

Cosplay Collaboration Videos: Community Interactivity in Times of Pandemic

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Abstract: Cosplay has developed with the influences of contemporary society since its early beginnings. From analog event-based interactions to online activities, this growth in popularity has been gradual and encountered challenges along the way. The COVID pandemic lockdown conditions of 2020, however, have been extremely disruptive for conventions. Cosplay activities online have changed from a supporting element of the physical event to being the only option available for a period. In tumultuous times human society has proved capable of adapting rapidly and popular culture is no different. Particularly during the early days of the restrictive measures, there was a burst of online activity and for the global cosplay community this manifested as cosplay collaboration videos. These cosplay community-based projects coalesced around themes familiar to the fandom from anime and manga to games and beyond. The global reach of the digital realm facilitated groups to come together in cooperation in a unique way which inspires further development of tools available to cosplayers.

Keywords: Community, Cosplay, COVID-19, Digital, Anime

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Introduction

In a year that has been tumultuous around the world in many ways, people have attempted to come together to somehow rebuild connections through participatory activity. Digital methods of interactivity have become a reliable option to fill the void as international travel in traditional form has become near impossible. Online communication has grown in recent years as a legitimate form of community development.^{1,2,3} Cosplayers also have been quick to utilize this medium in what has been traditionally analog aspects of group participation such as costume construction support or idea sharing through photo images. Until 2020 these forms of communication over the Internet were augmentations of direct networking at anime related events or similar forms of gatherings. The Covid-19 pandemic changed this dramatically however, and what was optional became a necessity for community interaction.

Early in the pandemic, among the many changes that came with lockdown measures in countries around the world was a burst of interactive endeavors - digital and otherwise. From Zoom classes to bread making and gardening, people were looking at ways to occupy the greatly increased amount of time spent at home. This reflects the extreme change in environment and the ability of living beings to adapt when faced with necessity. In times where change is not needed the status quo is often maintained; in times where change is vital, it can come quickly. With the innate awareness youth have for digital technology growing up with it all around them, their penchant to create change is formidable. This study will examine online cosplay collaboration videos as one form of this dramatic development in culture.

During 2020, dozens of cosplay collaboration videos were uploaded online. Those posted to the YouTube platform will form the focus of this article. As far as historical archiving is concerned, these projects were not planned well in advance; rather they were spontaneous digital congregations. These postings appeared in coordination with the fashion inspired 'Pass the Brush Challenge' and cosplayers tailored them to accommodate their transformation into character form. Of interest to this study is the examination of the nature of the videos uploaded and through interviews with project organizers, and questionnaires answered by participants analyzing the outcome of their efforts. The analysis of fan activity during this first year of the pandemic compliments similar studies conducted by others; most notably Alberto and Tringali's surveys of anime convention attendance later in the pandemic when events started being held in 2021 and 2022, "Working with Fannish Intermediaries."^{4,5}

Literature Review

The early lockdown period in 2020 has provided the opportunity for many to look closely at the effect on fandom. Innate understanding of the use of the tools available has situated members of some communities to play a dynamic role in social activism.^{6,7} Crystal Anderson examines the correlation between K-Pop online communities and the move to the digital classroom. The already established use of blogs, wikis and podcasts provides a blueprint for effectively engaging students through online platforms.⁸ Similar to anime conventions, theme parks as gathering locations for fans have been heavily impacted by the pandemic. The magnitude of having all 6 Disney park locations around the world closed simultaneously cannot be understated.⁹ This loss gives us pause and a "chance to consider how connections to such spaces were

continued during the lockdowns of the coronavirus pandemic”.¹⁰ In a similar way, the Eurovision event being cancelled for the first time in 65 years had a powerful impact on those who closely follow the multinational singing competition. This pushed the community to develop the Eurovision Again contest, giving fans the opportunity to relive past moments and react simultaneously with friends over social media in a similar way to the live celebration.¹¹

The sudden upheaval of the pandemic and impact on fandoms provides compelling counterpoints to the collaborative cosplay videos presented in this study. Similar to the case of the Eurovision Again contest, the YouTube platform was commonly used as a venue to host the cosplay collaboration videos. The videos posted by cosplayers, however, were created between fans in a contemporaneous fashion and were not so much retrospective looks at past moments to be celebrated in coordination with other fans. We can see here a noteworthy disparity in fandom and how content is celebrated. Another significant difference is how unlike the Eurofan movement seems to have been an upwelling of desire for content by a great number of fans, the collaborative cosplay videos were initiated by a call to action from one or two community members to worked with other participants on a smaller scale.

