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Fandom in comic-con: Cosplay tourists' interaction and emotional solidarity

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ABSTRACT

The fan experience, a fast growing sub-culture at comic conventions, has yet to be considered in tourism literature. Integrating research on expectancy violations theory, social identity theory (SIT), and emotional solidarity, this study investigates how positive and negative tourist-to-tourist (T2T) interactions are influenced by cosplayer identity and lead to emotional solidarity at comic conventions. Findings indicate that cosplayer identity has a significant positive effect on their positive T2T which in turn affects their emotional solidarity, while leaving negative T2T unaffected. Furthermore, fascination as important environmental cues was found as a moderator between T2T interaction and emotional solidarity. This study offers insight on how to enhance the fan experience as a marketing tool.

Notes on contributors

Juan Tang: conceptual framework, data curation and paper writing. **Baoyi Song:** first draft writing and data analysis. **Yingchuan Wang:** paper writing and paper editing.

1. Introduction

Developing from merely a childhood entertainment to a more adult-oriented platform with diverse experiences, the animation industry has recently been expanding across both developed and developing countries. With a global market of 372.44 billion US dollars in 2021, this industry is predicted to surge to 587.1 billion US dollars by 2030 (Precedence research, n.d.). Its role as an important sector in cultural and creative economic industry is also being recognized and supported by many governments global-wide. As the animation industry develops, the volume of fans is expanding. Comic conventions (mostly shortened to Comic-Cons) are an important popular cultural phenomenon for fans to gather, even from far away, and celebrate their fandom, generating billions of dollars for the host city (Salkowitz, 2019).

So far, tourism literature has rarely considered Comic-Cons as a tourism space to explore fan tourists' experience, to the best of authors' knowledge. Fandom as a social cultural phenomenon receives extensive attention from media, culture and art disciplines including anime fans and cosplayers (Yamato, 2016). There is an emerging stream of tourism literature examining various fans experience, such as music fans in festivals (Kinnunen, Honkanen, & Luonila, 2021), e-sport tourists at in-person events (Thompson, Taheri, & Scheuring, 2022), or pop culture fans who created or re-invent sacred events or places to commemorate some mixed-media work or relive some plots in movie (Jang, 2021; Milazzo & Santos, 2022). Recent tourism literature has begun to investigate anime fans' tourism experience, but only in ordinary locations or places which lean towards "film tourism" (Ono et al., 2020). Comic-Cons represents "a tremendous laboratory for the study of popular culture" (Pustz, 2014, p. 8). Currently, quite a limited tourism literature illustrated the power of pop culture by a swift tap on Comic-Con (e.g., Reichenberger, 2019). Cosplayer tourists' experience in Comic-Con warrants proper academic attention.

The fans' collective presence and interaction is "central to fanship" when consuming a shared imaginary space as a fan community (Milazzo & Santos, 2022, p. 6). Their partaking of interactive environments such as anime shows, or events allows them to express their identity when mimicking some characters. Many cosplay tourists are drawn to this kind of events to travel and cosplay various characters from cartoons, films or video games. Unfortunately, not all interactions in Comic-Con meet the expectation of cosplay tourists. Besides positive tourist-to-tourist interaction (positive T2T), negative tourist-to-tourist interaction (negative T2T) also occurs in multiple forms, such as chaos

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among spectators at football games, music fans riots and fights (Sugiana & Hafiar, 2018), which is similar to the uncivilized behavior of tourists (Adam, Taale, & Adongo, 2020). For instance, recent news about a conflict in the 27th Shanghai Comicup, an influential animation event in China, went viral. The conflict was started by a cosplayer making sexual gestures for photographers in the exhibition hall. Her action aroused the anger of some peer participants because she was accused of undermining the cosplayer identity and destroying the reputation of the fan community (Sina News, 26 July 2020).

Cosplay tourists' interaction with each other in the Comic-Con might be sharply different from the interaction with locals in public space outdoors, where they join together to celebrate their own sub-culture by exploring fiction and subverting reality (Lamerichs, 2011; Zhou, 2016). Despite some insinuations such as "transvestites" or "troubled teenagers" (Ducroquet & Jouny-Rivier, 2016), they were also labelled as creative and ingenious by the pubic (Abad-Santos, 2015). It is important to note that these might represent 'stereotype' from outsiders or non-cosplayers. In short, the probably consistent expectation held by publics might not guide cosplayers' interaction with each other in a confined space like Comic-Con. That said, we argue that cosplay tourists' interactions in Comic-Con could be either positive or negative that are more likely to be underpinned by their expectancy towards each other on an intra-group level (cosplayer to cosplayer), not by the expectancy from inter-group level (cosplayer to non-cosplayer).

Expectancy violation theory (EVT) posits that people hold pre-interaction expectation with others. Expectancy violation or otherwise confirmation leads to positive or negative interactive behaviour and psychological outcome (Burgoon, Poire, & A, 1993; Tang, 2022). This suggests that cosplayers' positive interaction along with negative one is likely to (de)construct emotional bonds while sharing this esoteric culture. Reichenberger and Smith (2020) notes the urgency and importance of researching fan-based experiences within tourism spaces. Being mostly employed in communication, media and business (e.g., Tang, 2022; Wayne, Sun, Kluemper, Cheung, & Ubaka, 2022), there is a dearth of tourism literature that ever applied EVT to offer insights of cosplayers' interaction.

The interaction among cosplayers is crucial to shape the emotional state of themselves and their peers. Another well-established theory, social identity theory (SIT) ascertains that an individual has a fundamental need to belong to a self-selected or labelled group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory is beneficial to understand individuals' attitudes towards self and others in group relationships (Hogg, Abrams, & Brewer, 2017; Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Many prior studies have suggested that tourists' interaction can affect their emotional solidarity (Joo & Woosnam, 2020). Regretfully, as much as the fundamental premise of this theory points to "shared beliefs" in ritual-like practices (Durkheim[1915], 1997), this theory is under-researched when it comes to fandom when fans' performances highly feature ritual-like practices (Jang, 2020).

