



Social Media Influence on Cosplay Communities: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract. The costume play (cosplay) subculture is now deeply embedded in the social media environment, and this change has profoundly reshaped the way culture is created. Although the existing literature has pointed out the gatekeeping and cyberbullying in the online cosplay community, the structural conditions behind these phenomena are often ignored. Therefore, this study uses a qualitative method to conduct semi-structured interviews with 20 cosplay participants, aiming to explore how digital platforms affect their behavior, psychological state, and cognition. The results of the study reveal some key insights. Social media limits participants' self-expression to some extent. Participants are forced to be embedded in the platform's valuation system. Community conflicts still exist through horizontal exclusion and vertical hierarchy. More importantly, platform capital creates an alienation among individuals, which is a part of the widespread alienation in contemporary society through technology. In addition, a close relationship has been established between the alienation by platform capital and the alienation by social structure. In general, based on the understanding of how digital platforms affect the cosplay subculture, this article helps people understand their situations under platform capitalism and promotes the knowledge and discussion of new types of social alienation in the digital age.

Keywords: Cosplay, Social Media, Platform Capitalism, Alienation

1 Introduction

The costume play (cosplay), simply put, is the activity in which individuals play fictional characters in animation, video games, or literature through performances [1]. It is like an outlet that allows people to temporarily get out of the stress of daily life and relieve psychological stress. At the same time, as a social activity, cosplay helps people connect with community members and cultivate a strong sense of emotional belonging and collective identity [2]. Therefore, as cosplay becomes widely integrated into people's lifestyle and entertainment list, it has evolved into a global cultural phenomenon that cannot be ignored [3].

However, as social media has fundamentally changed the way culture is generated and communicated, the interaction focus of many subcultural communities has shifted from offline space to online platforms on a large scale. Digital platforms are profoundly

reshaping the cosplay culture. As Lamerichs pointed out, traditional comic conventions are increasingly integrating with digital platforms [3]. This change is obvious. Cosplay performances that used to have to be seen at offline comic shows can now be recorded at home through video recording. Live broadcast technology has greatly enhanced the immediacy of content dissemination. The interactions have also shifted from traditional forums to multiple online communities. These integrations have changed the way cosplay content is created, shared, and evaluated. Through the algorithm recommendation on the digital platform, the platform systematically transforms the participation of fans into commercial data assets. Therefore, contemporary cosplay practices have become highly dependent on the social media environment.

This study adopts a qualitative method, taking social media as the main research field. Through interviews with 20 cosplayers who are deeply involved in social media cosplay, this study tries to explore how digital platforms reshape contemporary cosplay practices. This paper aims to deepen the understanding of the cosplay subculture and to provide a new perspective on people's situation under platform capitalism. In the process of analysis, this article introduces Bourdieu's field theory and capital theory to explore the changes in cosplay communities under the influence of social media [4]. Specifically, this study mainly focuses on three issues. First, the appearance of the cosplay community on social media. Secondly, the platform's influence on these aspects. Finally, the potential social regularities behind these phenomena.

2 Literature Review

Recalling the emergence of Web 2.0 around 2004, the pattern of cultural production and circulation began to change significantly. The Web 2.0 stage is characterized by interactive participation and social networks, which means that users are no longer just consumers of information, but also creators and sharers of content. As Poell et al. pointed out, the platform has gradually shifted the leading power of cultural production and distribution from the traditional editorial orientation to a model driven by user demand [5]. This change once made people optimistic that digital power was decentralized. But the reality is that the development of the platform has led to the increasing homogeneity of cultural content. The pusher is the algorithm system, which gives priority to recommend content that meets mainstream. Specifically, the recommendation algorithm determines the priority of content according to clicks, likes, shares, and other indicators, which invisibly encourages creators to imitate those popular styles in order to gain exposure. Over time, creators sometimes even subconsciously, constantly adjust strategies to adapt to algorithm preferences, resulting in similar content in terms of aesthetics and themes [6]. Although the platform lowers the threshold of participation, it may give rise to new forms of labor exploitation. As Stoyanova pointed out, for some participants, maintaining an online role gradually evolved into a full-time job [7]. They run their own personal brands through continuous interaction with the audience and the platforms. In response to this phenomenon, Abidin put forward the concept of "visible labor", which refers to the continuous efforts of individuals to maintain being seen on the platforms [8]. This concept highlights the emotions and creative inputs that are often