Methodology

Before discussing the accumulated data directly, this section will explain how it was collected. The 'Dataset Cosplay Collaboration Videos - Videos' dataset is a listing of 65 collaboration videos and 'Dataset Cosplay Collaboration Videos - Responses' is the

feedback from 83 participants to the 9-question survey, 'Appendix A - Online Cosplay Video Activity Questionnaire'.

The collaboration videos were as short as 1:40 to as long as 12:21 in length; with as few as 6 participants to as many as 116. On average 21.5 participants in each video was the standard and with the 65 videos included in this study, 1395 cosplayers came together to participate in their respective projects. The videos normally begin with a cosplayer in casual clothing, at home with a background that is often incongruent with the character into which they would be transforming. They would then take a make-up brush or similar item, move the brush to the lens of the camera and after moving the brush away from the camera and a quick edit, it would appear as though the cosplayer had magically changed into the character. They would then pass the brush off screen one direction to the next participant of the project.



Figure 1 Screen captures of Astellecia Skye's part in the 'Pass the SSR' Crystal challenge video

In Figure 1 we can see an example from the Pass the SSR Crystal challenge video. The participants are dressing as characters from the *Granblue Fantasy* role-playing video game and coordinate to a certain extent with participants who appear before and after them by passing an in-game item.

Although the YouTube collaboration video project data analysis was extensive, it was by no means exhaustive. Most of the videos have a few thousand views each and some have views in the hundreds at the time of writing this article. Videos continue to be posted by creators and there are surely other videos that did not appear after multiple searches. That being said, a small number of outlier videos will not dramatically affect the results of the survey below. Video data analysis was limited to YouTube due to the substantial number available however there are likely different (or the same) videos posted to Facebook, Instagram or TikTok. Search expressions were limited to English as terms were predominantly used in this language. Although people wrote in various languages in the comments section associated with the videos, the titles and credits were often written in English. YouTube or Google cannot be accessed in some countries (most notably China), and this will also skew some results. A number of the videos included in the survey used variation terms such as 'Pass the Headband Challenge' for Naruto videos or 'Don't Rush Challenge' in relation to the music-based trend which occurred during the same time frame as other videos. Finally, fashion-based videos with costumes that were not based on particular characters such as Goth, Horror or 'spooky' themes were not included in the analysis.

Cosplay Collaboration Video Data Analysis

Cosplay collaboration videos became a particular trend that coincided with the global effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Comparison of Google search trends and cosplay collaborative projects posted to YouTube demonstrate this strong correlation. As can be seen in Figure 2, global searches for the term 'Pass the Brush Challenge' peaked during the week of April 19 - 25 and remained relevant from between

April 5 through June 13th. This corresponded with the Italy lockdown of March 9 to May 18 and approximately 90 countries and territories followed with some level of restrictive measures from late March to May or June.¹²