Comic-Cons evoke and enhance fans' fantasy through its playful and imaginative setting (Osmud, Liu, & Brittany, 2012). The impact of environmental factors on people's psychology and mental states has been extensively documented in marketing, therapy, and product/service design. Fascination, as an essential element of restorative environments, has some effect on alleviating the effects of people's negative interactions (Kaplan, 1995). It can be found from not only the natural environment, but also artificial environments or urban destination in various experiences, including gambling in a casino (e.g., Kaplan, 1995; Liu, Wang, Huang, & Chen, 2017). In recognizing the unique environment of the Comic-Con, it is important to consider the role of fascination and examine its effect on cosplay tourists' behavioural and emotional state.

To fill the above-mentioned gaps, this study intends to adopt a relatively holistic perspective to propose a conceptual framework, integrating cosplay tourist identity at the ideological level (human to membership), their T2T interaction at a behavioural level (human to human), fascination at an environmental level (human to environment), and their emotional solidarity at an emotional level. This study aims to investigate the identity of cosplay tourists in relevance to their in-situ behaviors and emotions. Further, by viewing fascination as environmental cues that triggers involuntary attention, this study further reveals whether fascination can moderate the relationship between their interaction and emotional solidarity.

This study can help extend the fan tourism literature from a holistic perspective, by addressing the fragmented nature of fan research in tourism literature (Gyimóthy, Lundberg, Lindström, Lexhagen, & Larson, 2015). It also fills the void about cosplayers' interaction in Comic-Con as tourism space in particular. Important to note is this study further advances emotional solidarity and social identity theory to fan-based community when accentuate their sense of belonging and strong emotional connectedness (Chadborn, Edwards, & Reysen, 2018). Findings of this study may also contribute to practical implications for government, fandom marketers and Comic-Con communities.

2. Literature review

2.1. Expectancy violations theory (EVT)

A well-structured framework of interpersonal communication theory, the EVT (Burgoon & Hale, 1988) was adopted to bring clarity of how cosplayers' interaction with each in Comic-Con can influence their emotional solidarity when guided by cosplayer identity. EVT was initially formulated to account for the communicative effects during interpersonal and group interaction from non-verbal to all-inclusive communicative violations. The scope and utility of EVT has been successfully applied from media and computer science discipline, examining users' perception and behavior online such as being unfriended on Facebook (Bevan, Ang, & Fearns, 2014), and receiving likes or comments on social media (Tang, 2022). More recently, it was commissioned in organization behavior (OB) to explain the manager-employee relationship (Wayne et al., 2022), co-worker's relationship (Liu, Zheng, Ni, & Harms, 2022), and customers' attitudes towards organization about their corporate social responsibility (CSR). Despite these, there are still limited studies in tourism literature which integrated this theory to examine tourists' interaction.

EVT posits that people hold consistent expectation before interaction with others. This expectation is violated during interaction when an act is perceived as deviation from anticipated ones (Afifi & Metts, 1998). Conversely, if the anticipated expectation is confirmed, a positive interaction will be triggered. Our study argues that cosplay tourists expect to bond with each other and share their common identity. As stated, the expectancy violation is context specific (Tang, 2022). Within the confined environment, the whole exhibition venue and its surroundings is a stage for cosplayers to perform and enjoy interacting with others (Jouny-Rivier & Ducroquet, 2017). Given this, this study theorizes certain behaviour as negative which damage their bonding and celebration, while some behaviour as positive which help maintain harmonious and friendly rapport and contributes to the fandom and strengthen their connectedness.

Three factors are stressed in these communication expectations: communicator characteristics, relational characteristics, and context (Burgoon, Beutler, et al., 1993). We argue that cosplayer identity represents essential communicator characteristics. While participating in a Comic-Con, cosplayers manage a network of complex interpersonal relationships established across shared spaces. Next, relationships are built upon status or trust. Interaction with peers to establish relationships can make emotional bonds during the interactions at a Comic-Con. Finally, context characteristics dictate the expectations of a given encounter that encompasses both environment and interaction characteristics. Through fascination provided by the environment of Comic-Con, this interaction occurs among fans, photographers and interested bystanders. The following sections will start with

communicator characteristics in terms of cosplayer identity, followed by interaction characteristics, tourist-to-tourist interaction (T2T) and fascination with the environment as context variable. Finally, emotional solidarity will be discussed as a communication outcome from how cosplayers interpret and value their interaction at a Comic-Con.

2.2. Cosplayer identity: A social identity theory perspective

Social identity theory (SIT) is one of the most influential identity theories (e.g., Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999; Hogg, Hornsey, 2008; Terry, & White, 1995). It studies how group membership leads to individuals sharing common characteristics and values on their behaviour (Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In other words, social identity theory (SIT) focuses on group membership qualification based on individuals' self-perception and self-categorization (Lock & Heere, 2017) to enhance their identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Three components are included into SIT: the cognitive component (self--categorization), the evaluative component (self-esteem), and the emotional component (commitment to a group) (Ellemers et al., 1999; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Based on the application of SIT to backpacker identity by Chen, Zhao, and Huang (2020), this study identified and measured cosplayers' desire to establish and maintain their relationships to this particular social group. Cosplay tourists distinguish themselves from the general tourists according to tangible criteria, like wearing costumes to cosplay a specific character. Existing research has focused mainly on the issues related to the phenomenon of cosplay as a kind of culture, but not on the perspective of cosplayer identity. This study is thus significant in exploring the identity of cosplayers.

2.3. Tourist to tourist interaction

Comic-Cons are a special setting for cosplayers. Their interaction at Comic-Cons can be unique for those cosplayers performing themselves as specific characters. The prescribing or proscribing of certain interactions has been expected in the setting of Comic-Con. Many studies have verified that interacting with others to establish relationships is the main purpose of certain forms of tourism such as backpacking, cruises and group tours (Huang & Hsu, 2010). Several researchers have suggested that festival tourism is a type of T2T interaction (Sun, Wu, Li, & Dai, 2019). Comic-Con is similar to festival tourism, so interaction represents a crucial motivation for attendees to participate.

Tourist-to-tourist (T2T) interaction is originally derived from the theory of customer-to-customer (C2C) interaction (Rahman, Karpen, Reid, & Yuksel, 2015). Applied in the tourism field, intra-group interactions among tourists commonly occur while traveling (Joo & Woosnam, 2020; Koth, Field, & Clark, 1992; Sorensen, 2003) apart from inter-group interactions between tourist and host (Huang & Hsu, 2010). Tourists' interactions involve various social and physical elements (Huang & Hsu, 2009; Pearce, 2005). Huang and Hsu (2010) emphasize the importance of T2T interaction for enhancing the whole tourist experience. This is particularly typical in a confined environment such as a coach, that segregates the tour group from outside world (Heinonen, Jaakkola, & Neganova, 2018; Levy, 2010; Torres, 2015). Moreover, previous research has confirmed the influence of T2T interactions in event, festival and exhibition tourism (Chang, Kim, & Kim, 2018; Zgolli & Zaiem, 2017).

