

Cosplayers' Bounty: an ethical path that guides consumers' subjective forms

Recompensa dos Cosplayers: um caminho ético que orienta as formas-sujeito de consumidores

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Abstract: Cosplay is a marketing phenomenon that allows consumers to create themselves through the desire to intensify their consumer relationships. Therefore, the present study aims to understand how market relations arrange the subjectivity of cosplayers. To do so, the Ethnographic Foucauldian Genealogy (EFG) was adopted, combining multiple approaches to virtual ethnography – i.e., netnography, virtual ethnomethodology, autoethnography, online ethnographic interviews – to collect the data and Foucault's genealogical perspective to analyze them. Three subjectivities were identified among cosplayers: Businessmen, Ambassadors, and Models. Each of these subject-forms presents the cosplayers' ongoing effort to follow a Bounty ethic that suits their own desires. Bounty ethics reveals how an arrangement of desirable productions, when subjects know and manifest themselves through desires that are inherent to market logic. Thus, the subjectivities associated with cosplay reflect the existence of neoliberal ethics, where economic and cultural relations are superimposed on values that guide contemporary subjectivities. Such results indicate how cultural and collaborative phenomena, such as cosplay,

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also manifest a neoliberal ethic. Additionally, the interpretation of the results attests to the possibility of cultural consumer research studies combining concepts from epistemologically close theorists – i.e., Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari.

Keywords: Cosplay, Ethnographic Foucauldian Genealogy, Bounty, Desire, Neoliberal.

Resumo: Cosplay é um fenômeno de marketing que permite aos consumidores se criarem através do desejo de intensificar suas relações de consumo. Logo, o presente estudo tem como objetivo compreender como as relações de mercado conduzem as subjetividades dos cosplayers. Para tanto, a Etnografia Genealógica Foucaultiana (EFG) foi adotada combinando múltiplas abordagens da etnografia virtual – i.e., netnografia, etnometodologia virtual, autoetnografia, e entrevistas etnográficas online – para coletar os dados e a perspectiva genealógica de Foucault para analisá-los. Foram identificadas três subjetividades entre os cosplayers: Empresários, Embaixadores e Modelos. Cada uma dessas formas-sujeito apresenta o esforço contínuo dos cosplayers para seguir uma ética de Recompensa que atenda aos seus desejos. A ética da Recompensa revela-se como um arranjo de produção desejante, quando sujeitos se conhecem e se manifestam através de desejos inerentes à lógica de mercado. Assim, as subjetividades dos cosplayers refletem a existência de uma ética neoliberal, onde as relações econômicas e culturais se sobrepõem a valores que norteiam as subjetividades contemporâneas. Tais resultados indicam como fenômenos culturais e colaborativos, como o cosplay, também manifestam uma ética neoliberal. Além disso, a interpretação dos resultados propõe que pesquisas sobre o consumo cultural combinem conceitos de teóricos epistemologicamente próximos – e.g., Foucault, Deleuze e Guattari.

Palavras-chave: Cosplay, Etnografia Genealógica Foucaultiana, Recompensa, Desejo, Neoliberal.

Introduction

Cosplay is a cultural practice where participants dress up and interpret media products associated with pop culture, whether at events that celebrate this market segment or through social networks (Bucher *et al.*, 2024; Carrington and Ozanne, 2022; Kozinets and Jenkins 2012). Thus, cosplay is considered a practice in which consumers co-create their consumption experiences, redefining and improving themselves during the process (Gn, 2011; Gunnels, 2009; Thomas and Epp, 2019).

However, recent studies have highlighted how it is a marketing and professional opportunity for its practitioners to achieve financial returns from their skills related to cosplay (Timothy and Hidayat, 2020; McCutcheon *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, other studies indicate that cosplay provides a space for personal expression and the construction of identities within a shared community (Arnould *et al.*, 2020; Seregina and Weijo, 2017). Both perspectives understand the cosplay phenomenon as a subjective journey in which consumption practices function as a support for broader sociocultural relations, not limited to the consumer relations that give rise to it (Moura and de Souza-Leão, 2024; Gn, 2011; Seregina, 2019).

Therefore, it can be reflected as a liberation movement or alignment with market structures, when consumer performances express individual or institutional desires (Beighton, 2017; Kozinets *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, truths that establish the conditions for understanding themselves as subjects (Mikkonen and Bajde, 2013; Coskuner-Balli, 2020).

On the one hand, the desire conception evoked by consumer research alludes to Deleuze and Guattari (1987) perspective. It is the condition that, simultaneously, attracts us to institutionalized conduct in the social assemblage in which we live and the possibility to escape predetermined destinies.

On the other hand, Foucault (2011) suggests that the relationship with truth produces the means for us to understand our own subjectivity. In this situation, we need to balance subjective wills and moral values. Thus, the relationship with truth elucidates the ethical path present, invariably, in the actions we perform in our routine.

Both perspectives indicate how the relationship with truth is a path that enables, as a historical product, the conditions to produce subjectivity. Therefore, it is closely associated with the power relations that subjects need to deal with throughout their existence. By relating to truth, it is possible to know and express one's own desires, considering the positions that a subject can and should assume in the context in which he or she lives. Consequently, understanding how truths are uttered – whether

to maintain certain contexts or to question them – is fundamental to understanding how subjects produce themselves or are produced (Foucault, 2011).

Considering both theoretical perspectives, our study focuses on the phenomenon of cosplay to answer the following research question: how market relationships assemble cosplayers subjectivities?

By answering this question, our study aims to expand discussions about the existence of market assemblages and their capacity to establish power relationships and consumers' subjectivity (Beighton, 2017; Carrington and Ozanne, 2022; Kozinets *et al.*, 2017). Although these studies are enlightening and fundamental for the construction of the problem of our research, they lack exploration of the interrelationship between the elaboration of consumer subjectivities and their arrangement with desirable market productions. Consequently, our study seeks to explore a phenomenon – i.e., cosplay – that encompasses intrinsic online and offline consumption practices to broaden the understanding of the ways in which desires are assembled in subjectivities exercised through consumption practices.

Thus, our study was designed to present its main contribution as reflections able to expand discussions on contemporary cultural consumer strategies (Holt, 2017; Thompson, 2017). To do so, we focus on a complex and dynamic market phenomenon – such as cosplay – that exemplifies the richness of the investigative possibilities to Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) studies (see Arnould *et al.*, 2020) to establish propositions – through dialogic theoretical lenses – that allow a more accurate understanding of the interrelations, motivators and consumption agencies that transit between online and offline cultural environments.

Cosplay: a consumers' subjective production

Cosplay is a phenomenon that illustrates how interrelationships between consumers can manifest themselves in different consumption contexts (Carrington and Ozanne, 2022; De Mello *et al.*, 2020; Kozinets and Jenkins, 2022; Seregina, 2019). It is defined as a consumer subculture in which its practitioners – i.e., cosplayers – dress up to play characters and media products associated with pop culture – e.g., superheroes, science fiction, fantasy, TV shows, comic books, video games, etc. (Jenkins 2012; Seregina and Weijo, 2017). Unlike other consumer subcultures – e.g., punk, hip hop, goths – which include their aspects in the daily routine and everyday relationships, cosplay is limited to extraordinary events – i.e., pop culture events, scheduled publications on social media –, when they exhaustively prepare to dress and display their costumes (Carrington and Ozanne, 2022; Rahman *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, the effort put into planning and preparing costumes, makeup and acting skills are conceived as qualifiers of the performances performed by cosplayers (Murphy *et al.*, 2019; Seregina and Weijo, 2017).

