

The Cosplay Phenomenon in Intentions of Art Marketing

Dana Hodinková, Oľga Púchovská,
Lucia Račkovičová

Mgr. Dana Hodinková, PhD.

*Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra
Faculty of Arts
Dražovská 4
949 74 Nitra
SLOVAK REPUBLIC
dhodinkova@ukf.sk*



Dana Hodinková works as an assistant professor at the Department of Mass Media Communication and Advertising at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovak Republic. In her scientific and professional activities, she focuses on the issues of the concept of corporate social responsibility and social marketing in the environment of companies and organizations. She is currently a co-researcher of scientific research projects focused on digital media and the specifics of digital marketing communication, as well as on a specific area of marketing of cultural and artistic institutions – art marketing.

PhDr. Oľga Púchovská, PhD.

*Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra
Faculty of Arts
Dražovská 4
949 74 Nitra
SLOVAK REPUBLIC
opuchovska@ukf.sk*



Oľga Púchovská works as an assistant professor at the Department of Mass Media Communication and Advertising at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovak Republic. Her professional profile is focused on digital marketing, its tools and methods of analysing the performance of digital campaigns, which complements her work in research projects focused on aspects of digital marketing and digital communication. She is the co-author of the foreign monograph "Marketing in the Digital Era" as well as a monograph reflecting current issues of art marketing in the context of digital media called "Korona – Art – Media: Digital conversion of art marketing".

**Mgr. Lucia Račkovičová**

eWAY s.r.o.
M. R. Štefánika 77
010 01 Žilina
SLOVAK REPUBLIC
scath.san@gmail.com

Lucia Račkovičová is a master's degree graduated at the Department of Mass Media Communication and Advertising at the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovak Republic. She began cosplaying during high school and she is also the creator of several different costumes. She has been active in the environment of the Czech-Slovak cosplay community since about 2014 and she knows the cosplay scene itself from a personal point of view as a cosplayer, a representative at foreign competitions and also as a jurywoman. She felt the marketing potential of cosplay in Slovakia and also in the Czech Republic at events such as Profesia Days, Lenovo Showroad (Nitra, Žilina) or Cosplay Festival Šatovka (Olomouc). She currently works as a marketing assistant in a software company.



ABSTRACT:

Since the 1980s, the cosplay phenomenon has become a significant aspect of popular culture mainly in Japan, but also in other parts of Asia and in the Western world as well. Nowadays, cosplay events are the most common feature of various fan conventions and there are also dedicated conventions, such as local and international competitions. Websites, social networks, and other forms of social media centred on cosplay activities are just as popular places for the presentation of cosplayers work, and also for cosplay fan conventions. We encounter the definition of this phenomenon mainly in sociological studies, but in its definition from a marketing point of view, and also in term of art studies is less frequent in an academic environment. In the presented study, we look at the cosplayer as an artist with the possibility to become a brand. Cooperation with cosplayers is attractive for different categories of products, not only directly connected with popular culture, e.g., cooperation with bank institutions. On the other hand, it is really necessary to underline the connection with products and texts of popular culture. In the case of self-promotion of cosplayers, games, movies and other pop-culture festivals and events take really important place. This study aims to present a theoretical reflection of the cosplay phenomenon from the perspective of art marketing, as a potential basis for the further research in this area. The situation is illustrated by practical examples.

KEY WORDS:

art marketing, cosplay, digital culture, performance art, personal brand, social media.

Introduction

Digitization and challenges of the virtual environment stimulate the increase of the popularity and potential of the cosplay phenomenon, also in the Czech-Slovak environment. In the perspective of J. K. Lome, we look at cosplay as the “act of dressing up or emulating fictional or historical characters”,¹ such as figures known from popular comics, movies, digital games or other various forms of media texts. At the same time, this underlines the connection between the phenomenon and culture itself, as it contains “many material practices that use the text as a starting point for new forms of play and productivity”.² The terms 'play' and 'productivity' can also be identified in the term cosplay itself. When analysing the etymology of the word cosplay more deeply, we will find out that the term “is a linguistic mash-up typical in modern Japanese language, the combination of the English words 'costume' and 'play', which become コスプレ”.³ According to the mentioned perspective it is necessary

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- 1 For more information, see: LOME, J. K.: The Creative Empowerment of Body Positivity in the Cosplay Community. In *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 2016, Vol. 22, No. 1. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/712/645>>.
 - 2 LAMERICH, N.: *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*. Amsterdam : Amsterdam University Press, 2018, p. 201. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://library.oapen.org/viewer/web/viewer.html?file=/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/28223/1001770.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>>.
 - 3 ITO, K., CRUTCHER, P. A.: Popular Mass Entertainment in Japan: Manga, Pachinko, and Cosplay. In *Society*, 2014, Vol. 51, No. 1, p. 47. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://silo.tips/download/15446>>; Remark by the authors: Japanese meaning of コスプレ is called “kosupure” – see: TRUONG, A. H., GAUDET, S.: Costume Play and Young Adults' Socio-Economic Insertion Pathways in Japan. In *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure*, 2020, Vol. 3, No. 3, p. 177-196. [online]. [2021-06-27]. Available at: <<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s41978-020-00054-3.pdf>>.

to look at cosplay as a *form of art, or the way people produce art* – they create art products and become pieces of art themselves. Based on the above, this study offers an innovative and little-reflected view of the cosplayer as an artist. The aim of the study is to present a theoretical reflection of the cosplay phenomenon from the perspective of art marketing illustrated by practical examples, as a potential basis for further research in this area.

Brief Definition of a Cosplayer as Part of a Cosplay Community

According to the World Cosplay Summit's fundamental principles we can define cosplay as "the act of dressing up as a character from a manga, anime, or game and cosplayers are the people who dress up as a character from manga, anime, game".⁴ As we mentioned above, the term 'cosplay' originated by the combination of two English words – 'costume' and 'play' – and "it indicates the identification of a cosplayer with his or her favourite fantasy hero (e.g. cartoon, manga, movies, or videogames), imitating gestures, behaviour, and especially the aesthetic aspect through refined costumes accompanied by the same accessories (e.g. weapons, rings, sceptres, etc.)".⁵

A. H. Truong and S. Gaudet also use term 'kosupure' as the original Japanese name of this unique phenomenon. They also argue that cosplay can be viewed as a tool which young adults use to "negotiate the opportunities and constraints they face in their life course or even forge alternative trajectories outside traditional norms, in a context where young people sometimes no longer have access to, or no longer wish to conform to, conventional life courses".⁶ The authors underline the importance of cosplay according to its ability to re-frame the socio-economic and cultural participation of young adults in Japanese society. Based on the above perspective, it is possible to point out the important socially anchored position of the phenomenon, which offers young people the possibility of open alternative participation and self-expression in social and cultural issues. A similar perspective is offered by the concept of the so-called 'cultural citizenship', which B. S. Turner defines as "a cultural empowerment, namely the capacity to participate effectively, creatively and successfully within a national culture",⁷ while the author also adds that in contemporary societies "cultures proliferate, fragment and diversify through political and social experimentation".⁸ The phenomenon of cosplay can thus be seen as a subculture with an anthropologically anchored interest in the specifics of the culture of Japanese youth and the values shared by it.⁹

4 About World Cosplay Summit. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://www.worldcosplaysummit.jp/en/about/>>.

