

**Transnational Consumption of Japanese Popular Culture in Egypt: The Case  
of Anime and Cosplay Subculture**

by

Basant Ahmed Sayed

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The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, the thesis entitled:

Transnational Consumption of Japanese Popular Culture in Egypt the Case of Anime and Cosplay Subculture

submitted by Basant Ahmed Sayed in partial requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology

**Examining Committee:**

Dr. Millie Creighton, Anthropology, UBC, Supervisor

Dr. Jennifer Kramer, Anthropology and Museum of Anthropology, UBC, Supervisory Committee Member

Dr. Amirpouyan Shiva, Anthropology, UBC, Examining Committee Member

**Abstract:**

In the twenty-first century, emerging digital and network communications have facilitated the widespread circulation and expansion of Japanese anime (animation) and manga (comics) cultures to all parts of the world. Today, anime and manga fans across the world interact and engage with each other through social media and other forms of mass media, creating global fan communities. Japanese anime first came to the attention of Egyptian children, teens, and young adults in the 1990s, when Arabic-dubbed versions of the animated television programs *Mazinger-Z* and *Grindizer* aired on the national television network. They immediately had a significant influence on Egyptians, rapidly gaining popularity throughout the Arab world and the Middle East.

With the technological turn of the new millennium and the increased accessibility of the internet and social media in the second decade of the 21st century, Egyptians learned about the broad subculture surrounding anime and manga and have had a growing appetite for it ever since. Amid this rise in the popularity of anime subculture in Egypt, anime and cosplay<sup>1</sup> conventions, particularly EGYcon<sup>2</sup>, have been increasingly popular. Egyptian anime fans use such spaces to engage in play, generate social relationships and express their interest in anime and cosplay away from the patriarchal social gaze that can be critical to the fandom activities. For example, they can engage in cross-gender play<sup>3</sup> considered transgressive to gender

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<sup>1</sup> Cosplay is an activity or a practice in which participants called cosplayers dress in costumes to portray a certain character that belongs to a specific form of popular culture.

<sup>2</sup> EGYcon is the first and biggest annual anime and cosplay convention in Egypt. It attracts anime and cosplay fans from all over Egypt.

<sup>3</sup> Cross-gender play or cross-dressing involves dressing up as the opposite gender of the anime character's original gender, or of the cosplayer's own gender.

expectations. My research primarily explores the rise in the popularity of anime culture in Egypt and its connections to Japan starting from 2010 until the year 2020. I examine Egyptians' use of Japanese anime and cosplay as transnational products to negotiate individual identities, and resist Egyptian societal ideologies restricting freedom of self-expression, particularly regarding gender and religion. My fieldwork included participant observation at the 6th annual EGYcon convention in Cairo, Egypt on February 8th, 2019, at Tokyo Comic Con in Tokyo, Japan in November 22-24, 2019, and at Akihabara anime shopping district in Tokyo, Japan in November 25-26, 2019.

## **Lay Summary**

With the rise in the popularity of Japanese popular culture worldwide comes the importance of researching the influence of Japanese anime culture in other parts of the world, including the Middle East and the wider Arab world. Since there seem to be few academic studies on the popularity and impact of Japanese popular culture (including anime and J-pop) in Arab countries, and while most academic research has been concerned with politics, economy, and religion in the Middle Eastern region, my research involves the study of Japanese popular culture, and in particular, the study of anime (Japanese animation) and cosplay (the practice of dressing up as a certain anime character) in Egypt, a phenomenon that has been on the rise since the start of the second decade of the 21st century.

## **Preface**

This thesis is an original intellectual product of the author Basant Ahmed Sayed. Drafts of this thesis were reviewed by her supervisor Dr. Millie Creighton, and committee member Dr. Jennifer Kramer, and by Dr. Amirpouvan Shiva as the external examiner of the thesis. The field work discussed throughout was approved by the University of British Columbia (UBC) Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) under the title “Japan and Egypt Connections via Anime and other forms of Popular Culture,” BREB number H18-03713. Portions of the thesis, entitled; “Transnational Consumption of Japanese Popular Culture in Egypt the Case of Anime and Cosplay Subculture,” resulted in a paper presented at 2022 MEICON Student Conference (Middle East and Islamic Consortium of British Columbia) that was held on March 26th, 2022 at Allard Hall, University of British Columbia (UBC), Vancouver Campus.

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## 1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the global consumption of popular cultural products from East Asia is equal to that of Western commodities (Iwabuchi, 2004, 2). The transnational consumption of Japanese popular culture, such as animation, cartoons, comics, and computer/video games, have become prevalent worldwide and have been well received in many countries.

With the growing popularity of Japanese popular culture worldwide comes the importance of researching the transnational consumption of Japanese anime culture in other parts of the world, including the Middle East and the wider Arab world. Since there seem to be few academic studies on the appeal and impact of Japanese popular culture in Arab countries, and while most academic research has been mostly concerned with politics, economy, and religion in the Middle Eastern region, my research involves the study of Japanese popular culture, and in particular, the transnational consumption of anime and cosplay subculture in Egypt, a phenomenon that has been on the rise since the start of the second decade of the 21st century.

In Japan, the word “anime” is a reference to all animation, but for other nationalities anime is used to refer to animation from Japan or as a “Japanese-disseminated animation style often characterized by colorful graphics, vibrant characters, and fantastical themes” (Rashed, 2017). Unlike cartoons and animations (which usually target children), Japanese anime’s target spectators are often older teenagers or adults.

The popularity of anime in Egypt started with the broadcast of Arabic dubbed versions of the television shows Mazinger Z, Grindizer, and Captain Tsubasa (or Captain Majed, as fans know the series in Arab countries) on Spacetoon satellite TV channel in the late 1990s. The popularity of anime further increased with the airing of anime TV shows such as Dragon Ball,

Detective Conan, and Slam Dunk on Spacetoon satellite TV channel in the summer of 2000, surpassing that of its American counterparts that used to air over the same time. With the accessibility to the internet in the second decade of the 21st century, Egyptian viewers (i.e., teens and young adults) were eager to stop watching children's anime (a genre that does not need censorship) and switched to watching uncensored anime from different anime genres.

Egyptian anime and manga fans from a broad age range proclaim themselves as otaku (members of a subculture obsessed with Japanese manga, anime, video games, and other popular culture elements), thus creating a whole new otaku subculture in Egypt. These Egyptian otaku created several online and offline platforms through which they express their interest in anime. These platforms include social media fan pages and groups such as "Anime Aiko Ka Egypt," a Facebook group that has garnered over 47,000 members from all over Egypt that discuss and review anime series and films, anime, cosplay, and gaming conventions, such as EGYcon, Heuincon, E-Sport summit, and Gamer's Lounge (Rashed, 2017). Since 2014, the number of anime and gaming conventions in Egypt has been on the rise, with over six conventions held annually in Cairo and other major cities around Egypt (including Alexandria). EGYcon is Egypt's first and biggest annual anime and cosplay convention for anime and manga fans that have been running over seven years. The number of EGYcon attendees exploded, reaching 3,200 attendees at EGYcon 6 in 2019, as compared to 1,600 attendees at EGYcon 1 in 2014 (First EGYcon 2014). The increase in the number of EGYcon attendees reflects the rise in the popularity of anime culture over the period of 2014-2019.

Consumerism and cosmopolitanism are intertwined with Egyptians consuming transnational products (i.e., purchasing, watching, playing, spending time and money, and

immersing themselves into the worlds of popular transnational products), such as Japanese anime, manga, and video games. One of the major scholarly contributions in this area is by American anthropologist Mark Allen Peterson in his book *Connected in Cairo: Growing up Cosmopolitan in the Modern Middle East* (2011). In chapter three of his book, Peterson examines the transnational consumption of Japanese popular culture products in Egypt, particularly Pokémon, in the first five years of the 21st century. In this chapter, Peterson examines how consumerism and cosmopolitanism are in direct relation to the consumption of transnational products in Egypt, such as Japanese anime, manga, and video games. Peterson also discusses how, in the first decade of the 21st century, upper-class Egyptians consumed several imported foreign products including Pokémon, Pokémon playing cards, and Nintendo Gameboys to connect to global popular culture and assert cosmopolitan identities.

In this study, my research builds on Peterson's work by extending the chronology of the consumption of anime products in Egypt from 2010 to 2020, which is a significant time frame due to the recent growth in accessibility and a wider usage of the internet in Egypt. My thesis also further examines the more recent consumption of anime and cosplay products in Egypt from approximately 2010 – 2020, suggesting that Egyptian anime fans' transnational consumption of anime and cosplay products in the 2010s is not limited to the elite and upper-middle classes<sup>4</sup>, but includes fans from the middle and lower classes.

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<sup>4</sup> The elite class in Egypt is a wealthy class that is high in economic capital and high in cultural capital. The Western-educated upper-middle class in Egypt is high in cultural capital, but not necessarily high in economic capital. Other classes in Egypt include the urban lower middle class and the lower working class.

