

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON COMMUNICATION PATTERNS OF CZECH AND SLOVAK COSPLAYERS

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ABSTRACT:

Cosplay is a distinctive hobby of fans of popular culture texts such as comics, manga, anime, digital games and films. Members of the cosplay community are active participants affiliated with various fandoms and communities who produce their own costumes, props and make-ups. An important part of those specific fan and community groups are fan conventions and festivals, which have been cancelled or postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic situation. This fact is reflected significantly in usual behaviour, community life and participation of cosplayers. The main goal of this study is to identify the main changes and impact of the pandemic on Czech and Slovak cosplayers' fan and community behaviour and communication habits. This study uses qualitative research strategy, specifically a series of in-depth interviews. The research unit consists of Slovak and Czech cosplayers who have been involved in this activity for at least eight years and are active members and participants in cosplay communities and fan conventions.

KEY WORDS:

cosplay, Covid-19, fan convention, fan studies, participatory culture

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1 Introduction

Cosplay, an increasingly widespread hobby amongst (mostly) teenagers and young adults, fans of Japanese culture, *anime*, *manga*, comics and films, is discussed in basis of various types of research. Studying communication in cosplay fandom groups as well as communication of these particular individuals towards bigger media corporations is an important part of fan studies and participatory culture. There have been many scholarly works that reflect on this activity, most of them focusing mainly on quantitative research or general descriptions of cosplay and its terminology. This body of research includes inquiries about cosplay in terms of education and how education can be improved by cosplay craft. Cosplayers – as a rather *niche* community

or subculture – are researched less often, mostly in terms of questionnaire surveys asking about their age, professions, educational background and skills. However, qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and focus groups might provide a wider spectrum of knowledge, as they focus on individuals rather than big diverse groups of people. Answers acquired from such interviews can and should be later used by further quantitative research on this subculture – cosplayers.

COVID-19 has had considerable impact (not only) on cosplay communities, conventions and, most importantly, on cosplayers and their costume making process.¹ Many cosplayers lost their daily jobs and were forced to give up their hobby for some time. Some of them, on the other hand, used this situation as opportunity to improve their craft and even started their own cosplay-related businesses.

The goal of this study is to conduct interviews with Slovak and Czech cosplayers according to pre-set rules and find out more about how cosplay worked in the COVID-19 pandemic situation. All the current findings are compared with previously conducted interviews with the same cosplayers and related research results. Answers about the pandemic are especially important for this research, as well as the pandemic's impact on cosplayers' daily, social and professional lives. The research is focused on the main differences between the lives of cosplayers before and during the pandemic.

2 Research on Cosplayers as a Part of Fan Studies

Firstly, it is important to shortly outline necessary terminology which is used in this study – to introduce the main theoretical frameworks and theories. As we mentioned in introduction, cosplayers are mainly fans of *anime*, *manga*, comics and other types of media content. They are also parts of various communities, as we will mention in the following chapters. Scholarly perspectives on fans are changing rapidly. It is difficult to define the concept of “a fan” and precisely outline their characteristics; moreover, different researchers possess different views on the issue. There are several ways to describe a fan, whether their activities are common, and if so, what is the purpose of this joint engagement which motivates fans to form communities. Despite the contradictions and changes in the definition of fans, it is possible to distinguish certain common characteristics. One of the first academic researchers interested in fans, who later coined the term “aca-fan” (academic fan), Henry Jenkins, is primarily interested in fan behaviour, routines, activities, as he himself is a fan. In one of his most recognised books, *Textual Poachers*, he describes etymology of the term “fan”. It is an abbreviation of the word *fanatic*, which has its roots in Latin word *fanaticus*, meaning a devotee or a temple servant, but later it assumed negative connotations.² Jenkins continues: “*Its abbreviated form, ‘fan’, first appeared in the late 19th century in journalistic accounts describing followers of professional sports teams (especially in baseball) at a time when the sport moved from a predominantly participant activity to a spectator event, but soon was expanded to incorporate any faithful ‘devotee’ of sports or commercial entertainment.*”³

At first, fans were considerably pathologized and perceived as passive and easy to manipulate by media while consuming (predominantly) mainstream content.⁴ Fans were looked at through stereotyping with respect to their possibly pathological reception tendencies. They were considered immature or senile, deviant, antisocial people who had trouble participating in a functioning society, unable to find and keep a steady job. In other words, there were many negative opinions on fans.⁵

In general, the origin of the term “cosplay” is difficult to trace, as it is an expression that could have occurred in communities of science-fiction and fantasy fans, or Japanese *anime* and *manga*, at any time since their inception, without its original author realising its meaning. People dressed up in different costumes – whether they manufactured them or not – with the knowledge that it was “cosplay” long before the term

became known to the general public. Fans of various musicians, singers, actors or works of art and characters could create a costume and later wear it only in order to experience the momentary embodiment of a popular character. The degree of involvement of an individual in the production of a costume could be different – whether it was wearing a jacket or another piece of clothing worn by a favourite character or creation of the entire costume.

The term “cosplay” is inextricably linked to Japan and Japanese culture and blends two English words, “costume” and “play”. As Kinko Ito and Paul A. Crutcher summarise, the term “cosplay” “*is a linguistic mash-up typical in modern Japanese language, the combination of the English words costume and play, which become コスプレ. Game designer Nobuyuki Takahashi is credited with originating the term in the 1980s*”.⁶ As stated by Osmund Rahman, Liu Wing-Sun and Brittany Hei-Man Cheung in their work from 2012, the word *kosupure* (cosplay) first appeared in Nobuyuki Takahashi's *My Anime* article in June 1983, while other sources claim that Takahashi used the term in various Japanese journals after returning from a visit to the Los Angeles Science Fiction Worldcon Festival in 1984.⁷ In 2014, one of the authors of the book *Cosplay World*, Luke Plunkett, published an article taken from the book on his website, where he deals in more detail with the actual origin of the term “cosplay”.⁸ In the introduction, the author mentions that to describe the activity of dressing as fictional characters in Japan at the turn of the sixties and seventies, the term *kasou* (仮想) already existed, which translates as imagination, assumption, true. In the meaning relevant to this study, the word imagination is considered to be the most appropriate translation.