From this perspective, a consumer who performs cosplay is part of an active bodily learning process: the practice of using costumes and interpreting characters allows cosplayers to engage in exercises that adapt existing structures – the characters and media objects performed – to the subjective desires of those who practices them (Arnould *et al.*, 2020; Seregina, 2019). Consequently, cosplayers believe that their experiences are fundamentally affected by the sharing of information and interactions with third parties who are interested in the media products performed or, at least, in the effort presented in their cosplay (Gn, 2011; Moura and De Souza-Leão, 2023).

Furthermore, when performing cosplay, it is possible to give new meaning to one's own consumption relationship with pop culture products through interactive actions with other cosplayers, when seeking to expand their consumption experiences beyond the moment in which they perform, establishing communal, affective and even professional (Bucher *et al.*, 2024; De Mello *et al.*, 2020).

As Seregina and WeiJo (2017) explain, cosplay involves two constituent practices: interpretation with costumes and the elaboration of these performances. The search for continuous improvement of the details of these performances is growing, leading many cosplayers to consider it worthwhile to buy or hire professionals to help in the process of creating their cosplays (Timothy and Hidayat, 2020; McCutcheon *et al.*, 2023).

In this imbroglio, the multiple aspects that make up cosplay reveal a marketing commitment that represents a more complex process carried out by cosplayers: a search to be recognized by the culture in which they operate (Arnould *et al.*, 2020; Gollnhofer *et al.*, 2019). Further, the subjective experience of consumers and the performance of their performances – whether with fictional characters or with the community they are part of – are responsible for establishing their positions towards the people who interact with their cosplays (Seregina, 2019; Thomas and Epp, 2019).

Broadly, cosplay is pointed as a process when consumers elaborate and improves themselves beyond the market interactions experience by them, constituting ethics according to Foucault's concepts about the conditions to produces subjectivity (Moura and De Souza-Leão, 2023). Simultaneously, cosplay endorses the existence of a capitalism system analogous to Deleuze's conception of assemblages where individuals produce their subjectivity through the existence of multiple desires (Gn, 2011).

Subjectivity production: a path between desires and freedom

Movements that seek liberation from market structures exercised by creative consumers – such as cosplayers – are usually interpreted as consumer performances, which allow them to express their interests, manifest identities or articulate social interactions by co-creating their consumption

experience (Rahman *et al.*, 2012; Seregina and Weijo, 2017). Consequently, cosplay represents a process in which its practitioners embody and materialize the media products they consume and, simultaneously, elaborate truths and express their own subjectivities (Gn, 2011; Mukherjee, 2012).

According to Deleuze (2013), one of the determinations attributable to the elaboration of subjectivities is the assemblage where we live, continuously comparing our desires with others. According to the author, desire is the driving force of complex power diagrams since it attests to the individuals' ability to manifest their own singularities. However, desires also represent an oppressive force that leads us to incorporate and reproduce institutionalized behaviors, when the creative processes and singularities that differentiate us from the social arrangement in which we live are inhibited. These power diagrams are discussed by Deleuze and Guatarri (1987) to explain how desiring machines work: an arrangement of agencies in which heterogeneous actors in the social context relate rhizomatically. In the authors' understanding, there is no sovereign government, but simultaneous governments governed by an infinite number of desires. Desiring productions are created by the subject himself and are characterized as an innovative and libertarian way of living, when we exercise continuous resistance; when we live a life that is an inspiring work of art to be admired by everyone we affect and are affected by (Deleuze and Guatarri, 1987).

At this point, we consider it valid to expand present discussion with Deleuze's (2013) perception about Foucault's concept of experiences: these are technologies that allow subjects to exercise agency over themselves. However, before being an agency of one's own wills, they reflect morality. From this perspective, moralities work as a condition to produce subjects. It is another assemblage's form, where interconnect subjects in complex power diagrams relations are not limited to themselves, but reflecting the entire context in which they live. The process that produces subjects is a consequence of the way individuals deal with their own truths – i.e., wills – and other people's truths – i.e., moralities. When combined, it is possible to conceive knowledge about oneself, which is called by Foucault (2010) as culture of the self; elaborated throughout experiences in which subjects relate to government forms for themselves and for others with whom they live.

One of the ways to understand culture of the self is through the exercise of freedom: when the subject expresses their own version of self-government for self-preservation through what Foucault (2017) calls self-techniques. Such exercises of freedom evoke Michel Foucault's understanding that they are a result of continuous contact and historical products that he categorizes as systems of truth. Freedom is an expression of self that positions subjects in the context in which they live. Therefore, in order to achieve them, we first need to understand how the truths that allow them to be exercised are uttered – whether to maintain certain contexts or to question them (Foucault, 2011).

For Foucault (2005), the exercises of freedom and the relationships established with different truths that make up our existence are aspects that make up a more complex process: the subjectivation in which we constitute ethics that make us subjects. This process reflects the way we balance subjective wills and moral values – which, when expressed contextually, take on the character of truths. On the one hand, to respond to desires, we need to understand the limits of their use, so that we do not deny the social positions we assume in the cultural context in which we live. On the other hand, to deal with the moral norms that regulate the context in which we live, it is necessary that we understand how they influence our search for living in the most pleasurable way possible.

Consequently, both aspects can be evoked to investigate how market relations present certain narratives that have the character of a regime of truth for consumers, leading them to act ethically or unethically depending on their positions and consumption practices (Mikkonen and Bajde, 2013; Coskuner-Balli, 2020). After all, when they engage in what they consume spontaneously, consumers end up establishing exercises of freedom through consumption that are not limited to the scope of consumption in which they experience them (Ashman *et al.*, 2018; Thompson and Kumar, 2021).

Consequently, the present study seeks to fill this gap in literature on the CCT studies, exploring the aforementioned both aspects. In this effort, we intend to establish an in-depth reflection through two theoretical lenses – i.e., Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault – that are epistemologically close and considered opportune to expand the understanding of contemporary consumer culture strategies (Holt, 2017; Thompson, 2017), but which are not usually accessed together.

Methodological procedures

The methodology adopted by the present study was the Ethnographic Foucauldian Genealogy (EFG). On the one hand, we consider that the ethnographic approach allows marketing studies to understand in detail aspects that attest to consumption as a collective and, possibly, interactive cultural practice (Kozinets, 2020). On the other hand, Foucault's genealogical analysis reveals conditions in which consumers produce truths, government forms and subjectivity itself beyond the market relations that are investigated (Thompson, 2017)

By combining both proposals, EFG considers that each of the methodologies, despite autonomous methodological perspectives, is combinable and contributory (Moura and De Souza-Leão, 2024; Kozinets, 2020). In this effort, we used the precepts and steps of multiple ethnographic approaches – i.e., netnography, virtual ethnomethodology, autoethnography, online ethnographic interviews – to construct the frameworks for our study. Subsequently, we followed Foucauldian analytical steps to perform a genealogical data analysis.

Ethnographic data collection procedures

Ethnography is an approach that allows marketing researchers to act as interpreters of cultural phenomena (Woermann, 2018). According to Hine (2020), such possibilities were expanded from the digital context, as the convergence of communal consumption practices towards the virtual environment predominates. However, they can rarely be isolated from everyday situations and the affective relationships present in consumption practices. This proposal was adopted in our study, when we opted for ethnographic approaches that adhere to the virtual context present in the cosplay phenomenon. Considering the scope of cosplay, we collected data in four complementary corpora (see Figure 1).

