Reviewing the Concept of Subculture: Japanese Cosplay in Malaysia

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Abstract: Globalization and advances in technology have aided the transmission of culture to local communities as to provide these communities different cultural options. They can thus break away from the lifestyle established through the norms of local society and involve themselves in what has become known as subculture. This article considers how one foreign culture, Japanese cosplay became a part of Malaysian subculture and ultimately came to be considered as part of mainstream Malaysian culture. This article is divided into two parts. The first part reviews the various concepts of subculture, such as it being mainly practiced by those who are marginalized in society or those who lack social standing. These interpretations are rejected in favor of a concept of subculture as constituting a different part of main culture. Then the diffusion process of Japanese cosplay into other countries such as Australia and North America is discussed. The second part consists of an elucidation of how Japanese cosplay became a part of Malaysian culture by a textual analysis of Malaysia’s cosplay community forum. It will consider the early formation of Malaysia’s cosplay community and the role students and industry played in this formation. Also the background of the participants and the reasons for their participation in these cosplay activities are
analyzed. It is concluded from this that their participation constituted not some kind of resistance to mainstream culture but in fact is a part of this mainstream culture.

**Key Terms:** Subculture, Mainstream, Marginal, Capital, Japanese, Malaysian, Cosplay

**Introduction**

Globalization and advances in technology have aided the transmission and diffusion of cultures, thus providing various cultural options to different local communities such as for example in the kinds of lifestyle they lead. The influx of multiple forms of culture—usually different from the local culture—allowed local communities the option of “breaking away” from the lifestyle established through the norms of the local society, and involving themselves in what has come to be known as subculture. In this article, we will consider how one foreign culture, the Japanese cosplay became a part of Malaysian subculture and ultimately became part of the mainstream Malaysian culture. It will be divided into four sections. First, there will be a discussion of the concept of subculture where we hope to demonstrate that subcultures constitute not some kind of resistance to the dominant culture but constitute a different part of it. Second, there will be an explanation of how the process through which the culture of Japanese cosplay became part of the local subculture of Malaysia. Third, this process will be elucidated through a textual analysis of the Malaysian cosplay community’s web forum regarding the drive and/or motivation behind the participation of individuals in subcultural activities. With these we hope to demonstrate that subcultures constitute not some kind of resistance to the mainstream culture but constitute a different part of it. Further observations of subculture and the conclusion will constitute the fourth part.

(1) The concept of subculture

The Oxford English Dictionary defines subculture as “a cultural group within a larger
culture, often having beliefs or interests at variance with those of the larger culture".¹ This “variance” is usually understood as something that has negative connotations. We will single out three and show why they are not correct. One is that a subculture is formed by a marginalized bracket of society that reacts to the challenge of various problems by resorting to deviant behavior. Such an interpretation has been referred to by McCracken (McCracken, 1998). But McCracken himself, and we concur with him, does not agree with this approach. He argues instead that the probable motive on the part of many of the participants in a subculture, is curiosity. Thus McCracken (1998, p.119) writes that:

Some subcultures will appear in the world because there are people in the world who want to try something on or something out. ...We are driven by a constant interest in experiential realities outside our own. Sometimes the curiosity can be satisfied by simply taking up long or short term residence in an existing subculture. But sometimes you have to make your own.

Another negative interpretation of subculture is that its formation resulted from what may be called the suppression of an individual and that the collective efforts by like-minded individuals to respond to such suppression will result in the formation of a community or group. Thus Cohen (1955) argues that the formation of a subculture involves processes whereby a collection of individuals with a set of problems coalesce into a group and interact among themselves in order to find a set of solutions for the same problems. We argue against this view as it does not take into account that the driving force of subculture emanates from the outside rather than something that occurs within an individual. An example of the great importance of outside influence is that of the role of the media, which can act as a catalyst to spark certain behavior. It does so by supplying information on the kind of “lifestyles to lead,” thus offering the respective individuals choices as to whether or not to take up the suggestions by the media. In this process it is possible to differentiate participants from non-participants in the subculture where the latter are not forever bogged down by the problems affecting the subcultural group whereas the former, those who choose to practice subculture, gain experience and knowledge which set them apart from the rest who choose otherwise.

