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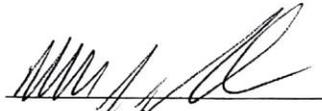
**THE SEXY PIKACHU EFFECT: EMPOWERMENT AND OBJECTIFICATION IN  
WOMEN WHO COSPLAY**

A senior thesis submitted to the  
Department of Psychological Science  
of the  
University of Mary Washington  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
Departmental Honors

Sophia J. Lamp

April, 2018

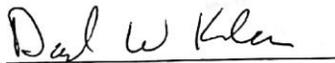
This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Sophia J. Lamp entitled "The Sexy Pikachu Effect: Empowerment and Objectification in Women Who Cosplay" has been approved by her committee as satisfactory competition of an honors thesis as partial fulfillment for the degree of Bachelor of Science.



Mindy J. Erchull, Ph.D.  
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Miriam Liss, Ph.D.  
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The Sexy Pikachu Effect: Empowerment and Objectification in Women Who Cosplay

Sophia J. Lamp

University of Mary Washington

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between wearing sexualized cosplay and feeling empowered by cosplay. Mediation analyses indicated that, among women who wore sexualized cosplay, enjoying being sexualized while in cosplay positively predicted feeling empowered by wearing sexualized cosplay which, in turn, negatively predicted body surveillance which positively predicted body shame. Among women who wore sexualized cosplay, enjoying sexualization while in cosplay indirectly predicted body shame through feeling empowered by cosplay and body surveillance. Enjoyment of sexualization while in cosplay also related to a higher personal sense of power through empowered cosplay for this subsample of participants. Cosplayers also reported engaging in more self-objectification and enjoying sexualization more often while in costume compared to during their daily lives. The results of this study provide a unique context for studying the debate among feminist scholars regarding female empowerment through sexualization.

### The Sexy Pikachu Effect: Empowerment and Objectification in Women Who Cosplay

Cosplay is a contraction of the words “costume” and “play,” referring to the act of recreating the appearance of a character from popular culture and pretending to be that character, generally at a public event or convention (Gn, 2011; Kington, 2015). The term cosplay is relatively new; however, people have been attending conventions and dressing up as characters from their favorite fictional universes since at least the 1<sup>st</sup> World Science Fiction Convention held in New York in 1939 (Ashcraft & Plunkett, 2014). The idea of cosplay spiked in popularity in Japan and the United States in the 1990s, with interest and participation in geek culture through cosplay increasing exponentially ever since (Ashcraft & Plunkett, 2014). In 2015, San Diego Comic Con and New York Comic Con saw more than 150,000 attendees from all over the globe, many of whom wore cosplay as part of the events (Kington, 2015; Matsuo, 2015). Cosplay has become a popular way for people to engage with their favorite forms of media, yet little empirical research has been undertaken to study this global phenomenon.

Although cosplay is a fun hobby for many, the cosplay community is not without controversy. One significant point of contention involves sexualized cosplay. Many female characters in popular culture and the media tend to be highly sexualized in their design, no matter the genre (Collins, 2011; Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008). Women often identify with these characters for a variety of reasons besides their sexualized designs—such as Wonder Woman from DC Comics for her strength and courage or Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* video game series for her intelligence and daring nature—and choose to cosplay as the women to show their love for the characters (Ashcraft & Plunkett, 2014; Weisberger, 2016). Other cosplayers have redesigned non-sexualized characters to appear sexier, such as Jessica Nigri’s Pikachu cosplay from the *Pokémon* video game series; for example, she designed a low-cut, yellow top that

revealed her cleavage and midriff and wore a short skirt to sexualize this character (“Jessica Nigri’s 26 Most Epic Cosplay,” n.d.).

Female cosplayers who engage in sexualized cosplay are sometimes regarded with scorn by others in the cosplay community, as people claim it overshadows the creative and fun elements of cosplay with an attempt to merely gain sexual attention (Bryonhelm, 2012; nintendo424, 2011; Ortiz, 2014). Some women in the cosplay community, however, have argued that wearing sexualized cosplay empowers them and gives them confidence by showing off their bodies as their favorite characters (McKinney, 2014). Ramano (2017) wrote an article defending women who engage in sexy cosplay, stating that judging women based on how they choose to cosplay is an attempt to undermine the female presence in the convention space and perpetuates the idea of the fake geek girl. The concept of the fake geek girl reflects the idea that women fake their interest in popular culture—which is often considered a male-dominated community—in order to garner attention from men (Letamendi, 2012; Reagle, 2015).

Conversely, other cosplayers fear that the increase in sexualized cosplay works to uphold the expectation that women must be sexy or conform to traditional standards of physical attractiveness in order to feel confident (Danahay, 2016; nintendo424, 2011; Stoker, 2012). This is closely related to objectification theory. Objectification theory posits that people tend to value others for their bodies and their physical appearance, rather than for their humanity (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Most commonly, objectification is regarded as the “male gaze,” viewing women as objects of desire (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The objectification of women stems from many sources: advertisements that focus on female body parts, popular media that display women in revealing clothing, etc. (Collins, 2011; Daniels, Layh, & Porzelius, 2016; Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008; Vance, Sutter, Perrin, & Heesacker, 2015). Women, therefore, are objectified

constantly and are expected to maintain their appearance in ways that please men (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Women may then begin to constantly survey their bodies as if they are an observer in order to assess whether they meet societal beauty standards, a process known as self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Several research studies have identified a plethora of consequences of the objectification of women. Women who are objectified are often perceived to be immoral, low in intelligence, and less capable than others of performing complex tasks (Holland & Haslam, 2013; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Ward, 2016). This pattern of thinking is prevalent in the cosplay and convention community, with many men claiming that women who engage in sexualized cosplay are “bimbos” (cuillere, 2015, para. 1), “sluts,” or “whores,” (Bryonhelm, 2012, para. 9). Research has also shown that self-objectification predicts a variety of negative outcomes for women as well. Women who self-objectify show increased body surveillance, higher rates of body shame, impaired cognitive abilities, and more depressive symptoms, disordered eating, and anxious behavior (Calogero, 2004; Gay & Castano, 2010; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005). These negative societal and personal impacts make objectification an important subject to study as it is a process that has become deeply ingrained into modern culture (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Self-sexualization is very similar conceptually to self-objectification, but it focuses more on the process of women sexualizing their bodies to give themselves greater social value (Ruckel & Hill, 2017). Women learn that in order to be worthwhile in society, they must appear attractive in the eyes of others—or specifically, men (Ruckel & Hill, 2017). Because self-sexualization is closely tied to self-objectification, they share similar consequences. Women who self-sexualize survey their bodies more frequently, experience greater body dissatisfaction, have lower self-

esteem, are more likely to exhibit sexist attitudes, and are more likely to display depressive symptoms and engage in disordered eating (American Psychological Association, 2007; Ramsey & Horan, 2016; Ruckel & Hill, 2017; Ward, 2016). Despite these consequences, women report enjoying receiving sexualized attention from others (Liss, Erchull, & Ramsey, 2011). Other studies, such as those exploring burlesque performance, have found that women report feeling a greater sense of empowerment when they sexualize themselves in front of an audience because it allows them to engage and control their sexuality without feeling the need to hide it (Regehr, 2012). It is unclear, though, whether this can expand for women in other contexts, and whether this truly gives women more agency.

Some in the cosplay community are afraid that this pattern of objectification and sexualization has manifested in how women choose to cosplay. Cosplayers holding this perspective argue that the prevalence of sexy cosplay puts pressure on other female cosplayers to cosplay in the same style in order to receive positive attention and achieve success in the community (Hernandez, 2013). A cosplayer by the name of MangoSirene (2017) detailed her experience with this problem in a YouTube video. She used to make her living by being a professional cosplayer, largely through funds given by her fans via Patreon—an online service where people can pay a certain amount to a person each month in exchange for, in MangoSirene's case, cosplay tutorials and sneak peaks of her photoshoots. After a while, she noticed that many people had started withdrawing their funding specifically because she was not doing enough sexy cosplays. She tried to make more sexualized cosplays in order to keep others from pulling their support, but she did not feel comfortable wearing them and ultimately distanced herself from the community.

The debate around women gaining empowerment through sexualization is not limited to cosplay culture—it is a prevailing topic in psychological research, gender studies, and feminist communities. Researchers from these areas have argued for years about the best definition for empowerment (Peterson, 2010). Some have described empowerment as an intrinsic and subjective force that gives women confidence and perceptions that they are in control (Zimmerman, 1990), while others believe that true empowerment comes from a woman's external ability to control her life and the resources available to her (Peterson, 2010; Riger, 1993; Regher, 2012). Researchers who endorse the former perspective have also claimed that women achieve empowerment when they are able to choose to engage with their sexuality—telling women that they cannot dress or behave how they want takes away their agency (Danahay, 2016; Peterson, 2010; Tolman, 2000). Other researchers have countered that these actions may not be a completely autonomous choice for women since there are societal pressures for women to dress for male pleasure (Gill, 2007; Lamb, 2010; Levy, 2005). They argue that while empowerment through sexualization may help a woman feel confident, her sense of agency may be primarily coming from receiving positive feedback from society for adhering to these expectations (Liss et al., 2011). Erchull and Liss (2013) operationalized a type of empowerment through the belief that sexuality can give women power over men, but they also found that this construct was related to more frequent engagement in self-objectification behaviors, e.g., body surveillance, as well as greater sexist attitudes—which on face value does not seem very empowering for women. Overall, it is difficult to gauge under which circumstances sexualization can be an empowering experience.

Cosplay offers a unique context in which to explore this debate. Research on phenomena such as deindividuation shows individuals experience a change in their normal behaviors due to

the influence of being part of a large group (LeBon, 1895; Diener, 1980). They feel a stronger sense of identity with the group rather than as individual people, which can lead to being less aware of the self (Diener, 1980; Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1989). These patterns are increased when there are elements of anonymity and excitement for being part of the crowd (Zimbardo, 1970). Cosplay is a perfect example of this phenomenon. People take on a new identity by dressing up as a character—often giving them a sense of anonymity—and go into an environment full of like-minded individuals to share their enjoyment of a genre or media form which can further fuel their excitement. Cosplay as a mechanism of deindividuation may lead to people experiencing an altered sense of self that is tied to the character they are cosplaying. Those who choose to dress as female characters with powerful characteristics—such as Wonder Woman or Lara Croft, as previously mentioned—may begin to take on the characters' traits themselves while in costume. This aspect of cosplay may be the empowering experience for cosplayers, regardless of the sexual nature of the costume. What remains unclear, however, is whether taking on these characteristics in the moment affects a cosplayers' sense of self in their daily lives. Moreover, it is unclear whether this serves to buffer some of the negative effects associated with self-sexualization for those engaging in sexualized cosplay.

Although there is no research that I know of that specifically addresses cosplay in the context empowerment through sexualization, previous research on the effects of sexualization may provide insight to how these theories relate to cosplay. Ramsey and Horan (2016) found that women who tended to post sexualized pictures on Instagram did not report increased sexual agency despite women's claims that they felt empowered after engaging in this behavior. Engaging in sexy cosplay could potentially follow the same pattern. Given this, without

achieving empowerment through their cosplay, women who participate in sexy cosplay may experience the negative consequences associated with self-objectification and self-sexualization.

With this study, I aimed to provide empirical evidence for the psychological consequences of engaging in various types of cosplay, particularly sexualized cosplay. I developed measures to assess the sexual nature of participants' typical cosplay and to determine how empowered each participant felt while in costume. Several measures from previous studies were also adapted to examine participants' tendencies to self-objectify, enjoy sexualization, believe that their sexuality gives them power, and feel that they hold power in their interpersonal relationships both in and out of cosplay.

Because this subject has remained largely unexplored within psychology and related fields, it was unclear whether the impacts of cosplay would be positive or negative. Based on the results of psychological research examining the effects of objectification and sexualization more generally, however, I hypothesized that (1) female cosplayers who engaged in sexy cosplay would (1a) enjoy sexualization to a greater extent than cosplayers who did not, (1b) believe that they personally derive power from their sexuality, (1c) believe that other women use their sexuality to gain power, (1d) be more likely to self-objectify by surveying their bodies, and (1e) experience more body shame. Because previous research has not produced a clear answer in regard to the empowering effect of sexualization, I did not have an a priori prediction for how engagement in sexualized cosplay would (1f) influence the participants' personal sense of power, but I did plan to explore this.

I also hypothesized that (2) cosplayers who felt more empowered while in cosplay would (2a) experience a greater personal sense of power, (2b) survey their bodies less, and (2c) feel less body shame compared to cosplayers who did not feel empowered while in costume. I did not

have an initial prediction for how empowerment would (2d) influence enjoyment of sexualization or (2e) the belief that sex is a source of power for the participants personally and (2f) women in general for the same reason I did not have a specific hypothesis regarding sexualized cosplay and personal sense of power.

