Boundaries, Expression, and Positivity: Investigating Commentary on Black Women Within Cosplay Fandom on TikTok

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Boundaries, Expression, and Positivity: Investigating Commentary on Black Women Within Cosplay Fandom on TikTok

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of Social Studies

of Bard College

by

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to my mother, who has been an unwavering pillar of support throughout my entire college career. You have inspired me to keep going and to thrive, and I am eternally grateful that you have been here with me. I love you always. To my sister, thank you for the memes that have kept me laughing while I was having a tough time. I am so proud of you for graduating to college this year, and I wish you a smooth ride until you reach this point.

I want to thank the rest of my immediate family for your support and encouragement especially during my time here. To my Teedy Jennifer, Grandmother, Grandfather, and extended family, thank you for the emotional support and checking up on me to make sure my head was clear and held high. To my cousins, I am so sorry that I missed many milestones because of the distance, but I am so happy and proud that you are achieving your goals and taking next steps in life. I love you all.

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Lastly, I would like to thank God that I am in this position to express my gratitude. It’s been a tough four years with so many obstacles in the way, and only by His grace was I able to pull myself out of the darker times I’ve experienced. This is only the beginning.
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Lastly, thank you to the Black women cosplayers that are creating each and everyday. It can be tough being a nerd when the world tries to weigh you down for your identity, and shun you from the things you have every right to enjoy, but you all are shining so brightly. You are seen and you are heard, and you look absolutely stunning in and out of costume.
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I. Introduction

Social media has been revolutionary in the way we live our lives. It serves as a hub of information, interaction, and expression on a massive scale, allowing for the gathering of existing crowds and the creation of new ones over time. Twitter, for example, with the 280 character limit and the emphasis on a text-based interactive interface, has become a popular site to casually voice people’s opinions or spread awareness about current events.

I have been a user of the Internet for as long as I can remember. At age 9, my afternoons were often filled with playing dress-up games and binge-watching YouTube videos. The Internet is also the place where I was a participant in the many interests that I had, especially in the realm of anime and manga. These spaces, called fandoms, were pockets on the web where I went to regularly gush about my favorite characters, discuss plots and storylines, and post my contributions to the fandom through artwork, photography, and forum posts.

To reduce confusion on terminology, the etymology of “fandom” consists of the noun “fan” and the suffix “-dom”. Considering the context of this paper in regards to discussing popular culture, “fan” is an abbreviation for “fanatic” and “-dom” is “condition, state, dignity.” “Fanatic” (in the context of a person) is defined as “frenzied, mad.” From these two pieces of the word, we can infer that fandom is the state of being a fan of something or someone (Cottom 2016). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “fandom” is defined as “the world of enthusiasts for some amusement or for some artist”. The etymology of the noun “fan” is described more in the context of being a fan as we know it today, “a keen and regular spectator of a (professional) sport, orig. of baseball; a regular supporter of a (professional) sports team;
hence, a keen follower of a specified hobby or amusement, and gen. an enthusiast for a particular person or thing” (OED Online 2021).

The word “cosplay” combines the words “costume” and “play” which translates to individuals (or fans) that dress up and perform as their favorite characters. Fans of various TV shows, movies, comic books, anime, and manga (Japanese animated shows and comics respectively) often like to cosplay their favorite characters and showcase their costumes at comic conventions. Over the years, cosplay has gained immense popularity mainly from professional cosplayers showcasing their costume craftsmanship and their ability to recreate and embody all types of characters. It was on sites like Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram where my love for this subculture deepened.

After attending my first convention, I was thrown into the sphere of cosplay. In the summer of 2010, as I was listening to the radio, I heard an advertisement for Mechacon, which was my first instance of learning about the existence of an anime and manga convention in my hometown of New Orleans, Louisiana. After making this chance discovery, I begged my mother, who simultaneously was just finding out about my interest in this stuff and extremely apprehensive about it, to bring me. Despite her anxiousness about seeing adults, teens, and children alike in “weird” and “fetishistic” costumes, seeing so many of my characters embodied in person filled me with excitement. I had only seen cosplayers on fan webpages and otaku (a fan of anime and manga) magazines in bookstores! Subsequently, I begged my mother to buy a costume for me so that I could cosplay in the next year, and continued for the next 9 years.

My first cosplay was Ciel Phantomhive from the anime and manga series called *Kuroshitsuji* or *Black Butler*. The series follows the adventures of the orphaned boy and his
contracted demon butler Sebastian as they solve problems for the Queen in the unsavory underground world of 19th century London. Needless to say, my middle school self had quite an obsession with the series (which had absolutely nothing to do with having a crush on both the protagonist and his butler), which prompted me to cosplay this character. Due to my undying interest in anime and manga, my history of investment in the cosplay fandom from a young age, and my interest in seeing more Black people openly participating in these spheres prompted me to conduct this study.

In this Senior Project, my aim is to talk about significant and recurring commentary seen in comments sections on Black women-identifying cosplayers' TikTok pages. To offer some context for the Project, I will give a brief historical account of cosplay and the emergence of social media. Then, I will discuss cosplay fandom, as conceptualized through social theories.

Based on my study of cosplayer commentary, I will be identifying specific characteristics of fandom culture and the ways these are mediated through TikTok as a platform. The characteristics I identify will illustrate the ways that boundaries are drawn within the cosplay fandom, and the ways that support and acceptance are expressed. The keys to my identification of these processes will rest in the identification of “rules” that are seen within this group. I hope this project can give some insight into cosplay fandoms and their characteristics, and into the ways people experience being within fandoms, not only on social media generally but also on a platform that is still relatively new.

Before getting into the breadth of this project, I would like to mention that cosplays taken into account in this study do not include “fursuiters” or “furry cosplay” which is the action of dressing up as anthropomorphic animals in suits (similar to a mascot one would see at a
sporting event). I believe there is a distinct set of expectations and boundaries between what constitutes a cosplayer and a fursuiter, and there is a wide range of studies showing how reasons for dressing up and presentation of these cosplays are characteristically different. Wearing fursuits is a type of cosplay, but not cosplay in the sense that you would see an individual dressed as Spiderman or Wonder Woman. This is not to exclude this community, but to make a distinction as to cause less confusion. To see examples of fursuits, please reference Appendix B. (Costuming, Cosplay & Costume Clubs 101 2019).
II. Research Questions

I hope to shed a light on acceptability, or rather, the definition of social norms and the ways this is connected to cultural capital within social media spaces, particularly fandoms. Specifically, centering my focus on black women identifying cosplayers brings me to these questions: Does social media perpetuate power dynamics (in the setting of moral norms) and the marginalization of black womanhood online? If so, how is this marginalization demonstrated in relation to black women within the online cosplay community? Relatedly, I wonder: Do specific features of TikTok, as a social platform, contribute to these dynamics?
III. Methodology: Content Analysis of Tik Tok Videos and Comment Section

For this project, I wanted to find black cosplayers that identified as women regardless of the types of characters or types of cosplay that they choose to embody (e.g. traditional cosplay featuring hand-made or commercially made costumes or “closet-cosplay” where costumes are constructed using clothing the cosplayer already has). I also made no intention of looking at particular franchises or series (e.g. distinguishing Japanese anime and manga from American comics or television series). I felt that the cosplay fandom encompasses all types of material and many creators cosplayed a mix of characters that spanned from manga to webcomics to cartoons and more, so those distinctions will not be made within this project. To lessen confusion as well, I will be referring to the subjects studied as a “cosplayer” or “creator” interchangeably.

I studied ten videos from 15 different cosplayers, all with varying degrees of followers, participation in different types of cosplay, and interests in all types of series. For the sake of preserving the identity and safety of their wellbeing, I gave them an alias but included the number of the video I started with when I began to study their page (e.g. 1 out of 10 or 1/10), the date these videos were posted, and a small description of the cosplayer and their content based on my observations. My citations of these notes will give a brief description of the cosplayer as a person, the number out of the 10 videos studied on that specific cosplayers page, the date the video was posted, a description of the character cosplayed, and what franchise they come from, a brief video description, various comments received, and notable conversations found. Here is an example of how these notes will be presented:
Madison is a self-proclaimed “aspiring closet-cosplayer” meaning that the type of cosplay she likes to perform is based not on hand-made costumes or commercially made costumes, but uses clothing that she already owns or that you would see an average human wearing on a regular basis. Using highly expressive facial expressions and body language in combination with her interpretations of the characters she cosplays (often in humorous situations with other characters of the same series), she paints colorful images of the characters she cosplays. Additionally, she uses a lot of creative makeup concepts that could be described as “glam” makeup, with the use of heavier eyeliner, complex eyeshadow visuals, and lipstick. She switches between using her natural hair or wigs to portray her characters. Cosplaying Kaoru Sakurayashiki (Cherry Blossom) from SK8 to Infinity (anime series); Known generally as “Cherry”, is a participant skater in the “highly secret a highly secret and dangerous no-holds-barred downhill skateboarding race that takes place in an abandoned mine.” Respected inside and outside of “S”, Cherry is a professional intellectual with strangers but has a more “prickly” personality with his friends. He has light pink hair like the color of a Japanese cherry blossom (SK8 The Infinity Wiki 2021).

5/10- (4-14) Cosplaying Kaoru Sakurayashiki (Cherry Blossom) from SK8 to Infinity (anime series); She receives various compliments on cosplay such as “you look amazing” and various comments expressing laughter in response to the video. In this video, the creator in cosplay makes a joke about another character from the series. There is an agreeable response, with comments such as “you’re right” and “LMAO” (slang acronym for “Laughing My Ass Off”).

Videos studied for this project received 10 comments or more. I thought that this would give me enough material to gauge the audience’s feedback and relevant sentiments. For the sake of consistency, I am only studying videos where the video content is solely on the creator of the page and/or cosplayer, their content, and the commentary they would receive. For example, TikTok has a feature called a “duet”, which allows two different users to stitch together two separately filmed videos. I am omitting videos like these to maintain focus on the creators of the
pages studied. To learn more about other types of videos seen on TikTok, please refer to the section detailing the history of social media and TikTok as a platform.