Similarly, Comic-Cons are also a confined environment providing cosplay tourists a shared space or activities simultaneously (Venter & Erasmus, 2021). That is, Comic-Cons are the most distinctive place for cosplay tourists to interact and further develop emotional connection.

2.4. Emotional solidarity and fandom

Originating from sociology, the term "emotional solidarity" was coined to explain an affective bond or emotional attachment between individuals or groups (Woosnam & Aleshinloye, 2015; Woosnam, Norman, & Ying, 2009). In tourism context, emotional solidarity is usually used to explain the interaction between residents and tourists (inter--group) (e.g., An, Jiang, Woosnam, & Eck, 2022; Joo, Woosnam, Lee, & Lee, 2020) or between tourists (intra-group) (e.g., Mossberg, 2007; Rihova, Buhalis, Moital, & Gouthro, 2015). Forming emotional bonds could be easier in the setting of special interest tourism as tourists expect to connect with others (Joo et al., 2020), which thus becomes a pull factor for many tourists (Huang & Hsu, 2010; Murphy, 2001).

The fan experience is generated when fans travelled to live events and interact with fellow fans under a shared identity (Thompson et al., 2022). Although fandom can be experienced virtually, it is never more powerful than physical gathering in-person (Reichenberger & Smith, 2020). Fandom by its very nature is characterized by emotional closeness and connectedness between fans (Chadborn et al., 2018). And seeking socialization with likeminded people through interactive and participatory experience is embedded in the core significance of fandom (Ono et al., 2020).

2.5. Fascination as environmental cues

Fascination is an essential concept in Attention Restoration Theory (ART) featuring involuntary attention in a restorative environment (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). When an environment is devised to pursue personal interest out of curiosity and explore the environment, people are fascinated with effortless attention (Kaplan, 1995). Unlike voluntary attention which leads to attentional fatigue, fascination as an alternative attention mode can free people from this fatigue and release mental capability thus leading to restoration (Laumann, Gorling, & Stormark, 2001). Fascinating environments come from various sources at different levels, ranging from macro-environments such as nature or urban destinations (Lehto, 2013), or micro-environments like the casino as commercial or leisure setting (Rosenbaum & Wong, 2015). The notion of fascination is used to measure the restorative property of an environment, or to what extent an environmental trait can contribute to a restorative state (Liu et al., 2017).

Comic-Cons provide a fascinating setting for cosplayers and other attendees to find engrossing objects and immerse themselves in. Environmental properties or atmospheric cues are vital in influencing customers' attitude and behaviour in marketing and environmental psychology studies (Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2003; Tomazelli, Broilo, Espartel, & Basso, 2017). Comic-Cons might be a case-in-point, providing an excellent environment for cosplay tourists entering fantasy Land and temperately escape away from the pressures and monotony of daily life (Zhou, 2016).

2.6. Conceptual framework and research hypothesis

EVT posits that a confirmed or violated expectation in interpersonal communication lead to different behaviour and psychological outcome (Burgoon, Poire, & A, 1993; Tang, 2022). Integrating research on expectancy violations theory, social identity theory (SIT), and emotional solidarity theory, a conceptual framework was established, as depicted from Fig. 1. This model links the three factors of communication expectations: communicator characteristics (i.e., cosplayer identity), relationship characteristics (i.e., T2T interaction), context characteristics (i.e., fascination), together with emotional solidarity as communication outcome. Further, the major tenets of fandom theory were considered, which is underpinned by intense emotional and behavioural involvement and interaction (Lee, Bai, & Busser, 2019; Thompson et al., 2022).

Common identity as a social psychology term denotes that the extent to which individuals feel attached to a group can promote favourable perceptions, feelings, attitudes and behaviours (Wit & Kerr, 2002). In this sense, identity has been extensively adopted in various tourism contexts to explore tourists' interaction (e.g., Aleshinloye, Fu, Ribeiro,

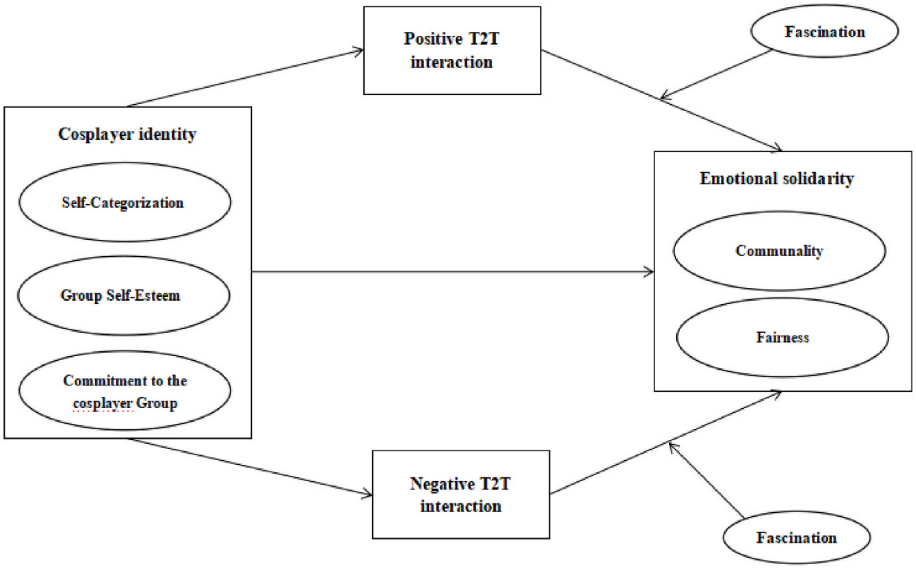

Fig. 1. Research model
Note * : p < 0.05 ** : p < 0.01 *** : p < 0.001.