5 ROGORA, A., CARLI, P., MORGANTI, M.: The Imitation Game: The Urban Sustainability Game as an Experience of Participation, Knowledge, Evaluation, and Project Sharing. In SAYIGH, A. (ed.): *Green Buildings and Renewable Energy: Med Green Forum 2019 – Part of World Renewable Energy Congress and Network*. Cham : Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2020, p. 520.

6 TRUONG, A. H., GAUDET, S.: Costume Play and Young Adults' Socio-Economic Insertion Pathways in Japan. In *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure*, 2020, Vol. 3, No. 3, p. 181. [online]. [2021-06-27]. Available at: <<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s41978-020-00054-3.pdf>>.

7 TURNER, B. S.: Outline of a General Theory of Cultural Citizenship. In STEVENSON, N. (ed.): *Culture and Citizenship*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi : SAGE Publications, 2001, p. 12.

8 Ibidem.

9 TRUONG, A. H., GAUDET, S.: Costume Play and Young Adults' Socio-Economic Insertion Pathways in Japan. In *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure*, 2020, Vol. 3, No. 3, p. 179. [online]. [2021-06-27]. Available at: <<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s41978-020-00054-3.pdf>>.

Another social level of the concept, determined by elements of popular culture, is the culture of fandom, which points to the possibility of updating the original story with the intentions of expectations and preferences of a specific community of fans, while cosplay thus becomes a form of social integration of young people.¹⁰

In terms of anchoring the origin of the cosplay phenomenon, it is possible to identify the presence of two currents – the influence of American and Japanese culture.¹¹ In the case of the historical perspective connected with America, the primary American festivals of popular culture, organized in the 1960s in North America (in the USA), come to the fore.¹² As mentioned by T. M. Winge, perhaps the earliest mention of cosplay in the American context can be considered a unique masquerade ball, which took place in honour of Jules Verne's novels in 1877, at which guests were disguised as heroes from his books.¹³ Other examples of dressing up as fictional characters follow-up caricatures created by A. D. Cond (early 20th century) and the first special masquerade ball *Worldcon* took place in 1940, at which visitors could even receive an award for the best costumes.¹⁴ On the other hand, there is the Japanese perspective, as K. Ito and P. A. Crutcher directly associate this phenomenon with Japanese theatres called *Kabuki*. These performances are associated with feudal times, when male actors portrayed both male and female characters, using make-up and wigs as well as camouflage by clothing.¹⁵ As mentioned by H.-J. Niu, Y.-S. Chiang and H.-T. Tsai, a new, internet technology-stimulated, *otaku subculture* was formed in the 1980s in Japan, which had subsequently a share in a significant role in forming the cosplay subculture.¹⁶ Otaku specifically symbolizes a generation of young people growing up, and often socialized, with computers and computer games. In the case of the Japanese branch of the cosplay phenomenon, it is also necessary to replace the connection of cultural elements "manga, pachinko, and cosplay are three immensely popular parts of Japanese pop culture entertainment today".¹⁷ A. Truong and S. Gaudet associate the cosplay phenomenon especially with the onset of the new millennium, pointing to it as one of the most recognized practices of the cultural industry in Japan.¹⁸ In the case of Japan, N. Lamerichs emphasizes the important, even prominent, position of cosplay also in Western settings and notes that "cosplay is associated with Japanese popular culture. There seems to be significant overlap between cosplay and other forms of dressing up such

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- 10 For more information, see: LAMERICH, N.: *Stranger than Fiction: Fan Identity in Cosplay*. In *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 2011, Vol. 7, No. 1. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/246/230>>; TRUONG, A. H., GAUDET, S.: *Costume Play and Young Adults' Socio-Economic Insertion Pathways in Japan*. In *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure*, 2020, Vol. 3, No. 3, p. 177. [online]. [2021-06-29]. Available at: <<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41978-020-00054-3#citeas>>.
 - 11 WINGE, T. M.: *Costuming the Imagination: Origins of Anime and Manga Cosplay*. In *Mechademia Second Arc*, 2006, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 66. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/368597>>.
 - 12 LAMERICH, N.: *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*. Amsterdam : Amsterdam University Press, 2018, p. 199. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://library.oapen.org/viewer/web/viewer.html?file=/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/28223/1001770.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>>.
 - 13 UNWIN, T.: *Jules Verne: Journeys in Writing*. Liverpool : Liverpool University Press, 2005, p. 223.; WINGE, T. M.: *Costuming Cosplay: Dressing the Imagination*. London : Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019, p. 2.
 - 14 WINGE, T. M.: *Costuming Cosplay: Dressing the Imagination*. London : Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019, p. 3.
 - 15 ITO, K., CRUTCHER, P. A.: *Popular Mass Entertainment in Japan: Manga, Pachinko, and Cosplay*. In *Society*, 2014, Vol. 51, No. 1, p. 47. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://silo.tips/download/15446>>.
 - 16 NIU, H.-J., CHIANG, Y.-S., TSAI, H.-T.: *An Exploratory Study of the Otaku Adolescent Consumer*. In *Psychology & Marketing*, 2012, Vol. 29, No. 10, p. 713. [online]. [2021-06-29]. Available at: <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/mar.20558>>.
 - 17 ITO, K., CRUTCHER, P. A.: *Popular Mass Entertainment in Japan: Manga, Pachinko, and Cosplay*. In *Society*, 2014, Vol. 51, No. 1, p. 44. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://silo.tips/download/15446>>.
 - 18 TRUONG, A. H., GAUDET, S.: *Costume Play and Young Adults' Socio-Economic Insertion Pathways in Japan*. In *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure*, 2020, Vol. 3, No. 3, p. 178. [online]. [2021-06-29]. Available at: <<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s41978-020-00054-3.pdf>>.

