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Vulnerable narcissism and body image centrality in cosplay practice: A sequential mediation model

Francesca Gioia ¹, Martina De Clemente ¹, Santa Parrello ¹, Valentina Boursier ^{1*}

Abstract

In recent years, the cosplay practice has become a ubiquitous activity, representing a pivotal way to get in touch with the so-called geek culture and its media content (such as videogames, comics, manga). Cosplaying appeared related to narcissistic fragility which in turn is strictly linked to social appearance anxiety and self-objectification experiences. However, despite the body image centrality in cosplay practice, no studies evaluated cosplayers' narcissistic vulnerability in association with these body image-related issues. A total of 926 young adults (73.2% female; 47.3% cosplayer; mean age=25.3 years) participated in the study. Results confirmed the direct and indirect effect of narcissistic vulnerability on social appearance anxiety (via body surveillance and body shame) among both cosplayers and non-cosplayers. Overall, narcissistically vulnerable individuals, regardless of their involvement in cosplay practice, seem to experience higher body surveillance and body shame, which in turn might promote social appearance anxiety.

¹ Department of Humanities, University of Naples Federico II, Naples, Italy

E-mail corresponding author: valentina.boursier@unina.it

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1. Introduction

In the wake of the increasing globalization and technological advancements, the cosplay culture has become consequently ubiquitous (Napier 2007; Rahman et al., 2015). The term “cosplay” has been coined in 1983 by the Japanese journalist Noboyuki Takahashi and it represents the combining of the words for “costume” and “play” (Rahman et al., 2015; Winge, 2006). Specifically, cosplay describes the practice consisting of interpretation, disguise, and play a character from media products of geek culture based on imaginary worlds (such as Japanese manga and anime, American comics, movie, and videogames) (Winge, 2006). Traditionally, the “cosplayers” played the character following its way of being, imitating its gestures and behaviors,

and assuming its attitudes and personality traits (Adami, 2009; Mountfort et al., 2019; Vanzella, 2005; Winge, 2006).

According to Vanzella (2005), different cultures greatly influenced the cosplay phenomenon. Indeed, in Japan, it represents a social matter and it is considered a subculture defined by its own style and ideology (Crawford & Hancock, 2019). Accordingly, Japanese cosplayers are driven by a strong desire of contestation of social values that limit self-expression and establish dress code for everyday life, wearing unconventional costumes to express freedom and creativity, even in quite disruptive and eccentric ways (Adami, 2009). However, within Japanese culture, cosplay practice has been often described as a form of rebellion against social rules (Aoyama & Cahill, 2003; Richie, 2003) and cosplayers have been socially stigmatized and perceived as fanatics and immature individuals (Lopes, 2006; Peirson-Smith, 2013). Differently, in Western contexts, cosplay is not considered a subculture, but an increasingly widespread practice held during comics' conventions (Adami, 2009; Ramirez, 2017). In the last thirty years, in Italy, the number of participants at the most famous Italian convention "Lucca Comics & Games" has dramatically increased, counting more than 270.000 people in 2019 (Lucca Crea, 2019). The Italian cosplayers are generally aged between 15 and 35 years and are mainly females (Canal, 2015; Vanzella 2005). Overall, the Italian phenomenon is considered an appendix of the geek subculture and it is motivated by personal satisfaction, playful, creative, and interpretative purposes, allowing to test themselves with new identities (Adami, 2009; Leshner & De La Garza, 2019; Polvi et al., 2019; Vanzella, 2005; Winge, 2006).

In recent years, scientific research found controversial findings concerning cosplay practice. Some studies considered the cosplay as a symptom of social dysfunction (Jenson, 1992) and deviance (Lewis, 1995), due to the passion for products (such as anime and manga) that are socially opposed to traditional and legitimized Western canons (Chen, 2011; Napier, 2002). Other scholars claimed a relationship between cosplay practice and violent behaviors and drugs use (Kinsella, 2000; Njubi, 2001). Thus, the cosplay practice has been often socially stigmatized as obsessive, "hysterical" (Lundy, 2010), unproductive, and an attempt to remain children (Griner & Fùrnari, 1999; Pellitteri, 2002). On the contrary, other researchers highlighted the pivotal role of the cosplay-related creative dimension that assumed a constructive function for positive self-regulation (Chen, 2007, 2011), emotions management, and general well-being (Chen, 2011). According to Napier (2007), the cosplay practice might represent a potential temporary escape from reality, stress, and daily monotony (Rahman et al., 2015), allowing cosplayers to experience positive emotions, pleasure, fantasies, and feelings of fulfillment and self-esteem. As Cantone et al. (2013) highlighted, the cosplay practice might allow individuals