Garry Crawford and David Hancock define term “cosplay” in their book *Cosplay and the Art of Play* from 2019 as: “*Put simply, cosplay would appear to be typically about individuals taking on (certain aspects of) the appearance (and to some extent mannerism and characteristics) of characters from manga, comics, graphic novels, video games, films, or similar.*”⁹ In both definitions, the terms “costume” and “play” (role-play) are dominant. Cosplayers themselves most commonly define “cosplay” as a combination of dressing up as their favourite characters while portraying the characters' most prominent behavioural features.¹⁰

Existing research on cosplay is mostly focused on quantitative inquiries into some aspects of the cosplayer's behaviour and their activities: Some studies investigate cosplayers in the wider context, for example as part of other communities, or in a sense of art itself. For example, Marjorie Cohee Manifold focuses on uses of cosplay in art classes, outlining how it can be implemented in the teaching process, providing enough space for artist creativity.¹¹ She conducted research on active cosplayers, mostly in their teenage years, who actively participate in cosplay and fan conventions. She interestingly includes cosplay in her research paper about education and how it can be improved by cosplaying, using quantitative method of inquiry (a questionnaire survey).

In this context, the term “play” is usually understood in terms of costume play/costume games. In general, this term means dressing up and acting as fictional characters known from various types of media content such as episodic dramas, movies, anime or comics. Cosplayers often interact with each other to create a subculture centralised around role-play. The wider use of the term “cosplay” can be applied to any costume role-play performed during specific events other than stage performances, regardless of cultural context. Popular sources of inspiration for cosplayers are Japanese *manga*, *manga* animated series, Western and other comic books, digital games and movies. Some of them are fond of Korean *manhwa* or other types of written content. What makes them unique among the general audience of the mentioned products, is their active participation in fan and cosplay communities.

6 ITO, K., CRUTCHER, P. A.: Popular Mass Entertainment in Japan: Manga, Pachinko, and Cosplay. In *Society*, 2013, Vol. 51, No. 1, p. 44-48.

7 RAHMAN, O., WING-SUN, L., HEI-MAN CHEUNG, B.: “Cosplay”: Imaginative Self and Performing Identity. In *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress Body & Culture*, 2012, Vol. 16, No. 3, p. 317-342.

8 PLUNKETT, L.: *Where the Word “Cosplay” Actually Comes from*. Released on 22nd October 2014. [online]. [2022-04-25]. Available at: <<https://kotaku.com/where-the-word-cosplay-actually-comes-from-1649177711>>.

9 CRAWFORD, G., HANCOCK, D.: *Cosplay and the Art of Play: Exploring Sub-Culture through Art*. London : Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 5.

10 See also: JELÍNKOVÁ, A. P.: *Cosplay ako prejav fanúšikovstva špecifických recipientov*. [Master's Thesis]. Olomouc : Palacký University, 2018.

11 MANIFOLD, M. C.: What Art Educators Can Learn from the Fan-Based Artmaking of Adolescents and Young Adults. In *Art Education*, 2009, Vol. 50, No. 3, p. 257-271.

1 Remark by authors: We will support this claim in the following chapters.

2 JENKINS, H.: *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. New York : Routledge, 1992, p. 12.

3 JENKINS, H.: *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. New York : Routledge, 1992, p. 12.

4 See: ALVERMAN, D. E., HAGOOD, C.: Fandom and Critical Media Literacy. In *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 2000, Vol. 43, No. 5, p. 436-446.

5 See also: SIUDA, P.: From Deviation to Mainstream – Evolution of Fan Studies. In CIEŚLAK, R. (ed.): *Studia Medioznawcze*. Warsaw : Faculty of Journalism, Information and Book Studies of the University of Warsaw, 2010, p. 87-99.

3 Cosplay and Pop Culture Conventions in Czech and Slovak Cultural Environment

Conventions are an important part of cosplayers' lives and play considerable role in interactions between cosplayers and their fans and friends. In the past ten years, cosplay has become widely popular amongst fans and visitors of *anime*, *manga* and comics conventions in Czechia and Slovakia. Domestic academics, researchers and university students acknowledge this growing popularity as well. Mainly university students specialising in cultural studies see cosplay as an interesting topic to write about in their master's theses. Věra Dvořáková's thesis focuses on Czech fantasy and sci-fi fans and conventions, as well as visitors of these conventions – cosplayers.¹² The author uses participated observation at conventions and semi-structured interviews. The main goal of this thesis is to map the Czech cosplay scene with regards to the fantasy genre. On the other hand, Ludmila Kocanová's thesis discusses the topic of commodification in cosplay communities and how cosplayers deal with this increasingly popular side effect of cosplaying.¹³ Similarly to Dvořáková, she conducted ethnological field research – participated observation. Marketing possibilities related to cosplay are addressed in the quite recent thesis written by Lucia Račkovičová who claims: *"The main objective is to create a new marketing communication strategy for social networks of particular cosplay personal brand."*¹⁴