I believed that (3) there would be an interaction between sexualized cosplay and empowered cosplay scores. I predicted that cosplayers who more frequently choose sexualized cosplay but also felt empowered by their cosplay would (3a) report a higher personal sense of power and (3b) experience less body shame than sexualized cosplayers who did not report this empowerment. While I did not have specific predictions for the potential interactions between sexualized cosplay and empowerment in cosplay in predicting (3c) body surveillance, (3d) enjoyment of sexualization, and (3e) endorsing the idea that sexuality gives women power, I was, nonetheless, interested in exploring these potential interactions.

I also hypothesized that (4) two mediational paths would be potential mechanisms for participants experiencing positive effects of sexualized cosplay. I believed that these women, if they found pleasure in being sexualized while in costume, could benefit from engaging in sexualized cosplay if they achieved those feelings of empowerment expressed by burlesque performers and exhibited less problematic self-objectifying behaviors. Specifically, I hypothesized that, for women who engaged in sexualized cosplay, (4a) enjoyment of sexualization while in cosplay and (4b) general enjoyment of sexualization, would, respectively, positively predict empowerment in cosplay which would, in turn, negatively predict body surveillance which would positively predict body shame. Although I believed that these variables in both their general as well as the cosplay-specific forms would behave in similar ways, I decided to evaluate both pathways to test each pattern in case there were difference in the nature

of the relationships or the size of the effects. I had parallel hypotheses for a second set of mediation analyses where the first variable in the model would be either (4c) the belief that sex gave participants power while in cosplay or (4d) the general belief that sex was a source of power.

Looking again at women who engaged in sexualized cosplay, I also wanted to examine whether (5) feeling empowerment while in cosplay would mediate the relationship between (5a) enjoyment of sexualization while in cosplay, (5b) enjoyment of sexualization in daily life, (5c) the belief that sexuality gave participants power while in cosplay, and (5d) the belief that sexuality gave participants power in daily life and the outcome variable of personal sense of power.

Finally, I hypothesized that (6) a mixed ANOVA would reveal that participants would (6a) show signs of greater self-objectification while in cosplay than in their daily lives because the nature of cosplay involves wanting others to look at them in their creation and (6b) would feel a greater sense of personal power during their cosplay experience because I theorized that they would take on the traits of their characters while in costume. I also sought to compare the participants' (6c) enjoyment of sexualization in and out of cosplay, as well as their (6d) belief that they achieve power through their sexuality during their cosplay experiences and in their routine activities. In addition, I was interested in exploring whether sexualized cosplay moderated these relationships, although I had no specific hypothesis about this.

## Method

### Participants

**General demographics.** A total of 288 participants who identified as women participated in this study. See Table 1 for detailed descriptive statistics for the sample. The participants

ranged in age from 18 to 62 ( $M = 25.47$ ;  $SD = 6.33$ ). Most participants were from the United States (80.9%) and identified as White (67.4%). Participants in the sample reported diverse sexual identities including heterosexual (28.5%), bisexual (23.6%), asexual (18.8%), pansexual (13.2%), lesbian/gay (9.0%), or identifying in a different way (6.3%). Most of the participants had at least a bachelor's degree (35.8%), with a majority coming from a working class (36.8%) or middle class (43.8%).

**Cosplay demographics.** Complete descriptive statistics about the participants' cosplay habits are provided in Table 2. More detailed information about their convention attendance can be seen in Table 3. Participants had been cosplaying for 1 to 25 years ( $M = 6.50$ ;  $SD = 4.10$ ), with many typically attending either 2 (30.6%) or 3 (20.5%) conventions per year. Most participants reported wearing either 1-2 (31.9%) or 3-5 costumes (31.9%) per year, as well as creating 1-2 costumes per year (52.1%). The most popular types of media that participants cosplayed from were video games (71.2%) and anime (66.3%). Similar to these findings, participants most frequently reported attending anime (79.2%) and gaming conventions (60.8%).

### **Procedure**

Participants were recruited through various social media platforms to complete a 20-minute online survey hosted through Qualtrics about their cosplay experiences. Participants learned about the study through Tumblr (37.5%), Facebook (29.2%), Twitter (28.5%), friends/word of mouth (1.7%), Reddit (1.0%), Instagram (.7%), or did not report this information (1.4%). Three restrictions for participation were present in the recruitment message: Participants had to identify as a woman, have cosplayed at least once in the past year, and be at least 18 years old. The recruitment messages also contained a link to the survey which began with an online informed consent.

After reading the informed consent, participants had to answer screening questions to ensure they met the study's criteria for participation. If any of these questions were answered with "no," they were brought to a screen informing them that they did not qualify for the study.

Eligible participants then completed a series of measures that evaluated specific behaviors and attitudes they experienced during their everyday lives. They then provided information about their cosplay habits. Finally, the participants responded to many of the same measures from the beginning of the survey that were adapted to examine feelings and behaviors during the participants' cosplay experiences.

After completing the survey, participants were brought to a debriefing page that allowed them to withdraw their data from the study. Participants received no compensation for their participation.

## **Materials**

**Cosplay demographic items.** Basic cosplay habits and convention attendance were measured with 3 questions inspired by Kington (2015). These questions asked participants to select the genre they tend to cosplay from as well as the types of conventions they attend the most. More in-depth questions regarding cosplay experience developed by Rosenberg and Letamendi (2013) were used to assess how long participants had been cosplaying, how often they cosplay in a given year, and how much they spend on cosplay.

**Personal Sense of Power Scale (PSPS).** The PSPS (Anderson, John, & Keltner, 2012) was used to measure participants' perception of power in their everyday relationships. A sample item is "In my relationships with others, I think I have a great deal of power". The measure is comprised of 8 items which are responded to on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Disagree Strongly*) to 7 (*Agree Strongly*). Mean scores were calculated such that higher scores represented

reporting more power within relationships. The measure has been found to be reliable. In the original investigation, Cronbach's alpha for this measure when using it to assess power within everyday relationships rather than a specific relationship ranged from .82 to .85. It was .89 in the present study.

I also used a modified version of the PSPS to assess participants' feelings of power while in cosplay. Items were adapted so that they all began with the phrase "When in cosplay" (e.g., "When in cosplay, I think I have a great deal of power"), but items were otherwise identical to the original version. The response scale was retained, and mean scores were calculated in the same way. This adaptation of the PSPS was also reliable ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

**Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale (ESS).** The ESS (Liss et al., 2011) was utilized to measure the participants' pleasure from receiving sexual attention from others. The original 8-item scale was designed to gauge enjoyment from receiving male attention; however, I changed the language from the original slightly to be more gender-neutral in tone (e.g. "It is important that people are attracted to me" rather than "It is important that men are attracted to me"). The ESS uses a 6-point response scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly Agree*) and results in a mean score in which a higher score reflects a greater enjoyment of sexualized attention. The original ESS is a reliable scale ( $\alpha = .85$ ), and the version used in this study was as well ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

The ESS was also adapted to assess participants' enjoyment of sexualization while in cosplay. The same response scale was utilized, and a mean score was calculated in the same way as the original. The wording of the items were the same, with only the phrase "When in cosplay" attached to the beginning of the questions (e.g. "When in cosplay, it is important that people are

attracted to me”). This version of the ESS was also found to be reliable with a Cronbach’s alpha of .86.

**Sex is Power Scale (SIPS).** The SIPS (Erchull & Liss, 2013) was used to examine the extent to which participants believed they and other women in general derive power from sexualization. The scale is composed of two subscales to measure these components separately as the Self: Sex is Power Scale (S-SIPS) and the Women in General: Sex is Power Scale (W-SIPS) with 7 and 3 items, respectively. The SIPS uses a 6-point response scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly Agree*). A higher mean score for S-SIPS indicates a stronger adherence to the belief that the participant personally gains power from her sexuality, and a higher mean for W-SIPS demonstrates the participant believes that other women use their sexuality for power over others. Like the ESS, both scales were edited to use gender-neutral language (e.g. “My sexual appeal helps me control others (S-SIPS),” and “People are easily manipulated by beautiful women (W-SIPS)”). The original S-SIPS and W-SIPS are both reliable scales ( $\alpha = .87$  and  $\alpha = .82$ , respectively). For the versions used in this study, the S-SIPS and the W-SIPS had Cronbach’s alphas of .90 and .82, respectively.

The S-SIPS was adapted to measure whether the participants felt that they gain power from sexualization while in cosplay. It used the same response scale and score calculation as the original S-SIPS, with the phrase “When in cosplay” added to the beginning of each item. A sample item is “When in cosplay, my sexual appeal helps me control others.” This version of the S-SIPS was also found to be reliable ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

**Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBCS).** I used two of the three subscales of the OBCS (McKinley & Hyde, 1996) in this study: body surveillance and body shame. Body surveillance is an 8-item subscale that measures the degree to which participants view

themselves with an outsider's perspective in mind (e.g. "I often worry about whether the clothes I'm wearing make me look good"). The body shame subscale also consists of 8 items that assess how participants feel about their appearance and their bodies (e.g. "I would be ashamed for people to know what I really weigh"). Both scales produce their own mean scores calculated from a 6-point response scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly Agree*), with higher means indicating participants reported more frequently engaging in body surveillance and feeling a greater amount of body shame. The original study found both scales to be reliable: Body surveillance had an alpha of .89 and body shame had one of .75. In the present study, surveillance ( $\alpha = .87$ ) and shame ( $\alpha = .89$ ) were also shown to be reliable measures.

Only the body surveillance subscale was adapted for cosplay, which was used to measure the extent that participants surveyed their bodies while in cosplay. The measure still consisted of the same 8 items from the original, but the language was altered slightly to apply directly to the cosplay experience (e.g. "When in cosplay, I often worry about whether the clothes I'm wearing make me look good"). The response scale and the calculation for the mean score remained the same. The Cronbach's alpha for this version of the measure was .82.

**Sexualized and Empowered Cosplay.** Items were written for the present study to assess participants' sense of empowerment while in cosplay as well as their engagement with sexualized cosplay (see Table 4 for a complete list of the items). Empowerment items were developed by reviewing various definitions of empowerment from the literature and by reading through cosplay blog posts about why people believe cosplay is empowering. Sexualized cosplay questions were inspired by objectification research exploring what parts of the body and what types of clothing are most commonly viewed with a sexual gaze. These items were presented together along with distractor questions regarding cosplay experience in order to mask the

questions of interest. All items were responded to on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 6 (*Always*).

## Results

### Exploratory Factor Analysis

First, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to identify whether distinct, interpretable scales assessing empowerment and sexualization while in cosplay could be derived from the items written for the present study (see Table 4) using principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation. I worked closely with my advisor to ensure that I was using the appropriate procedures to perform this analysis. I anticipated that these items would factor into two distinct scales: one reflecting the sexualized nature of cosplayers' costumes, and the other measuring cosplayers' sense of empowerment while in costume. Examination of the first scree plot showed 6 factors with eigenvalues over 1, with the first two factors explaining 16.55% and 9.63% of the variance, respectively. Although the additional factors accounted for their own small percentages of variance, there was no clear conceptual interpretation as to why the items were loading on these factors.

Given this, I forced a two-factor solution based on my a priori predictions. Factor 1 (empowerment) explained 22.15% of the variance, and Factor 2 (sexualized) explained 13.85%. Items were considered to load on a factor if they had a factor loading of .4 or above for that factor and did not cross-load above .2 on the other factor (see Table 5 for factor loadings). Four items did not load high enough on either factor to be included, and two more items were excluded because they cross-loaded onto the other factor. This resulted in two 8-item measures assessing empowerment in cosplay (Factor 1) and sexualized cosplay (Factor 2). Both scales

were found to be reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of .86 for empowerment and .80 for sexualization.

### **Descriptive Statistics**

The descriptive statistics for each scale including means, standard deviations, and ranges are provided in Table 6. Participants tended to score low for the sexualized cosplay scale; conversely, participants seemed to score higher for the empowerment in cosplay scale. In general, the measures saw higher means for the participants in cosplay compared to their daily lives.

Table 7 displays the correlations among the measures. All the scales that were adapted to measure behaviors and attitudes during the cosplay experience—PSPS, ESS, S-SIPS, and body surveillance—were strongly correlated with the original versions of the measures. Both general surveillance and surveillance in cosplay were moderately correlated with sexualized cosplay scores; however, body shame was not correlated with sexualized cosplay. Sexualized cosplay and empowered cosplay scores were moderately correlated in the positive direction, indicating that feelings of empowerment tended to increase with the sexualized nature of the participants' costumes.