to experience different identities, creating excitement not without risks for the real Self (Rahman et al., 2015). Accordingly, Lotecki (2012) found a process of *identity negotiation* in cosplay practice, starting from the emulated characters. Indeed, the chosen characters might represent identity aspects not yet integrated into an adult Self (Adami, 2009; Lamerichs, 2011) and playing different characters (also with the opposite gender) might allow cosplayers to continually explore and reshape themselves (Peirson-Smith, 2013; Rahman et al., 2015; Ramirez, 2017; Truong, 2013). Likely, the identification with a character allows the temporary assumption of a *projective identity* (Gee, 2007) or false identity, without transforming own personal identity (Adami, 2009; Chen, 2011; Peirson-Smith, 2013; Wang, 2010) and allowing cosplayers to interact and socialize more easily (Bonnichsen, 2011; Cantone et al., 2013). On the contrary, according to Pietropolli Charmet (2018), cosplaying might represent a new expressive practice that uses manga and anime in search and definition of true Self, through creativity, expressiveness, and craftsmanship.

1.1 Narcissism, body image centrality, and cosplay practice

In 1990, Christopher Lasch introduced the concept of the culture of narcissism based on the increasing individuals' devotion to digital media. In this regard, the cosplay practice might represent a pivotal way to get in touch with own favorite media content (such as videogames, comics, manga) (Lamp, 2018), and a link with narcissism has been searched. In an Italian study, Cantone and Laudanno (2013) defined cosplaying as prolonged adolescence (Blos, 1962, 1967), in which the developmental processes were characterized by traits of narcissistic pathology (Blos, 1979). In this perspective, similarly to adolescents who used to play the adult role in order to experience independence, strength, and power, cosplayers seem to turn to fantasy models rather than real ones, trying to manage emotions, feelings, and identity crisis (Cantone & Laudanno, 2013). In another study, Cantone et al. (2013) suggested that playing fantasy characters might represent a way to cope with social anxiety and narcissistic fragility. The authors found more pathological personality dimensions, grandiose fantasies, and a higher need for admiration among cosplayers than non-cosplayers, assuming that avoidance and inadequacy of the Self might be the basis of the cosplay practice. Thus, cosplaying (the disguise, the play, and the obsessive care of costumes) might arise from narcissistic impulses, representing a social facilitator and a coping strategy to face social anxiety, find a temporary break from own anxieties, and withdrawal from social life (Cantone et al., 2013).

According to previous literature, narcissism traditionally refers to grandiose and megalomaniac fantasies (narcissistic grandiosity) (Fossati & Borroni, 2018; Miller & Campbell, 2008; Pincus et al., 2009; Ronningstam 2009; Rose, 2002; Wink, 1991) or low self-esteem, feelings of shame,

anxiety and anger, insecure sense of grandiosity, and hypersensitivity to the others' evaluation (narcissistic vulnerability) (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Fossati & Borroni, 2018; Pincus & Roche, 2011; Rose, 2002). In particular, narcissistic vulnerable traits have been found generally associated with self-shame (Bilevicius et al., 2019; Cain et al., 2008; Freis et al., 2015; Malkin et al., 2011; Pincus et al., 2009; Ritter et al., 2014, Ronningstam, 2009), body image-related concerns (Carrotte & Anderson, 2019; Davis et al., 1997; Purton et al., 2018; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2008), body dissatisfaction (Swami et al., 2015), social appearance anxiety (Boursier & Gioia, 2020), and self-objectification experiences (especially body shame), representing a specific risky factor especially among women (Boursier & Gioia, 2020; Boursier et al., 2020c; Carrotte & Anderson, 2019; Jakšić et al., 2014; Pincus et al., 2009; Swami et al. 2015; Wright et al., 2010; You et al., 2013; Zeigler-Hill et al. 2008). In this regard, body image and physical appearance seem to represent pivotal issues in vulnerable narcissistic individuals.

