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"They Said We Ruined the Character and Our Religion": Authenticity and Legitimation of *Hijab* Cosplay

Introduction

Marketers and the media are infatuated with Gen Z consumers (born mid 1990s), their media habits, their consumption behaviours and belief systems; for this teens and tweens segment constitutes more than 60 million consumers in the US alone (Forbes 2015). These consumers are forecasted to shape the future of consumption; they are tech savvy, love digital brands and are considered to be true digital natives. A recent article in the Huffington Post examined whether these young consumers are more conservative or more liberal than their millennial predecessors. Relying on published statistics, the article found that 41% of US Gen Z attend church as compared to 18% for millennials while at the same time holding more liberal attitudes than millennials- for example, Gen Z consumers hold more tolerant views of body performance like sexuality and gender diversity. One context in which combines such tensions between religious identity and body performance in youth culture is *Hijab* cosplay.

Cosplay is a performance art that involves dressing up as a character from fiction (a film, comic book, manga, pop culture, superheroes, or video game). Cosplaying involves representing a character's appearance and personality using a combination of costumes, makeup, wigs, accessories, and props. In the early 2000s, Muslim hijab-clad women in South East Asia, namely Indonesia and Malaysia, took interest in cosplay culture, starting a trend called *hijab* cosplay. There is today a dedicated Facebook community with thousands of followers sharing their photos and supporting each other- see for e.g. *Hijab* Cosplay Gallery (HCG) and Islamic Otaku Community (IOC).

The hijab is a headscarf worn by religious Muslim women. Women wearing the hijab would also normally cover most of their body, avoiding for example tight-fitting and/or revealing clothing, to conform with the Islamic doctrine of modesty. Thus, in *hijab* cosplay, women partake in cosplay while maintaining their religious identity by incorporating their *hijab* in one form or another into their chosen costume (Rastati, 2015). An 'authentic' cosplay performance may be challenging for *hijab* players since their religious teachings do not allow them to show their skin or hair or even wear a wig.

The visible dimension of the head cover and the creativity displayed by young women in adapting the costumes while maintaining a full coverage of their hair and body make *hijab* cosplay as a quintessential example of the intersection of religious identity and body performance in youth cultures. Such Islamic dress code only applied to Muslim women, not men, and further allow to explore tensions between cosplay authenticity and our respondents' religious identity. Since female pop culture characters are often sexualized and costuming often involves heavy use of makeup, this may be at odds with traditional Muslim modesty. For example, at a cosplay show in Kuala Lumpur, a 20-year-old cosplayer named Nursyamimi Minhalia told *Reuters*: "It's quite challenging. Usually, I pick a character that covers most of my body, so it's easier for me to wear it in the 'Muslimah' style," employing the Arabic term for Muslim women. This tension between modesty and cosplay embodiment can be illustrated in the works of Queen

of Luna (see https://www.awesomeinventions.com/queen-of-luna-hijab/), whose embodied characters always appear attractive and sometimes sensual which can be construed as the opposite of the purpose of the *hijab*. However, the view that the *hijab* can be limiting when it comes to cosplay performance is contested by some, for example Sind Yanti, a *hijab* cosplayer told *Reuters*, "Wearing a *hijab* should not be a barrier for anything. We are free to be creative".

This study thus seeks to explore further the hijabi cosplay subculture and thereby contribute to the growing interest in youth cultures and their consumption habits, by exploring how tensions between religious identity and performativity of the body are explored and negotiated to achieve 'authenticity', a decidedly under-researched area. The human body has a cultural performative role which reveals private and public spaces, illustrates the construction of gender and race, and is a medium that transgresses the borders of art (Parker and Sedgwick, 2013). Given the role of the body as a site of negotiating identity, the study of tensions in this context between authentic body performance and religious identity constitutes a pertinent research issue.

This paper starts with an exploration of the literature dedicated to religion, identity and consumption. We explain further what cosplay is and the centrality of 'authenticity' in the cosplay performance. This gives us an opportunity to discuss current understanding of authenticity in consumer research. Following a presentation of our data collection and analysis, we discuss our findings. Our exploration of members of the *hijab* cosplay online community in South East Asia, reveals that *hijabi* cosplayers deploy multiple authenticating practices to legitimate a seemingly religiously incongruent leisure activity. The concept of authenticity emerged as multi-faceted for *hijab* cosplayers, and the malleability of authenticity is used to legitimate cosplay as an acceptable practice from a religious as well as from a subcultural view.

Religion and identity

Notwithstanding the centrality of religion in human behavior and identity formation, religion remains under-researched within the marketing field (Sandicki, 2011). Most of the existing literature on religion–consumption interaction focuses on the individual effects of religion and examines how religion and religious ideologies influence individual decision making, choice, and purchase behaviors (e.g., Hirschman, 1982, 1983; Sandıkcı and Ger, 2011; Moschis and Ong, 2011; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Jafari and Goulding, 2013, Moufahim, 2013). This has led to an oversight of the communal aspects of religion and their relationship to consumption (Sandicki and Ger, 2011). A number of studies construe religion as a component of identity and examine the role of materiality and consumption practices in constructing and communicating religious identities (see for example Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Sandıkcı and Ger, 2011; Mehta and Belk, 1991; Wattanasuwan and Elliott, 1999, Moufahim, 2013). This stream of research highlights the role of religion in the pursuit of identity projects and examines how consumers make use of market resources to build their religious identities. Yet, such studies focus on individual experiences and expressions of religion.

