The Psychology of Communication in Constructing the Self-Concept of Crossdressing Cosplayers

Muhammad Rafli Ardiansyah[1], Mustiawan [2] Andys Tiara [3]

[1] Fakultas Ilmu Sosial Ilmu Politik Universitas Muhammadiyah Prof Dr. Hamka, Indonesia; rafliardiansyah.muhammad@gmail.com

[2] Fakultas Ilmu Sosial Ilmu Politik Universitas Muhammadiyah Prof Dr. Hamka, Indonesia; mustiawan@uhamka.ac.id

[3] Fakultas Ilmu Sosial Ilmu Politik Universitas Muhammadiyah Prof Dr. Hamka, Indonesia; andys.tiara@uhamka.ac.id

Abstract	This study analyzes how communication psychology plays a role in shaping the self-concept of individuals who practice cross-dressing within the cosplay community in Indonesia. This phenomenon gives rise to complex identity dynamics, as it directly intersects with cultural norms that tend to be conservative toward non-binary gender expressions. The study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive method. Informants were selected using purposive sampling techniques based on their consistency in cross-dressing cosplay and active involvement within the community. Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and literature review. The results show that the psychological communication process in cross-dressing cosplay involves intrapersonal communication through identity reflection, social support from the community, and reinforcement from social media despite the presence of cultural conflicts and norms attached to gender issues. Crossdressing is positioned not merely as a form of artistic performance but as a symbolic strategy to express, test, and negotiate self-identity within a social space that is not yet fully inclusive. These findings confirm that self-identity is a communicative construct that is dynamic, contextual, and potentially subversive to dominant norms. This study makes an important contribution to the development of communication psychology studies in the domains of alternative identity expression and popular culture. The limitation of this research lies in the small number of participants and the narrow geographic scope; thus, further research with a larger participant base and multi-location approaches is necessary for more comprehensive results.
Keywords	Communication Psychology; Self-Concept; Crossdressing; Cosplay; Gender Identity

Corresponding Author
Muhammad Rafli Ardiansyah
Fakultas Ilmu Sosial Ilmu Politik Universitas Muhammadiyah Prof Dr. Hamka, Indonesia; rafliardiansyah.muhammad@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Cosplay activities are a form of expression shown by Japanese cultural enthusiasts, where cosplayers wear costumes to portray characters from games, anime, manga, or other media. Cosplay is a culture originating in Japan, derived from the words "costume," meaning clothing, and "play," meaning to perform; thus, cosplay refers to a game or performance in which someone wears the same costume as a certain character. Individuals wearing these costumes are called cosplayers (Suryani & Adib, 2023). Cosplay activities are carried out by fans of Japanese culture, such as anime, who use costumes to imitate characters from a specific anime, film, or manga (Rohimah et al., 2024). Cosplay is a kind of performance in which an individual fully dresses up to resemble a character and acts it out.

Cosplay is a form of roleplay that involves imitating characters from films, anime, manga, and other sources, bringing to life through the use of costumes related to a character, and adapting fantasy characters into reality. Cosplay is a culture that originated in Japan, derived from the words "costume" and "play," so cosplay refers to a game or a performance where a person wears a costume identical to a certain character; those who wear these costumes are called cosplayers (Suryani & Adib, 2023). Cosplay activities are usually performed by fans of Japanese pop culture, such as anime, using specific costumes to imitate characters from certain anime, films, or manga (Rohimah et al., 2024). Cosplay is a type of performance in which an individual dresses fully to resemble a certain character and acts it out. Usually, cosplayers get their cosplay ideas or inspiration from sources such as comics, anime, movies, games, dramas, and others (Pramana & Masykur, 2020)

At Japanese pop culture events, cosplayers typically appear as certain characters, complete with distinctive attributes, weapons, costumes, and other signature elements, so that they can be identified as the characters they are portraying. The development of cosplay in Indonesia began in 1998 and has continued to grow ever since. This cultural phenomenon has especially flourished in big cities like Jakarta, Bandung, and Surabaya, which are active in holding cosplay events such as Jakarta Comic Con, Ennichisai, and Chibicon. The cosplay community serves as a place for cosplayers to connect with one another and explore various styles, including cross-dressing cosplay (Mantong & Furisari, 2024).