According to my eight interviewees, anime and cosplay are activities that are available and affordable to anyone from any social class. I also suggest that the goals of this decade's otaku anime and cosplay fans—capital and financial capabilities aside—is to pursue their interest in anime, social engagement, and social acceptance rather than to aspire to a cosmopolitan identity, a merit that has been used by Egyptians in social class distinction.

Drawing on previous fan studies, in this thesis, I explore a popular practice among anime fans: cosplay, focusing specifically on the activity among anime fans in Egypt. Since the start of the 2010s, Egyptian anime fans and cosplayers have faced considerable opposition and criticism within the public sphere and the family realm because of their adoption of a transnational subculture that is condemned for being foreign by the traditional mainstream culture in Egypt. Looking into gender, identity, religion, and social class paradigms, I examine the reasons behind fans' practice of cosplay (including cross-play), most of which are ideas that concern expressing one's passion, and true self through impersonating and/or dressing up as one's beloved anime character.

## **2. Fieldwork Sites**

I propose that anime and manga conventions provide a safe and welcoming space for their audiences and participants for anime fans and cosplayers to interact, socialize, and share their interests and passion away from the clashing mainstream culture. As part of the field work intended for this research, I attended EGYcon 6 on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019, in Cairo, Egypt, and Tokyo Comic Con from November 22-24, 2019, in Tokyo, Japan. I also visited the Akihabara

anime shopping district in central Tokyo, Japan, practiced participant observation and conducted interviews.

### **2.1. Field Site: EGYcon**

EGYcon is an anime, cosplay and a science fiction convention held annually in Cairo, Egypt as an event for fans of American and Japanese popular culture. It started in 2013 with several otaku gatherings, and in 2014 an official convention was held. EGYcon 2014 was supposed to be another otaku gathering for anime fans in Egypt, however, the event transformed into a cultural convention as the news of the cosplay and science fiction event spread rapidly by fans' word of mouth (First EgyCon 2014). Fans' enthusiasm about the popular culture convention was clear at EGYcon 2015 as the number of the audience increased from the year before, reaching 2,300 attendees (Cairo Scene 2015).

EGYcon is the creation of Islam Risha, a 30-year-old architect and a dedicated anime otaku, who proclaims himself the godfather of Egyptian anime conventions. Like most Egyptian otaku, Risha's passion for anime started by watching anime as a child on Egyptian national television. Following his dream of organizing an anime convention that meets the standards of international comic cons<sup>5</sup> and that draws the sponsors' attention to talents in the anime world in Egypt, Risha organized EGYcon 1 at El Sawy Cultural Wheel (a cultural event venue in Downtown Cairo) in 2014, under the sponsorship of the Japan Foundation, Cairo office (a public institution dedicated to culture exchanges around the world). The unprecedented number of

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<sup>5</sup> Comic con or comic book convention is an event that centers around comic books and comic book culture. At comic cons, fans get together to meet and connect with artists and comic book illustrators and socialize with each other.

attendees and the amount of profit made through this one-of-a-kind event surpassed what Risha and the sponsors expected of a casual fan gathering.



Image #1 This photo includes: (from left to right) graduate student Basant Ahmed Sayed in her cosplay costume, the Japanese Ambassador in his cosplay costume as the Mario character, and two other cosplayers at EGYcon 6 in Cairo, Egypt, 2019. Photo by Millie Creighton.

Today, the EGYcon convention is the biggest annual anime convention in Egypt. It attracts anime and cosplay fans from all over Egypt, mainly because the convention provides a relatively cheaper ticket price compared to other gaming and cosplay conventions in Egypt and provides bus service for attendees and participants that live in major cities outside of Cairo. The popularity of EGYcon can be also attributed to its inclusivity of various fans' activities, such as cosplay competitions, Japanese cultural booths, and anime merchandise selling corners. EGYcon also has a gaming section for gamers and gaming fans.

Over the years, the EGYcon anime conventions have attracted anime fans from across Egypt to socialize with one another in an inclusive environment that welcomes fans of all social

classes, genders, and ages. The annual popular cultural event provides anime-related activities for all fans to take part in and enjoy. These activities include cosplay competitions, stand-up comedies, Japan Foundation booths, anime gadgets booths, manga drawing corners, Ninjutsu school performances<sup>6</sup>, and music bands performing anime songs (En.wikipedia.org 2021). Some EGYcon conventions included special events, which were the highlight of the anime social meeting; for example, EGYcon 2 had a professional cosplay group flown in from Japan to entertain the crowd, and EGYcon 3 had a gaming room packed with PCs and gaming consoles from EGYcon gamers, and a YU-Gi-OH! championship<sup>7</sup>(En.wikipedia.org 2021). The anime merchandise selling corner, which later became a permanent event at all EGYcon conventions, provided an opportunity for anime fans to purchase and consume locally produced anime-related



merchandise (e.g., posters and key chains with anime characters) without the hassle of ordering them online at international webstores.

Image #2 This is a photo of the area selling anime related goods at EGYcon 6. Photo by Basant Ahmed Sayed.

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<sup>6</sup> Ninjitsu is a traditional Japanese art of camouflage and sabotage and now practiced as a type of martial art.

<sup>7</sup> YU-Gi-OH! or (“King of Games”) is a Japanese anime/ manga series created by the Japanese saga illustrator Kazuki Takahashi, and it is also a popular card game.



All seven EGYcon conventions had a Japanese corner presented by the Japan Foundation, adding a taste of Japanese traditional culture to the popular culture gatherings (i.e., presenting food, cosplay, language, etc.).

Jen Youth or Japan Egypt Network Youth, an organization that organizes cultural exchange programs between Egypt and Japan, is usually present at EGYcon events. At EGYcon 6, Jen Youth had a cultural booth, where they offered EGYcon guests the chance to try on kimono and provided information about studying Japanese language and learning about Japanese culture, stimulating their desire to cross national borders and travel to Japan.

The manga drawing booths at EGYcon events offer opportunities for Egyptian mangaka (manga illustrators) to show their talent in manga drawing to the anime fan community, media, and publishing companies. Shyro, a 26-year-old mangaka and an EGYcon organizer, said; “Publishers in Egypt are just not interested in publishing manga. I just present my work at EGYcon hoping for anyone to sponsor me and offer to publish my work.” Shyro hopes that one day she can study animation at a university in Canada or Japan.

## **2.2. Field Site: Tokyo Comic Con**

Tokyo Comic Con is a celebration of American and Japanese popular culture and popular culture’s latest technology in a huge convention hall based in Tokyo, Japan. The American style popular culture convention was founded and established by Stan Lee<sup>8</sup> and Steve Wozniak<sup>9</sup> in

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<sup>8</sup> Stan Lee: (1922-2018) (“the father of pop culture”) was an American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer, who created Spider-man, Iron Man, the X-Men, and many other fictional characters. He was also executive vice president and chief editor of Marvel Comics.

<sup>9</sup> Steve Wozniak, who was born in 1950, who is also known by the name Woz, is American electronics engineer and technology entrepreneur, who co-founded Apple Inc. in 1970.



Images #3 and 4 These photos show amateur and professional comic illustrators at Tokyo Comic Con, 2019. Photos by Basant Ahmed Sayed.

2016 in Tokyo. It is in connection with Lee and Wozs' "Silicon Valley Comic Convention"<sup>10</sup>.

Because of the event's family friendly nature (i.e., suitable for all family members), it usually attracts fans of all ages and from all over the world. The first 2016 Tokyo Comic Con

attracted more than 30,000 visitors, a number that has been on the rise ever since (Tokyo Comic Con 2021). During Tokyo Comic Con 2019, the convention hall was lined with various booths

of exhibitors and artists. Exhibitors vary from amateurs and small budget exhibitors to world

famous movie studios and production companies such as Walt Disney, Sony Pictures, and Warner

Bros., and their sub-brands, such as Marvel Comics, Star Wars, and DreamWorks, each with its

special fan zone.

The "Meet and Greet" event was by far the highlight and climax of the 2019 popular culture event. Each year Tokyo Comic Con brings Hollywood popular culture celebrities to meet, greet and take private photos primarily with fans who paid for the privilege. The celebrities that came for the meet and greet at Tokyo Comic Con 2019 included: two Avengers (Chris

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<sup>10</sup> Silicon Valley Comic Con, which was rebranded as SiliCon in 2020, is an annual popular culture and technology convention that was founded by Stan Lee and Steve Wozniak in 2016.

Hemsworth and Mark Ruffalo), Rupert Grint, Ian Somerhalder, Zachary Levi, Jude Law, Daniel Logan, and Orlando Bloom. The Meet and Greet event takes up the largest space in the convention and is considered the most popular of all the Comic Con events.

### **2.3. Field Site: Akihabara District**

Akihabara district (also called Akiba) in central Tokyo, is known as a hub for everything that otaku collect and enjoy from manga, anime, video games, figurines, card games (such as Pokémon cards) to other anime related goodies. One of the most popular retail stores in Akihabara is Animate that specializes in otaku products and which I visited during my field work in Akihabara. The large retail chain store has more than one branch in Akihabara, of which one specifically targets female anime fans.