not recognized behind the participation on the platform. Creating content on the platform means that cosplayers need to constantly publish works. These creative behaviors are actually providing data for the platforms. Therefore, some of the participation behaviors have evolved into a kind of unpaid labor, indirectly helping the platform to complete the capital accumulation.

On digital platforms, attention distribution is extremely uneven, leading to an imbalance under the influence of social media. Traffic and commercial opportunities tend to be highly concentrated in the hands of a few people. Instead, other participants can either get meager economic returns or are actually doing unpaid digital labor. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, the cosplay community on digital platforms can be understood as a social field where the platform algorithm largely makes the rules and determines which kind of capital can be accumulated and transformed [4]. Studies have found that on platforms such as TikTok, algorithms prompt creators to cater to the current mainstream aesthetics and video styles in order to gain attention [9]. This process makes the content homogeneous and also reduces the uniqueness of the individual. Therefore, in the cosplay field, those participants who have rich resources or other forms of capital are obviously more capable of transforming them into popularity on the platform, so as to have great power. On the contrary, due to the lack of these resources, it is difficult for ordinary participants to realize their limited cultural capital into platform visibility, and this structural disadvantage leads to marginalization.

As mentioned above, in an algorithm-dominated environment, it is difficult for many participants to break through the barriers of attention. Under this pressure, some people will turn the frustration caused by platform inequality into groups and attack their peers who also hold limited resources. This phenomenon is a kind of horizontal violence, referring to aggression directed at peers within the same marginalized group. Drawing on "Panopticism", when people realize that they are being observed, they tend to adjust their behavior [10]. On the digital platforms, the indicators of views, likes, and comments prompt participants to constantly monitor their online image in order to gain recognition. Research showed that this performance pressure in cosplay in social networks causes participants to continuously self-examine their body, appearance, and social performance, thus increasing anxiety [11]. In this case, some criticism and exclusion in the community can be seen as the exercise of power by marginalizing others. This practice may be packaged as maintaining the purity of the community, but it is actually a discipline for oneself and others. Existing research also confirms this kind of horizontal violence. Peirson-Smith pointed out that in Asian cosplay scenes, members use very strict standards to judge the quality of others' makeup and clothing, which sometimes even evolves into cyberbullying [2]. Similarly, Stoyanova also observed that those participants who encounter gatekeeping and ridicule in the community [7]. To cope with these restrictions, some participants make strict community rules to make up for their vulnerable position on the platforms. These kinds of internal conflicts can actually be linked to broader social problems. As Sobkin and Fedotova showed that online aggression was a projection of power relations, those who experience marginalization in real life may tend to play the role of aggressors online to make up for the gap between reality and cyberspace [12]. In addition, Andersson's research found that the impolite expression of certain groups can strengthen the sense of identity and superiority within

the group [13]. In short, the supervision and exclusion within the cosplay community are largely shaped by participants in order to gain recognition and exercise the power they may lack in reality.

Overall, there are several common findings in the existing research. First of all, social media has revolutionized the ways of production, making cultural activities dependent on platforms. Secondly, the algorithm-driven attention economy has increased inequality and benefited a few people, while the majority have fallen into the dilemma of digital labor. Third, under these conditions, participants in subcultural groups such as cosplay communities face great pressure, including traffic anxiety and appearance anxiety. Finally, those who are marginalized offline or online may cope with this unequal treatment by harming other vulnerable groups. However, there are still some gaps in the relevant literature. To begin with, although scholars have observed phenomena such as gatekeeping and cyberbullying in cosplay communities, they pay insufficient attention to the social conditions that lead to these behaviors. Furthermore, the current explanation of how marginalized participants deal with the inequality they face is still limited. This study aims to make a preliminary exploration of this phenomenon.

