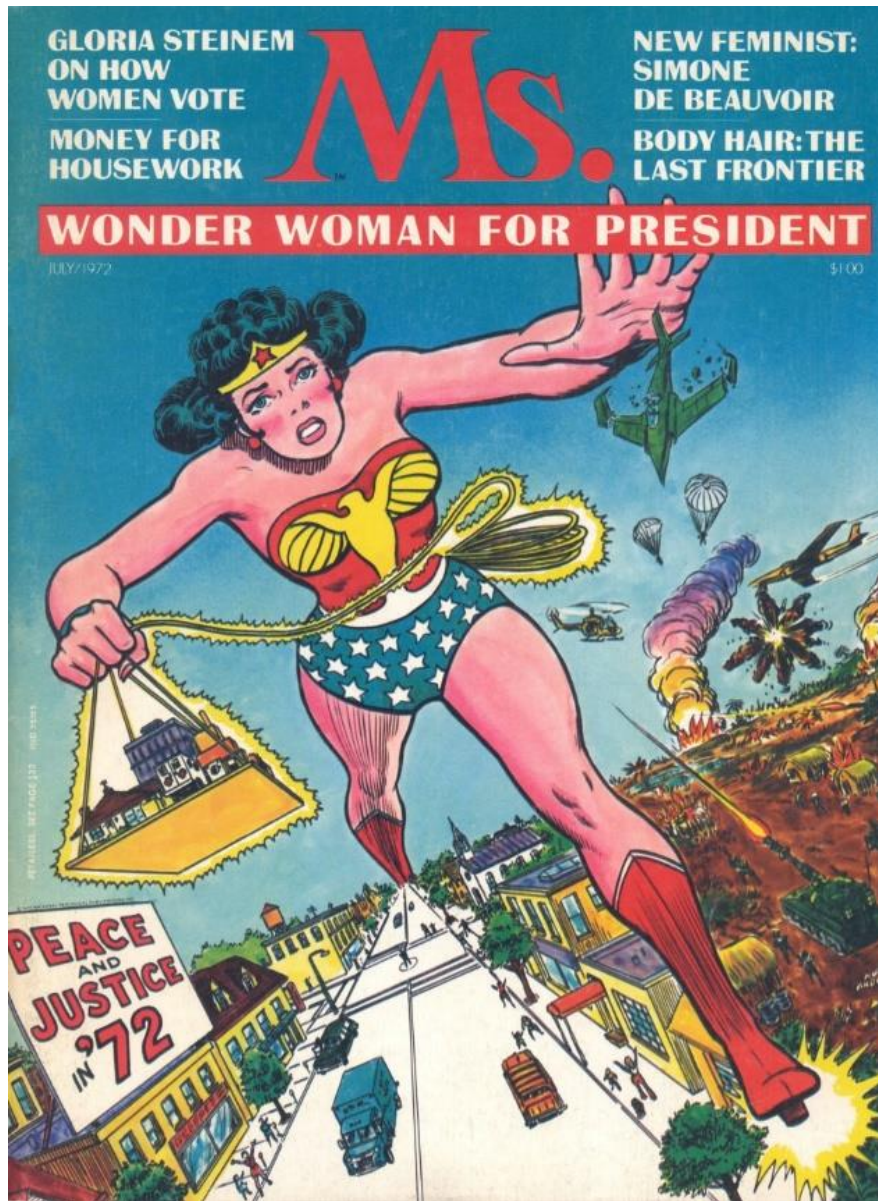


Figure 3 Ms. Magazine #1 (Steinem 1972).

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The question I approached my research with was: To what extent do cosplayers embody or identify with Wonder Woman as a potential feminist icon? I conducted ethnographic field research at local comic book conventions in Florida, Georgia, and Washington from May 2018 through March 2019. To study cosplay, my primary research methods were participant observation, semi-structured interviews, extensive field notes, and textual and visual analysis. I designed this study in method and theory by drawing on my education and knowledge from both the Anthropology M.A. and Gender Studies Certificate programs at the University of Central Florida.

### Participant Observation

Participant observation as an anthropological technique allowed me to see interactions with cosplayers, as well as develop a more significant understanding of the cosplay process. What makes the data from participant observation so essential to gaining this perspective is the way that researchers go beyond seeing, toward experiencing alongside those under study (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 92). Cosplay is performed at comic book conventions and these are the primary locations to observe and interact with cosplayers in their own community environment. Cosplay is rarely performed outside the convention setting, and as such it remains the primary location for fieldwork. At conventions cosplayers can interact with other cosplayers, celebrities, and convention attendees. I observed this dynamic primarily within the convention setting and when I shared a room with cosplayers at DragonCon. Comic book conventions are a

unique research site as they last for a few days and are open to the public, therefore they are not exclusive to the cosplay community. The conventions I attended are represented in Table 1.

*Table 1 List of conventions attended.*

| <b><u>Convention</u></b> | <b><u>Location</u></b>   | <b><u>Date(s) Attended</u></b>                             |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| MegaCon Orlando          | Orlando, Florida         | May 25 <sup>th</sup> , 2018                                |
| Ocala Comic Con          | Ocala, Florida           | June 23 <sup>rd</sup> , 2018                               |
| Florida SuperCon         | Fort Lauderdale, Florida | July 12 <sup>th</sup> – 15 <sup>th</sup> , 2018            |
| Tampa Bay Comic Con      | Tampa, Florida           | August 3 <sup>rd</sup> – 5 <sup>th</sup> , 2018            |
| DragonCon                | Atlanta, Georgia         | August 31 <sup>st</sup> – September 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 2018 |
| Tampa Bay MegaCon        | Tampa, Florida           | September 21 <sup>st</sup> – 23 <sup>rd</sup> , 2018       |
| WasabiCon                | Jacksonville, Florida    | October 21 <sup>st</sup> , 2018                            |
| Dreamhack Atlanta        | Atlanta, Georgia         | November 16 <sup>th</sup> – 17 <sup>th</sup> , 2018        |
| Orlando Toy & Comic Con  | Orlando, Florida         | January 26 <sup>th</sup> , 2019                            |
| Emerald City Comic Con   | Seattle, Washington      | March 14 <sup>th</sup> , 2019                              |

For anyone who has not been to a comic book convention, it is difficult to imagine how it would appear. Most conventions are held at large convention centers or in small connected hotel ballrooms and hallways. From the outside of the building, there is nothing unique other than maybe a sign or people directing parking or ticketing. However, of the attendees walking into the building there are people dressed in costumes to cosplay from anything imaginable – comics, anime, movies, video games, etc. Attendees in costume tend to be around one-third of the people entering the building, while others are usually wearing graphic t-shirts with jeans or shorts. This is a safe estimate, but it is always possible that some everyday wear appearing outfits could also be a costume for a character not as easily recognizable. Costumes of specific characters usually

fluctuate based on the celebrity guests attending the convention. For example, when Matthew Lewis attended one of the conventions, I saw more *Harry Potter* themed cosplays, Ariel the *Little Mermaid* cosplays for Jodi Benson, and Marty McFly from the *Back to the Future* series for Michael J. Fox, etc.

Once you enter the convention, past ticketing booths and security, at the larger conventions, guests first experience what is called the show room, or show floor. The show room is where hundreds of vendors have booths displaying their wares for attendees to view. The space of the venue determines the amount of vendor booths available, but usually there are 5-20 narrow aisles that convention attendees navigate through. This can be difficult when there is high attendance at the convention, especially MegaCon Orlando, as well as when there are oversized or delicate cosplayer costumes to work around, such as a Hawkgirl cosplayer I saw at Florida SuperCon with large wings. It is also usually very loud, making it difficult to talk with other guests in this area. In addition to vendors' booths, there is usually a section of the show floor dedicated for food vendors with a dining area and photo prop areas that usually include custom *Star Wars* films droids, the Ecto Machine from the *Ghostbusters* films, or the DeLorean time machine from the *Back to the Future* films, amongst other iconic popular culture props. The last part of the show floor is a celebrity guest section. These guests are usually set up at folding tables with banners behind them so you can see who they are from afar. In this section, fans line up to pay for autographs and non-professional pictures. However, if the celebrity guest is at a table, not secluded behind curtains, anyone can wait in line and just meet and briefly talk with them at no cost.

The last section of the convention is the panel rooms. These are additional rooms where workshops, lectures, and additional small events are held. Usually there are rooms dedicated to a local science center, for learning how to play various card or board games, as well as rooms arranged for a lecture hall style setting. In these rooms, it is common for local artists, authors, or professional cosplayers attending the convention to give presentations and answer questions from the community. Depending on the topic, I have seen a range of 5-50 people in attendance for these. For example, one of the panels I attended was “Introduction to Molding Props” where the panelist spoke about his success selling props made from silicone and clay, while giving tips about certain brands and techniques for those starting to learn (field notes, 07/12/2018). However, the most frequented panel room is what is referred to as the main stage. In the main stage room, there is usually a small stage put together with chairs for a large audience. There are primarily two functions for this room, 1) for the cosplay competition, 2) for moderators to interview and control audience questions from celebrity guests. For lecture-style panels and celebrity panels, events usually change every 1-2 hours. While my description is not all-inclusive, this is the general layout and format for most comic book conventions, with variations usually based on venue.

### Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are most appropriate for qualitative data collection. My semi-structured interviews followed an Interview Guide format (Appendix D), which allowed me more fluidity through subtle probing prompts, but addressed key topics as well (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 139, 145-150; Fetterman 2010, 40-41). I interviewed 19 participants (Table 2) –



13 who are Wonder Woman cosplayers, 2 who are currently working on constructing their Wonder Woman cosplays, and 4 long-time cosplayers with substantial experience within the community. All of whom are represented by pseudonyms here, for their privacy. My collected interviews ranged from 7-72 minutes in length. I recorded all interviews with the permission of the participants on a cellular device application, with security measures of two different passcodes and a fingerprint/facial scan.

*Table 2 Participant Details*

| <b><u>Pseudonym</u></b> | <b><u>Interview Date</u></b> | <b><u>Communication Style &amp; Location</u></b> | <b><u>Cosplay Details</u></b>  |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|--|--|
| Rachel                  | 7/14/2018                    | In-person, Florida SuperCon                      | Costume based on Gal Gadot Wonder Woman design. Leather, wig, corset, and heeled boots used.   |
| Sandra                  | 7/14/2018                    | In-person, Florida SuperCon                      | Original design, with elements from Lynda Carter Wonder Woman costume, such as the tiara and cuffs of metallic gold with a red star. Uses a cape, sword, boned corset, and star-patterned bikini over spandex. Natural hair kept, no wig.  |
| Colton                  | 7/14/2018                    | In-person, Florida SuperCon                      | Non-Wonder Woman cosplayer, dressed as Mr. Freeze. Specializes in LED lighting and fog machine techniques  |
| Olivia                  | 7/14/2018                    | In-person, Florida SuperCon                      | Modelled after the DC Bombshells Wonder Woman design. Costume uses cotton-based fabrics and painted foam. Has other original costume variants based on same design – such as swimsuit and slumber party. Has also done pin-up, New 52, and Gal Gadot Wonder Woman costumes previously. |
| Peggy                   | 8/4/2018                     | In-person, Tampa Bay Comic Con                   | Costume based on Gal Gadot Wonder Woman design. Leather, wig, corset, and heeled boots used.   |
| Dennis                  | 8/15/2018                    | Observed at Tampa Bay Comic Con,                 | Gender-bent Wonder Woman costume, incorporates leather themed  |

| <u>Pseudonym</u>      | <u>Interview Date</u> | <u>Communication Style &amp; Location</u>                             | <u>Cosplay Details</u>  |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|---|---|
| Dennis<br>(continued) | 8/15/2018             | interviewed via Skype   | motorcycle jacket, dark jeans with star patches down the legs, red converse sneakers, a graphic tee with the Wonder Woman logo, a golden lasso, and a silver tiara with red gem.  |
| Victoria              | 8/22/2018             | In-person at the University of Central Florida, observed at DragonCon | Magical girl inspired version of Wonder Woman, based on a fan art design. Design incorporates key elements like color scheme, sword, wig for long black hair, gauntlets, arm cuff, and tiara. Tights are also used in the costume.            |
| Brenna                | 9/20/2018             | Mutual contact, interview via phone                                   | Costume based on the New 52 Wonder Woman design, incorporating armor pieces.  |
| Linda                 | 10/4/2018             | Mutual contact, interview via phone                                   | Original inspired 1940's/WWII bomber pilot costume design. Used official war memorabilia from a relative to help construct the costume with authenticity.   |
| Jess                  | 10/21/2018            | In-person double interview, WasabiCon                                 | Has performed numerous variants of Wonder Woman costumes, some of the same costume to try to improve each design. Some costumes include the Gal Gadot Wonder Woman with leather-working, Wonder Woman Odyssey, and an original lazy day look. |
| Charlotte             | 10/21/2018            | In-person double interview, WasabiCon                                 | Has performed a few different Wonder Woman costumes, such as a Lynda Carter Wonder Woman based design and the New 52 initial pants design. Has used corset techniques.  |
| Oliver                | 1/11/2019             | In-person at Barnes and Noble Cafe                                    | Non-Wonder Woman cosplayer. Specializes in leather-working techniques. Frequently cosplays Green Arrow, Hawkeye, and Batman.  |
| Irene                 | 1/20/2019             | Observed at prior conventions, interview via Skype                    | Non-Wonder Woman cosplayer. Specializes in found-item cosplays. Frequently cosplays Jessica Jones, Rosa, and Faith.   |

| <u>Pseudonym</u> | <u>Interview Date</u> | <u>Communication Style &amp; Location</u>          | <u>Cosplay Details</u>  |
|------------------|-----------------------|--|---|
| Grant            | 1/21/2019             | In-person at Barnes and Noble Cafe                 | Working on his Wonder Woman costume, it will be based on Gal Gadot Wonder Woman design. Leather, wig, corset, and heeled boots used.  |
| Athena           | 1/24/2019             | Observed at Dreamhack Atlanta, interview via Phone | Costume based on Gal Gadot Wonder Woman design. Leather, corset, and heeled boots used. Natural hair, not wig, present.   |
| Rebecca          | 1/25/2019             | Mutual contact, interview via Phone                | Working on her Wonder Woman costume, it will be an original design based on a 1950's hoop skirt look.   |
| Miranda          | 1/27/2019             | Observed at Florida SuperCon, interview via Phone  | Costume based on Gal Gadot Wonder Woman design. Leather, corset, wig, and heeled boots used.  |
| Arthur           | 1/28/2019             | In-person at Barnes and Noble Café                 | Non-Wonder Woman cosplayer. Known for many different cosplays, as he has been active for almost two decades. His most popular costumes include several <i>Star Wars</i> characters, James Bond, Iron Man, and numerous versions of Aquaman. |
| Lucy             | 2/1/2019              | Observed at Florida SuperCon, interview via Phone  | Costume based on Gal Gadot Wonder Woman design. Leather, wig, corset, and heeled boots used. Visually brighter colors were adapted to original design.  |

### *Field Notes*

I utilized field notes to document experiences of both my observations and thoughts, but not in front of participants, as some participants could have become concerned or self-conscious about what I was writing about them (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 163). Field notes are a useful tool for developing analysis from observations, not only in initial reactions but throughout the

research process (Fetterman 2010, 116). At each convention, I took notes at panels I attended, my schedule for the day, and what I observed and experienced.

### *Textual and Visual Analysis*

There have been many different iterations of Wonder Woman in popular culture that have shaped the way she is viewed, some of which I have included in this work as textual and visual data. Feminist media research, such as in film, is used to examine power structures, gender characterizations, and ideological changes, with a goal of “instigating positive social change” (McIntosh and Cuklanz, 2014, 267). I analyzed comic books, films, and other Wonder Woman themed material culture throughout the study to develop a firm history of the character as source material for cosplayers. Being aware of my own influences or assumptions from this material, was also pivotal to maintaining a feminist perspective (McIntosh and Cuklanz 2014, 265). Images I selected that are represented were approved by DC Comics and independent artists (Appendices E and F).

### *Sampling and Recruitment*

I recruited participants for this study in the convention setting or through networking with other cosplayers. My sample consisted of 19 cosplayers. This was lower than my anticipated sample size of 30 cosplayers. Halfway through data collection, I sought-out some non-Wonder Woman cosplayers to interview to help bridge this gap. I contacted any professional cosplayers who have performed Wonder Woman at the conventions I attended, through contact requests with the event manager, at their personal booths during off-time, or through social media, rather than approaching the cosplayers while on “stage.” All participation in this research was

voluntary, and there was no compensation to participants. Included participants were initially cosplayers of the character Wonder Woman, including known past performances, but also included some additional non-Wonder Woman cosplayers. The sample consisted of 13 Wonder Woman cosplayers, 2 cosplayers working on Wonder Woman costumes currently, and 4 non-Wonder Woman cosplayers. Excluded participants were minors under the age of 18 and initially cosplayers who had not performed the character Wonder Woman. This was modified in the interest of further data collection. I provided all participants with an Explanation of Research consent form (Appendix B), detailing the objectives of the study and their rights as participants. I obtained verbal consent, rather than written, for additional confidentiality of participants (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 216-219). I obtained written consent for cosplayers willing to let me use their photographs (Appendix C).

### Data Analysis

I transcribed and coded all interviews. I have also analyzed my field notes for observational data. Within the coding process, I identified three key themes of empowerment, identity, community. Utilizing themes or patterns allowed for a recognition of trends in beliefs or concerns amongst cosplayers. Coding for themes exposes related varying viewpoints and meanings (Buch and Staller 2014, 137; DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 189; Fetterman 2010, 97). Due to my personal connection to cosplay, I remained open and reflexive (McIntosh and Lisa Cuklanz, 2014, 288), and ensured that any of my assumptions made were verifiable by other members of the cosplay community. I accounted for this through the process of triangulation, to test the information I gathered against those being interviewed (Fetterman 2010, 94-95). Due to

my role as a cosplayer, I relied on my scholarly ethnographic perspective to “denaturalize taken-for-granted aspects” of my own social experiences (Buch and Staller 2014, 112). My use of an insider approach to analysis provided a greater depth in understanding, that an outsider would not see from the same angle, while providing the challenge of maintaining scholarly distance (Clifford 1986, 9; Sherif 2001, 438).

### Reflexivity

I first began my own cosplay journey to fully experience participant observation in my undergraduate Honors in the Major thesis research (Morrison 2015). It was an experience I found so beautiful, fun, and fulfilling that I have continued to do since 2014. In this project, I knew that I would need to learn how to balance my now more developed role within the community to that of an objective researcher. Any of my claims or assumptions are derived from my data, and not from familiarity with the role. By paying special attention to detail, I addressed this concern with autoethnographic practices about things which may seem common but might not get recorded in field notes (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 168). Having an insider perspective is useful in terms of access to the population, especially when the opposing perspectives of “self” and “other” are blurred (Sherif 2001, 438).

