Together in Difference
Political Ethics in Cosplayers' Performativity

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We investigate the cosplay phenomenon through a Butler and Foucault's theoretical lens, aiming to understand how cosplayers articulate ethical dispositions through their performative practices. A foucauldian genealogical ethnography was conducted over two years of fieldwork, combining digital and in-person approaches. Results reveal three subject-forms whose political ethics reflect an agonistic relationship, where cosplayers navigate conflicting resistances to establish forms of governance they perceive as legitimate. The study contribution reveals how contemporary cultural practices shape political subjectivities, offering an innovative articulation between performativity and consumption.

Keywords: Cosplay. Performativity. Foucauldian genealogy. Political ethics. Subjectivity.

Juntos na Diferença: ética política na performatividade dos *cosplayers*

Nós investigamos o fenômeno cosplay através das lentes teóricas de Butler e Foucault, visando entender como *cosplayers* articulam disposições éticas por meio de suas práticas performáticas. Uma etnografia genealógica foucaultiana foi conduzida ao longo de dois anos de trabalho de campo, combinando abordagens digitais e presenciais. Resultados revelam três formas de sujeito cuja ética política reflete uma relação agonística em que *cosplayers* navegam por resistências conflitantes para estabelecer formas de governança que eles percebem como legítimas. A contribuição do estudo revela como práticas culturais contemporâneas moldam subjetividades políticas, oferecendo uma articulação inovadora entre performatividade e consumo.

Palavras-chave: Cosplay. Performatividade. Genealogia foucaultiana. Ética política. Subjetividade.

Juntos en la diferencia: la ética política en la performatividad de los cosplayers

Investigamos el fenómeno del cosplay desde la perspectiva teórica de Butler y Foucault, con el objetivo de comprender cómo los cosplayers articulan disposiciones éticas a través de sus prácticas performativas. Se realizó una etnografía genealógica foucaultiana durante dos años de trabajo de campo, combinando enfoques digitales y presenciales. Los resultados revelan tres formas de sujeto cuya ética política refleja una relación agonística, donde los cosplayers navegan entre resistencias conflictivas para establecer formas de gobernanza que perciben como legítimas. La contribución del estudio revela cómo las prácticas culturales contemporáneas moldean las subjetividades políticas, ofreciendo una articulación innovadora entre la performatividad y el consumo.

Palabras clave: Cosplay. Performatividad. Genealogía foucaultiana. Ética política. Subjetividad.
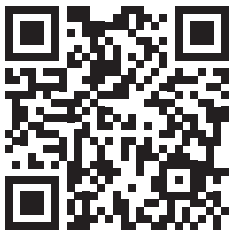
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Introduction

Cosplay is a dynamic and collaborative cultural practice that enables pop culture consumers to engage with media products by wearing costumes and reinterpret them (Mello; Almeida; Dalmoro, 2021; Seregina; Weijo, 2017). It is a phenomenon marked by creative expression and community interaction, providing its practitioners – i.e., cosplayers – with a way to explore identities and narratives within a culturally inclusive environment (Moura; Souza-Leão, 2024; Rahman; Wing-Sun; Cheung, 2012).

These possibilities are the result of the effort exerted by cosplayers when they invest time and significant monetary resources in constructing authentic costumes that enable them to perform the most complete performances possible, as closely as possible to the interpreted media products (Brock; Johnson, 2022; Nunes, 2023). Additionally, they seek to interact with their peers to share or learn tips, thereby strengthening bonds between cosplayers and enriching the consumption experience through a process of collaborative co-creation (Mello; Almeida; Dalmoro, 2021). Cosplay is, therefore, an interactional practice in which consumers seek to perform various performances that, when arranged, manifest sociocultural positions (Gn, 2011; Seregina, 2020).

Thus, given the arguments above, the present study aims to understand how cosplayers perform ethical dispositions. Such an aim examines the cosplay phenomenon as an empirical locus that enables the combined investigation of performativity through pop culture consumption (Seregina; Weijo, 2017) and the conditions that facilitate understanding the elaboration of ethics guiding consumers' subjectivation (Moura; Souza-Leão, 2023).