## **3. Methods**

My research primarily draws on data gathered from interviews conducted with cosplayers and observations of anime and cosplay fan communities both online and offline, and at conventions and gatherings in Egypt and Japan. I did participant observation at the 6th annual EGYcon convention that I attended as a cosplayer in Cairo, Egypt on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019. After returning to Canada, I used the snowball technique to get in contact with several EGYcon participants and organizers, and I was able to do audio recorded online interviews with eight. My interviewees comprised five men (one of whom is the founder of the EGYcon conventions), and three women. I conducted the interviews in the Arabic language, (except for some English vocabulary used by interviewees). I refer to the interviewees in the same way they asked me to

refer to them during the interviews. The ages of the interviewees indicated in the thesis reflect the ages of the interviewees at the time of the interviews, which is during the year 2019.

During my field trip to Japan, I, first, attended the ‘Tokyo Comic Con’ convention that was held from November 22- 24 in Makuhari Event Hall in Chiba. I did participant observation at the convention, looking at Japanese and American popular culture fan activities in the comic con that included cosplay, and other anime, manga, American cartoons, movies activities. I also interviewed different exhibitors and cosplayers (including those that spoke English) to learn about the consumption habits of fans and fan related behavior. One of the major difficulties I faced during my participant observation at Tokyo Comic Con was that there were only a few visitors, cosplayers and exhibitors that could speak English well, most of whom were not Japanese nationals. During my stay in Japan, I did participant observation at popular anime and manga destinations and hubs, including the Akihabara anime district, Ghibli Museum, ‘One Piece’ exhibit<sup>11</sup> in Tokyo Tower, and Nihonbashi’s Denden Town in Osaka, all to learn about different anime and manga related merchandise and consumption habits of anime fans.

For this study, I used archives from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada to do content analysis on posters and brochures from different anime events. I also applied content analysis to online databases (e.g., The Economist, USA Today, New York Times, BBC News, Daily News Egypt, Japan Foundation’s Wochi Kochi (online magazine), Egyptian Independent, and Cairo Scene, etc.), and social media (e.g., Facebook). I also incorporated my own reflections from my personal experience with anime culture in Egypt.

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<sup>11</sup> The One-Piece exhibit inside Tokyo Tower was an indoor theme park and a popular destination for the fans of the Japanese anime ad manga series, *One Piece* in Tokyo, Japan. The theme park shut down permanently on July 31, 2020, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 4. Anime Otaku Subculture

The term otaku has several meanings and explanations, and scholars' theories differ regarding its meanings and connotations (Larsen, 2018, 278). Otaku is a Japanese word that means "your house" in a formal way (Larsen, 2018, 278). The Japanese *kanji* of the word otaku connotes, "a sense of both belonging and sequestration," (Larsen, 2018, 278). Historically, the otaku subculture started in the 1970s in Japan, and the production of anime, manga, and video games resulted in a tremendous leap in the entertainment industry (Azuma, 2001, 3).

The otaku subculture is usually associated with negative connotations in Japan by the mainstream culture, such as excessive, obsessive behavior (Newitz, 1994, 1). However, conversely, an otaku can be regarded as a person who possesses a high level of knowledge on a certain genre or field (Tobin, 1998, 109). An otaku can be, for example, an anime otaku, a manga otaku, a gaming otaku, etc. (Tobin, 1998, 109). An otaku can also be, "an enthusiastic consumer", in any field (Kitabayashi, 2004, 3).

The otaku subculture in Egypt began in the 2010s, along with a rise in anime subculture, leading fans of Egyptian anime, manga, and video games to immerse themselves into the anime and cosplay subculture, thus creating a community of otaku in Egypt. Egyptian otaku use various spaces to connect with the anime fandom in Egypt and around the globe, including social media platforms and anime conventions. My interviews with some Egyptian otaku from the anime and gaming community in Egypt suggest that not all Egyptian anime fans consider themselves "real otaku", but instead, only the dedicated anime and manga fans that have been adopting the hobby for a long time call themselves otaku.

When I asked my interviewees if they considered themselves otaku, some concurred, while others admitted that they were not there yet, or they had not reached that level of dedication as they considered themselves new to the anime and manga fandom. For example, Ahmed Zekri, 21 years old, considers himself an otaku; however, because he is only interested in watching popular anime series, he does not think that he is as dedicated as other otaku who watch all anime series. Another reason for not regarding himself as a dedicated otaku is that he also does not enjoy reading manga. Ahmed Saied, 23 years old, is another anime fan that proclaims himself an otaku. Saied started watching anime at a young age, which later triggered his interest in Japanese anime. Saied is also a manga fan. One of Saied's favorite manga of all time is *Attack on Titans*. Saied thinks of himself as a "comic book geek." He also considers himself a "nerd, geek, otaku, etc.", using those exact English words to describe himself

Unlike in Japan, where fans of anime, manga, and video games are often known as having a compulsive shopping attitude towards anime subculture products and usually criticized for it, most Egyptian otaku do not have the capital or the financial means to shop for transnational anime, manga, and video game products. Instead, Egyptian otaku consume local replicas or local anime products, and only those from the upper-middle and elite social classes are the ones that can purchase transnational anime, manga, and video game products.

As mentioned, Peterson linked the Egyptian elite class's compulsive shopping behavior towards transnational popular culture, such as Pokémon products, to their desire to develop a cosmopolitan identity that would allow them to stand out from other Egyptian social classes and make them appear as more cosmopolitan in the contemporary world (Peterson, 2011, 65-66). The Egyptian mass media pay little attention to the Egyptian otaku shopping behavior, whereas in

Japan, the mainstream media is extremely interested in the strong anime culture and its otaku fans. The main reason behind that is the growing nature of the anime subculture in Egypt, and the minimal number of otaku fans compared to fans of other popular subcultures in Egypt (i.e., fans of American popular culture and Egyptian popular culture). The growing anime subculture, however, is attracting the attention of Egyptian parents who are critical of their children for overspending and wasting their money on their anime obsession. For example, Nadine, 20 years old, claims that her parents are not convinced that making cosplay costumes and taking part in anime and cosplay conventions are a type of hobby like drawing and painting, which she also likes. Nadine claims that her father is especially critical of her spending habits, as he believes that it is problematic for her to spend her savings on the tailoring and making of anime cosplay costumes. Nadine admits that she likes to draw and paint, and that she spends a lot of her money on buying paints and tools for her hobby. She believes that cosplay deserves investment, the same as any other hobby.

Compared to Japan, Egypt has limited outlets and spaces where anime fandom members can shop for anime, manga, and video games-related goods. For example, the Akihabara anime/otaku shopping district in Tokyo, which is known as the “Otaku Holy Land” or *otaku no seichi*, the imagined center of the otaku world (Galbraith, 2019, 128) is considered a main shopping hub for anime, manga, and video game products. During my fieldwork in the Akihabara anime shopping district in December 2019, I noticed numerous stores, shopping malls, mega stores, and arcades where otaku go to shop freely and buy a wealth of anime, manga, and video games products.

In Egypt there are no shopping districts specifically for anime consumers to shop for their collectables and other anime products. Instead, there are only a few small local stores and some online Egyptian stores that mostly sell locally manufactured anime and manga products.

Egyptian otaku also use spaces such as anime, cosplay, and gaming conventions to find their favorite anime subculture products, most of which are locally designed, crafted, and made by local amateur anime and manga artists known as mangaka (manga illustrators), and local small publishing companies.

During my participant observation at EGYcon 6 on February 8th, 2019, I noticed several tables set up with anime and manga fans' merchandises, all of which were locally made. The one and only international gaming convention that displays, advertises, and sells original manufactured video games and other related products, and that was recently held in Egypt is "Insomnia", the British brand gaming and cosplay convention. However, the convention only attracts consumers from the elite social class because of the convention's costly entry pass and high prices of the merchandise.

Egyptian otaku are bound by some common features, including aspiration for social engagement and societal acceptance. Egyptian otaku (regardless of their social class) perceive themselves as introverts. They can only be extroverts among each other, as their common interest in anime, manga, and video games helps them show their outgoing side, especially in otaku gathering events, such as comic cons or anime conventions, as I will discuss in the next chapter.



## 5. Online and Offline Anime Fan Communities

Anime fans around the globe use various social media platforms—such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook—to join online fandom communities, connect with one another, and add their share of knowledge, experiences, and meanings to the public sphere (Bourdaa, 2018, 387). Anime Facebook pages such as “Anime Fanatics International” and “All about Anime” attract fans from all parts of the world to take part in an online social experience that has become an important part of anime fans’ lives in the last few years of the second decade of the 21st century.

The online experiences of Egyptian anime fans are not so different from anime fans in other parts of the world. In the early 2010s, when the internet became more affordable, Egyptian anime fans had access to a near-unlimited number of social media anime fan forums, which they joined and to which they contributed. The first webpage for anime fans in Egypt was “Anime Aikoka Egypt”, which was created in 2011. The Egyptian anime fans used the web page to interact with the fan page members, discuss different anime topics and share photos of their favorite anime characters and memes related to anime. They also used the fan page to post original videos and drawings of popular anime characters. The “Anime Aikoka Egypt” fan page reflects a large anime fan base in Egypt, proving to investors (such as comics publishing companies) that there was sufficient interest to justify the creation of Egyptian comic cons.