3 Method

This study recruits 20 cosplayers who are active on social media. The samples cover people of different identities, both professionals and amateurs, together with relevant photographers and makeup artists. Participants' experience ranged from less than one year to over twenty years. The samples included male, female, and non-binary participants. Participants' social media accounts ranged from having no followers to several hundred thousand followers. The selection aimed to ensure diversity across gender identity and level of experience, together with geographic location and degree of social media visibility. This study obtains the consent of all participants, and the data have been anonymized. In terms of recruitment methods, this paper uses snowball sampling that first posts online to find initial participants, and then follows the recommendation from initial participants to contact different levels of members.

Data collection is mainly semi-structured interviews through voice calls. This study records the audio with a voice memo and then transcribes the recording word for word to ensure the integrity of the information. During the interview, this article focuses on the following topics, including the motivations for participating in cosplay, the resource investments, and the factors affecting the popularity. Finally, this study uses the coding method to analyze interview records. By repeatedly reading the manuscript, themes are summarized and classified.

4 Results

4.1 The Paradox of Self-expression

Many people regard cosplay as a way to break social labels and express themselves. However, as social media reshapes cultural production, the interaction focus of subcultural circles shifts from offline comics to online [3]. In the face of this change, many participants became cautious and began to suppress their desire to express themselves. Initial engagement in cosplay communities was associated with self-expression and a sense of community belonging. As Never and Cyn recalled:

“I first got into cosplay during my senior year of high school when the academic pressure was overwhelming. When I was cosplaying a character from a book at the Comic-Con... Then a few people came up to me and said, ‘Your cosplay is so cute!’ At that moment, I didn’t want to feel so lost anymore. By becoming this character, what people seek is also validation for themselves.” (Participant Never, Online Communication, March 18, 2026)

“At first, I joined the Cosplay to make friends... But now it is more about I really like some characters in comics and want to bring them to real life.” (Participant Cyn, Online Communication, March 5, 2026)

However, when the platform gradually becomes the main space of cosplay, the risks behind self-expression also rise. In the digital space, a small mistake in cosplay may be magnified, attracting internal and external criticism. Steven gave such an example:

“I have a friend who was photographed eating bread at the comic exhibition. As a result, someone on the Internet criticized her for poor performance, because the way she ate did not match the original character setting.” (Participant Cyn, Online Communication, March 5, 2026)

This high exposure rate in the digital space increases the possibility of being criticized and weakens participants’ willingness to express themselves. In order to avoid these potential risks, some participants began to choose to reduce their activities in public places.

“Now I only post cosplay photos on WeChat Moments, and I do not share them on public platforms.” (Participant Berry, Online Communication, March 15, 2026)

These statements suggest that cosplay practice, originally associated with self-expression, gradually changes in digital spaces toward more cautious forms of participation.

4.2 Disciplines of New Value Evaluation Systems

Because of the influence of social media platforms, a new system of value evaluation gradually took shape in cosplay communities. The value evaluations include the visibility, which results in digital labor. Drawing on Bourdieu’s framework, data metrics such as likes, shares, and followers can be understood as functioning analogously to cultural and symbolic capital within the digital field [4]. As platform users, cosplay creators continuously accumulate cultural capital through acquiring traffic and followers, building personal brands, expanding their social influence, and even generating economic returns. This quantification enhances the standards of assessing individual

value. As creators gain greater visibility, they accumulate and expand symbolic and cultural capital, which may also turn into economic value. Many interviewees indicated that the platform's traffic evaluation system puts a sense of pressure. Several participants described that they were experiencing, or had experienced, traffic anxiety. Their experiences show that low visibility is often interpreted as insufficient quality. Some participants reported that their work was not good enough, and their efforts received little recognition. Furthermore, platform algorithms shape the standards. Algorithmic traffic distribution on platforms is driven by trending topics. Once a particular video format gains widespread traction, mass imitation quickly follows, including similar cinematography styles and editing techniques. This trend results in content homogenization. Octopus explained how this mechanism operates in practice:

