

Pinoy Cosplay: Profile of Cosplayers in the Philippines

Dorcas Juliette Ramos

Introduction

The word “cosplay” (“*kosupure*” in Japanese) is derived from the Japan-made “English” words “costume play” (“*kosuchūmu purei*”) for masquerade, by combining the first two moras of each word in Japanese pronunciation: “kosu” (コス) for “cos-” of “costume” and “pure” (プレ) for “pla-” of “play.”¹ It pertains to a Japanese subculture centered on dressing as characters from manga, anime, movies, and video games. Today, cosplay has become a global phenomenon. In recent years, it has gained practitioners in Asian countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, South Korea, and China.

In the Philippines, the popularity of cosplay grew rapidly in the 2000s as manifested in regular cosplay events; the existence of cosplay organizations, cafés, retail stores; and the opening of a cosplay museum in 2010. There has been no published study on cosplay in the Philippines in the best of my knowledge. Cosplay being a relatively recent phenomenon in the country, an accurate profile of Filipino cosplayers remains to be explored; likewise the demography of cosplay in the globe has yet to be studied (Winge 2006).

Having been observing the cosplay scenes in the Philippines since 2010, I suggest that cosplay in the country is ostensibly part of youth culture, female-dominated, and an activity rendered by those belonging to a relatively higher socioeconomic status. In order to verify this assumption, albeit partially, I conducted a survey of cosplayers in Manila focusing on age, sex, and socioeconomic status. This essay asks: Who are cosplayers in the Philippines? Particularly, what socio-demographic conditions constitute cosplayers in the country? It aims to document the socio-demographic characteristics of cosplayers

in the metropolis Philippines and to contribute to the understanding of current trends of consumption of popular culture of Japan and its neighboring countries in the local setting.

Though still a young field of academic queries, studies on cosplay have developed since the latter half of the 2000s. According to Theresa Winge (2006), cosplay refers to activities associated with dressing and acting like a character from comic books, anime, movies, or games. These activities are like a masquerade with makeup and costumes, photo sessions, and performance of skits. Pier Medina, a cosplayer for five years, says in the survey that cosplay is a “hobby” where she “expresses her love and appreciation for a character.” Cosplay’s primary concern is to imitate, as accurately as possible, selected character based on anime, comics, movies, or games.

Winge (2006) identified four elements of cosplay—the cosplayer, social settings, character and role playing, and costumes and accessories—elements that play important roles in the cosplay interaction between people, environment, and fantasy (*ibid.*, 66). Through comparative study of cosplay between Japan and North America, Winge (2006) noted that Japanese and North American cosplay share some common elements such as a fan-base setting and the use of costume and accessories. The differences, on the other hand, lie on how cosplay competitions are held and the nature of the cosplay market (*ibid.*, 76). In a cosplay event in Japan, cosplayers mimic the poses and sometimes recite a famous line of their characters, while in North America, cosplayers perform humorous skits not necessarily representing their chosen character. Another difference is that in Japan, there are specialty shops catering to the needs of cosplayers, such as costumes, accessories and publications, while in North America, there is a very limited selection of these items.

Meanwhile, Indah Lestari (2011) argued that cosplay as a popular culture operates and circulates based on social conditions of postmodernism. According to her, “cosplay is a play between fantasy and reality, building 'carnavalesque' space where individuals can be someone or something other than themselves ... This aspect is postmodern in nature as postmodernism is the attempts to destabilize concepts such as presence, identity, reality and meaning” (*ibid.*, n.p.).

Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and Roger Caillois's notion of mimicry lay the conceptual foundation of this essay. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of construction of a new cultural capital, I suggest that Japanese popular culture takes the role of a particular tool with which a certain generation (in a

given locale, in this case the Philippines) gains access to a certain type of culture and its associated products. When Japanese pop (J-pop) music became popular in the Philippines in the 1990s, it brought about cultural affiliation to Japan among many Filipino youth. While revealing the discrepancy between the young generation of Filipinos and older ones in the consumer activities, Filipino youth's liking Japanese popular culture at large is interpreted as a process of nurturing their access to "Japan," be it realistic or of fantasy, through their consumption of the products. The cosplay is a mode of proactive consumption of the Japanese (and even other East Asian) popular culture, an ostensible capital for social mobility.

