From Virtual to Reality: Physical Discipline, Aesthetic Capitalism and Female Subjectivity in Cosplay Community

Chuqi Yan

Guangzhou Foreign Language school, Guangzhou, China
*Corresponding author:
3118329480@qq.com

Abstract:

This study is based on the Cosplay subcultural community, focusing on body image anxiety and aesthetic discipline among its members, particularly women. Situated within the frameworks of aesthetic capitalism and bodily discipline, the current study explores the phenomenon from an interdisciplinary way and argues that the female body becomes a site of commercial exploitation and normative control. The mechanism behind is discussed from a dual pressure system: internally, via the pursuit of an unattainable "slender yet curvaceous" anime character ideal, and externally, through homogenizing social media algorithms and an industry promoting smaller-sized costumes and cosmetic consumption. Outside of that, the fast-changing fashion industry, women's focus on "self-care," and social media— a main way Cosplay is spread that makes how bodies are shown more uniform and boosts anxiety—also matter. The findings reveal a cyclical process where the pursuit of authenticity fuels anxiety, which in turn is monetized by capital, thereby disciplining participants' bodies and shaping their subjectivity. This study concludes by critically examining this phenomenon, highlighting the tension between creative expression and commercial coercion, and prompting reflection on its implications for individual well-being and group identity within digital visual cultures.

Keywords: Female; cosplay community; media; aesthetic concept.

1. Introduction

Societal aesthetic norms underpin the prevailing standard that equates thinness with beauty. In the era of rapidly evolving internet and video streaming media, people increasingly rely on visual means to perceive the world, making the female body and its image a focal point within visual culture. On streaming platforms, a preference for pale skin, youthfulness, and slenderness is widely promoted, subtly shaping the

self-perception and bodily attitudes of women in China. To conform to this aesthetic ideal, some women adopt practices such as restrictive dieting, rigorous sun protection, accentuating under-eye features during makeup application, and wearing large-diameter colored contact lenses to cultivate a youthful appearance. This aesthetic is particularly pervasive across East Asia and is notably reflected in the portrayal of female characters in Japanese animation, exemplified by lolita-style figures such as Aisaka Taiga from Toradora! and Kasugano Sora from Yosuga no Sora. International studies have indicated a correlation between women's appearance anxiety and social media usage: prolonged exposure to images and videos of idealized women on these platforms is associated with higher levels of appearance-related anxiety. From the perspective of social comparison theory, individuals often engage in upward comparisons between their own bodies and the idealized representations prevalent on social media, which can lead to negative body image, diminished self-worth, and emotional distress. Such comparisons tend to amplify perceived flaws and trigger emotional fluctuations. This phenomenon is especially observable among cosplayers. In light of this, this study focuses on the cosplay subcultural community, with a specific emphasis on female participants as the core research subjects, to delve into the prevalent issues of body image anxiety and aesthetic discipline within this group.

Integrating multidisciplinary theoretical perspectives from sociology, cultural studies, psychology, and media studies, this research will systematically analyze the interactive relationships among body image, anxiety, and commercial forces. It aims to uncover how power, embedded in commercial interests, media, and subcultural norms, shapes bodily practices through aesthetic norms. Ultimately, this study seeks to provoke deeper reflection on how such aesthetic discipline influences collective identity and individual well-being, thereby offering a new analytical dimension for understanding female body issues within subcultural contexts.

2. "Imperfect" Body Image

2.1 Body Discipline

Under capitalist modes of production, a closed aesthetic system emerges that institutionalizes virtualized bodily ideals as normative standards. This system operates through several distinct yet interconnected mechanisms. First, the apparel industry reinforces bodily eligibility through the gradual reduction of standardized clothing sizes—for instance, establishing XS as a baseline requirement, thereby excluding non-conforming bodies. Second,

beauty conglomerates commodify aesthetic transformation by promoting character-based makeup tutorials that facilitate the reproduction of idealized virtual appearances. Finally, social media algorithms monetize bodily compliance by treating conforming bodies as measurable engagement metrics. Within this structure, participants are subjected to continuous commercial surveillance: each reduction in waist measurement and each precise match of wig color becomes a quantifiable indicator of legitimacy within cosplay and broader aesthetic economies. When the value of the body is reduced to adherence to digitally constructed benchmarks, the physical body is alienated as mere raw material. Consequently, anxiety becomes concentrated around the body, as the least standardizable, yet most scrutinized, instrument within this system.

