# "You Know, We're Just Having a Good Time": Masking Racism and Foregrounding Fun in Cosplay

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**Abstract**

Comic book conventions and cosplay, as increasingly popular sites of cultural consumption and production, are often viewed as spaces that offer inclusivity, diversity, and fun for all. At the same time, many women and people of color report that they do not always feel like these spaces are intended for them. Racial discourse and ideology studies have found that speaking positively about themes such as diversity can serve as "happy talk" that does more to reproduce, rather than challenge, power structures. Drawing from in-depth interviews with cosplayers and observations of two comic book conventions, this study examines how convention participants' and cosplayers' discourses and practices reproduce racial and gender inequality even in spaces described as diverse and inclusive. I introduce the term "foregrounding fun" to describe the discursive strategies in which White participants emphasize positive intentions, prioritize the experience of White people, and minimize the presence and impact of racism. The findings indicate that cosplayers may shift between colorblind and race-conscious racial ideologies in delivering racial discourse, which supports the notion that racial ideologies are flexible, fluid, and evolving.

Keywords: Diversity, Racism, Race, Cosplay, Representation

## Introduction

Fans marginalized by race and gender navigate cultural spaces that often remain dominated by normative images of Wwhite, straight, cisgender, and non-disabled men (Pustz 1999; Griffin 2014; Orme 2016). Comic book conventions—considered one of the most important sites of popular cultural production in the United States (Brown 1997; Jenkins 2012)—offer a unique space to interrogate persisting race and gender-based marginalization. Thousands of fans attend these conventions, many of whom dress up in costume and perform as fictional characters from comic books, video games, television, or film. This popular practice is referred to as "cosplay." Cosplay and comic book conventions are often considered fun spaces inclusive of minoritized groups (Rockett and Lee 2018). While there have been many efforts to make inclusiveness a reality within cosplay and convention spaces (Liao 2017, Britto 2018; Keifer 2019), and conventions have taken strides to implement panels discussing issues of race, gender,

sexuality, and disability, implicit structures of marginalization remain (Stanfill 2011). In this paper, I address the following research questions. First, to what extent does the diversity and inclusion of comic book conventions challenge the structures that reproduce privilege among Whites? How are race, diversity, and inclusion discussed among cosplayers who frequently attend comic book conventions? Lastly, how is Whiteness maintained through discourse within cosplay communities? I argue that despite conscious efforts to make cosplay and comic book conventions welcoming spaces for all fans, race, and gender-based marginalization persists covertly through discourse and practices that maintain the structure of Whiteness. To investigate the racialized and gendered conditions of comic book convention spaces and cosplay communities, I observed two popular Florida-based comic book conventions and conducted nine in-depth interviews with cosplayers. I ground my arguments in theories of structural racism (Bonilla-Silva 1997) and diversity ideology (Embrick 2011; Mayorga-Gallo 2014) to interrogate how shared discourse and

practices, particularly those by White comic book convention attendees, covertly reproduce marginalization. I discover that in contradiction to their efforts of inclusion, White attendees of comic book conventions reproduce marginalizing spaces for women and people of color despite explicit goals of diversity, inclusion, and acceptance. In addition, interview data shows how White male participants' discourses often remained within colorblind and diversity ideology frames.

The organization of my paper is as follows. First, I discuss the significance of comic book conventions, cosplay, and media representation in studies of racism and diversity. I then review the literature on colorblind and diversity ideologies to illustrate my arguments' theoretical foundations. After detailing my research methodology, I delve into the two sections of my findings. The first findings section focuses on the marginalizing processes I observed at comic book conventions. Second, I conceptualize the "foregrounding fun" discursive strategy through an analysis of the racial discourses of my participants. Building on the frames of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017) and diversity ideology (Mayorga-Gallo 2019), I argue that White participants' use of "foregrounding fun" centers individual intentions, dismisses structural racial inequality and maintains White dominance.

## Theoretical and Empirical Background

*Comic Book Conventions and Cosplay*

Comic book conventions are large social gatherings where fans and creators of mass media consume and reproduce popular culture (Peaslee 2013). Comic book conventions have been a part of American popular culture for over four decades and have grown steadily ever since. San Diego Comic-Con, for example, is one of the world's largest popular culture conventions, with its attendance surpassing 130,000 people each year since 2010. Today, in addition to many small comic book conventions across the U.S., there are over sixty comic book conventions held annually that host tens of thousands of fans. Comic book conventions can now be considered "the major focal point of modern fan culture" (Brown 1997:17).

As they continue to grow in popularity, comic book conventions are also constantly changing. Despite historically being White and male-centric (Lopes 2009), convention crowds have become increasingly diverse, with a growing presence of women and people of color of all ages (Jenkins 2012). Part of the reason for the diversifying fan base is that comic book conventions have become

increasingly inclusive of varying forms of entertainment. At most conventions, fans are not limited to comic books and comic book-related attractions. Comic book conventions are commonly hubs of American popular culture where any fan can attend and appreciate media from varying genres and mediums. For example, fans can meet with creators and celebrities from popular movies and TV shows, some of which have no relation to comic books or the superhero genre. Fans can also attend special events such as film screenings, table-top game tournaments, and speed dating. Comic book conventions have become a place where most fans can celebrate the content of comic books without having read comic books (Jenkins 2012). Comic book conventions appeal to a much wider audience than merely comic book readers; serving as a space to consume, interact with, and broadly celebrate popular culture. Given their growth, popularity, and cultural significance, comic book conventions make for an important site of sociological study.