In Slovakia, most fan festivals are organised in the capital, Bratislava. The three-day Comics Salon and AnimeSHOW events are clearly amongst the largest and most known *otaku* and fan festivals in Slovakia. They have a rich history and have undergone various changes, whether in names or organisational structure. The predecessor of the two festivals was IstroCON, which was founded in 1988 and took place in Bratislava annually until 2003. The event's content included science-fiction and later fantasy, and a section focused on anime was added at the turn of the Millennium. At that time, costumes associated with this theme were added – *samurai*, school uniforms known from *anime* series, etc. In 2007, 6,000 visitors came to Istrocon & Comics Salon. The attendance of the festival grew every year: 2007 – 6,000 visitors, 2008 – 8,095 visitors, 2009 – 9,006 visitors, 2010 – 10,145 visitors. The IstroCON & Comics Salon festival is traditionally held in mid-September. In November, a three-day Nipponfest¹⁵ and Hangukon festival is held in Bratislava, which is dedicated exclusively to Japanese and Korean culture. The average attendance at the festival is about 600 people. For cosplayers, there is definitely a range of interesting activities; in addition to the cosplay competition and the original costume competition, there is also a disco, where they can dance to songs from *anime* in their costumes. Becoming a part of the largest game festival in Slovakia, Y-FEST,¹⁶ the YCON¹⁷ section was added in 2018, which was created exclusively for cosplay fans and lasts for three days. The average attendance at the festival is 5,000 visitors. Within this section, the entire programme line is reserved for YCON with its own stage and host, containing lectures, discussions and workshops on cosplay, often presented by cosplayers themselves. Cosplayers can meet internationally recognised cosplayers who are invited as professional judges of the cosplay competition. YCON is held twice a year and the winner of the cosplay competition in autumn gets the opportunity to represent Slovakia at the Cosplay World Master's World Final in Portugal.

Over the years, festivals in the Czech Republic have formed similarly to Slovakia, beginning in the 1980s with the organisation of sci-fi and fantasy festivals. The largest, most distinctive and most visited *otaku* and cosplay festival is undoubtedly Animefest,¹⁸ which takes place in Brno and lasts for three days. It is traditionally held once a year in May. The gates of this festival first opened in 2004 and welcomed 200 visitors with a purely anime and manga programme.

In 2019, the festival was attended by up to 6,000 visitors. Cosplay fans have the opportunity to meet their cosplay idols from all over the world, whom Animefest invites either as judges of cosplay competitions or special guests. In 2018, there were two qualifications for foreign cosplay competitions at Animefest: the prestigious European cosplay competition European Cosplay Gathering¹⁹ and the C4 cosplay team competition: Clara Cow's Cosplay Cup.²⁰ Advik²¹ is a three-day festival with more than a decade of tradition, which takes place once a year in Prague, traditionally in August. It focuses primarily on *anime*, *manga* and music games. Cosplay enthusiasts can enjoy both indoor and outdoor programmes and participate in competitions such as karaoke and cosplay. Other three-day festivals usually took place in Prague, such as Natsucon in July and Akicon in October. Approximately 800 – 900 visitors take part in both festivals. The continuation of the last two conventions is in question currently.

4 Research Methodology

The main goal of this qualitative research is to determine the impact of Covid-19 on Czech and Slovak cosplayers who have been active in the cosplay community for at least 8 years. The inquiry follows up on previously conducted research by one of the authors of this study. It aims to broaden the obtained data with emphasis on the pandemic situation. We conducted the research by using qualitative research methodology in the form of in-depth interviews. As stated by Renáta Sedláková: *"Qualitative research focuses on individual phenomena, individuals or cases and tries to understand them in as much detail as possible. In qualitative research, researchers try to cover the phenomenon in detail, in the full breadth of its scope and action, while maintaining the context; compared to quantitative research, qualitative research is expected to reduce the number of units studied."*²² By using in-depth interviews with participants we were able to obtain clear answers. We chose qualitative method for this research as we are interested in a *niche* group of fans who identify themselves as members of cosplay subculture. Interviews were conducted between January 2021 and May 2021.

Cosplayers are a very specific group of fans, especially within the context of the Central European cultural terrain. We focus exclusively on Slovak and Czech cosplayers who have been actively communicating in the cosplay community for at least eight years. This specification, which has been advisedly intended (we will explain later why), is very important in regards of the scale of the researched unit. It is important to realise that cosplay as a form of art, hobby and communication is relatively new in the Czech and Slovak environments. The first public cosplay contests took place around 2006 – 2007 and resembled more costume parades than competitions as we understand them. Back then, only a handful of people in costumes attended local conventions. Later, as these phenomena began to be more popular and accessible, more people joined. Today, cosplayers are a natural part of each anime, manga and in general pop culture convention in Czechia and Slovakia.²³

By estimation and our long-time observation there are around 1,000 Czech and Slovak cosplayers in total in Czech and Slovakia.²⁴ This number is a rough estimate, as the cosplay community is growing each year. Also, we must take in consideration that in this number only Czech and Slovak cosplayers are included, excluding foreign cosplayers who also attend these local conventions. It would be inaccurate to differentiate exactly how many cosplayers in this estimate are Slovaks and Czechs specifically, since many cosplayers attend both Czech and Slovak events.²⁵ Amongst this estimation of cosplayers only a handful of them have been actively participating in the cosplay community for more than eight years. This exact threshold was selected because in a span of eight years young adults and teenagers can experience a variety of life situations – from entering

12 See: DVOŘÁKOVÁ, V.: *Fantasy cony jako setkání na prahu liminality: Fenomén cosplay v České republice*. [Master's Thesis]. Pardubice : University of Pardubice, 2016.
13 See also: KOCANOVÁ, L.: *Proces komodifikace v cosplay komunitě*. [Master's Thesis]. Plzeň : University of West Bohemia, 2019.
14 See also: RAČKOVIČOVÁ, L.: *Obsahová komunikační strategie osobnej značky v niche komunitě cosplay v prostredí sociálních sietí*. [Master's Thesis]. Nitra : Constantine the Philosopher University, 2020.
15 *Nipponfest*. [online]. [2022-04-25]. Available at: <<http://nipponfest.sk>>.
16 Remark by authors: Y-FEST sponsors two festivals: Y-Games (held in the spring) and the Slovak Championship in Electronic Sports (held in the autumn).
17 See also: *Yzone*. [online]. [2022-04-25]. Available at: <<https://yzone.sk/ycon/>>.
18 See also: *Animefest*. [online]. [2022-04-25]. Available at: <<https://www.animefest.cz/>>.

