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Digitising and Professionalising Cosplay: Interweaving culture, technology and industry

Madeleine Antonellos

ORCID: 0000-0002-1100-5961

Doctor of Philosophy

April 2025

Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements

of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Computing and Information Systems

Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology (FEIT)

The University of Melbourne

Dedicated to the women who came before me:

For my Nana, Diane;

η γιαγιά μου, η Σωτηρία; και
(my Grandmother, Sotiria); and,

my Mother, Jane.

Abstract

Cosplayers are fans who recreate the costumes, props and aesthetic traits of characters from video games, science fiction, anime, comic books and other popular entertainment media. Cultural studies researchers have contributed a compelling account of the foundations of cosplay as a cultural practice engaged with by hobbyists. This formative research has focused on documenting the socio-cultural components of cosplay, including creating or sourcing a costume, expressing and playing with identity, and interacting with the cosplay community. Researchers have also analysed cosplayers as creative entrepreneurs and have investigated how they use crowdfunding platforms to monetise their activities. Although valuable insights have emerged in the literature, researchers have yet to fully account for the way cosplayers utilise a range of digital platforms, tools, and skills to practice or professionalise their craft. This thesis focuses on addressing this opportunity for further research by presenting the results of an exploratory investigation into the role that digitisation and professionalisation have played in shaping cosplay. The results presented in this thesis are based on an interdisciplinary and mixed-methods research design, situated in the fields of media and communications, human-computer interaction (HCI), and games studies. Focusing on Australian cosplay as a central case study, the discussions will introduce the key findings from this research project. Firstly, the socio-technical transformation of cosplayers' cultural activities and how this has contributed to the professionalisation of the craft. Next, by exploring how cosplayers challenge gender-based barriers to hobbyist and professional practice (i.e. harassment and objectification) in physical and digital environments. Then, by analysing the types of digital labour that cosplayers engage with and the related skillsets they may develop as a result. Finally, the discussions turn to introducing cultural intermediaries as they emerge from, develop within and contribute to the professionalisation of cosplay. In doing so, cosplay will be contextualised in relation to the digital transformation and professionalisation of analogous cultural practices into monetisable forms of creative labour. The discussions herein aim to broaden societal understandings of cosplayers as valid and valuable contributors to the emergent creative economic industries surrounding games and popular culture.

Declaration

This is to certify that:

(i) the thesis comprises my original work towards the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), except where indicated in the preface;

(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used; and,

(iii) the thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, figures, bibliographies and appendices.

_____

Madeleine Antonellos

April 2025

Preface

Chapters 1–4 and 6–9 present my sole, original and unpublished work. However, **Chapter 5** contains a book chapter that has been accepted for publication, co-authored with Dr. Lucy Sparrow (School of Computing and Information Systems, The University of Melbourne). The chapter will be published in the edited collection, The Post Gamer Turn, which was **Accepted for Publication** by **MIT Press** in April 2024. My chapter in *The Post-Gamer Turn* is included in the thesis, verbatim, in Chapter 5. As corresponding and coordinating author, my research contribution was substantial, accounting for approximately 85% of the work, including all data collection and analysis activities. Lucy Sparrow, my co-author, contributed 15% and primarily assisted with the final write-up of these results after I had initially drafted them. Please find below the full publication details for this chapter:

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Acknowledgements

The development of this thesis was made possible only due to the support of individuals who had faith in my determination to study what, in 2019, when I started this project, was a relatively niche phenomenon of cosplay from a novel interdisciplinary perspective. As a young girl, I grew up in a social context where my passion for video games, computing and technology led me to sometimes face scrutiny from peers or elders who understood my hobbies as unusually "geeky", peculiar or "techy"– and, at worst non-traditional or false – due to hegemonic notions of these interests as somehow exclusive to the male gender. The importance of this thesis project has been fundamental to my personal and professional development as a person and researcher. The opportunity to study – and hopefully contribute to the legitimisation of – cosplay has been particularly special due to its nature as a subculture dominated by female participation, which is also situated in fandoms related to my passions for the creative art forms of videogames and science fiction media.

I want to begin by acknowledging the significant impact of the support and contributions of my research supervisors, Professor Martin Gibbs and Associate Professor Bjorn Nansen. Their patience, expertise and advice were fundamental to my completion of this research project. I thank them both for their compassion and patience, as well as for their support in completing this thesis during a global pandemic. I would also like to sincerely thank the other members of the Academic Committee who oversaw this research project, namely the two Academic Chairs who supported me in achieving important milestones during my research: Professor Vassilis Kostakos and Associate Professor Jorge Goncalves. Finally, I would like to thank the academic support staff of both the School of Computing and Information Systems and the School of Media and Communications at the University of Melbourne.

On a personal level, my family and friends have been the other pillars of support that were critical in assisting me on my path to completing my PhD. To Daniel, my Mum and Papa, Nana and Poppy, Yia Yia, Brittany, Isabella, Zac, Zara, Carol and Liz – thank you does not begin to cover it. To my late Nana Hooper, as well as Pia Pou and Pa Hooper, who left before I was born, I thank you and wish you were here. I love you all.

Thank you to my closest friends, near and far: Sophie, Lucy, Mahli-Ann, Cass, Kayla, Chiara, Snow and Alex.

To my cousin Kristian, who was taken too soon: Thank you for letting me play the games I wasn't allowed to, entertaining your annoying little cousin, and for the impact you have forever left on my life.

To all of my cousins, I thank you as well: Ally, Steven, Stephanie, Eleisha, Alannah, Samarah, Danielle, Nick, Nikelah, Amy, Adrian, Jesse and Christopher.

I would like to also share a heartfelt thank you for my extended family: Uncle John, Uncle Paul, Uncle Charlie, Aunty Joy, Aunty Joanne, Aunty Amanda, Uncle Johnny, Aunty Paula, Uncle Michael, Rosemary, Rex, Anthony, Julie, Maria, John, Vicki, Gianni, Victoria, David, Olivia, Kristy, John and Kairi.

Thank you to all of the friends, colleagues and mentors I have met along the way, including, firstly, Dr. Sarah Webber and Dr. Simon Coghlan from The School of Computing and Information Systems. Sarah and Simon have provided ongoing opportunities for me to further extend and develop my skills as a researcher, as well as crucial support and mentorship during my studies.

Secondly, thank you to my friends and colleagues – both current and former members – of the HCI Games and Pop Culture Group at The University of Melbourne: Mel, Jane, Fraser, David, Brian, Josiah, Ronny, Romina, Jenny, Matt, Nellie, Ruby, Tom, Sasha, Geoffrey, Jess, Kyle, Ren and Tim. Also, from the broader HCI group, Eduardo, George, Bingyi, Rashika, Songyan, Samangi, and Stella.

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Last – but most certainly not least – I would like to extend my sincere, and heartfelt, gratitude to the Australian cosplay community who welcomed, supported and entertained my ongoing presence as a researcher. Thank you to Steamkittens, Captain Patch-It, Maggie, John; Julian, and Morgan – for sharing your experience and wisdom developed over years of practice in Australian cosplay. Thank you to games and popular culture convention management teams and staff at *PAX Aus*, *Supanova* and *Oz Comic-Con*, who also provided me with media passes and extended general support of my research activities in your event spaces. But mostly, I thank the Australian cosplayers that I was privileged to meet, and to study amongst. This one is, ultimately, for you.

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Chapter 1 • Introduction

> "What the hell is cosplay, and how is it different from just putting on a costume? The answer seems tricky; but in my opinion, it's only tricky if you're thinking of cosplay as a hobby. It's not. Cosplay is expansive. It's a bona fide art form, and an inclusive one."
>
> – Adam Savage (2022)

1.1 Becoming '2B': A Brief Prelude on Participant Observation

Cosplay is a fan-costuming practice where individuals create, purchase and model outfits adapted from video games, comics, films and television series. Traversing the space of cosplay research sometimes felt like following breadcrumbs through a dark and billowing—but intriguing—forest. Many cultural studies researchers have engaged with the practice in its infancy, making invaluable contributions to the discipline (Norris & Baimbridge, 2009; Crawford & Hancock, 2019; Lamerichs, 2010, 2021). Still, the disruption of digital technologies and platforms—and how cosplayers co-opted these tools for use in their everyday activities—had yet to be comprehensively accounted for in the literature. I wanted to address this by contributing an exploratory understanding of the cultural developments I had observed emerging in digital spaces, particularly those related to acquiring new skills and career pathways, within the fan communities surrounding videogames and popular media. I designed my research around two key considerations. First, I wondered, how cosplay was being impacted by the proliferation of digital platforms and technologies? Next, I considered, did these changes indicate a level of progress towards the professionalisation of cosplay? Focusing on cosplay communities in Australia, I aimed to understand how cosplay has been impacted by advancements in creative technologies, the popularity of social media platforms and the development of novel career opportunities facilitated by and within digital spaces. I had to decide then how to capture a phenomenon that interweaves digital and physical activities, from the "ground-up". I wanted to gain authentic insights by engaging with existing cosplay communities both online and offline, but I needed to find the right approach.

Bonnie Nardi (2010), a researcher in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), faced a similar situation when approaching the online *World of Warcraft* (WoW) gaming community (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004. Noting her inability to 'penetrate the game without being engaged as a player', Nardi (2010, p. 28) designed participant observation methods that lent 'towards the participant-end' of research practice. By directly participating in the "in-game" world of WoW, Nardi (2010) gained experiential insights through her digital interactions with everyday players. This approach to participant observation contributed invaluable findings towards her overarching

ethnographic research project, which may have otherwise been missed if she had used a more traditional approach. Inspired by Nardi's (2010) approach to participant observation, I decided to experiment with different types of participation at key cosplay events—and in digital cosplay communities – throughout my PhD studies. A potential limitation of this research method is that the researcher's personal biases may influence the data collection process. Taking this into consideration, the intent behind adopting this approach to participant observation was not to retrieve datasets for direct analysis. Instead, it was selected for the ability to observe and collect rich, contextual information that helped inspire the direction of this research project.

Figure 1

2B Reference Sketch



Note. Cosplay reference sketch of character 2B from Nier: Automata (Platinum Games, 2017). Own work.

While planning my first in-person cosplay experience, I embarked on a digital journey that I could not have anticipated. Settling on a character, *2B* (Figure 1) from my favourite videogame *Nier: Automata* (Platinum Games, 2017), I embarked on the arduous process of putting together a costume. In my search, I navigated a complex network of local cosplayers who were re-selling pre-loved costumes or commissioning out their skills to create them. I visited several eBay listings and digital shopfronts that each sold cosplay attire. I would work back and forth between pictures of the video game character that I had sketched, as shown in Figure 1, and those I had saved during online searches. These ranged from official game art to in-game screenshots and fan art of *2B*—from various angles—to build a set of reference images that depicted all elements of the costume. I quickly determined what I could buy as opposed to what I might have had to make myself. Despite my character being an android—with anthropomorphic features that were mostly easy to replicate through costume—I soon realised how many components were still going to be

involved in achieving a semblance of *2B*. The final list of requirements for the costume included: wig, dress, gloves, headband, blindfold, socks, and high-heeled boots. As thrifty as I tried to be, while shopping in the online marketplace for cosplay goods, I was surprised to find my expenses quickly mounting up. The total, final cost for the costume was upwards of AU$250.00, which was particularly strenuous on a student budget. I took a moment to consider what cosplay must mean to its practitioners, with many – potentially – having to sacrifice no small amount of their funds to perform their chosen craft. I wondered how, too, this might work to limit and constrain who gets to participate in cosplay spaces, and how they can participate. I also pondered how this type of work could result in professional opportunities, and whether they had methods to generate profits, or had found a way to renumerate some or all of their cosplay-related expenses.

Figure 2

Twitter Post and Response from Yoko Taro



Notes. Screenshot of *Twitter* post by researcher and response from Yoko Taro.

Having received and collated all necessary parts of my *2B* costume, I decided to try it on and take some test photographs. Being months away from my research commencing, and excited about the project, I posted a highly edited photo of myself in costume on *Twitter* (now known as the *X* platform), as shown in Figure 2. To my surprise, I received a reply to my post from Yoko Taro, Director of *Nier: Automata* (Platinum Games, 2017), a prominent game creator based in Japan. I was fascinated to see that a single, social media post about cosplay could reach the Director of the game that inspired my costume. As a researcher, I was immediately drawn towards

understanding the expansive and potentially global reach that a digital persona engaging in any type of cosplay content creation might experience. This was before I had even stepped into the physical, performative space of games and popular culture conventions—while dressed in cosplay.

It was not until later in the year that I walked—for the first time—into the main hall of a *Comic Con* in cosplay. At *Oz Comic-Con* (https://ozcomiccon.com) in 2019, you could not miss the spectacle of cosplayers in all manner of fantastical costumes. Some of the cosplayers were taking photos, while others chatted with one another, pointing at details on garments and asking questions. To the delight of their parents, children approached friendly and welcoming cosplayers who would re-enact famous character poses, recite quotes and take photos with them upon request. Despite paying the same entrance fee as any other convention-goer, cosplayers were evidently also a key attraction for people attending the convention. On another level—in place of traditional names—most cosplayers I interacted with would introduce themselves with their "*Cosplay Name*". This *Cosplay Name* would generally match the cosplayer's username on social media. This type of pseudonymity can be used to mask the cosplayers' real identity. It also serves the secondary purpose of directing the new people they meet to cosplay-dedicated social media profiles, which can result in gaining new "followers" and fans.

In the convention hall was the *Brother-Spotlight Cosplay Central* space, named to highlight the sponsors of the section: the global sewing machine brand, *Brother* (https://global.brother/en/digest) and the Australian fabric and craft store, *Spotlight* (www.spotlightstores.com). In the back right corner of the convention, cosplay claimed a relatively large portion of floorspace – albeit packaged and represented within the broader marketing strategies of *Brother* and *Spotlight*. In one space, a selection of skilfully crafted cosplays was on display, some temporarily donated by the year's featured Cosplay Guests. Oz Comic-Con's annual Cosplayer Spotlight sees approximately three cosplayers selected as Cosplay Guests through a competitive entry process. In an area called Cosplay Central, attendees could view these costumes and meet the Cosplay Guests – with dedicated spaces provided for taking photos with them – in front of backgrounds emblazoned with the logos of sponsors. They appeared primed for shareability on social media platforms. I wondered what made someone eligible to be a guest cosplayer at a convention.

An adjoining space featured a 'Brother-Spotlight demo store', where cosplayers provided live demonstrations and interactive crafting workshops. They sat among racks of materials and crafting supplies from Spotlight, offered at discounted rates. Brother-branded sewing machines were available for cosplayers to try out and use. Already, the marketability of cosplay was being leveraged by commercial interests. At the same time, Cosplay Guests were offered the space to

sell physical copies of prints from their cosplay photo shoots, demonstrate their artistry through their displayed costumes, and showcase their professional identity as a cosplayer. It seemed, at this time, that cosplayers were becoming a subset of consumers that relevant commercial interests were beginning to target. However, at the same time, these interests that may have sought to profit from them were, in turn, at least appearing to help support cosplayers seeking cultural or professional legitimacy.

It was at this point that I realised the immense value of this exercise. Cosplay, at face value, might be easily disregarded as a topic for serious research: primarily, because it is a form of play. The focus on aesthetic appearance may also initially present a false notion of "superficiality" or illegitimacy as a fan endeavour. Without experiencing something like the complexities of researching and compiling a cosplay ensemble, the surprising reach of a cosplay photo shared on social media, or the nuances of interacting as a cosplayer in physical and digital spaces, the importance of this community's activities – and the demonstrable connection between humans and technology that underpin it – might not have emerged for me as organically and explicitly. Making a costume was hard work that required artistic and technological skills beyond what I had initially anticipated. It was this thinking that led me to consider at what point cosplay becomes more laborious than ludic (or playful) and how that labour may be compensated; especially when it contributes to the profit-generating practices of broader commercial interests. In recounting my experience with participant observation, the aim was to introduce and position this thesis in the vibrant context of the emergent cosplay industry and the concept of digital skills. Cosplay – once regarded as a niche, hobbyist subculture – has rapidly evolved into a practice that can be monetised, where digital technologies and skillsets are empowering individuals to find new ways to practice their craft and even build novel career trajectories. This thesis intends to analyse this transition, exploring the cultural, technological, and economic foundations of cosplay to analyse the impacts of digitisation and professionalisation on the industry in Australia.

1.2 Definitions

This section provides brief introductions to definitions of "cosplay", "digitisation" and "professionalisation", key terms that will be regularly referred to throughout the thesis.

1.2.1 Defining Key Concepts: Cosplay

The practice of cosplay has cross-cultural roots that can be traced back to costuming practices from centuries past. Liptak (2022, p. 12) found precedents for modern cosplay in historical events that featured analogous costuming practices. These early events included a costume ball, hosted by science-fiction author Jules Verne at his home in Amiens, France, in 1877, where many guests attended in outfits which paid homage to the fictional characters and worlds of his novels (Liptak, 2022, p. 12). Also included is what is often referred to as 'the world's first sci-fi convention': a

costumed fundraising event titled '*The Coming Race* and *Vril-Ya* Bazaar and Fete', hosted at the Royal Albert Hall in London, 1891 (Royal Albert Hall, 2021; Botes, 2021). The event was themed around a popular sci-fi novel of the period, *Vril: The Power of the Coming Race,* by Edward Bulwer-Lytton (Botes, 2021; Liptak, 2022). Despite these predecessors, the most 'widely recognised' origin point for the 'cosplay movement' has been attributed to Forrest J. Ackerman and Myrtle R. Douglas and their attendance at the first *World Science-Fiction Convention* [*WorldCon*], in New York City, 1939 (Liptak, 2022, p. 11). Ackerman and Douglas were outfitted in costumes based on a 1936 film adaptation of the H.G. Wells sci-fi novel *Things to Come* (Liptak, 2022, p. 11). The pair traversed the *WorldCon* halls in costumes sewn by Douglas, creations she dubbed her 'futuristi-costumes', and their satin-caped attire gained interest from 'confused' but intrigued spectators (Liptak, 2022, p. 18). After this initial appearance, fan costuming practices evolved from recurrent masquerade balls to become a prominent feature of future science-fiction conventions and *WorldCons* (Liptak, 2022, pp. 18–22).

Although the practice of fan costuming at conventions had already gained traction in the United States, the term *cosplay* did not come into use until the 1980s. Cosplay was officially coined by film director Takahashi Nobuyuki in the June 1983 issue of Japanese magazine *My Anime* (Ashcraft & Plunkett, 2014). Nobuyuki needed a phrase to describe the fan costuming practices he had been observing at Japan's science-fiction, *anime* and *manga* conventions – to which he settled on the Japanese portmanteau of 'costume' and 'play' – (*コスプレ, kosupure)* – or its close English adaptation: *cosplay* (Ashcraft & Plunkett, 2014). It must be noted that there is much conjecture around the emergence of cosplay as a practice; in particular, its country of origin. Perhaps due to the short timeframe between the first recorded cosplay outfit in the United States and the emergence of the definition of cosplay in Japan, there are opposing views on the cultural origins of cosplay. This thesis seeks to recognise the limitations of studying within a Western context, where English resources have been primarily relied upon for research purposes. While finding cosplay's actual point of origin is a worthwhile endeavour, it is understandably beyond the scope of this thesis. This research proceeds with a general recognition of a cross-cultural foundation for cosplay practice, with a notable recorded presence in Japan and the USA.

1.2.2 Defining Key Concepts: Digitisation and Professionalisation

Digitisation[1] and *professionalisation* are broad terms that have been defined, and re-defined, across disciplines and industries. These definitions may share specific themes and features across these spaces, so their use requires specificity and precision if adopted in a research context.

1 It must be noted that this interpretation of 'digitisation' has been used interchangeably with the term 'digitalisation', in different fields (Valenduc & Vendramin, 2017). The preference for 'digitisation', as applied in this thesis, was largely based in disciplinary preference during the initial planning period of 2019-2020.

Starting with *digitisation*, I will provide definitions for each term and specify how the concept was applied to the research presented in this thesis. Digitisation, when used explicitly, refers to the conversion of information from analogue to digital formats. However, when using the term 'in a broader societal context', Katz et al. (2014, p. 33) define 'digitisation' as 'the economic and social transformation triggered by the massive adoption of digital technologies to generate, process, share and transact information'. Digitisation 'leverages the spillover effects' of the use of 'network access technologies, semiconductor technologies, and software engineering', including 'common platforms for application development, e-government services, e-commerce, social networks, and availability of online information' (Katz et al., 2014, p. 33). The mass adoption of digital technologies, platforms, and services has led to widespread disruptions in the everyday activities of individuals and professional practices across various industries. Impacts have ranged from small periods of change to large-scale socio-technical processes that have reshaped entire industries, including government (Prins et al., 2012), print media (Aubert-Tarby et al., 2018), and beyond. Cosplay, as this thesis argues, is a community of practitioners—both hobbyists and professionals—that has been transformed by the social process of digitisation. Cosplayers have evolved and adapted what were primarily material—or "offline"—practices engaged in during the early days of cosplay practice, with digital skills that—as this thesis will argue—have become increasingly embedded in the everyday personal and professional activities of cosplayers. Thus, digitisation is a critical component of understanding the development of Australian cosplay.

Professionalisation is a similarly layered term, appropriated across a range of disciplinary and industry contexts. This thesis adopts an understanding of 'professionalisation' that is widely used in the sociology of professions, a subfield of sociology which explores how occupations based on specialised knowledge organise, regulate entry, and claim authority in society through institutional and cultural strategies (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933; Abbott, 1988; Saks, 2012). Lange (2014, pp. 189-190) provides a definition of professionalisation, based in the sociology of professions, that applies specifically to 'creative communities of practice' like cosplay; and how creative practitioners have adapted their practices to digital spaces.

> *'Professionalisation denotes the transformation of an occupation into a profession, which is an occupation with certain autonomy in defining and controlling the standards of the work of its members. Furthermore, professionalisation denotes the transition towards paid work that is subject to binding quality standards. In this wide sense, people and activities can be professionalised, gaining in professionalism'.*

Due to the rapid digitisation of cosplay and its related practices, this thesis employed the term professionalisation to refer to a broad range of activities that encompassed the legitimisation of cosplayers as professionals, the monetisation of cosplay and its related activities, and other forms

of renumeration across physical and digital contexts. In doing so, the thesis also intended to acknowledge and consider the socio-cultural tensions that may emerge from creative industries undergoing professionalisation and digitisation processes. Lange's (2014) definition considers the way creative workers form 'socio-spatial' networks by engaging in novel 'network practices' on a range of digital platforms and for how these platforms shape the development of their professional identities (pp. 184:189). Thus, this was selected as an appropriate starting point to explore the way cosplayers engage in creative production in both material and immaterial labour environments.

To date, cosplayers have been researched as practitioners of 'entrepreneurial labour' across physical and digital spaces (Seregina & Weijo, 2017; Rouse & Salter, 2021; Nichols, Lewis & Tomczyk, 2023). This prior literature has foregrounded profit-generating activities and analysis from business and marketing-based perspectives. To distinguish these findings from prior analyses, this thesis employed the concept of 'professionalisation' to encompass both physical and digital activities that may or may not result in remuneration. Then, to further explore the concept of digital work, this thesis adopted the concept of 'immaterial' labour – and related frameworks – to understand how to produce intangible goods, such as knowledge, communication and affect (Negri & Hardt, 2000). Grounded in the Marxist tradition, these ideas build on Marx's (1844/1978; 1867/1976) distinction between *labour* as a commodified activity exchanged for wages under capitalism, and *work*, as creative, self-directed activity that represents a non-alienated form of human practice not primarily defined by renumeration. This distinction highlights the dual nature of creative labour, which often promises autonomy while being embedded in capitalist logics, and is particularly relevant in digital environments where boundaries between paid and unpaid work are blurred (Terranova, 2000; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011).

Building on this, the thesis draws on concepts that extend the notion of 'immaterial' labour to describe specific forms of digital activity including *affective labour* (Lamerichs, 2010:2021), *relational labour* (Baym, 2015; Oksala, 2016), *visibility labour* (Abidin, 2016-2017) and gendered or sexualised labour (Drenten et al., 2020; Rouse & Salter, 2021). These concepts are defined in Chapter 2, Section 2.2.2. Taken together, these theoretical frameworks provide a lens to analyse the professionalisation of cosplayers and how they negotiate identity, value and agency within platformised cultural economies.

1.3 Situating the Research Project

1.3.1 Interdisciplinarity

Cosplay —among many other creative, socio-cultural activities—has become entwined with the digital infrastructures that mediate our personal, social and professional lives. An interdisciplinary approach—guided by research in media and communications, human-computer interaction (HCI) and game studies—was selected for this research project. I selected these fields due to their multidisciplinary focus on the ways users interact with—and, in turn, may be impacted by—a range of technologies; from social media platforms to computer-assisted design (CAD) tools, algorithms and AI. Interdisciplinarity is also supported and encouraged in these fields, allowing for the project to be planned and developed based on concepts and methodologies across the disciplines (Marchessault, 2014; Blackwell, 2015). The interdisciplinary nature of this study represents a novel approach to exploring cosplay, which I argue is crucial to understanding the complex relationships, skill sets and practices that cosplayers develop with the technologies they use—as everyday practitioners—and the platforms or companies which create and moderate them.

As HCI has evolved as a discipline—accounting for the proliferation of digital technology use in the everyday lives of individuals globally—the field has welcomed contributions and collaborations with the social sciences (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2011). Feminist approaches to HCI have underscored the importance of these collaborations, as Bardzell & Bardzell (2011) argue, since 'feminism seems well positioned to support HCI's increasing awareness and accountability for its own social and cultural consequences'. In HCI and game studies, specifically, the digital activities of cosplayers are comparatively under-researched compared to analogous fan-based activities, such as esports (Taylor, 2012), despite both emerging from games and pop culture-related fandoms. Moreover, cosplay is a female-dominated cultural activity (Lamerichs, 2013a, p. 3; Crawford & Hancock, 2019, pp. 90-91) that has also previously been identified as operating within the context of gaming communities which simultaneously marginalise and fetishise female participation (Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Vossen, 2018). Due to this historical context, this thesis—broadly speaking—contributes to existing work in media and communications, HCI and game studies that connects cosplay to feminist methodological stances. The purpose of demonstrating this connection is to promote 'the critical online activity of women and their engagement with media technologies' (Lamerichs, 2013a). It is also important to note that this thesis adopts an intersectional, and trans-inclusive, definition of "Woman" (Kirkland, 2019). With gendered or sexualised labour becoming a critical issue for cosplayers who monetise their digital activities (Rouse & Salter, 2021), I argue that it is crucial to approach cosplay with a feminist critical lens,

where applicable. In doing so, we may identify opportunities to improve conditions for women practising in these spaces.

1.3.2 Establishing the Research Gap

To date, cosplay has largely been explored by cultural studies researchers, focusing on earlier foundations of the activity as a hobbyist—or leisure-based—pursuit. Fandom and media studies scholar Nicolle Lamerichs (2009:2021) has contributed significant insights to this emergent area of research; focusing on the way fandom is performed, 'embodied' and made 'productive' through cosplay. Socio-cultural research into cosplay has engaged with various topics, ranging from identity, embodiment and affect (e.g. Lamerichs, 2010); to materiality and performance (e.g., King, 2016); gender identity and sexuality (e.g. Hjorth, 2009); and social identity and community (e.g. Norris & Bainbridge, 2009). This formative research has provided crucial foundations—and historical context—for future academic inquiries into the practice. As cosplay research has itself been in the process of legitimisation as a topic of academic inquiry, globally, the practice has been rapidly transitioning from a niche, subcultural activity to an emergent creative industry. Despite the economic development of cosplay into a global, 'billion-dollar industry' (Tango et al., 2022), in line with other fan-based and gaming-adjacent activities (i.e. esports), cosplay has had significantly less engagement from an academic perspective. This gap is especially prominent when it comes to defining how novel technologies, digital platforms and monetisation strategies have shaped and contributed to this transition. The results presented in this thesis contribute to this opportunity for further research, and potential to further legitimise cosplay as a valuable topic of academic inquiry. Researchers have been recommending—often explicitly—deeper, more academically rigorous, explorations into cosplay; especially due to the 'scant' amount of literature available (Masi de Casanova & Brenner-Levoy, 2021). In various academic contexts, cosplay researchers have specifically requested the type of research conducted in this project, which focuses on how cosplayers have adapted their practices to continue operating within the context of a cultural activity undergoing a rapid period of digitisation and professionalisation.

To date, only three key publications have specifically analysed the digital labour of cosplayers on platforms that afford the monetisation of content, which is just one aspect of what this thesis has explored. Seregina & Weijo (2017) introduced the concept of cosplayers being referred to as '*fantrepreneurs'*—entrepreneurs who produce goods or services for fans of different media—when monetising their work. Focusing on cosplayers operating on the *Patreon* (https://patreon.com) platform, a subscription service for fans of digital content creators, Seregina & Weijo (2017) call for further examination into how entrepreneurial approaches to cosplay may result in exploitative labour conditions for cosplayers. This thesis addresses this in Chapter 6, where the digital monetisation strategies of cosplayers are discussed and situated in the context

of the cross-platform ecosystems for content production that they contribute to. In a similar study, Rouse & Salter (2021) analysed the sexualised labour of female cosplayers on the *OnlyFans* (https://onlyfans.com) subscription platform. Rouse & Salter (2021) call for further studies into this space, focusing on how the gendered labour of marginalised cosplayers is exploited by platforms like OnlyFans. In response to this, Chapter 5 of this thesis discusses the issue of sexualised and gendered labour in cosplay, contributing findings on the way cosplayers both experience and overcome harassment and objectification in physical and digital cosplay environments. Moreover, Lamerichs (2021) analysed the 'material' and 'affective' labour of cosplayers on the Amazon-owned *Twitch* platform (https://twitch.tv), stressing the importance of re-examining cosplay practices in relation to their 'platform work' and engagement with 'complex interfaces, texts and commentaries that circulate in digital culture' (p. 207). Lamerichs (2021) suggested that researchers look beyond 'individual texts and signs' to understand how communities of practitioners operate within digital platforms and systems (p. 207). To address this explicit call for further research, this thesis examines how cosplayers practice across physical spaces and digital platforms, which are explored throughout each chapter.

In HCI research, and closely related disciplines (i.e. information systems science), cosplay has rarely been explored in the literature. In saying this, Vardell et al. (2021) have published a relatively recent ethnographic exploration into a specific, cosplay-related group on *Facebook*. This project was among the first to analyse cosplay in the field of information sciences. Vardell et al. (2021) found that the cosplay Facebook group they analysed was operating 'as a complex information community' (p. 574). Vardell et al. (2021) argued that this also indicates that 'other cosplay communities' are 'likely ripe for informational analysis' (p. 574). Most recently, in the discipline of HCI, cosplay has even been used to inspire the development of a machine learning model for image-to-image generation. Tango et al. (2022) developed this tool to aid cosplayers in transforming digital character art into realistic fashion garments that might inspire or support the costume design process (Tango et al., 2022). These initial studies have taken a crucial step towards further development of HCI research in cosplay, while also demonstrating the viability of cosplay as a legitimate subject for academic inquiry in the discipline. The research undertaken to complete this thesis drew from the interdisciplinary perspectives of media and communications, HCI and games studies. These fields were found to be especially apt for analysing the integration of digital technologies in the personal and professional lives of cosplayers.

1.3.3 Occupying the Research Gap: Aims and Scope

This thesis explicitly responds to opportunities for further research by providing an exploratory account for the digitisation and professionalisation of cosplay. The project focuses on a central

case study, the Australian cosplay community, and is centred on the following main research question:

> **RQ:** How do cosplayers use digital platforms, tools and skills to practice their craft and contribute to the professionalisation of Australian cosplay?

From this central research question, three sub-questions were then identified:

> **RQ1**: What materialities, identities and practices associated with digitisation have characterised the development of cosplay?
>
> **RQ2**: How do Australian cosplayers use digital labour and skillsets to practice and monetise their craft?
>
> **RQ3**: How do cultural intermediaries emerge from, operate within and contribute to Australian cosplay?

1.4 Methodological Approach

To answer the above questions, the research completed for this thesis is best described as constructivist, interpretive, and reflexive, using qualitative mixed-methods techniques for data collection and analysis. The research design for this project was based on Creswell & Plano Clark's (2017, p. 35) 'four levels' for positioning 'philosophy within a mixed method study'. These include establishing the paradigm worldview, theoretical lens, methodological approach and methods of data collection during the formative research design process (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017, p. 35). It is worth noting that cosplay, as an emerging field of research, does not have a dominant theoretical or critical lens that has been well-established in media, HCI or game studies; therefore, this level was omitted from this overview. This thesis incorporates the philosophical paradigms of constructivism. Ontologically, constructivists emphasise the fact that each individual constructs their own, subjective experience of reality, which results in the existence of 'multiple realities' (Shannon-Baker, 2023). In terms of epistemology, knowledge—then—is reflexive, generated by individual participants sharing their understandings and views (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017, p. 36). These perspectives, in turn, are influenced by participants' personal histories and lived experiences interacting with others (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017, p. 36). Knowledge, in this way, is also described as 'co-constructed between researcher and participant' and, thus, interpretative (Shannon-Baker, 2023). As a result, constructivism is typically associated with inductive research methodologies, which generate understanding of a phenomenon "from the ground up"—starting with the individual experiences of participants and building up to broader patterns, theories and interpretations of the phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017, p. 39).

Table 1

Methodological Overview of Research Project

Study Period [RQ]	**Data Collection [DC]**	**DC Techniques & Tools**	**Data Analysis [DA]**	**DA Techniques & Tools**
Study 1 [RQ1]	Qualitative, ethnographic research (Patton 1990; Newman, 2014)	Semi-structured interviews [**SSI**] and participant observation [**PO**] (Patton 1990; Newman, 2014)	Qualitative, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry & Crawford, 2021)	*NVIVO 14* (QSR International, 2023)
Study 2 (RQ2)	Quantitative, survey research (Newman, 2014; Müller et al., 2021)	Online questionnaire produced and published on *REDCap* (Vanderbilt University, 2004)	Quantitative, descriptive statistics (Müller et al., 2014; Holcomb, 2016)	*IBM SPSS Statistics* (Version 28)
Study 3 (RQ3)	Qualitative, case study research (TL Taylor, 2006; Newman, 2014)	**SSI** and **PO** (As in study 1) Field research (Adler & Adler, 1987; Marcus, 1995; Cumming et al., 2022).	Qualitative, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry & Crawford, 2021)	*NVIVO 14* (QSR International, 2023)

The research for this thesis was conducted using a 'qualitative mixed methods approach' to data collection (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Tashakkori & Creswell (2007) define mixed methods research as that 'in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods' (p. 4). According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2017, p. 23), mixed methods research in the social sciences originated in the late 1980s, when scholars from different countries and disciplines began adopting similar combinations of qualitative and quantitative strategies roughly at the same time. In this thesis, a mixed-methods approach to data collection and analysis was applied to offer multiple perspectives on the phenomena being explored; the details of which are provided in Chapter 3. In Table 1, an overview of the research methods used in this thesis is provided. These included: qualitative ethnographic field research, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, site visits and a quantitative survey. Despite using both quantitative and qualitative methods in this project, as Creswell & Plano Clark (2017) recommend, the research should ultimately be described in relation to the overall approach taken, which—for this thesis—can be best described as qualitative.

1.5 Thesis Overview

Chapters 1–3: Introduction and Background

This final section of this introduction provides a chapter-by-chapter overview of the thesis. The first three chapters of this thesis (Chapters 1–3) introduce the reader to the topic and situate the research project in the context of academic research. The thesis begins with ***Chapter 1***, which provides a general introduction to the thesis and its core concepts. This is followed by a comprehensive review of the related literature in ***Chapter 2***, which focuses on the cultural, technological and economic contexts of cosplay. Finally, ***Chapter 3*** outlines the methods for data collection and analysis that comprised this qualitative mixed-methods research project.

Chapter 4: Digital transformation of the cosplay community

In ***Chapter 4***, the results of Study 1 are presented, in response to the research question (**RQ1**): *What materialities, identities and practices associated with digitisation have characterised the development of cosplay?* This initial, qualitative investigation employed ethnographic methods for data collection including semi-structured interviews and participant observation (Patton, 1990; Newman, 2014). The results were analysed with the support of qualitative data analysis software, *NVivo 14* (QSR International, 2023). Using NVivo 14, I engaged in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry & Hayfield, 2021) to produce the discussion presented in this chapter. Overall, I found that Australian cosplay has been redefined, from a hobbyist practice to an emergent economic activity, through the socio-technical processes of digitisation and professionalisation (Katz et al., 2014; Lange, 2014). The exploratory findings that emerged from Study 1 highlighted the way that cosplayers have adapted, translated or interwoven the physical, "offline" or material components of their activities with those that are immaterial, "online", or performed digitally. I found that hybridisation of their physical and digital cosplay activities has also resulted in the formation of novel career opportunities for cosplayers in both environments. In this chapter, the results of Study 1 are contextualised in the findings of prior cultural studies research into cosplay, which focused on the materiality, identity and practices of cosplayers as they—initially—developed as hobbyist pursuits of leisure or play. The purpose of doing so is to illuminate the role of cosplayers in extending and often adapting these practices to integrate novel technological advancements into their craft, which has resulted in opportunities to further monetise and professionalise cosplay using digital platforms and skillsets. The results presented in this chapter focus on the digitisation of cosplay culture, firstly, in Section 4.2, by detailing advancements in crafting tools and technologies used in cosplay, as well as the evolution of the digital economy surrounding specialist cosplay supplies. Following this, in Section 4.3, the discussion turns to the way modes of cosplay performance and expressions of personal identity are mediated by digital platforms. In Section 4.4, the third area of results focuses on the

digitisation of community practices in cosplay spaces. Then, finally, in Section 4.5, the discussions analyse opportunities to monetise cosplay activities on digital platforms, exploring the impact of influencer agencies and economies in Australia. This chapter, ultimately, contributes a foundational, contextual understanding of cosplay as an emergent creative labour activity or professional practice—focusing on the way the socio-technical processes of digitisation have impacted cosplay—which will be built upon in the following chapters.

Chapter 5: Barriers to cultural industry participation for cosplayers

Chapter 5 is also based on **RQ1** and the Study 1 dataset, which applied the same techniques for data collection and analysis. This part of the thesis features a Book Chapter, included verbatim, which has been accepted for publication in an edited collection, *The Post-Gamer Turn*. The publication details were included in the ***Preface***. Having explored the broader digitisation and professionalisation of cosplay culture in the previous chapter, ***Chapter 5*** introduces related issues that emerged from the interviews in Study 1. During the interviews, it became clear that cosplayers were being impacted by the broader changes to their practice—driven by digitisation and professionalisation—especially in venues that facilitate cosplay performances. Cosplayers typically circulate in physical spaces, such as public conventions or social "meet-ups", which are intrinsically connected with the digital communities of fans – and wider industries – of games and pop culture. In these spaces, concerning patterns of behaviour relating to consent, harassment, and objectification have been observed. For female-presenting cosplayers, who have been historically marginalised by individuals in these communities, this is especially problematic due to the way this conduct has formed barriers that disrupt their engagement in safe and equitable practice.

During the Study 1 interview process, cosplayers referred to a viral meme that emerged in gaming and popular culture fandoms—the "*Fake Gamer Girl*". A Fake Gamer Girl was often targeted or identified in digital communities with the use of the hashtag "#fakegamergirl". The idea of a "#fakegamergirl" was popularised during a period of targeted harassment against women in among videogame fandoms that became known as "Gamer Gate" (Quinn, 2017). Cosplayers were among the first members of videogame fandoms to be identified as Fake Gamer Girls. Despite this, I was surprised to find that Gamer Gate had yet to be extensively engaged with in the academic literature. To address this critical gap, this chapter explores the responses of female cosplayers today as they navigate spaces of practice where they have been hegemonically othered and marginalised. In the face of these challenges, cosplayers—the titular "*gamer grrrls*"—are engaging in quiet modes of resistance. Cosplayers continue to engage in their activities, primarily by working on community-focused or grassroots responses to gender-based discrimination and harassment. Thus, this chapter draws a connection between cosplayers and the do-it-yourself

approaches of feminist movements, such as "*riot grrrls*" and craftivists (Greer, 2011; Clarke, 2016; Tolikonnikova, 2020). The discussions also focus on the way cosplayers demonstrated an overall 'ethics of care' approach to the support they provide one another in continuing to engage in cosplay, despite these issues (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Tronto, 1998; Keller & Kittay, 2017). In doing so, this chapter contributes an important examination of how women resist gender-based discrimination and harassment in cosplay.

Chapter 6: Digital labour and monetisation practices in cosplay

Chapter 6 will present the results of Study 2; a quantitative research project designed around the second research question **(RQ2)**: *How do Australian cosplayers use digital labour and skillsets to practice and monetise their craft?* The data was collected using an online survey (Neuman, 2014; Müller et al., 2014) which was built, disseminated and managed on the secure web application, *REDCap* (https://project-redcap.org). The results were then produced and analysed using descriptive statistical methods (Holcomb, 2016; Aldrich, 2019), which were conducted using *IBM SPSS* (Version 28). The discussions in Chapter 2 will provide an overview of the digital platforms that cosplayers frequent, categorised into: general social media and messaging, live-streaming and video-sharing, and crowdfunding or subscription-based platforms. Furthermore, the results examine how digital platforms influence the activities of casual enthusiasts who engage with cosplay as a hobby (Hobbyist Cosplayers) and those engaging with cosplay at a semi-professional or professional level (Professionalising Cosplayers). What was found was that the digital activities of cosplayers who define themselves as hobbyists do not largely differ from those engaged in by professionalising cosplayers. As a result, there is confusion around what constitutes digital labour in cosplay, which implicates all cosplayers in broader platform-based affordances and infrastructures that can be profitable, but also exploitative. The activities that constitute digital labour for cosplayers may also provide professional pathways or opportunities for cosplayers, especially when these skill sets are framed within the frameworks of 'digital skills' or 'digital careers' which are beginning to be acknowledged by governments and industry (CSIRO, 2020; Australian Commonwealth Government, 2023). The attitudinal data collected during the survey indicated that digital platforms—in particular, social media spaces—were considered "essential" to the majority of cosplayers surveyed. At the same time, the results also reflected cosplayers' concerns for the efficacy of moderation features in digital environments. Overall, the results further demonstrate how digital activities and platforms mediate the activities of cosplayers, while also illustrating the ambiguous nature of professionalisation and monetisation activities in these spaces.

Chapter 7: Cultural intermediaries and professionalisation in Australian cosplay

Chapter 7 presents the results of the third study for this research project, which is designed around **RQ3**: *How do cultural intermediaries emerge from, operate within and contribute to Australian cosplay?* A longitudinal 'case study research' approach was adopted for the purpose of data collection, and the qualitative techniques used included: semi-structured interviews and participant observation (Newman, 2014); and field research (Adler & Adler, 1987; Marcus, 1995; Cumming et al., 2022). The data from these interviews was then qualitatively analysed using thematic analysis methods (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). This section presents three case studies that detail the way cosplay specialists have emerged as cultural intermediaries in Australian cosplay: including Captain Patch-It, John and Maggie—the creators of *Lumin's Workshop* (https://www.luminsworkshop.com)—and Leigh Hyland (*Steamkittens*). The term 'cultural intermediaries' is derived from sociology—and has been later adapted and applied to media and cultural studies contexts (Bourdieu, 1984; Maguire & Matthews, 2010). 'Cultural intermediaries' refer to 'workers who come in-between creative artists and consumers' who are engaged in the continuous process of 'forming a point of connection or articulation between production and consumption' (Maguire & Matthews, 2010). First, the individual journeys of Study 3 participants are explained in detailed descriptive accounts of their emergence as cultural intermediaries. After this point, Maguire & Matthews (2010) framework for analysing 'cultural intermediaries' is then used to explain the 'framing' of cosplay-related goods or services, the 'expertise' developed in relation to these goods and services and the 'impact' of cultural intermediaries on the cosplay community.

Overall, this thesis presents exploratory research into the way cosplayers contribute to the digitisation and professionalisation of their practice. Each of these studies weaves together a picture of how cosplayers use digital platforms, tools, and technologies to practice, develop new skills and redefine cosplay from hobbyist cultural activity to professionalised mode of creative labour.

Chapter 2 • Literature Review

Despite the term 'cosplay' itself having been coined by Takahashi Nobuyuki in 1986, research into the practice is still highly emergent, though promising, across a range of academic fields (Ashcraft & Plunkett, 2014). However, due to its novelty, cosplay researchers Masi de Casanova & Brenner-Levoy (2021) have recently described the literature as 'still scant', noting that 'not much of it is empirically rigorous' (p. 135). Despite these limitations, crucial foundations for understanding cosplay as a practice have been provided—and critically examined—through substantive research contributions from the fields of cultural studies and media studies. It must be noted that Nicolle Lamerichs (2009:2021) is an eminent cosplay researcher, who has contributed substantially to this growing field. Previous research has primarily focused on cosplay as a creative cultural practice and a valuable medium for communicating identity through embodiment and affect (e.g. Lamerichs, 2010; Rahman et al., 2015); or materiality and performance (e.g. Lamerichs, 2013a; King, 2016; Lunning, 2021). Cosplay has also been analysed as a vehicle for exploring, subverting or otherwise challenging normative gender roles and interpretations of sexuality (e.g. Hjorth, 2009; Jacobs, 2013). The role of cosplay communities, in the development of a cosplayer's sense of social identity and belonging, has also been explored (e.g. Norris & Bainbridge, 2009; Crawford & Hancock, 2019); as well as how these communities might be challenged or restricted by gatekeeping practices that limit equitable participation (e.g. Jenkins, 2020). This thesis builds upon existing research into the historical development of cosplay as a practice, with previous findings providing a critical basis for developing novel results that focus on the impact of digital transformation on the cultural foundations of the practice.

As cosplay and its related industries have moved away from their subcultural origins and into the 'mainstream' (Liptak, 2021), media and cultural researchers have provided early investigations into cosplay as an emergent economic activity—primarily, positioning cosplayers as entrepreneurs (Nichols, Lewis & Tomcyzk, 2023), or '*fantrepreneurs'* (Seregina & Weijo, 2017; Rouse & Salter, 2021). Seregina & Weijo (2017), as well as Rouse & Salter (2021), focus on the entrepreneurial practices of fan labourers on platforms including OnlyFans and Patreon, analysing the potential for sexualisation and exploitation in these spaces. This thesis answers their calls for further research into the monetisation practices of cosplayers on digital platforms—most explicitly in Chapter 5—by providing rigorous academic analysis into the digital labour and skillsets of cosplayers holistically; as well as in relation to their intentions to practice non-commercially (as hobbyists) or commercially (as professionals). However, in obtaining the results for this thesis project, it was found that a more substantial number of participants engaged in cosplay as a hobbyist pursuit, and thus framing their work as entrepreneurial by nature would

potentially limit the full scope of understanding that was sought. Instead, this thesis focuses on the way technologies and related commercialisation or monetisation practices impact casual cosplayers, alongside those seeking to professionalise. Similarly, the proliferation of technology use among cosplayers—and the way this has impacted their practices—has been referred to by many researchers, but never explicitly analysed as a focal point for a substantive research project. Crucially, this is the 'gap' that this thesis seeks to fill. In saying this, Lamerichs (2021) analysed material culture on Amazon's Twitch live-streaming platform, finding that Twitch contributes to a 'larger personal brand that cosplayers also communicate, perform, and possibly monetize on other channels' (p. 207); indicating that the strategies of platform work for cosplayers are located within broader systems of meaning that warrant further investigation.

As an interdisciplinary research project, combining concepts and methods from the fields of media and communications, human-computer interaction (HCI), and game studies, this thesis takes a novel approach to exploring cosplay as a practice that is being increasingly facilitated, supported and developed using digital technologies and related professionalisation practices. In HCI, initial research projects have explored cosplay from a human factors and economics perspective (Robles, 2021). Other experimental research has investigated how generative AI can be leveraged to support cosplay practices through image-to-image translation (Tango et al., 2022). This literature review provides a summary of existing research related to cosplay and culture, the economic practices of cosplayers and, finally, their use of technologies and digital platforms. Related concepts from media and communications, HCI, and game studies research are drawn upon to substantiate this knowledge; while the areas where this thesis contributes novel findings are also indicated.

2.1 Cosplay and Culture

Cosplay has been researched—perhaps most extensively—within the cultural studies disciplines. Previous research has explored the cultural practices that emerged in early iterations of cosplay communities (e.g. Napier, 2007; Norris & Bainbridge, 2009; Lamerichs, 2010) and has accounted for the historical development of a range of cultural activities across offline and online environments. Research interest in cosplay as a cultural practice grew noticeably between 2011 and 2016, as researchers began to more frequently analyse the complex dimensions that comprised cosplay in its early iterations as a creative cultural domain for hobbyist fan production. Firstly, this section will outline research into the cultural practices that cosplayers have historically engaged in as fans and audiences of media texts (Jenkins, 2006; Lamerichs, 2015, 2018; Crawford & Hancock, 2019). The focus will then turn to cultural studies research into cosplay as a vehicle for expressing personal identity through materiality, embodiment and affect (Lamerichs, 2011:2018; Rahman et al., 2015; King, 2016). Following this, an overview of the

extensive research on the performance of gender and sexual identity is presented (e.g. Leng, 2013; Jacobs, 2013). Finally, the section concludes with an overview of cultural studies research on the development of communities, social identity and belonging in cosplay (e.g. Bainbridge & Norris, 2013; Crawford & Hancock, 2019), while also addressing issues related to gatekeeping practices based on gender or race (Jenkins, 2020). The research in this thesis builds upon these important insights into the historical development of cosplay as a cultural activity. The findings in this thesis build upon this research as a crucial foundation for exploring how cosplayers have adapted, reshaped, or otherwise changed the way they engage in their everyday cosplay activities in response to the digital transformation—and professionalisation—of their hobbyist practice into a broader economic industry.

2.1.1 Crafting, fandom and cultural production

Crafting is often highlighted as a core component of cosplay as a cultural practice. As Lamerichs (2015, p. 146) explains, 'the process of making or combining the outfit is not only preparation for a performance, but also a meaningful act by itself'. While crafting is central to many cosplayers and their activities, professional cosplayer Svetlana Quindt (*Kamui Cosplay*) adds that craft-based approaches are just one, among a range, of different methods cosplayers may adopt to acquire a cosplay outfit:

> 'Your costume can be a casual outfit from your closet, or it can be bought, borrowed or hand-crafted during months of hard work. A cosplay isn't defined by a specific quality standard, and it doesn't even need to be self-made' (Quindt, 2020, p. 4).

Acquiring an outfit contributes to what Kirkpatrick (2015) defines as 'cosplay culture', referring to the 'broader range of cultural activities performed by cosplayers' (para 3.3). Crawford and Hancock (2019) elaborate, by explaining:

> 'Cosplay is an everyday, lived culture. This often involves an individual extensively researching the character that they are going to play, sourcing material, practising and perfecting crafting skills, communicating with others… designing and constructing a costume, rehearsing and so much more' (p. 181).

Due to the range of components involved, Crawford & Hancock (2019) also note the 'considerable amount of time'—and significant financial resources—often required to engage in cosplay as an activity (p. 181). Cosplay culture has also been historically contextualised as a type of cultural production which foregrounds cosplayers and their affective reception of media texts in the context of fan studies.

Cosplay inspirations are typically drawn from cultural reference points that include videogames, anime, and manga, among numerous other popular entertainment mediums (e.g. sci-fi television programmes or *Disney* cartoon series). Thus, interpreting the cultural activities of cosplayers

requires an understanding of how they use fandom as 'a way of making sense of the world through shared and felt experiences' (Lamerichs, 2018, p. 19). The discipline of fan studies – the foundations of which are often attributed to Henry Jenkins (1992) and Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) – emerged historically as an interdisciplinary research area preceded by cultural studies analysis into audiences and reception. Jenkins (1992) and Bacon-Smith (1992) analysed early forms of cultural practices which contributed to the development of fan communities – specifically, focusing on the way fans acted as producers of fiction based on science-fiction media (i.e. fan fiction). Lamerichs (2018, p. 17) argues that, even though cosplay can correctly be interpreted as what Jenkins originally conceptualised as 'textual poaching' – in the basic sense that their creative practices draw inspiration from existing media texts – there are a range of issues with this perspective that emerge when applying it to cosplay as a fan activity. First, Lamerichs (2018, p. 17) argues that existing frameworks that position the 'participatory culture' of fan activities as a type of 'textual poaching' – including Jenkins (1992) – incorrectly limits understandings of these practices to 'a reiteration or recombination of source texts'; which denies the fact that 'derivative writing has a larger history and presence' which include the potential for 'political or subversive implications' (i.e. those relating to gender, 'where the source text is not only copied but also subverted'). Next, Lamerichs (2018) highlights that existing literature on 'transmedia' storytelling, may also serve to 'limit fan texts to written texts' – like fan-fiction – where she instead argues for including 'forms of play, critical interpretations and material or embodied performances' as legitimate texts (p. 18).

Fan scholars, including Henry Jenkins (2006, pp. 97–98) have positioned practices developed in media fandoms within a broader 'cultural shift' towards 'convergence', where 'transmedia' narratives 'court' consumers across 'multiple media platforms', through interrelated media texts that each form a 'distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole'. Lamerichs (2018, p. 15) found that the "online turn" of fan studies – which was adapting to increased audience engagement with industry narratives through the proliferation of use of the internet and social media – was leading the discipline to focus on issues that were useful for understanding 'underlying power dynamics and competencies' that are 'central to media use' – but not necessarily to further understand the way audiences engage in cosplay and its 'offline' components as an affective, creative, cultural activity. Lamerichs (2018, p. 18) introduces an alternate framework for understanding fan activities – including cosplay – as a type of 'productive fandom'. This framework focuses on understanding how fans—as audiences—engage in 'textual productivity' by 'charting the narrative relationships between the source text and fan text' (Lamerichs, 2018, p. 19). Lamerichs (2018, p. 18) also contributes to her definition of 'productive fandom', the concept of 'affective reception' or, in other words, how 'in their reception, fans draw from a felt and embodied response towards the text and its characters'. There is a complexity in addressing

this aspect of cosplay as a cultural activity and its relationship with consumer culture, as well as the profit incentives of media conglomerates. Lamerichs (2018, p. 15) addresses this tension, noting that these differing approaches to cosplay as a fan activity are not mutually exclusive, and that – instead – 'what the industry considers to be profitable' can also 'be entertainment for fans and provide a sense of ownership over the fiction that they love'. This thesis draws on Lamerichs' (2018) conceptualisation of 'productive fandom'—which includes a historical analysis of the emergence of both online and offline fan activities for cosplayers—as an important foundation for understanding what cosplayers have historically valued in cosplay as a socio-cultural activity. However, as this thesis will demonstrate, it has become evident that the digitisation and professionalisation of the community have created a need to explore further the way cosplayers engage in activities supported by advances in digital technologies, economies and labour and how they have become an important addition to analysing cosplay as a cultural practice. This thesis will demonstrate the importance of understanding the cultural and economic approaches taken to researching cosplay, as the increased use of digital media technologies, tools, and skills—and the development of related professionalisation or monetisation processes—have further complicated the relationship between cosplayers, the media they consume and industries they interact with.

2.1.2 Personal identity: materiality, embodiment, affect and gender

This section will focus on research into the cultural components that contribute to the development of personal identity for cosplayers. The value of cosplay practice in facilitating the development, negotiation and performance of personal identity has been highlighted extensively in cultural studies literature. Lamerichs (2010) found that cosplayers embody their 'appreciation for a character and a text' as a means of social and emotional self-expression, making 'the relation between the fictional and actual explicit' through their practice (p. 15). Despite being costumed in the guise of a fictional character, through dress, makeup, and other temporary physical modifications, cosplayers may also use their costumes to embody an idealised sense of self. Rahman et al. (2015, p. 334) explain this process as cosplayers 'momentarily chang[ing] their identity in order to create an exciting, extraordinary, and contented self, rather than attempting a real-life transformation' (Rahman et al., 2015, p. 334). Cosplay has provided an invaluable means of understanding how the self and personal identity can be expressed through the practice of costuming, utilising key cultural studies concepts including embodiment and affect. The cosplay costume, as Lamerichs (2015, p. 13) argues, is often paramount to what becomes an 'affective process', a 'range of emotional experiences that can lead to investments in the world through which we constitute our identity'. In this way, cosplay can be seen as the embodiment of the 'interplay' between the cosplayer, the media their costume has been inspired by, and the cosplay they are creating (Lamerichs, 2015, pp. 14–15). Lamerichs (2018, p. 18) adds that 'fans draw from a felt and embodied response towards the text and its characters', which constitutes an

'admiration of texts' that are used 'to connect to others and the world itself' through material performances.