During my time in the field, I cosplayed three different characters – Cheetah, Michelle, and Loki. Each of these characters are distinct and embodying them through cosplay provided me diverse participant observation opportunities, which are discussed in more detail in the epilogue section of the concluding chapter. While in costume, I was in a covert role, because other cosplayers would not be able to differentiate me from any other attendee (DeWalt and

DeWalt 2011, 32). I did not perform a cosplay each day of the conventions I attended. There were many days when I wore daily apparel. I wanted to observe if there was a difference in reception by my participants between when I interacted with them in costume and regularly. There was no noticeable difference in the interactions.

In the following three chapters, I will share the stories and beliefs of fellow cosplayers. In “Chapter Four: A Model for Empowerment, A Model of Feminism,” I analyze the role of empowerment and Wonder Woman as a potential feminist icon as perceived by Wonder Woman cosplayers. In “Chapter Five: Will the Real Diana Please Stand Up?” I explore how Wonder Woman cosplayers connect with the identity of the character, at various levels. Finally, in “Chapter Six: The Community Around Her,” I reveal how the wider cosplay community receives Wonder Woman cosplayers, the character itself, as well as issues within the community that influence many cosplayers. The stories and quotes I share in these chapters are the unique perspectives of the cosplayers who participated and all of them are Wonder Woman to me.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: A MODEL FOR EMPOWERMENT, A MODEL OF FEMINISM**

Empowerment and feminism are both terms that have layers of meaning behind them. They are not simply defined, nor do individuals come to a likely agreement on their meaning and influence. Both terms, however, are essential for understanding what Wonder Woman means to the people who don her costume and to the people who see these performances. In this chapter, I interpret the meaning of the terms empowerment and feminism in relation to the character of Wonder Woman according to my research participants who cosplay her.

### A Role Model for All

One concept that I asked each of my participants was whether they felt Wonder Woman was a good role model in general. Especially around Halloween, it is not uncommon for children to dress up as their favorite heroes or people they admire. I wanted to understand if the people who cosplayed as her felt as if she was a character worth the admiration of people – someone to they should aspire to be. All the participants I spoke with agreed that she is a good role model, but in varying ways – frequently using the terms “strong” and “independent” to characterize her. This initial consensus is important because it builds a foundational understanding of the type of character Wonder Woman should be.

Although all the cosplayers agreed that she is a good role model, in some extent or form, I focus more narrowly on two perspectives here. The first comes from Linda, who stated: “Of course a strong female is always a good role model to girls, but she’s a good model to men as well” (Linda, interviewed 10/4/2018). Linda did not elaborate why she feels men also benefit



from having Wonder Woman as a role model, but I am more interested in her perspective of the “strong female.” In an article about feminism and empowerment programs in Ugandan NGOs, anthropologist Erin Moore (2016) conveys that international understandings of empowerment are often based on the work of philosopher Paulo Freire. From this Freirian perspective “the empowerment process begins only with the realization of one’s disempowerment, that is to say, of one’s position of powerlessness” (Moore 2016, 376). Feminist scholars Lucy Gilbert and Paula Webster (1991, 45) agree with Moore as they argue: “While power is the reward for doing masculinity well, powerlessness is the reward for doing femininity well.” From Linda’s point of view a “strong female,” is a recognition that many other female characters are not considered on the same level, and in a position of disempowerment. By utilizing the adjective of “strong,” Linda directs a state of expectation that both girls and boys should strive to have through her statement – girls should overcome weaknesses and gain the power to be like Wonder Woman and men should respect them as equally strong counterparts.

Cosplayers are not the only ones who feel that Wonder Woman reaches across gendered dimensions as a role model. Carolyn Cocca (2014, 98), political science, economics, and law scholar, argues that the performed traditional “masculine” and “feminine” qualities in Wonder Woman “highlights the instability of the categories and creates space for gender hybridization.” Cocca believes that Wonder Woman is appealing to people regardless of gender, because of her development on a spectrum of gendered qualities. Cocca (2014, 98) drew this conclusion after referring to a quote by the first-female editor for Wonder Woman, Karen Berger, that the work on the series written by George Perez (Figure 4) “crosses the gender line.” These attributes are

not only present in the series by Perez, but across the span of Wonder Woman comics as a part of her character design, likely influencing many cosplayers in their performances.

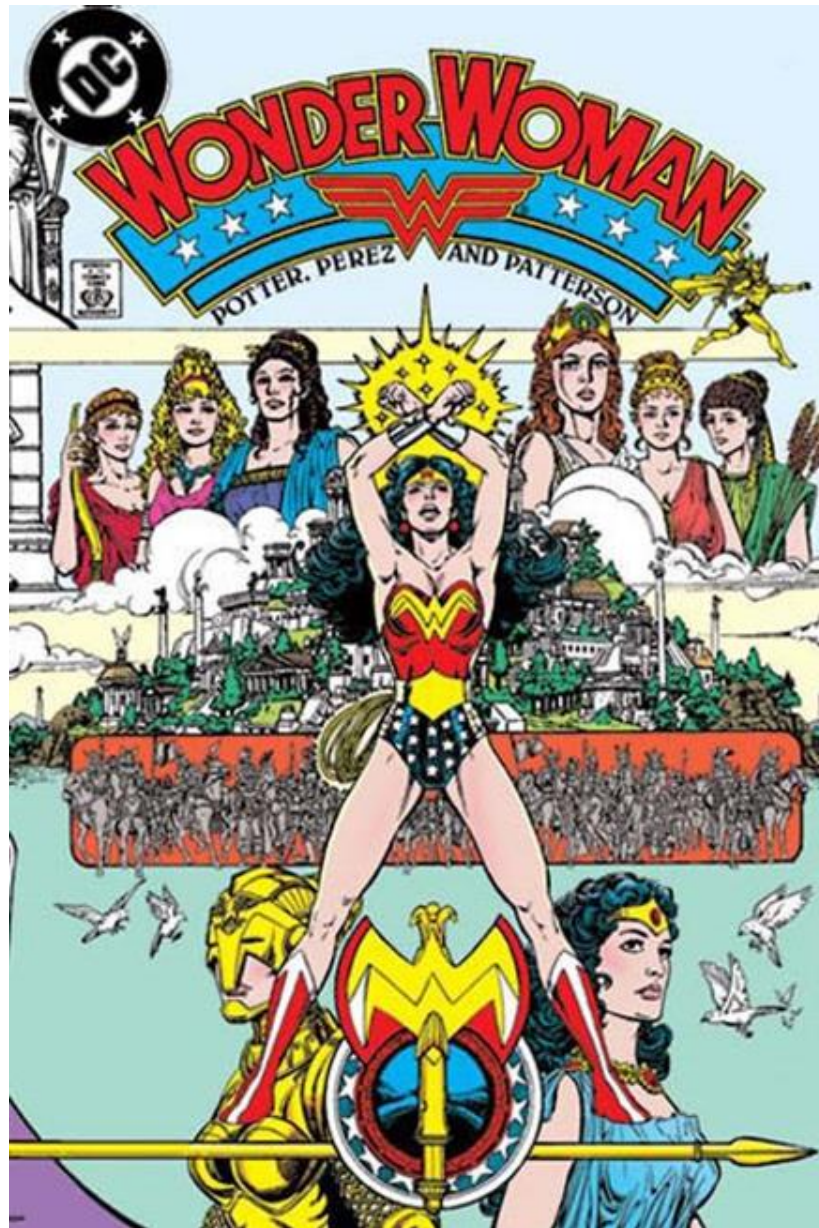


Figure 4 George Perez's Wonder Woman. "Wonder Woman" #1 © DC Comics.

Victoria, a veteran cosplayer in her mid-20s, makes a similar point to Linda about men and women both looking up to Wonder Woman, but she differs on the point of strength:

I think she's a great role model for so many. For me, I really like that so many artists now are showing her not just as white, and I think that she represents so many things for women and girls. For me it's hard to say she's a bad role model because she's so much more than her strength. She has to be level-headed, you know, she uses the lasso of truth, she makes people be honest... I think those are qualities we look-up to or want to emulate in some sort of way... She's not just a good role model for women, she's a great role model for men as well. (Victoria, interviewed 8/22/2018).

In her explanation, Victoria is more assertive about qualities, such as honesty and level-headedness, that make Wonder Woman a role model "for so many." Victoria does not deny the role of strength in Wonder Woman's character with this statement, but she is asserting that there are more factors to consider when aspiring to be Wonder Woman. She also recognizes the inclusion of men, like Linda, but adds that the increased diversity in artist renditions of her also reach a wider audience of aspirants. I will discuss diversity in Wonder Woman cosplay further in the next chapter, but it is important to recognize that from Victoria's perspective, the variety in adaptations of Wonder Woman's character helps qualities reach audiences who previously may not have felt connected to her.

### *Women and Girls*

Any civilization that does not recognize the female is doomed to destruction. Women are the wave of the future and sisterhood is stronger than anything (Lynda Carter as *Wonder Woman*, Pilot Episode "The New Original Wonder Woman," Airdate 11/7/1975).

More than any other response, Wonder Woman is a character relatable to women and young girls, according to my participants. The narratives in my research show that cosplaying Wonder Woman appears to be much like a sisterhood, as described in the *Wonder Woman* quote above. Cosplaying Wonder Woman inadvertently serves to create a community of support

amongst women and girls in the cosplay. Not only is Wonder Woman viewed as a role model, but as a symbol of solidarity.

Victoria, the cosplayer I introduced in the previous section, felt the power of this communal relationship. As a fan of Japanese anime, her cosplay (Figure 5) was based on an artist rendition of Wonder Woman as a magical girl.<sup>2</sup> The uncommon version of her costume choice, however, did not affect the recognizability of the character:

For women constantly, and little girls, I had them come up to me and tell me how much they loved the character. It was all women, of all kinds. That's what astounded me, was how transitional she was across everything. It didn't matter age, what background or race, every single woman or girl that I came across – I mean, even if they didn't say anything, heads were turning, or they'd smile. And it was just so unique to see that. I've never seen a character before where it transitioned over so many different types of women and girls. For me, through them, it was like having my own kind of magic moment. It kind of strengthened and reinforced me wanting to wear that costume, because it not only meant so much to me but it meant so much to others, other women (Victoria, interviewed 8/22/2018).

Victoria extends her surprise and appreciation of the diversity of women to whom Wonder Woman appeals. However, in this quote, she is reflective on how it shapes her own role as the character that is received well by the audience of women and girls. Therefore, she feels empowered herself, and compelled to continue portraying Wonder Woman.

This concept of supporting other women is not unique to Victoria. Olivia (interviewed 7/14/2018), a cosplayer who is part of the large themed group The Bombshells Cosplay<sup>3</sup>, remarked “Every time I see another Wonder Woman cosplayer, I'm like ‘Yes girl, work it!’”

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<sup>2</sup> Magical girl is a common genre of many Japanese manga and anime titles, where young girls and women have either superhuman or supernatural abilities. The use of this genre often shows women as fighters against evil forces, much like superheroines. The most arguably popular example of the magical girl genre is the *Sailor Moon* series.

<sup>3</sup> The Bombshells Cosplay is a Central Florida cosplay group consisting of 20-30 women who perform cosplays of the DC Bombshells retro pin-up style character variants, as designed by artist Ant Lucia.

This quote reflects the positivity The Bombshells Cosplay group promotes, which includes body positivity, where size does not matter for someone to be a bombshell of a woman. Cocca (2016, 52) contends that the bombshell version of Wonder Woman is as an “active agent in her own stories.” Olivia also noted that Wonder Woman cosplayers are her favorites because of the community feeling it fosters amongst them. She further believes in the power of making women feel encouraged in their cosplays and confident in their performances of a character she “aspires to be.”



*Figure 5 Victoria's Magical Girl Wonder Woman. Photo Credit: Masumi Senpai.*

Unlike Victoria and Olivia, Grant, a gender-bending cosplayer who is currently working on his Wonder Woman costume, felt the impact of Wonder Woman as a role model had a much narrower audience. When directly ask about Wonder Woman's target audience, he reported:

I probably think more towards little girls, because it is probably better for them to have some role model growing up than it is women. I don't know, I guess I already feel like women have their established personalities as they're growing up, while little girls don't. So, they still have that time to I guess change and mold their personality, so it makes more sense. (Grant, interviewed 1/21/2019)

Grant's perspective is interesting because he appears to not think adult women benefit from having role models. While it is logical that a role model like Wonder Woman would be more important in a child's formative years, many of the other cosplayers in this study still express looking up to her as adults. I think everyone looks towards someone else, real or fictional, to model our own lives and decisions after, and that it does not stop when we pass through an invisible barrier into adulthood. This is not to take away from Grant's perspective, however, because it is a valid point that the largest audience for Wonder Woman as a character are young girls. In fact, during my research, I saw twice as many girls wearing Wonder Woman outfits as adult or adolescent cosplayers.

One way that DC Comics connects with girls about Wonder Woman is through their recent partnership with the Girl Scouts of America for their Cookie Pro contest. According to the Girl Scouts Press Room website:

In just a few months, Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA) will team up with the *DC Super Hero Girls* to inspire more girls to participate in the Girl Scout Cookie Program, the largest girl-led entrepreneurship program in the world. The program gives girls real-world experiences managing money, setting goals, meeting deadlines, learning the basics of marketing to customers, and having fun as they learn and earn. This year, Warner Bros. and DC Entertainment will collaborate with GSUSA to foster the female leaders of tomorrow through the 2019 Cookie Pro contest. Using the power of the *DC Super Hero Girls*, the contest will inspire

Girl Scouts to be smart and courageous as everyday Super Heroes (Girl Scouts of the USA Press Room 2018).

This press release is interesting because it comes from an organization that already focuses on the empowerment of girls ages 6-17 and attempts to match it with girl characters, including Wonder Woman, as an inspiration for their development skills. Including an organization with an additional interest that the girls can relate to is a moving partnership. As a lifetime member of Girl Scouts, I have had plenty of my own experiences selling cookies and having a model like Wonder Woman to look at as “courageous” would have felt inspiring to me.

The *DC Super Hero Girls* was created as a series of animated shorts and graphic novels. According to Brenna, a Wonder Woman cosplayer and mother of a 3-year-old girl, *DC Super Hero Girls* reaches a younger target audience of girls who are interested in female-based groups in a high school setting, like *Monster High* and *Ever After High*. Brenna is concerned about the extent of oversexualization, “large unrealistic breast sizes,” and adult themes that some, but not all, artists have depicted in the *Wonder Woman* comics and so she is very careful about what comics she gives her daughter who frequently dresses up as Wonder Woman herself (interviewed 9/20/2018). She felt, like Girl Scouts, that *DC Super Hero Girls* demonstrates a more positive image to younger audiences. Despite her concerns, Brenna argues that Wonder Woman is a role model to girls because she shows them “that they can be strong, badass, and feminine.” This comment again highlights the perception that there is a need for women to be empowered, in particular through physical strength.

Embodying or admiring the strength of Wonder Woman appears to be one aspect of empowerment. Based on my research, I also believe that the community of sisterhood, whether it is with the convention attendees or the Girl Scouts, helps develop the qualities that make Wonder

Woman a role model. The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media and J. Walter Thompson Company (seejane.org, 2016) “finds that 90% of women globally feel that female role models in film or TV are important, 61% said female role models in film and TV have been influential in their lives and 58% said that women have been inspired to be more ambitious or assertive.” This cross-cultural survey was conducted in Brazil, China, India, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Russia, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the U.S. with 4,300 women. Looking at this survey, it is important to understand that a visual character, like Wonder Woman, can have a significant impact on viewers. Looking beyond the audience of girls, I now turn to the core part of my research inquiry – whether Wonder Woman can be perceived as a feminist icon by those who perform her.

### The Feminist Icon

To assess if cosplayers view Wonder Woman as a feminist icon there are multiple aspects to consider. Firstly, as I made clear in my questions to my participants, everyone offered their own definition of feminism. As a result, I asked many of my participants what it meant to them, when they did not clarify on their own, because I did not want to misrepresent their understanding of the concept. Secondly, the meanings of feminism have also changed over time, including three waves of feminism,<sup>4</sup> with additional branches, like black feminism. As my participants ranged in age from their 20s-60s, what feminism means to them could be vastly

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<sup>4</sup> The three official waves of feminism, in brevity are explained by Launius and Hassel (2015, 12-15). The first wave (1850’s-1950’s) focused on women’s suffrage and rights in property and marriage. The second wave (1960’s-1980’s) focused on reproductive rights and justice, with Roe v. Wade and Title IX being of major importance. The third wave (1990’s-Present) developed a more rounded approach with attention to intersectionality, LGBTQ+ rights, and international concerns like female genital mutilation and sex-selection.



different. Finally, not only has my participants' exposure to feminism influenced them, but the variations of Wonder Woman over time have as well. A lot has changed for women since 1941, and her representations would be reflective of that perspective.

Contemporary gender scholars Launius and Hassel (2015, 191) broadly define feminism as "the social and political movement advocating for women's equality." However, it is also important to recognize that women's rights are advocated in culturally-specific ways. Most of the cosplayers I spoke with equated feminism with equality for women. However, many more connected it to being "strong" and "independent" women as well. Some of the cosplayers proudly declared they are feminists and that they felt Wonder Woman was too, prior to my asking, while a few others were unsure of what it really meant or avoided the label of being feminist.

For example, Olivia remarked "To me it means, female empowerment and regardless of your ethnicity, or class, or whatever it is, it's females rising to power, becoming equal to men and other people" (interviewed 7/14/2018). It is important to distinguish, however, that this rise in power that Olivia and other cosplayers mention is about women's equality. This sentiment is echoed further by Linda in her definition:

Equality is big part of it. I believe feminism is not being put on a pedestal. It's not being set out as a separate class. It's more we are equal, we're different but equal, and that is in all aspects of life, parenting, working from home, chores, all of that we are equal with it. So I view it as that fight to make sure we get our equal share (interviewed 10/4/2018).

Linda's view of equality as a "fight" is a part of what makes feminism political and controversial (Launius and Hassel 2015, 8). It is a fight in feminism because attaining equality involves upsetting the status quo of inequality that has been present since the beginning of modern human

life. Regarding this matter, prominent feminist scholar Gloria Steinem (1991, 142) claimed:

“Any woman who chooses to behave like a full human being should be warned that the armies of the status quo will treat her as something of a dirty joke. That’s their natural and first weapon.