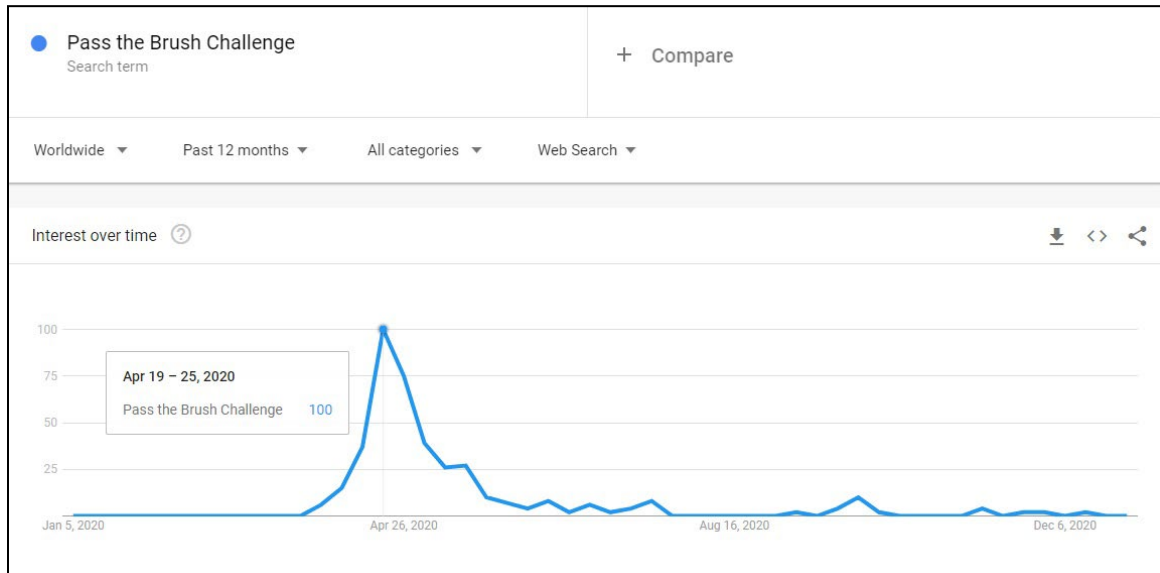


Figure 2 Google Trends search for the frequency of the searched term 'Pass the Brush Challenge' during 2020

YouTube postings of cosplay collaboration videos followed a similar trajectory although with a certain amount of delay. As demonstrated in Figure 3, among the 65 videos found on YouTube, 11 of them were posted in the month of April when the 'Pass the Brush Challenge' term peaked in trending on Google. The greatest number was posted in May at 24, and numbers dropped to 14 in June and 6 in July. For the remainder of the year from August until December one to three were posted each month.

Categorizing the main features of the videos, the greatest number of groups at 36 could be labeled 'Series' based collaborations as they accumulated characters from the same comic, anime, or game titles. They had the highest number of posts in May at 14