Another key aspect of performance, for cosplayers, is accuracy and authenticity. Kawamura (2012, p. 78) explained authenticity as a cosplay community value that dictates that the closer a cosplayer can replicate objects in reference to their source material, 'the higher the respect and status you earn as a cosplayer'. Bainbridge & Norris (2013, p. 27) add that cosplayers, by reproducing designs from characters whose references may be entirely digital, two-dimensional and fantastical 'offer materiality to what is essentially an unreal construction' and in the process become 'the suture between the unreal existence of the character' and 'the real performance space in which they talk, move and interact with others'. Accuracy relates directly to a cosplayer's competency in translating and adapting immaterial character traits from media texts into wearable, material costume elements. This involves managing the material complexities of adapting—or translating—the attributes of characters from media which may be non-human, or do not possess a replicable interpretation of a type of human body structure. King (2016, p. 363) further contributes that, in some cases, cosplayers base costumes on characters from creative projects that have already undergone 'linguistic' translation (i.e. Japanese anime or manga translated to English and culturally adapted to the Western cultural context in 'localisation' processes); before being distributed; resulting in expressions of identity that may be pieced together across different cultures, contexts and meanings. Kirkpatrick (2015) adds that accuracy—and thus authenticity—can also be judged in relation to how costumes are created (i.e. 'hand-crafted' as opposed to 'shop bought'), or how a cosplayer will then embody their character through role-play and performance in community spaces. Cosplayers, when creating costumes based on non-anthropomorphic or sci-fi and fantasy character identities, are also balancing 'creating an accurate visual representation of a fictional character with the practicality of posing, moving and possibly performing in the costume', which can be challenging in designs that are physically heavy or restrictive (Lunning, 2021). However, more nefariously, they can also emerge through 'gatekeeping' practices that dictate participation in cosplay based on race, gender, weight, age, and other personal attributes (which will be explored in subsection 2.1.3).

Authenticity is further complicated by the fact that—instead of dressing the self in a transformative way to hide or obscure their identity—cosplayers may be used to reveal or reflect an authentic expression of self through their choice of character as a type of "proxy", avatar or persona which stands in for the individual. Masi di Casanova et al. (2020) further extended this idea, using Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model of social interaction to define the way cosplayers may express 'multiple selves' in their physical, performative practices. Goffman's (1959) model relates activities in everyday life to those performed by an actor on a stage for the

different groups of people that comprise their daily audience. The 'front stage' of social interaction relates to the public-facing activities a person engages with to express a sense of self. At the same time, the 'backstage' private processes of creation may be obscured for the sake of performance (Goffman, 1959). Instead of demonstrating inauthenticity, however, Goffman (1959) argues for the ability of human beings to possess 'multiple selves', which are simply adaptations of a singular sense of self for a specific audience. Masi de Casanova et al. (2020) found that cosplayers can seamlessly navigate the boundaries between 'front' and 'backstage' cosplay activities, since their performance in cosplay inherently implies a level of playful intentionality to their performative behaviours. The relationship between cosplayer and audience, Masi di Casanova et al. (2020) found cosplay relies on a level of performativity that is negotiated with the audience—allowing them to transition between performances of self and character, typically with ease—as the audience is ultimately not meant to be deceived by, but instead made interested in, the techniques or manner of adaptation that a cosplayer is engaged in.

Moreover, researchers have considered cosplay as a means of exploring and subverting normative ideals around gender and sexuality. Cosplay costume choices can involve "playing" with traditional gender archetypes (Yang, 2022). This may be through dressing as a character of opposite sexual presentation, typically referred to as *crossplay*—a portmanteau of cosplay and cross-dressing (Leng, 2013; Nichols, 2019; King, 2023). In other words, female-presenting cosplayers may dress as male-presenting characters, and vice versa. For female-presenting individuals, the act of *crossplaying* provides space for practitioners to explore 'different types of gendered appearance' through the performance of 'beloved characters with whom they identify' (Nichols, 2019, pp. 280-281). Moreover, female-presenting *crossplayers* may also use the practice to overcome personal fears and anxieties, and meet new friends, in a productive 'space for self-expression and performativity' (Hjorth, 2009, p. 284). Despite the binaries presented in the nomenclature, the practices of male-to-female (M2F) and female-to-male (F2M) cosplay have been studied as a means of representing the 'cosplay community's resourceful and malleable approach towards the human body' (Leng, 2013, pp. 105–106). Jacobs (2013) similarly emphasised the relationship between queer sexuality and the 'cosplay zone', as a 'space of art as sexual experiment', where cosplayers have engaged with the practice as a form of queer activism, due to the freedom of engaging with 'media landscapes as augmented realities; or spaces that morph between material and immaterial worlds' (p. 42). Crossplay practices are indicative of a level of comfortability, within the community, around fluid experiences of expressing gender and sexuality—as adopted and explored in the inherently playful context of character performance. Thus, cosplay has also been revealed, in related studies, as a valuable method for exploring a range of normative and queer identities in a way that may subvert traditional expressions of the relationship between the self, gender, and sexuality. This thesis will take the following steps in

researching developments in the cultural, identity-forming practices of cosplayers as their cultural community of practice has evolved into an increasingly digitised and commercialised industry.

2.1.3 Community, social identity and authenticity

Finally, cosplay communities have also been examined in cultural studies, where they emerge dualistically as both positive and problematic settings for facilitating expressions of social identity. Many cosplayers regularly attend fan conventions and photoshoots for the purpose of communal performance and interaction. Pop culture, gaming and sci-fi conventions were key sites of community that were key to cosplay's early formation as an amateur hobby. Attending convention sites have been described as the 'moment supreme' for cosplayers, where fellow practitioners and fans congregate to showcase their latest costumes and characterisations (Lamerichs, 2011). In these spaces, the cosplay community may provide a sense of belonging for cosplayers, as a means of engaging with local groups of 'like-minded performers, spectators and fans', where they develop a sense of 'communal identity' through building relationships with their peers (Norris & Bainbridge, 2009, p. 15). Dunn & Herrman (2022) further corroborated this, finding that cosplayers associated the personal enjoyment they derived from cosplay as a fan community, to their friends' enjoyment of the fandom, and to sharing their fandom with large groups of people; reporting that their cosplay fandom was 'improving their self-esteem' (p. 111). Participating in cosplay events can also involve performing in competitions, parades and panels which, as Crawford & Hancock (2019, p. 186) found, result in the shared 'appreciation of others' that some cosplayers value as a 'key motivation' for attending conventions. Crawford & Hancock (2019, pp. 176–178) – based on the ethnographic research of Etienne Wenger (1998) – define cosplayers as a 'community of practice', explaining:

> 'Cosplay, and its processes of crafting, is a dynamic and complex culture, involving various cross-cutting and intersecting networks of actors, practices, and knowledges. Cosplay is not just one thing, but an amalgam of people, processes, practices, and places, which come together to make cosplay what it is, but equally radiate outwards, to locate cosplay within a wider and changing cultural landscape'.

However, the same support structures may—sometimes inadvertently—produce the opposite effects for cosplayers who deviate from community norms, rules or structures. Cosplayers, Crawford (2012, p. 37) argues—at times—can be 'very critical, maybe even exclusionary' (Crawford, 2012, p. 37). When selecting a character, and engaging with the costume creation process, failure to craft a cosplay 'as a respectful and authentic form of (re)presentation may lead to rejection by the public in general and their peers in particular' (Rahman et. al, 2015, p. 335). Similarly, when cosplaying in public spaces like fan conventions, Jacobs (2013, p. 43) found that cosplayers, though deriving enjoyment from light and playful enactments of character [i.e. a

Batman cosplayer repeating a popular catchphrase in passing, to entertain a fan of the franchise]; ultimately do 'envision a smooth return to normality when required', which implies an expectation of self-moderation between cosplayers, in choosing when it is appropriate to enact a particular expression of fandom—which may result in the dismissal of 'individuals who are unable to do so'. More troublingly, issues related to hierarchy, harassment and gatekeeping practices have been explored in cultural studies research on cosplay. Lome (2016) reported on 'misconceptions' among cosplayers relating to 'whether people can cosplay characters of different genders, races, heights, weights, and so on'; highlighting issues relating to 'policing and prejudice' and sexual harassment which 'defeats what cosplay is about'. Jenkins (2020) highlighted serious issues with community-based racism and sexism in geek communities. Jenkins (2020) emphasised the importance of acknowledging that cosplay itself is still associated with geek culture and is thus already a marginalised community. However, he adds, 'even within a marginalised group there still exists a hierarchy of oppression' in American cosplay communities, where people of colour are 'often met with racist remarks' when cosplaying as non-POC characters and generally subjected to racism by a predominately white and male geek culture (Jenkins, 2020, p. 157).

Furthermore, women and non-binary cosplayers, as Jenkins (2020) contends, are often subjected to sexism because female characters are created 'with the male gaze in mind'. At some cosplay conventions globally, the slogan 'Cosplay is not Consent' has even been popularised as part of measures to improve standards for women who 'can be subject to unwanted and uncomfortable attention from male convention attendees' (Lome, 2016; Oz Comic-Con, 2019; Jenkins, 2020). Masi de Casanova & Brenner-Levoy (2021) have also explored the impact of normative ideals around beauty and appearance on freedom of creative expression in cosplay. Their research found that—'while allowing for body-positive discourse'—'conventional beauty ideals hold sway' among cosplayers, whose costumes are often based in 'idealised character depictions' from a range of source texts (Masi de Casanova & Brenner-Levoy, 2021). Ultimately, communities of cosplayers can be positive social spaces for encouraging playful, or even subversive, interactions and experimentation with personal and communal expressions of identity. However, the very values that serve to unite cosplay communities as shared fans of media texts can also be used as means of restricting or limiting access to individuals who may be suffering from broader societal marginalisation or stigmatisation.

Cultural studies researchers have also examined the historical emergence and evolution of cosplay as a practice, primarily among fans of media texts who engage in affective—and everyday—methods of cultural production. Research into materiality, identity and community has provided a critical foundation for understanding cosplay as more than just "dressing up". Cosplay, as

described in the literature, is a type of 'productive fandom' based on 'transmedia design' practices (Lamerichs, 2018). Cosplay's formative activities included 'affective', creative fan adaptations of character narratives and identities from fictional media texts, into wearable costumes and props (Lamerichs, 2018; Crawford & Hancock, 2019). Based on these key cultural activities, cosplay culture developed into a – primarily hobbyist – 'community of practitioners' around shared fan costuming practices (Crawford & Hancock, 2019). Crawford & Hancock (2019, p. 193) argue for the importance of understanding cosplay in the context of digital and consumer cultures – explicitly noting the appearance of a 'complex relationship' developing between the 'rise of new media technologies and crafting' – and establishing that 'cosplay is a useful lens for helping us understand contemporary digital and consumer culture'. This thesis seeks to contribute to the ongoing work of cultural studies and fan studies scholars in cosplay research – in particular, following from the foundations provided by Lamerichs (2018) and Crawford & Hancock (2019) – to explore the maturation of the 'complex relationships' between cosplayers and digital and consumer cultures.

2.2 Cosplay and Economics

Cosplayers have been researched as consumers and producers ('prosumers') of fan-related goods (Toffler, 1980). Cosplayers may sell and trade material objects such as props and costumes, as they explore earlier iterations of cosplayers who engaged with emerging digital and consumer cultures (e.g., Norris & Bainbridge, 2009; Lamerichs, 2013a). Crawford & Hancock (2019, p. 190) explored the next stage in this transition, where—they note—some 'high profile cosplay models do make a comfortable living' from cosplay. However, they remarked that a 2016 estimate of cosplayers earning up to '$200,000' a year was 'likely an exaggeration' (Crawford & Hancock, 2019, p. 190). Cosplay has recently become widely recognised as a 'billion-dollar industry' among academics and marketing professionals (Tango et al., 2022). Research has already begun to explore the commercialisation of cosplay through the economic and labour frameworks of influencer marketing (Robles, 2021); as well as 'fan entrepreneurship' or 'fantrepreneurship' (Seregina & Weijo, 2017; Rouse & Salter, 2021). Critical exploratory examinations have also been made into the 'trade-offs' cosplayers make between 'ludic' and playful cosplay experiences, as opposed to those conducted for commercial ends which are more laborious and time-consuming (Seregina & Weijo, 2017). Rouse & Salter (2021), then, focus on digital labour conducted on platforms like OnlyFans, which offer a means for cosplayers to monetise the sexualisation of their practices. Where this thesis strives to contribute to this literature is in further developing an understanding of how cosplayers utilise digital technologies, platforms and infrastructures to monetise their activities. Rather than adopting a singular existing economic framework—i.e. entrepreneurship—this thesis provides an exploratory investigation into the professionalisation and commercialisation of the industry from the perspectives of cosplayers

themselves. In doing so, this thesis builds from the interdisciplinary context of media studies, games studies, and human-computer interaction (HCI) to analyse the digital labour of cosplayers, while also introducing the concept of cosplay 'cultural intermediaries' within their economic landscape. Using critical theories from research into digital and consumer cultures from media, games and cultural studies, as well as methods for analysing technology use among communities of practitioners from HCI—in particular, computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW) and information systems—this thesis will further illuminate the economic infrastructures that surround and rely on cosplay practice.

2.2.1 Fan Labour and Entrepreneurial Activities

When cosplayers produce garments, props and accessories, both the costume and its development can generate commercial—or cultural—value as a fan-generated product that is circulated back through the communities it emerged from. The relationship between cosplayers as both consumers and producers (or '*prosumers'*) of fandom-related goods has been established as a process where cosplayers leverage what Bourdieu (1984) termed 'cultural capital'—or an exemplar of community preferences, tastes or social values—to generate commercial value for these goods among their communities: seeing them transition from fan, audience member or consumer to 'prosumer' (Toffler, 1980; Crawford & Hancock, 2019, p. 191). Jenkins (2006, p. 136) introduces the concept of transmedia—or 'convergent media'—narratives which 'demand more active modes of spectatorship' and participation from consumers, who are then 'courted' across multiple platforms, to follow segmented parts of a larger story. Jenkins (2006, pp. 135–136) describes fans as consumers within this broader shift towards 'convergence culture', a participatory media environment that encourages audiences to comment on, curate and re-produce content using the internet through an associated rise in internet subcultures supporting 'amateur' media production. Lamerichs (2013a), extending these enquiries, investigated cosplay music videos (CMVs) and the use of platforms, including Etsy and eBay, for reselling cosplay goods within the context of convergence culture; highlighting the way cultural capital is developed, leveraged or monetised using 'convergent' digital media platforms.

Fan studies and cultural studies scholars have also explored how cosplayers skilled in craft and design may transition from hobbyist production to becoming recognised practitioners among cosplay fan communities; in some cases, developing means of commercialising their artistic endeavours. Norris & Bainbridge (2009) developed a practical roadmap of the Australian cosplay industry as it stood in the early-to-mid 2000s, which located cosplayers within a 'cottage industry' of community-based sales between cosplayers, a 'niche industry' of commercially manufactured cosplay-influenced garments and 'mainstream retailers' who had started to stock cosplay-like

props and garments (pp. 1–7). Norris & Bainbridge (2009) outline the various actors involved in this early iteration of an economic framework for cosplay goods as follows:

> 1. The cottage industry: Local, cosplayer-to-cosplayer on-selling of hand-crafted costumes, props and accessories, means by which cosplayers can afford to cosplay, and allow event organisers to bring large cosplay crowds together (pp. 1–2).
> 2. The niche industry: Locally available, commercially sold cosplay-style clothing, e.g. *otaku-wear'* from *Madman*, a global distributor of *anime* and *manga* content, who produced and manufactured cosplay-influenced garments based on outfits from popular characters from these genres (p. 5).
> 3. Mainstream retailers: Clothing produced with a limited relationship to cosplay, targeted at a 'casual, mainstream consumer', e.g. cosplay-like props and clothing sold at Australian, youth-targeted clothing retailers like *Jay Jays* (p. 7)

This classification system reveals a complex and interconnected network of cosplay and industry-based practitioners, who engage in the sale of cosplay-related goods in Australia. Cosplayers were positioned as consumers deeply influenced by wider community attitudes, where 'no radical opposition' existed 'between fans and industry; instead, commercial industries' were considered 'vitally important' to how cosplayers defined themselves as fan-creators (Norris & Bainbridge, 2009, p. 1). In this thesis—specifically in Chapter 4—results will be presented that demonstrate the current landscape of economic activities in Australian cosplay, which primarily relate to an increase in scale, as well as numbers of contributing actors and networks, due to the industry's growth.

Transitioning into the digital economy, Lamerichs (2013b) explored the popularisation of sales of 'fan objects' by cosplayers on eCommerce platforms including *Etsy* and *eBay*. Cosplay products are typically sold across physical and digital platforms, between fan-related industries, independent craftspersons and cosplayers themselves – from booths at gaming and pop culture conventions to eCommerce platforms such as *eBay* and *Etsy* (Lamerichs, 2013b). By analysing the differences between *Etsy* (etsy.com) – a digital platform focused on 'craftsmanship, artistry and maintenance of the fan object' – and *eBay* (ebay.com), Lamerichs (2013b) found that, since cosplay has enjoyed global growth in popularity, cosplayers' fan-oriented production practices have emerged as potentially lucrative activities through which 'budding or professional artists and even small factories can support themselves or at least refund their expenses' (p. 4). Both Lamerichs (2018, p. 16) and Crawford and Hancock (2019, p. 190) acknowledge the economic growth of cosplay-related activities, noting the apparent link between cosplay and Stebbins' (1992:2007) conceptualisation of fan production as 'serious leisure'. Stebbins (2007, p. xii) defines 'serious leisure' as the 'systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer core activity' for the purpose of 'finding a career'. However, Crawford & Hancock (2019, p. 190)

suggested, at the time of writing, that there would only be a 'very small number' of individuals earning a 'living from cosplay' in this manner.

As cosplay grew in popularity and opportunities for professionalisation began to increase, initial investigations of cosplayers as entrepreneurs emerged concurrently. Robles (2021) – approaching from a human factors and ergonomics research background – proposed that cosplayers 'fail to recognise their value', in line with other 'micro-entrepreneurs'. Thus, Robles (2021) developed a business model (*QWorkSpace*) which teaches cosplayers 'how to build a value position and communicate their value' as commercial operators, using a pedagogical approach based on the mechanics of role-playing games. Nichols, Lewis & Tomczyk's (2023) edited book collection, 'Entrepreneurial Cosplay' was published after research activities were mostly completed for this thesis. However, it must be noted that the authors further extended these types of business and marketing-focused analyses to cover a 'range' of practices which position cosplayers as—relatively speaking—more independent, 'entrepreneurial' practitioners, or 'intrapreneurs', which the researchers define as operating with an 'entrepreneurial mindset' within the context of an organisation or industry (Nichols, Lewis & Tomczyk, 2023). This research does not use existing frameworks for 'entrepreneurship', due to the issues with the 'precarity' of labour found in related creative industries (Neff et al., 2005).

As cosplayers began to navigate these digital, commercially oriented spaces for their practice—which started to yield financial returns that at least supported or helped sustain their activities — critical tensions emerged between the contrasting playful and commercial ends of cosplay production, impacting its long-term sustainability as a method for income generation. Seregina & Weijo (2017) explored the trade-offs that occur in the balance between the ludic dimensions of cosplay practice and the 'hard work' involved in time spent engaging in cosplay practices, and their often-high monetary costs. They highlighted the importance of the fact that cosplayers, when operating as 'fantrepreuneurs', are having to 'rely upon extensive, multiplatform branding' strategies across a range of digital platforms, including perceiving audiences as paying consumers from whom they might derive precarious levels of 'economic sustainability' (Seregina & Weijo, 2017). Rouse and Salter (2021) also the 'platform labour' of cosplayers as 'fantrepreneurs', central to which is the monetization of 'hypersexualised labour' activities by marginalized user groups whose labour is exploited for the profit of—primarily—platform owners and commercial interests from less marginalized groups (e.g. the owner of OnlyFans, as Rouse and Salter (2021, p. 11) note, is 'Tim Stokely, a white man whose net worth is estimated to be 120 million dollars'). As Rouse and Salter (2021, p. 10) explain, 'the strict sexual politics of many social media sites have driven sex workers and cosplayers alike from their platforms' and on 'to more exploitative ones like OnlyFans and *Chaturbate*'. Following directly from Seregina and Weijo's (2017)

findings regarding 'multiplatform branding' strategies, Rouse & Salter (2021) found that cosplayers acting as 'fantrepreneurs' on digital platforms like OnlyFans or Patreon—in order 'to gain the following' required 'to sustain a multiplatform branding' strategy—are becoming increasingly reliant on relationships 'formed between patron and creator' (Rouse & Salter, 2021). In other words, cosplayers rely on the development of relationships as core components of their digital content strategies; problematising the type of entrepreneurial work engaged with in labour environments that monetise the 'hypersexualised labour' of cosplayers.

Economic frameworks like *fantrepreneurship* are beneficial for contextualising the acts of professionalising cosplayers; and as Crawford & Hancock (2019, p. 243) argue, locate cosplay within 'wider, capitalist consumer cultures' within which cosplayers 'tend not to be subversive' but instead act as 'fairly loyal consumers' to their respective fandoms. However, the work of Seregina & Weijo (2017) and Rouse & Salter (2021) suggests that ongoing critical investigations are also necessary to investigate the sustainability of neo-liberal or capitalist approaches to careers in the creative industries, including cosplay. Thus, this thesis will draw on existing interpretations of 'digital labour' in the creative cultural industries to analyse the way cosplayers have adapted to and appropriated use of media technologies and platforms to practice or professionalise, analysing both the potential benefits and limitations of novel monetisation methods in these spaces.

2.2.2 Digital Labour

Cosplayers are yet to be extensively studied as digital labourers in the context of social media platforms and environments. To address this gap in the literature, this section will introduce the concepts of micro-celebrity (Marwick, 2015), personal branding (Liu & Suh, 2017), and social media influencers (Wellman et al., 2020) in relation to their applicability to cosplay labour. Next, types of digital labour are expanded upon from their initial introduction in Section 1.1.2, including visibility labour (Abidin, 2016–2017), affective labour (Lamerichs, 2010:2021), relational labour (Baym, 2015; Oksala, 2016), and algorithmic labour (Bucher 2012; Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Finally, research into the problematic relationship between gendered or sexualised labour practices and cosplay is introduced (Drenten et al., 2020; Rouse and Salter (2021). These approaches to understanding digital labour provide a range of critical lenses for interpreting the use of digital tools, platforms and skill sets by cosplayers as presented in this thesis.

Microcelebrity, personal branding and social media influencers

When a cosplayer reaches a high number of followers on social media platforms, their digital, professional persona may be complicated by the development of a niche level of celebrity for the cosplayer. *Instagram* is a popular app for sharing images, used widely by cosplay practitioners across the globe—for instance, a single *Instagram* search result for the hashtag *#cosplay* returns

approximately 40,699,843 posts[2]. The cosplayers developing these posts may, eventually, reach the 'condition of having a relatively great number of followers on the app', resulting in 'Instafame' (Marwick, 2015, p. 137). Instafame can be categorised under what Marwick (2015) terms 'micro-celebrity' culture, where users engage with 'the currency of the attention economy', through competing to gather enough fans to support themselves in their 'online creative activities' (Marwick, 2015, p. 139). Terms like 'Instafame' and 'micro-celebrity' act as historical precursors for the now popularised concept of social media influencers, defined as 'individuals who leverage their social and cultural capital on social media to shape the opinions and purchasing decisions of others' (Wellman et al, 2020).

Personal branding has been explored primarily in the context of culture and communication, as well as business studies. 'Style bloggers', people who post fashion-related content on social media, are among many forms of digital practitioners in these spaces, working to develop a personal 'brand' on different platforms (Liu & Suh, 2017). In Liu & Suh's (2017) study of female style bloggers on Instagram, they identified the ways that practitioners worked to increase exposure to their self-brand through use of digital skillsets, including: using hashtags to increase visibility on the platform, leveraging the reputations of celebrities, maintaining brand consistency in tone and style throughout their content production practices, and establishing 'friendly relations with other specific brands' to optimise their blogging output (p. 18). This type of 'self-publicity work' engaged with by 'models, creative workers and influencers' alike (Abidin, 2016b) is a form of digital labour that cosplayers appear to engage with actively (Robles, 2021). Digital labour is a type of 'immaterial labour' that produces 'an immaterial good such as a service, knowledge, or communication' for distribution in online spaces (Negri & Hardt, 1999, p. 94). The production of these types of goods makes use of 'digital skills', described by UNESCO (2018) as a 'range of abilities to use digital devices, communication applications, and networks to access and manage information'. Personal branding and digital labour are both concepts that will be applied during analysis of the cultural practices of Australian cosplayers in this thesis.

Types of digital labour

As digital labour matures as a practice and related industries continue to develop, different categorisations have emerged which may offer novel means of analysing the digital labour of cosplayers beyond the entrepreneurial. Lamerichs (2010) has already identified cosplayers as practitioners of 'affective' modes of work. Affective labour relates to 'what feminist analyses of women's work have called labour in the bodily mode' and includes a range of immaterial, often 'emotional' components (Negri & Hardt, 1999). 'Relational labour' is a similar concept, which

[2] Data collected by searching for the hashtag *#cosplay* on Instagram in 2019.

may be interrelated with affective processes, which refers to 'the labour of human contact and interaction, which involves the production and manipulation of affects', where 'the "products" are relationships and emotional responses' (Oksala, 2016). Through her research into digital music communities, Baym (2015) found that 'new media ramp up demands' for relational labour practices, including 'ongoing relationship building and maintenance in ways that may bear greater resemblance to friends and family than to customers and clients' (p. 20). People engaging in relational labour practices, thus, require a substantial investment of emotion and time, an issue that has also been identified in the roles of community managers for online videogames (Kerr, 2016). Community managers routinely engage in relational labour to counter the effects of 'negative encounters' in videogame spaces by moderating the behaviours of problematic players, which can cause an understandable emotional toll on practitioners (Kerr, 2016, p. 18). Finally, visibility labour is 'the work individuals do when they self-posture and curate their self-presentations so as to be noticeable and positively prominent' towards a particular audience ranging from 'prospective employers' to 'fans' (Abidin, 2016b). This type of visibility labour can be distinguished from 'algorithmic labour' performed to increase visibility through the use of algorithms on digital platforms (Bucher, 2012).

Sexualised digital labour

Sexualised digital labour has also emerged as a highly visible and potentially commercially viable (albeit inherently problematic) form of labour for cosplayers. Women in video game subcultures who gain large followings on digital platforms may feel increased pressure to engage in 'sexualised labour' activities for the 'precarious potential to be monetised by generating attention' (Drenten et al., 2020, p. 42). Rouse and Salter (2021, p. 10) provided the first examination of cosplayers as 'fantrepreneurs' performing sexualized labour, revealing that 'the strict sexual politics of many social media sites have driven sex workers and cosplayers alike from their platforms and to more exploitative ones like OnlyFans and *Chaturbate'* that may, in some case, serve to predominately benefit the interests of platform owners who are predominately white, male and cisgender. Cosplay creators on OnlyFans include Belle Delphine whose viral online popularity surged after a publicity stunt that saw her 'selling her bathwater for $30 a jar (and selling out in just three days) (Rouse & Salter, 2021). The same creator has also used their platform to post images 'that many in her fanbase called a rape fantasy' (Rouse & Salter, 2021). The impact of monetisation practices that could be perceived as fetishistic (i.e. drinking a woman's bathwater), or – at worst – exploitative and dangerous, especially in relation to depicting sexual violence against women (i.e. the aforementioned 'rape fantasy' photo set); and the impacts on creator and audience warrant further examination. Rouse & Salter (2021) call for this specifically, due to their finding that 'to gain the following to sustain a multiplatform branding' exercise, cosplayers may rely on the development of 'parasocial relationships' – perceived social

relationships between content creator and audience (Rouse & Salter, 2021). In a female-dominated landscape, research into sexualised labour and digital persona management online reveals the broader expectations of practice that may inform or influence these activities—warranting further investigation into how these factors may be impacting cosplayers engaging in these types of monetisation strategies. This thesis will extend critical analysis of gender-based discrimination and its ongoing impact on the formation of safe community spaces for cosplay, which will now require further application to digital environments, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

2.2.3 Cultural Intermediaries

Cosplay scholars have yet to explore the emergence of 'cultural intermediaries' in the digital and physical environments they practice within, and the way these intermediary figures have contributed to the formation of cultural value and professionalisation processes in the industry (Bourdieu, 1984). Initially set out by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (1984),* 'cultural intermediaries' are described as 'a group of taste makers and need merchants whose work is part and parcel of an economy that requires the production of consuming tastes and dispositions' (p. 3). To date, there are two main avenues of research concerning this concept, the former following Bourdieu (1984:1986) and his initial conception of cultural intermediaries as the emergence of the 'petit-bourgeoisie', the 'exemplars' of a 'new middle class' operating as 'mediators' between the production and consumption of goods and services. The other angle approaches the concept of cultural intermediaries as 'contextualised market actors' involved in 'the qualification of goods' and mediating the space between economy and culture (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 551). The adopted framework, for use in this thesis, is based on Maguire & Matthews (2012) framework, which positions cultural intermediaries as 'contextualised market actors', who:

> 'Construct value, by framing how others—end consumers, as well as other market actors including other cultural intermediaries—engage with goods, affecting and effecting others' orientations towards those goods as legitimate—with 'goods' understood to include material products as well as services, ideas and behaviours' (pp. 551–552).

Moreover, cultural intermediaries are not a 'monolithic occupational group' but rather are differentiated by their locations within commodity chains, claims to professional authority and capability to frame 'goods' as valuable (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 3). Maguire and Matthews (2012, p. 552) add that what distinguishes the activities of 'cultural intermediaries' from those of the average consumer, who arguably possesses some 'hand in the formation of value' of goods, is their 'expert orientation'. Thus, Maguire and Matthews (2012, p. 1) stress the importance of cultural intermediaries as a concept, being a 'productive device for examining the

producers of symbolic value in various industries', despite criticisms of it being an 'overly inclusive, analytically neutered term' used for 'seemingly *any* creative or cultural occupation or institutions' (Molloy & Larner, 2010; Hesmondhalgh & Pratt, 2015). Instead, Maguire & Matthews (2012) underscore its importance as a means of 'highlighting issues' relating to 'the blurring of work and leisure' and an 'important complement to the study of cultural production' (p. 1). With cosplayers being implicated in the landscapes of cultural, or 'fan', production, the concept proved particularly salient for use in this thesis to analyse the roles of key intermediary actors in the Australian cosplay industry. Maguire and Matthews (2012, pp. 554–556) recommend three dimensions for articulating the concept in context: identifying the 'framing' of goods by cultural intermediaries (what goods/products/services/ideas are legitimate or worthy in their economic context); the professional and personal 'expertise' attributed to the cultural intermediary in question, and the 'impact' their 'framing' of goods and expertise has on the industry or community as a whole. These conceptual dimensions were employed to articulate the role of cultural intermediaries, and their impact on the professionalisation of cosplay, as presented in Chapter 7.

This section presents a review of existing literature on cosplay, economics and labour. Cosplay researchers have identified cosplayers as practitioners of entrepreneurial labour derived from their positions as fans and consumers of related popular culture industries, including science-fiction, video games and other popular entertainment media (Lamerichs, 2018; Crawford & Hancock, 2019). Initial investigations into cosplay labour activities, on crowdfunding and membership platforms, have also been analysed for both their potential—and limitations—in supporting the development of renumeration practices for cosplay content (Seregina & Weijo, 2017; Rouse & Salter, 2021). Critically, these initial investigations into the labour, monetisation and professionalisation practices of cosplayers indicated a need for discussion of how these practices have evolved in digital environments. Notably, the research highlighted the importance of further investigation into the moderation and management of cosplay content, particularly in the context of digital labour, including community contributors who work within existing platform infrastructures and governance mechanisms to facilitate key digital activities within the community. Thus, existing frameworks for understanding the range of actors, networks and technologies implicated in digital economies were introduced, including approaches to categorising digital labour and the concept of 'cultural intermediaries' (Bourdieu, 1984:1986) which inspired the overall approach to data collection and analysis. This thesis aims to address the literary gap by analysing the digital labour and skill sets of cosplayers, as well as their perspectives on industry engagement.

2.3 Cosplay and Technology

Existing research from the media and cultural studies disciplines, as well as Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) and Information Systems, have made initial exploratory investigations into the role of digital labour in cosplay. Cultural studies researchers have explored the role of digital cosplay activities and their potential to support practitioners in overcoming barriers to physical participation (Hoff, 2017); and cosplay photography (Langsford, 2016). Matsuura & Okabe (2015) first introduced pedagogical forms of information sharing on social media to a CSCW audience, examining cosplayers' use of 'scaffolding' processes for transferring or communicating information through a 'collaborative innovation network (CoIN)' (Gloor, 2006). Gloor (2006) defines a CoIN through a phenomenon called 'swarm creativity' (which pre-dates the advent of the internet) but is a collaborative information-sharing system that now relies on digital communication systems for its primary operational purposes. Information Systems scholars Vardell, Wang & Thomas (2021) also explored information and knowledge-sharing networks of digital cosplay communities on Facebook. However, research into how cosplayers operate as everyday users of social media and other digital platforms has yet to thoroughly explore their roles and activities across various networks and platforms, as well as how their practices have been increasingly influenced by the digital infrastructures in which they operate. Cosplay has also been involved in experimental research in the field of Human Factors (Robles, 2021) and, most recently, in the computer science disciplines (Tango et al., 2022). Among the most substantive enquiries is Lamerichs (2020) analysis of affective and material labour on the Twitch live-streaming platform. Lamerichs (2020) identified cosplayers as 'platform workers', from the disciplinary context of media and fan studies and set out research recommendations for examining cosplayers and their digital activities across a range of platforms and contexts. This thesis aims to respond to the call for further research by introducing existing theories for studying user groups in the context of digital infrastructures, affordances, and platforms. These frameworks will be used to support the analysis of the everyday, online activities and professionalisation processes of cosplayers that will be provided in this thesis.

2.3.1 Digital cosplay communities and information-sharing practices

Community interactions between cosplayers in digital spaces have also been analysed for their sociocultural effects, in relation to different areas of cosplay practice. Fan conventions, and other events that draw large crowds of cosplayers, occur intermittently throughout the year. As a result, the digital cosplay community can act as a bridge between convention periods, facilitating ongoing communication, knowledge-sharing practices and events that help cosplayers operate beyond location-based barriers. Firstly, digital cosplay communities have been found to provide supportive spaces that have the potential to impact the social wellbeing of cosplayers experiencing

social isolation (Hoff, 2017). In Japan, there is a social phenomenon called ひきこもり (*hikikomori*) which has been controversially used to describe individuals who experience 'cases of extreme reclusiveness' (Hoff, 2017, p. 368). What Hoff (2017) terms 'digital cosplay' provides a means of participating at a distance for Japanese cosplayers who cannot physically attend event spaces but still want to continue cosplaying, which has led to an 'eventual return to the social environment' for some cosplayers who have been stigmatised using this term, allowing them to re-engage with an 'activity they enjoy' in its online iteration all the while remaining in the 'safe space of their home' (Hoff, 2017, p. 369). To engage remotely with their cosplay practices, digital cosplay practitioners may also create work-in-progress (WIP) content posted to a range of online networks, where cosplayers share 'upcoming costumes and provid[e] insight into their construction methods' (Hoff, 2017, p. 368). These systems for information sharing and retrieval have also been explored in relation to cosplay.

In the Computing and Information Systems sciences, researchers have begun to analyse the information-seeking and sharing practices of cosplayers (Matsuura & Okabe, 2015; Vardell et al., 2021). Matsuura & Okabe (2015) use the concept of 'scaffolding' to illustrate the 'peer-based, reciprocal learning models' of cosplayers in digital spaces; a system that integrates social media platforms with peer-to-peer interactions (p. 3). This involves the repeat performance of archival processes by experienced cosplayers—such as sharing cosplay photos or garment-crafting tutorials online—which contribute to a growing database of future reference material, serving as a 'scaffold' for the next practitioners to draw from and build upon (Matsuura & Okabe, 2015). Vardell et al. (2021) have provided detailed accounts of the individual and community-based information-seeking and sharing practices exhibited by cosplayers in social media communities. Using the case study of the 'Rey Cosplay Community' (RCC) on Meta's Facebook platform—a fan community focused on the *Star Wars* character, Rey—Vardell et al. (2021, p. 573) sought to demonstrate how communities like the RCC engage in information-based practices, including accessing 'information that is otherwise hard-to-obtain and/or high-quality', the ability to 'contact reputable information sources' and to 'decrease "transaction costs" by saving users time and money'. Another aspect of Vardell et al.'s (2021) study that warrants further examination is their finding that 'general group positivity, a respect for community rules and a tight-knit connection between members seems to strengthen an information community as a whole' (pp. 574–5). Due to what Vardell et al. (2021, p. 545) found to be a rise in research regarding 'toxicity in fandom spaces' and around the 'gatekeeping behaviours of certain fans' (see also: Jenkins, 2020), the positive community values demonstrated by members of the RCC cosplay community act 'as a fascinating case study in how information communities can flourish if toxic behaviors are restricted'. Moreover, Vardell et al. (2021, p. 574) note that their ethnographic exploration of the RCC community on Facebook only analyses 'one of many fan spaces focusing on cosplay', and

that their research – which 'conceives of the RCC as a complex information community'– indicates that 'other cosplay communities' are 'likely ripe for informational analysis'. Following this guidance, this thesis explored information sharing and retrieval practices, as they appeared in the broader context of cosplayers' digital labour activities and professionalisation processes, across a range of highly populated online sites of communal practice.

2.3.2 Image sharing and cosplay photography

Cultural studies scholars have identified photography as a central component of cosplay culture. Though dedicated research into cosplay photography, as a novel genre, is relatively scant (Langsford, 2016; Zarin, 2017), researchers have engaged with the practice as part of the broader cultural and artistic activities of cosplayers (Lamerichs, 2010:2018; Crawford & Hancock, 2019). Lamerichs (2010) found that cosplay photography 'foregrounds' the role of character in the image, aiming to articulate selfhood through idealised or fantastical representations. Wider practices in commercial photography have been researched in the context of media studies, where – as Morton (2017, p. 17) explained – digital editing tools (i.e. *Adobe Photoshop*) in advertisements have been found to be largely recognised as a 'misleading market tool' among audiences, which resulted in a growing 'preference for user generated imagery' that favoured authenticity over idealism (Morton, 2017, p. 17). Authenticity, thus, forms part of a wider 'vernacular aesthetic' on social platforms, where social media affordances privilege 'the mundane and the everyday experiences of life' (Morton, 2017, p. 16). Despite this, cosplayers occupy a unique position in these spaces, where broader trends towards authentic expressions of selfhood ultimately operate in contention with what cosplayers value – and share – on social media platforms. In cosplay photography, Langsford (2016, pp. 16–17) found that photographic 'assemblages' are meticulously crafted to ensure 'costumes and photographs accurately mimic the source material' – instead of reality (Langsford, 2016, pp. 16–17). Authenticity in cosplay, as a result, merges the physical activities of the cosplayer in the "real-world", with their capabilities for faithful artistic replications of fictional characters. Even when cosplayers may appear to be placed 'in physical locations', they are often ultimately being superimposed onto 'digitally manipulated backdrops' (Langsford, 2016, p. 16). In digital spaces, places are 'dressed up' alongside people – particularly in cosplay photoshoots – through a range of digital editing processes. In Australia, for example, cosplay photographers will even 'obscure or erase localising features or identity of a site', by editing the image, to more accurately re-create the geographic context of the character being represented (e.g. a *Game of Thrones* character requiring a backdrop that reflects the show's European setting) (Langsford, 2016, pp. 24–26). Zarin (2017) examined cosplay photography practices at conventions, finding that 'cosplayers face an almost constant stream of harassment' in these spaces, which includes taking 'photos for adult use without asking

permission', among other troubling behaviours. Zarin (2017) suggested that privacy law be taken into consideration when considering safer protections for cosplayers in convention spaces.

Most recently, Tango et al. (2022) contributed research into Computer-Assisted Design (CAD) tools and processes, drawing on cosplay's complex relationship with material translation of costumes based on digital characters in popular media, to create a novel technology to 'facilitate high-quality cosplay image generation'. Tango et al. (2022) developed a Generative Adversarial Network (GAN) – a type of machine learning model which is trained to create artificial data based on a "real" (pre-existing) dataset. Using 'paired dataset construction for the specific task of cosplay costume generation', the GAN works to translate 'anime character images to clothing images' for the purpose of creating a reference image for cosplayers to base their costume on (Tango et al., 2022). In other words, translating a 2D image of an anime character to images of authentic clothing that a cosplayer could tangibly wear. In Chapter 4, this thesis will discuss cosplay photography as a core practice that has become increasingly prominent as the industry has undergone further digital transformation. In Chapter 7, a case study is also presented on the contribution of a prominent Australian cosplay photographer and his impact on the professionalisation of the industry.

2.3.3 Digital infrastructures, affordances and platforms

Cosplayers are active users across a range of digital platforms including social media interfaces, crowdfunding technologies and game streaming services. At the time of project planning, research into cosplay had not yet accounted for advancements in the technologies implicated in cosplay practice, nor the role of platform affordances in this context. However, it is worth noting that—in 2021—Nicolle Lamerichs first addressed this gap in the literature by analysing the Amazon *Twitch* videogame live-streaming platform. Using cosplay as a case study, Lamerichs (2021) introduces the concept of 'platform fandom' as: 'a complex eco-system that functions as an interface on the one hand but is also a fan-driven business model that companies, like Amazon, profit from on the other hand' (p. 189). Contributing to this broad system, Lamerichs (2021) explores the complex interplay that cosplayers engage in through Twitch, from creative processes to explorations of fan identity and the 'emotional and gendered labour of being engaging' (p. 207). As this thesis will further extend upon and validate, Lamerichs (2021) found that Twitch operates using various actors – both human and technological, in the case of bots and algorithms – which cosplay content (like Twitch streams) contributes to. This is a 'complex system with actors that range from the streamer, the game, and the audience to the affordances of Twitch and specific streaming software utilised' (p. 207). This thesis will analyse the way digital infrastructures and affordances impact the activities of cosplayers, through their use and preferences on a range of social media, crowdfunding and streaming platforms.

The concept of 'affordances' was coined by psychologist James J. Gibson (1979) to describe 'the actionable properties' which exist 'between the world and an actor (person or animal)'. To account for technological objects, Donald Norman (1988) contributed the term 'perceived affordance', which identifies an 'affordance' as something which 'refers to the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used' (p. 9). Analogous use of the concept of 'affordances' in human-computer interaction (HCI) has been applied to social media platforms, as well as contributed to the development of 'complex affordances' (Sharma et al., 2016) which involve interconnected human and non-human actors. With this research foundation, the thesis will explore how cosplayers engage with digital environments and how platforms may afford the online actions used in their daily working practices. Using the concept of affordances, the features of a platform can be broken down and interpreted to find meanings that are literally or indexically correlated with their use. To press a button on social media *means* something, 'it mediates and communicates' and then 'relates to different affordances' on the platform (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 2). In social media spaces, lower-level affordances are 'more concrete' and 'feature oriented' – relating to how an object looks, feels, or otherwise operates – and higher-level affordances relate to 'dynamics and conditions enabled by technical devices, platforms and media' (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 12). A lower-level affordance on X (formerly known as Twitter) is typified in the 140-character limit for posts on the platform, which ultimately 'privileges some forms of content over others' in representation (Haider, 2015, p. 10). An example of a higher-level affordance can be seen in the 'universal currency' that many platforms employ on social media – for instance, the 'like' function – where potentials for content are assembled by a platform's infrastructure to be 'liked'; but the individual 'likes' of the users who produced this content and their audiences 'play a generative role in producing those very offerings in the first place' (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, pp. 25–28). The research presented in this thesis aims to shed further light on the way cosplayers practice and professionalise through their interaction with complex affordances on social media, using these conceptual foundations.

3 Conclusion

This literature review has summarised existing research into the cultural, economic and technological dimensions of cosplay. Evidently, cultural studies researchers have made significant contributions to the development of this novel area of inquiry. Fan studies scholars have provided historical accounts for cosplay's origins as a cultural community of practice, highlighting the crucial role of crafting in its origins (Lamerichs, 2010; Crawford & Hancock, 2019). Cultural studies researchers have also explored cosplay as a valuable means of expressing and exploring personal identity through material, embodied and affective—sometimes

transformative—modes of performance (Rahman et al., 2015; King, 2016; Lamerichs, 2011:2018). Research has also explored authenticity and accuracy as cultural values that complicate expressions of identity for cosplayers, where high levels of skill are correlated with the ability to replicate character costume designs or appear aesthetically similar to a fictional character (Kawamura, 2012). This is particularly problematic due to the adaptation processes of cosplayers who 'suture' the 'unreal' to the 'real' by materially guising themselves as fictional beings (Baimbridge & Norris, 2013). Experimentation and expression of gender and sexual identity through cosplay have also received substantive attention in the field, focusing on opportunities for safe, sometimes subversive, and often playful costuming experiences (Leng, 2013; Jacobs, 2013). Finally, cultural studies research has explored how cosplayers engage with social expressions of identity through community practices based around shared fan appreciation for media texts and their practical enjoyment of the hobby (e.g. Norris & Bainbridge, 2009). However, research has also addressed concerns relating to how discrimination based on sex, gender, age or weight persists through gate-keeping practices, complicating the issue of equitable and safe participation in cosplay spaces (Lome, 2016; Crawford & Hancock, 2019; Jenkins, 2020). In Chapter 4, this thesis will explore how 'cosplay culture' has transformed from these cultural foundations, from the perspective of cosplayers, by examining the effects of the rapid increase in digitisation and professionalisation processes in their everyday practices.

The literature review presented emergent research into the economic activities of cosplayers, positioned as 'productive fans', in the cultural studies disciplines, who contribute to broader digital and consumer cultures (Lamerichs, 2013a, 2018; Crawford & Hancock, 2019). Specific enquiries into early economic frameworks for cosplay and monetisation in Australia were also discussed, through the work of Norris and Bainbridge (2009). Then, research into cosplayers as '*fantrepreneurs'* was introduced, first in relation to finding avenues for monetisation on digital crowdfunding and membership platforms (Seregina & Weijo, 2017; Rouse & Salter, 2021). Secondly, through adopting marketing strategies and business approaches based on entrepreneurship (Robles, 2021; Nichols et al., 2023). Due to issues emerging that relate to the framing of cosplay labour as 'entrepreneurial' – from the precarity of related labour in the creative industries (Neff et al., 2005; Seregina & Weijo, 2017) to the potential for gender-based exploitation and harassment (Rouse & Salter, 2021) – this thesis will not adopt the framing of 'entrepreneurial labour'. Instead, the thesis focuses on the way digital labour has emerged for practitioners at both hobbyist and professional levels of practice, from the perspectives of cosplayers themselves.

Due to these intentions, frameworks for understanding digital labour and 'cultural intermediaries' were also presented to inform the development of independent and original insights for this thesis

(e.g., Lamerichs, 2015; Baym, 2015; Abidin, 2016–2017). In Chapter 5, some of the gender-based issues related to cosplay practice will be addressed through the inclusion of a book chapter pending publication; before the digital labour and skill sets of hobbyist and professional cosplayers are comparatively analysed in Chapter 6. Finally, the literature review addressed the—to date—limited research on the intersections between cosplay and technology. These included explorations into the digital activities of cosplayers experiencing social isolation in Japan (Hoff, 2017), and the digital information-sharing practices of cosplay communities (Matsuura & Okabe, 2015; Vardell et al., 2021). Research into cosplay photography practices at conventions was also introduced, including issues relating to harassment and privacy through misinterpretations of consent (Langsford, 2016; Zebin, 2017). Finally, the review closes by mentioning the work of Lamerichs (2021) and her initial investigation into the affective and material performances of cosplayers on Twitch. A complementary introduction to the concept of affordances in the context of social media is then provided, serving as a final framework for supporting investigations into the 'platform work' of cosplayers on digital platforms (Lamerichs, 2021). Overall, existing literature has provided a crucial foundation of knowledge, from which this broader investigation into the digitisation and professionalisation of cosplay is based.

Chapter 3 • Methods

3.1 Introduction

Having provided an overview of the relevant literature, this chapter explains the methods used in this thesis project. The research conducted for this thesis is interdisciplinary, drawing on the fields of Media and Communications, Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Games Studies. This orientation reflects the core aim of the thesis: to explore how cosplayers experience, negotiate and professionalise their practices across physical and digital spaces. The design aligns with Creswell and Plano Clark's (2017) framework for positioning mixed methods research across four levels: philosophical worldview, theoretical lens, methodological approach and methods of data collection (p. 35). The philosophical foundations, theoretical background and methodological approach—as outlined in Chapter 1, Section 1.4—are constructivist, interpretive, and reflexive, employing a qualitatively driven mixed-methods approach to data collection and analysis (Creswell & Plano-Clarke, 2017). While multiple methods were integrated, the study maintained a predominantly interpretive orientation, with qualitative approaches providing the primary lens of analysis and quantitative data serving a complementary role (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This aligns with recommendations for exploratory research in emergent fields, where depth and contextual understanding are prioritised over generalisability (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). The central research question (**RQ**) guiding this dissertation was:

> **RQ**: How do cosplayers use digital platforms, tools and skills to practice their craft and contribute to the professionalisation of Australian cosplay?

This was addressed through three interlinked studies, each aligned with a sub-question (**RQ 1**–**3**):

> **RQ1.** What materialities, identities and practices associated with digitisation have characterised the development of cosplay?
>
> **RQ2**: How do Australian cosplayers use digital labour and skillsets to practice and monetise their craft?
>
> **RQ3:** How do cultural intermediaries emerge from, operate within and contribute to Australian cosplay?

Mixed methods were deployed at both the data collection and analysis stages, following a sequential and partly iterative process. The design consisted of three interconnected studies. Study one, based on **RQ1**, was a qualitative study where data collection was guided by ethnographic techniques—including semi-structured interviews and participant observation—to capture participants' lived experiences and practices (Patton, 1990; Newman, 2014). The data was then analysed using Terry & Crawford's (2021) approach of 'reflexive thematic analysis', based on

Braun & Clarke's (2006) explanation of the method. Study two, based on **RQ2**, used a quantitative approach, collecting data through the development of an online questionnaire (Newman, 2014; Müller et al., 2021) and generating results using the techniques of descriptive statistics (Holcomb, 2016; Aldrich, 2019; Müller et al., 2021; Holcomb, 2016) on IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28).The survey was introduced to validate and expand insights emerging from the qualitative phase across a broader participant group. Study three—based on **RQ3**—returned to a qualitative case study approach, drawing on interviews and field observations to explore themes identified in the earlier stages in further depth. The study adopted a hybrid approach of traditional and 'digital' ethnographic methods for data collection to produce a series of 'case studies' (Newman, 2014; Hine, 2015:2017). Case studies were based on the qualitative techniques of 'semi-structured interviews' and 'participant observation', also used in study one (Newman, 2014), online participant observation (Hine, 2015:2017) and extended 'site visits' (Adler & Adler, 1987; Marcus, 1995; Cumming et al., 2022). Thematic techniques for data analysis were again employed to produce the results (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry & Crawford, 2021). Integration of methods occurred at multiple points. During data interpretation, qualitative findings informed the design of the survey instrument, ensuring that questions reflected participants' language and concerns identified in Study 1. Conversely, survey results guided the selection of focus areas for follow-up interviews and observations in Study 3. This iterative relationship between methods exemplifies what Greene et al. (1989) term 'complementarity' in mixed-methods research design, in which one method enriches the findings of another. Ultimately, while mixed methods were essential for breadth and depth, the analytical emphasis remained interpretive and inductive, consistent with the thesis' constructivist paradigm.

Reflexivity was integral to this research, allowing me to critically assess how my positionality shaped both methodological choices and participant interactions. As a partial insider within creative and fan communities, I benefited from cultural familiarity that facilitated rapport; yet, I remained aware of potential biases in interpretation. To address this, I incorporated reflexive notes into my fieldwork, documenting assumptions, reactions and the dynamics of engagement alongside descriptive observations, following the recommendations of Adler & Adler (1987) and Hine (2015). My approach to participation varied across studies to reflect their distinct purposes. In Study 1, observation was primarily exploratory, designed to contextualise interviews and capture the material and social dimensions of cosplay within event spaces, focusing on conversational interactions and observation of real-time practices in context. In contrast, Study 3 involves more sustained and prolonged interactions in physical and digital cosplay contexts, aligning more closely with the tradition of ethnographic case studies. These differences underscore the iterative nature of reflexivity in adapting observation practices to research objectives. Overall, this thesis employed a qualitatively driven mixed-methods approach that

combined qualitative and quantitative strategies—namely, ethnographic techniques and survey research, enabling both an in-depth understanding and the identification of broader patterns. Throughout all stages, reflexive documentation was engaged with to ensure transparency and enhance the credibility of this study.

3.2 Overview of Australian Cosplay and Key Terms

Cosplay in Australia developed within the broader context of global fan convention culture, which began with science fiction fandom in the mid-20th century and later expanded to include comics, gaming, anime, and other forms of media (Jenkins, 1992; Booth & Kelly, 2013; Lamerichs, 2018). Fan conventions, known colloquially as "Cons", are organised gatherings where audiences of popular media engage in activities relating to their shared interests, including panels, workshops, purchasing merchandise, and participatory practices, including cosplay. Australia hosted its first major international fan event, the *World Science Fiction Convention* (1975), in Melbourne, marking a foundational moment in the formalisation of fan communities within the country. The rise of anime and gaming fandoms in the 1990s introduced new spaces for cosplay in Australia. A pivotal event in this trajectory was the Melbourne Anime Festival (Manifest), first held in 1998 and running until 2013. Manifest (https://www.manifest.org.au) was among the earliest conventions in Australia to institutionalise cosplay through structured competitions and dedicated community events. From the early 2000s, the convention landscape diversified and grew in scale through the introduction of multi-genre events, including *Supanova Pop Culture Expo* (est. 2002) (https://www.supanova.com.au), Oz Comic-Con (est. 2012) (https://ozcomiccon.com), and *PAX Australia* (est. 2013) (aus.paxsite.com). These events now serve as key sites for cosplay practice, drawing thousands of attendees and integrating industry-led activities such as sponsored contests and professional development workshops.

Cosplay competitions have been a central feature of these conventions. Typically, competitions assess participants on their craftsmanship, performance, and accuracy to source material, with evaluations conducted by panels of experienced cosplayers or industry professionals (Lamerichs, 2018). Beyond offering recognition and prizes, these contests function as mechanisms for legitimising cosplay as a skilled, performative practice. At the highest level, Australian competitions are connected to international events such as the *World Cosplay Summit* (https://worldcosplaysummit.jp), providing local practitioners with pathways to global stages. Within this context, cosplay judges act as cultural gatekeepers who interpret and enforce quality standards, further contributing to the professionalisation of cosplay communities in Australia. Beyond conventions, cosplay in Australia is also associated with philanthropic activities. Numerous charity groups, such as *Heroes for Hire Australia* (https://www.heroesforhire.com.au)

and the *Justice League 501st* (https://justiceleague501st.com.au/), organise costumed appearances at hospitals, fundraising events, and community initiatives, leveraging popular superhero and pop culture characters to support charitable causes. These organisations exemplify the social and community-oriented dimension of cosplay, extending its significance beyond entertainment and demonstrating how the practice intersects with volunteering and civic engagement. From its roots in early fan conventions to its current status within large-scale multi-genre events, cosplay in Australia reflects both local innovation and global influences, encompassing diverse activities that include competitive performance, digital labour, and philanthropic practices. This dynamic landscape highlights the significance of cosplay as a site of identity formation, creative expression, and socio-cultural participation within Australian popular culture.

3.3 Study One: Data Collection

Study One, in this research project, was designed around **RQ1**: *What materialities, identities and practices associated with digitisation have characterised the development of cosplay?* The data collection techniques for Study One were based around a 'pure qualitative strategy', using an ethnographic approach to research (Patton, 1990). This initial stage consisted of semi-structured, ethnographic interviews with 25 Australian cosplayers, and cosplay professionals, as well as participant observation at three gaming, anime and popular culture convention events ("Cons"). Cosplayers were identified and recruited for this research project through their publicly available social media profiles and were contacted via email, direct message on their social media profile page, or in person at the Cons. A plain language statement, a copy of the consent form, and a list of proposed interview questions (Appendix I) were sent to each respondent who confirmed their interest. After receiving their signed consent form, the interviews were conducted across multiple sites, depending on the interviewees' location and requirements. In-person interviews were conducted in Melbourne (Australia) at a public location of the participant's choosing, including The University of Melbourne, a cafe, or at a Con. Some interviews were also conducted over the telephone or online, through applications such as *Skype* and *Zoom*, for participants who were unable to attend an in-person interview. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and 20 minutes on average and were audio recorded with the interviewees' consent. After the interview, each participant received a $20(AUD) gift card as reimbursement for their time.