She will need *sisterhood*.” The definitions of feminism given by the cosplayers I spoke to generally focus on the concept of equality, but the subtle details are illuminating as to what this means for Wonder Woman and her performance. Specifically, feminist self-identifying Victoria describes in detail the relationship between Wonder Woman and feminism:

I think she really is a feminist icon. She’s just herself and she tries to stand for what’s right and I think that’s what feminism is – you know, you just try to do what’s right by everybody and you don’t exclude anyone. You do what you can for every single person. It’s more than just equality, its equity for everybody. And that’s truly the difference between Wonder Woman and other, so many other feminist icons in comics and such. They get equality, but they don’t get equity. And that’s such a unique difference for Wonder Woman to have. I think feminists are always trying to fight for others. They’re trying to make things better. That’s a quality of course that Wonder Woman has. She’s always trying to fight for others, she’s never really fighting for herself. That’s a quality that’s unique to feminists. Yes, there’s something that got us into this social movement that was important to us but at the same time, once you’re in it you wanna do it not just for yourself, but for others around you. And I think that’s really important and unique to why Wonder Woman is such a good feminist icon (interviewed 8/22/2018).

Victoria makes an important distinction in how she feels Wonder Woman and feminism are connected through equality and equity. Equality across people assumes that they started on the same level. Equity, on the other hand, recognizes that not everyone began with at the same level, and favors different support levels for different groups of people. Through this distinction, Victoria is making an insightful claim about the gender politics Wonder Woman influences, that many other comic book women do not. From her perspective, neither Wonder Woman nor feminists are selfish, because they look beyond their own interests for the good of everyone’s chance at equity. It is important to note here that the idea of feminists being selfish or not is

historically contested and can be viewed from both positions. Victoria's assumption that feminists are not selfish is reflective of her understanding of feminism as an egalitarian concept.

*The Warrior vs. the Damsel – Gender Roles at Play*

On Paradise Island, there are only women. Because of this pure environment we are able to develop our minds and our physical skills unhampered by masculine destructiveness (Lynda Carter as *Wonder Woman*, Season 1 Episode 2 "Fausta: The Nazi Wonder Woman," Airdate: 4/28/1976).

The quote above from the *Wonder Woman* television series focuses on the unique situation of the way Wonder Woman's character was formed. From her origins, she grew up surrounded by warrior women, amazons specifically, and was not exposed to men until Steve Trevor crash-landed on the island. This concept of Wonder Woman not being aware of a difference in gender roles, because she had not been raised in a society which enforces them on a structural level, was an eye-opening revelation to my understanding of the character.

The first cosplayer to make me aware of Wonder Woman's innocence to gender roles was Olivia (Figure 6). When asked if she believed Wonder Woman was a feminist icon, she responded:

She was born and grew up with an island full of women, so as far as a feminist icon, she knows what it's like to live without gender roles. So, when she comes here to America, or wherever she goes, she's independent. She's like 'What is this? I don't understand why it's different for men and for women.' As far as feminism, she's the epitome of it because she doesn't know what it's like to live in a man's world (interviewed 07/14/2018).



Figure 6 Olivia as Bombshell Wonder Woman. Photo taken by author.

Olivia insightfully reflects that Wonder Woman begins to experience the limitations of structural gender roles, when she previously had no conceptualization of it. One example of this occurs in the *Wonder Woman* (2017), when Etta is tasked with dressing Diana in clothing that is deemed more appropriate for a lady at that time – as opposed to a leather gladiator style dress

and armor. Linda also noted this absence of gender roles in Wonder Woman's upbringing: "An ongoing theme throughout her story is that she thinks women are strong because she grew up in a society of all women, so of course to her women are stronger, better, you know, but she really does fight for equality and justice" (Linda, interviewed 10/4/2018).. Linda's statement suggests that that the women Wonder Woman met in America could be "stronger" and "better," because she had known plenty of women who were. In that sense, she is fighting for the other women of the world to match the equality of the men. The important factor for both Olivia and Linda's remarks remains that Wonder Woman grew up in a world, where everything was done by women-warriors, and her entrance into American society elicits a shock of structural gender roles she never experienced; therefore, as a character, she holds women accountable to be their best, because she knows how women can be. Recognizing the difference, Wonder Woman's fight aligns with the fight of many feminists, to see women treated in the same way as men.

### *Feminist Label Aversion and Vernacularizing*

One interesting facet of this research is that some of the cosplayers I spoke with either were not sure what feminism is or they avoided the label. The two individuals who were hesitant about the application of feminism also seemed to fall prey to some of the common misconceptions about feminism. In order to work around any misconceptions, I had to vernacularize feminist ideals in different ways to see if they truly felt feminism was a negative concept. According to sociologist Peggy Levitt and anthropologist Sally Merry (2009, 441), vernacularization is "the process of appropriation and local adoption of globally generated ideas and strategies." Levitt and Merry (2009) focused on using vernacularization to understand how

women's rights are explained to fit the local languages and communities. Each community they encountered had a unique approach to women's rights, therefore, Levitt and Merry had to assess the global rights tensions on the local community to recognize context-driven results. My primary use of vernacularization was to ask the cosplayers initially what they thought feminism was after their initial rejection of the concept and then ask them follow-up questions about qualities in the character of Wonder Woman, such as truth, justice, independence, and equality. If the cosplayer then connected with these qualities, I would return to the feminist icon question by asking if they felt these qualities aligned with feminist ideals. This strategy was rather successful in its implementation and demonstrated that participants could engage with feminist qualities regardless of self-identifying as feminist.

As an example of being unclear about what feminism is, Sandra (Figure 7), a Wonder Woman cosplayer and self-described Lynda Carter mega-fan, sought help in understanding the concept:

Feminist, I forgot what that means. What does it mean again? ... Well, I'm definitely one for equality. What makes me think she's a good representative for women is that she can fend for herself, she takes care of herself, and she doesn't depend on anyone else (Sandra, interviewed 7/14/2018).

When Sandra asked what feminism meant I offered that everyone's definition differs, but most commonly that it was perceived as equality for women. This resonated heavily with Sandra, as she talked about her family and wearing her costume to share her love for Wonder Woman.

While not directly related to understanding feminism, Sandra also emphasized that she thinks people need to see more "curvaceous" Wonder Woman examples because she worries about girls like her teenage daughter, who was also present during the interview, who might be susceptible to eating disorders in an attempt to look just like the character. Sandra's perspective and costume

choice are focused on her nostalgia for the Wonder Woman television series, and concern as a mother for what her children are exposed to.



*Figure 7 Sandra in her Wonder Woman cosplay at SuperCon. Photo taken by author.*

Unlike Sandra, Miranda had an aversion to being labelled at all. As a cosplayer who specializes in armor construction, she portrays the Gal Gadot version of Wonder Woman (2017) in her costume, and reflected on feminism:

I mean, personally, I'm not a big fan of labels, just in general with that. I saw the movie and I definitely felt empowered, but I think that guys can also feel that way, not with her but with any other superhero. So I don't know, for me it depends on who it is, but I definitely like to see a woman that's very strong so that you can kind of look up to her and strive to be like that. (Miranda, interviewed 1/27/2019).

Miranda's aversion to the feminist label is interesting, but it appears as though she is not isolating it as the only label she tries to avoid being associated with. It is also interesting that she feels Wonder Woman cannot be a source of empowerment for men, which is a contrast to many of the other cosplayers I spoke with. Feminism can be equally beneficial to men because it upsets societal expectations of masculinity. When I asked Miranda more specifically what feminism meant to her, she responded:

Personally, to me it means equality. I've seen a lot of [pause], like that's why I don't like to label myself so much a feminist because it has gotten a connotation of like kind of 'men suck.' It's just kind of what I've noticed over time what it's turned into. I believe in equality, I think that like the good and the bad parts that both genders endorse should be under like both. Like not even just the positive equality stuff, but also the negative, if that makes sense (interviewed 1/27/2019).

Miranda's response suggests that she does not have a problem with the goals of feminism per se, but rather what other people might perceive of her as a part of it. Gender scholars Launius and Hassel (2015, 8) refer to this in their work as the "I'm not a feminist, but... phenomenon," which is when "people express feminist ideas and opinions but disavow the label." They argue that the central focus of feminism as "the personal is political" frightens young women from identifying with the feminist label because rather than being confrontational they would rather "hide from



feminist issues by not being feminists” (Launius and Hassel 2015, 8). As Miranda talks about female empowerment, strength, emulation of the character, and equality, this suggests she does relate to feminism, but is hesitant to confront some of the stereotypes made about it.

Grant is a gender-bending cosplayer, working on his Wonder Woman costume at the time of this research, who strives to make those around him feel more comfortable to be themselves by blurring the gender lines in his costume. As we sat in a crowded Barnes & Noble Café, with him heavily coughing as he was recovering from bronchitis, he told me that his decision to cosplay Wonder Woman came after his girlfriend suggested it while seeing the 2017 film. As I asked him about his opinions on feminism, he became pre-occupied with what he terms “radicalist feminism:”

That depends on if you’re a radicalist or if you’re just normal, but normal feminism would be equality. Radicalist feminism would be fighting for equality but then damning everyone else who – I don’t really know like a good way to explain it, but I know if you say one thing and then do another it’s pretty much the definition of hypocritical and radical feminists tend to lean towards that. I’m not really sure how to define it for you though. I guess I would say for normal feminism, it’s fine because they fight for something that’s right and its fine for everyone to have equality and their own terms. Cause I get that in the workplace its different for women that it is men. But I guess if you’re gonna fight as a radicalist, fight for equality but then damn men for treating you with equality it’s like different (Grant, interviewed 1/21/2019).

Like Miranda, Grant’s perspective on feminism, similarly relies on stereotypes that seek to undermine it altogether. While he does distinguish that there is a “normal” feminism, he briefly mentions it in comparison to the much larger “radicalist” view he feels is most common in the world. Launius and Hassel (2015, 6) assert the stereotype of feminists hating men as a dismissive misconception, where people view “feminism as a battle of the sexes,” instead of as a critique “of systems of privilege and inequality.” Further they claim that it is important in overturning

this stereotype that feminists are “combatting sexism and patriarchy, not hating or bashing individual men” (Launius and Hassel 2015, 6). Grant’s critical perspective on feminism is distinctive, but still falls prey to this common misconception about feminism. If feminists hated all men individually, it would only be counter-productive to making any structural changes.

When asked more directly about Wonder Woman, after a series of vernacularization based questions, Grant’s perspective seemed to soften. He viewed Wonder Woman as a more just character:

Every single time I’ve seen her, in the movies and I’ve read the comics and stuff, she-she’s a little different. Like she’ll fight for equality, she’ll fight for herself, but she’ll also-she can hold her own I guess, and that’s not radical feminism. I guess that’s just being realistic. You know, there’s no reason women should be treated any differently than men, there’s no point (Grant, interviewed 1/21/2019).

In this quote by Grant, he not only recognizes the variation in depictions of Wonder Woman’s character but claims that she is not what he considers to be a “radical” feminist, because she just wants what most women would want – equality. The final sentence of Grant’s comment resonates with feminist goals, and while he may not admit it, he appears to be an ally to feminism.

#### *Wonder Woman Wears the Pants*

Another piece of information that came up in a few interviews was the idea of Wonder Woman wearing pants, both physically and symbolically. This is a fascinating feature to come up, at least in the physical sense, because I would assume that wearing pants would be safer than bare skin for Wonder Woman in combat, and yet there seems to be a connection to her apparel and the success in the comic. *Wonder Woman* artist Bill Loeb (Figure 8) has revealed that

“Every time the bikini was smaller, the sales got higher” (Cocca 2014, 99). In a newer example that followed a similar statue line to comic trajectory as the DC Bombshells, the series *Gotham City Garage* features Wonder Woman wearing pants (Figure 9). This series has a unique, new, and interesting plotline reimagining DC Comics women in a women’s biker gang in a post-apocalyptic setting. While it is not entirely clear why the series ended after only 12 issues, perhaps Loeb’s comments have some connection to its success, but it could also have been poor advertising.



Figure 8 Wonder Woman art by Bill Loeb. “Wonder Woman” #72 © DC Comics

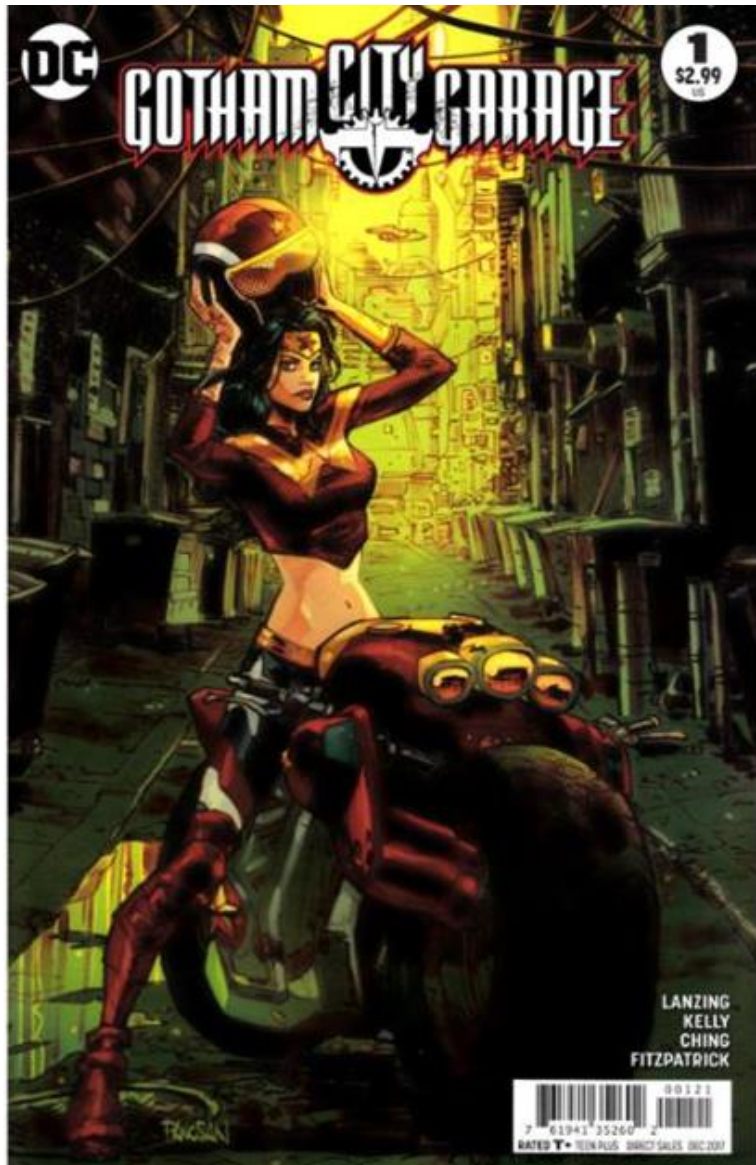


Figure 9 Wonder Woman in pants. "Gotham City Garage" #1 © DC Comics

Charlotte, a long-time professional cosplayer, blogger, and former costume boutique owner worried about wearing pants in a Wonder Woman costume. Over her time involved in cosplay, she has several variations of Wonder Woman, but regarding wearing the pants costume she shared:

I was actually worried to wear it to MegaCon cause so many people were crapping on that outfit [design] and I was like 'I think it turned out good,' you

know. ... I was actually worried that people were gonna come up to me and be like 'I hate that outfit. Pants suck!' (Charlotte, interviewed 10/21/2018).

Charlotte is aware of how costumes can be received at conventions through her many years of experiences, but ultimately because she loved the costume, she performed it anyway. The Wonder Woman costume Charlotte is referring to is very similar to the one mentioned in Olivia's interview, from *Wonder Woman Odyssey*. Olivia said that the costume was the first Wonder Woman cosplay she did and that being able to wear pants was a very comfortable experience and that she wished more Wonder Woman designs incorporated pants. As she had not seen it before, I showed her the image for Gotham City Garage and she was excited to show the other girls in The Bombshells Cosplay group.

Whether Wonder Woman wears pants or not may seem amusing to include in this research, but it is an important segway because it is a disruption in the typical appearance of her costume, as usually a bikini, skirt, or leotard. Pants are perceived to be more masculine in a traditional sense, and so altering her costume to incorporate pants is an example of the gender hybridization that Cocca (2014) claims. This shift also occurs in the symbolic adaptation of Wonder Woman wearing the pants – as an upset to the traditional “breadwinner” gender role. Several of the cosplayers I interviewed made comments about Wonder Woman not being reliant on a man, but being independent and strong on her own. For example, Jess, a Wonder Woman cosplayer who looks like she jumped right off the page, compared Wonder Woman to other popular DC female superheroes:

If you think of comic book female characters, every other character came from a man – Supergirl, Batwoman. You know, they [male superheroes] were there first and then they needed a chick for a sidekick. Wonder Woman was there before any of them, she was created. She was the only one not taken out of a man's ribcage (interviewed 10/21/2018).

Here Jess is emphasizing that Wonder Woman is no one's sidekick, that she was not created from another male character – she is the one in charge of her story. She also uses a biblical allegory with “a man's ribcage” to demonstrate this relationship further. Jess is opposed to being reliant on a man for anything, she wants to show that she and Wonder Woman, are truly independent. This is reflected well in an emotionally moving comment she shared:

For 8 years I've been doing everything on my own, struggling, getting myself in holes and digging my way back out. And my mom has been married all her life, so when my dad died, she had to get married again because she couldn't be by herself. And I don't know how, but I didn't go down that same path. They see me doing this all on my own – you don't necessarily have to have a man there for things (Jess, interviewed 10/21/2018).

Here, Jess notes a generational difference as compared to her mother. While she does not demean her mother's approach, she is clear she does not follow that path, and is proud for embodying a characteristic she also sees in Wonder Woman, of not needing a man or a partner.

Men have not been absent from *Wonder Woman* comics. She frequently teams up with fellow male superheroes in the Justice League and forms the DC trinity with Batman and Superman, as well as the presence of Steve Rogers and his descendants in her own series. The point Jess and many other cosplayers are making is that she is not their sidekick, and instead they work together. Sometimes, however, the presence of a man is also interpreted as a romantic partner. Comic writers and artists have made Wonder Woman have relationships with many characters over the years, most commonly this involves Steve Trevor and Superman. While some cosplayers and fans accept this as her being comfortable with her sexuality, others feel that it takes away from her character and what she stands for. Linda found herself agreeing with the latter reaction in her interview stating, “I personally don't like the romance aspect they've done in more recent years with her. I don't think that's something she was ever really interested in...

I've always appreciated that she was independent and strong on her own, she didn't need a male counterpart" (Linda, interviewed 10/4/2018).