Religious communities differ from consumption collectivities/subcultures that form and revolve around a particular brand or activity, in that shared scripture-based value systems shape religious communities in a rather permanent manner. Religious subcultures allow their members to construct ‘‘identity spaces associated with their own vocabulary, expectations, and leaders, where like-minded people can engage in meaning construction for the subcommunity’’ (Starks and Robinson, 2009: 652). The resulting subcultural identity provides members with a particular worldview, attitudes, and behavioral preferences through which distinctions from other groups are (re)produced and (re)articulated (Sandicki, 2011).

Particularly useful in our research is the concept of identity salience (Peek, 2005), which acknowledges contributing factors and processes that render one identity—e.g. being Muslim—a core identity and paramount in the hierarchy of the manifold identities that comprise one's sense of self. The more salient an identity, the more likely it will be enacted in a given situation (Peek, 2005).

Cosplay as Youth Performance Activity

Cosplay involves a particular kind of performance where fans play with identity and find their own layers of meaning (Duchesne, 2005). Cosplay is based on the assemblage of costumes, performance and embodiment of characters that are usually sourced from popular culture, movies, comic books, TV series, anime and manga etc. Cosplayers wear detailed makeup and elaborate costumes modeled after their chosen characters (Poitras, 2001; Richie, 2003). They spend significant part of their income and time constructing or purchasing costumes, learning signature poses and dialogue, to perform at conventions and events, as they transform their daily life identities into fictional characters (Richie, 2003).

Other than for fulfillment and pleasure, cosplayers use cosplay as a form of escapism by often negotiating the boundaries between reality and fantasy (Rahman et al., 2012) and as a means for resolving identity ambiguity (Seregina and Weijo, 2017). In a sense, cosplay is a form of identity transformation from an "ordinary person" to a "super hero, from a "game player" to a "performer," from "adulthood" to "childhood," and sometimes from "female" to "male" or vice versa (Rahman et al., 2012).

Costuming serves a dual function: 1) expressing a visually communicated difference from other non-Cosplayers, and 2) signaling group identity in a neo-style tribe (Peirson-Smith, 2013). In presenting their costumed self in public, cosplayers inhabit parallel spaces with other subcultural narratives through expressing both their individual and collective identities and ideologies through the material change of appearance, for "...fandom is a particular kind of performance that many members boldly explore, playing with identity and finding their own layers of meaning" (Duchesne 2005: 18). Fiske (1992) described fan activities as "(semiotic) productivity and participation." In other words, cosplayers are consumers as well as producers of culture with symbolic meaning. Cosplayers convey their cultural capital by expressing their knowledge of popular culture by "embodying the character, providing an accurate and authentic experience in terms of body features and behaviors as much as dress" (Bainbridge & Norris 2013:3). Cosplay is

an embodied and affective process where the players perform an identity that they might not be able to enact in their everyday lives either due to physical limitations or social norms. Cosplay, therefore, provides for fluidity of identity (see Bakhtin, 1997) which carnivalesque spaces allow for in terms of identity play. Such acts of play and performance allow for self-creation, where through costuming players transgress normativity and experiment with non-normative identities and the fluidity of identity. Through cosplay, a person's identity can thus be transformed – an experience that is exciting, escaping, and empowering.

Authenticity and Cosplay Performance

Within the study of subcultures, such as the cosplay subcultures, authenticity is a central yet contested subject (see among others Arthur, 2006; Kozinets, 2001, 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). For example, who decides what is authentic and according to what criteria? Authenticity relates to what is conceived to be "genuine", "trustworthy" or "real" (Arthur, 2006: 144). Within subcultures, authenticity can be achieved at the individual level as well as the collective authoritative performance (Beverland, 2010).