19 *ECG*. [online]. [2022-04-25]. Available at: <<http://www.ecg-cosplay.com/fr/>>.
20 *Welcome to Animecon*. [online]. [2022-04-25]. Available at: <<https://animecon.nl/regular/en/program/cosplay>>.
21 *Advik*. [online]. [2022-04-25]. Available at: <<http://www.advik.cz/>>.
22 SEDLÁKOVÁ, R.: *Výzkum médií: Nejživanější metody a techniky*. Prague : Grada Publishing, 2014, p. 49-51.
23 Remark by authors: This is observation based on our long-time experience with cosplay competitions within the Czech and Slovak terrain as well as regular attendance at conventions since early 2007.
24 Remark by authors: These numbers are estimated by our regular (every 3 – 4 months) attendance associated with pop culture conventions in Czechia and Slovakia, as well as 3 years' practice as an event and cosplay contest organiser.
25 Remark by authors: Slovaks living in Czechia and *vice versa*.

high school, graduation, through enrolling to university or starting to work, to even having kids, finding their significant others, renting their first flats or buying houses. Given our observation and the previous research, as stated in the next part of the study, there are altogether around 20 cosplayers meeting these conditions. Our respondents consisted of four Slovaks and one Czech cosplayer. We reached out to fifteen cosplayers that would fit our requirements, but out of these fifteen only five of them were able to participate in this research. The main reasons for not participating given by cosplayers were workload, reluctance to participate in research, impossibility of conducting an interview due to technical reasons, they were no longer part of the community and therefore no longer met the conditions of research.

There was only one male among the respondents. This disparity stems from the very gender layout of the cosplay community. Among cosplayers, the female representation and activity is significantly greater. Among approximately twenty cosplayers who met the conditions set by us, there are only two men in total. The rest of the target population is predominantly women. This fact is directly related to the aspect of portraying animated characters and the use of significant make-up. It should also be taken into account that currently (in the years 2022+), the ratio of men and women in cosplay communities is almost equal, but in our research, we are examining male cosplayers who have been in the community for more than eight years. Moreover, this phenomenon of an increasing number of men in cosplay communities appears mainly in the post-pandemic era. We explain this, among other things, by the fact that communities are much more tolerant of men who use, predominantly, female make-up.

Taking this into consideration, we can say that the exact part of Czech and Slovak cosplay community we are focused on is, in terms of such an international phenomenon as cosplay, considerably small, hence we used qualitative methodology. We conducted, as stated before, in-depth interviews with five participants – four females and one male.

Follow-Up to Previous Research

It is important to say that this qualitative research is conducted as an extension of previous research led by one of the authors.²⁶ In short, the previous research focused on answering the question ‘*What are the main motivations of Czech and Slovak cosplayers to participate in cosplay communities for more than eight years?*’ Data collection took place in several phases during November 2018. The research sample consisted of twelve respondents aged twenty-four to thirty-one. The representation of participants in terms of gender was considerably unbalanced, with only one male out of twelve respondents. The reason for this disproportionality is that there are considerably fewer male cosplayers on the Slovak and Czech scene than female cosplayers.²⁷

From the obtained data and its subsequent detailed analysis, it was possible to determine five main motivations. For a better understanding, the most frequently recurring phenomena, which all respondents had, to some extent, in common, were first presented. These included the initial enthusiasm for cosplay and the initial inspirations for making costumes; changes in the life of the cosplayer that have affected the shift or change of their motivations; the emergence of new inspirations for remaining in the cosplay community and continuing to create. These phenomena occurred in different intentions and forms in each case. Through them, the motivations of individual cosplayers were easier to understand. An analysis of the responses revealed the five most common motivations. These motivations occurred, to some extent, in each case, depending on the specific stages of the cosplayers’ lives. For an individual, these motivations have different priorities and may change or overlap over time. The inclination of a particular cosplayer to certain motivation changes over the course of a lifetime. An individual may or may not have more than one motivation, which is the reason for their cosplay activities. The following five motivations were identified:

²⁶ See: JELÍNKOVÁ, A. P.: *Cosplay ako prejav fanúšikovstva špecifických recipientov*. [Master’s Thesis]. Olomouc : Palacký University, 2018.

²⁷ Remark by authors: It was based on the statistics of cosplay competitions in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, where the percentage of men and women differs significantly in favour of women. These statistics were provided by the competitions’ organisers from their private databases.

- **Social relationships** are an important part of how cosplayers interact in the cosplay community. By making friends, the cosplayer maintains and, in a way, shapes their place in the cosplay community. The influence of social relations on the cosplayer shapes them as a human being and a cosplayer.
- **Role-play** was described by most respondents as something they enjoy the most in cosplay. Thanks to that, they can get used to the characters and become someone else for a while.
- **Recognition by others** as a motivation is related to the fact that cosplayers physically create something that can be and is judged by the public. Within this motivation, terms such as cosplay competition, cosplay idols and costume presentation often appeared.
- **Costume production** was described by cosplayers as joy, having fun while engaging in the cosplay production process itself. These were mainly cosplayers who like to sew costumes, searching for reference pictures to make their costumes as detailed as possible.
- **Cosplay as a profession** – this motivation was the least prominent. The respondents expressing this stance were willing to devote themselves to cosplay to a much greater extent than just a hobby.²⁸

Given this knowledge obtained from previous research, as well as results, we decided to formulate new research questions that would reflect on the COVID-19 pandemic and related changes manifesting themselves within the local cosplay community.