Caillois (1961) focuses on mimicry and imitation, and defines mimicry as "a diverse series of manifestations, the common element of which is that the subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself. He forgets, disguises or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another" (19). In cosplay, fans wear costumes, wigs, makeup, accessories, and props to imitate a character from comic books, videos, movies, anime, or games. The fan becomes free from reality through the construction of a temporary "real-at-its-present" alternative reality (Caillois 1961). Likewise, the concept of sexual inversion allows a cosplayer to take on roles different from his roles in everyday life, though that may lead to reaffirmation of traditional hierarchies and gender roles (ibid.).²

Profiling Filipino Cosplayers

For profiling of cosplayers in the country, a survey was conducted with fifty cosplayers. I applied the definition of "cosplayer" by Winge (2006) in identifying the participants to the survey. According to Winge, a cosplayer is a fan of anime, manga, comic books, and games who attends events and conventions wearing a costume of a character.

I was able to recruit nineteen participants at Asia Pop 2011 held at SM Megamall, Mandaluyong City, on October 9, 2011. A cosplay competition was one of the programs of this event. All of the nineteen contestants in the event, all Filipinos, answered a one-page survey focused on socio demographics. I also conducted an online survey through email. I also posted the survey in online cosplay communities, though this method turned out ineffective as most of the returned surveys were incomplete. After all, fifty cosplayers participated in the survey, all presumably Filipinos. Due to time and resource constraints, the total



number of respondents had to be limited to fifty. Likewise, only the basic indicators—such as age, sex, monthly income or allowance—were documented in profiling the socio-demographics of cosplayers. But respondents were also asked to write their comments freely if they wished. These comments are cited with their consent. (They are identified by the names they wrote in the questionnaire.) These serve as descriptive information through which readers can have a glimpse of the agency of the Filipino cosplayers. Aside from the survey, supplemental information was gathered from cosplayers' blogs and online chat communities, particularly those managed largely in the Philippine settings. Academic literature on cosplay was also consulted.

In what follows, I will illustrate an overview of cosplay in the Philippines. This will be followed by the presentation of demographic profile of the cosplayers in the metropolis Philippines (by age, sex, and socioeconomic status) according to the survey results. I will further provide a brief reflection on the socio-demographic characteristics of cosplayers in the Philippines.

Cosplay in the Philippines: Social Settings

Anime was introduced into the Philippines in the 1970s. Since the rise of its popularity in the 1990s, demands for anime-related products such as

comic books, DVD movies, CDs of anime soundtracks, and memorabilia have been growing in the local market. Today, the presence of cosplayers and regularly organized cosplay events indicates the cosplay's popularity in the country. While the exact date of the beginning of cosplay in the Philippines is unknown, it is safe to assume that it came with the popularity of anime in the 1990s, perhaps accelerated with the advent of the Internet.

Cosplay is a practice that shows admiration of anime, manga, videos, and games. Edralyn Andrade, a cosplayer for four years, said in the survey that “cosplay is the art of embodying a certain fictional character through imitating his appearance.” Cosplayers have to do extensive research on their favorite character and prepare costumes, accessories, and props to portray the character. Most cosplayers attend cosplay conventions where they can display their creativity, resourcefulness, and craftsmanship. During such an event, a contest is held to select the best cosplayers who portray a character in the most authentic and creative manner possible through costume and acting.

Cosplay conventions

Major online cosplay communities in the Philippines generally agree that the first anime convention in the country that also featured cosplaying is the Anime Explosion 2000 held at SM Megatrade Hall, SM Megamall, Mandaluyong City, on November 3–5, 2000 (e.g., Chylle 2010). In a cosplay convention, individual and group cosplay competitions are held in which cosplayers display their costumes and perform a skit on stage. Some events have a cosplay photography contest. Cosplay Mania and the Philippine Cosplay Conventions are two major cosplay events held annually, bringing together cosplayers from around the country. At least one cosplay event is held every month in the country.