The notion of authenticity also holds a central position in the cosplay performance itself. Since cosplay represents an act of embodiment; true or "authentic" embodiment of a character is judged based on nearness to the original character form (Kirkpatric, 2015). Attention to detail is important for the performance of "good" cosplay and for a faithful representation of a character in its appearance, traits and personality. Beyond such 'objective' dimension of authenticity, the concept has been conceptualized in more useful ways for consumer research, to include differing negotiation and interpretations of authenticity by consumers (Arthur, 2006). A constructive approach would see authenticity as symbolic and pluralistic, as a struggle for competing interests. A useful conceptualisation of authenticity shifts the focus of authenticity from 'object' to 'experience' and from 'universal' to 'personal' (Wang, 1999). The 'experiential' perspective is concerned with the subjective experience of the consumer (or more specifically the tourist in Wang 1999, and Badone and Roseman, 2004). Existential authenticity involves *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* dimensions. Intrapersonal authenticity relates to bodily feelings; both the sensual (the body as subject/body as feeling) and the symbolic, where the body becomes a display of personal identity (health, naturalness, youth, fitness, movement, beauty, etc.). Intrapersonal authenticity is essentially concerned with 'self-making' (e.g. Kim and Jamal, 2007), while interpersonal authenticity relates to the formation of, for example, 'touristic communitas' (Wang, 1999), or other communal shared experiences (as discussed below).
The proliferation of perspectives on authenticity has brought about the need to move the debate beyond the focus on 'objective vs. existential authenticity'. A call has been made to shift the focus onto the need for 'hybrid' authenticity, which is essentially a negotiation or reconciliation of object, constructive and existential authenticity (Chhabra, 2008). Rickly-Boyd (2012) goes further, calling for consideration of authenticity in all its complexity, linking object, site and experience, because "authenticity … has come to be used simultaneously as measurement, representation, experience, and feeling" (Rickly-Boyd, 2012: 284).

Within the context of cosplay, Rahman et al. (2012) has identified two types of authenticity: visual/concrete and narrative/abstract, which can be related to the conceptualization of 'objective' authenticity discussed above. Visual authenticity is closely related to physical attributes such as costumes, props, hairstyles, and makeup, whereas narrative authenticity is linked to mimetic attributes such as verbal, bodily, and facial expression. Rahman et al (2012) explain that both physical and mimetic attributes play a significant role in shaping and forming the authenticity of a cosplay character. These 'types' of authenticity by Rahman et al (2012) seem to both refer to the so-called 'objective' authenticity of the cosplay. In contrast, our research seeks to explore the cosplay from a hybrid, fluid, and multi-sited notion of authenticity, as a more powerful analytical lens for the study of hijabi cosplay subculture. This is particularly relevant given that cosplayers' ability to perform and to achieve a so-called "objective" authenticity is limited by physical features such as appearance or body size, or sometimes physical limits such as disability that often restrict and confine how accurate the cosplay is perceived (Galbraith,2013). One phenomenon that embodies this tension between authenticity and personal limits is *Hijab* Cosplay.

Context: *Hijab* Cosplay in Southeast Asia

The idea of using *hijab* in cosplay has become a new trend in the cosplay world of Southeast Asia (Cahya and Harris 2017). *Hijab* is a religious doctrine in Islam. The word *hijab* means covering up and showing modesty in the public space in an effort to "conceal women's sexuality" (Sobh et al., 2010, p. 1). Broadly speaking, *hijab* is the principle of modesty and decency (including behavior) for both male and female in Islamic religious beliefs. The term routinely refers to the female Islamic dress code, including but not limited to the head cover), or simply to the headscarf itself. *Hijab cosplay* thus involves cosplaying while adhering to an Islamic dress code. For example, while regular cosplayers would usually use wigs, a *hijab* cosplayer would use a headscarf of certain color to match the hair color of the character being cosplayed. The costume worn by *hijab* cosplayers would also usually be adjusted to cover as much of the cosplayers' skin as possible. While it was rare to spot *hijab*-clad women at these earliest cosplay conventions, there is a growing number of *hijab* cosplayers embracing the possibility to combine their religious beliefs with cosplay culture (The Strait Times, 2017).

Methodology

Hijab Cosplayers constitute a community that exists both online and offline, with the bulk of interactions between members taking place on social media (Instagram, Facebook, Whatsapp). They sporadically meet for local comic conventions or cosplay events. We have therefore focused our data collection on online spaces where the cosplayers manage the majority of their communications. We have identified a particular community called the *Hijab* Cosplay Gallery (https://www.facebook.com/*Hijab*Cosplay/), which counts a number of 15,000 members in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. We joined the group in August 2017 and for 3 months we

observed the group in an attempt to understand the specificities of *hijab* cosplay, jargon, codes, and member areas of interest and their focus of interactions (e.g. cosplay events). We have gathered videos, articles, and photos, which reflect the online activity of the group. This background data allowed us to learn the cultural world of the group. Our membership to the group has contributed to building up rapport with the community members, and to identifying leaders, influencers and potential respondents.

Twenty-five members of the group have been recruited via snowballing for interviewing. Baltar and Brunet (2012: 65) have noted that Facebook snowballing sampling can be effective for the study of "hard-to-reach" populations. According to their research the main advantages of this technique are that it can expand the geographical scope and facilitates the identification of individuals with barriers to access. Notably, none of the researchers is based in South-East Asia, thereby making Facebook an ideal medium for contacting and interviewing our respondents.

[Table with respondents' profile here]

Following a successful piloting of the interview guide, data was collected via chat-based interview on Messenger. This choice of medium was guided by our respondents' request; they felt more comfortable being interviewed via text-chat rather than video-chat.

