COSPLAY, SUPERHEROES AND THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF FASHION

Abstract
In contemporary society, where information and the use of branded fashion content and material has increased enormously, enhanced viewer agency and influence have enabled a variety of forms of operational and participatory connection to media texts. Cosplay is a significant example of this: a widespread phenomenon of costume and role-playing inspired by characters taken from science fiction, manga, and the world of superheroes. Cosplay’s use of superhero equipment highlights the pleasures related to constructing and exhibiting costumes in a culture of individual adaptability, nurtured by fantasies of transformation involving the body. This process is assisted by an increasing ‘democratization’ of fashion, introduced by the globalization of fashion industry and an evolving fashion economy that has flooded the market with reproductions and fakes. The Superman cosplay is an emblematic case study of how ‘the ordinary’ comes into play in the transformative fantasies of costumed conventioneers, a spectacle that meaningfully and increasingly intersects fashion photography. The article draws on the concept of the costume as a brand, analysing its shape, colour, and symbolism to explain the consumers’ need to self-position in the context of the tremendous expansion of fashion’s global middle-market.

Keywords
Cosplay; superheroes; Superman-costume; fashion’s marketing; fashion branding.

1. SUPERMAN OFF-SCREEN

In 2014 the American portrait and fashion photographer Andrew Michael Phillips pictured a Superman fan costumed in an accurately crafted Superman outfit, intensely interpreting his favorite character in front of the camera (Fig. 1). Amazed by the costumes worn at thematic conventions but disappointed by the low quality of their photo-portrayals, Phillips started to engage in giving them aesthetic uprightness1. Other photographers have committed to Phillips’ effort. His specific style, sophisticated and glamorous, is bound to a controlled setting. By depriving cosplay from the convention floor and the surrounding environment, Phillips effectively shifts the attention to the costumes’ details and focuses on each cosplayer’s idea. While cosplay has been investigated from the perspective of media studies and in a psychological and sociological perspective, little attention has been paid to the intrinsic qualities of cosplayers’ clothing. A recent turn in cosplay performance concerns fashion photography’s ‘remediation’ of the cosplayer’s spectacle. Phillips’ glamorous showcasing celebrates the intensity of the unknown man,
uncovering a neglected area of fashion studies: not high fashion, and not even countercultures, but ‘the ordinary’.

Superman’s cosplay can be used as a lens through which to explain why in the last two decades a number of translativel movements from the text to the world have been articulated around the act of dressing. The way cosplay has recently evolved intermingles with an epochal revolution in the world of fashion that has affected self-positioning through willful uses of brands and style. Like other super-hero kinds of costuming, Superman’s cosplay is a successful off-screen behavior revealing the effects of a close relationship between ordinary people’s increased interest in fashionable styles of clothing and the fashion industry’s marketing politics of the new millennium. Its fidelity to the original text is typical of classic superhero costuming like Batman or Spiderman. This absence of free re-elaborations – a clear endorsement of a trademark – enacts a negotiation with the notion of ordinariness comparable to todays’ massive use of fashion brands to convey a personal style and make identity statements. The material resources of the super-heroic transformative phantasies are very similar to those sustaining the world of fashion: the costume allows a rebirth from the confines of the ordinary, and so does the fashion item. Two characteristic traits of Superman’s costume, the absence of a mask and the iconic ‘S’, put to the foreground the cosplayer’s ordinariness: his face is always revealed (is he adequate to the model?), and so is his playful empowerment – epitomized by the ‘S’ in his chest, the ultimate logo of superiority.

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2. HOW FASHION ‘DEMOCRATIZED’ CLOTHING’S TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIALS

The parable of cosplay culture in the 2000s is revealing of the changing position of self-transformative performance in the public eye. From an arena of “social outcasts and geek pioneers” cosplay has turned into a celebrated art form. The explosion of super-hero enthusiasts in the last decades, nurtured by big Hollywood productions and the relaunch of Marvel and the DC comic press, conflates into viewers’ enhanced strategies of self-exposure nurtured in the Hollywood milieu of fashion-entertainment.

