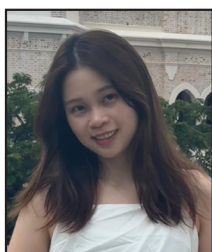




Exploring the meaning of cosplay for adolescents: A narrative approach

by Su Ying



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Abstract

Cosplay has become a popular subculture among teenagers and is prevalent in Hong Kong, yet it is subject to misconceptions and prejudices. The imagined identities formed through cosplay can contribute to the formation of preferred identities. Cosplay can facilitate self-exploration, expression, social connection and the active construction of identity. I employed a narrative approach to explore the meanings of cosplay in young people's lives. In conversations with Julia, a secondary student, we made links between the "imaginary self" she constructed through cosplay and her skills, hopes and intentions in life. Our conversations provided the basis for a series of questions that can be used with other young people who are interested in cosplay. Julia was supported to document her story of using cosplay to support preferred directions in life. This facilitated connection with other young people, who were invited to respond as outsider witnesses. It also allowed Julia to challenge some misunderstandings and stereotypes about cosplayers, fostering new understandings for teachers and others working with young people.

Key words: *cosplay; Hong Kong; subculture; youth; double story; therapeutic documents; outsider witnesses; narrative therapy; narrative practice*

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Cosplay, short for costume play, is a form of performance art in which participants dress as characters from anime, video games, books, movies, manga or other comics. In Hong Kong, cosplay has grown rapidly over the last two decades, becoming a significant part of youth culture (Chen, 2007; Rahman et al., 2012). Many students at the secondary school where I work are passionate about cosplay, finding that it offers fulfilling experiences and a way to relieve academic pressure. However, these students say that their parents, while not actively opposing this hobby, often have significant concerns. Their ambivalence reflects wider misconceptions of cosplay, including an association with “fanaticism” or unhealthy obsession (Abramova et al., 2021; Peirson-Smith, 2012). External observers frequently view cosplay as an extreme form of fandom, suggesting participants are unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. In Chinese cultural contexts, cosplay is often dismissed as childish, a frivolous waste of time (不务正业 *bú wù zhèng yè*), or as socially deviant escapism (宅 *zhái*) (Rahman et al., 2012).

My curiosity was piqued by students facing academic pressure, strained family relationships or emotional distress who reported overwhelmingly positive experiences with cosplay. I was interested in whether they used cosplay to assist them in navigating these difficulties. As a site of creative expression, I wondered if cosplay might provide an opening to conversations about young people’s values, hopes and intentions. One student, Julia, explained that cosplay provided a powerful and positive experience that helped her through moments of loneliness and misunderstanding. By embodying characters she admired, she felt empowered and moved closer to being the person she hoped to become. This suggested that for her, cosplay was not an escape from reality but a way to regain agency.

Cosplay and youth identity

The cosplay subculture originated in the 1970s in Japanese *dōjinshi* (amateur magazine or comic) conventions. During the 1990s, this subculture

became increasingly popular outside of Japan, springing up in other areas of Asia, including Hong Kong, Taiwan (Chen, 2007), mainland China, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia (Rahman et al., 2012). Over the past two decades, cosplay culture in Hong Kong has significantly evolved, emerging as a vibrant and influential youth subculture. Young people in Hong Kong have adopted and adapted cosplay not merely in imitation of Japanese culture but as a means of exploring an “imaginative self” (Rahman et al., 2012). Cosplay offers a powerful medium for young people to explore and express their desires and choices, not only as individuals but as part of a supportive cosplay community in which they feel accepted and understood (Pérez-Torres, 2024; Reysen et al., 2018; Wang, 2010).

I was interested in how the imagined identities formed through cosplay might contribute to the formation of preferred identities.

The following conversations were informed by narrative practices. Narrative therapy seeks to render visible subjugated stories that have been eclipsed by problems, allowing people to re-author their experiences in ways that emphasise their skills, knowledge, preferences and agency (White & Epston, 1990).