### **Sexualized and Empowered Cosplay**

As distinct empowered and sexualized cosplay scales were developed, means scores for each measure were used to test Hypotheses 1 through 3. This was done using multiple regression analysis using PROCESS (Hayes, 2017; Model 1) to test for significant interactions among continuous variables. Sexualized and empowered cosplay scores were mean centered prior to analysis. Parallel analyses were run to explore how sexualized cosplay, empowered

cosplay, and their interaction predicted PSPS, ESS, S-SIPS, W-SIPS, body surveillance, and body shame scores.

The first analysis, testing Hypotheses 2a, 3a, and exploratory question 1f, had PSPS scores as the criterion variable. Both sexualized cosplay,  $b = .23$ ,  $t(282) = 2.67$ ,  $p = .008$ , 95% CI [.06, .40], and empowered cosplay,  $b = .20$ ,  $t(282) = 2.58$ ,  $p = .01$ , 95% CI [.05, .36], significantly, positively predicted women's personal sense of power. This finding confirmed Hypothesis 2a that women who engaged in more empowered cosplay felt a greater sense of personal power in their lives as a whole. While I had no specific hypothesis about sexualized cosplay in relation to PSPS scores (1f), I also found that those who engaged in more sexualized cosplay reported a greater sense of personal power. The interaction of the two did not, however, significantly predict PSPS scores,  $b = -.04$ ,  $t(282) = -.39$ ,  $p = .70$ , 95% CI [-.24, .16], so Hypothesis 3a was not supported. This model explained 6% of the variance in PSPS scores,  $F(3, 282) = 6.09$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Analyses were then run with enjoyment of sexualization as the variable of interest. Supporting Hypothesis 1a, sexualized cosplay scores  $b = .65$ ,  $t(282) = 11.50$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.54, .76], were shown to significantly predict participants' ESS scores. Additionally, results for the exploratory question 2d showed that empowered cosplay scores also predicted ESS scores  $b = .13$ ,  $t(282) = 2.47$ ,  $p = .01$ , 95% CI [.03, .23], indicating that women who wore more sexualized costumes and women who felt empowered by their cosplay also tended to enjoy being sexualized. I did not have a specific prediction for the interaction between these two variables on ESS scores, but I was interested in exploring it for question 3d. There was no significant interaction between the two variables in predicting ESS scores,  $b = -.01$ ,  $t(282) = -.11$ ,  $p = .91$ ,

95% CI [-.14, .12]. The model as a whole accounted for 36% of the variability in ESS scores,  $F(3, 282) = 52.29, p < .001$ .

Analysis of the S-SIPS scores supported Hypothesis 1b, with sexualized cosplay scores significantly predicting S-SIPS scores in the positive direction,  $b = .57, t(282) = 8.06, p < .001$ , 95% CI [.43, .72]. Women who more frequently wore sexualized cosplay also were more apt to believe that they personally derived power from their sexuality. For the exploratory question 2e, however, empowered cosplay scores were not shown to be a significant predictor of S-SIPS,  $b = .09, t(282) = 1.32, p = .19$ , 95% CI [-.04, .21], meaning that empowerment in cosplay was not related to the cosplayers' belief that sexuality gives them power. For exploration question 3e, the interaction was found to be non-significant  $b = .11, t(282) = 1.25, p = .21$ , 95% CI [-.06, .27]. The results showed that 21% of the variability in S-SIPS scores was due to this model,  $F(3, 282) = 25.27, p < .001$ .

Hypothesis 1c and exploratory question 2f followed a similar pattern for the W-SIPS. Sexualized cosplay scores positively predicted W-SIPS,  $b = .36, t(282) = 3.59, p < .001$ , 95% CI [.16, .56], supporting Hypothesis 1c. Women who reported engaging more often in sexualized cosplay seemed to more readily believe that other women gain power by using their sexuality; however, empowered cosplay scores were not significantly related to W-SIPS,  $b = .01, t(282) = .07, p = .95$ , 95% CI [-.18, .19], for exploratory question 2f. As with S-SIPS, there was no interaction between sexualized and empowered cosplay scores on the participants' W-SIPS scores,  $b = -.16, t(282) = -1.32, p = .19$ , 95% CI [-.39, .08]. The model as a whole explained 5% of the variability in W-SIPS scores,  $F(3, 282) = 5.06, p = .002$ .

Body surveillance was shown to be positively predicted by sexualized cosplay scores,  $b = .41, t(282) = 5.67, p < .001$ , 95% CI [.27, .55], and negatively predicted by empowered cosplay

scores,  $b = -.24$ ,  $t(282) = -3.59$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI  $[-.37, -.11]$ , confirming Hypotheses 1d and 2b respectively. Cosplayers who tended to wear sexualized costumes were more likely to survey their bodies during their daily lives, while cosplayers who felt empowered by their cosplay surveyed their bodies less frequently. I was interested in examining the interaction between sexualized cosplay and empowered cosplay on body surveillance for exploratory question 3c, and I found that the interaction between these two variables were not significant,  $b = -.09$ ,  $t(282) = -1.01$ ,  $p = .31$ , 95% CI  $[-.25, .08]$ . This model accounted for 12% of the variance in the participants' surveillance scores,  $F(3, 282) = 12.77$ ,  $p < .001$ .

The next analyses used body shame as the criterion variable to test Hypotheses 1e, 2c, and 3b. Hypothesis 2c was supported as empowered cosplay significantly negatively predicted body shame scores,  $b = -.34$ ,  $t(281) = -3.95$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI  $[-.51, -.17]$ . These results indicated that women who were empowered by their cosplay experience less body shame in their routine lives. Hypothesis 1e, however, was not supported, as the analysis showed that sexualized cosplay scores were not related to their levels of body shame,  $b = .16$ ,  $t(281) = 1.70$ ,  $p = .09$ , 95% CI  $[-.02, .35]$ . The interaction between empowerment and sexualized cosplay was also non-significant,  $b = -.04$ ,  $t(281) = -.36$ ,  $p = .72$ , 95% CI  $[-.26, .18]$ , contrary to my prediction for Hypothesis 3b. The model explained 6% of the variability for the participants' body shame scores,  $F(3, 281) = 5.62$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### **Mediation Analyses**

I next focused specifically on the experiences of women who engaged in sexualized cosplay. To do this, I conducted a median split. Any participant with a score above 2.25 on the sexualized cosplay scale was categorized as being high in sexualized cosplay ( $n = 150$ ). For each mediation analysis, at least one participant was missing from the highly sexualized category due

to missing data from the specific measures included in that analysis. I then tested Hypotheses 4a through 4d using PROCESS (Hayes, 2017; Model 6) to analyze multiple direct and indirect pathways using 10,000 bootstrap samples.

The first analysis undertaken was to test Hypothesis 4a, exploring whether the relationship between enjoyment of sexualization in cosplay and body shame was mediated by feeling empowered while in cosplay and body surveillance (see Figure 1). The indirect effect was significant, with a completely standardized effect of  $-.07$  ( $SE = .03$ ), 95% CI  $[-.13, -.02]$ . For women who engaged in sexualized cosplay, enjoying sexualization during the cosplay experience predicted a higher empowered cosplays score that, in turn, negatively predicted body surveillance, which then positively predicted body shame. The full model explained 43% of the variance in participants' body shame scores,  $F(3, 144) = 43.83, p < .001$ .

Although scores for ESS in cosplay and ESS in daily life were strongly correlated with each other, they did not behave in the same way in this model. Hypothesis 4b was, thus, not supported as the relationship between enjoyment of sexualization in daily life and body shame through empowerment in cosplay and body surveillance had a non-significant completely standardized indirect effect of  $-.03$  ( $SE = .02$ ), 95% CI  $[-.07, .002]$  (see Figure 2). However, the full model did account for 44% of the variability in participants' body shame scores,  $F(3, 145) = 44.03, p < .001$ .

The hypothesized pattern of relationship was not present when participants' S-SIPS scores were used as the initial variable (Hypotheses 4c and 4d). Analyses showed the relationship between S-SIPS cosplay scores and body shame was not significantly mediated by empowered cosplay scores and body surveillance, with a completely standardized indirect effect of  $-.02$  ( $SE = .01$ ), 95% CI  $[-.05, .006]$ . The full model did, though, account for 44% of the

variability in participants' body shame scores,  $F(3, 144) = 43.36, p < .001$ . See Figure 3 for path coefficients. The same pattern emerged for Hypothesis 4d, testing S-SIPS general scores at the beginning of the model (see Figure 4). There was a non-significant completely standardized indirect effect of  $-.02$  ( $SE = .02$ ), 95% CI  $[-.06, .002]$ , but the full model significantly explained 44% of the variability in the participants' body shame scores  $F(3, 144) = 44.72, p < .001$ .

I also analyzed several 3-variable mediations to find support for Hypothesis 5—exploring how variations of ESS and S-SIPS related to PSPS through empowered cosplay—using PROCESS (Hayes, 2017; Model 4). I found that Hypothesis 5a was supported (see Figure 5). Empowerment while in cosplay significantly mediated the relationship between enjoying sexualization while in cosplay and the participants' personal sense of power while in cosplay, with a completely standardized indirect effect of  $.07$  ( $SE = .03$ ), 95% CI  $[.01, .14]$ . The full model accounted for 10% of the variability in the participants' personal sense of power scores,  $F(2, 146) = 6.68, p = .002$ . Conversely for Hypothesis 5b, the relationship between enjoyment of sexualization in cosplay and personal sense of power in daily life was not significantly mediated by empowered cosplay scores (see Figure 6). The completely standardized indirect effect was  $.05$  ( $SE = .03$ ), 95% CI  $[-.003, .11]$ , and the full model did not significantly account for the variability in participants' personal sense of power scores,  $F(2, 146) = 1.88, p = .16, R^2 = .03$ .

Neither of the hypotheses exploring empowerment while in cosplay as a mediator between S-SIPS scores' and personal sense of power were supported. The model beginning with S-SIPS cosplay scores had a completely standardized indirect effect of  $.03$  ( $SE = .02$ ), 95% CI  $[-.009, .07]$ . See Figure 7 for path coefficients. However, this model did significantly explain 18% of the variability in participants' personal sense of power while in cosplay scores,  $F(2, 146) = 14.44, p < .001$ . The model used to test Hypothesis 5d exhibited a similar pattern. The

relationship between S-SIPS cosplay scores and personal sense of power in daily life was not significantly mediated by empowerment while in cosplay, shown by a completely standardized indirect effect of .02 ( $SE = .02$ ), 95% CI [-.01, .05]. Additionally, this model did not account for a significant amount of the variability in personal sense of power scores,  $F(2, 146) = 1.19, p = .31, R^2 = .02$  (see Figure 8).

### Comparing Variables In and Out of Cosplay

Further analyses were conducted to analyze differences in participants' behaviors and attitudes while in cosplay and during their routine lives with several mixed ANOVAs. I used the same median split for sexualized cosplay scores as was used for the mediation analyses above. This resulted in a categorical variable reflecting "high sexualization cosplay" ( $n = 150$ ) and "low sexualization cosplay" ( $n = 136$ ) as the between groups variables in these mixed ANOVAs. All means and standard deviations for each measures' simple effects are presented in Table 8.

The participants scored significantly higher in body surveillance while in cosplay than during their daily lives,  $F(1, 280) = 287.40, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .51$ , supporting Hypothesis 6a. This indicated that women tended to survey their bodies more frequently while in cosplay as opposed to during their typical day. Consistent with the findings of the regression interaction reported above, participants in the high sexualized cosplay category scored significantly higher in body surveillance compared to those in the low sexualized cosplay category,  $F(1, 280) = 18.35, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .06$ . The interaction between body surveillance and sexualized cosplay, however, was not significant,  $F(1, 280) = .97, p = .33, \eta_p^2 = .003$ .

Hypothesis 6b was also supported. The participants reported a greater personal sense of power while in cosplay compared to in their daily lives,  $F(1, 283) = 17.21, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .06$ . High sexualization cosplayers reported higher personal sense of power than low sexualization

cosplayers as well,  $F(1, 283) = 14.07, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .05$ , paralleling the results from previous analyses. The interaction between PSPS and sexualized cosplay scores was not significant,  $F(1, 283) = 3.06, p = .08, \eta_p^2 = .01$ .

