The Social Phenomenon Surrounding Black Cosplay: The Unseen Toll of Racial Battle Fatigue

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Abstract

Black cosplayers are experiencing backlash for their chosen characters (which are often fictional) not being Black. There is an underrepresentation of the Black community in all forms of media. This lack of representation does not allow many options for those that participate in the subculture of cosplay. As cosplay is a marginalized group within society, Black cosplayers are a marginalized group within a marginalized group. An online survey for those involved in cosplay and voluntary participant interviews have been analyzed along with data collected from various social media platforms. All participants in this study are 18 years of age and older and are now or have previously been members of the cosplay community. Results of the online survey conducted show that many participants in cosplay have positive experience associated with the subculture. This information was consistent in interviews although members of the Black and Female community have experienced more negative backlash from the community. People of color are experiencing higher negative responses as a result of participating in cosplay, supporting the thesis that cosplay reflects systemic racism within society. While some Black cosplayers have noted that they believe they have the same experiences of their White counterparts, others note that members of the Black community have become accustomed to this type of behavior.

Keywords: Cosplay, Race, Black, Geek, Racial Battle Fatigue

Introduction

Throughout societies there are many marginalized groups of individuals with varying types of marginalization. Cosplayers are a marginalized group. Cosplay is a combination of the words costume and play which an individual dresses up as a character from a tv show, movie, video game, or a book. Cosplay is a form of expression of a marginalized group of individuals who are typically members of the "geek" community. Black cosplayers happen to be a marginalized group within a marginalized group.

With the common misconception that one must share a skin tone with the character to portray that character, it brings about a hierarchy of oppression. This study aims to identify if there is racial battle fatigue associated with being a Black cosplayer that stems from negative experiences due to racial discrimination. It is anticipated that the results of this study will prove that cosplay is a subculture which will reflect the racial biases of the dominant culture causing Black participants unnecessary racial trauma. Racism that is blatant or in the form of microaggressions has had a negative impact on Black people from the cradle to the grave.

There is importance in exploring the marginalization within this expressive community in its reflection of geek and popular culture as giving this a name and the attention it deserves will bring awareness to an issue that can cause added unnecessary emotional trauma to the lives of Black cosplayers. Anticipated results are that cosplay is a subculture which will reflect the racial biases of the dominant culture causing Black participants unnecessary racial trauma. In research done on the reduction of racial stress and enhancing racial coping mechanisms, it shows that there are harmful effects to the mental health which stems from racial discrimination.

Background

The backlash that is being received by Black cosplayers is often because the chosen character, which is frequently fictional, is not Black. Members of the Black community are underrepresented in all forms of media. Black individuals must constantly reshape and transform themselves to fit into white dominated spaces which often causes racial battle fatigue. Many of the activities that Black individuals partake in were not created with Black people in mind. There is a tendency for Black people to try to evolve superficially to similar characteristics of western societal standards to better fit in and receive less scrutiny. However, this convergence is often met with

negativity. Being Black in any environment comes with its own battles.

When members of the Black community are fighting for equality, it is most successful only when white and black interests converge. It is important to have one less space for black individuals to have to fight for inclusion without being attacked for existing in a white dominated space. "Black people are often subject to racism, and women, sexism, within the geek community." (Jenkins, B.) Cosplay enthusiasts should pay attention to the details on the costume instead of the color of the person's skin who is in that costume. It is important to explore the marginalization within this expressive community in its reflection of geek and popular culture. This phenomenon needs theorizing because giving it a name and the attention it deserves will bring awareness to an issue that causes an added unnecessary emotional trauma to the lives of Black cosplayers.

The research surrounding Black cosplay is lacking. While there have been articles written to shed light on the amount of discrimination, racism, sexism, and invisibility that is faced by Black cosplayers; it is also worth noting that there have been no studies (that I can find) which explore the unseen toll of racism and the emotional impact that Black cosplayers are experiencing. General research has shown thus far that, "studies on race and gender within cosplay and the geek community at large identify that geek culture is a White and male dominated space." (Jenkins, B.) This has resulted in Black, non-binary, women, and other non-White cosplayers to experience marginalization within this community. Cosplay is a subculture which is an individual's outward expression of passion for a favorite comic book character, video game, movie, anime character, or tv-show. The cosplayer can be whomever they choose to be if society will allow it.

Cosplay is both a presentation of live art and of fandom. When one portrays a character, it is important to embody that character and express one's knowledge of that character. According to Bainbridge and Norris (2013), the cosplayer must express their knowledge of pop-culture by presenting an authentic and accurate depiction of the character. Cosplay is like gender roles where one acts in a performative manner to define one's own identity. This is a social process in which the "fandoms" or sub-groups are indicated through cosplay.

Although cosplayers are more likely to experience marginalization and stigmatization outside of conventions, there are fans who are members of the minority group (like black cosplayers) who face the same marginalization and stigmatization within these conventions (Orme 2016). bell hooks writes about race and representation as they relate to performance practices by black individuals. She states that this performance practice has been a central part of the process of decolonization which is why it is important for black fans to be present in this space.

Methods

My research has included an online survey, ethnography of articles written about the subculture of cosplay, and interviews of select participants in from the survey. The survey has been collected online from voluntary participants aged 18 and over and include information from Black and non-Black cosplayers. Social media platforms TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook have been used to recruit participants. The sample size for the survey at the time of this article is 47 participants. While the survey was not anonymous, identifying participant information will not be shared only data collected. The survey consists of 17 questions which includes demographic information and questions regarding experiences during cosplay. I want to expand this research not only to include reactions towards Black cosplayers but also the racial battle fatigue that is experienced by these individuals. More research will also be conducted on what type of representation is needed. The primary focus of this research will be on the experiences and effects of being a Black cosplayer.