The ages of participants ranged from 21–56, and 21 of the overall 24 individuals interviewed were cosplayers, or former cosplayers. Of the four participants who were not cosplayers, three of them were identified as key intermediaries in the cosplay community who I would later conduct in-depth case studies with: Leigh Hyland, also known as Steamkittens, a highly regarded cosplay photographer; Captain Patch-It, cosplay repairman and Admin of the largest Australian Facebook group for cosplayers; and co-owners of *Lumin's Workshop*, the first Australian cosplay supply

retailer, John Reading and Maggie Hu; Maggie has also worked professionally in cosplay. The final participant was a cosplay-adjacent professional, Julian Newman, who was Project Manager for *Digital Fox* (https://digitalfoxtalent.com), an influencer marketing company. The then-titled *Digital Fox Media* agency focused on what they termed the 'geek influencer' space (which included cosplay). Another notable participant was Morgan Thompson, the former Cosplay Manager at Reed Exhibitions[3], who—at the time of interview—owned prominent Australian conventions including Oz Comic-Con and *PAX Aus* (https://aus.paxsite.com), Australia's largest video game convention. Each participant was asked during the interview about their preference regarding pseudonymity. Some cosplayers, as indicated, preferred to be referred to as their "Cosplay Name", which typically equated to their username on their preferred social media platforms. Other cosplayers preferred to remain anonymous, primarily citing personal or professional reasons for needing to distinguish their personal identity from their "cosplay identity". A complete list of the participants, including preferred name or pseudonym; age at the time of interview (in 2019); where they lived—within Australia—at the time of interview (location) and their preferences for pronouns, is provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Study 1 Participant Details

Preferred Name (Pseudonym/Cosplay Name)	Instagram Account Details	Age (2019)	Location (Aus)	Pronoun preference
Flitterpuff	@flitterpuff	21	QLD	She/Her
Sarah		30	QLD	She/Her
Anna		32	NSW	She/Her
Julian	@digitalfoxmedia	ND*	VIC	He/Him
JaclynMay_	@JaclynMay_	22	NSW	She/Her
Brian (Awesome Oldies)	@awesomeoldies	56	QLD	He/Him
Sue (Awesome Oldies)	@awesomeoldies	56	QLD	She/Her
Sean or Sena_Does_A_Thang	@Sena_Does_A_Thang	28	VIC	He/Him
TwerkinGherkin	@twerkingherkin	22	QLD	They/Them
BombshellxBarbie	@bombshellxbarbie	22	QLD	She/Her
Kara		27	VIC	She/Her
Steve		30	VIC	He/They
E.K.Bolt	@e.k.bolt	26	VIC	She/Her

[3] *Reed Exhibitions* re-branded in 2021 and now operate as *RX Australia* (https://rxglobal.com/rx-australia).

Morgan		30	WA	She/Her
Emi.Apollo	@emi.apollo	21		She/Her
AndyCam	@andycamcosplay	30	VIC	He/Him
Michael or OzoneOcean		44	VIC	He/Him
Harley		31	VIC	She/Her
Speakeasy_Mischief	@speakeasy_mischief	29	WA	She/Her
Jess or Yeetbix.Cosplay	@yeetbix.cosplay	22	SA	They/Them
Josie	@avocadojosie	25	VIC	She/They
Leigh (Steamkittens)	@steamkittens	52	SA	He/Him
John	@luminsworkshop	ND*	VIC	He/Him
Maggie	@luminsworkshop	ND*	VIC	She/Her

Notes. *ND = Not disclosed

Participant observation took place at Australian gaming and pop culture events throughout 2019, where I attended the following events: Oz Comic-Con (June 8–9, 2019), Animaga Expo on (August 24–25, 2019), Madman Anime Festival (September 14–15, 2019) and PAX AUS (October 11–13, 2019)**.** Similar to what Cumming et al. (2022) encountered during participant observation in the context of a gaming subculture, what began with 'relying on observations and informal conversations'—often informative for the primary researcher, who had limited prior engagement with cosplay—evolved into a 'more involved' strategy. As an initial experiment, I both purchased and hand-crafted a few pieces together to create my first attempt at cosplay. Acknowledging that a researcher's presence might be unusual in a playful space like a local Con, the purpose of this rather involved method of participant observation was not a matter of disguising my identity—but rather allowing me to participate as a co-contributor to the activity itself, allowing me to explain my identity to each new participant in a more natural and comfortable manner. The costume, then, became a research instrument; as the body does for the anthropologist. I employed it as a means of immersing myself in the dynamics of cosplay as a process and performative experience, which I found only enriched my understanding of the practice. Instead of wasting precious time asking what it was—or felt like—to be a cosplayer, I was equipped with a general understanding and familiarity which decoded some of the more unique facets of such a physically demanding practice. My physical presence as a cosplayer also allowed me to seamlessly interact with a range of key members of the cosplay community—such as the cultural intermediaries identified as candidates for case studies in Study Three.

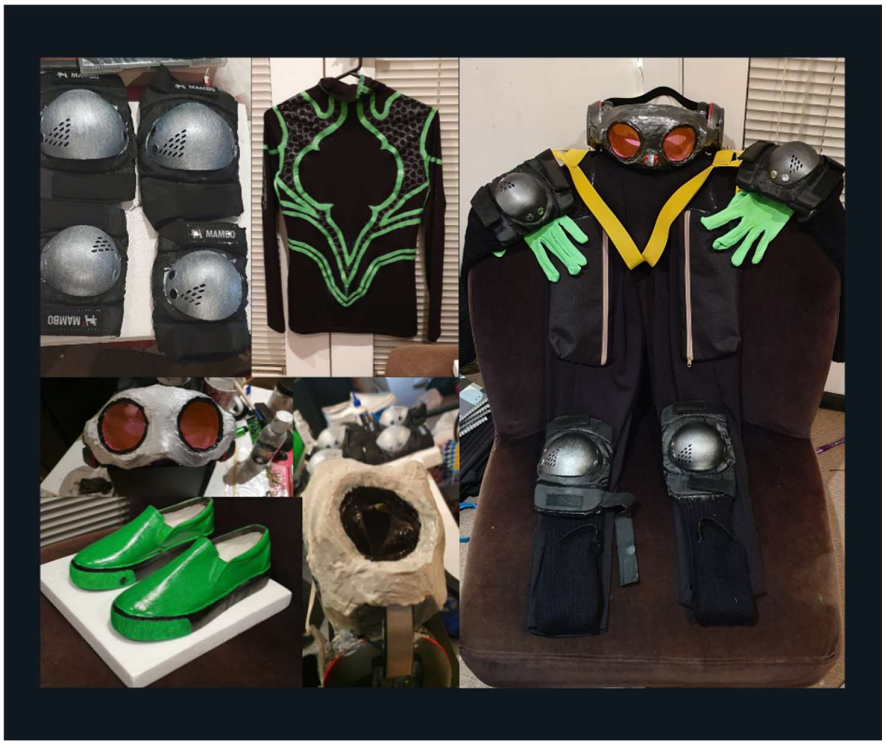
Figure 3

Researcher engaging in participant observation (2019–2022)



Figure 4

Development photos of cosplay design process



3.4 Study One: Data Analysis

The first dataset that emerged from the interview series included: audio recordings of the interviews, transcripts of these interviews, and occasionally images or video recordings of the researcher and participants in the interview context—if consented to by the participant. The second dataset for *Study One,* which was collected, consists of a series of notes and reports from participant observation experiences in Australia. Other types of data that emerged from this initial study, are participant demographics related to age, profession and gender preference from the semi-structured interview period; alongside extensive notes and diaries taken throughout the period of observation – including descriptions of rules and procedures observed at convention sites, descriptions of activities, discussions and interactions between community members; photographs and video taken with the express permission of interviewees; as well as 'interaction logs' of follower growth on participants public, social media accounts (Rogerson, 2019, p. 299). The dataset for this study was anonymised, before being uploaded to *NVivo*, a software package developed by *QSR International*, which helps facilitate qualitative data analysis by digitising data storage and the overall coding process. An 'Introduction to *NVivo'* course was undertaken at the University, alongside private learning, prior to using the software. I also attended the 2020 NVivo conference to glean insights from experienced qualitative researchers who had successfully implemented the software into their analysis.

The data analysis portion of study one was developed from Terry and Hayfield's (2021) approach to reflexive thematic analysis, which slightly revises and adapts Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to the method. Terry and Hayfield (2021, p. 9) detail a flexible and recursive approach to thematic analysis method that allows for results to emerge organically, as 'situated truths', from the data—conducted by a researcher informed by 'theory and an understanding of a research area and culture'—where rigor is measured by the depth of a researchers engagement with the data and not its 'reliability' in terms of attaining an ultimate, singular, objective truth. The method is centred on four core values: 1) 'theoretical flexibility'; 2) a 'procedural focus on a systematic, ever-increasing and rigorous engagement with data'; 3) 'emphasis on the reflexive contributions of the researcher' and 4) 'framing of themes as multifaceted, conceptual, meaning-based patterns' (2021, p. 4).

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Terry and Hayfield (2021, pp. 8–9), proceeds through six key stages: familiarisation, coding, initial theme generation, developing and reviewing themes, naming and defining themes and writing up the results. These stages were replicated for use in this project, starting with the 'familiarisation' stage where I read through my interview transcripts several times and revisited notes, images, and personal voice recordings collected during participant observation experiences. I took additional, brief notes as I went through them, where

potential thematic links began to emerge, but retained my keen focus on becoming fully acquainted with the dataset's contents (2021, pp. 30–33). Phase two was the 'coding' stage of the process, where I—primarily—used an inductive, data-driven approach, which allowed me to start interpreting 'chunks' of text and assembling a list of codes for further examination (2021, p. 35).

Next, the third phase involved generating an initial set of tentative or prototypical themes from the set of codes generated in phase two (2021, pp. 33–42). Using *NVivo* allowed me to cluster, organise and interpret different codes into potential themes and create various visualisations to support a range of perspectives on different aspects of the dataset. Phase four comprises the development and review process for the themes tentatively outlined in the prior stage, where these themes are 'tested against the data', further developed where needed or broken down and reconstructed (2021, pp. 54–59). The next, fifth phase leads directly into the sixth, where the final list of themes is determined and labelled for use in the final phase of the method, which involves writing up your research in the format of a report (2021, pp. 59–76). The report was developed into Section One of this thesis, comprising a full results chapter and book chapter submitted for publication.

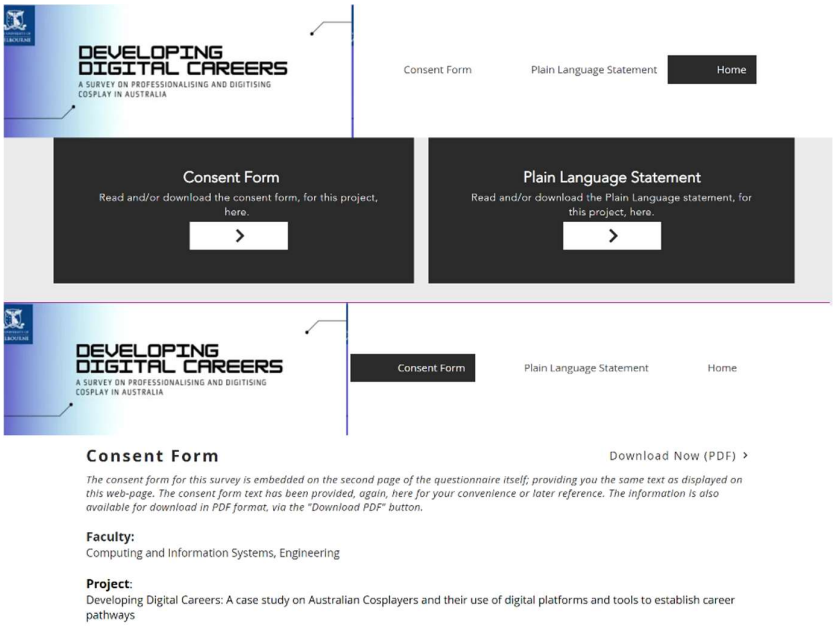
3.5 Study Two: Data Collection

Contributing to the mixed methods approach of the overall research project, the second data collection project was an online survey, developed using quantitative approaches used in both the social sciences and HCI. A copy of the survey instrument is provided in Appendix II. The survey was designed to be completed using 'computer assisted self-interviewing' (CASI) methods—allowing participants to remotely engage with and respond to the survey using their choice of internet browser—which was crucial for this data collection period, which occurred during an ongoing period of "lockdowns" in Australia, due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Macreadie, 2022). *REDCap* software, developed by Vanderbilt University in 2004, was selected for its use as a 'secure web application for building and managing online surveys and databases' (Vanderbilt University, 2004). The approach to quantitative survey design was largely guided by Müller et al.'s (2014) chapter in *Ways of Knowing in HCI*, which offers an extensive overview of how to design and deploy a survey with the highest level of accuracy achievable, while reducing bias wherever possible. The survey method was recommended for its useful nature as a tool to gather attitudinal data on the topic, elucidate the nature of cosplayers' 'interactions with technology' and intent behind their use, their characteristics as a user group and comparative data on the way cosplayers at different levels of practice (i.e. hobbyist or professional) might interact with different digital platforms, or use particular technologies and related skillsets, to facilitate their cosplay-related activities (Müller et al., 2014, pp. 231–232).

The first of five stages—specifically relating to the data collection portion of the research design process—involves determining a set of research goals and matching them to 'constructs' (2014, p. 235). Constructs, which Müller et al. (2014, p. 235) describe as 'unidimensional attributes that cannot be directly observed' serve as the basis for constructing the survey questions. Wanting to gather insights into cosplayers' everyday use of a range of digital platforms and tools for cosplay-related purposes, the primary goal of the survey was to answer the research question: How do cosplayers appropriate or adopt digital platforms, design tools and skillsets to practice or professionalise their craft? The questions were structured into three main sections. The survey included four main sections: demographics, practising cosplay (online and offline), use of digital platforms and design tools in cosplay and reflections on cosplay industry participation. These areas of focus were primarily informed by Study One, where the cosplayers interviewed illuminated the various aspects of cosplay that are supported by digital technologies, tools and related skill sets, as well as the types of activities they might perform using them.

Figure 5

Screenshots of survey companion website including PLS and Consent form

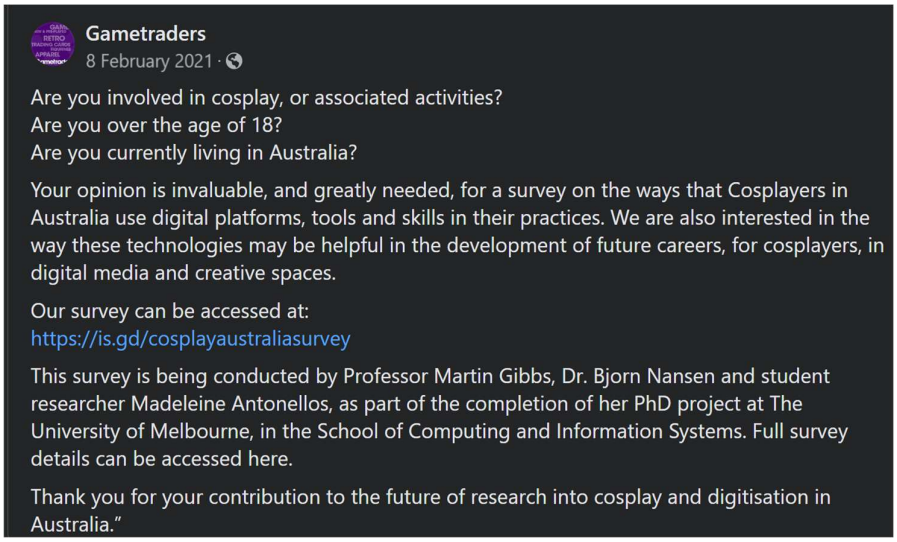


The second stage of Müller et al.'s (2014, pp. 236–237) approach to survey design involves determining the number of people to survey. Due to the lack of population-based data on cosplayers, which would have allowed for inferential statistics to be generated, non-probability-based sampling methods were employed instead. The techniques used were primarily 'purposive' in nature (Neuman, 2014, p. 273). Purposive sampling is a 'valuable sampling type for special situations' in social sciences and is primarily 'used in exploratory research or in field research' to

'select members of a difficult-to-reach, specialised population' (Neuman, 2014, pp. 273–274). Knowledge and connections established through engaging in interviews and fieldwork during Study 1 were used to inform the first stage of recruitment. Once the CASI questionnaire method was established, and the choice of platform settled on—*REDCap* survey design and analysis software (Vanderbilt University, 2004), provided through a University of Melbourne license—the survey was made distributable via a shareable, digital link. A companion website was established to provide further context and information about the study; as well as to house the preparatory documents (a copy of the plain language statement and consent form) for potential participants to access. Key cosplayers were invited to participate by sharing the link to the survey, and the companion website, as shown in Figure 5. Cosplayers were also invited to complete the survey through email or by sending instant messages to their professional, publicly accessible, social media profiles. 'Snowball sampling' was also utilised throughout the survey duration, by performing searches for cosplayers in Australia on search engines and social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, using their search tools. Cosplayers were also invited to share the survey with other cosplayers. In the process, as word spread about the survey, we acquired the help of Australian, retro video game retailer *GameTraders*; as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Screenshot of survey advertisement on Gametraders' Facebook page



The third stage of Müller et al.'s (2014, pp. 240–250) approach to survey design involves designing survey questions and familiarising oneself with the potential for bias to emerge from incorrectly formatted questionnaires so that it can be avoided. I determined that I wanted to gather data on: 1) Frequency of use of digital platforms (including general social media and messaging; live-streaming and subscription-based services); 2) Importance of cosplay-related activities on

the aforementioned platforms; 3) Frequency of use of digital design tools (e.g. CAD software, 3D printing and others) in cosplay-related activities; and, 4) Attitudinal data on the digitisation and professionalisation of cosplay. I decided to use closed-ended questions, including a range of single-choice, multiple-choice, ranking, and rating questions (2014, p. 242). The opening section of the survey focused on gathering demographics, while Section A was structured around practising cosplay in physical sites of engagement. Section B focused on use of digital platforms, and the importance of cosplay-related activities performed on these platforms. It also collected data on the use of design tools and digital skills, before Section C finalised the survey by asking cosplayers questions about their perspectives on cosplay industry participation; specifically, on the digitisation and professionalisation of cosplay at large.

Figure 7

Sample of Study 2 Codebook

<table>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>SM_Peers</td>
<td>Level of importance of activities, for cosplay purposes, undertaken using social media.
Option 3: Peer Support

<table>
<tr><td>1</td><td>Not at all important</td></tr>
<tr><td>2</td><td>Slightly important</td></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>Moderately important</td></tr>
<tr><td>4</td><td>Very important</td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td><td>Extremely important</td></tr>
</table>

Survey Instrument Reference
Question 11: When using social media platforms for cosplay purposes, how important are the following activities?
Question 11.3 Peer Support</td>
</tr>
</table>

After settling on an initial draft of survey questions, I selected the University-provided electronic data collection (EDC) software, *REDCap* (Vanderbilt University, 2004) and statistical analysis software IBM SPSS Statistics [SPSS] (Version 28). At this point, I engaged in an extensive 'review and survey pretesting' phase, which is the fourth phase of Müller et al.'s (2014, pp. 250–252) design process. Due to my prior research background being primarily in qualitative methods, I began by consulting a statistician at the University's Statistical Consulting Centre to ensure the design approach made sense, would yield the desired research outcomes and be suitably organised in preparation for the data analysis process to come. After several rounds of questionnaire refinement with my supervisors, I proceeded to field test the survey by running a pilot study with the first iteration of the survey questions with a small subset of the final survey sample (Müller et al.,2014, p. 251). Following the pilot study, further rounds of revisions were conducted over

several months until the researcher and supervision team were satisfied that the questions were as straightforward as possible; and structured in a way that would minimise the potential for a range of biases that can emerge through poorly designed or tested surveys. Once the survey instrument was finalised – knowing that SPSS would be employed – I prepared, in advance, a codebook which pre-coded the instrument into numerical variables, recorded variable names and labels, measurements of data (i.e. nominal and ordinal) and provides other information which helps to decode the final dataset for analysis (Müller et al., 2014; Mooi et al., 2018). The final phase of Müller et al.'s (2014, pp. 251–254) approach to survey data collection involves implementing and launching the survey. The survey went live through a publicly accessible online link on February 4, 2021, and closed on May 4, 2021. *REDCap* software (Vanderbilt University, 2004) streamlined the process of adapting the questionnaire to its digital format and finalising the visual design elements.

3.6 Study Two: Data Analysis

Müller et al.'s (2014) approach to survey design includes a sixth phase dedicated to data analysis, which is further broken down into three stages. I used this structure to organise the overall data analysis period. These three stages, as recommended by Müller et al. (2014), include data preparation and cleaning, conducting the analysis, synthesising the findings and reporting the results (p. 254). The first step is 'data preparation and cleaning', which involves removing duplicate responses, speeders, straight-liners, and other questionable patterns, as well as missing data and breakoffs (2014, p. 254). A total of 276 responses to the survey were received. The full results of the survey were initially exported from *REDCap* (Vanderbilt University, 2004) in the format of a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet (.xcv) file. Using the spreadsheet, the data was first manually read and checked against individual responses. Anomalous results were identified, as well as considered, as to where there were any instances of 'straight lining', false or incorrect entries and other forms of bias (Neuman, 2014). Question by question, we were then able to assess whether there were 'outliers' that had arisen or 'inadequate open-ended responses' (Neuman, 2014, pp. 255–256). Simultaneously, as results were re-read, initial observations and interpretations also started to take shape (Newman, 2014, p. 256). After manual review, 271 valid responses were imputed into SPSS to conduct data analysis. At this point, the second stage of Müller et. al.'s (2014) approach to survey design could be addressed, ensuring the data was 'thoroughly analysed', starting with 'descriptive statistics' as a data analysis method (Neuman, 2014; Holcomb, 2016). Aldrich (2019), then, provided guidance on how to conduct descriptive statistics using SPSS.

This first level of analysis helps with understanding and familiarising oneself with the dataset. An essential part of this process is 'specifying the correct *level of measurement* of each of your

variables' – which is also an 'essential bit of knowledge required to successfully use SPSS' (Aldrich, 2019, p. 27). The three levels of identification—namely 'nominal', 'ordinal', and 'scale'—provide integral information on what data can be analysed, which determines what 'statistical procedures' might need to be applied, in order to determine how results can be measured (Aldrich, 2019, pp. 27–28). I identified two levels of measurements that could be applied to the data in this study, nominal and ordinal. It must be noted that the data measured at this level is limited to descriptive statistics that measure the dispersion of frequency distributions, which 'take on the quality of the most basic level – nominal'; but allow for the production of pie charts or graphs that are still integral to exploratory research projects such as this one. (Aldrich, 2019, p. 32). The other level of measurement I could apply to my data was 'ordinal', which is often called 'ranked' data because the categories of such variables measure the amount (a quality or quantity of whatever is being observed). Ordinal data 'goes beyond the nominal' to provide 'additional analysable information' by providing labels for each category that are 'ordered or ranked in terms of the quality or quantity of the characteristic of interest they possess' (Aldrich, 2019, p. 32). Data measured at the ordinal level can provide additional insights into how participants share the degree to which they use a particular technology, determine an activity to be important, align with sentiments or particular categories; and provide attitudinal data (Aldrich, 2019). Aldrich (2019) also provided detailed guidance on how to produce these types of descriptive statistics using SPSS.

Ordinal data was analysed to produce an initial series of univariate descriptive statistics—created in SPSS—including frequency distribution tables, pie charts and bar graphs. The results and associated data visualisations, developed using SPSS, were then exported as Microsoft Word files, and graphs saved as .png files. The next stage of descriptive statistical analysis was the production of multivariate cross-tabulations in SPSS; also known as "Crosstabs" (Aldrich, 2019). Crosstabulations were produced using key nominal (i.e. Level of Cosplay—i.e. Hobbyist or Professional), and ordinal data variables (e.g. frequency of use of digital platforms, ranking of importance of activities conducted on digital platforms). In other words, the "Level of cosplay" that cosplayers chose to identify with—namely, "hobbyist" (i.e. casual or non-professional cosplayers) or "professionalising" (i.e. semi-professional or professional cosplayers)—were cross-tabulated with the results relating to how cosplayers use digital platforms (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3). This study was conducted to determine how cosplayers—with different self-reported approaches to hobbyist or professionally-oriented practices—might attribute varying levels of importance or engagement with digital platforms and skills or perspectives on the digitisation or professionalisation of the practice. It must be noted that nominal or ordinal data are limited in their capacity to produce more complex, inferential statistics. Furthermore, due to the sampling methods used—which resulted from the lack of accurate population statistics on Australian

cosplay—there were minimal options for testing the statistical significance of the data collected. Despite this, a chi-square test of independence was conducted on SPSS, but did not produce any meaningful results, primarily due to the relatively small dataset of 271 cosplayers (Aldrich, 2019, p. 262). The cross-tabulated results were exported, similarly, into Word, Excel or image files for later use. The final step in Müller et al.'s (2014) guidance for data analysis involves synthesising the research and producing a report, which is provided in Chapter 6 of this thesis. Part of this process involved experimenting with different approaches to the final presentation of data through translating the results produced through SPSS into clearer visualisations using Microsoft Excel and Canva.

3.7 Study Three: Data Collection

The third stage of this research project was a series of three case studies produced to explicate the role of 'cultural intermediaries' in the cosplay industry (Bourdieu, 1984:1986; Maguire & Matthews, 2012). During the initial, ethnographic data collection phase of Study One, participants routinely mentioned key members of the Australian cosplay community who are valued for their expertise and cosplay-related professional businesses or skill sets. Noting this and being familiar with the sociological term of 'cultural intermediaries' (Bourdieu, 1984:1986; Maguire & Matthews, 2010; 2012), it was decided that this could be an ideal conceptual framework for use in this study. Further reading on the concept also demonstrated its adoption in analogous spaces of practice. For example, Woo (2012) analysed cultural intermediaries in 'geek' or 'nerd media' spaces including games and pop culture. Critically, Maguire & Matthews (2012, p. 555) recognised the 'power of detailed qualitative research and historical and ethnographic methods' for developing an understanding of 'the specific devices and constraints negotiated by cultural intermediaries in their attempts to influence how goods are perceived and practised'. Historical and ethnographic methods, Maguire and Matthews (2012, p. 555) note, are ideal for providing 'insight into how that influence is exerted and concretised'. Case studies are also recommended for allowing researchers to 'link abstract ideas' such as cultural intermediaries 'with the concrete specifics of cases we observe in detail' (Newman, 2014, p. 42). As a result, the data collection method used for this study was a series of qualitative, 'cross-sectional' case studies, which took place primarily from 2019–2022 (Newman, 2014, p. 44). The data collection techniques included 'semi-structured interview' techniques and 'participant observation' methods—as applied in Study One (Newman, 2014)—alongside multi-sited, ethnographic field research (Adler & Adler, 1987; Marcus, 1995). Approaches to field research of analogous gaming-related spaces like esports were also consulted for advice relevant to the research context (Cumming et al., 2022). Digital ethnography informed the design of supplementary participant observation activities in digital field sites (Hine, 2015:2017). Finally, the data analysis period employed the same methods used in Study One – namely, thematic analysis (Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

The case study participants selected—as mentioned in Section 3.3—include, firstly, 'Captain Patch-It', a pseudonymous individual who helped establish Australia's first cosplay repair stations at pop culture and gaming conventions—and secondly, Maggie Hu and John Reading, co-founders of Lumin's Workshop. Lumin's Workshop is Australia's first dedicated cosplay supply store and workshop space. The third participant is Leigh Hyland, also known as Steamkittens, a cosplay photographer who was the first to be titled and compensated for the role of 'Principal Cosplay Photographer' at the long-running Australian pop culture and gaming convention, Supanova. The individuals selected demonstrate diversity in cultural influence, roles and impact, as well as background (in terms of race, gender and ability). Initial semi-structured interviews were conducted with Maggie, John, Steamkittens and Captain Patch-It, during the Study One data collection phase for this project (Section 3.1, pp. 23–24). Plain language statements were provided and consent forms signed—including extra provisions for conducting ongoing case studies—by each of the participants. During the interview period, with Study Three in mind, follow-up fieldwork visits—at their primary spaces for cosplay-related work—were also initially inquired about and agreed upon with these participants.

3.7.1 Site visits

In addition to the initial interviews conducted with participants during Study One, as explained in Section 3.2, follow-up semi-structured interviews and participant observation were also conducted during extended site visits (Adler & Adler, 1987; Cumming et al., 2022). Due to the nature of the study, examining 'cultural intermediaries' in their occupational contexts (Bourdieu, 1984:1986; Maguire & Matthews, 2010), site visits were conducted at each case study participant's primary location of work. For Captain Patch-It, this was the *Cosplay Repair Station* at PAX Aus in 2019 and 2022. Multiple sites were visited during the process of capturing the case study around Lumin's Workshop, including the primary researcher's visit to their stall at the PAX Aus games convention in 2019, participation in one of their cosplay workshops, and a visit to their physical store in 2022. Finally, when conducting the case study on Leigh Hyland, after an initial meeting in 2019 at PAX Aus, the primary researcher engaged in extended site visits at the Steamkittens booths at the Supanova convention in 2021 and 2022. The dates, locations and ethnographic methods used are recorded and presented in Table 3. During physical site visits, I followed Adler & Adler's (1987) guidance on ethnographic field notetaking practices, which emphasize the importance of immediacy, detail and reflexivity. While immersive participation often limited the possibility of extensive real-time notetaking, I produced brief, provisional notes during observations and expanded them into comprehensive field notes immediately afterwards to preserve accuracy. Adler & Adler (1987) recommend that such notes include 'descriptive data as fully and accurately as possible' (p. 67) while also integrating 'reflections on feelings, interpretations and intuitions' (p. 69). In line with this, I recorded both objective accounts of

settings and interactions as well as reflexive commentary on my position and responses as a researcher. Where relevant, I added separate analytic memos to capture emerging patterns and ideas while maintaining the integrity of the descriptive record.

Site visits typically lasted between 1.5 and 6 hours, depending on the amount of contextual information required. During each site visit, I conducted extensive participant observation, being constantly mindful of how I was being perceived as a researcher (Gold, 1958), as well as to what extent (if any) my activities were impacting the work environment for any given participant. Where possible—even in cases where I was cosplaying—I tried to maintain what Miller and Glassner (2004) term 'social distances' by emphasising my role as a non-cosplayer, thereby encouraging participants to engage in critical and reflective commentary on their activities in an informative and distanced manner. It is worth noting that an evident gap in time exists between physical fieldwork encounters, primarily due to the COVID pandemic, which interrupted the course of this thesis project (Macreadie, 2022). Due to the need for an extensive redesign of my overall project, methods had to be temporarily adapted to digital tools and techniques that could be conducted remotely and safely in these conditions. This particularly affected the period of research which occurred between 2020 and partway into 2022.

Table 3

Study 3 Data Collection Methods and Fieldwork

Participant	Date/Time	Location	Methods
Captain Patch It	11–13 Oct 2019	PAX Aus 2019 (Melbourne, VIC)	Semi-structured interview, participant observation, and site visit
	21 Feb 2020	Brunswick (VIC)	Follow-up interview
	7–8 Oct 2022	PAX Aus 2022	Site visit
Lumin's Workshop	11–13 Oct 2019	PAX Aus 2019 (Melbourne, VIC)	Semi-structured interview, participant observation, and site visit
	20 Apr 2021	Online (Zoom)	Follow-up interview
	28 Jul 2022	Physical Shopfront (Campbellfield, VIC)	Participant observation and site visit
Steamkittens	13 May 2020	Online (*Gmail*)	Semi-structured interview
	22–23 May 2021	Supanova 2021 (Melbourne, VIC)	Site visit
	22–23 Apr 2022	Supanova 2022 (Melbourne, VIC)	Site visit

3.7.2 Digital site visits

For digital site visits, I employed the principles of digital ethnography, as articulated by Hine (2015; 2017), who adapts traditional ethnographic techniques to online environments. According to Hine (2015, p. 70), digital ethnographers should create 'detailed and reflexive fieldnotes' that capture not only participant interactions but also the socio-technical environment in which these occur. Hine (2015, p. 75) stresses the importance of supplementing textual notes with visual documentation, including 'screenshots, logs and maps' which preserve the structure and visual character of the digital environments they are sourced from. Digital fieldwork primarily focused on exploring the social media platforms and communities mentioned by the case study participants in their interviews, as well as relevant publicly available resources, including their digital shopfronts or portfolios, to further investigate the ways these sites have contributed to the development of their position as cultural intermediaries in cosplay. In Table 4, below, the list of online sites is listed alongside the associated cosplay professional.

Table 4

Digital field sites visited in Study 3

Participant	Digital Field Site	URL
Captain Patch It	Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/CaptainPatchIt/
	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/captainpatchit/
	International Cosplay Corps (Facebook)	https://www.facebook.com/InternationalCosplayCorps/
Lumin's Workshop	Online store	https://www.luminsworkshop.com/
	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/lumins_workshop/?hl=en
	Community Discord	https://discord.gg/qYBFYfGwtc
Steamkittens	Photography Portfolio	https://steamkittens.myportfolio.com/published
	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/steamkittens/
	Waitwhile	https://app.waitwhile.com/
	Elementice	https://www.elementice.com/

3.7.3 A note on adapting fieldwork techniques to meet accessibility requirements

Before engaging in the interview process, Leigh Hyland (Steamkittens) informed the researcher that he was experiencing an ongoing health condition that limited his ability to participate in lengthy, in-person interviews. Leigh was enthusiastic and accommodating to me as a researcher, explaining that he suffers from a motor neuron disease called Primary lateral sclerosis (PLS). Leigh and the researcher discussed, at the outset, what accommodations could be made to ensure

his interview process was as comfortable and accessible as possible. Leigh provided explicit consent to disclosure of his health information, expressing that he felt it was an important part of his story. One of Leigh's key concerns was his growing difficulties with speech. Persons with limitations or impairments to their speech are often excluded from research on the grounds that they cannot 'speak for themselves' (Teachman et al., 2014, p. 3). Instead, Leigh suggested that writing answers to questions would be an ideal method for engaging with the interview process; therefore, we conducted an online interview using a combination of email and *GSuite*. By continuing to engage Leigh like this, ensuring he was in charge of his engagement with this study, we were able to—as has been previously found—collaboratively combine 'multiple methods that generated different types of data that informed one another and allowed for rich interpretations and deeper understanding' to still be generated despite any limitations to our communication (Teachman et al, 2014, p. 18). Even more importantly, Leigh's story could be shared in a manner that was most comfortable and suitable to him. During all fieldwork visits, the researcher routinely checked in to see where any methods might be adapted to better suit the conditions on the day and fluctuations in Leigh's health status. Wherever possible, during these site visits, the researcher would also engage in any extra, light activities that might ease the workload for Leigh and his care team. This was only ever conducted with explicit permission from Leigh, and the activities that the researcher was sometimes able to engage with—for example, assisting with cosplay photography practices—were especially valuable means of gaining material experience with the object of research.

3.8 Study Three: Data Analysis

The results of Study Three, examining the role of cultural intermediaries in the cosplay industry, were produced using the techniques of 'thematic analysis', as described in Section 3.3 (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry & Hayfield , 2021). The data collected for each of the case studies comprised interview transcripts, extensive fieldwork notes, voice recordings and various online media. The initial transcripts from Study One had been coded as part of the thematic analysis process and were already uploaded to NVivo. The extra data from fieldwork visits and participant observation were then added. All data was coded thematically to examine its relationship with the concept of cultural intermediaries, before being interpreted, collated, and written chronologically, covering events specifically related to the establishment of their position in the Australian cosplay industry. The results are presented in Chapter 7 of this thesis.

3.9 Conclusion

Overall, this section has provided an overview of the methods used for data collection and analysis throughout this thesis project. This qualitative, mixed methods-based, ethnographic study was framed within a constructivist, relativist, and inductive research design (as initially contextualised

in Chapter 1). This interdisciplinary project used data collection strategies rooted in traditional ethnography, including semi-structured interviews and participant observation (Newman, 2014); as well as quantitative survey design strategies from HCI (Müller et al., 2014) and case study research techniques (Newman, 2014). Data analysis methods included thematic analysis (Terry & Hayfield, 2021), and descriptive statistics (Holcomb, 2016) using SPSS (Aldrich, 2019). Ultimately, these research methodologies were combined to provide an academically rigorous, exploratory inquiry into the digitisation and professionalisation of cosplay—using the case study of the emergent Australian cosplay industry—through the following discussions in this thesis.

Chapter 4 • Digitising Cosplay Culture:

Exploring the Socio-Technical Evolution of Cosplay Practices

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of Study 1, which consisted of qualitative data collected through ethnographic methods, including interviews and participant observation within the Australian cosplay community—as outlined in Section 3.2. The research question for Study 1 (RQ1) was: *What materialities, identities and practices associated with digitisation have characterised the development of cosplay?* By thematically analysing interview transcripts and participant observation notes (as detailed in Section 3.3), the results found that the hobbyist and professional identities, materialities and practices of cosplayers, in Australia, have been re-shaped by the proliferation of use, and evolution, of digital technologies: including social media platforms, or computer-assisted design (CAD) processes. By adopting—or adapting to—the use of digital technologies and platforms, cosplayers interweave the traditional, physical, or "offline" components of their activities with related "online" practices. As a result, cosplay in Australia has undergone a digital transformation, evolving from a hobbyist cultural activity to an economically viable creative practice. During the coding process, a range of issues relating to cosplay practices in physical and digital environments also emerged from the dataset. This data—though crucial—I felt was better suited to a separate report. This report presents the issues relating to cosplay's historical connections to sexism, harassment and misogyny, which were derived from the reflections of cosplayers in *Study One*. The cosplayers discussed the barriers that challenge equitable participation in community spaces within the games and popular culture industries. This report was submitted and accepted for publication as a book chapter, the details of which were presented in the Preface. The report is included in this thesis and presented in Chapter 5.

Previous literature provided foundational, historical context for this study; having accounted for the way cosplayers developed into a cultural 'community of practitioners', by exploring the social, cultural and creative components of their (mostly physical or "offline") activities (Lamerichs, 2010:2021; Crawford & Hancock, 2019). Early research into materiality and identity, as well as the cultural or commercial practices of cosplayers, provided insight into the way cosplay emerged – primarily – as a playful, art-focused subculture of local groups of enthusiasts (Lamerichs, 2010; 2013a; Norris & Bainbridge, 2009; Rahman, 2015; Crawford & Hancock, 2019). Research into the digitisation and monetisation of cosplay is present but limited to a small number of publications focused on the way cosplay practices have emerged on crowdfunding and subscription platforms (Seregina & Weijo, 2017; Rouse & Salter, 2021); and specific investigations into how cosplayers engage with a range of affordances on social media platforms

(Lamerichs, 2021; Vardell et al., 2021). Despite these promising findings, there has yet to be a substantive, focused research effort into the impacts that have resulted from the way cosplayers have adopted novel crafting technologies and cross-platform social media practices in their everyday activities. Also, how these processes have contributed to the monetisation and professionalisation of cosplay. This chapter seeks to address the gap in the literature by presenting the results of an exploratory study into how digital technologies mediate the cultural practices of Australian cosplayers and provide opportunities for professionalisation. The discussion will present analysis into how cosplayers have interwoven "offline" or material components of their activities with those conducted using digital technologies and platforms, and how they have transformed their practice. The results will address key components of cosplay as a cultural activity, and how digital technologies have impacted them. The cosplay practices discussed include crafting and design (Section 4.2); performance and identity (Section 4.3); community and information-sharing (Section 4.4); and monetisation or professionalisation (Section 4.5).

4.2 Advancing Craft and Design: Technological Developments and Digital Access

4.2.1 Improvements to Craft and Design Technologies

Industry-defining improvements to craft-related technologies have altered the material relationship between cosplayers and the way they create or acquire cosplay-related artifacts, such as costumes and props. Traditionally, crafting has been considered central to the practices of many cosplayers (Lamerichs, 2015; Crawford & Hancock, 2019). The results of this study indicated that these material, 'affective' components of creating a cosplay outfit remained central to the practices of some cosplayers. As defined by former Cosplay Ambassador for Australian popular culture convention Supanova—AndyCam, some cosplayers identify as *"craftsmanship-based"*, referring to Svetlana Quindt (*Kamui Cosplay*)—as an exemplar of a craft-focused approach to cosplay practice. Quindt (2024) is a professional cosplayer who has written and published over 16 books on cosplay crafting. Sean further clarified the value he derives from cosplay, as a cosplayer who centralises the role of crafting in their work:

> *"For me, when it comes to cosplay, it needs to be made out of nothing. That's the magic of it. That's the wonder and the beauty of it. You have a pile of flat pieces of foam, and the next minute you have a full set of armour".*

However, as explained by Crawford & Hancock (2019, p. 181), crafting has not only always been found to be 'an important part' of the practice, but also the 'most time-consuming'. For some cosplayers in our study, including Sean, a meticulously detailed—and more traditional, physically demanding approach—to the crafting process is part of the enjoyment he derives from cosplay. This could be seen in his description of designing angel-wings for his cosplay of antagonist *Malthael* from *Diablo III: Reaper of Souls* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012):

> *"There's a swirly foam detailing that was all hand traced, and hand carved, by me. It probably took about fifty hours to do, all up. So that's where a lot of my time went… it was just the best way to make it look how I wanted it to look".*

Though existing, labour-intensive approaches to crafting persist; many cosplayers interviewed in Study 1 reflected on the effects that improvements to cosplay craft-related technologies, tools, and materials had on their practice. They also reflected on how they used social media to augment their knowledge-sharing practices and community networks. To date, it has been found that cosplayers often value the accuracy of their costumes, in relation to their representation in the related media (Lamerichs, 2010; Rahman, 2015; Lunning, 2021). The results of this study indicated that the digitisation of crafting techniques, and the increased availability of more efficient and precise design technologies, have resulted in improvements to the way cosplayers can engage with—and derive value or satisfaction from—the aesthetics of replication (i.e. how cosplayers reproduce, remix or recreate a character's costume, props and accessories). Sue, one part of the *Awesome Oldies* cosplay duo, started cosplaying in the early 1970s when, as she describes, "*You were just the freaky weird one that dressed up*". She recalls "*very simple costumes*" and "*very simple sewing"* techniques *"because that's all you had*". Sue reflects on the effects this has had on her practice:

> *"Hell, I even look at costumes we made just five, six years ago – and compare them to what we make now – and I'll even think, 'Well, that's a piece of crap'. It's just that I would do things so differently now, because even in the last five to six years, the amount of product and tools available have really changed. And there's so much stuff that's really designed for cosplay that just wasn't there before".*

In saying this, a focus on accuracy has also traditionally created barriers to engagement with cosplay activities, due to the need for intensive labour, time and effort – as well as, potentially, high financial expenses – to support key crafting activities related to the practice (Seregina & Weijo, 2017; Crawford & Hancock, 2019). The results of this study indicated that the rise of technologies like commercial 3D printers, CAD software and programmable electronics – and the development of novel materials like *Worbla* (https://worbla.com)[4] – have improved or advanced some of the more traditional and resource-demanding components of cosplay. As Brian, Sue's partner and the other cosplaying member of the *Awesome Oldies*, explains:

> *"A lot of the tools we use nowadays for our costumes didn't exist. You didn't have things like, thermoplastic, like Worbla, that you can just shape and form into whatever you want. You didn't have a sewing machine that would do embroidery patterns that you just*

[4] *Worbla* is a thermoplastic that is popularly and widely used by cosplayers, as a malleable alternative to traditional foam.

> *program in. You didn't have 3D printers, which I use all the time, you know? Or programmable electronics".*

Brian explained how he would approach designing a costume for Sue—using his current knowledge and available technologies—with relative ease, describing the seamless integration of digitised crafting practices in his everyday approach to cosplay. To create a costume based on *Ursula*, the sea witch from *The Little Mermaid* (Musker & Clements, 1989), Brian explained that he would create tentacles—that move in a manner similar to an octopus—by building eight, separate components which "*all move individually"*. Brian listed the components he would need, which included: "*two separate motors, a 3D print-out of some concentric discs, and some motorcycle speedometer cable*". In 2016, for his Star Wars-inspired, "*Old Man Luke*" costume, Brian explained that he wanted to recreate the robotic hand that protagonist Luke Skywalker acquired at the conclusion of *Star Wars: The Emperor Strikes Back* (Kershner, 1986). To do so, he 3D-printed the individual parts and mechanisms – including digits, joints and connectors – and secured them in place with metal screws. This eventually resulted in a fully movable, puppet-like glove with space to conceal his hand.

The increased availability of more efficient and precise design technologies and materials for cosplayers has also been crucial to improving physical safety while in costume. Cosplayers use costumes as a vehicle for expressing selfhood and identity, enabling them to embody characters that represent cultural values and narratives found in popular culture in a uniquely physical and transformative way (Lamerichs, 2010; Rahman, 2015; Lunning, 2021). AndyCam, during our interview, identified this as one of the more challenging aspects of cosplay crafting: *"To actually put something from a cartoon, onto an actual person, there's got to be concessions made because obviously what is on a TV screen does not work proportionally to real life".* Many cosplayers shared their first craft-related accidents or incidents, as well as the material obstacles that arose in the process of designing and refining cosplay for fashioning on a human body. Flitterpuff recounted her experience replicating a character with a prosthetic, bionic arm – Bucky, from *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Russo & Russo, 2014). Flitterpuff designed a glove to replicate Bucky's hand, featuring "*little silver fingertips"* that were *"made out of duct-tape"* and painted "*metallic"* to replicate the silver, fictional '*vibranium'* material it is based on. 'Vibranium' is a fictitious metal which first appeared in issue 13 of Marvel comic *Daredevil* (Lee et al., 1966). Wearing the prosthetic for the first time, for the duration of a day at a convention – which can be up to 8 hours of physical performance – Flitterpuff recalls that she *"had to get a screwdriver to let [her]self out of it"* after being *"locked into it for the whole day".* She adds: "*I'm never doing that again".* With experiences like these, cosplayers may develop novel strategies for enhancing the safety and comfort of their costumes, which often incorporate refinements using digital technologies. Sue and Brian, the *Awesome Oldies*, reflected on a similar situation, where Sue's

safety was jeopardised while dressed up as character '*Groot'* from *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Gunn, 2014):

> *"I overheated massively, and we'd realised that it was the way the helmet was sitting. It was basically sealing in my very little air intake, so I was actually re-breathing my own carbon dioxide. I passed out on 15-inch stilts".*

As a result, their "*Groot was almost redone from scratch"*, adding key technological measures to ensure she can perform in it safely, as Sue explains: *"Now we've got cooler packs sewn into the outfit, we've got three fans in the helmet, and we've increased the airflow.* She continued, while grinning, adding "*I can do it for hours now"*.

4.2.2 Development of the Online Marketplace for Cosplay-Related Products

Another aspect of cosplay crafting and design that has been impacted by related advancements in digital technologies is the development and evolution of the global online marketplace for cosplay and related goods. In the early 2000s, specialty cosplay products, from costumes to crafting materials and technologies, were difficult to acquire; with most stockists being based internationally. AndyCam, a long-time cosplayer, remembered his experience during this initial period in the Australian cosplay market, noting, *"When I first started back in 2008, if you had a wig—full stop—you were ahead of the game".* During this time, Norris and Bainbridge (2009) provided an early conceptualisation of the cosplay industry as a network of 'cottage', 'niche' and 'mainstream' stockists and sellers. These categorisations stand as critical, foundational work for understanding the different elements that contributed to the early development of the Australian marketplace for cosplay goods. However, the results indicated that the digital transformation of the industry, along with its growth in popularity over the past two decades, has reshaped the commercial industries surrounding the sale of cosplay goods in Australia. In Norris & Bainbridge's (2009) study, the '*cottage industry*' (p. 39) comprised peer-to-peer sales of commissioned or pre-owned costume parts or full outfits, as well as props and accessories. The results for this study indicated that the *cottage industry* in Australia—though it still exists—has been largely overshadowed commercially by specialty and mainstream retailers of cosplay goods. Cosplayers interviewed for this study demonstrated less resistance towards mass-distributed cosplay goods, as found in Norris & Bainbridge's study (2009), perhaps due to increases in popularity and accessibility of online cosplay sales platforms, which offer more affordable alternatives.

The fan-production efforts that may have traditionally occurred in Norris & Bainbridge's (2009) idea of the '*cottage industry*' are becoming limited by having to compete with more affordable, commercially produced costumes in the digital marketplace. Flitterpuff explained how the efforts and costs of cosplay production—as an individual craftsperson, and not a commercial enterprise

—often outweigh the potential profits that could be gained through selling her products: *"I get asked a lot about commissions of things, particularly the Mary Poppins skirt, but It took 65 hours of solid painting".* Unable to find an accurate tapered fabric, she *"painted every stripe around the whole skirt"*, and *"hand-drew"* every line. Showing me a photograph of the skirt, Flitterpuff explained that the penguins were "*the correct penguins from the film"*. She had sketched each penguin, before painting them in, by hand and found that *"it took a lot of work".* Flitterpuff added, "*I can't do that for anyone else, because the amount I would need to charge is ridiculous"*. A preference for the ease of accessibility of purchasing pre-made costumes online may have also contributed to the reduction in reliance on the cottage industry for acquiring cosplay goods. As Anna explains:

> "*I feel like most of the time they're better finished, and they actually come on time compared to mine, so I just buy them now. Can't be fucked. I'm too old. I've got the money to afford it now. I just do it.*

Cosplayer Kara explained that she *"used to make all of [her costumes]"* but finds she no longer has "*the time*" or "*the energy*" to do so, explaining that she now will "*buy the costume, wear it a couple of times, then just resell it*". Kara described a further incentive for purchasing cosplay outfits and accessories, noting that *"it's easier to resell a costume that's made by a professional, than it is to sell your own work"*, when you cosplay as a hobby.

In Australia, a specialist industry has emerged in place of the 'niche' industry conceived of by Norris and Bainbridge (2009), which includes retailers of cosplay-specific tools and supplies. Over time, inventions and advancements in modelling materials were made—including the product launch of *Worbla* in 2014—but a lack of local suppliers resulted in cosplayers needing to purchase and import goods from international sellers to access these products and keep pace with global developments in the craft. Maggie, co-owner of Australia's first brick-and-mortar cosplay supply retailer, Lumin's Workshop, describes the experience of acquiring specialty cosplay materials in 2014, when she was a full-time Architecture student and hobbyist cosplayer: *'There was not a whole lot available, in general, for cosplay. I actually just started off importing materials to use myself and then we stored them in our apartment'.* What started out as a personal quest for new materials slowly grew into a marginally profitable side business when, as Maggie explains:

> *"I guess more and more people started to get the word out that I wasn't using floor mats like everyone else, that I had specialised materials and that I was importing it. And people would message me to buy it; [Lumin's Workshop] kind of just started like that. Then people who I didn't know would approach me on Facebook and be like, "I heard from so and so that you were selling materials?".*

By accessing and using global supply chains, Lumin's Workshop's product catalogue expanded over time to include specialty cosplay materials for crafting, including: foams (EVA, foam clay, PVC, XPS and pre-made foam detailing including bevels or dowels); thermoplastics (*Worbla*); 3D printing tools; resins and silicones for moulding and casting; and fabrics for sewing. Specialty cosplay craft paints and pre-styled wigs are also sold, as well as in-house services including custom laser cutting and pattern printing for cosplay armour, props, or costumes. Lumin's Workshop is Australia's sole cosplay specialist retailer, operating with both a physical store and workshop, as well as a digital storefront. In saying this, Maggie finds: "*online sales contribute about 90–95% of our entire business*"; where their physical space is mainly used for educational cosplay activities and community events.

In 2009, Norris & Bainbridge explained that subcultural studies might traditionally decry the way cosplayers have historically lacked 'resistance' to commodification, relating it to 'a loss of the subculture's essence'. Instead, Norris & Bainbridge (2009) found that in the case of cosplay, recognition by the mainstream could also be understood as: 'crucial for defining both them (cosplaying, what it is and is not) and the interesting work they are doing (in terms of gender disruption)'. The *work* of gender disruption in cosplay refers to the prevalence of cosplay engagement, especially among marginalised cohorts of women, non-binary and queer individuals, which will be further explored in Chapter 5. At present, mainstream retailers are active contributors to the industry, with most conventions in Australia—from 2019—featuring installations, booths and events sponsored by large retail outlets. These included booths from sewing machine retailer *Singer* (https://www.singer.com/), which often displayed competition-winning or otherwise notable costumes designed by Australian cosplayers. In the future, this will also include support from the Australian cinema chain, *Hoyts* (https://www.hoyts.com.au), which has recently been announced as a sponsor for the Supanova convention's new "Kids Costume Parade" (Supanova Expo Pty Ltd., 2025). Manufacturers of craft technologies and supplies have also developed products which cater to cosplay, including *Singer,* which has recently launched a specialised Cosplay Sewing Machine (Singer, 2025). Professional cosplayer Yaya Han was also the first cosplayer to produce a self-titled line of cosplay fabrics – in collaboration with *Cosplay Fabrics by Wyla* (https://wyla.com/) – which are sold exclusively online through mainstream retail outlets, like Spotlight (2020) in Australia. Cosplayers emphasised the improvements in the general accessibility of cosplay practice that resulted from broader recognition of the activity, especially by mainstream retailers. Morgan, who at the time of interview was Cosplay Content Manager for two of Australia's leading pop culture conventions – Oz Comic-Con and Supanova – explained how the increased accessibility of specialty materials has changed the cosplay convention and competition landscape in Australia:

> *"A few years ago, people were making costumes out of cardboard, you know? Scraps of fabric that they had around the house, and they were excited about it. Now you've got LED lights, blue light-reactive contacts which make your eyes glow and moving parts. I think that definitely effects the level of skill and the level of cosplay people are more likely to try".*

Kara (27), a former competitive cosplayer, also echoed the positive effects of availability in her comments on the way better access to supplies has improved the practice:

> *'It's so much easier to buy things for cosplay. It's a huge advance in such a short amount of time, because now everyone can do it – and can do it cheaply – and still look great."*

4.3 Digitising Identity and Self-Presentation

4.3.1 Performance, Identity and Personal Branding

The physical and material components of cosplay practice, which have historically contributed to the performance of identity through cosplay (Lamerichs, 2010; Rahman et al., 2015), have become entangled with analogous, digital and 'immaterial labour' practices (Negri & Hardt, 1999). Traditionally, the convention halls of gaming and pop culture events were heralded as crucial sites of performance for cosplayers. Entering a convention, cosplayers would achieve what Lamerichs (2015) called their 'moment supreme', where the final costume – and its ideation processes – are showcased through the act of publicly performing a character in costume. Anna recalled first participating in the Australian cosplay community in the early 2010s where cosplayers were less of a presence at conventions, and "*you could go to the convention and take a photo of every single cosplayer*". Compared to conventions in 2019, where – due to the sheer number of cosplayers in attendance – Anna explained, "*you can only take photos of the characters that you like or a costume that you particularly liked*". In response to increased levels of participation in the community, the results for this study found that cosplayers may use their digital presence on social media profiles to generate more engagement with – or derive further personal value from – the more performative (albeit transitory) aspects of cosplay performance. The physical acts of performing, role-playing or expressing identity through cosplay are now interconnected with digital practices that reproduce or showcase this performance in a more enduring format accessible to the global audiences of cosplay content. Perhaps unsurprisingly, digital cosplay content flourishes particularly well on platforms with affordances which favour the dissemination of visual content – with *Instagram* emerging as the preferred publishing venue (Abidin, 2016a; Leaver et al., 2020). JaclynMay_ explained this, noting: "*Instagram's my main platform; it's probably the easiest platform to work with when it comes to cosplay".* Cosplayers may even associate the establishment of a social media profile as contributing to their legitimisation as a cosplayer. Flitterpuff associates the time she "*first got Instagram*" with her claim to becoming "*properly a cosplayer"*; describing that she even has friends developed

through her cosplay activities that she refers to as her *"Instagram friends"*, adding that she knows them *"by their Instagram name first and then their real name second"*.

Cosplayers use a range of 'social media affordances' to develop their digital cosplay identity (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Among these are selecting a pseudonym, a username – often adopted across digital platforms – which many cosplayers refer to as their *cosplay name.* e.k.bolt, a hobbyist cosplayer, explained this further, adding: *"Most cosplayers use some form of a pseudonym. Very few actually use their real name when they've got their cosplay name"*. Many cosplayers who were interviewed maintained curated social media profiles dedicated to the development of an online cosplay identity, with cosplayers sharing similar approaches to digital activities as those engaged with by 'influencers' (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2017; Wellman et al., 2020) – even when they identified as hobbyists – carrying out a range of activities that amount to 'self-branding' (Li & Suh, 2017) and 'visibility labour' (Abidin, 2016b). Clarifying the development of her digital identity, Speakeasy_Mischief, explained how she reached her personal branding strategy as a cosplayer. Her first choice of cosplay name was "Little Loki Cosplay"—based on the character Loki from Marvel's *Thor* (2011)—which she found to be, understandably, limiting: *"It kind of put me in a box of mainly doing Loki cosplays"*. She continues, adding, *"people are going to say the name and assume that that's all I do"*. Having *"already gotten 700 followers"* and not wanting to "*start again afresh",* Speakeasy_Mischief opted to change her brand name to broaden her digital identity as a cosplayer: "*I'm like, well, 'Speakeasy' – that's the 1920s inspiration—and 'Mischief'—because Loki's the god of mischief"*. Cosplayers demonstrated varied approaches to developing identity on social media, though many considered it central to current practices in cosplay. Kara reflected concerns shared by other casual or hobbyist cosplayers in this study, who found this intersection between developing a digital identity as a cosplayer and personal branding to be disruptive to the enjoyment she once derived from the activity. *"I was with a bunch of people that were popular cosplayers, and we used to go out and have a lot of fun",* Kara explained, but—from her perspective—"*popularity*" in cosplay has transformed into "*whoever's got the most likes*" on social media.