A third negative aspect, suggested by Clarke et al. (1976), is that a subculture is formed when a cluster of youths faces a problem of social standing in society. They start forming structured relations amongst themselves by indulging in multiple activities together in order

¹ http://oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/subculture

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to solve problems (in an imaginary way). We offer a different perspective. We believe that subculture can be formed when there exist individuals with (basic) subcultural capital who seek space and opportunity to increase and validate this capital via interaction with other individuals with the same inclination. And finally, a community is formed when more individuals are involved.

Thus it will be shown later that these three non-negative aspects, curiosity, lack of suppression and lack of relation to social standing are present in Japanese cosplay in Malaysia.

(2) The Formation of a Local Subculture

Cosplay, anime and manga have constituted an important part of Japanese cultural influence abroad. Cosplay is an acronym which is a result of combining the English words costume and play. It refers to the act of wearing clothing (costumes) and playing the act that resembles the characters in anime, manga or Japanese video games (ACG). Ani me is the abbreviation which means animation or moving cartoons, and when we talk of anime we refer to the animation which is produced in Japan. Manga means comics, and like anime used here, they refer to those that originate in Japan. This article focusses primarily on Japanese cosplay, more specifically the process by which it developed into a Malaysian subculture and subsequently became part of Malaysian mainstream culture. We begin first with a discussion of some of the literature on Japanese cosplay. The literature on this subculture is surprisingly slim. Despite it having been around for more than three decades, it was only in the last ten years that it has attracted the attention of the social scientists.

Most of the efforts however have been exploratory in nature where the researchers attempt to define the term cosplay and identify the motivation behind people’s involvement in this subculture. This tends to be a prevalent trend of research among Japanese researchers. An example is that of the researcher, Touko Tanaka (Tanaka, 2009). In an article, she elaborated on a definition of cosplay. Along with it, she gives the history behind the existence and formation as well as the diffusion process of the cosplay subculture in Japan. Western researchers on the other hand tend to reflect on and compare the practices of the cosplay subculture observed in Japan and the West, aside from discussing the concepts related to and within the Japanese cosplay subculture. An example of this is the article by Theresa Winge (Winge, 2006) where she discusses the initial existence of the cosplay subculture in Japan.
and North America. Both scholars however are agreed that contrary to the belief that Japanese cosplay subculture exists independently, it actually involved and hence benefited from the contributions from both Japan and North America. Japan is perceived as an importer of a culture from North America, out of which the cosplay subculture eventuated. North America later imported “back” their “retouched” culture which has been added on and improvised by the Japanese who made it more popular.

Both efforts however have not attempted to explain how Japanese cosplay was exported or imported into countries with no backgrounds whatsoever in ACG web culture. Neither researcher elucidated whether there are similarities or differences in the formation pattern the subculture went through between the countries that started it and countries that received the subculture. In this connection two studies are worth mentioning. They focus on Australia as the recipient country. Norris and Bainbridge (2009) attempt to map the interest towards Japanese ACG and the efforts by industry to encourage the formation of a Japanese cosplay subculture in Australia. They concluded that Japanese cosplay subculture did not develop naturally but involved the efforts of industry. Another researcher, Larissa Hjorth (Hjorth, 2009) focused on female cosplayers. She argues that by the use of the internet female groups which mainly used to be mere passive fans can now break the glass ceiling and be actively involved in and contributing to the diffusion of the subculture they love. She also stressed that despite ethnic and cultural differences between Australia and Japan, localization will happen with regards to Japanese cosplay subculture in Australia.

As to Malaysia, little or none exists of academic studies on the diffusion of Japanese cosplay in Malaysia. What exist of publications of cosplay in Malaysia are of a journalistic nature. To address this lacuna, this article will study the formation process of the Japanese cosplay subculture in the case of a recipient country like Malaysia.