Additionally, the research aim reflects how, despite being quite enlightening, previous studies that investigate cosplay seem to focus only on the performative scope of the phenomenon (Gn, 2011; Rahman; Wing-Sun; Cheung, 2012; Seregina, 2019). Consequently, there is a gap in the literature since it would be necessary to observe the ethical conditioning that is (re)formulated from these performative exercises. Thus, the present study was structured to fill this gap and expand discussions on the phenomenon through the combination of concepts proposed by epistemologically dialogic authors – i.e., Judith Butler and Michel Foucault.

Performativity, originating from Butler (1993; 2002), serves to challenge social inequalities through political acts of disruptive discourse. It emphasizes unique identities outside institutional norms. Individuals construct themselves by resisting signs that perpetuate inequalities, established by cultural hegemony. Butler (2005) suggests an ethical approach where individuals affirm their capacity to be subjects, navigating societal expectations through varied performances. Performativity thus becomes an ethical journey, confronting everyday norms (regimes of truth) to articulate self-values.

Truth regimes in Butler's work align with Foucault's (2011) idea that subject formation is tied to their ethical disposition. The author states that subjects continuously create and validate self-truths against institutionalized moralities. Both these creations and validations foster self-knowledge, shaped by the governing systems of their social context. Thus, Foucault (2012a; 2017) frames such governing systems as a unified process of ethical production, where ethics evolves through the subject's engagement with truths in daily practices and relationships.

By combining both theoretical perspectives, this study was able to interpret that the differences expressed by members of the same participatory culture – such as cosplay – reiterate the existence of a political ethic that unites them. Such an ethic is based on the exercise of representative performativity about agonistic truths, which, despite being conflicting, coexist to improve the phenomenon and its cultural interactions.

Cosplay: a performativity elaboration

Cultural studies have investigated cosplay because it is an interactive, collective, and collaborative practice through which consumers enhance themselves through the marketing relationships they experience (Mello; Almeida; Dalmoro, 2021; Winge, 2006). It is a phenomenon defined as the act of consumers dressing up and playing characters from pop culture media products – e.g., movies, comic books, books, mangas, TV Shows, music artists (Rahman; Wing-Sun; Cheung, 2012; Seregina; Weijo, 2017).

When the cosplayer chooses to play a character, he/she generally tries to pay attention to several particularities, such as care, reliability and adaptability of the performance. This attention goes from choosing the character to creating the costume and the material and mental training necessary to create the media object consumed (Brock; Johnson, 2022; Winge, 2006). Consequently, when cosplay is not performed with due dedication, it should not be considered as cosplay; its performers are just a consumer who identifies with a character and have decided to dress up in a way that alludes to the media product consumed by them (Rahman; Wing-Sun; Cheung, 2012; Seregina; Weijo, 2017).

Thus, cosplay is considered a complex and subjective practice, extending beyond the act of wearing costumes; it involves moving between play and interpretation as cosplayers adapt mannerisms and accents, thereby not limiting themselves to simple imitation and publicly demonstrating their intense consumer relationship with the performed character (Nunes, 2023). This intensity is reflected in the exercise of a creative appropriation of fashion elements and narratives of consumed media products (Brock; Johnson, 2022; Kozinets; Jenkins, 2022).

In addition to the intense relationship with what they consume and perform, cosplay materializes as an aesthetic in which the consumer seeks to legitimize themselves before the community in which they play an active role (Gn, 2011; Winge, 2006). Cosplay occurs, notably, at events organized by the entertainment industry or by other consumers in this segment – also known as fans – to promote and celebrate pop culture (Mello; Almeida; Dalmoro, 2021; Seregina; Weijo, 2017).

In this sense, it is common for cosplayers to feel more comfortable expressing their performances and detailing the effort they put into their cosplay with their peers, as they are familiar with the difficulties or opportunities experienced through this phenomenon (Nunes, 2023). After all, cosplay is the result of the creative process in which consumers operate, at some level, a reinterpretation of the media products they consume. It is the combination of aspects of their experience with the perspective that they consider valid from the characters performed (Brock; Johnson, 2022; Moura; Souza-Leão, 2024).

Furthermore, cosplay has been perceived as a form of consumer performativity that allows its practitioners, even in specific situations, to transcend social and cultural concepts – e.g., gender, race, nationality, etc. Thus, cosplay provides support for the combination of diverse consumer performances that make up the production of subjectivity. Since cosplay utilizes individuals' bodies, it enables cosplayers to achieve consumer performativity that serves as an extension of themselves (Gn, 2011; Seregina, 2020). If each individual can manifest their own performativity, they first need to conceive it through their performances, directly involved with the perception they have of themselves and others (Thompson; Üstüner, 2015; Visconti, 2008).