Crossdressing refers to the practice of wearing clothing, which is often associated with the opposite gender (Delu & Budiawan, 2024). Crossdressing cosplay is unique because cosplayers imitate characters of a gender opposite to their own. This phenomenon is especially noticeable at cosplay events owing to its uniqueness, both in terms of the cosplayer's boldness of expression and the contrast created by body posture and costuming when embodying a character of the opposite gender. A crossdresser is someone who wears clothing, takes on an appearance, and behaves in ways traditionally associated with a gender different from their own (Anastasya Putri et al., 2024).

Crossdressing cosplayers do not just represent fictional characters; they also manifest self-expression, which often finds little space in conventional social settings. From a communication psychology perspective, this practice can be seen as part of the process of communicating identity or as a way for individuals to project, negotiate, and shape their self-concept through symbols, body language, and direct social interaction. The concept of self, or self-concept, is an important aspect of communication psychology that explains how an individual views themselves as a result of internalization and social interaction. In the context of crossdressing cosplayers, self-concept is formed and constructed through the experience of dressing particular characters, feedback from audiences both online and offline, and reflection on social reactions received. In this regard, the opinions of others have become very important. Previous studies also explain that self-concept is a mental image of oneself, where a person sees themselves as an individual (Purnomosidi et al., 2023). When cosplayers receive positive validation from the community or social media, their identities tend to be strengthened.

Although initially viewed negatively and colored by gender stereotypes, the form of cross-dressing cosplay has become increasingly accepted within the community over time and is now seen as part of creative expression. Crossdressing cosplay is not merely a form of entertainment but also serves as a platform for expressing identity and building self-confidence. Many crossdressing cosplayers use it as a way to express their love for admired characters as well as a means of self-exploration. Social media can serve as a place to broaden the reach and acceptance of cosplay styles. Through social media, cosplayers share their work and support with each other, allowing them to form or join supportive communities.

The main issue in this context is how individuals build and manage their self-concept through cross-dressing expression, especially when facing social perceptions that are often biased against non-conventional gender expression. Although there are initial studies addressing community aspects and social media, there have not been many in-depth studies exploring the personal experiences of crossdressing cosplayers as they negotiate their identity through the psychological communication process. The self-concept that is formed does not stand alone; rather, it is the result of ongoing dialogue between the ideal 'self,' societal perceptions, and self-expression mediated by symbols of pop culture.

The gap in the research lies in the lack of exploration of the relationship between visual crossdressing expression and self-concept formation from the perspective of communication psychology. Previous research has tended to focus on social or popular culture aspects in general, without highlighting how intrapersonal and interpersonal communication play a role in shaping the self-identity of those who engage in cross-dressing cosplay. Therefore, an approach that combines self-concept theory, Mead's symbolic interactionism, and the framework of communication psychology is

important for dissecting the process of meaning internalization from consciously and repeatedly engaging in crossdressing.

The novelty of this study lies in presenting a new understanding of cross-dressing cosplayers as active agents in shaping self-identity through communication. Rather than viewing crossdressing merely as a performative expression, this study emphasizes how such expression is a strategy of identity communication and a reflection of individual psychological conflicts and needs for self-acceptance. It also examines how social media, cosplay communities, and other digital spaces have become important arenas for forming brave, dynamic, and socially connected self-concepts.