To understand the context of the Japanese cosplay subculture in Malaysia, we need to take into consideration the wider society where this particular subculture belongs. But identifying an ultimate culture (or set of cultures) for the people of Malaysia can be a challenging task due to the fact that Malaysia is a country whose people come from various races and religions. This means that there is no agreement on what is the national culture.

From the Malaysian perspective, the traditional practices passed down through generations within the various races have commonly been acknowledged as culture. Additionally, certain matters (set of behavior, responses, etc.) attain a culture status if they are well-received by the majority within a society even if they are morally conflicting with existing norms. For example, littering is a behavior regarded as morally wrong but should an
overwhelming number of people within a society indulge in it, it soon becomes accepted as part of the culture. On the other hand, certain practices are deemed as subcultural if they are not widely accepted or are yet to be widely accepted by the society at large, regardless of whether they are good, right or commendable. For example, recycling as a practice can only be considered as a subcultural activity and not a main cultural activity in certain societies as the majority of the members of these societies fail to embrace this practice.

Thus if we consider the introduction of Japanese cosplay to Malaysia and indeed to elsewhere, it is not one that is status related in the sense of it being weird or deviant from the main Malaysian culture but one that comes with an artistic achievement, that of Japanese anime and manga. In fact, this subculture is almost exclusive to those who are well-versed in anime and manga (in addition to those inclined towards manga-esque and anime-esque fashion). This thus suggests that the formation of the Japanese cosplay subculture in Malaysia is not due to the attempt to find solutions to status-related challenges, rather, it is a means of accumulating subcultural capital\(^2\) in relation to anime, manga and cosplay itself.

(3) The Development of Japanese Cosplay Culture as a Subculture in Malaysia

What follows is a study of the development of Japanese cosplay subculture in Malaysia with respect to how and why it took form.

_The Early Formation_

The discussions held within the Malaysian cosplay community’s web forum contend that Japanese cosplay subculture found its footing in Malaysia circa 1999 though a number of forum members declared they were involved in the cosplay activity as early as 1993. We disagree with this date. This is because the understanding then of cosplay was superficial like

\(^2\) The subcultural capital is one innovation of a term by Thornton (1995) which borrows and continues from the “cultural capital” concept which was developed by Bourdieu (1984). According to Bourdieu, the cultural capital plays the role of a kind of social connection within a system of interaction or interchange, which includes the accumulated knowledge on culture that in turn furnishes the owner with power and prestige. The cultural capital is different from the economic capital which measures one’s material and financial wealth. At the very core, the concept of cultural capital explained that one’s standing or status can be distinguished based on the knowledge he or she possesses.
merely putting on a wig or donning unusual clothing. This is understandable. One main reason for this is that during its formative years cosplay activity is but a form of activity where the involvement would be a matter of leisure or hobby for a group of individuals and nothing close to what can be considered a culture.

Thus given the definition of culture as a way of life or a form of sharing of art and learning,\(^3\) cosplay cannot really be considered to be categorized as culture if it is the limited practice of groups of individuals that do not in one way or another keep in touch with each other. That being so, we argue that the Japanese cosplay subculture started to emerge as a form of subculture in Malaysia only after the various anime, comic and video games (ACG) events which involved cosplay started being actively and consciously organized beginning late 2002. It is here that cosplay-related events start to come forth to play the role of a medium to facilitate and encourage affiliation and social exchange amongst like-minded individuals who share the same interest. The place where these events are held also provided the opportunity to share perspectives while operating on the same wavelength. In the process these people develop values which enabled them to develop into a community which existence hitherto had not been obvious. Since then, cosplay events started to really mushroom with the number of events rising steadily every year and there have also been a marked increase in those donning costumes from the members of the audience.

**The Role of Industry and Students**

In the early days of its formation, the dissemination of elements of Japanese cosplay subculture in Malaysia owes much to the industry, and students. Two pioneering cosplay events held in Malaysia namely the Gempak Toys and Comics Fiesta 2002 and the AXN Anime Festival 2003, attest to this. The Gempak Toys and Comics Fiesta is an annual event hosted by Art Square Creation Pte. Ltd. as main proponents with support from co-organizers namely Sungei Wang Plaza, LEGO, Hasbro Toys and Red Force. Art Square Creation Pte. Ltd. is a subsidiary of the Art Square Group,\(^4\) one of the largest and most prolific publication houses in Malaysia which focuses on comics and the world of entertainment. The Art Square

\(^3\) Williams (2000, p.32).