To find cues of gender identity, if pronouns were not listed in the bio of the creator on TikTok or any social media platform linked on their TikTok page, I went with what I saw were positive responses to the types of compliments or tags that these creators used. For example, if the creator responded to comments that contained words such as “girl”, “goddess”, “queen” or personally tagged posts under “#blackgirlcosplay”, “#blackgirlcosplayer”, etc. I took those actions as gendered marking factors within this study. I define a “response” as giving a “like” to a comment or giving a written response to a comment containing this verbiage. I used these as cues that they might identify themselves as women. Due to time constraints, I could not ask, and I thoroughly apologize for any inaccuracies or misgendering that might come out of this methodology as a result. However, I nonetheless hope to be able to shed some light on these wonderful and talented individuals that are doing an amazing job having fun and contributing to the cosplay community.

All creators listed are 18 years or older and I used similar methods of finding cues of gender to finding age as well. If the cosplayers’ age was not listed in their bio, I scoured all social media sites linked to their TikTok page for posts that would give an indication of their age such as birthday posts or bios that might contain their age on other social media sites. Again, I apologize for any inaccuracies that might come out of this methodology as well.

Lastly, I am listing an appendix of photos of myself and examples of cosplay I have found on Unsplash.com-- which is a free-to-use website for high-quality photos-- and Google Images. For the sake of preserving the identity and well-being of these cosplayers, I will not be
using any identifying material listed on TikTok or any of their social media pages. Sources will be listed in the bibliography section of this project. To see examples of cosplay, please refer to Appendix A. To see examples of “furry” cosplay, please refer to Appendix B. To see examples of trending aesthetics I have come across being a user on TikTok, please refer to Appendix C.
IV. My Journey with this Project

When beginning this project, I originally wanted to study commentary found on black women identifying cosplayers and prepare a comparison of fan expectations of cosplay and how these women were defining their own boundaries within the fandom. I wanted to look at TikTok in particular, because of its extremely performative nature of following trends and vast participation in various subcultures that thrive there. Previously, I had a list of candidates I wanted to interview, detailing their experiences on TikTok and I planned on using these verbal experiences to paint a story of the intricacies of being a Black cosplayer. Since this plan did not work out, I decided instead to focus on the comments section under video content posted by black women-identifying cosplayers on TikTok and to study the expression of relationships between the creator (cosplayer) and the commenter. These commenters can be a possible newcomer or a possible follower, but more generally, they are various observers of the cosplayer and their content. My sentiments on what I thought I would find when planning on speaking to cosplay candidates were similar-- I thought that by looking in the comment section on the TikToks posted by these cosplayers, I would be able to gather overwhelming amounts of sanctioning for deviance within this section so I could study it through the lens of sociological theory… and I did.

However, while I did find examples of deviance sanctioning, most comments made were overwhelmingly positive and within these comments emerged overarching questions that encompassed the bonds seen between my chosen subjects. Between black women cosplayers and
the commenters, how are positive and/or negative comments about cosplays expressed online, specifically mediated through TikTok?

To my surprise, this study took me in slightly different directions than I expected at the outset. Indeed, I found myself exploring territory that is very basic to sociology. What constitutes being a part of the "ingroup," in this case, cosplay fandom, and what does this say about the cosplay community? Who is allowed to be a cosplayer? How might this be different for black women creators? What are the boundaries that come with playing characters, all with different and unique qualities about them?

As a self-proclaimed Black woman cosplayer myself, my goal is not to invalidate the very real experiences that Black women cosplayers might go through, but I hope this study can shed some light on the complexities of cosplay fandom as a community: on the practice of boundary-making by ingroup members, on some of the ground rules of cosplay, on the ways that support (or possible hate) in the commentary is expressed and/or performed, and on what makes cosplay, and being a part of the fandom, fun. And finally, I hope to shed some light on the ways that TikTok may render all of these aspects unique, as the world learns more from its impact and usage.
V. What is Cosplay? A Brief History

The origins of cosplay are still constantly and heavily debated by scholars and avid fans today. However, there’s been a vague agreement that aspects of costuming first originated in the United States, and that the term “cosplay” was coined in Japan. I, myself, thought of cosplay to be a purely Japanese phenomenon that made its way overseas via immigration and cultural exchange. However, many claim that the first instance of cosplay actually took place in the United States in 1939. Nonetheless, cosplay, as we know it today, is based on Japanese interpretation and expansion.

Forrest J. Ackerman and Myrtle Rebecca “Morojo” Douglas Smith Gray Nolan-- were the first individuals to “cosplay”, arriving in “futuristicostumes” at the first-ever Worldcon (World Science Fiction Convention). Morojo was the designer of said costumes. However, the term “cosplay” was coined in Japan (Runnebaum 2019).
Forrest J Ackerman (left) and Myrtle Rebecca "Morojo" Douglas Smith Gray Nolan (right) at Worldcon in July 1939. (Photo credit: Unknown, Racked.com)

In 1984, Takahashi Nobuyuki, founder, and writer for Studio Hard attended the 42nd annual Worldcon (Winge 2006, 66). By this time, the costumes showcased by Morojo and Ackerman became a huge hit, and the conventions started to host masquerade balls, where fans dressed in fanciful costumes. This was intriguing to Takahashi, who took the idea back to Japan with him and wrote encouraging fans to participate with their favorite series as well.

He struggled with giving this newly found phenomenon a name, because “masquerade” in Japanese translates to “a costume party held by aristocrats.” The word seemed unrelatable to him and what he wanted to express to his readers, so he experimented with various words to
describe how these con-goers were playing roles in costume. Eventually, the meshing of “costume” and “play” came to mind, and thus, the term used so fondly by comic and anime fans alike was born. (Bruno 2009).

Japan is accredited with spreading the cosplay subculture (specifically with anime and manga) across the globe. In the United States specifically, cultural exchange between Japan within this comic-type subculture became especially prevalent in the ’80s and 90s, with increased demand for Japanese media. Anime and manga became more popular and, as a result, so did the cosplaying of these characters (Winge 2006, 67).

I will be discussing cosplay within a Western media context but will be talking about cosplay as encompassing both Western and Eastern-based franchises (e.g. Marvel vs Naruto franchises). In my experience, cosplayers showcase both types of characters and an equal amount of effort is put into the design and portrayal of these costumes.
VI. What is TikTok? A Brief History of Social Media, TikTok, and Related Literature

This section will give a brief synopsis of the history of social media and TikTok as a platform. The information given is what makes TikTok different from other platforms, its rise in popularity, historical notes such as the year it emerged, and relevant notes on the statistics of usage and its users.

Social media was born from the infamous switch from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. It is argued that the first form of social media was BBS (Bulletin Board Systems) created in 1978. BBS allowed individuals to create their own pages and anyone with access to a computer at that time could dial into another person’s BBS. Like a real bulletin board, individuals could interact with pages by leaving messages. (Edwards 2016) Later, in 1983, the Internet was invented and then subsequently the World Wide Web in the 1990s which led to the demise of the system. This would eventually make way for a boom in social networking websites and in 2004, the popularization of the term Web 2.0 (DiNucci 1999). Web 2.0 is characterized as more social and flexible, encompassing a wide range of shareable media such as videos, audio, or photography all on one interface. There’s a specific focus on user-generated content as well, which changed the landscape of interaction and relationships on the Internet. Being a participant in Web 2.0 was more personalized with more connectivity to people in a user’s direct interests (e.g. following popular cosplayers), friends, and family.

However, TikTok has proven to be different impactfully as it has accrued a massive base of users over the past year, captivating the world with its addicting trends. With an infectious
combination of using popular sounds for lip-syncing (music, speech, or otherwise) in tandem with dances and skits, Tiktok has dominated in the area of social media popularity with 689 million active users online. In the US alone in August of 2020, it was estimated that the app would host around 65.9 million active users. Worldwide, 53% of users are male and 47% are female as of 2020. Most US TikTok users are between the ages of 10-19 making up 32.5% of users. The second-largest age cohort is 20-29-year-olds, encompassing 29.5% of users. As of 2020, it was the most downloaded app on Google Play and the Apple App Store (Iqbal 2021).

TikTok, also known as Douyin in China, is a Chinese-produced and run social media app. Emerging in 2016, with features that allow the user to create their own videos with an array of filters and video editing tools with audio and text components, over time encompassed its grasp around the world. In recent years, the popularity of video-based content has risen in popularity. The most notable being Vine, which was shut down in 2017, was a video sharing app that allowed users to create short 6 second videos. Despite its decline in popularity, this app created a plethora of memes and left a deep impression on Internet culture and interaction. Larger, more popular apps such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter all incorporate a “story” sharing feature, which allows users to be able to post and/or share short clips as well (Anderson 2020, 3).

TikTok, emerging with its unique sense of connectivity has proven to be a formidable app in comparison to larger platforms that have dominated the Internet for years. In order to emerge and engage an active American audience, TikTok merged with Musical.ly, an older, existing app that is very similar to Vine but gained more popularity due to Vine’s downfall (Iqbal 2021). TikTok also runs algorithmically, rather than based on the connections made by following others that you know. This means that most of the content seen on TikTok is a type of “controlled
chronos”, in which you would never really know what would get scrolling aimlessly on the app. This has allowed for completely random videos on various “parts” of the app to be bolstered to virality (Anderson 2020, 5-6).

In the study of the popularity of TikTok and its impact, Daniel Klug in Performance and Production Practices in Dance Challenge Videos on TikTok states the coding methods used in the creation of the videos. I will not be looking extensively at this study, but rather, the categorizations used to study the videos they used in their study. These categories in his “guiding questions” section include ‘type of video’, “video effects”, “text elements“ and “lip-syncing”. Additionally, looking at the “creation strategies and performance” qualities in these videos they list: “textual”, “performance”, “appearance”, and “setting”. All of these categories serve as the essence of what constructs and constitutes a TikTok video, and furthermore, considering the content of these categories, what constitutes a “good” video (Klug 2020, 10-11).