My interviews with Egyptian anime fans and otaku show that almost all anime and manga fans in Egypt, most of whom have regular access to the internet, are part of the global online anime fandom community. For example, Ahmed Zekri, a 21-year-old dentistry student and a dedicated anime fan, suggests that anime fans in Egypt connect to different anime and cosplay

Facebook groups. Some of these include fans from around the globe, and the Facebook groups use the English language in their communication. Such as the group “Art of Cosplay”. “Art of Cosplay” includes 250,000 international cosplay fans (professional and amateur cosplayers), while other groups target anime fans from the Middle East and the Arab countries (these groups use the Arabic language as their primary communication tool).

Zekri considers himself a part of the global online anime fan community. His activities in regional and global anime forums include sharing photos of his cosplay costumes in order to get other cosplayers’ opinions on his work. Zekri claims that he constantly makes friends with Arab cosplayers and anime fans through online social media, regional fandom platforms (i.e., the Anime Mix, Egy Anime, and Anime World Facebook pages). Zekri also earned the privilege of being granted administrative status of the “Inazuma Eleven” Facebook page, which is a Facebook page for Inazuma Eleven’s global anime fans. The Inazuma Eleven Facebook page mainly includes fans from Japan and Europe and a few fans from the Middle East. As administrative personnel of the Inazuma Eleven Facebook page, Zekri shares and posts various news, photos, and videos related to the game/anime series Inazuma Eleven.

Ahmed Saied, a 22-year-old engineering student and an anime and manga otaku, suggests that anime fandoms (including gaming and cosplay fans) mainly use social media such as Facebook to connect and get in touch with one another. Saied virtually connects to the local and global online anime and manga fan community through anime social media platforms and to Egyptian anime and cosplay real life community through anime conventions. Saied’s online friends have become his offline friends after meeting them in person at anime conventions. Saied claims “We all became connected online and offline”. Saied believes that EGYcon and

other anime conventions brought him and his otaku friends together. Saied's testimony resonates with the fan studies' scholar Melanie Bourdaa<sup>12</sup>, who stated that:

Fans create social bonds in their communities that often transform into solid and lasting friendships. These social bonds appear (of course) during discussions and debates in forums, during sessions of cosplay at conventions, and during sessions of live tweets, when fans gather and share their viewing experience using a common hashtag. (2018, 387).

All interviewees from the Egyptian anime community agreed that they used to see themselves as introverts, a self-perception that changed as they started connecting with other otaku at anime conventions such as EGYcon. Saied, 23 years old, thought of himself as an introvert who had difficulty making friends who shared his interest in anime. He claims that anime conventions in Egypt, such as EGYcon, gave him and other anime fans opportunities to meet, engage in anime activities, and connect with each other. Saied suggests that the anime conventions dramatically influenced the social lives of many of the introvert otaku in Egypt. He believes that after getting to know many people who share the same interest as himself, he opened and mingled, and he no longer thinks of himself as an introvert.

Nadine, 20-year-old mass media university student, believes that attending anime and cosplay conventions such as EGYcon influences her positively because, in such venues, she can be herself, the anime and cosplay fan, the otaku, with no one making fun of her or accusing her of being childish. At EGYcon, Nadine feels that she is not the same introvert that she is outside the convention. She feels that she is that outgoing person who poses for photos with fans and

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<sup>12</sup> Melanie Bourdaa is a faculty member at the Universite Bordeaux-Montaigne, ISIC- Institut des Sciences de l'Information et de la Communication. She works on issues related to fan studies in the digital era, trans-media strategies and American TV series.

talks and jokes with other anime fans about their cosplay characters and other matters related to their shared interest. Nadine states:

At EGYcon, I am not Nadine; I am my character for the day. I meet others that share the same interest as myself, feel that they are welcoming me, and that they are proud of me. It gave me more confidence to see that there are many people who like the same things that I like. I met a lot of good anime fans through EGYcon and befriended them.

Nadine thinks that most anime fans who attend and take part in anime and cosplay conventions are introverts who have difficulty socializing with their peers outside the anime community. At anime and cosplay conventions, they share the same interest, and they understand each other's jokes, so it is easier for them to socialize with each other, engage in activities, and enjoy friendships. Shyro, 26 years old, thinks she was lucky enough to have found someone who shares the same interest in anime, manga, and cosplay as herself. Shyro's husband, Fouad, is an otaku just like her, they do cosplay together and take part at anime conventions together. She thinks that her case is one of a kind, as it is very rare to find a compatible husband who is also an anime and cosplay fan.

Shyro got to know Fouad at EGYcon events where he was a cosplayer himself. According to Shyro, "If it weren't for EGYcon events, I would not have found such a guy that shares my passion for anime and cosplay as simply where would I find such a guy in my everyday life." Shyro explains that before marrying Fouad, she was engaged to someone else who used to take her passion for anime very lightly. Shyro believes that at EGYcon otaku do not feel "awkward, odd or weird."

The above discussed otaku's testimonies show how real-life comic cons and anime conventions influence fans' sociality by providing them with opportunities for social

experiences, social engagement, and chances to explore their extrovert side with their otaku peers in safe spaces, away from the judging public gaze.

## **6. Cosplay, Consumption, and Social Class**

‘Cosplay’ can be defined as the combination of the meanings of the two words ‘costume’ and ‘play’ (Lamerichs, 2015, 1.1), or rather more than the combination of the meanings of the words ‘costume’ and ‘role-play’ (Lome, 2016, 1.2). The definition of the term ‘cosplay’, however, can be in fact much deeper and complex than a simple combination of the meanings of two or three words. A general description of ‘cosplay’ can be the practice of dressing up and performing as a fan’s favorite character from popular culture media, including manga, comics, video games, animated films, music videos (Crawford et al., 2019, 5). A more complicated description could involve relating the cosplay activity particularly to Japanese otaku. Some scholars, however, consider all forms of dressing up in science fiction conventions as characters from any source of popular media (Hollywood films, Western cartoons, etc.) as a sort of cosplay (Crawford et al., 2019, 5).

Almost all cosplayer interviewees agree that cosplay is a commitment, simply because it takes time, effort, dedication, and money from the cosplayer. That cosplay is a commitment activity that consumes many hours to create (i.e., to search for ideas and materials, to buy materials, and to craft the cosplay costume), costs a considerable amount of money (i.e., to pay for cosplay materials, convention entrance tickets, transportation, etc.), and requires a lot of effort (for example, making the costume and performing the cosplay character). This means that social class may be an important catalyst and determinant factor to the dynamics of this costly

hobby. There has always been this idea among the cosplay community that the more well-off the cosplayer is, the more time, effort, and money she or he or they can put into her or his or their cosplay project. It is usually difficult to determine the social class of the cosplayers within a certain cosplay community, mainly because of the young age of most of the cosplayers, many of whom are students who have not yet entered the job market. However, in Egypt, one can determine someone's social class simply by learning about their place of residence and their proficiency in foreign languages (i.e., a high proficiency in foreign languages is more common among upper classes who usually study foreign curriculum and foreign languages at foreign language schools in Egypt).

When I asked the Egyptian interviewees about the affordability of cosplay, their answers varied according to their level of commitment, method of practice, and presumably their social class. For example, Zekri, who studies dentistry at Misr International University (MIU), thinks that cosplay is like any other hobby. He said, "you get more involved with time, and you get better with time." He also thinks that cosplay expenses can be minimal, if cosplayers choose to use materials that are cheaper or already available in their homes. For example, when making cosplay costumes, Zekri suggests that cosplayers can always reduce the cost of the cosplay project by using fabric from their own worn clothes in sewing their cosplay costume; by using cardboard instead of craft foam, as cardboard is much cheaper than craft foam, and by using paints that are less expensive. Zekri has been making his own cosplay costumes with the help of his sister Menna. He made around 40 cosplay costumes over the period of 2016-2019.

Similarly, Nadine, who lives with her parents in central Cairo, believes that cosplay does not have to be an expensive hobby. Nadine believes that a cosplayer does not have to spend

much money on their costume if they use fabric from their worn clothes. Nadine thinks that buying fabric and using a tailor to sew the cosplay costumes can be expensive, however, using what one has in terms of materials can bring the cost of the costume down to the minimum. Nadine thinks that fans from the middle social classes can commit to cosplay if they can cut down on costs by using cheaper or used materials and by crafting their own costumes. Safwat, a 23-year-old Commerce University graduate, works as a cashier in a department store and lives with his family in the suburbs of Cairo. He claims that cosplay is rather a costly hobby that is, in a way, limited to the upper-middle classes. Safwat admitted that there were many times in which he could not finish his cosplay costume because he lacked the financial means.