\(^4\) The Art Square Group is one of the largest and most prolific publication houses in Malaysia which focuses on comics and the world of entertainment as their main mission. The group consisted of four subsidiaries namely Art Square Creation Pte. Ltd., Anjung Taipan Pte. Ltd., Gala Unggul Resources Pte. Ltd., and Gempak Starz Pte. Ltd.. The group publishes magazines such as Popcorn, Gempak, Utopia, Comic King, Little Monitor, Gogo Class and Elemen.
Group adopts the approach of involvement in local and international events which offer the visitors the experience of figurines, cosplay, multiple competitions, and meet-the-fans sessions involving local and international artistes to name a few.  

Another example which supports the argument of the industry’s active involvement in the formation of Japanese cosplay subculture in Malaysia is the AXN Anime Festival 2003 held on 27 September 2003 at the Mid Valley Convention Centre. AXN is a television network corporation operating under Sony Pictures Entertainment and broadcasts various forms of entertainment programs including anime series, targeting audience ranging from 18 to 34 years old. The Singapore-headquartered AXN-Asia selected Kuala Lumpur as the location of their event, succeeding Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Hong Kong and Taiwan in the previous editions. The half-day event sponsored by companies such as Panasonic Malaysia Sdn. Bhd., Ragnarok Online Game and 19uana Mobile.  

It attracted thousands visitors amongst fans of anime, some of which attending in costumes. The response reflects how events of such nature are eagerly awaited by fans of anime in general, and specifically cosplay fans.

Ten years after its initiation, the industry continues to play its role in keeping the Japanese cosplay subculture alive in Malaysia. The more active industry names observed are namely the Sungei Wang Plaza, Penang Times Square, Berjaya Times Square, Mines Shopping Fair, Animax, Hotlink, Sony and several other companies involved as sponsors of not co-organizers. The common characteristics shared amongst the industry players are firstly; that of a brand or location popular amongst Malaysian youths. Secondly, close relations to ACG products and/or communications and IT gadgets. Our observations constantly find these industry players hosting programs involving cosplay competitions (or cosplay events in general) in promoting new products or outlets.

The strength of cosplay as a crowd puller is undisputedly acknowledged by the industry. For example, the Mines Shopping Fair in launching their IT center Digimart frankly declared that the inclusion of a cosplay event is due to its effectiveness in attracting the crowd as well as the culture being closely related to IT. Accordingly the industry has been voracious in including cosplay events and/or competitions in conjunction with their own events to introduce their products. Despite advertisements announcing the events or competitions, there were instances where the event or competition did not take place, or was very poorly

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5 Gempak Starz website.
6 Siti Hajar Abd Aziz (2003a).
7 Oh In Yeen (2008).
Aside from the industry, we observed that efforts of random clusters of teenagers and/or students also contributed to the formation and progression of Japanese cosplay subculture in Malaysia. This is illustrated in the cosplay competition held concurrently with the Gempak Toys and Comics Fiesta 2002 which was organized by Art Square Creation Pte. Ltd. in collaboration with Red Force; a group of *doujinshi* (non-commercial comics) activists consisting mainly of students. Red Force was established in September 2002 by then 18 years old Mimasaka Kyo, a form five student, with assistance from 22 years old graphics designer Kaiei Tenjitsu, with the vision of providing multiple platforms for creative individuals to showcase their talents in comics sketching and novel/fictional writing. Additionally, Malaysia’s largest ACG event the Comic Fiesta combines youths volunteering themselves as organizing committee. Findings in the research also suggest that currently the majority of cosplay-related events held in Malaysia involves students’ clubs or committees from private institutions of higher learning as organizers.