As has been said, fashion culture is currently dominated by the “dematerialization of practices and items, which tend to be substituted by intangible brands”. Moreover, fashion economy is flooding the global market with reproductions and fakes. For instance, Fast fashion has conquered the global market proposing fashionable clothes at very low prices: a response to the demand for a product that is similar to what can be seen on the catwalks, that in turn has effects on the design of high fashion. To this should be added the so-called Trading Up, which is linked to the concept of new luxury: high quality products sold at premium prices.

The consumption of fashion today acts as a way into the great narrations which, thanks to the system of branding, each individual feels able to enter as a protagonist. We want to be, and believe we are able to be, creators of our own shape. What we offer to the street, to the workplace or to the domestic interior.

The historical roots of these changes are to be seen in a revolution started in the 1990s with the decline of old French maisons, when a deep change in the social perception took place. High fashion descended the pedestal in public opinion when international corporates turned couture into high fashion brands, starting a process of homogenization of the products and a standardization of the experience of fashion. In the new millennium the fashion industry has successfully spread luxury brands on a global scale addressing the middle market: “that broad socioeconomic demographic that includes everyone from teachers and sales executives to high-tech entrepreneurs”. Fashion products have been made more available, physically and symbolically – especially through affordable accessories and disseminated high fashion shops selling a ‘brand experience’. At the same time, the systematic dressing of celebrities has inflated a brand-induced demand for, and expertise on, fashion, always supported by the social media.

The democratization of fashion in the twenty-first century has allowed consumers to enter symbolic spheres that had previously been the domain of social elites, especially the professional-artistic conclaves such as designers and couturiers. Unlike the fashion market in the period between the 1950s and 1990s – when the customer was dictated to and followed along almost blindly – now consumers contribute actively in the discourse on fashion, overcoming the control previously held by traditional fashion media:

The rise of fashion blogs, social networking, online retail and online live streaming of fashion shows has exponentially increased the availability of fashion products and images...
globally, enabling a further multiplication of styles and looks. At the same time, new genres such as fashion film are increasingly blurring the line between fashion and industry, creativity and control.\(^\text{10}\)

3. BRANDING THE SELF THROUGH COSTUMES

Cosplayers’ dressing “is a powerful signifier of identity, purpose and function”\(^{11}\), although more playful and not overtly related to identity politics like drag, for example.\(^\text{12}\) With its rituals of prize-winning costumes, its sartorial expertise and its pleasure in surprising a wide audience, cosplay uncovers a culture of individual adaptability, nurtured by fantasies of transformation involving the body. Cosplay speaks the language of self-help, which reality television and its transmedia extensions have encouraged for decades, promoting a wide range of “techniques of the self”, personal responsibility and play as enactment of meaningful citizenship.\(^\text{13}\) In this context, where even the star has become a member of the fan’s “mastermind-group”\(^\text{14}\), the relationship between consumers and marketers has changed, “no longer viewed in terms of stimulus-response” and instead conceived of as an exchange.\(^\text{15}\) Brands have become ever-present: in the spheres of clothing, health, leisure, and labor, food culture, and urban landscape. The use of brands “allows a process of positioning, or ‘negotiation’ of the self in relation to the shifting demands of everyday life”, especially in a society rewarding personal overt stands to social expectations.\(^\text{16}\)

Increasingly, fashion-literate consumers have experienced the cross fertilizing dynamics between brand use and identity statements.

A number of entangled discourses and practices are involved in the complex process of branding: it entails the marketing and selling of immaterial things – feelings and affects, personalities and values – rather than actual goods. It engages the labor of consumers so that there is not a clear demarcation between marketer and consumer.\(^\text{17}\)

A specific need to re-position oneself also underpins the complexity of interactions between viewers and audiovisuals in what has been defined the ‘post-television’ era, where screens have multiplied and the interaction with contents becomes less and less passive. “Onscreen fashion develops into a semiotic language that audiences and consumers may assimilate and appropriate in order to express and negotiate cultural identities”\(^\text{18}\). Fashion-oriented TV fictional series address viewers with cultural competences in fashion prac-

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tices and triggers the curiosity about style in less aware viewers, orienting their buying inclinations. Non-fictional TV is also deeply involved in the spectacularization of ordinary people’s competence in dressing. This is the case of “fashion factual TV” – playfully showing how common people construct their own attire according to a model.