Research Unit

The target population of the qualitative research are Slovak and Czech cosplayers who have been actively involved in the cosplay community for at least eight years. The criteria to be met by the respondents were as follows:

- Being involved in cosplay production since 2015 or earlier,
- Attending themed festivals at least once a year,
- Producing or otherwise procuring at least one cosplay each year.

In total, five interviews were conducted, involving five cosplayers who met the required conditions (four women, one man). Interviews took place online, via *Google Meet*, and in total produced 7 hours and 38 minutes of recordings. We will distinguish between the respondents by using their nicknames. Tyrael and Klaudia were later interviewed again, but separately, on basis of follow-up questions. See Table 1 for more specific information about each participant.

Table 1: Basic information about respondents

Nickname	Sex	Age	Number of Years of Active Participation	Employment Field	Nationality	Length of Interview in Minutes
Prue	Female	29	13	Administration	Czech	90
Čača	Female	28	14	Administration	Slovak	115
Domika	Female	29	13	IT	Slovak	98
Klaudia	Female	31	17	Maternity Leave	Slovak	140
Tyrael	Male	34	13	IT	Slovak	94

Source: Own processing

²⁸ For more information, see also: JELÍNKOVÁ, A. P.: *Cosplay ako prejav fanúšikovstva špecifických recipientov*. [Master’s Thesis]. Olomouc : Palacký University, 2018.

Interviews were recorded for later use and transcription. Participants were selected conveniently from cosplayers participating in the previous phase of the research and were asked complementary questions regarding the topic discussed in this research study. The method of in-depth interviews was used for data collection. This method is most suitable for the purposes of the present inquiry, as it allows us to hear the stories of people without significant interventions.

Interviews were conducted individually with each respondent in a quiet and undisturbed place, without the presence of other respondents, to ensure the spontaneity and honesty of the answers. The only exception was a married couple; both participants were present at the same time. Informed consent was obtained from the respondents through verbal consent, which is a part of the audio file recorded during the interview with the respondent. The participants were informed of the research before the interviews were conducted, instructed on the progress of the research and, by mutual agreement, they provided as much personal data and information as they deemed appropriate. Throughout the interview as well as during the research as a whole, the basic principles of academic ethics were followed. The respondents had the opportunity to refuse to participate in the research at any time during the research process.

Research Questions

The aim of this inquiry is to analyse and describe the impact of the global pandemic on a specific Czech and Slovak *niche* community – cosplayers. To achieve this goal, research questions were used, which helped us to better organise the interviews. The formulation of the research questions was based on the general determination of the research goal. A list of questions in the broader categories was prepared in advance. Below are the research questions:

RQ1: Has your domestic situation changed over the last two years?

RQ2: What are the differences between your social activities (cosplay wise) before the pandemic and now?

RQ3: How do you communicate with your fans during the pandemic?

RQ4: In what ways do you fulfil your need for mutual recognition with other cosplayers, fans?

RQ5: What has changed in the production of costumes?

RQ6: How many costumes have you made since the pandemic, what types?

RQ7: Did you change any production techniques?

5 Results

As stated before, this research follows up on previous research inquiry, hence it has many similar features. What is of importance is that its aim is to update and expand the already existing research data in the context of the current pandemic situation and analyse the impact of the pandemic on Czech and Slovak cosplayers. The interviewed respondents are the same as in original research, even though this research unit is considerably smaller. This can be seen as one of the study's limitations. Previous research findings on the most important motivations of the cosplayer to maintain their hobby even after eight years of active participation are categorised as follows:

- Social relationships;
- Role-play;

- Appreciation from others;
- Costume and prop making;
- Cosplay as a profession.

We acknowledge these findings and apply them in terms of the current in-depth interviews. Even during in-depth interviews, we noticed that answers of our respondents differentiated widely. Some of the respondents seemed to be greatly affected by the pandemic, others were unaffected. That is why we updated the previous categories of findings as follows:

- **Category 1 – The impact of COVID-19 on the cosplayer's motivations was minor.** This category represents cosplayers who have not been affected by the pandemic in any significant way cosplay wise. They still have the same job, meet with their cosplay friends and fans, still role-play/or do not, have the same aspiration to become a professional cosplayer and have the same motivation to create new costumes. In this category belong the respondents whose original motivations were unaffected or affected in one case out of five categories.
- **Category 2 – The impact of COVID-19 on the cosplayer's motivations was visible.** This category represents the respondents whose basic motivations were affected in two – three categories out of five.
- **Category 3 – The impact of COVID-19 on the cosplayer's motivations was major.** This category represents the respondents who have been affected by the pandemic the most (be it in good or bad way) and four or five motivations out of the five categories of their motivations must have been directly affected by the pandemic situation to be included in this category.

Changes in Social Relationships of Cosplayers during the Pandemic

Amongst the five participants, only one of them, Domika, did not notice any changes in this aspect. She still has the same job, the same colleagues, some friends, and family members who are supportive of her hobby. As Domika stated:

“No significant change has occurred in my life in regards of my social life. I still have the same circle of friends, only we meet less in person.”

On the other hand, all the remaining participants saw minor or major changes in their social surroundings. For instance, Klaudia and Tyrael, the married couple, experienced major change when their baby was born. This, naturally, changes the life of every parent, and cosplayers are not different. What is interesting is that this couple intends to further participate in the cosplay community and activities, including their child in these activities. Klaudia said:

“Since we are both cosplayers, and love cosplaying, I already started to sew a few easy costumes from anime for our son. The fact that we have a kid now will not stop us from cosplaying!”