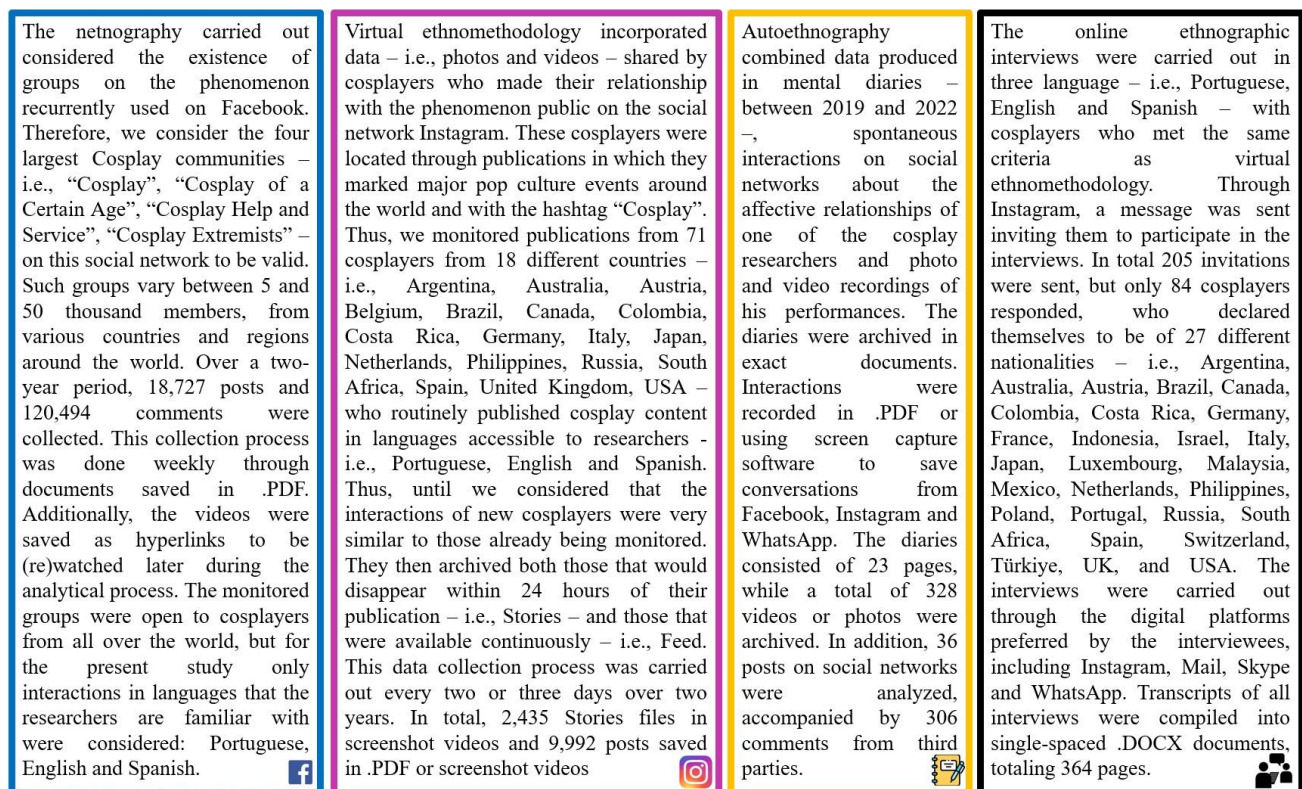



Figure 1.


Corpora composition

Source: elaborated by the authors following Kozinets (2020) and Hine (2020) suggestions.

Netnography allows us to capture and understand how virtual interactions historically established on certain platforms impact online and offline consumption practices (see Kozinets *et al.*, 2018). Virtual ethnomethodology adapts the search for mapping the everyday decisions of consumers who belong to a certain cultural grouping to the context of social networks (see Jacob and Hansen,

2021). Autoethnography presents itself as the possibility for the researchers to deepen their relationship with the cultural phenomenon investigated, enabling them to capture details that only those who experience the consumer ethos are able to express (see Kapoor *et al.*, 2020). Online ethnographic interviews adapt researchers' efforts to obtain in-depth answers by using platforms that impact on the way members of the investigated cultural community interact with their peers (see Cristofari and Guitton, 2017). Considering the possibilities inherent to the data collection tools adopted for the present study, Figure 2 was created to detail the composition of the research corpora – except for the autoethnography, which is already explained in Figure 1.

Facebook group	Description	Posts	Comments
 Cosplay	Largest group found on Facebook about cosplay. It brings together members from all over the world with posts in several languages, predominantly English.	10567	15616
Cosplay Help and Service	Main group for exchanging information, suggestions and tips between cosplayers. Posts must be made as a questions and in English.	5305	59551
Cosplay Extremists	Group dedicated to cosplay enthusiasts from around the world, where everyone is invited to share images and videos of cosplayers performed professionally or at a competitive level. Interactions are mediated mostly in English or Spanish.	610	23798
Cosplay of a Certain Age	Group that brings together cosplayers aged 30 and over. Although interactions predominate in the English language, it is possible to identify posts from cosplayers from all over the world.	2245	21529
Total		18727	120494

Cosplayers' nationality	Cosplayers	Stories	Feed
 Argentina	5	152	536
Australia	2	92	453
Austria	1	19	174
Belgium	1	9	113
Brazil	12	624	1596
Canada	2	81	349
Colombia	2	33	175
Costa Rica	1	12	74
Germany	5	232	676
Italy	3	108	478
Japan	1	54	278
Netherlands	1	122	493
Philippines	2	4	97
Russia	2	79	300
South Africa	1	19	176
Spain	1	6	67
UK	2	66	456
USA	27	723	3501
Total	71	2435	9992


ICT used to conduct the interview	Instagram	Skype	WhatsApp	Mail	Total
Cosplayer' nationality					
 Argentina	3	0	0	0	3
Australia	6	0	0	0	6
Austria	2	0	0	0	2
Brazil	4	6	4	0	14
Canada	3	0	0	0	3
Colombia	2	0	0	1	3
Costa Rica	1	0	0	0	1
Germany	2	0	0	0	2
France	3	0	0	0	3
Indonesia	4	0	0	0	4
Israel	1	0	0	0	1
Italy	4	0	0	0	4
Japan	3	0	0	0	3
Luxembourg	1	0	0	0	1
Malaysia	1	0	0	0	1
Mexico	1	0	0	0	1
Netherlands	1	0	0	0	1
Philippines	1	0	0	0	1
Poland	3	0	0	0	3
Portugal	3	0	0	0	3
Russia	6	0	0	0	6
South Africa	2	0	0	0	2
Spain	0	0	0	1	1
Switzerland	1	0	0	0	1
Türkiye	1	0	0	1	2
UK	2	0	0	0	2
USA	10	0	0	0	10
Total	71	6	4	3	84

Figure 2.
Corpora details
Source: elaborated by the authors.

The researchers carried out the steps that Kozinets (2020) establishes for collecting data on social media: simplify, search, scout, select, and save. These processes allowed researchers to organize and familiarize themselves with the corpora, establishing a screening process in which they proposed themes present in cosplayers' interactions. These themes, when totalized, could be translated into discussions previously established in consumer research. Consequently, such operated care meets the quality criteria of a virtual ethnography – i.e., rigor and instruction in how the methodology was

adopted, resonance and praxis of the data collected, credibility and representativeness of interactions, consistency and reflexivity of the study propositions.

Furthermore, we also consider it worth highlighting that we adopted the proposal by Leban *et al.* (2021) about transforming the faces of the examples collected by the research into drawings to avoid the use of images members of the cultural context directly investigated. Therefore, the examples presented in the results section of our study were treated with image editing software, when the photos were transformed into cartoons.

Foucauldian genealogical data analysis procedures

The analytical proposal in the Foucauldian genealogy is capable of elucidating ambiguities inherent to the power relations that govern consumption practices (Tadajewski, 2011; Thompson, 2017), clarifying conditions that produce knowledge, institutionalize government forms and practices in which subjects recognize themselves as such (Kendall and Wickham, 1999). Consequently, Foucauldian genealogical analysis allows marketing studies to carry out a critical understanding of consumption as a cultural practice that usually maintains hegemonic statuses of certain social groupings (Denegri-Knott *et al.*, 2018).