Cosplayers may also use the affordances of social media platforms to limit the disclosure of their personal identity. This could relate, firstly, to the way cosplayers perceive attitudes towards cosplay among wider publics. In the Australian context, earlier research into cosplay has demonstrated that cosplayers may feel negatively stereotyped, or stigmatised against, among the general public (Norris & Bainbridge, 2009). Participants in Study 1 reflected on the persistence of social misinterpretations of cosplay, and how this continued to affect their activities. Sarah felt that "*right now*", in Australia, "*it's still much more socially acceptable for someone to be going*

to a Footy[5] *match on a Friday than going to a Con on a Friday. But it's starting to change a little bit more, as the cosplay world develops*". Michael offered his perceptions of how he felt members of the Australian public continued to react to cosplay outside of venues, like games and popular culture conventions, which have become associated with cosplay performance:

> *"I don't fit in with typical Australian guys. To me it feels normal when I'm dressed up like this, but people don't know how to react. They're like, is something wrong with you?".*

Yeetbix.Cosplay also reflected on what they saw as a perceptible difference between rural and urban attitudes towards cosplay in Victoria, a state in Australia:

> *"It is very, very low-key around here. It's a little bit of like a country town. There's not a lot around here, so, I think people don't really understand what it is. That's why, when conventions come, we go and stay in the city. So, we can get dressed and we can go straight to the convention. We don't have to sit on a train for two hours and be the only ones dressed up in cosplay".*

Platform privacy was another key issue for cosplayers, who described adopting personal strategies to manage issues relating to the dissolution of boundaries between a cosplayer's personal identity and their professional or everyday persona. This issue—termed 'context collapse'—has been identified and examined in media and cultural studies in relation to use of digital platforms. 'Context collapse' describes the dissolution of traditional, everyday boundaries (e.g. the professional networks of an individual, as opposed to one's social circles) through the proliferation of social media use (boyd & Heer, 2006; boyd, 2013; Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018). To manage this issue in her own life, Sarah explained her preference for pseudonymity through use of a "cosplay name" on social media. This was based on Sarah's desire to keep her professional online persona separate from her cosplay persona in online spaces: *"Amongst all my hobbies, my cosplay journey is sort of a real 180 back flip on what my real life is. Because of that, and because of the stigma around cosplay, I have to maintain a professional stance".* Sarah described self-moderating the process of being tagged in photos, to combat this dissolution of boundaries pervasive in social media and allow her to maintain critical distance between her personal and professional audiences online. *"All of my friends know that I don't want to get tagged"* in photos, she explained, adding that despite this: *"some have still tried".* As a result, cosplayers like Sarah perform activities that are also closely related to 'algorithmic labour' (Bucher, 2012), including having to "*adjust settings"* to ensure her *"profile doesn't pop up as tagged in something". "I have to approve everything now"*, Sarah added, relating to a setting she

[5] "Footy" is an Australian slang term which refers to the contact team sport of Australian-rules football.

adjusted that requires content which tags her to be manually reviewed instead of automatically published to her profile (which is typically the default setting on most social media platforms).

While cosplay practices have been shaped by the affordances of digital platforms and tools, these practices are not merely passive responses to technological change. As we have seen, cosplayers actively adapt and, in some cases, push the boundaries of these affordances through their use of platforms and tools. This dialogical relationship is evident in the ways cosplayers leverage streaming services, social media algorithms and subscription-based models to amplify visibility and economic opportunity. As Jenkins (2006, p. 137) notes, participatory cultures and fandoms maintain 'a give-and-take relationship with media technologies'. Taking this into account, cosplayers also demonstrate their ability to shape platforms by engaging in trends or patterns that serve to influence innovation in the digital spaces in which they operate. Cosplay demonstrates this through its migration to platforms like OnlyFans, which have adapted their features in response to an increase in sexualised, creator-driven monetisation strategies, including those popularised within cosplay (Rouse & Salter, 2021). Many cosplayers interviewed brought up the influence of professionals in the craft, including Jessica Nigri—a professional cosplayer—who, as Kara described, has a *"big presence in the cosplay community"* and *"an inspiration to some"* but who also popularised selling physical and digital prints of *"lewd"* or sexualised cosplay using crowdfunding platforms like "*Patreon"* and, later, OnlyFans. Kara continued: *"everyone sexualises everything now. So, it's all about who can look the best and the sexiest and it definitely makes it much more of a competitive space, especially online".* Kara admits, however, that she had given into the "*pressure to create based on what's popular*", explaining that she would cosplay characters who "*were a bit more revealing*" and that this would result in "*obviously more likes compared to other cosplays*" on social media. Emi.Apollo, who felt there was room to understand "*lewd cosplay as its own little area*", rather than something cosplayers universally felt pressured or drawn to do. explained further:

> "*Let's face it, sex sells, and lewd cosplays open up an area where it's not just cosplayers following you for your skills, it's also people who are interested in the art of the lewd cosplay – like Boudoir*[6] *– that sort of thing. It opens up the modelling side of things and opens up your work to a wider audience, so you can fund the hobby or career that you love*".

[6] Some cosplayers, during the interview period, used the term "*Boudoir*" to refer to photography practices that closely align with the aesthetics of 'erotic photography' (Wentland & Muise, 2010) and its focus on highlighting the sexuality or intimacy of the subject and their space, often depicting models in private settings and in lingerie or sleepwear.

General attitudes towards cosplay also reflected a general move towards improvement in societal recognition of cosplay as a more "mainstream" activity in Australia; arguably impacted by the popularity and visibility of cosplay-related content on social media. Julian, Project Manager for Australian cosplay influencer marketing agency, Digital Fox, explained the impact of cosplays visibility on digital platforms as a key factor in this transition:

> *"It's funny, because as a society, we've always loved Cosplay, but we haven't really realised it. I don't know what kid didn't have a Spiderman outfit, or a Batman outfit. If you went back some decades ago, what pop culture meant then is very different to what pop culture means today. Pop culture today is really just an extension of geek culture. The biggest YouTuber in the world got his start in gaming and does a lot of gaming content. We have the biggest movies in the world, they're all comic book movies, and Star Wars movies, so I think almost sneakily, over the past two decades, geek culture has taken the mantle of pop culture. I'd say that Cosplay, being a huge part of geek culture, is now starting to gain a lot of traction, and it's going to exponentially tune up, and become a part of everyday vernacular".*

Julian continues, "*people will know what it is" because "the internet is shouting from the rooftops*" about it. This level of visibility – impacted by the digital content produced by cosplayers as content creators – illustrates that cosplay is not a passive consumer activity but an active force in shaping both cultural norms and the infrastructures that sustain digital economies.

4.3.2 Developing and Managing Audiences on Social Media

With cosplayers regularly performing their physical costuming activities on social media profiles, and developing identities in these spaces, they may capture higher audience engagement. As a result, cosplayers can achieve minor to major levels of fame or influence through gaining an audience for their digital content. Many cosplayers who were interviewed maintained curated social media profiles dedicated to developing an online cosplay identity, with cosplayers sharing similar approaches to digital labour with those engaged with by 'influencers' (Marwick, 2015; Wellman et al., 2020). Anna attributed the growth in popularity of cosplay social media profiles as a key driving force in "*creating the professional cosplayer*". Feigning the tone of voice of someone much older for comedic effect, she added, "*Back in my day…",* before continuing, "*it was incredibly hard to become well known"* due to it feeling "*impossible to create a fanbase".* Whereas "*now",* Anna explained that she feels the benefits of cosplay's popularity and visibility on "*social media"* make it *"so easy to follow people that you like, publish your work and get eyeballs on it*". Perhaps due to the perceived 'frivolity' or 'vanity' often attributed to activities that relate to the 'influencer economies' of digital media (Abidin, 2016a, p. 2), even when levels of fame or "virality" were achieved, cosplayers were hesitant to relate success to a desired number

of followers or levels of engagement with their content. Josie commented, *"It's exciting to see growth because it's validating and nice, but I don't have follower number-based aspirations or anything".*

Cosplayers would often add qualifiers, indicating an apparent disinterest in follower counts, when communicating success in their digital content activities. BombshellxBarbie, a cosplayer looking to further professionalise her activities, explained: *"I mean, it's not a big deal. I just know that sometimes new opportunities can arise, the higher the follower count is"* adding that she is "*not one of those people that's super focused on it"* but admitting that *"if it did get higher"* she *"wouldn't be mad".* This is not to say that cosplayers were intentionally deceptive in their responses, but rather that the aforementioned issues relating to the stigmatisation of not only cosplay, but influencer culture, might have impacted the reflections of cosplayers in this study. AndyCam exhibited a similarly reserved approach to recounting an example of success by sharing a photo on Facebook, which comprised progress shots of his *Doctor Strange* (Derrickson, 2016) cosplay. For AndyCam, sharing posts on social media was less about gaining a larger audience, and more about the opportunity to showcase creative works among his wider community. The post "*apparently went viral and was shared quite a lot around the world*" through "*several thousand shares"* of his social media post, resulting in him *"getting friends messaging from different countries saying, "All my friends over here are sharing this album!*". Shortly after, he added, "*the follower count really doesn't faze me*", AndyCam explains, "*it's just awesome that so many people can be interested in it*". With rising follower numbers, some cosplayers described feeling increasing pressures to cater to their online audiences, despite their identification as hobbyists or professionalising cosplayers. Similar issues have been found in other creative industries which have undergone digital transformations, where highly laborious and emotionally intensive approaches to audience management can be described as 'relational labour' activities (Baym, 2015). TwerkinGherkin, a cosplayer with over 18k followers on *Instagram*[7], cited an increase in activities which related to a perception that increased popularity in online spaces increases the potential for the exploitation of audience-creator relationships: *"I'm happy with having followers, but the more followers I get, the more under pressure I feel to produce more content for them. Which is also why I don't really want to turn my thing into a career".*

Even in earlier stages of a cosplayer's career, Emi.Apollo explained the challenges of navigating which platform affordances are successful in generating the most audience engagement to grow audiences of any size: "*When the platforms are consistently changing, I find it's quite hard to keep track of, sometimes".* Speakeasy_Mischief echoed these concerns, explaining that part of a

[7] Follower count on *Instagram* recorded in January 2025 on Twerkin Gherkin's Instagram profile (https://www.instagram.com/TwerkinGherkin).

developing an interesting cosplay-related post, and generating engagement on social media, is "*getting the photo"*. However, she added:

> "*But the photo's not enough anymore, you've also got to come up with a caption. It gets to the point where you're sitting there, staring at the photo, going, 'I don't know what to say' – so you just end up not posting it"*.

TwerkinGherkin explained the difference between the affordances of Facebook and Instagram, and why cosplayers have increasingly favoured the Instagram platform for the purpose of generating audience engagement (despite being both owned by *Meta*):

> "*I feel like when I put something up, I want the people who follow and like my page to actually be able to see it. With Facebook, that's gradually not happening as much. It's really pushing you to pay for your own posts just for people, who are already following you, to see them. So, it just slowly died down. I mainly use Instagram now because not only does it show the people who follow you your work, but you can also use hashtags to find people easily"*.

Digital labour activities, today, occur in the aftermath of issues like GamerGate, a targeted online harassment campaign against women's participation in gaming and associated subcultures (Welsh, 2012). Cosplay, being a female-dominated space, has contended with historical over-sexualisation of representations of women in gaming spaces (Zolides, 2016; Consalvo, 2019; Cote, 2020). During our study, BombshellxBarbie explained the way this still surfaces in the cosplay community, describing community reactions to her experiences cosplaying as *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017)*:*

> *"She doesn't wear a lot of clothes and she's my favourite one to Cosplay. But she's literally just a strong independent woman who lives by truth. I don't think it's fair that people come to me being like, 'Hey, you look like a skank'. Instead of being like, 'Wow, I really loved that you were representing such a strong female character'.*

TwerkinGherkin, being a highly visible content creator, also encountered this in several ways in their everyday, digital activities:

> *"It's ridiculous. Constant dick pics as well, it's honestly disgusting. Sometimes I hate being a female cosplayer... At the end of the day, I feel like I'm putting myself on display. My body, for my craft. People will take that in whatever way they feel like but most of the time it's just baiting and unsolicited, what they feel like sending me, and it's hard"*.

Gender-based harassment emerged as a concerning thread through most interviews with cosplayers who identified as women, the scope of which was beyond what could be explored in this exploratory chapter. In Chapter 5, the results related to this critical issue are explored in greater detail through the inclusion of a book chapter—pending publication—on the topic.

4.3.3 Cosplay Photography and Social Media

With the evolution of cosplay practices, physical activities like conventions have transformed community-focused practices, like casual photography, to include socio-technical practices—for instance—archiving, uploading and sharing images online. Thinking back to her first experience cosplaying at a convention in the early 2010s, Anna recalls her experience as a member of a much smaller community of Australian cosplayers who "*all had lunch together outdoors"* and *"were all taking hilarious photos".* She remarks, *"It was a very different way of cosplaying. A more innocent time*". Although physical performances at conventions are still valuable to cosplayers, the ephemeral and transitory nature of these practices has been mediated by reimagined approaches to digital photography and archival strategies performed on social media. This may even lead cosplayers to favour photo shoots over physical conventions, as Michael explained: "*I started out doing more photo shoots than conventions really, because you just spend so much time with your outfits. You want to be flashy, and show it off somewhere, and get into it more than once a year".* Cosplayers may also engage in digital image archival practices to extend the personal value and enjoyment derived from their costume, Flitterpuff explained that she likes "*to use Instagram just like a photo album that's easier to access than a normal photo album"*, noting the efficiency of accessing a single collection of cosplay photos instead of having *"to scroll through things in [her] phone if she wanted to find a picture*".

Cosplay photography is a specialist practice that is a core component of cosplay activities, contributing to the development of identity in cosplay by providing an alternative means of performance (Langsford, 2016; Zarin, 2017). Lamerichs (2015) described cosplay as a creative practice that 'foregrounds the character' in the design process. Cosplay photography has emerged analogously as a novel genre and discipline, with a unique approach that mirrors its focus on character by combining professional lighting and framing effects with digital practices including editing 'people' alongside 'places' to situate the cosplayer in their character's context (Langford, 2016). In this way, cosplay photography combines the physical, material presence of a cosplayer with an idealised, or fantastical, identity based on a character from an existing media property. Cosplayer Emi.Apollo explained the way photographers help cosplayers demonstrate or showcase aspects of their character's identity by aesthetically making the cosplayer look the way they idealise. She described having *"specific ideas"* that she *"may not have even seen in the original content"* or in her *"references"* (i.e. reference images of the character used in the design process) that a professional cosplay photographer was able to help her realise:

> *"It's just an idea. I just imagine my character doing this, in this way, and then you can go to the photographer and be like, 'This is what I want to do'. And then, when they're like, 'Oh, that's so cool. We can do this and that'. All of a sudden, you're bouncing off each other… You find more ideas, and then you get these awesome photos. Seeing it all*

> *come together, it's just like painting – you know – when you see the finished product, and you're happy with it?"*

Cosplayers valued the ability to use digital photography to showcase their creative achievements and those of others in the community. As JaclynMay_ noted:

> "*Good photos attract more attention. I definitely enjoy looking at professional photos over selfies, because I find that you're not just showing off your art, you're showing off your photographers' art, and I think that's really important in the community*".

Other cosplayers, including Anna, identified photos as a marker of not only legitimisation, but professionalisation: "*When a cosplayer slowly becomes a professional, they would definitely be booking more photo shoots and would have better photographs*". Cosplay photographers may gain levels of expertise and recognition in the community, and at least recoup their expenses for cosplay activities. JaclynMay_ also outlined crucial digital labour activities cosplay photographers perform and how they have impacted the development of the Australian cosplay community; explaining, "*Our photographers put in so much time and effort to editing photos, taking photos and don't often get anything in return for it*". Highlighting the intermediary role of cosplay photographers in convention activities that continuously interweave offline and online processes, she explained:

> *"There's a big, dynamic type of relationship between cosplayers and photographers at Cons. A lot of the photographers, after a Con, will usually post up to Facebook, in certain groups. There are a couple of quite big cosplay groups in Australia, and they'll post entire albums of their photos from Cons. Often, people will go through and, if they know people in the photos, they'll tag them, just so that they don't have to sift through hundreds of photos to find themselves".*

As cosplay has evolved, cosplay photography and digital image editing services have grown in demand as integral aspects of cosplay activities, which has brought into question issues relating to fair compensation for this type of labour. AndyCam, who acted as Cosplay Ambassador for the Supanova convention series in 2018 and 2019, cited improvements to industry recognition for Australian cosplay photographers "Steamkittens*"*—who was also referred to by many participants in Study One as a trusted provider of professional-grade services, free-of-charge, to cosplayers attending conventions nationwide—explaining his eventual transition to the role of *"resident, main lead photographer for Supanova"* – which provided some compensation for his activities. AndyCam added:

> *"He's just the nicest guy, and he's done so much for the Cosplay Community, as well, so it's good to see him getting a bit of recognition. I mean, obviously, he's got a huge following on Facebook and things like that; 'cause his work speaks for itself. But it's nice*

that conventions are, you know, taking him around and having him as a paid photographer; just so he's not working at a loss, basically."

Cosplay-related practitioners, like photographers, have emerged as 'cultural intermediaries' in the industry (Bourdieu, 1984:1986). Cosplay photographers, including Steamkittens—as will be discussed in Chapter 7—have developed into 'cultural intermediaries', or 'contextualised market actors, by articulating and generating value around a novel, cosplay-related practice (i.e. photography) (Maguire & Matthews, 2012).

4.4 Digitising Communal Spaces

4.4.1 Digital Resources and Information Networks

Cosplayers have established extensive networks of digital resources and information-sharing processes, developed to contribute to the collaborative learning goals of cosplayers both locally and globally. The focus of content-sharing in these platforms is for the dual purpose of cosplayers keeping notes on their 'progress' towards a particular design and gaining feedback, but perhaps more significantly, to instruct and inform other cosplayers about new techniques or related insights. What has emerged from these digital networks has been identified for its pedagogical and scaffolding purposes (Matsuura & Okabe, 2015); or, as Vardell et al. (2021) found, 'information-seeking behaviour' and practices in the context of a Facebook community. Our interviews found similar information-seeking and skill-sharing practices, although this study differs in its contextualisation of how these practices have developed within the Australian cosplay community. This study also addresses broader trends in online community development and the general use of digital platforms, capturing a range of digital cosplay practices and their emergence in various contexts.

Discussing the development of information and skill-sharing practices in Australia, cosplayers like Sue and Brian from the *Awesome Oldies*—who have been cosplaying since the mid-to-late 1970s—offered their insights from the invaluable perspective of long-term engagement with the hobby. Brian explained that *"At the time, especially when we first started, it was word of mouth with your friends–"*, before Sue continued, "*–And then deeply erupt into it at conventions. You'd spend the first hour going, "How did you do that part?".* General improvements to global communication practices, developed through a range of social media and digital platforms, have allowed cosplayers to connect across cultures, backgrounds and physical locations instantaneously. Brian also suggested that it was the "*huge advantage of YouTube*" and similar internet platforms which helped evolve digital networks of cosplayers. Prior to this point, Brian described that: *"It was all what we learned by talking to local people, because that's the only ones you had contact with, right?".* Sue recounted an early cosplay experience, where her friend's husband was helping her to find the right crafting tool that she could use to *'adjust the sizing and*

have the exact same pattern' as the depicted costume. 'It ended up being a pantograph;' Sue laughed, adding *'Now it's: Here's the PDF file—just download it. We would've killed for that!"* Brian recalled*:*

> *"Back in the late '70s, early '80s, we made Star Trek uniforms, the women's ones. A friend had been to the States and had talked to one of the costumers that actually worked on the original Star Trek uniforms. They gave [Sue] a copy of the pattern".*

Whereas, "*now*", Brian continued:

> *"If I have a good idea, I can put it up online and get a message from someone in Slovenia or Brazil, saying "Oh, that's cool, how'd you do that?", and that just wasn't available before. Now there's a big online community of sharing how to do things, and tips and tricks. Posts like 'I found this really neat way to do this', that you can get from your phone, for crying out loud".*

Cosplay-related content in digital spaces has impacted the overall accessibility and popularity of the practice. When it comes to the types of digital content cosplayers favour on these platforms, informative or instructional cosplay-related materials are key. Cosplayer Michael explained this when recounting his approach to sharing cosplay-related materials online: *"I like progress shots. Finished shots look fantastic, but progress is where the fun is, when you're making it".* He continued, *"I like the idea of helping other people make stuff as well, so they can see there's different methods and techniques".* Emi.Apollo stressed how important this type of pedagogical, digital content was in introducing herself—and other cosplayers—to the practice:

> *"When I first started cosplay, it was starting to get a lot of traction on the internet. Before, it was like a big secret, and I think that's why less people got into it, because they couldn't find resources to help them out".*

Describing her information-retrieval processes, when researching and preparing to create a costume, Emi.Apollo described being able to "*just Google things like, how do I make a shirt?"* and look at how other cosplayers approach it. *"You look up the different ways people do it, look at your costume and then go, 'Okay, I can kind of see how someone would do that".* As a result, she suggested: "*Cosplay does really feel internet-based. The internet has definitely helped people realise that you don't have to be an amazing seamstress to cosplay".* AndyCam, another cosplayer, validated this notion, suggesting that digital, community-developed resources have made cosplay a more accessible physical practice:

> *"I don't want to sound like one of those "back-in-my-day" cosplayers… But cosplay really has become more accessible. Especially with the use of the internet, with the tutorials and everything else. A lot of cosplayers, now, they do have it very easy in the sense that there's so many tutorials, and how-to guides, and full instructionals".*

Information-sharing practices in cosplay communities provide opportunities for the development, refinement, or even preservation of skills related to their craft. As someone who has also witnessed over a decade of growth in the cosplay community, Anna explained the advancements in costume design that have emerged from digital information and skill-sharing networks:

> *"Most cosplayers are incredibly generous in sharing their skills. So, the more cosplayers there are, the more people there are posting tutorials, and the better everyone is getting because they're building up each other's knowledge rather than starting from zero. The costumes are just getting bigger, and better, and more amazing".*

Another purpose for the information-sharing practices of skill-related knowledge was found to be the preservation of traditional crafting methods; especially those which were not necessarily recorded on the internet. Cosplayer Michael explained how difficult it can be to source information about older crafting methods—citing the example of creating vintage boot harnesses. The internet, he feels, is a crucial space for unearthing some of the more traditional crafting practices to teach new generations of cosplayers:

> *"A lot of these skills are very hard to come by, and they are easily lost. Often, I dig them up or work them up for myself, so it really helps to get it out there so more people are able to do this. So, the knowledge isn't lost".*

There exist some minor points of contention around approaches to sharing content—particularly when it comes to compensation. Sue, from the Awesome Oldies, explained "*you'll get the odd little spider that goes, "Oh that's mine, and I'm the only one who can make it". But then someone else normally works it out and says, "Here it is for free, people!"*. Explaining further, Sue added that she is not referring to *"people who are real specialists*" and who "*have done a lot of work on designing their own stuff*". Drawing on an example of someone who has "*worked and spent thousands of hours and God knows how much money*" working out a particular cosplay design process; noting that they now sell the finished product but not the patterns. Sean notes that helping people can be difficult when it is requested because they are a very "*hands on person*" who has to "*make things to explain it*"; though he tries to help online "*from time to time*". However, he adds, "*I also get a lot of people who are trying to ask me to do stuff for free, so that's not fair"*.

4.2.2 Accuracy or Inclusivity?

An inclusive approach to welcoming "*everyone*" into cosplay is championed by many members of the community, even resulting in a colloquially developed slogan explicitly referenced by several cosplayers during the interview process, including JaclynMay_: *"Cosplay is for Everyone".* However, gatekeeping behaviours relating to race, weight, and gender have previously been identified in research into cosplay communities and the development of social identity in these spaces (Norris & Bainbridge, 2009; Crawford & Hancock, 2019; Jenkins, 2020).

Despite improvements to the accessibility and physical conditions for safety of the practice, gatekeeping in community debates persists, especially in online spaces. Flitterpuff explained the often emotional and physical toll she feels when engaging with digital cosplay content:

> *"I tend to go through lurking periods online, where I stop posting things and just enjoy what everyone else is posting, because I've tapped out of it. You know, need to recharge. And by the time I get back, everyone's ready to kind of kill each other over accuracy again, and I'm like, 'You guys, we just went through this'. It can't be that every time I take a step out of the door, everyone else is kind of going back to the mob mentality of how we do cosplay. I don't know where these rules of cosplay came from".*

JacylnMay_ echoed these sentiments, explaining that "*there's so much gatekeeping in our community and it is so unnecessary".* Continuing her thoughts, she stressed:

> *"Cosplay by definition is costume play – this is what really gets me. That's what it means. It means you dress up and play. It doesn't matter what you look like, whether you look like a character or not, whether you're big or small, it doesn't matter your weight, it doesn't matter your age – it's for everyone"*

Michael, while commending "*cosplayers who put in extra effort to make their physicality match their character*", also shared JaclynMay_'s thoughts on the matter, adding:

> *"Play is a big thing. If someone's having fun an enjoying it and wanting to be this character so badly – that's fantastic. But I've also seen people in wheelchairs, creating great costumes around their wheelchairs, turning it into this amazing thing. People on walkers and mobility scooters, anything can be part of the costume, you know? You transform your own self, which is fun when it's just playful'.*

It is interesting to note that the cosplayers interviewed reflected an overall inclusive attitude towards cosplay. Therefore, it would be interesting—in future research—to ascertain the origins of these attitudes and whether the potential for anonymity in cosplay and online spaces might further influence this.

4.4.3 Developing and Moderating Digital Communities

With the advancement of internet communication technologies, including the proliferation of social media platforms, cosplayers have established complementary, digital networks which may extend, advance or support those developed in person. One of these components is the social aspects of cosplay practice, which include a range of opportunities to practice, perform—and even give back—as a community. Flitterpuff thinks, "*A huge part of cosplay is the community itself. It wouldn't be flourishing as it is if we didn't have such a large community*". Flitterpuff mentions that there are a "*lot of events*" and "*competitions*" that they can enter, "*meet-ups every couple of months, where people come together just to wear the costumes*" and "*a lot of people*" who cosplay "*for charity*". JaclynMay_ finds, similarly, that she has met "so many different amazing and

diverse people" and that "*there are people that I'm friends with that, in my everyday walk of life, I never even thought I'd be friends with"* that she has met through cosplay. Digitally, Facebook groups are among the various types of social media groups where cosplayers might commune. In Australia, as cosplay grew in popularity, several Facebook groups emerged in the early 2010s, organised as individual, state-based groups of cosplayers. Steve became an Admin for the largest state-based Facebook group at the time, for cosplayers in Victoria, Australia.

When Steve "*jumped in*" the group "*was probably about 4,000 or so people*". By the end of 2019, they explain, the group had grown to "*about 13,000*" members. "*I think due to its size*", Steve explained, "*people just preferred to go to the bigger group*" which, they explained, also "*seemed to be a lot more active than a lot of the other state-based ones*". As a result, "*a lot of the interstate people would jump in*" and – to this day – the community continues to operate as a national space for cosplayers to commune, share and discuss cosplay-related topics. Steve's main role, as an Admin, was community engagement, explaining "*I kind of jumped in to help keep people interacting*" and to "*keep conversations going*". They also described their techniques for improving interaction in digital spaces, especially "*with the questions that aren't easy to Google*". Steve explains, "*A lot of posts were people asking questions like, "Where can I buy this?"*", which required more of a "*copy-paste*" response where they would provide lists of resources. Whereas, as they explained: *"If someone goes: I've tried this and this, what would you suggest I do to finish this in a certain way? I might look it up and go: Maybe try this technique on your sewing machine, or use this pattern, or something like that".*

Community management and moderation were found to be another core component of facilitating digital community spaces for cosplayers. The 'relational' labour of content moderators has been studied in similar online communities related to videogames (Kerr, 2016). Talking with Steve, about their time as a Facebook Admin for an Australian cosplay group, they mentioned an issue with recurring instances of people *"itching for a fight*" in the community, to the point where they had to set up a separate "*Cosplay Debates*" group to direct these individuals to. Steve explained that this allowed their team of moderators the ability to easily tell arguing community members to "*take it over to Debates*". The moderation approach of their group, having dealt with ongoing issues relating to racism and political disagreements, was to delete offending comments – especially those containing hate speech – because, as Steve describes, "*being completely racist or discriminatory against someone in the community is just not okay*". Otherwise, Steve continued, they are "*locking comments*" and "*going to let it sink away*" – as if effectively silencing the communication. Steve explained that the moderation team still wrangle with negative online behaviours and interactions, noting that *"it's a lot nicer nowadays"* but that *"ages ago, it was a lot more lawless".* He offered the example of a post made in their cosplay group at the time of

our interview in 2020: "*People were suggesting someone should cosplay as these characters in Jojo Rabbit*" or "*The Producers*". Noting that the context of these types of provocative posts is often a poorly veiled attempt at neo-fascist commentary, they add: "*They are literally suggesting just walking down the street in SS uniforms? No, not a good idea*".

Further discussing the issue of negative inter-personal communication in digital cosplay community spaces with BombshellxBarbie and TwerkinGherkin, BombshellxBarbie commented: *"I think we get more of the negativity from just random people that we've never met. People that have seen pictures of our cosplay and then want to go into cosplay groups and comment on our pictures*". "*People that don't really know much about us"*, TwerkinGherkin added. BombshellxBarbie finished their thought: "*People that don't really know much about us, or what we're doing, they will go on other online forums, and say a lot of shitty things, and most of the time, we just ignore it. But sometimes it can get a little bit draining".* JaclynMay_ shared a similar sentiment, also citing external actors as potential sources of poor behaviour in cosplay communities: "*I think social media is where all the negativity comes into it… Many people on the outside of the community, who don't understand the community*". Neo-fascist and otherwise hateful rhetoric have long been accused of infiltrating anonymous online forums like 4Chan (Tuters & Hagen, 2020; Faramelli & Piper, 2022). Although this specific line of inquiry is outside the scope of this chapter, the controversial relationship between cosplay content, anonymous online forums and trolling or neo-fascist behaviour warrants further investigation in future research.

4.5 Digitising Monetisation and Professionalisation Strategies

4.5.1 Defining Professionalisation in the Australian cosplay industry

The digitisation of different elements of cosplay has established a range of opportunities for professionalising or monetising the practice. These can be facilitated by conventions (for example—booth workers, ambassadors, and sponsored cosplayers); or by media companies (events, hosting, sponsorships) and through agencies. Cosplayer Anna commented on how it can be challenging to determine at what stage professionalisation begins in the industry, "*It's tricky because it depends how you define success"*. Anna explained further, adding that professionalisation for cosplayers can mean anything from "*doing particularly well in competitions*" to cosplayers "*doing particularly well at building up their social online following*, *getting big by creating products and selling them*", or doing "*photoshoots to generate attention*". Though, she continues, "*you know you're big when overseas conventions start inviting you to be a special guest*". Morgan (Cosplay Content Manager, Reed Exhibitions), having been privy to the hiring of international guests for cosplay conventions in Australia (namely, PAX Aus and Oz Comic-Con), detailed the selection process as starting with a cosplayer's digital presence: *"I think*

the first thing they look at is generally your social media following So, combined between Instagram and Facebook and other platforms, how many people are watching what you do?".

However, Morgan also explained that the number of followers—or audience members—that a cosplayer may have is not the sole determinant of whether they will be invited to a Con:

> *"If you want to be a guest at Comic Con, but you only have 6,000 followers... they don't just examine people going, "oh, they shouldn't go to Comic Con", comparing them to someone with 600,000. On top of that, they also check for "What are your skill sets?", "What are you bringing to us specifically?". So, a lot of our guests will do workshops on how to make a prop, or they will judge my competitions, or they will do other things. Yaya Han always specifically comes and provides a lot of advertising for Spotlight, who is one of our major sponsors. So then, it's like, "Oh yes, of course we want Yaya Han".*

Cosplayers, from the convention's perspective, may be considered for their instrumentality in increasing profits for stakeholders and owners—or, as Morgan suggested, cosplayers should consider:

> *"What do you bring to the table first? Can you judge, can you do media interviews, can you spend a lot of time in front of a camera? Can you speak fluently while you're doing it? It's not just "I want to be a guest", when it comes to hiring".*

Morgan also explained that the conventions' approach to remuneration for international cosplay guests is contractual, with some room for negotiation:

> *"We don't say, 'We're going to pay you this amount'. We have to negotiate. We'll pay for your flights, we'll pay you an appearance fee"* but she notes, *"it's different for every person, based on how many followers they have, how far they have to travel, all those different things".*

Due to the variety of pathways emerging for cosplayers to monetise activities related to cosplay, there are varying approaches to defining professionalisation that exist between the cosplay community and the gaming and pop culture convention industries. Morgan (Cosplay Content Creator, Reed Exhibitions) mentioned that at PAX Aus, they "*did a panel talking about cosplay as a profession".* Among the featured guests were Hench and Scrap—an award-winning cosplay duo who have made 'cosplay, props, trophies and influencer giveaways' for 'some of the biggest names in gaming' and operate a 'full size fabrication workshop'—featuring embroidery mill—in Adelaide, South Australia (Hench & Scrap, n.d.). Morgan explains, "*Before [Hench] became a cosplayer, she worked in props in the film industry. She actually worked on Lord of the Rings!*[8]".

[8] (Jackson, 2001)

Morgan summarised the panel discussion, explaining that their approach was to communicate that "*Cosplay is fun and it's great; and if you want to take it more seriously, here's how you do it—but it's not specifically a profession. Which, at the time, it wasn't*". Morgan explained that she found it important to give perspective on the nature of the industry, which she feels is difficult to succeed in when you approach it as wanting to perform the act of cosplaying—specifically—as a professional:

> *"We were giving them the different perspective of; you're not going to put a costume on and get paid to do it. You have to be doing this and get a job. That might be making the costume for somebody. It might be making tutorials on how to make that costume and selling those. Or, you can be wearing the costume, but at that point you are a model and an influencer for that brand; and that's what you're getting paid for, not to put the costume on".*

Cosplayers framed professionalisation activities in a similar manner, reflecting realistic methods for applying skills related to their hobby that may not necessarily equate being paid to *'putting the costume on'*, as Morgan mentions. For JaclynMay_, professionalising her hobby has taken her down the avenue of digital content creation, explaining, "*Three or four years ago when I started doing this, if I thought I'd be going to events, and reporting, and working as a media person, I would've been like, oh, you're dreaming".* At the time of interview, she was doing "*freelance editorial work with Supanova*", content production for New-Zealand based cosplay magazine, *Con Artist* and "*reporting on cosplay events for the Pixel Pop Network*". Her job responsibilities at the time included covering cosplay at key conventions like PAX Aus, or corporate events in the gaming industry, including "*World of Warcraft*[9] *launches*" and a *"Bethesda party*" for the "*anniversary celebration of Elder Scrolls*[10]"; none of which she felt she would have engaged with if she had not pursued hobbyist cosplay.

4.5.2 Cosplay and Digital Influencer Marketing

Professionalising in cosplay—particularly through the pathway of social media—shares many similarities with the career trajectories of influencers and digital content creators. Cosplayer Harley highlighted that Instagram was central to her professionalisation efforts, due to the way its affordances favour personal branding activities:

> "*You can build a brand with Instagram in cosplay. It takes a lot of networking. The cosplay community is kind of an arms race. I guess it's like being an actual person, you*

[9] (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004)

[10] (Bethesda Game Studios, 1994–2016)

> *have to figure out what kind of brand you want to go for and then work out how you're going to do it*".

Approaches to maintaining a following on social media have become more complex for emerging or professionalising cosplayers. Cosplayer Speakeasy_Mischief had "*loose goals of getting enough followers to become an influencer*", but notes she has "*realised how much effort that's going to take*", in terms of "*keeping up*" her online presence, finding if she "*hasn't posted in a while",* her past experience has been that *"followers have given up and gone somewhere else*". Harley was one cosplayer among many who identified changes to algorithms on social media as part of what makes growing an audience challenging, explaining that because "*the algorithm changes so much, it's incredibly difficult to figure out what does and doesn't work*". Established cosplay influencers like TwerkinGherkin also felt that the introduction of crowd-funding platforms and subscription services to a cosplayer's activities would result in them having to engage in labour-intensive digital professionalisation practices:

> *"I've noticed a lot of cosplayers are going onto Patreon, which is a monthly subscription service, where you produce content and people pay for it. But I just don't feel like that's something I'd be wanting to do. As it turns your hobby into more of a career, and people are depending on you to produce more. But I don't want that stress".*

As a mediator between cosplayers and potential hirers, influencer agencies have stepped in to represent cosplayers. When conducting our interviews in 2019, *Digital Fox,* which was operating as *Digital Fox Media* at the time, was a content influencer agency that gained traction in the cosplay community. There were several participants who had acknowledged working with the agency around the time of our interviews. During this period, Project Manager of *Digital Fox Media*, Julian Newman, also agreed to an interview. Julian explained the company's purpose behind engaging with cosplayers, as an influencer talent agency:

> *"A practice we found quite common was that Cosplayers, who had spent years building their audience on Instagram, Facebook and YouTube, were being asked by big agencies – not naming names – but also distributors, and production companies, to essentially promote their films and games in exchange for a free ticket to a movie. We noticed that was a trend, and my business partner, Tom and I, very strongly believe in fair pay for young people. We don't believe in free work. So, fair payment, in a movie ticket, for a social post, and what a lot of people would call quote/unquote, "opportunity", to grow exposure. We saw that as borderline exploitation".*

From this basis, Julian explains, *Digital Fox* began working to *"win campaigns",* from a sales and marketing perspective, and to *"pay the influencers fairer compensation".* At the time of interviews, two other cosplayers had—coincidentally—signed up to *Digital Fox's* services,

emerging with mixed experiences with the company's strategic approach. The effectiveness of influencer marketing agencies, instead, appears to depend mainly on the intention of the cosplayer signing up to the service. Cosplayer Harley mentioned working with *Digital Fox*, confirming, "*They heavily push that if you're doing work for someone, you have to get paid. Then, if they don't work out an agreement with that person directly, you have to run it by us, and we'll negotiate on your behalf*". Speakeasy_Mischief contributed a personal experience with *Marvel Entertainment*, and her experience with Digital Fox acting as advocate on behalf of the cosplayers they represented:

> "*There was a big event that Marvel wanted to do, when they changed the name from Etihad Stadium to Marvel Stadium*[11]*. They wanted a whole heap of cosplayers to be at the stadium, all day—to do this poster thing—and they weren't going to pay anyone before Digital Fox stepped in*".

However, a tiered approach to accessing more premium services may also complicate the effectiveness of influencer agency services, for some cosplayers. A challenge, for both cosplayers and agencies, can be seen where cosplayers—even those who appear successful, or have a high number of followers on social media—may not be intentionally professionalising. When it came to engaging with Digital Fox, Harley found that "*it didn't work out"* with the agency. Harley considered that it was "*probably a combination*" of things that contributed to her not continuing to get work with the agency, including the fact that—in her opinion—her: "*follower count wasn't particularly high"* and that she *"wasn't particularly engaging with people".* Remarking how on how she felt Digital Fox perceived her, Harley pretends to evaluate herself from their perspective: *"They kind of come to the events, a lot of the time, but their follower count's low, it's probably not worth it".* However, adding to this, she admits that her lack of intention to professionalise may have resulted in fewer work opportunities:

> *"They had two streams. One is: "I want to do this for a living, and I want to become an influencer"; and the other track is: "I'm just doing it for fun". So, I would guess that the priority would go to people who are actively working on their brand? No hard feelings—I mean, it's a business—but if you ask me, I wouldn't have classified it as kind of a Mentor/Mentee structure.*

Even though, as Harley assessed, *Digital Fox* were "very focused on building a brand", and not necessarily in alignment with her personal values and hobbyist approach to cosplay, she added:

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[11] In Melbourne, Australia, the formerly titled entertainment arena, Etihad Stadium was purchased by Marvel entertainment and rebranded to Marvel Stadium in 2018 (Fox Koob, 2018).

> *"It's just one of those things. I have no issues with them, I enjoyed working with them and would work with them again".*

Speakeasy_Mischief, whom *Digital Fox* also represented at the time, explained her position in a —purportedly—tiered structure within the agency:

> *"At the moment, I'm just on the bottom level. I'm on the page, I see the posts, and I can specifically message individual people, at that level. Then there's another one where I think the contract is a little bit tighter, but it means that they're picked first for all the paid gigs. And they're supposed to be getting the majority of the work. Although, I've spoken to someone who's in that top tier; and she's done like, one thing? And she's been in it for a year, at that top tier level, so she's considering that it's not really worth it*".

Digital Fox is still in operation and continues to offer services to the "geek media space", as *Digital Fox Talent*. Most recently, they have been posting promotional video content targeted to different influencers. This can be seen in a recent video titled, '*Toy Influencers*' on their YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/c/digitalfox), which tailors an explanation of their service offerings to the toy and influencer industries. In future research, the developing relationship between cosplayers and digital talent agencies appears to be fertile ground for further assessing the evolution of monetisation practices – and related, emergent business spaces – in cosplay.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter presents the results of the first study, which examined the materialities, identities and practices that emerged from the digitisation and monetisation of cosplay practice in Australia. The results demonstrate the impacts of digital tools, technologies and related skill sets on the evolution of Australian cosplay: from hobbyist 'community of practitioners' (Crawford & Hancock, 2019); to viable economic activity within the games and popular culture industries. By focusing on the perspectives of cosplayers engaging in these practices, this study has analysed the current landscape for Australian cosplay from "the ground up". These critical insights informed the analysis provided in this chapter, which focused on how Australian cosplayers combine physical and digital skills, interweaving them in a complementary manner, and transforming cultural activities into professionalised—sometimes monetisable—creative labour practices. Firstly, the results described technological advancements in the cosplay crafting and design space, examining the impact of digital design tools and software on the creative processes involved in creating cosplay attire, props and other artefacts. Then, exploring how digital sales platforms have improved access to traditionally hard-to-acquire, specialised cosplay products and supplies, and next, examining the physical, performative spaces of cosplay—especially games and popular culture conventions—concerning how social media platforms have impacted them. After which, cosplay communities were analysed in relation to information sharing—and related skill-sharing practices—on digital platforms. These discussions also demonstrated the moderation practices of

administrators of cosplay groups on social media. Finally, the chapter explored the monetisation and related labour practices that have emerged from this creative and economic space, where cosplayers incorporate a range of skills to practice, including leveraging the strength of their digital presence, to advance the professionalisation of the practice.

Chapter 5 • Digitising Cosplay Culture: Overcoming Barriers to Cosplayer Participation in the Gaming Industry

In the following chapter, I present the second part of the findings from Study 1 of this project, which analysed the digital transformation of cultural practices in the emergent cosplay industry in Australia. These results focus specifically on barriers to cosplay participation in the gaming industry, which impacted the enjoyment of cosplayers who identified as women in this study. These findings are presented in the following manuscript, which has been accepted for publication as a book chapter in *The Post-Gamer Turn*, an edited collection of academic essays, to be published by *MIT Press* (USA) in 2025. The volume's editors include Dr. Mahli Ann Butt (The University of Melbourne, Australia), Dr. Amanda Cote (The University of Oregon, USA), Dr. Emil Hammar (University of Tampere/ University of Tromsø, Finland) and Dr. Cody Majeur (The University of Buffalo, USA). The proposed book chapter is included verbatim, in its current state, which precedes a final edit of the full manuscript of the completed book by the publishers. I led the research design and execution of the project and received input from co-author Dr. Lucy Sparrow from The University of Melbourne (as declared in the preface to this thesis).

5.1 Introduction and contribution to existing literature

During the first stage of the interview process, a series of critical issues emerged from the explorations into the digital evolution of cosplay practices in Australia, which was introduced in the previous chapter. Cosplay, in its transition from hobbyist community to emergent economic industry, was inevitably found to be colliding with issues related to conduct and misconduct in spaces for cosplay practice. These initial findings revealed a need for reflection on existing behavioural policies in spaces where cosplayers congregate, and that further efforts were required to improve safety standards in performance spaces and environments for hobbyists and professional cosplayers. Primarily, this was found to be due to cosplay's relationship as a form of play historically dominated by women (Lamerichs, 2010) in the troubled context of videogame fandoms and communities. Female gamers being labelled as 'fake gamer girls' (or 'fake geek girls') is what Cole & Grogan (2018) describe as an 'issue in the community' surrounding videogames, where 'female gamers are forced to prove their gaming credentials to be accepted into a traditionally masculine community'. Ongoing cultural issues with hypermasculinity and the sexualisation of women in gaming and related spaces culminated in *Gamergate*: a targeted harassment campaign against women in gaming that reached notoriety in 2014 (Quinn, 2017). Though there have been many papers exploring the issue of Gamergate in the context of women's participation in gaming spaces, the clear connections between cosplay, the conceptualisation of fake gamer girls, and Gamergate itself, has yet to be explored in the context of academic research

into cosplay. This was especially surprising to find, when what many cite as one of the incendiary incidents that led up to Gamergate was comic artist Tony Harris' viral social media post about cosplayers being 'fake geek girls' (Welsh, 2013). The results of this chapter explore this critical opportunity for further research into the relationship between cosplay and the notion of a "fake gamer girl" (Welsh, 2013; Cole & Grogan 2018). The title for the book chapter is a playful suggestion for reclaiming the term, inspired by the feminist movement of the 'riot grrrls' in the traditionally, similarly hyper-masculine, cultural context of punk music (Tolikonnikova, 2020).

5.2 Summary of findings

The findings situated female cosplayers in spaces of practice where they have been hegemonically othered and marginalised. Cosplayers in this study frequently interacted with gaming communities and many cosplayers even identified as gamers themselves. Despite this, we spoke to cosplayers who shared experiences that reflect the persistence of misogynistic attitudes in gaming and pop-culture related spaces of practice, where women continue to be simultaneously othered and fetishized. These attitudes also underlie pertinent issues relating to harassment and how some members of gaming and pop culture fan publics misinterpreted consent in their interactions with cosplayers. In the face of these challenges, cosplayers – the titular "*gamer grrrls*" of this publication – are engaging in quiet modes of resistance, continuing to practice while working on primarily community-driven responses to gender-based discrimination and harassment. Cosplayers echo the do-it-yourself approaches of feminist movements like 'riot grrrls' (Tolikonnikova, 2020) and 'craftivists' (Greer, 2011; Clarke, 2016), while supporting one another in ways that reflect an overall ethics of care (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Tronto, 1998; Keller & Kittay, 2017) approach to respond to the issues that complicate the enjoyment of their artform.

5.3 Contributions to Thesis

In Study 1, issues relating to gatekeeping and harassment emerged – and was highlighted especially in Section 4.2.2 – which briefly introduced the emergence of gatekeeping and harassment in online spaces for cosplay practice. As mentioned in this section, the sheer volume of reported instances of gender-based discrimination and related behavioural issues in the community indicated that a dedicated analysis into the persistence of barriers to industry participation for female cosplayers in offline and online spaces was a necessary component of this overall thesis. These findings were analysed in a second, separate, thematic analysis of related data found in Study 1, and resulted in the development of the following manuscript, which was produced in the format of a book chapter for publication in the aforementioned book collection, *The Post Gamer Turn*, pending final publication.

5.4 Full chapter manuscript for publication: *gamer grrrls: Reclaiming Feminine Gamer Identities through Cosplay*

Madeleine Antonellos
The University of Melbourne, Australia

Lucy Sparrow
The University of Melbourne, Australia

Introduction

The *riot grrrl* movement emerged, shouting, through a male-dominated punk music scene in the early '90s. Feminist activists congregated in Washington creating bands and writing zines with messages as defiant and loud as their music. Feeling excluded from their own scene, *riot grrrls* would operate by their own 'Manifesto' in creating their art. Why were they doing this?

> 'BECAUSE doing/reading/seeing/hearing cool things that validate and challenge us can help us gain the strength and sense of community that we need in order to figure out how bullshit like racism, able-bodyism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-semitism and heterosexism figures in our own lives' (Hanna, 1991).

Today, echoes of the *riot grrrl* creed can be found in acts like Russian performance art and protest group Pussy Riot, whose brand of punk feminism 'means systematically changing the image of yourself, being elusive' and 'sabotaging cultural and political codes' (Tolokonnikova, 2018). Where art and feminist politics collide, women creators have historically breached male-dominated cultural and political spaces. For Pussy Riot's founder, Nadya Tolokonnikova (2018), the addition of a bright colored balaclava allowed her to 'feel a little bit like a superhero' who is 'brave' enough to enact positive change.

Watching a female-presenting cosplayer approach the site of a gaming-related convention conjures similar notions. "Cosplay" is a portmanteau of "costume" and "play," coined by film director Takahashi Nobuyuki in the 1960s when he needed a new term to describe the fan costuming practices that were emerging from science-fiction, *anime* and *manga* conventions in Japan (Ashcraft & Plunkett, 2014). Cosplayers have long-since practiced in the margins of the hegemonically male-dominated space of gaming and related fandoms. Layered in cloth, wigs, make-up and props, women dodge gazes and unwanted grasps to reach the convention venue. Dressed as their favorite character, the cosplayer enters with the armor of a full costume into a long day of (typically unpaid) performance of their fandom for a particular game, anime, film or television series and environments that are still learning how to safely include them.

In this chapter, we explore how women in cosplay are combatting a range of socio-cultural challenges to navigate a space that both invites and others them for participating. In doing so, we hope to point to the ways cosplayers – as communities of practice – exist as embodied challenges to misconceptions and the marginalization of female gamer identities. Drawing on twenty-four interviews with cosplayers and marketing professionals in the gaming and pop culture industries, we look into the ways the historical context of fetishization and sexualization of women in gaming – while working towards brighter futures – impacts women practicing cosplay today.

We will draw on instances and explanations of gender-based discrimination brought forward by cosplayers themselves, and we reflect on institutional responses. Finally, we explore the ways cosplayers respond to these issues through alternative methods of protest that have ties to feminist and intersectional approaches like the ethics of care and craftivism.

Background

> *'What the hell is cosplay, and how is it different from just putting on a costume? The answer seems tricky; but in my opinion, it's only tricky if you're thinking of cosplay as a hobby. It's not. Cosplay is expansive. It's a bona fide art form, and an inclusive one'* (Savage, 2022).

Cosplay's foundations were established by small communities of fans of video games, comic books, and science-fiction, connecting through shared interests and a passion for putting together costumes that replicated, or reimagined, artifacts and identities from their favorite media. Over time, the activities of highly localized groups of practitioners evolved into a digitally-connected, 'billion-dollar' global industry (Tango et al., 2022). Though some cosplayers may buy their costumes, many create their own designs. To craft a cosplay outfit can be a complex interplay between the use of traditional craft skills, like hand-sewing or sculpting, and modern technologies like 3D printing. This is often layered with make-up, wigs, and props that contribute to a detailed process of representing a character which, in the case of video games, anime, or comic characters, may not even present with a physically realistic human body.

Prior research into cosplay has analyzed the practice as a means for expressing personal or gender identity from a range of cultural, gender, and media studies perspectives. Nicolle Lamerichs (2013, 2014; 2018) has extensively explored the complex, highly 'embodied,' and 'transmedial' sense of identity that can be found in a cosplayer performing their craft as individual, fan, and consumer. Cosplay has also been explored as a vehicle for subverting and "playing" with normative ideals around gender and identity. This includes "crossplay", dressing as a character with a different gender to what you identify as in your everyday life (Hjorth, 2009; Leng, 2013; Nichols, 2019), and performances of 'queer sexuality' (Jacobs, 2013).

While cosplay can be an emancipatory space for many, for women in the space, there is also a disturbing undercurrent of historical connections to harassment, misogyny, and rape culture (Zarin, 2017; Lucas, 2018; Wrona, 2018). Selling hypersexualized cosplay imagery on digital platforms has been explored as a potentially exploitative means of earning income on the one hand, and as an empowering means of exploring feminine gender identities on the other (Rouse and Salter, 2021; Thomas-Parr, 2021). Though these initial research foundations are promising, there is a stark need for further, ongoing investigations in this space. Despite cosplay's deep ties to gender-based issues in the industry, including the prolonged and targeted harassment campaign against women in gaming known as Gamergate – 'a culture war between men who identified as "gamers" and the women who they viewed as fake' (Garcia, 2018) – limited research has engaged with cosplay as central to its investigations in wider gaming publics.

Cosplay, Gamergate and #fakegamergirls

In 2012, comic book illustrator Tony Harris drew cosplayers into public debate surrounding the authenticity of their fan practices in an 'unhinged' social media post (Hern, 2012). Shared on his public Facebook account, Harris accused women cosplayers of not actually reading the comics their costumes and props were inspired by:

> I appreciate a pretty Gal as much as the next Hetero Male… but dammit, dammit, dammit I am so sick and tired of the whole COSPLAY-Chiks. I know a few who are actually pretty cool-and BIG Shocker, love and read Comics.So as in all things, they are the exception to the rule. Heres the statement I wanna make, based on THE RULE: "Hey! Quasi-Pretty-NOT-Hot-Girl, you are more pathetic than the REAL Nerds, who YOU secretly think are REALLY PATHETIC.

Though the height of the Gamergate scandal is typically placed at around 2014, Harris' comments are often cited as the incendiary moment that triggered the highly publicized scandal that followed and caused the *fake gamer girl* meme to go viral (Welsh, 2013). The *fake gamer girl* identity stems from a 'prototypical standard on what does not make someone a gamer and how women in the gaming community are portrayed' (Winters & Williams, 2018). The imagery surrounding the *fake gamer girl* often involves markers of 'gaming cultural capital' improperly used due to deficiency of her knowledge of what she is wearing (e.g., a bright-pink, gaming branded headset left unplugged) (Consalvo, 2019). She is depicted as a heteronormatively attractive, often white, woman posing in vaguely – or outwardly – sexualized ways[2] with signifiers of membership to the gaming fandom that they supposedly do not really use.

Vossen (2018) termed these types of exclusionary, and 'othering' practices a general 'cultural inaccessibility' that holds 'women back from full participation in games culture'. As women increasingly claim agency over their representation and inclusion in gaming spaces, they are met with a hostile response from proponents of the hypermasculinity historically prevalent in the community (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). By simply continuing to participate within the gaming community, female gamers 'act to transgress their traditionally coded roles and interests' (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). Cosplayers, as we argue, are proud "transgressors" in the female gaming community, engaging in hegemonically feminine practices of craft, make up, or costuming to perform their fandom and increasing the visibility of women in gaming spaces. For women in cosplay – as found in the female gaming community at large (Ibid.) – these hostile reactions might even become 'desirable,' as markers of their rejection of sexist perceptions of their practice.

Crafting quiet resistance

After the highly publicized issue of Gamergate placed women in an uncomfortable position – their very existence within the gaming community being called into question – acts of protest and resistance have continued in quieter incarnations. In our discussions with cosplayers, we found that many participants displayed an approach that can be analyzed comparatively with feminist approaches to ethical issues, including an 'ethics of care' perspective (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Tronto, 1998), and the practices of craftivism (Greer, 2011; Clarke, 2016). Carol Gilligan (1982) first devised a framework which foregrounds the value of care, and caregiving – which have been historically relegated to the realm of 'women's work' – in response to ethical issues. Care, as expanded upon by Fisher and Tronto (1990) is, rather:

> *'a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web'* (p. 2).

In our interviews with cosplayers, we found many instances of caring which follow Fisher & and Tronto's (1990) 'four phases of care', namely: caring about, caring for, caregiving and care

receiving. Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to perform a comprehensive and focused analysis of cosplay from an ethics of care approach, we found a salient example in the behavior of cosplayers who costume themselves as Disney princesses. Cosplayers demonstrate an 'attentiveness' in 'caring about' other people in the community, when faced with potential ethical challenges; for instance, when observing that a child is unattended at a convention (Tronto, 1998, p. 16). Many participants cited the inherent responsibility they feel towards a lost child when dressed as a character designed for children's entertainment and thus displayed a sense of 'caring for' the child. Caregiving is then conducted when the cosplayer helps the child locate their parent before they are – hopefully – found and care receiving occurs for the child. This is an unpaid and unincentivized activity that those cosplaying as Disney princesses reported as a regular occurrence due to children seeking out a familiar character for help in chaotic convention environments. In this chapter, we will see this type of care emerge from a range of responses to ethical issues in the community where, for example, buddy systems are developed to combat threats of harassment.

Similarly, the 'craftivist' movement, originally coined by Betsy Greer (2011), focused on 'crafty activism' which promotes 'express[ing] your feelings in a visual manner without yelling or placard waving' and 'challenging that anger in a productive way'. We will see this exemplified, later in this chapter, in cosplayers who choose to dress as "strong" or "powerful" female characters – hoping to embody the values of the characters they select to empower other women. In saying this, it is important to note that this approach to feminist activism can be viewed as exclusionary due to an implied distaste for anger in protest spaces. This, of course, holds 'the potential to erase past protests' – including the loud, bold cries of the *riot grrrls* – which is not the intention of drawing craftivism into our discussions in this chapter (Clarke, 2016). Instead, we support the underlying message that creative expressions of activism are not a zero-sum game but rather include a range of artistic responses to socio-political issues. The artistic, craft-based elements of cosplay—and their persistence in a hypermasculine gaming space that can be volatile to their inclusion—demonstrates that 'representing passion in alternative ways has the potential to revalue such craft work and our historical relationship to things' by 'drawing attention to the persistence of feminist ideas over time and disrupting normative expectations of protest and protestors' (Clarke, 2016).

