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GENDER REPRESENTATION AND BODILY AESTHETICS IN CROSSPLAY PRACTICES IN SEMARANG CITY

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Abstract *Crossplay is a popular cultural practice in which individuals portray characters of a different gender through bodily, aesthetic, and behavioral strategies. This study examines the forms of gender representation emerging in crossplay, the strategies used to construct them, and how audiences interpret and negotiate these representations. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed through field observations at five cosplay events and in-depth interviews with ten informants in Semarang City, comprising five crossplayers and five audience members. Data were analyzed thematically using Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, particularly impression management, front stage, back stage, audience involvement, and definition of the situation. The findings show that crossplayers construct gender impressions through selective bodily management, modifying salient bodily cues through costume, makeup, posture, gesture, and visual technology. Preparation, public performance, and evaluation through photographs and audience responses form a feedback loop that informs subsequent adjustments. Perceived performance success encompasses character resemblance, gender legibility, and technical execution, which do not necessarily coincide with social acceptance. Among the audience informants interviewed, female-to-male and male-to-female performances were sometimes evaluated through different standards. Tensions could arise when audiences shifted their definition of the situation from character performance to an interpretation of the performer's personal gender identity, even when the presentation was technically convincing. These findings suggest that gender representation in crossplay is a relational accomplishment shaped by performers' bodily and aesthetic practices and audience interpretations.*

Keyword:
Crossplay, gender representation, bodily aestheticy, impression management, audience involvement

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1. Introduction

Crossplay is a practice within cosplay culture that allows individuals to portray characters of a gender different from the one associated with themselves, through the management of the body, costume, make-up, gesture, and expression (Thaariq & Dharma, 2025). This practice involves not only the effort to visually resemble a character but also the process of constructing a gender impression in front of others (Nichols, 2019; Purba & Anggara, 2026; Thaariq & Dharma,

2025). The body becomes an important medium in crossplay, as facial features, silhouette, posture, and visual attributes can be arranged to produce a particular impression, which is then read by the audience through the visual signs and behavior displayed by the performer (Alam et al., 2026). Crossplay can thus be understood as a cultural practice that brings together aesthetic expression, bodily management, and social interaction in the process of gender representation (Wafa & Dahriyanto, 2024; King, 2023).

Previous studies on cosplay and crossplay highlight three interconnected themes: the relationship between the body, technology, and visual attributes; gender identity and expression; and collective work and impression management. Stoyanova (2023) demonstrated how wigs, corsets, cosmetics, and digital media shape the relationship between the body and technology in crossplay, while Ang & Ibasco (2023) showed that transfeminine crossplay provides a space for experimenting with gender expression. Glasspool (2023) further explained that authenticity in cosplay is negotiated among the performer, character, and performance context, involving bodily presentation, performance, and social interaction (Arfani, 2025; Muhlisian, 2024; Putri, 2024; Septiani, 2018). Meanwhile, Chan (2018) and Yang (2022) emphasized collaboration among cosplayers, communities, and photographers in producing visual representations, while Septiani (2018) and Yusup (2019) highlighted impression management in Indonesian crossdress cosplay. Studies by Muzdaliva et al. (2021) and Putri M et al. (2021) further indicated that gender performance and identity are closely connected to social stigma within the cosplayer community in Malang City

Previous studies on cosplay and crossplay can be organized into three interconnected clusters. The first concerns the relationship between the body, technology, and visual aesthetics. Stoyanova (2023) demonstrated how wigs, corsets, cosmetics, and digital media shape the relationship between the body and technology in crossplay. Chan (2018) and Yang (2022) further emphasized collaboration among cosplayers, communities, and photographers in producing visual representations, showing that appearance is constructed through both bodily practices and visual mediation. These studies explain how bodily and technological resources contribute to visual presentation, but how particular bodily cues are selectively prioritized to construct recognizable gender impressions remains less clear.

The second cluster addresses gender expression, identity, and stigma. Ang & Ibasco (2023) showed that transfeminine crossplay provides a space for experimenting with gender expression. Studies by Muzdaliva et al. (2021) and Putri M et al. (2021) further indicated that gender performance and identity are closely connected to social stigma within the cosplayer community in Malang City. This literature establishes crossplay as a space for gender exploration and contested social recognition, but the distinction between the gender represented through a character and the personal identity attributed to the performer by audiences requires further explanation.

The third cluster focuses on impression management and social interaction. Glasspool (2023) explained that authenticity in cosplay is negotiated among the performer, character, and performance context, involving bodily presentation, performance, and social interaction (Arfani, 2025; Muhlisian, 2024; Putri, 2024). Septiani (2018) and Yusup (2019) also highlighted impression management in Indonesian crossdress cosplay. These studies show that convincing performances depend on self-presentation and interaction, but how audience interpretations distinguish technical success from social acceptance, and how their responses inform subsequent performances, remains insufficiently explained.

Although these three themes provide a fairly broad picture, research on crossplay remains limited in explaining the relationship between gender representation, body-aesthetic

management, and audience response within a single analytical framework. Most previous studies have focused on contexts outside Indonesia, such as Japan, Singapore, and Malaysia, while research in Indonesia has tended to examine identity, stigma, and self-presentation separately from the visual strategies employed by performers. Yet the success of a gender performance depends not only on how performers design their appearance but also on how that appearance is read and evaluated by others. Audience responses whether in the form of acceptance, compliments, photo requests, or critical judgment form part of the process through which meaning is constructed around such performances. The relationship between performers and audiences is therefore a critical aspect that warrants further examination in understanding how gender is represented in crossplay practices.

Although previous studies have examined bodily and visual practices, gender expression, and impression management in cosplay and crossplay, these discussions leave an important question insufficiently explained: how does a convincing character presentation become socially recognized, accepted, or contested through audience interpretation? The issue extends beyond examining these themes within a single framework, because the gender impression intended by a performer may acquire a different meaning when interpreted by an audience. Compliments, photo requests, recognition, and critical judgments therefore offer insight into how audiences participate in defining both the meaning and the perceived success of a performance. This study contributes by showing that gender representation in crossplay is a relational accomplishment emerging through the interaction of performers, bodily and visual technologies, and audience interpretation. The differing evaluations of female-to-male and male-to-female crossplay among the audience informants further demonstrate that technical success and social acceptance are distinct: a performance may convincingly communicate a character or gender impression while remaining contested when audiences interpret it as an expression of the performer's personal gender identity.