Cosplay organizations

Along with the popularity of cosplay, anime organizations have increased and maintained an online presence. For example, Cosplay.ph, which started in 2006 with only fifty members, has almost ten thousand members today. Other well-known organizations include Otaku Philippines Organization (OPO) and PhilAnime, with a growing membership list.

A number of schools and universities have some cosplay organizations: UP Anime-Manga Enthusiasts (UP AME) and UP Soma Soshiki in the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman and Los Baños, respectively; Genshiken in De La Salle

University; Tomasinotaku in the University of Santo Tomas; and Oni-Bear Clan in the University of the East. The existence of such groups reflects the increasing interest of young Filipinos in cosplay.

Cosplay cafés

Cosplay cafés have also become popular. MeiDolls Café in Ortigas Avenue Extension, Cainta, claims at its official social network site that it has been the first cosplay café in the country.³ At MeiDolls Café the waitresses are dressed in French maid costumes and make diners feel like they are their masters and mistresses. It has been featured in a number of television shows, radios, and magazines for its unique and creative concept. There are other cafés that are not really cosplay cafés but have serving staff who dress in costumes once a month.

Cosplay stores

The popularity of cosplay also paved the way for some new businesses, such as stores selling ready-made costumes, wigs, and props for cosplayers. Sugarfree and Blue sells cosplay clothing to teenagers in major shopping malls.⁴ According to its official Facebook page, the store aims to “provide alternative fashion specifically for the fantastically-edgy and flamboyant youth.” There are online stores that cater to the needs of cosplayers. Ebay.ph and multiply.com have more than a hundred sellers of costumes for cosplay.



Cosplay museum

The Philippines is one of the first countries in Asia to have established a cosplay museum. The Cosplay Museum in Quezon City opened in January 2010. A project of Cosplay.ph and the Diliman Preparatory School, it provides “individuals and enthusiasts alike with valuable information on the history of Cosplay in the Philippines as well as giving a semi-permanent home for weekly workshops, discussions and casual gatherings. This also gives a home to the creativity and determination of Filipino Cosplayers and photographers whose hard work can be reflected on the costumes and photos that embellish the museum.”⁵ It features historical cosplay costumes, a cosplay historical gallery, and an extensive gallery of cosplay photographs.

Cosplay queen

Alodia Gosiengfiao is an internationally known Filipino cosplayer. She has contributed in raising the profile of cosplay in the country. She is called Queen Alodia by anime, game, cosplay enthusiasts, and the media both locally and internationally. Her official website claims that her Facebook has 1.6 million followers (Alodia Official Site, n.d.). Her popularity soared when she became an ambassador for Animax-Asia in 2010. Alodia cosplayed more than forty anime, movie, and video game characters from *Witchblade*, *G.I. Joe*, *K-On!*, *Paradise Kiss*, *Evangelion*, and *Final Fantasy X-2*. As an international, multi-awarded cosplayer, Alodia is a frequent guest in cosplay conventions. She has also served as a judge in local and international competitions (ibid.).