Linda's concern is a fair assessment of how she understands Wonder Woman's personality. One example of romance between Wonder Woman and Steve Trevor occurs in *The Brave and the Bold: Batman and Wonder Woman #1* (2018). This scene is an intimate moment between the characters, but Wonder Woman's narrative text reflects her position on the situation. It reads: "Love ever played a grand part in the dance between gods and humankind. It would be well for us not to forget that." Unlike other violent examples gender comics scholars cite (field notes, 8/5/2018), this is a consensual relationship. In the comic issue, this scene is interrupted shortly after by the Celtic god Cernunnos who came to seek Wonder Woman's help. She goes off to fight on her own, Steve does not accompany her into battle and respects her sense of duty. There is "balance" to the love in Wonder Woman's life, and "love" is an integral part of her character according to fellow cosplayer, Dennis. Dennis, a gender-bending Wonder Woman cosplayer in his 40s-50s, made a similar comment to Jess regarding the separation from male superheroes in Wonder Woman's character. He conveyed:

It's not like you have Supergirl and Superman or Batgirl and Batman, you have Wonder Woman, but you don't have a Wonder Man, per se. And I think that was important for her to be on her own for an icon of feminism and to embrace the female nature of who she is. I think that's a trait that anybody is capable of emulating, boys or girls, to be true to yourself and not have to rely on copying other people to be like them just for the sake of saying 'Oh I wanna be a superhero, but I wanna be like Superman, so I'm just gonna be Supergirl or Superboy, or something (Dennis, interviewed 8/15/2018).

Dennis takes his perspective further by going beyond Wonder Woman's character and including those who embody her. His response claims children who look up to and want to emulate characters that are their role models, should look to Wonder Woman. Rather than finding a like

gendered version of a specific character, Dennis advocates being true to yourself and cosplaying them anyway. Wonder Woman was a childhood hero to him, and he did not let that influence his own cosplay performance.

In his interview, Dennis self-identified as being a feminist prior to me asking the question. He emphasized that he does think of Wonder Woman as a feminist icon in the above quote but takes it further by trying to embody it within his Wonder Woman costume. This is a contrast to Grant, who avoids the label of feminism. While I do not have any comments from female cosplayers in my data about men cosplaying Wonder Woman, the difference of gender display in their cosplays pushes normative boundaries. Gender display is “the presentation of self as a kind of gendered person through dress, cosmetics, adornments” and is based on the construction of the binary gender system (Launius and Hassel 2015, 28). The way in which Dennis and Grant’s costumes display gender are outside the assumed binary pattern. Grant physically dresses as what is considered as a woman’s appearance with a long-haired wig, corsets, and dresses. While Dennis dresses in a masculine binary style clothing of a leather jacket and pants but includes Wonder Woman’s tiara. Both men call their cosplays Wonder Woman, not Wonder Man, and push boundaries of how gender can be displayed, as cosplay easily allows for this fluidity.

In this chapter I have demonstrated that individuals who cosplay Wonder Woman see her as a model for empowerment and of feminism. There is no uniform understanding expressed by the cosplayers I have interacted with, but each has provided unique insights into how they understand and emulate the character. All my participants reflected in some form that Wonder Woman is a role model, with many of them specifying a connection to women and girls. A few



of my participants expressed a form of sisterhood that they connect to when cosplaying Wonder Woman, that they do not experience to the same extent with other female characters. Many of the cosplayers agreed that Wonder Woman is representative for feminism. From my interpretation of the cosplayer's sentiments, even of those who avoided the label of feminism, Wonder Woman is a feminist icon in the way that she seeks equality for all. In the next chapter I examine identity construction more deeply as a relationship between the character and the cosplayer.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: WILL THE REAL DIANA PLEASE STAND UP?**

The central features of cosplay are the costume and the character, but when a cosplayer dedicates so much time to both, an interesting dynamic is formed. My research participants' narratives show that they construct transformative identities as a Wonder Woman cosplayer. Due to this identity construction, I have titled this chapter in reference to Eminem's 2000 rap hit "The Real Slim Shady," as many of my participants relate to Wonder Woman on a personal level and there is no one to say whether they are the true Wonder Woman. In this chapter, I will interpret identity construction, escapism, and diversity in the cosplay of Wonder Woman, and argue that cosplayers personally identify with the character in varying ways.

Prior to my analysis of Wonder Woman cosplayers directly, it is important to build a foundational understanding of the costume designer's relationship to the costume. Costumes are "a 'magic' garment – a garment that enables an actor to become, for a time, someone else" (Cunningham 1994, 1). From this definition, wearing a costume presents two identities: that of the actor and the character, and these separate identities are then transformed by the presence of the costume. In other words, once the actor dons the costume, they adopt the identity of the character, at least until the costume is removed. From the perspective of professional costume designers Ingham and Covey (1992, 21) the success of a costume relies on a "union between character and characterization. It is easier for the designer to affect this union when he or she has had enough time to get acquainted with the character." In the context of cosplay, getting "acquainted" with Wonder Woman or another character reflects on the amount of research cosplayers do prior to their performance at conventions. Their performance and identity are enhanced by their dedication to learning about the character.

Identity construction and knowledge of the character are not the only factors that make a costume successful, however. Professional costume designer Cunningham (1994, 3) argues that the role of the audience is just as important to successful costume design:

An effective costume is one that engages the audience's attention and enhances the production and the actor's performance. It performs these two basic functions. (1) it visually defines the character portrayed by the actor, and (2) it helps establish the overall theme (idea) and mood (atmosphere) of the production as interpreted by the director. An effective costume speaks to the audience's subconscious store of knowledge and experience, helping them to identify the individual characters even before they speak and even if they are silent.

Although Cunningham was studying costume design in a theatrical setting, I argue that the same experiences are expressed in cosplay, especially for Wonder Woman cosplayers. The cosplayer takes on the role of both actor and director in this sequence, but their ideas are still received by the broader audience that views their performance. As Cunningham's suggests, first the cosplayer's costume design should easily communicate who the character is. For Wonder Woman cosplayers, this is often portrayed by items like the lasso of truth or, in later variants, her sword and shield. However, this also relates to the establishment of a theme that Cunningham describes, where any Wonder Woman costume, whether it is based on comics and film or not, will incorporate the primary colors of red and blue. Further, gold and silver extend to the coloring of the accessories – bullet-proof bracelets and a form of tiara. These various pieces allow audience members, the convention goes, to immediately recognize the character of Wonder Woman. The audience does not consciously process this recognition, as Cunningham suggests, it is just known from being aware of the popular icon that is Wonder Woman. Finally, the concept of mood or atmosphere that Cunningham argues, is relevant to the identity construction of the character. If an individual cosplayer has done all of these, they will engage in

a performance that the audience would expect from their knowledge of the character, which sets a tone or mood.

### The Alternate Identity – A Transformative Experience

*“Wonder Woman is not a fictional character. Wonder Woman is a mindset”* (Maraboli 2019).

Businessman and behavioral scientist Steve Maraboli (2019) makes an interesting point relating to how identity construction happens for Wonder Woman cosplayers. My study shows that developing a “mindset” about what it means to be Wonder Woman comes from within the cosplayer’s own mind. Most often, my participants said that they first connected with Wonder Woman as children. Dennis, a gender-bending Wonder Woman cosplayer and high school English teacher reflected on this experience:

Growing up as a fan of the character since I was a child, a lot of what I learned about in comics, just her compassion her approach to truth and love and wisdom, and all of those things, I try to embody those in myself as a person. That was part of the reason I embraced the character because her values aligned with my own and growing up that way – you know, growing up in a time before internet, before cell phones, before social media, we had books. We had comics. So, it was interesting to see a character in comics who mimicked the person that I wanted to be when I grew up. So, as I kept getting older, I kept saying “Oh this is the person, and yes, she’s fictional but, this is the character or type of person I want to be. So, I kind of absorbed some of that into myself as a grew older and it came out in my cosplay as well (Dennis, interviewed 8/15/2018).

Dennis’s perspective is truly built on a mindset, because he sought to embody qualities he saw in Wonder Woman as a child. Viewing Wonder Woman as a personal role model was not only about the construction of the character in his cosplay, but transformative in his own personal identity. This type of identity construction makes it more difficult to differentiate between the character and the actor, because they so closely align.

Like Dennis, Victoria also connected back to her childhood and her desire to emulate characteristics she saw in Wonder Woman. Her perspective is slightly different, however, because of the physicality she notes:

I prefer to cosplay as really strong, fierce, women. When I was younger, I didn't have those characteristics and I wanted them. I wanted them within me. I think you look up to these women to try to have those characteristics as you age. That's something you want to emulate. I relate a lot to that personally... Looking like Wonder Woman, it's all make-up (laughs)... I don't necessarily physically want to be her, but I want to emulate those characteristics in a way that makes me feel more like I relate to her... When I look at myself, I don't see her. After I do the costume and the make-up, that's when the transformation happens (Victoria, interviewed 8/22/2018).

Victoria is aware of the transformative nature of being Wonder Woman, but for her it does not happen until the full costume is on. This is a method of code-switching between the self and the character. Victoria feels she embodies some of the same characteristics between herself and Wonder Woman, but she distinguishes the difference in the roles. She does not fully adopt the persona, but rather adopts Wonder Woman's principles as herself in-costume. Rather than a physical presence of Wonder Woman, Victoria is more emotionally attached in her portrayal of the character.

This contrasts greatly to Jess, who practically dares for someone to tell her she is not Wonder Woman. Jess does not feel that she needs a costume to be Wonder Woman, but that she embodies her every day. During a panel I attended at WasabiCon, called "The Wonderful World of Wonder Woman," Jess described that she even created a lazy-day style Wonder Woman costume out of robes, hair curlers, and slippers (field notes, 10/21/2018). From her perspective:

I pretty much am her all the time... Like if I'm not in costume you know somewhere, something on me is associated... I have a t-shirt that says 'I needed a hero, so that's what I became.' And that's like a model of my life right there really (Jess, interviewed 10/21/2018).

Jess does not feel like she needs to attach to a separate persona for Wonder Woman, because she believes she is her every day. This is not to say Jess does not recognize herself as an individual apart from the character, but that her individuality is so akin to Wonder Woman that she feels like they could be one in the same. It is also important to reflect on the idea of becoming her own hero. This is reminiscent of the American Dream mythos and the self-made individual. Jess does not need another hero, she is her own hero – she can save herself.

As I interviewed Jess and Charlotte together after their panel, it was interesting to see how differently Charlotte viewed the identity construction of Wonder Woman in cosplay. Charlotte felt that identity of the character was not as important, unless she is in the presence of children:

Some cosplayers are like ‘I am the character!’ and they refuse to get out of the character. I am pretty much like ‘I am ‘Charlotte’ wearing a Wonder Woman costume’, you know, but then if little kids come over then I’m like, ‘I am Wonder Woman,’ so it depends (Charlotte, interviewed 10/21/2018).

From the perspective that Charlotte provided in her interview, her form of cosplay appears to be more in the construction of the costume and having fun in it, not so much including any acting. She does not shame other cosplayers for taking the adopted identity approach to their cosplays, but she remarked in the interview that cosplay is more about costuming for her. The concept of acting like the character for children is important, because of the influence it can have on their perception of the character as a potential role model.

Athena, a nursing student who loves to visit hospitalized children in her cosplay of Wonder Woman, shared similar viewpoints to Charlotte. In her cosplay of Wonder Woman, it was situational as to whether she also would adopt the persona of the character. Reflecting on the meaning of location, she remarked:

I think it depends on where I am. For conventions, I like to be myself, you know, meet people naturally. But when I'm in the hospital I love being the character all the time and I think that's something really important to the kids you know, when they ask me 'Are you the real Wonder Woman?' I really have to be convincing in that situation, but when I'm at conventions just hanging out with my friends, I'm more myself" (Athena, interviewed 1/24/2019).

The way that Athena expresses taking on the role of Wonder Woman for the children at the hospital is fascinating because it resonates as a sense of duty. She feels she needs to become the real Wonder Woman for the sake of the children and really embrace what it means to be her. Athena's sense of duty seems to align with characteristics of Wonder Woman, because the children Athena visits with are fighting for their lives. Wonder Woman can be inspiring to the children to help fight their diseases, and so Athena's construction of the character is pivotal to them. Whereas when she is with her friends, she is enjoying quality time as herself, but in Wonder Woman costume.

### *The High Pedestal of an Icon*

If Wonder Woman is an Amazonian warrior and a goddess – how can the average person compare? When a character is so iconic and well-known to society, it is as if they are put onto a pedestal and become untouchable. Both Charlotte and Jess shared concerns about this concept in their joint-interview. Jess (Figure 10; interviewed 10/21/2018), who is confident that she and Wonder Woman are alike even in everyday life, shared her apprehensions with taking on the role: "When I first started making costumes, I never wanted to be her because she was too good for me. It took me awhile. I didn't feel like I could do a good enough job." In Jess's early years of costuming, she described feeling of self-doubt and self-confident about her ability to portray Wonder Woman. The idea that as a fictional character Wonder Woman was "too good" for Jess

is interesting not only for how Jess viewed her past self, but for how unattainable Wonder Woman seemed in that moment. Jess was able to overcome this feeling though, as seen in Figure 10.



*Figure 10 Jess cosplaying Wonder Woman. Photo Credit: Jesse Jovero Photography.*

Charlotte's hesitance in portraying Wonder Woman was based on newer versions of the character. In the newer versions, both comics and in the *Wonder Woman* film (2017), Wonder Woman is of Greek heritage, as that is the general area where her home island of Themyscira is. Further, and Gal Gadot who plays her is of Israeli nationality. Charlotte (Figure 11) expressed concerns in being able to portray that version of the character because she does not share that heritage or the age of the actor:



With Wonder Woman I just didn't think I could pull it off. She was younger, she's foreign, I don't look a damn thing like her. I look at 1970's Lynda Carter and I'm like 'I can do that!' Then I look at this younger more exotic Wonder Woman and I'm like 'nope!' I stick with the classic versions cause that's what I identify with more (Charlotte, interviewed 10/21/2018).

Lynda Carter is an American actor and her costume for Wonder Woman was more vibrantly colored and patriotic themed than the newer costume worn by Gal Gadot. Charlotte's gravitation towards the Lynda Carter style is related to her own comfort level. Many cosplayers try to match similar characteristics to themselves to the characters they portray so that there is a deeper connection with the character. For example, in my own cosplays, I try to do characters I love that have red hair, because that is my own hair color. Charlotte's connection to the Lynda Carter character also stems from being a fan of the show since its debut in her childhood, while the Gal Gadot version is still very new and starkly different in appearance. As Charlotte remarked earlier about taking the persona on for children, it is easier to do so in a costume you feel comfortable in. Charlotte's placement of Wonder Woman on a pedestal is restricted to the newer comic and film versions of her, because of her difficulty in finding the same connection to these variations in style. These representations are best understood as anthropological identity constructions.



*Figure 11 Charlotte as the Lynda Carter Wonder Woman. Photo Credit: Sean Keane.*

When considering Wonder Woman as a feminist icon, however, it is useful to compare her character to other iconic figures. Two other commonly described feminist icons are Lady Godiva and Rosie the Riveter. Lady Godiva, as a controversial figure of legend, is comparative to Wonder Woman by taking on a heroic role for political activism. English scholar Boyd (2017) contends that Lady Godiva deserves the title of superheroine as much as Wonder Woman, with a “cape of supernaturally long locks to cover her” and qualities such as being “courageous” and a “crusader.” If Boyd’s comparisons are to be used, features of both Wonder Woman and Lady Godiva as feminist icons would be activism, persistence, and bravery.

Perhaps the most popular image claimed as a feminist icon, is that of Rosie the Riveter. Rosie the Riveter is the character on the “We Can Do It!” poster (Figure 13), designed by J. Howard Miller in 1942 for Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company (Kimble and Olson 2006, 535). Communications scholars Kimble and Olson (2006, 539) assert that the image of Rosie the Riveter conveys “strength” and the “confident determination to do her job” through the use of a clenched fist, rolled sleeves, and flexed muscles, but femininity through various cosmetic details. The representation of Rosie the Riveter has been so popularized as “a symbol for girls, too, inasmuch as Rosie appears as a heroine in children’s stories and as an action figure who has joined the ranks of Batman, Wonder Woman, and various other superheroes” (Kimble and Olson 2006, 537). Rosie the Riveter has even been an influential figure for the DC Bombshells design of Wonder Woman (Figure 12). The DC Bombshells design by Ant Lucia has many similarities to the Rosie the Riveter design by Miller, including color scheme and details, but the phrasing changes from “We” to “She,” and she’s breaking chains. From the perspective of Kimble and Olson (2006), if Miller’s Rosie was a representative icon of strength and femininity, the Wonder Woman design by Ant Lucia expands that notion further.



Figure 12 DC Bombshells Wonder Woman. "Wonder Woman" #32 © DC Comics



Figure 13 Rosie the Riveter Poster Design by J. Howard Miller (1942).

### *Placing the Lasso of Truth Around Yourself*

There is something unique to the experience of cosplay, and I firmly believe it lies in the power of creating another identity for oneself, separate from the day to day self. For some people, this can be transformative for looking at themselves as well. According to professional cosplayers Bowan and Cline (2017, 20) “cosplay allows for people to overcome their phobias and social awkwardness. Much like a form of Role Play Therapy... It also allows healthy social interaction with like-minded individuals.” Their connection to roleplay therapy is interesting because that form of therapy directly connects to identifying feelings experienced. According to

this logic, a cosplayer can use the role of the character to work out their psychological thoughts through a costume.

Athena, a nursing student and Wonder Woman cosplayer, remarked about this type of experience in her interview. She explained:

I didn't really fit in before, but once I started cosplaying and, you know, doing characters that have a lot of confidence, I feel like my own confidence came out and I got to blossom into the person that I want to be. I'm more outward now that I cosplay, and it's been amazing (Athena, interviewed 1/24/2019).

From Athena's perspective, the confidence of the character she was portraying in a way transferred onto herself. She sought to transform her introverted and shy nature and used her success in cosplay to do so. From the expertise of Bowan and Cline (2017), Athena was able to overcome not fitting in, or the "social awkwardness," through the positive interaction in character with other similar people. For Athena, there was an acknowledgement of herself, and an effort to use cosplay as a form of self-improvement or self-empowerment.