Ethical disposition: a path to produce subjects in contemporary cultural practices

As Butler (2002) explains, performativity resists social asymmetries through unprecedented discourses, built upon individual performances. Such performances are strategies individuals use to adapt, resist, or politically rebel within their context. Consequently, performativity arises when discursive effects shape subjects but avoid reproducing signs that institutionalize existing inequalities (Butler, 1993).

Following this perspective, subjects continuously challenge these citational relationships, creating new political perspectives. Even identities based on free will are influenced by socially constructed elements, such as political positioning and cultural power dynamics. This cultural matrix regulates roles and sustains power relations (Butler, 1993; 2002). Thus, ethical production emerges when individuals navigate norms through acts of recognition, constructing themselves as subjects in contrast to institutional truths. These acts reflect self-constitution, where subjects redefine themselves in opposition to regulatory norms through daily practices and relationships (Butler, 2005).

Among the possibilities for observing ethical conspiracies in contemporary routine practices, consumer practices stand out for presenting a form of grand narrative and regimes of truth, where consumer performances can be associated with ethical or unethical behavior. Performances produced through consumer relations converge in a performativity that enables the consumer to understand and position themselves about the social and marketing context in which they operate (Thompson; Üstüner, 2015; Visconti, 2008).

Thus, it is possible to see how the Butlerian concepts applied to cultural studies are analogous to Foucauldian concepts such as ethical elaboration, process of subjectivation, and regimes of truth (Gauntlett, 2008). Through sociocultural practices, such as consumption, it is possible to investigate how dynamical media produces truth that maintains or transforms individuals' subjectivity (Moura; Souza-Leão, 2023).

Foucault (2005; 2017) argues that subjects understand themselves through their relationship with truths, balancing personal wills with moralities embedded in social, economic, and affective contexts. This process involves assimilating external norms while reinterpreting them to align with individual interests, indicating how subject relations themselves with truths (Foucault, 2011).

Such relationships with truths form an ethical path, where subjects shape and are shaped by truths throughout life. In the Foucauldian perspective, ethics reflects the self we aim to become, balancing personal desires and accepted moralities. Thus, political positions emerge from how individuals pursue their ethics, navigating and confronting moralities, shaping their behaviors, and institutionalizing conduct (Foucault, 1997).

In this sense, interdisciplinary cultural studies have focused on routine behaviors to understand discourses, government forms, and identity values that are equivalent to Foucauldian concepts. Such studies indicate how ordinary practices, such as media consumption, allow individuals to position themselves and resist beyond marketing relationships, expanding reflections to sociocultural and political spheres (Camargo; Souza-Leão; Moura, 2022; Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Roux; Belk, 2019).

Methodological procedures

The Ethnographic Foucauldian Genealogy (EFG) was adopted for the present study since it considers both aspects discussed in the thematic and theoretical perspective that underlie the research problem. It is a methodology that combines two autonomous approaches that are epistemologically close, following Kozinets' (2020) suggestion on how ethnographic investigations can be improved through theoretical lenses – specifically, a Foucauldian lens – which enables the proposal of reflections and interpretative extrapolations. This combination meets the objective of the present study, which is to understand the interrelationship between performativity exercised online and its subsequent ethical disposition.

Ethnographic data collection procedures

The ethnographic approach emerges as a traditional investigative lens for current cultural studies that seek to understand the overlaps between marketing relationships and cultural groupings established in this context. Consequently, this approach has been adapted, expanded, and refined to deal with contemporary phenomena impacted by the increasing use of social media and virtual technologies, as consumers'

practices can less and less be isolated from the online interactions they carry out in their daily lives. (Hine, 2020; Kozinets, 2020).