Pinoy Cosplayers Revealed

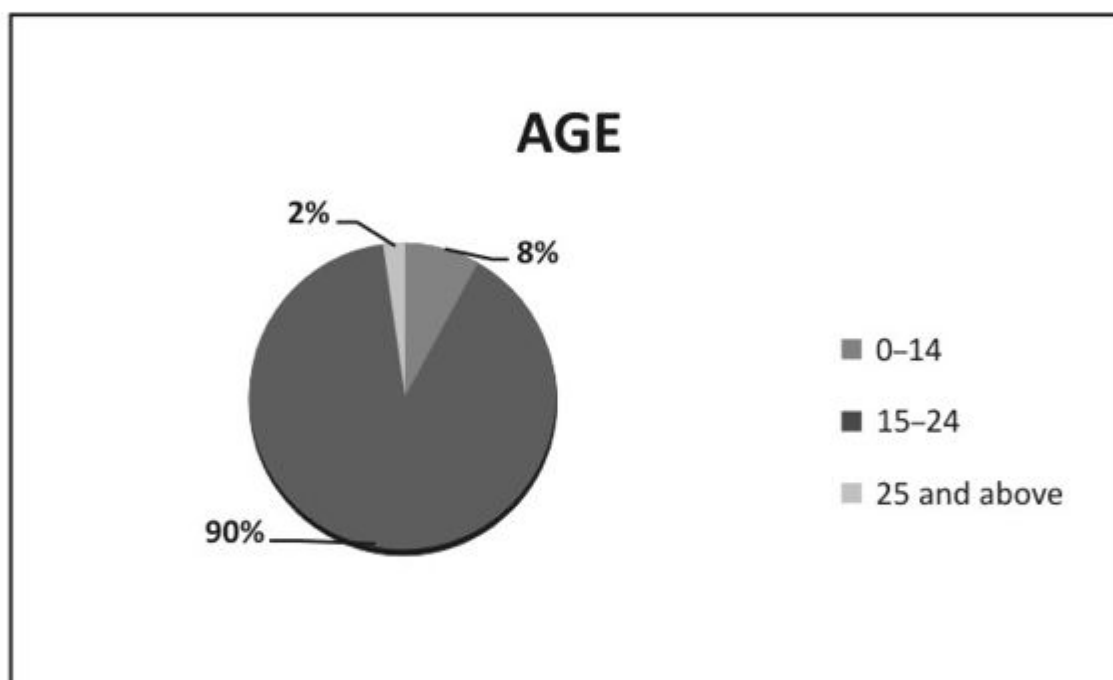
As stated earlier, the purpose of this study is to document the profile of cosplayers in the Philippines. The data presented in this section show some cosplay trends in the Philippines.

Cosplay as youth culture

Youth, as defined by the United Nations General Assembly, are “persons between the ages of 15 and 24,” and it understands youth as those belong to “a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence and awareness of our interdependence as members of a community” (UNESCO 2012). In the survey conducted among the fifty cosplayers, forty-five (90 percent) fall under the age group regarded as youth. This trend

conforms with Yi Luo's argument that the youth has the tendency to be attracted to popular culture such as cosplay as they are fond of presenting their individual uniqueness. At the same time, they get a sense of security along with satisfaction by interacting and communicating with people who share similar values and interests (Luo 2006). Nevertheless, cosplay does not exclude children and adults from participating. In Asia Pop 2011, three contestants in the cosplay competition were less than ten years old. The three children—siblings Philip, Patricia Gonzales, and their neighbor, Justin Michael Aloria, aged eight, five, and nine, respectively—cosplayed characters from the anime *Naruto*.

Figure 1. Age Distribution of Respondents



Cosplay as female-dominated

The survey revealed that majority of the respondents are female. Of the fifty cosplayers surveyed, thirty-three (66 percent) were female while seventeen (34 percent) were male. When cosplay started in the 1990s in the Philippines, the discrepancy in the number of male and female cosplayers did not seem to be as great as it is now.

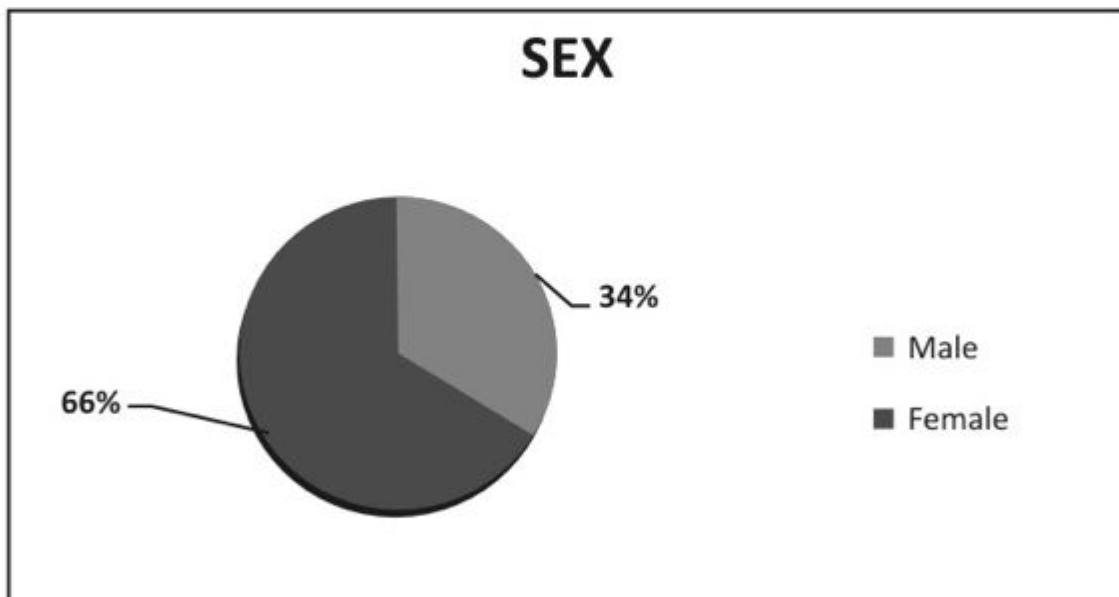
Previous studies have explored the female attraction to cosplay. Jonathan Broussard (2009) explained that making costumes requires sewing and crafting skills, thus cosplay appeals more to females than to males. Larissa Hjorth (2009), on the other hand, noted that females are more attracted to cosplay than males due to the popularity of the *kawaii* culture that emphasizes “cuteness.”⁶