Based on the discussion above, this study is formulated around three research questions. First, how is gender represented in crossplay practices? Second, how are the body, costume, and expression used as performative devices to construct and manage a particular gender impression in front of an audience? Third, how does the dynamic between crossplay performers and audiences shape the acceptance and interpretation of such performances? These three questions position crossplay not merely as a matter of appearance, but as a social process in which performers arrange visual and behavioral signs while audiences interpret them.

Based on the discussion above, this study addresses three research questions. First, what forms of gender representation emerge in crossplay practices? Second, through what bodily, aesthetic, behavioral, and technological strategies are these representations constructed? Third, how are these representations interpreted and negotiated by audiences? These questions guide the analysis from identifying forms of gender representation to examining the strategies through which performers construct them and the ways audiences participate in shaping their meaning and social acceptance.

To analyze this process, this study draws on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, which views social interaction as a form of performance in which individuals manage particular impressions through the signs they display to an audience. The concept of impression management is used to analyze how individuals arrange their appearance, behavior, and visual attributes to produce a particular impression, while front stage and back stage distinguish the space of performance before an audience from the space of preparation prior to performance. In addition, the concepts of audience involvement and definition of the situation are used to understand the audience's position not merely as observers, but as parties who evaluate,

interpret, and jointly shape the meaning of a performance through their interaction with the performer (Goffman, 1959). These five concepts will be further elaborated in the Result and Discussion section as the analytical framework applied to the data.

Based on the problems and research gap outlined above, this study aims to analyze how gender is represented in crossplay practices in Semarang City, how the body, costume, and expression are used to construct and manage a particular gender impression, and how the dynamic between crossplayers and audiences shapes the acceptance and interpretation of such performances. Academically, this study is expected to contribute to sociological and anthropological studies of gender, popular culture, and social interaction, particularly by demonstrating the relationship between the body as a medium of representation, impression management, and audience response. Practically, this study is expected to provide an understanding of the diversity of gender expression within the cosplay space and to serve as a reference for further studies on crossplay and popular culture in Indonesia.

2. Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to understand crossplay as a social phenomenon related to gender representation, bodily management, aesthetics, and performer–audience interaction. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective was used as the analytical framework, particularly the concepts of impression management, front stage, back stage, audience involvement, and definition of the situation (Goffman, 1959).

The author has been personally engaged with cosplay culture since 2023 and regularly attends cosplay events as both a hobbyist and cosplayer, without formal affiliation with any specific community or organization. This experience provided insider familiarity with the practices, vocabulary, and social dynamics of these events, allowing for more informed engagement during fieldwork. At the same time, the author remained attentive to how this familiarity might shape assumptions during data collection, and interviews were therefore conducted openly, allowing informants to describe their experiences in their own terms.

The research was conducted in Semarang City from December 2025 to August 2026, during five cosplay competition events that included crossplay participants alongside general cosplay categories. Semarang was selected because it regularly hosts cosplay events, with major events attracting up to approximately 6,000 attendees Orenji Undip (2025), providing a substantial setting for interaction between performers and audiences.

The research was conducted in Semarang City from December 2025 to August 2026 through field observations at five cosplay competition events that included crossplay participants alongside general cosplay categories. Semarang provided a relevant setting for examining bodily and aesthetic presentation and performer–audience interaction within cosplay events. As contextual information about the scale of local events, Orenji Undip (2025) reported attendance of approximately 6,000 visitors at a major event; this figure does not describe attendance at all five observed events or serve as the sole basis for selecting the research location

Table 1. Overview of Observed Cosplay Events in Semarang City

Event	Venue	Relevant event characteristics	Activities and interactions observed
CL SUKAKU VIII	Mall Ciputra Semarang	Mall-based cosplay event involving cosplayers, crossplayers, and	Crossplayers presented character-specific poses and gestures during competition or coswalk

		audiences.	performances.
Lawang Sewu Cosplay Carnival	Lawang Sewu	Cosplay carnival involving cosplayers, crossplayers, and audiences.	Crossplayers posed for photographs at audience members' requests and interacted with them while maintaining character-specific gestures.
Cherry Blossom Festival	Queen City Mall	Mall-based festival featuring cosplay and crossplay participation	Audience members commented on crossplayers' costumes, makeup, and resemblance to the characters portrayed
Nihon Matsuri Unnes	Semarang State University	University-based festival featuring cosplay and crossplay participation	Crossplayers maintained character-specific gestures during conversations and photo sessions with audience members.
Bunkasai Udinus	Dian Nuswantoro University	University-based festival featuring cosplay and crossplay participation.	Crossplayers performed in competitions or coswalks, while audience members offered compliments on their appearance and character resemblance.

Field observations were carried out across five full-day events, focusing on performers' presentation, bodily expressions, gestures, and the degree to which they maintained an in-character performance. The observations showed variation in performance, with some performers maintaining an in-character presentation more consistently than others.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately 50 minutes, were conducted separately with ten informants through scheduled appointments outside the events. Informants were selected through purposive sampling: five active crossplayers (aged 19–26, with a minimum of one year of experience and offline performance experience) as primary informants, and five audience members (aged 20–30) with direct interaction with crossplayers, such as photographers, fans, or attendees who commented on or evaluated performances. Interviews with performers explored how they constructed their appearance and interpreted audience responses, while interviews with audience members explored how they recognized, evaluated, and responded to crossplay performances.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately 50 minutes, were conducted individually with ten informants through scheduled appointments outside the events. Informants were selected through purposive sampling and comprised five active crossplayers and five audience members. Crossplayers were aged 19–26, had at least one year of crossplay experience, and had performed at offline events. Their crossplay practices included three female-to-male (F2M) performers, two male-to-female (M2F) performers, Audience members were

aged 20–30 and had directly interacted with crossplayers as photographers, fans, or attendees who commented on or evaluated performances.