as(live-action) role-playing but also customizing one's avatar. In cosplay, games are embodied and transposed to new, physical settings".¹⁹ Although this is a phenomenon strongly associated with the contents and products of popular culture, the impetus and starting point of cosplay can be a fictional, but also of historical character. As mentioned by J. K. Lome, "fictional characters can include figures from television, comics, movies, and other various forms of media. In cosplay – the term is a portmanteau of 'costume' and 'roleplay' – people create and become the art".²⁰

As we can see, this popular phenomenon has truly broad roots based on elements of at least two major cultural entities. For the time being, however, we can unequivocally conclude that this phenomenon, at least in its elementary forms, existed within these cultures much before it was given the currently established name, the authorship of which is attributed to Japanese film director and game designer Takahashi Nobuyuki.²¹ N. Lamerichs states that the origin of the name is based on Takahashi's visits to the USA in the 1980s, when he became acquainted with the practice of American fans dressing up in the costumes of their heroes.²² On the other hand, A. H. Truong and S. Gaudet also point to a fan perspective, that combines the popularization of cosplay with the famous science-fiction author and critic Kotani Mari, "who is said to have been among the first to dress-up in manga and anime *characters at two major events – Comiket and Ashicon – in the late 1970s*".²³

From the point of view of a broader perspective and anchoring of the cosplay phenomenon, one can lean towards the concept of the author J. K. Lome, who defines cosplay culture as a collective production of traditions, products as well as ideas mentally and physically supporting the self-confidence of individuals. According to him, "cosplay can transcend conventional costuming to become a transformative and creative means to view a character, as well as the person embodying them".²⁴ Cosplay can therefore be seen as an opportunity to get a fan closer to their fictional hero, to the world presented in popular movies, series, comics, or digital games. We can perceive cosplay as a way of a unique self-presentation of enthusiasm and admiration for a given work, which also brings the potential of individual personalization of the portrayed hero.

19 LAMERICHS, N.: *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*. Amsterdam : Amsterdam University Press, 2018, p. 201. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://library.oapen.org/viewer/web/viewer.html?file=/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/28223/1001770.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>>.

20 For more information, see: LOME, J. K.: The Creative Empowerment of Body Positivity in the Cosplay Community. In *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 2016, Vol. 22, No. 1. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/712/645>>.

21 ITO, K., CRUTCHER, P. A.: Popular Mass Entertainment in Japan: Manga, Pachinko, and Cosplay. In *Society*, 2014, Vol. 51, No. 1, p. 47. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://silotips/download/15446>>.

22 LAMERICHS, N.: *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*. Amsterdam : Amsterdam University Press, 2018, p. 201. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://library.oapen.org/viewer/web/viewer.html?file=/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/28223/1001770.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>>.

23 TRUONG, A. H., GAUDET, S.: Costume Play and Young Adults' Socio-Economic Insertion Pathways in Japan. In *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure*, 2020, Vol. 3, No. 3, p. 178. [online]. [2021-06-29]. Available at: <<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s41978-020-00054-3.pdf>>.

24 For more information, see: LOME, J. K.: The Creative Empowerment of Body Positivity in the Cosplay Community. In *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 2016, Vol. 22, No. 1. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/712/645>>.

Cosplayer as an Artist - Cosplay as a Form of Art

Cosplay can be also considered as “costume play or costume playing”,²⁵ however, on the other hand it is necessary to emphasize that cosplay is not standardly perceived in the perspectives of art, although as J. Martin emphasizes creativity, which is presented by the created costumes as well as the way of portraying a given character, represents a unique form of art.²⁶ As mentioned by J. K. Lome, cosplay should be seen as a transformative form of visual art, based on the potential to enhance a person’s creative identity as well as stimulating feelings of bodily self-confidence and supporting self-confidence.²⁷ At the same time, the author emphasizes that cosplay also includes elements of dramatic play, which creates a unique performance. This perspective is also confirmed by the approach of I. Abizu, who perceives cosplaying as a mixture of various forms of art – “a visual art (something to be appreciated with the eyes), a plastic art (something built as representing an object), and a performance art (something to be performed in front of an audience)”.²⁸ In the case of cosplay, four factors come to the fore: (1) *a narrative*, (2) *a set of clothing*, (3) *a play or performance before spectators*, and (4) *a subject or player*.²⁹ Based on the definition of different forms of products in art,³⁰ in confrontation with the above factors, we propose to distinguish two primary levels of cosplay as an art product. The first level represents ‘the product in the sense of the performance’, because each costume hides a story behind it, that is most often anchored in a fictional work of popular culture. At the same time, however, it gives the author of the cosplay the possibility of self-presentation and self-reflection in the actions of the portrayed character. Here we mainly underline the combination of visual and performance art. On the second level it is possible to point to *the product in terms of the costume itself*, while the elements of visual art come to the fore but are based on aspects of ‘plastic art’.³¹ In the case of both perspectives, however, we also emphasize the position of the author of the complex work himself, who becomes an artist with the potential to build their own brand. J. Martin also emphasizes the presented perspective of cosplay in two basic forms – the costume creation and the performance – while he also underlines that this is the way for creative expression, self-presentation, and social-interaction too.³²

25 LAMERICHS, N.: *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*. Amsterdam : Amsterdam University Press, 2018, p. 199. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://library.oapen.org/viewer/web/viewer.html?file=/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/28223/1001770.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>>.

26 MARTIN, J.: *Cosplay as Art*. [online]. [2021-06-29]. Available at: <<https://nashvillearts.com/2015/04/cosplay-as-art/>>.

27 See also: LOME, J. K.: The Creative Empowerment of Body Positivity in the Cosplay Community. In *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 2016, Vol. 22, No. 1. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/712/645>>.

28 ALBIZU, I.: *Is Cosplay a Performance Art?*. Released on 7th September 2018. [online]. [2021-06-29]. Available at: <<https://ingmaralbizu.com/is-cosplay-a-performance-art/>>.

29 For more information, see: LAMERICHS, N.: Stranger than Fiction: Fan Identity in Cosplay. In *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 2011, Vol. 7, No. 1. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/246/230>>.

30 JOHNOVÁ, R.: *Marketing kulturního dědictví a umění: Art marketing v praxi*. Prague : Grada Publishing, 2008, p. 16-18.; ŠTEFKO, R., KRAJŇÁK, R.: *An Analytical View on Fine Arts Marketing*. Katowice : Publishing House of the Jerzy Kukuczka Academy of Physical Education, 2013, p. 54. [online]. [2021-06-29]. Available at: <<https://www.unipo.sk/public/media/25721/Fine%20Arts.pdf>>.