Hjorth stressed that “cosplayers provide new avenues for expression and subjectivity, operating in an ambiguous space in which females are both objects and subjects” (ibid., n.p.). A well-known male cosplayer, Bryan Rogers, observed that

cosplay is more of a female-dominated hobby because of the work that is involved in it. A lot of guys aren't comfortable with the idea of sewing or 'crafting' things to wear in public! So, when you do have these guys who get into the hobby and make cool stuff, it's kind of a 'shock' factor to folks when it's actually not only handmade, but well done! (Rowles 2010, n.p.)⁷

On the other hand, female cosplayers are often challenged by the lack of a strong female character to cosplay (Stoker 2010).

Figure 2. Sex of Respondents



One way of solving this problem is to cross-play in which a female cosplays a male character. However, many cosplayers are not comfortable in cross-playing. In a country like the Philippines where homophobia is the norm especially at the public space, males are usually expected to be “manly” and females to be feminine. Cosplay entails wearing wigs and makeup, which many Filipinos are not used to doing. When cross-dressing occurs, gender identity of the cosplayer becomes a subject of question. When a woman dressed as a man makes a pass at another woman, she is considered “playing at” heterosexuality while creating a homosexual element. If the other woman is also dressed as a man, the

two are “playing at” male homosexuality while suggesting female homosexuality. Each female cosplayer is reacting to the performed “masculinity” of the other. Similarly, when a woman dressed as a man flirts with a man dressed as a woman, there is a double-reverse heterosexual element. And since each one would hypothetically react to the “gender” of the other, there is a suggestion of homosexuality (Hjorth 2009). Female cosplayers who do not feel comfortable with cross-playing have another option called “femme-ing”—that is, portraying a male character as female. Cosplay is indeed a channel of addressing and correcting gender inequity through chosen works of art (Stoker 2010).