As interpretivist researchers, it was important for us to understand motives, meanings, reasons and other subjective experiences that are time and context bound (Neuman, 2000). We have used thematic analysis to identify, analyze and report themes within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006), looking for differences and similarities, recurrent themes and emerging patterns (Beech, 2000; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Coding documents for each respective interview were analysed for cultural categories and interpretations as well as collectively for general emergent themes (Houston, 1999). Analysis was driven by emic responses from our participants (Reinecke et al., 2016), and it was a multi-stage "iterative process in which ideas were used to make sense of data, and data used to change ideas" (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007: 158). Prior conceptualisations of authenticity also informed an etic side to the analysis, which involved the coding of interview texts that was guided by a protocol based in part on the literature. Links to photographs posted on social media by respondents and quotes from the interviews have been added to illustrate the key themes identified. The quotations used as illustration in our findings section are the words used by our respondents, and we have refrained from correcting their grammar and spelling when these did not come in the way of comprehension.

FINDINGS

The interviews revealed that *hijab* cosplay emerges as a sub-category of cosplay with its own set of codes and practices. It influences 1) the cosplayer's character choice, and 2) the customization (*hijab*ifying) of the cosplay to the Islamic dress code. Findings revealed that within

hijab cosplay subculture, authenticity and authentic play take multiple meanings: religious, personal and social. These multiple meanings of authenticity and their corresponding authenticating practices contribute to the legitimation of cosplay and the players' quest for authentic identity as Muslim cosplayer. In what follows we discuss how these multiple meanings of authenticity: authenticity to one's religious identity (religious), authenticity to the character (personal), and authenticity to the subculture (social).

Authenticity to Religious Identity

Regarding character choice, interviewees picked characters from their favorite movie, anime, manga or video game, they identify with the most in terms of personality and/or physical resemblance. Adhering to *hijab* cosplay meant that a range of characters were dismissed based on Muslim religious values: 'sexy' characters and characters from 18+R anime, those showing too much skin, and characters related to religious mythologies (e.g. angels, demons, priests, or costume features large crosses), as expressed by Wan, a 20-year old cashier:

> "*I'd avoid characters with crosses… also if the character's outfit is too revealing, I would try to avoid that also since it seems difficult to alter to be more modest.* […] *I'm really not creative enough to change a design into more Islamic*" (Wan, 21)

Such characters were considered as unsuitable from a religious perspective, and/or particularly difficult to modify (or "*hijabify*" as put by Mizurei) to remain true to the aesthetic of the character. These limitations were not construed as particularly problematic because, as Mizurei put it: "*there are so many characters and costumes one can choose from and we could always pick something that fell into our own values*" (Mizurei, 28)

While customization is not unusual in cosplay to accommodate gender (e.g. crossplay), race, body type and (dis)ability, *hijab* cosplayers have to customize their costumes to include a head cover, cover bare skin, and loosen outfits (see image 1):

> "*Usually I try my best to choose character that don't show many skin (too sexy)… then the background of anime/character (make sure they don't have any relation with sex thing or religion). If the character wear skirt, I will wear long pants, if the character wear short sleeve, I will wear inner shirt on the inside*". (Airi Coser, 23)

Hijab cosplayers have made their head cover an intrinsic dimension of the cosplay experience. Participants spoke of 3 different approaches to the inclusion of the *hijab* in the cosplay: a) *Hijab* styled as hairstyle, b) non-styled *hijab*, and c) headgear.

a- *Hijab* styled as hairstyle: Significant time and efforts are spent styling the headscarf to resemble the character's hairstyle (see https://templeofgeek.com/amazing-cosplayer-makes-cosplays-using-hijab/). Advice from other *hijab*i cosplayers, and Youtube tutorials were prime support resources for that part of the cosplay. "*As a Muslim woman, I can't just show all parts of my body, also I can't even wear wig cuz it still looks like hair when wear it, even though it is fake. So I just change the wig to hijab"* (Tira, 21). Styling the *hijab* to look like the character's hair is a laborious and tricky task, as expressed by Mira: *"I had to figure out how to style my hijab into the character's hair. It actually took me weeks of trial*

and error before I finally got it right. The entire progress duration for this character was around 3 months" (Mira Dina, 20)

Non-styled *hijab*: For a few *hijab* cosplayers, the *hijab* is not modified to blend with the aesthetic of the character. It is worn in a very simple fashion (as she would in her 'civilian' clothes). It is in this case, an intrinsic part of the person (such as skin color, body size) that is not modified to fit the cosplay (see https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=533433736823048&set=a.303409419825482).

b- Headgear (Helmet, hoodies, scarf): Some participants purposefully chose characters with headgear so that the presence of the *hijab* does not interfere with character portrayal while at the same time conforming to Islamic teachings of covering the hair (see https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=569773833189038&set=a.372452086254548):

"For me, I consciously pick characters that has some form of head gear or hood so that it would be able to include my hijab without being obvious thus, it doesn't remove the essence of the character" (MizDesert, 27)

Hijab cosplay is not unidimensional as highlighted by the quotes and images above. These 3 ways of including the head covers into the *hijab* cosplay are not necessarily mutually exclusive, with cosplayers choosing the one that suits their own preferences for a particular character cosplay, or their own style of cosplay: "*I personally won't do anime characters and hijabify them because that's not how I enjoy the fandom, but I understand that's how some hijab cosplayers participate so that's fine"* (Mizurei, 28)

