



# “I Never Envy Anyone, for I Have Already Built a Kingdom With My Fingertips”: Exploring Teenagers’ Experience in Chat-based Cosplay Community

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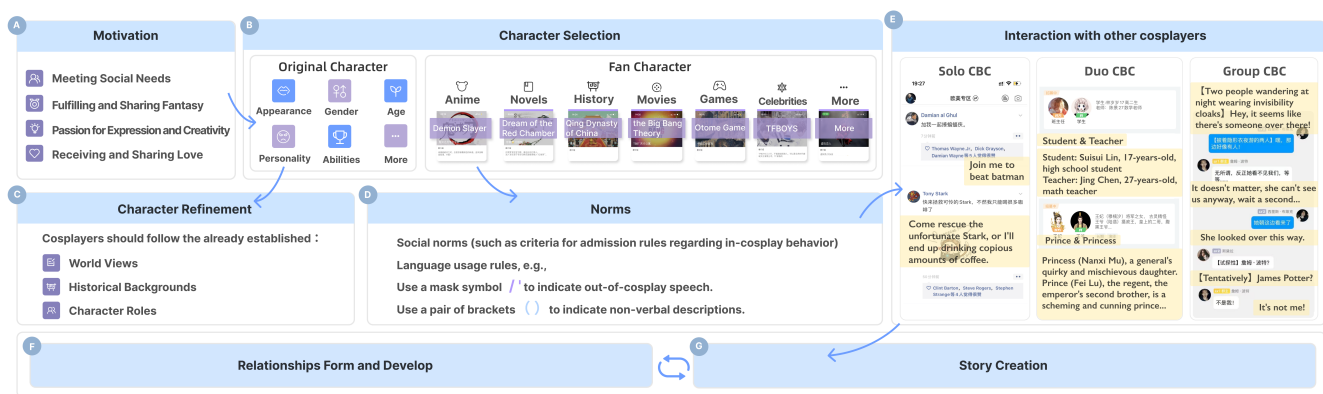
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**Figure 1:** The study reveals the four primary motivations and main practices of participants in chat-based cosplay. Adolescents perceive character presentation and portrayal as a central aspect of CBC, devoting significant effort to refine their characters for higher character consistency. The findings also highlight the positive feedback loop between social relationships and story creation within the chat-based cosplay community.

## ABSTRACT

This paper reports an interview study about the practice of teenagers’ chat-based cosplay in China. Findings reveal the four primary motivations of the participants and their main practice in chat-based cosplay. We found that adolescents perceived character presentation and portrayal as a central aspect of chat-based cosplay and they devoted significant effort to refine their characters to achieve higher character consistency. We highlighted the positive feedback loop between social relationships and story creation in chat-based cosplay community. In addition, we identified the influence and

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negative experiences on adolescents in the chat-based cosplay community.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI.**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

As the bell signaling the end of the school day rang, Hermione Granger couldn’t wait to pull out her phone and chat with her dear friend Harry Potter. Harry, too, had just finished his classes for the day at the prestigious Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Until her mother reminded her to do her homework, “Ada, time

to put away the phone and focus on your homework!” **Hermione** reluctantly said goodbye to Harry, “/Sorry, Harry, I’ll play with you after I finish my homework (frowning, with a reluctant face).”

Yes, Ada is role-playing Hermione. She has been participating in Chat-based Cosplay (also denoted as *CBC* below) as Hermione for almost three years. *CBC* is a text-based role-playing activity where participants use written descriptions to narrate stories, depict characters, and interact with fellow cosplayers. Generally, chat-based cosplay is divided into two main categories: original chat-based cosplay (i.e., using self-created original characters and original storylines to perform chat-based cosplay) and fan chat-based cosplay (i.e., using existing characters from anime, books, movies, etc. to perform chat-based cosplay). In contrast to the current development trend of role-playing platforms, which is heading towards multimodal role-playing, from massively multiplayer online role-playing games to more immersive Social VR role-playing games [8], chat-based cosplay focuses solely on text-based interactions. Since the emergence of *CBC* in 2004 [5, 10], its user base has grown, especially in recent years with the help of social media (such as Weibo and Douyin) and the emergence of professional *CBC* apps. The *CBC* community has attracted an increasing number of teenagers.