Woosnam, & Tasci, 2020). Although the relationship between social identity and emotional solidarity received limited substantiation in an explicate way, many studies did note that certain attitudes and emotions can be affected by social identity, such as loyalty, commitment and satisfaction to the group (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010; Harris & Ogbonna, 2008; Zhang, Pearce, & Chen, 2019). Besides the widely accepted notion about customers' behavior can be induced by their identity (e.g., Qu, Cao, Ge, & Liu, 2021), some studies particularly noticed the negative behavior intentions can be mitigated by identity, with high identity spectators maintaining a positive attitude towards their team regardless of the scandal (Chien, Kelly, & Weeks, 2016). The similar relationship was also identified in tourism literature, with tourists' group identity reducing their negative behaviour, e.g., uncivilized behaviors (Zhang et al., 2019). Furthermore, clothing can influence a person's sense of identity and thus guide their behavior, such as school uniforms used to reduce absenteeism (Evans, Kremer, & Ngatia, 2008), or dressing code used to regulate the perceived professionalism in business context (Zhang et al., 2020). In this study, by dressing differently from traditional tourists, it is argued that devoted cosplayers who choose to travel to Comic-Con are assertive of their identity and the norms of the group, thereby increase their emotional closeness, induce more positive T2T, and reduce negative ones. Based on those aforementioned discussion, the following hypothesis were proposed.

Hypothesis 1. At Comic-Cons, cosplayer identity (CI) has a positive effect on emotional solidarity (ES) among cosplay tourists.

Hypothesis 2. At Comic-Cons, cosplayer identity has a positive effect on positive T2T interaction (PTTI).

Hypothesis 3. At Comic-Cons, cosplayer identity has a negative effect on negative T2T interaction (NTTI).

The relationship between behavior and emotional state has been extensively substantiated. For example, getting along with tour members and tour leaders can affect tourists' positive emotions and tour rapport (Chang, Tsaur, Yen, & Lai, 2020). Similarly, tourist value co-creation behavior is positively related to tour leader love, which can enhance the tourist and tour leader relationship (Yen, Tsai, & Han, 2022). For fandom community, it is through interaction that the shared emotional connections can be established (Reichenberger & Smith, 2020). Prior tourism studies have confirmed that tourists' emotional solidarity can be formed by shared beliefs and behaviors during interaction in the destination (Joo et al., 2020). Fandom is particularly marked by intense emotional connectedness (Chadborn et al., 2018). In the study context of Comic-Con, we argue that fans get to bond up with each other through intimate interaction. According to the interpretation-evaluation process in EVT, if the interaction does not meet their expectations and thus goes negative, this will downplay their emotional solidarity. Given these, the following are hypothesized.

Hypothesis 4. At Comic-Cons, positive T2T interaction has a positive effect on emotional solidarity.

Hypothesis 5. At Comic-Cons, negative T2T interaction has a negative effect on emotional solidarity.

Interactions among tourists can be influenced by physical environmental and social environmental factors (Sun et al., 2019). The importance of physical environment in service setting, i.e., in-flight ambient conditions can serve as a moderator in understanding passengers' decision-making process (Han, 2013). Environmental cues or atmospherics such as perceived noise or warm ambience can influence customers' emotional and cognitive states as a moderator (Han, 2013). The study from Jung, Yoo, and Arnold (2017) showed that the perceived service climate of an environment was confirmed to moderate the impact of positive and negative C2C interaction on support from other customers. Fascination is viewed as involuntary attention from restorative environmental cues/properties, or atmospherics in this study. Cosplay tourists participate in Comic-Cons to escape from their routine life (Napier, 2007). While immersed in highly anticipated surroundings, the fascinating stimuli can strengthen the emotional solidarity gained from positive T2T interaction. Conversely, if they ever face negative interaction, fascinating stimuli may serve as a beneficial distraction or stress reliever to mitigate or dilute the possible emotional impact. Based on aforementioned literature, the following hypothesis were put forth.

Hypothesis 6a. Fascination promotes a positive relationship between PTTI and ES, such that the relationship is higher among dyads with weaker fascination, compared to those with higher fascination.

Hypothesis 6b. Fascination buffers the negative relationship between NTTI and ES, such that the relationship is weaker among dyads with higher fascination, compared to those with weaker fascination.

3. Methods

3.1. Measures

This questionnaire had two main sections in addition to some filter questions to screen out local respondents (i.e., "Are you a tourist to Guangzhou") and ensure respondents' recent cosplay experience in Comic-Con (i.e., "Have you attended similar Comic-Cons before while involving cosplaying?"). The first section dealt with the major four constructs of this study: cosplayer identity, T2T interaction, emotional solidarity and fascination. This section was measured by a seven-point Likert scale based on existing literature. Cosplayer identity was adapted from Chen et al. (2020). "Positive T2T interaction" and "negative T2T interaction" were adapted from Luo, Wong, King, Liu, and Huang (2019) and Huang and Hsu (2010). Emotional solidarity was adapted from Joo and Woosnam (2020). Fascination was adapted from Lehto (2013). The wording of the questions was slightly modified to reflect the context of this study. The second section dealt with demographic information about the respondents.

3.2. Sampling procedures and data collection

Judgmental sampling was used in this study. In the first step of the data collection, Guangzhou city was selected. As one of the three major cities in China's convention and exhibition industry, Guangzhou has hosted many famous large-scale exhibitions. The exhibition industry has created huge economic benefits for Guangzhou (Yang, Luo, Li, Zhang, & Hu, 2021), which is one of the most economically-developed cities in China (Wang, 2021). With this in mind, the identity of the exhibition city provides a guarantee for cultural prosperity. This cultural diversity allows many niche culture like cosplay being equally respected and celebrated here, providing an ideal cultural catalyst for Comic-Cons to prosper (Shen, 2017). In the second step of data collection, a sample frame which listed 20 influential Comic-Cons in this city were adopted for further sampling (Nyato, 2021). As an influential professional online platform in the comic industry, Nyato has been continuously profiling the popularity of Comic-Con by presenting the rankings on its home page. Among these, the A-3 Comic-Con was selected based on a comprehensive evaluation of popularity/brand awareness/number of tourists (with reference to the statistics of previous years). In addition, this was also the first large-scale Comic-Con after the COVID-19 lockdowns and was held during a public holiday (Qingming Festival) in China, which led to a large number of cosplay tourists.