Table 2. Crossplayer Informant Profiles

Pseudonym	Role	Age	Crossplay type	Crossplay experience
Gumi	Crossplayer	25	F2M	3 Years
Joy	Crossplayer	23	F2M	2 Years
Fahreza	Crossplayer	23	M2F	3 Years
Michi	Crossplayer	20	F2M	3 Years
Nabz	Crossplayer	21	M2F	4 Years

Table 3. Audience Informant Profiles

Pseudonym	Role	Age	Experience with cosplay/crossplay
King	Cosplayer	22	3 Years
Devan	Photographer	20	3 Years
Abdie	Event attendee	-	3 Years
Tsuga	Cosplayer	22	4 Years
Mister	Cosplayer	-	3 Years

Tables 2 and 3 summarize the informants' profiles and experiences relevant to the analysis of F2M and M2F crossplay. Interviews with crossplayers explored their bodily and aesthetic strategies and interpretations of audience responses, while interviews with audience members examined how they recognized, evaluated, and responded to crossplay performances. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and identifying details are omitted to protect informants' privacy.

Data were analyzed thematically through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles, 1994). Interview transcripts and observation notes were organized around themes relevant to the research questions, including gender representation, bodily and aesthetic management, impression management, front stage and back stage, and performer–audience dynamics. The data were then interpreted using Goffman's dramaturgical framework, with interpretations continuously grounded in the empirical data.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Gender Representation in Crossplay Practices

3.1.1 Forms of Gender Representation Displayed in Crossplay

The data indicate that crossplay does not produce a single, standardized form of gender representation. Among the performers discussed here, masculine representation took different forms according to the qualities emphasized in portraying a character. Three patterns emerged: the coexistence of masculinity and softness, shifts between masculine aesthetic registers, and character-specific construction of gendered representation.

The first pattern is illustrated by Gumi's "masculine but soft" presentation. Gumi described this approach as follows:

> "Um, more masculine, but soft"
> — Translation of Interview with Gumi, 1 March 2026.

Gumi's account illustrates how masculine representation can incorporate softness rather

than depend exclusively on sharp or conventionally assertive features. In this pattern, softness does not necessarily weaken the masculine impression; it forms part of the particular masculinity being presented. The analytical point is therefore the coexistence of these qualities within a character presentation, rather than a simple opposition between masculinity and softness.

The second pattern concerns shifts between masculine aesthetic registers, as illustrated by Joy's masculine and bishounen presentations. When asked about the gender impression sought in crossplay, Joy explained:

> "Looking back at the characters I've cosplayed, I've tried masculine and bishounen looks. So, it depends on the character. Personally, though, I prefer male characters because I'm more comfortable wearing costumes that provide more coverage, and I feel that my build is too broad for feminine looks."
> — Translation of Interview with Joy, 23 February 2026.

Joy's account identifies masculine and bishounen looks as different approaches selected according to the character portrayed. This suggests variation within masculine representation rather than a single appearance applied to all male characters. The preference for male characters also reflects considerations of costume coverage, bodily comfort, and perceived suitability. Joy's account therefore supports the second pattern: performers move between masculine aesthetic registers while negotiating character requirements and their own bodily preferences.

The third pattern is character-specific construction, illustrated by Michi's description of portraying Giorno Giovanna from JoJo's Bizarre Adventure:

> "When I portray Giorno, I get carried away by the character the way I move and carry myself changes on its own."
> — Translation of Interview with Michi, 6 March 2026.

Michi's account shows that the character provides a reference for bodily conduct as well as appearance. The reported changes in movement and self-presentation suggest that representation is organized around the qualities of a particular character. This supports an understanding of crossplay in which gendered impressions are constructed through character-specific visual and behavioral cues, rather than through a universal model of masculinity.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that masculine representation in crossplay is differentiated and organized around the character being portrayed. This interpretation is consistent with Tompkins (2019), who argues that crossplay does not produce a standardized form of gender representation, and Gürkan (2017), who challenges masculinity as a fixed visual template. The coexistence of masculinity and softness also resonates with Nabza & Daulay (2025) and De Coster & Zanoni (2022). Through Goffman (1959) concept of impression management, these variations can be understood as the organization of expressive cues including costume, makeup, posture, gesture, and expression to communicate a coherent character impression.

These combinations further resonate with Kamran (2021) account of gender presentation as a "patchwork" and Thaariq & Dharma (2025) discussion of Indonesian crossplay as a space for negotiating gender meanings. However, variation does not necessarily eliminate gender categories. As Skentelbery (2024) notes, cosplay can disrupt gender conventions while also reproducing them. The contribution of these findings lies in showing how performers organize different masculine qualities through character-specific presentation, making the character a

framework for constructing gendered impressions.



(a) Gumi's (F2M) "masculine but soft" presentation (b) Joy's (F2M)masculine/*bishounen* presentation.

Figure 1. Variations of Gender Representation in Crossplay

Figure 1 shows how hairstyle, costume, facial expression, and posture contribute to different masculine impressions. In panel (a), Gumi's blond wig, glasses, white shirt, and dark outerwear frame the face, while the relatively upright posture and restrained expression contribute to a composed presentation. These visible features can be read alongside Gumi's description of the intended impression as "masculine but soft." The volleyball also provides a character-related cue, connecting the presentation to the character portrayed. In panel (b), Joy's tousled grey wig, dark clothing with a skeleton motif, and reclining pose create a contrasting visual arrangement. The extended legs and asymmetrical positioning emphasize bodily posture more prominently than in Gumi's photographs. These differences show how masculine impressions are assembled through combinations of visual and bodily cues rather than a single feature. However, Joy's photograph illustrates one presentation; the claim that Joy shifts between masculine and bishounen looks is supported by the interview account rather than demonstrated by this image alone.

3.2 Body, Costume, and Expression as Strategies of Gender Performance in Crossplay

3.2.1 Body Management in Constructing Gender Impressions

The body becomes important in crossplay because it cannot simply be replaced. Rather than reconstructing themselves from head to toe, performers focus on bodily features most consequential to the intended impression, consistent with Putri & Dewi (2026), who emphasize the selective role of bodily features in crossplay. Joy uses a chest binder and shoulder pads to alter the chest and shoulder structure; Michi adds height through an insole and adjusts perceived facial structure through contouring; while Gumi focuses on the face through tape and makeup. These differences demonstrate that bodily transformation is selective because not every part of the body carries equal weight in producing the desired impression.