2.2 Aesthetic Capitalism

The term beauty economy can be used to explain the behavior of commercializing and standardizing the body (especially a specific form of the body) and regarding it as the primary means to gain recognition and value. In the coser community, the beauty economy takes role restoration as the evaluation criterion. When the degree of restoration is directly related to the evaluation of the work, the recognition in the community, and even the ranking in competitions, participants will strongly feel the gap between their own bodies and this standard, generating huge pressure on their figures and anxiety about not meeting the standards. On the other hand, driven by restoration and consumerism, the beauty economy will prompt cosers to constantly purchase various cosmetics. To restore the original appearance of the character, cosers also have to spend a lot of money on customizing wigs, some cosers even go to plastic surgery for cosplay. Finally, for visual effects, cosers will also hire photographers, build photo studios, and hire professionals for post-production. In this way, on the one hand, the high cost itself constitutes pressure; on the other hand, these solutions provide hope while reinforcing the message that your body needs to be modified to meet the standards. The popularization of post-production has created a false reality of everyone is perfect, raising the threshold for a qualified body in reality and intensifying anxiety about the original body.

2.3 Female Subjectivity

Female aesthetic practices are systematically shaped: In recent years, research on women's bodies has mainly been conducted from the following perspectives. First, many scholars have examined women's physical forms through a sociological lens. For instance, both the foot-binding practice among women in ancient China and the use of

high heels in modern times can be seen as manifestations of male oppression toward women; notably, such discipline and oppression have been internalized and accepted by women themselves, which in turn further reinforces the social construction of women's bodies [1]. Same, Anime, which first constructs idealized female forms as perfected objects, are then promoted through cosplay culture into material reality. When women engage in waist cinching, restrictive eating, or photo editing—erasing pores and imperfections to emulate virtual flawlessness—they internalize commercially driven bodily standards. In this process, the female body is instrumental as a display object, a material for production, and a consumable signifier. The persistent sense of inadequacy—of failing to resemble the ideal—fuels continued consumption, from lace wigs to hip implants. Each pang of "not being enough" is thereby converted into profit for the beauty industry. Although consumption is often framed as a means of reclaiming bodily autonomy, it ultimately reinforces women's deeper integration into capitalism's aesthetic production system, and it is entirely possible for them to realize that the material world they are involved in ultimately determines the meaning of the body rhetoric [2].

3. The Mechanism of Cosplay Industry

3.1 Inner Stress: The Unrealistic Figure of Characters

Anime characters are intrinsically hyper-idealized and exist as constructs that defy material realization such as anatomically improbable proportions, digitally perfected skin devoid of texture, and exaggerated physical features. These elements combine into bodily ideals that are unattainable in reality. Yet, the central aim of cosplay remains the physical embodiment of such fictional characters. In cosplay activities, the aestheticism of vision is the main content pursued, that is, emphasizing the aesthetic value of external images, thus making the image greater than the meaning it contains and becoming an independent aesthetic or consumption object. Actually, to a large extent, cosers' love for cosplay activities also stems from their recognition of visual culture, and further, from their interest in shaping their own external images[3]. When the human body serves as a medium for translating two-dimensional fantasies into three-dimensional form, fundamental biological limitations become sources of persistent self-rejection. Efforts to mimic these ideals—through severe calorie restriction, prosthetic applications, or extensive photo-editing—continuously highlight the irreconcilable gap between malleable flesh and immutable anatomical structures. It is this inherent tension between the virtual and the corporeal that constitutes a foundational cause of body anxiety within cosplay culture. Furthermore, the pervasive depiction of female anime characters as both slender and curvaceous reinforces narrow aesthetic standards, intensifying the pursuit of authenticity among cosplayers and generating internalized pressure to conform. This pressure is systematized through community and competitive frameworks that quantify "accuracy" in role portrayal. When evaluation, social recognition, and contest rankings are explicitly tied to perceived fidelity to animated models, participants become acutely aware of the discrepancy between their own bodies and the ideal. This institutionalized measurement and ranking turn the pursuit of resemblance into a source of normative anxiety and bodily dissatisfaction.

3.2 Outer Stress

3.2.1 Small size clothes

Apparel industries enforce eligibility through diminished sizing (e.g., XS as baseline requirement); the phenomenon is under the multiple influences of the fashion industry's rapid turnover. The phenomenon of "women's clothing shrinkage" refers to the actual ruler of clothes made of standard sizes. In the case of gradually getting smaller, for example, the clothes marked as "M" size are actually smaller than the "M" in the standard size. This issue has gradually become the focus of heated discussion in society. Originally, small size women's clothing should have been designed for small consumers, but now "small size" is not only a special version, but has evolved into a popular trend, occupying a significant share of the women's clothing market [4].