Their son is now 1-year-old and is even capable of helping with easy tasks given to him by his parents – such as holding materials for them, retrieving small objects like pieces of fabrics and buttons. They both agreed that this even helps their son to understand what costume designing is and how their costumes are made. Other major change in the social life of this couple was the death of the wife's grandmother. Klaudia said:

“Since she was the only member of our family who supported our hobby, I was very sad at first.”

The passing of the beloved grandmother took a large toll on Klaudia's motivation for a while. Later, she found her initial motivation again,

“(...) but I never wanted to stop cosplaying. Yes, I was sad for a while, but after few days I realised I cannot live without the thrill that cosplay brings me”.

One more change within this couple's life was the sudden support from Tyrael's father when he realised that cosplay can be profitable.²⁹ Currently he is helping the couple to build a better craft space in their shared house. In the previous research, the husband was working on his PhD. degree, now he is fully employed in the IT sector. He has also started his own business with cosplay licensing. Klaudia is now on maternity leave and will be for at least another 1.5 years.

Two other respondents – Čača and Prue – both changed their previous jobs. Prue from part-time to full-time, and Čača joined the IT sector. Both have better and more stable financial situations now. One of the respondents even has a new boyfriend who is very supportive of her hobby, even though they did not meet thanks to cosplay (at a convention). They were colleagues at her previous job. Čača stated:

“I'm currently in relationship, and since we had to be in quarantine during the pandemic, I realised how much crafting and cosplaying helped me deal with the fact that I cannot meet my friends. At least I still have my boyfriend!”

From these responses we can say that even though four out of five respondents experienced considerable changes in their social relationships during the pandemic, they were happy that cosplay, as a hobby, helped them overcome these challenges. Not all changes were negative (the passing of a loved one being an exception). The majority of them are happier; for instance, they experienced a promotion, change of jobs or new life partner who is tolerant regarding cosplay.

During the state of emergency imposed in both countries, Slovakia and Czechia had strict regulations. People could not meet as they were used to, and same goes for cosplayers and their respective communities. Conventions were postponed or even cancelled, so these social gatherings of cosplayers could not happen. When research participants were asked to compare their social activities (cosplay wise) before the pandemic and today, all of them agreed they were almost non-existent. Čača is also a member of the organising committee of one of the biggest and oldest conventions in Slovakia – AnimeShow/Comics Salon. She oversees cosplay competition, cosplay theatre competition and sometimes helps with karaoke contest at said conventions. She said:

“You know, it is sad for me that I work so hard for these fellow cosplayers and in the end, I cannot even meet them. But I am positive, conventions will be here again soon!”

For her, it was also saddening that these conventions had to be postponed repeatedly for almost two years. But she is positive about the future.

Social relationships are very important for Slovak and Czech cosplayers in their community and form a basic component of their identity as a cosplayer. In the research, we observed two main branches in relationships, family and community. Family relationships, especially positive and supportive ones, helped cosplayers better survive stress and loneliness during the pandemic. Community relations within fandoms were supported exclusively online, through platforms such as *Facebook* or *Instagram*, where respondents could communicate with their friends, followers and fans on a daily basis. Thanks to this, they were able to stay in the community.

Another important form of communication in the Slovak and Czech communities during the pandemic was the communication of pop culture festivals with their fans and visitors. For communication, they mainly used social media such as *Facebook* and *Instagram*, on which they are most active. Since the festivals were not held, event organisers informed their visitors about ongoing plans of events, or used these platforms to make light of the situation and added funny meme pictures or behind-the-scenes samples.

²⁹ Remark by authors: Only this couple showed interest in the professional aspect of cosplay in the previous research.

Cosplayers also presented themselves online in connection with festivals, and acted as participants and guests of discussions and panels. In this way, the social life of cosplayers could be brought closer to the fans, even during the pandemic.

What about Role-Play?

In the previous research we asked the participants about role-playing, as it is an important part of cosplay. Surprisingly, not many of them considered role-play to be essential. One of the main reasons is that they have been active in the cosplay community for eight years and more, and many of them said that they are too old now for the role-playing aspects of cosplay. This does not necessarily mean that they do not enjoy occasional role-play when in-character.

The question is how do these cosplayers use role-play when they do not attend any conventions where they could participate in cosplay competitions; during casual conversations with their friends? Domika registered that there are online LARPs, often sci-fi themed, but she did not attend herself. She said:

“I noticed one of my friends shared this sci-fi LARP online convention. I am not a big fan of LARP myself, but I thought it was a very interesting idea!”

She would recommend that for cosplayers who are fond of LARPs.

Prue had a different experience:

“Most of the cosplayers worldwide started to use online platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels and Instagram Stories to practice and perform their role-play. Mostly teenagers and younger cosplayers are fond of TikTok and Reels.”

Amongst our respondents only Čača is actively making *TikTok* and *Reels* videos, but she is not very happy with the results. She has artistic background in singing and theatre, so she is comfortable with little dances and skits for video platforms. She noticed that her videos do not get so much attention compared to younger cosplayers – she is explaining that

“(...) it may be due to fact that I am significantly older, in my late twenties, and I don't have such a wide fan base. Still, I am happy when I make these videos and my motivation is still there!”

She does not feel pressure to post these videos daily, as she considers cosplay to be her hobby and not a job.

Prue said that she is active in her role-play group on *Discord*:

“We are playing Naruto-based game, with our original characters. This is somehow replacement of cosplay role-play for me since conventions are closed off for now.”

She is participating in role-play in written form in *Discord* chat with her friends. It takes considerable time from her schedule – she even admitted that it may have been one of the reasons she did not obtain her Master's degree. Still, she does not regret playing it, since it brought her much needed enjoyment during the pandemic. For her, this was one of the ways to 'escape' since she could not leave her home to meet with friends, as she lives with her brother who has weak immunity and could not be exposed to the virus.