A key finding of this study is selective bodily management: performers prioritize and modify the bodily cues most consequential to the intended character and gender impression rather than attempting to transform the body as a whole. Joy uses a chest binder and shoulder pads to flatten the chest and broaden the shoulder silhouette; Michi uses insoles to increase apparent height and contouring to reshape the perceived facial structure; while Gumi focuses on facial presentation through tape and makeup. These differences reveal that performers target particular bodily features according to the character portrayed. Such practices resonate with King (2023) discussion of how cosplay practitioners reshape bodily appearance through

makeup, footwear, padding, and binding to construct character-related silhouettes. Building on this discussion, selective bodily management captures the targeted minimization, emphasis, or amplification of bodily cues identified in the present study. Its analytical significance lies in showing that gender impressions are constructed through the organization of salient bodily features rather than through complete bodily transformation.

This selectivity is significant from a dramaturgical perspective. Goffman's notion of the performer relies on expressive elements, or "sign-vehicles," through which information about the situation and role is communicated. In crossplay, the body functions as one of these sign-vehicles: its importance lies not in resembling an "ideal" male or female body, but in whether particular bodily cues support the intended character and gender impression. A broadened shoulder line, flattened chest, greater apparent height, or sharper facial structure can therefore perform communicative work without requiring complete bodily transformation. This labor is better understood as strategic bodily management, as Masi de Casanova et al. (2021) similarly emphasize that the body in cosplay is part of the labor through which a performer produces another persona.

This also distinguishes the role of the body from interpretations that place crossplay primarily in relation to identity. Endres (2023) and Mishou (2021) connect body, costume, character, and performance to the exploration of gender and identity, but the present findings highlight a more immediate and situational function: the body is managed so that a particular character becomes legible within a specific performance context. Bodily modification therefore forms part of impression management, allowing performers to selectively minimize, emphasize, or amplify bodily cues rather than transform the body as a whole. What matters is not bodily completeness, but how effectively these cues communicate the intended character and gendered impression.



Figure 2. Selective Body Management in Crossplay

Figure 2 illustrates how crossplayers selectively modify bodily features rather than transforming the entire body. Joy uses a chest binder and shoulder pads to alter her silhouette and create a broader shoulder structure, while Gumi focuses on facial modification through tape and makeup. This contrast shows that body management is selective and strategic, with performers targeting features most relevant to the intended gender impression. Masculinity is therefore constructed not through complete bodily transformation, but through the coordination of specific visual cues that make the character's gender more legible to the audience.

3.2.2 Costume, Wig, and Makeup as Gender Markers

If body management establishes the physical foundation of the impression, costume, wig, and makeup provide the visible system that makes that impression coherent. None of these

elements operates entirely independently. Joy's binder and shoulder pads were reinforced through makeup and styling; Gumi's facial adjustments were coordinated with a character specific wig and costume; Michi combined facial contouring with the visual identity of a particular character. The resulting impression therefore depends less on the presence of individual gender markers than on whether several markers point in the same direction.

This coordination can be understood through Goffman's idea of impression management. A performer does not simply display isolated signs but attempts to organize them into a sufficiently consistent front. In crossplay, the masculine impression is consequently strengthened when body, face, hair, and clothing support one another. A masculine-coded costume paired with an inconsistent hairstyle or facial presentation may produce a weaker character impression, whereas coordinated elements allow the audience to read the performance more quickly as a whole.

The audience's role becomes visible at precisely this point. Visual coherence is not only something performers attempt to achieve; it is also something audiences actively evaluate. Devan, one of the audience informants, placed makeup at the beginning of this process and then emphasized the execution of the wig and costume:

> "The first thing is the makeup that's a given. Then it comes down to how well they maximize their cosplay. For example, if a girl cosplays Shōyō Hinata from Haikyuu, that's the kind of female-to-male crossdress I encounter most often, and I think it's fairly simple, depending on how they execute the makeup and how well they maximize the wig and costume."
> — Translation of Interview with Devan, 15 March 2026.

Devan's description shows that audiences do not judge crossplay against a universal standard of masculinity, but against how effectively the performer realizes a particular character through coordinated elements. His view of Hinata as "fairly simple" suggests that expectations vary according to the character rather than a fixed standard of gender representation.

Costume and makeup therefore function as more than decoration; they form a negotiated visual language between performer and audience. Building on Endres (2023) and previous studies of crossplay and gendered style (Skentelbery, 2024; Thaariq & Dharma, 2025; Trejo & Nichols, 2023), this study shows that visual experimentation is ultimately evaluated through coordination. Costume, wig, makeup, and bodily adjustments work together to transform separate modifications into a coherent character impression, connecting backstage aesthetic preparation with front-stage presentation.

3.2.3 Gestures, Posture, and Expression in Gender Performance

A convincing gender impression cannot be sustained through appearance alone. Once the performer moves, speaks, poses, or interacts with others, the body becomes a behavioral sign-vehicle as well. The data show that crossplayers therefore manage not only how the body looks but also how it behaves within the performance. Nabz adjusted his voice, sitting position, walking style, and gestures when in character, while Gumi rehearsed poses before events. Joy relied on character references when posing for photographs and coswalk performances, while maintaining a clearer boundary around her speech and everyday personality.

The difference between these approaches matters because behavioral performance introduces another degree of character embodiment. A costume can be put on deliberately, but a gesture may need to be repeated until it becomes convincing, or may emerge spontaneously once

the performer enters the character's situation. Michi described the latter experience when portraying Giorno Giovanna from JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: “When I portray Giorno, I get carried away by the character the way I move and carry myself changes on its own.”

These practices reveal different forms of character embodiment. Some expressions involve deliberate preparation, while others are experienced as spontaneous during character immersion. Michi described the latter when portraying Giorno Giovanna from JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure:

> “When I portray Giorno, I get carried away by the character the way I move and carry myself changes on its own.”
> — Translation of Interview with Michi, 6 March 2026.