Dennis, a gender-bending Wonder Woman cosplayer and high school teacher (Figure 14), saw his devotion to the character of Wonder Woman as transformational as well. Rather than seeking to change who he was through the character however, Dennis used her character as to metaphorically tie the lasso of truth around himself. With truth being of the utmost importance to Wonder Woman, Dennis explained to me that her character made him learn to be truthful with himself about who he is as an individual:

So being true to yourself is kind of what I saw in that and embracing that part of who you are and saying, 'this is who I am, and I shouldn't be afraid of admitting to that.' And that character [Wonder Woman] kind of helped me to actually come to terms with my own sexuality a lot later in life. But it was that being true to yourself, the idea of truth that was so important. And it may sound silly to people, but she carries the lasso that's supposed to make people tell the truth and truth is always around her and I felt like that was an important quality to have. It's to be

able to see the truth in others but to recognize the truth within yourself and face those truths whether they're uncomfortable or not and be able to move forward and finding a way live with the truths of who you are regardless of whether you like them or not." (Dennis, interviewed 8/15/2018)

This experience with truth was transformative for Dennis because it caused him to acknowledge things about himself that he was not ready to do before. Adopting that quality of truthfulness from Wonder Woman's character into his own identity shifted Dennis's perspective on his life and forced him confront his personal truths. What is even more inspiring about Dennis's experience battling the truth, is that he recognizes truth is not something people will always be happy about or proud of, but still needs to be handled either way to be able to accept oneself for who they are. While other cosplayers I interviewed may not have been as open about their experiences as Dennis, this type of self-recognition and self-evaluation is reflective of using a role or identity in cosplay and is likely to be experienced by many "like-minded individuals."



*Figure 14 Dennis cosplaying as Wonder Woman. Photo Credit: Dennis.*

### *Who is Your Wonder Woman?*

Beyond looking at themselves, I also asked my participants if there was someone in their life that they looked to and felt that they were Wonder Woman to them. Interestingly, many of my participants connected Wonder Woman with their own maternal figures. Parents may be one of the first examples of role models (whether good or bad) that children receive and might compare them to superheroes. However, it is important to recognize anthropologically that the concept of the traditional family as supportive is contested. In Kath Weston's (1991) research, a



biological originating family can be oppressive. Her ethnographic work claims LGBTQ members of a community can choose to formulate and culturally construct new family units. Barlow and Chapin (2010, 324) also content that anthropologists have typically viewed mothers “as crucial to the transmission of culture,” but find through their research that mothering complexly impacts children to varying ways.

In her interview, Rebecca shared how her mother connected to Wonder Woman in her mind:

I definitely think my mom. My mom has been through a lot in her life and she always just like – she’d work 70+ hours a week, but she’d always kind of do it with a smile on her face, got everything done and made people happy, and pull off these absolutely crazy amazing things and I mean, she’s a fighter so she battled like a year of Stage 4 cancer, like 14-15 years ago and came out the other side so happy and alive. So, I’d definitely say my mom (Rebecca, interviewed 1/25/2019).

Rebecca appears to relate her mother to Wonder Woman on two levels. First, in her ability to persevere and keep the peace in any situation – Rebecca’s mother worked tirelessly for her family in order to make sure they had what they needed. Secondly, the idea of Rebecca’s mother fighting cancer is important to the connection because unlike Wonder Woman, the battle she fought was very real.

This same argument could be made for Grant’s grandmother. In his interview, he shared that his Wonder Woman was “probably my grandmother at the time. She had to fight Stage 3 cancer three different times and fought each time” (Grant, interviewed 1/21/2019). Grant knows the fights his grandmother endured were all too real and her ability to triumph each time is inspiring and heroic. Cancer is one of the greatest health threats, but the ability to overcome that

condition not once, but three times, is a testament to the strength, power, and will of Grant's Wonder Woman grandmother.

Participants aged 20-30 years, most frequently connected their mothers as the embodiment of Wonder Woman's qualities – being strong and independent. This change likely coincides with the growth of the second wave feminism in the 1960s-1970s, when their mothers would have been growing up, when women's rights were at the forefront (Launius and Hassel 2015, 12-13). According to Cocca (2016, 35), the arrival of Lynda Carter's *Wonder Woman* on screen pushed “the boundaries of traditional narratives of gender on prime-time TV” and showed that women could be “multifaceted: strong, confident, smart, humble, sexy, fierce, diplomatic, sweet, funny, and regal all at once.” If their mothers were influenced by the second wave feminist movement and Lynda Carter's portrayal of Wonder Woman in their formative years, this reflection is then carried over to their experience as a role model to their children, who now live in a world asking more questions about feminism yet again. This perspective is important to understanding identity because it reinforces embodied characteristics between the character and maternal role models.

### Cosplay as an Escape from Reality

Another important aspect to identity and cosplay is the concept of escapism. Nearly everyone goes through tough times at some point in their life, some more than others, and art in its various forms is one method of coping with daily struggles. Bowan and Cline's *Coping Through Cosplay* focuses specifically on this idea of using cosplay in this way:

To be someone else for a little while, *to escape* [my emphasis] the everyday hum drum of monotony and status quo. It is, a very cathartic feeling. The ability to be

someone else, to not be socially awkward, to immerse yourself in a character; it is a very freeing experience. One that allows some of us to be more than just a fan (Bowen and Cline 2017, 8).

Bowen and Cline's perspective describe the experience as a suspension of reality. From this understanding, those cosplayers who fully adopt the personas of their characters while in costume are not worried about their own problems during the performance. This may be freeing to allow cosplayers the opportunity to be someone other than themselves in a limited setting. Out of all the characters in comics, film, or other media, it is interesting to further consider why people choose to escape into the role of Wonder Woman over others available.

Rebecca, who is currently constructing her Wonder Woman costume, reflected on the idea of escaping from reality with her experience in cosplay, but for her it was also an escape from our technology-driven society. She remarked:

I think it's cool to kind of step away from reality for a little bit and get to be a different character. It's something that I love... I know the place I mostly cosplay at is DragonCon every year and it's definitely a nice weekend to kind of get away from everything and you're not – you the accountant or you the something else. You get to step away and be this character instead and really connect and kind of get away from reality and our over stimulated world of technology (Rebecca, interviewed 1/25/2019).

The way that Rebecca discusses her experience in using cosplay to escape reality, describes DragonCon as a special atmosphere to accommodate this separation of identity. Of the conventions I attended, DragonCon was the largest and easiest to get lost in. Cosplayers are able to have a limited anonymity at this venue, due to its enormity and the disguise of wearing a costume.

Like Rebecca, Grant, a gender-bending cosplayer working on his Wonder Woman costume, defended his reason for choosing not to be himself. He posited:

If you're gonna go to the cons and stuff, there's no reason to be yourself because you're gonna go as a character. You might as well go all out... I don't think if it were me every day, I would dress as a girl or any of that stuff, but its- it has nothing to do with your real life. So, for some people, yes, I do feel like it could be an escape, but for me, it helps me be a little bit different than I really am, cause life is not the best thing in the world. For others, probably they're just to have fun, I guess it's not so much escape cause not everybody has hardships (Grant, interviewed 1/21/2019).

From Grant's perspective, this concept of escaping into the role of the character, depends on "hardships." If a cosplayer has not been through these hardships, they lacked a need for an escape, following Grant's logic. This may seem contradictory to the initial point in his statement, but Grant distinguishes between acting and escaping into a role. For cosplayers who are just casually going to have fun, it may not be an escape. The cosplayers who do use cosplay as an escape, however, use characters like Wonder Woman to help them through these hardships, in ways they struggle to work through on their own. This distinction can only emerge through in-depth interviewing of trying to understand the motivation and feelings behind cosplay.

### Diversifying the Icon

Another important aspect to identifying with the character being cosplayed, in this case Wonder Woman, is the concept of diversity. It is no secret that there is a shortage of comic book heroes that are representative of the wide range of people in the world. Most are white males, with some white women. Representation matters. As I have described, many cosplayers connect with characters they share a resemblance to; however, this is easier to say when there are characters that they share that connection with. Cosplay is unique in that anyone can do it and be a character they love, but this also leads to tensions in representation.

Physically resembling the character carried significance for Athena in her cosplay of Wonder Woman. With the recent portrayal by Gal Gadot, Athena felt inspired to begin cosplaying as Wonder Woman (Figure 15):

I come from a mixed background and, I'm from a few races and when they finally released what Wonder Woman was going to look like [in the 2017 film] I was just super proud cause I was like 'I feel like she kinda looks like me.' ... Usually my family doesn't agree on the types of movies, but she has something to offer to everyone (Athena, interviewed 1/24/2019).

Most often, Wonder Woman is drawn as a white woman with the occasional mention of her Greek origin, therefore Gadot's Israeli origin offers a different representation for the character. Athena's connection to Gadot's image as Wonder Woman is self-reflective in an empowering way. She felt that this new version of Wonder Woman shared not only a connection with her, but that she could be appealing to all different kinds of people.



Figure 15 Athena in her Wonder Woman cosplay. Photo Credit: Rebirth Photography.

Inspiration gained from the character of Wonder Woman takes many different forms. While Athena felt a connection to similarities in Gadot's representation of the character, Lucy, who cosplayed the same version of the character (Figure 16), was more influenced by the strength of the character. Lucy latches onto the powerful images in *Wonder Woman* (2017), such as her march into No Man's Land, to stand up for cosplayers of color in the cosplay community. She admires Wonder Woman's ability to fight injustice and attempts to embody this in her own performance:

I may not have super human strength, you know, to go and fight [laughs] for justice, but I voice about the injustice that happens in terms of the cosplay community, and how people treat certain cosplayers – mostly cosplayers of color... When I speak about certain things that happen in the community,

especially for a woman of color that cosplays and the type of hate, you know, they might receive because the character is for example not of their race and it's like cosplay is for everyone to enjoy. You know, no one should harass you for something that is supposed to be for fun. Because that's all it is at the end of the day... it doesn't matter your race, if they match, or if you're chubby or skinny... I speak up about things I don't like, and I think about it cause it happens to me too and I can relate, and they can relate. So, in terms of her [Wonder Woman], she motivates me to find strength using my voice (Lucy, interviewed 2/1/2019).

Lucy was adamant in her interview that her experiences in cosplay have helped her speak out about issues that others will not. As a professional cosplayer that participates in panels, booths, social media, interviews, and photoshoots, she has access to talk about the community widely. Being Wonder Woman has inspired her to take the hateful comments she receives, which only comes from the online audience, and then transforms it instead into positivity. Lucy firmly believes that cosplay, for everyone, is about having fun as the character you love, no matter what they look like.

The characteristic of strength is indicative of inequalities in boundaries between people. If a person or character is perceived as “strong,” there is a reason for it, and what it means to have strength could differ on an intersectional basis. According to gender scholars Lane et al. (2018, 498), “Postfeminist representations of strong women uphold gender binaries” and become a form of hybrid “where women must meet masculine measures of success while still upholding their femininity.” In their study of white middle-class teenage girls and pop culture media, Lane et al. (2018, 504) found that their participants viewed strong women as those who were independent in their actions, within patriarchal conformity. In comparison, Winkle-Wagner's (2008) study addressed strength from the perspective of black female college students. When asked the question “Who am I?” the participants listed terms such as “strong,” “aggressive,” and “assertive,” as terms they self-identified with (Winkle-Wagner 2008, 188-189). One of the

participants further explained that these are not characteristics that are generally seen as womanly, while another participant reported a situation they encountered with a white male peer who claimed, “You are not over-aggressive like other black girls” (Winkle-Wagner 2008, 189). This interaction is indicative of a racialized view of womanhood and extents of passivity or assertiveness. It is important to recognize through the analysis of Lane et al. (2018) and Winkle-Wager (2008), that strength and womanhood carry different connotations depending on the participant and subject.

Continuing from this intersectional perspective of strength, the term may have different meanings to white and non-white cosplayers, who are portraying a traditionally white character. In Lucy’s interview, she described Wonder Woman’s strength as inspirational for her to be bold and speak out in the community, like she asserts herself on the battlefield. Whereas Victoria, in the previous chapter, stated that Wonder Woman is much more than her strength. Both Lucy and Victoria are gauging the strength the same character, Wonder Woman, but through different lenses. Lucy’s perspective echoes the findings of the Winkle-Wagner (2018) study by connecting strength to her own identity compared to the character. Victoria’s claims about strength were made as something she aspires to emulate, amongst other qualities, of the character, but does not necessarily already possess to the same extent. How strength is understood individually and communally, pushes the boundaries of what it means to become Wonder Woman on an intersectional level.





*Figure 16 Lucy in her Wonder Woman cosplay. Photo Credit: Phillip Dawkins.*

Lucy's transformation through experience is promoted more frequently by professional cosplayers at conventions. At many of the panels I attended, panelists discussed the term "cospositivity," which is essentially cosplay positivity. Cospositivity aims to not shame cosplayers for the weight, race, age, disability, etc., and instead encourage everyone to cosplay characters that make them feel happy. At a panel I attended, "Finding Your Cosplay Self," the panelists talked about this extensively, but went into further detail about the experiences of black cosplayers (field notes, 7/12/2018). The panelists described that many black cosplayers receive

insults that their cosplay is non-canonical or are “ghetto versions.” When people claim that a black cosplayer’s costume is non-canonical, they are using fandom as an excuse for racism. As Lucy and the panelists described, some cosplayers and audience members contend black cosplayer representations are versions of the chosen characters, such as being a black Wonder Woman. This type of statement causes conflict and debate within the cosplay community. As a cosplayer, I firmly believe that if a black cosplayer portrays Wonder Woman or another character, they are that character not a “version” of it (Figure 17). This also intersects on the level of gender. For example, Dennis is a man who cosplays Wonder Woman, not Wonder Man. A more appropriate description of a version would be related to thematic styles, like retro, magical girl, or steampunk. To share more cospositivity, the panelists also discussed that, like Lucy’s efforts, there is a push through social media using #BlackCosplayerHere and #BlackCosplayersRock to promote acceptance of diversity among cosplayers. Entering these hashtags into the search bars of any mainstream social media website like Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram, results in numerous photos of black cosplayers in-costume, to be recognized by the larger community for their work. The unity of this hashtag activism highlights an overlooked population within cosplay culture in a directly visible format. The panelists and *all* my participants concur that there are no specific rules to cosplay, it is an artistic form of expression. Intersectional differences of all kinds have a right to be present in cosplay, however that may be. Simply understood, representation matters (Cocca 2016, 3). Popularized characters perpetuate “ideas about gender and sexuality and race and disability,” and how they are represented can either reinforce negative stereotypes or empower marginalized people through subversion (Cocca

2016, 1). How we see characters like Wonder Woman, whether it is on the screen or in a comic, influences how we interpret the character's representation.



*Figure 17 "We Are All Wonder Women!" Artwork by Catherine and Sarah Satrun.*

In this chapter, I have argued that identity is constructed by Wonder Woman cosplayers in various complex ways. The statements made by my participants solidify that each cosplayer constructs identity in a variety of complex ways, and they choose what identity to perform individually. For some, cosplaying as Wonder Woman became a transformative experience, and even potentially therapeutic, as they understood her values in their own way. Others saw cosplaying as Wonder Woman as a form of escape from their daily lives. Further, I found that Wonder Woman cosplayers are not hindered by her common representation as a young, white, able-bodied woman, but that they can identify and embrace her character for themselves and for the community around them. However, diversity in the cosplayer character representations was not always met with the acceptance that is communally promoted. This community around Wonder Woman cosplayers will be the focus of my final findings chapter, where I hope to understand how the character goes beyond the individual cosplayers.

## CHAPTER SIX: THE COMMUNITY AROUND HER

The proceeding chapters have focused on the perspective of Wonder Woman cosplayers as they have come to understand the character of Wonder Woman and their role in performing her. However, in most research new things not originally intended often become apparent. Beyond the scope of my original research question, this chapter and parts of the previous chapter, address topics and perspectives that were not in the original design of the project but came out of the research process naturally. This chapter begins with the views of Wonder Woman cosplayers about the community around them, before connecting to the perspectives of non-Wonder Woman cosplayers and looking at some further impacts of Wonder Woman on society. Throughout the chapter I will revisit past concepts in new forms and develop a more rounded perspective of cosplay, Wonder Woman, and the community they share. In this chapter I argue that the cosplay community has developed into its own culture with shared practices, problems, and outside connections. As members of the cosplay community, Wonder Woman cosplayers are involved in these community aspects.

To understand the community of cosplay, it is first important to recognize its cultural function. Sociologists Dick Hebdige (1979) and David Muggleton (2000), are known for their work on defining the youth punk subculture in Britain. However, their analysis on subculture has overlapping concepts towards the larger culture of cosplay. Hebdige (1979, 76) describes a subculture as “an independent organism functioning outside the larger social, political and economic contexts.” In response to Hebdige’s work, Muggleton (2000, 73) claimed that “subcultures are characterized by inherently liminal tendencies,” where liminality is “between clear social identities.” Although Hebdige and Muggleton’s research focused on the British punk

youth subculture, their analysis is relevant to understanding cosplay as a culture. As cosplayers juggle between identities in their performances, this places them in a liminal state, where a social identity is not clearly defined and can be easily altered. As some of my participants noted, there are no set rules to cosplaying, so it functions outside other social contexts.

Hebdige and Muggleton also recognize an importance of style in the punk youth subculture they studied. Style is an important feature in cosplay culture as well. Muggleton (2000, 69) postulates that “the conception of subculture as both widespread and individualistic is achieved through the material and cultural practice of wearing a style that allows one both to fit in and stand out within the group.” Cosplayers distinguish themselves by their unique stylistic constructions of their costumes, and yet they fit in with other cosplayers, both as a specific character and a person in costume. Hebdige (1979, 92-93) advanced that a truly “spectacular subculture” is also followed by “hysteria in the press” which is “typically ambivalent: it fluctuates between dread and fascination, outrage and amusement... In most cases, it is the subcultures stylistic innovations which first attract the media’s attention.” Frequently, when major conventions occur, there is media coverage and the reactions Hebdige describes are common. However, it is the craftsmanship of the cosplayers that is eye-catching to many media outlets.

It is also important to understand that as a culture, cosplayers can be recognized as an entity of their own. When I attended Orlando Toy and Comic Con at the Florida Mall, I found a retail store called PopCult, presumably named after popular culture, that displayed a mannequin dressed as Wonder Woman in their front window (Figure 18). As I entered the store out of curiosity, I noticed a sign on their door which advertised a discount on purchases to cosplayers

in-costume (Figure 19). Firstly, I found it interesting that the store owners abbreviated their name to cult instead of culture, because it may give this image of pop culture fanatics, like cosplayers, as belonging to a dedicated group. Secondly, by providing a discount specifically to cosplayers, which I did not see on any other store window in the mall that day, they are recognizing cosplayers as a coherent cultural entity. Other retail stores that specialize in popular culture merchandise, like Hot Topic, encourage cosplayers via social media to come to their stores in-costume. Stores like PopCult and Hot Topic help cosplayers express fandom outside conventions. Cosplayers are recognizably in a culture of their own.