Despite being from a financially well-off family, Saied believes that his interest in cosplay, anime, and manga costs him a lot of money. Saied explains that he spends a lot of money on wigs he uses for cosplay, as he prefers ordering good quality wigs from online stores outside of Egypt. Saied admits that he also spends lots of money on transportation on the day of the anime and cosplay event. Saied thinks that it is safer and easier to take an Uber car to a cosplay convention, while wearing a wig and a costume, than taking public transportation (the subway, for example), where both police and other commuters would be suspicious and uncomfortable with him wearing the anime cosplay costume.

Risha, the 30-year-old, EGYcon founder and organizer and a former engineer, suggests that until 2015, the anime and manga fans in Egypt were only from the upper-middle and the elite classes. The reason behind that, Risha explains, was because until 2015, anime had only English subtitles (no Arabic subtitles) so, whoever attempted to watch anime had to have a good understanding of the English language, which is a skill limited to the upper-middle and elite

classes in Egypt. Risha explains that after 2015, however, because of the creation of the so-called ‘Arabic fan subs’ (i.e., Arabic subtitles for anime), and consequently the disappearance of the language barrier, Egyptians from the middle and lower classes joined the anime fandom in Egypt.

In terms of cosplay within the anime fandom in Egypt, Risha claims that a good proof that not all anime fans and EGYcon attendees are from the elite class is that he had to change the language of the EGYcon advertisements—from English to Arabic—as some fans complained about not understanding the English language used in the earlier EGYcon communications, meaning they did not have education in other languages as the elite classes do.

One of the main social habits that distinguish social classes in Egypt is the consumption of transnational commodities, especially popular culture media, by the elite classes. Egyptian elites consume other countries’ media to construct a cosmopolitan identity that connects them to the modern world and differentiates them from the lower classes. Peterson discusses how transnational goods and practices, such as the Pokémon media products and cosplay practices, are deemed essentials to Egyptians from the elite classes (not luxuries as to other classes) at the turn of the millennium. He writes that “it’s the stuff that defines who they are” (2011: 2). Egyptian elites can afford to consume those transnational products, while Egyptians of the middle and the lower classes cannot, and so they use this form of transnational consumption as a mean of class-differentiation and a symbol of modernity.

In chapter three of his book, called “Pokémon Panics: Class Play in the Private Schools,” Peterson (2011, 65) uses the Pokémon mania that reached Egypt at the turn of the millennium, as an example of a transnational media product that is being consumed by Egyptian elites and used



in class differentiation between Egyptians. Peterson (2011, 65) states that in the early 2000s, Pokémon was a significant source of play and imagination for Egyptian children from the middle and upper social classes. Pokémon and similar transnational commodities constructed (in-part) these children's cosmopolitan identities through linking them to imagined communities of children who have the same interest and possess similar media products (2011, 65). The consumption experience, however, differed for children according to their social class. For children who belong to the middle classes, connecting to the global communities of Pokémon fans and constructing cosmopolitan identities remained aspirational for the rest of their lives. However, for the children of the upper classes, their cosmopolitanism was constructed through “institutionalized activities,” such as consumption that was incorporated into their everyday lives (Peterson, 2011, 65). Peterson writes:

The distinction between these ranges of imagined communities is not inherit in Pokémon, of course, nor is it a product of different imaginative capacities. The values of these different ranges and forms of connectivity are culturally produced in homes, schools, peer networks, and other social fields where the nature of connectivity can be discussed and the symbolic capital of Pokémon collecting, and ownership can be converted into the social capital of status and identity. (Peterson, 2011, 66).

Studying Egyptians' interest in practicing cosplay and particularly cosplay of anime characters throughout the 2010s and into the following decade, I found that in the second decade of the 21st century, ‘anime’ and ‘cosplay’ as Japanese transnational popular culture practices are not consumed by Egyptian elite fans in the same way as the transnational popular culture products (such as Pokémon) were consumed at the turn of the millennium. Egyptian anime and cosplay fans in the 2010s (even the fans from the elite classes), mostly consumed transnational cosplay and anime products not merely to construct cosmopolitan identities, but mostly to fulfill their passion about anime and cosplay and express their identities as anime fans and cosplayers. I

suggest that this new model of transnational popular culture fans only encompasses Egyptian fans of the anime and cosplay subculture, whose dedication to the anime and cosplay subculture surpasses aspirations to cosmopolitanism and upper-class status.

Nadine, 20 years old, states: “the fact that the popularity of anime and cosplay is on the rise in Egypt in the last few years is exciting.” Nadine thinks that the interest in anime and cosplay, which are globally popular subcultures, shows that Egypt is joining the rest of the developed first World countries in their interest in popular culture, therefore reflecting Egypt’s cosmopolitanism. On a personal note, however, the primary reason behind Nadine’s passion about anime and cosplay is not the fact that it is a transnational subculture that originates from Japan, but because it is a subculture that is fun and interesting. Nonetheless, Nadine hopes that



she travels to Japan someday to attend the different anime attractions, particularly the ‘One Piece’ exhibit at Tokyo Tower.

Image #5 This is a photo of a group of cosplayers at EGYcon 6. Photo by Basant Ahmed Sayed.

Maggie Chan, a 27-year-old Egyptian accountant, confirms that at the time she started watching anime, she did not realize it had such tremendous popularity worldwide. Maggie explains that the reason behind her interest in anime is the graphics and the visual effects that she claims are unique to Japanese anime. For example, things such as characters’ enormous eyes, colored hair, and the sparkles surrounding characters in certain scenes.

By adopting the anime subculture, Egyptian anime and cosplay fans in the 2010s, regardless of their social class (thus from any social class) connect to the global community of fans and play—not only to construct a cosmopolitan identity, but mostly to fulfill an interest in this transnational subculture.

## **7. Cosplay, Gender Expression, and Societal Opposition**

In cosplay, questions about identity always come into play. Is the cosplayer a mere copycat or does she and/or he express agency? Is her/his performance subjective or objective? There are many theories on cosplay performance and its relationship with cosplayers' identities. For example, the comic culture and identity scholar Ellen Kirkpatrick (2015, 6.4) suggests that cosplayers' performances need to be understood as an 'embodied translation' of the original character into physical form. If we are to apply Kirkpatrick's theory, cosplayers can never be 'first language speakers', but 'translators', who must engage in the active processes of representation and reinterpretation (Kirkpatrick 2015, 4.7). The professor of film and media Matt Hills (2002) states that in cosplay role-play, "the self is not replaced by the character, it is expanded". Similarly, Valle et al. (2015, 15) suggest that cosplay is not simply about choosing an identity to replace one's own, but that it represents a search of the self and a way to define the cosplayers' own identity.

From my participant observation at EGYcon 6 and Tokyo Comic Con 2019, as well as from my interviews with some of EGYcon participants and organizers, I found that all the cosplayers I observed and interviewed expressed agency and subjectivity in creating and performing their cosplay. They reflected their own persona through their cosplay costume and

performance rather than simply copying from the original character. In my interview with him, Ahmed Zekri, 21 years old, explains how he usually feels related and connected to some anime characters that undergo the same hardships in life as he has (characters that remind him of himself as Zekri words it). He says, “for example, characters that had no friends, then later on developed some friendships”.

I also found that some cosplayers simply find pleasure in impersonating their beloved anime and science fiction characters and in shaping and adding their own personal touch to the character’s identity and look, while others find relief and sanctuary in performing a cosplay that reflects their true identities. For this type of cosplayers, dressing up and performing a character gives them an opportunity to express their identity, without the fear of being criticized. In both cases, expressing subjectivity in cosplay involved altering the appearance, and the performance of the character played.

The idea of gender swapping in cosplay is popular among cosplayers worldwide, as it broadens the options, they have of choosing the characters they want to portray. Ahmed Saied, for example, said; “great and interesting characters in anime are usually females”, such as Tsunade in the anime *Naruto*. Saied adds that he thinks Tsunade is “a great churchgoer with an amazing personality”. Saied believes that there is no reason a male (like himself) cannot dress up as a female when practicing cosplay. The character that Saied played at EGYcon 6 was Kakashi from the anime *Naruto*. Saied dressed up as the female version of Kagashi (who is originally a male character in the anime). Saied said, “Why dress up as the original male gender, when I can dress up as the female?” Saied also stated that “not everybody has the guts to dress up as the opposite gender in cosplay”.

Safwat, 23 years old, claims that he was interested in cross-dressing, even before he became an anime fan. Safwat admits that his interest in cross-dressing has always been mixed with a fear of being judged by others who might think of him as queer and treat him accordingly. For Safwat, cross-dressing as a cosplayer at EGYcon events allowed him to express his interest in cross-dressing without experiencing criticism or harassment. Safwat stated: “In Canada people can cross-dress as much as they want (if they wanted to). However, in Egypt, things are different as one has to think about the social stigma that comes with cross-dressing”.



Safwat, like other cosplayers I interviewed, thinks it is easier for female cosplayers to cross-play than a male cosplayer. Safwat’s parents oppose the idea of him doing cross-play or cross-dressing, but they do not mind him dressing in costumes of his own gender, male gender. Safwat believes that it is more socially accepted for females to cross-dress than males. For a male to cross-dress is deemed as a threat to the image of masculinity within the Egyptian society.