Subjects are inherently produced from power relations when they govern or are governed. Power relations that, in turn, represent the propagation of institutionalized knowledge in the social arrangements in which we live. Such knowledge is enunciated by subjective agencies. This interrelationship is represented in Figure 3, when the analytical categories indicated by Foucault (2012b) to carry out a genealogical analysis are explained.

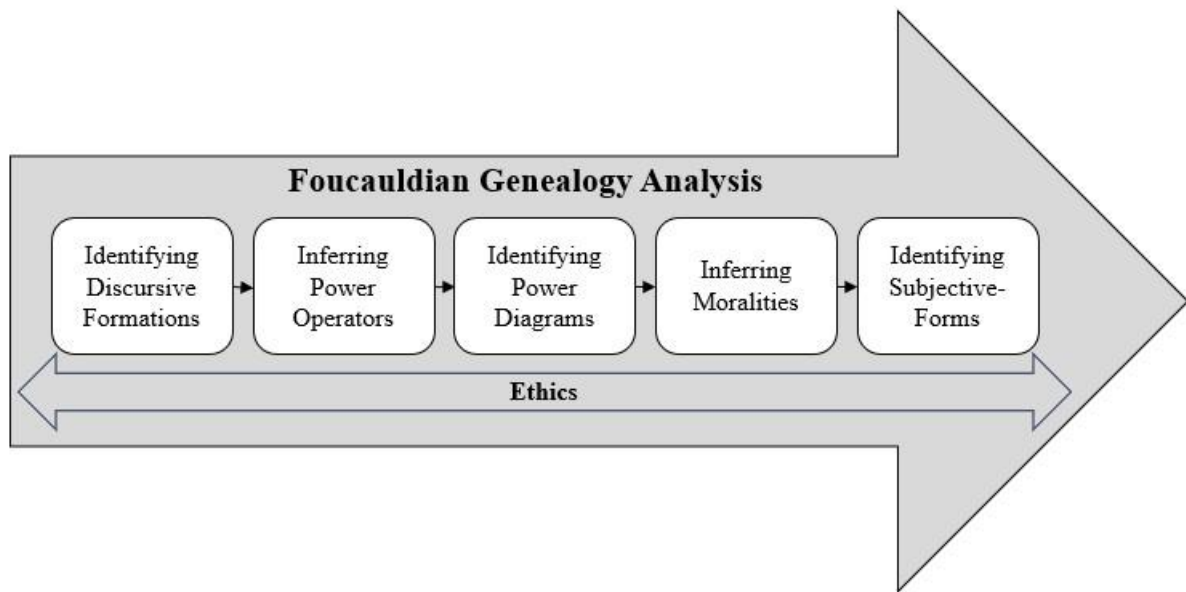


Figure 3.

Foucauldian genealogical analysis steps

Source: elaborated by the authors based on Foucault (2012a; 2012b).

Genealogical analysis begins by identifying discursive formations that allow the inference of power operators responsible for representing practices and behaviors. These operators affect each other multiple times, establishing power diagrams that can be identified based on their relationships. Such diagrams are, in turn, analogous to moralities that establish limits and directions for values that make up the subjectivities of individuals. Consequently, after inferring moralities, it is possible to identify the existence of subject-forms that represent the conditions that produce subjectivities. This entire process is one, represented by the existence of ethics that guide the way in which subjects deal, and experience phenomena present in the context in which they live.

Results description and reflections

Over the course of eighteen months, data from the four ethnographic *corpora* from our study were organized and analyzed. In our genealogical analysis, we identified the existence of seven discursive formations analogous to six power operators. The overlap and convergence of these six operators enabled us to identify five power diagrams analogous to the four moralities. Such moralities, finally, allowed us to identify three subject-forms that shared elements with each other – the previous analytical categories. Consequently, it was possible to reflect on the existence of ethics that guides the practices of the three subjectivities of cosplayers that we identified (see Figure 4).

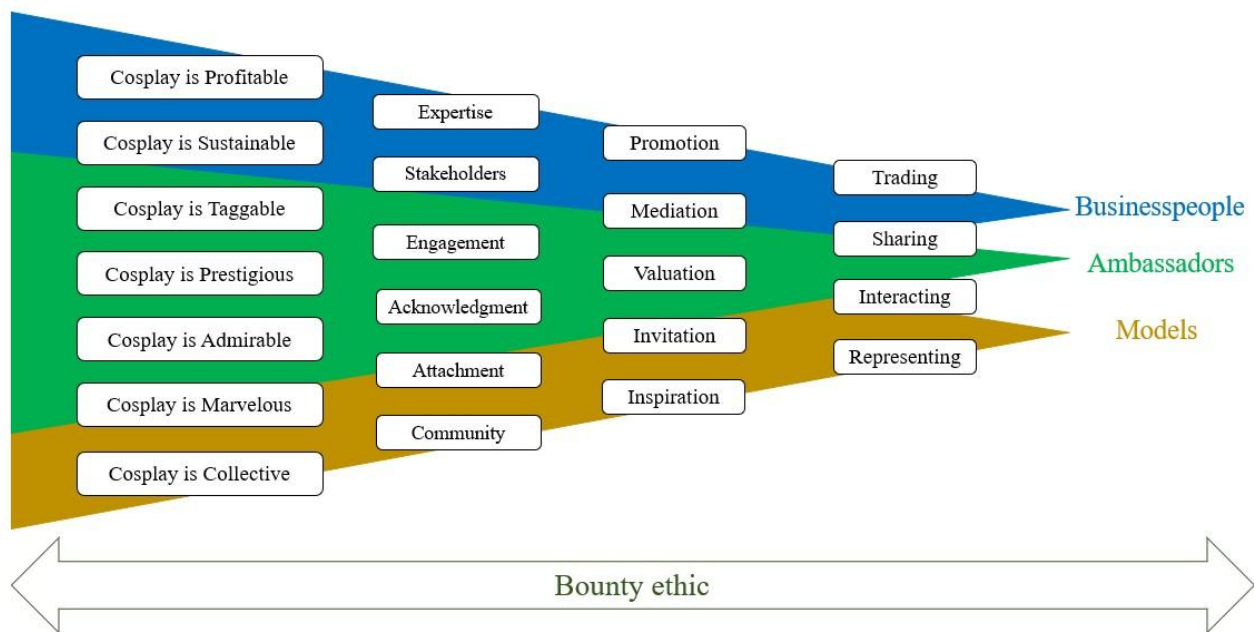


Figure 4.
Analytical map
Source: elaborated by the authors.

Considering the multiple details observed in our analysis, we created two subsections to present the study results. The first has the function of presenting, describing and illustrating – with examples taken from our research corpora – the interrelationship between the aforementioned analytical categories. The other seeks to establish a reflection on the findings, establishing a dialogue with discussions previously established in the literature, to propose the contributions of the present study.