Julia’s story: Deconstructing “nobody cares”

Julia initially sought help for depression and suicidal ideation. After immigrating from mainland China to Hong Kong for primary school, Julia had faced significant challenges adapting to the new language and cultural norms. She endured discrimination and ridicule. Her parents often quarrelled. In secondary school, especially after the pandemic, social interactions became overwhelmingly difficult. She ruminated on whether her words and actions were inappropriate, and she didn’t feel accepted by classmates. When Julia began sessions with me, she had been experiencing escalating distress, deteriorating sleep quality and thoughts of suicide.

During our conversations, Julia talked about feeling “not good enough” and said that nobody cared about her. She saw herself as unworthy of love: “I think I’m a very strange person.” Julia’s oft-repeated belief that “nobody cares about me” affected how she saw herself, making it difficult for her to find confidence, happiness or other possibilities. Together, we began to gain awareness and understanding of how certain beliefs had shaped her identity. We tried to deconstruct “nobody cares”, working from the premise that our lives and identities are shaped by the meanings we ascribe to our experiences and by the cultural discourses we absorb (White, 1993). Negative beliefs are often shaped by larger societal ideas about what’s “normal” (White, 2002). In examining these beliefs, we make hidden norms visible and available for questioning (Denborough, 2019). The following questions were used to investigate “nobody cares”:

- When did “nobody cares” first appear, and how did it convince you that it was true?
- How has “nobody cares” influenced your view of yourself?
- What would it be like to be cared for? Does care have to be expressed in words?
- Have there been any times when you’ve felt like you might be cared for?
- You mentioned a time when you felt profoundly sad and uncared for, even having suicidal thoughts. What prevented you from giving up your life then? Do you recall what you cared about, or who cared about you, at that time?

Through these questions, Julia traced her belief in “nobody cares” to when, as a child, she had witnessed arguments between her parents, which made her feel left out or disconnected. She came to realise that her friends’ patience with her temper was a form of caring, even if they didn’t explicitly say so. Recalling a time when she felt intensely abandoned and suicidal, she said she had thought about the characters she cosplayed. The acceptance she felt from these characters and her cosplay experiences made her feel that she could be liked and loved.

Cosplay as an opening to unique outcomes

When working with teenagers struggling with suicidal thoughts, I’ve often observed a common thread: a deep reluctance to leave behind their loved ones, which ultimately dissuades them from acting on these thoughts. However, Julia’s experience introduced a new idea, sparking my curiosity: How might engagement in creative expression encourage a teenager to abandon resist ideation? Could embodying characters through cosplay provide companionship and a path forward?

For Julia, cosplay emerged as a significant unique outcome. In narrative practice, unique outcomes represent moments of divergence from a problem-dominated story (White & Epston, 1990). They can provide crucial entry points to developing preferred narratives, enabling individuals to gain new understandings of their experiences and reclaim their sense of agency (Denborough, 2019; Payne, 2000). Through the collaborative construction of alternative narratives, counsellors can help transform fleeting exceptions into enduring anchors of identity.

Once cosplay was identified as a unique outcome that challenged Julia’s belief that she was unworthy of care, we began exploring her cosplay experiences together. These conversations allowed her to move away from problem-dominated stories and to identify a deeply held value: to “try my best to help others”.

Cosplay as folk culture metaphor

Julia’s comments about the gifts and challenges she encountered in cosplay reminded me of the “fruits” and “storms” explored in Ncazelo Ncube’s (2006) “Tree of Life” practice. Because of its resonance with many of the young people I was meeting with, I thought that cosplay metaphors might provide a way into narrative therapy conversations with others. I developed a set of questions inspired by folk cultural narrative

therapy practices (Denborough, 2018), using cosplay metaphors to identify and clarify skills, values, hopes and relationships that are significant to a young person. From my conversations with Julia across a number of sessions, I extrapolated five sets of questions that could be explored in conversations with other young people.

The first cosplay experience

These questions invite individuals to reconnect with their initial reasons for engaging with cosplay:

- When did you first try cosplay?
- What happened at that time?
- What initially drew you to cosplay, and what keeps you coming back?
- Did a friend introduce you to cosplay? How important is that person to you?