Similarly, physical appearance and individuals' beliefs and perceptions of others' participation in this evaluation have been found directly related to social appearance anxiety (Cash & Fleming, 2002; Garcia, 1998; Leary & Kowalski, 1995). More specifically, the preoccupation for own physical appearance and fear of situations in which own body image might be negatively evaluated have been considered the main components of social appearance anxiety, leading to the need to provide a positive impression on other people, likely enhanced by the perception of own difficulties in complying this goal (Hart et al., 1989, 2008). According to previous studies (Cusumano & Thompson, 1997; Dakanalis et al., 2016; Doğan & Çolak, 2016; Jones et al., 2004; Levinson & Rodebaugh, 2012), women appeared more engaged than men in appearance-related anxious feelings, despite both male and female individuals share similar perceptions of their bodily attractiveness as a function of their level of appearance anxiety (Garcia, 1998). In this regard, social media exposure could be a pivotal catalyst for appearance concerns and anxiety (Aubrey, 2006; Ganth, 2017; Trekels & Eggermont, 2017). Likewise, in a different perspective, the self-objectification and objectified body consciousness frameworks (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996) highlighted that the exposure to and the creation of sexually objectified media content might lead to the internalization of an external observer's gaze on own physical selves. Consequently, this internalization might lead women, and more and more men (Dakanalis et al., 2012, 2015; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Karsay et al., 2018; Manago et al., 2015; Moradi, 2010; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012), to repeat experiences of self-objectification, encouraging self-body surveillance and increasing body shame when own appearance is perceived as discrepant with unrealistic beauty ideals (i.e., Aubrey, 2006; Boursier et al., 2020b, 2020c; Cohen et al., 2018; Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Gioia et al., 2020; Meier & Gray, 2014; Perloff, 2014;

Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). Furthermore, these repeated self-objectification experiences might lead to a hyper-sexualization of women and a hyper-masculinization of men (Grissom, 2019; Ricciardelli et al., 2010), an overinvestment in others' approval, lower awareness about internal states, depressive states, and social appearance anxiety (Boursier & Gioia, 2020; Calogero & Thompson, 2009; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Henning & Szymanski, 2007; Moradi, 2010; Ohring et al., 2002; Thompson et al., 2003; Volpato, 2011). Accordingly, the use of geek media content (such as videogames, comics, and manga), so widespread in cosplay practice and often gender- and race-stereotyped (Cote, 2017; Duggan, 2015; Embrick et al., 2012; Fox & Potocki, 2016; Kidd & Turner, 2016; Lamp, 2018; Rodriguez, 2015; Schott & Horrell, 2000), might promote self-objectification experiences, male dominance, and women's subordinate role (Hamilton et al., 2019; Messerschmidt, 2017). Specifically, despite some studies showed that cosplay practice might lead to creating themselves far from social standards, becoming more self-confident about own bodies, sexuality, and physical abilities (Caldeira & De Ridder, 2017; Dalley & Vidal, 2013; Halliwell, 2015; Lome, 2016; Slaughter, 2019), male characters have been increasingly masculinized, depicted as strong and combative men with muscular and robust bodies, while female characters have been relegated to secondary roles or simply depicted as the love of male protagonists (Hamilton et al., 2019; Messerschmidt, 2017). Moreover, the women's body has been usually depicted as hyperfeminine and hypersexualized, slender but shapely, to please the male audience (Baker, 2019). Consequently, choosing a character, especially if female, a cosplayer might become a conscious or unconscious medium of these unhealthy values. However, further studies on the relationship among cosplay practice, appearance-related issues, and vulnerable narcissism are needed.

1.2 The present study

In summary, the cosplay practice is a widespread activity still understudied and little explored. Previous Italian studies found a clear association between cosplaying and narcissistic fragility (Cantone & Laudanno, 2013; Cantone et al., 2013), assuming that the disguise, the play, and the obsessive care of costumes among cosplayers might arise from narcissistic impulses and represent a coping strategy to manage social anxiety and withdrawal from social life (Cantone et al., 2013). Moreover, other studies highlighted the strict relation among narcissism, body dissatisfaction (Purton et al., 2018), social appearance anxiety (Boursier & Gioia, 2020), self-shame (Bilevicius et al., 2019; Cain et al., 2008; Freis et al., 2015; Malkin et al., 2011; Pincus et al., 2009; Ritter et al., 2014; Ronningstam, 2009), and self-objectification experiences (Boursier & Gioia, 2020; Boursier et al., 2020c; Carrotte & Anderson, 2019; Swami et al., 2015; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2008). However, despite the certain centrality of body image and appearance in