The phrase “changes on its own” suggests that Michi experiences spontaneous bodily expression through immersion in the character. Being deeply in character allows movements and ways of carrying the body to emerge without consciously directing every gesture. Gumi’s rehearsal and Michi’s account illustrate different routes to character-consistent expression, but these should not be treated as a strict opposition between strategic and spontaneous performance. Deliberately adopting a character can involve bodily expressions that subsequently feel automatic. These findings therefore complicate the assumption that impression management always requires conscious calculation at the moment of performance. From a dramaturgical perspective, the intended impression can be sustained through both deliberate preparation and embodied character immersion.

Masi de Casanova et al. (2021) similarly observe variation in the degree of theatricality with which cosplayers inhabit their personas. The present findings suggest that such variation need not indicate differences in competence; it can reflect different relationships between performer and character. Rehearsal and immersion may both contribute to expressive behavior without requiring every movement to be consciously controlled during the performance.

Gestures and posture consequently extend gender representation beyond static appearance. The way performers sit, walk, pose, speak, and occupy space can reinforce or complicate the intended impression. The body functions both as a visual medium that can be modified and as an expressive medium through which the character is enacted. Crossplay performance emerges through the coordination of these visual and behavioral cues.



(a) Nabz’s (M2F) rehearsed character poses (b) Michi’s (F2M) embodied character performance.

Figure 3. Gestures, Posture, and Expression in Character Performance.

Figure 3 illustrates how posture, gestures, and facial expression function as behavioral sign-

vehicles that support character-specific gender impressions. These visible cues complement costume and makeup; whether they emerge through rehearsal or immersion is explained by the interview accounts rather than the photographs alone.

3.2.4 Impression Management in Crossplay Practice

The techniques discussed above become more analytically meaningful when understood as parts of a sequence rather than isolated choices. Crossplay involves preparation before appearing publicly, performance while being seen, and evaluation afterward. Makeup, costume, body-management tools, poses, and character references belong to backstage preparation, while coswalks, photographs, and interactions with attendees constitute front-stage moments in which the intended impression is publicly tested. Reviewing photographs and audience responses then provides feedback for future performances.

This sequence reflects Goffman's distinction between backstage and front stage. Backstage allows performers to prepare the expressive resources later presented to an audience, while the front stage is where these resources must function together. However, the data complicate a rigid separation between the two. Gumi and Fahreza described reviewing previous performances and using these evaluations to modify makeup, shoulder padding, and character immersion in subsequent performances. Backstage therefore becomes not only a space of preparation but also of reflection on previous front-stage performances (Thaariq & Dharma, 2025). This supports previous research on the "bleeding" of front-stage and backstage regions in cosplay, where the boundary between performer and persona is more fluid (Fanasca, 2021; Gago, 2021; Masi de Casanova et al., 2021), This recurring connection between preparation, performance, evaluation, and adjustment is summarized in Figure 4.

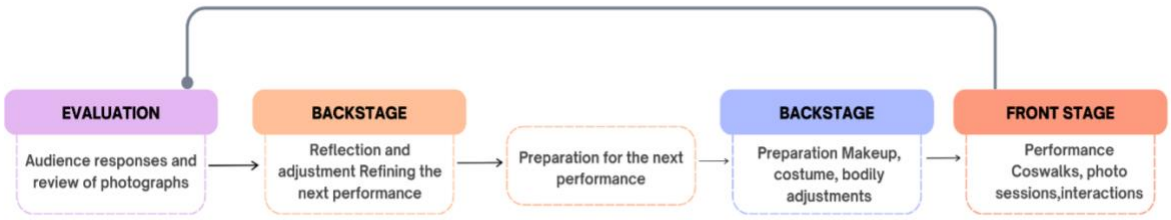


Figure 1. Backstage–Front-Stage Feedback Loop in Crossplay

As illustrated in Figure 4, impression management in repeated crossplay practice operates as an iterative process connecting backstage preparation and front-stage performance. Each performance generates information about what worked, what did not, and what the audience noticed, which performers bring back into their subsequent preparation. Through audience responses, photographs, personal reflection, and technical experimentation, performers refine the gendered and character-specific cues used to produce the intended impression. This feedback loop constitutes a key finding of the study: backstage is not only a space for preparing a performance but also a space for interpreting previous performance experiences and adjusting future presentations.

3.2.5 The Role of Visual Technology in Reinforcing Gender Representation

The iterative process becomes especially visible once the performance is mediated through photography. A camera does not simply document an already completed gender representation; it can reveal whether the representation survives the transition from embodied performance to photographic image. Joy identified the face as the most difficult element to control and described editing as part of making the intended masculine impression visible through the camera:

> “About 80% of the challenge is really the face features we have to look as sharp as possible, especially for a strongly masculine character. The contour has to be really sharp, and even with heavy makeup, it sometimes doesn't come through on camera. So using filters and editing isn't wrong, in my opinion, because we need to enhance what the camera couldn't capture.”
> — Translation of Interview with Joy, 23 February 2026.

The significance of this statement lies in the distinction between what is achieved in person and what becomes visible through the camera. Makeup may produce a particular facial structure to the eye but fail to reproduce the same impression in a photograph. The performer must therefore manage a second layer of representation: not only how the body appears in the physical setting, but how that appearance is translated into an image.



(a) Joy’s (F2M) Original camera image (b) Joy’s (F2M) Edited image

Figure 4. Photography and Editing in Reinforcing Gender Representation

From a dramaturgical perspective, photography creates another front stage in which the performer’s impression is mediated through photographs, edited images, and social media. Joy’s use of filters, editing, and analysis of photographs from different angles demonstrates that impression management continues beyond the physical performance. By identifying which angles best supported the intended representation and directing photographers accordingly, she used photography as a form of feedback on how the performance appeared from an external perspective.

This process also shows how technology overlaps with audience involvement. The camera allows performers to anticipate the audience gaze by revealing aspects of the body and performance that may not be visible from the performer’s own perspective. A photograph can show whether a posture produces the intended silhouette or whether a particular angle communicates the character more effectively. Joy’s practice therefore demonstrates that audience evaluation can be anticipated and incorporated into the production process itself.