Image #6 This is a photo of Safwat in his gender-bender anime costume. Photo by Basant Ahmed Sayed.

Openness and acceptance to the idea of cross-playing or cross-dressing can be in direct relation with social class in Egypt. Egyptians from elite classes usually relate to the cosmopolitan and the modern world by inhabiting transnational ideas and practices such as cross-dressing. As I previously explained (referencing Mark Allen Peterson), inhabiting transnational popular culture practices is one way that Egyptian elites use to connect to the global cosmopolitan

communities, even if it leads to deviating from social norms. This means it is easier for cosplayers from the elite classes to gain acceptance and autonomy within their own communities if they choose to cross-play or cross-dress. Saied, a member of the elite class, states that he is confident enough to go out to malls wearing his cosplay wigs without caring about other people's stares or judgmental comments. Cross-dressing is, however, harder for cosplayers from the middle and lower classes, whose identities are more constrained by customs and traditions. Safwat, for example, must hide the fact that he cross-dresses or cross-plays from his family and people in his middle-class community. In this regard, Safwat states: "I would be harassed and even beaten up hard, if people in my community knew about my cosplay practices or the fact that I like to cross-dress".

In Egyptian society, gender roles are enforced by inherited culture and traditions, and by state ideologies and religion. Societal disapproval can be harsh for most people who like to cross-dress, even just to fulfill a hobby. Risha, the founder and the organizer of EGYcon, explains that when he first officially introduced a cross-dresser at one of the EGYcon's events, he faced backlash from some attendees and on the EGYcon social media fan pages. At that EGYcon event (EGYcon 3), Risha invited a cosplay judge, who is known for his gender-bending cosplay, to show the audience an example of a passionate gender-bender cosplayer. After being harshly criticized in person and on social media, Risha decided not to disclose any kind of public support to cosplay that can be regarded as a deviation from gender norms in Egypt.

Risha said that "gender-bender cosplayers can tell their friends about their gender-bending cosplay, post on social media and do whatever they want, but EGYcon administrative personnel will not advertise about them". Risha explained saying that he has nothing against

gender-bending cosplay, but that, he could not publish anything about the gender-bender subculture. He further explained saying that since the backlash he received from hosting a gender-bending cosplay judge, he had to downplay the fact that EGYcon conventions include gender-bending cosplay from the press and social media, to avoid criticism which may cause the cancellation of the cosplay events. For Egypt, a heteronormative traditional society, the idea of cross-dressing, even for popular culture events, can be easily translated by the public as desires for homosexuality and/or transgenderism. Until the present time, although not illegal by law, homosexuality and transgenderism are both socially stigmatized and deemed as unacceptable by Egyptian society and the Egyptian government.

With the popularity of anime cosplay worldwide, it would be difficult to guess the type of cosplayers the anime fandom will include in terms of age, gender, sexual orientation, etc. In her study about the influence of the Japanese popular culture in the West, the Japanese studies professor Susan J. Napier states, “anime fans come in all shapes and sizes, from all walks of life and with a wide range of approaches to both fandom and life” (Napier 2007, 142). Other cosplay studies suggest that young female fans make up most of the anime fandom. In his studies in the United Kingdom, David Hancock suggests that female cosplayers make up most cosplayers at science fiction conventions in the United Kingdom (Crawford et al., 2019, 91). Lamerichs (2013) also claims that cosplayers at fantasy conventions in Japan are mostly females. My anime and cosplay research in Egypt suggests that it is rather difficult to determine whether female cosplayers at science fiction anime conventions (mainly EGYcon conventions) are predominant or not. However, my observational and interview evidence suggests that female fans from

cosplayers, organizers, and attendees are present in large numbers at anime and cosplay conventions.

The relatively high female presence at the EGYcon 6 convention (and presumably all EGYcon conventions) can be significant, especially if we were to consider notions of patriarchy that are presumably grounded in Egyptian culture, which limits female agency and restricts female mobility. Within the socially constructed gender norms in Egypt, young women are expected to earn some level of education. The expectations vary depending on the social status of the family, from some school education to a postgraduate education (i.e., the more educated and richer the family is, the more university education their daughters are expected to earn). Egyptian families also expect young women to marry and bear children at a fairly young age, ideally between ages 18-30. Any type of behavior outside of the traditional conservative societal norm can threaten their eligibility to have a compatible marriage (for example, staying out late with friends, having many male friends, etc.). Young women's behavior and actions are constantly monitored by their family and family friends.

My interviews with female cosplayers at EGYcon 6 show that parental acceptance to cosplay practices varies from one family to another depending on 1) social class, 2) level of education, or 3) simply individual ideologies. Some female cosplayers consider themselves lucky to have been granted family acceptance to pursue their interest in anime and cosplay. Others have to hide their connection to the anime subculture in Egypt and their involvement in cosplay events. Shyro, for example, believes that she is one of the lucky ones as her parents (especially her father) have supportive of her hobbies, which include drawing, painting, and cosplay. Shyro states that she gets support from all the people in her life, including her siblings, her cousins, and





even her friends and neighbors. She gives an example saying that the cosplay costume for EGYcon 6 (for which she won the first prize) was not ready a few hours before the event, so her cousins and her siblings had to come for a sleep over to help her finish the costume. Even her neighbor volunteered to go shopping for missing materials and fabric.

Image #7 This is a photo of Shyro dressed in her first-place winning costume at EGYcon 6. Photo by Basant Ahmed Sayed.

As for Maggie-chan, her father was against her interest in cosplay. However, after noticing that she was getting recognized and applauded by fans following her social media cosplay related



pages, Maggie's father realized the popularity and wide acceptance of the hobby and he started showing his support for her cosplay activities.

Image #8 This is a photo of Maggie-chan in her anime costume at EGYcon 6. Photo by Basant Ahmed Sayed.

Nadine's family was totally against the idea of her following anime and cosplay activities right from the start.

Nadine states, "It took me almost a year to convince my dad

to let me take part in an EGYcon". After receiving her

father's long-awaited approval, Nadine finally got to attend as a cosplayer in an EGYcon event in 2017. Nadine's father, who thinks of the cosplay practice as childish and culturally inappropriate, had granted his approval for Nadine to take part in cosplay conventions only once.

After that, Nadine had to hide her participation in anime and cosplay events from her parents, especially her father. Because of her parents' disapproval, Nadine usually must wait until nighttime to work on her cosplay costumes. After an event, she would stack up her cosplay costumes in a bag, hiding them, which usually resulted in wrecking the costumes. When I asked Nadine if she considers hiding her participation in cosplay events to be rebellion, her answer was "yes". She considers it a type of resistance to social expectations. Both Shyro and Maggie's families can be regarded as open-minded families that are open to their daughter's following transnational trends. Nadine's parents, in my opinion, although educated and well-off, are like many other families in Egypt, more of a traditional type that find adopting new transnational subcultures threatening to inherited social culture and traditions.

Family disapproval of anime related activities in Egypt does not apply only to female anime fans, but also to some male fans. For example, Serag, 35 years old interior designer, watches anime and makes cosplay as a way of distancing himself from the stress of his work in interior design. Serag explains that he does not like the routine of going to work and then going home with no sort of entertainment. So, he breaks the routine of his daily life by enjoying his hobby of watching anime and designing, crafting, and making cosplay costumes. Serag states that there is no support for his hobby within his family circle, however, there is lots of support within his circle of friends. Serag also states that "although my family has no interest in anime, they respect my interest in it, so they never bother me, or interrupt me, when I am watching anime. They understand that this is my hobby".

As for Zekri, he believes that his parents are open minded, and kind of liberal compared to other parents that do not approve of cosplay and especially gender bender cosplay. He explains

that some people he knows stopped doing cosplay because their parents and family were annoyed and bothered by them dressing up in anime and movie costumes at public events (because, for example, they think of this hobby as childish and culturally and socially inappropriate). Zekri believes that parental approval and support is a key element to teens and young adults in Egypt following their interest in anime and cosplay.

## **8. Gender Transgression, Religious Hindrance, Restrictions on Self-Expression, and Inclusivity**

### **8.1. Gender Transgression and Self-Expression**

Although homosexuality and transgenderism are not legally considered a crime in Egypt, they are not accepted by most of Egypt's population. According to a 2013 survey by the Pew Research Centre, 95% of Egyptians resent homosexuality and condemn the LGBT<sup>13</sup> Community in Egypt (En.wikipedia.org, 2021). Contemporary Egyptian Law does not explicitly criminalize homosexuality and transgenderism. However, several clauses criminalize any behavior or practice that challenges public morality and defies cultural and religious principles<sup>14</sup> (Wikipedia.org, 2021). Recently, it has been reported that those clauses and provisions in

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<sup>13</sup> LGBT is an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals.