Analyses for exploratory question 6c showed a significant difference in ESS scores between cosplay conditions. Participants reported enjoying sexualization significantly more often while they were in cosplay than in their day-to-day lives,  $F(1, 283) = 17.24, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .06$ , meaning that the cosplayers seemed to like being sexualized in costume but not in their everyday interactions. Similar to results found in the regression interaction performed previously, participants in the high sexualization cosplay category reported higher enjoyment of sexualization than those in the low sexualization category,  $F(1, 283) = 130.57, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .32$ . There was a significant interaction between these variables and the participants' sexualization scores,  $F(1, 283) = 12.36, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$ . See Figure 9 for a graph of the interaction. Analyzing the simple effects demonstrated that participants with high sexualized cosplay scores reported enjoying sexualization more often in cosplay as opposed to in their daily lives,  $p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.18, .38]$ ; conversely, participants with low sexualized cosplay scores did not show a significant difference in their ESS scores between the cosplay experience and their day-to-day lives,  $p = .66, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.08, .13]$ . In addition, high sexualization participants scored higher in ESS scores compared to those with low sexualization scores for both daily life,  $p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.72, 1.06]$ , and in cosplay,  $p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.94, 1.36]$ .

Exploratory analyses for question 6d found that the difference between S-SIPS in cosplay and out of cosplay was not significant,  $F(1, 282) = 2.40, p = .12, \eta_p^2 = .01$ . The effect of sexualized cosplay was, in fact, significant for S-SIPS scores,  $F(1, 282) = 45.38, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .14$ , with cosplayers in the high sexualization category scoring higher than cosplayers in the

low sexualization category. The interaction between S-SIPS and sexualized cosplay scores was also not significant,  $F(1, 282) = 1.97, p = .16, \eta_p^2 = .01$ .

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to research the psychological effects of cosplay as well as to study a previously unexplored context for the self-sexualization by, and empowerment of, women. The first hypothesis was partially supported; as expected, regression interaction analyses showed that wearing sexualized cosplay positively predicted participants enjoying sexualization, believing that they and other women attain power from sexualization, and surveying their bodies. Further analyses showed that engaging in sexualized cosplay also positively predicted perceptions of power within personal relationships. Contrary to my prediction, the cosplayers' feelings of body shame were not related to their cosplay sexualization scores.

The relationship between sexualized cosplay and self-objectification found in this study is partially consistent with findings from previous research. Other studies have shown that enjoyment of sexualization was related to self-objectifying behaviors (Liss et al., 2011; Ramsey & Horan, 2016). Ramsey and Horan (2016) also found that posting sexualized pictures on Instagram was moderately correlated with increased body surveillance. The present study showed parallel results, with women who wore more sexualized cosplay exhibiting a stronger tendency to survey their bodies as well as reporting enjoying sexualization more often. Previous studies have also established that self-objectification and self-sexualization are related to increased body dissatisfaction and body shame (American Psychological Association, 2007; McKenney & Bigler, 2016; McKinley & Hyde, 1996; Moradi & Huang, 2008). However, I found

a contradictory result for the regression interaction in that self-sexualizing through cosplay was not related to body shame.

I believe that the experience of embodying a character may have interrupted some of the negative effects of self-sexualization. Although there have not been empirical studies exploring sexualization in the cosplay context before the present study, established theoretical frameworks of deindividuation may provide some insight into the mechanisms through which this pattern may occur (Diener, 1980; Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1989). Cosplayers may experience a type of deindividuation while attending conventions in costume because they are taking on a new identity in the midst of a crowd that shares their interests (Diener, 1980; Zimbardo, 1970). Rather than being their “true” selves, they feel attuned to the character who they are portraying and, thus, may start to exhibit that character’s traits. Amon (2014) alluded to this idea while reminiscing about her first cosplay—Esmerelda from Disney’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* film—in her article discussing Disney cosplay at conventions: “I am not a highly independent or adventurous person, but through cosplaying I experienced an expansion of that trait in my own identity; because Esmeralda would stride through the hall with confidence, I found myself striding with confidence...” (para. 3.4).

This may explain why women who tended to wear sexualized cosplay did not show more body shame than other cosplayers despite findings from other research on self-sexualization—if they were pretending to be characters who embodied positive characteristics, cosplayers who engaged in sexualized cosplay may have incorporated some of these traits into their own identity. Rosenberg and Letamendi (2013) researched motivations for cosplay and provided qualitative evidence pertinent to this theory. They quoted one cosplayer who explained what caused her to start cosplaying Wonder Woman from DC Comics: “Wonder Woman was a beautiful princess,

but strong and independent...in Wonder Woman I saw the best qualities of my mother, and the type of woman I wanted my sister and I to become” (Rosenberg & Letamendi, 2013, p. 14). Despite the revealing or sexual nature of most Wonder Woman designs (Grauso, 2016), cosplayers tend to identify with her personality and are inspired to exhibit her characteristics (Ashcraft & Plunkett, 2014; Weisberger, 2016). My own findings provide some quantitative support for this idea since the participants did not exhibit the increased body shame often associated with self-sexualization. However, I did not analyze cosplay motivations, so my results cannot fully support this underlying idea. Future studies could expand on my own by incorporating qualitative methods that would allow for further exploration into which types of character attributes people are drawn to and how those characteristics impact their attitudes and behaviors in daily life outside of cosplay.

Feeling empowered by cosplay showed similar patterns of relationships to various outcome variables as the sexualized cosplay results, lending credence to my second hypothesis. Empowered cosplay positively predicted perceptions of power within the participants’ interactions during daily life and negatively predicted body shame and body surveillance. Interestingly, feeling empowerment in cosplay also positively predicted enjoying sexualized attention, but the belief that sexuality gives women power was not predicted by empowerment.

These findings are consistent with theoretical works of feminist scholars exploring the definitions of internal empowerment. Researchers have described empowerment as a personal perception of being in control and feeling good about the self (Peterson, 2010; Zimmerman, 1990), and it is often discussed in context of self-efficacy and self-confidence (Regehr, 2012). The questions created for the empowered cosplay scale sought to assess these factors to measure internal empowerment. It is intuitive that the participants experienced less body shame when

feeling more empowered by their cosplay because they felt more confident in themselves and their abilities because of it. Body surveillance followed the same pattern, likely because those who felt secure and confident enough in themselves did not feel the need to constantly monitor their appearance.

Scholars have also discussed the existence of an external empowerment, which focuses on a person's ability to control their lives and the resources available to them (Riger, 1993; Regher, 2012). Some have argued that this may be a more important type of empowerment because perceptions of power may not translate to the person's actions and abilities (Riger, 1993). Because this study focused primarily on internal empowerment, I cannot state how cosplay would affect cosplayers' external empowerment; even the Personal Sense of Power Scale, which measures the perception of power within interpersonal relationships, is more a measure of internal than external empowerment. Research in the future comparing external empowerment with internal empowerment in the context of cosplay could provide empirical evidence for this debate. Questions would need to be developed to supplement those I created for this study that specifically measure external empowerment, such as items assessing participants' ability to influence the environment advocate for themselves in various settings.

Despite sexualized cosplay and empowerment in cosplay being moderately correlated with each other in this study, they did not interact to negatively predict body shame together as I had expected for my third hypothesis. Researchers who have discussed the relationship between sexualization and empowerment have expressed concern over whether engaging in sexualization leads to women experiencing a false sense of empowerment, in which women feel good about themselves only when they are fulfilling their roles as an attractive object for others to gaze upon (Liss et al., 2011; Peterson, 2010; Riger, 1993). However, my results implicate that they are two

distinct forces rather than intertwined variables in the context of cosplay. Women who self-sexualized through cosplay experienced patterns of attitudes and behaviors that were independent of their feelings of empowerment in cosplay, and vice versa. Overall, my findings suggest that sexualization and empowerment should be more frequently studied as separate constructs rather than as inseparable variables.

Although the results from the regression interaction analyses did not significantly predict participants' feelings of body shame, an interesting relationship emerged among highly sexualized cosplayers in regards to their empowerment in cosplay impacting their body shame during daily life (Hypotheses 4a and 4b). Specifically, empowerment in cosplay and body surveillance mediated the relationship between enjoyment of sexualization while in cosplay and body shame in daily life, supporting my fourth hypothesis. This finding showed that women who enjoyed being sexualized while in costume did, in fact, experience a positive impact in their daily lives in the form of less body surveillance and body shame—an important finding for the empowerment through sexualization debate described previously. I also expected that the same pattern would appear for enjoyment of sexualization during everyday life. General enjoyment of sexualization was highly correlated with enjoyment of sexualization while in cosplay, but these variables did not demonstrate the same pattern of relationships in the mediation analyses. Enjoyment of sexualization during daily life, as compared to in cosplay, did not predict empowerment in cosplay, and the mediation was not significant. This suggests that empowered cosplay was only tied to a context-specific enjoyment of sexualization.

The mediation analyses testing my fifth hypothesis exploring highly sexualized cosplayers' personal sense of power also showed patterns that were specific to the cosplay experience. I hypothesized that the relationship between enjoyment of sexualization while in

cosplay and personal sense of power in both cosplay and everyday life would be mediated by feeling empowered while cosplaying. This indirect effect was only significant for the model with personal sense of power in cosplay as the outcome variable. Overall, my results revealed that some of the positive effects felt by cosplayers while in costume were not apparent during their day-to-day lives, unlike my finding for body shame. Cosplay seems to provide cosplayers—and of particular interest, self-sexualizing cosplayers—with only brief real-world benefits for certain variables.

Interestingly, the belief that participants gained personal power from their sexuality did not behave the same way as ESS scores in these mediation analyses. Although the two variables are distinct constructs, I expected the results from the analyses of the models beginning with the S-SIPS to parallel the results found in the models starting with enjoyment of sexualization because prior research has shown them to be highly correlated with each other (Erchull & Liss, 2013). The original SIPS article by Erchull and Liss (2013) found a correlation between ESS and S-SIPS of .62; this study found one that, while significant, was a lower correlation of .49. For my sample, the pleasure that cosplayers received from their sexualized costumes seemed to be more influential and meaningful to the participants than just the perception that they were gaining power over others from engaging with their sexuality.

For my sixth hypothesis, I tested the differences in scores for parallel measures asking about attitudes and behaviors in and out of cosplay using mixed ANOVAs. The only variable that did not show any differences was the participants' belief that sexuality gave them power. This may have been because this sample scored very low on this measure overall—a sample with more variability on this measure may have led to a different result. However, cosplayers enjoyed being sexualized more in cosplay rather than outside of the convention space. Further analyses

showed that there was a significant interaction between enjoyment of sexualization and sexualized cosplay: only highly sexualized cosplayers enjoyed being sexualized significantly more while in cosplay than during daily life, while cosplayers with low sexualization scores showed no differences. These results are important to the empowerment through sexualization debate as it shows sexualized cosplayers only found pleasure in being sexualized under certain circumstances. In this case, women who made the choice to present themselves in sexual attire enjoyed sexualization while in costume; in everyday life, though, when women may not have as much control over who sexualizes or objectifies them (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), this pattern was not apparent. This indicates that future research exploring this topic must take specific context into account.

Participants also reported a higher personal sense of power while in cosplay compared to their daily lives. Participants may have felt as though they had more power within their personal relationships while in cosplay due to taking on the traits of the characters they cosplayed—from deindividuation theory—which may have led cosplayers feeling more confident and persuasive in the convention space. Body surveillance was experienced more frequently while the participants were in their costumes, which supports the idea that cosplay is inherently an objectifying experience. Cosplayers dress themselves to look like characters and attend conventions in anticipation of others noticing and complimenting their appearance. Therefore, it is understandable why this anticipation may have led the cosplayers in this study to survey their bodies more often while in costume to ensure that they looked as accurate and kempt as possible.

While cosplay as an objectifying experience is not problematic in and of itself, it may explain some of the controversy surrounding behaviors exhibited by some convention attendees. Many people have reported experiencing sexual harassment at conventions while in cosplay,

which has led to the Cosplay is NOT Consent movement within the community (Backe, 2015; “Cosplay is NOT Consent,” n.d.). According to a survey conducted by Asselin (2014), 13% of 3,600 respondents reported receiving unwelcome sexual comments in the convention space, and 8% revealed that they had been inappropriately touched or even assaulted while attending a convention. Some believe that the prevalence of harassment at conventions is due to men attempting to marginalize women in the geek community, which is perceived to be a male space by some people (Backe, 2015; Reagle, 2015; Wesiberg, 2014). However, my results indicate that objectification may also contribute to these patterns. Because cosplay is an objectifying experience, others may see and treat cosplayers as fictional characters rather than as human beings. Future research exploring the perception of cosplayers while they are in costume could help strengthen these findings.

While this study contributes empirical evidence to the sexualization and empowerment debate, it is not without limitations. One limitation of this study is that it did not assess mental health outcomes that have been found to be associated with sexualization and objectification in past studies, such as depression, anxiety, and disordered eating (Moradi & Huang, 2008). Because the present study focused primarily on body shame and personal sense of power as outcomes of cosplay, it is difficult to know the extent of the benefits—or possible costs—for engaging in sexualized cosplay. The majority of this sample was also White, so these results may not completely generalize to cosplayers of color. Women of color who cosplay have reported unique problems within the cosplay community and popular culture, including the low representation of people of color in all types of media and racist remarks from others about their appearance while in cosplay (Harding, 2017). Despite these limitations, though, my findings

have provided a starting point that may show potential positive effects from engaging in self-sexualizing behaviors in the context of cosplay.