The *hijab* dress code and the costume design provide the participants a constant opportunity to reflect on their own religious identity, and what it means to be a Muslim woman enjoying, they all admit, a rather unusual hobby in their national context. Among the broader non-cosplaying Muslim community, cosplay is considered a frivolous activity that should not be pursued:

"*in general Muslim community, they think hijab cosplay was quite a disgrace, since they think the idea of cosplay is wasting time and money. Some would say it would be better the money you buy for your costume is donated for the poor people*" (Riey, 18)

Tira (21) for example, bluntly states: "*actually real Muslim is not allowed to cosplay though, because it is costume play, show off ourselves in public […] In Islam we can't show off our beauty in public*". She goes on to explain that while she does wear *hijab*, pray, and eat halal food, she is not a 'real Muslim'. She says: "*I get dressed in costume, cover all part; but still the costume is too attractive, it attract people to look at us that is not allowed in Islam'".* She adopts here the broader understanding of *hijab* (i.e. *hijab* as modesty for both dress code and behavior). She reconciles the dissonance by explaining that: "*It's not like I am against it* [adherence to strict Islamic *hijab*], *but I can just say it's my hobby, sooner or later, I will go to the right path*" (Tira, 21).

The idea of that cosplay may be a distraction from being a good Muslim was expressed by others as well. For example, Rai expresses her concerns about being "good Muslim": *"I'm sad because I can't be a good Muslim for now, I am still trying".* Notably, there were some cosplayers who held a different stance on the issue: "*You can be a good Muslim and cosplay at the same time as long as you follow the shariah law like keep your make up to a simple make-up*" (Yuu Riey, 18).

In other words, you can cosplay and be a good Muslim so long as your way of practicing cosplay did not oppose religious teachings according to Sharia laws.

Cosplayers share very personal conceptions of what it means for them to be a Muslim, and they reconcile critiques about their cosplaying (portrayed by some Muslim non-cosplayers as being incompatible with Islamic traditions) with their religious identity:

> *"Good Muslim" means a person who is well aware of Islamic shari'a and its laws. a Muslim is obliged to wear the veil clearly written in the hadith of the Prophet regarding his obligations […] I really have said that hijab and cosplay is very different. Cosplay is definitely attracting attention with its uniqueness is it not? But it is about on their own personal values. Hijab cosplayer channelling the hobby is a happiness. I am sure of us all have respect for shari'a Islam. we would very thoroughly choose a good character to be made [in a] hijab version to not violate the rules and remain acceptable* (Rai Arims, 21)

Other cosplayers stressed the importance of using common sense in interpreting Sharia Laws:

> "*Each individual hijab cosplayers have their own value when hijab cosplaying. Some of us prefer to cover our bust with our hijab, some don't mind shortening their hijab to make them look exactly like the character's hair. we are just regular humans. we have our own individual values*" (Rioka, 21)

Sindi found cosplay to be a way to teach others that *hijab* does not mean that one has to be limited in their leisure activities and what they could do for fun.

> *"Cosplay for me just for fun, to share, I know I won't be perfect cosplayer like others, but my goals it's not to be perfect, but to inspire others, to introduce about Muslims girl who can do some creativity without feeling confined with their hijab. Being good Muslims for me needs very long journey. My first step is how much I tried to keep believing in Allah and to follow his command. I think it's depending about what is your real goals…"* (Sindi, 24)

'Being Muslim' is certainly not a static fixed identity, rather it is a process of becoming (Peek 2005) and our participants highlight this through their talk of a journey, and their attempts to become better Muslims through their choices (within and outside of cosplay). These statements highlight the multiplicity of views regarding Islamic beliefs and praxis, including dress code, and what the believers' understanding of guidelines/Islamic teachings, and their own choices (see Jafari and Suerdem, 2012 for similar observations regarding Muslims' consumption practices).

<u>*Authenticity to the community (social dimension): support, rules and guidelines*</u>

'Cosplay is for everyone' was a leitmotiv used to justify *hijab* cosplayers' legitimate presence as a subculture within the cosplay community. While such presence has not been accepted without issues (within and outside the cosplay community), the participants have noted a broader acceptance of their type of cosplay: *"as years pass, the hijab cosplay community has drastically grown. We have influenced a lot of young Muslims to follow their wish to cosplay and unleash their creativity" (Mintea, 20).*

The support of community members proved invaluable in the face of criticisms, providing a support network, resources (e.g. tailors, boutiques, friends to go to events with; co-cosplayers for 'team cosplays').

> "*when my recent cosplay as Yang Xiao Long from RWBY got viral in the fan page, I got comments like "she has ruined the character" or "this looks awful", etc. my friends just told me to ignore them coz we know that hijab cosplay is still very new and there are some people who will dislike it*" (Rioka, 21)

An important role of the community is to provide advice about characterization (e.g. dress, poses, *hijab*/wig), but also guidance about the craft itself (sewing, customization, tutorials). With regards to the compliance of cosplay to an Islamic dress code, the *hijab* cosplay community members form a loose authority body that provides guidelines and advice to other members (in particular, new cosplayers).