Despite its growing popularity, the HCI field has under-explored why teens engage in chat-based cosplay, how they interact with others through chat-based cosplay, and how participation in chat-based cosplay affects their understanding of the world and themselves. By examining cosplayers’ behaviors, the HCI community can better comprehend adolescent needs related to role-play and storytelling, potentially leading to improved game design or storytelling methods.

We conducted an interview-based study involving 18 teenage cosplayers with extensive *CBC* experience. Our findings reveal that teenagers participate in chat-based cosplay for various reasons, including social fulfillment, indulging in and sharing fantasies, expressing creativity, and exchanging affection. Character portrayal is central to *CBC*, and cosplayers often invest considerable time and effort to refine their characters, aiming for greater consistency. Furthermore, we discovered that story creation and social relationships are closely intertwined in *CBC*, with the community fostering a positive feedback loop in which story creation and social relationship development mutually reinforce each other.

## 2 BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK

Adolescence is a critical period of development characterized by numerous challenges and changes. One of the most important tasks during this stage is the establishment of a coherent identity [7]. In recent years, online self-presentation has increasingly influenced the identity development of adolescents. For example, research [11] shows that adolescents use online self-presentation to gain social approval from their peers, with girls being more likely to consider the perspective of their audience when deciding what to post. Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) can help adolescents promote their identity [2], and gaming-addicted teens tend to identify more with their online personas than their real selves [3]. Prior work [4] explored participatory design as an approach to help girls present their emerging identities. This present work continues this line of research by exploring how teenagers

use chat-based cosplay to present themselves and how chat-based cosplay affects their identity development. Besides, in chat-based cosplay, text-based messaging is the primary mode of interaction. Text chat allows people to focus on the content and structure of their written communication, ignoring physical appearance and body language [9, 12]. Such text-based messaging systems are common in CMC, for example, in instant messaging apps [6] or in gaming communities [12]. In contrast to previous research, chat-based cosplay exhibits significant differences in that teenagers utilize text to create more elaborate plots, construct stories, and build a fully text-based virtual interactive scene.

## 3 METHODS

To better understand the context, motivations, practice, and perception of cosplayers, we conducted a qualitative, semi-structured interview study. Participants were recruited by posting recruitment information and sending out individual invitations to cosplayers on popular online chat-based cosplay communities and social media platforms. Given the age of the teenagers, informed consent was obtained from both the children and their parents/guardians before the study started. The average interview time was 64 minutes, and participants received a 100 CNY (≈ \$15 USD) gift card after completing the interview. As of writing this paper, we conducted 18 interviews, of which 16 were cis-female, and 2 were cis-male. The reason for the low number of male participants is that male users in the chat-based cosplay community are a rare presence. Of those who shared their geographic location, 15 were located in China, and 1 was in North America. The average age of the participants was 16, ranging from 13–19. The average weekly time spent in chat-based cosplay communities was 19 hours. Two Chinese-speaking authors first coded 20% of the interview transcripts independently and met to reach a consensus on the coding. A unified codebook was developed, and the lead author coded all the remaining transcripts accordingly. The codes were then grouped into five themes, with each theme resulting in a subsection within the Findings section.

## 4 FINDINGS

### 4.1 Teenagers’ Motivations for Engaging in *CBC*

Interviewees reported a number of different reasons, from wanting to meet social needs to fulfilling their fantasy and passion for expression and creation, as well as wanting to receive love and share love. Each of these motivational themes is discussed next.

*Meeting the Social Needs.* One of the primary motivations for youth participation in *CBC* communities, as reported by our participants, is the fulfillment of social needs. These needs include a sense of belonging and the desire to establish new social connections with like-minded cosplayers. For example, For P12, a young girl with a disability of SMA (Spinal Muscular Atrophy), noted that she found her social life through *CBC* communities, “*Due to my physical condition, I hardly ever go out. But through CBC, I’ve been able to make some friends. I’ve been in the CBC community for five or six years now. It’s like a second life to me.*”

*Fulfilling and sharing their fantasy.* Similar to fanfiction communities where people explore and create new stories within a familiar universe, fulfilling and sharing fantasy are important reasons for

our participants' engagement. For instance, P7 said that after watching a Chinese historical drama, he couldn't shake off the feeling and often imagined himself time-traveling and interacting with one of the characters. Consequently, he joined the *CBC* communities.