"Many short video operation courses ask creators to find certain accounts and imitate their successful formats, because the platform gives more traffic to content if you follow these patterns." (Participant Octopus, Online Communication, March 2, 2026)

Under such conditions, creating works out of passions and contributing traffic to the platform gradually evolve into producing works out of generating traffic or economic benefits. Creative activities become labour performed to sustain audience attention. Hu Yan reflected on this change when discussing professional cosplayers:

"Professional cosplayer changes the original motivation for participating... It would make me feel tired." (Participant Hu Yan, Online Communication, March 15, 2026)

Thus, platforms construct a form of seemingly decentralized participation. While participants seem to voluntarily pursue visibility through traffic metrics, they remain unaware that they become digital laborers who are alienated by these metrics. Beyond traffic anxiety, the logic of the attention economy extends into bodily self-presentation, giving rise to appearance anxiety. Owing to attention economy on platforms, physical appearances increasingly become resources to attract visibility. Similar to the standard mentioned in content production, aesthetic styles also present a strong tendency toward homogenization. Octopus and Never noted:

"Platforms are now filled with very similar makeup." (Participant Octopus, Online Communication, March 2, 2026)

"Only attractive faces and bodies can generate traffic... so everyone inevitably starts to pursue the same things." (Participant Never, Online Communication, March 18, 2026)

Many participants rely on photo editing techniques as an initial strategy; however, in more extreme cases, they reported considering plastic surgery and physical body modification. Cyn and Indeterminacy pointed out this phenomenon:

"At one point I considered getting a chin filler. Later I calmed down... but I did seriously look into this surgery." (Participant Cyn, Online Communication, March 5, 2026)

"They dance in shoes around 27-centimeter, wear shoulder pads that look like bricks." (Participant Indeterminacy, Online Communication, March 4, 2026)

These practices indicate that body modification extended beyond the purpose of accurately representing fictional characters. Instead, these practices cater to the visual preferences and traffic distribution mechanisms on platforms.

4.3 Community Conflicts

Platform capital shapes social activities, including horizontal exclusionary and vertically structured phenomena. At the horizontal level, strict forms of purity testing emerge within the community, where participants are rigorously scrutinized for whether their costumes and physical appearance accurately reproduce the characters. At the same time, a sense of professional superiority or the feeling of jealousy encourages some people to criticize others' works on the Internet. In addition, online harassment has become prevalent. Specifically, there is a culture called "touce", which anonymously posts accusations and complaints about others through related accounts on platforms. As Berry, Never, and Steven noted:

"Some creators criticize the works on platforms, particularly regarding makeup styling or character interpretation." (Participant Berry, Online Communication, March 15, 2026)

"Such behaviors are sometimes regarded as rights protection, but the behaviors are often caused by personal emotions or competitive relationships. The anonymity of platforms allows negative evaluations to spread more easily." (Participant Never, Online Communication, March 18, 2026)

"Some online attacks originate from frustrations in real life, with individuals seeking targets for emotional release in virtual spaces. These attacks often target participants with lower visibility and fewer resources." (Participant Steven, Online Communication, March 12, 2026)

At the vertical level, the concentration of resources and online visibility raises the threshold for participation, excluding those who do not meet the requirements. For example, participants with limited financial resources may be unable to buy expensive costumes, and those with low content visibility cannot take part in certain activities.

"Many offline events require participants to submit previous works as proof. This makes economic investment, such as spending on costumes, makeup, equipment, and photography, a necessary condition for entering certain community spaces." (Participant Doris, Online Communication, March 3, 2026)

4.4 Alienation

Given the influence of social media, platform capital shapes the field of cosplay communities. To put this influence in a broader social context, class structure limits opportunities for grassroots upward mobility in the labor market. Platform capital through technology makes it visible the underlying things that were previously obscured. Platform capital constructs the illusion that diligent creation will be rewarded with algorithmic favor, yet this process ultimately leads to structural alienation among participants. This means that creative activities generate traffic, data, and resources for platforms, while these metrics simultaneously encourage creators to produce works toward styles favored by algorithmic recommendation, increasingly constraining their own creative choices. Nevertheless, while creators work hard to create works, the participants are also providing unpaid labor for the platform. When upward expectations fail, the frustration turns to peers or other vulnerable members, through community purity tests and anonymous attacks. In this process, individuals adapt to and repeat the rules of the

platform and accumulate capital. This process further strengthens the alienation of platform capital. Over time, the alienation of platform capital becomes a part of the alienation of the whole society.