A popular form of fan expression at comic book conventions is "cosplay." Cosplay is a performance of fan identity in which fans embody a fictional character by altering their body features, dress, and behavior (Bainbridge and Norris 2013). Cosplay was popularized initially in East Asian cultures, most notably in Japan, to celebrate Japanese animation and manga. However, since the early 1990s, cosplay has become increasingly popular in Western cultures, particularly in the United States (Pustz 1999). Aside from its Eastern cultural influence, origins of cosplay in the United States can be traced back to the 1970s when fans dressed up as science fiction characters at the first San Diego Comic-Con (Bainbridge and Norris 2013), the New York Comicon of 1964, or as early as 1939 with the World Science Fiction Convention in New York City (Huntemann 2017).

Cosplay often remains confined to comic book conventions, comic book shop events, and movie premieres (Bainbridge and Norris 2013; Lamerichs 2010; Peirson-Smith 2013). This is perhaps due to the social stigma cosplayers sometimes experience when seen outside of these unique cultural spaces (Gn 2011; Lopes 2006; Peirson-Smith 2013). Despite, or perhaps due to, increasing media coverage of cosplay, including a competition-based reality television show called Heroes of Cosplay, cosplayers are at times perceived as fanatical and immature (Lopes 2009). Because cosplayers still experience some stigma, fan conventions may serve as a safer space where cosplayers can band together in celebration of their common interests virtually free of judgment from non-fans. That is not to say, however, that cosplayers do not experience stigmatization or marginalization within spaces where cosplayers

typically congregate. For instance, sexual harassment and racism are continuing issues and topics of discussion at comic book conventions (Huntemann 2017).

Wherever there is marginalization and oppression, there is resistance. Cosplay serves as a site of race and gender reproduction as well as subversion and resistance. For instance, Samantha Close (2016) found that cosplayers perform alternative masculinities that subvert hegemonic masculinity. Racebending allows fans of color to resist whitewashed, normative, and racially homogenous media representations; carving a space for themselves within a mostly White space (Gilliland 2016). The growing popularity of racebending and genderbending has given cosplay greater subversive potential for transgressing normative identities. As media scholar Henry Jenkins has stated, "fan culture stands as an open challenge to the 'naturalness' and desirability of dominant cultural hierarchies" (1992:18).

According to Patricia Hill Collins, "an increasingly important dimension of why hegemonic ideologies concerning race, gender, sexuality, and nation remain so deeply entrenched lies, in part, in the growing sophistication of mass media in regulating intersecting oppressions" (2002:303). Mass media regulates oppressions by what Collins calls controlling images, or widespread images that seek to normalize systems of racism, sexism, poverty, and other social injustices (2002). The controlling images in popular media that permeate through comic book conventions inform us of, and shape, our social world. More specifically, controlling images that circulate throughout popular media reinforce the prevailing ideologies of structural social stratification (Bonilla-Silva and Ashe 2014). Being that cosplay and comic book conventions are so centered on popular media, these communities offer unique opportunities for studying how racial ideologies persist, change, and emerge.

*Racial ideologies*

Structural and systemic racism (i.e., White people's material, ideological, and political subjugation of people of color rooted in constructed biological and cultural notions of "race") is central to the history, formation, and continued realities of the United States (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin 2014). While more subtle than in the past, today's "new racism" remains heavily institutionalized (Bonilla-Silva 2001). For example, despite arguments that the United States is post-race, immense racial inequality in wealth (Oliver and Shapiro 2006; Thomas et al. 2017) and residential segregation (Massey and

Denton 1993; Krysan and Crowder 2017) remain deeply embedded via seemingly race-neutral policies and practices. Furthermore, American politics (Omi and Winant [1986] 2015) and law enforcement (Alexander 2012; Aranda and Vaquera 2015; Armenta 2017) illustrate how colorblind racism is deeply embedded in American institutions. Hence, the contemporary racialized social structure largely persists through a colorblind racial ideology (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017). While previous research has discussed the implications of colorblind ideology in popular media (Bonilla-Silva and Ashe 2014) and cultural spaces (Rodriguez 2006; Hancock 2008; Withers 2017), little research has examined how colorblind ideology and racial ideologies more generally operate within fan culture, particularly at fan conventions and among the cosplay community. This study utilizes these spaces of fan culture as sites of examination to expand our understanding of racial ideology in the United States and further theorize its material and social implications.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva defines a racial structure as "the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege" ([2003] 2017:9). Racial structures are multidimensional, comprising of social, economic, political, and ideological realms that individually and interrelatedly reproduce racial oppression and privilege within a social system. Racial ideology is a racially based framework of understanding, explaining, justifying, and/or challenging the racial order (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017:9). Racial ideologies are comprised of frames, styles, and stories. Frames are established ways of understanding information. Four central frames comprise colorblind racial ideology: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017). Americans in general, but White Americans especially, apply one or more of these four ideological frames when composing racial discourses, also using a myriad of what Bonilla-Silva refers to as stylistic components and racial stories ([2003] 2017). Styles are specific ways of speaking such as using certain phrases or terms to convey an idea or pose an argument. Stories are comprised of "socially shared tales that are fable-like and incorporate a common scheme and wording" and testimonies, or, "accounts in which the narrator is a central participant in the story or is close to the characters in the story") (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017:97).