Considering such proposals, the present study chose to combine multiple digital ethnographic strategies, namely netnography, virtual ethnomethodology, and online ethnographic interviews. Each of these strategies enabled the creation of research corpora that complement each other, allowing us to understand the online and offline nuances of the investigated phenomenon holistically (see Fig. 1).
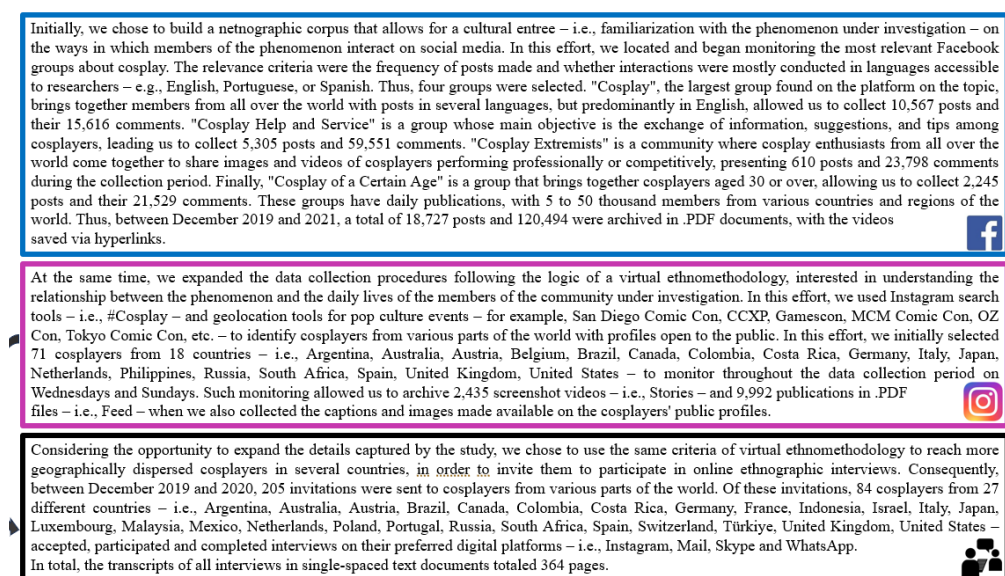
Initially, we chose to build a netnographic corpus that allows for a cultural entree – i.e., familiarization with the phenomenon under investigation – on the ways in which members of the phenomenon interact on social media. In this effort, we located and began monitoring the most relevant Facebook groups about cosplay. The relevance criteria were the frequency of posts made and whether interactions were mostly conducted in languages accessible to researchers – e.g., English, Portuguese, or Spanish. Thus, four groups were selected. "Cosplay", the largest group found on the platform on the topic, brings together members from all over the world with posts in several languages, but predominantly in English, allowed us to collect 10,567 posts and their 15,616 comments. "Cosplay Help and Service" is a group whose main objective is the exchange of information, suggestions, and tips among cosplayers, leading us to collect 5,305 posts and 59,551 comments. "Cosplay Extremists" is a community where cosplay enthusiasts from all over the world come together to share images and videos of cosplayers performing professionally or competitively, presenting 610 posts and 23,798 comments during the collection period. Finally, "Cosplay of a Certain Age" is a group that brings together cosplayers aged 30 or over, allowing us to collect 2,245 posts and their 21,529 comments. These groups have daily publications, with 5 to 50 thousand members from various countries and regions of the world. Thus, between December 2019 and 2021, a total of 18,727 posts and 120,494 were archived in .PDF documents, with the videos saved via hyperlinks.

At the same time, we expanded the data collection procedures following the logic of a virtual ethnomethodology, interested in understanding the relationship between the phenomenon and the daily lives of the members of the community under investigation. In this effort, we used Instagram search tools – i.e., #Cosplay – and geolocation tools for pop culture events – for example, San Diego Comic Con, CCXP, Gamescon, MCM Comic Con, OZ Con, Tokyo Comic Con, etc. – to identify cosplayers from various parts of the world with profiles open to the public. In this effort, we initially selected 71 cosplayers from 18 countries – i.e., Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Philippines, Russia, South Africa, Spain, United Kingdom, United States – to monitor throughout the data collection period on Wednesdays and Sundays. Such monitoring allowed us to archive 2,435 screenshot videos – i.e., Stories – and 9,992 publications in .PDF files – i.e., Feed – when we also collected the captions and images made available on the cosplayers' public profiles.