Cosplay and higher socioeconomic status

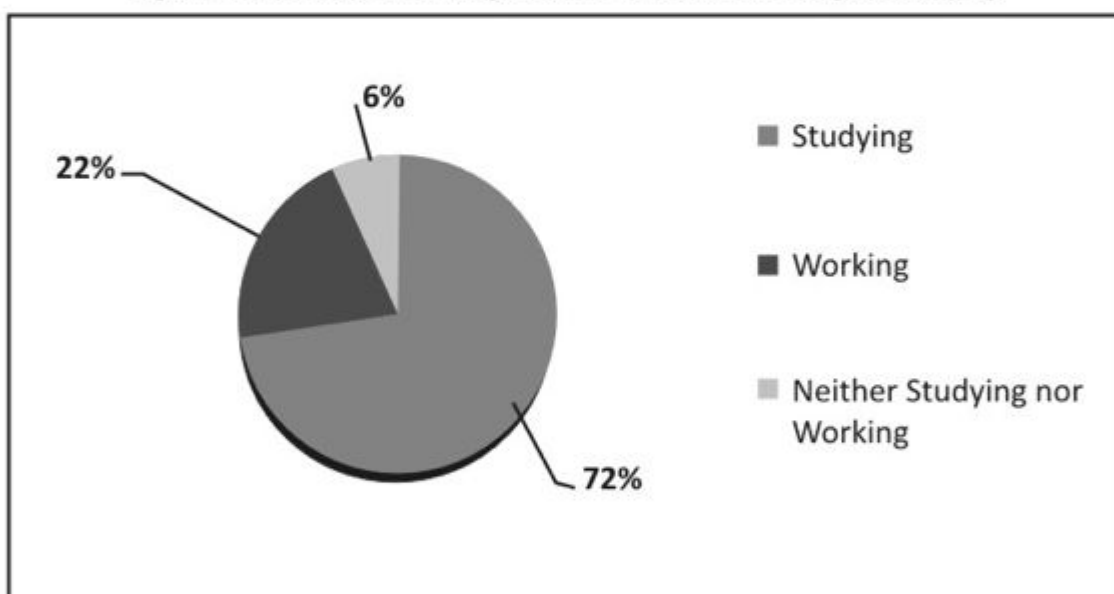
Is cosplay an expensive hobby? Majority of cosplayers in the survey were young and students or were employed in an entry-level position. In the survey conducted, thirty-six respondents (72 percent) were studying, eleven respondents (22 percent) were working, and three respondents (6 percent) were neither studying nor working. It is assumed that the students in the survey save part of their allowance for cosplay activities while those who are working are more liberal in spending on cosplay since they have a steady source of income.

Of the thirty-seven students, twenty-seven respondents (72.98 percent) received an allowance of less than PHP 5,000; nine respondents (24.32 percent) received PHP 6,000–10,000, and one respondent (2.7 percent) received PHP 11,000–15,000 each month. Of the ten workers, five respondents (50 percent) had a salary of PHP 11,000–20,000; four respondents (40 percent) had PHP 21,000–30,000 per month. One respondent (10 percent) did not answer this part of the survey. Those who were neither working nor studying received allowances from their parents; the total amount they received each month varies.

Most student cosplayers saved part of their allowance to buy costume materials and to pay for entrance fees for a cosplay competition. For costumes, a student cosplayer was likely to spend less than PHP 1,000 to a maximum of PHP 2,000 per costume. An employed cosplayer, on the other hand, spent PHP 2,000–10,000 per costume. Yu Shomora, a cosplayer for two years and a half, had spent PHP 5,000–10,000 per costume to accurately portray the dress and props of the character she cosplays. Samantha Ocampo, a cosplayer for three years, said that “you really have to spend for it [cosplay]. Sometimes, you have to sacrifice a lot of things like cell phone or laptop or shoes you have been eyeing for months.”

Interestingly, the survey revealed that some cosplayers had spent thousands of pesos on making costumes and buying props and yet did not consider cosplay an expensive hobby. Tricia Tan, a cosplayer for three months, said that spending money on costumes is “worth it especially if it becomes your passion.” For eleven cosplayers (22 percent), cosplay was not necessarily an expensive hobby if one is resourceful and creative. Pier Medina pointed out that “if you have time, creativity, and skill to make your own costumes and improvise, it isn't expensive at all. It all boils down to being resourceful.” Maria Malstrom, a cosplayer for half a year, shared a similar opinion that “[cosplay] is not expensive if you think out of the box.” In other words, some Filipino cosplayers believe that the key to making affordable and quality costumes is improvisation and resourcefulness.

Figure 3. Distribution of Respondents Who Are Working or Studying



Conclusion

With the popularity of cosplay in the country, various anime events have been held in major shopping malls in Metro Manila, and a number of cosplay organizations, cafés, museums, and retail stores have been established since the 2000s. A survey of fifty cosplayers was conducted to know their socio-demographic profile. The results of this research showed that cosplayers in the Philippines are largely youth. It is safe to assume that cosplay in the Philippines—as extension of anime, manga, comic books, and video games—is very much part of youth culture. Children and adults also participate in cosplay events, but they have remained a minority.

Cosplay in the Philippines is female-dominated, as it is in other countries. It may be due to the skills required in cosplay, such as sewing and craftwork, which are traditionally associated with females. It could also be that males are not comfortable wearing makeup and wigs and dressing up.