31 Remark by the authors: In the case of the concept of ‘plastic art’ we start from the perspective of 3-dimensional art – see: *Definition of Plastic Art*. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/plastic%20art>>.

32 See: MARTIN, J.: *Cosplay as Art*. [online]. [2021-06-29]. Available at: <<https://nashvillearts.com/2015/04/cosplay-as-art/>>.

In the context of the above definition of cosplay as a form of art and the cosplayer as an artist, or as a free creator of art, we come to a specific area of marketing – art marketing – which applies to area of commerce and presentation of art as capital.³³ In a broader sense, according to R. Johnová, art marketing does not “include only fine arts, but also marketing in all areas of culture and art, i.e. literature, libraries, publishing houses, music, theatre, architecture, film and applied arts. It deals with the marketing of performing artists as well as the marketing of copyright works, as well as the sale of works of art”.³⁴ Art marketing enables the acquisition of funds for individuals or organizations who choose to implement and publicly present fine artistic, cultural and social events.³⁵ Art marketing can be seen as a ‘subordinate servant of art’, as it brings to its ‘customers’ the possibility of internal filling and enrichment of life on the basis of the artistic experience itself. In its application, however, it is necessary to accept the subordination of marketing to artistic goals, and also not to adapt the product to market requirements, but on the contrary – to attract the audience to the current offer.³⁶ From the marketing point of view, the place of presentation for the cosplayer are mainly various festivals of popular culture, connected with the fantasy world, inspired by the game, film or serial environments. They offer various possibilities of self-promotion for the cosplayer, but also its application in cooperation with various brands falling under the products of popular media culture. We consider these events to be a very important stepping-stone in terms of building publicity and recognition of the cosplayer with the potential to create their own brand.

Promotional Activities of Cosplayer as an Artist

Based on the above findings it is clear that cosplay is an integral part of various sci-fi, comics, and gaming festivals and competition, which we consider to be primary possibilities of presenting the cosplayer and their work. Among the leading festivals we can undoubtedly include the *World Cosplay Summit*, which was first held in 2003 in Nagoya City (Japan) and was even sponsored by TV Aichi. As is stated by K. Ito and P. A. Crutcher, “the purpose of the summit is to promote international friendship and exchange through the medium of Japanese pop culture and to recognize its popularity and importance abroad”.³⁷ WCS is an event that brings together cosplayers to promote international and cultural interaction as well as the exchange of cultural values, and is supported by local governments as well as foreign diplomatic missions.³⁸ Equally important is the traditional *Comic-Con* event organized in San Diego. As a result of the pandemic situation in 2021, this meeting has been moved into the online space (the period from 23rd to 25th July 2021). As a replacement for the traditional

33 ŠTEFKO, R., KRAJŇÁK, R.: *An Analytical View on Fine Arts Marketing*. Katowice : Publishing House of the Jerzy Kukuczka Academy of Physical Education, 2013, p. 11. [online]. [2021-06-29]. Available at: <<https://www.unipo.sk/public/media/25721/Fine%20Arts.pdf>>.

34 JOHNOVÁ, R.: *Marketing kulturního dědictví a umění: Art marketing v praxi*. Prague : Grada Publishing, 2008, p. 13.

35 ŠTEFKO, R., KRAJŇÁK, R.: *An Analytical View on Fine Arts Marketing*. Katowice : Publishing House of the Jerzy Kukuczka Academy of Physical Education, 2013, p. 5. [online]. [2021-06-29]. Available at: <<https://www.unipo.sk/public/media/25721/Fine%20Arts.pdf>>.

36 SPÁLOVÁ, L., SZABÓOVÁ, V.: Recipročný transfer umenia a značiek alebo kultúrny supermarket?. In *Culturologica Slovaca*, 2020, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 40.

37 ITO, K., CRUTCHER, P. A.: Popular Mass Entertainment in Japan: Manga, Pachinko, and Cosplay. In *Society*, 2014, Vol. 51, No. 1, p. 47. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://silo.tips/download/15446>>.

38 *About World Cosplay Summit*. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://www.worldcosplaysummit.jp/en/about/>>.

“offline” meeting, the organizers promise a special event called *Comic-Con Special Edition*, which should take place on 26-28th November 2021.³⁹ This event also includes the *Masquerade Costume Competition*, which is attended by cosplayers from all over the world every year.

In Slovakia, popular cosplay festivals include an international festival of pop culture (e.g. comics, anime, games, Japanese culture, KPOP, science fiction, fantasy and horror) called *Animeshow* or *ComicSalon* (it depends on the term in which it is realized), which includes a rich offer of lectures, workshops, competitions, presentation of the latest films, fantasy literature, music and art. In addition, it offers meetings with actors, writers and other various foreign and domestic guests. It was organized under the name *Istrocon* as early as 1988 and is currently held on a semi-annual basis, mostly in March and September. Due to the pandemic situation, the 14th edition of the Spring Festival version *Animeshow* took place from 2nd to 4th July 2021 (after more than a year break) and once again enjoyed great success.⁴⁰ Also worth mentioning is the *UniCon* festival of games, electronic sports and virtual reality, which offers its visitors the opportunity to get an overview of the latest technologies in the field of virtual reality.⁴¹ This year was its 6th edition (from 20th to 21st February 2021),⁴² which due to the pandemic situation also took place (as well as most other mass events) in the online space (last year this took place directly in the building of the Jozef Matúš Hall in Trnava). Last year there was a special novelty for all cosplayers, a photo shoot of the Cosplay calendar for 2021, the sale of which was launched in support of the crowdfunding campaign on 20th January 2021. Undoubtedly, the traditional Czech festivals include *Animefest*, which has been organizing by the *Brno Otaku* association at the Brno Exhibition Grounds since 2004.⁴³ This annual meeting of fans of Japanese comics (manga) and animated films (anime) is considered as the oldest and also the largest independent con of its kind in the Czech Republic. The last event took place in 2019 (16th edition) and the next event is scheduled for 2022 (events in 2020 and 2021 were cancelled due to the pandemic situation). In addition to these festivals, cosplayers have the opportunity to participate in other interesting events organized in the Czech Republic or in Slovakia, however, some of them, as well as several global events, did not take place as a result of the pandemic or took place in modified virtual form, e.g., *Advík*, *Fantasy Festival*, *Comic Con Prague*, *VUB Y-con* or *Nipponfest & Hangukon*, etc.