In terms of engagement includes likes, retweets, reposts, subscribing, purchasing user-related content and/or items, and, of course, comments. Comments are the most immediate type of engagement that you can receive outside of the quick and painless method of using likes. Comments can be quick and painless too, but what’s unique about them is that they can be anything. A comment can be positive, negative, or neutral. A comment can be anything from one word to a paragraph, stretching out until the maximum length that the platform allows. Comments are real feelings (or real in their impact of being posted) that allow the user to gauge what content is more popular, what the audience wants to see more of, and a measurement of how real people are actually receiving your content. Being a metric for engagement on TikTok, the comments section is an important component of interaction on the app. Users can even
engage with their audience by responding to comments with a video (Docherty 2020). This study will be focusing on direct, text-based commentary to cosplayers from the commenters and vice versa and not video responses.

VII. What is Fandom? Fandoms as A Community

We can gain important insights into the nature of fandoms through the work of Henry Jenkins and his text *Textual Poachers*, which helps us see that fandoms (and again, especially the cosplay fandom) are participatory, with cosplayers constantly contributing new ideas, introducing new interpretations of characters. Also, at its core, fandoms are a type of community that would not exist without this function of exchange. After establishing fandoms as a type of community, I will then go on to connect these arguments to more contemporary formulations in the work of cultural sociologists, such as Michele Lamont that base their formulations on classical arguments presented by sociologists such as Emile Durkheim. The common thread of these "Durkheimian" arguments is that communities are created through the drawing of social boundaries, and we can see this clearly in the interactions observed in TikTok commentary.

In Henry Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* he talks about the general outlook that those that aren’t involved within a fandom. He goes into detail about who and what fans are and how they are characterized. In this text, characterization is often made by “outsiders” of the fandom, and oftentimes these descriptions are negative, thus resulting in seeing fans that are participants within fandoms stereotypical of being “brainless” and placing “inappropriate importance on devalued cultural material” (Jenkins 1992, 10). Of course, Henry, while finding these stereotypes
to be true to an extent given that some people do embody the representations of fans that these dominant cultures have characterized and (e.g. photographs and interviews as evidence) circulated around in the realm of non-fans, he finds these views to be completely skewed, and throughout *Textual Poachers*, debunks many of the general and often hurtful stereotypes placed upon fans and fandom culture and, instead, argues fans to be intelligent, highly creative, and especially participatory. Through the words of Michael De Certeau, Jenkins echoes this sentiment of fans as “poachers”, in which these individuals contribute and manipulate the “raw materials” (e.g. texts, episodes, comic book chapters) provided by the creators in which particular fandoms are based.

In investigating Black woman cosplayers on Tiktok, their actions are just the same. By using TikTok as a medium to express their personal ideations (e.g. skits, displays of their costumes), they solidify their involvement in fandom culture, and therefore, are “textual poachers”. What makes my subject cosplayers unique is their experiences and sentiments based on identity-politics, complexities within fandoms, and the usage of TikTok as a means of presentation and proof of interest. As a relatively new and constantly evolving platform, and more generally, TikTok showcases social media’s involvement and evolution within fandoms as a new way of “poaching.”

“Unimpressed by institutional [dominant culture, culture that exists outside of fandoms] authority and expertise, the fans assert their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons” (Jenkins 1992, 18). We can clearly see examples of this phenomenon in this study, particularly seen with cosplayers that formulate their own skits. For example, in this video description provided by the user Yoko, we can see an instance where
the cosplayer takes a character and puts them in an imagined space. Another word for this phenomena is called a “headcanon”:

Yoko is an artist and traditional cosplayer (traditional in the sense that she wears costumes) and uses her natural hair to portray her characters. She often portrays characters in imagined comedic scenarios, talks about being a part of otaku culture (someone who is deeply invested in anime and manga), gushes about her favorite characters, and sometimes talks about the struggles of being a black cosplayer and receiving hate comments. Despite this, however, her skits are hilarious and creative, and relatable as a self-proclaimed anime fan and cosplayer myself.

3/10- (4-28) Cosplaying Nami from the anime and manga series *One Piece*. She receives various compliments on cosplay and laughing replies specifically to the video skit. Nami is an 18 year old (and later on in the series, 20 years) and is characterized as a very money-hungry, but loyal individual to her comrades. She is also smart and is often seen reading a book in her spare time. In this video, Yoko is dressed as Nami and is lip-syncing to audio about taking money. Based on the video, there are comments saying what the character would do and even extending the creators ideas of the character, “this is cannon”, “no seriously (in agreement to the skit)”, “take my money (to the creator in Nami cosplay)”. There were a very few instances of racial comments, but were notable nonetheless, “Nami isn’t black” and “Nami isn’t a monkey”.

In the context that Jenkins explains, there is not only deviation from the ways in which dominant cultures study mainstream works, but a construction beyond what is presently canon within fandom lore. In this example, Nami is characterized as money-hungry, but within the spirit of the fandom and their knowledge of the character, would also “charge for advice” as mentioned within the commentary affirming this interpretation.

When describing how fans of *Star Trek* have to defend themselves against a dominant culture that scrutinizes their involvement in the fandom and having to make themselves more
palatable through expression of relatability to dominant culture, from this negative emerges a positive: a social bond that connects fans collectively-- that they are not alone in their involvement in fandom and their experience from the “outside”. “These fans often draw strength and courage from their ability to identify themselves as members of a group of other fans who shared common interests and confronted common problems. To speak as a fan (within the context of Trekkers and public scrutiny during this time) is to accept what has been labeled a subordinate position within a cultural hierarchy… Yet, it is also to speak from a position of collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others in defense of tastes…” (Jenkins 1992, 23).
VIII. Theme 1: Drawing Boundaries & Setting Rules

Understanding fandoms as communities, in the way that Henry Jenkins helps us to see, we can also draw on a developed line of sociological theory that highlights the role of social boundaries and norms/rules in constituting communities. For Michele Lamont, he focuses on the concept of symbolic resources and symbolic boundaries as a means to cultivate a sense of identity within a group. In a religious context that can be extended to the inner-relations seen within the cosplay fandom as we define the concept of the boundaries established, we can look more closely to why the boundary presented, “no blackface”, was made. To substantiate this boundary-making more generally, this section will also look at the works of Henri Tajfel and John Turner in their theory of social identity.

Keeping in mind the collective nature of fandoms as described in Textual Poachers, to connect to a sociological framework, we can also see a distinction between perceived “insiders” and “outsiders” within the ideology expressed in Emile Durkheim’s The Elementary Forms of Religious Life as well. Again, I will be using this text to explain how Durkheim’s distinction between the sacred and the profane as a figment of religious operation can help formulate how cosplay fandom similarly operates in this fashion and gives more substantiated framework behind the cosplay fandoms boundary-making as it relates to the sentiment behind cosplaying certain characters. Therefore, we are moving from fandoms as social pockets in a dominant culture to how boundaries are expressed and upheld within cosplay fandom.

The Case of "Blackface"
This study specifically will talk about the commentary made often in response to black women cosplayers cosplaying characters outside of their race, and this question is: “Can white people cosplay Black characters?”; And the answer is yes unless you cosplay in blackface. The goal of this section is to show how this boundary, as it relates to black women cosplayers in this study, racialized history, and the fandom defining how they socialize (e.g. what is acceptable and unacceptable), is mediated through the TikTok commentary observed and how this theoretical framework can be used as a grounds of understanding this phenomenon.

When conducting my research, I came across this video while studying cosplayer Timmi’s page. Timmi is a talented cosplayer, often making all, if not most of her cosplays by hand. Her attention to detail and general craftsmanship of the garments and wigs are stunning, and her acting depictions of these characters are even more incredible. Cosplaying characters from both anime and manga series as well as American cartoon and comic book series, visitors to her page are sure to be amazed by her dedication to her cosplays and to the cosplay fandom as a whole. Below are notes taken from one of her videos, both simultaneously mocking and voicing her distaste for racism within the cosplay community. As it relates to cosplay fandom being established as a type of community, I will be looking at how commenters and the creator herself set boundaries within the cosplay community. Specifically, I will be focusing on this idea of “no blackface” and the condemnation of racism within the cosplay fandom.

We see this with a video from April 17, where Timmi is cosplaying Usagi Tsukino from the popular anime and manga series Sailor Moon:

5/10- (4-17) Cosplaying Usagi Tsukino/Sailor Moon from the anime and manga series Sailor Moon. Usagi is the cute, girly protagonist from this wildly popular and classic series. Her personality is that of an average high school
girl-- she has strong likes and dislikes, can be very moody and has her romantic interests. However, she is courageous and hopeful, and “sees the good in everyone” (Sailor Moon Wiki 2021). She is physically recognized by her twin pigtail and “Sailor Senshi” uniform, which is a girly and magical spin on traditional Japanese high school uniforms, more fitting for this cutesy heroine. The creator receives various compliments on cosplay such as “you killed this” and “you look amazing”, but many comments are in response to the caption in the video: “When you tell the racists you wanna cosplay non-black characters too”. Other cosplayers and non-cosplaying people alike expressed the same sentiment of the distaste for racism within the cosplay community. There’s a general consensus in these comments that as long as someone doesn’t imitate Blackface (unnatural skin colors are fine) and that people can cosplay who they want. There are many comments saying that racism in cosplay is a paradox, “There’s not a lot of characters to choose from (in terms of Black characters)” and “Racists get mad when Black people demand Black characters but also get mad that Black people cosplay characters that they see as ‘White’. There’s a general consensus in these comments that cosplaying is *emulating a character, not a culture*-- if the cosplayer is emulating a culture, it’s wrong and it’s cultural appropriation. There’s the sentiment that if Black people can’t cosplay characters then neither can White people due to most characters being specifically Asian (at least, mostly within the realm of anime and manga). There are some comments asking if it’s OK for a White person to cosplay various Black characters in response to her comment (specifically mentioning the Marvel superhero, Black Panther, who is a Black man). Most comments in response are saying “it’s fine as long as it isn’t Blackface”. Similarly, for racism, there were comments mentioning their distaste for general “gatekeeping” within the community. Lastly, there were comments encouraging the creator, “do what you want”.