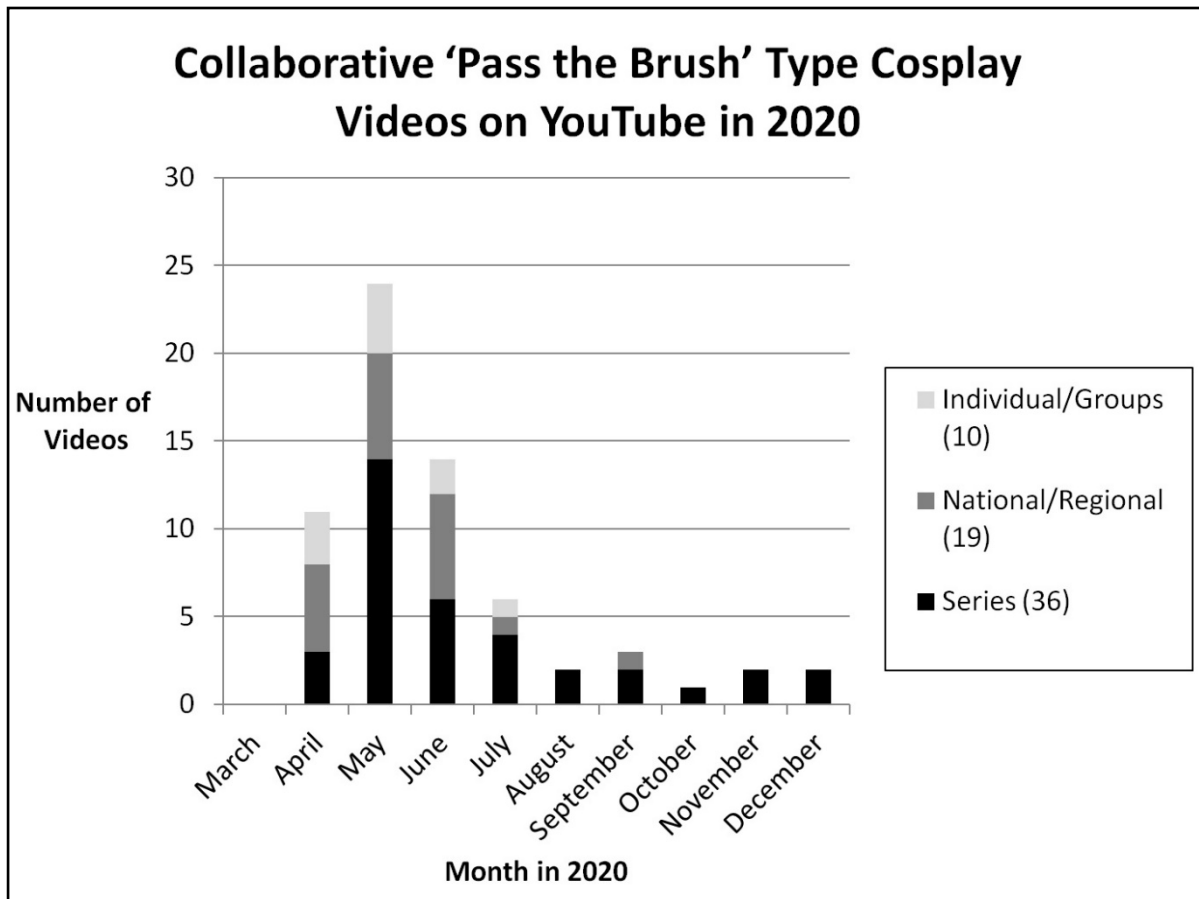


Figure 3 Graph of 'Pass the Brush' collaboration videos posted to YouTube during 2020

and continued to be posted throughout the year. In particular, a series of 4 *Touhou Project* videos were posted monthly from August to September. Clearly, participants found the strongest connection through a certain series. The next largest group could be categorized as National/Regional with a total of 19 videos. These peaked in May and June with 6 videos similar to series-based collaborations. A number of videos were difficult to classify as they could be placed in 2 different categories. One example is the Italian based Cosplay Italia group who posted 4 videos devoted to the *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* series.

This group could easily have been categorized under 'National/Regional' or 'Series', however, to demonstrate the overwhelming predominance of series-based

videos they were placed in the 'National/Regional' category. Finally, 10 videos are categorized as 'Individual/Groups' and were posted by individuals without particular series theme or location. Most notably, POC (People of Color) groups posted 3 videos in April including #7 from the 'Countries' category from the dataset. All features found in the title or comments section of the videos were included in the Cosplay Collaboration Videos Dataset.

The main features and categorization of some of the videos could be debated however the predominant trend of the 'Series' being the most popular category is indisputable. Although national identity or the role of the individual is notable in Figure 3, the series, in which cosplayers participated as part of an assembly of characters was the most popular format. In other words, the series is the exemplification of a shared vision that the participants have endorsed.¹³ Bringing the project together is the work of individuals but it is clear that it is not about one member alone but a convergence through fandom.¹⁴

Participant Responses

Many collaboration participants were kind enough to complete a questionnaire regarding their experiences. Figure 4 is a pie chart of Q5 on the questionnaire inquiring about the amount of time spent preparing for what was often a 5 to 10 second video clip. The greatest number of participants spent 2-3 hours and about a third of participants worked for more than 3 hours in preparation. This would include preparing their costume, putting on make-up, and taking multiple videos until satisfied with the result. In all, a substantial amount of time was dedicated by all participants to the project considering the brevity of each persons' appearance in the video.