Festivals and specialised competitions offer these creators a unique space for the presentation of their art, represented both by the costume itself and by a complementary performance depicting the character itself (see the definition of a cosplayer as an artist). For this reason, most festivals create a special space for cosplay in the form of so-called fashion shows, photography sessions and cosplay acts,⁴⁴ which represent the basic limit of the institutionalization of this phenomenon at the same time, while from a competitive perspective they are elements of motivation. N. Lamerichs adds that “cosplay is gradually influencing the professional game and media industry. Some media companies are already very aware of the quality of fan’s costumes and use them for promotional activities”.⁴⁵

39 *Comic-Con International: San Diego 2021*. [online]. [2021-06-24]. Available at: <<https://www.comic-con.org/ccli>>.

40 *AnimeSHOW 2021*. [online]. [2021-06-24]. Available at: <<https://www.comics-salon.sk/>>.

41 ŠMILŇÁKOVÁ, M.: *Unicon vám ukáže najväčšiu zbierku retro hier na Slovensku a Česku. Prídte zažiť jeho jedinečnú atmosféru*. Released on 26th February 2020. [online]. [2021-06-24]. Available at: <<https://aetter.sk/unicon-vam-ukaze-najvacsiu-zbierku-retro-hier-na-slovensku-a-cesku-pridte-zazit-jeho-jedinecnu-atmosferu/>>.

42 *UniCon 2021*. [online]. [2021-06-24]. Available at: <<https://unicon.lol/20-21/>>.

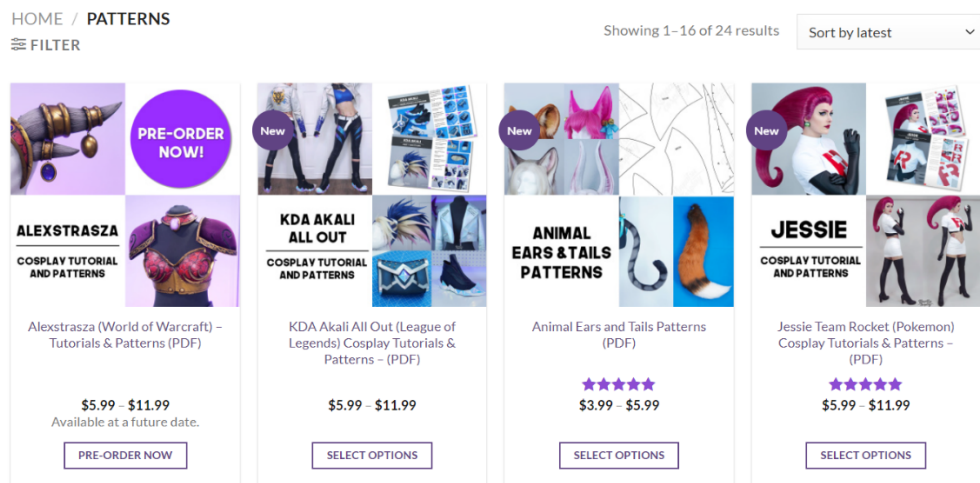
43 *O Animefestu*. [online]. [2021-06-24]. Available at: <<https://www.animefest.cz/cs/Animefest>>.

44 For more information, see: LAMERICHS, N.: *Stranger than Fiction: Fan Identity in Cosplay*. In *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 2011, Vol. 7, No. 1. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/246/230>>.

45 LAMERICHS, N.: *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*. Amsterdam : Amsterdam University Press, 2018, p. 202. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://library.oapen.org/viewer/web/viewer.html?file=/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/28223/1001770.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>>.

At the same time, we also perceive this cooperation as a perspective way of cosplayer promotion from the perspective of the general public, e.g., a way of spreading awareness about the cosplay phenomenon in general, but especially the promotion of the unique cosplayer.

Although we consider festivals to be the dominant way for the presentation and interaction of the cosplay community, the digitization and virtualization of the online environment have brought opportunities for promotion in the online environment as well. Cosplayers can create their own promotional web page or use a specific 'cosplay sites' (e.g. Cosplay.com, Worldcosplay.net, etc.), which offer cosplayers spaces to create a virtual profile and present their work as well as procedures for processing their own costumes.⁴⁶ As an example of the use of a promotional web page we have chosen a cosplayer and artist originally from South African who is currently operating in Canada – *Kinpatsu cosplay* (>330k followers on FB, 430k followers on Instagram), who has her own website and e-shop, where she not only promotes her work and monetizes her passion through the sale of e-books, tutorials or templates for creating add-ons, but also presents herself as an artist who can be engaged as part of a program in workshops, discussions, e.g. as 'a photo attraction' and so on (Picture 1). Cosplayers become not only sellers of costumes as creators, but also of ideas and so-called 'know-how' presented in the form of tutorials and patterns for creating cosplays, for which dedicated fans are willing to pay considerable money.⁴⁷



Picture 1: *Kinpatsu cosplay* promotion website

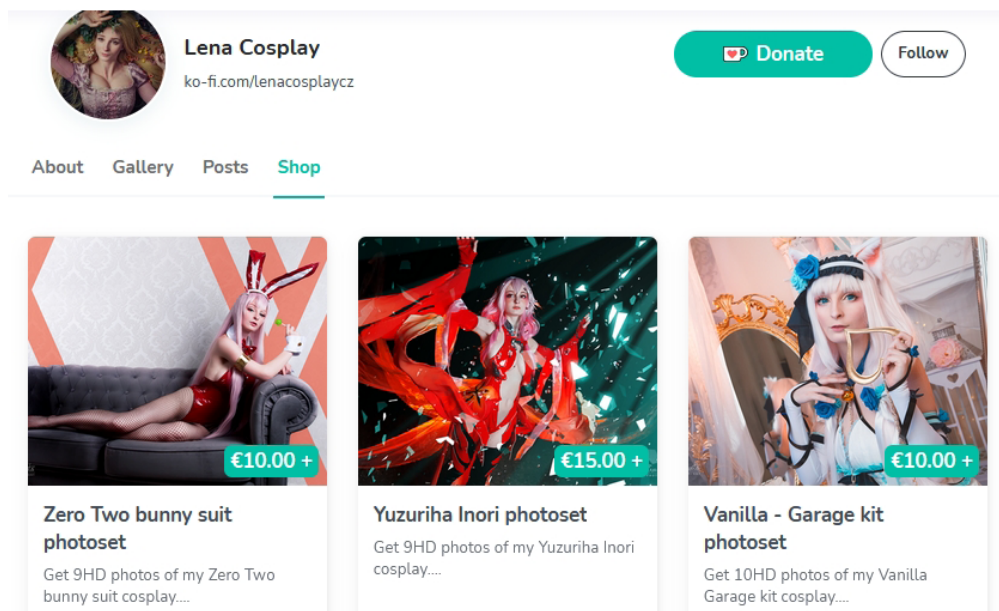
Source: authors' screenshot; *Kinpatsu cosplay*. [online]. [2021-06-24]. Available at: <<https://kinpatsucosplay.com/>>.