This research not only contributes to the development of communication psychology studies in Indonesia but also offers diversity of identity. In a society with binary gender norms, it is important to understand how individuals use symbols, language, and visuality to express their true selves. Therefore, this study opens new discussion spaces regarding acceptance, authentic expression, and the right to shape identity within a more inclusive and empathetic communication framework. The aim of this study was to understand the psychological communication processes experienced by crossdressing cosplayers as they form their self-concept, particularly in social interactions and community acceptance, as well as the personal dynamics that emerge through the practice of crossdressing cosplay.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive method to thoroughly examine how communication psychology shapes self-concepts among crossdressing cosplayers in Indonesia. Qualitative research is a scientific approach aimed at deeply understanding social phenomena (Rafaelino et al., 2025). The informants in this study consisted of three individuals who were active crossdressing cosplayers in major Indonesian cities. They were selected using purposive sampling techniques, with criteria including active community involvement, consistent cross-dressing practices, and willingness to share their identity experiences reflectively.

Data collection techniques included semi-structured in-depth interviews, participatory observation in both offline and online spaces, and a literature review encompassing works related to self-concept, gender, cosplay, and communication psychology. Data were analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) model, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing/verifying conclusions. Data reduction was carried out to filter relevant information, presentation was done thematically, and conclusions were drawn through consistently recurring patterns of meaning across data and theory. The research also paid close attention to research ethics, such as informed consent, confidentiality of informants' identities, and an empathetic approach,

considering the sensitivity of the topic regarding gender expression within Indonesian culture.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to understand how the process of communication psychology plays a role in the formation of self-concept in individuals who practice crossdressing cosplay in Indonesia. Crossdressing is the act of wearing clothing typically associated with the opposite gender and is usually carried out for emotional satisfaction, self-expression, or aesthetic purposes. It is not always related to sexual orientation or the desire to change one's gender identity (Anastasya Putri et al., 2024; Haikal et al., 2024).

Through a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews with informants who are active in the cosplay community, along with observations of their online activities on social media, it was found that the formation of self-concept occurs in a complex way through processes of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and digital-mediated communication. This entire process shows a strong connection with self-concept theory and the basic principles of communication psychology. The study resulted in three main findings: (1) Self-Concept as a Result of Intrapersonal Communication, (2) Interpersonal Communication and Social Validation, (3) Digital Media and Externalization of Identity, and (4) Cultural Conflict and Social Resistance towards Cross-Gender Expression. Thus, the results of this study provide a new perspective on the phenomenon and process of Communication Psychology in constructing the Self-Concept of Crossdressing Cosplayers.

Figure. 1. Crossdressing Cosplayers (informants)

(a) (b) (c)

(a). Female cosplayer impersonating Monkey D. Luffy (male) from the anime "One Piece."
(b) Male cosplayer impersonating the character "Bronya" (female) from the anime game Honkai: Star Rail.
(c) Male cosplayer impersonating "Anya Forger" (female) from the anime Spy x Family.

Source: Researcher's Analysis, 2025

a. Self-Concept as the Result of Intrapersonal Communication

Initial findings show that cross-dressing cosplay serves as a medium for individuals to explore and negotiate their ideal self-concept. All informants experienced intense forms of intrapersonal communication, such as self-reflection, internal dialogue, and emotional assessment of the gender roles they expressed through cosplay characters. Intrapersonal communication, the process of communicating with oneself, forms the basis of effective communication with others, and shapes one's self-concept (Kustiawan et al., 2022; Rapiadi & Kasrah, 2024). Previous research also mentions that an individual's self-concept can be shaped through interpersonal communication and social involvement (Lubis & Bonifasius S, 2019). In this context, individuals shape their self-concept as a result of a subjective perception of themselves, which is then compared to their ideal self or desired self-image. When informants wear costumes of characters of different genders, they feel more "connected" to their authentic side, which has been held back by social norms.

> *"...Cosplay crossdressing made me realize that I have a side of myself that I never show in everyday life. When I co-play, I can become a different person—more confident, more attentive to my appearance, and more free to express myself. I have come to understand that I can look attractive if I make an effort. This has helped me get to know other sides of myself that I might have ignored before..." (Interview Result, 2025)*

Interview results showed that the informants experienced a strong internal dialogue before and during their crossdressing cosplay activities. This process reflects the workings of intrapersonal communication, where individuals negotiate their identity between their actual self-image and their ideal self-image. Informants revealed that wearing costumes of characters with a different gender gives them "a chance to be themselves without social burdens." In many cases, the characters they choose have personalities, expressions, and values that match the self-image they envision but find difficult to express in daily life due to the limitations of social norms.