People to invite to Comic-Con

These questions invite reflection on significant others in a young person's life, and on potential witnesses to different facets of their identity. These may include real people, living or no longer living, or characters from their cosplay experiences. These may form part of the young person's association of life, with the potential to support the emergence of preferred identities (White, 2007).

- If you were going to a really important Comic-Con, who would you want to invite?
- You've put so much effort into your costume. Who do you most want to see it?
- Whose acknowledgment means the most to you? Why is their affirmation important to you, and what effects might it have?
- Why are these relationships important to you, and what do they add to your life?
- How do these relationships influence your goals, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams and commitments?
- What do you think it would mean to them to know how important they are to you?

Overcoming cosplay challenges

By recalling difficulties encountered in cosplay and how they were overcome, individuals can reflect on the skills and knowledge they have applied. They can be invited to consider how these might be used in other situations.

- Have you ever faced difficulties in cosplay that made you want to give up?
- How did you respond to those challenges?
- Have you ever used the skills you learnt from overcoming these difficulties in your everyday life?

In our conversations, Julia shared some of the difficulties she encountered in cosplay, how she responded to them, and how these skills had helped her tackle other challenges:

Yes [I have thought about giving up], because [cosplay] requires a lot of effort, time and money. But passion keeps me going. When I recall past experiences at comic conventions and being appreciated by others, it makes me happy and gives me the confidence to continue. Actually, I've learnt a lot from cosplay, like comparing prices and calculating costs, checking different e-platforms to buy affordable and high-quality materials. So now I've developed a habit of comparing prices across different shops to get the best value for money.

Favourite characters

As imaginary roles often play a crucial part in adolescent identity formation, exploring favourite characters can illuminate a person's aspirations and dreams.

- Who's your favourite character to cosplay?
- What do you admire about them?
- Do you aspire to be like this character? Why?
- Do you see parts of yourself in them?
- Has there been a moment when thinking about that character made a difference for you? What happened?

- What hopes do you have for your future when you think of this character, and how do those hopes impact you now?

Julia shared with me the character she cosplayed the most and what attracted her to this role:

The character I've cosplayed the most is Tōru Oikawa, one of the main characters in the Japanese anime *Haikyū!!* He serves as the setter within the [volleyball] team. He is capable and loyal. Even though the opposing teams were stronger and invited him to join them, he refused. He chose to stay with his own team and lead them. He has his own values ... I hope I can also become like him and demonstrate my ability in the school football team.

When I asked Julia if she saw a reflection of herself in Oikawa, she pondered for a moment and replied:

I think we're alike because we both seem tough on the outside but are soft on the inside. He's often sarcastic, and people might see him as arrogant. But deep down, he's very caring. He quietly helps his teammates and encourages his friends without seeking attention ... Even though I often joke around with my friends and my words might sound harsh, they know me well enough to understand it's just my way of talking. When they're in need, I never hesitate to do anything I can to help them.

Julia also described two other characters she loves: Geto Suguru from *Jujutsu Kaisen* (Akutami, 2018–2024) and Shin Ermi from *Frielen: Beyond journey's end* (Yamada, 2020–ongoing). Geto Suguru, one of four top-tier jujutsu sorcerers, strongly believed that “sorcerers must protect non-sorcerers”. Shin Ermi is a celebrated hero and recognised leader of the group that defeated the Demon King. Julia said:

Before he turned to the dark side, Geto Suguru was a sorcerer who dedicated himself to helping the weak. He felt a strong sense of duty and was endlessly patient and protective towards anyone vulnerable.

Shin Ermi is such a narcissist! He always calls himself a handsome man. But he's also very helpful and often volunteers to assist residents with all kinds of tasks.

I noticed that Julia emphasised some common traits in the three characters she described, and I wondered whether this was why Julia was drawn to them.

Sue: I noticed that these three characters seem to share certain qualities. Is that part of why you're attracted to them?