Even in the case of the Czech-Slovak cosplay scene, it is possible to identify cosplayers whose name is their brand. However, unlike abroad, where the sale of so-called *know-how* of materials is at the fore, in the case of the Czech-Slovak environment, products are mostly photo-sets of the cosplay brand (Picture 2). As an example, we present

46 LAMERICHES, N.: *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*. Amsterdam : Amsterdam University Press, 2018, p. 202. [online]. [2021-06-23]. Available at: <<https://library.oapen.org/viewer/web/viewer.html?file=/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/28223/1001770.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>>.

47 *Kinpatsu Cosplay profile on Facebook*. [online]. [2021-06-24]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/KinpatsuCosplay/>>.

the Czech cosplayer *Lena Cosplay*, who sells professional photos of her own cosplay under her brand, however, uses a specialised *ko-fi.com* platform.⁴⁸



Picture 2: Sales page of photosets from Lena Cosplay

Source: author's screenshot; Sales page of photosets from Lena Cosplay. [online]. [2021-06-24]. Available at: <<https://ko-fi.com/lenacosplaycz/shop>>.

On the other hand, this space, although less unique and closed, is still offered by so-called *traditional* social platforms such as Facebook or Instagram. “Online communities, much like in person social communities, develop their own rhetoric that participants in the community use when interacting with other members. Part of the inclusion in the knowledge capital is being able to develop and participate in the rhetoric of an established community”,⁴⁹ which develop their own unique virtual subcultures represented by own language, values and behaviour which support “feelings of inclusion and membership”.⁵⁰ Whether we are talking about specific cosplay forums or ‘traditional’ social media, it is necessary to look at them as an environment for creating and presenting a personal cosplayer brand. W. Greyser emphasizes the importance of a personal brand, especially in connection with online operation, as a personal brand is everything that represents a person in the online environment – their abilities, skills, experience and personality as such, it is a way to present, emphasize strengths as well as passions, making the individual recognizable and memorable to potential audiences.⁵¹ According to this statement, a person

48 Remark by the authors: Ko-fi.com is free platform to accept donations, memberships and sales directly from fans.; For more information, see: *What Makes Ko-fi Different?*. [online]. [2021-10-16]. Available at: <<https://ko-fi.com/about>>.

49 KANE, L.: *Why Cosplay? Motivations behind Participation and Use of Social Media among Cosplayers Who Maintain Facebook Artist Pages*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Oregon : Oregon State University, 2017, p. 54. [online]. [2021-06-24]. Available at: <https://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/concern/graduate_thesis_or_dissertations/j098zd59k?locale=en>.

50 Ibidem, p. 55.

51 GREYSER, W.: *What Is Personal Branding [Free Personal Brand Health Checker]*. Released on 17th August 2021. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://influencermarketinghub.com/what-is-personal-branding/>>.

who has built a personal brand becomes more trustworthy and has a higher potential to influence the opinions of other people, which is especially important in the case of millennials, which is also supported by results of recent research, according to which a significant part of them (up to 84%) express distrust of advertising, emphasizing the tendency to trust people from whom they acquire a sense of credibility and acquaintances.⁵² This perspective is also applicable in the case of the cosplay community, while the awareness, popularity or recognition of the creator associated with their name or personal brand are a promise of effective cooperation from the perspective of other brands. A typical example is cooperation with producers or sellers of accessories or materials needed to make a costume. Due to the growing segment of cosplay fans, specialized shops began to emerge (mostly foreign), in which it is possible to buy ready-made costumes of various characters. And it is these stores that tend to work with cosplayers often, either in the form of long-term ambassadors, or in the form of one-off collaborations, where cosplayers as influencers receive either percentage discounts or free products in exchange for their reviews and promotion in their social media profiles.⁵³

Another example is cooperation in the presentation of events or festivals, which, however, in the case of really established events can be understood as a very valuable connection with a significant promotional potential for the cosplayer himself. These represents further potential for cosplayers not only to promote themselves as creators of products with art value (cosplay costumes, cosplay accessories, tutorials, acting, etc.), but also in the position of opinion authorities, long-term ambassadors or influencers – basic levels of the three-component model of social influencers.⁵⁴ In this case, in terms of the wide possibilities of cooperation as well as due to current measures restricting various international festivals, we will focus mainly on the potential of social media. In the case of influencer marketing, collaboration can take various forms. According to A. Gaid, sponsored content, reviews, competitions and various gifts, cooperation in the creation of products or content, or even long-term cooperation in the form of brand ambassador come to the fore.⁵⁵ On the other hand, *Engaio Digital* company introduces more specific types of influencer marketing campaigns, e.g. gifts and bets, competitions and events, social media management, affiliate marketing, sponsored posts, sponsored blogs, unboxing and reviews, guest blogs, program of brand ambassadors as well as pre-release campaigns.⁵⁶

The organizers of game or pop culture festivals have also adopted the use of the cosplayer as part of their promotion. They use cosplayers for their promotion, e.g., in the form of sponsored competitions for event tickets (Picture 3), which are presented in the social media profile of the cosplayer (influencer). The organizers of these festivals tend to attract visitors especially well-known foreign names from the cosplay community, but the use of nano- and micro-influencers represented by smaller 'local' influencers is also a motivation to visit a specific close community of followers.