A central element of colorblind discourse is the ability to disguise racial inequality with positive notions of inclusivity, acceptance, tolerance, and diversity, also referred to as "happy talk" (Bell and Hartmann 2007). Abstract liberalism and

minimization of racism frames are particularly important in what I call the "foregrounding fun" rhetorical component of my White respondents' discourse around race. The abstract liberalism frame uses notions of equal opportunity, choice, and individualism to explain racial inequality. Respondents used abstract liberalism in tandem with racism minimization—arguing that racial discrimination is no longer significant in explaining the experiences of people of color. But beyond discounting racial discrimination, some White respondents downplayed the structural realities of racism. Respondents' comments suggested that colorblind frames were partnering with a diversity ideology.

David G. Embrick (2008; see also Embrick 2018) argues that diversity ideology, as a prominent racial ideology in the United States, dilutes the structural significance of race and racism. Differing from colorblind ideology, diversity ideology utilizes race consciousness to avoid systemic change and maintain White supremacy (Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017). Nonetheless, colorblind and diversity ideologies are used interchangeably, often reinforcing one another (Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017). Sarah Mayorga-Gallo (2019) maps out four tenets of diversity ideology: diversity as acceptance, diversity as commodity, diversity as intent, and diversity as liability which sometimes work in tandem with the four frames of colorblind racism. Diversity as acceptance, intent, and liability tenets were most prevalent among the current study results. Diversity as acceptance calls for the mere presence of people of color as the solution to racial inequity, which distracts from the importance of structural change (Mayorga-Gallo 2019). Diversity as intent centers good intentions over continuing disparate racial outcomes. Framing diversity as a liability or potential threat works to justify a lack of support for diversity and equity policies among Whites. Mayorga-Gallo states that "diversity ideology creates a logic by which Whites can discuss racial inequality or the importance of diversity, while centering their desires, intentions, and comfort" (2019:6). An analysis of racial ideologies that considers tenets of diversity ideology can reveal how even race-conscious "happy talk" can complement a system of Whiteness. In investigating racial ideologies in previously understudied spaces such as comic book conventions and cosplay communities, I can shed light on how colorblind and diversity ideologies work interchangeably to maintain Whiteness as a structure of ideas, discourses, and practices within sites of popular culture consumption and production in American society.

Research in critical diversity studies has mostly examined corporate workplaces (Embrick 2011; Berrey 2014), college universities (Berrey 2011; Moore and Bell 2011; Warikoo 2016), and multi-ethnic neighborhoods (Burke 2012; Mayorga-Gallo 2014). There has yet to be much research examining diversity ideology outside of these sites. While recent scholarship has increasingly interrogated race and racism in fan studies (Pande and Moitra 2017; Stanfill 2011; Wanzo 2015), there lacks an extensive analysis of how colorblind and diversity ideologies manifest discursively among fan communities (including cosplay). The current study seeks to extend the study of race in fan culture by critically evaluating racist discourse and ideology in cosplay, an area in which gender presentation has been the central focus of research. I examined comic book conventions as a site of popular culture in which structural racism and misogyny persists despite, and as a result of, explicit valuing of inclusion and diversity. I find that even though cosplay is renowned for its fun, diverse, and inclusive qualities, White participants' use of discourses rooted in colorblind and diversity ideologies contribute to the maintenance of racial power structures. Contributing to the literature on racialized discourse and diversity ideology, I identify a new stylistic component of the diversity as intent tenant in which White social actors use notions of fun to prioritize individual intentions, center White experiences, and dismiss structuralized racism. I refer to this discursive strategy as "foregrounding fun."

## Methods

Data were acquired by attending and observing two large comic book conventions in Florida and conducting nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews with cosplayers. The conventions were attended before completing any interviews to acquire ethnographic data and gain access to initial participants. I accessed additional participants through snowball sampling from the initial group of participants met at conventions.

Both conventions took place in large convention centers that were capable of housing tens of thousands of attendees. The conventions' layouts and event schedules were reviewed beforehand to ensure efficient observation. The main hall, where most of the convention activity occurs, was open to fans for nine hours at both conventions. However, conventions included events that took place after the main convention hall would close, such as special guest panels, costume contests, or cosplay after parties. I

attended the costume contests at both conventions, each lasting roughly ninety minutes. Including time spent waiting in line for the conventions to open, approximately twenty-two hours were spent observing and taking preliminary notes. In between observing and taking field notes at the conventions, cosplayers were approached to invite participation in the study. Attending the conventions offered me an opportunity to gather extensive observational data in addition to meeting and building rapport with potential interview participants.

My main interests of observation at comic book conventions included the interactions between fans, the methods of costuming done by cosplayers, and the overall presentation of the convention spaces. In addition, I took detailed notes of how non-cosplaying fans approached and interacted with cosplayers, what costumes seemed to be getting the most attention, popular costumes among cosplayers, and how fans engaged with the activities at the conventions. These inquiries and more guided my investigation of the convention spaces. Overall, my main concern was not with the degree of inequality that existed at conventions, but with the covert, taken-for-granted manifestations of inequality.