This finding reinforces the importance of visual coherence identified by audience informants. Devan’s emphasis on makeup, wig, and costume suggests that audiences evaluate how effectively these elements combine to create a recognizable character. Performers, in turn,

adjust these elements not only for the event space but also for how they will appear through the camera. Technology therefore expands impression management across multiple representational environments: the body, event space, camera frame, and edited image.

Crossplay consequently has no single "finished" stage. Gendered impressions are continually adjusted as they move across different situations and media. The body, costume, makeup, gesture, and technology operate as an interconnected system in which each element can reinforce or disrupt the intended representation. What appears as a coherent gendered character in a final photograph is therefore the result of repeated bodily, aesthetic, behavioral, and technological adjustments.

3.3 The Dynamics of Interaction between Crossplayers and Audiences in Shaping Gender Representation

3.3.1 Audience Responses to Crossplay Performances

Audience recognition does not always arrive as an explicit statement that a gender performance has succeeded. It can appear through forms of address, compliments, requests for photographs, or simply the decision to approach and interact with the performer. These seemingly ordinary responses become significant because they provide evidence that the impression constructed on the front stage has been noticed and interpreted by someone else.

Joy's experience illustrates this process particularly clearly. She recalled receiving compliments about her makeup, overall appearance, posture, and masculine presentation. The most direct confirmation came when people called her "ganteng," which she interpreted as evidence that the intended masculine impression had landed. She also described being approached by a photographer without having requested a commission. Although the photographer did not explicitly state that her gender representation was convincing, the act of approaching her became meaningful precisely because it demonstrated that her presentation had attracted attention. Mister similarly connected audience appreciation with successful transformation. When a crossplay performance appeared convincing, he described responding directly to the performer:

> "Whether you're a man or a woman, that's amazing! I wouldn't have expected that you were actually a man or a woman. That means the cosplay was good. It means they succeeded in becoming the character."
> — Translation of Interview with Mister, 1 March 2026.

Here, recognition moves from visual uncertainty to explicit validation. Mister's statement suggests that when audiences cannot identify the performer's original gender, this uncertainty can be interpreted as evidence that the character has been convincingly embodied. Audience interpretation therefore becomes part of the performance's achievement: the performer presents the character, while the audience provides social confirmation that the presentation is convincing.

Goffman's concept of audience involvement helps explain this process. The audience does not simply observe a completed performance but participates in sustaining its definition through reactions such as compliments, photograph requests, or the use of character-appropriate honorifics. These responses indicate that the audience has accepted the presented frame, meaning that the performance gains part of its meaning through interaction rather than visual construction alone.

However, audience responses were not uniformly positive. Fahreza reported mostly

positive comments but also encountered negative reactions online, while Michi noted that some people outside the cosplay context viewed crossplay as strange. This coexistence of recognition and discomfort shows that audience involvement does not produce a single interpretation. A performance may be aesthetically appreciated while the practice itself remains questioned. Audience response is therefore better understood as a range of interpretive acts rather than a simple positive or negative judgment. What audiences recognize may differ: the gender being performed, resemblance to the character, technical skill, or the legitimacy of crossplay itself.

3.3.2 Indicators of Successful Gender Representation According to Crossplayers and Audiences

The findings identify three dimensions through which audiences evaluate the success of crossplay performances: character recognition, gender legibility, and technical execution. Character recognition concerns resemblance to the character portrayed; gender legibility refers to how audiences interpret the masculine or feminine cues presented; and technical execution concerns how effectively makeup, wigs, costumes, and posture support the intended presentation. These dimensions are related but not interchangeable, as recognition of a character does not necessarily imply that the intended gender impression is equally clear. Table X summarizes these dimensions and the aspects evaluated by audiences.

Table 4. Dimensions of Success in Crossplay Performance

Dimension of recognition	**What the audience evaluates**
Character recognition	Resemblance to the intended character through recognizable costume, hairstyle, and character-specific attributes.
Gender legibility	The masculine or feminine impression communicated through facial appearance, bodily silhouette, posture, and gestures.
Technical execution	The quality and coordination of makeup, wig styling, costume, and bodily presentation.

Mister's account illustrates the overlap between technical execution and gender legibility. He emphasized makeup and bodily appearance when evaluating crossplay, referring to body shape as a cue for masculine presentation in F2M performances and facial transformation through makeup in M2F performances. His assessment therefore concerns both how effectively the transformation is executed and how the resulting bodily and facial cues communicate the intended gender impression:

> "Because obviously, their makeup has to look good, and it's about how they transform their face"
> — Translation of Interview with Mister, 1 March 2026.

His criteria demonstrate that audiences read gender through specific bodily and aesthetic cues. The body is not interpreted as a neutral object; particular features become evidence from which the audience constructs an assumption about gender. Tsuga offered a similar hierarchy, describing posture, makeup, clothing, and gesture as successive indicators of a successful gender presentation:

> "From the posture, and makeup too, I guess that's the basic thing, the first thing. Then the makeup, the clothes, the posture, and then the movements they make, their gestures"
> — Translation of Interview with Tsuga, 6 March 2026

The sequence is analytically useful because it shows that audience judgment is cumulative. Gender representation is not read from one isolated sign (Zahra et al., 2024) . Rather, audiences combine facial appearance, clothing, body posture, and movement to construct an overall impression (Rahmadani & Sahiruddin, 2023). This corresponds closely to Goffman's understanding of impression management, in which an actor organizes multiple expressive resources so that they support a particular definition of the situation.

These accounts indicate that character recognition, gender legibility, and technical execution are related but analytically distinct. Recognizing the intended character does not automatically establish that its gendered qualities are equally clear, while appreciating makeup or costume execution does not necessarily imply that the intended impression has been achieved. Gender legibility here concerns the impression communicated within the performance, rather than the performer's personal gender identity.

Devan's account further illustrates how technical execution contributes to character recognition. His assessment of an F2M Shōyō Hinata cosplay as relatively simple depended on how effectively makeup, wig, and costume were coordinated, suggesting that expectations of successful execution also vary according to the character portrayed.