cosplay practice, no studies evaluated cosplayers' narcissistic vulnerability in association with body image-related issues. Therefore, the present study evaluated the main and indirect effects of vulnerable narcissism and self-objectification experiences on cosplayers' social appearance anxiety, comparing them with a non-cosplayer group. It was expected that cosplayers would show higher levels of vulnerable narcissism, body surveillance, body shame, and social appearance anxiety than non-cosplayers. Moreover, it was expected that women would report a higher level of vulnerable narcissism, body surveillance, body shame, and social appearance anxiety than men, in both cosplayer and non-cosplayer groups. Finally, it was expected that vulnerable narcissism would significantly influence social appearance anxiety and that body surveillance and body shame would mediate this relationship, especially among cosplayers.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Participants and procedures

A total of 926 participants were recruited (73.2% female; aged 20–35 years; $M_{age} = 25.3$ years, $SD = 4.52$), divided into 438 cosplayers (76.9% female) and 488 non-cosplayers (69.87% female). Data collection occurred via an online survey, through advertisements in Italian social networking sites' groups dedicated to cosplay practice and other similar activities and in university Web communities, including cosplayer and non-cosplayer individuals. Before filling out the online questionnaire, all participants were informed about the nature of the research and the measures to be used in generating the data and provided their informed consent. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and all participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. No course credits or remunerative rewards were given. The study was approved by the research team's University Research Ethics Committees and was conducted according to the ethical guidelines for psychological research laid down by the Italian Psychological Association (AIP).

2.2 Measures

Socio-demographic information and cosplay practice patterns. In this section, information was collected about gender, age, and sexual orientation. Only for cosplayer group, information about the chosen characters was collected.

Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI). The PNI is a 52-item multidimensional measure of pathological grandiose and vulnerable narcissism rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 6 (*very much like me*). The Italian version of the PNI (Fossati et al., 2015; original English version by Pincus, 2013; Pincus et al., 2009) was used to assess only the covert characteristics of vulnerable narcissism through four subscales: (i) contingent self-esteem (12

items, e.g., “*It’s hard to feel good about myself unless I know other people admire me*”), (ii) hiding the self (7 items, e.g., “*I often hide my needs for fear that others will see me as needy and dependent*”), (iii) devaluing (7 items, e.g., “*Sometimes I avoid people because I’m concerned that they’ll disappoint me*”), and (iv) entitlement rage (8 items, e.g., “*I typically get very angry when I’m unable to get what I want from others*”). The second-order narcissistic vulnerability scale has been obtained from the average score of contingent self-esteem, hiding the self, devaluing, and entitlement rage subscales. In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha values of the first-order subscales were .92 for contingent self-esteem, .79 for hiding the self, .80 for devaluing, and .85 for entitlement rage. The Cronbach’s alphas for vulnerable narcissism was .94.

Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBCS). The Body Surveillance and Body Shame subscales of the Italian version of OBCS (Dakanalis et al., 2015; original English version by McKinley & Hyde, 1996) were used. The 8-item subscales rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*) and explored the internalization of the observer’s perspective on the body (body surveillance; e.g., “*I often worry about whether the clothes I am wearing make me look good*”) and the individuals’ feelings of shame about own body and its appearance body shame; e.g., “*When I can’t control my weight, I don’t feel right*”). The Cronbach’s alphas for body surveillance and body shame were .77 and .86 respectively.

Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS) The Italian version of SAAS (Dakanalis et al., 2016; original English version by Hart et al., 2008) was used to assess participants’ social appearance anxiety (e.g., “*I get nervous talking to people because of the way I look*”). The one-dimensional 16-item scale rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Extremely*). In the present study, the scale showed an excellent Cronbach’s α value (.95).

2.3 Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics were examined for all study variables. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to examine the differences between cosplayers and non-cosplayers, and between men and women. Pearson’s r correlations between the study variables were examined. A sequential mediation model was tested by using Model 6 of Hayes’s (2017) Process Macro for SPSS, with 1,000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples to test the mediating effect of body surveillance and body shame between cosplayers’ and non-cosplayers’ vulnerable narcissism and social appearance anxiety.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive analyses

Among the cosplayers, 81.1% was heterosexual, 12.6% bisexual, and only 3% homosexual. Instead, among non-cosplayers, 92.2% was heterosexual, 3.9% was bisexual, and only 3.7% was homosexual.