**Background of Participants**

In general it can be asserted that there exists no specific social structure that can readily represent the cosplay population in Malaysia. This is another way of saying that the said population has a very open social structure. If the effort by Sugiura (2008) and Tanaka (2009) concluded that the cosplay subculture is somewhat exclusively the culture of the female

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8 Barbara Foong (2002).

9 Listed here are the cosplay-related events organized by students’ clubs or committees from private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. Animangaki: Sun-U Anime Club (SUAC), Sunway University College; Anime Mega Blasts: Manga, Anime & Games Club (MAG), INTI International University College, Nilai; Bunkasai Night: Anime and Manga Club (AniMaC), UCSI University; C2AGE: HELP Matriculation Centre Student Council, HELP University; Daicon: EmiNA–Society of Modern Visual Culture (EmiNA Cyber), Universiti Multimedia Cyberjaya; GACC: EmiNA Japanese Animation Club (EmiNA Melaka), Universiti Multimedia Melaka; GAMP: Nihon No Sekai (NNS), International Medical University; Ichibanzai: Anime, Manga, Games, and Cosplay Club (AMGC), KDU University College, Penang; KONMAS: Fakulti Seni Lukis & Seni Reka, UNiSEL Shah Alam; MAGE Festa: The Manga Anime Games Enthusiast Club (The MAGE Club), Nilai University College; MGCC: KDU University College, Damansara; Taylor’s Asaban Festival: Taylor’s Anime Society (TAS), Taylor’s University College.
counterparts of the working population in Japan, the same situation cannot be observed in Malaysia.

Labelling it as a culture for females is strictly insufficient as there is no shortage of male cosplayers. It cannot be labelled as the culture dominated by the Chinese as it also actively being participated by Malays and Indians. Similarly labelling it as the culture of working-age youths would be misleading as there is participation by teenagers as young as 13 years old. The notion of it being a culture for the rich should also not be entertained as although it can be an expensive culture to be involved in there are participants who work part time and save enough money to secure a figurative membership to this culture and actively participate.

Due to the open nature of the social structure, the effort to define the characteristics of the population by means of statistical diagram would hence be rendered irrelevant. In a limited sense, certain things are statistically straightforward, i.e. the findings of the research thus far reveal that firstly in terms of gender, female cosplayers number greater compared to their male counterparts. Secondly, in terms of racial make up, it is found that Chinese cosplayers outnumber the Malay cosplayers, with an almost negligible number of Indian participants. Although an explanation is yet to be found, our research showed that Chinese participants have been somewhat dominant in this subculture even in the early days of its inception.

Thirdly, in terms of age, we found that the majority of people getting involved in Japanese cosplay subculture in Malaysia falls within the early youth age range of 13 to 25 years old. There exists however a select number of participants whose involvement went beyond age 25 with some even approaching their 40s. In line with their age, the majority of cosplayers in Malaysia are found to consist of students either at college or university level, as well as high school students. The remaining work in various different fields. Fourth, the research also established that most of the cosplayers either originate from or are currently living in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, followed thereafter by Penang, Malacca and Sabah. Lastly, the findings reveal that the individuals involved in this subculture possess either the interest and/or abilities in at least one of the following fields namely animation, comics and illustration, video games, information technology, fashion and photography.
Reasons for Participating¹⁰

For a number of cosplayers, beginning to get themselves involved is merely a simple matter of having seen and experienced the fascination of seeing another donning a costume and feeling an inner pang that urges "hey, maybe I can do better than that...!" There are also those that do not have much or possibly nothing going on in the matter of knowledge in anime/manga but felt compelled to try out cosplaying due to their natural leaning towards fashion. This goes on to prove that participation in the Japanese cosplay subculture is open to anyone that possesses initial (financial) capital to venture and expand themselves from being an amateur cosplayer into a professional one.