Crossplayers' accounts further illustrate differences between an appealing presentation and the intended gender impression. Gumi described the presentation as looking "good, but somehow not masculine enough," explaining that this was a personal assessment rather than audience criticism. Michi similarly recalled a mismatch between the intended impression and audience feedback:

> "I was supposed to look macho, but people kept complimenting me on looking cute, so I felt something was wrong with the makeup and wanted to improve it."
> — Translation of Interview with Michi, 6 March 2026

Michi's account shows that positive audience responses can coexist with dissatisfaction about the impression conveyed. The compliments emphasized cuteness rather than the macho quality intended. These accounts therefore show that aesthetic appreciation does not necessarily mean that the intended gendered qualities have been communicated.

These findings suggest that success in crossplay is multidimensional and relational. Performers assess whether their presentation achieves the intended character and gender impression, while audiences evaluate the cues they notice and consider important. Goffman's impression-management framework helps explain how these assessments can diverge: expressive cues may receive positive recognition while communicating an impression different from the one intended. Success therefore emerges through the relationship between performers' aims, technical execution, and audience interpretation rather than through a single criterion.

3.3.3 The Influence of Audience Response on Crossplayer Performance

Once audience responses become evidence of whether an impression has worked, they can also become resources for future performance. The performer learns from being seen.

Compliments identify which aspects of the presentation have been noticed, while criticism or questioning can reveal where the intended impression conflicts with audience expectations. Crossplay therefore contains a feedback process in which audience interpretation returns to the backstage preparation of later performances.

Fahreza described this process directly. Most of the responses he received were positive, particularly comments that he suited particular characters:

> "So far, most of the responses have been compliments. They usually say things along the lines of, 'Hey, you really suit this cosplay,' or 'I think this character would also suit you to cosplay. You should try it sometime."
> — Translation of Interview with Fahreza, 2026.

The significance of these comments is not simply that they made him feel appreciated. He explained that positive responses encouraged him to become more deliberate about makeup, character details, and ragasukma. Audience recognition was therefore converted into practical knowledge about how to improve the next performance.

Joy described a similar process, but in relation specifically to her masculine representation. She explained that audience support created "encouragement to do more and better," and that being called "ganteng" functioned as a form of validation that it was acceptable for her to act masculine within the performance. The audience response consequently strengthened the performance without requiring a change in her personal gender identity.

This distinction is important in relation to the earlier discussion of front stage and back stage. Audience feedback travels backward from the front stage into backstage preparation, where performers decide whether and how to incorporate it. The process is therefore not simply one-way impression management. A performance produces a response; the response becomes information; and that information can modify the next performance.

Goffman's concept of audience involvement is particularly useful here because it explains why audience reactions can become constitutive of the performance's subsequent development. Yet the data also reveal a limit to audience power. Fahreza explicitly stated that negative responses did not cause him to stop crossplaying. Even when faced with hostile commentary, he treated the response as something he could choose not to incorporate into his practice.

The same selective relationship appears in Joy's response to questions about why she does not simply cosplay female characters. She explained that such questions did not make her feel that she "had" to change what she performed. Instead, she used the questioning as another reason to demonstrate that masculine presentation was a skill she could intentionally develop.

Audience involvement therefore does not amount to audience control. The audience supplies recognition, criticism, and alternative interpretations, but performers decide which of these responses become consequential. This creates a feedback loop rather than a hierarchy: audiences help performers understand how their front stage is being read, while performers retain the ability to accept, reinterpret, or reject that reading.

3.3.4 Acceptance and Negotiation of Gender Representation within the Cosplay Community

The feedback process becomes more complicated when the question shifts from whether a performance is convincing to whether the performance itself is socially accepted. Here, the data reveal a clear asymmetry between F2M and M2F crossplay. The difference is not simply that one is "accepted" and the other "rejected." Rather, audiences appear to apply different interpretive

expectations to each direction of gender representation.

Devan's account provides the clearest contrast. His reaction to F2M was strongly approving:

> "Female-to-male crossplay is cool, like, 'Damn, you can do that?."
> — Translation of Interview with Devan, 15 March 2026.

When discussing M2F, however, his response changed considerably. He questioned the purpose of a man presenting as a woman and described the practice as something he found unacceptable. The contrast is analytically more important than the intensity of the language itself: the same general activity of crossing gender categories was interpreted through two different standards depending on its direction.

Tsuga expressed a similar asymmetry, describing his first reaction to M2F crossplay as one of shock and discomfort:

> "My first impression when I found out that a man was cosplaying as a woman was shock. I thought, 'This is the man I took a photo of,' but honestly, I felt a little disgusted and somewhat scared too.."
> — Translation of Interview with Tsuga, 6 March 2026.

More significantly, he later explained that when an M2F performance was particularly convincing, it could actually make him question the performer's gender:

> "When a man crossplays as a woman and the makeup is too good, it makes me question it."
> — Translation of Interview with Tsuga,6 March 2026.

The paradox here is revealing. Greater success in constructing the intended gender impression does not necessarily produce greater acceptance. In some cases, successful performance appears to increase uncertainty about the person behind the character. The stronger the front-stage impression becomes, the more difficult it may be for an audience member to maintain a simple distinction between "male performer" and "female character."

This is precisely where Goffman's definition of the situation becomes especially useful. The performer may define the encounter as a cosplay performance in which a fictional character is being presented. The audience may initially accept that frame, but when the gender representation becomes highly convincing, an alternative definition can emerge: the audience begins treating the presentation as information about the performer's actual gender. The disagreement is therefore not necessarily about whether the performance is technically successful. It is about what the successful performance is supposed to mean.

Abdie's account demonstrates that this interpretation is not universal. He initially described M2F crossplay as something he found uncomfortable, but when asked directly about acceptance within the cosplay community, he adopted a more conditional position:

> "A man becoming a woman or a woman becoming a man is basically the same. As long as they are not harming anyone... then it's okay."
> — Translation of Interview with Abdie, 15 March 2026.

His position shows that acceptance can be negotiated through a different definition of the situation. Rather than treating gender crossing itself as problematic, he evaluates whether the performance causes harm. The same crossplay practice can therefore be interpreted through different frames by different audience members.