<sup>14</sup> "Article 9(c) of Law No. 10/1961 on Combating Prostitution, Incitement and its Encouragement criminalizes the 'habitual practice of debauchery'. The offence covers consensual sexual acts between men" (refugeelegalaidinformation.org, 2020). "Article 38 of the draft Egyptian Constitution provides that 'Citizens are equal before the law. They have equal public rights and duties without discrimination between them based on sex, gender, origin, language, religion, belief, or any other reason'. However, this constitutional right does not protect against discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity" (refugeelegalaidinformation.org, 2020).

Egyptian law have been frequently used to prosecute members of the LGBT community in Egypt.

Egypt used to be internationally known for its lenient stance towards male homosexuality in the previous decade (2001-2010). However, since the 2013 military coup, Egypt's attitude has drastically changed (hrw.org, 2020) with incidents of Egyptian homosexuals and transgender people being imprisoned and (systematically) tortured and sexually violated in prison repeatedly reported (hrw.org, 2020). A well-known case of abuse and torture of an LGBT member by the Egyptian authorities is Sarah Hegazy. The adolescent female, accused of raising the rainbow flag at a concert in 2017, was arrested by the Egyptian police, tortured, and sexually abused. She later committed suicide in Canada, where she sought asylum, in June 2020 (hrw.org, 2020).

Since the military coup of 2013 and the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood's elected president Mohamed Morsi, the new president Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and the new military regime has had "a problem of legitimacy" (En.wikipedia.org, 2021). As a means of regaining the support of the Islamic religious affiliation and reasserting the Christian support, the Egyptian president, who was the former Military Minister of Defence waged a war against the LGBT community in Egypt. During the aftermath of rising the rainbow flag during the Mashrou' Leila concert in 2017, the Orthodox Coptic Church held the "Volcano of Homosexuality" event with the support of the El-Sisi government (En.wikipedia.org, 2021). The event aimed to unite all religious affiliations against the common enemy of homosexuality (En.wikipedia.org, 2021). The war against the LGBT community is ongoing with the government and the Islamist and Coptic bases joining forces against it. The impact of this complex change in government and religious

affiliation explains why the cosplayers with whom I spoke felt a rational need to hide their cross-dressing from the general Egyptian public.

## **8.2. Hindering Religious Expression**

In the last few years, there has been a backlash against wearing Islamic headwear, hijab or niqab within the upper-class community. Many upscale restaurants, bars and coffee shops have issued a ban on the Islamic veil because veiling contradicts the modern, liberal, and classy atmosphere that these places aim to achieve and makes them look like inferior low-class establishments. Similarly, some high-end hotels and resorts have been imposing a ban on the burkini<sup>15</sup> that prohibits women dressed in burkini from swimming in the pools and/or the beaches of these private establishments.

A recent example of discrimination against the female Islamic attire the abaya<sup>16</sup> involved a popular cafe in New Cairo called the "Hookah Lounge" in June 2021. This coffee shop offers hookah<sup>17</sup> smoking, among other refreshments, to its middle-and upper-class clients. The coffee shop manager had requested a female customer, who was dressed in an abaya and in a company of several women of various looks and styles (i.e., some of whom did not wear a hijab), to leave the premises as her attire was defying the cafe's dress code. Like other similar incidents before, this incident raises questions regarding the reasons why some establishment owners enforce a ban on specific Islamic attire in a country where 90 per cent of its population are Muslims.

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<sup>15</sup> The burkini is a style of swimwear for women that covers the whole body except for the face, hands, and feet.

<sup>16</sup> The abaya is a long full-length piece of clothing covering the whole body, sometimes worn by Muslim women and men.

<sup>17</sup> Hookah smoking involves a tobacco pipe with a long, bendable tube which draws the smoke through water contained in a glass bowl.

Because of the ongoing backlash against modest Islamic attire, including the burkini, hijab, and niqab, the Egyptian Minister of Tourism had issued a warning against any Islamic ban in 2019. However, he soon withdrew his warning with no further comment on the issue. One theory that explains the rise in discrimination against modest Islamic attire attributed it to the military government-led hate campaign that targeted the Muslim Brotherhood political party amid the 2013 Military coup and the government's ongoing fight against Islamists in Egypt that resulted in a public backlash against Islamic religious figures and Islamic religious attire. This discriminatory attitude towards modest Islamic attire, especially women's modest attire, has been influencing the freedom of self-expression of Egyptian women, including female anime fans and cosplayers.

### **8.3. EGYcon and Inclusivity**

Like most science fiction conventions, EGYcon offers a safe environment to all cosplayers, including those discriminated against in Egyptian society. According to my interviewees' testimonies, EGYcon has proved to be a sanctuary and a safe space for Egyptian anime fans and cosplayers, including those discriminated against in Egypt's modern society. For example, Saied thinks that the Egyptian society is a patriarchal society that criticizes and resists any popular culture trend out of the norm. He admits that he has been facing criticism within his family circle because of his interest in anime and cross-play (dressing up in a gender-bender cosplay at cosplay competitions). Mixing the interest in cross-play with interest in transgenderism, Saied's family disapproves of his gender-bender cosplay, critiquing him for being too young to know the real reason behind his interest in dressing up in a costume of the opposite gender. Saied believes that there has been a significant change in the Egyptians' way of

thinking towards transnational popular culture trends, such as cosplay, since the first EGYcon convention in 2014. He explains that during the first EGYcon, cosplay participants did not dare to exit the EGYcon 1 venue dressed in their cosplay costumes. However, Saied states that, “now things have changed, and people have become more accepting of the idea of cosplay.” He gives an example of when he and his friends went to get a milkshake from a nearby MacDonald's dressed up in cosplay costumes after the EGYcon 6 event had ended, with no one on the streets making fun of them or bothering them. Regarding this incident, Saied claims that while some people were surprised to see them dressed up in anime costumes, others were greeting them, cheering them up for doing something out of the ordinary and taking pictures with them.

Regarding the phobia that some people in Egypt have against gay people and transgender people (i.e., homophobia), Saied believes in the saying, “live and let live”. He thinks that if someone thinks that what he is doing is not right, that does not make them right and make him wrong. Saied admits that whenever someone condemns his cosplay costume, deep inside, he is torn. However, he tries to keep his head high and not care what others think of his gender-bending costume.

According to Serag, EGYcon supports the idea of freedom of religious expression. EGYcon events do not restrict any religious expression, regardless of the religion (e.g., Islam, Christianity, Judaism) the participants or the attendees express. EGYcon's administrative personnel welcome all attendees and contestants and do not discriminate against anyone (i.e., because of religion, gender, age, social class, and nationality, etc.). Serag gives an example of a friend of his that came back from his pilgrimage from Saudi Arabia on the day of an EGYcon event. Because he wanted to attend the convention, he came from the airport directly to the event

wearing his pilgrimage outfit (a white abaya), adding the headpiece that Saudi men wear and a sword. With his pilgrimage cosplay, the friend fit in well with the other cosplayers and was welcomed by everyone.

Another good example of EGYcon's strategy of inclusion<sup>18</sup> is welcoming and supporting women who wear the hijab or the niqab to attend and take part in the cosplay contest, something that other events and establishments in Egypt recently chose not to accommodate. Shyro thinks that hibaji (i.e., women who wear a veil covering their hair) and niqabi women (i.e., women who wear a veil that covers their hair and another that covers their face except for the eyes) in Egypt lately have been facing criticism and discrimination in various places including some high-end restaurants, clubs and resorts (also including recreational areas that are run by the military). She believes that this kind of discrimination is repressive and against the freedom of self-expression.



Image #9 This photo includes a niqab wearing Egyptian woman (far left) together with her two hijab wearing daughters (third and fourth from left), who were part of the audience at EGYcon 6), and Dr. Millie Creighton (second from left) anthropologist, Japan specialist, and a cosplayer at EGYcon 6. Photo by Basant Ahmed Sayed.

She further claims that hijabi cosplayers can also face discrimination and criticism on social media (including EGYcon Facebook page after posting their photos with their cosplay).

“People just make fun of anything,” Shyro states. She also states that there is no discrimination against hijabi cosplayers at EGYcon, and that the EGYcon space is a positive and inclusive one.

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<sup>18</sup> This includes all anime fans regardless of their religion, gender, age, social class, and nationality.



Similarly, to Shyro, Nadine suggests that there has been discrimination against women wearing the hijab and the niqab after the military coup in Egypt. She believes that most of the public in Egypt resents the former deceased Egyptian President Morsi, who was a representative of the Muslim Brotherhood political party. Resentment led to a rejection of some of the conservative Islamic practices, including wearing the hijab and the niqab. Moreover, Nadine



believes that this negative attitude towards Islamic practices was stimulated and encouraged by the El Sisi military government. In this regard, Nadine states.

“Since that time, hijabi and niqabi women have been experiencing discrimination; they were banned from entering many places, such as certain restaurants, resorts, beaches with no law to protect them from this kind of treatment”.

Image #10 This is Nadine is pictured in her cosplay costume, in which she is wearing a red headscarf as a representation of the cosplay character's red hair. Photo by Basant Ahmed Sayed.

Nadine claims that at EGYcon, hijabi participants are celebrated, just like all participants, rather than discriminated against. She thinks that if any negative feedback or verbal abuse occurs, it would involve individual cases and most likely from people outside the anime and EGYcon community. Nadine says that inside the EGYcon community, cosplayers and fans would only provide a critique on the cosplay costumes themselves and not on the cosplayers.