*Passion for expression and creativity.* Some cosplayers participate in expressing and creating stories. For example, P2 said, "I enjoy Chinese history and really like writing, and by *CBC*, I am able to deepen their understanding of it and improve my writing skills in classical Chinese". P3 and P12 both indicated the *CBC* community provides them with an opportunity to have their writing seen by others. P14 also highlighted "My initial motivation for participating in *CBC* is to create a world with just words; it's truly wonderful. What I need to do is make sure the characters and plot are well-written and make sense".

"Receiving love and sharing love". Although receiving and sharing love can be considered social needs to some extent, we still want to elaborate on this motivation separately. An interesting phenomenon was that when participants were asked why they participated in *CBC* communities, over half of them mentioned: "receiving love and sharing love." This was especially true for those who cosplay characters from *otome games*. P1 shared her memories of how she began her journey in chat-based cosplay. She said that she came across other cosplayers' chats shared on social media platforms, and it made her realize the potential of expressing and understanding love in non-traditional ways, beyond just physical interactions and her Chinese familial love.

## 4.2 Presentation and Portrayal of Characters as the Core

Participants emphasized that the essence of *CBC* lies in character presentation and portrayal. They considered "character consistency"—the degree of alignment between the cosplay and the original work—as the most crucial factor. Consequently, cosplayers often invest significant time and effort in "character refinement", a process aimed at deepening their understanding and connection with the character to enhance consistency.

*4.2.1 The selection of the character.* We found that the selection of character, original character, or fan character is often related to the interviewees' motivation, and whether it is the original character or fan character, consistency with the interviewees' true or ideal self is a typical characteristic.

*Original character VS fan character.* In chat-based cosplay, teens can fully customize their characters and participate in original *CBC*. According to our interviewees, twelve do not roleplay original characters at all, four primarily roleplay fan characters with occasional roleplay of original characters, and two prefer roleplaying original characters. Compared to fan characters, participants indicate that original characters have higher flexibility and are more suitable for creating and presenting ideal selves. For example, P8 said, "Choosing original characters lets me be the imagined version of myself, expressing my ideal self and values with a different name and life." Participants who prefer fan characters often mention that fan *CBC* is about "roleplaying as the character I love" or "being loved by the character I love." For example, P15 explained, "As Zhou Yu, I can outsmart and outfight Zhuge Liang, and I can use my heart to love my Qiao."

*Consistency with one's true or ideal self.* Many participants chose roles similar to their real-life experiences and personalities because they thought it would be easier to roleplay them that way. For instance, P1 and P10 both noted that when the character is similar to themselves, refining the character can be easier, and the consistency of the character will be higher. P4 highlighted the advantage of embodying one's true self in casual cosplay, stating that "it makes it easier to participate in casual cosplay and others will feel that my character consistency is high, so it is easier to make friends."

Consistency with the ideal self was also an essential consideration for participants in choosing the character. For example, P16 aspired to become a lawyer like her parents, so she often cosplayed various lawyer characters. P12 stated that "it is important for me to choose characters because by imitating their thoughts and behavior, it would change myself, and the cosplayed character would have a significant impact on shaping my own personality. So I will definitely choose the person I want to be to roleplay."

*4.2.2 Refining the character.* Participants shared how they go about refining their characters with us. Cosplayers often dedicate much time to analyzing the original work and gaining a deeper understanding of additional background information. P10 mentioned she had watched an anime seven times. P9 described her approach to analyzing the original work, "Besides watching the series multiple times, especially in the ancient Chinese style genre, I have to spend much time organizing the character's background and story. I collect dialogue, analyze their speaking style, and analyze what character traits from the dialogue reveal. Besides, I also need to supplement a lot of historical knowledge"