Blackface was a popular form of entertainment that started in New York in the 1830s and examples and practice of it still persist to this day. Invented by poor and working-class whites who felt that they were displaced in a world that valued whiteness but also economic wealth, they donned costumes and created caricatures of Black people (e.g. the first popular character being Jim Crow). By smearing “burnt cork or shoe polish” on their faces, dressing in tattered
clothes they portrayed Black people as “lazy, ignorant, superstitious, hypersexual, and prone to thievery and cowardice”. Simultaneously, however, by creating these caricatures they made the distinction of what “Blackness” and “Whiteness” is and is not, which subsequently left a deep impression on the sentiments towards Black people. (National Museum of African American History and Culture, “Blackface: The Birth of An American Stereotype”).

In the cosplay fandom, racism is still felt by many Black cosplayers. In this Cosplay Central article, Black cosplayers detail their experiences and outlook on racism within the community. One cosplayer states, “For example, there are people that will look down on a POC cosplay because the fictional character is NOT black, and other times they will only recommend a specific character for you to cosplay because their black, forgetting the most important part of cosplay is that 'Cosplay is for EVERYONE.'” Another cosplayer says, “I cosplay to have a community with other nerds, and it's just a great creative outlet. I will say that as a black cosplay, I do experience criticism, whether it be for my skin tone or my size as a plus-sized cosplayer. I would like to see more cosplayers come together and support black and brown cosplayers the way lighter-skinned, thin cosplayers get that automatic support” (Ginn 2021). Even while conducting this study, I saw examples of this racism through comments my subjects received.

Nana is a cosplayer with a talent for body-paint based cosplay and traditional cosplay. When she’s not cosplaying using costumes, she uses body paint to create the illusion of a costume, in combination with the use of wigs and eye contacts. Her makeup style is more “glam” based, with the use of false lashes, intricate eyeshadow, and lipsticks and glosses. Her content focuses a lot on the display of her cosplays, gushing about her favorite characters, and sentiments about the shows that she’s watching. She’s very skilled at makeup, presentation, and the use of
transitions in her videos, which makes her a wonderful member of the cosplay community and very popular on TikTok. Here is one of many examples of comments she received:

4/10- (4-9) Cosplaying Sakura Haruno from Naruto. Sakura is one of the main female characters in Naruto. She is once insecure and timid in some respects, as the series progresses she becomes more collected and able to express her feelings. She grows up to be one of the strongest female characters in the series. She is most often recognized by her light pink hair. The creator receives many compliments on cosplay such as “pretty”, but receives other racialized comments such as “Sakura isn’t black”, “horse”, “black horse”, “Sakura I told you not to put in the sun” and multiple comments saying “No” in response to her cosplay. However, there are many more comments defending her cosplay with comments such as “Isn’t about whether the person stays with the character or not, it's about having fun”; Translated from spanish: “It's not about skin tone or face shape, this is without a doubt perfect”, and “Anyone can cosplay” and responses to these negative comments saying to “stop being racist”.

Cosplay Central, a website run by individuals behind many large and famous conventions, such as New York Comic Con, is “the global voice of the cosplay community and the premier destination for all things cosplay, including the latest news, videos, galleries, interviews, tutorials and much more”. Keeping this in mind, for this project I will be using this site as a reference outside of my own knowledge of being a cosplayer for 9 years. As a cosplayer, there are many rules for cosplaying and cosplaying in certain contexts. For example, a “golden rule” that I have encountered many times being a cosplayer in convention settings is “cosplay is not consent”, meaning that just because a person is in costume, does not mean you have permission to touch them or their costumes without consent. This rule generally speaks to the sexual harassment that female cosplayers often experienced by con-goers.

In relation to the theme of this section, there is also a rule that “anyone can cosplay”. This means that regardless of body type, gender, race, sexual orientation, or other categorical
identities, individuals can and should feel free to cosplay whomever they want. “Cosplayers often get pressured to portray a character perfectly, and if they don’t, they aren’t a “true” cosplayer. This is simply untrue. No matter what race, size, age, cosplay comes in many forms and should be celebrated” (Krikowa 2020). With this representation of the cosplay community’s acceptance of cosplayers of different shapes, sizes, and colors, and the denouncement of racism within cosplay as seen through the comments section highlighted, I will be studying how boundaries are made within the cosplay fandom through this example of “no blackface”.

In his writings in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkhiem describes his ideology on the expression of morality as mediated through examples prevalent in spiritual and religious practices. Conceptually known as the “sacred” and “profane” within this text, Durkheim's explanation of this distinction within religion and their importance can explain the boundaries made within cosplay fandom as it relates to this denouncing of blackface. According to Durkheim, religious phenomena are not exclusive to any religion. As a result, we see boundary marking within many spiritual and religious contexts, both often extremely polarized without any nuance (Durkhiem 1995, 34). For the case of cosplay fandom and the racist remarks in which this rule of “no blackface” emerged, we can see that racism itself is in the realm of the profane. Any iteration that falls under this category is put into this slot and therefore shunned in comparison to cosplays that do not use this practice of performance. Clear examples of this separation are seen in the defense of these Black women cosplayers, often in the form of uplifting (e.g. compliments, “I love your cosplay”), encouragement of ignorance (e.g. “Ignore the hate”, or outright mockery or denouncement of the commentary in various ways (e.g. “There's a specific emoji I am starting to notice people use in response to racist comments. According to
Apple Emojipedia, it is officially called the ‘neutral face emoji’, and many commenters in defense of the creator. This emoji normally signifies neutral sentiments but has been used to convey ‘mild irritation and concern or a deadpan sense of humor (Emojipedia 2021)). Additionally, there were other comments like ‘haha I laughed’ in a mocking tone, or ‘where’s the joke’ as well. Some commenters even sought out these types of racialized comments, in hopes of having the opportunity to tell them that racism does not have a place within the community.

Another text that substantiates this boundary-making is in the text *The Colors of Poverty* presented by Michèle Lamont, and Mario Luis Small. In this text, they talk about how poverty is observed and experienced by members within the cohort of race and ethnicity. With finding numerous examples of theoretical application as it relates to other factors (e.g. work) that may influence a person's wealth status and outlook on poverty, they attempt to theorize this cohort within the realm of culture, as there is a perceived lack of investigation in this realm (Lamont and Small 2008, 76). As it relates to the idea of boundary creation they describe “culture as symbolic boundaries” (Lamont and Small 2008, 84). Lamont and Small argue that “Boundary work (the separation of Us and Them)” is essential in formulating a group and group cultures. Similar sentiments can be traced back to Jenkin’s ideas of fandom culture, and the relationships that fans forged from being deemed outsiders by mainstream culture. Lamont and Luis similarly use the same language as Durkheim, in that establishing boundaries “It is part of the process of construction of collective identity” (Lin and Harris 2008, 85). In the case of cosplay fandom, by observing the comments previously mentioned, there is an attempt to keep the community as a positive whole.
Some of the Black women cosplayers experiencing the brunt of this commentary are protected by these comments, and therefore ensured that they do have a place within the fandom. They are cherished for their hard work and relatability and based on the commentary, truly appreciated for their contributions. These creators have most likely made their audience, laugh, encourage their creativity, envision their favorite characters in a plethora of scenarios, made them feel welcome on their page by responding to comments, or think critically about how they should go about supporting them with the layer of racial discourse that is tied to just existing as a Black person. Making this distinction can also serve as an educational moment, in which not only the racist is told what is and is not accepted within the cosplay community, but it educates all who may encounter this distinction. Simultaneously, racist comments and racists are ignored, attacked, and are attempted to be made useless in these comments sections. The audience doesn’t want the creator to feel the potential negative effects of these racial comments, and, by some of these cosplayers speaking out about this problem, they want the audience-- should they fit under the categories that make them subject to this commentary-- to feel welcome as a pioneer (textual poacher, contributor), especially if they have a large platform on TikTok. Instead of solidarity based on inequality, the interactions observed in the comments section point toward a need or want for a tighter, more respectful community, and shunning these types of comments achieves this effect.

Cultivating this sense of community through making and enforcing these boundaries as it pertains to blackface, its hurtful history, and how it affects the cohort that I am studying is present in the theory of Social Identity, as presented by Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner. According to their studies that focus on intergroup conflicts, they state that when conflicting
interests develop within communities which is often through competition (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 276). In the case of the cosplay fandom, this is represented by racist ideas about how a character should look like. Based on the comments, this form of competition is seen often in obsessive ideologies about the presentation of the accuracy of a cosplay. These obsessive ideas often go hand and hand with racist sentiments, as seen with various comments talking about my subject’s skin color or certain practices of different forms of cosplay (e.g. In some of Nana’s comments sections there were comments deeming body-paint based cosplay as “lazy”...). However, Tajfel and Turner go on to say that this competition simultaneously “enhances intra-group morale, cohesiveness, and cooperation” (...and subsequently, there were comments defending Nana’s body-paint work in the form of compliments such as “beautiful” and “gorgeous”, thus ostracizing the negative commentary).

Firstly, before any in-group ostracization can be considered, there needs to be a general moral ground for depictions of seemingly racist cosplays of characters. To do this, one must recognize on a moral educational basis that blackface is a part of a perceived racist history. Secondly, one must recognize that racism itself is a morally incorrect phenomenon and since blackface is a part of this, blackface is stooped further into the idea that it is morally wrong, or “profane”. Thirdly, there must be an education of what blackface looks like, establishing sub-boundaries of what constitutes a “mockery of Black people”. Lastly, using these sub-boundaries, one must become acquainted with the ideology that what constitutes blackface is bad, therefore, blackface itself is bad, separating what constitutes cosplay from racist imagery.