Moreover, research into alternative means of protest while navigating gaming spaces have also explored the way people have learned to 'cope' – sometimes, by '(not) coping.' Instead, they learn to negotiate responses to the 'increased normalization of sexism, racism, and homophobia across the new gaming public' by selectively engaging with or avoiding toxic elements in the space (Butt, 2021). In online multiplayer gaming, women have had to adapt to the volatility of such spaces – which can be rife with harassment – by engaging in behaviors like avoidance of strangers and 'gender camouflage', which involves 'carefully managing avatar attributes and the use of voice chat so that other players do not recognize one's offline gender identity' (Cote, 2016, p. 145). Traces of these modes of response, as we will explore, can be found in the way cosplayers have developed alternative approaches to responding to issues around sexism which, perhaps, have not changed as much as they have evolved and mutated into new, insidious forms of exclusion.

Methods

Our discussion in this chapter draws from interviews conducted with 24 participants in the Australian cosplay community from 4 June 2019 to 13 October 2019. After the study received

ethics approval, most potential participants were identified and recruited via their publicly available social media profiles, either by email or direct message on their social media profile page. Some participants were recruited and interviewed at public gaming and pop culture conventions, including Supanova, OzComicCon, PAX Aus, and Madfest (now Crunchyroll Expo). All participants were from different states across Australia (Victoria–13, Queensland–6, New South Wales–2, South Australia–2, Western Australia–1). Ages ranged from 21–56 and participants identified as Female–14, Male–8, and Non-Binary–2. Two participants were industry leaders, while 19 were cosplayers, including casual cosplayers, emerging cosplayers, and professional cosplayers.[3] The Instagram pages of cosplayers studied ranged from private accounts with 100 followers, to aspirational or professional influencer accounts with up to 34,000 followers.

From these interviews we generated a set of key themes capturing the values, tensions, and experiences of participants through reflexive thematic analysis of the interview transcripts (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). This is a flexible method that is well suited to the constructivist approach that this study adopts. The authors coded the data across several sessions. At each meeting, the coders collaboratively analyzed and discussed the data in depth. This informed the creation, application, and refinement of the codes until all the relevant themes were identified and organized to the satisfaction of the researchers. In keeping with a pure qualitative strategy (Patton, 1990) under a constructivist paradigm, the goal here was not to seek agreement or inter-rater reliability, but rather to 'eventually yield concepts and themes (recurrent topics or meanings that represent a phenomena)' (see McDonald et al. 2019, p. 14), namely the experiences and perspectives of those in the cosplay community in relation to our focus on women's participation in gaming and pop culture-related spaces.

5.3 Results and Discussion

"Girls to the front!": Finding empowerment in cosplay

Kathleen Hanna's shout, "Girls to the front!," is a saying that has come to represent an entire movement (Wickman, 2019). The *riot grrrl* plea resounded in audiences where women like her had traditionally always been – literally and figuratively – sidelined by men. Though on a comparatively quieter front, women cosplayers today are navigating spaces of practice where they have been hegemonically othered and marginalized. Cosplayers engage in different modes of performance, including modeling their crafts at physical sites like gaming and pop culture conventions, or by sharing digital content on social media. In both spaces, cosplayers frequently interact with gaming communities; many cosplayers even identify as gamers themselves. Despite this, we spoke to cosplayers who shared experiences that reflect the persistence of hypermasculine attitudes in gaming and pop-culture related spaces of practice, where women continue to be simultaneously othered and fetishized. These attitudes also underlie pertinent issues relating to harassment and how some members of gaming and pop culture fan publics misinterpret consent in their interactions with cosplayers. In the face of these challenges, cosplayers – the titular "gamer grrrls" – are engaging in quiet modes of resistance. Continuing to practice while working on primarily community-driven responses to gender-based discrimination and harassment, cosplayers echo the do-it-yourself approaches of feminist movements like *riot grrrls* and craftivists, while supporting one another in ways that reflect an overall ethics of care approach in response to the issues that complicate the enjoyment of their artform.

Sexualization, Monetization and #fakegamergirls

"Booth babes" and convention codes

In gaming, women have continued to encounter marginalization due to an extensive history of industry and community-level fetishization and othering of female sexuality. In video game properties themselves, female-presenting characters have been traditionally hypersexualized in their representation (Dietz, 1998; Cote, 2018). This is a practice that some have called cosplayers into question for – presenting themselves as 'forbidden fruit' in the way they physically represent characters that individuals admire and thus are responsible for 'tempting' a public portrayed as incapable of resisting them (Wrona, 2018). Yet gaming companies have long used women as hired models to promote products, extending the hypersexualized representation of women in games to physical reality.

Just like women in other traditionally hypermasculine spaces, like those of car enthusiasts, women in gaming have been constantly used as physical mannequins. This is typified in the practice of "Booth Babes," the employment of often scantily clad models to promote sales of video games and products at gaming conventions (Taylor et. al., 2009). In place of women from modeling agencies, cosplayers have been more frequently hired for similar promotional activities and at conventions, which can disproportionately favor the interests of commercial entities (Rouse & Salter, 2021). *"We don't use the term 'Booth Babes'"*, says Aurora[4] – former manager in the cosplay space for one of Australia's largest gaming and comic book conventions – *"but that's kind of what it is… you're hiring someone to stand at your booth, in a specific outfit, to bring more people in".* This perspective calls into question how dissimilar the two practices might actually be and the way conventions continue to approach women in the space.

Though conventions have seemingly increased regulatory practices, a similar undercurrent plays into the introduction of codes of communication to indicate to convention staff that a particular situation needs to be addressed. As Aurora explains, *"They do have weird codes. You have, you know, your Lost Children Codes and everything and we do have a Lewd Code".* The "Lewd Code" indicates that someone is breaching the dress code: *"It's simple things like put tights on under those costumes or wear a jacket."* In convention spaces, a tension emerges between the commodification of sexuality, through practices like "Booth Babes," and the regulation of it. Rules regarding sexualized attire might not be as effectual as they seem, with Aurora reflecting upon how staff may even exploit breaches of these codes of behavior:

> *"It's definitely the one that all the staff seem to jump on to grab. You say, "We have an inappropriately dressed woman on the scene", and there's at least four staff who will go "Oh, we'll check it out". But I'm like, "Will you, though?".*

"Lewds", agency and monetization

When it comes to practicing cosplayers, the sentiments are far more nuanced and varied. Sue (22) highlights the mostly positive attitudes towards fellow cosplayers embarking on projects that may involve more revealing costumes, which some cosplayers have termed 'lewd' cosplay (Rouse & Salter, 2021). '*Lewd is such an unusual term'*, Sue notes. Due to the inherent sexualization of women in gaming spaces, potential misunderstandings and misuse around the term is clear to her: '*I've done costumes where I've been in a bunny suit, or where I've had tops that are a bit lower cut, and then people go "Oh, that's lewd!". And I'm like, "But is it? There are a lot of characters that have that kind of element to them. Why be afraid to step into that part of a character?"'*. This approach to sexualization has also led cosplayers to reclaim agency through collecting profits for

practices relating to the commodification of their own bodies. Working alongside an industry that has profited from their bodies for decades, some cosplayers now sell their own "lewd" content in digital spaces. Natasha (31) feels that *'if you're comfortable in your own skin and you want to show off your body, go for it. I know a couple of girls who make good bank doing it'.*

At the same time, monetizing one's own sexuality through cosplay is a complex matter, which might perpetuate pressures to produce "lewd" content to increase profitability. Rouse and Salter (2021) found that 'the rhetoric of empowerment often associated with cosplay falters in the face of the economic realities of how cosplay and fan labor are exploited'. Poppy (30) reflected on this in our discussions:

> *It's interesting how a lot of the cosplayers, even in Australia, are starting to get to the point where they realize they can make a certain amount of money by actually doing what they are doing… making replica costumes and imitating who they wanted to be … it gets to a threshold where they realize – if I also do a sexy version of this, I'm actually going to get a couple more hundred bucks this month, or a couple more thousand bucks this month*.

Other cosplayers like Maya (22) resent the notion that sexualized cosplay is *'not real cosplay'*, revealing yet another layer to the matter couched firmly in the rhetoric of Gamergate. *'Honestly, I get messages on my page being like, "Oh my god, I love your cosplays, I'm so glad that you don't just do naked shit like all the other female cosplayers. I'm like, 'That's not a compliment. But thank you'".* This comment points to a potential undercurrent of misogyny in the community, where cosplayers are to be praised for not meeting the false narrative of the "fake gamer girl" who weaponizes her sexuality as we saw in Harris' (2012) social media rant.

Beyond #fakegamergirls

From the moment Tony Harris criticized women cosplayers for weaponizing their sexuality and faking their "geek" or "gamer" status in the community to attract the attention of men, cosplayers were brought into the debate surrounding the campaign of organized online attacks that comprised Gamergate (Welsh, 2013; Quinn, 2017). Talking with cosplaying couple James and Holly, it is clear that the explosion of this modern meme is rooted in an accusation that has followed women for some time. *'In the early days,'* James (56) shared, '*there have been some people, we tend to call them "neckbeards", you know? They say you're a fake fan, you're just here for attention or whatever.'* Holly, laughing, adds: *'Well, it was either that, or, "A girl! What do I do?"'.*

However, the *"early days"* may be less distant than they initially seem, especially in online spaces. For Emma (27), who was in the community during the Gamergate controversy, being a cosplayer was particularly challenging during this period: *'cosplayers were always getting posted about on 4Chan'* and *'people were horrible'*. Prior research has also identified anonymous imageboard website 4Chan as a frequent space for harassment against cosplayers, with the cosplay board being one of the oldest on the site, and boards like 'Terrible Cosplays' posting images of specific cosplayers that attracted often misogynistic and hateful rhetoric about the individuals targeted (Lucas, 2018). Even younger cosplayers like Maya and Namora (22), who are comparatively newer to the community, were still experiencing negative online interactions:

> Maya: *I think we get more of the negativity from just random people that we've never met. People that have seen pictures of our cosplay, and then want to go*

> *into cosplay groups and comment on our pictures; and will go on other online forums, and say a lot of shit'*
>
> Namora: *Cosplaying is like high school'*
>
> Maya: *Yep, that's it. You've got to have thick skin, I think.'*

Though participants often shared sentiments about the space getting better for women, remnants of these attitudes still echoed throughout explanation of their encounters with the community. Natasha recalled an experience when she was at a gaming convention watching a trailer for an upcoming *Spiderman* video game. When she commented that she was *'really excited'* for the game, she notes, *'some guy in front of me turned around and was like "I bet you don't even know any Spiderman comics"'.* Beyond unwarranted assumptions about a stranger's knowledge, Holly brought up a potentially serious consequence of misinterpreting the intentions of cosplayers: '*A lot of people, especially young guys, tend to misinterpret "girl in skimpy costume" for "easy"'.* This attitude becomes particularly problematic when idealistic objectification evolves into physical interactions that misinterpret or outwardly violate standards for consent between individuals.

Harassment and Consent

A crucial tension raised by cosplayers was the various ways in which they have experienced the erasure or obfuscation of personal boundaries in shared, public cosplay spaces. Prior research has called attention to the prevalence of harassment in cosplay communities (Zarin, 2017; Lucas, 2018; Wrona 2018), though further exploration into the ongoing nature of these behaviors is essential to better protect women cosplaying at gaming-related events. Experiences with physical and/or sexual harassment while cosplaying was a worrying and prevalent trend that emerged from our study and reflects a clear ethical issue in cosplay spaces. Violations range in severity, occurring amidst confusion and ambiguity surrounding audience interactions between cosplayers as fans and cosplayers as performers (who form a part of the paid entertainment experience of these spaces). Emma recalls a behavior she remembers as '*glomping*', where *'instead of asking for permission for a photo'* with a cosplayer '*you literally just jump on them*'. Mona detailed a similar practice:

> *People think they can treat me a bit like a doll… they don't give me warning or anything, they'll just kind of run up and pick me up, like, "Oh, look! It's Rapunzel!"… Unfortunately, it happens mostly when I'm at a Con by myself, so there's no one immediately there to help me… if I scream at them to put me down, they kind of think it's part of [my cosplay]. And I'm like, "Yeah, no it's not… put me down. I'm a random member of the public, please don't pick me up".*

Maya recalls a time when a fellow convention attendee asked for a photo with her, enquiring: *'Can I choke you in the picture?'* Though it was a strange request, Maya felt it was easier to deal with and refuse due to the directness of the question from the person who asked. For many cosplayers we talked to, including Maya, consent was a crucial part of comfortable and respectful interactions with the public.

Despite the recurrence of these types of behaviors in our data, many of our participants mentioned the introduction of a slogan, "Cosplay is Not Consent" which has become emblematic of what

Selina (32) describes as a "no tolerance" rule towards inappropriately touching a cosplayer in the convention space:

> *I think it's Supanova that does a lot of work with the "Cosplay is Not Consent" thing. They have signs up all around the Cons saying, "If you see cosplayers, treat them like human beings. If you want a photo, you have to ask. Please don't touch costumes unless you ask." So, it's education. It's getting out there a bit more.*

Mona was less convinced by the efficacy of such measures: *'There are regulations in place. Like, the "Cosplay is Not Consent" thing, but no one listens to that'.* Mona's worst interactions are typically with *'the members of the public who've come to the con like you're part of the attraction'.* This misinterpretation of consent and harassment can also extend into the digital spaces that cosplayers practice in. Jade (22) sometimes '*hate[s] being a female cosplayer'* due to behaviors she refers to as *'baiting and unsolicited'*, including *'constant dick pics'* being sent to her Instagram account. Maya recalls a similar type of interaction:

> *I had a guy message me about my Dorothy costume, and he's like, "Oh, I'd love to be your Tin Man." I was like, "Oh cool." I go, "What convention you going to, let's meet up?" and he says, "Oh no, no, I didn't mean it that way." Then a few months later, he messaged me a picture of his penis. And was like, "This is for you, my little Dorothy." I'm like, "Get out".*

As Zarin (2017, 9) and other researchers who investigate cosplay content have contended, issues pertaining to consent and harassment are an ongoing problem that needs to be addressed. We join this call for further investigations into protective measures against harassment for all members of cosplay communities.

Community Responses to Gender-based Discrimination

Traces of different feminist strategies for resistance and protest against the Gamers – who, as we have seen, simultaneously marginalize and hypersexualize women's participation in gaming cultures – can be found in the ways cosplayers respond to this tentative environment in their practice. Though efforts have been made to regulate instances of harassment in formalized codes and guidelines at events[12], many cosplayers reflected on the importance of having a companion when attending; or, as Peggy mentioned: *'I'd say friends are definitely a big help.'* Namora and Maya, who met through cosplay, developed a buddy system for dealing with instances of harassment. Maya reflected:

> *I can kind of see when, if Namora is struggling, I always make it known to go over there, and kind of rescue her from that situation. I think that's why it's really good to cosplay with friends sometimes. Because I know, if someone was to hug me too tight, or if someone was to say something kind of degrading to me, or kind of touch me inappropriately, I know that I'm okay to be like "Okay, don't" – but lots of female cosplayers are scared to do that.*

[12] Oz Comic Con. (2023). "Cosplay Props and Behaviour Policy". https://ozcomiccon.com/cosplay/policies/prop-policy/

These types of protective responses to fellow cosplayers reflect an underlying value system which prioritizes an 'ethics of care' approach to such matters (Tronto, 1998). In the cosplay community, protection over younger people at events also governs reactions to these behaviors; sometimes even transcending prescriptive gender-based boundaries persisting in wider gaming publics. James quips: *'I have an awful lot of nieces I've never met*', continuing: *'If I see a guy harassing a girl, I'm like, what did you just say to my niece? And they tend to back off'*. Holly added, referring to herself and her partner, *"We're sort of like cosplay mum and dad"*.

Other cosplayers also expressed hope that more women will feel empowered to support one another and to look out for themselves without having to rely on the good will of community members like James and Holly who are sadly not present in all cosplay environments. As Namora suggests, *'there's nothing wrong with standing up for yourself'*. She hopes that younger cosplayers will see people like Namora and Maya *'cosplaying and standing up for themselves'* and that they will *'learn that exact same trait'*. Some cosplayers feel supported enough to continue engaging with their practice, and in some cases even feel empowered enough to defend themselves against unwanted behaviors; others, however, understandably feel safer avoiding environments that make themselves vulnerable.

As Mahli-Ann Butt (2021) explores through the politics of coping with toxicity in gaming spaces, the negotiations that gamers make in order to engage with their hobbies can be varied, including strategies that range from the choice of games and related media they consume, to the games they play and the way they express their fan identity. These complex engagements with the space were also reflected in the way cosplayers like Ivy (26) negotiate feminist participation in the hobby:

> *Sometimes I get this dilemma, when I'm part of it, and I'm walking around in it... I'm like, what am I supporting now? Like, who am I in this? You just want to feel a little bit pretty and do something that makes you feel happy without it being completely like, "I'm politically standing for this, and this, and this. I can be a feminist, too and want to play a character from a game where you can see her vag the entire time".*

For some cosplayers, these tensions can result in further marginalization and displacement from gaming spaces. Cole and Grogan (2018) highlighted this 'general trend for female gamers to withdraw from mainstream game consumption and the gaming community as a result of misogynist gaming environments'. Some cosplayers expressed similar intentions. Namora, who has dealt with the effects of the *fake gamer girl* narrative in her practice, explains:

> *A lot of male gamers feel they can kind of quiz you, and be like "Oh, do you really know who you are cosplaying?". That's why I've just tried to stay away from game cosplays. The few times that I have cosplayed as characters from games I've had a lot of, especially guys, being like, "Oh, do you really know this character? Hashtag fake gamer girl!", so I tend to stay away from it.*

Similarly, Harley (28) feels that she has *"skirted [around] most of the issues by predominantly cosplaying as men"*. Offering another, more direct, method of avoiding the matter, Harley continues, grinning: *'Then, when I am dressed up as a woman, I'm generally covered head to toe in fake blood. So I don't tend to get bothered'*. This response to harassment in cosplay spaces can also be seen as, perhaps, the physical incarnation of the types of 'gender camoflaging' Amanda Cote (2016, pp. 144–146) identified in online multiplayer gaming spaces. Cote (2016, pp. 144–

146) found that female players would disguise their gender by leaning towards gender-neutral usernames or avatar attributes, evading anything which could be perceived as 'overtly-feminine', as well as engaging in practices like not using a microphone; all to avoid becoming targets of online harassment. Cosplaying, then, as men or "covered head to toe in fake blood" can be seen as a similar technique for avoiding harassment in physical gaming community spaces.

Cosplayers also engage with a range of quiet modes of creative expression, as reflected in analogous acts of feminist protest in craftivism (Greer, 2011; Clarke, 2016). There were cosplayers who also reflected on their desire to express a level of feminist agency through their approach to their own cosplay and empowerment. For Selina, she *'loves'* to cosplay as *'strong female characters'*. She explained, '*One of my all-time favorites is Xena, Warrior Princess... she is such a strong, sexy, intelligent female lead'.* Maya furthers this idea, explaining her approach to empowering herself and other women through creating her cosplay outfits:

> *I like to use my cosplay to pay homage to really strong female characters that I find are very empowering. I just like to use them to empower myself and other women around me… my goal is to keep learning new skills—bettering my sewing, building and crafting—but also just continuing to empower other cosplay women, or even young girls, that I meet at conventions through the female characters that I cosplay.*

5.4 Conclusion

With it now being a decade since *Gamergate,* 'the post-Gamer turn' heralded by Butt (2022, p. 51) looks towards a future of improved diversity and inclusion for those who will choose to identify as gamers or players. Still, as we have explored, issues relating to the historical hypersexualization and marginalization of women in gaming spaces have by no means dissipated, and cosplayers are continuing to encounter harassment and breaches of consent in their everyday practice. Combining craft, community support, and care, cosplayers engage in quiet acts of protest in an attempt to renegotiate and reclaim feminine gaming identities. However, it is imperative that research continues to analyze the way these acts can be better supported by institutional practices, and to raise awareness of how women express their identities as gamers. There is room for *riot grrrls,* just as there is for *craftivists*. With further inquiries from academic and industry perspectives, we might, then, invite the next generation of "gamer grrrls" into safer, more inclusive gaming spaces.

Endnotes

[1] It is important to note, from the outset, that our definition of women in this paper includes trans-women and non-binary individuals and encourages an intersectional and inclusive approach to feminism (Kirkland, 2019).

[2] An example of hypersexualized elements used in digital representations of the *fake gamer girl* are *ahegao* poses, intended to imitate a woman in orgasm (Thomas-Parr, 2021).

[3] 'Casual Cosplayers' include people who participate in cosplay primarily as a hobby and are not seeking to professionalize; 'Emerging Cosplayers' include cosplayers who are seeking to professionalize; and 'Professional Cosplayers' are those who have reached a position of professional recognition and have a large social media following. Finally, 'Industry Leaders' were participants working in positions of corporate influence in Australian cosplay and convention spaces.

[4] All participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity; Aurora's age has also been omitted upon request.

Chapter 6 • Defining Digital Labour and Skillsets in Cosplay

In Chapter 4, the results of Study One were discussed, highlighting the role of digitisation in the transition of cosplay from a hobbyist, craft-based, cultural activity to a monetisable creative practice. In line with this broader trajectory towards professionalisation, the analysis focused on cosplayers in Australia and how they have increasingly integrated use of technologies, digital platforms and monetisation strategies in their practices. Chapter 5, then, comprised a book chapter, pending publication, '*gamer grrrls*: Reclaiming Feminine Gamer Identities through Cosplay'. In this chapter, the discussions highlight a concerning pattern—relating to equitable and safe practices for female-presenting cosplayers—that was identified during the data collection and analysis conducted for Study One. These included qualitative and ethnographic methods for data collection, as well as thematic analysis techniques, as presented in Chapter 3 (Sections 3.1 and 3.2). During the interview period of Study One, Australian cosplayers shared experiences with gender-based discrimination, harassment and objectification in their interactions with—both offline and online—fan communities associated with games and popular culture. In the following chapter, the findings of Study Two—a quantitative survey of cosplayers in Australia—will be presented and discussed. This project was designed primarily to clarify further the types of digital activities that cosplayers demonstrated engagement with in the Study One results, so that they could be analysed in relation to existing media and cultural studies frameworks for digital labour and skill sets.

6.1 Introduction

To extrapolate, and further analyse, the broader applicability of the qualitative findings of Study One, Study Two used quantitative research methods to produce an online questionairre, as described in Sections 3.3 and 3.4. The approach to survey design was based on the second research question (**RQ2**) for this thesis: *How do Australian cosplayers use digital labour and skillsets to practice and monetise their craft?* Study 2 was also designed in response to calls in prior cosplay research for a more substantive exploration of the digital practices of cosplayers across a range of platforms (Seregina & Weijo, 2017; Rouse & Salter, 2021; Lamerichs, 2021). To date, a comprehensive account of cross-platform digital cosplay labour has yet to be developed in the literature. To address this call for further research, this chapter presents the results of a quantitative online survey of 271 cosplayers (Appendix II), which was designed to provide insight into the broader patterns observed in the digital practices of cosplayers in Australia. The initial results of Study 2 demonstrated that cosplayers reported high levels of engagement with a range of activities on digital platforms. Overall, this served to validate further the proliferation of digital technology use and its increased role in cosplay practices, as initially found in Study 1. As indicated in the

results of Study 1, the survey results for Study 2 (Appendix II) similarly established that Instagram was the most frequently used platform among cosplayers, further demonstrating the centrality of Instagram in the overall digital landscape used by cosplayers. On a general level, this survey found that cosplayers tend to operate in similar networks that utilise a range of digital platforms. However, as described in Chapter 3, Section 3.4, the aim was also to try and distinguish the practices of cosplayers who identified as casual enthusiasts or hobbyists from those who wanted to professionalise their practices. Thus, the self-reported levels of practice were calculated—namely, "Hobbyist" or "Professionalising" Cosplayers—and then cross-tabulated with the survey results that related to the digital practices of cosplayers in either category. When analysing the results of what activities were deemed most important to cosplayers, there were unanticipated levels of similarity between the digital practices of Hobbyist and Professionalising cosplayers. Overall, the findings in this chapter indicate that cosplayers at both levels engaged in shared approaches to digital activities, which ultimately blur the lines between cosplay as leisure and labour.

These practices will be contextualised within relevant interdisciplinary frameworks for categorising and interpreting novel forms of digital labour and related skillsets. Relevant interpretations of digital labour—from research into analoguous creative industries—are used to frame discussions surrounding the types of activities cosplayers reported engagement with on digital platforms. These concepts include self-branding strategies (Li & Suh, 2017); 'influencer commerce' and 'visibility labour' (Abidin, 2016–2017); 'emotional' or 'affective' labour (Negri & Hardt, 1999; Oksala, 2016); 'relational labour' (Baym, 2015; Kerr, 2016) and even 'sexualised labour' practices (Tiidenberg & Cruz, 2015; Rouse & Salter, 2021). With the majority of cosplayers surveyed indicating that they identified as hobbyists, the discussions in this chapter consider the implications of increased use of digital activities on digital platforms—which govern, regulate and shape the behaviours of users through 'complex affordances' and infrastructures that feature both human and non-human (algorithmic) agents (Sharma et al., 2016; Bucher, 2012; Bucher & Halmond, 2018). This is especially problematic, as digital platforms have increasingly integrated features that focus on monetisation and other mechanisms to support the commercial interests of a range of corporations, politicians or private individuals through advertising. With the majority of cosplay labourers identifying as hobbyists, as found in this survey, the discussions will highlight the potential for cosplayers to be implicated in the more exploitative practices that have emerged from research into digital economies and labour. The discussions will also address the potential for structural hierarchies and inequalities to emerge in cosplay communities, as very few cosplayers reported being able to sustain themselves financially through their activities alone. Following this, the potential for the professionalisation of digital labour practices among cosplayers will be briefly discussed in relation to the legitimisation of related skillsets through

international and local cultural policies and frameworks. Finally, the chapter closes the discussions by presenting the perspectives of cosplayers, in Australia, on the digitisation and professionalisation of cosplay, which indicated the importance of the role of cosplay-related industries and digital platforms in providing features to support content moderation and safety.

6.2 Demographics

The results of this survey found that cosplayers in Australia predominately identify as women, but that a diverse cohort of individuals also contribute to the space – including representation of other underrepresented and marginalised individuals who identified as non-binary, or with other gender identities across the LGBTQIA+ spectrum (Figure 10).

6.2.1 Age

Cosplayers were asked to select their age range from a set of categories recommended by the Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] (2020). As shown in Figure 8, the age range of the cosplayers surveyed was 18–62, with 66% of cosplayers (N = 271) selecting an age range between 18 and 27. Although the results also demonstrated higher levels of engagement among individuals in relatively younger cohorts, 4% of cosplayers, aged between 48 and 62, also participated in the survey.

6.2.2 Location

The cosplayers surveyed were all located in Australia, as demonstrated in Figure 9. Most cosplayers (N=271) were located in the most heavily populated Australian capital cities, namely Victoria (VIC) (33%), New South Wales (NSW) (23%) and Queensland (QLD) (21%) (Figure 9). While the survey received responses from cosplayers in six of the seven Australian states and territories, no respondents were located in the Northern Territory (NT). The researcher would like to note that future work might engage more directly with individuals living in the NT, with a focus on the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals in the area might engage with cosplay. The Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] (2021) reported that—even though most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders live in Australia's capital cities—'over one quarter (26.3%) of the Northern Territory's population' identified as 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander'; which is a proportion of the population that was 'much higher' than any of the other states and territories that were surveyed; which is why I note that the lack of representation of people from the NT is something that should be addressed in future surveys (ABS, 2021). Our survey did not collect data on race, so overall participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals has not been measured. Due to this, the researcher believes that future work should engage with the important contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals in the Australian cosplay community—namely, Ciernan Muir, a Yorta Yorta and Ngarrindjeri man who has established a cosplay organisation focused on creating 'a space' for 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander Creativity' and to celebrate Indigenous Australian creators who are 'doing amazing stuff in the pop culture world' (Muir, n. d.).

Figure 8

Age range of cosplayers

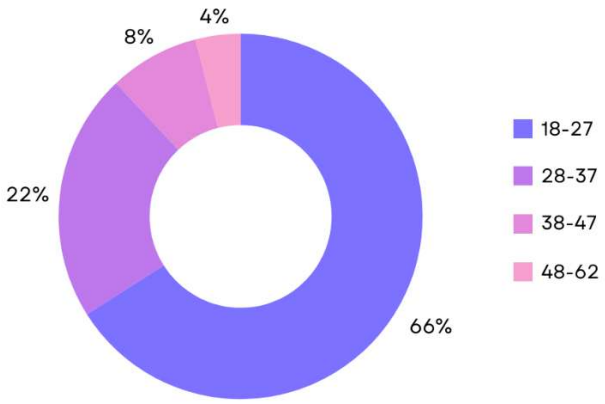
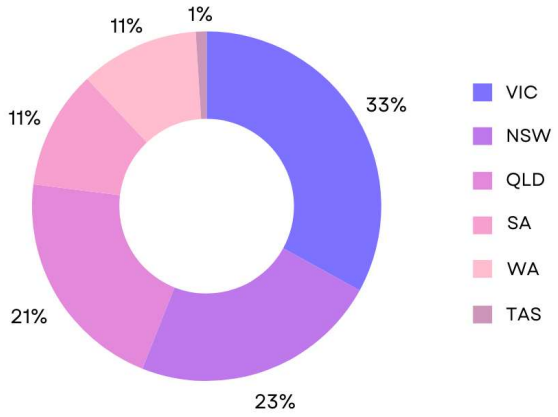


Figure 9

Location of cosplayers by state and territory (Australia)



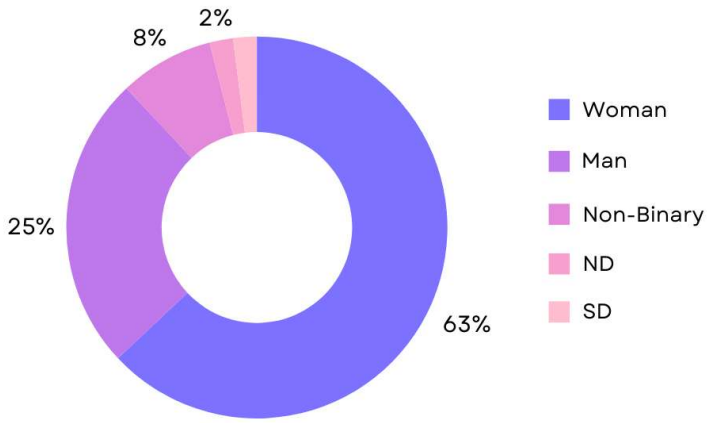
6.2.3 Gender

Participants were asked to select their gender identity from a series of options developed using Spiel et. al.'s (2019) suggestions for improving questions on gender in HCI surveys. With this method, we were able to ascertain that most cosplayers surveyed (N=271) were women (66%), which aligns with Lamerichs' (2014) findings that cosplay is a 'type of play that flourishes particularly well among female audiences' (p. 3). As presented in Figure 10, 10% of individuals also identified as non-binary (8%) or chose to self-describe their gender (2%). For those who chose to self-describe (2%), a blank text box would appear in the survey, allowing the cosplayer

to identify their gender in their own terms. Participants who selected this option entered the following: 'Trans-Man', 'Intersex (Female)', 'Female bordering non-binary', 'Genderfluid', and 'Genderqueer woman'. These findings are also in line with previous research, which has found that cosplay audiences comprise individuals who identify with and engage in diverse expressions of gender and sexuality (Hjorth, 2009; Leng, 2013; Nichols, 2019).

Figure 10

Gender Identities of Cosplayers



6.2.4 Income

As part of a set of introductory and background questions, cosplayers were asked to describe whether cosplay was a 'main source of income', an 'important supplement to their main source of income' (shortened to "supplementary income"), a 'minor source of income' ("minor income"), or not a source of income ("no income"). As shown in Figure 11, for the vast majority of cosplayers, cosplay-related activities are not a source of remuneration (73%), and just 1% of cosplayers surveyed were able to support themselves with cosplay.

6.2.5 Social Media Influencer Status

Using a social media influencer scale, deployed in influencer studies in both the media and marketing fields, cosplayers were asked to select from a series of categories based on the number of followers they had on their cosplay-related social media page(s) (Alessani & Goretz, 2019, p. 252):

1. 'Mega influencer': Has follower numbers from the 'seven-digit range' (i.e. over 1,000,001 followers)
2. 'Macro influencer': Has follower numbers in the 'six and seven-digit range' (i.e. 100,001-1,000,000 followers)

3. 'Micro-influencer': Has follower numbers in the 'four or five-digit range' (i.e. 1,001-10,000 followers)
4. 'Nano influencer': Has 'maximum follower number of 1,000'
5. Not an influencer: Does not use social media as an influencer.

As demonstrated in Figure 12, most cosplayers surveyed selected either the nano influencer (38%) or micro influencer (28%) category (Figure 12). Thirty-eight percent of cosplayers also reported that they do not use social media as an influencer.

Figure 11

Income from cosplay activities

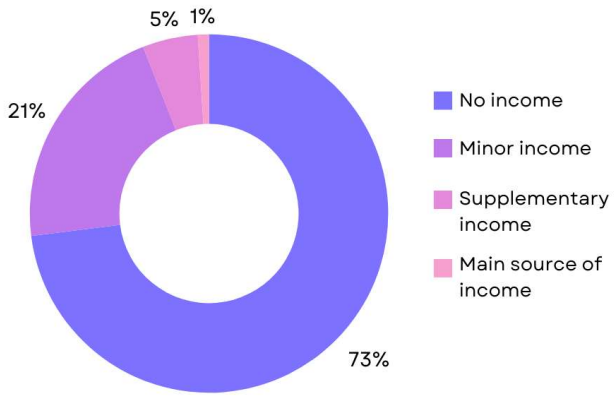
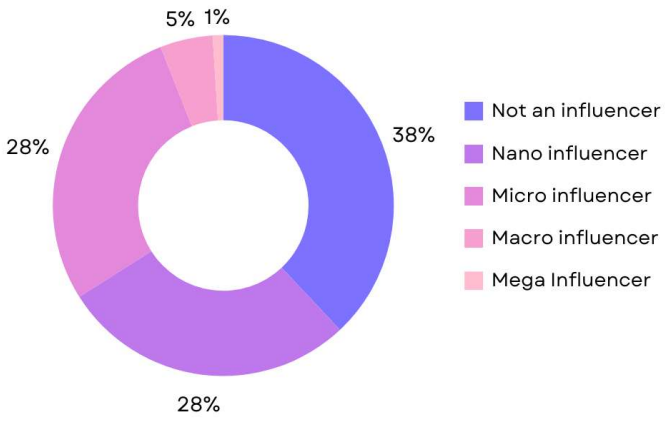


Figure 12

Cosplay influencer status



6.3 Digital Platform Use and Cosplay

In a series of closed-ended questions, participants were asked: *How often do you use the following social media platforms in your cosplay activities?* Alongside this question, a range of options for

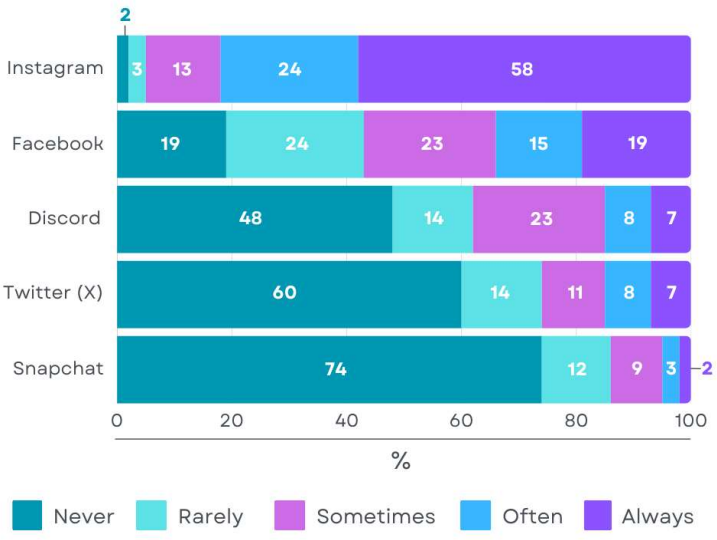
digital platforms were provided. To prevent survey fatigue, platforms were divided into sub-categories, covering: general social media and messaging; live-streaming and video-sharing; and crowdfunding and subscription-based platforms. Within each sub-category, cosplayers were instructed to select one option on a Likert scale to represent the frequency of their use of the platform being considered, from 1) Never to 5) Always. When comparing the results provided by hobbyist and professional cosplayers, no statistically significant difference was found between the groups in relation to their social media platform preferences or the frequency with which they are used. Instead, we found that hobbyist and professionalising cosplayers gravitate towards shared preferences for a range of digital platforms, to engage with different aspects of their cosplay-related activities. Thus, the results for most frequently used platforms are presented below for all cosplayers surveyed, without differentiation between hobbyists and professionals.

Instagram was the most frequently used platform for cosplayers to engage in cosplay-related activities. However, other platforms would also emerge as significant for cosplayers, dependent on the type of platform being considered.

6.2.1 General social media and messaging platforms. Instagram stood out as the most frequently used general social media platform for cosplay-related activities with 58% of cosplayers 'always' using the platform, and 23% using it 'often' (Figure 13). Facebook, *Discord* (https://www.discord.com), X (formerly Twitter) and *Snapchat* (https://www.snapchat.com) were the following four most frequently used platforms in this category (Figure 13).

Figure 13

General social media and messaging platforms used by cosplayers by frequency (%)

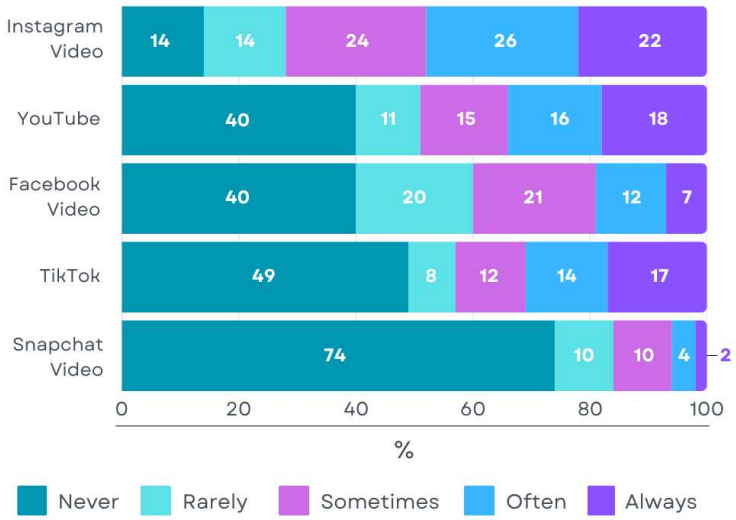


6.2.2 Live-streaming and video-sharing platforms. These platforms include dedicated video content sharing and streaming platforms like YouTube and TikTok, as well as the video

content sharing features provided by major social media platforms including Instagram (e.g. streaming video content via *Stories or IGTV*); *X* (e.g. posting or sharing videos on one's profile) and Snapchat (e.g. live-streaming and Stories features). Instagram's video features were, again, the most frequently used with 23% of cosplayers selecting that they 'always' used the platform and 26% that they 'often' used the platform (Figure 14). YouTube and TikTok followed slightly behind, with 18% of cosplayers 'always' using YouTube and 17% of cosplayers 'always' using TikTok.

Figure 14

Live-streaming and video-sharing platforms ranked by frequency of use (%)

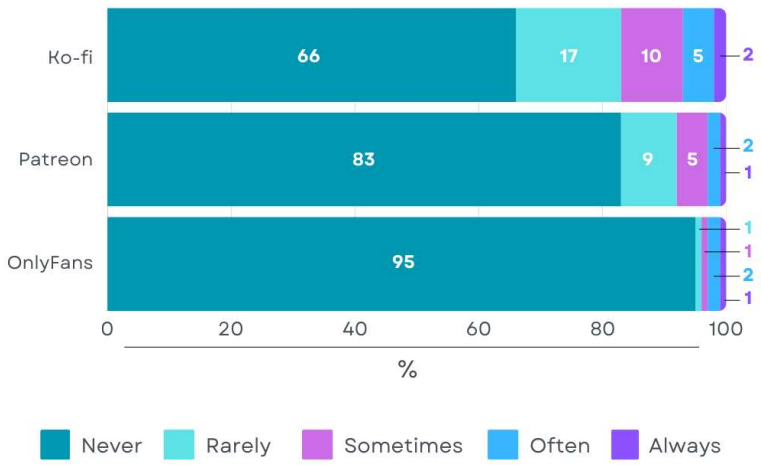


6.2.3 Crowdfunding and subscription-based platforms. The platforms in this category were less frequently used overall. For those who did use these types of platforms—as shown in Figure 15—the most frequently used were, firstly, *Ko-Fi* (https://ko-fi.com), a platform which allows users to donate directly to a creator or subscribe to an ongoing paid membership with them. Second, subscription-based platforms Patreon, which provides memberships for creators—often in tiered pricing schemes. Then, finally, OnlyFans—a members-only digital platform which primarily houses adult content. Overall, cosplayers—with varying degrees of frequency—utilise a range of general social media and messaging platforms, live-streaming and video-sharing services, as well as subscription-based digital platforms for cosplay-related activities. Instagram emerged as the most frequently, and widely, used platform overall. In line with their primary affordances, other platforms which emerged as more widely used were highly dependent on category. When it came to live-streaming and video-sharing, cosplayers were also using the platforms YouTube and TikTok, alongside Instagram's video features, which are similarly globally significant platforms in this space. The use of crowdfunding and subscription-based

services, most significantly – Ko-Fi, Patreon, and OnlyFans – were used relatively less frequently to other social media platforms. As we will see, this is perhaps best understood in relation to the way cosplayers frame their activities within strategies based on leisure-based or career-focused goals.

Figure 15

Crowdfunding and subscription platforms ranked by frequency of use (%)



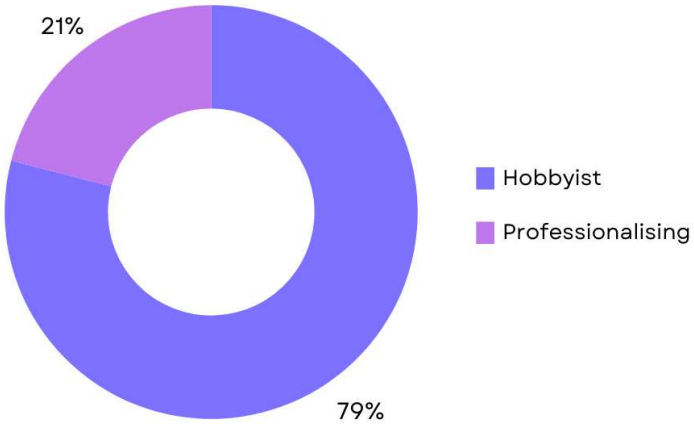
6.4 Cosplay Activities on Digital Platforms

As detailed in Section 3.4, it was determined that more complex data analysis may emerge by cross-tabulating a key variable – namely, the self-reported "Cosplay Level" of participants – with a range of variables relating to levels of engagement with digital activities and skills. The purpose of these cross-tabulations was to produce results that may help to identify or distinguish the types of cosplay activities engaged with by casual and hobbyist cosplayers as opposed to cosplayers who identify as professional or are otherwise pursuing career-based objectives. To determine the "Cosplay Level" of participants, cosplayers were asked to select a single response to the closed-ended question: *How would you describe your level of cosplay activities?* As demonstrated in Figure 16, 79% (n=214) of cosplayers (N=271) identified as 'hobbyists' or 'casual' cosplay enthusiasts (hereon referred to as 'Hobbyist Cosplayers'). The remaining 21% (n=57) of cosplayers identified as 'semi-professional' or 'professional' cosplayers (hereon referred to as 'Professionalising Cosplayers'). What became clear, after cross-tabulating the survey results (Appendix II) with this new variable, is that the types of labour considered the most important across digital platforms were highly similar when it came to analysing the practices of hobbyist and professional cosplayers. The results (Appendix II) were produced from a series of questions, where cosplayers were asked to select a value – on several Likert-type scales – how important they considered different cosplay–related activities to be, in the context of the general social

media and messaging, live-streaming and video-sharing; and crowdfunding and subscription-based platforms.

Figure 16

Levels of cosplay



6.4.1 Cosplay activities on general social media and messaging platforms.

On general social media and messaging platforms (i.e. Instagram, or Facebook – see Section 6.2), there were uses of the platforms which held high levels of importance among professional and hobbyist cosplayers (N=271); especially in relation to peer support and sharing cosplay-related images, videos or posts. However, there were marked differences in the degree to which **Professionalising Cosplayers** (n=57) and **Hobbyist Cosplayers** (n=214) determined specific activities to be important. These distinctions demonstrated that—perhaps naturally—Professionalising Cosplayers (n=57) engaged with activities that related to developing a marketable digital identity or networking, with 78% of the cohort selecting the levels of "moderately", "very" or "extremely" important on the Likert-scale provided for the category of self-promotion and branding activities ("Self-promotion") (Figure 17). Moreover, 72% of Professionalising Cosplayers (n=57), also selected the options of "moderately", "very" or "extremely" important for the category 'making industry connections for professional purposes' ("Industry Connections") (Figure 17). Comparatively, only 43% of Hobbyist Cosplayers (n=214) selected the positive categories of "moderately", "very" or "extremely" to indicate the importance of 'Industry Connections' (Figure 17). For Hobbyist Cosplayers (n=214), activities were favoured that related more specifically to community-oriented goals, including 93% of Hobbyist cosplayers attributing the levels of "moderately" to "extremely" important for the "Peer Support" category and 90% of Hobbyist cosplayers selecting the same levels of importance for "Sharing Content" (Figure 17). In contrast, just 45% of Professionalising Cosplayers (n=57) selected a high level of

importance on the scale for "Sharing Content" (Figure 17). Overall, though all categories appear to demonstrate some levels of importance for both Professionalising and Hobbyist Cosplayers, there were clear differences that emerged in relation to how "positive" the levels of importance were to cosplayers in these distinct groups.

Figure 17

Digital labour activities of cosplayers on general social media platforms

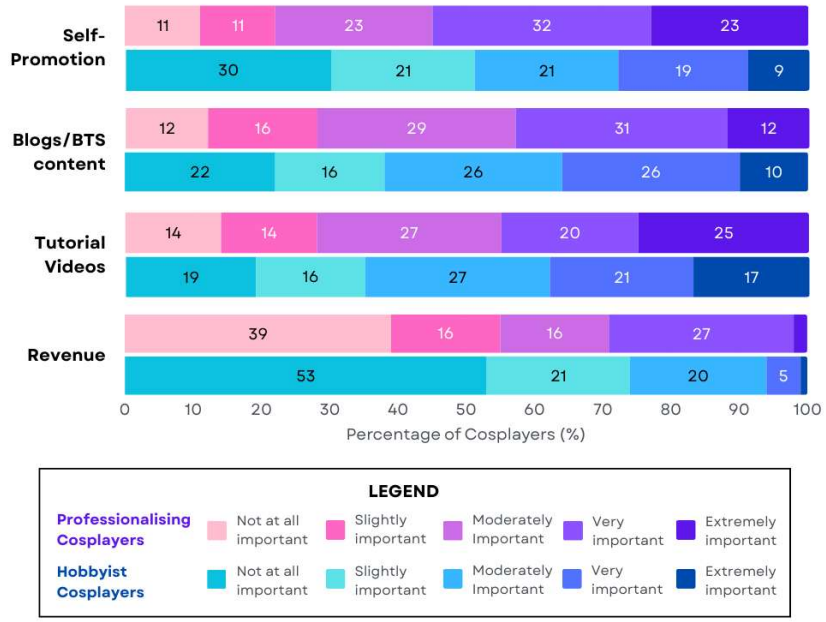
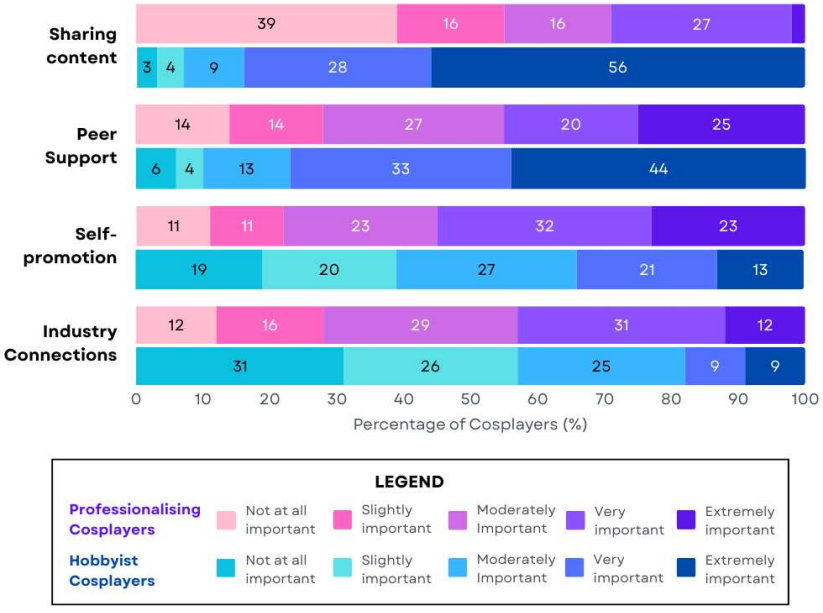


Figure 18

Digital labour activities of cosplayers on live-streaming/videosharing platforms

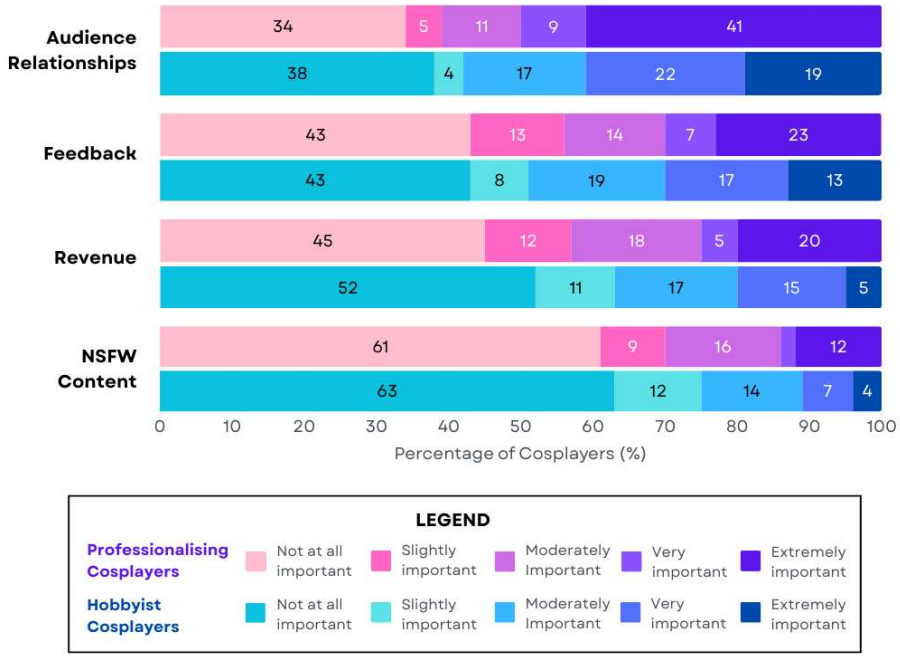


6.4.2 Cosplay activities on live-streaming and video-sharing platforms.

However, interestingly—when it came to the platforms under the categories of live-streaming and video-sharing, as well as 'crowdfunding and subscription-based' platforms—both hobbyists and professionals placed statistically similar levels of importance on the same activities. For live-streaming and video-sharing, these included: creating and sharing how-to-videos, sharing vlogs or behind the scenes content, self-promotion and branding, and generating revenue through advertising and sponsorships. The most important activity for **Professionalising Cosplayers** was self-promotion and branding (Self-Promotion), with 23% of Professionalising Cosplayers considering these types of activities 'extremely important' and 32% considering them 'very important' in relation to their cosplay activities on live-streaming and video-sharing platforms (Figure 18). This was closely followed in importance by sharing vlogs or behind-the-scenes content (Vlogs/BTS content); creating and sharing "how-to"/tutorial videos (Tutorial Videos); and generating revenue through advertising or sponsors (Revenue) (Figure 18). When ranking the importance of cosplay activities on live-streaming and video-sharing platforms for **Hobbyist Cosplayers**, Tutorial Videos and Vlogs/BTS content were considered slightly less important to Hobbyist Cosplayers but placed above both Self-Promotion and Revenue (Figure 18).

Figure 19

Digital labour activities of cosplayers on crowdfunding/subscription-based platforms

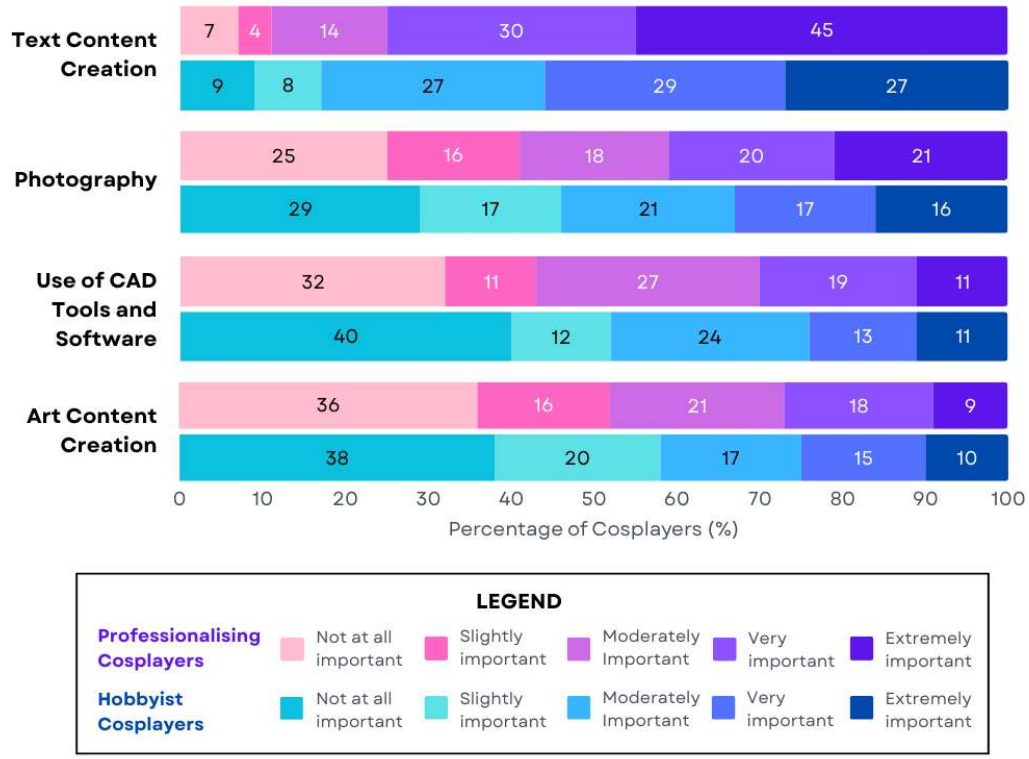


6.3.3 Cosplay activities on crowdfunding and subscription-based platforms

In the context of crowdfunding and subscription-based platforms; again, highly similar levels of importance were placed on developing relationships with audience members; sharing cosplay related content not suitable for work; generating sales for cosplay-related goods and income from sponsors or subscribers for cosplay-related activities. For **Professionalising Cosplayers**, developing relationships with audience members (Audience relationships) was an extremely important cosplay-related activity for 41% of cosplayers, and it was very important to a further 9% of cosplayers (Figure 19). Other important activities included receiving feedback on cosplay progress from fans (Feedback), generating income from sponsors or subscribers (Revenue) and sharing cosplay-related content not suitable for other social networks (NSFW) (Figure 19). Though less **Hobbyist Cosplayers** thought audience relationships were as important as those of professional cosplayers (Figure 19), 19% of cosplayers considered audience relationships and feedback important to their cosplay-related activities on crowdfunding and subscription platforms (Figure 19).

Figure 20

Use of digital career skills among cosplayers



6.5 'Digital Career' Skills

To discuss how digital skills contribute to the professionalisation of cosplay, a series of skills that cosplayers may use in their activities was developed from the CSIRO's (2020) 'My Digital Career' resources; specifically, their categories of 'Digital Design' and 'Social Media' careers. 'Digital Design' was described as a digital career pathway which includes job with 'tasks similar to that of graphic designers, with an expanded skillset in using digital tools' (CSIRO, 2020, p. 10). Featured 'Graphic Design' jobs included 'Art Director', 'Digital Content Producer' and 'Digital Illustrator' among others (CSIRO, 2020, p. 10). The 'Social Media' careers category was described as jobs which contribute to the 'sharing of ideas, thoughts and information through the building of virtual networks and communities' and included jobs like 'Copywriter', 'Social Influencer' and 'Marketing Manager' (CSIRO, 2020, p. 12). The skills listed associated with 'Digital Design' careers were creation of artwork or graphics for use in digital content (Art Content Creation); use of computer-assisted design (CAD) tools or software (CAD Tools/Software Use).