Results

This project investigates the emotional impact on Black cosplayers by surveying and interviewing Black and non-Black Cosplayers. The Survey has garnered responses from 47 individuals. The semi-structured interviews that have been conducted has allowed me to then analyze the collected data to assess whether there is an emotional trauma is present in Black cosplayers. Preliminary results show that comfort levels of characters portrayed have risen for those that have been involved in cosplay longer. While some participants have stated that they have had negative interactions when participating in cosplay events, others say that they have gotten more comfortable as time has gone on. When asked whether participants believe that race has an impact on the characters that Black cosplayers choose, several participants stated that they began by choosing characters based on who they looked most like. One participant states, "My first cosplay event I dressed as Nani from Lilo and Stitch because even though we don't share the same race, at least she is brown, and it just felt more comfortable." The study uses survey information as a control for data comparison.
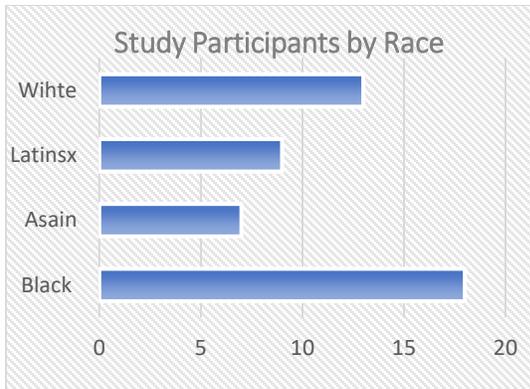
Figure 1. Participants in study broken down by race.

Results of the online survey conducted by this researcher show that many participants in cosplay have positive experiences associated with the subculture. This information was consistent in interviews as those who have negative experiences are of the Black or female community. During the analysis and interpretation of data, the impact on other groups of cosplayers has been considered. Although the overall experience of White cosplayers was more positive, survey results show that White female cosplayers have had more negative experiences than males. Data shows that people of color are experiencing higher negative responses as a result of participating in cosplay, which supports the thesis that the subculture of cosplay reflects the dominant culture within society." Racial slurs are a commonplace, but it seems like the same people who throw these slurs out are the very people who think it's okay to do black face or tape their eyes to appear more Asian."
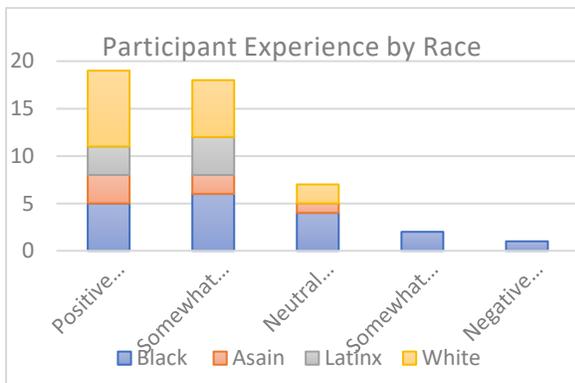

Figure 2. Type of experiences that participants have by race.

While some Black cosplayers have noted that they believe to have had similar experiences to those of White cosplayers, one participant notes: "It is important to remember that as Black people, we have gotten used to negative responses of others in our day to day lives. That doesn't make it okay, just means that we as Black people know that there are many spaces that we must grin and bear it." The results of the online survey show that Black participants have experienced more negative feed-back. Some participants note the lack of representation in media for people of color. This lack of representation does not allow many options for those that participate in the subculture. " You need to look like the character that you are cosplaying." For some the notion of looking like the character means that they need to share the same skin tone while others simply show their creativity by putting time and money towards creating the most accurate costume.
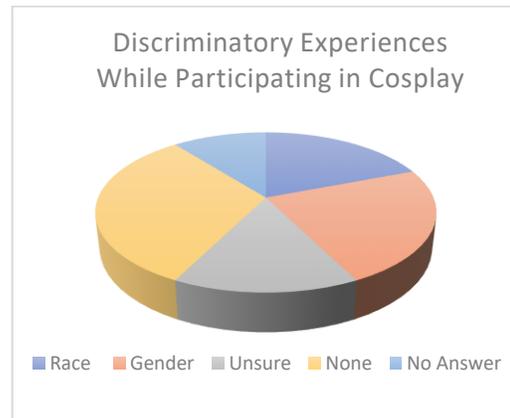

Figure 3. Type of discriminatory experiences while participating in cosplay.

Conclusion

There has been a correlation between being a member of the Black community and being involved in cosplay. While female cosplayers experience more backlash than their male counterparts, Black female cosplayers experience an even higher amount of backlash. Online research has shown that one of the largest issues that the cosplay community faces is racism. People of color are experiencing higher negative responses as a result of participating in cosplay, supporting the thesis that cosplay reflects the systemic racism within society. While some Black cosplayers have noted that they believe they have the same experiences of their White counterparts, others note that members of the Black community have become accustomed to this type of behavior. Although cosplay is a subculture that is praised for being acceptive of those that are within the geek community that feel as though they do not fit in society, improvement of the community is still needed when it comes to racial acceptance. Representation can create empathy outside of the Black community. It is the hope of this researcher that this information will help better educate people about the cosplay subculture and to show that the greater issues of society can be present even in accepting subcultures.

References

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