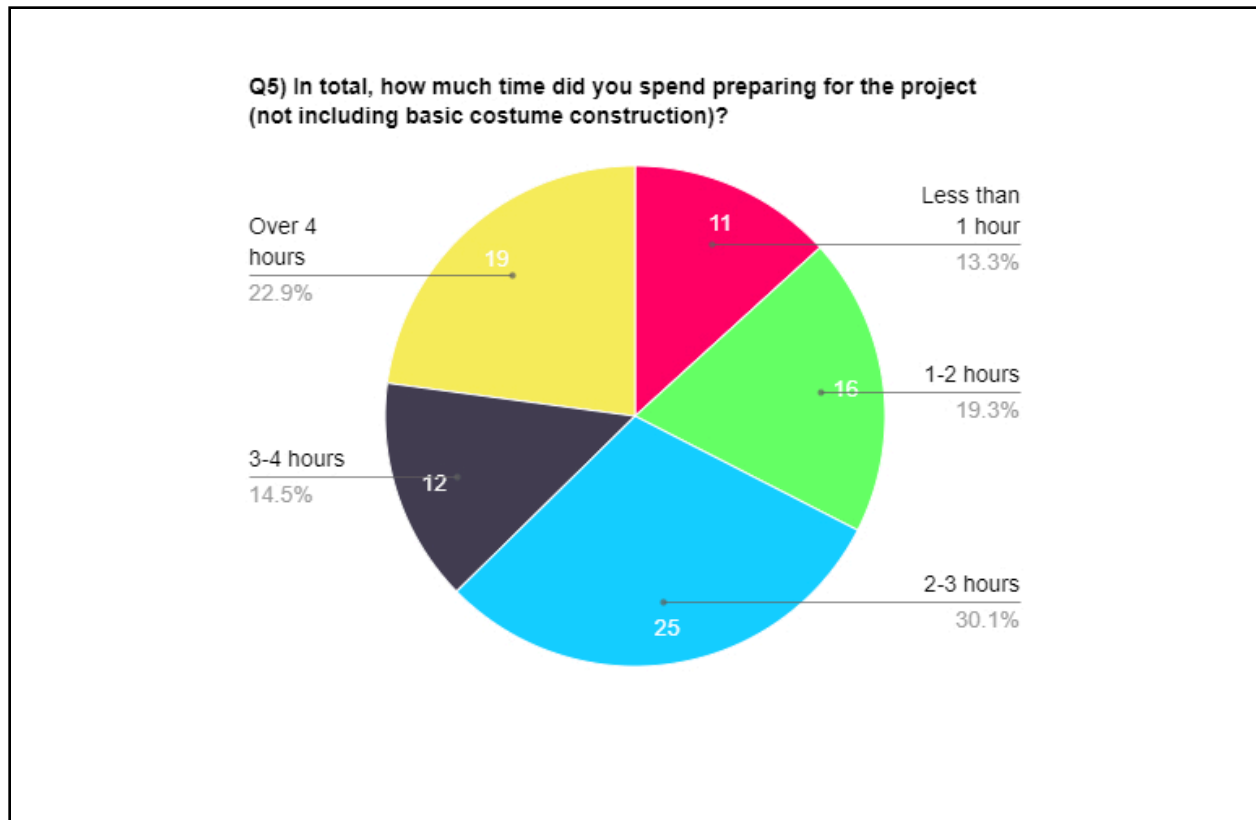


Figure 4 Interviewees responses regarding time spent in costume preparation for their video submission

The sentiments of participants came through in Q8 of the questionnaire. In response to the question 'With regards to the Covid-19 pandemic in particular, how did the project affect or inspire you?' Some expressed the sense of isolation felt and the access to an outlet for pent up energies; "You can still be creative at home while practicing social distancing (*n* 14). "A similar response was more to the point; "Just don't feel so alone anymore" (*n* 38). Others reflected on the interactivity of the exercise and ability to pursue a common cause; "It was beautiful to see people from all around the world contribute with the same cosplay passion from their own homes" (*n* 45). or "Perhaps we can have more innovative ways to present ourselves and interact with friends at home in future" (*n* 3). Still others reflected on agency in being able to

collaborate and build connections through the project. "It inspire me a lot, cause I didn't feel alone doing this, I thought about my friends, ask them some details and news at the same time. It was a good way to socialize" (*n* 53). These are only a few of many projects that appeared during these early days of the pandemic.