Considering the opportunity to expand the details captured by the study, we chose to use the same criteria of virtual ethnomethodology to reach more geographically dispersed cosplayers in several countries, in order to invite them to participate in online ethnographic interviews. Consequently, between December 2019 and 2020, 205 invitations were sent to cosplayers from various parts of the world. Of these invitations, 84 cosplayers from 27 different countries – i.e., Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Germany, France, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Mexico, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, Türkiye, United Kingdom, United States – accepted, participated and completed interviews on their preferred digital platforms – i.e., Instagram, Mail, Skype and WhatsApp. In total, the transcripts of all interviews in single-spaced text documents totaled 364 pages.

Figure 1: *Corpora* details
Source: Elaborated by the authors following the suggestions of Hine (2020) and Kozinets (2020).

Netnography consists of choosing a community relevant to the phenomenon investigated, familiarizing and sensitizing researchers to the context they are mapping, and archiving virtual interactions associated with the online and offline consumption practices of members of the monitored group. Virtual ethnomethodology posits that social media enables us to observe everyday aspects and singularities in the lives of consumers who are members of the communal ethos being investigated. Online ethnographic interviews allow researchers and interviewees to feel more comfortable discussing themes intrinsic to the routinary practices that place them in the cultural grouping under investigation.

Ethnographic ethical procedures

Considering the use of multiple virtual ethnographic data, we adopted Kozinets' (2020) precautions for carrying out research of this nature. According to the author, researchers must adhere to the five steps – Simplification, Search, Scouting, Selecting, and Saving – of collecting social media data. During this effort, one of the researchers began to participate in the cosplay community actively. This process is explained as a stage of ethnographic familiarization. In contrast, it is essential to operationalize a distancing from the phenomenon. This operation was carried out by the other researcher, who was responsible for validating the data collected and organizing the research corpora. Both are ethical efforts for carrying out netnography.

Consequently, the data collected were validated through triangulation between researchers. The triangulation performed met Kozinets' (2020) suggestion regarding the need for researchers to confirm whether these were interactions and opinions that resonated with the perspectives of the individuals present in

the online interactions. Additionally, we conducted a detailed reading of the data, following a chronological coherence that allowed us to propose reflections on the findings of the analysis carried out. This detailing reflected instructional efforts that respected the observed praxis to ensure the voices of cultural members were heard. Finally, the research results were then combined with concepts previously established in the literature to allow the interpretation and proposal of the innovation and representation indicated in the research contribution.

Furthermore, the present study aligns with Leban *et al.*'s (2021) suggestion to transform the faces of images of members of the phenomenon being investigated into cartoons using software. According to the authors, even if such data were obtained with explicit consent or are available in public access – i.e., open profiles on social media –, it is prudent to use cartoons rather than photos, to avoid demands regarding the use of image from third parties and, mainly, to preserve the research participants.

Foucauldian genealogical data analysis procedures

Conducting a Foucauldian genealogical analysis enables us to acknowledge the ambiguities inherent in the power relations that govern contemporary practices (Camargo; Souza-Leão; Moura, 2022; Paltrinieri, 2012). According to Denegri-Knott *et al.* (2018), the unique analysis of Foucauldian genealogy allows interdisciplinary cultural studies to establish a critical discussion about how consumption phenomena (re) configure cultural interactions and, consequently, the hegemonic status of certain social groups. This possibility reflects Foucault's (2012a) suggestion that such an analytical effort be used to thoroughly explore the conditions that produce subjects based on the power relations in which they are embedded and the discourses with which they are associated.

Furthermore, the conception of who we are is a consequence of the way we position ourselves and are positioned in the complex power dynamics that govern the social fabric in which we live. Such power dynamics reflect the existence of particular discourses, delivered by subjects and institutions to manifest truths about themselves (Foucault, 2012a; 2012b).

This entire process, commonly categorized into three instances – i.e., discourses, power relations, subjectivities – is one and inseparable, explained in the analytical categories of a Foucauldian genealogical investigation (Paltrinieri, 2012). Thus, as indicated in the previous subsections, the collected data were organized according to the chronology in which they occurred. The analysis follows in the footsteps of Foucault (2012a), when the researchers carried out several rounds of triangulation:

· Genealogical analysis begins with the identification of discursive formations that synthesize the knowledge produced about certain phenomena. Such knowledge represents how individuals and institutions exercise power over one another. Thus, from an initial reading, we were able to observe patterns enunciated in the cosplayers' interactions that were categorized as discursive formations.