I believe that this approach to studying female empowerment through sexualization can be studied in other contexts besides cosplay, such as burlesque culture. Feminist scholars have previously explored how women who engage in burlesque may achieve a sense of empowerment from performing a sexualized dance in front of an audience (Ferreday, 2008; Regehr, 2012). Most of these studies have focused on gathering qualitative data from women through interviews in which women claim they feel empowered by engaging with their sexuality (Ferreday, 2008; Regehr, 2012), similar to how female cosplayers who engage in sexualized cosplay say they feel (McKinney, 2014). The researchers have also mentioned how this empowerment may come from internalizing the expectation that women must be attractive in order to be worthwhile, thus leading women to derive pleasure from fulfilling that role (Regehr, 2012). Applying my approach to burlesque, however, could provide researchers with clearer evidence as to whether burlesque performers achieve a genuine sense of empowerment that impacts their day-to-day lives.

As cosplay becomes more mainstream in society, it is important to understand the underlying consequences it can have for those who choose to partake in it as a hobby. Cosplay is an activity that also provides an interesting context in which to study psychological theoretical frameworks, from empowerment to deindividuation. The present study showed that sexualization and empowerment function as two separate constructs, but interesting patterns among highly sexualized cosplayers showed that empowerment while in cosplay can be predictive of positive feelings about the self during their everyday lives, including lower rates of body shame. It is important to note, though, that empowerment in cosplay did not seem to

translate into the participants' general life, such as the participants' personal sense of power within interpersonal relationships. Overall, this study has contributed a novel perspective to the debate on female empowerment through sexualization and suggests that there may be some real-world benefits for women who choose to self-sexualize under specific contexts, but not all benefits are far-reaching. This may provide a foundation for future studies to explore the positive and negative consequences of attaining empowerment through sexualization.

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Table 1

*General Demographic Characteristics*

<i>N</i> = 288	
Age	
<i>M</i>	25.47
<i>SD</i>	6.33
Median	24.00
Range	18 – 62
Country	<i>n</i> , %
United States	233, 80.9%
Australia	3, 1.0%
United Kingdom	11, 3.8%
Japan	4, 1.4%
Finland	3, 1.0%
Canada	18, 6.3%
Germany	2, 0.7%
Norway	1, 0.3%
Sweden	2, 0.7%
Russia	1, 0.3%
Cyprus	1, 0.3%
Thailand	1, 0.3%
Chile	1, 0.3%
New Zealand	1, 0.3%
Dual Citizenship	1, 0.3%
Not disclosed	5, 1.7%
Education	<i>n</i> , %
Grade school	1, 0.3%
Some high school	6, 2.1%
High school diploma/GED	28, 9.7%
Some college	90, 31.3%
Associates degree	17, 5.9%
Bachelor's degree	103, 35.8%
Master's level degree	29, 10.1%
Doctoral degree	8, 2.8%
Other	4, 1.4%
Not disclosed	2, 0.7%

	<i>N</i> = 288
<b>Race</b>	<i>n</i> , %
White	194, 67.4%
Black	11, 3.8%
East Asian	14, 4.9%
South Asian	3, 1.0%
Pacific Islander	1, 0.3%
Latinx	20, 6.9%
Middle Eastern	3, 1.0%
A Member of an Indigenous Group	--
Multiracial	26, 9.0%
I identify in a different way	3, 1.0%
Not disclosed	13, 4.5%
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	<i>n</i> , %
Straight	82, 28.5%
Lesbian/Gay	26, 9.0%
Bisexual	68, 23.6%
Pansexual	38, 13.2%
Asexual	54, 18.8%
I identify in a different way	18, 6.3%
Not disclosed	2, 0.7%
<b>Socioeconomic Status</b>	<i>n</i> , %
poor	13, 4.5%
working class	106, 36.8%
middle class	126, 43.8%
upper middle class	40, 13.9%
wealthy	1, 0.3%
not disclosed	2, 0.7%

Table 2

*Cosplay Demographic Characteristics*

<i>N</i> = 288	
Total Years of Cosplay	
<i>M</i>	6.50
<i>SD</i>	4.10
Median	6.00
Range	1 – 25
Cosplays Worn Per Year	<i>n</i> , %
1-2	92, 31.9%
3-5	92, 31.9%
6-10	54, 18.8%
10-15	25, 8.7%
16 or more	23, 8.0%
Not disclosed	2, 0.7%
Cosplays Made Per Year	<i>n</i> , %
1-2	150, 52.1%
3-5	88, 30.6%
6-10	33, 11.5%
10-15	11, 3.8%
16 or more	3, 1.0%
Not disclosed	3, 1.0%
Money Spent Per Cosplay	<i>n</i> , %
\$0-50	28, 9.7%
\$51-99	91, 31.6%
\$100-199	104, 36.1%
\$200-399	51, 17.7%
\$400 or more	12, 4.2%
Not disclosed	2, 0.7%

	<i>N</i> = 288
Most Popular Genre to Cosplay From*	<i>n</i> , %
Science Fiction	67, 23.3%
Fantasy	86, 29.9%
Gaming	205, 71.2%
Anime	191, 66.3%
Western Animation/Cartoons	75, 26.0%
Comic Books	72, 25.0%
Anthropomorphic/Furry	7, 2.4%
Steam Punk	14, 4.9%
Renaissance Fairs	31, 10.8%
Urban Fantasy	--
Cult Classics	3, 1.0%
Theatre	4, 1.4%
Cyber Punk	2, 0.7%
Horror/Slasher	3, 1.0%
Reality Shows	--
Ball Jointed Dolls	1, 0.3%
Lolita	20, 6.9%
Other	8, 2.8%

*Note.* \* Participants were allowed to select up to 3 types of popular media that they tend to cosplay from. The frequencies for this measure reflect the number of people who indicated that particular genre as one of their 3 choices.

Table 3

*Convention Attendance Demographics*

<i>N</i> = 288	
Conventions Attended Per Year	<i>n</i> , %
0	2, 0.7%
1	47, 16.3%
2	88, 30.6%
3	59, 20.5%
4	35, 12.2%
5	13, 4.5%
More than 5	44, 15.3%
Most Popular Types of Conventions to Attend*	<i>n</i> , %
Science Fiction	74, 25.7%
Fantasy	78, 27.1%
Gaming	175, 60.8%
Anime	228, 79.2%
Western Animation/Cartoons	80, 27.8%
Comic Books	141, 49.0%
Anthropomorphic/Furry	7, 2.4%
Steam Punk	20, 6.9%
Renaissance Fairs	87, 30.2%
Urban Fantasy	3, 1.0%
Cult Classics	20, 6.9%
Theatre	8, 2.8%
Cyber Punk	2, 0.7%
Horror/Slasher	8, 2.8%
Reality Shows	1, 0.3%
Ball Jointed Dolls	--
Lolita	15, 5.2%
Generic or Popular Culture	5, 1.7%
Other	12, 4.2%

*Note.* \* Participants were allowed to select up to 3 types of conventions that they generally attended while cosplaying. The frequencies for this measure reflect the number of people who indicated that convention types as one of their 3 choices.

Table 4

*Sexualized, Empowered, and Distractor Cosplay Items in the Order Presented to Participants*

Purpose	Item
Distractor	1. Wear a wig for your cosplay
Sexualized	2. Wear cosplay that covers most of your skin*
Distractor	3. Wear cosplay that involves armor
Empowered	4. Cosplay characters that make you feel powerful
Distractor	5. Buy or commission most of/all of your cosplay
Sexualized	6. Wear cosplay that is form-fitting
Distractor	7. Build props for cosplay
Distractor	8. Coordinate your cosplay with a group
Empowered	9. Feel confident while in cosplay
Empowered	10. Believe cosplay enhances your self-esteem
Distractor	11. Wear/design Lolita fashion as part of your cosplay
Sexualized	12. Wear cosplay that reveals cleavage
Distractor	13. Wear a fur suit
Empowered	14. Believe that your cosplay allows for you to express your creativity
Sexualized	15. Wear a corset over or under your cosplay
Empowered	16. Feel outside pressure to behave in particular ways when in cosplay*
Distractor	17. LARP (“Live Action Role Play”) while in cosplay
Empowered	18. Feel uncomfortable with your body while in cosplay*
Empowered	19. Believe that other people perceive you as powerful when you are in cosplay
Sexualized	20. Avoid cosplaying characters that have been designed to be sexy*
Distractor	21. “Crossplay”, or cosplay a character that does not share your gender identity
Empowered	22. Believe that your cosplay allows you to express yourself
Sexualized	23. Contour your chest to make your breasts look bigger for your cosplay
Empowered	24. Feel like a stronger person in your cosplay
Distractor	25. Wear/design steam punk fashion for your cosplay
Empowered	26. Feel in charge of your sexuality while in cosplay
Distractor	27. Wear color contacts or "circle lenses" for your cosplay
Sexualized	28. Wear cosplay that does not completely conceal your butt
Distractor	29. Craft/prepare your cosplay to include even the smallest details in the character's appearance
Empowered	30. Believe that cosplay does not influence how you feel about yourself in your daily life*
Empowered	31. Feel proud of yourself and your abilities while in cosplay
Distractor	32. Wear a mecha suit
Sexualized	33. Redesign a character to appear more sexy for your cosplay
Distractor	34. Wear cosplay that covers part of your face
Empowered	35. Feel like an independent person while in cosplay
Sexualized	36. Pose in ways that will show off your body when someone takes your picture

*Note.* Items were prefaced with the phrase, “Think about your cosplay choices, how you design and/or prepare your costumes, and your experiences while in cosplay. How often do you...”. \* indicates reverse-coded items.

Table 5

*Factor Loadings from the Exploratory Factor Analysis*

Item	Factor 1: Empowerment in Cosplay	Factor 2: Sexualized Cosplay
Feel proud of yourself and your abilities while in cosplay.	<b>.77</b>	-.09
Believe cosplay enhances your self-esteem.	<b>.74</b>	.01
Feel like an independent person while in cosplay.	<b>.73</b>	-.08
Feel confident while in cosplay.	<b>.73</b>	.06
Feel like a stronger person while in cosplay.	<b>.71</b>	.03
Believe that your cosplay allows you to express yourself.	<b>.63</b>	-.03
Believe that your cosplay allows you to express your creativity.	<b>.53</b>	-.03
Cosplay characters that make you feel powerful.	<b>.51</b>	.11
Wear cosplay that reveals cleavage.	-.07	<b>.71</b>
Pose in ways that will show off your body when someone takes your picture.	.12	<b>.64</b>
Avoid cosplaying characters that have been designed to be sexy.*	-.07	<b>-.61</b>
Wear cosplay that is form-fitting.	.03	<b>.58</b>
Wear cosplay that does not completely conceal your butt.	-.002	<b>.55</b>
Wear cosplay that covers most of your skin.*	.09	<b>-.54</b>
Contour your chest to make your breasts look bigger for your cosplay.	.06	<b>.52</b>
Redesign a character to appear more sexy for your cosplay	-.05	<b>.48</b>
Wear a corset over or under your cosplay.	.09	.35
Feel in charge of your sexuality while in cosplay.	.51	.27
Believe that other people perceive you as powerful when you are in cosplay.	.43	.28
Feel uncomfortable with your body while in cosplay.*	-.40	.05
Believe that cosplay does not influence how you feel about yourself in your daily life.*	-.16	-.11
Feel outside pressure to behave in particular ways while in cosplay.*	-.04	.04

*Note.* Items were prefaced with the phrase, “Think about your cosplay choices, how you design and/or prepare your costumes, and your experiences while in cosplay. How often do you...”. Bold loadings indicate that an item was retained for that subscale. \* indicates reverse-coded items.

Table 6

*Descriptive Statistics for All Scales*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Actual Range	Possible Range
Sexualized Cosplay	2.42	.75	1 – 4.63	1 – 6
Empowerment in Cosplay	4.76	.85	1.75 – 6	1 – 6
PSPS	4.44	1.11	1.13 – 7	1 – 7
ESS	3.45	.87	1 – 6	1 – 6
S-SIPS	1.89	.99	1 – 5.57	1 – 6
W-SIPS	3.72	1.29	1 – 6	1 – 6
Body Surveillance	3.75	.95	1 – 6	1 – 6
Body Shame	3.21	1.20	1 – 6	1 – 6
PSPS: Cosplay	4.68	.98	1.13 – 7	1 – 7
ESS: Cosplay	3.60	1.05	1.25 – 6	1 – 6
S-SIPS: Cosplay	1.81	1.08	1 – 6	1 – 6
Body Surveillance: Cosplay	4.52	.84	1.25 – 6	1 – 6

*Note.* PSPS = Personal Sense of Power Scale; ESS = Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale; S-SIPS = Self: Sex is Power Scale; W-SIPS = Women in General: Sex is Power Scale.