Mister similarly expressed conditional acceptance, arguing that crossplay is acceptable as long as performers remain themselves outside the cosplay context and do not extend the performance into situations he considers inappropriate. At the same time, he recognized cosplay as a space for creative freedom in manipulating appearance and character. This suggests that gender experimentation is more readily accepted when contained within the boundaries of cosplay, while its social meaning becomes contested when perceived as extending beyond that frame.

The asymmetry between F2M and M2F therefore cannot be explained simply by technical difficulty. Audiences may recognize and admire technically convincing M2F performances while still expressing greater discomfort toward the gender crossing itself. This supports Skentelbery's (2024) argument that cosplay can simultaneously disrupt and reproduce gender norms. Although cosplay creates space for gender experimentation, that space is not equally available to all forms of gender performance.

This pattern also resonates with Remminga (2023) finding that gender-diverse cosplayers can experience intensified scrutiny, which may appear as questioning, surprise, discomfort, or attempts to restore performers to expected gender categories. Indonesian studies similarly situate crossdressing cosplay within broader cultural tensions surrounding gender performance (Ibrahim et al., 2026; Mishou, 2021; Yamato, 2020). These perspectives help explain why M2F performances may be aesthetically appreciated while still carrying contested social meanings.

However, the data do not suggest that the cosplay community is uniformly intolerant. Abdie's conditional acceptance, Mister's recognition of creative freedom, and Joy's continued participation despite being questioned indicate that acceptance remains negotiated through interaction. Performers are therefore not merely subjected to community judgments; by continuing to perform, explaining their choices, or rejecting audience questioning, they also participate in negotiating the boundaries of acceptable gender performance.

Among the audience informants interviewed, F2M and M2F crossplay were sometimes evaluated through different standards. Devan's response to F2M emphasized admiration:

> "Female-to-male crossplay is cool, like, 'Damn, you can do that?'"
> — Translation of Interview with Devan, 15 March 2026.

For M2F, however, he questioned the performer's intentions and opposed normalizing the practice. His account framed F2M as an aesthetic accomplishment, while M2F prompted judgments extending beyond appearance and technical execution.

Tsuga similarly recalled discomfort after learning that a performer portraying a female character was a man:

> "My first impression when I found out that a man was cosplaying as a woman was shock. I thought, 'This is the man I took a photo of,' but honestly, I felt a little disgusted and somewhat scared too."
> — Translation of Interview with Tsuga, 6 March 2026.

These expressions represent Tsuga's interpretation rather than objective descriptions of

M2F crossplay. His reaction suggests boundary-making, as discovering the performer's gender changed his understanding of the encounter. He further stated:

> "When a man crossplays as a woman and the makeup is too good, it makes me question it."
> — Translation of Interview with Tsuga, 6 March 2026.

Goffman's definition of the situation helps explain this tension. Performers may understand the encounter as fictional character portrayal, while some audience members interpret the presentation as information about the performer's personal identity or intentions. A convincing performance can therefore intensify questioning rather than secure acceptance. The disagreement concerns the meaning attributed to the performance, not necessarily its technical quality.

However, reception was not uniform. Abdie expressed discomfort with M2F but also articulated conditional acceptance:

> "A man becoming a woman or a woman becoming a man is basically the same. As long as they are not harming anyone... then it's okay."
> — Translation of Interview with Abdie, 15 March 2026.

Abdie's position shifted when avoiding harm became the criterion. Mister likewise recognized creative freedom but preferred to separate character portrayal from everyday self-presentation. These conditions reflect the informants' expectations rather than requirements performers must follow.

Such responses resonate with Skentelbery (2024) argument that cosplay can disrupt and reproduce gender conventions, Remminga (2023) discussion of heightened scrutiny, and broader research on gender performance (Ibrahim et al., 2026; Mishou, 2021; Yamato, 2020). They remain specific to the interviewed informants rather than representative of Semarang society or the entire cosplay community. Acceptance is negotiated through these interpretations and performers' responses, including Joy's continued participation despite questioning.



Figure 5. Audience Involvement in Crossplay Performance

Figure 5 summarizes gender representation as a relational process connecting performers' bodily, aesthetic, and behavioral practices, visual technology, and audience interpretation. Audience responses can sustain or contest the intended meaning and inform performers'

subsequent presentations.

4. Conclusion

This study identifies selective bodily and aesthetic management as a central practice in constructing gender impressions in crossplay. Performers prioritize particular bodily features and coordinate costume, makeup, wigs, posture, gestures, and photographic presentation according to the character portrayed. The findings reveal varied masculine presentations, including the coexistence of masculinity and softness, shifts between masculine and bishounen aesthetics, and character-specific bodily expression. These practices show that gender representation involves the selective organization of expressive cues rather than complete bodily transformation or an assumed change in personal gender identity.

Gender representation also emerges as a relational accomplishment involving performers and audiences. Character recognition, gender legibility, and technical execution constitute related but distinct dimensions of perceived success. Compliments and recognition do not necessarily confirm that the intended gender impression has been communicated, as illustrated by differences between performers' aims and audience interpretations. Among the audience informants interviewed, F2M and M2F performances were sometimes evaluated through different standards, indicating that reception depends on the expectations and meanings brought to the encounter.

The study contributes to Goffman's dramaturgical perspective by showing how backstage preparation and front-stage performance form a feedback loop. Audience responses, photographs, and personal reflection inform adjustments to subsequent presentations, making backstage a space of evaluation as well as preparation. Competing definitions of the situation further explain why technical success does not necessarily secure social acceptance. Tensions can emerge precisely when a convincing character portrayal prompts some audience members to interpret the presentation as an expression of the performer's personal identity. The disagreement therefore concerns what the performance means, rather than simply whether it succeeds.

These findings are limited to a descriptive qualitative study involving five crossplayers and five audience members within the selected event settings in Semarang City. Purposive sampling and the small number of informants limit the range of experiences and interpretations represented. The findings therefore offer contextual insights rather than conclusions about the entire cosplay community or Semarang society, particularly regarding differences in F2M and M2F reception. The researcher's familiarity with cosplay also requires reflexive attention to its possible influence on interpretation. Future research could examine more varied participants and settings to explore how these processes differ across local contexts and forms of crossplay.

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