> "*I will normally advise them* [new members] *on how to modify the costume and how to cover up. But if the costume is clearly something that is not allowed in Islam- e.g. another religious clothing like nun clothes, if that's the costume she wants to wear then of course I would tell her not to" (*Rioka, 21)

Controversies arose when some of these comments were overly critical:

> "*One of my friends cosplayed as a guy and the shorts were above the knee and it show her thigh, some people thought it would be nice to throw her some harsh words so that she could cover her thighs*" (Riey, 18)

Other respondents spoke about an evolution in the group, where they have decided to avoid negative comments, and consciously be more supportive and accepting to the *hijab* cosplayers who do not strictly observe the *hijab* dress code (e.g. use a wig instead of *hijab*, cosplay a 'sexy' character).

> *"a hijab cosplayer who decided to not hijab cosplay anymore and wear a wig. I wasn't really involved in it but I heard that those who were involved were being bashed by the hijab cosplay community themselves. It left a bad mark to our community. since then we made an oath to not condemn those want to remove their hijab and wear a wig and become more open-minded. We can't stop them to do what they want to do unless it is totally forbidden (like committing a crime). If she wants to wear revealing costume but still wants to wear a hijab, of course we will advise them to modify and cover up. As a hijab cosplayer, we just need to be more creative"* (Rioka, 21)

This illustrate the evolution of the community itself, but also of *hijab* cosplaying itself towards a more structured and codified practice. Rioka (21) from example, spoke about creating a page: "*I have a plan in the future to make a hijab cosplay tutorial or tips on my cosplay page to help those who want to hijab cosplay*" (Rioka, 21)

The community policing of cosplayers' choice of outfit aligns with society's religious and moral conventions, which are upheld within the community. Islamic rules are not suspended for the sake of cosplay as it became evident from our interviewees' responses. They are held to Islamic dress code guidelines, but also ethical concerns where one is held responsible for the well-being

of others (including their avoidance of sin, and by extension their salvation). As a relatively young community adjustment are taking place, and they are evolving in their approach to each other, and to cosplay.

Beyond the faithful representation of a character, it is the commitment to cosplaying as a hobby that defines the 'real' cosplayer and her commitment to the community and to this art form:

> *"I do get messages from some of my hijabi followers saying that what I do encouraged and inspired them to also pursue hobbies that might not be the norm for a hijabi. I also do get messages from my non-hijabi followers saying that they appreciate how I can stay true to my faith while enjoying mainstream pop cultures as a regular Joe would because they feel that they are often exposed to the negative news of Muslims, and following hobbyist like me allow them to understand and be more open-minded about the differences between extremist Muslims that are regularly portrayed in the media as opposed to regular Muslim folks like me who are just living our lives peacefully and appreciating pop culture just like everyone"* (Miz Desert, 27)

<u>Authenticity to the character (personal dimension of authenticity)</u>

The issue of authenticity emerged as being of prime importance to the *hijab* cosplayers. For one, it was often used as a criticism against their style of cosplay. Wan recalls some of the most common comments *hijab*s have received for their cosplay: "*they look so weird wearing like that" " oh no they ruin our fave girls! " " they all looked ugly*"". Sindy explained how she does not respond to trolls verbally, but with perseverance instead: "*I couldn't do anything when hijab cosplayer got bullied and [*bullies] *said that we ruined the character and our religion. I'm just trying to shut the haters mouth with achievement" (*Sindi, 24)

Authenticity was redefined by the participants in terms of the creativity demonstrated to stay true to the physical appearance of the character, including hair, face, clothes, and props, but also his/her personality and mannerisms. *Hijab* can be construed as a creative resource to display one's creativity and craftsmanship, or as a physical constraint to be overcome to create the character:

> "*I really admire hijab cosplayers nowadays because even with the limitations we hold, they always find a creative way to resembles the character's design. They still manage to cover their skin and hair even when they cosplay an exposed character"* (Mintea, 20)

While some cosplayers who usually wear *hijab* in daily life were reported by our respondents to have substituted their *hijab* for a wig to ensure a maximum character authenticity, our respondents unanimously stated that they would not sacrifice their own religious beliefs to the character's physical likeness. Creativity was highly valued and elevated in this context. The validation of their work by their peers (*hijab* and non-*hijab* cosplayers) was evidenced by the positive feedback received: "*subsequently when I did Altair from Assassin's Creed and Snow White's Evil Queen, there were so many people who were actually impressed by how I managed to make the character look really good despite including my hijab in it"* (MisDesert, 27).