Table 7

*Inter-correlations Among All Scales*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Sexualized Cosplay	--										
2. Empowerment in Cosplay	.20***	--									
3. PSPS	.18**	.20***	--								
4. ESS	.58***	.25***	.11	--							
5. S-SIPS	.45***	.15*	.23***	.49***	--						
6. W-SIPS	.21***	.07	.03	.33***	.47***	--					
7. Body Surveillance	.28***	-.14*	-.29***	.34***	.24***	.23***	--				
8. Body Shame	.05	-.22***	-.43***	.10	.07	.19**	.66***	--			
9. PSPS: Cosplay	.17**	.40***	.56***	.18**	.32***	.13*	-.13*	-.30***	--		
10. ESS: Cosplay	.66***	.35***	.10	.80***	.48***	.37***	.33***	.07	.30***	--	
11. S-SIPS: Cosplay	.48***	.19***	.12*	.54***	.71***	.41***	.30***	.14*	.35***	.64***	--
12. Body Surveillance: Cosplay	.31***	-.09	-.15*	.36***	.32***	.21***	.65***	.42***	-.14*	.39***	.32***

Note.  $n = 282$ ; \*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ ; PSPS = Personal Sense of Power Scale; ESS = Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale; S-SIPS = Self: Sex is Power Scale; W-SIPS = Women in General: Sex is Power Scale.

Table 8

*Scale Comparisons In and Out of Cosplay (Hypothesis 6)*

Variable	In Cosplay <i>M (SD)</i>	Out of Cosplay <i>M (SD)</i>
<b>PSPS</b>		
General	4.68 (.98)	4.45 (1.11)
High Sexualization Participants	4.83 (.91)	4.69 (1.07)
Low Sexualization Participants	4.53 (1.03)	4.18 (1.09)
<b>ESS</b>		
General	3.60 (1.05)	3.45 (.87)
High Sexualization Participants	4.15 (.89)	3.87 (.73)
Low Sexualization Participants	3.00 (.87)	2.98 (.75)
<b>S-SIPS</b>		
General	1.81 (1.08)	1.88 (.99)
High Sexualization Participants	2.18 (1.23)	2.19 (1.10)
Low Sexualization Participants	1.40 (.70)	1.54 (.71)
<b>Body Surveillance</b>		
General	4.52 (.84)	3.75 (.95)
High Sexualization Participants	4.74 (.74)	3.92 (.90)
Low Sexualization Participants	4.29 (.88)	3.56 (.98)

*Note.* PSPS = Personal Sense of Power Scale; ESS = Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale; S-SIPS = Self: Sex is Power Scale.

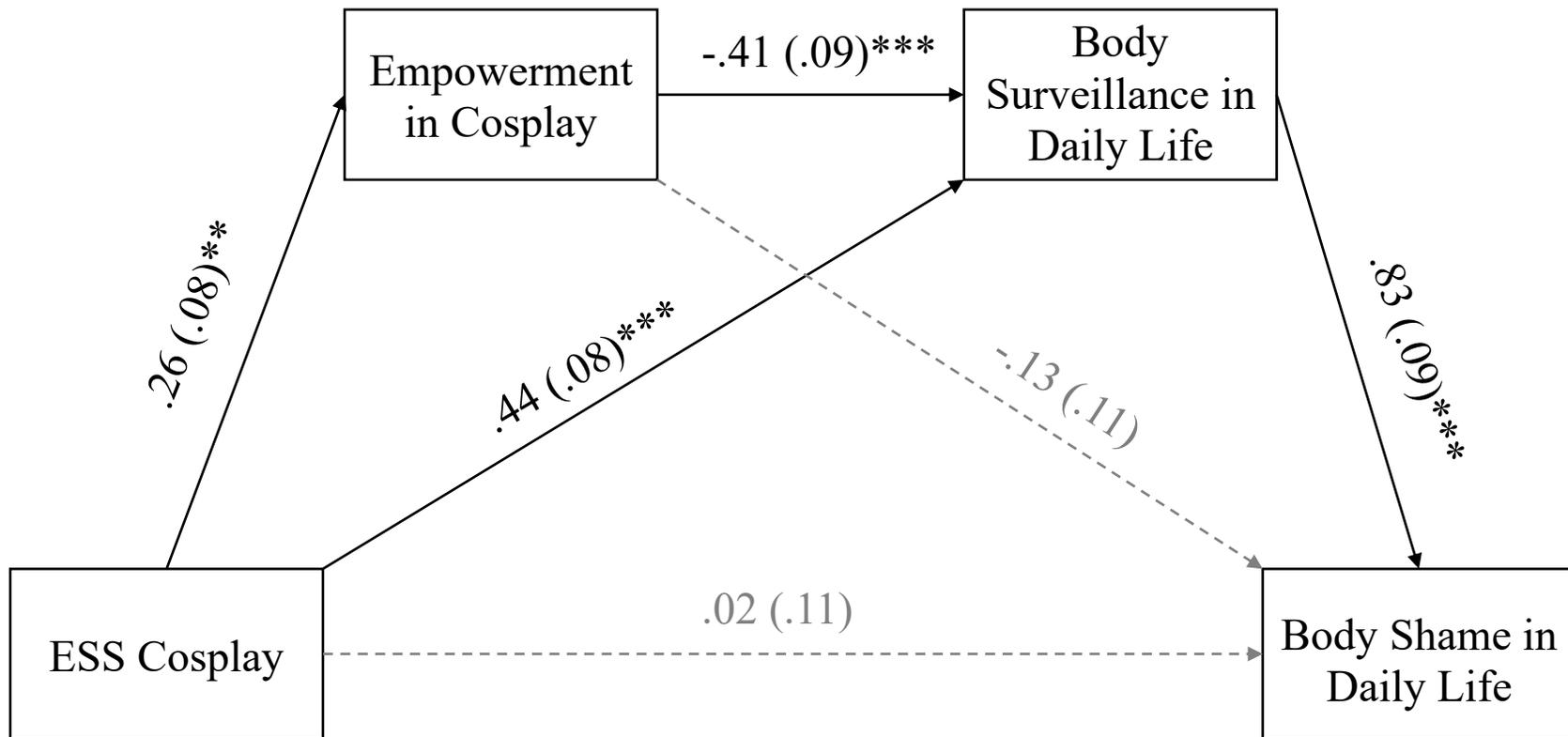


Figure 1. Path coefficients (and standard errors) for model testing Hypothesis 4a. \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ . ESS = Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale.

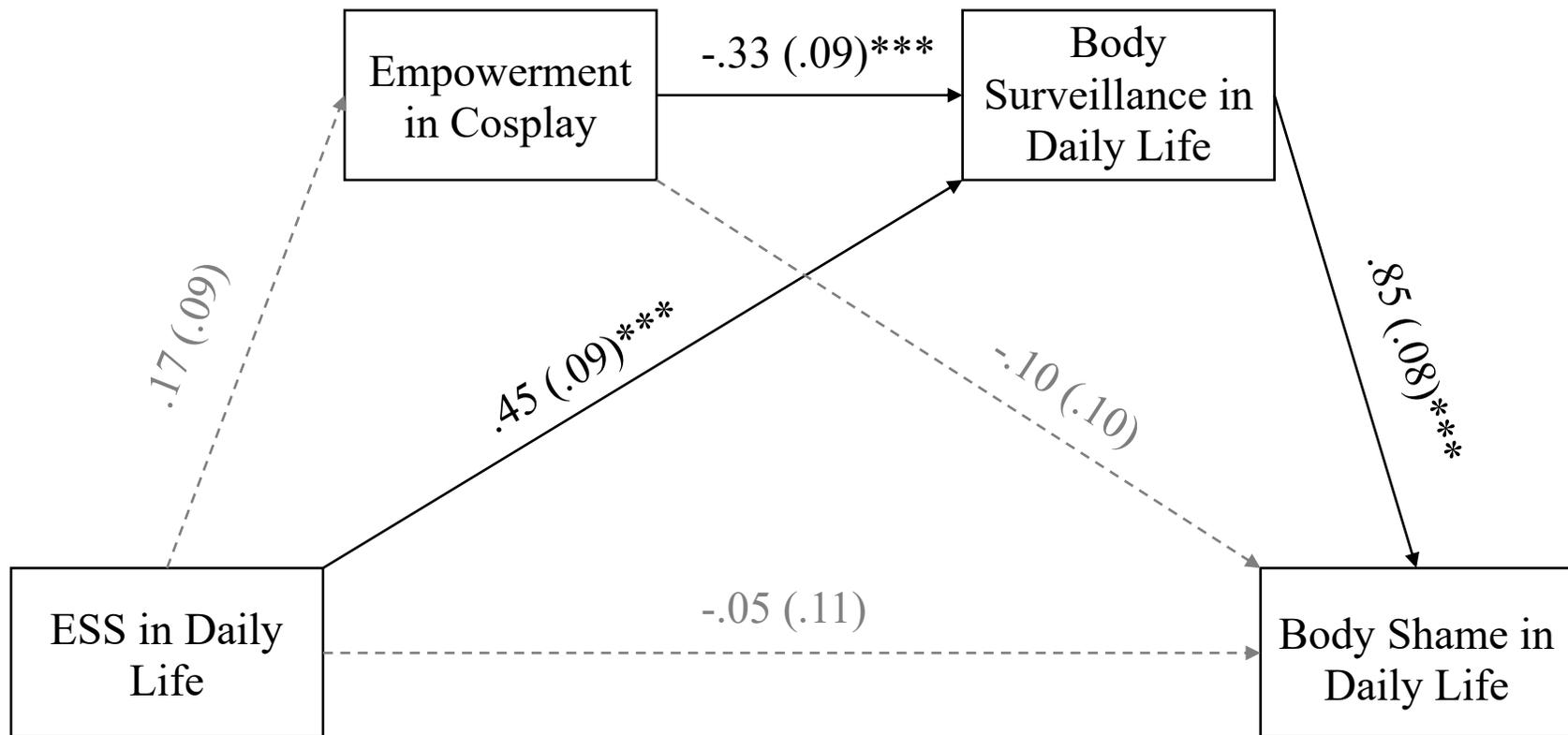


Figure 2. Path coefficients (and standard errors) for model testing Hypothesis 4b.  $*p \leq .05$ .  $**p \leq .01$ .  $***p \leq .001$ . ESS = Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale.