I conducted, transcribed, and analyzed all interviews used for this study. Respondents were assigned pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality. Interviews ranged from thirty-five minutes to one hour and thirty-three minutes. The average interview time was approximately one hour. Nine cosplayers volunteered to participate in the study. I conducted seven interviews in-person and two through a video call service. To be eligible for the study, participants needed to be at least eighteen years old and have experience with cosplaying at a comic book convention. All participants have previously attended Florida-based conventions including the ones observed for this study. Participants self-responded to open demographic questions at the beginning of the interview on gender, race/ethnicity, social-economic status, age, and years of experience with cosplay. I asked respondents questions such as: how did you first become interested in cosplay; describe your most recent cosplaying experience at a convention and how, if at all, this experience has changed over time; how do you prepare to cosplay at conventions; what do you enjoy most about cosplay; have you been criticized about your cosplay; how do you choose your cosplay; what are the "good" and "bad" ways to cosplay; what do you think about racebending and genderbending in cosplay; do you consider cosplay diverse and/or inclusive, why or why not?

The youngest participant was twenty-two years old, and the oldest was fifty-two. The average participant age was approximately thirty-two years old. The least experienced participant has cosplayed for one year while the most experienced participant has been cosplaying for over twenty-two years. The average cosplay experience between participants is about six years. Four participants self-identified as White men (Johnathan, Jake, James, and Terry), one Hispanic man (Robert), two White women (Melissa and Laura), one Asian American woman (Kelly), and one Black woman (Rena).

Although I have attended comic book conventions before this study, I have never participated in cosplay. This prior experience seemed to benefit me as a researcher because I maintained a status that teetered between outsider and insider. Whereas a researcher with no prior knowledge or connection to the culture may have had a more difficult time finding cosplayers who would agree to partake in the study, having basic knowledge and recent experiences with comic book conventions helped me build rapport with participants.

Moreover, while I identify as Latino, I also privilege from being light-skin, sometimes assumed to be White-Anglo. Therefore, it is important to note that my White-passing privilege may have granted me more approachability (Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman 2017) among my White participants, potentially allowing for less restrained comments on race.

I utilize critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2013) to examine the racial ideology of participants. I qualitatively coded interview transcripts into themes. Coding was accomplished through multiple phases. With each coding phase, themes were thoroughly reviewed and revised. I used the initial phase of coding to search for broad themes of race and gender. I refined each theme further with each new phase of coding. The themes discovered throughout the interview transcripts were then compared to previously recognized discourses of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017) and diversity ideology (Embrick 2011; Mayorga-Gallo 2014; Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017).

## Results

*From the Panels to the Margins: Marginalization at Comic Book Conventions*

When asked how he feels about diversity and inclusion at comic book conventions, James, a White man in his early twenties, said, "I mean, it is a safe place for diversity of everything. It's inclusive." Like James, most participants in this study spoke positively about the inclusivity at comic book conventions. However, my observations of convention spaces revealed that

the inclusivity of women and people of color operated as a surface-level smokescreen to persisting forms of marginalization. After observing the two Florida-based comic book conventions as part of this study, two things were clear. First, the crowd in attendance was diverse in terms of race and gender. While men and White people remained the clear majorities, there were still strong presences of women and people of color among fans in attendance. Second, the guests, events, and general attractions that conventions used to draw crowds largely centered the White hetero-masculine experience.

The fans in attendance appeared to be representative of the surrounding city's diverse general population. Both conventions are in large metropolitan cities in Florida with prominent African American, Latinx, and Asian communities. Without exact quantitative estimations, fans in attendance presumably were of proportional gender, race, and age. However, if one were to observe the fans in attendance alone, it would be clear that these comic book conventions were indeed "diverse" and "inclusive."

My conversations with fans at the conventions suggested that some of their positive experiences were directly related to conventions' efforts for inclusivity. When I spoke with fans who were women and/or people of color at the conventions they often had something positive to say about their experience. It was clear that they were genuinely enjoying themselves. Many of the fans I spoke to said that the inclusivity of conventions was a factor in their enjoyable experiences. Two White women, for instance, told me that they appreciated one convention's efforts to dissuade harassment with signs that read "Cosplay is not Consent." One African American man told me that he was excited to see the representation of Black Panther, the Marvel superhero, around the convention spaces, although he expected to see more (this convention took place after Marvel announced the plans for the first Black Panther film). Another fan expressed excitement over an "LGBTQ speed dating" event at the convention. These conventions undoubtedly made strides to include often neglected populations of fans. Based on my encounters with fans at the conventions, the efforts to make convention spaces inclusive seemed to be paying off—fans with minority status were attending and enjoying themselves. There is no discounting the real positive experiences that come from striving to embrace marginalized communities. The conventions were making positive changes that made people feel welcome. Nonetheless, other issues remained.

Two of the most common kinds of booths I saw at the conventions were comic book vendor and artist booths. Comic book vendors sold comic book issues, trade paperbacks, toys, and other memorabilia related to popular characters. Artist booths sold artwork of mostly well-known characters. Artists mostly sold previously created artwork, but some also offered commissions of characters upon request. Almost all the comic book vendors were White men while artists were more varied, yet still disproportionately White and male.