Those derived from the 'Social Media' digital career category were creating text-based content for use on social media (Text Content Creation) and marketing activities in social media and digital advertising (Marketing/Ad Content Creation). The final skill, taking or selecting photographs for use in digital content (Photography) could fit into positions in both categories. Cosplayers were asked to rate their use of industry-recognised 'digital career' skills (CSIRO, 2020) when engaging in cosplay activities, on a Likert-scale from 1) Never to 5) Always. 45% of **Professionalising Cosplayers** (N=57) reported 'always' engaging in Text Content Creation, with 30% 'often' doing so. This was followed in frequency of use by Photography, with 21% of cosplayers 'always' using this skill and 20% 'often' using it. **Hobbyist Cosplayers** (N=214) reported having used similar digital design skills, though there are some key differences in the reported frequencies of use. Text content creation is a skill that 27% of cosplayers reported 'always' using (Figure 20), in comparison to 45% of professionalising cosplayers (Figure 20). 29% of hobbyist cosplayers created text-based content 'often', and 27% would do so sometimes.

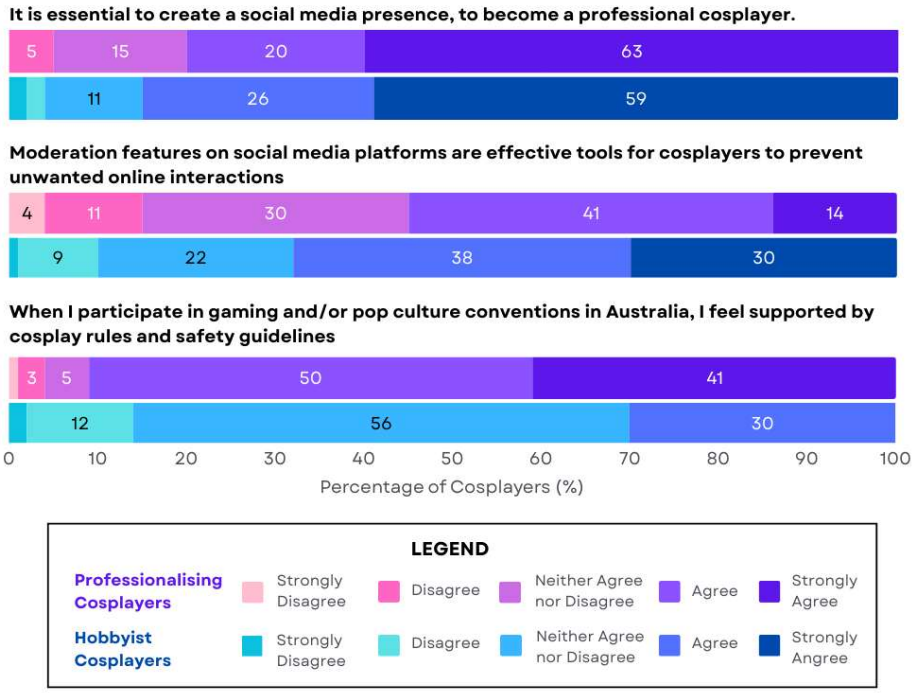
6.6 Perspectives from Cosplayers on Industry Participation

The final area of results produced from Study 2 comprised attitudinal data relating to participation in industry event spaces, or digital fan communities – specifically, in games and popular culture – that cosplayers contribute to. Participants communicated levels of agreement with a series of statements relating to the digitisation and professionalisation of cosplay, by selecting from options arranged on a *Likert*-type scale from 1–Strongly Disagree to 5–Strongly Agree. **Professionalising Cosplayers** largely agreed that creating a social media presence was essential to becoming a professional cosplayer, with 63% selecting 'strongly agree' and 20% selecting 'agree' (Figure

21). Attitudes towards moderation features on social media platforms being effective tools for cosplayers in preventing online interactions were more diverse, with 41% of professional cosplayers agreeing with the sentiment and 30% responding neutrally (Figure 21). Cosplay rules and safety guidelines for games and popular culture conventions were largely agreed upon as being supportive of cosplay participation, with 41% of cosplayers strongly agreeing and 50% agreeing with the statement (Figure 21). **Hobbyist Cosplayers** agreed at a similarly high rate with Statement 1 (S1): it is essential to create a social media presence, to become a professional cosplayer. 59% of Hobbyist Cosplayers strongly agreed, while 26% agreed (Figure 21). Moderation features were considered slightly more effective as tools for preventing unwanted online interactions among Hobbyist Cosplayers, with 30% strongly agreeing with the statement (Figure 21), compared to 14% of Professionalising Cosplayers (Figure 21).

Figure 21.

Perspectives on cosplay industry participation among cosplayers



6.7 Discussion

The results of this survey demonstrate that many cosplayers engage in digital practices across multi-platform networks and infrastructures, from sharing content to developing audience relationships. These activities reflect a spectrum of engagement within digital cosplay culture, supporting prior calls (e.g. Lamerichs, 2021) for nuanced analysis of cosplay as embedded within broader platform economies and media ecologies. However, it is important to clarify that not all

such digital practices performed by cosplayers should be straightforwardly classified as “digital labour”, particularly when considered through the lens of Marxist theory that most theories on immaterial labour are founded in. In Marxist traditions, labour is typically understood as an activity performed under conditions of remuneration or the threat of penalty, tied to alienation and exchange value (1867/1990). Most cosplayers surveyed, especially those self-identifying as Hobbyists, do not rely on cosplay for income nor face penalties for non-participation. Thus, while relational, affective or visibility-oriented actions —such as maintaining audience connections or sharing content—may resemble forms of labour, these acts are primarily embedded in hobbyist motivations, including leisure, personally expression, and community participation. This distinction is crucial to avoid overgeneralising the concept of relational labour. Although all relational labour involves investing in relationships, not all relationship-building qualifies as relational labour in the economic sense. For example, hobbyist cosplayers may develop social ties without the expectation or pressure of monetization, differentiating their experience from that of professionalising cosplayers who actively cultate audiencesc as part of a monised or career-oriented practice. Nevertheless, certain cosplay activies-particularly on subscription-based platforms or those aiming for professionalisation-may indeed create labour-like conditions and obligations, blurring the boundary between hobby and commodified creative work. These findings underscore the need for further research to explore how and when hobbyist cosplay practices transition into forms of commodified creative work, as and the implications for this hybridity for both cultural and economic valuations of cosplay.

6.7.1 Situating the Digital Practices of Cosplayers Across Platforms

The discussions that follow present the results of Study Two, which, first and foremost, provide insight into the cross-platform activities of cosplayers, with Instagram serving as the central environment for digital cosplay practice. As found in Study One, and demonstrated in Figure 13, Instagram was identified as the most frequently used general social media or messaging platform by the cosplayers surveyed. This finding aligns with previous research into Instagram as ‘the social media platform most associated with online images’ (Rogers, 2021). The visual aesthetics and particularities of cosplay performance—including the prominent role of cosplay photography—lend themselves well to the platform's affordances. Instagram’s visual affordances favour a type of embodied aesthetic expression and communication that interweaves seamlessly with cosplayers' objectives for representing and sharing their work through photography. Cosplay photography, as found in Chapter 4.3.3, often commemorates or archives the transitory experiences of physical cosplay performance. The results of Study Two also showed that the use of Instagram is often supplemented with additional social media platforms favoured for their individual affordances, including Facebook for general use or messaging purposes (Figure 13), YouTube and TikTok for live-streaming and video-sharing activities (Figure 14) and Ko-Fi,

Patreon and OnlyFans for developing crowd-funding initiatives or subscription-based services to monetise their cosplay activities (Figure 15). Though fewer cosplayers used crowdfunding and subscription-based services, the results remain pertinent due to recent, emergent research into the exploitation of cosplay labour on Patreon (Seregina & Weijo, 2017) and OnlyFans (Rouse & Salter, 2021). Overall, cosplayers were found to have primarily developed shared preferences for using digital platforms, with Instagram emerging as the most central to digital cosplay culture.

6.7.2 The Blurred Lines of Work and Labour for Hobbyists and Professional Cosplayers in Digital Environments

The survey findings (Appendix II) highlight the blurred boundaries between the digital activities of Hobbyist and Professionalising cosplayers. While differences exist in how each group rates the importance of various activities, key differences emerge in the types of digital practices considered important by both groups (Figures 16-18). The survey cross-tabulated cosplayers' digital activities across general social media and messaging; live-streaming and video-sharing; and crowdfunding or subscription-based platforms with cosplayers self-reported "levels" ("Cosplay Levels"): which demonstrated how many cosplayers identified as "Hobbyist" or "Professionalising" Cosplayers (Figure 16). Most survey participants (79%) identified as Hobbyist Cosplayers, while 21% of cosplayers identified as Professionalising. This distribution raises a critical issue: despite the majority positioning themselves as Hobbyists, many reported engaging in practices often associated with professionalisation, complicating any clear-cut division between leisure and commercially motivated activity. For example, Figure 11 shows that 27% of cosplayers reported cosplay as least a minor income source, exceeding the 21% who self-identified as Professionalising Cosplayers. As Figure 17 demonstrates, while Professionalising Cosplayers unsurprisingly placed higher importance on career-oriented practices – such as generating industry connections –many Hobbyists also engaged in branding and audience-building activities. This overlap challenges straight-forward distinctions between hobbyist "play" and professional cosplay labour.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that these findings do not imply that all such practices constitute "labour" in the Marxist sense. Marx distinguished between work and labour, the latter being tied to remuneration, exchange value and the risk of penalty for non-performance. By this definition, most cosplay activities—given that most respondents earn little or no income—cannot be explicitly categorised as labour. Instead, this analysis draws on concepts from digital labour studies as interpretive frameworks for understanding patterns within these practices. 'Visibility labour' (Abidin, 2016b), for example, refers to the deliberate, ongoing work that digital creators perform to maintain and increase their visibility within platform algorithms and audiences. It includes producing and sharing content consistently, engaging with followers, managing one's

online persona, and navigating platform dynamics to remain relevant and discoverable (Abidin, 2016b). While this labour is rarely formally recognised or remunerated, it remains essential for maintaining a public presence online (Abidin, 2016b). Closely connected is 'affective' or emotional labour, which refers to the production and management of social bonds and emotional connections with audiences (Hardt & Negri, 1999; Lamerichs, 2015; Oksala, 2016). This can include activities such as fostering supportive communities, maintaining positive interactions, and regulating one's own emotions to present a desirable public persona. Affective labour is often intertwined with visibility labour, as maintaining visibility depends not only on content production but also on the quality of relationships and emotional engagement creators cultivate (as explored in Chapter 4.3.2).

The survey findings illustrate how these tendencies are manifested among cosplayers in practice. When asked to classify their social media influence based on follower counts, 38% identified as nano influencers (with up to 1,000 followers), 28% as micro influencers (1,001-10,000 followers), and 1% as mega influencers (over 1,00,000 followers) (Figure 12). Notably, 38% reported that they do not use social media as influencers (Figure 12). This distribution suggests that while not all cosplayers engage in visibility labour, a large portion adopt practices associated with influencer culture-even if monetisation is limited or absent. On platforms like Instagram or Facebook, Hobbyist Cosplayers rated sharing cosplay-related content and peer support—the affective labour dimension—as their most important digital activities (Figure 13). However, many Hobbyist Cosplayers also engaged in self-promotion and industry networking, reflecting the strategic aspects of visibility labour (Figure 13). Professionalising Cosplayers, on the other hand, favoured career-focused activities including self-promotion and generating industry connections; but still valued the more community-focused activities of peer support and sharing content (Figure 13). Professionalising cosplayers balanced career-focused activities with community-building practice, showing that affective and visibility labour coexist across cosplay levels.

Similar patterns emerged on live-streaming and video-sharing platforms (Figure 17) where both Hobbyist and Professionalising Cosplayers found importance in sharing behind-the-scenes content and tutorial videos—strategies often linked to attracting and sustaining audience attention. Moreover, as shown in Figure 17, activities like generating revenue were understandably favoured by Professionalising Cosplayers. Still, over half of the Hobbyist Cosplayers surveyed indicated that they found revenue-generating activities important. Almost 70% of all cosplayers surveyed, for instance, reported engagement in self-promotion and branding activities on live-streaming and video-sharing platforms (Figure 17). In this environment, it can become understandably difficult to discern the intentions behind a cosplayer's video content, which may result in audiences misinterpreting the meanings behind

an individual cosplayer's digital activities or misattributing them as seeking professionalisation. When audiences on digital platforms perceive content creators as providing a service – or seeking professionalisation – they have been found to impose increased demands on their digital practices (Baym, 2015). This could introduce pressures and restrictions on the digital creative activities of cosplayers who are not financially rewarded but are instead motivated by a personal understanding of their hobby as leisure or "labour of love". This issue is reflected in the survey results, which demonstrated that, on crowdfunding and subscription-based platforms, Hobbyists and Professionalising Cosplayers attributed similar levels of importance to developing relationships with audience members (Figure 18). While not all such relationship-building constitutes "relational labour" as theorised by Baym (2015), the survey indicates that these dynamics—when routinised and expectation-driven—may approximate patterns identified in other digital creative industries.

6.7.3 Challenges for Cosplayers in Monetising or Renumerating Digital Labour

In identifying types of digital labour engaged with by cosplayers, there are – of course – associated challenges that cosplayers may have to contend with in conducting their activities on platforms that offer mechanisms for monetising content. These difficulties were initially found in discussions with cosplayers in Study 1, when describing their approaches to monetisation (Chapter 4, Section 4.5). On digital platforms, relationships with audience members have been found to range from the 'purely transactional' to the 'intimately familiar' (Baym, 2015). Some of these practices have been conceptualised in digital labour scholarship as 'relational labour'—understood as the ongoing effort creators invest in cultivating and sustaining audience relationships over time (Baym, 2015; Bonifacio et al., 2013). However, it is important to note, as mentioned in Section 6.6.2, not all relationship-building should be understood as labour in the Marxist sense. Most cosplayers surveyed earn little to no income (Figure 11), and many do not position their activities as professionalised (Figure 16). Therefore, these concepts are used here—once again—as interpretive frameworks rather than rigid classifications: while all relational labour involves relationship-building, not all relationship-building constitutes labour. With this caveat in mind, practices associated with audience engagement can yield outcomes such as financial or emotional support (Bonifacio et al., 2023), although this is not universal for all creators. Many cosplayers in Study 1 (Chapter 4.3) found it difficult to discern how to reach larger audiences and navigate platform affordances, including interactions with non-human agents like algorithms and bots. This means that even non-commercial motivations—such as archiving creative works or fostering community (Chapter 4, Section 4.4)—are often shaped by platform affordances that incentivise intensification of engagement and monetisation.

The survey findings (Appendix II) show that cosplayers gain cultural capital, and sometimes economic benefits, through engagement with 'influencer economies' (Abidin, 2017). Hobbyist Cosplayersmay therefore appear to exhibit professionalisation behaviours, even if they do not identify as influencers or service providers. This perception can create potential pressures for cosplayers when acting as digital content creators, especially in contexts where creators in related industries face 'difficulties in maintaining appropriate relational boundaries' with their audiences, 'some of whom control a substantial part of a creator's income' (Bonifacio et al., 2023). This is especially relevant given that 38% of surveyed cosplayers reported that they did not use social media with the intentions of being influencers (Figure 12). For these cosplayers, audience expectations may still emerge—but such risks should not be overstated without acknowledging the variability in motivations and outcomes. The survey findings also reflected engagement of Hobbyist and Professionalising Cosplayers with crowdfunding and subscription platforms (Figure 18), where interactions with supporters sometimes carry expectations of reciprocity—whether financial or emotional—which other scholars have linked to relational labour (Abidin, 2016b). Again, this does not suggest that all such interactions constitute labour, but rather that some patterns resemble dynamics observed in other digital creative industries.

Another aspect of the results that warrants attention is the presence of the adult content platform OnlyFans and the membership-based crowdfunding platform Patreon, as spaces for cosplay content and practice (Figure 18). Previous research highlights the complex and often, exploitative 'trade-offs' on these platforms: between leisure-focused values and monetisation pressures, as seen on crowdfunding platforms, including Patreon (Seregina & Weijo, 2017), and algorithmic affordances that amplify sexualised content, such as OnlyFans (Rouse & Salter, 2021). As discussed in Chapter 5, cosplayers were shown to have oriented their digital activities—constantly engaging in acts intended to reclaim their space—to continue to practice in games industry spaces that have historically marginalised women's participation. Cosplay has long been recognised as a cultural activity dominated by women (Lamerichs, 2013a). The results of Survey 2 were consistent with this, with most cosplayers identifying as women (Figure 8). It must be noted that there was also representation of other individuals who identified with comparatively marginalised gender identities; notably including fellow women who identify as transgender; as well as gender non-binary or non-conforming individuals across the LGBTQIA+ spectrum (Figure 8). The fact that cosplayers represent substantial proportions of women; along with those who align with a diverse range of gender identities—and men— further demonstrates the importance of socio-cultural legitimisation of inclusive cosplay practices and how they contribute to modern interpretations and understandings of games and popular culture-centric fandoms. Yet, despite the promise in these interpretations of cosplay, previous findings—especially those contributed by Rouse & Salter (2021)—have shown that the 'rhetoric of empowerment' often associated with

'NSFW cosplay' ultimately 'falters in the face of the economic realities of how cosplay and fan labour are exploited' when it comes to monetising sexuality on platforms like OnlyFans. With 39% of professional and 37% of hobbyist cosplayers indicating that they create and publish NSFW—or, in other words, sexualised—content (Figure 18), further intersectional feminist inquiry is needed to extend these exploratory findings and explore how cosplayers negotiate and manage associated risks when engaging in these practices in digital spaces. Moreover, the results specifically confirm the use of platforms like OnlyFans by Australian cosplayers, making clear the urgency of exploring regulatory measures that prioritise safe practices and protections for cosplayers operating in monetised and sexualised digital environments.

6.7.4 Industry Regulation, Platform Moderation and Professionalisation

The absence of a clear means of delineating the labour practices of Hobbyist, as opposed to Professionalising, Cosplayers are further reflected in issues relating to fair compensation for cosplay practices. Lamerichs (2021) research into 'game cosplayers' and streaming practices on the Amazon-owned *Twitch* platform, discovered that performances of fan identity were largely determined by the 'emotional and gendered labour of being engaging' on the platform (p. 207). Lamerichs (2021) also argued that the affordances of Twitch would see the platform 'function as an interface on the one hand' but also as a 'fan-driven business model that companies, like *Amazon*, profit from on the other hand' (p. 189). Even for professionals, cosplay is in a highly emergent space, with only 1% of cosplayers reporting that their activities can financially support them as a primary source of income. Thus, the highly emergent nature of commercial cosplay practices may leave cosplayers vulnerable to the types of potential exploitation or lack of compensation for their labour described in Chapter 4 (Sections 4.3.3 and 4.5). In saying this, it is important to note that—since most cosplayers surveyed considered themselves hobbyists (Figure 16)—many may not expect or desire compensation, meaning that occasional opportunities to commercialise or monetise do not necessarily entail exploitation, particularly when cosplayers exercise agency over their engagement with these practices.

Another avenue for "compensation" could also be understood in terms of transferable skills. The increasing recognition of digital skills by governmental and industry stakeholders may enable cosplayers to clarify or articulate professional pathways that build on their digital practices. UNESCO (2018), for instance defines 'digital skills' as a 'range of abilities to use digital devices, communication applications, and networks to access and manage information' (UNESCO, 2018). In Australia, as outlined in Section 6.4, the CSIRO's (2020) categorisations of 'digital careers' provides a framework that could help contextualise which digital competencies cosplayers develop and whether they see these as relevant to future opportunities for professionalisation. Study 2 results demonstrated some correlation between the digital practices of both Hobbyist and

Professionalising Cosplayers (Figure 20). For example, text-based content development, was reportedly ‘always’ undertaken by 45% of Professionalising cosplayers, and ‘often’ by a further 30% (Figure 20). Among Hobbyists, 29% reported creating text-based content ‘often’, and 27% ‘sometimes’ (Figure 19). These findings suggest potential alignment between cosplay-related digital practices and industry-recognised digital skills, which could offer pathways for further legitimisation and professional recognition of these activities.

Finally, the results also included attitudinal data on cosplayers’ perceptions of cosplayers on the digitisation and professionalisation of their craft. While most Professionalising and Hobbyist cosplayers surveyed in Study 2 felt that safe attending conventions in costume and supported by cosplay rules and safety guidelines, a minority expressed concerns about safety and protection (Figure 21). As explored in Chapter 5, improvements to safety measures—particularly for marginalised groups—remains necessary in both physical and digital performance spaces. Similarly, responses about the effectiveness of moderation features on social media platforms were mixed: only 41% of Professionalising Cosplayers agreed that these features effectively prevent unwanted online interactions, and 16% disagreed (Figure 21). These findings suggest that some Professionalising Cosplayers do not feel adequately protected by current platform moderation systems. Future research should examine these issues in greater depth, focusing on how platforms might better facilitate digital safety mechanisms for users engaged in creative practices like cosplay. Despite these challenges, the majority of respondents—specifically, 83% of Professionalising Cosplayers and 85% of Hobbyist Cosplayers—agreed that “it is essential to create a social media presence, to become a professional cosplayer” (Figure 21). Taking this into consideration, these findings suggest that digital practices and the associated skills warrant closer examination as potential components of cosplay labour—while acknowledging that, for many, these remain primarily leisure activities rather than remunerated work.

6.8 Conclusion

In summary, building on the results of Study One, this chapter presents the results of Study Two, an online survey that further elucidates patterns in the digitisation and professionalisation of Australian cosplay. The results addressed the research question concerning the ways cosplayers use digital platforms, tools and services to practice and professionalise their craft. Responding to Lamerichs’ (2021, p. 207) call for further investigation into cosplayers’ interactions with platform-based creative economics, the findings described the range of digital activities undertaken by cosplayers in these environments. The results indicated notable similarities in digital practices between Hobbyist and Professionalising Cosplayers, through their reported frequency and perceived importance varied and often aligned with orientation toward commercialisation. Importantly, activities associated with monetisation and professionalisation

were not exclusively confined to those identified as Professionalising. While these practices have been discussed in previous scholarship using concepts such as 'visibility labour' (Abidin, 2016b); 'affective' or 'relational labour' (Baym, 2015; Lamerichs, 2015; Oksala, 2016) or 'sexualised' labour (Rouse & Salter, 2021), it is necessary to qualify their use in the context. The data presented here do not demonstrate that such practices consistently meet the definitional threshold of "labour" under Marxist or political economy traditions—particularly for participants who neither reported earning income nor faced penalties for non-participation in cosplay. Instead, these conceptual framings were employed as interpretive heuristics to situate cosplay within broader debates on digital cultural production. Further qualitative inquiry would be needed to determine when under what conditions a cosplayer's digital practices take on the characteristics of labour in an economic sense.

The chapter also positioned cosplay's digital practices within emerging frameworks for digital careers and creative economies, noting efforts by organisations such as UNESCO (2018) and CSIRO (2020) to formalise digital skills and pathways. While many cosplayers remain hobbyists and do not seek financial returns, these frameworks are helpful for understanding how their skill sets align with recognised forms of digital work and how some participants may leverage these for professionalisation. Finally, the chapter examined issues of safety and moderation in physical and digital spaces. Although most respondents reported feeling safe at conventions, a significant minority did not. Similarly, confidence in platform moderation was mixed: only 41% of professionalising cosplayers agreed that moderation tools were effective in preventing unwanted interactions, while 16% disagreed. Given the strong consensus that establishing a social media presence is essential for professionalisation (83% of Professionalising and 85% of Hobbyist respondents), these findings point to an urgent need for improved moderation and safety mechanisms on digital platforms. Finally, it is essential to consider the lived context of both the researcher and participants during the survey data collection period. Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged at the start of the second year of this research project, may have resulted in higher concentrations of individuals occupying or practising in digital spaces than is standard. However, with the findings relating to digitisation already having been identified prior to the emergence of the global pandemic, I chose to reframe these potential limitations as an unexpected —and rather unfortunate—but ultimately, opportune moment, to examine the digital cosplay activities of the community.

Chapter 7 • Case Studies on Cultural Intermediaries in the Cosplay Industry

Previous chapters explored contributing factors relating to the digitisation and professionalisation of Australian cosplay. In Chapter 4, the results of Study One were presented, detailing the socio-technical transformation of the cultural activities of Australian cosplayers. That chapter focused specifically on how cosplayers have adapted their cultural practices into modes of creative labour that feature prominent use of novel digital technologies, platforms, and tools. The creative labour of cosplayers has also been complicated by the potential to monetise their activities in digital spaces. Chapter 5, then, presents a publication that explores the historical, gender-based barriers that have prevented safe labour standards and practices from being upheld in cosplay event spaces, and how female-presenting cosplayers have overcome these obstacles to remain engaged in the cosplay community. In Chapter 6, the results of an online survey conducted during the research period for Study Two, were presented to validate further the use of digital labour and related skillsets among a larger sample of cosplayers. The results demonstrate how cosplayers utilise digital platforms and tools in their everyday cosplay-related personal, social, or professional activities. This chapter will present the final set of results that contribute to this overarching thesis project. Study Three, presented herein, takes the form of a series of case studies, each demonstrating the way 'cultural intermediaries' (Bourdieu, 1984:1986) contribute to the everyday activities and professional processes embedded in the cosplay industry.

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the results of Study Three develop an account for the emergence and contribution of cultural intermediaries in the Australian cosplay community, by presenting the results of three case studies (as described in Section 3.5 and 3.6 of this thesis). The findings for Study Three are presented as chronological and descriptive accounts, based on ethnographic research methods, in response to **RQ3**: *How do cultural intermediaries emerge from, operate within and contribute to Australian cosplay?* The activities of professional, cultural intermediaries in cosplay are described not only to legitimise the work they do in supporting cosplay as a craft-based activity, but also to demonstrate their key role in shaping the professionalisation of the industry. As intermediaries, the nature of their cultural work—though highly regarded within the cosplay community and slowly being recognised by associated industries—is often underpaid, self-sustained and emotionally or physically taxing due to its 'affective' nature (Negri & Hardt, 1999). It is work that can be easily missed, or remain relatively "invisible" to broader audiences, due to its oft-immaterial nature. As a result, it was considered an integral part of the overall picture of how cosplay speciality goods and services have been commercialised, industry-recognised and,

ultimately, professionalised. Using Maguire and Matthews (2012) 'three dimensions' for defining cultural intermediaries, the case study results will demonstrate the way cosplay cultural intermediaries legitimise and engage in the '**framing'** of particular cosplay-related goods as valuable (p. 554); how their claims to '**expertise'** have been developed through their position within a 'commodity chain' or cultural space (p. 555); and what their level of '**impact'** has been in their contextual field, which relates specifically to the 'construction of legitimacy' of their cosplay-related 'goods', products, services or behaviours through aforementioned 'framing' practices (p. 556). The three case studies will be presented as chronologically organised accounts of how Captain Patch-It, the owners of Lumin's Workshop and Leigh Hyland (Steamkittens) have emerged as cultural intermediaries in the Australian cosplay industry, by referring to the **framing** and formation of value of their cosplay-related goods and services, the development of **expertise** through claims to cultural authority in cosplay community spaces, and the resulting **impact** on the cosplay industry through their framing of cosplay-related goods.

The first case study will focus on Captain Patch-It (Section 7.2), who emerged as a cultural intermediary in cosplay by acting as a formative influence in the professionalisation of cosplay repair in Australia. The second case study details the journey of Maggie Hu and John Reading (Section 7.3), chronicling their development into cultural intermediaries through the creation of *Lumin's Workshop*, Australia's first dedicated cosplay supply store with a community space for workshops, training in cosplay-related skills, and hosting social events. Then, finally, the chapter presents a case study into the cosplay photography work of Leigh Hyland (Section 7.4), otherwise known as Steamkittens, who—after establishing themselves as a key cultural intermediary in the cosplay community—would become the first cosplay photographer to be officially paid and titled by an Australian pop culture and gaming convention. Through the analysis of three case studies, this chapter will explore cultural intermediaries, as they have emerged in the Australian cosplay industry, by chronicling their personal history with their practice, and highlighting: the way they enact the 'framing' of the value of 'good**s'** as legitimate or worthy in the cosplay industry; the ways that they established their 'expertise' and the 'impact' that their framing of goods and expertise has on the industry or community as a whole (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, pp. 551–2).

As this chapter will demonstrate, Captain Patch-It, Lumin's Workshop and Steamkittens are three cultural intermediaries who have established novel, specialist cosplay services for cosplay repairs, cosplay supplies and cosplay photography, respectively. Each participant has worked – in some cases for negligible or minor financial compensation – to legitimise and develop a tier of services that mediate the experiences of cosplayers in digital and physical spaces of cosplay practice. The development of this categorisation of cosplay specialty services by individuals who have gained expert status in the cosplay community has, in turn, helped to legitimise and

professionalise cosplay. These service offerings recognise cosplayers as creative labourers that contribute—economically—to the profitability of cosplay event spaces like conventions. In doing so, they have also shone a light on the need for improvements to standards and regulations to support their activities —legitimising cosplay and recognising the professional endeavours of cosplayers. At the same time, there are also limitations, barriers and restrictions that emerge from greater industry recognition. As seen in Chapter 6, cosplayers still predominately identify as hobbyists who engage in cosplay for leisure. However, the potential for monetisation has raised questions regarding whether professionalisation is ultimately good for cosplay, transforming the cultural activities which were once focused on leisure or play into a form of work. This chapter first focuses on the individual journeys of each cosplay specialist; before analysing their emergence and contributions to cosplay as cultural intermediaries using Maguire & Matthews (2012, p. 551) framework.

7.1.2 Background

Cosplayers interviewed throughout the course of Study 1, would reference important members of the Australian cosplay community who were not necessarily cosplayers, but rather creators who were practicing in areas of cultural production that are analogous or related to cosplay. Three of the most frequently mentioned individuals during the study were: 1) Captain Patch-It, a cosplay repairer; 2) Maggie and John, owners of Lumin's Workshop, a retailer of specialist cosplay products; and 3) Leigh Hyland, also known as Steamkittens, a cosplay photographer. Cosplay repair, specialist cosplay crafting products, and cosplay photography are all 'goods'—including 'material products as well as services, ideas and behaviours'—which 'produce symbolic value' in the context of the cosplay industry (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 551). Thus, 'cultural intermediaries', a term first defined by Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), was selected for its use in examining culturally impactful actors in emergent or professionalising cultural communities and commercial industries, 'prioritising issues of agency, negotiation and power' (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 551). Cultural intermediaries have been documented across most digital spaces of cultural production, including what Woo (2012) termed the 'geek media' industries that cosplayers contribute to. Despite their documentation in various cultural industries and related spaces of practice, a dedicated study on cultural intermediaries in cosplay has yet to be pursued. This chapter seeks to remedy this by contributing the first dedicated, exploratory, study on the development of cultural intermediaries in the Australian cosplay industry. Maguire and Matthews (2012) describe 'cultural intermediaries' as 'contextualised market actors' who 'construct value, by framing how others—end consumers, as well as other market actors including other cultural intermediaries—engage with goods, affecting and effecting others' orientations towards those goods as legitimate' (p. 551–2). Acknowledging that 'we all have a hand in the formation of value', what ultimately

differentiates the work of a cultural intermediary is the development of an 'expert orientation' through 'claims to professional expertise in taste and value' in the context of a 'specific cultural field' (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 552).

Maguire & Matthews (2012, p. 553) noted the importance of interpreting cultural intermediaries within the 'density of contextualizing conditions' which may enable and constrain the 'expert roles' of cultural intermediaries in 'value formation processes' for the purposes of 'highlight[ing] the contextual specificity of cultural intermediaries, what they do and why they matter'. As a result, in this chapter, the case studies are presented chronologically in relation to the aforementioned 'three dimensions of investigation' recommended for defining and describing the practices—and roles—of cultural intermediaries in their relative contexts of operation, namely: 'framing', 'expertise' and 'impact' (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 553). The results in this chapter will demonstrate the way cosplay cultural intermediaries engaged with each dimension of Maguire & Matthews' (2012) framework, by firstly, exploring how each case study demonstrated in the practices of 'framing' cosplay goods and services as valuable in their cultural and industrial contexts, noting that 'what is available for framing and how, to whom and with what degree of constraint they frame goods will reflect their particular locations within networks of human and non-human actors' (p. 554). Secondly, the results will demonstrate how each case study developed 'expertise', by building their 'claims to authority' which 'reflect the specific stocks of professional and cultural capital and subjective dispositions and preferences that cultural intermediaries have at their disposal' (p. 555). Finally, each case study into cultural intermediaries and cosplay will be analysed in relation to the 'weight and durability' of the 'impact' and influence of the devices they used to emerge as cultural intermediaries, including 'framing work', concerning the effectiveness of their ability to 'influence others' estimations of goods as legitimate', and their development of expertise (p. 556).

In this chapter, the case studies are, first, each presented as highly descriptive accounts of the history and journey of each case study and their emergence as cultural intermediaries in cosplay. Then, in the following discussion section, their impact on the cosplay industry is interpreted using Maguire & Matthews (2012, p. 553) framework for analysing 'cultural intermediaries'. Their work in 'framing' goods and developing 'expertise' is then analysed, and the 'weight' and 'durability' of their 'impact' is assessed; specifically in relation to the way they have impacted the commercialisation or professionalisation of their cosplay-related goods and services.

7.2 Launching the Cosplay Repair Space: A Case Study on Captain Patch-It

Captain Patch-It—who prefers to remain anonymous—is a key cultural intermediary in the cosplay industry, often credited as founding the cosplay repair space in Australia. Patch-It was a critical influence in the '**framing'** (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 553) of cosplay repair as a legitimate service offering valued by members of the Australian cosplay community. With the support of digital cosplay communities championing the introduction of cosplay repair services at the grassroots level, Patch-It not only gained the attribution of '**expertise'** (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 553) from fellow cosplayers but, eventually, from actors involved in the production and management of events which cater to large numbers of cosplayers (i.e. comic, gaming, sci-fi and pop culture conventions in Australia). Leveraging 'framing work' and 'claims to authority' as instrumental components of developing as a cultural intermediary in cosplay, as described by Maguire & Matthews, (2012, p. 553), Patch-It's 'expertise' gained industry recognition among wider networks of actors that own or organise cosplay event spaces. By framing and legitimising the value of cosplay repair services—among both cosplayers and key industry interests – Captain Patch-It is a cultural intermediary who has produced considerable 'weight' and 'durability' through his '**impact'** on the cosplay industry (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 553). Conventions have largely appropriated or adopted Captain Patch-It's repair services as a regular feature at their events both nation-wide, and internationally, and he remains a critical cultural intermediary in the cosplay industry.

7.2.1 Creating the Captain: 'Framing' the Value of Cosplay Repairs

Captain Patch-It began his journey as a self-described collector of "*weird*" and wonderful items, regularly acquired during op-shop visits in his hometown of Melbourne, Victoria in Australia. His eclectic assortment of goods would even start to attract the interest of others, an early indicator of the journey to come:

> *"I became the go-to person within my group of school friends at the time, who'd go, oh, I've got a '70s themed thing... what have you got? And I'd pull out a pair of checkered bell-bottoms and say, that'll probably do ya![13]".*

Eventually, Patch It's cousins suggested that he might be interested in visiting some local conventions, including the now-defunct *Manifest* (https://www.manifest.org.au) —an Australian gaming and pop culture convention which operated on The University of Melbourne's Parkville campus from 1999–2013. After his first *Manifest*, Patch-It would attend a few conventions—colloquially known as "cons"—every year. He enjoyed, in his words, engaging in *"low quality,*

[13] "That'll probably do ya" is an Australian slang phrase that communicates that something will be suitable.

low effort" cosplays, primarily crafted to generate a light-hearted reaction, perhaps even a laugh, from peers in the community.

Figure 22

Captain Patch-It (photographed by Steamkittens)



Notes. Photographed and edited by Leigh Hyland (Steamkittens) for Captain Patch-It. Third party copyright material, reproduced with explicit permission from Leigh Hyland (Steamkittens) and Captain Patch-It.

In March 2014, it was two weeks before Australian pop culture and gaming convention Supanova, and Patch-It had made an off-hand suggestion to a few friends who were planning to cosplay at the event. He was in his early 20s and inspired by the communal cosplay scene. Patch-It remembered asking his cosplay group, "*What if I just carry stuff and help you guys out? I can get a few safety pins, whatever you need?*" Met with an enthusiastic initial reception from his friends, Patch-It considered how he would carry these supplies. Explaining, in his usual, affable tone, that he wondered whether he could dress as a *"Cosplay Medic"* and make specific components of his outfit functional. He recalls thinking:

> *"What if I have this costumey[sic] SWOT-style vest? In all the pockets, I can carry tubes of glue, and hang safety pins off them, and bobby pins. I can make a bandolier out of all coloured threads. I'll find a cordless hot glue gun to carry".*

Shortly after, Patch-It "*floated*" this idea in a private Facebook group of Australian cosplayers, wanting to find out if his portable cosplay repair station could have wider use, and what supplies might be helpful to append to his costume. His enquiry was warmly embraced by the community at large, with many group members jumping in on the thread with not only suggestions for

supplies but also numerous proposals for potential names for his cosplay alter ego. Patch-It recalls:

> *"Someone said Captain Patch-It, there were a couple of other suggestions, even The Fairy Cosmother. I've gone, I don't think I'm elegant enough to be a Cosmother, with my SWOT vest and all. I'm gonna go with Captain Patch-It on this one".*

With the date of the following Con drawing ever closer, having confirmed the value of these services through interactions with the digital community, Patch-It's outfit had become a dedicated project. He started to think about practicalities, including how to remain visible in the crowded environment of a popular con, considering:

> *"How am I going to put it on me, in a way that it's visible, and so people will know what I'm doing? Because, I've gone, if I just carry everything in a duffle bag, no one's going to know what it's there for".*

Understanding the potential for police or military-inspired garb to misleadingly project austerity or power, he felt that brightening the colour palette might help to counteract this, to ensure cosplayers feel safe enough to approach him and accept his assistance: *"So, it was basically, you know, bright, visible and people could go, "You're not just dressing like a police guy".*

He joked, explaining that if people ask a question—for instance, *"Oh, those threads, are they usable?"* he needs to ensure people feel comfortable with him saying *"Yep! You sew something"* while *"pulling out a sewing needle"*, which might be mistakenly perceived as a sinister action in any other context*:* "*Really it was all just a little bit about being visible so people would not be worried about approaching and go, "Yeah, can I borrow a safety pin?".*

Once Captain Patch-It and friends arrived at Supanova on Friday, April 11, 2014, the garb was not lacking in visibility, and the perception of the service and its intentions were apparently a success. Patch-It services were in-demand among cosplaying attendees at the con over the weekend. Patch-It describes the initial reception to the practice, and how he willingly assumed his newly acquired role in the community. Even though he had originally planned to provide the service primarily to his friends—and the few others he thought might be interested—he remembers: *"All these other people would be like, you know, 'Can you help me with this? Can you come and do this?' And I've gone, Yeah, okay'. People are like, 'Are you going to be here tomorrow?' and I've gone, I suppose I am now".* Progressing through 2014, Captain Patch-It would walk the halls of conventions nationwide, making further appearances at nine more cons that very year (Table 4). Patch-It provided his cosplay repair services routinely, developing practices that would evolve into strategies for future iterations of the activity:

> *"I'd carry everything on me, walk around and people would just come and find me. So, I sort of put out a second mobile phone number. Just so, I said, with anything, issues,*

just give me a call or whatever and I can come find you myself. So that worked out all right".

Table 5

Captain Patch It's convention attendance in 2014

Convention	**Location**	**City (State, Country)**	**Date(s)**
Supanova	Melbourne Showgrounds	Flemington, Victoria, Australia	13–15 April
Supanova	Sydney Showgrounds	Sydney Olympic Park, New South Wales, Australia	13–15 June
Oz Comic-Con	Royal Exhibition Building	Carlton, Victoria, Australia	5–6 July
Comic Con	San Diego Convention Centre	San Diego, California, USA	24–27 July
SMASH!	Rosehill Gardens Grand Pavillion	Rosehill, New South Wales, Australia	9–10 August
CHAOz	Wilson Hall, The University of Melbourne	Parkville, Victoria, Australia	23–24 August
Animaga	Royal Exhibition Building	Carlton, Victoria, Australia	27–28 September
Armageddon	Melbourne Showgrounds	Flemington, Victoria, Australia	18–19 October
PAX Aus	Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre	South Wharf, Victoria, Australia	31 October–2 November
Supanova	Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre	Southbank, Brisbane, Australia	28–30 November

Captain Patch-It's development of a one-person cosplay repair service was grounded in years of experience as a cosplayer and was not driven by financial motives. Employed full-time as a laboratory technician, Patch-It framed his efforts as a contribution to community wellbeing rather than an entrepreneurial venture:

"A lot of cosplayers are younger people, who may still be in Uni or don't have jobs, you know? They spend enough on their costumes to start with. So, I'm not going to make them pay even more just to keep going for the day."

As discussed in Chapter 6, the cosplay community is predominately composed of hobbyists, many of whom face financial constraints when engaging in the practice. Patch-It reflected on the trade-offs younger cosplayers often described: "*A lot of people, you know, will say, 'Not eating this weekend, 'cause I'm gonna to a con', or something like that, and you're thinking, oh, that's not okay"*. His decision to operate on an unpaid basis, also intersected with broader structural considerations. Conventions are highly commercialised environments where organisers closely

regulate on-site transactions, presenting barriers for participants and cultural intermediaries seeking to monetise their skills. From the perspective of event management, an unauthorised attendee collecting payment for services risks breaching event policies and complicating relationships between organisers, contractors, and volunteers. Acknowledging these constraints, Captain Patch-It noted the reputational and practical risks involved:

> *"People kept going, 'please take my money,' and I've just gone 'look, I really can't'…When I was there, I'd even buy my own badge to get in. If there was any money changing hands, you know, I don't want to be kicked out. So, I've gone, I'm just gonna blanket say no because I don't want to get on anyone's bad side and it's not worth it over some hot glue."*

As his visibility within the community grew, so too did the range of repair services and resources he provided. However, his refusal to accept payment highlights the structural tensions within cosplay economies: while attendees valued and sought to remunerate his labour, the commercial governance of conventions restricts the ability for such services to operate legitimately, reinforcing—and ultimately limiting—the positioning of cosplay as a leisure pursuit rather than a viable career pathway.

With cosplayers flocking to Patch-It's repair services, and even enquiring after methods for compensation, it was clear that the 'framing' process was well underway for cosplay repairs, with the community beginning to see these activities as 'legitimate and worthy points of attachment' as the 'intended receivers' of these services (Maguire & Matthews, 2012). Cosplay repair services often include simple fixes, which cosplayers will specifically request. This could be as simple as hot-gluing broken pieces of a prop back together, or stitching a broken lining on a garment, but sometimes repair work at conventions like PAX Aus can be more demanding. Patch-It explained:

> *"For PAX, everyone does their big costumes—it's their big con of the year—and so we've had people come in with these giant set of wings that just aren't holding together. And you're doing your best with what you can, with the minimal stuff we've got, and you're just trying to get them through the day."*

Presented below is a short excerpt from the researcher's fieldwork observations of the cosplay repair station in action at the PAX Aus 2019 convention—including a follow-up discussion with Patch-It—to demonstrate the nature of the service and space he helped to establish:

> **Fieldwork Notes (11/10/2019)**
>
> **Research Location:**
>
> Cosplay Repair Station at the PAX2019 convention, Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre (Victoria, Australia)

Case Study:

Captain Patch-It

Today, I met Captain Patch-It at PAX and was given a tour of his main place of work, the Cosplay Repair Station. Mid-tour, I saw what Patch-It described as a "*big costume fix*". Looking around the space, which could not have been larger than a standard change room, cosplayers were resting as their costumes were sewn, glued, soldered and welded back together in minutes. The environment still held the excited buzz of a convention atmosphere, but the relative peace and quiet of the space belied how constantly busy it was.

Suddenly, a cosplayer entered the repair room. To the uninitiated – as I was at the time – her costume was glorious, but unfamiliar. At first glance, I noticed that the cosplay design featured a twist on the aesthetics of Korean pop (K-pop) groups, combined with the type of fantasy character traits I'd see in a fitting in a videogame. She was wearing a glistening, fox-like tail that glowed with a kind of holographic sheen; and perched atop her head were a set of fluffy, white fox ears. A quick Google search confirmed that she was cosplaying as a character called *Ahri*, a popular, playable champion based in the *League of Legends (LoL)* gaming franchise (https://www.leagueoflegends.com). However, I was surprised to find that this iteration of *Ahri* was not *Ahri* from the LoL videogame, but the *Ahri* from a virtual music group – created by the game's developers, *Riot Games* –who imagined champions like *Ahri* from the game as K-pop stars. In-game, *Ahri's* signature costume features nine magical, flowing tails that often glow and change colours to produce an ethereal, mystical effect. I was immediately struck by the apparent detailed, meta-knowledge of videogame characters and lore that might underpin recognition of certain cosplay designs and wondered how this might factor into the repair process.

I watched the cosplayer show a picture of her character and describing the costume to Patch-It and Ahri, who were thankfully familiar with the character. To replicate the fantasy-inspired character design, the cosplayer was wearing a tail made from an inflatable, shiny and balloon-like material, which was secured at the lapel, and waist, and at the back of the costume. It was her second time visiting the repair station for the tail, that day, and she was devastated. Despite its size and complexity, I watched as Patch-It and team got to work on a fix. Later, when I asked him to explain the repair process, and how it progressed throughout the day, he explained:

> *"So, first time she came around, I've gotten a bunch of clear thread, basically hooking the tail to the collar, and I've gone, 'Look, it looks okay', because it's clear-ish thread and it worked for most of the day. Then she came back, and said that she'd had a 'bit of a jump', or something like that, just put a bit too much pressure on the connection. So, I've replaced it with elastic bands, then at least it's got a bit more structure to it. It doesn't look as nice, but you know, we do what we can with what we have"*.

> The repair team solved the matter with patience and empathy, offering support and comfort during a time that was especially uncomfortable for the cosplayer. After the repair was over, the cosplayer was excitedly able to re-join the convention. Patch-It mentioned to me, off-hand, that he had made an internal note to improve future repair services: *"Next year I might invest in some fishing wire or something a bit, you know, clearer and stronger";* even in his downtime, reflecting on opportunities for continuous improvement. I can see how, with resourcefulness, innovation, and collaboration – Patch-It has established a space of practice that improves the convention experience for so many cosplayers.

7.2.2 'The Ultimate Cosplay Hero': Gaining Expert Status

By April 2014, Captain Patch-It's one-man repair station had grown rapidly in scale, as word spread over social media and enjoyed a level of virality. He was a highly active and engaged member of a Facebook community for cosplayers in Australia, where he initially advertised his services and crowd-sourced ideas on what to bring to future cons. It was at this point, he felt, the "*whole thing blew up"* online. He had built a cross-platform digital identity through a suite of accounts developed under his Captain Patch-It persona (@CaptPatchIt), which were all growing in popularity, including: a Facebook page, and accounts on *Tumblr*, X (formerly Twitter*)* and Instagram. Patch-It's work even began to be championed by journalists from international media outlets (Hernandez, 2014; Mallikarjuna, 2014). Hernandez (2014) dubbed Captain Patch-It '*The Ultimate Cosplay Hero'* in an article on *Kotaku*, and Mallikarjuna (2014) described him *as 'A Hero Among Cosplayers'* in *Buzzfeed*, the by-line reading*:'Petition for there to be a Captain Patch-It at every con from now till the end of time'.* Gaining this level of global visibility, and high praise, resulted in an influx of messages on his social media pages, as Patch-It explains:

> *"A bunch of people overseas were, sort of, messaging me and saying, "Oh can we do this? Can we do this?" in various locations? And I've gone, "Oh go for it." My only rule is don't charge people for it. Do it just because you want to. And that was pretty much it. But otherwise, go for it, help people and stuff."*

Wanting to connect to these interested people, Patch-It would also launch the Facebook page for the *International Cosplay Corps* (2020). Self-titled *"Patch-Iteers*" started popping up globally from April 2014, each encouraged to create what Patch-It called a *"cosplay assist alter-ego"*. Patch-It's "unit" grew to include a range of new members; from *Sgt. Swift Stitch* (n.d.) in the USA, *Major Minor Repair* (n.d.) in Malaysia, and *Sgt. Cosmaker* (n.d.) in Spain.

Not long after he launched the ICC, Patch-It was contacted by Sgt Swift Stitch and Sgt Cross-Stitch based in San Diego, who were planning to attend the world's largest comic convention, the *San Diego Comic Con* (SDCC). They wanted to conduct cosplay repairs at the convention, and Patch-It let them know they were welcome to do so. Serendipitously, in July 2014, Patch-It went

to visit another Patch-Iteer in Canada, who went by *Admiral Fix*. After visiting Canada, Patch-It was scheduled to visit New York before spending his last few days in San Diego. When planning his travels, tickets had not yet been released for *SDCC*, but knowing he would be there at the time, he had tried to factor this into his trip. He recalls thinking:

> *"I'll be there during Comic-Con, tickets aren't out yet, but yeah, I'll get the tickets. I'll book flights and stuff because I'd like to give it a shot and if I don't get in, I'll see what else is around... Didn't get tickets. But one of the cosplayers in San Diego said, 'I'm volunteering!', and as a volunteer, you're entitled to a code that lets you buy a ticket for a day. So, it's not a free ticket, but it allows you to buy it directly, instead of having to go through a raffle".*

Seizing the opportunity, he was able to attend *SDCC* – dressed in full Patch-It garb – and joined Sgt. Swift Stitch and Sgt. Cross Stitch as they walked the convention, showing them the rounds of how he operates his cosplay repair process in Australia.

Figure 23

International Cosplay Corps



Notes. Retrieved from the International Cosplay Corps *Facebook* page (Captain Patch-It, 20XX). Reproduced with permission from third-party copyright holder, Captain Patch-It.

Later in 2014, a PAX Aus organiser—who was also a member of the cosplay Facebook group that Patch-It belonged to—made a post asking the community if they should have a cosplay change room at PAX Aus that year. Quickly, other members of the group started to bring Captain Patch-It into the conversation; he recalls:

> *"People started tagging my Patch-It profile in the comments, saying, 'Speak to this guy, he might be able to help you out'".*

The organiser ended up reaching out to Patch-It through Facebook's *Messenger* feature, offering him space at the upcoming convention to run his voluntary operation:

> *"PAX gave me an office down near Tabletop[14]. They built the change room structures,*

[14] "Tabletop" is an abbreviation of the "tabletop gaming section" at the PAX Aus games convention.

> *let me set up and do my thing, then kind of just left me alone. That's what a lot of cons do, they sort of just go—Here's space. Do what you want".*

Patch-It embraced this offer of space, using it to provide his repair work from a central location at PAX Aus in October 2014, where he started to develop a comfortable area for conducting repairs:

> *"At that point I started just bringing bottled water and sweets and stuff. Then just going, now we've got a space, people can actually sit down and rest and all of that. So that's when it became a bit more of a comfort-zone type thing, a chill out zone".*

He acquired a team of volunteers who would assist at these new repair spaces, managed by Patch-It. PAX Aus also provided one of their official volunteers, who are titled "Enforcers" during the event.

> *"There was another girl who was looking after the whole thing from an official standpoint as an Enforcer. So, she worked with me and I kind of just popped in there as Patch-It, but not in any official capacity. I was there but I wasn't part of the con. I wasn't a volunteer. I wasn't an exhibitor… They went, 'Look, we'll just put you in and you do your thing'".*

Over the next few years, Captain Patch-It, and his cosplay corps, established a reputation for providing a safe environment for cosplayers to repair garments at conventions across Australia; while the ICC continued to grow as a digital, global community of cosplay repairers. When considering gaining trust from the cosplay community, Patch-It reflects:

> *"I think it helps that in the local scene I've managed to make Cosplay repair a thing. So, people go, 'Oh yep. it's Caps' Patch-It, I trust you to do a thing'. I've gone, 'I don't know what I'm doing, but at least I know roughly some kind of fix'.*

Being a relatively novel practice, in games and pop culture event spaces, Captain Patch-It and crew would have to adapt to the needs of the cosplay community as they went, learning how to better improve their skills and define the practice of cosplay repair:

> *"Each year just evolves, you know, you take stock every year and go, this is what we were missing, this is what we need, and we'll slowly go add that on. So, for instance, I've got soldering irons and stuff this year, because there's been that one person who's gone, 'All these wirings were broken'. And I would have to be like, 'I can't do much about it, I can tape it together, but if it's not soldered it might not do the trick'".*

The Patch-It costume, too, has been through many iterations. Each year, he enjoys refreshing the outfit, coming up with new creative uses of different parts of his costume. "*One year*", he recalls, "*I had a pirate-themed thing, so had I pouches, and stuff, and I had this really cool leather cuff with sewing equipment on it*". Another feature of the pirate iteration of the outfit was "*a pirate hat with feathers, but the feathers were actually just Textas and Sharpies*", which attendees could

pull out and use. In 2018, the Patch-It costume adopted a Safari theme, featuring khaki-coloured zookeeper-style clothes, and a wide-brim hat. Wanting some respite from carrying so many supplies on his outfit, what was notably missing was his notoriously "*usable*" attire. Despite the absence of his trademark garb, Patch-It found an artful solution, based on the original "*cosplay medic*" outfit; in a metal toolbox, which appeared like an old and battered first aid kit, and emblazoned with the words "*Cosplay Repair*":

> *"I actually only bought it at the start of the year but, you know, you scratch it up, add on some hydrogen peroxide and it'll artificially rust. So it looks like it's a lot older than it is... People go, "Oh, where did you find it? At an antique shop?", and I've gone,"Nah. Just eBay, 70 bucks[15]".*

7.2.3 A Heroic Impact: The Enduring Effects of Captain Patch-It on the Cosplay Industry

Captain Patch-It's contributions have had a lasting impact in the cosplay convention space, with practices he pioneered—such as on-site costume repair—eventually being adopted and formalised by both local and international conventions. Reflecting, in 2019, on their trajectory within the Australian convention industry, Patch-It noted that it had taken five years since PAX Aus first approached him to provide cosplay repair services before his work received any formal recognition. During that period, he had supplied these services on a voluntary basis at every event, a process he described as markedly slow:

> *"I think up to last year I was there "off the books". So, I'd do my thing and I'd have the room, but I wasn't really recognized. Over time, they kept wanting me to be an Enforcer, but I didn't know what that would be – because I couldn't wear my own costume, and I'd have to stick by their rules, and keep by their shifts".*

PAX Aus refer to its volunteers as "Enforcers", a formalised role that requires adherence to organisation structures and shift-based allocations. For Patch-It, the requirement to register as an Enforcer introduced tensions, as it meant relinquishing autonomy over the cosplay repair work he had become known for. As he explained, registration created the possibility of being reassigned to unrelated tasks: You can "*sign up as a volunteer*" but once signed up they can say "*Cool. You're on on line management. Watch this stall for your shift*". Such experiences reflected broader challenges in negotiating the bureaucratic requirements of large-scale events, which, according to Patch-It, often involved "*iffy*" communication and misalignment between his expertise and official role assignments. Patch-It explains that a convention organiser could say, "*We've got you down for door watching"* and, he continues, "*Then I'm stuck doing not what I want. And so, that's why I've gone, if I'm off the books then I'm a free agent. I could do my own thing to some degree".* /Despite his fears, Patch-It decided to take the chance and sign up as a PAX Aus Enforcer for

[15] Australian slang term for 'dollar'.

2019. "*This is my first con being technically on the books*", he added. Over time, more cons had been providing space, as well as paid and volunteer Enforcers to support his repair stations. As Captain Patch-It explained:

> *"There's dedicated volunteers or "Enforcers" for PAX, for instance, and Oz Comic-Con also dedicates a couple of volunteers to the area... They can acquire some of the Enforcers that are paid or volunteering through PAX, pretty much; to become like my minions, or something".*

In turn, his relationship with organisers at various Australian cons developed, offering better communication channels and support for his work. He explained that *"nowadays"* he is "more tied in with the cons", by being given access to direct communication channels with management for cons like Oz Comic-Con, Supanova, and PAX Aus.

> *"The higher ups have really been supportive and they're like, "Yeah, we're happy to do what you need. You do what you need to do, let us know what you need in terms of staffing, hours, whatever. You know… you're in our Slack channel". So yeah, if there are any issues, I can ping them, they can get on to it and I don't have to flag down people".*

Just as Patch-It's support from convention staff improved, so too did their general attitudes and approach to cosplay. He paved the way for future cosplay repair programs and provided crucial support where there was a noticeable need in his community. Cosplay has not generally been encouraged at gaming-focused conventions like PAX Aus, despite its direct connection to the games-related fandom.