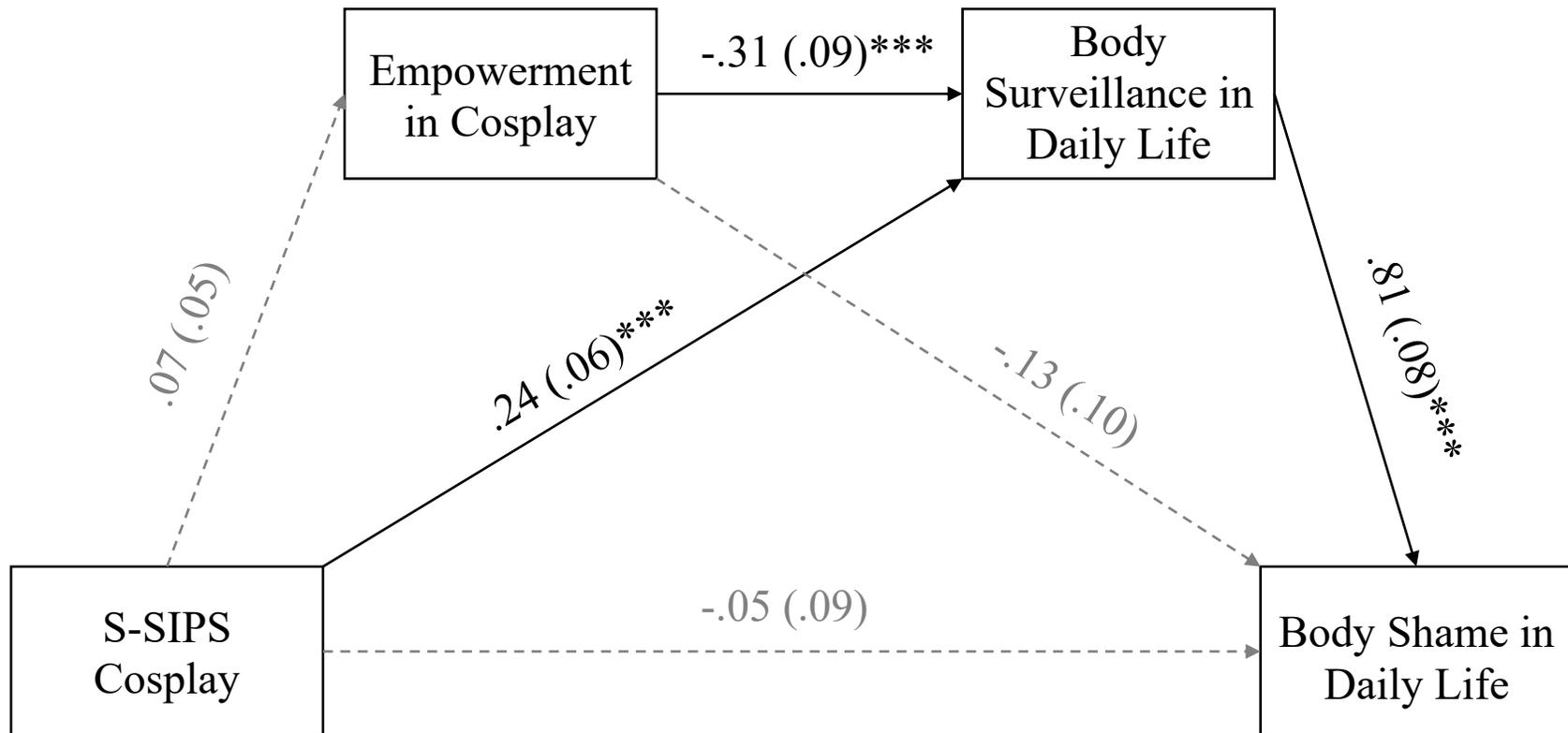


Figure 3. Path coefficients (and standard errors) for model testing Hypothesis 4c.  $*p \leq .05$ .  $**p \leq .01$ .  $***p \leq .001$ . S-SIPS = Self: Sex is Power Scale.

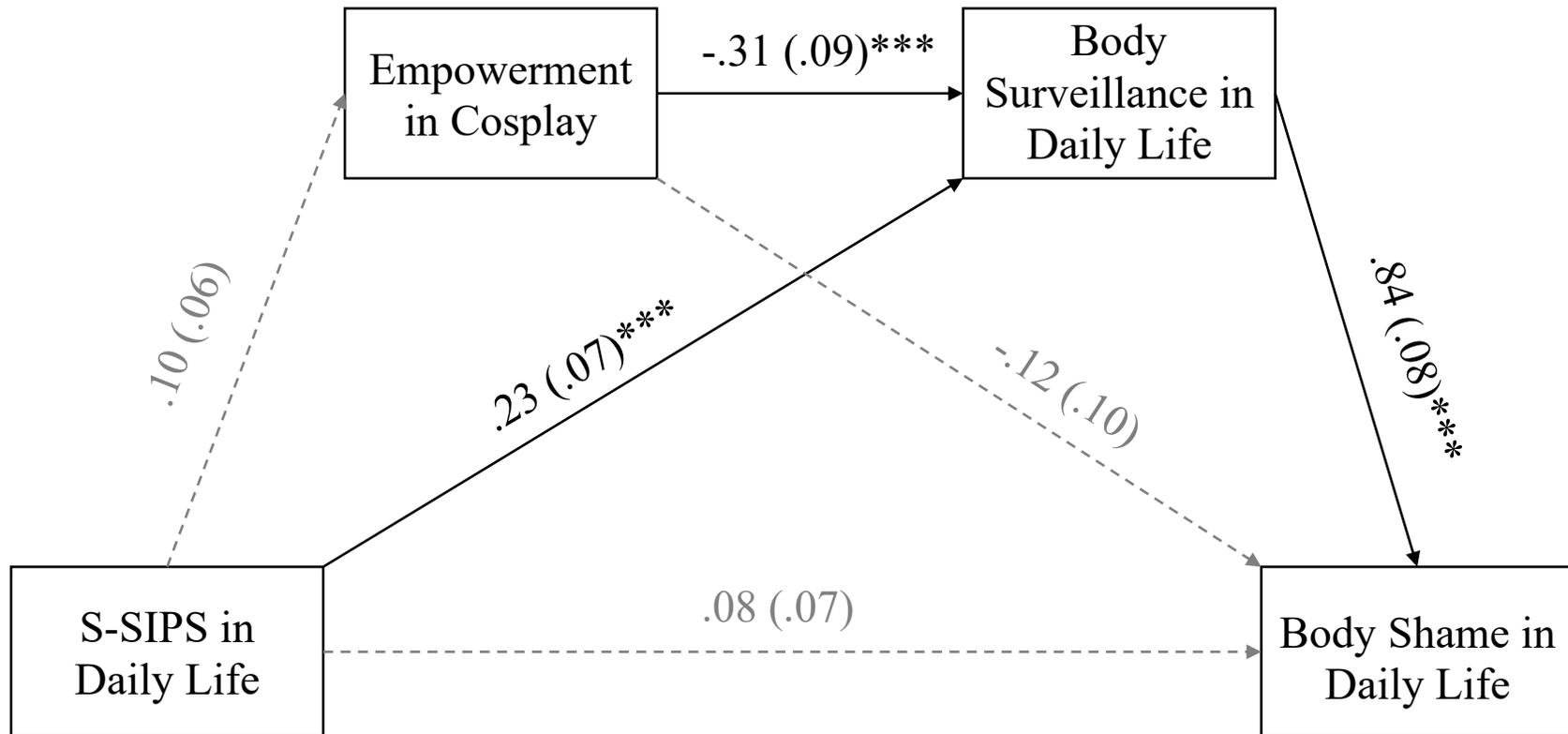


Figure 4. Path coefficients (and standard errors) for model testing Hypothesis 4d.  $*p \leq .05$ .  $**p \leq .01$ .  $***p \leq .001$ . S-SIPS = Self: Sex is Power Scale.

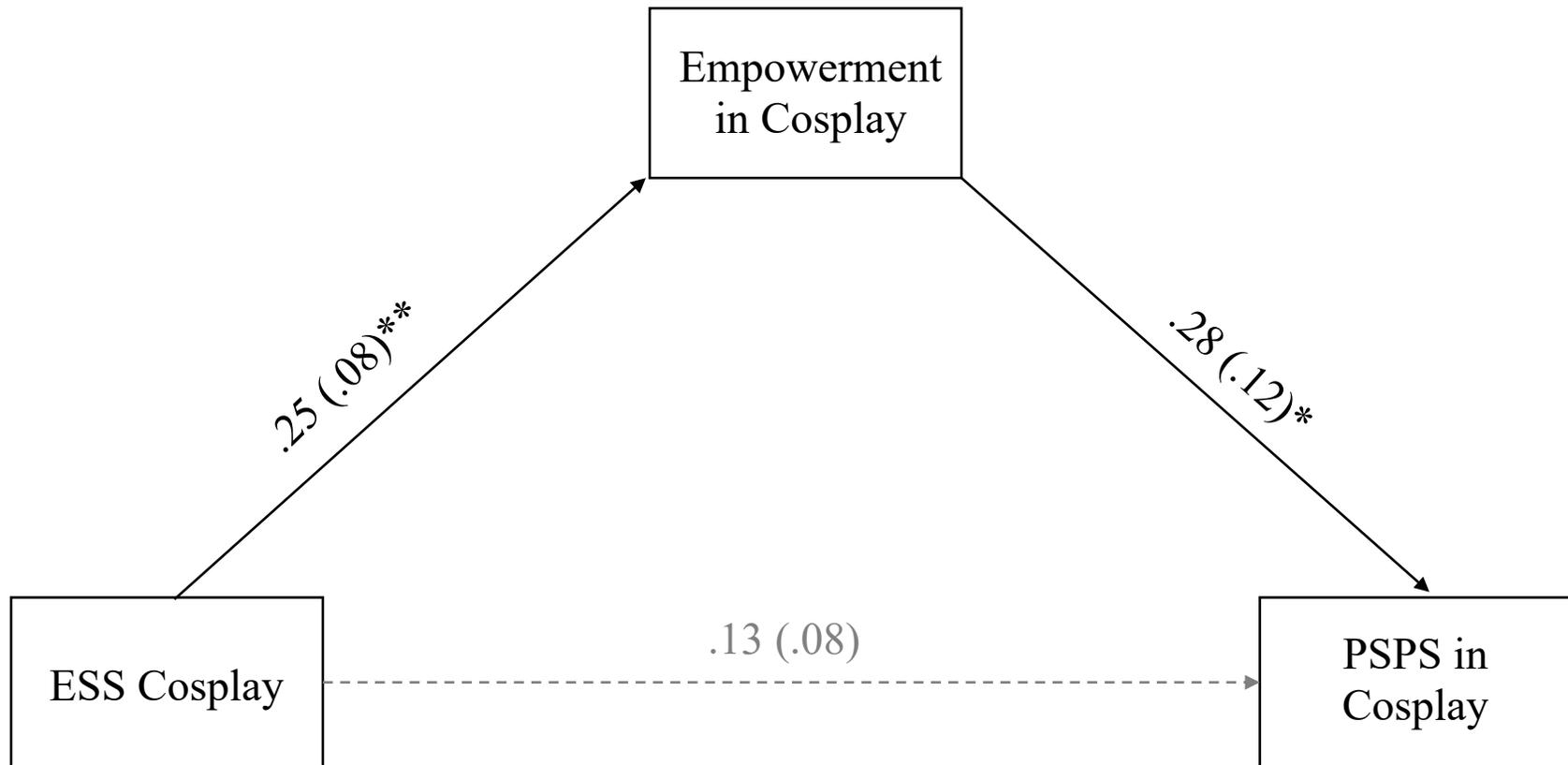


Figure 5. Path coefficients (and standard errors) for model testing Hypothesis 5a.  $*p \leq .05$ .  $**p \leq .01$ .  $***p \leq .001$ . ESS = Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale; PSPS = Personal Sense of Power Scale.

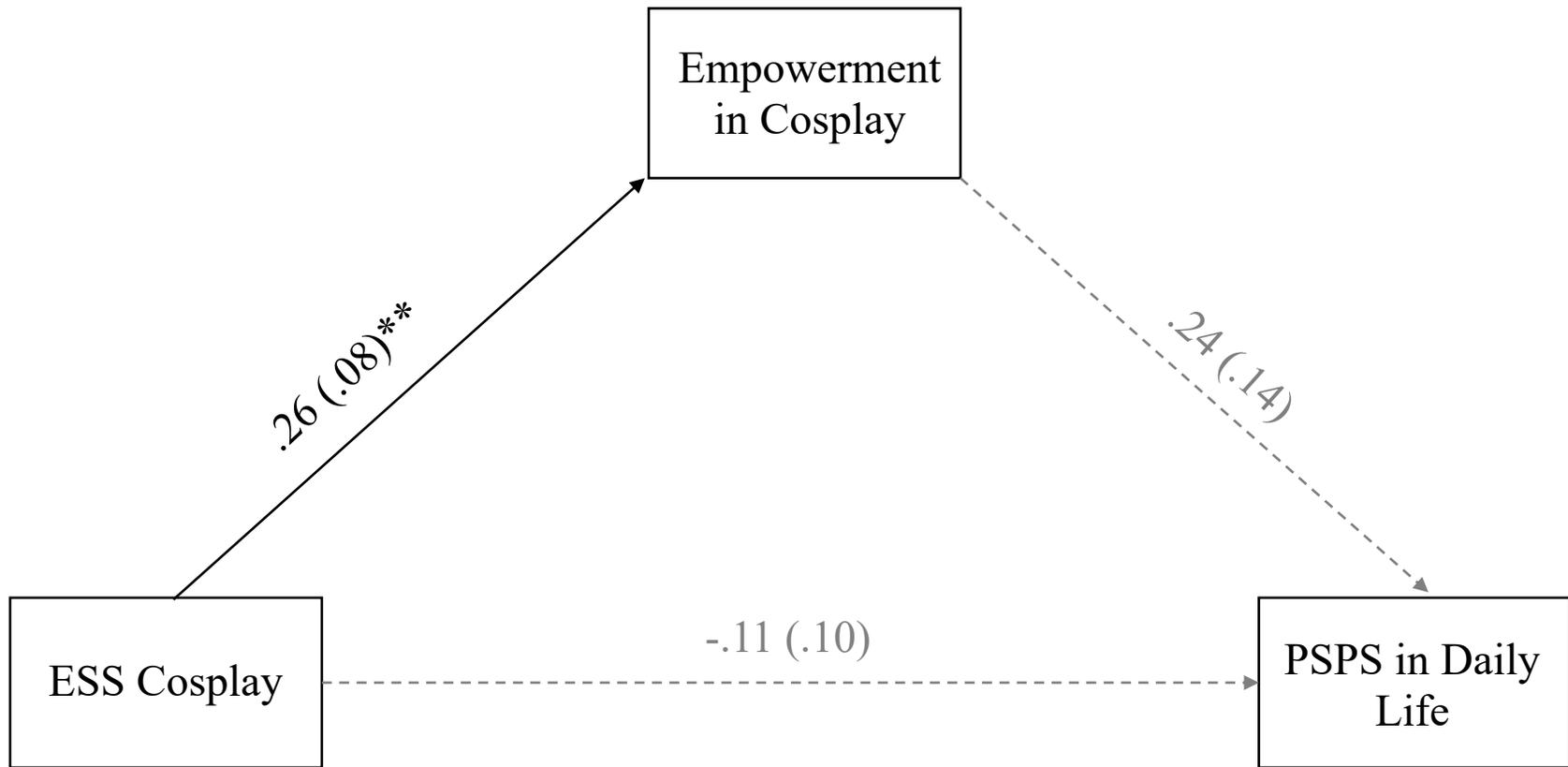


Figure 6. Path coefficients (and standard errors) for model testing Hypothesis 5b. \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ . ESS = Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale; PPS = Personal Sense of Power Scale.