Sifting through boxes of single comic book issues and shelves of collected trades at the vendor booths, I noticed a clear pattern. Most of the books for sale were of White, male superheroes such as Batman or Superman. Although this was unsurprising, it was also at a time of popularity for new comics, TV shows, and films that showcased superheroes of color such as Kamala Khan, a new Muslim-American character in the Marvel universe, a new Netflix produced Luke Cage television show, and a newly announced Black Panther movie. I saw many fans dressed up in Black Panther costumes at both conventions and overheard a lot of excitement about the upcoming film from fans and vendors. Yet, there was minimal to no signage or display of Black Panther at either convention. I recall finding one box of comic books at one convention that was marked "Black Superheroes" which consisted almost entirely of Black Panther and Luke Cage comics. This box sat on a bottom shelf away from the main display of the comic book vendor's booth which exhibited large posters of Superman and Spiderman. When I asked vendors if they had any Black Panther comics, they typically told me that I would have to dig through their selection and see what I could find, which ended up being very little. Similarly, at the artist booths, artwork for sale most often consisted of White male superheroes. It was only among women and artists of color where I observed considerably more offerings of non-White characters.

The comics for sale, poster displays, and artwork also mirrored the guest celebrities in attendance who were mostly White and cisgender men. For example, in the official program of one of the conventions, twenty-four out of thirty-six celebrities pictured were White men. In this program, only eight women celebrity guests were pictured, three of them being women of color. Women, particularly women of color, made up a small number of guest creators. Guest comic book creators at both conventions were overwhelmingly White men. As paid guests, including celebrities and creators, women were found most frequently in the "cosplay alleys," a place where fans can meet and take pictures with celebrity cosplayers. Almost all the celebrity cosplayers at each convention were young White women. There were only two men celebrity cosplayers, one at each convention observed, both of whom were presumably White Americans.

My observations suggest that comic book conventions contribute to the marginalization that women and people of color experience, such as limited representation among celebrity guests, characters displayed around convention spaces, and items sold among booths. While most White participants in the study praised conventions for being inclusive, the attempts I observed at the conventions to represent its racially and gender diverse attendees were minimal aside from "Cosplay is not Consent" signage, some representation of Black Panther, and an LGBTQ dating event. Inclusivity was often praised in my conversations with fans and my interviews with cosplayers, but traditionally marginalized groups remained underrepresented by the content at these conventions. Even though women and people of color were well in attendance at these conventions, regular attendees were also marginalized in the sense of the quality of experience. Marginalization is not solely determined by physical presence. Who is and is not in attendance is important. However, emotions, imaginations, and experiences can also be marginalized.

Although some argue that comic book conventions are more "family and female-friendly" now than they were at their conception (Lopes 2006), my observations suggest that these pop-cultural spaces remain primarily focused on a White hetero-masculine experience. Paid celebrity guests, promotional images, signage, and items for sale around the convention overrepresented White masculine bodies and hypersexualized women's bodies. Comic book conventions may be diverse on the surface, but the patriarchal and racialized structures that privilege White male bodies remained largely intact.

The next section examines how White participants employed colorblind and diversity ideologies to downplay racism in cosplay. More specifically, White participants foreground fun to prioritize their enjoyment and dissolve a discussion of race.

*Fun for Whom: Diversity Ideology, Colorblindness, and Foregrounding Fun among Cosplayers*

One of the most reoccurring themes among all the participants was the idea that cosplay was all about having fun. When talking about cosplaying at conventions, Terry said, "You're there to have fun… I'm not there to work." Repeating the idea multiple times throughout the interview, Johnathan said, "I can't stress enough how much this is supposed to be for fun." To explain what made cosplay and conventions so enjoyable, participants would refer to notions of inclusiveness and acceptance. For example, when asked if he had anything else to add at the end of

his interview, James said, "I really want to reiterate about the inclusivity. It's just a huge family. Even if there are disagreements here and there, it doesn't change the fact that it's a safe space where anybody can go with an interest in anything." Laura said, "I'm just happy that the con is a nice place for everyone where we accept everyone." Participants repeatedly described cosplay and comic book conventions as safe spaces that embrace inclusivity, however, the discourses that many of the White participants shared acknowledged—yet ultimately dismissed—the social conditions that structure the experiences of cosplayers who are of color.

When I brought up the topic of race in cosplay, Jake, a White man in his fifties with many years of cosplay experience, offered his only comment on the subject:

> Now the other thing for different races or anything like that, I don't pay any attention to that. I mean I see other people do it. I've never really focused or actually took notice so much of it because I don't take notice of other races or so forth. I mean to me everybody is all about what they are inside. So if I see a guy that's dressed as Superman and he's a different race, well Superman was an alien to begin with so what difference does it make? I mean you're comic book characters… and plus most of the comics are changing a lot of the characters. There's a new Spiderman, I think his name is Miles Morales, who is a different race than Peter Parker was. So it really doesn't matter. Bottom line, if you're having fun, you're having fun.

Jake seemed frustrated about having to talk about race as if to suggest that it is a topic that is better off ignored. It was clear to me by his suddenly stern facial expressions in what was an otherwise lighthearted conversation about one of his passions, that Jake had no interest in discussing race at length. While not completely avoiding the subject, Jake quickly offers a brief response so that the conversation remains focused on other subjects. In his only comment on race, Jake utilizes a commonly used technique in colorblind discourse in which he claims he does not "take notice" of race. Jake defends people of color who cosplay as traditionally White characters such as Superman or Spiderman, stating that the opposing argument is futile because black characters have donned the superheroes' mantles in the comic books. Jake concludes with what was a reoccurring idea in his interview: "cosplay is about having fun." While Jake's intentions are positive—he wants everyone to have fun with cosplay and defends cosplayers of color who race-bend—he invokes colorblindness as a strategy to

address race and racism. In other words, Jake's statements, while intended to be positive, are still "baptized in the waters" of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017:237).