Intriguingly, in the realm of fashion, where catwalks have ceased to be the sole epicenters of fashion meaning, the public’s interest is being shifted to backstage activities and fashion film, removing the attention from the mere fashion contents and focusing on the process of models’ changing or ordinary professionals’ contribution to constructing the fashion show. The era of global fashion has seen, for example, the birth of new interpretations of shopping. The creative contribution of OMA/AMO Rem Koolhaas for Prada underlines the diversity of shops in an era dominated by the flagship stores that make the streets of all the great metropolises of the world seem the same. Koolhaas introduces, within the experience of the fashion brand, activities other than purchasing. Moreover, the fashion film, which entered the mainstream between 2008 and 2010, is nowadays ubiquitous, and is capable of adapting to the conditions of viewing in the digital age. It can subordinate and even completely abandon the fashion subject and forge “a more authentic experience [...] in tune with an increasingly media-savvy spectator/user who is in control of what to view and how”.

The position of the fashion user thus becomes more active but also more problematic: the new frontiers of the concept of fashion highlight the complexity of the places of fashion experience, the delocalization with respect to the historic fashion capitals, the ramified and hybrid cultural position of the user. This results in a series of ambivalences, also concerning the concepts of authenticity and originality.

Cosplayers increasingly make iconic statements through their costuming, which is thus used as an act of self-branding. This makes contemporary cosplay crucially different from early days’ costuming, and also from 1990s cosplay. Contemporary cosplay, which expresses itself in a moment when material and object-oriented fandom is more prominent than ever, reflects a cult of personal image and a revolution in the means of control of personal appearance heavily influenced by fashion branded objects and style awareness. Cosplay can indeed be included in an array of forms of public self-presentation on multiple platforms of distribution of visibility, competing with official channels of communication such as cinema, television, press distribution and fashion publicity. The apparently unrestricted forms of self-publicity, self-broadcast and life-casting of ordinary individuals through the web and the transformation of fans or consumers into celebrities, experts, professionals or producers are phenomena often involving the fashion world.

4. SUPERMAN: ‘THE ORDINARY’ IS THE DISGUISE

Rooted in the extraordinary visual experience of fantastic characters, cosplayers’ pleasure is bound to the unusual, the incredible, the exorbitant. The superhero’s costume is

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20 Geczy, Karaminas, Fashion’s Double, 111-120.
23 See the analysis of forms of self-branding and self-casting in the contemporary US economy of attention and access in BanetWeiser, Authentic.
both a disguise and a marker of the self. And each particular super-hero character allows the cosplayer to negotiate his/her stance in a particular way, modulating each time this tension between visibility and authenticity, between branding and self.

In Phillips’ portraits, Dany Kelley’s cosplay challenges the boundaries between personality and dress and between the official text and the unofficial production of a Superman’s outfit. Notably, he does so through an accurate seen-on-screen imitation of shapes and colours: sharp reds in the cape, boots, overpants and logo; shiny yellows in the details; a tight electric blue suit, underneath which a muscular body can be observed. He, therefore, reaffirms the canon, drawing as accurately as possible from a now-classical Hollywood source: the Christopher-Reeve-model, which therefore becomes a brand. Brands are vehicles of enhanced visibility, but also involve “the loss of a kind of authenticity”24. Agglomerating the elements of a realistic costume, comparing his body shapes with a Hollywood model and choosing a set of poses and gestures, Kelley embraces the compromises and duplicities of the super-hero binary structure of identity25 (with Superman, identity plays out incessantly within the Superman/Clark Kent dynamic).

Like a number of Superman cosplayers, Danny Kelley thus uses the costume as a brand: an aesthetic object, a signifier – of taste, ambition, and ethics–, and a mark of identification. His outfit is endowed with intense meaning. It occupies the typical fannish interspace between the material and the spiritual26. On the other hand, Kelley’s is a showcased performance. It testifies professional photographers’ growing interest in cosplay’s visual impact and entertaining potential. The studio recreation obliterates the spontaneity of live inventiveness, subduing it to the embellishments of fashion photography, marked especially by the glossy quality of the print and the perfection of the dramatic poses and viewpoints (Fig. 2). A sense of boundary crossing is therefore conveyed. An oscillatory relationship with authenticity places commercial (therefore inauthentic) side by side with noncommercial (therefore authentic) purposes27.