Before the main survey, a pilot study was conducted among popular cosplay fan social media (e.g., QQ group, Comic-Con Fan Club, Sina Weibo). A total of 60 valid questionnaires were received from March 28, 2021 to March 30, 2021, yielding satisfactory reliability. The main survey was distributed at four Comic-Con locations where a large number of cosplayers normally gathered, including: exhibition lounge area, the queue for cosplay celebrity autograph, cosplay shooting area and exit area. Attendees in cosplay were approached and briefed about the aim of this study. After obtaining their consent with a filter question to rule out the possibility of local attendees, 244 questionnaires were collected on site, i.e., from April 3, 2021 to April 4, 2021.Then, one of the authors further joined certain online cosplay hobby groups and social platforms. These virtual communities have strict admittance regulation to authenticate fans' identity, such as receiving likes and being retweeted no less than thirty times for their posted cosplay photos. The other 158 questionnaires were retrieved from tourists who had had similar Comic-Con experiences within the past six months. A total of 402 questionnaires were collected, with 37 invalid questionnaires, representing a response rate of 90.8%. The two subsets of data were further compared by T-test to detect any possible bias from two data sources. Findings reveal no significant difference on each construct. So they were merged together for the following data analysis.

3.3. Data analysis

The software SPSS 24.0 and Smart PLS 3.3.3 were applied. PLS SEM (partial least squares structural equation modelling) was adopted in this study for several reasons. Smart PLS is suitable for conducting exploratory research (Gefen, Rigdon, & Straub, 2011). Besides, normality of data distribution and data size are less required. The measurement model is assessed to test internal consistency and reliability by means of composite reliability (CR), factor loading (Hulland, 1999), the convergent validity by average variance extracted (AVE) (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). This study also ensures discriminant validity by cross-loading (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The hypotheses were tested by examining the significance of the path coefficients in the structural model. In addition, to assess the predictive power of the model in terms of inner model evaluation, R^2 and Q^2 were also analyzed.

3.4. Common method variance (CMV)

To avoid risk of CMV, the collected data were tested by Harman's single-factor test. The unrotated exploratory factor analysis extracted 14 factors with Eigenvalues greater than one, and the maximum factor variance interpretation rate was 47.992% (less than 50%, which did not explain most of the variance) (Hair, Tatham, & Anderson, 1998). Therefore, there was no significant CMV biasing the results.

4. Findings

4.1. Profile of respondents

The main participants in the survey were female (61.1%). The majority of respondents were between the ages of 12 and 18 (47.4%) and 19 and 25 years old (40.5%). More than one third had received an education level of junior high school or below (35.5%), and slightly less than one third had a senior high school/technical school (30.2%). More than half of the respondents had had cosplay experience of one to four years (59.6%), and more than three quarters of respondents were loyal cosplay tourists who had attended similar cosplay exhibitions more than six times. Respondents' profiles are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1
General profile of respondents (N = 365).

Profile	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	142	38.9
Female	223	61.1
Age		
Under 12	4	1.1
12-18	173	47.4
19-25	148	40.5
26-30	35	9.6
Above 31	5	1.37
Education		
AMJunior high school or below	38	10.5
Senior high school/technical school	175	47.8
University	131	36.8
Postgraduate and above	21	5.7
Years of cosplay		
Under 1 year	45	12.3
1–4 years	218	59.6
5–8 years	96	26.3
Above 8 years	6	1.75
Number of times join in Comic-Cons		
1–5 times	97	26.6
6–10 times	138	37.8
Above 10 times	130	35.6

Source: collated in this study

4.2. Assessment of measurement model

The adequacy of the model was assessed by measuring the criteria of reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity. The values of both Cronbach's alphas and composite reliability (CR) were above 0.7 (see Table 2), indicating that the measurement model has good reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The factor loadings are greater than 0.7 and all AVE values were above 0.5, thus satisfying the minimum requirements (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017) by indicating convergent validity.

As can be seen from Table 3, the square root of AVE on the diagonal is greater than the corresponding correlation coefficient below the diagonal. This indicates that the measurement model in this study has good discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Meanwhile, the load of each item on its own dimension is higher than the cross-loadings of other dimensions. The results show that discriminant validity between all the dimensions based on the cross loading criterion is obtained (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In conclusion, the results exhibit satisfactory discriminant validity between all the latent variables in the model.

4.3. Assessment of structural model

After confirming reliability and validity, the next step is to examine the model's capabilities of predictive and explanatory power (Hair et al., 2017). Evaluation of the structural model was conducted with Q^2, R^2, goodness-of-fit and path coefficients. Smart PLS3.3.3 was used for data analysis of the model. Tenenhaus, Vinzi, Chatelin, and Lauro (2005) proposed that a goodness of fit index (GFI) could be used to evaluate model fit. The goodness of fit value of the model in this study was 0.552. According to Cudeck and Browne (1992), $GFI_{small} = 0.1$, $GFI_{medium} = 0.25$, $GFI_{large} = 0.36$. Thus, the model has a good fit.

Meanwhile, the values of R^2 as a criterion of predictive accuracy for the three endogenous latent variables of positive T2T interaction, negative T2T interaction and emotional solidarity, are 0.184, 0.007 and 0.817. In SEM models, Q^2 values greater than zero for a reflective endogenous construct indicate the path model's predictive relevance for that construct (Hair, Sarstedt, Hopkins, & Kuppelwieser, 2014). Q^2 in our study are all above the threshold of 0, ranging from 0.003 to 0.460.

4.4. Hypotheses testing

In order to judge whether the path is established, bootstrapping was used to sample 5000 times (two-tailed) from the original sample. T-value and P-values of path coefficients between variables were obtained to determine whether the hypothesis is supported. Specific path analysis and hypothesis results are shown in Fig. 2 and Table 4:

Fig. 2 shows the results of structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis. The results indicate that cosplayer identity (CI) has a significant positive effect on emotional solidarity (ES) ($\beta = 0.485$, p-value$<$ 0.001); CI has significantly positive effect on positive T2T interaction (PTTI) ($\beta = -0.429$, p-value$<$ 0.001); PTTI has significantly positive effect on ES ($\beta = 0.493$, p-value$<$ 0.001); NTTI has negative effect on ES ($\beta = -0.075$, p-value$<$ 0.05). Thus, Hypotheses 1, 2, 4 and 5 are supported. Hypothesis 3 is not supported when CI is not found to be a significant effect on NTTI ($\beta = -0.082$, p-value = 0.263).