Cosplay will include portraying the personality and aesthetic of the character (including poses), and the unveiling of the character and public performance at conventions, events, or via social media. Being true to the character is of prime importance to the cosplayer, highlighting the importance of narrative authenticity (see Rahman et al, 2012), and constructive authenticity (i.e. what the cosplayer herself choose to focus on to bring the character to life: '*the best cosplayers always come up with their own version of a character'):*

> *"if you insist on accuracy, you end up sacrificing potential. I think the best cosplayers always come up with their own version of a character. but for Star Wars in particular, there are groups of costumers that really adhere to standards and accuracy. I did have someone ask me to register myself so I take it I look authentic enough with hijab cosplay. You can either pick a character who already dons a hijab or you can take a character and modify it the latter requires much artistic liberty and it's up to the cosplayer's design to make it look good and reflect the character they are portraying*" (Mizurei, 28)

Authenticity in cosplay is not as much 'objective' as it is 'relational' (Rickly-Boyd, 2012); it is 1) assigned by others who pass judgement on the 'objective' dimension of the character being cosplayed, and 2) the value assigned to the cosplay by the cosplayer herself:

> "*I do hear quite loudly that some people don't like hijab cosplay […] they see it as a break in the authenticity of a character, which is why I am wary of how I would modify costumes. Cosplay is about portrayal to most people. so if you don't look like something they expect, they react. Basically they don't like the look of it… when anime characters who wear short dresses and have colourful hair suddenly have long dresses and hijab* (Mizurei, 28)

Wearing the *hijab* to cosplay is simply a characteristic that the individual needs to work with to represent a character as faithfully as possible:

> "*at the end of the day, these are fictional characters and they do not represent the individual. What it does represent is how much the individual likes that character and he/she wants to portray it to the best of their ability whether they are hijabi, plus sized, special needs or just a regular fan"* (MizDesert, 27).

MizDesert includes in her statement different categories of 'differences' that need to be ignored or accommodated in a cosplay (such as body type and abilities). Narrative authenticity and/or experiential authenticity is therefore given prominence over visual authenticity in *hijab* cosplay. Visual authenticity is redefined and stretched to incorporate creativity as a defining feature of an authentic *hijab* cosplay. Riey (18), who used to hold negative views about *hijab* cosplay, has learnt through her own practice as *hijab* cosplayer that "*a good cosplayer is someone who can portray the character perfectly. No matter inside or outside*". Wan highlights the importance of satisfying the expectations of the fans of the character, putting more pressure on the *hijab* cosplayer to present detailed and intricate characterizations:

> *"The less accurate the costume is, the more insecure I get. I might offend the other fans of the character if I didn't get it right. I want to bring happiness and smiles for both myself and whoever sees my costume"* (Wan)

In a similar vein, Sindi highlights the political dimension of her cosplay, both for Muslims and non-Muslims:

> "*I would like to see hijab cosplay to be more advanced, inspiring, and give the perception that there is no harm to hijab girl to be creative, reducing islamophobia, and can invite other muslim girls to wearing hijab…"* (Sindi, 24)

The cosplayers are thus challenging stereotypes yet they are reiterating ideas of religious norms and modesty. The role of *hijab* cosplay therefore allows for the normalisation of Muslim cosplay subculture within the cosplay community, increase the visibility of the cosplay to the general public (several *hijab*i cosplays have become viral, attracting attention beyond the cosplay community), but also address misconceptions about Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular. These 3 dimensions of an authentic *hijab* cosplay allows respondents to address legitimacy issues as cosplayers, what constitutes an accurate cosplay, and also who is entitled to define what is authentic, accurate and/or acceptable.

DISCUSSION

In this research we explored how tensions between religious beliefs and consumption of embodied activities are resolved by youth consumers in South East Asia. Specifically, the research focused on how religious identity is made sense of and performed in the context of *hijab* cosplay, providing insight into a growing phenomenon in contemporary Asian youth culture.

Findings revealed that unlike previous findings where cosplay is seen as an act of escapism (see Rahman et al 2012) or resolving identity ambiguity (Seregina 2017), *hijab* cosplayers retain with them an identity that visibly "sticks out" – their religious identity. It transpires from our respondents' responses that 'being a Muslim' is at the core of their identity and paramount in the hierarchy of the manifold identities that comprise one's sense of self. As a salient form of identity (see Peek, 2005), this religious identity has to become part of the character's authentic portrayal and performativity and is thus incorporated into the costume through the *hijab*. Through aestheticization of the veil, *hijab* cosplayers reconstruct their religious identity to include incongruent cosplay identities and legitimize cosplay as a religiously acceptable activity through various authenticating practices. *Hijab* cosplay provides these young informants with pleasurable experiences, empowerment, a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose.