Figure 2 - Photograph by Andrew Michael Phillips (2014)

24 Banet Weiser, Authentic, 12.
25 Kirkpatrick, “Towards new Horizons”.
What are the specific meanings conveyed by Superman cosplay? And how do the dynamics between ordinary and glamour contained in Phillips’ portrayals reverberate a wider phenomenon deeply rooted in contemporary fashion culture? Such culture, Teri Agin maintains, is dominated by pragmatism, which superseded designers’ daring creativity and induced fashion houses to prefer “grabbing trends from the present, from the past, and from the trendy kids on the streets, making it impossible for any designer to claim ownership of a particular style”28.

As Kelley’s example describes, Superman cosplay is, predominantly, a conservative mode of costuming. Superman cosplayers tend to avoid doing recreations like other cosplayers – who allow themselves deliberate infidelities. In most cases they prefer to replicate the classic 1930s model, colouring, cape, and Olympic masculinity, also drawing on the most enduring Hollywood embodiment of the super-hero: Christopher Reeve. Superman cosplay brings about specific classic super-hero moral qualities: stern self-reliance, universal commitment, and a self-sacrificing ability not to reveal his superior identity. In this dynamics between outward commitment and inner self the costume is the one thing that reveals Superman’s true identity (therefore also the cosplayer’s), otherwise masked beneath Clark Kent’s regular clothes.

Superman’s outfit has very clear distinguishing traits. The S on the breast functions as a brand: Superman’s most graphic sign of identification, the S is as a synecdoche of the whole costume and signals the superior value iconically. Secondly, the style codes are majestic, evoking the magic of the circus and its brilliant colours. Thirdly, the face is not masked. These traits are the same, whether the costume used in communitarian events for charity purposes (examples can be found in the last five or six years in England, Canada and USA), or turned into the epicenter of an obsessive bodily self-improvement (that may include plastic surgery: a famous case is in the Philippines), or else expressed by scattered forms of playful self-exposure on social networks: images posted on Pinterest repeatedly show the typical Superman’s strip gesture uncovering a sexy hidden ‘super-self’ (Fig. 3).

Figure 3 - Superman cosplayer (unknown photographer)

In particular, Superman’s costume requires explicit facial self-exposure and suggests a crucial element, excluded from the costume’s overt features: Clark Kent, the ordinary man, who, ultimately, is Superman’s disguise. Superman does not wear a mask. It is instead Kent who bears a mark of camouflage: his heavily framed glasses. If Superman’s S is a sign of extra-ordinariness, Clark Kent’s glasses are indeed a label of Kent’s ordinariness. Phillips’ particular display of Superman’s cosplay uncovers a neglected area of fashion media studies: the ordinary and its magnifications, therefore the street styles and the grassroot trends, the fashion-bloggers and the you-tubers, the television experts and fans. Stirred by his own love of comics, Phillip endows his subject with glamour. The low key photography, the emphasis on the accurate hairstyle, and the mysterious allure of the floating dark red cape endow his anonymous subject with glare. He celebrates the common man through a photographic transformation of his body, assigning to ‘the ordinary’ a magical spectacle. His photos even draw from the film industry’s publicity codes. The dramatic pose – arms lifted, head and hands upwards –, illuminated from above and shot against a neutral gray screen (Fig. 4), reinterprets Warner Brothers’ glowing production pictures of Superman Returns (Bryan Singer, 2006), unmistakably modelled after Christopher Reeve.

Figure 4 - Photograph by Andrew Michael Phillips (2014)

5. CONCLUSIONS

The transformative body is a foundational fantasy of both superhero narratives and fashion creativity. By allowing extreme fantasies of self transformation to play at the level of ordinary life, the twenty-first century has marked a convergence of these realms. Rejecting ordinariness can be seen as one of the fashion industry’s major marketing goals in addressing the global middle market with luxury mirages. Ordinariness therefore a social or an aesthetic category (having an average lifestyle, financial situation, or being excluded by an élite of good taste). It is rather a condition underpinning the consumer’s ephemeral access to privilege, visibility and official discourse: a notion whose ambivalences the consumer is always aware of, and which he embraces willfully, even turning it into play.