*Figure 18 Wonder Woman mannequin at PopCult. Photo taken by author.*



*Figure 19 Discount to cosplayers at PopCult. Photo taken by author.*

### A Community of Their Own

Grant’s interview narrative is emblematic in how participants conceptualized the cosplay community as a culture. From his perspective, “Cosplay is a different world, it’s not normal society” (Grant, interviewed 1/21/2019). Like Hebdige and Muggleton, Grant is aware of the different style of the cosplay community as something that is more “accepting” and open to different opportunities. Grant explained that his decision to gender-bend characters, like Wonder Woman, encourages others to feel accepted for who they are within the community (Grant,

interviewed 1/21/2019). My data show that acceptance and welcoming attitudes are defining features of this community.

Miranda (interviewed 1/27/2019) observed that “Cosplay is kind of a huge to-each-his-own kind of thing. Everyone does their own thing with it, which makes it such a wide community... One of the nice things about going to conventions, is that everyone’s very accepting.” Like Grant, Miranda acknowledges the power of acceptance and explains it as a likely reason for this community’s continual expansion from comic books to other popular culture genres, including science-fiction, anime, and horror.

While acceptance and expansion seem to be welcomed, this can also create some tensions within the community. Rebecca remarked:

For the most part the cosplay community has gotten more welcoming in the past few years. I’ve heard other people talk about how much flack they get for not making their own costumes. But I think there is just so many people who are kind of getting into cosplay now, that it’s just kind of like a fun community. I love going around and talking to people about their costumes and for the most part I’ve only encountered like a few really weird people here and there. Everyone’s just been really open and welcoming in the cosplay community (Rebecca, interviewed 1/25/2019).

The “flack” that Rebecca is referring to is the convenience of some cosplayers buying pre-made costumes from websites or costume shops, rather than designing and making their own costumes. The tensions are likely caused by cosplayers who take pride in their art and feel like mass-produced costumes ignore the difficulties of costume construction. As Rebecca describes, however, with the expansion of the cosplaying community this becomes less relevant as acceptance of new cosplayers expressing fandom also grows.

Unlike Grant, Miranda, and Rebecca, Lucy was more critical of her experiences with the community. Many cosplayers, including myself, develop fan pages for their cosplays so that they



can share their work and interact with the community. Lucy explained that “online you’re able to spread your work on the internet a lot faster. For me it’s been a bit of both, welcoming and hate. But the hate is always drowned out by the love that I get, so I don’t really focus on the negative... I’ve never really gotten any negative energy in-person when I wear my costumes anywhere” (Lucy, interviewed 2/1/2019). In an online setting, social media users can remain anonymous which leads to a greater number of unfiltered comments that would unlikely occur in-person. For example, in my previous research, I experienced rude commentary about my weight in a cosplay on Facebook (Morrison 2015, 22). Lucy further distinguished that there is a difference in reception between the audience viewing the costume in-person and her fellow cosplayers.

When describing the community of cosplayers around her, Lucy was frustrated. She revealed that she rarely voices her concerns to others, but saves them for interviewing and podcasting situations where she feels she would be taken more seriously:

The cosplay community has become like poison. I would say that there’s this idea of “I wanna be the best.” And there’s nothing wrong with trying to be, you know, good at something, but to some people it has become very much a competition and how popular this person gets or fake being friends with someone so you can gain form them (Lucy, interviewed 2/1/2019).

Lucy’s observation about the competitive nature of cosplay was echoed in other participants’ interviews. Rebecca’s comment about whether cosplayers craft their costumes is one aspect to this competitive nature. From Lucy’s perspective, however, she claims that people are commonly using each other to increase their own popularity. To further intensify this phenomenon, *every* convention I have ever attended held a cosplay competition, usually divided into a few categories, with cash prizes and sometimes qualifying ranks as rewards. Cosplay competitions

also increase audience recognition when cosplayers earn trophies or titles for their artistry. However, only a small fraction of cosplayers attending the conventions enter the competitions, and every entry is applauded for their work when they walk across the main stage. For those who do not enter competitions, it is common to overhear people complementing others' costumes or accessories on the show room floor.

From the perspective of the Wonder Woman, and Wonder Woman-in-progress cosplayers I spoke with, the cosplay community is both accepting and competitive. It is most frequently described as accepting, because of the freedoms the style of cosplay allows – where anyone can become anything, there are no set rules. However, putting on the costume can also be competitive towards the other cosplayers because of the desire to be the “best.” There are also cosplayers, like Olivia, who encourages other cosplayers for their hard work (Olivia, interviewed 7/14/2019). Although there are significant problems within the cosplay community, such as racism, competitive attitudes, and sexual harassment, these problems are not as prevalent as the level of acceptance within the community, as reflected by the testimonies of my participants. Many of my participants reflected that the acceptance of the community is what encourages them to continue creating their cosplays.

### Unite the League

While the perspectives and stories of Wonder Woman cosplayers are at the core of this research, it is also worthwhile to explore how non-Wonder Woman cosplayers react to understand this community. The four professional non-Wonder Woman cosplayers I interviewed offered similar conclusions about the cosplay community, Wonder Woman, and identity. The

title of this subsection “Unite the League” is in reference to the slogan from the *Justice League* (2017) film, to describe the united perspectives of these non-Wonder Woman cosplayers with the notions of Wonder Woman cosplayers presented earlier in this thesis. Developing a complete picture of the cosplay community, by the inclusion of non-Wonder Woman cosplayer’s opinions, supports the validity of previously gathered data.

Irene, cosplayer in her mid-twenties who focuses primarily on found-item<sup>5</sup> cosplays, shares similar views to Grant, Miranda, and Rebecca. She claims that “The fun part about cosplay is about bringing communities together, and people you didn’t necessarily expect to ever meet will now approach you and talk to you because you’re in a costume. And also, being in costume makes you more approachable than just being yourself” (Irene, interviewed 1/20/2019). The notion of merging of communities Irene describes echoes the Wonder Woman cosplayers’ experience of acceptance. Although convention attendees are diverse, the shared subcultural style of wearing costumes unifies cosplayers into accepting new friendships. As opposed to taking the time to learn about interests one has in-common with someone in friendship building, in-costume, cosplayers can bypass this step by already recognizing something they have in-common with one another.

Although he was not as critical or frustrated with the cosplay community, Colton, a cosplayer who specializes in his incorporation of LED-lighting into his costumes, recognized that there is a need for improvement in the community. Using the term “culture of cosplay,” Colton explained that cosplayers need to work on positivity, especially when it comes to keeping

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<sup>5</sup> A found-item cosplay is when a costume is composed of articles of clothing that were found at thrift stores and then altered by the cosplayer to fit the needs of their costume. In Irene’s case, she shops at Goodwill to find clothes from the 1990’s more accessibly.

“childlike wonder” alive (Colton, interviewed 7/14/2018). Colton began his cosplay journey performing at a children’s hospital, and as such he strongly felt that it is a cosplayer’s “responsibility to *be* that character,” especially when children are around (Colton, interviewed 7/14/2018). Like Lucy, Colton is not satisfied with the status quo, he believes there are things to be improved. With each of the non-Wonder Woman cosplayers, community is a central aspect to cosplay.

### *Revisiting the Icon*

I was interested to learn how the non-Wonder Woman cosplayers perceived her. The most fascinating aspect of these interviews with the non-Wonder Woman cosplayers, is that each of them reflected on how the character relates to the current state of the world or society. Colton described her as one of the strongest role models in comic book history, arguing that her independent nature is important for both women and men to see in “today’s climate” (Colton, interviewed 7/14/2018). Colton described Wonder Woman as “elegant,” but able to “throw you through a roof,” and he felt this was an example of “masculinity not only as a male concept” (Colton, interviewed 7/14/2018). Using this description in relation to his comment on “today’s climate” Colton is referring to the ways in which gender roles have expanded in our society. Colton’s perception of Wonder Woman as projecting masculinity resonates with the concept of gender hybridization. The body of a woman can be transformative, according to gender scholar Balsamo (1999, 39), who asserts that “the female body is the site at which we can witness the struggle between systems of social order...new forms of gendered embodiment, emerge which on the one hand may display inherited signs of traditional dichotomous gender identity, but

which also reinvent gender identity in totally new ways.” This quote is relevant to the idea of disrupting the gender binary through construction of gender identities. If the female body is often regarded as the “other” and as the source of femininity, it has the greatest opportunity to change into something new. Thus, women have the potential to change gender construction because they are the source of shifting embodiments. Wonder Woman’s potential use of traditionally masculine traits contributes to a hybridized image.

Irene more specifically resonated with the idea of Wonder Woman as a feminist icon in her response. She explained:

I 100% think she should be a feminist icon... I think labeling her as a feminist icon can start getting people to see that being a feminist isn't a bad thing. Like I said, she's a great female character and has been pretty much since her inception. Even though she was created by a man, she's still based on two incredibly intelligent and badass women that he was with (laughs) and I feel like people have tried to not let that spirit go, like she's smart, she's funny, she's likeable, but she's also complex. She's able to be emotional, like she's a real person. She's a real character and you believe her person... [*Wonder Woman* 2017] it's not about being deserving of a hero, it's about being a hero even when the world has kind of lost its way. I feel like that's a big part of *Wonder Woman* and I feel like people need that message, especially right now (Irene, interviewed 1/20/2019).

From Irene’s perspective, attributing the title of feminist to Wonder Woman can be transformative in encouraging others into feminism. Irene further evaluates Wonder Woman’s qualities as that of a relatable person – a characteristic that can resonate with people because her character is believable. Irene also reflects on the idea of an unspoken hero arguing that people “need that message, especially right now” and demonstrates her encouragement of others to be the heroes the world needs – like Wonder Woman. Oliver, a cosplayer in his twenties who has learned skills in leather-crafting and archery for his costumes, also noted the world needs heroes:

She does stand for hope, and she does stand a little bit apart from our world, although she's trying to fit into it. I think that resonates a sort of idealism... In my head, feminism has always been the idea of women trying to stand, not in a man's shadow, not bound by, well, whatever label society has tried to put on them... I think in the world we're living in, that's what a lot of people are looking for, you know, whether they admit to it or not. Everybody's having a tough time, and everybody just needs that little spark (Oliver, interviewed 1/11/2019).

Oliver hesitated to define feminism in his interview, and claimed it was not something he regularly thought about. However, the connection he makes with Wonder Woman to hope and how he understands feminism gives people in the world "that little spark." Oliver suggests he views Wonder Woman as an example of that spark and hope for our society.

Contrary to Irene and Oliver, Arthur, an internationally renowned cosplayer in his forties, was more wary of feminism because of the political climate in the United States. However, he was more supportive of the character of Wonder Woman as a model for women:

Feminism, right now, is a mine field. Unfortunately, with the snowflake<sup>6</sup> mentality that a lot of people have – to be labeled a feminist can be a good thing or a bad thing... to me it means a woman who's not afraid to take charge of her own life, that doesn't need a man to run her life... What I expect to see from Wonder Woman, one that she does promote girl power. In every comic I've ever seen she's always been a proponent of the women's rights, the women's strengths, that no man, you know, could best her. That she could go toe-to-toe with any male. She personifies inner beauty, that she carries herself with poise and beauty. She maintains a sense of confidence and control (Arthur, interviewed 1/28/2019).

Arthur's political application to feminism, does not seem to correspond to how he views Wonder Woman. Like Grant, he believes there are "good" and "bad" feminists. Using Arthur's definition of a "good" feminist and his expectations of the character, she appears to be representative of his

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<sup>6</sup> Snowflake is a slang term, commonly used by political media, to describe someone as overly sensitive or easily offended.

idea. Like the other non-Wonder Woman cosplayers, and a few of the Wonder Woman cosplayers, Arthur connects the presence of the character and feminism to our current society.

### *Where Do I End and the Cosplay Begin?*

Like the Wonder Woman cosplayers, the non-Wonder Woman cosplayers were reflective about identity construction between their cosplays and themselves. Sociologist Alexandria Ellsworth (2018, 11) argues it is “important to look at identities in cosplay as it involves an evolution of identity and transformation for the person who cosplays.” While each cosplayer has a different perspective, I have demonstrated the transformative nature of identity construction in my participants.

For Irene, identity is the core of cosplay. She believes cosplay helps separate from oneself, while developing a better self-understanding:

Cosplay is all about exploration of identity. There’s a reason we pick the character... I think everybody who cosplays, to some extent, uses it as a way to start kind of exploring elements of themselves... I think it’s a form of escapism. It’s the same as any role-playing, you use it to just get away from yourself for a minute... Doing Rosa from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* [2013-Present] was a great one too... It’s just like I love the show, I love this character. The actress is half-Colombian, I’m part Colombian. She’s bi in real life, the character’s bi, I’m bi. It was just so many things, where I was so accurately able to embody the character and be the character... It becomes an experience (Irene, interviewed 1/20/2019).

Aside from Rosa, Irene described some of her other cosplays include *Jessica Jones* (Figure 20; 2015-Present), punk rock Poison Ivy, DC Bombshells Black Canary, Elizabeth from *Bioshock Infinite* (2013), and Faith from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), to name a few (Irene, interviewed 1/10/2019). As a seventh-year cosplayer, Irene has been influenced by each character’s identity. Her ability to embody a character depends on her personal connection to

them. When cosplaying as Rosa, Irene identified with her ethnic background and sexuality, empowering her performance of the character.



*Figure 20 Irene in her Jessica Jones cosplay. Photo Credit: Blythe Kala.*

While Irene views cosplay as self-exploration, Oliver revealed his cosplay as transformative for others to experience. Oliver reflected on his past and point of transformation into cosplay in his interview:

I do like the characters that have taken bad life circumstances and spun them around to make a positive difference. I grew up in a broken home. It wasn't a bad situation but, you know, I was just a geeky kid, I got picked on all the time. You know, and it just led to a mentality that 'well how do I go through life? And how do I make my life livable for me?' Which is a very selfish view, let's be honest, and eventually I realized I started taking the things that brought me happiness and escapism and I started using those to cheer-up other people, which is exactly what all the costuming charity things, you know, what that sort of allowed me to do... There were just aspects of my life that I didn't enjoy when I was a kid and I just always – I just gravitated to things that pulled me out of whatever my circumstance was at the time. Now as an adult, hey, I love my life and I think the



world we live in – it's messed up, but it's pretty great. But at the same time, you know, if I can go and spend say an hour or so in Gotham that still makes me happy (Oliver, interviewed 1/11/2019).

I met Oliver at CONjure during my undergraduate research (Morrison 2015), and throughout his cosplay career he has been active in cosplay charity work and dedicated to crafting his skills. He explained that he started young as an avid lover of Indiana Jones, he then learned leather-crafting, and went on to cosplay popular heroes like Batman, Hawkeye, and Green Arrow (Figure 21; interviewed 1/11/2019). Oliver has even learned archery to accurately portray his roles as Hawkeye and Green Arrow. He appears to be driven towards taking his personal trials to help others, and this gives him the happiness he seeks. This is also a transformative approach to cosplay, as Oliver develops a purpose for his cosplays.



Figure 21 Oliver in his Green Arrow Cosplay. Photo Credit: Badger Studios.

Backgrounds like Oliver's are common to the cosplay community. From Arthur's perspective, cosplay helps people to overcome their past:

As far as in the community as a whole, and this might be a conservative number, I would say at least 80%, if not more, of the people in the cosplay community are *broken individuals* (author's emphasis). These are people who have issues and use escapism, you know, they put on the mask... I totally believe that cosplay is an escape mechanism for so many people. For me it wasn't so much an escapism as it was therapy. It was something that allowed me to stay connected to the memory of my son (Arthur, interviewed 1/28/2019).

Arthur started his cosplay journey about 14 years ago after the loss of his son to leukemia.

Cosplay connects Arthur to his son. His description of the cosplay community as primarily made

up of “*broken individuals*” is insightful from his vast experience. However, this descriptor would likely be controversial and debatable if applied as widely as Arthur suggests to the cosplay culture. As I sat in a quiet Barnes & Noble café one morning listening to Arthur share his story, my heart was breaking for what he had overcome. Arthur’s story illuminates how cosplay is not only transformative, but supportive. Although my other participants did not reveal similar backgrounds as Oliver and Arthur, I included their reflections here because the potential that Wonder Woman cosplayers may also be affected by this situation. I cannot make the claim to agree or disagree with Arthur’s statement on cosplayers being “broken individuals,” as this research sought to examine a different question and therefore my current data does not support this perspective beyond the representation of a few individuals’ hardships.

### *Cosplay Is Not Consent*

One aspect for cosplayers, predominantly women, that has a presence in the community is the Cosplay Is Not Consent movement, which began in 2013 (Ellsworth 2018, 13). This movement is still very recent and not thoroughly explored in academia, nor is it widely talked about at conventions themselves. As I witnessed at the conventions I attended, most of the efforts to address this community problem were based on the use of signage and occasionally a panel discussion about the topic. However, the effort of the movement is a recognition of sexual harassment and assault as a problem at conventions. I would like to emphasize that although the topic and the need to address it are severe, the statistical extent that an assault occurs at a convention is relatively unknown. My participants did not engage with this topic as part of their interviews, aside from Irene, but more information could have been obtained had they been

directly asked about it. Irene explained the movement and the concerns it attempts to address in her interview:

Cosplay Is Not Consent is a movement that was started because a lot of female costumes specifically, a lot of costumes for women, and that's not to say it doesn't affect men too on some level, but for the sake of this it started because of women. A lot of costumes are really revealing or sexy, they show a lot of skin, and like it takes a lot of confidence for women to wear those costumes. A lot of dudes – there was a problem with a lot of men taking this as 'you're dressed like this, that means I can touch you or do something to you in a way that I wouldn't necessarily normally do to you.' Especially if it's a character that's really flirty or something. A lot of people use that as a reason to grab someone's boob or touch their ass, or stick a camera up their skirt, like these are just some of the examples of things I've heard. Another side of this is that men in costume say, like a very common one is Captain Jack Sparrow... because of their nature of being flirty and handsy or whatever, men will use that as an excuse to touch women in cosplay and say that they're just too in-character. So the movement was kind of started by conventions to say cosplay is not consent – you have to get consent from these people before you just touch them... So a lot of conventions have started implementing rules and structures for reporting it and just trying to get people to understand that just because someone is wearing something that does not mean they want you to be inappropriate with them... Cosplay Is Not Consent goes to a lot of societal things too, like whenever a woman gets harassed or something, people are always like 'well what was she wearing?' It's like, that doesn't matter, she's still a person! (Irene, interviewed 1/20/2019).