Results also showed that interaction between PTTI and FAS significantly predicted ES (p-value$<$ 0.001) and interaction between NTTI and FAS significantly predicted ES (p-value$<$ 0.01). The result supported both H6a and H6b.

5. Discussion

The search for comradery or finding one's tribe is the essence behind the longstanding appeal of fan communities like Comic-Con (Salkowitz, 2019). This research examined cosplay tourists' emotional solidarity in relation to how they feel about their fandom, i.e., cosplayer identity, and

Table 2
Mean, standard deviation, factor loadings and reliability.

	Measured Item	Mean	S.D.	Factor loading
SC	Self-categorization (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.928 CR = 0.945)			
SC1	I am a typical cosplayer	4.98	1.707	0.853
SC2	Everyone calls me a cosplayer	4.57	1.959	0.882
SC3	I am a cosplayer, not a mass tourist	5.05	1.786	0.886
SC4	Being a cosplayer is an important part of my personal identity/status	4.64	1.868	0.909
SC5	I have a strong sense of belonging to cosplayers	4.83	1.818	0.869
GS	**Group self-evaluation/group self-value (Cronbach's Alpha= 0.950 CR=0.958)**			
GS1	cosplayers have a unique way of traveling	5.41	1.624	0.782
GS2	cosplayers have a unique travel culture	5.47	1.429	0.840
GS3	cosplayers have many unique personality traits	5.67	1.489	0.812
GS4	cosplay (being a cosplayer) strengthens my sense of self-identity	5.36	1.759	0.879
GS5	cosplay (being a cosplayer) is important to my personal growth	5.41	1.641	0.871
GS6	cosplay (being a cosplayer) is important in my life transition	5.32	1.642	0.846
GS7	cosplay (being a cosplayer) is beneficial to individual's growth and development	5.49	1.396	0.908
GS8	cosplay (being a cosplayer) contributes to the development of the destination community	5.06	1.624	0.858
GS9	cosplay (being a cosplayer) promotes the development of whole society	4.88	1.571	0.818
CCG	**Commitment to the cosplay group (Cronbach's Alpha= 0.928 CR=0.954)**			
CCG1	I will continue to be a cosplayer in the future	5.44	1.759	0.948
CCG2	I will choose to cosplay to actualize personal growth in the future	5.2	1.912	0.943
CCG3	I will continue to do things that are beneficial to destination and social development in the future	5.28	1.648	0.913
PTTI	**Positive T2T interaction (Cronbach's Alpha= 0.882 CR=0.927)**			
PTTI 1	My interaction with other cosplay tourists was harmonious.	6.06	1.016	0.922
PTTI2	My interaction with other cosplay tourists was friendly.	6.05	0.99	0.924
PTTI3	My interaction with other cosplay tourists was cooperative.	5.84	1.127	0.851
NTTI	**Negative T2T interaction (Cronbach's Alpha= 0.919 CR=0.942)**			
NTTI1	I do not feel good when other cosplay tourists making loud noise	5.62	1.779	0.910
NTTI2	My experience is affected by the crowing environment of Comic-Con	5.27	1.815	0.940
NTTI3	I do not like other cosplay tourists interrupting the experience I received in Comic-Con	4.81	1.882	0.821
NTTI4	My emotion is influenced when other cosplay tourists do not follow the rules	5.83	1.633	0.898
CM	**Communality (Cronbach's Alpha= 0.934 CR=0.944)**			
CM1	I feel affection towards other cosplay tourists	5.26	1.525	0.776
CM2	I feel close to other cosplay tourists	5.05	1.622	0.830
CM3	I have a lot common with other cosplay tourists	4.88	1.664	0.816
CM4	I will be proud to be welcomed as a fellow cosplay tourist	5.93	1.34	0.711
CM5	I understand other cosplay tourists	4.78	1.586	0.830
CM6	I expect to make friends with other cosplay tourists	5.79	1.445	0.841
CM7	I identify with other cosplay tourists	5.73	1.211	0.788
CM8	I share similar views with other cosplay tourists	5.22	1.481	0.864
CM9	I feel the community will benefit from having us (me and other cosplay tourists) in my destination	5.61	1.421	0.703
CM10	I can trust other cosplay tourists	5.1	1.51	0.767
FN	**Fairness (Cronbach's Alpha= 0.855 CR=0.912)**			

(*continued on next page*)

Table 2 (*continued*)

	Measured Item	Mean	S.D.	Factor loading
FN1	I will treat other cosplay tourists fairly	5.95	1.191	0.876
FN2	I plan to get along with other cosplay tourists	5.95	1.141	0.872
FN3	I have respect for other cosplay tourists	6.26	0.987	0.892
FAS	**Fascination (Cronbach's Alpha= 0.915 CR=0.936)**			
FAS1	For me, visiting Comic-Con was a captivating experience	5.74	1.168	0.864
FAS2	My attention is drawn to many interesting things about the Comic-Con	5.89	1.067	0.864
FAS3	There was much to explore and discover at the Comic-Con	5.91	1.098	0.815
FAS4	I found the Comic-Con fascinating	5.83	1.05	0.895
FAS5	Being at the Comic-Con makes me wonder about many things	5.53	1.279	0.849

Source: collated in this study

how they interact with each other, i.e., positive and negative T2T, as well as to what extent they are involuntarily drawn to the environment, i.e., fascination. This conceptual model was empirically confirmed with proper capabilities of predictive and explanatory power.

The findings revealed that cosplayer identity is crucial to understand both their behavioural interactions and emotional state, which echoes the significance of common identity in increasing group members' favourable attitudes and behavioural outcomes (Aleshinloye et al., 2020; Van Veelen, Otten, Cadinu, & Hansen, 2016). H1 and H2 confirms a promising avenue for academic research on fandom, suggesting that fan's identity is central to unpack this phenomenon. It is in exactly the same spirit of "friendship talk as identity work" (Anthony & McCabe, 2015, p. 64), that cosplayers with similar identity gather and celebrate in Comic-Con. The relationship between cosplayer identity and positive T2T interaction was proven to be significantly positive. People derive self-esteem from their group membership and adopt behaviors consistent with the norms associated with that particular group identity (Shih, Pittinsky, & Trahan, 2006). As Agarwal, Busby, and Huang (2018) argued, dedicated fans actively seek positive interactions with those who had the same interest. Taken together, these results can be interpreted that cosplay tourists shared similar identity, they are more prone to positively interact with others and elicit their emotions at a harmonious and friendly Comic-Con.