Julia: Definitely. They are all highly capable and try their best to help others. I really admire their skills, but what I admire even more is their willingness to do what they can to support people. While they may seem a bit narcissistic because they like to show off their talents, deep down they have a strong desire to help others.

Sue: How does the idea of trying your best to help others resonate with you? It reminds me of what you mentioned earlier, that even though you feel your relationship with your classmates is somewhat distant and that they don't seem to care much about you, you're still willing to explain how to do homework when they need help. Or back when you were on the soccer team, you helped new junior members learn the basic rules of the game. Does this relate to what you mean by “a strong desire to help others”?

Julia: Yes, exactly. The qualities these characters embody encourage me to keep helping others. If I'm able to help, I will, and when I do, I don't really worry about whether people will appreciate it or not. I feel like, at heart, this is just the choice I want to make.

Through reflecting on these characters, Julia came to recognise “trying one's best to help others” as a treasured value. She also became more focused on her dreams about playing football. She hoped to prove her capabilities through the sport and become an outstanding goalkeeper.

Precious gifts from cosplay

Julia mentioned the small gifts that are sometimes exchanged in cosplay settings. The questions here go beyond physical gifts to invite reflections on kindness, support and other intangible benefits received through cosplay. They can open conversation about the positive changes the “gifts” have brought, and about what sustains continued involvement in cosplay.

- Have you received any gifts from others at comic conventions?
- Were there any special gifts that really stuck with you? Tell me about that experience.
- What do these gifts mean to you?
- How have these gifts made a difference in your life?

Julia shared some heartwarming experiences she'd had at comic conventions:

They are so thoughtful. They prepare little gifts for us. They wrap them themselves, and inside there might be homemade cookies. In the summer, some even give us towels [for wiping sweat] ... When they see cosplayers wearing high heels, they kindly offer band-aids [preventing heel damage].

It feels really nice. It's a feeling of being cared for. Being complimented and having people take photos with me is such a rewarding experience. Whenever I feel down or start doubting myself, remembering those moments makes me feel so much better.

Enabling the person to speak through us, not just to us

My conversations with Julia were rich and meaningful. They helped to identify values and directions that were important to her and provided a sense of direction in life. I wanted to thicken and sustain the preferred story that was emerging, and to offer a way that Julia might contribute to other young people who were interested in cosplay (Denborough, 2008;

Hilker, 2013). I asked if she would be interested in writing a letter to some of the other students I was meeting with. Julia was happy to do so.

I carefully typed her words and checked that my notes captured what she wanted to convey. In this way, I became a conduit for Julia's story, ensuring that her language, metaphors and values shaped the document rather than professional or societal discourses (White & Epston, 1990). The following is an extract of Julia's letter:

Hey!

I wanted to share a bit about what cosplay means to me. I actually started back in fourth grade in primary school. I was super bored during an online class one day when I stumbled on a video about cosplay and was instantly hooked. Later, my friends and I started going to comic conventions. Those experiences really stuck with me, especially when people would ask to take my picture or compliment my costume. It was amazing to feel seen and appreciated, especially during times when I was feeling down or doubting myself. Just thinking about cosplay or my favourite characters always puts a smile on my face.

The truth is that cosplay can be pretty tough. For example, you must wake up super early to do your makeup, then lug a bunch of bags to the convention. On the way, you sometimes get weird stares, and some people might even secretly take photos with bad intentions. Having friends with you definitely helps make it less awkward. But no matter how hard it gets, I'll never give up because it's something I genuinely love. My passion for it keeps me going. Just thinking about the upcoming Comic-Con gives me the motivation to tackle homework I'd otherwise have no energy for!

My most unpleasant cosplay experience was when I met someone cosplaying the exact same character as me, and honestly, their costume was way more accurate. I felt so defeated and like I just wasn't good enough. I felt shame and tried to avoid them. But I didn't leave the convention. I realised I had put in a lot of effort and tried my best to bring the character to life. It wasn't worth completely dismissing my own hard work just because someone else seemed better. Your efforts are always worth recognising.