Unlike Jake, Terry spoke on race extensively, sometimes without any probing. Terry is a middle-aged, middle-class, White man who is by far the most experienced cosplayer of the sample having spent twenty-two years cosplaying. One of the first things Terry mentions about race is how he acknowledges the unearned privileges he gains as a White man. Terry explains:

> I understand that race is a huge worldwide, historical issue… I do believe in White privilege. It's a thing. Do I do my best to be the best person I can be and help out my fellow brothers and sisters no matter their color? Yes. Absolutely. Do I get cut a lot of slack in society just because I happen to be male, Caucasian and middle-aged? Yes. Yeah. Absolutely. It sucks. It's not my fault. I can't help it. But it exists. And I disagree with anybody who thinks there's no such thing as White privilege.

While aware of his White privilege, Terry also argues that it is not his fault; he "can't help it." He denies his role in potentially reinforcing or challenging racial privilege. Terry goes on to say that aside from being more prejudiced in his youth, he fully embraces people of color who want to cosplay as characters who are traditionally White:

> If you are a (short pause) Hispanic Male and you want to dress up as Nightwing, great, whatever. Awesome. Now I will say this, and I'll be completely honest about this. When I was younger I would say that, but behind closed doors I thought "oh god that guy does not look great. Nope, not the best Nigthwing I've ever seen."… So nowadays I truly believe that. I will say… that if you are a 5ft 5in Hispanic female that wants to do Nightwing and you're 195 lbs. Great! Do it. I really truly, fully support that.

Terry illustrates the "diversity as acceptance" tenant of diversity ideology in which the mere presence of non-White people equates to equal inclusion (Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017). Cosplayers who identify as White may focus the conversation concerning racial inclusion on individual intent and acceptance, often overlooking how intent and personal feelings of acceptance do little to challenge structural disadvantages. Terry, for example, recognizes his privilege and expresses tolerance for non-White folks who cosplay as traditionally White characters. Yet later in the interview, Terry describes the structures that keep racial power dynamics in place as natural. Terry resorts to the colorblind frame of naturalization (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017) by arguing that resentment over phenotypical differences extends back to the beginning of humanity: "I'm convinced that there were cavemen that were like, 'nope your hair is dark brown, and my hair is light brown. You get into your own cave. I want nothing to do with you.'" Terry simultaneously expresses progressive views on race (acknowledging his privilege) while positing that resentment based on perceived "racial" differences is natural to humans. Terry's comments establish how White social actors may shift back and forth between colorblind and diversity ideologies (Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017). In addition, Terry demonstrates how racially progressive Whites may employ racial ideologies that remain focused on individual rather than systemic change (Beeman 2015; Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017).

Melissa, a middle-aged White woman with five years of cosplay experience, expressed reluctance to discuss race explicitly. At one point in her interview, Melissa begins to mention race but then quickly redirects her point, "Remember cos-play has the word "play" in it. So it should be fun. I like to see different colored people playing different colored—I wanted to paint myself green and, you know, be a Romulan or an Orion slave girl. I'm like, 'it doesn't matter.' It's a character. It's all fantasy. So I think it's great." Although starting to speak specifically about race at first, Melissa seems to feel uncomfortable with her phrasing (using the words "colored people") and transitions into a conversation of color more generally, one that includes aliens of varying colors. While not completely avoiding the topic of race, Melissa seems to want to dilute the conversation by equating cosplaying as a human of color to cosplaying as an alien. Melissa asserts that "it's all fantasy," perhaps to suggest that cosplay should be exempt from sociohistorical contexts. By dismissing the significance of people of color having to experience White cosplayers performing in blackface and placing focus on a cosplayer's individual intent to have fun, Melissa is foregrounding fun and reinforcing a racialized social system in the process.

James is a college student in his early twenties with six years of experience in cosplay. James argues that there should be no restrictions to how one can cosplay because it might impact their enjoyment of cosplay. However, when discussing race, James seems

particularly concerned with the enjoyment of White cosplayers. He said:

> Race. My opinion on that, my perspective, not opinion, is that—cosplay whoever you want to, you know. If you feel more comfortable applying makeup to better represent the character, do so. A good example of that is someone who made—I don't know who she is, I just saw it all over the internet—who darkened her skin tone to a darker ethnicity to play a character who had that ethnicity. And people just tore her apart for it. And you have to sit there and go, but if she didn't, she'd be torn apart for Whitewashing a character. You see what I'm saying? I just think that those tensions that we're dealing with right now bleed into that and I think that it's unfair. Because we shouldn't have to worry about "the rules." You know, we're just having a good time.