During the pandemic, social media, mainly *Instagram Reels* and the *TikTok* platform, were used extensively to fulfil the motivation of role-play. Both platforms allow the possibility of adding audio-visual content, and content creators who are regularly active can quickly gain visibility on these platforms. Many

cosplayers therefore used these platforms to replace roleplay in the physical offline world (such as festivals) by creating and still creating short, often funny videos with cosplay content.

Appreciation from Other Cosplayers and Fans and How Respondents Deal with Separation from Fans

The next motivation for most of the cosplayers is appreciation from either other cosplayers or visitors at conventions, fans. As Čača described,

“(...) there is no better feeling for cosplayers than when people recognise the character they are cosplaying, especially little kids when they see their favourite hero from TV embodied by cosplayer”.

Only one of the participants, Domika, expresses that there was no change in this aspect for her, as she has never used social media to communicate with her fans. She said:

“I stayed in contact with my close cosplay friends who are enough for me – appreciation wise. I shared my cosplay progress with them, but since I only made one costume since 2019, there was not much to send them.”

She is more focused on her art and job for now – for her, conventions were the biggest motivation to make and present her costumes. She is waiting for conventions to make their comeback, and then she will make more costumes.

As for others, the majority of them use social media on daily basis (*Instagram, Facebook*) and did not recognise any major differences in communicating with their fans and admirers. They use social media as a primary way of communication with their fans and friends. From time to time, they receive words of praise in comments or via direct messages. Prue used a support group on *Instagram* where users had to share photos in stories, comment on each posted photo and follow each other. After a few months she left the group as she did not want to share all her content, and she wanted to stay true to her fans. She also has *OnlyFans* and *Twitch* account where she posts regularly and streams her progress on costumes and commissions for other cosplayers, fans and clients. This way she can stay in direct contact with them and chat in real time.

Čača organised a small event for a few people; it can be described as a cosplay picnic. People could attend in cosplays and chat with each other. This happened in summer 2021, when the pandemic restrictions were not that strict and allowed bigger groups of people to meet. This picnic had a great response from cosplayers who attended. She is planning to make a similar meet-up again soon.

During the pandemic, social media were a refuge, a source of inspiration and the only way for cosplayers to maintain communication with the community and their fans. It is communication that is important for the action of cosplayers on social networks, since during the pandemic there were no offline physical events where they could present their work. For the purposes of presentation and communication, *Instagram* was most often used by our respondents, followed by *Facebook* and its various groups. For the purposes of closer communication with her followers, one of the respondents also used the *OnlyFans* platform, which offers better opportunities for promoting specific material and content.

Costume and Prop Making Are Not What They Used to Be

Surprisingly, costume and prop making alone were in fourth place regarding their importance for cosplayers' motivations in the previous research. Amongst these five respondents, only two of them considered costume making as one of the primary motivations for them in the previous research. It is the married couple – and it can easily be seen why that is so, as they have recently started their own business with costume making for different clients worldwide. Tyrael said:

“We are very happy that we can now call our hobby as our profession too! We can finally make some money by doing something we both love.”

This is an important advancement for Tyrael and Klaudia in their lives as they are making their dream come true, monetising their common hobby – cosplay. Interestingly enough, it was the pandemic that brought them more work and clients – we will analyse this case in more detail in the next part.

Domika in previous research claimed that she considers costume making fun and exciting, but now she changed her way of thinking. She said:

“Since there are no conventions, I don't feel the pressure to make costumes in time. I would rather spend my time by painting.”

We can deduct that her motivation to meet friends and attend conventions is surely bigger than costume and prop making alone.

The two remaining cosplayers, Prue and Čača, continued to make their costumes even in the pandemic times, but in considerably lower amounts. What is interesting is that they learned new techniques and acquired new skills that can be used later. Čača worked from home, so she had time to work on her costumes and made about seven costumes herself and three more she bought and adjusted. The married couple have made about 80 full costumes and 220 different parts of costumes as commission for their clients since the beginning of quarantine in March 2020. And Prue made about three full costumes since the outbreak of the pandemic and currently she has been working on her very detailed costume for four months.

Creation of costumes during pandemic times was measurably less interesting for respondents/cosplayers, as they did not have the motivation to work on costumes (deadlines for events and contests). The availability of products and materials needed to make costumes has also changed significantly. As the production of materials was limited, or the companies that produced them went bankrupt, cosplayers had to invent and use other techniques. The pandemic affected the availability of materials, their distribution and, at the same time, production. The pandemic made cosplayers reluctant to make costumes, and they often lost motivation. With no deadline in sight, they did not feel like starting the production of several projects at once and preferred to concentrate on one long-term project. Alternatively, they did not even start making costumes during the pandemic.

Is Cosplay a Possible Way How to Make Money?

In regard to this question, only two respondents from the original research showed interest in turning their hobby into a profession – Tyrael and Klaudia. Two years later they established a new costume and prop making brand for foreign clients. As Klaudia said:

“Now we have clients from more than 20 countries, mainly from Germany, Japan and France. Currently we are at a point that we have to decline some commissions as we are fully booked months in advance.”

Tyrael continued:

“For now, we aren't in green numbers yet, since we have started our business recently, but payments from commissions are able to cover our work and the used material. For now, we are mainly focusing on establishing a good name as a quality business.”

They proved that their motivation to maintain their hobby and make it even profitable is accessible. As for the other respondents, only one of them changed her mind and started her cosplay project, which she later intends to turn into a small business. Čača is offering her services as a cosplayer at children's parties,

since she has many costumes of Disney princesses as well as fairies and costumes generally popular with children. As she said:

“Later on, I intend to offer jobs to other cosplayers via this project.”

This way she wants to promote cosplay in a positive way amongst the general audience and parents. She is encouraging kids and teenagers to develop their skills in crafts, sewing and drawing as well. So far, she has had positive feedback from parents as well as the public.