On the flip side, my happiest experience was when a ton of people wanted to take pictures with me. Throughout the day, they even gave me little gifts called "free material" (むりょ *muryou*). Most of these were homemade trinkets or practical things like slippers, cotton swabs, bandages and tissues. I thought those gifts were incredibly thoughtful. Thinking back on it still warms my heart. It made me feel so cared for and like people genuinely appreciated my efforts and wanted to encourage me.

My top three anime characters to cosplay are Tōru Oikawa from *Haikyū!!*, Geto Suguru from *Jujutsu Kaisen* and Shin Ermi from *Frielen: Beyond journey's end*. What draws me to them is that they all possess qualities I've always admired and strived for: trying their best to help others, being humble (with a dash of self-confidence!), and having strong leadership skills.

For instance, even if I know my efforts might not be rewarded, I'll always try my best to help my friends when they're in need. And even though I was bummed about not being captain of the football team, when new, younger players were being ignored, I made sure to talk to them and teach them some basic skills. Because I've been through tough times,

I don't want others to experience that same unhappiness. This mindset has really shaped how I treat others.

I'm curious — do you have a similar experience of cosplay, or is your perspective totally different?

Outsider witnessing

To enrich the therapeutic process, narrative practice uses outsider witnessing to help individuals feel that their stories are not only heard but also valued, leading to a strong connection with preferred identities and with community (Denborough, 2008; White, 2007). When properly delivered, outsider witnessing also has a profound effect on the listener, who is invited to offer a response (Denborough, 2008).

With Julia's permission, I invited two students who also loved cosplay to read her letter and to respond. I chose them because they had both gone through some difficult times and found a lot of comfort in cosplay. I hoped that Julia's letter would spark new ideas for them, and in turn, that their responses would help reinforce Julia's preferred identity.

May was the first student I invited to read the letter. May was struggling with social anxiety. In crowded places, she often had a racing heartbeat and trembling. However, she didn't experience this fear at comic conventions. She explained that through cosplay she got to experience feeling liked and noticed:

After reading Julia's letter, I realised we have so many similar experiences ... When I think about all the people giving me gifts and telling me I look great, it makes me feel so happy and accepted ... Thinking about those experiences always cheers me up when I'm feeling down ... My favourite character is Suzuki Iruma.² He also loves helping people, but I think he has his own set of principles for how he helps. I feel like if I can help

others, I'll be happy ... I want to tell Julia that I hope she can always enjoy cosplay and become the person she wants to be.

Kate was also afraid to show herself in public. She avoided school because she felt so stressed after being criticised by her teacher in front of everyone. Kate also enjoyed cosplay and Julia's letter moved her deeply. She said:

I think cosplay really gives Julia a lot of support. I like cosplay too, and she reminded me of my favourite and only cosplay character, Nice Nature.³ She's a racehorse, and she's incredibly tough. She's come in third in eight races, but she's never given up running. I remember signing up for the 100-metre race on school sports day, and I'm really not good at sports. I wanted to give up then, but when I thought of Nice Nature, I felt like I could keep pushing through. I tend to give up easily. I want to tell Julia that I'm so happy to see she can find the strength to support herself in cosplay.

Identity is socially constructed: people make sense of their lives through the stories they tell and the responses they receive from others (White, 2007). May and Kate responded in ways that honoured, expanded and thickened Julia's preferred narratives. Julia was touched by May's and Kate's replies. She said it was inspiring that her story resonated with others:

I'm delighted to see that they share similar feelings. This is truly wonderful! I'm so glad that my letter resonated with other people and made them feel the energy that cosplay brings. It also makes me feel like I'm truly doing my best to help others, which is really good.