The behavior of refining the character permeates into the cosplayer's daily life. As P10 explained, internalization was the actual purpose of understanding background context and analyzing the original work, "When I refine a character, I thought and acted as he/she in my daily life, using the character's mindset to think about my own life and act accordingly". P3 mentioned that to roleplay a character well, she even had to alter her daily habits, "I cosplayed Tan Zongming from 'Ode to Joy' before. He is a ruthless businessman, so different from me. I had to watch the series, read books, and change my habits to become him; it was exhausting. I rarely put so much effort into cosplay. Felt like I was living as him"

## 4.3 Story Creation and Social Relationships

*4.3.1 Norms in CBC.* Our participants further highlighted that the inclination to invest time in refining the character is closely correlated with the norms and culture of *CBC* community. For example, P3 stated that some *CBC* groups do not welcome new cosplayers who are unfamiliar with the norms, P16 mentioned the three most famous taboos in the *CBC* community, namely male sissy, newcomer, Mary Sue<sup>1</sup> who likes to exaggerate and depiction. The *CBC* community has specific social norms for cosplay activities, such as entering groups in character, remaining engaged, not interrupting others during group cosplay events, and not involving reality. As P11 explained, "In formal cosplay, involving reality is considered a big

<sup>1</sup>A Mary Sue is a character archetype in fiction, usually a young woman, who is often portrayed as inexplicably competent across all domains, gifted with unique talents or powers, liked or respected by most other characters, unrealistically free of weaknesses, extremely attractive, innately virtuous, and/or generally lacking meaningful character flaws[1]

*taboo, and in serious cases will be directly asked to withdraw from the group.*” According to P11 and P12, these norms aim to maintain an immersive and respectful experience within the community. And *“Even some cosplayers who are already familiar with the general rules of the CBC community, when they join a new cosplay group, they still have to learn the ‘group rules’ ”*, as P15 said.

Besides, as cosplay primarily takes place in written form, there are also established conventions for language use. For example, the use of a mask symbol “/” to indicate out-of-character speech and the use of parentheses “( )” or “[ ]” to indicate non-verbal descriptions. For example, a scenario from the anime Detective Conan CBC group provided by P10,

Ran: (excitedly) Shinichi, London Eye! Let’s ride!  
Shinichi: (smiling) Let us go! Wow, the view up here is amazing! (looks around)

...

Ran: / Wait a minute, my parents are back, and I can not use my phone right now.

Our participants mentioned that some mature CBC groups, especially those original CBC groups, often have a screening group. Generally, the group leader or the screening person checks if the applicants pass the screening process, then they evaluate their cosplay skills. Only those who pass the screening process can join the group. Therefore, P9 said, *“the best way for a new member to join the CBC community was to find a mentor to guide them; this way, they could minimize their mistakes and better blend into the CBC community.”*

**4.3.2 CBC activity and social relationships.** CBC activities are divided into three categories based on the number of participants: solo CBC, duo CBC, and group CBC.

Solo CBC is often posted on platforms such as MingPeng. Participants said that solo CBC helped them make new friends. They enjoyed the likes and positive feedback they received on their cosplay posts. For example, P3 said *“I like writing, and I enjoy getting many likes.”*

When interacting with others in a duo or group CBC, the content can be divided into formal CBC and casual CBC. Formal CBC refers to the process of creating a story together based on a particular story background and in accordance with the character’s characteristics. Casual CBC refers to casual conversations that do not require consideration of the story plot, such as a daily “good morning” within the context of the character’s characteristics. Our participants usually engage in both formal and casual CBC.

P4 expressed her preference for casual CBC, *“compared to formal CBC, it is less demanding and allows for more relaxation and enjoyment.”* In Casual CBC, participants generally use it for emotional communication. P1 also said that she likes to share with her “wife” happy stories together.

Before a formal CBC event, cosplayers often discuss the plot and design it together before, but it’s just a rough idea and often doesn’t have much impact on the details or development of the story. Generally, through the creation of story content in formal cosplay, social relationships are formed and developed. These relationships may stem from pre-existing social relationships within the story, like romantic relationships in the story of “Empresses in

the Palace” or sisterhood in the anime “Daily”. The formation of social relationships may also arise from positive impressions formed during formal CBC. For example, P14 mentioned that *“when I notice someone roleplay well in formal cosplay, I like to talk to them more and pay attention to their ideas during casual cosplay. It helps me form friendships with them.”*

Social relationships, in turn, facilitate the creation of stories. The formation of social relationships leads young people to have expectations for the maintenance and development of relationships, leading them to engage in more formal CBC. P7 shared with her maintains a relationship with through formal CBC *“We became a couple because of an ancient Chinese novel, her character consistency is amazing! She’s really good at writing; I’m happy to do formal CBC with her. We almost created a sequel to the novel!”*

#### 4.4 Perceived positive influences of CBC on themselves

We attend to the potential influences of teenagers in the CBC community. We identify three main themes: emotional support, the understanding of the world, and the understanding of one’s self.