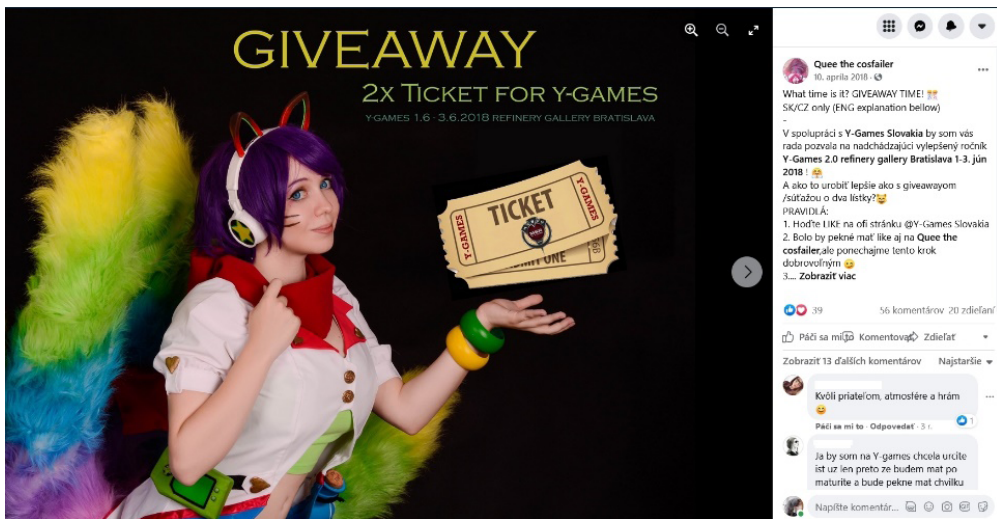
52 GREYSER, W.: *What Is Personal Branding [Free Personal Brand Health Checker]*. Released on 17th August 2021. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://influencermarketinghub.com/what-is-personal-branding/>>.

53 For example, see: *Senko-san Cosplay Review (Trustedeal) by Quee the Cosfailer*. Released on 27th October 2019. [online]. [2021-06-24]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1v3DyTvxaQ&feature=youtu.be>>.

54 SPÁLOVÁ, L., MIKULÁŠ, P., PÚCHOVSKÁ, O.: Attitudes Towards Different Influencer Categories – Exploration of Generation Z. In *Communication Today*, 2021, Vol. 12, No. 1, p. 49.

55 GAID, A.: *6 Top Types of Influencer Marketing Campaigns (with examples)*. Released on 18th December 2020. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://www.oberlo.com/blog/influencer-marketing-examples>>.

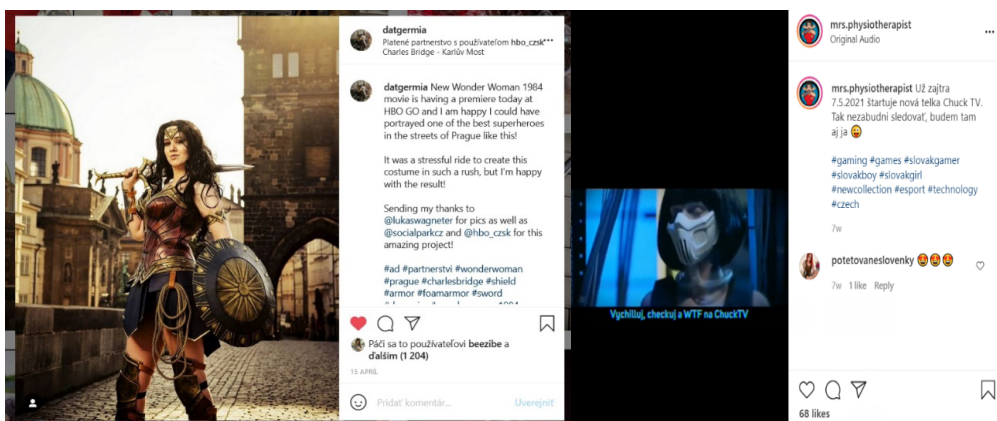
56 *8 Influencer Marketing Campaign Types*. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://engaiodigital.com/influencer-marketing-campaign-types/>>.



Picture 3: Promotion of the Y-games festival in the form of a competition for tickets to the event by cosplayer Quee the cosfailer

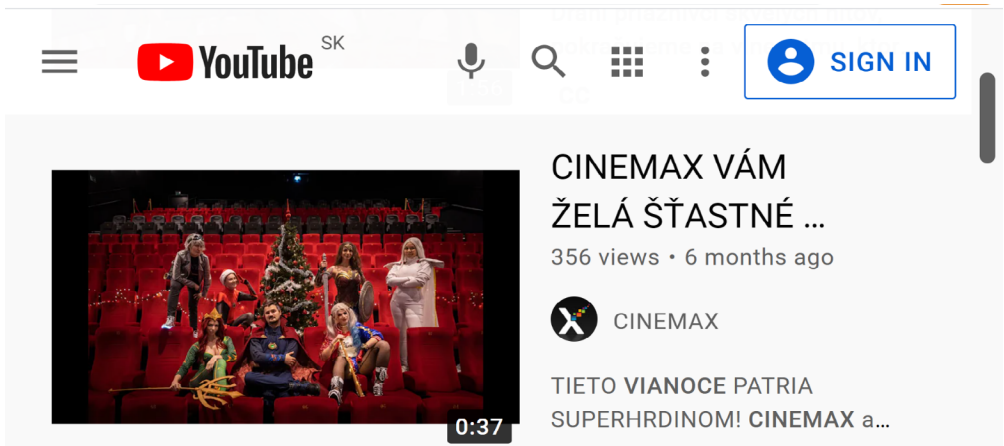
Source: authors' screenshot; Post from Quee the cosfailer Facebook profile. Released on 10th April 2018. [online]. [2021-06-24]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/335296803506371/photos/pb.100056417477454.-2207520000.../572632286439487/?type=3>>.

In the Czech-Slovak environment, cooperation with television stations such as HBO, where cosplayers are used to promote current TV series and film news, comes to the fore as well as the presentation of new television stations (Picture 4). The potential of cosplayers is gradually being discovered by cinema chains too, which invite cosplayers to movie premieres or the shooting of thematic video spots (e.g., the cinema chain Cinemax, which engaged several Slovak cosplayers in its Christmas spot in 2020) (Picture 5). Cosplayers can also be involved in corporate events and promotions, as it was the case with the cooperation of the nekonečno.sk store in SC Eurovea (Bratislava) with cosplayer Kaminari Cosplay (Picture 6).



Picture 4: Cosplayer Datgermia promotes the film “Wonder Woman 1984” in collaboration with hbo_czsk and cosplayer Mrs.Physiotherapist promotes new TV station “Chuck TV”

Source: authors' screenshots; Post from Instagram profile @datgermia. Released on 15th April 2021. [online]. [2021-06-24]. Available at: <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CNsbkKDQTb/>>; Post from Instagram profile @mrs.physiotherapist. Released on 6th May 2021. [online]. [2021-06-24]. Available at: <<https://www.instagram.com/p/COIRyZnLsi/>>.