Concerning the cosplay practice patterns, the 67.8% of participants preferred to play anime characters (71.5% female vs. 55.4% male; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 13.46$; $p < .001$), 59.4% manga character (62% female vs. 50.5% male; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 5.36$; $p = .02$), 56.4% videogames characters (54.3% female vs. 63.4% male; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 4.45$; $p = .04$), and 50.5% film or animated feature movies characters (51.6% female vs. 46.5% male; $\chi^2_{(1)} = .82$; $p = .05$). Finally, 55.7% of cosplayers played characters of their own sex (47.5% female vs 83.2% male; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 61.82$; $p < .001$), 40.9% characters of both sexes (48% female vs. 16.8% male; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 48.58$; $p < .001$), and 3.4% played characters of the opposite sex (4.5% female vs. 0% male; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 5.34$; $p = .02$).

3.2 Multivariate analysis of variance and bivariate correlations

The MANOVA (Table 1) exploring group differences (cosplayers/non-cosplayers and males/females) in relation with vulnerable narcissism, body surveillance, body shame, and social appearance anxiety showed significant differences by cosplay practice (Wilks's $\lambda = .96$, $F_{(7,916)} = 4.99$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .04$) and gender-based groups (Wilks's $\lambda = .96$, $F_{(11,912)} = 6.16$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .05$). Non-cosplayers showed higher means in devaluing the self, entitlement rage, and body surveillance. Females showed higher means in contingent self-esteem, body surveillance, body shame, and social appearance anxiety. Bivariate correlations among the variables showed a significant and positive co-occurrence of social appearance anxiety with all the involved variables, except gender (Table 2).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and comparisons between cosplayer/non-cosplayer groups and male/female groups.

	Total sample	Cosplay practice			Gender		
	M(SD)	Cosplayer M(SD)	Non-Cosplayer M(SD)	$F_{(1, 924)}$	Female M(DS)	Male M(DS)	$F_{(1, 924)}$
PNI contingent self-esteem	2.88 (1.13)	2.95 (1.18)	2.81(1.07)	1.33 ^{ns}	2.93 (1.13)	2.74 (1.10)	4.76*
PNI hiding the self	3.73 (1.05)	3.76 (1.04)	3.71(1.06)	.03 ^{ns}	3.77 (1.06)	3.64 (1.03)	2.72 ^{ns}
PNI devaluing	2.64 (1.06)	2.56 (1.05)	2.70 (1.07)	5.57*	2.65 (1.05)	2.59 (1.08)	1.28 ^{ns}
PNI entitlement rage	3.24 (1.09)	3.16 (1.10)	3.31 (1.07)	6.32*	3.24(1.08)	3.24 (1.12)	.12 ^{ns}
Vulnerable narcissism	3.12 (.88)	3.11 (.88)	3.13(.86)	1.16 ^{ns}	3.15 (.86)	3.05(.90)	2.70 ^{ns}
OBCS body surveillance	4.28 (1.07)	4.23 (1.13)	4.31 (1.02)	4.11*	4.39 (1.02)	3.95 (1.15)	34.04***
OBCS body shame	3.56 (1.41)	3.57(1.47)	3.55 (1.36)	.04 ^{ns}	3.66 (1.45)	3.27 (1.28)	13.67***
Social appearance anxiety	2.76 (1.10)	2.80 (1.15)	2.71 (1.04)	.07 ^{ns}	2.84 (1.12)	2.50 (.99)	18.56***

Note. PNI = Pathological Narcissism Inventory; OBCS = Objectified Body Consciousness Scale.