Among the respondents, only a small number showed interest in the professional use of cosplay. Cosplay is primarily a hobby for them, and they use earning opportunities in other spheres. Cosplay as a means of livelihood has only limited possibilities in Slovakia and is rather a loss-making activity. Three respondents, including one married couple, tried to use their enthusiasm for cosplay for possible earnings. And in very different ways. Tyrael and Klaudia used the possibility of earning and at the same time promoting their brand in the form of commission. This includes custom-made products for primarily foreign customers. For these purposes, they also had to create legal conditions, trade. In the next few years, they plan to go full-time creating costumes and selling related products. Their work is popular in Japan, Germany and the countries of Western Europe. Respondent Čača used the opportunity to promote her brand through a service in which she portrayed fairy-tale creatures at children’s parties and events. However, this motivation is not a priority for her and she uses this opportunity rather to expand her field of activity and contacts. Cosplay is still more of a hobby for her, which can be profitable from time to time.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

We can say that the respondents of this research experienced different aspects of cosplay and related activities during the pandemic. Some of them stayed active, even more than two years ago; in turn, some of them lost their motivation. The social aspects of this hobby have not changed considerably, most of their families or colleagues support it. The married couple with a newly born son is experiencing different social aspects thanks to their son, as they try to include him in their hobby. The role-play part of cosplay has slightly changed by moving to online platforms rather than being performed on-stage. Cosplayers use platforms like *TikTok* and *Instagram Reels* to show their acting skills and short cosplay skits. As for appreciation of their hobby by other cosplayers and/or their fans, there has not been a big change, although these interactions are mostly limited to the online space. Thanks to comment sections under posts, reactions on *Instagram* or online streaming via *Twitch*, cosplayers are able to stay in touch and show their content to their fans and admirers. Regarding prop and costume making, the number of costumes made have changed rapidly. The couple who usually made 2 – 3 costumes per year (for themselves) has now made over 80 full costumes over two years, monetising their skills via commissions. Others usually made approximately 5 – 10 costumes a year, depending on their difficulty. During the pandemic, Domika made only one full costume dress, Prue made only three costumes which she considers to be easy, and Čača is approximately in the same range with seven costumes made. Only three cosplayers showed interest in the professional aspect of cosplay, as a possible source of profit. Two of them, the married couple, are successful, and have many foreign customers and clients for their commissions. Čača is just starting her business related to cosplaying during children’s parties. Overall, we were able to define three new categories in regard to the previous research. These are:

Category 1 – The impact of COVID-19 on the cosplayer’s motivations was minor.

Category 2 – The impact of COVID-19 on the cosplayer’s motivations was visible.

Category 3 – The impact of COVID-19 on the cosplayer’s motivations was major.

Each participant is associated with one of these categories depending on how many changes they have experienced during the pandemic. As can be seen in Table 2, most of the participants are situated in Category 2. Only Domika is in Category 1, where the impact of the virus on her motivations was minor and Čača is in Category 3, where the impact of pandemic was major.

Table 2: Final categorisation of participants

Nickname	Category of Motivation					Total Score	Final Category
	Social Relationships	Role-Play	Appreciation from Others	Costume and Prop Making	Cosplay as a Profession		
Prue	change	change	change	without change	without change	3 out of 5	Category 2
Čača	change	change	change	without change	change	4 out of 5	Category 3
Domika	without change	without change	without change	change	without change	1 out of 5	Category 1
Klaudia	change	without change	without change	change	change	3 out of 5	Category 2
Tyrael	change	without change	without change	change	change	3 out of 5	Category 2

Source: Own processing

Category 1 – The impact of COVID-19 on the cosplayer’s motivations was minor.

Only one respondent appeared in this category, who felt almost no changes during the pandemic compared to before the pandemic period. Domika felt the biggest change in the manifestations of motivation in Costume and Prop Making, where her performance decreased to almost zero. During the pandemic, she did not make any new costumes and had no intention of working on any. This behaviour is mainly explained by the fact that during the pandemic there were no physical events and festivals to which she could wear costumes. Other respondents showed more than two changes in their pre-pandemic motivations and thus were included in the second and third category.

Category 2 – The impact of COVID-19 on the cosplayer’s motivations was visible.

In the second category are three respondents out of five who showed three changes in their motivations for cosplaying during the pandemic. Klaudia and Tyrael have identical changes in motivations, which can be explained by the fact that they are a married couple and experience cosplay manifestations together. The third respondent is Prue, who experiences primary changes in social relationships (this motivation is the same as Tyrael and Klaudia), role-play motivation and appreciation from others. For Prue, participating in social media and presenting her work and person online played a significant role during the pandemic. On the contrary, it was important for Tyrael and Klaudia to establish a business in the form of orders in cosplay communities and to break into the Western market.

Category 3 – The impact of COVID-19 on the cosplayer’s motivations was major.

The third category is represented by only one respondent, Čača, for whom the pandemic had an impact on all motivations except Costume and Prop Making. Since Čača is a prominent person in the cosplay community in Slovakia, she significantly missed daily contact with friends from the world of cosplay. Čača works as a volunteer in the organisation of festivals, so the loss of contact and organisational possibilities affected her in the area of social life, both online and offline. During the pandemic, she tried to transform her skills from a cosplay hobby into the real world and educate the general public in the form of cosplay presentations at children’s parties and events. As part of these events, her motivation of Appreciation from the others was partially fulfilled, but she still felt a significant change in the reactions of the audience.

In conclusion, we conducted research involving five in-depth interviews with Slovak and Czech cosplayers who have been active in the cosplay community for at least eight years. As it seems, the pandemic has brought them many obstacles and complications, even loss of motivation, but also opportunities. However, the topic of cosplayers, especially in the domestic environment, remains widely unaddressed and interesting, and in need of further research in the academic field.

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