In communication psychology, this process is part of intrapersonal communication, which takes place within the individual, including self-awareness, self-appraisal, and emotional regulation. The practice of crossdressing cosplay is not just an aesthetic act, but also a communicative response to the psychological need for expression and identity validation. This proves that communication is not merely about transmitting messages outward, but also a mechanism for constructing meaning within ourselves, serving to organize personal identity both symbolically and narratively.

This phenomenon aligns with the concept of self-concept in communication psychology, which emphasizes that self-perception is formed through personal experiences and reflection on social feedback. In this context, costumes have become symbolic media that help individuals clarify their identities. The process of enclothed cognition, namely, the influence of costumes on feelings and

behavior, is also prominently observed. Informants experienced increased self-confidence, emotional freedom, and clarity of roles when wearing costumes, showing that cross-dressing cosplay has significant psychological and communicative functions in the development of self-concept.

b. Interpersonal Communication and Social Validation

Interpersonal communication, especially within cosplay communities, serves as a social mirror that helps individuals recognize and reinforce their self-image. Community involvement has a significant impact on the formation of positive self-identity through processes of imitation and group impression (Lalitya P & Indrayani, 2019; Malafitri et al., 2020). This is further supported by previous research, which mentions that communities can shape their members' self-concept in all physiological, spiritual, social, intellectual, and anthropological aspects (Apriyanti et al., 2022). The informants admitted that support and acceptance from fellow cosplayers provided significant emotional encouragement for their self-confidence and self-acceptance. In theory, self-concept is formed from individuals' perceptions of how others perceive and respond to themselves.

> *"…as for my friends, it's different. They tend to be relaxed, and some are really entertained to see my cosplay. Some don't really care either, because they know I'm just having fun, but I get good support in this cosplay community, so I can keep going…" (Interview Result, 2025)*

These interview results show that cosplay communities play an important role as arenas of social validation in the formation of self-concept. Through interpersonal interactions within the community, both directly at events and through conversations on social media, informants receive social feedback that shapes their self-perception. The importance of the cosplay community lies in its function as a relatively safe and supportive social space. Interpersonal communication within the community, whether directly at events or through online conversations, becomes a key factor in strengthening or weakening the self-concept of cross-dressing participants. Informants stated that interactions with fellow cosplayers helped them feel accepted and understood. This validation not only increased their self-confidence but also reduced their anxiety about rejection from the outside environment.

The social support received through direct and online interactions creates a sense of security to express oneself while reducing psychological burdens caused by external stigma. In the context of communication psychology, interpersonal communication functions as a tool for exchanging symbols, meanings, and emotions, which not only influences social relationships but also personal identity. When social response is positive, the perceived self approaches the ideal self, thereby increasing individual self-concept stability.

c. Digital Media and the Externalization of Identity

Another important aspect in the development of cross-dressing cosplayers' self-concepts is the role of social media as a space for public communication. Informants actively use platforms such as Instagram and TikTok to showcase character visuals, share personal narratives, and construct an online persona. In this space, the concept of symbolic communication becomes tangible, and costumes, poses, captions, and interactions serve as symbolic representations of the identity being built.

> *"..In my opinion, communities and social media play an important role. Even though my circle is not that big, the friends I know are quite supportive. Some give positive feedback, some offer suggestions, and others say that my cosplay is cute. All of that really motivated me to keep going. It feels like there's a place where I can be accepted just as I am, without having to explain too much..." (Interview Result, 2025)*

These interview results demonstrate the role of social media as a platform for self-actualization and identity management. The informants used platforms such as Instagram and TikTok as spaces for public communication to construct and affirm their desired identities they want to express. This is supported by previous studies stating that social media platforms, such as Twitter, enable limitless self-representation and self-expression, influenced by platform features and their fast-paced nature (Aisha & Bahalwan, 2024). The crucial role of social media as a medium for externalizing and strengthening identity goes beyond just displaying cosplay photos or videos; it also facilitates the construction of a chosen identity narrative.