* $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$

Table 2. Cosplayer/Non-cosplayer. Non-cosplayer above the diagonal, cosplayer below the diagonal.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Gender	-	-.05	-.03	.01	.04	-.01	-.16***	-.12**	-.11*
2 PNI contingent selfesteem	-.09	-	.40***	.63***	.64***	.83***	.35***	.54***	.65***
3 PNI hiding the self	-.08	.49**	-	.50***	.43***	.72***	.18**	.38***	.35***
4 PNI devaluing	-.08	.62**	.53**	-	.65***	.86***	.13*	.39***	.46***
5 PNI entitlement rage	-.06	.61**	.43**	.59**	-	.84***	.27***	.43***	.40***
6 Vulnerable narcissism	-.09	.85**	.75**	.84**	.81**	-	.29***	.54***	.58***
7 OBCS body surveillance	-.21***	.36**	.17**	.14**	.26**	.29**	-	.54***	.41***
8 OBCS body shame	-.12*	.54**	.41**	.41**	.38**	.54**	.58**	-	.64***
9 Social appearance anxiety	-.16**	.63**	.47**	.50**	.37**	.61**	.45**	.70**	-

Note. PNI = Pathological Narcissism Inventory; OBCS = Objectified Body Consciousness Scale.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

3.3 Mediation analysis

Concerning the mediating effect of body surveillance and body shame on the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and social appearance anxiety, a sequential mediational analysis has been conducted in both cosplayers' and non-cosplayers' samples (Figure 1). As shown in Table 3, results supported the hypothesized models. Among cosplayers, vulnerable narcissism positively predicted body surveillance ($B=.37, t=6.39, p<.001$) and body shame ($B=.67, t=11.24, p<.001$). Body surveillance positively predicted body shame ($B=.60, t=12.73, p<.001$). Both body surveillance and body shame positively predicted social appearance anxiety ($B=.08, t=2.1, p<.05$ and $B=.37, t=10.79, p<.001$, respectively). Finally, the positive and significant direct effect of vulnerable narcissism on social appearance anxiety ($B=.43, t=8.78, p<.001$) increased in magnitude ($B=.79, t=16.01, p<.001$) when body surveillance and body shame were included in the model. Similarly, among non-cosplayers (Table 4), vulnerable narcissism positively predicted body surveillance ($B=.34, t=6.6, p<.001$) and body shame ($B=.66, t=11.88, p<.001$). Body surveillance positively predicted body shame ($B=.56, t=11.92, p<.001$). Both body surveillance and body shame positively predicted social appearance anxiety ($B=.09, t=2.21, p<.05$ and $B=.32, t=9.66, p<.001$, respectively). Finally, the positive and significant direct effect of vulnerable narcissism on social appearance anxiety ($B=.39, t=8.42, p<.001$) increased in magnitude ($B=.69, t=15.5, p<.001$) when body surveillance and body shame were included in the model. Analysis of the bias-corrected confidence intervals of the indirect effects in the bootstrapped samples further revealed that all indirect effects of both models were significant, corroborating further the sequential mediation of body surveillance and body shame (with scores on body surveillance predicting body shame) in the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and social appearance anxiety. Thus, in both samples, body surveillance and body shame mediated the link between vulnerable narcissism and social appearance anxiety. The total models accounted for a significant amount of variance in both cosplayers' ($R^2=.57$) and non-cosplayers' ($R^2=.49$) social

appearance anxiety and our findings supported the hypothesized models ($F_{(3,484)}=156.05, p<.001$ and $F_{(3,434)}=189.98, p<.001$, respectively).

Figure 1. Illustration of a serial multiple-step indirect effect, vulnerable narcissism (predictor variable) is hypothesized to effect directly and indirectly on social appearance anxiety (outcome variable) through body surveillance (Mediator 1) and body shame (Mediator 2) (PROCESS Multiple Mediation Model 6; Hayes, 2012).