If a cosplay incorporates blackface into their depiction of a character, it is simply not cosplay, but a mockery of a culture and a group of people. To go further, individuals are also,
simply not cosplayers by this logic, or rather, a part of the cosplay community if they participate in this behavior. By laying out this boundary, if a person dressing up as a Black character carefully considers their depiction of them (e.g. no painted brown skin, no hairstyles that is sacred within Black culture, not embodying stereotypes that have accompanied Black people since the era of slavery and beyond), this cosplayer is able to have grounds for positive response and feedback and that is a sign that they are accepted; They are a cosplayer, and even a positive and creative addition to cosplay fandom. There is an establishment of respect between the cosplayer and the fandom culture, and bringing in race and history and a respect for other cosplayers and the characters depicted as well. If the fandom were to give cues of acceptance like, “I love your Black Panther” to a cosplayer blackface, within the cosplay fandom as whole, this fandom would encourage blackface, and therefore, be representative of bolstering racist histories, accepting blackface as an acceptable form of cosplay and expand the bounds of cosplay, and possibly, simultaneously, ostracise the Black participants within the fandom, which would be in direct violation of the third theme mentioned in this study, “anyone can cosplay”, in terms of fandom participation being a fun and leisurely activity for all to enjoy. As it relates to TikTok, the site would then become a platform to normalize these ideologies, as positive reception to blackface makes it a morally acceptable form of cosplay. If this were to happen, society would probably see a 21st-century widespread return to minstrelsy (similarly to the coined phenomena of “black-fishing”, which is a play on words of “cat-fishing” in which specifically, the Internet presence of a person is untrue of their real, physical existence. Black-fishing is just that, except people play with the boundaries of race and what similarly constitutes blackface, which can be embodied in darkening of the skin, wearing styles deemed
sacred in Black culture, and acting in stereotypical ways based on broader depictions pushed by “outsiders” or “dominant culture” or institutions that have greater control over imagery as Jenkin’s described (Virk and McGregor 2018)).

With this, some Black women cosplayers still experience ostracization to this day. Even as I was continuing my study and going back to some pages I saw new videos uploaded by various cosplayers talking about racism within the community whether that be them highlighting racist remarks they’ve received over the past day, or just talking about it generally. Again, I do not want to take away from the very real experiences that these individuals have by emphasizing a more collective and “positive” approach to this topic. Additionally, I would never know if my subjects have used various methods of reducing these racial comments, and they are actually way more pronounced in the community as I previously thought. Some TikTok features can allow users to filter certain words in their comments section, block certain hashtags and block certain accounts and taking into account the demographic these cosplayers might bring in, through identifying factors such as race and/or gender might be more educated on racism and willing to defend these cosplayers. Though, I hope that these instances help to highlight how the cosplay fandom operates and possibly give a small glimmer of hope that the community as it pertains to acknowledging, uplifting, and respecting Black women cosplayers, is showing a gradual shift.
IX. Theme 2: “Gushy” Fandom - Performativity, Active Audience, and Cues of Support within the Cosplay Fandom

In this section, I will briefly talk about cosplayers as Jenkins mentions, being “textual poachers”. Through his text, we can grasp that the cosplayers use “raw materials” given (e.g. comics, anime, manga, cartoon series) and through TikTok, expands upon the components of the franchises, in this case, by dressing up as various characters and performing these personalities through dance, song, video, and audio. However, the concept of performance will be shifting from cosplayers contributing to cosplay fandom culture, to the ways in which their audience, the commenters, express their sentiments towards the cosplayers’ contribution. Through the text *The Presentation of the Self* by Erving Goffman and other substantiated texts relating to performance this text will apply these comments Black women cosplayers have received on TikTok. I will attempt to use Goffman’s theory as a means to characterize the separation and actions of the two roles and build upon Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst’s performance theory in *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination* based on the influence of mass media as it relates to my subjects on social media.

“In real life, the three parties are compressed into two; the part one individual plays are tailored to the parts played by the others present, and yet these others also constitute the audience” (Goffman 1956, i). First, it often happens that the performance serves mainly to express the characteristics of the task that is performed and not the characteristics of the performer (Goffman 1956, 47). As it relates to cosplay being performed on TikTok, first and foremost, the goal is to convey the character and their actions. Even though some of these
interpretations are not canon in the franchises that they come from, the task, as described by Goffman, is expressed through costuming and acting. Some cosplayers may identify with the characters displayed, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that they act like this character on a regular basis.

“The notion that a performance presents an idealized view of the situation is, of course, quite common… Thus, when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, then does his behavior as a whole… Furthermore, insofar as the expressive bias of performances comes to be accepted as reality, then that which is accepted at the moment as reality will have some of the characteristics of a celebration” (Goffman 1956, 53).

Goffman’s view on how the performer and audience are separated can give insight into how commentary has been seen on TikTok as it relates to the separation of the cosplayer and the audience. Both sides are mediated by their respective positions within the fandom. The cosplayer is the main performer, and the subject of all videos studied. They perform overtly through virtue of the medium they choose to display online, meaning that they literally act and embody characters physically and emotionally. They can also do this through the types of topics talked about on their pages, performing their thoughts that can be directly cosplay-related or otherwise on this social media platform. They perform by the ways in which they understand how to act in terms of being a cosplayer and this is influenced by being a participant within the cosplay fandom and having an understanding of the social culture.

From an audience perspective, commenters know how to give a good compliment, or rather, perform their support, based on the qualities that cosplayers aim to seek out. These
qualities can include bolstering positive feelings of accuracy towards the cosplay, complimenting craftsmanship, protecting cosplayers from negative commentary, expressing relatability to the content, reaffirming the perceived accuracy of the scenarios imagined by the cosplayer (e.g. skits and “headcanons”), or complimenting the cosplayer’s physical appearance. All of these instances establish the cosplayer in one position of interaction and the audience in another.

“Each participant in the interaction ordinarily endeavors to know and keep his place, maintaining whatever balance of formality and informality has been established for the interaction, even to the point of extending this treatment to his own team-mates. At the same time, each team tends to suppress its candid view of itself and of the other team, projecting a conception of self and a conception of other that is relatively acceptable to the other. And to ensure that communication will follow established narrow channels, each team is prepared to assist the other team, tacitly and tactfully, in maintaining the impression it is attempting to foster” (Goffman 1956, 107).

In Goffman’s theory of performance, when two parties “present themselves” for the purpose of interacting with each other, both sides practice “staying in character”, often in the instance of being a performer and having an audience. As mentioned before, these parties often know how to interact with each other based on the social culture they are encapsulated by. However, there is another level of understanding in which the cosplayer presents a facet of themselves (e.g. their cosplay content) that is acceptable within this social culture and an understanding of their audience. Likewise, the audience performs an acceptable response within this social culture of the fandom. “Unlike the Kardashians, who present curated versions of themselves as themselves, star cosplayers present curated versions of themselves as the
characters they portray. On social media, cosplayers may engage in a charade of celebrity, with cosplayers enacting impersonations of impersonations. Star cosplayers, as performers preserving their image, paint themselves in a favorable light, their self-controlled interactions online ensuring an equally controlled perception (Goffman 1959)” (Haborak 2020, 7.1). In relation to the “gushiness” factor that permeates the cosplay fandom’s expression of support, Katie Haborak and their investigation on how cosplayers utilize Instagram to achieve a celebrity-like level of fame explains how in comparison to the Kardashian’s type of branding as deeply personal, themselves being a celebrity, cosplayers tend to bounce from identity to identity with the plethora of cosplay-able characters as their disposal. With this, they are able to curate their identity more carefully in online spaces and have the satisfaction of being able to switch from “private” (out of character) to “public” (in character). Later, this concept will help to explain the cultivation of the identity and how this contributes to a supportive audience, in which this careful curation is reflected by the actions taken by the cosplayers themselves. However, ultimately, this has to do with relatability and being able to know how to step out of the costume and use the self as performance (in a metaphorical example for TikTok and its features, a knowingness of when to lip-sync and when to actually speak in videos). A deep interest and investment into the audience are bound to spur the creation of the strong responses received by the subjects.

We can see an instance of this previously in theme one where both parties-- creator and commenters-- establish a type of interaction via the comments section, deeming racist commentary and racist practices in cosplay instances of deviance within the cosplay community’s social culture of acceptance. Instead of focusing on the action of boundary-making, the focus should be placed on how these boundaries are expressed. In many ways, these racist
comments are disregarded or denounced, and in these instances is a performance of an expression of the “uplifting” and “supportive” social culture that supposedly permeates the cosplay fandom. Again, this phenomena relates to Goffman’s point that often a performer will enact interaction based on the society that encapsulates it, meaning that these positive comments seen in the comments section of my subjects are, again, a performance of the boundaries and characteristically supportive culture constructed within the cosplay fandom.

In the notes taken on a video provided by cosplayer Madison, we can come to understand the performance of her cosplay (a presentation of a facet of herself, in which this video was worthy enough to be posted as a representation of her and her craft as well as something she believes that her audience would enjoy), and the performance of the audience (which responds to Madison’s work in good faith and supports her through expressions of “love”).

Madison is a self-proclaimed “aspiring closet-cosplayer” meaning that the type of cosplay she likes to perform is based not on hand-made costumes or commercially made costumes, but uses clothing that she already owns or that you would see an average person wearing on a regular basis. Using highly expressive facial expressions and body language in combination with her interpretations of the characters she cosplays (often in humorous situations with other characters of the same series), she paints colorful images of the characters she cosplays. Additionally, she uses a lot of creative makeup concepts that could be described as “glam” makeup, with the use of heavier eyeliner, complex eyeshadow visuals, and lipstick. She switches between using her natural hair and wigs to portray her characters.

2/10- (4-21) Cosplaying a female version of Kenma Kozume from the anime and manga series Haikyuu!! Known as just “Kenma” in the series, he is a volleyball player of a rival school within the series. He is generally a very quiet but intelligent and analytical character, and when not playing volleyball, he is playing video games. In this video, the creator is lip-syncing to a fan-made song about the popular online, multiplayer shooter game Fortnite. Simultaneously, she is acting out and lip-syncing to various parts of the song, such as pretending to aim and shoot a
gun on the lyric in the song “10 kills on the board right now”. Although this video game is not canon within the series, combining this specific character’s love for video games with a franchise that exists in real life, she creates a hilarious and relatable image of the character by meshing these two concepts. She receives various compliments on her cosplay, such as “Love your Kenma” and “I love your cosplay” and other comments make joking references to how Kenma acts in relation to her interpretation.