Picture 5: Christmas advertising spot of the cinema chain Cinemax 2020 in Slovakia

Source: authors' screenshot; Cinemax Vám želá šťastné a filmové Vianoce!. Released on 15th December 2020. [online]. [2021-06-24]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1bKI5bv1fo>>.



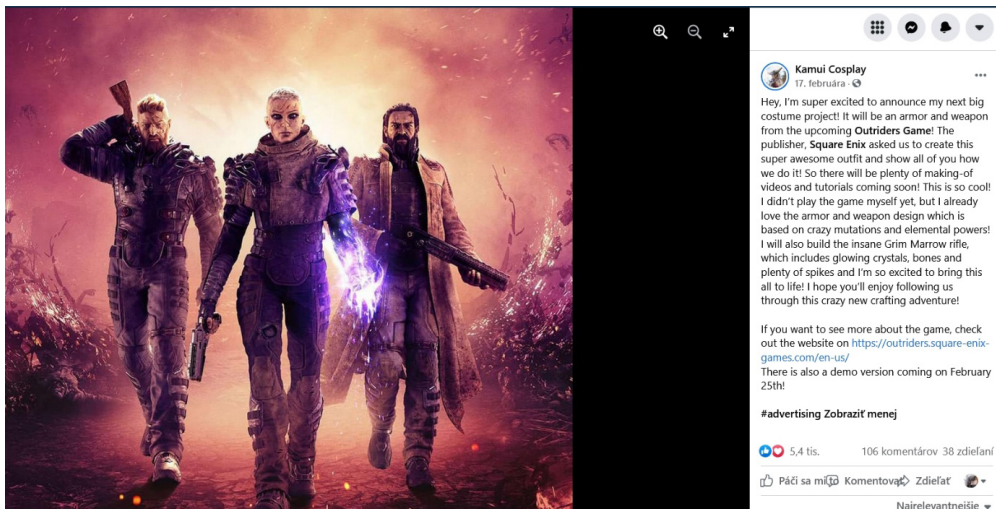
Picture 6: Cooperation of the thematic shop "Nekonečno" with the Slovak cosplayer Kaminari Cosplay

Source: authors' screenshot; Post from Instagram profile @kaminaricosplay. Released on 18th August 2020. [online]. [2021-06-24]. Available at: <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CECdHkEDbgT/>>.

The significant potential and overall attractiveness of cosplayers are increasingly realized by brands, which have been often associated with the field of fantasy or products of contemporary pop culture only marginally, or not at all. An example is the relatively current advertisement of *Slovenská sporiteľňa*, which used several Slovak cosplayers as part of its campaign.⁵⁷ Subsequently, we suggest to perceive the promotional activities

57 For more information, see: *Slovenská sporiteľňa: Šťastie má 60 odtieňov*. Released on 1st July 2021. [online]. [2021-07-01]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-1vOl-rMLg>>.

of the cosplayer as a brand on two basic levels: (1) cosplayer promotional activities directly and primarily connected with its own brand of cosplay products (ready-made costumes, tutorials, e-books, patterns, etc.) and (2) cosplayer promotional activities based on their personal brand with significant recognition and expertise in their niche community, which are carried out in cooperation with other brands, e.g. clothing, gaming, technological or other brands with even really weak connections to pop-culture. Although we have reflected the above perspectives quite separately, it is important to emphasize the fact that overlap is not excluded, on the contrary – it is beneficial for both parties. An example is the German cosplay duo *Kamui Cosplay* with a follower base of over 1.1 million fans. This pair can be undoubtedly included in the world's most famous cosplayers dedicated to the so-called *manufacturing know-how*. Their last significant collaboration is the production of a costume for the game *Outriders*, which was still in the process of preparation at the time of cooperation. The pair were approached by the *Square Enix studio* itself to create a costume from this game (Picture 7). *Kamui Cosplay* in this way basically promoted the game itself just by creating a unique costume from this game and by uploading videos about its production and sharing know-how materials and video tutorials.



Picture 7: Announcement post about collaboration with Square Enix from Kamui Cosplay Facebook profile

Source: authors' screenshot; Post from Kamui cosplay Facebook profile. Released on 17th February 2021. [online]. [2021-06-24]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=268212844672962&set=pb.100044527445610.-2207520000..&type=3>>.

However, it is really important to reflect on the potentially negative impact of cooperation, which may be reciprocal – just as the image of the presented brand may be affected in the case of an inappropriate choice of influencer-cosplayer, so the reputation of the cosplayer among their fans can also be affected. Therefore, it is very important that the cosplayer (or cosplay-artist) approach each collaboration and engagement responsibly and critically, with reflection of the given specifics of the community in which they act and have built a significant position.

Conclusion

The cosplay phenomenon can be viewed from several perspectives: as a specific social unit forming a unique subculture with its own rules and norms (so-called *niche community*); as a post-product of texts produced by modern popular culture; and last but not least as a form of specific and unique multivariate work of art. Although cosplay is perceived mainly as an element significantly associated with current popular culture and its roots are associated mainly with Japanese patterns such as anime or manga, the truth is that masquerades inspired by contemporary popular texts took place also in America before the popularization of the mentioned Japanese phenomena. On the other hand, at the same time, Japanese cultural patterns associated with the otaku culture, as an element of socialization and integration of Japanese young people into society, are coming to the fore.

In the present study, we focused on the cosplay phenomenon mainly from the point of view of art, and we clearly defined it as a form of popular visual performance art, offering at least two basic levels of product – *costume design* and *the performance by itself*, when the author presents themselves by exhibition (e.g., roleplay as part of cosplay competitions). Although, when analysing cosplayers' promotional activities, we can consider specialised festivals and competitions as primary promotional tools. However, they do not represent the only one opportunity for self-promotion and brand building of cosplayer. Nowadays, especially in the age of the Covid-19 pandemic, the important position played by online forms of presentation offered by online platforms or social media such as unique community sites and general used social networks is evident. From a marketing point of view, a cosplayer can be seen in this context as an artist whose cosplay name is also their personal brand. We also present examples of cosplayers' collaborations with various world brands (e.g. Xbox, HBO or PlayStation), which point to the growing popularity of the cosplay phenomenon not only globally, but also in the Czech-Slovak environment. In addition to the aforementioned collaborations, cosplayers often have the opportunity to be part of various festivals, events, even advertising campaigns for brands that may not always be directly linked to digital games, sci-fi movies or series. However, the thematic focus of these events and advertising campaigns may include elements of modern popular culture or refer to them, making cosplayers the ideal artistic element of any activity, which definitely contributes to the popularity and awareness of this phenomenon, as well as the brand of engaged cosplay itself.

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