As explored in this thesis so far, particularly in Chapter 5, there have been historical barriers to participation for female cosplayers in gaming and pop culture community event spaces, such as conventions. Conventions like PAX Aus are starting to acknowledge and contribute to the removal of these barriers, by integrating community-driven, dedicated services and spaces for cosplayers, including repair stations, into their event planning processes:

> *"Not attempting to take credit at all, but before I was around, there wasn't much in the way of cosplay besides the cosplay competition. There wasn't anything that was dedicated to cosplayers. They didn't have Oz Comic-Con's 'Cosplay Central,' they didn't have the repair spaces".*

Cosplay Central is Oz Comic-Con's central hub for cosplayers at the convention. As Patch-It explains, it "*grew from let's make a repair area"* to *"let's have more things for cosplayers"*". He continues:

> *"I think Supanova's sort of taken that, and a couple of years later they've gone, let's make an area that's dedicated to cosplayers' and they went in with Cosplay HQ. So I think it's been only pretty recent that the 'let's try and cater to the cosplay thing' is happening".*

Explaining why conventions may have started to provide further support to cosplayers, Patch-It also brought up the economic considerations that may also underpin the attitude change of Australian games and pop culture conventions towards cosplay. He explains:

> *"Cosplay-wise, cons are realising that cosplayers are an untapped market. I'd say, a solid five, six years ago, Cosplayers attended conventions, but they weren't a focus. They were just people who attended. But then, over the last couple of years, Supanova and Oz Comic-Con have started doing Cosplay HQ and Cosplay Central. Dedicated spaces where they'll get Cosplay based guests and they'll set up displays of other people's costumes and put more of a focus on it. So I think they've realized, 'If we make these guys happy, they'll come to our convention".*

As cosplay continues to grow in popularity, and the repair stations Patch-It launched have become mainstays at Australian conventions, commercial interests have also started to appropriate the craft – not without taking the opportunity to profit from the endeavour:

> *"I think a few of the other brands have caught on. So, I know Bernina, and maybe one of the other sewing machine brands do their own repair things, so they'll actually get a booth to advertise a sewing machine, plus they say, 'Come over here, and get stuff fixed, and look at our sewing machines' or 'Watch us fix your thing with the sewing machines', and stuff. So, they're realizing once again the untapped market of cosplay".*

As Patch-It looks to the future, he considers why he has engaged in this practice – without compensation – for so long.

> *"It was passion slash just feeling obligated to continue. I just thought if I stop, then what are people going to do? What did they do before? But I think people have become a bit expectant that there will be there cosplay repair nowadays. Years ago, you know, people were like "That's a thing?" and now it's like "Where's the thing?".*

As he continues to mentor new Patch-Iteers, delegating more than relentlessly labouring, Captain Patch-It can watch his legacy evolve, knowing he was the superhero cosplayers did not realise they needed.

7.3 Creating Australia's First Cosplay Supply Store: A Case Study on Lumin's Workshop

Maggie and John are the co-owners of Lumin's Workshop, Australia's first and – to date – only dedicated, brick-and-mortar, cosplay supply store. Their physical shopfront also features a community crafting space, where they host cosplay community events and skill-based workshops. Maggie and John developed their business by '**framing**' (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 553) the value of services that sourced and imported, as well as processed and sold, cosplay-specific supplies to the Australian market. As confirmed through interviews, presented in Chapter 4

(Section 4.2) of this thesis, cosplay supplies were previously difficult to acquire for Australian cosplayers, due to the absence of a reliable, local market. Maggie initially leveraged her passion for sourcing new cosplay materials, and her cultural capital as a competition-winning cosplayer, to develop '**expertise'** (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 553) in the community. Maggie and John collaborated on many cosplay designs, with John contributing his knowledge and prior studies in engineering to add innovative features, including the implementation of LED lights and novel materials like thermoplastic *Worbla*. Maggie and John would transition into professionalising their activities, including supplying and selling novel cosplay materials and supplies; as well as delivering workshops in cosplay crafting. Lumin's Workshop have maintained operations for just over eleven years; still standing as the largest brick-and-mortar cosplay retailer in Australia and a profitable online business; standing as testament to their demonstrable legacy and '**impact'** (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 553) on the professionalisation of the Australian cosplay industry.

Figure 24

Maggie from Lumin's Workshop (photographed by Steamkittens)



Notes: Maggie cosplaying as the Lich King from Diablo III (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012). Photographed and edited by Leigh Hyland (Steamkittens). Reproduced with explicit permission from copyright holder Leigh Hyland (Steamkittens).

7.3.1 Crafting a Supply Chain: 'Framing' Cosplay Speciality Products and Workshops

In 2014, Maggie was a talented cosplayer wrangling with the limited, local craft supplies available and transforming them into costumes, props, and accessories. Her first costume was an armour-set for character *Bandos* – the god of war in Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) *Runescape* (https://www.runescape.com) – and it involved "*fibreglass, air-drying clay and cardboard*" and weighed in at 15 kilograms. "*The whole fiberglass thing*", she stressed, "*Never again*". Though this early foray into complex cosplay designs would precipitate a career of innovation and experimentation that has forever changed the Australian cosplay industry.

"I've always had a thing for materials", Maggie states. As an Architecture student at the time, at The University of Melbourne, experimenting with new materials—and the aspects of the course that focused on them—was what ultimately captured her attention. "*It was far more interesting than the rest of my degree*", she admits. "*I remember I used a lot of the more specialised cosplay materials to craft my architectural models, back in the day. The tutors would be like, 'What is this? We've never seen this before', and I'd be like, 'Oh, this is the material I imported from, you know, this country or that country*'". "*I did the same thing in my Engineering degree!*", adds John Reading, who joined myself and Maggie in an afternoon Zoom chat at the tail-end of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022. At the time, John was – and still is – Maggie's partner in life and in business. As for the business side of things, "*He didn't really have a choice*", Maggie jokes, the shared enthusiasm in the way they describe the origins of the business belying the quip. Standing in the store at present, it is hard to imagine a time when Maggie and John were operating from backpacks and home storage. The large space is a warehouse transformed, fitted with shelves of cosplay goods interspersed with physical prototypes of armour, props, accessories, and outfits. Maggie explains the circumstances that led to the creation of Lumin's Workshop, "*Back in 2014, there was not a whole lot available, in general, for cosplay and I actually just started off importing materials to use myself and then we stored it in our apartment*". Today, Lumin's Workshop operates from a central physical site in Campbellfield, Victoria. Central to the area is a learning space used for cosplay craft workshops and community events—another core aspect of their business.

Their journey to this point—from apartment to shopfront—was far from simple. Maggie explains that they "*were actually both at uni for the first two years of our business*", John stayed on to complete his Master's in Mechatronics, while Maggie finished her Architecture degree. Both would then set forth full-time into the business, which would be named Lumin's Workshop. As for the name, Maggie explains, "*To begin with, a lot of our costumes had lights… at the time, not a lot of people's costumes had lights, and I think that really helped us stand out*". Initially, they primarily stocked rolls of foam and a specialty craft material from Germany, which was being introduced into the cosplay world at the time: *Worbla*. What is commonly referred to as *Worbla* is the brand name of a thermoplastic which is particularly malleable when heated, as well as being self-adhesive. This material can significantly reduce crafting time, when compared to more traditional foam-type materials. For example, one might imagine crafting a helm from a video game that features a set of large horns and adornments. Naturally, hand-sculpting with more flexible materials allows for greater precision, while self-adhesion reduces the need for additional processes, such as hot glue. In a practice like cosplay, where builds can take hundreds of hours, these minor improvements have made for large leaps when it comes to crafting more accurate

costumes. This is also an example of the improvements to cosplay crafting technologies and materials we also saw reflected in Chapter 4.

Initially, they dedicated three days a week to Lumin's. John was working a second job in Bendigo on his off days, 185 kilometres from their primary location in Melbourne's CBD, while also trying to complete his degree. During this busy time, Maggie detailed how their business was growing, with people contacting her for materials through the Facebook page she had dedicated to her cosplay. *"I guess more and more people started getting the word out that I actually, you know, wasn't using floor mats like everyone else",* Maggie explained, *"and that I had specialised materials I was importing in".* Maggie continued:

> "*People would message me to buy it. It kind of just started like that. And then people who I didn't know approached me on Facebook and would be like, 'I heard from so and so that you were selling materials. Sometimes I would actually bring materials to uni to sell to people from uni as well".*

By 2016, Lumin's had already outgrown the Facebook *Messenger* feature as their singular mode of operation for the sales of cosplay supplies. At this point, they decided to open an online store on the *Shopify* ecommerce platform. Today, their online store remains the most prominent sales avenue for their business, with most transactions occurring through the website they designed using the platform. As Maggie explains:

> *"Online sales contribute about 90–95% of our entire business. The store is more so for if people are unsure on what they want to do, and how they want to go about it, they can come in and we can explain to them how they could do something and what materials they'd need and you can sort of show them in person, which I really like. It's more hands-on.*

They created and maintained all aspects of the website themselves, and still do so to this day, with John managing a lot of the web design elements, and Maggie creating the graphics.

7.3.2 Making 'Expertise': Creating Lumin's Workshop

After opening their online site, Lumin's continued in an upward trajectory. They had found a niche in the Australian marketplace that allowed them a somewhat dream route to success, in terms of transforming a passion project into a functioning business. "*I think we were very lucky*" John mentioned, *"because cosplay was really starting to become more prominent and mainstream at the time*". Maggie and John both found that the increase in popularity of properties like the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) helped shepherd in greater societal understandings of cosplay. John reflected on this period, noting, *"There'd be more people showing up at Comic Con, seeing people in cosplay and realising that's something you could do".* John explained how he felt the mainstream success of media like the MCU helped with broader acceptance of

subcultures related to games and pop culture, which were once considered comparatively more niche interests at the time. He explained that he felt like before this cultural shift:

> *"Cosplay just had this kind of connotation as a super nerdy thing people did. It wasn't something that most people would even touch. But with it being so much more normalised and, you know, you'd show up at Comic Con and see Thor or something. It's just bringing it into the consciousness of people as a thing that happens so it's not so weird and 'out-there' anymore".*

Being a business primarily established through social media and ecommerce platforms, Maggie and John also reflected on the impacts of digital technologies in the space, and the effects it has had on the general accessibility of cosplay as a practice. Maggie explains that "*Cosplay was something that you saw people doing but you could never see the process. So you could never understand how something was made*". This, she explained, made the final product appear "*unreachable*". Extrapolating further, Maggie thought of a salient example from popular culture: *"Remember when MasterChef became a thing and then everyone started enjoying cooking?".* John added, *"Yeah, everyone has that one friend who cooks really well"*, explaining that people are naturally curious about how they achieved the results. John continued, "*It's just years of experience and playing around. But then Masterchef becomes a thing and you get to see the process, right?".* He compared this to cosplay, *"It can show people that everyone can do it"*, adding, *"I think that, to me, really made a big difference for cosplay. Seeing the WIP*[16] *shots, things like that, where you can actually see how to source materials or build something".* The benefits of broader socio-cultural recognition of cosplay provided crucial opportunities for people, like Maggie and John, to professionalise and concentrate their expertise into the development of a creative entrepreneurial business venture. However, they also would face the challenge of adopting a more professional or business-minded approach to their endeavours.

Maggie captured the tensions that emerged from channelling her expertise in sourcing materials into a business venture. She captured the issues that may arise from transitioning from a community position as a non-commercially oriented hobbyist cosplayer. Maggie explained—noting that she did not want to appear negative towards the community—that she felt there "*was a bit of a divide between the people who wanted to capitalise on their hobby and the people who couldn't or didn't want to".* She continued:

> "*In my opinion, it almost divided the community. Some people were really against the capitalisation of their hobby. And other people saw it as a way for them to do what they*

[16] WIP is short for 'Work-in-progress' and relates to a common tag in cosplay communities on social media (#WIP), which cosplayers use to tag photos of their projects to share with the wider community.

> *wanted and still support themselves in some capacity – so they would only have to work part-time, or something".*

The blurred lines between cosplay as form of hobbyist leisure and commercial endeavour have proved challenging for the cosplay community. As explored in Chapter 6, hobbyists and professionals alike may monetise different aspects of their practice. This can make it challenging to determine where the labour is concentrated, and how fairly it is compensated. Maggie discussed this division, adding:

> *"The people who do it semi-professionally, I guess, can afford to spend a lot of time on their costumes versus the people who can't and purely do it as a hobby. Those people who do it semi-professionally, they'll get free supplies, and would have more time than everyone else, because – you know – they were supplementing their income and wouldn't have to work as much as everyone else. Like, a full working week".*

In the case of Lumin's Workshop, the team has sought to address perceptions of inequality that may arise when experienced cosplayers transition into commercial roles and begin monetising their expertise within the community. Maggie reflected on this dynamic, explaining: "*I think that the one thing those people don't see is though, yes, we're making money off the materials, we also give back to the community in terms of education*". She elaborated on how this principle is embedded within their business model: "*We provide free templates on our website. We do panels, we do classes, and we do a lot of it for free*". John added, "*At the end of the day, we can't give away the materials for free, for the business to exist, you know*?".

As the name suggests, the community education component of Lumin's Workshop was also a formative part of the business' early conception. Coordinated primarily through Maggie's Facebook cosplay page at the time, and by posting in groups on the platform, Maggie started to provide skill-based workshops for local cosplayers in Victoria, Australia. She explained, "*I actually used to teach them out of my apartment*", then, to John, she remarked, laughing, "*Remember, all the people around my kitchen counter? Oh my god*". John, also chuckling, added, *"Yeah, we used to clear the whole room. And we only had five chairs in our entire apartment, so I think it was a maximum of 4 people plus Mag".* Maggie continued, *"We started running classes; and we'd also do big, free mass workshops at some conventions".* Maggie also explained the community benefits of their approach to teaching cosplay-related skills: *"It shows people that it really doesn't take a lot of skill. It takes patience, but you don't need to have huge amounts of skill to get started or to create something that looks pretty nice".* The workshops held by *Lumin's* focus on particular aspects of cosplay crafting, from working with different materials to specialised practices like welding or working with electronic components, such as LED lights. The goal of each workshop, Maggie explained, is for each participant to leave with a physical craft that they develop through the session: *"You can paint it up, and it's something that you can*

physically hold. Some people just don't really learn by watching, they have to learn by doing". John added, shortly after: *"Yeah, and it shows people it's just a bunch of relatively simple steps to get to that really cool, polished finished product; as opposed to, you know, 20 years of experience and an apprenticeship".*

As they progressed through 2016, their online business succeeding, Maggie and John were quickly outgrowing their apartment-based storage solution. Their goods were spilling out of their own cupboards, and into those of their friends and relatives. It was time for a better storage solution. During this period, Maggie's parents were renting a large warehouse in Somerton, Victoria that featured an upstairs mezzanine. Maggie and John had approximately 200 square metres of space that they were free to use. However, there were a few caveats that came with using it, namely: no lift, ventilation, air con, or heating. John recounted, *"In summer we used to pack at like 10 o clock at night 'cause it was just too hot".* Maggie continued, *"Yeah, or even later, like 2am, honestly. As late as we could possibly go. I remember, actually, one summer—Worbla melted upstairs".* Ever determined, Maggie and John persevered through these arduous conditions as, all the while, still pursuing their university studies. Travelling together on the tram to The University of Melbourne, in Parkville, Victoria—with the business front of mind—they noticed a fortuitous opportunity which might improve their situation. Maggie explained: *"We would go along Sydney Road to go to uni and then we saw this shop that came up for rent on Sydney Road, and that ended up actually being our first shop".* Interested in the space, the pair went to assess it in person, only to encounter a significant issue. It did not have a floor. Despite this, they reached out to the real estate agent and even submitted an initial application, but received no response. A few weeks later, a floor had been added to the space and a new agent was assigned to the property. Submitting a second application, they would finally secure a lease for their first physical site of operation. As business demands continued to grow and evolve, John found himself constantly reducing his study load until, by the end of 2018, he had to let go of his studies: *"With the way they scheduled the classes it was gonna take another 2 years to finish the remainder of it. So, I just decided to drop it cause the business was taking off".* Making this personal sacrifice to his immediate future also meant John was able to work full time at the store and help secure the long-term future of Lumin's Workshop.

7.3.3 Building an 'Impact': Australia's First Cosplay Repair Store

On 25 September 2017, Lumin's Workshop opened the first brick-and-mortar cosplay supply store in Australia. Their newly secured Sydney Road shopfront was positioned in a vibrant creative hub in Melbourne's inner-north, the suburb of Brunswick, Victoria. Though a brilliant opportunity for the business, their storage situation was still far from ideal. To place some costume, armour and prop displays on racks, they had to sacrifice some of their already limited

floor space of 60 square metres. Unfortunately, they would have to keep the Somerton warehouse to compensate. With most of their business occurring online, all deliveries would still need to go to a postal Business Hub. Maggie recalls, sighing, as she remembers the daily grind of these early times: *"Every day, John would drive our parcels to the Business Hub".* John added, "*In summertime. Like, half an hour away*". Maggie confirmed, adding, "*And then he would go to the storage and pick out more stock for the shop. That was our routine"*. Things were not to be this way for ever, though, with Maggie and John constantly working to progress the business. By the end of 2018, they were able to hire their first full-time employee. Their workshops would also expand through use of the Sydney Road site, where they could host up to 8 people per class. Maggie explained that there were additional safety benefits to now running Lumin Workshop's cosplay workshops from a storefront: *"One of the really big upsides of having our Sydney Road shop was that people stopped finding out where I lived".*

With Maggie's cosplay workshops growing in popularity at the Sydney Road store, John and Maggie would also start to engage more frequently with Australian games and pop culture conventions interested in hosting modified versions of their workshops at their events. Among these was the now-defunct *Madman Anime and Pop Culture* (*Madman*) convention. At conventions like *Madman,* the Lumin's Workshop team were able to deliver large-scale versions of their workshops, with the ability to host up to 50 cosplayers. With their workshops usually being tailored for smaller class sizes, John described modifying and adapting this experience for conventions, going "*through several iterations"* to find the right approach. John explained: "*We started off with Maggie drawing up a bunch of templates, and then we would pre-cut supplies".* These prepared materials would allow cosplayers to make their artefact around a central crafting table, where participants—as John described— *"could just pick whatever template they wanted and build that".* To assist with the builds, a member of the Lumin's Workshop team would collaborate with skilled cosplayers, hiring them to help out participants. John continued, "*There'd be a few of us walking around helping people. We'd have a bunch of really experienced cosplayers who knew what they were doing with foam and things like that".* Maggie and John were able to expand the impact of their work as cosplay suppliers and cultural intermediaries by producing workshops for the approximately 500 participants who attend during a convention weekend. John explained that their workshops "*evolved very quickly*" as a result, due to the difficulty of managing participants "*doing different things, at different stages*". John explained how they overcame the "*absolute chaos*" that can ensue when participants may skip ahead and reach challenges faster than the group. John remembered how they amended this: "*Over the next couple of conventions we started scheduling more builds where we would clear the whole space and then you would come in and everyone would follow along at the same time. So it was more like one of our classes but condensed into an hour".*

The brand recognition that Lumin's Workshop were able to develop also provided them with a new opportunity to engage with conventions as sponsors. They explained the challenges they faced when deciding how to approach the business interests involved in managing conventions, who would—in some cases—ask them to provide prizes for cosplay competitions held during their events. These prizes were often asked to be voluntarily provided to the convention, in return for the publicity or marketing potential of being a sponsor for their competitions. The prizes requested would differ from substantial sums of money (through vouchers for cosplay supplies), products (cosplay materials) or labour (free cosplay workshops). John described the ethical dilemma of selecting which conventions might be worth sponsoring in this manner, questioning *"why a bigger company would even care about a couple thousand-dollars of prizes",* especially when *"a smaller convention could really benefit from it".* He explained the thought process behind this decision, noting, *"Let's just say, for example, sponsoring a big convention is 10 units of money. But, instead, we could provide 10 smaller conventions with 1 unit of prizes. So, to us, that's a lot more beneficial.* He continued that it feels like "*you're really helping them out. Whereas, with giving money to a bigger convention, you're really just throwing money into their ocean".*

Figure 25

Lumin's Workshop at Madman Anime and Pop Culture Festival (Melbourne 2019)



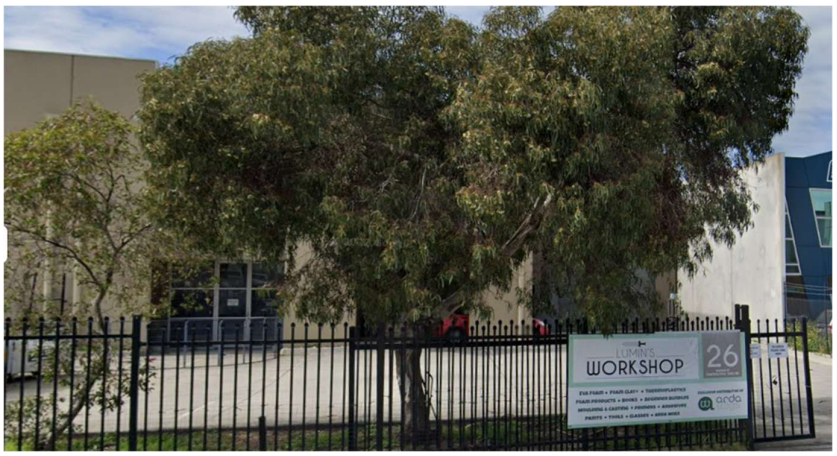
The Sydney Road store, although successful, was once again becoming far too small to meet demand. Primarily, this was due to the expansion of global cosplay supply markets, which would increasingly expand their product range. Maggie and John explained how this contributed to their quick expansion, offering the example of launching a new range from international cosplay brand *Arda Wigs* (https://arda-wigs.com/). The sheer scale of the range contributed to them needing to seek out another solution. John explained, "*It's what really killed it, because that would be an*

entire store of its own". Maggie added, "*That range itself probably takes up about 100 square metres in our warehouse, it's like 2,000 unique SKUs*". Finally, a critical turning point was reached when they had the opportunity to move the contents of their Sydney Road store. They were able to secure half of the warehouse's floorspace from another business located in Campbellfield, Victoria. John commented on some of the initial benefits: "*It wasn't hot, and it was much closer to the business hub*"—a significant improvement to what John terms the "*Somerton Upstairs Hot Storage Area*". Almost one year later, the business that owned the other half of the warehouse would offer them the opportunity to swap spaces with Lumin's Workshop. Being on the opposite side of the warehouse, *Lumin's Workshop* could now operate with the addition of a shopfront and maker space, while having enough room for storage.

In August 2019, Lumin's Workshop launched their Campbellfield store, which is still standing and growing to this day. In 2022, at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, Maggie and John detailed their continued dedication to the future development of Lumin's Workshop as a brand. Though their online store remains the foundational component of their profit-generating activities, Maggie and John still have bigger dreams they are working towards. John shared, "*One of the goals we've always had with this larger shop, 'cause we've got so much space now, is to make it into a cosplay community hub. We probably already would have done that if it wasn't for COVID".* Maggie added:

> *"After everything calms down, we would like to do some social parties have some photographers come, set up some backdrops for people to come dress up, and get photos done. And to hang out, and stuff. That is a bit of a plan. Which – we had these before – it was stuff we were working on before COVID".*

Figure 26
Physical shopfront for Lumin's Workshop (2022)



In the post-pandemic landscape, Lumin's Workshop were returning to conventions with "Cosplay Speed-Build Competitions". Maggie described the competition as featuring *"4 cosplayers and a*

host", who would then "*pick a team and take suggestions from the audience on what [they] should make".* Then, Maggie explained, *"Both teams have to make it in the hour that you get given. It gives them a sense that you can accomplish a lot in an hour, but also how much fun it is, and that you can do it with friends".* John continues, adding:

> "*At the same time, we're also answering questions from the audience, which really adds to it. Because then you could be doing one thing, and then the audience would be like what are you doing? What is the purpose of this? What are you trying to do? And you can really explain your process and be like this is how I'm doing it, because I've got to do it fast, but this is also how you could do it if you don't have to do it in an hour. It gets people more pumped, because you go to a convention to have fun, and it's not always fun to watch a standard tutorial."*

With their workshops back up and running, and social events returning to the calendar, Lumin's Workshop has cemented their place in Australian cosplay history, with Maggie and John being the co-owners of the first dedicated supply store nationwide.

7.4 Capturing Cosplay: A Case Study on Steamkittens and Australian Convention Photography

Leigh Hyland, known professionally as Steamkittens, is widely regarded as a formative influence on the establishment of the cosplay photography scene in Australia. Hyland was among the first cosplay convention photographers to gain national recognition for his '**expertise**' (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 553), establishing a reputation for producing professional-grade photograph for cosplayers, without compensation, at conventions across the country. His '**framing**' (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 553) of cosplay photography as a service of value to the cosplay community has led to industry recognition and acknowledgement of his services, being named 'Resident Cosplay Photographer' for the national *Supanova* pop culture convention series and receiving compensation for his expenses. Hyland's '**impact**' (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 553) has created standards for treatment of cosplay photographers as invaluable cultural intermediaries in the cosplay space, setting a precedent for acknowledgement and remuneration in an emergent cultural industry.

7.4.1 It's All in the 'Framing': Becoming *Steamkittens*

Growing up in South Australia, Leigh found his love for science-fiction in a familiar franchise:

> *"I was a massive Star Wars[17] fan growing up. Ever since seeing the original in my local theatre in 1978. I lived in a small country town, and this was before pop culture was,*

[17] *Star Wars* (1986) The Walt Disney Corporation.

> *well, popular. I was seen as the odd kid that liked sci-fi and played Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)".*

Leigh remembered playing the first edition of D&D, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arnerson, 1977), and how he used to "*love all the artwork*". Similarly, he was inspired by airbrushed film posters popularised at the time:

> *"In the 80s, all the sci-fi movie posters were illustrated, they all had a particular look, and I really like that aesthetic. I think it's the composition, frame and colours in their graphic design came from my love for movie posters".*

His father worked in the graphic design department for a printing company, as a screen printer. His father, who also screen printed in his own time, would teach these skills from his home office. Leigh followed in his footsteps, professionally pursuing advertising and graphic design.

Figure 27

Steamkittens photographing professional cosplayer Yaya Han



Notes. Steamkittens photographed at the Chinese Gardens in Sydney, Australia. Republished with explicit permission from third-party copyright holder Leigh Hyland (Steamkittens).

In the years after, Leigh would realise he wanted to be a photographer during his high school years. In his words, "*a very uninspiring teacher and the much more rigid technical and chemical nature of film photography at the time*" would steer him away from traditional learning methods and towards a self-directed artistic experimental approach to advancing his photography skills. Leigh explained: *"Apart from high school, I have not studied any photography at all and I've just been playing around and teaching myself. I think that it's been both a help and a hindrance to my work".* Leigh would also learn to use design software *Adobe Photoshop* (Version 4) [Photoshop]. Being self-taught, he remembered: *"It was in the really early days of doing design on the computer. So, computer design was really restrictive".* With photography remaining a crucial hobby in his life, professionally, Leigh spent 20 years working in the evolving space of multimedia and design. Earning his bachelor's degree in advertising and graphic design, he recalls the rapid pace that the field was moving in, towards digitisation, and how practices would evolve,

providing constant career disruptions: *"When I started we still did some subjects, basically old-school printing at the time, but it already wasn't being used any more in the industry. So when they changed it, you had to re-train.* Securing a job with a multimedia company, Leigh's start in the industry was designing educational content for publishing and distribution on CD-ROMs in the early 1990s. Leigh gives an example of what his work may have entailed at the time: *"We used to do kiosks for exhibitions at the South Australian Museum. We had 12 different stages talking about different habitats and ecosystems around the world".* Eventually, their company secured a job with *Workcover*, Australia's regulatory body for occupational health and safety. Realising how much money there was in digital content, Leigh explains, "*we pivoted to online learning*". Leigh's professional work continued for many years to come, with his official position title being Creative Lead, responsible for designing online health, safety and induction courses.

Leigh has owned many point-and-click, film and digital cameras over the years, but only one can be credited as defining the future of his work as Steamkittens:

> *"I'd owned a number of point and click cameras over the years both film and digital but it wasn't until 2008 that I bought my first Digital DSLR, and that really changed my life. It was an entry-level Nikon that a friend picked up for me while he was working in Japan. Coincidentally, it was around the same time my partner and I bought our first house, so we were finally able to adopt a couple of cats from the RSPCA. So obviously, new camera, new cats…".*

He had found the perfect models to practice his photographic skills with and, serendipitously, he was also about to find his first chance to photograph professionally

> *"I practiced a lot taking photos of them, which I then sent to the shelter to thank them and show the cats settling into their new home. Well, they loved the shots and said I should come in and photograph all the cats, something I didn't need to be asked twice. Basically, all I photographed for 5 years was rescue animals. At first it was just adoption photos but then expanded to promotional material, shelter signage and I even started to shoot humans for their social media and annual reports".*

Wanting to further explore his photography skills, and draw upon another element of his personal hobbies as a sci-fi enthusiast, Leigh did not yet know where to concentrate his interests: "*After 5 years photographing cats, I wanted to experiment more with creative lighting and integrate my Photoshop skills and I thought my passion for pop culture would be the perfect avenue for this, but where do you find a stormtrooper or an elf?"*

It was not until 2012, when Leigh would attend his first Australian games or pop culture convention, *Supanova Adelaide*. "*It opened my eyes to literally worlds of possibility*", Leigh recalls. He remembers "*like all new con-goers*" that he "*walked around sheepishly*" asking cosplayers if he could take a photo of them. He had never been to see cosplays in person and was

struck by the craftsmanship, and expressions of fandom, he saw in their work. He remembers his last night at the convention:

> *"Sunday night after getting home from the con I made my Facebook page, Steamkittens, a name that I finally settled on after much brainstorming and head scratching, but in hindsight one of the best decisions I've made.*

Leigh has found himself clarifying the meaning behind the name more than a few times, a common misinterpretation being that the origin for the word relates to a specific love for the *Steampunk*[18] sci-fi subculture. "*While the name is often misunderstood it actually references my beginnings photographing cats at the RSPCA*", Leigh notes.

A year later, in 2013, Leigh would attend Supanova Adelaide once again, this time with the specific goal of photographing cosplayers. Much of Leigh's initial nerves was based on earlier days at conventions, when professional cosplay photography was not yet a well-defined practice. Given the experiences of harassment, explored predominately in Chapter 5, Leigh was hyperaware of the potential for his earnest requests to take photos of cosplayers to be perceived as – at best – just another request from the pop culture fan public or – at worst – a predatory request. Wanting to stand out from the crowd, Leigh devised a new method for introducing himself:

> *"I would walk up and say: Hi, my name is Leigh, better known as Steamkittens, and here's my card, you can pick your favourite image to take. I handed them a deck of cards to look through. Some people would just grab the top one, but most would look through the cards, often issuing positive comments about the images or having trouble deciding which image to take".*

Being new to the cosplay scene, Leigh's personalised business card strategy helped him introduce himself and his work efficiently, "*People would get to look through what was essentially an entire portfolio of my work*", he explains. Leigh felt this approach "*builds confidence in your abilities, as they've seen what you are capable of*", adding, "*by building trust, the person is more willing, if not eager to shoot with you, happy to take the direction and give up precious con time*". However, as Leigh continued to develop a rapport with the community, his efforts towards professionalisation also attracted the ire of other cosplay photographers looking to engage in the same activities: *"It rubbed a few established photographers the wrong way. Surprisingly there weren't a great many back then but this was my first experience with cosplay drama".* Leigh decided to use the competitive nature of fellow cosplay photographers to his advantage, commenting: *"I soon discovered many cosplay photographers were very 'selective' about who*

[18] Steampunk is a genre that blends Victorian-era aesthetics with advanced steam-powered technology and imaginative, often futuristic, inventions.

they shot. They would pick someone, go off and shoot and then repeat. At one event in Adelaide, I was asked to photograph a kid in a Wolverine [19]costume because another photographer had refused to".

7.4.2 Capturing 'Expertise': Establishing Australian Cosplay Photography

In July 2015, Leigh had the opportunity to shoot with globally renowned cosplayer, Yaya Han. Leigh explains that "*he first shot with Yaya Han briefly at AVCon in Adelaide*". She told him she was going to return to Australia for Oz Comic-Con a few months later, and that she would have some more time to shoot if he could make it there. It was Leigh's first trip to Queensland, and his first interstate Oz Comic-Con—where he was able to secure Photowall spots for both days. Leigh recalls that, at the time, it had "*gotten around*" that he "*was there to shoot with Yaya*", which he feels may have "raised the perception" of him as a professional photographer, at the time. "*I got more social media likes that weekend by far than any other*", Leigh recounts. Oz Comic-Con features international cosplay guests at each event, so Leigh explains that he was able to rapidly "build a gallery" of shots of professional—globally famous—cosplayers, including Yaya Han, Abby Darkstar, and Stella Chuu. "*Once you have a portfolio like this, it makes it easier to approach other big cosplayers for photos*", Leigh explains. When I asked him what it was like to work with cosplayers at a professional level, Leigh responds with a simple reply: "*Nerve-wracking!*". Leigh maintains positive professional relationships with these cosplayers in an ongoing manner, noting during Supanova 2022 that he was even "*teaching Yaya Photoshop*".

Steamkittens, whose signature style evolved from early, make-shift set-ups, with studio lighting and a dedicated space for photoshoots, which quickly became an attraction for cosplayers attending conventions in Australia:

> *"At PAX15 I'd setup in a corner near a high traffic area and started asking if I could take people's photos. It didn't take long for a line to form, and it kept getting bigger. No way was I going to pick and choose or tell people no, from there it became almost a mission statement that I would photograph anyone who wanted a photo as long as they were willing to wait their turn, and people would actually wait hours. I think people were surprised they could get a quality shot with me for free for just waiting".*

What began as Steamkittens specialised approach to photographing cosplayers, quickly evolved into the foundations of the practice as a profession. The area that Steamkittens would secure at the convention, quickly became a hotspot for photographers to congregate and take photos of cosplayers, which was eventually officialised as the "*photo wall*":

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[19] *Wolverine* is a character from the *X-Men* comic book series (Marvel Comics, 1963)

> *"One year later at Adelaide 2016 Oz Comic-Con, they started their first photo wall, which I was part of. It became a regular at all Oz Comic-Cons, and I started travelling to more and more of them around the country. They had different backdrops you could stand, and be photographed, in front of and a couple of displays".*

After the conventions, Leigh would take his photos home and spend time individually processing and editing them for "*weeks at a time*", before disseminating them on social media. He would then post them to Cosplay groups on Facebook, where cosplayers could find their photos and use the affordances of "*tagging*". Tagging enables users to select a component of the image, such as a face, and digitally attach a link to a corresponding Facebook profile. This allows cosplayers to identify themselves at their discretion digitally. These editing sessions were comprehensive and time-consuming. When acting as photographer at *Supanova*, for example, Leigh would typically take photos of up to "*300 cosplayers*", over back-to-back days scheduled during the convention weekend.

Another element of working with conventions, which we saw in Captain Patch-It's study, involves having to adapt to an industry focused on profit over fair compensation. At the time, other conventions "*had a registration desk and that was it*", Leigh recalls. He tried to pitch the photo wall idea to another popular convention in the space, which they rejected: "*They thought the cosplay dollar was less significant, and that they'd rather get the mum and dad dollar instead*". He explains: *"My argument to them was you have a desk, but what are you doing for the large unpaid resource at your convention, because cosplayers are an attraction? They're the ones that people are going to ask for photos."* Now, the same convention – of course – features a photo wall as a mainstay of their event. Though, at this point, despite the evident popularity of his work, recognition – let alone any time of remuneration – from certain conventions would still take some time to materialise. Part of the popularity of *Steamkittens'* work is a unique style of photography that foregrounds the cosplayer—and their connection to their character—with an eye for how the cosplayer, as a particular character, might want to be framed or perceived.

> *"My style is very much designed around shooting individuals, and I definitely struggle with groups. Photography is a very visual media but one of the main things you need is to be really good with your subjects. Because I photograph a lot of shy or new cosplayers, communication was always one of my greatest assets. Making a person feel comfortable, posing them for the best photos is something I always got very positive feedback about".*

Leigh—having "*never been a fan of glamour lighting*", opts for dramatic lighting which is "*heavily influenced by the style of eighties movie posters*", which he "*saw growing up*". With his background and work experience in design, he approaches photography with expertise in composition, lighting, colouring, and the way he processes his photos. He explains,

> *"I think a lot of people forget what an important role a basic understanding in design, colour theory and composition play in photography. Many cosplay photographers use natural light, and maybe use a flash for fill. Whereas I'm shooting inside in a very dark area. With my setting if I took a photo with no flash the frame would be just black, as all light in my photos is generated by the studio lights. I also place those lights uncomfortably close to my subjects and I think this is what makes the cosplayer stand out"*

One of Leigh's regular clients, Evie—a cosplayer who has driven from Melbourne to Adelaide just to shoot with him—was able to explain the benefits of working with a professional photographer like Leigh:

> *"You feel like somebody's looking out for you, because you can't what's in the frame. So many photographers, especially newer photographers, aren't very good at giving instructions. And when you feel great in the pose and then you look back and you're like, "Oh my god, why?". It's so upsetting, and so disheartening. I've never had that with Leigh. Even if I'm like "oh, what was I doing in that photo? I never leave disheartened".*

7.4.3 A Picturesque Impact: *Supanova's* First Resident Cosplay Photographer

In 2016, Leigh's career in cosplay photography would make a marked leap forward:

> *"Getting invited to be a guest at a con, particularly an interstate one, was practically unheard of as a photographer. So, when I was asked to travel to Mackay in northern Queensland in 2016, I knew what a big deal it was".*

Leigh's photography even began to attract media attention, with articles published throughout the year in local and international publications—namely, *ABC News* (Hill, 2016; Williamson, 2016) and *Buzzfeed*, now known as *Mashable* (Lieu, 2016).Wanting to build his reputation as a cosplay photographer in Australia, he spent his "own money travelling to every state" across the country. Leigh explains his newfound dedication to conventions and was an official guest photographer at several events throughout the next few years. *"At the end of 2017, I was asked to go on my first official Supanova tour and I've been to every show since".* In saying this, the endeavour was also as expensive as it was labour-intensive. To this point, Steamkittens had provided his photography services free of charge and would—depending on the convention—mostly have to cover his personal and professional expenses, including travel and accommodation. As a professional still working in graphic design, Steamkittens would accept these conditions as a necessary sacrifice to continue doing what he loved.

Wherever Leigh would travel from this point onwards, his photography booth would become an increasingly popular attraction at local conventions. Conventions like PAX Aus and Oz Comic-Con would also begin to notice that the length of queues waiting for a free photograph with him was getting longer and more challenging to manage. Although the attention was ultimately

beneficial, Leigh's subject-focused approach to photography meant that these types of queues would also disrupt the personalised and individualistic process he wanted to engage in. Watching Leigh in action, as a researcher, I noted that his most stressful moments at any convention always centred around feeling that he was not providing an adequate experience for cosplayers. Originally, Oz Comic-Con photographers were given two-hour time slots to shoot at the Cosplay Central Photowall. As Leigh explains:

> *"The queuing was something that originated at PAX and the Oz Comic-Con Photowall. At Oz Comic-Con, photographers were given a two-hour time slot at the cosplay central Photowall, Some photographers would get dribs and drabs of people coming through, whereas they'd have to organise line management for me".*

Conventions would also allocate Steamkittens two of these two-hour times slots – where all other cosplay photographers would be allowed one per day. Over time, as the Steamkittens brand continued to grow, the team realised that they needed a more permanent strategy for managing queues in the future.

Figure 28

Steamkittens and Cosplay HQ at Supanova 2022.



Growing as a photographer

Leigh tested out a few strategies over time, explaining that one year, during the PAX convention, they tested out a "*selfie queue*" system. Leigh's assistant would take "*a selfie with people, as they came up for a photo, and would give them an estimate of when to come back"*. His assistant would use what became a selfie-based "*photographic record to determine the order*" of photoshoots for the day. Once the "*wait time starting to get to well over two hours*", he knew he "*had to do something*". Leigh explains why the time pressure can provide a less than practical working

environment: *"If someone waits 2+ hours, you want to make sure they get a good photo, but the longer you take with each person – and the longer the wait is – it puts a lot of pressure on you".* He would also miss out on key opportunities to shoot with cosplayers he wanted to shoot with from an artistic perspective; finding an affinity with their approach to modelling or selection of characters that Steamkittens is interested in capturing, as sci-fi fan. On a personal level, he "*only ever took bathroom breaks, eating and drinking little*" as a means of getting through the huge lines.

After PAX Aus 2017 came around, Leigh describes this as "*the last straw*" with "*queueing getting to crazy levels*". After finishing up at the con, he started immediately researching "*virtual queuing solutions*"; before settling on *Waitwhile* (https://waitwhile.com), which had a "*free trial period*". A few weeks later, in November 2017, Steamkittens was officially invited as an official guest photographer for Supanova in Brisbane and Adelaide, for the first time. "*Knowing they'd only cover flights and accommodation expenses*" meant that he had to be especially aware of additional expenses, ensuring any virtual solution would actually work before committing to purchasing a subscription to it. Happily, during the Supanova tour, the "*queuing software worked beautifully and seamlessly",* according to Leigh. He explains that "people were able to go and enjoy the con – and spend money, something the event was happy about – getting an SMS when it was time to come back". This was a "*weight lifted*" for Leigh, and something he felt was "*appreciated by all the cosplayers*". There have been a lot of opportunities to develop and finetune the use of their virtual queueing system, as Leigh explains:

> *"Over time we have worked out how many we can get through and when we need to close signups so we can get through the list. People have gotten used to the system and wait for sign-ups to open, I think we had 50 people sign up in the first 30 minutes at one event, which is almost the quota for the entire day".*

Leigh explains that the line will also change throughout the day and explains the case of people "*dropping off the queue*", especially if they sign up at the opening of the queue – which occurs around 10.30 am. Some people will inevitably be later in line, so Leigh explains that the line ends up "*constantly evolving*" throughout the day, and still "*takes someone to continually manage it*" and wrangle with the "*tons of analytics*" it provides.

There are some great features of what Steamkittens call the official "*Waitlist*", which I learned a lot about in practice at several conventions. The team will display an A4 poster that says 'Sign up for our Waitlist' with a QR code printed below. They can scan this and head to the waitlist. Steamkittens.com also redirects to the queue. Cosplayers can delay, cancel or amend their slots, and they get automatically notified when they are in the top three slots. When they reach the top

3, the person managing the waitlist can send the "*top three*" the message that their spot is ready and get notified. The cosplayer will get their first notification as soon as it is their turn to start heading back, but they do not have to come right away at that point. The second notification is more time-sensitive, and tells the cosplayer to please return, due to it being their turn soon. Once the cosplayer receives this, they should head back to the Steamkittens photo area. On the backend, Steamkittens and his team can see an estimate for each cosplayer's wait time. The waitlist automatically tries to estimate how long the wait will be, and when that exceeds the current wait time, it will close off. The waitlist gets full at different times, which changes per con, but Leigh notes that "*usually it fills in about two hours*". The system has some limitations. It gives you 100 a month for free, in terms of wait list slots. So, when there is "*two cons back-to-back, it doesn't work*". To get enough slots, Steamkittens would have to pay approximately *"$60USD*". Leigh explains: "*So, what we do is, we get the 100 free and so yesterday, we had 50 or so, and if we run out, we just grab people*".

2017 had already been a whirlwind year for Steamkittens. By November 2017, Supanova had formally asked Leigh to be the Resident Cosplay Photographer for the first time and had also asked him to be an official guest on the next Supanova tour to Brisbane and Adelaide. This was an honour for Steamkittens, who was to be the first cosplay photographer in Australia to get this title. Though, as it goes, life had an additional challenge in mind for Leigh. Returning to work on the Monday after the convention, Leigh was told he had been made redundant from the digital content design position he had held for 20 years. As if this was not already a difficult enough challenge, Leigh had been battling with some ongoing health issues that stemmed from an initial injury in April 2016. Slipping while out on a photoshoot at his favourite riverbed at home in Adelaide, a twisted ankle evolved into an ongoing issue with leg pain. By December 2016, a physiotherapist had recommended to Leigh that the injury might not be physical, and rather neurological. By the time Leigh was engaged as the Resident Cosplay Photographer at the convention he had attended for years, building his reputation, he was suffering from an increasingly severe limp in that injured leg.

Crisis and recovery

It was not long after that Leigh was diagnosed with Motor Neuron Disease (MND), a disease which affects motor neurons that control voluntary movement in the body. There are many diseases under the MND umbrella, including the slightly more well-known variant called Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) – which Steamkittens attributes to digital trends like the 'Ice Bucket Challenge' for improving visibility for ALS sufferers (Koohy & Koohy, 2014). However, having been – by 5 April 2024 – living with the condition for over 8 years, Steamkittens was eventually found to have the highly rare variant of the condition, known as Primary lateral

sclerosis (PLS). According to MND Australia (2024), 'PLS is very rare', but it progresses slowly, with a life expectancy of '10–20 years or more' from symptom onset. Talking to Steamkittens for the first time, in person, in 2022—his determination to keep pursuing his cosplay photography until he felt he could not do it anymore—has inspired many in the convention space. He manages his symptoms with physiotherapy and medical treatments and spends "*a lot of time on bikes and in the pool*", noting: *"The thing is... if I stop, I stop. You know? So stopping is admitting I'm never going to do it again. The motivation is always getting to the next event".*

Shouldering his new challenge, Leigh initially kept his illness private. It was not until a post on his official public Facebook page, on April 5, 2018, that he shared the details of his battle in a public manner. For years, Leigh has continued to produce beautiful photos, thanks to the combination of further digitising some aspects of his photography practice and the dedication of a team of volunteer assistants. CasperCosplay supported Steamkittens as a key supporter from 2017 to 2024. She met Leigh as a cosplayer at Brisbane Supanova in 2017, after having a few shoots with him in 2016, including at the PAX Aus 2017 convention in Brisbane. Leiland, another core assistant, will travel with Leigh to conventions, helping him board and depart from plane trips, as well as carry suitcases and other necessities. Leiland first helped Leigh in January 2018 but has known him for well over 10 years. Steamkittens support team would primarily manage the technical side of things, like the Waitlist or QR code feature—which will be explained shortly—this was mainly completed by Leiland. Steph was primarily responsible for positioning lights within the frame, adjusting filters or settings on the lights, and occasionally stepping in to take photos when physical movement was impossible for Leigh.

In 2018, Leigh had set his sights on trying to get to "*every Oz Comic-Con*" in Australia, so he could continue to solidify his reputation in each state. Supanova, at this time, did not have the "photowall" feature that OZCC had introduced, so Steamkittens "*started theirs in 2018*". Cosplayers, who had long supported Leigh's work, also fundraised to get Leigh to New Zealand to appear at the *Armageddon* convention (https://armageddonexpo.com) in 2018, and to help also launch their first photowall. In 2018, Supanova would reach out to Leigh "*tour by tour*"—locking him into each state it was running in—and by 2019, they had said "*come to all of them*". Supanova officially gave him the title of "resident genius Cosplay Photographer" on a public Facebook post on their official page (Supanova, 2018b). At the time of writing, Supanova continues to feature Leigh in highly visible posts on social media (Supanova, 2024) and has advertised him as their 'Resident Cosplay Photographer' since 2018 (Supanova, 2018b). Leigh has also been a featured photographer at *GammaCon* (https://www.gammaexpo.com.au), as explained in one of our interviews, where the Con team flew Leigh to Canberra, covered his accommodation and travel expenses, and provided him with access to the Con's VIP section for the weekend.

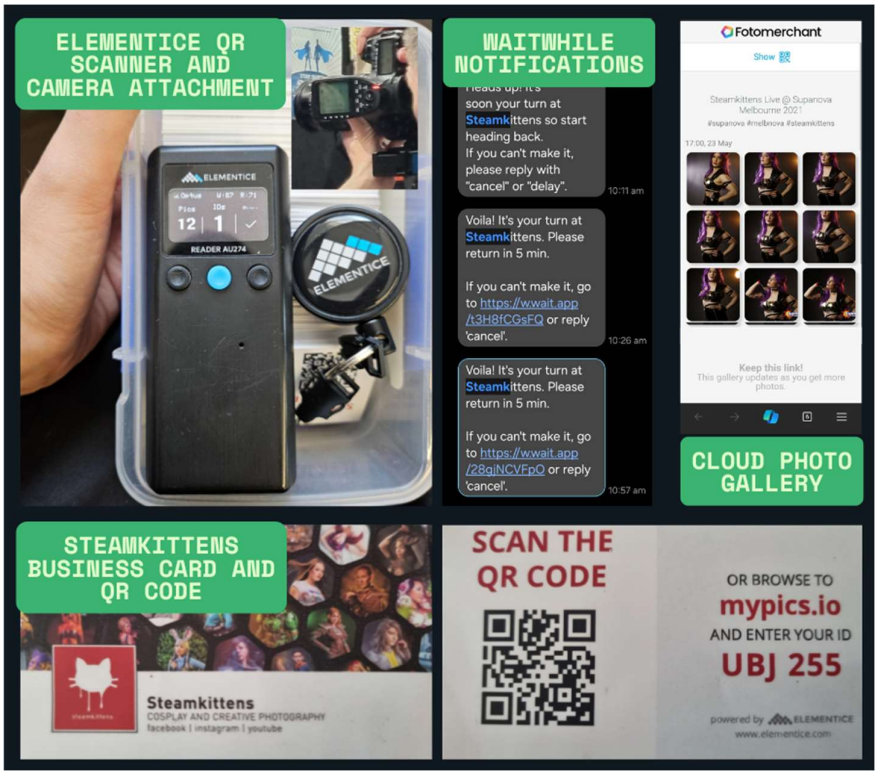
Leigh has been operating his Steamkittens photography services with the support of a robust system of digital technologies, which keep certain aspects of his work accessible. Two core parts of this system include the Waitlist, created using the *Waitwhile* (2024) virtual queue management system. The other part included a camera attachment and digitised photo dissemination technology, *Elementice* by Leigh's "*friend out of Canberra*", who worked as the Project & Design Lead at Elementice. The Elementice camera attachment was acquired by *Fotomerchant* in 2021 and is commercially available on the market as *Fotomerchant Capture* (Clapman, 2021). Leigh was provided with the Elementice—now Fotomerchant Capture—attachment for his camera, as well as full access to the software, which enabled him to share photos with cosplayers who visited his booths instantly. He explains, in an email correspondence in 2020: *"The idea of handing out unprocessed straight out of camera photos would have terrified me not too long ago and I don't know many photographers who would be comfortable. There are test shots, lighting misfires and poses that just don't work with the lights".* Leigh often finds it interesting, which shot a cosplayer will choose to post online, once they have received their shots via the Elementice system: "*people self-edit, they post the ones they like. It's often surprising and interesting to see what photos people do post*". He finds that shots he finds interesting as a photographer might not necessarily be the ones that end up being posted on social media. Some cosplayers purchase prints for personal archival purposes, as well, with Leigh noting that there is a cosplayer, he shoots regularly, who "*wants to buy a print of every costume because she enjoys the standardised photography of her work*", adding "*I have one for every con she's been to*".

Once a cosplayer has arrived at the Steamkittens booth, having been navigated to the space using the Waitwhile VCS, they will be marked off on the system and proceed to experience their shoot with Steamkittens. Leigh will take a series of shots, asking the cosplayer to change poses to ensure they get a variety of stills. Once the images are taken, the small, black Elementice camera attachment then hosts the photo transfer in their cloud services—which was managed by Elementice but accessible to customers as "Admins". Once the photos are in the server, the person managing the system on the day will pick up a Steamkittens business card, which features a QR code. Leigh can access the images, and they do not get deleted unless requested. Each card is also assigned to a unique URL, which links back to the Elementice photo cloud. Leigh mentions, "*if somebody brought back a card from a 2019 shoot, it would still work as long as you can scan the card*". The cards were also generated by Elementice, to Leigh's specifications—including choice of JPEG, text colour, and amount to print. A QR-code scanner, integrated with the image server, is then used to scan the card. When the QR code is scanned, it will assign the series of photos that has just been taken to the link attached to the card. The link to the photos—as stored on the Elementice cloud service—is instantly accessible when the cosplayer scans the card with their phone. When the user scans the card, it says "*Dispatched images should be associated with this*

URL". You can also split the images across a few cards. When they have scanned the QR code, they are taken to a unique link that hosts their images, which is instantly accessible. The photos are subtly digitally watermarked in a way that does not obscure the image. Instead, a small logo for Steamkittens, and often the convention itself, is placed within the frame of the image. This also provided the bonus of immediate promotion of the Steamkittens brand when cosplayers uploaded their shots to their social media profiles. Leigh found that introducing a digitised system for disseminating the photos, in this way, helped to "take the pressure off". When accessing the link by scanning the QR code on their phone, cosplayers can also purchase prints of their photos—including removal of the Steamkittens and convention logos. Steamkittens also provide options for downloading the content at a higher resolution. Once purchased, these images are provided to the customer through a download link sent to their email address.

Figure 29

Digital Components of Steamkittens' Photography Practices



Until the next con

Leigh will continue to take photos at cons, getting to "*the next one*"—in his words—"*until he can't*". Referring to his "*country town*" upbringing, where Leigh notes being "*treated differently for liking 'all that sci-fi crap'*", to being part of the cosplay convention scene environment is a freeing hobby. Leigh adds, "*To be at an event, surrounded by all the things you love and like-minded people, is in itself a reward, but to be considered by that community as a focal point for capturing that love into an image… that would have blown my childhood brain*". Of course, there

is added pressure to gaining a reputation, and Leigh's humble professional demeanour often sees him remarking on ways he could have done better; even though countless cosplayers would leave the booth full of praise for the experience. Even though Leigh is known for cons, he has also taken his photography skills outdoors, opting to "*shoot at locations that bring something to the photo, whether it be amazing architecture, natural beauty or added context for the character*". Something that can also be seen in his cosplay photography is that some of Leigh's favourite images are "*panoramic shots of the landscape with the character quite small in shot*" that "l*ose*" them within a setting". Working in the context of Australian natural landscapes, and architectural sites, to produce cosplay photos; Leigh was allowed to shoot—with permission—in sites like St Peter's Cathedral in Adelaide, where he used "*its amazing large doors*" in "*multiple fantasy shoots*". Leigh specifically will also seek out forests with plants of "*international*" origin, including riverbeds and pine forests, which serve to de-localise the setting from the typical "*Australian bush*"—which Leigh notes "*always looks like the Australian bush, and doesn't fit many characters*". However, when it comes to his iconic con photography, Leigh has the added benefit of portability, to help translate his work across differing con environments: "*Unlike many cosplay photographers who use mainly natural light, I've always shot with a studio setup and can shoot almost anywhere I have space*". Leigh stressed the importance of developing relationships with conventions—such as Oz Comic Con, PAX Aus and Supanova—who would facilitate the space he needed and arrange for accessibility requirements to support his practices.

As cosplayer Evie finished with her shoot at Supanova 2022, she paused to share her thoughts on Leigh's work as Steamkittens, having photographed with him on many occasions:

> *"He and his team always make you feel comfortable. There are always directions. It can be very daunting for anybody. Even me, and I've been doing this a really long time. But the team just makes you feel like… not a dumbass? To be quite honest".*

Evie laughs, continuing:

> *"It can be very daunting. You want to embody this amazing character who you admire, and that you put in all this time and effort into recreating. To have somebody help you reflect that?"*

She looks at me, knowingly, adding: *"You know, when you're in your room and you're taking a selfie*? *You're like, "I'm doing my best". But [Leigh] helps you embody it and feel like a superhero or feel like a badass. Or feel like somebody else's image of me. That's why I always come back. I've even driven to Adelaide before, and everything".*

7.5 Discussion

This final section will begin by discussing the social, cultural, and technological components of how cultural intermediaries emerge in cosplay, drawing on the case studies as key examples and

the previously introduced framework of Maguire and Matthews (2012). Maguire & Matthews (p.554) advise that their 'three dimensions' for analysing cultural intermediaries (i.e. 'framing', 'expertise' and 'impact') 'suggest a range of empirical entry points' for investigating common features between cultural intermediaries 'and their specific manifestations which vary relative to their contextual reality'. Thus, the next part of the discussion will focus on challenges for cultural intermediaries in emergent professions, analysing the labour practices of Captain Patch-It, Maggie and John from Lumin's Workshop and Leigh Hyland (Steamkittens) relative to their context for cosplay labour are highly emergent and – at times – precarious labour context of the cultural industry of cosplay. Finally, the section will conclude with discussion of the way Captain Patch-It, the Lumin's Workshop team and Steamkittens professionalised or commercialised cosplay repair services, cosplay specialty goods and supplies and cosplay photography, respectively, producing enduring impacts and notable legacies in the context of the cosplay industry. Cultural intermediaries have emerged in cosplay through a process that begins with the development of a cosplay-related specialisation through hobbyist labour practices, where they legitimise their activities among both physical and digital communities and networks. Second, as recognition of their specialisation grows, their expertise is often legitimised by performing unpaid labour on digital platforms, and physically at cosplay events. Third, broader industry recognition may then provide opportunities for commercialising or professionalising their specialisations. These three key processes relate, respectively, to the 'three dimensions' of 'framing', 'expertise' and impact, which comprise Maguire & Matthews (2012, p. 553) framework for investigating the impact of 'cultural intermediaries'; and will be further outlined below.