By combining the two realms of existing franchises with the fictional character’s love of video games, Madison expands the realm of possibility in envisioning the character. If Kenma existed in our world, would he like Fortnite? What would that look like? Through TikTok’s emphasis on making videos through the usage of other users' audio, there’s a practice of performance through lip-syncing in addition to staying in character. These acts of performance are meant to make the character and their iteration seem just as real to the audience. This is the image that she chooses to express.

There’s also the practice of performance within the types of comments that she receives. There is an expression of love for the components of the video, the cosplayer themselves, the character themselves, or both. In all of the comments sections studied, there was always a comment saying “I love your [insert character]”, “Amazing”, “Beautiful”, “Perfect”, “This is canon”, and “I love your cosplay”. The reception of positive comments can serve as a marker of acceptance within the fandom. With the relationship building between the cosplayer and their audience, there is a performance of support and positivity that both sides participate in, thus emphasizing the community and the proclaimed rules of being a positive and uplifting space as a fandom as well as an audience understanding of what cosplayers would want to hear about their craft.
In *Fan Studies: Researching Popular Audiences*, by Alice Chauvel, Nicolle Lamerichs and Jessica Seymour states, “A new paradigm, seeking to address these limitations, has since been elaborated on by Abercrombie and Longhurst: the ‘Spectacle/Performance’ paradigm, which assumes that audiences are ‘groups of people before whom performance of one kind or another takes place.’” They are socially constructed, fluctuating units. It recognizes that audiences are made up of multifaceted individuals for whom being part of a particular audience is reflective of who they are.” (Seymour, viii). Building upon this idea of reflection, we see a well-rounded explanation for this concept as it relates to cosplay in *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination*. Abercrombie and Longhurst make the case that mass media has changed the landscape of the audience and how it operates. Looking prior to the 50s, most people worked and slept in comparison to post 1950s where individuals worked, slept, and watched TV (Abercombie and Longhurst 1998, 77). I would argue that in our current age, individuals, work, sleep, watch TV, surf the Internet, consume social media content, and more. Whereas these aspects were somewhat separated, these forms of media permeate individual lives intimately.

For example, TV was a pastime that could only be accessed in the home. It was a pastime and a way to stay connected to the surrounding world in the form of news and entertainment. However, in 2021, individuals carry a supercomputer in their pocket everywhere. They’re able to stay up to date on the latest news as it is happening from any part of the globe, play video games, search the Internet for information, hold meetings, schedule plans, make calls, and, of course, keep up with their friends, family, and strangers alike on social media. In their theory there exists different types of audiences, the most notable being “diffused audiences” where interactions are
mediated through spectacle and narcissism (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998, 77). With this newfound time, cosplayers were able to fully thrive. As a cosplayer, I am fully aware that it takes time and dedication to make and present a cosplay. Cosplayers that modify or make clothing and shoes, create props, create wigs, or practice the voice of their character carve out considerable amounts of time and money to present these projects. Some even go to the extent of modifying their bodies, such as losing weight or gaining weight for a role. These are all examples of what cosplayers go through for the sake of their performance. Whether on stage at a cosplay competition at a convention or online in an effort to gain more followers, there is a great deal of care for performing an image. This is characteristic of Abercrombie and Longhurst’s theory of “Spectacle and Performance” and as seen in the text.

However, in this theory, they characterize modern society as a “diffused audience”. This means that there is an absence of a gap between a performer and an audience. Everything has become a spectacle. Consuming media constantly is one such characteristic that they heavily note, and this is a reality not only for Black women cosplayers on TikTok but for everyone. Since the audience is the performer and vice versa, this relates to the concept that “anyone can cosplay”, which will be explained later in theme 3. People are no longer tied to particular roles with concrete skills that make them separate from each other, and social media especially plays a huge role in meshing these roles. With something as simple as posting a TikTok video, the user has made themselves a spectacle and as a user of the platform, a spectator to the lives of others. This spectacle can be seen in the way we dress, the things that we repost, the way we decorate our homes, or even sharing our birthday. Characteristics of the diffused audience can be seen with the coordinating phenomena of “spectacle” and “narcissism” (Abercrombie and Longhurst
As Goffman makes the distinction between the performer and the audience, Abercrombie and Longhurst combine the two under the influence of mass media. In this case, I will establish this theory through the lens of the users studied on social media, as the influence of this phenomenon can be slightly different than what mass media presents.

As it relates to spectacle, there is a molding, perception, and representation, we can apply these characteristics to the cosplay fandom and the interactions between Black women cosplayers and commenters (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998, 78). Individuals are molded to their particular position. Cosplayers mold themselves to be characters, and as mediated through TikTok, uses the features provided to make this possible. The responses received also play a part in this molding, allowing for cosplayers to grow and improve their image as they see fit. In modern societies, everything is treated as a spectacle and social media makes this abundantly clear. TikTok’s trend of popularizing certain aesthetics is an example of this. With looks such as “cottagecore” and “e-girl”, this platform takes aesthetics from various sources of inspiration such as music, animation, nature, emotions, and ways of life to create these trends (Appendix B). In addition to costumes and makeup in cosplay, filters, video editing, and even the use of hashtags specific to TikTok create a mold. In the case of the active audience these cosplayers attract, they are molds as well as spectators to their artistry.

These cosplayers are also “perceived as spectacles” in that they are already a projected image not only by themselves as performers but by an audience (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998, 79). In the case of cosplay, their manipulation of raw materials, as described by Jenkins, is also a reflection of themselves, demanding to be seen as a cosplayer and notable fan within the fandom. Audiences reflect this cosplayer image back with careful attention to their actions, as
seen through expressions in comments, and also with their perception of themselves as being members within the cosplay fandom to do so.

For commenters, cosplayers become a representation of their favorite characters, and moguls of cosplay fandom, cherishing the interpretations presented and encouraging more from them. By focusing on aesthetics and the performance of spectacle, cosplayers on TikTok invite their audience to react and the commenters deliver through support. The audience demands more representations of their characters through raw material manipulation.

In focusing on comments, we can see how the narcissistic side of modern society is upheld on platforms such as TikTok. Incorporating Ambercrombie and Longhurst’s work, in this instance, we can see their idea of how “the narcissistic self is constructed and maintained only in the reflections received from others” (Ambercrombie and Longhurst 1998, 90). This narcissistic self is when an individual acts as if they are being watched, seeking out gratification from an audience that reflects them. This is not to say that the individuals studied are narcissists, but rather, by virtue of their participation in cosplay fandom on a social media platform, they operate within the context of the narcissistic self and their audience, and likewise the audience reflects the images that they desire through various forms of “gushing” support. As a creator puts out content, they see themselves in the world, and the world (in this case the commenters) reflects back this narcissistic image. In being an active member on social media, your audience and engagement are your lifelines, and having support from an active and engaging audience is seen within the comments given to the cosplayers studied. The compliments on their cosplay and their ideas as well as the types of ways boundaries are made in place to protect them as mentioned in theme one maintain their activity and production of content or their narcissistic self. The creator,
in this case, comes to recognize the images that they put out as a facet of themselves (Ambercrombie and Longhurst 1998, 91). The levels of acceptance seen within these comments make the user like a celebrity in their own right (and granted, some of the users studied are celebrities within the cosplay fandom itself), entertaining an audience of adoring fans.

In their investigation on how cosplayers utilize Instagram to achieve this celebrity-like level of fame, Katie Haborak in *Identity, Curated Branding, and the Star Cosplayer's Pursuit of Instagram Fame*, states, “Users might engage in a search for personal meaning because social media offers a mode of self-expression where star cosplayers can creatively express personal brands. These platforms offer the incentive to commodify an identity as a brand” (Haborak 2020, 4.1). Likewise, this is seen on TikTok. Outside of the general presentation of cosplayed characters and imagined scenarios, there exists a space for the cosplayer to express their personal life in tandem to being a cosplayer. This can be seen in videos that talk about personal identity, content created for the sake of expressing the user's position within nerd culture, or videos that show the process of the creation of cosplay from start to finish. In relation to this theory, having this type of content reflects relatability from the cosplayer to the audience. The audience may not partake in the process of cosplaying or being a proclaimed cosplayer at all but may enjoy the individual, admire the craft, or can relate to the proximity of being within nerd culture which can also lead to these “gushy” expressions.

This adoration as described through expressions of love and amazement of the cosplayers’ skills can be ascribed to the level of attention these commenters give to the cosplayers. The more attention is given, the more there will be a response and a subsequent impact (Ambercrombie and Longhurst 1998, 43). Fans of the franchises, the cosplayers
themselves, or of surrounding characteristics (e.g. a fan of Black cosplayers specifically or a fan of hand-made costumes only) bring in higher levels of attention to the content presented, resulting in the interactions seen in the comments section. Since cosplay places emphasis on aesthetics and accuracy in varying degrees, I would say the highest form of a compliment is that a person sees a rendition of cosplay as “canon”, in which the cosplayer is seen as an accurate representation of the character. An example of this can be seen with cosplayer Lyra:

Lyra is a traditional cosplayer and notable cross-player, with most of the videos studied on her page, are of her cosplaying male characters. She is an amazing makeup artist, with a talent for changing her features drastically to fit these male characters, most of which have beards or stubble. Her videos also feature a great amount of detail in terms of acting and envisioning her characters in scenes that could possibly happen within the lore of the franchise.

1/10- (4-19) In this video the cosplayer is dressed as Jean Kirstein from *Attack on Titan*. The cosplayer receives compliments on cosplay such as “canon” and similar comments relating to the interpretation of the character. In this video, Lyra is lip-syncing to a sexually explicit song and acting in a perceived “sexy” manner. There are various comments on how the cosplayer makes the commenters fall in love more with the character and this is seen in seemingly flirtatious comments such as “thank you for the meal” and “I can’t breathe”.