When I asked him to explain further, James said, "I'm not saying people shouldn't be aware and pay attention to those tensions but they're unnecessary in this moment unless something is legitimately problematic." Like how Melissa suggests that cosplay should be detached from sociohistorical contexts such as the legacy of racism in the U.S., James maintains that talking about these "tensions" are "unnecessary" in cosplay. In the case of Melissa and James, they seek to defend cosplayers' right to cosplay any character. They believe that cosplayers' ability to have fun should not be limited by "rules." Even though some White participants referred to the rules of cosplay in a general sense, the one rule participants like Melissa and James were particularly preoccupied with was the restriction of White cosplayers to cosplay as a character that is originally of color. According to these participants, this rule restricted (White) cosplayers' potential for fun. However, Melissa and James do not seem to consider how people of color are impacted by White cosplayers who perform in brown or blackface. James' framing of "tensions" and "rules" as "unfair" resembles the diversity as liability tenant which describes how Whites resort to notions of fairness to protect Whiteness (Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017). Like most of the other White participants, James' use of foregrounding fun prioritizes the White experience over the experiences of people of color. His defense of a White person wearing makeup to darker their skin to resemble a character of color as not "legitimately problematic" works to prioritize White cosplayers' intentions and dismiss the ramifications of blackface. Thus, in addition to relying on notions of fairness (diversity as liability), White cosplayers readily relied on notions of intent (diversity of intent) to explain White cosplayers' racist actions.

Johnathan is a White man in his early thirties. While only having three years of experience in cosplay, Joshua is revered in his cosplay community for his high-quality costumes, makeup, and acting performances. Much like Melissa and James, but more explicitly so, Johnathan prioritizes the experience of White cosplayers over the highly problematic implications of blackface. The following excerpt suggests that Johnathan doesn't mind performing what could be considered blackface to accurately portray a character. He says:

> There's like a lot of African American or Indian or people of color characters that are out there that people have cosplayed. If they're not of that descent or they're Caucasian, or they're just White, and they've darkened their skin to look like that character. And there's been a lot of—basically black people are calling it blackface. And while coming from a historical perspective, I understand. I'm in the minority where I don't view it as that at all, because if I was to cosplay a character that was of a different ethnic origin than myself I would want to do that exact same thing because I would want that accuracy. And it's not about mocking or being disrespectful, it's about being true to the character.

Like Terry, Johnathan's comments operate within colorblind and diversity ideology frames. Johnathan uses the "past is the past" discursive strategy (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017) to argue that blackface is historically relevant but inconsequential to today's racial structure, or at least in the context of cosplay. In the same breath, Johnathan suggests he is more concerned with creating an accurate cosplay than offending people of color. Johnathan's comments are another example of the diversity as intent tenant (Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017), placing priority on the individual's intent over the outcome. In resemblance to Melissa's example of alien cosplays, Johnathan continues:

> People use the example like aliens. Alien characters you paint your body a different color. And they're like, well that's not a real person. I'm like, I understand but you have to look at it through that lens that even though, yes, being African American is a real thing, if I'm going to portray an African American character, I'm going to want to darken my

skin to look African American otherwise what is the... no one is going to know who I am.

Like Melissa and James, Johnathan foregrounds his positive intentions to excuse any possible adverse social outcomes. Johnathan suggests that despite understanding the "historical perspective" of blackface, he views this contemporary form differently since it intends to " be true to the character" rather than mock. Johnathan's defense of blackface is not dissimilar to the colorblind discourses used in parts of Latin America where blackface is reduced to harmless entertainment that seeks to pay respect to, not insult, black people (Rivero 2005). In both cases, however, White fans' entertainment is given priority, while the power implications of blackface are hidden. Combining elements of colorblind and diversity ideologies, the logic of foregrounding fun places interests in having fun (being celebrated for an "authentic" cosplay) in the forefront while minimizing racism.

By foregrounding fun, Melissa, James, and Johnathan frame blackface as a normal, innocuous component of cosplay, rather than a racialized act. White participants argue that since cosplayers intend to have fun, any disagreement is unjustified. Despite any prioritization of individual intent, however, blackface (and its variants used against other non-White groups) is a historically significant tool of racism used to maintain White supremacy and subjugate people of color (Lott 1993; Roediger 1999; Rivero 2005; Pérez 2016) and persists in various forms today (Nowatzki 2007; Bucholtz and Lopez 2011; Tharoor 2016).

Operating within the confines of colorblind and diversity ideologies, White participants often defaulted on their good intentions to "have fun" with cosplay. Even though actions such as blackface in cosplay may offend other fans, particularly fans of color, White cosplayers may take value in "staying true to the character" so that they do not compromise their chances of enjoying themselves at conventions. While the White participants of this study saw "rules" as threats to their and others' ability to have fun, they did not recognize how they were prioritizing the enjoyment of White cosplayers over the pleasure of cosplayers of color. Smith and Mayorga-Gallo argue that "diversity ideology is rooted in a rationale that focuses on its benefits to Whites rather than one grounded in power-sharing or equity" (2017:899). While White participants consider cosplay communities to be racially inclusive, the discourses they utilized implicitly reinforce standards that marginalize people of color. Similar to the ways Whites may defend racist humor (Burdsey 2011; Pérez 2013), the dismissal of blackface in cosplay as fun,

fantasy, or authenticity is a discursive practice that erases the historical and structural workings of racism. Foregrounding fun keeps Whiteness as the "star of the show" while marginalizing people of color. White participants were adamant about how fun and inclusive cosplay and comic book conventions are. However, their commonly expressed discourses rooted in frames of colorblind and diversity racial ideologies contradict their values of racial inclusion and equality. Jake's unnoticing of race, Terry's naturalized view of race, Melissa's avoidance of race, and Johnathan's "past is the past" rhetoric stem from abstract liberalism, naturalization, and particularly the minimization of racism frame of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017). When "in view" of race, White participants embraced the diversity as acceptance, liability, and intent tenets of diversity ideology (Mayorga-Gallo 2019) through their discourse. Therefore, the foregrounding fun discursive strategy, immersed in colorblind and diversity ideologies, prioritizes the experiences of Whites, reinforces White dominance, and obscures the image of the racial structure.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the examination of convention spaces and interviews with cosplayers, I find that Whiteness was maintained within these cosplay communities and comic book conventions via implicit discourses and practices. Comic book conventions often promote fun, inclusive, and diverse spaces but reproduce race and gender inequality by privileging White and/or male bodies.