Cosplayers subjectivities: businesspeople, ambassadors, and models

Businesspeople represent a subject-form when cosplayers understand their practices as intrinsic to the professional relationships established to improve their cosplays. For these cosplayers, the prevailing understanding is that validation from third parties legitimizes their ability as cosplayers. Therefore, such validation usually involves commercial agreements based on their performances or cosplay skills. The analytical categories that make up this subjectivity are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Analytical categories from Businessmen

Moralities			
Trading		Sharing	
Cosplayers reveal how the quality displayed in their history with cosplay allowed them to be hired by third parties, whether to perform at specific events – e.g., children's parties, product launches, pop culture events, cosplay contest judges, etc. –, whether to produce – i.e., cosmakers – partially or completely the costume of other cosplayers.		Cosplayers publicly admit how they turn to professionals in related areas – e.g., photographers, wigmakers, dressmakers, makeup artists, etc. – which they consider capable of improving their performances and legitimizing the quality of their cosplays.	
Power Diagrams			
Promotion	Mediation	Valuation	
Cosplayers seek to establish commercial relationships associated with their skills with the phenomenon.	Cosplayers points how social media that allows them to commercially legitimize the skills employed in their performances.	Cosplayers act to achieve fame among their peers, but also among pop culture enthusiasts in general.	
Power Operators			
Expertise	Stakeholders	Engagement	Acknowledgment
Cosplayers' effort to monetize their skills or performances associated with the cosplay phenomenon.	Cosplayers points in social media third parties who allowed the improvement of their cosplay.	Cosplayers commit to making their content interactive and shareable on networks.	Cosplayers details their performances to be recognized and qualified by third parties.
Discursive Formations			
Cosplay is Profitable	Cosplay is Sustainable	Cosplay is Taggable	Cosplay is Prestigious
The skills developed to create cosplay usually make money for cosplayers who are already publicly recognized within the phenomenon.	Financial resources transferred through cosplay establish opportunities for cosplayers to hire and be hired to enhance their performances and that of their peers.	Points the professional involved in the elaboration of the cosplay attest its quality among the cosplay community.	The visibility achieved through cosplay allows some of its performers to be contacted by brands and events interested in promoting pop culture.

Source: elaborated by the authors.

As an example of the existence of the Businessmen, we highlight an excerpt from the interview carried out on Instagram with a cosplayer from Australia. In Figure 5, there is an excerpt from her response about how she envisions the relationship between cosplayers.

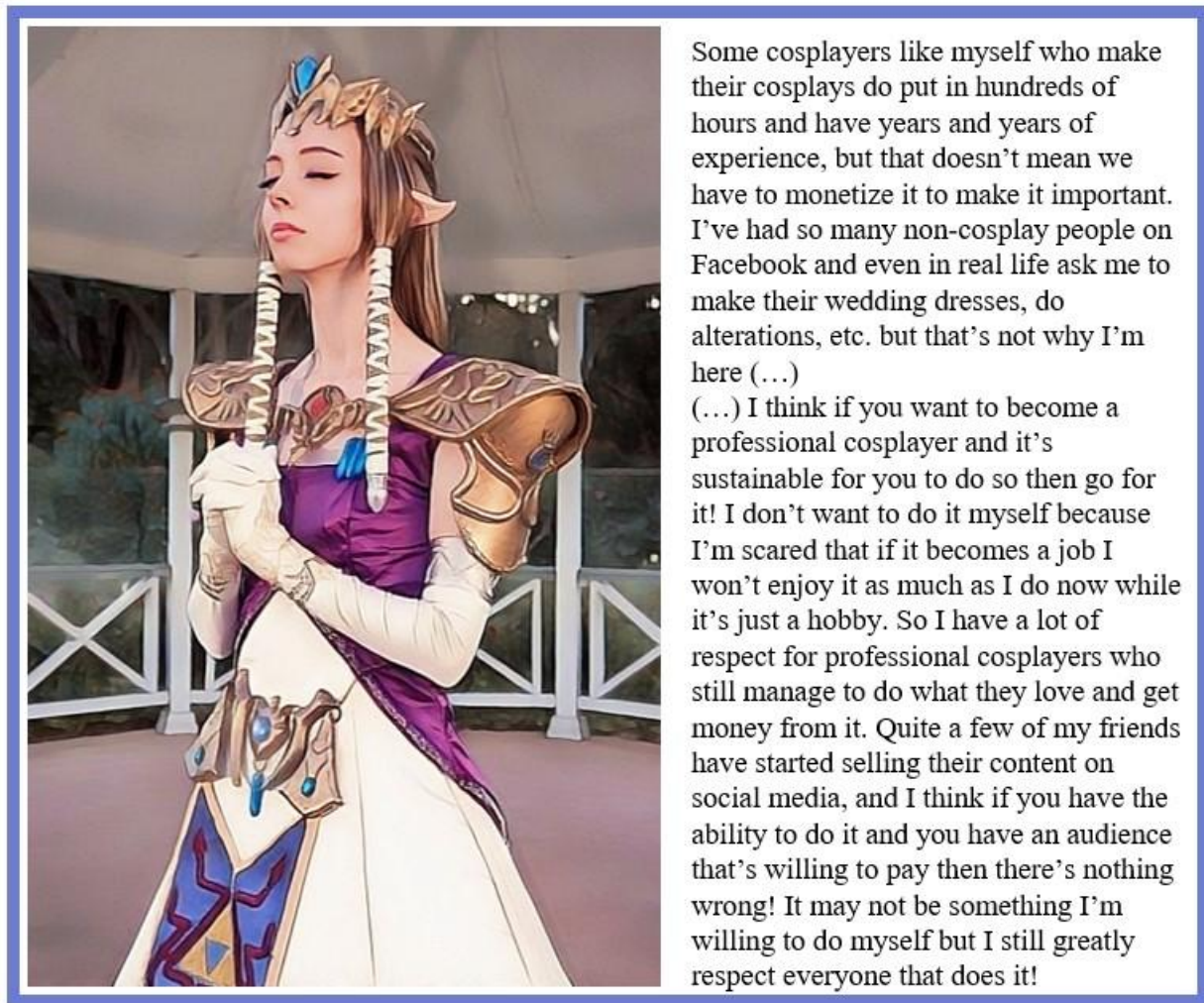


Figure 5.

Businesspeople example

Source: elaborated by the authors from online ethnographic interview *corpus*.

Despite not considering this as an option for her, she attests to respecting the choice of cosplayers who decide to monetize their skills. Further, she reveals how exist several interested people in establishing commercial contacts based on the skills inherent to the production of cosplay. Therefore, it is possible to observe the discourses that conceive that Cosplay can be Profitable and Sustainable. Such understanding depends on the cosplayer's effort to monetize his Expertise, but also on his role as a Stakeholder of the movement being recognized, whether among other cosplayers or by outsiders to the phenomenon. Thus, it is common for social networks to function as a means of Promoting such skills and, simultaneously, as Mediation of the phenomenon itself. Both converge on the possibility of Trading and Sharing cosplay practices, allowing cosplayers who exercise such moralities to develop themselves as Businessmen.

To highlight the other side of Businessmen among cosplayers, we highlight a post made by a Russian cosplayer in October 2022, about her difficulties were to resume in-person activities.



Figure 6.
Businesspeople example
Source: elaborated by the authors from netnography *corpus*.

Despite the short caption, the post itself fits in with those we observed from cosplayers who reported their efforts to resume in-person performances after the end of the quarantine. For the Russian cosplayer, it was necessary for her peers to stay positive. In her case, when she got a job again, she would have money to be able to perform her cosplays.

Such perspective shows how cosplay can be sustainable to the ones who sell their abilities and are expensive when the other ones need to spend resources to make a costume. To this end, she indicates that there are certain factors that act as Stakeholders for them to perform their performances. Furthermore, it is the Expertise exercised by positivity and resilience that allows them to continue as a hopeful member of the phenomenon.

Therefore, by promoting their performances, they are looking for ways to trade that make it financially viable to remain active as cosplayers. This quest indicates how she takes on the role of Businessmen among cosplayers.

The second subject-form identified was called Ambassadors, highlighting the effort of some cosplayers to take positions capable of representing the cosplay phenomenon itself, its practitioners and the media products performed. These cosplayers assume that their performance goes beyond the niche of practitioners, presenting themselves as a trend that promotes cosplay phenomenon, pop culture and its products. To present the analytical composition of this subjectivity, Table 2 was elaborated.

Table 2.