There were six main reasons that explain the motivation and persistence for people to carry on getting themselves involved in Japanese cosplay subculture. One frequently mentioned and perhaps overly used expression would be joy, which is admittedly complicated to comprehend and hence explain, especially to those who did not themselves get involved in the respective activities. Those who do will tell you that joy can be achieved by simple means such as getting addressed by audiences with the name of the character they are role playing as. This simple gesture is so valuable it affords the cosplayers a sense of achievement that audiences are able to identify (and possibly relate to) the character, which leads them to conclude that they have succeeded in role-playing the character in question. Cosplayers also experience joy if and when audiences glance their way and possibly talking about those in costumes in their little conversations, maybe even proceeding to scramble and jostle for photographs of them—the kind of sensation normally experienced by and equated with well-known and revered celebrities. Those who harbor no desire to grab other people’s attention experience the joy of being “out of (their own) character” and seeing themselves being “someone else,” and recording the affair amongst themselves to be viewed on later occasions.

A second motivation to continue cosplaying is the chance to get to know people and hence find more friends. The cosplay activity provides the platform and window for

¹⁰ The reasons are analysed from the many responses given by participants as found in the following two websites:

a) ComicFiesta Community. What got you into cosplay?

b) ComicFiesta Community. Why do you cosplay?
participants to approach and get to know other individuals as they share the same interest and inclination. New friends can be made via different means and gestures such as face-to-face meets during events or interacting within an online forum. They can also win new acquaintances by way of recruiting new members for a cosplay group. It is without a doubt that involvement in the cosplay activity can and will broaden one’s social scope. One of the hotter topics amongst these like-minded individuals would be on the methods and techniques to make and improvise on costumes and props, where they can exchange knowledge, ideas and experience and in the process get closer to each other.

The third factor influencing and motivating participants to carry on indulging themselves within the subculture is the opportunity to test out and sharpen one’s ability in terms of knowledge as well as techniques and expertise. Indeed, activities supposedly embedded within cosplay such as producing costumes and props undoubtedly require certain knowledge and expertise to carry out. The challenge begins first and foremost at the moment of deciding on which character to carry, and continues with obtaining the materials to make the costume and props; challenges which impress a deeper meaning for the cosplayer. An increased level of self-confidence is one such reward of producing something with their own effort. Amongst the specific techniques and expertise that will be acquired, having involved themselves in Japanese cosplay subculture, include sewing, tailoring clothes, possibly iron crafting, handicrafts, and other related ones.

Having successfully created something will give most people a sense of satisfaction is the fourth factor behind the motivation to carry on with the culture. The cosplay activity can potentially supply much satisfaction to the respective individuals after having successfully produce and improvise on something on their own. Especially for those who enter themselves into cosplay competitions, it can be exhilarating to receive the acknowledgements of the spectators and judges directed towards them and the fruits of their labor. Satisfaction is also something the cosplayers feel with the sight of the spectators’ happy faces having seen their performance. A number of cosplayers also practice the donning of costumes for the purpose of charitable activities for example entertaining children with medical conditions, such as Thalassemia, at charity events. See the happy faces of the children is very rewarding and gives the respective cosplayers much satisfaction.

The fifth factor that seemingly has a binding effect on the participants towards the subculture is the possibility and ability to change an individual’s personality. A number of

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11 Naveen Mathew Menon (2011).
cosplayers claim to have had a life-changing experience after involving themselves with the culture which owes much to the change in their personality for example from someone who is usually and normally quiet and introverted, into one that has less reluctance in stepping into the limelight and grabbing people’s attention. As according to one cosplayer, the shy person within her will be no longer especially when she starts conversing and explaining about the character and costume she’s wearing.

The nature of this subculture that puts no restriction on its participants in carrying and portraying any kinds of characters whatsoever provides an interesting opportunity for them to demonstrate the type of personality that might have been eagerly awaiting to be accentuated but was largely suppressed within them due to varying degrees and forms of constraints and possibly restraints. This includes although not restricted to the unveiling of male and masculine features by a female. Dubbed crossplay, it is a specific type of cosplay activity which involves the wearing of costumes from that of the opposite gender and is not confined to females wearing costumes of male characters but also works the other way around where male cosplayers don costumes belonging to female characters.