7.5.1 Framing

The case studies each demonstrate the way cultural intermediaries engage in 'framing' work (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, pp. 554–555), from positions as hobbyists or enthusiasts within the interconnected digital and physical networks established by cosplayers in Australia (as discussed in Section 4.4). Initially, the participants described finding authentic enjoyment in practising their niche subcultural work. For Captain Patch-It, this was repairing cosplays and costumes for friends. For Maggie from Lumin's Workshop, it was a passion for discovering new cosplay design materials that was founded during her tertiary studies. Then, for Leigh (Steamkittens), this was the cultivation of a passion for taking photographs of cosplayers at conventions. Woo et al. (2012, p. 673) found—when analysing cultural intermediaries in the 'geek culture' scene—a similar factor emerged from their results, where 'intermediaries' in these spaces 'are not simply economic agents, but also social actors, and their mediating labour may seem less like work and more like a calling'. What is crucial, then, is how they engaged in the framing of their cosplay-related goods and services as 'legitimate and worthy points of attachment for intended receivers' (p. 554). With cosplayers being the intended receivers of such framing work and said work occurring in both

physical and digital spaces, it is important to situate cultural intermediaries in the industry within associated networks of human and non-human actors. This allows for representation of all the 'specific devices or constraints negotiated' with in 'their attempts to influence how goods and services are perceived and practised' (Maguire and Matthews, p. 556). The cosplay industry is a space where digital and physical skillsets are operationalised as part of the everyday activities of cosplayers, as seen in the findings from Study 1 and Study 2. As a result, in the case studies, we saw how each participant combined physical and digital labour to establish the value of their goods and services in the eyes of fellow cosplay community members.

By being aware of existing needs in the community, each case study utilised their creative, entrepreneurial, and digital skills to tailor their goods or services to be highly valuable, initially driven by altruistic or non-commercial motives. Captain Patch-It provided his services for free, by first physically embodying the idea of a cosplay repair person through the creation of his usable costume (Section 7.2). Maggie and John from Lumin's Workshop leveraged Maggie's talents for sourcing, importing and supplying materials that cosplayers needed, helping cosplayers get the materials they needed in a highly emergent economic period for the industry, while also providing community workshops at key industry events (Section 7.3). Steamkittens used his photography talents to provide free services at major cosplay conventions to attendees (Section 7.4). Even where Maggie and John, of course, received commercial returns for their activities, their engagement in community events helped to bring visibility to their goods and services; while meeting legitimate needs in the community, which helped to support the co-development of the legitimacy and value of their services with the community that would receive them. Each case study also utilised key digital resources to promote further, support, or facilitate their services. Being local to Australia, Captain Patch-It, Steamkittens, and Lumin's Workshop were able to engage in continuous framing work – outside of the physical bounds of conventions and cosplay events. Working with the affordances of social media and digital sales platforms, each case study employed levels of 'visibility' work to support a deeper understanding of their goods and services among the community (Abidin, 2016b).

7.5.2 Expertise

Cultural intermediaries in cosplay distinguish themselves from fellow actors in their networks by establishing expertise through the professional and personal components of their work. There are two 'loose' components of expertise, in accordance with Maguire & Matthews (2012, p. 556) cultural intermediaries' framework: the 'professional' (reliant upon 'abstract, standardised devices and qualifications') and the 'personal' (reliant upon 'subjective preferences and tastes'). Maguire & Matthews (2012, p. 556) note that professional expertise is a 'contingent accomplishment' of the work of cultural intermediaries. While cultural intermediaries may –

according to Maguire & Matthews (2012, p. 556) ‘largely lack the hallmarks of the established professions’ (i.e. ‘institutionalized points of entry’ for professional work), they invest in the development of ‘a professional disposition’ and ‘vocational approach to their work’ by ‘casting it’ as ‘a service to the sacred’ or that which is ‘culturally legitimate’. The diverse entry points and professionalisation strategies used by each case study – and, in particular, how each of them engaged in ‘framing work’, as previously described – helped to distinguish their activities from others in their cosplay-related networks.

Captain Patch-It, as previously mentioned, decided to build cultural and social capital around the development of a cosplay persona (a concept introduced in Section 4.3); which he co-developed with the community through digital strategies (e.g. posting in cosplay Facebook groups about Patch-It-related activities to source knowledge and support) (Section 7.2.2). Maggie and John from Lumin’s Workshop developed an online story and digital identity for their brand by transforming Maggie’s popular cosplay Facebook page into a central space for coordinating sales of cosplay materials. This was followed by the development of a digital shopfront that allowed for a more professional approach to their practices (Section 7.3.2). Steamkittens developed a means of producing professional-grade cosplay photographs in a portable manner, to provide high quality photos and professional-feeling experiences for cosplayers within the constraints of operating in a crowded convention space; developing his reputation as a trusted photographers in spaces where it can be challenging to determine who is a professional photographer and who is the average convention attendee wanting to take a photo of a cosplayer (Section 7.4.2). Steamkittens, too, would engage in digital editing services and sharing practices in digital communities, further building social and cultural capital around his practices. The second ‘personal’ dimension of expertise relies on the ‘outcome of the subjective conditions of cultural intermediaries' work: their habitus, which affords a particular aesthetic orientation and forms of cultural capital’ (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 557).

As discussed in Sections 3.5 and 3.6, this study used ethnographic methods for data collection and a thematic approach to data analysis to develop chronological accounts for how each cultural intermediary emerged from, operated within and contributed to Australian cosplay. By using these methods, we were able to observe the way cultural intermediaries develop expertise, or what Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992, pp. 128–129) term a ‘feel for the game’. This “feel for the game” includes the ability to ‘read the market of receivers’—in this case, the cosplay community—through developing highly specialised knowledge of the scene (Maguire & Matthews, pp. 556–557). Woo et al. (2012, p. 661) analysed cultural intermediaries as retailers of goods relating to

'nerd culture'[20], finding that fans of 'geek' or 'nerd' media would use their cultural knowledge and expertise to legitimise their activities. Woo (2012) described how these cultural intermediaries demonstrated their expertise by adapting to the norms and values of related fan communities in the gaming and popular culture industries and presenting themselves as subject-matter experts.

During fieldwork experiences conducted for data collection, Captain Patch-It, Steamkittens, Maggie, and John from Lumin's Workshop each demonstrated their fan identities in different ways. Captain Patch-It, as an enthusiast of casual—decidedly unserious—cosplays, took me through photographs of previous costumes which included everything from an interpretation of film character Westley (aka. The Dread Pirate Roberts) from *The Princess Bride* (Reiner, 1987), to *Business Fish*[21]. Business Fish is a character created by Yuichiro Ohno, depicted as a Japanese businessman wearing corporate attire with a fish-like head. Patch-It's enjoyment of a range of icons from cult cinema and 'geek' media, alongside the everyday knowledge of the costumes of cosplayers (which can have a diverse range of inspirations) could be seen in the 'habitus'—or work patterns— (Bourdieu, 1986) in how he deployed his everyday knowledge and engagement as a fan through his repair services (as seen, in particular, in the fieldwork notes supplied in Section 7.2.2). Maggie Hu, from Lumin's Workshop, also found her roots in cosplay. Her practices were highly intricate, craft-based and focused on meticulously recreating characters from gaming media, as seen in her description of developing her *Bandos* cosplay, based on a character from the *MMORPG Runescape* (Jagex, 1998). The 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1986) of Maggie and John—at Lumin's Workshop's physical site—is structured around their cosplay workshop and events space. Their workshops often feature notable local cosplayers as guest hosts, further leveraging their cultural and social capital to support the professionalisation of cosplay as an industry. Finally, Steamkittens explained how his fandom for sci-fi films and other media inspired his aesthetic approach to cosplay (Section 7.4.2). Steamkittens used his cultural capital as a fan, alongside his social capital in the form of his intricate knowledge and understanding of the cosplay community, to develop an approach to cosplay that aligned with the desired photograph results of cosplayers themselves.

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[20] Nerd is not used in a derogatory manner in Woo et al.'s (2012) study. Woo (2012) argues his use for the term as a means of adopting the terminology used some members of his study in a 'frequently positive or ironically self-deprecatory way' by fans of games, comics, and/or popular culture (p. 661). It is used in this discussion for consistency but not necessarily endorsed due to what Woo et al. (2012, p. 661) recognise as the potential for the term to cause offence to individuals in the community who do not use the term in this manner.

[21] The Business Fish character is a registered trademark of *Quan Inc* (https://quan-inc.jp/)

7.5.3 Impact: Legacies and Challenges

Each case study demonstrates how cultural intermediaries can reconfigure the position of cosplay within Australian convention and fan economies. Through their efforts, specialist services and practices—once considered peripheral or informal—have been formalised, contributing to the professionalisation of cosplay-related work or labour. These impacts have extended beyond individual careers to influence the infrastructure of conventions and the visibility of cosplay as a creative practice. Captain Patch-It's work exemplifies this transformation. Initially operating as an unpaid, self-funded service provider, Patch-It developed a dedicated repair space at major conventions such as PAX Aus and Oz Comic-Con. Over time, these repair stations became institutionalised, supported by volunteers and promoted as featured services at events across Australia. By 2019, cosplay repair was not only recognised locally but had become a global convention standard, adopted by events such as San Diego Comic Con. In this sense, Patch-It helped create a template for professional practice where none previously existed, setting normative expectations for future cosplay repair services. This included establishing minimum standards of support, such as a dedicated workspace and event-provided staffing. Similarly, Steamkittens reshaped the perception of cosplay photography, moving it from a community-driven hobbyist pursuit to a specialised service aligned with the creative industries. His photography not only attracted significant attention from national and international media but secured his position as the first featured cosplay photographer at an Australian convention. By negotiating terms for compensation—including travel, accommodation and equipment requirements—Steamkittens established precedents for recognising cosplay photography as professional labour. This visibility was further reinforced through collaborations with globally renowned cosplayers such as Yaya Han, which linked Australian practice to broader international networks. Lumin's Workshop produced the most explicit commercial impact by establishing Australia's first dedicated cosplay supply store—both online and in a physical retail format. Their transition from hobbyists to entrepreneurs reflects a significant structural development within the cosplay economy, creating formal supply chains and education-based services. Lumin's Workshop integrated community-facing initiatives—such as free templates and educational panels—into their business model, reflecting a hybrid orientation that blends commercial viability with community reciprocity. These interventions professionalised material supply within cosplay, offering accessible resources while setting industry standards for product quality. Collectively, these legacies underscore the capacity of cultural intermediaries to reframe cosplay as more than a marginal subcultural practice. By embedding professional norms into convention infrastructure and industry discourse, these actors positioned cosplay as a cultural industry in its own right—one that intersects with the logics of gaming, digital content creation, and global fan economies.

Despite these achievements, the process of legitimising cosplay-related labour was slow and contested. Each intermediary faced systemic and cultural barriers that reflect broader dynamics of precarity in the creative labour sector. These challenges illuminate the structural misalignments between hobbyist-oriented spaces and the formalisation for creative work, as well as tensions within the community regarding monetisation. For Captain Patch It, formal recognition by convention organisers required sustained recognition over five years following his initial engagement with PAX Aus. During this time, his services remained "off the books"—a position that enabled flexibility but left his role informal and precarious. The bureaucratic structure of large-scale events presented significant obstacles to integrating unconventional roles, such as cosplay repair, into formal volunteer frameworks. As Patch-It explained, the expectation to register as an official volunteer ("Enforcer") threatened the autonomy of his work, introducing the possibility of reassignment to unrelated duties. Such arrangements exemplified the difficulties cultural intermediaries encounter in fitting into institutional categories, particularly when their roles involve restructuring value systems within existing organisational hierarchies (Woo et al., 2012). The cultural intermediary, by definition, performs boundary work that challenges conventional role classifications—a process that often delays institutional legitimacy and creates friction between personal expertise and organisational control.

Similar tensions emerged in the commercialisation pathways pursued by Lumin's Workshop. Maggie reflected on the community backlash accompanying their transition from hobbyists to entrepreneurs, describing how monetisation introduced perceptions of inequity and division. These divisions reflect broader cultural debates about authenticity, labour and status within cosplay communities in Australia (Norris & Bainbridge, 2009; Crawford & Hancock, 2019). While monetisation offers sustainability for skilled practitioners, it simultaneously risks reinforcing competitive hierarchies and eroding the egalitarian ethos of fan communities. Lumin's Workshop sought to mitigate these concerns through educational initiatives and free resources; however, their experience underscores the fragility of community trust when financial motives intersect with cultural capital. Steamkitttens' trajectory highlights another dimension of this precarity: the economic risks borne by individuals seeking to professionalise within an emerging industry. For several years, Steamkittens self-funded interstate travel to build visibility, absorbing personal and professional costs without guaranteed returns. Despite media coverage and eventual institutional recognition, tis pathway required enduring significant financial vulnerability—a common feature of aspirational labour in digital and creative economies (Neff et al., 2005).

These case studies collectively illustrate that the professionalisation of cosplay is neither linear nor universally accepted. Instead, it is characterised by negotiated compromises between institutional structures, community norms, and individual aspirations. While cultural

intermediaries act as conduits for revaluing practices, their roles often remain structurally ambiguous, exposing them to forms of risk that are unevenly distributed across gender, economic status, and access to social capital (as discussed in Chapter 5). Furthermore, the institutionalisation of cosplay-related services within convention programming does not eliminate precarity; instead, it shifts its locus. Paid positions and sponsorship opportunities remain limited, and the expectation of unpaid labour persists, particularly in contexts framed as voluntary or community contributions. These dynamics raise critical questions about whether professionalisation within fan cultures can occur without replicating the exploitative tendencies observed in adjacent cultural industries (Terranova, 2000; Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009).

Cosplayers globally have carved professional pathways by leveraging content production and monetisation strategies, often aligning with the digital labour practices characteristic of social media influencers. Despite the financial success of some cosplay influencers and the popularity of their content within fan and gaming communities, cosplay has historically lacked the institutional status afforded to adjacent cultural industries, such as esports (Taylor, 2012) or livestreaming on platforms like Twitch (Taylor, 2018). In this context, cultural intermediaries within cosplay have emerged as critical agents, operating within traditional professional frameworks and influencer-oriented models. Their work has facilitated wider recognition and gradual professionalisation of cosplay within industry spaces. This intermediary layer performs a dual function. First, it creates infrastructure and standards for cosplay practices within convention environments, introducing services such as repair stations, rest areas, photography booths, and educational workshops. These interventions illuminate the technical and artistic labour underpinning cosplay—labour that is often underappreciated or misrepresented as mere spectacle. Second, by embedding these practices within institutional frameworks, intermediaries help shield the community from the exploitative tendencies prevalent in creative labour markets (Neff et al., 2005). Initiatives such as offering free repair services not only foster community wellbeing but also challenge the logic of commercial extraction that dominates other sectors of fan and influencer economies. This positions cosplay professionalisation as distinct: grounded in reciprocity and cultural care rather than purely market-driven imperatives. The efforts of figures such as Captain Patch-It, Maggie and John (Lumin's Workshop), and Leigh Hyland (Steamkittens) underscore this point. Through sustained negotiation with key convention stakeholders, these actors have secured formal spaces for cosplay practices, transitioning them from peripheral curiosities to recognised components of event programming. Their interventions have contributed to a re-evaluation of cosplay—less as an ornamental feature for audiences and more as an integral cultural industry linked to global entertainment media, including video games, film, and streaming culture.

However, this process remains uneven. As discussed throughout this chapter, intermediaries confront structural barriers within event governance and cultural tensions surrounding monetisation, reflecting broader dynamics of precarity in creative work. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that, while cosplay communities are widely understood as female-dominated (Lamerichs, 2013a, p. 3; Crawford & Hancock, 2019, p.90-91), the intermediaries featured here include three men and one woman. This disparity does not accurately reflect the demographic composition of cosplay, but rather highlights the gendered distribution of visibility and authority in roles that require specific types of technical expertise, entrepreneurship, and institutional negotiation. For example, it is interesting to note that, throughout my ethnographic research project, I have yet to encounter a female cosplay photographer who has reached the level of influence of a photographer like Steamkittens in Australia. Future research may investigate whether these opportunities are disproportionately accessible to men, thereby reinforcing patterns observed in other cultural industries (Conor et al., 2015; Oakley, 2016). Ultimately, the case studies examined in this chapter demonstrate that cosplay professionalisation is not solely the result of influencer economies or digital labour, but also of cultural intermediation that operates through embodied, material, and institutional practices. By formalising infrastructures within conventions and advocating for the value of cosplay labour, these intermediaries have altered the organisational and cultural logics of fan events. In doing so, they have positioned cosplay as a legitimate creative industry, bridging the gap between participatory culture and professional practice while highlighting the persistent vulnerabilities and inequalities embedded within that transition.

7.8 Conclusion

The results of Study 3 were produced in response to the third research question for this study (**RQ3**): *How do cultural intermediaries emerge from, operate within and contribute to Australian cosplay?* Responding to the absence of existing research into the cultural intermediaries involved in cosplay networks, each of these case studies accounts for the way cosplayers establish themselves as cultural intermediaries. Firstly, by 'framing' cosplay-related goods, products and services as legitimate in their economic context: for Captain Patch-It, this is cosplay repair work; for Lumin's, cosplay materials; and cosplay photography, in the case of Steamkittens. The expertise that they possess is related to their particular areas of interest, with each representing the start, middle or end of a costume-making experience: from sourcing materials, to practising and requiring repairs, through to photographing the final cosplay outfit. Community reactions to their work display a level of respect that has extended to communal requests and advocacy for fair compensation for some of these activities. The impact for these individuals as cultural intermediaries on the community has been numerous and specific to each case: Captain Patch-It

established the importance of cosplay repairs as a feature of conventions and set future standards for compensation for these activities at conventions in Australia and the US. Lumin's Workshop are recognised as the first dedicated supplier of cosplay materials and a knowledge hub for cosplayers throughout the country about their craft activities. Steamkittens has also significantly contributed to the legitimisation of cosplay photography as an art form and, in doing so, has set standards for the compensation of photographers at conventions in Australia. Each of the case studies also exhibits prominent levels of engagement with social media platforms and digital tools, further legitimising their knowledge. For instance, apart from the main website they operate, Lumin's Workshop runs a community Discord to share tips, strategies and works in progress relating to materials bought from the shop or techniques learnt through the education portion of their activities. Captain Patch-It's popularity in digital cosplay communities has also influenced the industry-wide adoption of cosplay repair services in cosplay convention spaces. Finally, Steamkittens and his team embarked on the digitisation and streamlining of his whole photography process (from a digital waitlist to the complete Elementice QR code system for sharing photos with cosplayers). To reflect recent changes in the cultural industries, digitisation might be considered another factor in mobilising and legitimising the expertise of cultural intermediaries in cosplay and related digital career spaces.

Chapter 8 • Conclusion

8.1 Returning (as me): Reflecting on the Past to Re-Contextualise the Present

I continued to attend conventions (cons), even after the data collection period for this thesis came to an end. This was especially important for me, as COVID restrictions began to loosen in the last stages of this research project. At times, as a volunteer for Steamkittens. Otherwise, just as my (non-cosplaying) self. Re-entering convention spaces during the writing process, without the additional pressures of cosplaying or data gathering, allowed time for reflection on the changes that were apparent in my immediate surroundings. Convention (con) spaces continued to grow in scale, not just in terms of attendance rates, but also spectacle. At PAX Aus in 2023, advertisements from "AAA" gaming franchises and PC manufacturers began to tower, more prominently, over attendees. Specific crowds rushed between stalls, as brand promoters threw merchandise into cheering arms or game developers offered free codes and gifts to those willing to brave hours-long lines. These features have always been present but started to feel ever grander, especially as gaming gained further recognition in Australia as a creative economic industry (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023; Keogh, 2023). Among the attendees, I spotted cosplayers who had found ways to physically claim their own space among the crowds of casual con enthusiasts. Some were even supported by what appeared to be teams of assistants, which projected slightly more authority than I was used to observing in other con settings. Casual attendees in 2023 appeared to allow a wider range of movement for cosplayers in complex costumes, or for those who seemed to convey a more professional presence. Cosplay repairs, and photography services too, began to be featured on the official PAX Aus map. It appeared that, on some level, PAX Aus—which has always been focused on catering to gamers—had begun to adopt or absorb the community-driven initiatives of cosplayers and cultural intermediaries as convention service offerings.

Walking into Supanova in 2022, with the COVID-19 pandemic having prevented conventions from taking place in Australia since early 2020, the early indicators of cosplayers digitising and professionalising their activities—which I had observed in 2019—had further evolved. Cosplayers, who continued to engage in the digital iterations of their craft – as demonstrated by the survey undertaken at the height of the pandemic for this thesis project – had continued to advance the visibility and cultural relevance of their art form. In 2022, a Singer-branded "World of Cosplay" installation was advertised in tall flags lining the convention space. Supanova's "Cosplay HQ" was positioned towards the front-right of the main hall and contained a prominent installation for attendees to register for cosplay-related events, meet the selected "Cosplay

Ambassadors" and receive photos from the official con photographer, Steamkittens. Cosplay was being treated less as a hobby that fans might participate in, and more so a feature or service offering provided by—and catered to—under the guidance of the convention itself. This was further supported by clear signage of behavioural policies, including "Cosplay is not Consent" as a definitive rule. Separate, but placed diagonally opposite, to Cosplay HQ was SINGER's 'World of Cosplay' booth, which was being led by cosplayers with craft expertise. Competition-winning costumes were featured on display mannequins. Behind this, a series of crafting tables were set up with sewing machines for repairs and demonstrations. The cosplayers were being featured more centrally, with the commercial agenda of selling sewing machines appearing less overtly as it did at Oz Comic-Con in 2019. With Supanova's broader focus on pop culture—including, but not limited to, videogames—cosplaying attendees largely matched, if not outnumbered, those who were regularly dressed.

Figure 30

World of Cosplay flags at Supanova 2021



In the Australian popular culture and gaming industries, cosplay – it seems – has found a level of public recognition, if not awareness, as a legitimate creative and economic activity. While this is beneficial, especially for cosplayers seeking to explore professional career pathways through their work, the same industry recognition that has propelled this transition has also largely obscured signs of cosplay's origins as a hobby or leisure-focused activity. In saying this, conventions have begun to distinguish themselves from one another, adopting more community–focused or commercially driven event management strategies. This was evident in how conventions began to plan and manage their event spaces post-COVID. Conventions tailored to consumer audiences in the games industry, including PAX Aus, are quite forthcoming about their industry connections –-even visually, through their bold adoption of cultural signifiers through brand advertisements and elaborately arranged booths. Whereas conventions like Supanova integrate logos or branding

from commercial sponsors into displays focused on community activities or events, including cosplay, as seen in Figure 30.

Looking at the PAX Aus website, in the lead-up to their 2025 con, further cements this notion. Cosplay has now been allocated a dedicated page within their 'Features' section, under the title 'Cosplay Central' (https://aus.paxsite.com). The website features a quote: *'If cosplay is your game, then Cosplay Central is your new homebase at PAX Aus'*. "Cosplay Central", however, is not an entirely new concept—nor name—in the con space in Australia. Oz Comic-Con and Supanova were among the first Australian cons to feature their own iterations of "Cosplay Central" and "Cosplay HQ" spaces, respectively, and to adopt behavioural policies that encouraged respectful interactions with cosplayers. The adoption of the "Cosplay Central" title by PAX Aus—a leader in the Australian con space—demonstrates wider industry acknowledgement of the shift towards recognition of the cultural legitimacy of cosplay, among other gaming fan community activities and emergent industries that have previously enjoyed the same treatment (i.e. esports or Twitch streamers). PAX Aus is owned by global leaders in pop culture and gaming event management, ReedPOP (formerly Reed Exhibitions)—notable for owning the *San Diego Comic Con*. The 'Cosplay Central' website for PAX Aus (2025) lists the 'Cosplay Repair Station' as '*lead by some incredible cosplay community members*'. This can be compared to the way Oz Comic-Con (2025)—owned by Australia-based event organisers Expertise Events—who advertise their cosplay repair services, while still including a spotlight on Captain Patch-It, which states: *'If you experience any cosplay issues during the day, head to Cosplay Central – Captain Patch-It or one of the Patch-Iteers will be glad to help you out, patch you up and let you get back to enjoying your day!'* Taking this into consideration, their appropriation of the "Cosplay Central" name could also be criticised for the way it adopts community-driven initiatives like cosplay repair services without highlighting the efforts of the individuals who contributed to their creation (i.e. Captain Patch-It).

Today, as this thesis has demonstrated, cosplay is being increasingly recognised among similar fan-based activities – operating within networks and communities surrounding established media industries – in creating novel economic opportunities for their cultural activities. By focusing on the changing practices of cosplayers, which interweave the use of digital platforms, tools, and technologies with their everyday activities, I have highlighted how cosplayers have developed emergent economic and professional pathways through the adoption of digital labour practices present in similar cultural and creative industries. In Chapter 6, I also found that Australian cosplayers predominantly identify as women; however, they ultimately contribute to diverse communities where notable portions of the population identify as men, non-binary, transgender, or who prefer to self-describe in their own terms. As a fan practice enjoyed by diverse populations

in terms of gender identity, cosplay exists in stark contrast to the heterogeneous ideas of fandom being the cultural domain of men, especially in subcultures surrounding gaming, science fiction, or other "geek" or alternative media. Crawford & Hancock (2019) expressed this succinctly, presenting a case for cosplay as a legitimate art form: Cosplay is 'more than just dressing up'. Taking into account the everyday digital, economic, and cultural activities that this thesis has sought to capture, I argue that cosplayers have earned their position among Twitch streamers, esports practitioners, and gaming influencers who have each enjoyed moments of global, socio-cultural, and economic recognition. This concluding section will reflect further on what this means, in relation to the central research question (**RQ**): *How do cosplayers use digital platforms, tools and skills to practice their craft and contribute to the professionalisation of Australian cosplay?*

This thesis has found that Cosplay in Australia has followed broader patterns in analogous cultural and creative industries, with cosplayers adapting activities that were predominantly material or "offline" experiences to include "online" iterations of their practices in digital environments. Cosplayers have digitally transformed their skill sets—from crafting, to performing and communing—to adapt to the broader socio-technical and economic evolution of related cultural industries. This section will review the key findings of the thesis, explore the implications of the digitisation and professionalisation of cosplay in Australia, and reflect on limitations and future directions from this research project.

8.1 Key Findings

In this thesis, I have sought to answer a series of research questions relating to the digitisation and professionalisation of cosplay. Chapters 4 and 5, respectively, presented the findings of Study One, to address the first research question for this thesis:

> **RQ1**: What materialities, identities and practices associated with digitisation have characterised the development of cosplay?

Previous research has examined the cultural practices of cosplaying in physical settings. Most significantly, this research focused on documenting the emergence of cosplay as – primarily – a hobbyist, leisure-focused activity; by analysing the materialities, identities and practices that contributed to its formation as a cultural practice (Lamerichs, 2009:2021; Crawford & Hancock, 2019). In Chapter 4, the thesis provides an account of how cosplayers have developed socio-technical materialities, identities, and practices in line with the digital transformation of the activity. The results present a novel account of how cosplayers utilise digital platforms, technologies, and related skill sets to practice in both offline and online environments, with a focus on Australian cosplay. This exploratory study highlighted—specifically—the way cosplayers have transitioned away from traditional, offline or physically demanding approaches

to the cultural components of their practice by adopting novel craft technologies and digital platforms. The results also demonstrated the way cosplayers have created avenues to practice cosplay as an emergent creative economic activity. This chapter analysed the digitisation of Australian cosplay in four key areas: craft, design and specialty supplies; identity and self-presentation; community and social interaction. It then introduced novel pathways for monetisation and professionalisation created by the digital labour practices of cosplayers.

Next, in Chapter 5, the focus turned to issues which may affect safe practices in the cosplay industry. As the community has been practising in an industry undergoing digitisation and professionalisation processes—presented in Chapter 4—barriers to inclusive practice have emerged, especially for cosplayers who identify as women. Historically, female cosplayers have been both marginalised—and fetishised—by the communities surrounding video game fandoms, culminating in the targeted harassment campaign against women in gaming known as Gamergate (Quinn, 2017). A 'fake gamer girl' is a concept —and meme—created to delegitimise female players as 'fake fans' of videogames, whose engagement with the fandom and related industries is allegedly performative, for the purposes of attracting primarily men in the community (Welsh, 2013). Cosplay itself is inextricably tied to the formation and popular iconography surrounding the 'fake gamer girl' (Welsh, 2013), though this connection has not yet been thoroughly explored in academic literature. To meet this gap in the literature, and provide novel findings in this space, a book chapter (pending publication, as declared in the Preface), is included verbatim in this section, which draws connections between the way cosplayers have responded in silent protest to critical issues including harassment and over-sexualisation, to women in similar craft or arts-based, DIY feminist movements, including the 'riot grrrls' (Hanna, 1991; Tolikonnikova, 2020), craftivists (Greer, 2011; Clarke, 2016). It also reflected the overall 'ethics of care' employed among community members to continue engaging with their practices despite the challenges they face (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Tronto, 1998; Keller & Kittay, 2017).

Then, in Chapter 6, the results of a survey of 271 Australian cosplayers were presented—to further extend the exploratory investigation of Study One—in Chapters 4 and 5. This chapter focuses on the specific labour practices and skill sets used by cosplayers in digital environments. These results respond to the second research question (**RQ2**) for this thesis:

> **RQ2**: How do Australian cosplayers use digital labour and skillsets to practice and monetise their craft?

There have been some preliminary investigations into the digital labour – and related monetisation practices – of cosplayers on crowdfunding platforms (Booth, 2014), including exploitative or sexualised practices in crowdfunding spaces including OnlyFans (Seregina & Weijo, 2017) or Patreon (Rouse & Salter, 2021) and affective labour practices on games-centric live-streaming

platform, Twitch (Lamerichs, 2021). These critical studies have called for further research on the 'platform work' and digital labour of cosplayers (Lamerichs, 2021), to which this study seeks to contribute. To provide a more holistic account of digital labour and skillsets, the study focused on related practices across a range of platforms and tried to ascertain which of these were used most regularly—and were deemed most important—to cosplayers for cosplay-related activities. The study also contributed novel findings relating to the perspectives of cosplayers in Australia on the digitisation and professionalisation of their industry. Overall, cosplayers were found to be highly engaged digital labourers, who operated in shared digital environments, with preferences emerging for the platforms favoured in different contexts (including, most notably, *Instagram*). After cross-tabulating the results, however, it was found that the digital labour of self-identified Hobbyist or Professional Cosplayers surveyed was highly similar. As a result, the findings demonstrate the issue with demarcating labour practices in cosplay—which were found to include a range of 'affective' (Negri & Hardt, 1998), 'relational' (Oksala, 2016) and even 'sexualised' labour (Rouse & Salter, 2021) practices—each their own emergent, highly developmental spaces for labour. Finally, the future of digital labour and careers is discussed, relating to cosplayers professionalising in Australia. Developing a social media presence, most cosplayers agreed, was an essential part of this process.

Finally, in Chapter 7, a series of case studies was first presented as descriptive, biographical accounts of the career trajectories of three cultural intermediaries in the Australian cosplay industry, to answer the last research question for this project (RQ3):

> **RQ3**: How do cultural intermediaries emerge from, operate within and contribute to Australian cosplay?

Though 'cultural intermediaries' is a concept that has been widely used in anthropology, cultural and media studies, it has yet to be applied to analysis of actors in cosplay networks (Bourdieu, 1984:1986; Maguire & Matthews, 2010:2012). This study contributes the first instance of applying the concept to the industry, using Maguire & Matthews (2010:2012) framework for investigating 'cultural intermediaries' in context. Each case study focused on a cosplay practitioner who combined physical and digital labour—and engaged in 'visibility labour' practices—to 'frame' the value of their goods and services in the eyes of fellow cosplay community members (Abidin, 2016b; Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 553). They also leveraged social and cultural capital—both physically and in digital spaces—to develop 'expertise' and a 'feel for the game' that distinguished their activities from other practitioners in their networks (2012, p. 553). Then, finally, a combination of community campaigning and industry recognition supported the development of each practitioner's legacy in cosplay—both in Australia and internationally—namely: Captain Patch-It, who founded convention-supported cosplay repair services; Lumin's Workshop, who founded Australia's first cosplay speciality retail store; and,

Steamkittens, Australia's first cosplay photographer to be recognised and renumerated by a convention.

Synthesising across the three studies provides a holistic understanding of how cosplayers contribute to the digitisation and professionalisation of their craft, a perspective that was enhanced by the complementary strengths of a qualitatively driven, mixed methods approach to design. Study One offered rich, qualitative insights into how socio-technical change has transformed cosplay from a hobbyist pursuit into an emergent economic activity, highlighting the hybridisation of physical craft practices with digital tools, platforms and communities. These exploratory findings also revealed the opportunities and tensions surrounding monetisation, which informed the design of Study Two. This second, quantitative phase expanded the scope by identifying broader patterns in cosplayers' digital labour practices and skill sets, such as content creation, audience engagement and brand management. By situating individual experiences within community-wide trends, the survey demonstrated that these practices blur the boundaries between hobby and profession, even when monetisation is not the primary goal. While not all participants monetise their work, the infrastructures of digital platforms position cosplayers within broader economies of visibility that can both enable and exploit their activities. Finally, Study Three returned to an in-depth qualitative lens to examine the emergence of cultural intermediaries operating at the intersection of creative production, entrepreneurship, and community engagement. These cases illustrated how certain cosplayers leverage visibility, technical expertise and affective connections to position themselves as key actors shaping norms in the Australian cosplay ecosystem. Taken together, the three studies form a continuum: from the way individual cosplayers adapt to digitisation, through the negotiation of digital labour and monetisation strategies, to the institutionalisation of professional roles within cosplay culture. This multi-layered perspective—integrating qualitative depth with quantitative breadth—was critical in capturing the complexity of cosplay as both a cultural practice and an evolving creative economy.

8.2 Significance of the Digitisation and Professionalisation of Australian Cosplay

This thesis explored the changes in practice demonstrated by cosplayers in Australia, as their increased use of digital technologies contributed to the broader cultural legitimisation – and overall professionalisation – of their activities. This research focused on highlighting the crucial role of the cosplay community – and related specialists – in gaining a level of industry-recognition for cosplay as a contributor to the economic landscape of the Australian creative industries. Broader global movements towards reinterpreting and conceptualising the 'cultural' industries as 'creative' industries and economies have seen once leisure-based, or hobbyist, practices re-contextualised within novel economic frameworks for artistic methods of production (Garnham,

2005). One of the key features of the creative economies is growing inclusion of industries that involve digital labour or artistic work. In February 2022, the Australian Government's Office of the Arts published a report on the 'booming' industry of digital games, which contributed AUD$226.5 million to the Australian economy in 2021 (Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communication and the Arts, 2022). Even more notably, perhaps, is the inclusion of both 'screen and digital games' and 'streaming content' in the Australian Government's National Cultural Policy, '*Revive*' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023). '*Revive'* focuses on renewing Australia's cultural sector by focusing on supporting 'Australia's creative workers, organisations and audiences'. As creative practitioners who contribute to the cultural industries encompassed in this policy—through 'screen and digital games' and 'streaming content'—the legitimisation of these overarching sectors has shaped the activities of cosplayers examined in this thesis.

Over time, as this thesis has described, playful or casual experiences in cosplay have become increasingly complicated by incentives for remuneration or pathways to professionalisation that align with the commercial landscape of related creative industries. Within this emergent economic landscape, this thesis demonstrates how cosplayers have adapted, formalised, or advanced various components of their practice through the use of digital technologies. As seen in Chapter 4, cosplayers have hybridised the offline and online components of their activities. As a result, they have professionalised cosplay activities by leveraging the advantages of digital technologies, platforms, and tools, and developing associated skill sets. Cosplayers engage in digital labour using skillsets that adopt novel technologies to advance or augment—but not replace—traditional labour. This may be because Chapter 4 focused on how cosplayers used digital platforms for non-commercial purposes, including sharing critical information and knowledge with other cosplayers on social media platforms. Chapter 6 then explored this level of engagement through a larger dataset and articulated digital labour and skill sets as demonstrated by cosplayers. Digital labour —for a range of non-commercial or commercial purposes—is complicated by the fact that it can hold economic value within emergent labour frameworks for monetisation through novel creative industries including digital content creation and 'influencer economies' on digital platforms (Abidin, 2017).

Cosplayers, whether they choose to identify as hobbyists or professionals are thus engaging in similar activities—even though they may not seek the same results from their digital activities. Cosplayers, having selected an expensive hobby, may also be further incentivised to engage in activities that may result in remuneration for their supplies—which have been streamlined by digital platforms that facilitate immediate access to these types of financial activities. With more predatory platforms emerging, including OnlyFans that specifically promotes sexualised labour,

Figure 31

Policy posters on display at Supanova's Cosplay HQ (2021)



cosplayers have been open to new modes of exploitation in digital labour environments, requiring improved moderation policies and platform governance. However, as Chapter 7 demonstrates, cultural intermediaries have also emerged in cosplay, improving standards for practice and remuneration in convention settings by professionalising a novel tier of cosplay specialist roles.

Cultural intermediaries have emerged in cosplay, creating a novel category of professional services that cater to cosplayers in physical spaces of practice. In Chapter 5, specifically, issues emerging from conduct in cosplay event spaces related to the gaming industry were discussed, focusing on the history of marginalisation, objectification, and harassment of women in these environments. As cosplay specialists professionalised their endeavours, entrepreneurial endeavours like Lumin's Workshop have become stable economic contributors through their establishment of a permanent brick-and-mortar space for selling cosplay supplies and training workshops, acting as a physical testament to cosplay's origins as a hobbyist and community-focused activity. At the same time, the efforts of figures like Captain Patch-It and Steamkittens, have helped to move the idea of cosplay away from potential misconceptions of the activity as a performance, service-offering or spectacle for convention-goers; into a valuable segment of the population of convention attendees that can be catered to through acknowledgement of the specialty services and standards that support them. Cosplay photography and repairs have been integrated at the convention level, due to the endeavours of figures like Captain-Patch It and Steamkittens, who demonstrate the community-wide effects that can result from individual efforts towards advancing the overall professionalisation of cosplay. the introduction of regulations and standards of practice through formalising the role of cosplay repairs and photography at

conventions. Conventions have co-opted community slogans—including "Cosplay is Not Consent" —into regulations and standards for conduct that are published digitally in the lead up to conventions (Oz Comic-Con, 2019:2025) and presented in physical signage within the event spaces. Similarly, community initiatives from figures like Captain Patch-It and Steamkittens have set future standards for remunerating and recognising cosplay specialty practices, such as repair and photography services.

However, as this thesis has demonstrated, digital platforms, tools and skills play a significant role in the creative—sometimes economic—components of cosplayers everyday activities. Cosplayers are implicated in the technological and economic infrastructures of novel digital platforms that have supported the professionalisation of their practices. Novel digital environments for labour have their own—often platform-specific—standards and regulatory practices that are established by both human and non-human (i.e., algorithmic) agents and corporate interests. Cosplayers, through the digitisation and professionalisation of their activities, have become what Lamerichs (2021) conceives of as 'platform workers' in digital environments. In the context of the creative economic industry surrounding live-streaming gameplay and commentary on Amazon's Twitch platform, recent cases of public stalking and harassment demonstrate the increased need for further efforts focused on protecting women engaging in digital labour in these spaces. At the time of writing, female game streamers Valkyrae and Emiru were engaged in a live-streaming marathon, which saw the streamers enter a public fair in the USA; before they were stalked and harassed by an apparent fan (Zwiezen, 2025). In a violent outburst, the alleged assailant is filming following the streamers around the carnival, before lunging towards the group of streamers and shouting threats to their lives (Zweisen, 2025). It is clear that not only positive—but also negative—features of the physical aspects of cosplay practice are also being translated into novel forms of harassment perpetuated against already marginalised, gender-diverse creative workers in these labour environments.

Gender-based barriers persist in both physical and digital spaces related to the gaming and pop culture industries. However, they are constantly challenged by the practices of cosplaying women who invest time and effort into cultivating a more inclusive future for cosplay. Just last year, Supanova Comic Con & Gaming launched their first education-focused con, *Level Up*, in November 2024, as part of their anniversary celebrations for having held 100 cons across Australia. This event, aimed at school-aged students between 14–17, is designed to explore 'the vast opportunities within the gaming and tech industries' (Supanova Expo Pty Ltd., 2025). In an advertisement for the 2025 return of the Level Up convention, cosplayers are briefly featured in an accompanying video, alongside vague references to career paths including the creative arts (Supanova Expo Pty Ltd., 2025). Though it is notable to see leaders in the Australian industry

recognising career pathways emerging from cultural and creative industries relating to games and popular culture, the absence of cosplayers—some of the leading practitioners of female-dominated activities in gaming communities (as found in Chapter 6)—demonstrates the need for further industry recognition and legitimisation of women's contributions. This is made especially evident through the way traditionally male-dominated gaming subcultures and industries, like esports, are highlighted as features of events like Supanova's Level Up, but not cosplay. Cosplayers are often hired as promoters or entertainers at esports events and featured in their advertising campaigns; but rarely featured as professionals—even when they possess more 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1984) than some of the local organisations they promote for. It is worth noting that cosplay is an inclusive practice that welcomes people who identify themselves across the full spectrum of gender identities. The focus on gender is important to highlight here, given the historical gender-based discrimination faced by female-presenting individuals within the global tech and gaming industries, which cosplayers both practice in and contribute to (Lamerichs, 2013a). It is hoped that, with further research into careers in gaming and its related disciplines, cosplay may be included in these discussions, if only as a means of further engaging with and representing the efforts of young women—and gender-diverse individuals—in the tech and gaming industries in Australia.

8.3 Limitations and Future Directions

As anticipated with all research endeavours, there are some evident limitations to the findings presented in this thesis. It is hoped that, as a result, some promising pathways for future research can be provided. Firstly, the project's scope was constrained by its focus on cosplayers and their activities within the community. As a result, executives from related industries—including video games, film, television and other popular media—were not consulted as part of this project. However, in terms of opportunities, future research projects might wish to extend analysis into industry perspectives on the digitisation and professionalisation of cosplay. A second limitation and opportunity can be considered in the exploratory nature of some of the findings, for which there was limited prior research to base analysis on. This issue emerged most visibly when designing Study Two, where, ideally, quantitative research studies are developed using sampling measures with more reliability and, perhaps even more critically, further potential for data analysis. Previous surveys or censuses of the community provide the foundation for more complex results, providing an existing sample of cosplay population sizes for use in more detailed statistical analysis. Thus, it is hoped that future cosplay research can use the results of this survey as a basis for sampling to help counterbalance some of the challenges in researching this emergent industry. Similarly, the nature of the results—introducing blurred lines for engagement with digital labour in cosplay—inherently calls for research which might help further to distinguish the motives or incentives, and potential consequences, of Hobbyist and Professional cosplayers

engaging in this type of work. Specifically, a greater understanding of cosplayers' engagement with unpaid labour activities may help to further support, moderate or otherwise mitigate the precarious conditions and any potential negative impacts associated with fan activities in digital environments.

A third limitation related to the focus on Australian cosplayers and the national context, leaving an opportunity for further comparative global research into the way cosplay practices emerge in distinct cultural, social and technological environments. It must be noted that this project was initially conceived as a cross-cultural examination of the digitisation and professionalisation of cosplay between Australia and Japan. Sadly, one year into this project, the global COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the potential for this original research design to be realised, due to immediate and enduring restrictions on international travel. As a result, this project had to be quickly re-designed to meet the challenges of the new working environment—which included changing the research design of Study Two to an online survey, to accommodate the impacts of national lockdowns in Australia, which kept many cosplayers—and the researcher—mostly confined to working from home (Macreadie, 2021). In saying this, the potential for international comparisons —especially, to practices in Japan—remains an important, further opportunity for research. Finally, also related to the COVID-19 period, was what could be considered a final area of limitation for the project—which simultaneously emerged as an opportune period for researching digital labour—namely, the rapid advancement of the digitisation of cosplay practices, due to restrictions to practice. With the pandemic becoming an ever-distant memory, future research may consider whether digital labour practices have been sustained, now that physical spaces related to cosplay practice have largely re-opened and resumed operation.

Each of these studies has contributed to this novel account for the digitisation and professionalisation of cosplay in Australia; by exploring the interwoven physical and digital practices that contributed to the transformation of the industry; highlighting the digital labour and skills developed by cosplayers; and spotlighting the activities of cultural intermediaries and their contributions to the industry. Digital labour is an emergent space, where a range of novel professionalisation, monetisation, and commercialisation strategies are in constant tension with the everyday, social activities of users across a range of industries. Cosplayers, as has been demonstrated, contribute as both hobbyists and professionals in these spaces and are thus ever implicated in the changing affordances, interests and infrastructures of digital platforms. It is hoped that future research, focused on the moderation, regulation and legitimisation of digital labour for cosplayers, may contribute to the ongoing development of safer and more equitable spaces for practice as the industry continues to advance.

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Appendix I: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Introductory

1. How did you find yourself working as a Cosplayer, today?
2. What are your goals as a Cosplayer?
3. What is your favourite place to Cosplay?
4. What is your favourite character to Cosplay?

Digital Platform Use

1. Do you present your content online? If so, on what platforms?
2. Why did you choose these platforms?
3. Which platform has been most influential on your life as a Cosplayer?
4. Do you have a desired number of followers?
5. How do you consider your own fanbase?
6. How do you maintain a following as a Cosplayer?

Your Profession: "In-Game" and Online

1. Do you consider yourself a Gamer?
2. What types of games do you use for inspiration, and why?
3. Do represent yourself as a Cosplayer, when you play a game?
4. How would you describe your identity as a Cosplay personality? (E.g. Do you like to play out your character's favourite move-set, or do you just like to be yourself, but in costume?)

Your Profession: Offline

1. Have you considered Cosplaying at a convention or public event? /Or, have you considered Cosplaying at a convention or public event?
2. Where do you feel most comfortable being a practicing Cosplayer?
3. Do you find yourself understood as a Cosplayer in Australia?
4. What measures do you think could be taken to improve Cosplay in Australia?

Society, Community and Culture

1. Has your Cosplay been influenced by practices in Japan?
2. How do you find interacting with the gaming community, when discussing your Cosplay?
3. How do you find interacting with the general public in Australia, when discussing your Cosplay?
4. What does the word Gamer mean to you, today?
5. Do you think there are any particular, public Cosplay groups or fandoms that are working particularly well?
6. Where do you hope to go with your Cosplay? Do you think this is achievable in Australia?

Appendix II: Survey Instrument

Developing Digital Careers: Digitising and Professionalising Cosplay in Australia

Introduction and InstructionsThank you for your interest in this research project, investigating the digitisation and professionalisation of Cosplay in Australia.

Instructions:

This survey takes approximately 20 minutes to complete – depending on how much time is spent on each question and how many comments are provided.There are three sections to complete, with sub-instructions that further detail how to make your selection(s).This survey is completely anonymous, and participation is entirely voluntary. You are under no obligation to complete the questionnaire and may withdraw at any time.The responsible researchers for this project are:

We would like to start by thanking you, for your time and effort, in visiting our survey. Please feel free to get in touch with the student researcher, at any time, should you require assistance or have further questions about completing this survey.

Consent to Participate I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been provided in a written plain language statement. I understand that the purpose of this research is to investigate the digitisation and professionalisation of cosplay in Australia. I acknowledge that the possible effects of participating in this research project have been explained in the project's plain language statement. I understand that, to participate in this project, I will be required to spend 20-40 minutes on a single survey, in the style of a questionnaire, which I will access through a digital link. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from this project anytime without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data that I have provided. I understand that the data from this research will be stored at the University of Melbourne and will be destroyed after 5 years. I acknowledge that I have been informed, by this project's plain language statement, that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements; and that any data will be password protected and accessible only by the researchers named on the survey's introduction page. I understand that, after I submit this consent form, it will be retained by the researchers.

I understand that by completing this survey I am giving my consent to participate in this study

- ◯ Yes, I understand
- ◯ No

Pre-Selection Criteria Your role: You have been invited to participate in this survey as: A person who has engaged in Cosplay or associated activities; AND, who is over the age of 18; AND, currently living in Australia.

Do you meet the Pre-Selection Criteria?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Section A: Cosplay Practices (Online and Offline)

How long have you been involved in cosplay?	◯ 0 - 1 year ◯ 2 - 5 years ◯ 6 - 9 years ◯ 10 years or more
How would you describe your level of cosplay activities?	◯ Professional ◯ Semi-professional ◯ Hobbyist ◯ Casual ◯ Non-cosplayer
Do you generate any income from your cosplay?	◯ Cosplay is my main source of income ◯ Cosplay is an important supplement to my main source of income ◯ Cosplay is a minor income source ◯ I generate no income through Cosplay
Which physical (offline) cosplay practices do you participate in?	☐ Crafting cosplay outfits ☐ Crafting cosplay props ☐ Wearing cosplay at conventions ☐ Modelling cosplay in photo shoots ☐ Participating in cosplay competitions ☐ Other (Select all that apply)
	_____ (Please describe the "other" practice you participate in.)
How would you describe your source of cosplay outfits?	☐ Designing new cosplay patterns ☐ Modifying existing cosplay patterns ☐ Buying existing patterns from commercial retailers ☐ Buying existing patterns designed by other cosplayers ☐ Purchasing a complete cosplay outfit ☐ Other: (Select all that apply)
	_____ (Please describe the "other" source of cosplay outfits.)
How would you describe your status as a Cosplay influencer, on social media platforms?	◯ I am a mega influencer; I have over 1 million followers on social media. ◯ I am a macro influencer; I have 500,000 - 1 million followers on social media. ◯ I am an influencer, I have 10,000 - 500,000 followers on social media. ◯ I am a micro-influencer, I have 1,000 - 10,000 followers on social media. ◯ I am a nano-influencer, I have under 1,000 followers on social media. ◯ I do not use social media as an influencer.

Section B: Use of Digital Platforms and Tools in Cosplay

How often do you use the following social media platforms in your cosplay activities?

(For each option, please select one answer from: (1) "Never", to (5) "Always")

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Facebook	○	○	○	○	○
Instagram	○	○	○	○	○
SnapChat	○	○	○	○	○
WeChat	○	○	○	○	○
Reddit	○	○	○	○	○
WhatsApp	○	○	○	○	○
Discord	○	○	○	○	○
Other social media platform (not listed above): _____	○	○	○	○	○

When using social media platforms for cosplay purposes, how important are the following activities?

(For each option, please select one answer from: “Not at all important” to “Extremely important”)

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
Sharing images, videos or posts related to my cosplay	○	○	○	○	○
Commissioning cosplay services	○	○	○	○	○
Peer support	○	○	○	○	○
Self-promotion and branding	○	○	○	○	○
Research on cosplay or other cosplayers	○	○	○	○	○
Making industry connections for professional purposes	○	○	○	○	○
Entertainment and leisure activities	○	○	○	○	○
Generating revenue through advertising or sponsorships	○	○	○	○	○
Other: _____	○	○	○	○	○

Rank the following social media platforms - when used for cosplay activities - in order of your preference:

(Additional Instructions: Please select one option from each drop-down box to provide a ranking for each social media platform; with 8 being your least preferred and 1 being your most preferred. If you do not use a particular platform, you may select "Not Applicable (N/A)" and rank the other options accordingly.)

Facebook _____
Instagram _____
Twitter _____
Snapchat _____
WeChat _____
Reddit _____
WhatsApp _____
Discord _____
Other social media platform (not listed above):

_____

How often do you use the following crowdfunding and subscription platforms in your cosplay activities?

(Additional Instructions: For each option, please select one answer from: "Never" to "Always")

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Kickstarter	○	○	○	○	○
Patreon	○	○	○	○	○
Ko-Fi	○	○	○	○	○
OnlyFans	○	○	○	○	○
GoFundMe	○	○	○	○	○
Other crowdfunding and subscription platform (not listed above): _____	○	○	○	○	○

When using crowdfunding and subscription platforms for cosplay purposes, how important are the following activities?

(Additional Instructions: For each option, please select one answer from: "Not at all important" to "Extremely important")

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
Generating income from sponsors or subscribers for cosplay-related content	○	○	○	○	○
Generating sales for cosplay-related goods	○	○	○	○	○
Sharing cosplay-related content not suitable for other social networks (i.e. "Not Safe for Work (NSFW)" content)	○	○	○	○	○
Developing relationships with audience members	○	○	○	○	○
Receiving feedback on cosplay progress from paying fans	○	○	○	○	○
Entertainment and leisure activities	○	○	○	○	○
Other: _____	○	○	○	○	○

Rank the following crowdfunding and subscription platforms - when used for cosplay activities - in order of your preference:

(Please select one option from each drop-down box to provide a ranking for each social media platform; with 6 being your least preferred and 1 being your most preferred.

If you do not use a particular platform, you may select "Not Applicable (N/A)" and rank the other options accordingly.)

Kickstarter _____
Patreon _____
Ko-Fi _____
OnlyFans _____
GoFundMe _____
Other crowdfunding/subscription platform (not listed above):
_____ _____

How often do you use the following live streaming and video sharing platforms?

(Additional Instructions: For each option, please select one answer from: "Not at all often" to "Extremely often"):

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Youtube	○	○	○	○	○
Twitch	○	○	○	○	○
TikTok	○	○	○	○	○
Facebook (e.g. uploading video content to Facebook Stories, Facebook Watch, and/or streaming to Facebook Live)	○	○	○	○	○
Instagram (e.g. uploading video content to Instagram Stories, IGTV and/or streaming to Instagram Live)	○	○	○	○	○
Snapchat (e.g. uploading video content to Snapchat Stories, sending video "Snaps", and/or using the Video Notes feature)	○	○	○	○	○
Twitter (e.g. uploading video content for use in Tweets, in Twitter Video and/or live-streaming directly to Twitter followers)	○	○	○	○	○
Other live streaming and video sharing platform (not listed above): _____	○	○	○	○	○

When using live-streaming and video-sharing platforms for cosplay purposes, how important are the following activities?

(Additional Instructions: For each option, please select one answer from: "Not at all important" to "Extremely important"):

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
Creating and sharing "how-to"/tutorial videos for cosplay crafts	○	○	○	○	○
Generating revenue through advertising or sponsorships	○	○	○	○	○
Sharing vlogs or "behind-the-scenes" content	○	○	○	○	○
Self-promotion and branding	○	○	○	○	○
Entertainment and leisure activities	○	○	○	○	○
Other: _____	○	○	○	○	○

Rank the following live-streaming and video-sharing platforms - when used for cosplay activities - in order of your preference:

(Additional Instructions: Please select one option from each drop-down box to provide a ranking for each social media platform; with 8 being your least preferred and 1 being your most preferred. If you do not use a particular platform, you may select "Not Applicable (N/A)" and rank the other options accordingly):

Youtube _____
Twitch _____
TikTok _____
Facebook (e.g. Stories, Watch, Live) _____
Instagram (e.g. Stories, IGTV, Live) _____
Snapchat (e.g. Stories, Snaps, VideoNotes) _____
Twitter (e.g. Video Tweet, Twitter Video, Live) _____
Other video or live-streaming platform (not listed above):

_____

_____

How often do you use the following digital design tools and/or skills in your cosplay practices?

(Additional Instructions: For each tool or skill, please select an answer, from "Never" to "Always")

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Using software for cosplay design	○	○	○	○	○
Designing and publishing digital marketing and advertising materials	○	○	○	○	○
Writing, editing and sharing digital, text-based content	○	○	○	○	○
Designing and drawing images or photographs for use in digital content	○	○	○	○	○
Creating artwork for use in digital content	○	○	○	○	○

How often do you use the following social media skills in your cosplay practices?

(Additional Instructions: For each skill, please select an answer, from "Never" to "Always")

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Creating pages, posts or applications for use on social media	○	○	○	○	○
Writing creative "copy" (text-based content) for marketing purposes	○	○	○	○	○
Researching the cosplay industry for use in own cosplay activities	○	○	○	○	○
Creating and editing video content	○	○	○	○	○
Designing graphics for use in social media	○	○	○	○	○
Marketing activities - social media and digital publishing ads	○	○	○	○	○

Section C: Perceptions on cosplay industry participation

(Additional Instructions: For each question, please select one answer, from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree"):

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
When I participate in gaming and/or pop culture conventions in Australia, I feel supported by cosplay rules and safety guidelines.	○	○	○	○	○
When I participate in gaming and/or pop culture conventions in Australia, I feel safe attending in cosplay.	○	○	○	○	○
Social media platforms have made it easier to interact with other cosplayers.	○	○	○	○	○
Moderation features on social media platforms are effective tools for Cosplayers to prevent unwanted online interactions (e.g. blocking, reporting, or muting another user).	○	○	○	○	○
Digital platforms and tools have made it easier to earn income through cosplay.	○	○	○	○	○
It is possible to become a professional cosplayer in Australia.	○	○	○	○	○
It is essential to create a social media presence, to become a professional cosplayer.	○	○	○	○	○

Closing Question

Do you have any final comments to leave with us? ○ Yes ○ No

_____

(Please enter your feedback here (optional))