Conclusion

During the period of data collection a prevalent statement was that 2020 was a year to forget. This article sheds light on a time when the pandemic was perhaps at the toughest point. However, these moments of imagined togetherness and the sudden longing, which moved people to act deserve memorialization. Such bursts of activity in a time of confusion took cosplay fandom a fundamental step forward. This has not been a year to be forgotten by any means.

The experiences of the 1395 participants of the 65 videos in this survey deserve a spotlight in these dark days. The bulk of the projects were completed at a time when there was a rush of online activity, but many can see that this global experience is more of a marathon and those early weeks seem far away. Uplifting comments from participants from the questionnaire were worthy of note: "I learned that we are all in the same situation. People all over the world experience the same struggles as me right now and that definitely helped me coping with everything" (*n* 81). We habitually move from one task to the next and focus on what is in front of us, but these new skills learned through the activity will not only help with managing the moment but also bodes well for the future. In a time where mass events have come to a close these experiences will influence the direction of cultural interaction and community in years to come. The fact that the most common theme for the videos were the 'Series' category is meaningful; the

importance of the shared vision through anime and related stories proved paramount. Ultimately, these are stories of fandom recorded for history. Just as the Covid virus has mutated before and during the pandemic, so too society continues to adapt to deal with the realities of the world around us.

Notes

¹ Baym, Nancy K. Baym 2015. *Personal Connections in the Digital Age: Digital Media and Society Series*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

² Christine Hine. 2015. *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday*. London: Bloombury Publishing.

³ José Van Dijck. 2013. *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Maria K. Alberto and Billy Tringali. 2021. "Dataset for: Survey of Anime Convention Attendance in Response to Covid-19." Hive.utah.edu.

<https://hive.utah.edu/concern/datasets/qj72p722r>

⁵ Maria K. Alberto and Billy Tringali. 2022. "Working with Fannish Intermediaries." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 38. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2022.2227>.

⁶ Penny Andrews, "Receipts, Radicalisation, Reactionaries, and Repentance: the Digital Dissensus, Fandom, and the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no. 6 (2020): 902–907.

⁷ Michelle Cho, "Pandemic Media: Protest Repertoires and K-Pop's DoubleVisions ." in *Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory*, edited by Philipp Dominik

Keidl

et al. 333–340.

⁸ Crystal S. Anderson, "Fandom and Pedagogy in a Time of Pandemic." In "Fan Studies Pedagogies," edited by Paul Booth and Regina Yung Lee, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 35 (2021), doi:10.3983/twc.2021.2027.

⁹ Rebecca Williams, "Theme Parks in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic." In *Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory*, edited by Philipp Dominik Keidl et al., 137–142.

¹⁰ Williams, Theme Parks, 138.

¹¹ Abby S. Waysdorf, "This Is Our Night: Eurovision Again and Liveness through Archives." in *Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory*, edited by Philipp Dominik Keidl et al., 295–302.

¹² Alasdair Sanford, "Coronavirus: Half of Humanity on Lockdown in 90 Countries." euronews, Accessed April 3, 2020. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/02/coronavirus-in-europe-spain-s-death-toll-hits-10-000-after-record-950-new-deaths-in-24-hou>.

¹³ Mei Lee, "Transformational Leadership: Is It Time for a Recall?" *International Journal of Management and Applied Research* 1, no. 1 (2014): 17–29. <https://doi.org/10.18646/2056.11.14-002>.

¹⁴ Lori Hitchcock Morimoto and Bertha Chin, "Reimagining the Imagined Community: Online Media Fandoms in the Age of Global Convergence," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, edited by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, 176.

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