Irene's discussion of Cosplay Is Not Consent is important to the cosplay community, including Wonder Woman cosplayers, for many reasons. Due to shifting identities in cosplay, Ellsworth (2018, 12) argues "Men may feel entitled to women's bodies due to societal cues and expectation, and this may be exacerbated with cosplay as women are no longer viewed as a person but as a character." However, Ellsworth (2018, 14) also explains that incidences of harassment and sexual assault at comic book conventions are not exclusive to costumed attendees. At the time of Ellsworth's study very little has been done to address these problems or enforce policies set in place. Like Irene, Ellsworth's (2018, 32, 35) study provides testimonials of cosplayers who experienced people taking photos angled up their skirts.

Irene's comment towards the end of her quote is a firm connection to how the real-world still has applications to the cosplay community. Ellsworth (2018, 10) argues "victim blaming" is a commonly promoted by individuals with traditional ideologies onto "women who drink or dress in a promiscuous manner." Proponents of this ideology assert that the women are "worthy of the blame" because of their appearance. When sexism and "victim blaming" are present in society, this becomes what is referred to as "rape culture" (Launius and Hassel 2015, 103). The inability of conventions to address this issue, according to Ellsworth, is a major problem for the safety and security of cosplayers. The Wonder Woman cosplayers I interviewed did not openly indicate experiences of sexual harassment or assault. However, it is essential to talk about the presence of the Cosplay Is Not Consent movement in the community, because of the potential that my participants could have been victims.

Charlotte (interviewed 10/21/2018) remarked: "One of the things I really like about wearing Wonder Woman is people are really respectful of the costume. Like guys are not groping or being weird, and people are just like respectful of it." For Charlotte, Wonder Woman is a character more demanding of respect, however her comment also suggests she may have had an unpleasant experience in one of her other costumes. This would not be surprising given that incidents like "groping" do happen in the community. This is reminiscent of the of the SlutWalk movement that began in 2011, after a police officer at a safety event stated that "women should avoid dressing like sluts in order to not be victimized" (Launius and Hassel 2015, 175). This movement, like Cosplay Is Not Consent, focused on the idea a woman's sexuality and appearance is not the reason for sexual assault or rape culture.

As Ellsworth (2018) concluded in her study, and through my own participant observation, minimal efforts are generally made at conventions to address Cosplay Is Not Consent. However, as the feminist silence-breaking #MeToo movement era has begun, its role in the cosplay community has been highlighted in the media (Associated Press 2018). Several of the conventions I attended did not have Cosplay Is Not Consent signs posted. Any posted signs were frequently in less travelled areas of the convention or in the case of SuperCon, hidden behind plants and pillars. I will describe three different examples from the conventions I attended for this study. DragonCon prominently displayed their posters (Figure 22) in several common areas of the convention. The poster is descriptive and even provides guidance of what to do in a situation. DragonCon was the most informative and accessible example for attendees. MegaCon Tampa Bay used a poster (Figure 23) that has a definition of consent but fails to provide any information of what to do in a situation. Further, the placement of the poster was not in busy areas. Emerald City Comic Con used a similar phrasing to MegaCon on their poster (Figure 24), but it was prominently displayed. When purchasing my ticket for Emerald City Comic Con, I had to fill out an agreement about harassment and assault. The agreement contained detailed information that the poster did not, and every attendee would have accessed it when purchasing a ticket. Access to information and security is essential to providing safety for everyone.



Figure 22 Anti-harassment poster displayed at DragonCon. Photo taken by author.



*Figure 23 Cosplay Is Not Consent poster at MegaCon Tampa Bay. Photo taken by author.*





Figure 24 Cosplay Is Not Consent poster at Emerald City Comic Con. Photo taken by author.

## The Wonderful World of Wonder Woman

Cosplayers belong to their own cultural community, but they also connect with the even larger community around them. Wonder Woman has existed for over 75 years, and in this time, she has had a presence outside the comic book community. In this section, I highlight the role of the philanthropic efforts of some dedicated cosplayers as related to Wonder Woman and her wider recognition through social media.

### *Cosplay Philanthropy*

About a third of the cosplayers that I interviewed recognized their positions in cosplay-based charity organizations as influential in their cosplay experiences. These charities focus on going to hospitals to visit children with severe illnesses, including cancer patients. In times of worry and stress people turn to hope, whether that means loved ones, religion, or role models. Superheroes are major figures in many children's lives in America, and if a cosplayer can bring that character to life for a child in need of hope, it makes all the difference. As seen by stories like the one posted to Twitter (Figure 25) by Ryan Parker, a writer for *The Hollywood Reporter*, even celebrities who portray these superheroes understand the influence they have with children.



**Ryan Parker** ✓  
@TheRyanParker



Gal Gadot surprises children's hospital  
in full [#WonderWoman](#) gear [thr.cm/  
JrGoFY](#)



1:43 PM · 7/8/18 · [TweetDeck](#)

**3,078** Retweets **14.1K** Likes

*Figure 25 Gal Gadot at a children's hospital. Posted by Ryan Parker on Twitter on 7/8/2018.*

Wonder Woman cosplayers Jess and Athena resonated with the concept of being a hero to the children. Jess described her experience:

I do charity work and when I feel the most like her is around the kids, because they think I am her. And that's why I enjoy it... It's [with] Costumers With A Cause<sup>7</sup> and we raise money for charities or go to events like walks or like whatever events that are around and hangout with the kids (Jess, interviewed 10/21/2018).

Jess's perspective is comparatively similar to Athena's story:

Especially doing hospital work, I've met so many amazing people that cosplay that have great hearts that are not just in it for the cosplay name... there's a kid that's going through something rough and it's awesome to be able to put on this costume and be their hero for the day (Athena, interviewed 1/24/2019).

For both Athena and Jess, part of their transformative experience in being Wonder Woman is the ability to help someone else in need. Jess connects with the identity of Wonder Woman as a result of her interactions with the kids. Athena expresses similar sentiments, but she also recognizes the strength of other cosplayers and in her ability to become a hero. Like Jess, Oliver also briefly belonged to the Costumers With A Cause Group, before he joined Heroes Alliance<sup>8</sup> and Guardians of Justice<sup>9</sup>. With these groups, Oliver did "children's hospital visits charity fundraiser events for kids with cancer and various other childhood disabilities" (Oliver, interviewed 1/11/19). Each of these cosplayers are dedicated in sharing their performative art of cosplay to improve others' lives.

Another story that exemplifies cosplay philanthropy is that of Arthur, a non-Wonder Woman cosplayer, whose son's death influenced his cosplay journey. This influence extended

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<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.costumerswithacause.org/>.

<sup>8</sup> See: <http://www.heroesalliance.org/>.

<sup>9</sup> See: <https://www.facebook.com/guardiansofjusticeinc>.

when Arthur found himself directly confronting the memory of his son, while at a charity hospital visit:

The very first time I did charity work in a hospital setting was with the 501<sup>st</sup>,<sup>10</sup> and one of the first settings I went to was at the hospital that my son spent his last days in and I don't know why I put myself in that position, because of all the I mean traumatic things you could do to yourself is to go and visit a hospital that your own child spent his last weeks in. But I did. I went up there and thankfully, at the time, I was a clone trooper because I went into his room, cause he spent most of time in this one particular room, and there was another child in there afflicted with cancer, shaved. You know, the head was bald, and I visited him and I, you know, cried hard but you couldn't tell that I was crying because I had the helmet on thankfully. But I knew it was something I had to do because the kids lit up by seeing these fictional characters just walk-in and that's when I knew that yeah that's something, I have to do one a regular basis. I have to continue to give back. The way I see it often, is my son didn't get to grow up, so why should I? (Arthur, interviewed 1/28/2019)

Arthur confronted the memories of his son through his cosplay philanthropy, and that transformative experience encouraged him to be a hero to children who are going through similar circumstances as Arthur's son and who need heroes to give them hope and strength to carry on.

### *#IAMWONDERWOMAN*

Conducting fieldwork for this study drew my attention to other ways Wonder Woman has impacted society. In October 2018, popular collectible company Funko released a New York Comic Con exclusive figurine, modelled after the first cover appearance of Wonder Woman on *Sensation Comics* #1 (Figure 2). On the box of the figurine was the phrase #IAMWONDERWOMAN. Searching this phrase on social media websites like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram produced numerous posts, primarily from women. These individuals

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<sup>10</sup> The 501<sup>st</sup> Legion is an international volunteer-based *Star Wars* costuming group of which Arthur is a member. They participate in *Star Wars* themed events, charitable events, conventions, and other activities. See: <http://www.501st.com/>.

shared stories of empowerment and love for Wonder Woman. About half of the posts referred to a series of marathons – the DC Wonder Woman Run Series (Figure 26), where runners are encouraged to embrace the power of Wonder Woman in the athletic event. Browsing pictures tagged in the marathon series, many runners dressed in red and blue. The people who share their interest in Wonder Woman are carrying on the empowering message of her character, therefore it was interesting to see the role that social media is now playing in her future.



**Funko** ✓  
@OriginalFunko



Thank you to everyone who ran in & supported the Wonder Woman Run today in Los Angeles!! Such a beautiful day. 🏆

[#IAmWonderWoman](#)



 DC Wonder Woman Run Series and Busy Philip...

1:53 PM · 11/4/18 · [Twitter Web Client](#)

**53** Retweets **351** Likes

*Figure 26 DC Wonder Woman Run Series. Posted by Funko on Twitter on 11/4/2018.*

In this chapter I have argued through a feminist lens that Wonder Woman cosplayers are influenced by the community around them and that Wonder Woman influences the community. Wonder Woman cosplayers recognized that their community can be both accepting of all kinds of people, while being overly competitive at times. Non-Wonder Woman cosplayers exhibited similar impressions of the character of Wonder Woman and in identity construction, but were cognizant of societal influences, such as current political tensions in understanding feminism and bodily consent. Finally, I demonstrated that Wonder Woman's notion of empowerment does not end in the cosplay and comic book communities, she has a presence with cosplayers conducting philanthropic work and with the people who embrace her message of empowerment on global platforms every day. In my final chapter, I will make my concluding arguments and explain the significance of this research. I will also postulate future avenues for cosplay research and make personal reflections from my participant observation.



## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

In this research, I attempted to share the role of Wonder Woman in cosplayers' lives – what it truly means for them to “put on the mask.” My primary research question was: To what extent do cosplayers embody or identify with Wonder Woman as a potential feminist icon? From this question, three themes emerged from participant narratives: (1) Wonder Woman as a model of empowerment and feminism, (2) a shared identity with the character, and (3) the community cosplayers belong to. Each major trend had over-lapping components but was distinct in the individual findings. Overall, however, I have argued that Wonder Woman is an important feminist figure in the cosplay community, both for individual empowerment and self-identity, as well as comradery within the community.

The first theme, Wonder Woman as a model for empowerment and feminism, focused on whether the character was perceived as a feminist icon by cosplayers. I found that most cosplayers believe that she is not only a feminist icon, but an important figure for all people. Many cosplayers felt that Wonder Woman is an important role model to empower women and young girls specifically. A few cosplayers struggled with the understanding what feminism means but expressed Wonder Woman as positively embodying feminist traits they described. Several cosplayers also recognized how reactions from women and girls to their Wonder Woman cosplays developed an unspoken sisterhood.

My second set of findings focused specifically on identification with Wonder Woman. There was a divide in the cosplayers into perceptions of themselves as in-costume or if they believed they were fully embodying Wonder Woman. Some reflected further that it was situationally dependent, such as in the presence of children. Each cosplayer had different

characteristics they identified between their own personality and the character. There was also an abundance of cosplayers who connected the essence of Wonder Woman to maternal figures in their lives – like mothers and grandmothers. Some cosplayers also felt that their constructed cosplay identities served as an escape from their daily lives, while others connected it to concepts embedded in reality, like representation.

The third findings theme focused on the cultural community of cosplay, incorporating perspectives from non-Wonder Woman cosplayers. Wonder Woman cosplayers felt that their community was both accepting and competitive, creating tensions in their artwork. The non-Wonder Woman cosplayers expressed similar sentiments to other participants regarding the first two trends but were more cognizant of societal impacts – such as the political atmosphere of feminism in the United States. With connections to issues women face all over the world, the cosplay community is currently struggling with how to approach the Cosplay Is Not Consent movement. Finally, the icon of Wonder Woman does not only belong to the comic book and cosplay communities, I found that she also maintains wider connectivity to cosplay philanthropy and social media.

This study builds on the research I completed for my Honors in the Major thesis (Morrison 2015), however, it significantly stands apart from my previous work. My previous research focused on the anthropological perspective of performance, from initial theories on gender identity and performativity by Judith Butler (1988). I designed my study to examine cosplayers of three femme-fatale stereotyped characters from DC Comics – Catwoman, Harley Quinn, and Poison Ivy. These characters are villains that utilize their sexuality to achieve their goals. Participants connected with the characters for various reasons, but it often resulted in self-

reflections about their identities and body image. For example, recognizing Harley Quinn's abuse as similar to their own (Morrison 2015, 78). Both projects were directly related to gender identity and performativity, but this project explicitly incorporated perspectives on feminism. In my current research, I utilize a feminist anthropological approach to gender identity and performativity. To further develop my understanding on performativity and identity for this research, I engaged with later works by Butler (1990;2004), as well as, Hall (1999), McNeal (1999), Harris (1999), and Silvio (2010). I shifted my character focus towards a hero with significantly greater name recognition. My participants did not dwell on any supposed negative aspects to Wonder Woman's character. Instead, they preferred to claim what Wonder Woman can mean for the people around them. The main difference I see between the projects is the reactions of the participants to the characters – from an inward to an outward approach. Cosplayers in my previous project primarily felt that their chosen characters helped them to overcome personal hardships, such as abuse, helping their well-being. In my current research, some cosplayers had inward reflections, but the majority viewed their Wonder Woman cosplay as communally supportive.

Research on the cosplay community and this project contribute to anthropological scholarship. Presently, little attention is made within the anthropological field to the culture of cosplay (Silvio 2010). Cosplay is vast area for anthropological exploration, as it presents multi-faceted perspectives of relationships, identity, and artistic expression. As a key display of popular culture, cosplay has the potential to impact people more widely than ever before. Cosplay presents diverse perspectives on identity construction, gender, and other intersectional

lenses of analysis. Anthropologists are uniquely positioned to understand the humans behind the shifting art and venues through their in-depth holistic approaches.

While anthropologists would make significant strides in understanding cosplayers, the community is expansive enough to be relevant to many scholarly fields. Literature shows that cosplay is already a topic of interest to sociologists (Avery-Natale 2013; Ellsworth 2018), interdisciplinary fields (Gn 2011), gender theorists (Balsamo 1996), and theatre specialists (Winge 2006). However, there are also broader theoretical and philosophical connections to be made, such as Judith Butler's (1988; 1990; 2004) work on gender performativity. Cosplay can be performed by anyone, and like all of society, this connects a wider variety of approaches for understanding it as a culture and art.

There are various routes of future research exploration to the study of cosplay through the fields of anthropology and gender studies. Researchers could explore performativity and intersectional identity through video ethnography using cosplay is a visual art form, as much of what I witness at conventions is difficult to capture using just words and still images. I believe the cosplay community and convention atmosphere would be best captured through the fluidity of video. Another aspect to explore anthropologically could be to focus comparatively on major or international conventions, like DragonCon and Emerald City Comic Con, in order to explore cross-cultural understandings of performance and intersectional identity. As Rebecca (interviewed 1/25/2019) described, there is something unique about the setting major conventions provide for cosplayers. Conventions attract international guests, as recognized by the two gentlemen I befriended from the Philippines at Emerald City Comic Con (field notes,

3/14/2019). Conventions are also held in other countries, particularly Japan. It would be interesting to conduct a cross-cultural comparative study of cosplay performance.

Cosplay as a culture, refuses to stay within its bounds. Throughout this study I have learned significantly more about cosplay, both as a researcher and a member of this community. My participants provided insightful narratives into their cosplay journeys, of which only a fraction is represented in this thesis. Their knowledge and community spirit are transformative in how people can learn to understand themselves and those around them. Their perceptions of what it means to be Wonder Woman and wield her golden lasso, shines a beacon of hope to society.

### Epilogue

When I began this research, I did not like or read Wonder Woman. I thought she was an overrated hyper-sexualized character. It was not until I saw Gal Gadot in *Wonder Woman* (2017) and watched the indie film *Professor Marston and the Wonder Woman* (2017), that I realized how blind I had been to a character so important to the lives of women everywhere. Before watching those two movies, I never thought of her as the inspiration I do now. In this final section, I outline my personal experiences and reflections from the study.

Initially, I was going to cosplay the DC Bombshells version of Batwoman for my participant observation. To me, she is also a strong feminist icon within the DC Comics universe, and I believed it would be good to do a similar type of character. However, my sewing machine ceased to function, and I decided on the DC Bombshells version of Cheetah (Figure 27) instead. I thought it was fitting that Cheetah was once an anthropologist (although an archaeologist) and I

could present the same sort of inquisitive role. Although I am not as proud as I would be if I had made the costume myself, I liked the result (Figure 28).