As a personal fan of *Attack on Titan*, I can assure you that this character has had no “sexy” scenes or has been presented in any remotely sexual situation within the show or manga. However, by virtue of the cosplayer’s imagination, in combination with her makeup and acting skills, gives the audience (who is also likely a fan of this character and franchise regardless of the context) the belief that the character can act in this manner, despite the contrasting lore. The commenters' attention to the character and the cosplayers' ideas invoked a strong response, making the impact of the cosplay much more meaningful. The cosplayer, with their content being a reflection of themselves as a creator and felt that the content posted was good enough to
show to the world, will likely take heed to these reactions (the cosplayer liked the content and the audience reflected that same sentiment) and produce more content.

Another level of audience performance can be in the literal ways in which these comments are constructed in addition to the context of the social culture present in the background. With the presence of comments using all capitalized letters, a combination of capitalized and lowercase letters, or certain emojis (e.g. theme one’s neutral face emoji), or words that are entangled within a cultural background, these cues can be used to express certain sentiments such as excitement, mockery, or unadulterated praise. In *Introducing Internet Pragmatics* by Chaoqun Xie and Francisco Yus, they study the ways in which language is read and comprehended online in comparison to offline spaces. In the cosplay fandom, those coming from an outsider’s perspective may not understand the nuance of the language used in the comments my subjects received. This can span from the types of compliments given to the references used to express relation to the content posted. Within the idea that social culture surrounds the comments received from commenters to the Black women cosplayers studied, we can infer that this concept permeates the literal expression of language within the commentary.

Additionally, with the social status that comes with being a Black woman in online spaces, there’s the possibility for a layering of the cultural context within the expressions given by virtue of identity markers such as race, gender, or both. “Internet users would generate and manage social qualities through interactions in a similar way to offline communication. For example, certain types of online discourse (or some form of online code of behavior, interface use, etc.) and discourses exhibited therein are only comprehensible to those who belong to a specific social group within some delimited space of the Net, thus generating feelings of
community membership” (Xie and Yus 2018, 8). One recurring comment that I saw spanning multiple pages is the use of the word “bad”. “Bad” slang usage, means to be extremely attractive or sexy. I have also seen the word “baddie” in slang usage as well, meaning that the subject is an attractive and independent woman. In my experience, I’ve only seen this word applied to women that are Black or with features that are stereotypically considered to be “Black”-- fuller figures, fuller lips, and present themselves with a distinct look that is cornerstones of Black culture (e.g. braids or hoop earrings). However, in using this word to describe the Black women cosplayers studied, there is a performance not only the presence of support to the cosplayers that are characteristic of the cosplay fandom but also characteristic of recognizing the cosplayers identities as Black women.

In their investigation on how cosplayers utilize Instagram to achieve this celebrity-like level of fame, Katie Haborak in *Identity, Curated Branding, and the Star Cosplayer's Pursuit of Instagram Fame*, states, “Users might engage in a search for personal meaning because social media offers a mode of self-expression where star cosplayers can creatively express personal brands. These platforms offer the incentive to commodify an identity as a brand” (Haborak 2020, 4.1). Likewise, this is seen on TikTok. Outside of the general presentation of cosplayed characters and imagined scenarios, there exists a space for the cosplayer to express their personal life in tandem to being a cosplayer. This can be seen in videos that talk about personal identity, content created for the sake of expressing the user's position within nerd culture, or videos that show the process of the creation of cosplay from start to finish. In describing how cosplayers might use social media, Ivy Decker states that cosplayers often use social media to promote their work (and possibly get paid for it), stay connected to fans, and find resources to help them
further develop their cosplays (Decker 2017). “Cosplayers are identified by their unique pseudonyms, thus adhering to the unwritten rule of social networking encouraging individuality (Langlois 2014). Social media accounts are thus manipulated to construct an image or a reputation. Posted text makes use of carefully selected hashtags, often chosen via complex algorithms, to ensure the most cross-coverage” (Haborak 2020, 7.1). In maintaining this image, there exists a reflection of a strong response due to the careful curation of these social media identities that these cosplayers present. Through the combination of perceived “personal” views and cosplay performances (bonus points for uniqueness and creativity through constructing your own outfits, making flawless video transitions, or being exceptional at makeup), there is an opportunity to have a “gushing” audience reaction in the form of praise and adoration-- as most celebrities do.

Through these sources and the study of my subjects and the commentary that they have received, the cultivation of social media and the expression of the self is reflected by the audience. The cosplayer is molded by the perceptions of the audience, the cosplay fandom, and the tool used for this expression (TikTok), which can result in the “gushiness” of the comments that they have received. Likewise, the audience responds to the cosplayer and their content positively, due to the increased demand for their work in the form of videos, imagined scenarios, or imagined aesthetics, so much so that they idolize they could cosplayer in the process.
X. Theme 3: Acceptance, Fun, and Leisure - The Culture of Cosplay - “Anyone can cosplay”

Going back to Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* text, he describes how dominant culture characterizes the fan, often in negative stereotypes. Amongst the many examples of mainstream culture determining the characteristics of fans and fandom culture specifically within the realm of the *Star Trek* franchise, he mentions a skit produced by *Saturday Night Live*, which loudly made fun of the *Star Trek* fandom, characterizing these individuals as people who have “no life.” (Jenkins 1992, 19). He talks about as a fandom-specific cultural minority in a dominant culture which ridicules the fan, often fans are left to find ways to relate and express their lives’ complexity to those outside of the fandom, often through making the connection that fans, in fact, *do* have a life, and they are just like anyone else. Jenkins references a *Star Trek* fan’s response to this *SNL* skit citing that “I do live in the real world, with all of its tensions and stress. That is the reason why I am a Trekker. A hobby is necessary for mental health…” However, in this explanation, more interestingly she states, “*Star Trek* helps me to keep from burning out in all of the “important” things I do. It helps me relax. It helps me retain my perspective. It is fun” (Jenkins, Kulikauskas 1992, 21).

Similarly, cosplay is the same way. In my experience, with my interest in makeup and fashion in combination with my love for anime and various personal attachments to characters, I found cosplay to be a joyous medium of expression, and I have often admired cosplayers for their attention to detail and high levels of craftsmanship in both conveying the character
physically (e.g. prop-making) and emotionally (e.g. acting). Looking up ways to achieve the best way to convey a character is always fun, and I enjoy the excitement when con season comes around because I am able to display my contributions and admire the contributions of others too. During this time I am also able to be more of a nerd and escape the world around me that may not understand my hobbies and obsessions with certain shows, movies, characters, and books. Going back to Timmi’s page, here is an example of how cosplay can bring about fun and laughter:

9/10- (4-2) Cosplaying Aladdin and Jasmine from Disney animated film *Aladdin*. The video is comedic acting of one of the film’s most iconic scenes (“I Can Show You the World”, where Aladdin takes Jasmine on a magic carpet ride) using a popular TikTok audio. There is an expression of laughter in comments, comments referencing the film and the audio used, and compliments on cosplay-- more comments specifically for Jasmine such as “beautiful”; And in reference to the video scenario and overall cosplay of the characters: “loved this” and “spot-on”. To gain more attention for her skit, commenters mention and tag the creator of the audio used in the video.

From her interpretation of the character and her imagination, she created a video that she not only enjoyed, but shared with others so that they may enjoy it as well, and that, I believe, is the ultimate essence of cosplay. Being able to share the joy of costuming and have fun is embedded in this social culture. Every year at Mechacon before the cosplay competition, the host would always make a speech about “having fun” and establish the fact that we would not be in attendance at this con, dressed as “God knows who” if it weren’t for the simple fact that “we are all nerds”. Cosplay requires an audience and a fun-loving one at that. If it weren’t for the creators and the audience to establish cultural bonds of belonging and making their contributions under
the guise of having fun, the cosplay fandom would be a cold and mute place to participate in. Enjoying the process of construction, being able to make fun of yourself and the characters you love, and engaging in a positive community is what cosplay is about.

In this theme, I will attempt to look at the comments my Black woman subjects received through the lens of sociological theories about fun and leisure. I will also talk about another golden rule that has been representative of the cosplay fandom for a long time—“anyone can cosplay”. By looking at this rule and the connection between “fun”, we can look towards ideas of individual establishments of “fun” and how that might contribute to group identity and group establishments of “fun”. In this section, I will be looking at Ben Fincham’s *The Sociology of Fun*, as it relates to the cosplay fandom and TikTok. Additionally, since “fun” can be conceptualized with boundary-making and aesthetics and representation of activities deemed “fun”, this theme will be crossed with themes 1 and 2 respectively.

In Fincham’s studies, he attempts to theorize “fun” within multiple frameworks provided by scholars. Fun is seen as a figment of a social realm. It encompasses deviance, identity, group activities, inequality, and leisure. Looking again to the 1950s as previous theorists mentioned, there was a cultural and economic shift that began to emerge during this time. Not only was there more time to be immersed in mass media, but there was also more expendable income that individuals could spend at their own discretion. Due to these two factors, fun and leisure began to be looked at more closely (Fincham 2016, 587).

Going back to the introduction that presents these conceptions of fun, Fincham directly addresses the “fun” of the separation that I and many cosplayers feel in participating in the cosplay fandom--it is a separation from reality. “During fun, attention is directed away from
responsibility towards a more carefree attitude—however short-lived that may be. It is not necessarily the case that fun is defined through irresponsibility but that responsibility is not a concern during periods of fun” (Fincham 2016, 785). The responsibility that a human being participating in mainstream society feels dissipates through having fun. For example, even if we are to separate TikTok from cosplay at this moment, even TikTok can be used as a general means of escape by virtue of participation on the app. Lip-syncing, participating in dancing trends, creating your own video using the plethora of features and filters provided, can all be grounds of escape under this definition (Anderson 2020, 3-4). The only instance where this couldn’t be presented as an escape is when individuals go through the process of “branding” themselves, as seen in theme 2 theories of performance. Connecting cosplay back to TikTok once more, the development of the “celebrity personality” that social media platforms can promote, can be representative of this phenomenon. The very act of promoting oneself online could be seen as fun, but coupled with the intentions behind “branding” oneself online, doing this could possibly take away from the pure enjoyment of the activity and the act of cosplaying becomes a job rather than a pastime or escape. “A lot of energy is poured into representing fun, as opposed to just enjoying it. It is a common complaint that life is increasingly lived through a lens and many of us are guilty of doing this to ourselves” (Fincham 2016, 601).