Analytical categories from Ambassadors

Moralities			
Sharing	Interacting		
Cosplayers try to spread their performances among third parties to be recognized as qualified representatives of the phenomenon or as having experienced remarkable performances.	Cosplayers seek to establish contacts that position them as important representatives of the cosplay subculture, whether through partnerships with other cosplayers, or with brands or pop culture events managers.		
Power Diagrams			
Mediation	Valuation	Invitation	
Cosplayers position themselves in social media to have their skills commercially validate.	Cosplayers strive for recognition not only among their peers but also among pop culture enthusiasts at large.	Cosplayers prioritize responding to invites from third parties, either professional opportunity or to join groups with their peers.	
Power Operators			
Stakeholders	Engagement	Acknowledgment	Attachment
Cosplayers recommend third parties on social media who have contributed to the improvement of their cosplay	Cosplayers dedicate themselves to creating interactive and shareable content on social networks.	Cosplayers try to be recognized by third parties, engaging in thematic groups, trends on social networks and attend to pop culture events.	Cosplayers usually act to create connections with their peers who end up participating directly or indirectly in their performances
Discursive Formations			
Cosplay is Taggable	Cosplay is Prestigious		Cosplay is Admirable
The professionals involved in the creation of the cosplay are commonly referenced to attest its quality performances.	The fame and respect gained through cosplay enables some performers to be approached by brands and events interested in promoting pop culture.		The performances in cosplay are carried out in such a way as to become as faithful as possible to the characters and media products they allude to.

Source: elaborated by the authors.

A first example of the Ambassadors subjectivity among cosplayers, we select a post in Instagram from our virtual ethnomethodology corpus. It is posted by a U.S. cosplayer in 2021 July (see Fig. 7).



Figure 7.

Ambassadors' example

Source: elaborated by the authors from virtual ethnomethodology *corpus*.

In one of the many posts she made on her Instagram feed, the cosplayer lists multiple people and brands that allowed them to improve her cosplay performances. Such aspect indicates how Cosplay is Taggable since it allows her to propose an Engagement for such people and brands. Additionally, she highlights her only affiliation is with a specific brand, reiterating how Cosplay can be Sustainable for those who practice it. Both discourses on cosplay are analogous to the operator that denotes the existence of Stakeholders capable of improving cosplayers' performances.

The two operators observed – Stakeholders and Engagement – underlie the existence of the phenomenon of Mediation, when cosplayers produce their performances to be published on social networks. Similarly, this phenomenon is practiced by Sharing, when the cosplayer assumes her interest in representing her community and brands companies that are interested in her role as Ambassador.

On the other hand, to illustrate the second stream of Ambassadors subjectivity, we highlight a post made in the Facebook group “Cosplay of Certain Age” on July 4th, 2019. It is an invitation for members to share their performances during the pandemic isolation period (see Fig. 8).



Figure 8.

Ambassadors' example

Source: elaborated by the authors from netnography *corpus*.

In her post, the cosplayer highlights the help she received from a friend who edits her photos, considering that Cosplay is Taggable. At the same time, she makes a point of indicating that it is a performance that she made with household items – i.e., bargain basement costumes – or that she found in charity shops and remodeled them using her sewing machine. This effort reveals her perspective that Cosplay can and should be Admired for the effort put into its creation, as she attests to loving the performances that are made by recycling old clothes into costumes. Her behavior in the Facebook group indicates her interest in Engaging her performances and, simultaneously, in having her skills Acknowledged.

Both behaviors add up to the possibility of having their performances Valued, mainly due to the understanding that social networks allow them to Interact with others interested in their cosplay. Consequently, she elaborates herself as an Ambassador among cosplayers, encouraging her peers to publish their performances made at home and encouraging them to engage in the phenomenon to deal with confinement during the pandemic period.

Close to this example, the third subject form observed indicates the role of Models assumed by some cosplayers. It is about the continued effort of some cosplayers to present performances that expand the positive perception of others about the phenomenon, but also that inspire their peers to strengthen ties with the cosplay community. It is a form of experiencing cosplay based on the moralities that indicate how some of its practitioners are interested in guiding and becoming attached to their

peers. To understand the substance of this morality, Tabala 3 was organized with the analytical categories that support it.

Table 3.

Analytical categories from Models

Moralities			
Interacting		Representing	
Cosplayers need their performances to be evaluated and observed both externally – the enthusiasts of the phenomenon – and internally – other cosplayers – to the phenomenon.		Cosplayers try to be recognized as the main symbols of the cosplay phenomenon, inspiring other cosplayers who still feel inhibited in performing their own performances.	
Power Diagrams			
Valuation	Invitation		Inspiration
Cosplayers strive to value their own efforts, those of professionals and even their peers to improve their performances.	Cosplayers both force themselves not to refuse requests from those interested in their performances and try work as example that gives confidence to their peers.		Cosplayers treat anyone who interacts with their cosplay with care, whether at in-person events or in their publications on social media
Power Operators			
Engagement	Acknowledgment	Attachment	Community
Cosplayers interact with other cosplayers to spread the content of their performances.	Cosplayers seek to be recognized by their abilities among their peers.	Cosplayers establish connection with their peers and with those interested in cosplay itself.	Cosplayers strive to strengthen the communal sense with everyone who pays some kind of attention to their cosplay
Discursive Formations			
Cosplay is Prestigious	Cosplay is Admirable	Cosplay is Marvelous	Cosplay is Collective
The prestige among their peers usually occurs in pop culture events and through cosplayers resonance in social media.	The leadership role achieved by a cosplayer refers to their performances being considered as examples of quality among their peers.	The possibility of inspiring their peers to lose their shame to perform their own cosplays is one of the main motivators for veteran cosplayers	The socio-affective relationships established by cosplay give new meaning to the experiences that its cosplayers experience as part of the phenomenon.

Source: elaborated by the authors.

To illustrate the Model subjectivity among cosplayers, we choose an autoethnographic entry from December 5th, 2019. In this passage, the researcher tells how his first experience performing cosplay was at a pop culture event – the Comic Con Experience (CCXP) 2019 (see Fig. 9).