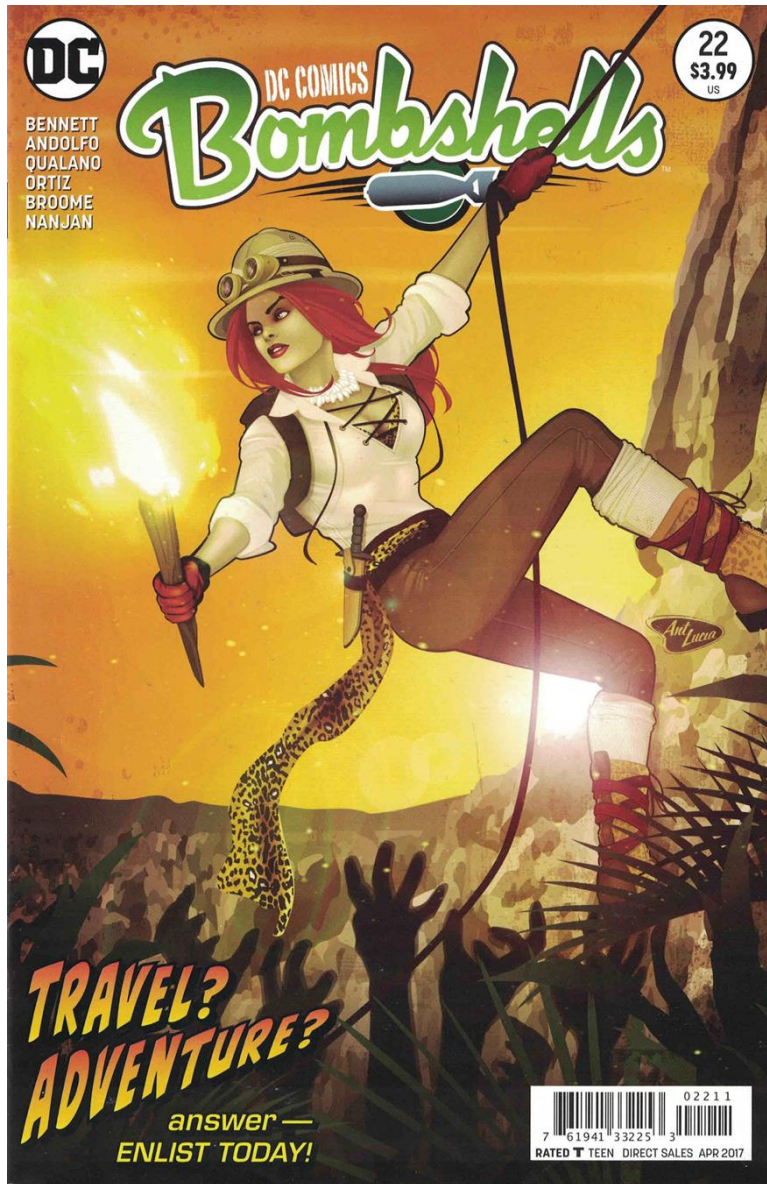


Figure 27 Bombshells version of Cheetah. "DC Comics Bombshells" #22 © DC Comics.



*Figure 28 My cosplay of Bombshells Cheetah. Photo taken by author.*

The first time I wore this costume was at MegaCon Orlando, and within five minutes of walking around I heard a woman say: “Look it’s Bombshell Cheetah!” and I felt overjoyed. I felt accomplished that I was my costume easily recognized. As popular as the DC Bombshells designs are, getting recognized at conventions was not a common experience. Not only is Cheetah not one of main characters of that series, but in every other image and the small-scale statue of her shows her in a skirt rather than capris, with hair more similar to mine. I chose the capris design out of greater comfort, but it was a sacrifice in recognizability for the character. In fact, while at Ocala Comic Con, a man directly asked me who I was supposed to be, and as I

showed him the comic book image, he still seemed confused. All the doubt that I felt in my ability to put together that costume was cast aside when I went to SuperCon, however. There, I met and showed my cosplay to the creator of the DC Bombshells, Ant Lucia, to which he said it was “amazing” and “looks just like her!” That moment has been my favorite in my cosplay journey so far, and it would not have happened without this research project.

SuperCon was a significant learning experience in conducting field research with cosplayers. My first obstacle was my recording method. Throughout the study I used an approved recording app on my phone, which worked well aside from minor user errors. However, the battery life on the phone itself became unstable, displaying inconsistent power percentages. After losing at least two interviews to the malfunction, I quickly learned at future conventions to always have an external charger on hand. The second obstacle was in reaching out to cosplayers. In a few of the panels I attended, cosplayers strongly encouraged networking through social media for easier accessibility (field notes, 7/12/2018). Taking their advice to heart, I created my own cosplay fan page<sup>11</sup> (Figure 29) and had a social media statement amendment approved to my IRB proposal. From my experience both aspects made accessing participants easier. Finally, I learned that it was important to establish a sort of home-base where I could rest and gather my thoughts between interviews and panels. Luckily, at many of the conventions I attended I had a friend operating a vendor booth (Figure 30). Each of these lessons made the following conventions easier for fieldwork, but it was unfortunate that I had to miss out on many opportunities to discover them.

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<sup>11</sup> See: <https://www.facebook.com/ARGBombshellCosplay/>.





*Figure 29 The logo I made for my Facebook cosplay page. Art by author.*



*Figure 30 My friend working his vendor booth, called Lumenoxy. Photo taken by author.*

DragonCon was the biggest convention I have ever experienced. For that entire weekend, downtown Atlanta was a creative imagination haven – there was even a parade. I did not want to

travel alone, so I stayed with a group of seven other cosplayers, one of whom I knew as a school colleague. We shared a one-bedroom suite meant for a family of four. Although it was cramped-quarters and I spent the weekend sleeping on the floor, it was still a great experience to meet new cosplayers and see their interactions in a way I would not have otherwise been exposed to. The door was constantly revolving for costume changes, photo shoots, parties, meet-ups, competitions, naps, and walking around the convention sites. Everything at DragonCon was located nearby, but it was still spread out across seven different buildings east of Centennial Olympic Park. The first night was spent just trying to get a layout of all the places where I might encounter people. I packed light and did not bring any costumes with me. Averaging 4 miles walking per day, I am grateful for the apparel choice I made. At DragonCon, the size of the convention was more of an obstacle than a help to my research. The few times I saw a Wonder Woman cosplayer, she was either three floors below me at one of the hotels while navigating to panels or across Peachtree Street headed the opposite direction. It was also too loud to hear in any of the common areas outside of panels and my recorder would not have been viable. I did learn, however, that there is an academic conference open to all convention attendees on comics and popular culture held annually at DragonCon. If for nothing else, DragonCon was a peculiar adventure that could have been its own subject of study.

By MegaCon Tampa Bay came I decided to do another costume. Over the summer I played a game for the Nintendo Switch called *Harvest Moon: Light of Hope Special Edition* (2018). I chose to cosplay a quirky scientist from the game, named Michelle (Figure 31). I thought looking like a scientist character would contribute to my positionality as a researcher. I was proud of the simplicity costume because I was able to put it together with some minor

sewing and ingenuity with things I already owned. Using a lab coat from a previous years' costume, some spray paint, hair dye, and a clip to hold the belt in place and I was ready to go (Figure 32). I did not wear costumes every day I went to conventions. I tended to only wear them one day per event. There were a few reasons for this. First, the lab coat and safari hat made me feel overheated quickly. More importantly, I wanted to see if there was any difference in the interactions I had with people, depending on how I was dressed. To my recollection, I do not remember anyone treating me differently whether I was in costume or not, as I was upfront about conducting research.



Figure 31 Michelle from Harvest Moon. Posted by Natsume Inc. on Facebook on 9/6/2018.



Figure 32 My cosplay of Michelle from Harvest Moon. Photo Credit: Julie Rogers.

I wanted to push my research boundaries even further, and I felt the best way to do this would be to attend one of the major national conventions. Having never been to Seattle, Washington, I travelled to Emerald City Comic Con. As both costumes I wore previously would have required extra luggage, I decided to do a new cosplay for the convention. I created a Bombshells-inspired version of Loki. Loki is a character in Marvel comics and films and has appeared in both male and female forms, due to his shape-shifting abilities. Although I did not make the dress in my costume, I did construct the glowing tesseract<sup>12</sup> to reference the recent successes in Marvel films (Figure 33). To my surprise, this convention was significantly smaller

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<sup>12</sup> The tesseract is a storage vessel for the space stone, one of six infinity stones. Visual representations of the tesseract can be seen in several Marvel comics, as well as in films: *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *The Avengers* (2012), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), and *Captain Marvel* (2019).

than DragonCon. From my experiences at Emerald City Comic Con, I agree with Irene's (interviewed 1/20/2019) assessment that there is a different feeling of organization and attention to west coast conventions. I did not get to spend as much time there as I would have liked, but it was a new experience that I hope to return to in future research.



Figure 33 My Bombshell concept cosplay of Loki. Photo Credit: Megan Mccollum.

Throughout this study, I had difficulties finding Wonder Woman cosplayers. This became my primary motivator to begin conducting social media searches. As popular as *Wonder Woman* (2017) had become, as well as the releases of *Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), and *Justice League* (2017), I expected to see cosplayers of Wonder Woman everywhere.

Most often, the Wonder Woman cosplayers I found were young girls and teenagers. The few I naturally found walking around and were able to interview were women who grew up watching Lynda Carter's television portrayal (1977-1979). It appeared clear that there was a generation in-between lacking her direct influence – my own millennial generation. Now, her image can be seen all over (Figure 34). Perhaps the reason why I did not see the attraction to her character initially, and why it took a while for me to find cosplayers of her my own age, was because my generation did not have a live-action exposure to the character in childhood years. This is merely a theory on my part, but still an interesting question of why I saw a significant divide in the people I saw.



Figure 34 Author by Wonder Woman at Madame Tussauds. Photo Credit: Raelene Morrison.

The biggest obstacle I had in this research was myself. I experienced severe anxiety over approaching participants. Conducting research in a convention setting is intimidating. People spend significant amounts of money to participate in them, with a limited amount of time to attend panels, view merchandise and art, make autograph and photo-op sessions, amongst many other things. Unlike traditional cultural anthropological research, where the researcher goes to live, work, and naturally meet people every day, convention-based research is limited to specific weekends where hundreds of people, or thousands in the case of DragonCon and Emerald City Comic Con, are mingling daily. I worried about taking time out of people's fun expensive days. I felt that taking any of that time away would be a nuisance. More realistically, I had a lesson to learn. As Dennis described, Wonder Woman helps people confront truths about ourselves. My truth that I was not ready to confront was that I was afraid to do this research. I was afraid of being rejected or people not wanting to talk to me and afraid that I did not have the necessary skills yet as an anthropologist to do this research. This research, and the character of Wonder Woman, caused me to recognize my anxieties in talking with people and find the courage *to do it anyway*. Something I have always known about cosplayers is that they are one of the most accepting communities, if you are just willing to try. I had friends and family members start going to conventions with me, for two reasons. First, as eyewitnesses that there were hardly any Wonder Woman cosplayers to be found at the conventions I attended; but secondly; to help me find my courage to talk with people. And it worked. Generally, all the cosplayers I have contacted in-person and through social media were kind and enthusiastic about this project. It is because of them that I feel confident to have shared their stories here. *They are all Wonder Women to me.*

**APPENDIX A: UCF IRB LETTER OF EXEMPT STATUS**





University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32816-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Determination of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**  
**FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Amber R Grissom**

Date: **May 23, 2018**

Dear Researcher:

On 05/23/2018, the IRB reviewed the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination, Category 2  
Project Title: The Wonder Women: Understanding Gender in Cosplay Performance  
Investigator: Amber R Grissom  
IRB Number: SBE-18-13976  
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 iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

This letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Renea C Carver on 05/23/2018 12:48:17 PM EDT

Designated Reviewer

## **APPENDIX B: EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH**

## EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH

Title of Project: "The Wonder Women: Understanding Gender in Cosplay Performance."

Principal Investigator: Amber Rose Grissom, Graduate Anthropology Program M.A. Candidate

Faculty Supervisor: Joanna Mishtal, PhD, UCF Department of Anthropology

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Whether you take part is up to you.

This research is being conducted to understand the role of gender identity and performance for cosplayers who are portraying Wonder Woman, and to understand more about the topic areas of gender and culture.

What You Need to Know About a Research Study:

- 1) Participation in this research is completely voluntary.
- 2) It is your choice to participate, if you decide you do not want to participate it will not be held against you.
- 3) You can choose not to participate, please do not feel pressured into the interview because you were asked.
- 4) Even if you agree to participate now, you are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time.
- 5) 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 area within the comic book convention venue, or if more convenient by appointment through Skype/Facebook Messenger Video.

**Time Required:** An average of 30-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.*

All recordings will be maintained by the Principal Investigator. Audio recordings will be erased after transcription and transcribed interviews will be maintained until five years from the closure of the study. Photos containing participant's faces will only be used under written consent. Photos that are used in the final thesis will be in the permanent record. Photos not utilized will be destroyed at the closure of the study. If you are photographed, you will be asked to sign a separate written consent form for your image use.

**Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem:** If you have questions, concerns, or complaints: *Amber Rose Grissom, Anthropology M.A. Candidate, College of Sciences, at AMorrison346@knights.ucf.edu, or Dr. Joanna Mishtal, Faculty Supervisor, Department of Anthropology at (407) 823-3797 or by email at joanna.mishtal@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 determined to be exempted from IRB review unless changes are made. 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: PHOTO CONSENT FORM**



## **PHOTO CONSENT FORM**

Title of Project: "The Wonder Women: Understanding Gender in Cosplay Performance."

Principal Investigator: Amber Rose Grissom, Graduate Anthropology Program M.A. Candidate  
Faculty Supervisor: Joanna Mishtal, PhD, UCF Department of Anthropology

For and in consideration of benefits to be derived from the furtherance of the educational programs of the University of Central Florida, I, the undersigned Participant, hereby authorize the UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA, and any agents, officers, employees, servants or students of the University of Central Florida, to photograph my image for use by the University of Central Florida or its assignees for purposes that include, but are not limited to, the creation of training and/or other informational materials, promotional materials, scientific research, quality assurance, recruiting, advertising and marketing, as well as education and teaching, at the University of Central Florida's sole discretion.

I understand and agree that these images may be used, edited, duplicated, distributed, reproduced, broadcast and/or reformatted in any form and manner without payment of fees to me or to anyone else on my behalf, forever and I hereby relinquish all right, title and interest therein to the University of Central Florida.

I release the University of Central Florida, and any agents, officers, employees, servants or students of the University of Central Florida, the University of Central Florida Board of Trustees, the Florida Board of Governors and the State of Florida and their respective agents, officers, employees and servants from any and all liability relating to the taking, reproduction, and/or use of such photographs.

I hereby certify that I am at least 18 years of age and that I am legally competent to sign this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Photographer Credit

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT**



## INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

**Title of Project:** “The Wonder Women: Understanding Gender in Cosplay Performance.

**Principal Investigator:** Amber Rose Grissom, Graduate Anthropology Program M.A. Candidate

**Faculty Supervisor:** Joanna Mishtal, PhD, UCF Department of Anthropology

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I’m Amber Grissom from the University of Central Florida, and I’m the Investigator for a research for project titled: “The Wonder Women: Understanding Gender in Cosplay Performance.” I will be conducting an interview with you about your experience as a cosplayer of the character Wonder Woman. All the information you give me will be confidential – I will not ask you for 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 Wonder Woman?

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 Wonder Woman over other characters?

- 2) Are there characteristics that you identify as a part of yourself, that you also see in Wonder Woman?

Probes:

Do you see physical resemblances between Wonder Woman and yourself?

Do you see personality similarities between Wonder Woman and yourself?

- 3) Do you have any concerns about the representation of Wonder Woman, in terms of representing women in comics have you know of?

Probes:

Were you aware of her origins relying heavily on bondage, phallic symbolism, amongst other sexual imagery?

Do you feel she is overly sexualized?

Does your perspective of Wonder Woman change from comics to films, television, art, or video games?

- 4) Based on your knowledge and perception of the character, is Wonder Woman is a good role model?

Probes:

How might the Wonder Woman be perceived differently across age, ethnicity, or gender?

Would you alter her costume in anyway or leave it in its current design?

- 5) Has your cosplay of Wonder Woman made you rethink the character design in your own image, or have you preferred to maintain a separate identity between you and your cosplay of Wonder Woman?

- 6) In recent years, Wonder Woman has been commonly described as a feminist icon. How do you feel about this?

Probes:

What does being feminist, or feminism, mean to you?

How does your understanding of feminism apply to Wonder Woman's character?

(If the participant is uncomfortable with or unknowledgeable about feminism, use the following potential questions)

1) Do you perceive Wonder Woman as fighting for justice? Why?

2) Do you feel Wonder Woman stands as a symbol for women or for everyone and why?

3) One of the key aspects to the character of Wonder Woman is her devotion to the truth, how have you related to this value in your understanding of her?

4) Of the Wonder Woman costume versions that you have seen, do you feel that they are representative of what female superheroes should wear, and why?

- 7) Does Wonder Woman remind you of anyone in your life, and how?

- 8) Do you have any further comments regarding what we have talked about that you would like to address?

Lastly, I would like to collect some brief demographic information, if you are okay with that.

- 9) What is your age range (18-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50+)?



10) What ethnicity or race do you consider yourself to be?

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.

**APPENDIX E: PERMISSION FOR “WE ARE ALL WONDER WOMEN!”**

## Re: Rights & Permissions



Sarah Satrun <sarah\_satrun@hotmail.com>

Tue 2/26, 10:57 AM

Amber Morrison; Joanna Mishtal <Joanna.Mishtal@ucf.edu> ✉



Reply all | ▾

Amber,

Thanks for asking first. Yes, feel free to use it with credit. Good luck on your thesis!

Catherine and Sarah Satrun

[www.sketchyduo.com](http://www.sketchyduo.com)

---

**From:** Amber Morrison <AMorrison346@Knights.ucf.edu>

**Sent:** Tuesday, February 26, 2019 9:34 AM

**To:** sarah\_satrun@hotmail.com

**Cc:** Joanna Mishtal

**Subject:** Rights & Permissions

Dear Sarah and Catherine,

I am writing to you to ask for your permission to include your artwork, "We Are All Wonder Woman," in my MA Thesis project, titled: "The Wonder Women: Understanding Gender in Cosplay Performance." This image would strictly be used for academic analysis and not repurposed or republished outside of this thesis. My research project was fully approved by the University of Central Florida, and the Department of Anthropology.

Thank you for considering this request and please let me know if you would like further information or clarification.

## **APPENDIX F: PERMISSION TO USE IMAGES FROM DC COMICS**



Rights & Permissions <RightsPermissions@dcentertainment.com>

Mon 3/11, 8:29 PM

Joanna Mishtal <Joanna.Mishtal@ucf.edu>; Amber Morrison ✕



Reply all | ▾

Inbox

Dear Joanna:

Thank you for requesting permission to several Wonder Woman comic images (the "Material") in connection with your student's thesis currently entitled "The Wonder Women: Understanding Gender in Cosplay Performance". Please be advised that we have no objection to your use of the Material, in electronic and print formats of this edition only, on the following conditions:

The Material may not be republished, carried over, excerpted, or otherwise used in any manner, or for any other purpose, including, but not limited to, advertising, publicity, or promotion, without the permission of DC Comics. In addition, the Material may not be used on the front and/or back covers, cropped, retouched or otherwise modified in any manner, except that they may be reduced or enlarged in order to fit into the space allocated for it, and/or reproduced in black and white.

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(NOTE: if your computer is interpreting the above lines with nonstandard symbols, the lines are meant to read "[copyright symbol] DC Comics.>").

**Unfortunately, we are unable to approve the additional artwork requested, including but not limited to the DC Super Hero Girls Cookie Pro Contest art, due to business and strategic reasons.**

Please note that since interactive digital media continues to evolve, we reserve the right to change our policies and fully enforce all of our rights regarding the reproduction and use of our property online at any time.

Sincerely,

Mandy Barr

DC Entertainment

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