



*Photo of female cosplayers courtesy of Katelyn Wilson, 2016*

Sexual harassment at pop culture conventions is not just theorized—it is anticipated.

Dragon Con is one of the most popular conventions in the United States, taking place every September in Atlanta, Georgia. In 2016, over 77,000 people were reported to be in attendance. However, with great popularity comes another reality: multiple cases of sexual harassment and sexual assaults, perpetrated against attendees and cosplayers, or fans who dress up as fictional characters. Although these cases receive coverage, there is only so much that can be controlled in a crowd of thousands.

I spoke with two Dragon Con cosplayers, partners Katelyn "Katie" Wilson and Colby Dockery, from South Carolina.

"My first year attending, I wore a pretty short dress while cosplaying as Scarlet Witch," said Wilson. "I caught a man attempting to film up my skirt on the crowded escalators [ . . . ] It made me uncomfortable, but since I was wearing shorts [underneath], there wasn't much he could see, honestly, and I knew there had been worse that happened to my other friends." Since then, when making her cosplay choices, she is conscious of how much skin shows, like avoiding the Poison Ivy costume she had planned "because [she] was afraid of the reaction [she would] get."

According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), almost 7000 cases of sexual harassment were reported in 2015. Notably, 17% of charges were filed by males.

Yet, Dockery knows he still doesn't have to worry nearly as much. "As a white male, I'm in the safest demographic at Dragon Con."

Statistics show that women are more affected by sexual harassment and assault than men. "It makes me furious that women have to deal with such insidious harassment to begin with," said Dockery. "It makes me even more angry that people will use the guise of a convention to orchestrate their actions."

I asked if they had witnessed sexual harassment.

"Never in the moment," said Wilson. But they had heard stories: "During this year's Dragon Con, we caught news of a girl whose drink had been drugged," said Dockery. "Thankfully, she was not injured or assaulted in any way [ . . . ] and took to her blog to describe the experience. She did not see or know the person who drugged her and issued a warning to everyone at the con to be cautious of their surroundings, their belongings, and the people they are with."

The lack of immediate attention seems to be a large part of the problem. "By the time you're reading about [sexual assault] on social media or the news," said Wilson, "it's too late to protect yourself."

I contacted the Dragon Con office to speak with security but did not receive a response.

But Wilson and Dockery are confident in Dragon Con security. "I know they're aware of the incidents, and they treat them seriously," said Wilson. "Other con securities have blatantly ignored the situations, but with Dragon Con being the biggest con on the east coast, I feel they have a duty to uphold standards."

And the cosplaying community of con-goers appears to be closely bonded, rejecting the stereotype that a person's costume is justification for sexual harassment or assault. "In no way, shape, or form should any kind of revealing clothing—be it cosplay or otherwise—be taken as an invitation for sexual advances," said Dockery. "Dragon Con is a place where fans come together to celebrate the books, shows, and movies that they love, and adorning cosplay and becoming someone other than oneself is a part of the experience for most people."

Simply put by Wilson: "Cosplay is not consent!"

What do experienced con-goers recommend for those interested in attending or cosplaying at Dragon Con? "Staying aware, staying in groups, and being knowledgeable about where the security is located and where any emergency exits are located," said Dockery. "The only true safety that can be relied upon is one's own awareness and the presence of friends and family alongside them."

Although sexual harassment at conventions like Dragon Con can be an anticipated issue, cosplayers like Wilson and Dockery are determined to still have fun while staying safe: "[Sexual harassment] deserves to be taken seriously as opposed to being treated as something that's expected [ . . . ] when the reality is that sexual harassment and assault are not asked for, invited through cosplay or appearance," said Dockery. "If more time was spent catching and punishing those who exhibit this behavior and less time spent blaming the victims of harassment and assault, I think these incidents could hopefully be reported more often, be taken more seriously, and could perhaps gain some of the media attention that they deserve."