Surprisingly, the relationship between cosplayer identity and negative T2T interaction was not confirmed in this study, with H3 rejected. This finding suggests that cosplayer identity cannot serve as a precursor to inhibiting the occurrence of negative behaviour. This is not consistent with some studies which support the negative influence of social identity on negative behaviour such as sports fan (e.g., Lock & Heere, 2017). A plausible explanation is that the cosplay identity is not enough to offset the bad mood experienced from peers. Being exposed to negative interaction with peers, cosplay tourists are not simply tolerant or

Table 4
Results of hypotheses testing.

Hypothesis		Coefficient	P-value	Test results
H1	CI→ES	0.485	0.000	Supported
H2	CI→PTTI	0.429	0.000	Supported
H3	CI→NTTI	−0.082	0.250	Not Supported
H4	PTTI→ES	0.493	0.000	Supported
H5	NTTI→ES	−0.075	0.030	Supported
H6a	PTTI × FAS→ES	0.108	0.000	Supported
H6b	NTTI × FAS→ES	0.082	0.006	Supported

FAS - fascination; CI – cosplayer identity; ES – emotional solidarity.
PTTI – positive T2T interaction; NTTI – negative T2T interaction.

Table 3
Validity and latent variable correlations.

Dimension	AVE	SC	CCG	CM	FN	FAS	GS	NTTI	PTTI
SC	0.775	***0.880***							
CCG	0.874	0.765	***0.935***						
CM	0.631	0.630	0.781	***0.794***					
FN	0.775	0.276	0.418	0.656	***0.880***				
FAS	0.746	0.514	0.603	0.739	0.486	***0.864***			
GS	0.717	0.725	0.798	0.806	0.476	0.721	***0.847***		
NTTI	0.803	−0.043	−0.047	−0.169	−0.16	−0.115	−0.072	***0.896***	
PTTI	0.809	0.237	0.386	0.584	0.713	0.588	0.457	−0.113	***0.900***

Note: The bold : The square root of AVE.
AVE = average variance extracted; CR = construct reliability; SC = Self-categorization; GS = Group self-evaluation/group self-value; CCG = Commitment to the cosplay group; CM = communality; FN = fairness; PTTI = positive tourist-to-tourist interaction; NTTI = negative tourist-to-tourist interaction.

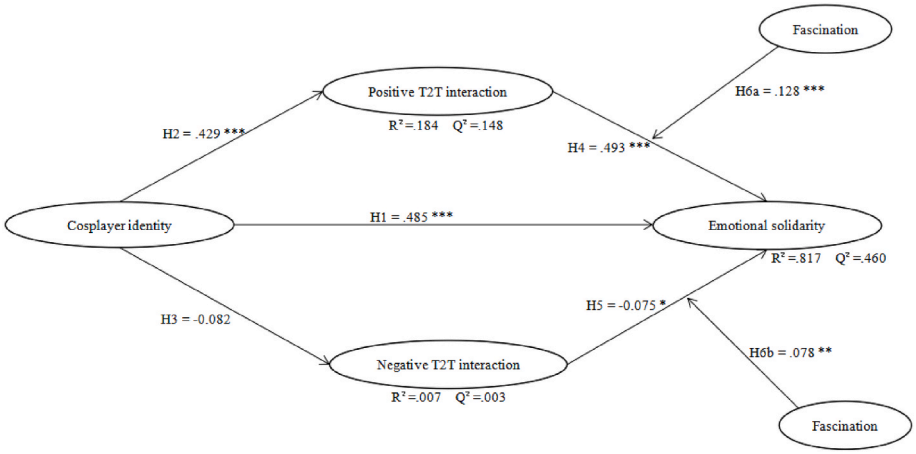

Fig. 2. Structural model results.

forgiving resulting from a shared identity. For example, making noise from a heated discussion or even exclaiming to express their excitement are commonplace at Comic-Con (Zhou, 2016). Additionally, waiting in a long queue might appear to be less annoying compared to other leisure tourists, considering that might exactly represent a performing opportunity for cosplayers themselves and fun time for other spectators, as well as communication chances between peers.

As was predicted, T2T interaction, both positive and negative, was found to influence emotional solidarity in a good or bad way, with H4 and H5 supported. This is in line with the findings that positive T2T interaction is likely to result in positive attitudes or favourable behavioural outcomes (Van Zalk, Nestler, Geukes, Hutteman, & Back, 2020). As explained by Reichenberger and Smith (2020), emotional connections are created by shared social interactions. In a similar vein, findings are congruent with previous studies of the relationship between negative T2T and negative emotional states such as satisfaction (Adam et al., 2020). The strength of this relationship in this study seems less influential ($\beta = -0.075$, compared to $\beta = 0.410$). Some reasons may account for this low value. As a niche market, cosplay tourists are different from mass tourists. Additionally, most young cosplayers might be mentally accustomed to and prepared for environments characterized by noise and crowds. Thus, their emotional solidarity is less likely to be influenced by negative T2T against this backdrop. With positive or negative interactions that meets or violates fan's consistent expectations and norms, different psychological outcomes arise, leading to a strengthened emotional closeness, or jeopardised ones. The essential role of emotional solidarity for cosplayers can be understood by Bell's (1999:1) notion, i.e., "belonging" does not just mean "being" but also "longing" for acceptance.

Finally, fascination plays an essential role in this study to enhance the positive interaction and mitigate the negative interaction, with H6a and H6b supported. Hence, the importance of fascination has been verified as an essential moderator in promoting T2T interaction on emotional solidarity. In other words, the relationship between positive T2T and emotional solidarity is even stronger when tourists are more fascinated with the environment. Cosplayers are immersed in their imaginative worlds in an environment like a Comic-Con (Napier, 2007). The fascinating environment creates ideal conditions for cosplayers to engage with others and enjoying themselves. The interesting activities, settings, and objects of exhibitions can allow cosplayers to have a more receptive interaction and communication. On the other hand, this study also suggested that the negative effects of negative T2T interaction on emotional solidarity can be buffered by fascination. That is, the fascinating environment of a Comic-Con can be used to distract from the negative interaction which leads to a less troubling emotional outcome. Even though negative interactions occurred, the attraction of the activities and environment were able to relieve or sooth their emotional state to some extent.