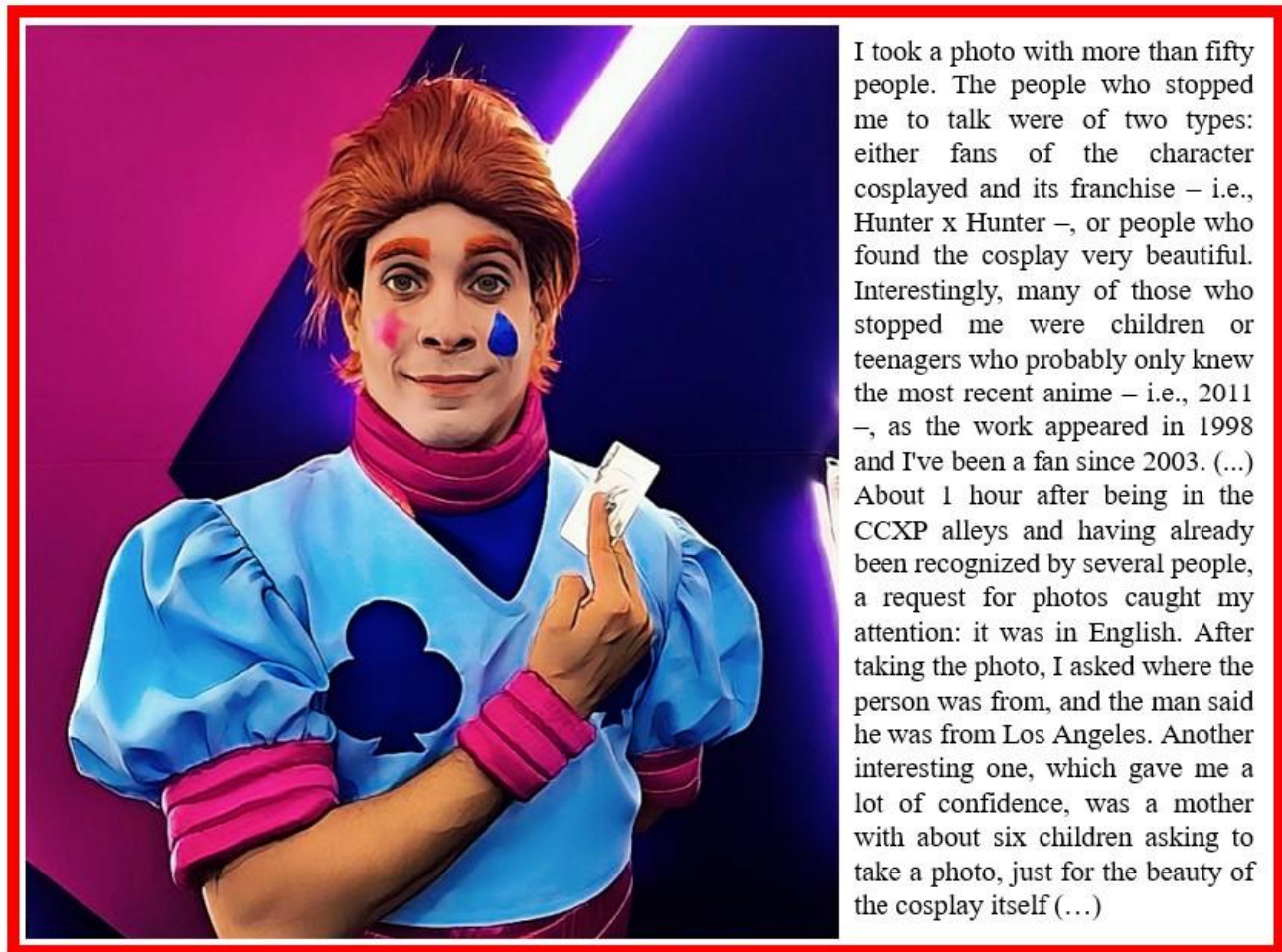


Figure 9.

Models example

Source: elaborated by the authors from autoethnography *corpus*.

In the highlighted passage, the cosplayer points out he gained confidence in his cosplay through contact with other people. In his report, the prevailing understanding was that the people he had contact with and asked to take a photo seemed to consider his Cosplay as Marvelous. Additionally, the cosplayer himself considers that the Collective role made his experience interesting. Both understandings highlight the existence of a Community behavior that guided his performance.

This communal sense underlies the perception that he should act to Inspire the people who contacted him about his cosplay to better express the character performed. Therefore, it was a Representation, when he conceived himself to be a Model that could inspire pop culture enthusiasts – present at CCXP – to have positive contacts with and about cosplayers in general.

Another example that allows us to observe the existence of Models among us is the publication made by a South African cosplayer in October 2022 on her Instagram Feed (see Fig. 10).



Figure 10.
Models example

Source: elaborated by the authors from virtual ethnomethodology corpus.

In the post description – and in the sum of other publications made during the period when she was preparing for a local Halloween event in which she would perform cosplay in person again – she highlights how proud she is of this cosplay and that, for a long time, she had wanted to play a character that was so important to her in her childhood. In this sense, she considers herself proud of the time spent sewing and bringing to life this cosplay that she wore when in-person activities returned after the pandemic period.

For the cosplayer, the phenomenon itself is admirable, as it allows her to experience old desires. In this sense, she simultaneously attests to her Acknowledgment in fulfilling this desire and an Attachment to the character she played.

Both behaviors add up to an Invitation for her peers to be inspired and do the same, overcoming the quarantine period they experienced between 2019 and 2021. Therefore, they indicate how some

cosplayers seek, through their performances, to achieve both Interaction and Representing. When added together, these searches legitimize them as Models to be followed by their peers.

The Neoliberal logic guiding the cosplayers' desire: the Bounty ethic

When cosplayers produce their subjectivities through their practices with cosplay, some of its practitioners either take on roles of production or dissemination of their own consumption practices, or as proactive consumers who seek to expand the possibilities of interacting between peers. These relationships are the basis for developing an ethic that combines the opportunities of the growing popularity of cosplay and their own interest in being recognized for their participation in the phenomenon.

Nevertheless, the ethics present in the three identified subject-forms were simultaneously present in the virtual interactions that maintained cosplayers' activities during the pandemic period - between the end of 2019 and much of 2021 - and in the resumption of in-person activities. On the one hand, virtuality allowed cosplayers to integrate collectively and overcome physical barriers. On the other hand, the resumption of in-person events was considered a reward for the resilience and improvements they made in themselves as cosplayers.

Consequently, this ethical path was named Bounty, an inspiration and connection source among cosplayers, which encourages them to maintain their performances and establish themselves as individuals who seek to benefit, enhance or improve the relationships they live with cosplay. Businesspeople establish themselves through the growing demand from those interested in cosplay – e.g., cosplayers, enthusiasts, producers of media objects, entertainment brands – and in performances that are as improved as possible and can hire or be hired through their relationship with the phenomenon. Ambassadors legitimize the participatory characteristic of cosplay, using both cultural convergence and the appropriation of technologies when they help spread or represent the phenomenon in the means of interaction inherent to the consumption of pop culture – i.e., Web, pop culture events. Models are interested in generating possibilities to experience consumer relations inherent to cosplay performances, whether between practitioners of the performed media object, or with others interested in what they are performing and, finally, with their cosplayer peers.

These subjects are guided by a so-called Bounty, when their relationships to be recognized in cosplay. First, in the quest to have their performances validated as professionals, either by resorting to third parties who are trained to do so, or when they are hired by market agents who recognize their skills. Second, by producing or disseminating their own experiences, which become engaging content in the social spaces available between those involved with pop culture and entertainment products.

Third, by being eternal consumers of the media characters and objects that inspire their performance as cosplayers, they are interested in finding peers with whom they can connect and legitimize their consumption practices.

The three forms-subject guided through the Bounty ethic seems to reflect the proposal of Kozinets *et al.* (2017) about how media platforms increase a compulsory paradigm when consumers assume multiple market agencies – e.g., experts, influencers, producers, distributors, etc. These authors consider that interaction between consumers allows to an emancipation of desire, which expresses the uniqueness of individuals and transforms the social context in which they live.

It is a perspective close to Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) understanding of how desire can be emancipatory. Desire is a force that drives people to know themselves and transform their relationships, a continuous capacity to produce other desires, which allows them to produce themselves as free subjects and escape social repression. We must remember that the desires we relate to throughout our lives are multiple and, dangerously, many of them are produced by the social arrangements in which we live.

Such production of desires seems to be present in the Bounty ethic that guides the production of the cosplayers' subjectivities identified in our analysis. Let us remember that these cosplayers seek to be publicly recognized for their performances – whether for their commercial expertise, representative influence or ability to create bonds with their peers. It is a search for recognition – i.e., desire – in which they feel responsible for themselves and for others with whom they come into contact, including the phenomenon that brings them together. They are subjects who prioritize the recognition of themselves as cosplay practitioners – the autonomy of those who reproduce desires – and not of their performances – the desire production that drives them.