Finally, involvement in the Japanese cosplay subculture is seen as influential in increasing the participants’ interest towards anime. For varying reasons such as a sort of tribute to their Japanese ACG of choice or merely a means of increasing their level of “otaku”ness (“nerd”ness), it is basically an existing desire that they have to know and experience the anime world at a deeper level. Support by the cosplayers i.e. the wearing of costumes from a Japanese ACG series is understood to give a promotional effect to the series. This is due to the fact that the spectators will experience a sense of excitement and enthusiasm to get to know the series further as they have been treated to a form of real life “meet the character” session. The cosplayers themselves will feel that they have contributed something meaningful to the benefit of their favourite character and/or ACG series by introducing it to a larger audience.

**Relation with Other Cultural Forms**

As a subculture, the Japanese cosplay never intentionally separated or isolated it’s participants from that of other cultures, be it a dominant one or a subculture. Although participants of the Japanese cosplay subculture indulge themselves in certain behavior or activities that may have gone against the norms of the dominant culture, they still hold on to certain elements of the dominant culture in specific situations or during particular occasions.
Thus with regard to the sexy aspect of Japanese cosplay, Muslim participants tend to choose characters that do not wear tight or revealing clothes. Some have gone further by donning the headscarf (required of Muslim girls when they appear in public) while being in character. Violent cosplay scenes are very much toned down like the Muslim cosplayers using swords made of cardboard instead of something more menacing like wood or metal. And as to the militant spirit of Japanese cosplay, the Muslim players have not adopted this spirit, an example would be how Malay participants would return and visit their respective hometown during the Hari Raya holidays irrespective of any cosplay events taking place in the Klang Valley area. In general where Japanese cosplay culture clashes with Malay Muslim sensibilities, the Malay Muslim cosplayers defer to the dominant culture.

(4) Further Observations on Subculture

Thus if we consider the introduction of Japanese cosplay to Malaysia and indeed to elsewhere, it is not one that is status related in the sense of it being weird or deviant from the main Malaysian culture but one that comes with an artistic achievement, that of Japanese anime and manga. In fact, this subculture is almost exclusive to those who are well-versed in anime and manga (in addition to those inclined towards manga-esque and anime-esque fashion). This thus suggests that the formation of the Japanese cosplay subculture in Malaysia is not due to the attempt to find solutions to status-related challenges, rather, it is a means of accumulating subcultural capital in relation to anime, manga and cosplay itself.

This paper thus rejects outright the notion that certain sets of practices are considered “sub”culture due to their being deviant or contradicting the general norms of society. This inclination to associate subculture with non-compliance is due to the biased observation by the media as well as others. The media tend to feature the more sensational aspects of the subculture. Such sensationalization influences people into focusing primarily on these

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12 The subcultural capital is one innovation of a term by Thornton (1995) which borrows and continues from the ‘cultural capital’ concept which was developed by Bourdieu (1984). According to Bourdieu, the cultural capital plays the role of a kind of social connection within a system of interaction or interchange, which includes the accumulated knowledge on culture that in turn furnishes the owner with power and prestige. The cultural capital is different from the economic capital which measures one’s material and financial wealth. At the very core, the concept of cultural capital explained that one’s standing or status can be distinguished based on the knowledge he or she possesses.
“deviant” aspects and thus into believing all subcultures are deviant. In reality there exists a considerable number and forms of subculture. An example of the latter are (female) teenagers fashioning their headscarves in ways which are very different from how their mothers do it so that the new style is “better aligned” with their more modern ways of dressing. This phenomenon can be considered a form of subculture for it is a way of life that not many practice. These less-sensational practices are, however, seldom if ever, defined using the term subculture as society has a tendency to associate subculture with unhealthy practices.

Aside from the media, researchers and others also tend to gravitate towards the more prominent and attention-grabbing subcultures to such extent that the relatively normal ones are not considered as subculture. This prejudiced view is one of the reasons behind the prevailing ideological difference between the assessors and practitioners of subculture. For example, should the assessment of a subculture for teenagers be done from an adult’s point of view, almost certainly the conclusion would be something along the line of the subculture being “different” or “deviant” for the differences it had compared to the values the adults held on to. Similarly, observations made by parties who themselves are not practitioners of a subculture are bound to lean towards the conclusion that the subculture is peculiar. This will lead to the tendency by all quarters to focus on the “peculiarity” or “difference” that subculture practitioners possess in their acts.