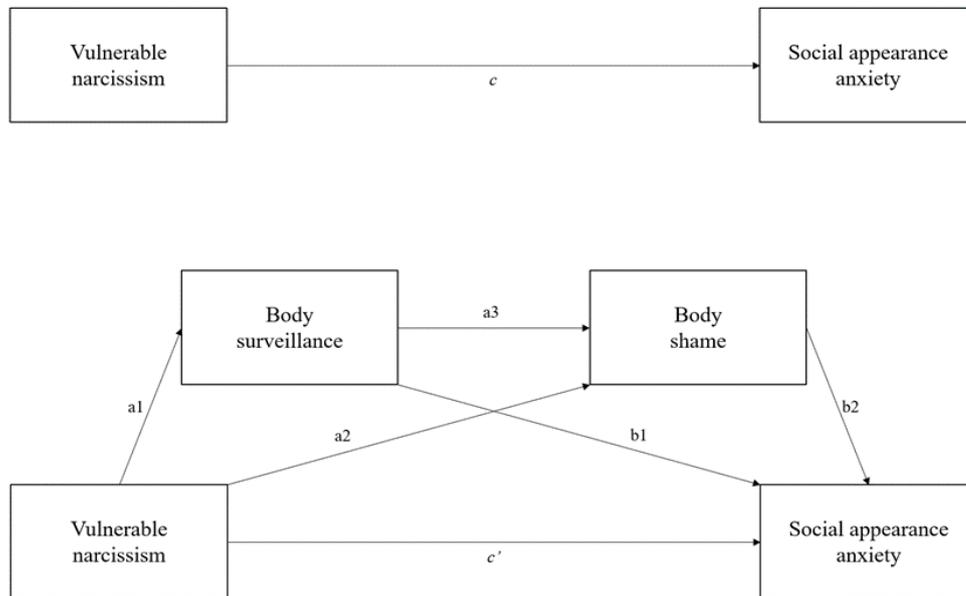


Table 3. Multiple-step mediation analysis on cosplayers’ vulnerable narcissism, body surveillance, body shame, and social appearance anxiety.

	Coeff.	SE	BCa 95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
<i>Path estimates</i>				
a1	.37***	.06	.26	.49
a2	.67***	.06	.55	.79
a3	.60***	.05	.50	.69
b1	.08*	.04	.01	.16
b2	.37***	.03	.30	.44
c	.43***	.05	.33	.52
c'	.79***	.05	.69	.87
	Effect	SE	BCa 95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
<i>Indirect effects</i>				
Total	.36	.04	.29	.44
M1	.03	.02	.00	.07
M2	.25	.03	.19	.32
M1 & M2	.08	.02	.05	.12

Note. M1 = Body surveillance; M2 = Body shame.

* $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$

Table 4. Multiple-step mediation analysis on non-cosplayers' vulnerable narcissism, body surveillance, body shame, and social appearance anxiety (n = 926).

	Coeff.	SE	BCa 95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
<i>Path estimates</i>				
a1	.34***	.05	.24	.44
a2	.66***	.06	.55	.77
a3	.56***	.05	.47	.65
b1	.09*	.04	.01	.16
b2	.32***	.03	.26	.39
c	.39***	.05	.30	.48
c'	.69***	.05	.61	.78
	Effect	SE	BCa 95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
<i>Indirect effects</i>				
Total	.30	.03	.24	.37
M1	.03	.01	.00	.06
M2	.21	.03	.16	.27
M1 & M2	.06	.01	.04	.09

Note. M1 = Body surveillance; M2 = Body shame.

* $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$

4. Discussion

The present study surveyed a specific sample of Italian young adults, both women and men, cosplayer and non-cosplayer, and tested a sequential mediation analysis to explore the direct and indirect effect of vulnerable narcissism on social appearance anxiety via body surveillance and body shame.

The present study provided novel findings concerning the cosplay practice, a still understudied and little explored activity despite its increasing spread, especially among women and younger people (Cantone et al., 2013; Della Valle et al., 2015; Palmonari, 2003; Vanzella, 2005). Accordingly, in the present findings, women appeared more engaged in cosplay practice than men. Furthermore, as Winge (2006) previously found, media products of geek culture still represent the main source by which cosplayers are inspired for their costumes. More specifically, according to previous studies (Burgess et al., 2007; Dill et al., 2008), female cosplayers significantly preferred to recreate anime and manga characters compared to males, while surprisingly there were no gender-based differences in the preference for videogames and film/animated feature movies characters. Concerning the gender of the chosen characters, female cosplayers appeared significantly more available to play characters of the same and opposite gender or both. No male cosplayers played characters of the opposite gender, appearing more reluctant to experiment with different genres. Likely, women who more than men gain self-objectification experiences might perceive themselves as more objectified in a

female body, consequently choosing to wear men's clothes (Ramirez, 2017). At the same time, male cosplayers might feel the pressure to preserve and comply with masculine behaviors and standards (Buetow, 2020; Cafri et al., 2005; Pope et al., 2016; Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004).