White participants used different strategies to discuss race, most of which aligned with frames of colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017) and tenets of diversity ideology (Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017). For instance, White participants like Jake and Melissa were reluctant to talk about race when the topic was brought up. Instead, these participants would offer quick, brief responses about race then quickly redirect the conversation about something else. Bonilla-Silva refers to this trend as avoidance of race talk ([2003] 2017). When engaging with race, White respondents focused on what they perceived to be unfair treatment towards White cosplayers, a phenomenon described by Smith and Mayorga-Gallo's concept of acceptance as liability (2017). Overall, White participants shared a foregrounding fun discursive strategy, shifting between colorblindness and race consciousness to emphasize their intentions, prioritize the experience of Whites, and deny the presence of racism.

White cosplayers perpetuate marginalization by utilizing colorblind and color-conscious discourses interchangeably. White participants often stated that everyone should have fun in cosplay but centered the experiences of White cosplayers by highlighting their positive intentions and dismissing concerns of people of color. Even when aware of the historical and structural realities of racism, participants such as James, Terry, and Johnathan defaulted back to color-blind frames, suggesting a "willful colorblindness" (Mueller 2017). Juggling colorblind and diversity ideologies, White participants employed a foregrounding fun discursive strategy that put their intentions in the forefront and racism out of sight. The ability of White participants to utilize multiple racial ideologies—colorblind and diversity ideologies—within their racial discourse supports arguments that racial ideologies can be adaptive, flexible, fluid, and interchangeable (Doane 2017; Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017).

Participants generally deployed egalitarian discourses to argue that all cosplayers deserve the same opportunities. For some White participants, the idea of equal opportunity extended to White cosplayers who are interested in darkening their skin to resemble characters of color. By promoting the right of White cosplayers to cosplay as characters of color, White participants reproduce power structures imposed on people of color. White participants' discourses generally suggested that issues involving race will dissolve as long as good intentions are maintained. When hegemony based on social stratification goes unaddressed, however, it is often reinforced rather than phased out (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017). The use of dominant racial ideologies among the study participants reinforces a racialized social system that benefits Whites and marginalizes people of color.

While generalizability is not the goal with this project, it remains crucial to detail the limitations of my research to clarify what my arguments can and cannot conclude and highlight the potential for future research to build on my explanations of the social phenomenon observed. First, the data is region-specific. The respondents and conventions studied were all Florida-based. Conventions and respondents from other regions of the United States would undoubtedly offer at least somewhat different experiences and responses. However, I argue that responses from different areas of the United States would still fall mostly within the parameters of the ideologies described in this study. The vast empirical research on racism and racial ideologies supports this claim (Bell and Hartmann 2007; Burke 2012; Berrey 2015; Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017; Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017). Furthermore, much larger or smaller

conventions may produce different dynamics between fans. For instance, larger and more established conventions such as San Diego Comic-Con or New York Comic-Con may have more resources and experiences with handling discrimination in fan spaces. Therefore, the conventions that are chosen for observation impact results. Similarly, the respondents who volunteered to participate have significant implications for the findings. Although snowball sampling was necessary for me to gain respondents for my study, it did not allow me to gain access to respondents outside of certain networks.

Although this study could benefit from a greater number of respondents, a critical analysis of discourse allowed me to "go deep" into the set of beliefs commonly used among the participants. The findings produced from the sample can serve as insight into some of the marginalized experiences of women and people of color as well as racial ideologies within popular cultural spaces. Further investigation is needed, however, to fully capture how systems of oppression and their ideologies operate in popular culture. Future studies can examine how race, gender, class, and other social categories act as intertwined facets of identity that inform and construct one another (Collins 2002). Future research can extend the current findings by exploring how people, informed by racial ideologies, foreground fun to disguise and reproduce power structures simultaneously. I expect the most relevant examinations of foregrounding fun will take place in studies of colorblind and diversity ideology, particularly within work on popular culture, entertainment, and racist humor (Burdsey 2011; Pérez 2013; Pérez 2017).

The study participants were pleasant and kind, many of whom regularly organized and participated in charitable events. From what I could tell they did not hold any malice towards other groups of people based on any social categories. Nevertheless, White supremacy and other oppression systems are not merely upheld by explicit individual resentments, but by implicit discourses, ideologies, and institutions that structure social life. In line with previous research (Embrick 2011; Mayorga-Gallo 2014; Berrey 2015; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017; Pérez 2017; Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017), the current study illustrates that despite the participants' positive intentions, dominant ideologies manifested through commonly shared discourse and practices covertly maintain systems benefitting Whites. Foregrounding fun is a discursive strategy rooted in colorblind and diversity ideologies, and—knowingly or not—costumes as positive intentions while masking the structures of White dominance.

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