In Fincham’s studies, he found that when fun is in relation to the self, there are more serious undertones in how importance is allocated to the activities they might participate in. Having fun in a group is seen and felt as more trivial and carefree than what makes an individual gravitate towards their idea of having fun. “This emphasis on the self and enjoyment relocates
fun to a trivial factor in the more important pleasure/enjoyment project of the self” (Fincham 2016, 653). In this case, fun is an experience that is contained within the individual’s livelihood.

“Fun facilitates cohesion by allowing participants to feel that their social engagements are rewarding in themselves. In this, we treat fun as collective pleasure. While participants are knowledgeable about their own experiences (Martin 2011), for fun to be defined as a collective event, group members need to recognize that they share awareness. By adopting a group-centered approach, we emphasize that collective action creates a shared emotional register and a commitment mechanism. As a result, fun is not a form of individual action but an interpretation of a group project” (Fine and Corte 2017, 66).

In combination with Fincham, Gary Alan Fine and Ugo Corte take a sociological approach to look at the concept of “fun” through the lens of groups rather than individuals. In the case of cosplay fandom, I believe there is a point to be made about both the individual connection to fun and fun within groups, represented by the cosplayers and the commenters. The relationships seen between the cosplayers and the commenters on TikTok point towards a type of group cohesion. Similar to the theories of performance where both parties recognize their positions as a performer, audience member, or both, there is a shared awareness of what constitutes having fun. As individuals, each person has their own attachment to cosplay, as a cosplayer or observant. This personal attachment builds upon the idea that the individual values this act of having fun as something deeply interpersonal to them, and finds enrichment in their respective participation. ...Fun is external, in contrast to the inner orientation of enjoyment. It is this external manifestation that accentuates the relational and contextual nature of fun” (Fincham 2017, 667). When a group of these individuals comes together in the sociocultural context of
cosplay fandom, there is a mutual understanding that cosplay is fun, and thus produces the concept of “collective pleasure”. When individuals can find a group to belong to that emphasizes the same ideals, that collective is able to bond in the recognition of what constitutes “fun”.

Also going back to theme 1 in terms of boundary-making, when this cohesion works smoothly, all participants can enjoy and relish having fun within this space. In terms of gatekeeping or discriminatory comments seen on my subjects' pages, this not only introduces an intrusion of the established moral code within the cosplay fandom that anyone is supposed to be able to partake in cosplay but also ruins the “fun” that everyone relates to on an interpersonal level. “Being absorbed or committed to an activity involves acceptance of assumptions and rules surrounding that activity—in the example they choose, two players of a game experience it differently depending on their orientation to the rules” (Fincham 2016, 742). The social cohesion of the cosplay fandom cannot exist without the boundaries that exist within it. Therefore, the types of negative comments some of my subjects received are pushed even further away from the culture of cosplay more. Not only are these commenters shunned from the cosplay fandom generally, but they are not seen as “fun” or partaking in the “fun” of the cosplay fandom as a whole.

Additionally, looking at “fun” as an external action that is comparative to individual “enjoyment”, we can see how TikTok might be a catalysis for this extension. In combination with theme 2 theories of performance and the participation within cosplay fandom on TikTok, there is a need for the expression of fun through these videos. Whether that means making an audience laugh, as mentioned in Timmi’s example, or displaying the entire development of a cosplay (e.g. making props, wigs, costumes, etc.) in order to appeal to the audience, there is an
extension of the enjoyment that is experienced by the individual cosplayer. In terms of the audience, reflecting the same sentiment of having this interpersonal relationship of enjoyment with cosplay (even though they might not be cosplayers themselves), is represented through the supportive commentary given. Through this, both parties come together in the cohesion of having “fun” on this online space and partake in each other’s company as lovers of cosplay and the franchises that they share an interest in.

Loneliness, envy, hate, fear, shame, pride, horror, resentment, grief, nostalgia, trust, sadness, satisfaction, joy, anger, happiness, frustration, and a myriad of other feelings emerge in specific social situations, expressing in the individual’s bodily consciousness the rich spectrum of forms of human social interaction and relationships. Understanding an emotion means understanding the situation and social relation that produces it (Bericat 2016, 495). In conclusion, through the words expressed by Eduardo Bericat and their investigation into human emotions and socialization, they argue that there needs to be an emotional layer of study as it relates to the social contexts we might find ourselves in. In the case of “fun”, there is an interpersonal understanding of what an individual desires when finding and enacting what is fun for them. Likewise with cosplay, finding those franchises and characters that are personal for them might propel their interest into cosplaying. As seen with the strong emotional responses that cosplayers can have when dressed a particular character in TikTok comments should be proof enough of the emotional aspects that the audience might have. In their investigation of the spread of cosplay culture across Hong Kong, Osmud Rahman, Liu Wing-sun, and Brittany Hei-man Cheung state, “Cosplaying their favorite character (or heroine, idol, or icon) is a way of expressing their fandom and passion. It is not a nonsensical or meaningless activity, but a form of
personal expression and manifestation that exists outside of acceptable norms of mainstream culture (Winge 2006)” (Cheung 2012).

As mentioned in the article “Black Cosplayers Call For Change In The Cosplay Community”, there is a problem, as with all aspects of life being a Black person existing in various spaces, within the cosplay community as it relates to discriminatory practices seen within the fandom. Despite this, however, these cosplayers all expressed their liking for cosplaying and depicting their favorite characters. “For me, cosplay is about being comfortable in my own skin. As ironic as that sounds (because usually, it is dressing up as someone or something else), I still believe this to be true. When we are comfortable in our own skin, we feel free to express ourselves how we like, without fear of ridicule or judgment” (Ginn 2021). Tying this emotional response to cosplay in relation to fun, these cosplayers have found ways to still be comfortable enough to partake within the cosplay fandom, and push the envelope of what it means to be a part of a culture in which “anyone can cosplay”. This simple rule has opened their hearts up to be in a space of adversity, simply because it is fun.
XI. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are three themes that have defined the relationships between Black women cosplayers on TikTok and the commentary they receive: (1) drawing boundaries, (2) performance, (3) having fun. Boundaries are often made when there is a problem of competition within communities, and in order to establish social cohesion and culture, these boundaries are defined. In the essence of being a user on social media, specifically TikTok, there is a layering of performance that is seen within the relationships between the subjects and the commenters. There's a performance as a cosplayer and as an audience member and there is a performance as a user of social media. Cosplaying is already a performance of a particular identity, as mediated through a plethora of contexts such as the identity and wants of the cosplayer themselves, a performance of what the audience may want, and a presentation of aesthetics. Likewise, the audience members perform in response to what the cosplayer may want to see and may relate to these individuals through the characters that they cosplay, the franchises that they might talk about, or their socio-cultural identity (e.g. race). With each piece of content posted and comment sent in response, there is a performance between these two parties. Lastly, having fun is intertwined with the cultural identity that permeates the cosplay fandom. The comments and the content posted can be a performance of fun, but the expressions of these interactions are rooted in emotional and personal ties to enjoyment. This enjoyment, when coupled with being in a type of social setting, such as being a part of the cosplay fandom, produces “fun”. A manifestation of this is the act of cosplaying. All of these factors have contributed to the interactions observed on TikTok.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


   https://ccc101blog.wordpress.com/2019/03/01/what-are-the-differences-between-cosplayers-fursuiters/.


APPENDIX A:
Cosplay Examples; Images are my own examples of cosplay and images were found via Unsplash which is a website for high-quality, free-use photos, and Google Images.

1. (Photo by Cymone Richardson via personal iPhone gallery)
Mary Saotome (Left), Yumeko Jabami (Middle), Kirari Momobami (Right) from the Japanese manga and anime *Kakegurui*. 
Boosette, based on the popular fan-created character Bowsette, which is a female, anthropomorphized version of Bowser from the Nintendo *Mario* video game franchise. In this case, instead of Bowser, it is King Boo from the Nintendo *Mario* video game franchise.
3. (Photo by Charles Chen (@color0911) via Unsplash)
Rei Ayanami from the Japanese anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*
4. (Photo by Larry Crayton (@lcrayton) via Unsplash)
Jasmine (Left) and Aladdin (Right) from the Disney animated film *Aladdin.*
APPENDIX B:
Fursuiting Examples:
Images were found via Google Images with given credit on the sites in which the
photos were found.

1. (Photo by Dont Hug Cacti (@donthugcacti) via Dazed.com, “Why furries are fighting over
‘designer’ fursuits” by Kish Lal)
Custom fursuit made by Dont Hug Cacti.
2. (Photo by Twinky Arts (@tweekowolf) via Flickr.com)
Custom feline fursuit named “Triton” made by Twinky Arts.
APPENDIX C:
Examples of Popular Aesthetics on TikTok
Images were found via Google Images with given credit on the sites in which the photos were found.

1. (Photo by Ines Silva (@Irisloveunicorns) via Wikipedia) This is an example of “e-girl aesthetic” which places an emphasis on colored hair (although not present here), alternative styles of makeup, and childish hairstyles (e.g. pigtails). The grunge-like necklace and clothing used are typical of this aesthetic as well, but most of this aesthetic takes from various styles, all composed to make the subject look more like a character or personality that you can only come across on the Internet.
2. (Photo by Shanna Shipin via Glamour.com) This photo is typical of “cottagecore” aesthetic, which places a heavy emphasis on being in the outdoors and surrounded by nature, tending to or simply taking leisure in the environment; Clothing style typically consists of flowy, loose-fitted garments with muted colors.