In self-concept theory, this online representation is a form of visual and narrative self-actualization. Individuals have control over how they wish to be seen (desired self-image) and process feedback from their audiences as material for identity reflection. On the other hand, from a communication psychology perspective, digital media are not just passive media, but rather part of a communication ecosystem that activates emotional connections and self-perceptions. Interactions in the form of comments, likes, or private messages can provide feedback that can strengthen or even shift an individual's self-perception. This aligns with previous research, which found that the motivation to express oneself and the emotional satisfaction gained from social interactions are important drivers (Wahyuni & Komara, 2023).

d. Cultural Conflict and Social Resistance Against Cross-Gender Expression

One of the most prominent dimensions in the research findings was the conflict between cross-gender expression in cosplay and conservative local cultural values. In some cases, informants experienced pressure from family, friends, and even work environments because their cosplay activities were considered to violate traditional gender norms. In Indonesian society, which still

strongly upholds hegemonic masculinity and gender binarism, crossdressing practices are often perceived as a threat to moral stability and heteronormative national identity.

"…Honestly, my family doesn't accept it; they have a lot of reasons, ranging from social perceptions, family values, religion, and so on…" (Interview Result, 2025)

These interview results show that the informants described a tension between their personally felt identities and societal expectations regarding gender roles. In intrapersonal communication, crossdressing cosplayers actively process feelings of alienation, social rejection, and anxiety regarding stigma. This reflective process indicates that their self-concept is shaped not only through internal narrative but also as a reaction to a social environment that does not fully accept cross-gender expression. In cosplay, especially for crossdressing cosplayers, individuals often face social stigma from those around them. Therefore, these crossdressing cosplayers continue to express themselves but do not adopt a defensive attitude towards others, which aligns with the principles of assertive communication. Assertive communication is a skill that involves attitudes, behaviors, or styles fundamental to individuals (Tiara & Wininda Qusnul Khotimah, 2023).

This finding reinforces the argument in communication psychology that identity communication never occurs in a vacuum. Every act of self-expression is colored by ideology, power, and normative control. The symbolic communication enacted by cosplayers—through the visualization of feminine characters by men or vice versa—can be seen as a form of resistance discourse or a counter-narrative to the dominance of traditional gender norms. Thus, beyond being a personal expression, crossdressing cosplay also encompasses political and cultural dimensions that challenge the singular narrative of what is considered "normal.".

4. CONCLUSION

This study finds that crossdressing cosplay practices in Indonesia are not only a form of artistic expression but also serve as a communicative mechanism to build and negotiate self-concept amid normative cultural pressures. Through the lens of communication psychology, those engaged in these activities use intrapersonal communication to reconstruct their ideal self-image, which is then tested and strengthened through interpersonal communication within their communities, as well as public communication via digital media. Crossdressing becomes a symbolic space for actualizing identities that are otherwise unaccommodated by dominant gender norms. These findings confirm that self-concept is not a static entity, but rather the result of complex social interactions, full of resistance and adaptive strategies influenced by sociocultural dynamics and communication technologies.

However, this study has limitations in terms of methodological aspects and the scope of its social context. The limited number of informants and the diversity of socio-cultural backgrounds not yet representing the full range of cross-dressing practices in Indonesia pose challenges to generalizing the findings. Furthermore, owing to the sensitivity of topics related to gender identity, some informants expressed caution when openly describing their experiences. Therefore, future research should use a mixed-methods approach to bridge the depth of qualitative data with quantitative accuracy and involve participants from regions with higher levels of cultural conservatism. Further studies should focus on the analyses of social media discourse and the construction of cosplayers' visual identities as forms of cultural resistance in digital spaces. This is not only relevant to expanding theories of communication psychology and self-concept but is also important for the development of more inclusive public policies toward alternative identity expression.

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