Hijab cosplay is revealed as a sub-category of cosplay with its own set of codes. *Hijab* cosplayers form their own online communities where they learn from each other, share resources and form hierarchies within these communities. Costume is seemingly being used by *hijab* cosplayers to communicate and perform their spectacular individual selves, whilst at the same time signaling their religious group identity through shared costume-based identities and markers. *Hijab* cosplay provides an interesting lens for the cosplayers to reflect on their own religious identity, and what it means to be an observant Muslim woman who has an unusual hobby (qualified by some as childish, or not appropriate). Since cosplay is performative, it can be

used to challenge traditional expectations (Hjorth, 2009); in this case, *hijab* cosplayers challenge existing stereotypes about Muslim women. They use this fantastical activity and negotiate their religious and cosplay identities with others in the larger Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

Research documenting the transformation of *hijab* from a stigmatized practice and a sign of conservatism and traditionalism into a trendy and stylish practice is not new (see for example Sandicki and Ger 2009). However, this research highlights the role of authenticity and authenticating practices in making a stigmatized practice (*hijab*, geek culture etc.) legitimate in varying social spheres. Similar to existing research on cosplay, authenticity emerged as a key feature in *hijab* cosplay performativity, where authenticity is used to gain legitimacy as a cosplayer within the wider cosplay community and the *hijab* cosplay community in particular while staying true to one's own religious identity. Rickly-Boyd (2012) has called for a consideration of authenticity in its complexity, linking object, site and experience and in relation to tradition, ritual and aura. For our participants, the authenticity of character portrayal and performativity cannot be separated from the authenticity of the self as reflected in the core identity. This authenticity is highlighted through making religious identity embedded in costuming whether through styling *hijab* or wearing headgear. Hence, authenticity is also performative, from the embodied experiences to the narrative communication of self (Noy, 2004; Rickly-Boyd 2012; Shaffer, 2004).

Authenticity in the context we have studied has to be understood as: 1) authenticity as Muslim (religious dimension of authenticity); 2) authentic performance (personal dimension of authenticity), i.e. the homage paid to their favorite character; and 3) authenticity to the wider cosplay community (social dimension of authenticity) as well as the *hijab* cosplay community (commitment to the craft, providing support and advice). These 3 dimensions of authenticity are part and parcel of the *hijab* cosplaying experience. This echoes Rickly-Boyd's argument that authenticity is relational: "[i]t is measured, perceived, experienced and felt in relation to other phenomena" (ritual, tradition, and aura) (Rickly-Boyd, 2012: 284). Authenticity in *hijab* cosplay is revealed as multifaceted, and players use these multiple facets to legitimate a seemingly religiously incongruent practice. Authenticity then, in the context of subcultures, is malleable construct, where members use their own meanings as well as religious and social meanings, used with authenticating practices to legitimate a religiously contested activity.

Conclusion

This research provides a glimpse into the complex and shifting relationship between youth culture and religious affiliation. This paper has examined how female Muslim cosplayers position themselves as legitimate players within the cosplay culture while maintaining their religious identity. Research documenting the transformation of *hijab* from a stigmatized practice and a sign of conservatism and traditionalism into a trendy and stylish practice is not new (see for example Sandıkçı and Ger 2011). However, this research highlights the role of authenticity and authenticating practices in making a stigmatized practice (*hijab*, geek culture etc.) legitimate

in varying social spheres. Similar to existing research on cosplay culture, authenticity emerged as a key feature in *hijab* cosplay performativity, where authenticity is used to gain legitimacy as a cosplayer within the wider cosplay community and the *hijab* cosplay community in particular while staying true to one's own religious identity.

Hijab cosplay provides our young informants with pleasurable experiences, empowerment, a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose. The ability to retain the visual marker of the *hijab* was important to all of the respondents as well as the challenge of modifying their costume to accommodate modesty in a creative and personal way. Lack of representation of Muslim women within the cosplay subculture seems to be a challenge but not an insurmountable obstacle for these cosplayers. *Hijab* cosplayers take on an ambassadorial role, inviting others to inquire about, or discuss, their religion or culture in a way that would promote further understanding of embodied activities from a religious lens.

This work has provided insight into how tensions between embodiment and religious affiliation are resolved. Furthermore, the research highlights the role of authenticity, and its malleable nature, in legitimating embodied activities that are seemingly religiously incongruent. Our work put into doubt the presentation of leisure embodied activities and religious practices as two discrete cultural categories; instead, there are two parallel processes that go hand in hand, of aestheticization of religious signifiers and *hijabification* of embodied activities.

The so-called Muslim market is worth $2.6 trillion, and a number of leading brands, including Gap, H&M, Vogue, L'Oreal and Nike have even started featuring the hijab in their advertising campaigns, adding to this is the value of the Cosplay industry is estimated at $25 to $50 billion market and still growing around the world (with a growing segment of hijab cosplay around the world, in both so-called Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority countries), it is evident that this research provides interesting insights into a segment of consumers often ignored by marketers. Understanding authenticity is (or should be) a key focus for marketing and brand practitioners (see Grayson et al., 2004; Rose and Wood, 2005), and our study highlights authenticity as subjective, negotiated, and multidimensional (see also Leigh, Peters, and Shelton, 2006; Littrell, Anderson and Brown, 1993). Marketers should thrive to support (diverse/minority) consumers in their quest for achieving their authenticity goals and representation in more inclusive global markets. Future research should focus on a range of participants involved in creative youth subcultures, including but not limited to religious affiliation, (dis)abilities, ethnic minorities, or gender identity.

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