3.2.2 Social media algorithm: retouching culture and homogeneous aesthetics

Retouching culture and homogeneous aesthetics is under the multiple influences of the pervasive penetration of social media. As the primary medium for contemporary cosplay culture dissemination, social media platforms exacerbate the homogenization of bodily representation, triggering and amplifying body anxiety. On streaming media, the uniformly favored aesthetic is pale, young, and thin, which imperceptibly influences Chinese women. The popularization of post-production has created a false reality of everyone is perfect, raising the threshold for a qualified body in reality and intensifying anxiety about the original body. Overseas related studies show that there is a correlation between women's appearance anxiety and social media use. Women who use social media for a long time to watch pictures or videos of beautiful women are more likely to develop appearance anxiety, and the degree

of anxiety is higher. From the perspective of social comparison theory, this is because viewers compare their own bodies with the ideal body images displayed on social media, thereby generating negative body images and triggering feelings of inferiority and anxiety. In the process of using social media, women compare their own bodies with the beautiful body images in them, which amplifies the "flaws" in their appearance and then causes emotional fluctuations [5].

4. The Operational Logic of Aesthetic Capitalism

4.1 Commercialization of cosmetics, medical beauty and photography services

As of 2023, the scale of domestic beauty products in China was 401.8 billion yuan [5], which has increased compared to previous years and is still growing. the scale of secondary dimension derivatives and peripheral products in China exceeded 20 billion yuan in 2022, among which cosplay costumes and props are important components.[6] driven by restoration and consumerism, the beauty economy will prompt cosers to constantly purchase various cosmetics, such as different colors of foundation and different types of eyeshadow (pearl, matte, etc.). To restore the original appearance of the character, cosers also have to spend a lot of money on customizing wigs, costumes, weapon props, etc. Some cosers even go to plastic surgery for cosplay. Finally, for visual effects, cosers will also hire photographers to take pictures, build photo studios for certain scenes, and hire professionals for post-production.

4.2 Platform Economy: Traffic Incentives for Perfect Body Content

Social algorithms monetize compliant bodies as engagement currency. As the primary medium for contemporary cosplay culture dissemination, social media platforms exacerbate the homogenization of bodily representation.

4.3 Anxiety transformed profit

Participants will strongly feel the gap between their own bodies and this standard, generating huge pressure on their figures and anxiety about not meeting the standards. On the other hand, driven by restoration and consumerism, the beauty economy will prompt cosers to constantly purchase various cosmetics, spend a lot of money on customizing wigs, or even go to plastic surgery for cosplay and build photo studios and hire professionals for post-production. Perpetuated anxiety fuels consumption, from lace wigs to hip implants, each inadequate resemblance pang

converts into beauty-industry profit.

5. Resistance and the Possibility of Public

5.1 Individual cognition wakefulness

Women themselves may realize that the white, young and thin aesthetic is a fictitious demand fabricated by capital to create anxiety. The infantilized aesthetic confines women to the role of harmless children, pale skin implies the privilege of a sheltered life, and thinness suggests the abandonment of strength. From a health perspective, among people who are underweight, almost 20% are sub-healthy individuals with metabolic problems, and their risk of cardiovascular disease and death is three times higher than that of metabolically healthy people, even higher than that of metabolically normal overweight people.True body empowerment begins with accepting appropriate fat, embracing one's natural skin color, and facing wrinkles with a calm mind.

5.2 Resistance of excessive photo editing

The bill requires that if internet celebrities accept commercial advertisements, they must clearly mark "This content contains advertisements" in their videos or posts. If they publish videos or photos that have been retouched or filtered, they must label them with "Edited/Retouched" notes. Furthermore, such labels must be placed on the modified content (whether photos or videos) and remain clear, legible, and identifiable throughout the entire viewing period.

6. Conclusion

Cosplay is a quintessential epitome of aesthetic capitalism. Here, capital disciplines the female body by setting character restoration standards, building industrial chains, and leveraging algorithms, confining bodies to standardized aesthetic frameworks.Yet Cosplay also acts as a starting point for resistance. French legislation on image modification, public dialogue, and growing awareness of health risks tied to youthful, slim aesthetics, such as metabolic issues and elevated cardiovascular disease risks in underweight populations, have broken the monopoly of single aesthetics. These factors collectively create possibilities for diverse bodily expressions, allowing Cosplay to shift from a tool of capital discipline to a space for challenging rigid beauty norms and embracing bodily diversity.

[1] Meng Wu. A Study on the Social Construction of Chinese Women's Bodies from the Perspective of Foot-Binding. East

China Normal University. 2009.

[2] Featherstone. Consumer Culture and Postmodernism. Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2006, 19.

[3] Shengzhi Liu.Conflict and integration - cultural and commercial analysis of cosplay activities. China Youth Research, 2006, (03), 16-19.

[4] Mengyu Fang. Discussion on the diversity of women's clothing sizes in the context of social media. West Leather, 2024, 46(10), 145-147.

[5] Yaoyao Wang. Media mirroring and realistic thinking. Shandong Normal University, 2022.

[6] Iresearch,《2023 China's ACG Industry Research Report》, 2023, retrieved from https://www.iresearch.com.cn