6. Implications and limitations

6.1. Theoretical implications

This study complemented extant fan tourism literature by adopting a more holistic perspective to propose and validate a conceptual model, which captures cosplay tourists' sense of membership, i.e., cosplay identity, their situation-induced behavior (both positive and negative), environment-induced cues, i.e., fascination, and their emotional closeness to each other, i.e., emotional solidarity. The current fan tourism research is largely "opaque and atheoretical, requiring a more theoretically-informed approach" (Thelen & Kim, 2021, p. 1). To tackle these fragmented and piece-meal approaches to fan tourism research, this exploratory study draws upon social identity theory (SIT), emotional solidarity and expectancy violation theory to investigate cosplay tourists' T2T interaction in Comic-Con settings. Our study can be considered as an addition to the stream of EVT relevant studies to tourism literature in general, and cosplay tourists in Comic-Con in particular. Besides, to the best of authors' knowledge, it can also be viewed as one of pioneer studies that consider fan's interaction in tandem with their group identity to explain to fandom tourists' emotional solidarity.

T2T interaction is essential while examining the impacts on tourists' perception during the value creation process (Sun et al., 2019). This is even the case when it comes to fandom, when like-minded fans gather in Comic-Cons as a ritual place to experience sacred aspects of comic culture and bond with like-minded fans (Elliott, 2018). Extending T2T research, this study builds on the prior literatures which normally relate to three typical tourism activities in relation to T2T, i.e., group tours, backpacking, and cruises (Yang, 2016, p. 427), and go beyond towards an emerging multi-disciplinary research domain, namely fan tourism. As claimed by Martin (1995, p. 168) from his interactionist stand, that festival as well as other social life, "must be understood in terms of actual interactional processes and practices". Importantly, to address the destructive nature of situation-induced misbehaviour of fans, negative T2T was particularly included along with positive T2T to fully reveal cosplay tourists' behaviors and emotions. This can also be viewed as a contribution to the limited literature about negative T2T interaction, which is crucial for tourists' perception (Adam et al., 2020).

Social identity theory and emotional solidarity theory were incorporated together with expectancy violation theory in this study to explore cosplay tourists' experience. Fan's attendance represents important vehicle for various fandom offering a shared in-group identity (Kinnunen et al., 2021). This study accentuates the importance of cosplayer identity with their positive T2T, which accords with Reichenberger and Smith's (2020, p. 167) call for a better understanding of individual and collective meanings held in fan-based tourism experiences. The substantiated cosplay identity in this study offers a valid approach to unpacking cosplayers' identity expression at a Comic-Con.

This study probably represents the first attempt to apply emotional solidarity theory in a fan-based community. As an important theoretical premise underpinning emotional solidarity, "shared beliefs" is deemed central to the understanding of religious people's emotional closeness in ritualistic behavior (Durkheim[1915], 1997). Even some recent tourism studies adopting this notion to examine the emotional solidarity between hosts and tourist at the general destination level (e.g., Lee, Joo, & Woosnam, 2022), it seems eventually to drift away from this ritualistic behaviour as core tenet. Fandom is characterized by an intense emotional connection (Smith & Stewart, 2007), and filled with many ritual-like practices and performativity for fan pilgrimages (Jang, 2020; Thelen & Kim, 2021). Thus, we argue for a revisit to the long-standing yet easily overlooked premise of this theory, to explore cosplayers' intense emotional state by its own right. Besides the people-to-people variables (cosplayer identity, emotional solidarity, T2T) we further acknowledge the people-to-place dimension in a place like Comic-Con, i.e., fascination as environmental cues can boost/mitigate the positive/-negative T2T on their emotional solidarity, giving credence to Attention Restoration Theory (ART).

6.2. Managerial implications

Findings of this study provide some suggestions for government, Fandom marketers and managers, and cosplay communities.

For government, measures can be taken to guide cosplayers' positive interaction and advocate a harmonious rapport in Comic-Con. As Docker (1994, p. 228) mentioned, releasing the different or opposite opinions or emotions in the playfulness, can actually strengthen the normal social order. Thus once regaling the negative T2T within an accepted fans' expectation and social norm, Comic-Con can indeed serve as a "safety valve" for society.

For fandom marketers and managers, as Netzer (2016) purports that the growth of fandom is teaching marketers a new culture or a new language. Marketers should promote positive T2T and suppress negative

T2T in marketing campaigns, by tuning their language into fan friendly and fan identity congruent style. The slogans of friendly interaction and posters discouraging uncivilized behaviour should be displayed in a subtle yet convincing way that suits cosplay identity, without decreasing the fascination of the environmental attractiveness. Inspired by our results about the moderator of fascination between T2T and emotional solidarity, fandom managers are suggested to prioritize the internal decoration and refurbishment to deliver fascination in this environment to engage attendees.

Cosplay communities should also make efforts to promote cosplayer identity. Some public misunderstanding or stereotype of cosplayers may affect the favourable recognition of cosplay identity. Fan communities should publicize the positive image of cosplay by forwarding news particularly via popular social media reporting their fantasy world and collective meaning for this group. Frequent festival goers are crucial stakeholders, who might mobilize the co-creation of a sense of community or festival brand (Reichenberger & Smith, 2020). In our context, cosplay community are suggested to concurrently remodel their reputation both online and onsite. To support their dreams while allowing some possible changes, proper guidance to offset some negative interaction as in-situ behavior should be offered.

6.3. Limitations and future research directions

This study is not free from limitations. First of all, the research samples were collected at the Guangzhou Comic-Con with all respondents coming from China. This study has been subject to current travel restrictions, but future studies should include diversified samples from various cultures as tourist behaviour is affected by different cultural values (Tang, Tosun, & Baum, 2021). Second, this study has found no influence of cosplay identity on negative T2T interaction. This might open up an interesting avenue for further research with a focus on possible antecedents which could suppress negative T2T interaction. In addition, different types of fans such as dilettante, dedicated, devoted and dysfunctional fans (Thorne, 2011), may exhibit various behavioural interactions and emotional states, which merits further investigation.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare no competing interests.

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