About Nadine, Safwat states:

At EGYcon, there is no discrimination against hijabi cosplayers. Nadine is one of the Hijabi cosplayers that won a prize at EGYcon. There is something called “Hijab Cosplay” that is very

popular among Egyptian female cosplayers. There are also a few pages on Facebook that are about Hijab cosplay.

Nadine posts photos of herself in cosplay costumes on her Facebook page, and she has her followers. Nadine explains that two major reasons made her create her own Facebook page on Hijab cosplay. The first is that she wants to post her photos in cosplay costumes away from her father's critical gaze. The second is that she believes many hijabi anime fans are hesitant to do cosplay, mainly because of their fear that hijab might impede how a cosplay should look. By posting her photos using hijab in her cosplay costumes, Nadine is showing other female cosplayers that hijab does not get in the way of doing cosplay and that they can use it in cosplay (i.e., use different colors of scarves, making the scarves look like the hair of the character they are portraying). Nadine wants to inspire hijabi women to follow their cosplay hobby in cosplay and give them practical ideas on how to use their hijab (instead of wigs) in cosplay. She also wants to challenge the stereotype that you cannot do cosplay if you wear hijab (or wear a religious head covering such as niqab). Nadine says that she received a great deal of positive feedback about her Facebook page and that many hijabi cosplay fans contacted her expressing their gratitude as she encouraged them to do cosplay.

#### **8.4. Localizing EGYcon**

When Risha initially hired an artist to create an icon image for EGYcon, the artist first came up with an icon featuring a red-haired girl who was wearing a white shirt and black pants (all of which are the colours of Egypt's national flag) with anime icons (such as Pikachu) coming out of her back. Although the icon seemed like a good representation of Egypt with the colors of

the girl's hair and clothes representing the colors of the Egyptian flag, Risha did not think of it as an accurate representation of the Egyptian girl or woman.

“The EGYcon icon is of an Egyptian girl wearing a hijab and a kimono and is named Hana” Risha said. By choosing the hijab wearing character of Hana<sup>19</sup> over the other characters that the artists initially designed, Risha meant to present EGYcon as an Islam friendly event, but not specifically an Islamic event, that adheres to Egyptian society's culture, norms and expectations. He stated that choosing a hijab wearing Egyptian girl to represent EGYcon was meant to show parents that EGYcon is an event that adheres to Egyptian society's norms, values modesty, and references that there was nothing abnormal about the event.

Moreover, by choosing ‘Hana’, Risha wanted to emphasize the event as “Islam Friendly”, to encourage the hijab wearing Egyptian Muslim girl to attend and for her family not to fear or have any concerns about her participation. Considering the common restrictions that Muslim girls experience within Egyptian society, especially in rural areas, Risha believes that delivering this message of including and encompassing Islamic religion in the event would ensure that all members of the Egyptian society (hijabi, Coptic Christians, males, females, elites, upper and middle classes) would have no problem attending the event, and would deem the event as safe, proper, and appropriate according to common Egyptian cultural standards. By creating a hijabi icon, Risha discusses how he wanted to defy the common belief regarding female cosplay costumes showing a great deal of skin and overly sexualized, stemming from the belief that most Japanese female anime characters usually represent a sexualized image of a female. Risha

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<sup>19</sup> Hana is a common Egyptian female name meaning happiness and satisfaction. It is also a common Japanese name that means ‘flower’.

explains how when he initially thought of creating such an event in Egypt, he anticipated critiques such as that the event might be considered inappropriate, in not adhering to Egyptian conservative cultural and religious values, or a possible foreign cultural invasion.

By having Hana as the EGYcon icon, Risha wanted to eliminate all such anticipated critiques and assure Egyptian anime fans and their families that the event would not be out of the ordinary in comparison to Egyptian cultural expectations and the Islamic religion. Risha gives an example of the heavy metal concerts that were started around the early 2010s. He points out that these concerts received many critiques from families accusing the event of holding satanic gatherings, like those allegedly held by satanic cults in the nineties in Cairo (Daniszewski, 1997).<sup>20</sup> By creating an icon representing local Egyptian women, Risha localizes the global popular culture trend of comic con to meet Egyptian cultural expectations and standards.

## **9. Conclusion**

The popularity of Japanese anime culture has shown a rise among youth in Egypt during the second decade of the millennium. This rise in popularity occurred as Egyptian teens and young adults used the affordable online platforms to gain access to various genres of Japanese anime streaming online and used the popular anime social media forums to join and connect to local, regional, and global fandom communities. With the growth in anime culture in Egypt came a rise in the otaku subculture, as more anime fans adopted various anime-related activities (such as video games and cosplay). Unlike otaku in Japan, who usually face criticism from the public

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<sup>20</sup> This involved a group of upper-class teenagers and young adults that were accused of losing their religion and worshipping the devil in the 1990s in Egypt (Daniszewski, 1997).

sphere, the Egyptian otaku faces opposition and resistance mainly from within the family realm. Many families are critical of these subculture practices, including watching anime and participating in cosplay competitions. However, anime culture still attracts minimal media attention because of its growing nature and that of its otaku subculture, which is still considered minuscule compared to mainstream culture. Egyptian anime fans and otaku have been practicing their anime-related activities inside the haven of the anime and cosplay conventions (such as an EGYcon) that have been on the rise since the start of the second decade of the 21st century.

My research examined the consumption habits and practices of eight anime fans and EGYcon 6 cosplayers that I met during my participant observation at EGYcon 6 in relation to their social classes. The research re-examines Mark Allen Peterson's theory that places social class and cosmopolitan aspirations (such as anime and cosplay, and previously Pokémon products in the first decade of the 2000s) in direct relation to consuming transnational popular culture products. In his theory, Peterson suggested that Egyptian elites assert their elite status by consuming trendy transnational popular cultural products (such as Pokémon video games, goodies...etc.) and to become part of the cosmopolitan world of global fans and players. I agree that this model applies to the Pokémon craze in Egypt in the first decade of the 2000s. However, it does not apply to the anime and cosplay popular culture model of the following 2010s but instead it deviates from it. The 2010s Egyptian anime and cosplay fans do not adopt time and cosplay practices to aspire to cosmopolitanism, but instead they adopt this type of transnational hobby to fulfill a passion for anime and cosplay and a desire for self-expression and self-reflection.

This thesis also investigated criticisms and oppositions that anime fans and cosplayers face for defying the recent Egyptian societal ideologies hindering gender and religious expression. I referenced the recent political situation in Egypt to explain the reasons behind the backlash and resentment that anime fans and cosplayers endure from both the family and friends circle and the public side. I claimed that the recent hindrance in self-expression (i.e., in the case of this research, cross- dress, and wearing the hijab or niqab in cosplay) is an indirect result of the 2013 military coup that created feelings of frustration both towards Islamic religious symbols (including hijab or niqab for women) and LGBTQ symbols. The research further highlighted the vital role that the Egyptian anime convention (EGYcon) plays in offering an opportunity for self-expression through cosplay in a legitimate and inclusive environment. This inclusivity allows groups that experienced discrimination in Egypt in recent years to express their passion for anime.

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## 11. Appendix

This is a list of the names of the eight interviewees that were involved in EGYcon 6 and with whom I conducted interviews. The list also includes the dates of the interviews, and the names I used to refer to the interviewees in the thesis.

1. Ahmed Saied, a 22-year-old engineering student and an anime and a manga fan. I refer to him in the thesis as Ahmed Saied or Saied. I conducted an interview with Saied on October 9th, 2019.
2. Ahmed Zekri, a 21-year-old dentistry student and a dedicated anime fan. I refer to him in the thesis as Ahmed Zekri or Zekri. I conducted an interview with Zekri on October 8th, 2019.
3. Hesham Safwat, a 23-year-old Commerce University graduate and a dedicated anime fan and a cosplayer. Safwat works as a cashier in a department store and lives with his family in the suburbs of Cairo. I refer to him as Hesham Safwat or Safwat in the thesis. I conducted an interview with him on October 16th, 2019.
4. Islam Risha, a 30-year-old EGYcon founder and organizer, and a former engineer. I refer to him in the thesis as Islam Risha or Risha. I conducted an interview with Risha on October 21st, 2019.
5. Maggie-chan, 27 years old Egyptian accountant, an anime fan, and a cosplayer. I refer to her in the thesis as Maggie-chan. I conducted an interview with her on March 11th, 2020.
6. Nadine, a 20-year-old Mass Media university student, an anime fan, and a cosplayer. I refer to her in the thesis as Nadine. I conducted an interview with her on October 18th, 2019.
7. Serag, 35 years old interior designer, an anime fan, and a cosplayer. I refer to him in the thesis as Serag. I conducted an interview with him on October 8th, 2019.
8. Shyro, 26 years old EGYcon organizer, an anime fan, and a cosplayer. I refer to her in the thesis as Shyro. I conducted an interview with her on October 13th, 2019.