From Deleuze's (2017) perspective, each cosplayers' subjectivity is equivalent to a type of explicit manifestation of desiring productions, when subjects can create conditions to escape or intensify their relationship with the society of control. If the subjects themselves produce desires, they are a counterpoint to functioning as a desiring machine. Producing desires is a revolutionary exercise of self, when subjects are continually guided by their own desires through creativity. However, if the desires are from others or third parties, willing and aligned with capitalism, the subjects reinforce how agency members of the control society are (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

Therefore, the desiring productions that make up the Bounty ethic are instituted among consumers who govern themselves, but also who govern the performances of other members of the consumption ethos that they are part of. As desirous productions, the cosplayers are independent of a scheme of oppressive power relations or those propagated by the producers of media objects.

These desiring productions are a means for us to understand the functions we assume in the context in which we live. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1983), subjectivity is elaborated by everyday practices, when we create a territory that both regulates us to certain relational functions and attests to the power of the being to practice their desires.

Thus, among cosplayers, the desiring production involves taking positions and recognizing themselves as a fundamental part of the marketing relationships that legitimize cosplay as an economic and cultural phenomenon. The Bounty ethic alludes to the intention of cosplayers to validate their skills, performances, interactivity and conditions to experience cosplay through the marketing relationships they seek to experience. Thus, each cosplayers' subjectivity goes beyond the interaction between peers, evoking the importance of the marketing legitimacy – economic and cultural – of the phenomenon they perform.

The interaction between cosplayers' subjectivities gets closer to Foucault's (2008) understanding of how subjects exercise responsible individualization when they seek to be an active part of the neoliberalism that governs them. According to the author, individuals take actions that allow them to constitute their own subjectivities through adjustments to the context they experience to govern themselves and some aspects part of their lives – e.g., families relationship, professional choices. Consequently, individuals need to act in ways that are productive for everyone without involvement.

We glimpse these acts in the three cosplayers' subjectivities who follow the Bounty ethic. On the one hand, Businessmen understand that their role in cosplay is to propagate business relationships to be receive some profits. On the other hand, Models are those who see themselves as responsible for legitimizing the collective interest in media objects and pop culture exercised via cosplay. Intermediately, Ambassadors prepare their performances by taking responsibility for themselves and others. Therefore, Bounty ethics alludes to Foucault's discussion about liberalism: a government form responsible for producing subjects.

Thus, it is worth reflecting on the ways in which consumers – and specifically cosplayers – can contest or subvert the neoliberal logic in which they are inserted. Consequently, it is necessary to consider that such contestations or subversions are exercises in resistance described in Foucault's works as a productive instance that modifies the power relations in which they are inserted.

Such consideration would allow us to expand our reflection to a more dialectical perspective of the phenomenon. On the one hand, there are cosplayers who incorporate the ethics of Bounty when they pursue or sustain the profit of those who can monetize their skills - i.e., Businessmen. On the other hand, Models are those who conceive of their reward as an emotional issue, with neoliberal logic being intrinsic to the way they relate to cultural products that are invariably guided by market logic. In

an intermediate way, Ambassadors transform neoliberal logic by incorporating for themselves the motivation to expand the commotion about the phenomenon in which they act.

Therefore, the resistance exercised by cosplayers is a challenge or subversion that enhances the neoliberal logic in which they are inserted and wish to insert themselves. It is an effort to adapt the market context – virtual during the pandemic and in person after this period of isolation – to their own wills, but maintaining agencies inherently affected by market logic – e.g., media products, pop culture events, social networks, etc. – that allow them to be who they are.

It is worth remembering that the subjects produced in a neoliberal society are active producers of capital that goes beyond their own will, benefiting the context in which they live. This capital represents a means for individuals to satisfy themselves – meet their wills –, often through consumption, recognizing themselves through the rewards they receive in their marketing relationships (Foucault, 2008).

Consequently, when subjects act in a productive way for themselves and others, they expose how the logic of neoliberalism delegates to its governed mechanisms and techniques that allow them to exercise their freedom. It is the case of consumers who act productively for their consumption practices, commonly changing the value of this context while exercising freedom (Parmentier and Fischer, 2015; Souza-Leão and Costa, 2018). However, this freedom is illusory, as they will still be inserted into the market logic even when they are co-creators of their consumption experiences (Humphreys and Grayson, 2008).

Broadly, when consumers consider that they can fulfill their desires through consumption practices in which they assume certain responsibilities (Beighton, 2017), they explain how their attitude is capable of governing that of others (Zajc, 2015). According to Dunne (2018), such government forms reflect how market relations are a complicated, but not contradictory, rhetorical art. From this perspective, the market is a condition that both produces marketing knowledge and allows the exercise of market liberalism.

It is this exercise that we glimpse at Bounty that guides cosplayers: a social arrangement in which autonomous subjectivities recognize themselves through broader market relations, reflecting a neoliberal ethic. In this imbroglio, consumption is a multiply cultural and interactional practice, and not just a commercial action limited by concepts of supply and demand. It is a complex and dynamic practice which illustrates how neoliberal logic still conducts truths present in contemporary society.

Final considerations

The identified subjectivities manifest their own agencies through actions, relationships and market functions that flow in a dynamic relationship capable of legitimizing themselves as cosplayers and the cosplay phenomenon. The Bounty ethic which guides these subjectivities points the possibility to elaborate or maintain desire productions through consumption practices. This desire is present in consumption practices that are transversal to virtual interactions – which mostly guided the performances of co-players during the period of social isolation between 2019 and 2021 – and in-person interactions - observed during the resumption of on-site events from 2022 onwards.

Broadly, the Bounty ethic exemplifies how neoliberal logic establishes the conditions for subjects to produce themselves, but also and mainly to be productive for the phenomenon itself. Thus, consumption interactional practices – as cosplay – allow consumers to satisfy themselves, but also for everyone with whom they engage through market relations.

Consequently, the contribution of our study expands and corroborates discussions previously established in the literature but also extrapolates by resorting to two theoretical lenses. First, by endorsing how the cosplay phenomenon more than illustrates a rich mosaic of possibilities for investigations achievable by the cultural approach to consumer research (see Arnould *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, our study showed – through cosplay – that online and offline consumption practices are increasingly intrinsic to each other, increasing the ways in which consumers produce, question or maintain market desires (see Kozinets *et al.*, 2017).

Such desires evoke the Deleuze and Guatarri's concepts about how subjects produce through everyday practices – such as consumption – assemblages that determine their desiring capabilities. These everyday practices sustain the Bounty ethic that, from Foucault's perspective, illustrate how neoliberal logic guides subjects seeking to be productive for themselves, establishing capital that can and usually benefits other agents with whom they interact. Thus, both proposals show how although these theoretical lenses are autonomous and relevant by their own, when epistemologically close to each other, it can be combined to establish more robust contributions to consumer research.

Consequently, the results identified in this study reveal that consumers can and will understand themselves as subjects aligned with a neoliberal logic, as long as they feel that they are achieving some kind of bounty for such alignment. Broadly, this result contributes to CCT studies by expanding the understanding of how neoliberal logic is present in participatory market relations and originating from cultural contexts developed and maintained by consumers themselves.

However, despite we consider that the present study sought to cover as many aspects as possible inherent to cosplayers' practices, it is worth highlighting its limitations. One of its areas is associated with the fact that we focused on cosplayers who made their relationship with the phenomenon public using social media. On the one hand, this approach allowed us to understand the importance of this environment in cosplayers' practices and, simultaneously, reach practitioners from various parts of the world. On the other hand, it represented a practical solution to the pandemic context that during 2020 and 2021 suspended many of the pop culture events that, until then, focused on cosplay practices.

Therefore, we consider that it would be worthwhile to expand our study by focusing on the performances and interactions of cosplayers that take place at these events. Consequently, the authors are interested in continuing the study focusing on face-to-face interactions, in order to better understand the differences in the subjectivities of cosplayers exercised exclusively in person. Additionally, it seems worth expanding the discussions established here through other subcultures which elaborate their performance and publish their productions in social media – e.g., gothic, drag queens, etc.

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