5 Discussion

This study reveals that the migration of cosplay practices to digital platforms reshapes both individual self-presentation and community interaction. This is consistent with previous studies, which show that the improvement of online visibility exposes participants to external criticism, prompting them to continue to monitor themselves when presenting themselves [2]. This phenomenon can be explained by “panopticism”, that is, realizing that the observed will guide people to regulate their own behavior [10]. Secondly, the change in participant behavior is closely related to the platform value evaluation system. Platform indicators such as likes, views, and followers are indicators of popularity, representing capital accumulation in the digital field [4]. In order to accumulate capital, creators need to engage in “visibility labor” to maintain relevance and attract audience attention [8]. Third, the platform value assessment system has exacerbated community conflicts. In a highly visible digital environment, practices such as purity testing, anonymous accusations, and public criticism show how members supervise the community. This finding is consistent with early research, there is a checkpoint in the cosplay community, and members impose strict standards on the performance of others [7]. These conflicts are usually aimed at individuals with fewer economic, social, or cultural resources. Consistent with previous studies on cyberbullying, individuals who experience marginalization in the social environment will redirect hostility to others in the digital space [12]. Therefore, the field of cosplay shows a hierarchy and an exclusion. Finally, this study reveals the alienation of platform capital from individuals. Parallel to the prevalence of neoliberalism in the 1980s, the latter built an idealized market, so that personal efforts could flow upwards, ignoring social relations and production conditions. The traces of neoliberal ideology still exist in the online creative space. Under similar circumstances in the digital field, the platform mechanism makes participants believe that continuous creation and exposure can accumulate capital. However, under such platform discipline, individuals create content in anxiety. When capital accumulation is difficult to achieve, some people may transfer their frustration by harassing more vulnerable groups. On the contrary, the platform squeezes out unpaid digital labor. In general, the alienation of platform capital constitutes a dimension of contemporary social alienation, which is presented through technology. At the same time, platform capital exacerbated the alienation in the whole social structure, thus forming a correlated relationship.

This paper offers several implications. For network users, cultivating media literacy and critical awareness may help relieve stress in the digital environment. Creating a respectful and inclusive community culture is crucial to promoting healthy participation. At the platform level, strengthening governance and supervision is of great significance to creating a safe environment.

There are several limitations of this study. The sample size is small, with 20 participants, which may limit the analysis of the results of the study. In addition, because different platforms run different algorithmic logics, this study may lack a discussion based on different platforms. In order to solve these limitations, future research should expand the sample range, include participants from different cultural backgrounds, and explore cosplay communities across multiple platforms to better understand how the platform influences the community.

6 Conclusion

In summary, this study aims to explore the impact of social media on cosplay practice. Four main findings are presented in this investigation. First of all, the expansion of social media reduces participants' willingness to express themselves. Secondly, participants adapt to the community norms generated by the platform value system and provide digital labor to the platform free of charge. In addition, community conflicts are presented in horizontal exclusion and vertical hierarchy. Finally, the phenomenon of individual alienation by platform capital represents a part of the general alienation of society to individuals. At the same time, platform capital strengthens this social alienation, and mutual influence is formed between the two.

These discoveries bring some revelations. For online content creators, cultivating media literacy may reduce their pressure in the digital space. Building a respectful and inclusive community culture is crucial to reducing hostile interactions. In addition, the platform should strengthen the supervision mechanism to ensure the safety of the creative environment. To conclude, based on the understanding of how digital platforms affect cosplay subcultures, this article provides a new perspective for individuals to understand the situations in the context of platform capitalism. This paper also promotes the understanding and discussion of new forms of social alienation in the digital age.

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