Some reflections from adults

As someone who was not previously familiar with cosplay, Julia's stories gave me a new understanding of this subculture. This made me wonder if Julia's letter could help other

adults learn more about this beloved hobby, and whether her letter might contribute to shifting prejudice against cosplay. With Julia's consent, I invited another counsellor and four teachers to read her letter and respond as outsider witnesses. One teacher shared this reflection:

There are many students in my class who love cosplay. Honestly, I never really understood why young people were so into it. It seemed like such a huge time and energy commitment. I even worried they might get too caught up in a virtual world. I thought it was just an escape from reality. And I used to be concerned about certain costumes being too revealing, fearing it would make teenagers mature too quickly or leave them vulnerable in terms of their understanding of sex. But after reading Julia's letter, I thought maybe I was overworrying. Some characters are like their idols. They want to emulate them because they admire those characters' qualities, hoping to become more like them. I now see that through cosplay, they can actually learn some life skills, which is fantastic. This actually reminded me of my own star-chasing days when I was younger. In hindsight, my passion for idols wasn't that different from their love for cosplay. We're all drawn to specific traits in our idols and want a deeper connection to the person we aspire to be. I remember putting up posters of my idols in my room as a kid. When I felt frustrated, I'd look at those posters, think of my idols and suddenly feel re-energised. Looking back now, I'm so grateful they helped me through my teenage years. Julia's sharing is truly meaningful, and it's given me a completely new understanding of my students' world.

Julia's letter clearly transported these adults and influenced their perspectives. The teachers' responses, as outside witnesses, explicitly acknowledged this transformation. Hearing their responses was incredibly meaningful for Julia. She felt she had made an impact by

shifting adult stereotypes about cosplay, and this sense of efficacy strengthened her preferred identity as someone who acted to help others.

Reflections on practice

One of the consistent challenges in youth work, for me, is breaking age barriers and fostering genuine engagement with young people. Narrative practice, by centring the individual as the author of their own life narratives, offers a powerful way to bridge these gaps. By asking experience-near questions, counsellors and social workers help young people articulate their own values, hopes and dreams. Acting as curious collaborators rather than guides or experts, this approach allows practitioners to maintain curiosity, creating a safe and inviting environment for young people to share their experiences.

Exploring cosplay profoundly enriched my conversations with Julia. She connected the knowledge and skills gained from cosplay to her daily life. She articulated how her cosplay expressed a treasured value of helping others, and was supported to make a tangible contribution by writing and sharing her letter. The resonant responses of outsider witnesses helped to solidify this preferred identity.

When asked who she would invite to witness her cosplay, Julia initially hesitated, stating she didn't want to invite anyone. She explained that while family and close friends were important to her, they didn't truly understand cosplay as a subculture. We unpacked the meaning of their "passive support" for cosplay, and Julia concluded that even though her family and friends didn't understand what cosplay meant to her, they still respected her. After Julia's letter had been shared with several people, I asked her if she would be willing to let her family and close friends read it. Julia refused. She was worried they still wouldn't understand, and that this could lead to more awkward conversations. She also wanted to keep it as her own secret. Although I thought it would be wonderful if her letter could give them a new understanding of her, I respected her decision.

When, with permission, I shared Julia's letter with colleagues who had no prior exposure to cosplay, I found that they developed new understandings of both cosplay and teenagers in general. This was especially impactful because many had previously stereotyped cosplayers as socially awkward or childish and saw cosplay as a frivolous hobby. This experience underscored that, beyond helping individuals redefine and strengthen preferred identities, narrative practice can also challenge cultural stereotypes and shift perceptions, leading to expanded understandings of culture and traditions.

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The artificial intelligence Google Gemini was used to modify the grammar and syntax of an earlier version of this paper.

Notes

- ¹ *Haikyū!!* (Mitsunaka, 2012–2020) is an anime based on the manga series by Haruichi Furudate (2012–2020). The story follows a school volleyball team.
- ² Suzuki Iruma is character from the manga series *Welcome to Demon School! Iruma-kun* (Nishi, 2017–ongoing).
- ³ Nice Nature (ナイスネイチャ Naisu Neichā) is a character in the game and multimedia franchise *Uma Musume Pretty Derby*. She is based on the Japanese racehorse Nice Nature (1988–2023) (Cygames, 2018).

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