However, the assumption that cosplay is only for people of higher socioeconomic status had not been found to be true in this study. Cosplay may require spending money on costumes and registration fees for conventions, but it does not necessarily mean that cosplayers have to be well-off. The study showed that majority of cosplayers were students who are dependent on allowances from parents and guardians. Resourcefulness and improvisation played an important role in making the best costumes and props, more than the socioeconomic status of the cosplayers.

The survey contributes in laying the foundation for the establishment of demographic information on cosplayers in the Philippines. However, the author is aware that the number of participants as well as that of questions in this survey is quite limited. Thus it is recommended that further studies on the socio-demographic characteristics of cosplayers in a larger population be conducted. At the same time, a demographic information shall be well complimented if a closer look on the practice of cosplay, such as ethnography, is conducted.

Notes

1. See Winge (2006, 65–78) for a background on cosplay in Japan.
2. See Caillois (1961) for a more detailed explanation of his concept.
3. MeiDolls Café has one branch in Cainta, Rizal, and it is open for franchising. See <http://meidollscafe.multiply.com/>.
4. Sugarfree and Blue is a pioneer retailer store selling ready-made costumes for cosplay. See <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Sugarfree-And-Blue/223629529562?sk=info/>.
5. <http://museum.cosplay.ph/>.
6. *Kawaii* culture pertains to a Japanese subculture of liking “cute” things and/or acting in a “cute” manner. *Kawaii* culture is amplified in anime and mangas, and later cosplay (Hjorth 2009, 11).
7. Quoted from an interview with Bryan Rogers. For the entire transcription, see Rowless 2010.

References

- Alodia Official Site. n.d. alodiagosiangfiao.net/. Accessed June 20, 2013.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. "The Forms of Capital." In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John G. Richardson, 47–58. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Broussard, Jonathan. 2009. "(Ad)Dressing Masculinity: Male Cosplay Performance at Fan Cons." *Southern Anthropologist* 34: 19–31.
- Caillois, Roger. 1961. *Man, Play and Games*. Translated by Meyer Barash. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe.
- Chylle. 2010. "Cosplay Mania X The Low Down." *Otakultura*. September 16. www.otakultura.com/cosplay-mania-x-the-low-down.html#.UcT9IEJpsy4/.
- Hjorth, Larissa. 2009. "Game Girl: Re-imagining Japanese Gender and Gaming via Melbourne Female Cosplayers." *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, no.20. <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue20/hjorth.htm/>.
- Lestari, Indah. 2011. "Cosplay: Postmodernism and Japanese Popular Culture in Indonesia." *Kahwa: Coffee and Journey* (blog). January 28. <http://nuitnoire.wordpress.com/2011/01/28/cosplay/>.
- Luo, Yi. 2006. "Youth Revelry and Bodily Extending: The Analysis of Cosplay." MA thesis, Huazhong Normal University.
- Pelitteri, Marco. 1974. *The Dragon and the Dazzle: Models, Strategies, and Identities of Japanese Imagination; A European Perspective*. Italy: Tunue Inc.
- Rowles, Kelly. 2010. "An Interview with Bryan Rogers: A Cosplay Hero." *Alltern8.com*. Accessed October 8, 2011. http://www.alltern8.com/library/cosplay_conventions/an_interview_with_bryan_rogers_cosplay_hero/l-4655_5.html/.
- Stoker, Courtney. 2010. "Cosplay: The Sincerest Form of Flattery." *Guardian.co.uk*. Accessed October 8, 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/18/cosplay-the-sincerest-form-of-flattery/>.
- UNESCO. 2012. "What Do You Mean by 'Youth'?" <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/youth/youth-definition/>.
- Villafania, Alexander. 2010. "Cosplay as an Art Form." *Loqal Home and Living*. Accessed October 8, 2011. <http://loqal.ph/home-andliving/2010/02/05/cosplay-as-an-art-form/>.
- Winge, Theresa. 2006. "Costuming the Imagination: Origins of Anime and Manga Cosplay." In *Mechademia 1: Emerging Worlds of Anime and Manga*, edited by Frenchy Lunning, 65–76. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press.

(All photographs were taken during Asian Pop 2011 by the author.)