In reality, subcultures have a broader definition than a mere deviation from societal norms, i.e. the members successfully obtain acknowledgement amongst themselves by practicing these “extraordinary” norms that the group established. In the case of the gangster subculture, one attains a higher amount of peer-respect by displaying a higher level of gangsterism i.e. lawlessness and ruthlessness. In terms of the clubbing subculture, one receives admiration by having the best dance moves. While in the subculture of stylish headscarves, the more creative one is in styling a piece of headscarf, the more lasting the impression left on peers. The same can be observed with regards to Japanese cosplay subculture in which one obtains more attention (and possibly admiration) by performing better at role-playing a character; action-wise and costume-wise. This suggests that participation in subculture supplies satisfaction to its practitioners in the form of acknowledgements gained. The acknowledgement on the other hand comes from the subcultural capital that an individual holds which distinguishes one participant from another.
Conclusion

To conclude, subculture represents one of the options a man can achieve what is previously missing or not achievable in his life. For example, someone who desires fun will look for activities that can provide this kind of sensation. Conversely, one who wishes to exhibit his creativity will look for outlets to show and share in the form of like-minded individuals with compatible taste so that the results of their creativity can be properly appreciated. Or take for example an individual who wakes up one day with the realization that she is bored with her life, and suddenly gains the desire to do something out of the ordinary. Or one who wishes to test the limits of his abilities, and goes on to do extreme activities that challenge his capabilities.

Based on these varying urges and inclinations, new communities that support the formation of new cultures emerge; ones that endorse and promote the sharing of lifestyle, behaviorism, thoughts and ideologies, philosophies and specific material results. It is these newly-formed cultures that we later come to know as subculture. It is a mere “sub” for it is practised only by a select few from the members of the larger society instead of everyone within the society. It is a culture because it carries the function of providing a form of lifestyle and living guide to the subjects involved. Practitioners of subculture should therefore not be viewed as people involved in deviant or weird behavior. The subculture they practice, depending on the circumstances, can be incorporated into mainstream culture and enrich it.

This is especially true of Japanese cosplay in Malaysia. Formed around 2002 with the help of students and industry, participants in Japanese cosplay are almost exclusively involved in Japanese manga and anime which have artistic merit. As the social structure of this subculture is open to all races the participants consist of a healthy mixture of Chinese, Malays and Indians and drawn mainly from the younger age group. These participants are by no means deviant. They show respect for other cultural forms. Malay participants for example demonstrate their sensitivity to their religion by dressing in ways that are not offensive to the mainstream Muslim population. Thus it is undeniable that Japanese cosplay helps to contribute to the cultural capital of Malaysia.

References


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次文化評論：在馬來西亞的日本角色扮演

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內容摘要：當今全球化與先進科技使地方社群身受多元文化輸入。人們借此擺脫在地文化形式，投身踐行所謂的次文化。本文主要探討日本角色扮演如何從外來文化發展為馬來西亞次文化，乃至最終組成馬來西亞主流文化的部分。全文內容分劃有二。其一為各類次文化概念述評，例如定義為社會邊緣群體或弱勢群體的生活文化，抑或認為是主流文化的衍生品。隨後則探討日本角色扮演流傳至他國如澳洲及北美地區的過程。其二則對馬來西亞角色扮演社群論壇的貼文進行文本分析，闡明日本角色扮演如何融合為馬來西亞文化。當中的探討有早期馬來西亞角色扮演社群的組成和學生及工商界從中扮演的角色，同時也論及他們的參與背景和參與目的。綜上所述，可見角色扮演並不是主流文化的抗衡者，反之更彰顯他們為主流文化的體現。

關鍵詞：次文化、主流、邊緣化、資本、日本、馬來西亞、角色扮演