*Emotional support.* Many participants said that CBC helped them to receive emotional support. For example, P1, a nearly professional cosplayer, shared an interesting perspective on how CBC helps her learn how to love, *“One is to let me experience love, to first let me see what love originally looked like. The second is to let me feel it, and the third is to teach me how to pass on love. The fourth step is for me to practice it and then to receive feedback on love.”* P4 said, *“When I am feeling low or going through a tough emotional time, I often find comfort and support in the CBC community. It helps me feel loved and healed, and it brings me a lot of emotional benefits.”*

*Influences on understanding the world.* Many participants have reported that participating in CBC activities has enhanced their understanding of the world and expanded their horizons. On the one hand, through the process of roleplaying, they have gained insight into the psychological states of individuals of different identities. For example, P16 said, *“I have been roleplaying as a lawyer, I learned about the legal profession despite not yet being in high school. I feel that I have a better understanding of my parents, who are lawyers.”* On the other hand, through roleplaying, communication, and interaction with others, participants have gained a better understanding of the background and context of different fields and historical eras.

*Influences on understanding one’s self.* Some participants reported feeling a sense of self-worth and self-efficacy through CBC. For instance, 12 said, *“I had little social interaction due to my SMA, but CBC gave me a second chance and increased my confidence and self-worth. I now know that I have the ability to be liked by others”* Similarly, P8 said that she felt that she was creative due to the popularity of her writing, while P1 discovered her social talents and ability to sense others’ emotions. Besides, P11 said that by constantly roleplaying the role of her ideal self, she discovered that she might be able to be that person in reality. Some participants reported that it helped them explore unknown aspects of themselves. For example, P10 shared a story she felt disappointed by facing failure, *“I’ve always done well on exams in my life, but then there was one cosplay event of Gintama, where I was playing a character that he failed in the story.”*

*While playing that character, I realized that I actually have a hard time dealing with failure, and it made me not want to try again."*

#### 4.5 Negative Experiences in Chat-based Cosplay Community

Interviewees shared many negative experiences that they had while in chat-based cosplay community. For example, some "big shots" in CBC communities would use their "power" to bully or exclude others. Some interviewees reported negative experiences with people who copy others' work, which is a common problem in CBC communities. P9 said that her writing was used without her giving permission, and it made her feel very upset, and she thought, "*Many people in that community didn't understand what plagiarism is. Especially for some elementary school students.*" Several participants, such as P18, also said that their participation in CBC had an impact on their studies or real life because they couldn't casually take breaks from it, which in turn increased their phone usage. Participants also reported negative effects on understanding themselves, such as P1 feeling "split" when playing multiple characters, and P3 said "*I feel confused when transitioning from CBC to reality, not knowing whether I am more like myself in CBC or in reality.*"

### 5 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

In our interview-based study, we explored teens' motivations, practices, and perceptions in chat-based cosplay communities. Chat-based cosplay allows adolescents to participate in role-playing and storytelling in a more flexible virtual environment. It offers a platform for the creation of unique stories and characters and enables adolescents to take an active role in shaping these stories and characters. The presentation and portrayal of characters is a core aspect of CBC, and cosplayers often spend significant time and effort refining their characters to achieve greater character consistency. Furthermore, we found that story creation and social relationships are closely interconnected in CBC and that the CBC community helps create a positive feedback loop where the act of story creation and the development of social relationships mutually reinforce each other. This work contributes to ongoing efforts to understand and provide support for teenagers' role-playing activities. In future research, we will engage in a more in-depth analysis of qualitative data and work alongside children to jointly investigate and design enhanced communities for role-playing and storytelling.

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