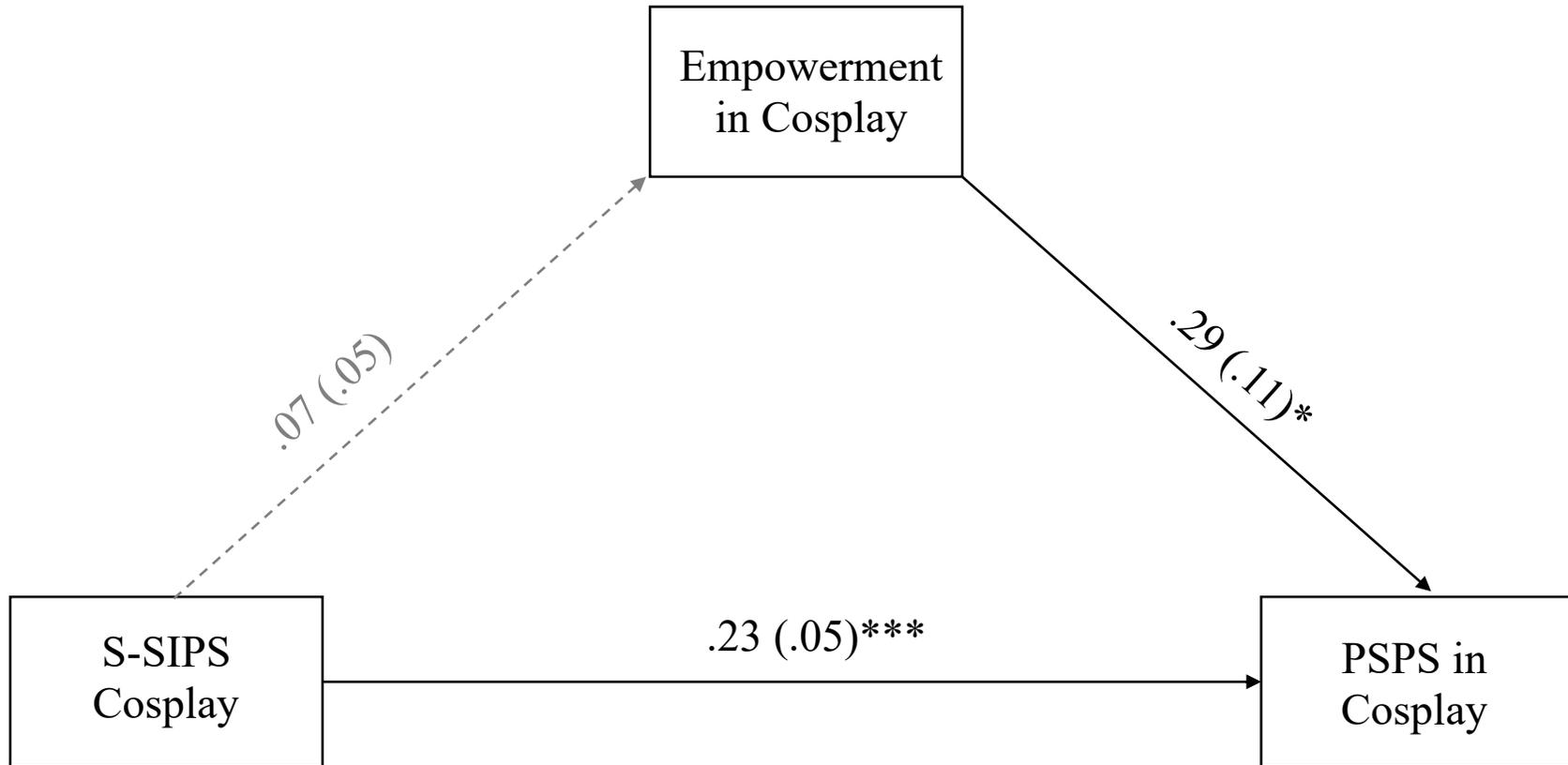


Figure 7. Path coefficients (and standard errors) for model testing Hypothesis 5c. \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ . S-SIPS = Self: Sex is Power Scale; PSPS = Personal Sense of Power Scale.

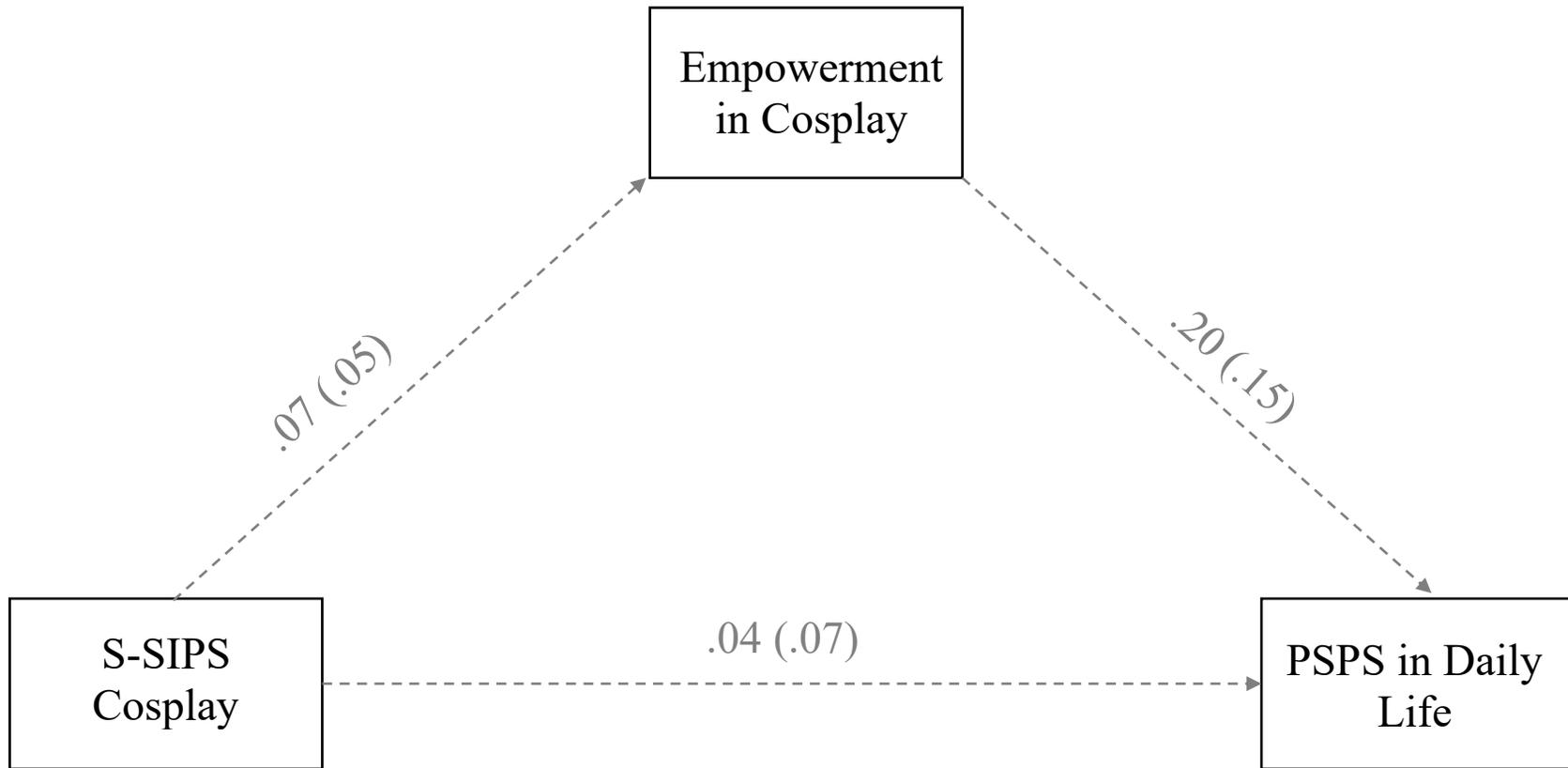
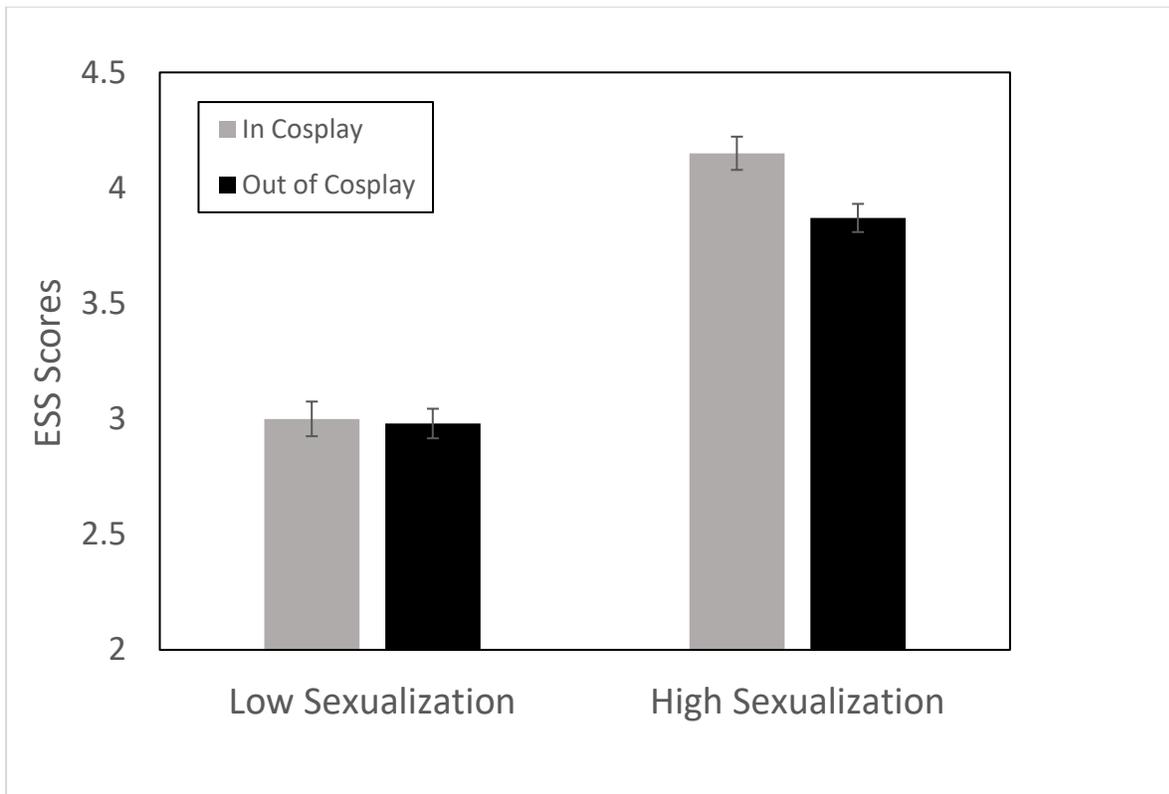


Figure 8. Path coefficients (and standard errors) for model testing Hypothesis 5d. \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ . S-SIPS = Self: Sex is Power Scale; PSPS = Personal Sense of Power Scale.



*Figure 9.* Interaction between participants' sexualized cosplay status and their enjoyment of sexualization (ESS) both in and out of cosplay. Error bars reflect standard errors. The possible range of scores for the ESS is 1-6; the graph's y-axis has been narrowed to more clearly display the nature of the interaction.