Differently from Cantone et al. (2013) who highlighted the pivotal role of narcissistic impulses in cosplay practice and found more pathological personality dimensions and a higher need for admiration among cosplayers than non-cosplayers, the comparison of the present cosplayer and non-cosplayer samples did not show a significant difference in vulnerable narcissism scores. Surprisingly, non-cosplayers showed higher levels of devaluation of others who do not provide the needed admiration and anger affects when entitled expectations are not met. Moreover, they reported a higher score in body surveillance, mainly assuming the outside observer's objectifying gaze. Overall, as expected, women of both samples showed higher scores in contingent self-esteem (fluctuating experiences of self-esteem when external sources of admiration and recognition are absent), self-objectification in both body surveillance and body shame, and social appearance anxiety, confirming the more complex females' relationship with their own bodies (Boursier et al., 2020b; Gioia et al., 2020; McKinley & Hyde, 1996; Tessitore & Margherita, 2019) and the lower levels of negative body image-related experiences among men (Agrnaslıgil et al., 2019; Boursier et al., 2020a; Doğan & Çolak, 2016; Gioia et al., 2020; Levinson & Rodebaugh, 2012; Moradi & Huang, 2008). Furthermore, according to previous studies (Boursier & Gioia, 2020; Boursier et al., 2020c; Carotte & Anderson, 2018), the present findings found that vulnerable narcissism significantly and positively co-occurred with body surveillance, body shame, and social appearance anxiety, confirming the strict relation between vulnerable narcissistic traits and feelings of shame and hypersensitivity to other's evaluation (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Pincus & Roche, 2011).

The tested mediation models suggested that vulnerable narcissism was both directly and indirectly (via body surveillance and body shame) positively associated with social appearance anxiety among both cosplayer and non-cosplayer participants. Indeed, partially confirming the hypothesis, despite a cosplayers' slightly greater explained variance, the model was strongly significant in both groups. Likely, narcissistically vulnerable individuals, regardless their involvement in cosplay practice, might experience higher body surveillance and body shame, which in turn might promote social appearance anxiety (Boursier & Gioia, 2020; Boursier et al., 2020c; Cantone et al., 2013; Carotte & Anderson, 2019; Hart et al., 2008; Swami et al., 2015; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2008). Differently from Cantone et al.'s findings (2013), in the present study, the cosplay practice seemed to not arise from narcissistic impulses neither represent a coping strategy to face social anxiety. Instead, the female gender appeared a pivotal issue. More specifically, the great significance of the tested model in both cosplayer and non-cosplayer

groups might be strictly related to the majority of female participants in the present study. Previous literature showed that women were more likely vulnerable narcissists (Jakšić et al., 2014; Pincus et al., 2009; Wright et al., 2010; You et al., 2013) and engaged in self-objectification experiences than men (Aubrey, 2006; Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Karsay et al., 2018; Meier & Gray, 2014; Swim et al., 2001). Moreover, previous studies (Boursier & Gioia, 2020; Carrotte & Anderson, 2019) highlighted the significant association between vulnerable narcissistic traits and body shame and social appearance anxiety among women. Similarly, in the present findings, female participants' higher narcissistically contingent self-esteem, body surveillance, and body shame might significantly influence their appearance-related social anxiety. Finally, concerning the cosplay practice, the present study seems to confirm that playing fantasy characters might represent not necessarily a dysfunctional behavior (Lotecki, 2012; Pietropolli Charmet, 2018; Peirson-Smith, 2013; Rahman et al., 2015; Wang, 2010), but a different way to experiment own identity, body, and sexuality, especially among females who, more than boys, choose models of both genders experimenting their sexuality.

5. Limitations and future directions

Some limitations of the present study needed to be addressed. Firstly, similarly to other Italian studies (Cantone & Laudanno, 2013; Della Valle et al., 2015; Vanzella, 2005), the present sample was mainly composed by women, thus future research should involve a more gender-balanced sample. Moreover, it could be interesting exploring the role of cosplay practice also in younger individuals and in other cultural contexts. Secondly, the present study employed a self-report survey with its well-known methodological biases (Rosenman et al., 2011). Thirdly, the cross-sectional design of the study limited the formal test of causality among the examined variables. Moreover, the present study explored only a small number of variables in relation to the widespread but understudied cosplay phenomenon. Future research should focus on unexplored cosplay-related issues, such as motivations behind the choice of a specific character, creativity, and identity dimensions. Finally, assuming that cosplayers are particularly engaged in media products, especially online, it could be interesting to explore the possible relation between cosplay practice and digital world.

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