· Based on the discursive formations identified, we sought to reflect on the behaviors and rules of conduct exercised by cosplayers. Through this reflection, it was possible to infer the following two genealogical analytical levels: operators and power diagrams. In this reflective moment, we selected emblematic interactions that illustrated these discourses and behaviors. Considering that power operators overlap, we were also able to identify the existence of power diagrams that govern the social arrangements we were analyzing.

· The power diagrams were subsequently triangulated among the researchers as equivalent to morality. Thus, the governmentality of these diagrams provides evidence of how they are analogous to the moralities embodied in the subjects' everyday lives. By identifying such moralities, we sought to contrast them with the governance structures observable in the context investigated, in addition to verifying whether these categories were present in the previously selected examples.

· By assessing the existence of inferred moralities, it was possible to define certain subject-forms that represent the positions assumed by cosplayers in the face of the phenomenon investigated. At this point, we sought to reflect retroactively on the entire analytical process, to establish evidence that would support such subject-forms. These subject-forms were, therefore, verified and validated as represented by the emblematic examples selected previously.

· When multiple subject-forms are identified that are elaborated and positioned in the same social context, it is possible to reflect on the ethics that guide such subjectivities. This is the ultimate category of genealogical analysis. Such reflection is inherent to the researchers' reflection, revealing the ethical disposition that we observe present in a range of performativity that we evaluated among cosplayers.

Results description and reflections

The analysis enabled the identification of three subject-forms that exhibited commonalities with each other, evidencing the existence of an ethic guiding cosplayers' practices. Thus, our results are presented in two subsections. The first one exposes, describes, and illustrates the interrelationship between the analytical categories, using examples from the research corpora. The second subsection reflects on the findings, engaging in a dialogue with existing literature to highlight the contributions of our study.

Cosplayers' subjectivities: vigilantes, gatekeepers, and avengers

The first subjectivity identified among cosplayers was called Vigilantes, those who consider their role to be preserving the principles they believe are valid for the cosplay phenomenon. In this context, it is cosplayers who tend to attack their peers' performances, to diminish any discordant or innovative perspectives.

On the one hand, these cosplayers establish their practices through the Segregation morality, when they limit and inhibit the agency of others, accusing them of not being able to be part of the cosplay community for ontological reasons. On the other hand, they evoke the Obsolescence morality, established from the perspective that certain traditions among cosplayers need to be maintained. Respectively, each of these moralities is analogous to a power diagram.

Segregation is equivalent to Toxicity, an arrangement of behaviors of some cosplayers when they act individually or collectively, attacking ethnic, gender, or sexuality aspects of other cosplayers, without any prior reason. Obsolescence is analogous to the power diagram known as Harassment, indicating the ways in which some cosplayers choose to act, considering that they are better than their peers, harassing them sexually or arranging for these others to know that their performances are inferior and, consequently, are in a hierarchy below those who make such attacks.

Both power diagrams have, in common, the same power operator: Rejection, which indicates the practices carried out by some cosplayers to reduce the performances or presence of peers who they consider as intending to ruin what they see as valid for the cosplay phenomenon. Specifically, Toxicity is also associated with the power operator named Humiliation, which reveals the actions taken to attack and, if possible, discourage cosplayers who they consider offensive, even if they have never had contact with them. Obsolescence is also supported by the power operator called Disclaimer, presenting the behavior of cosplayers who seek to consider how it is possible to criticize – according to themselves – someone else's performance without this being seen as an offense. Each of these power operators is analogous to two discursive formations.

In the most radical context, Humiliation represents the discursive formation that conceives that "Cosplay doesn't allow changes", a premise propagated by several cosplayers who are uncomfortable with the presence of peers at cosplay events and communities, whether because of the way they express their gender, sexuality, or ethnicity through the phenomenon. On a more moderate level, Humiliation also expresses the understanding of how "Cosplay has a tradition", revealing the perspective that some performances cannot be performed, considering that they do a disservice to the phenomenon by hypersexualizing some characters or changing their ethnicity or gender. Furthermore, this discursive formation is also analogous to the power operator Rejection together with the perspective that "Cosplay must be canon", when cosplayers are uncomfortable with a supposed lack of fidelity and accuracy in others' performance, arguing that they are bothered with the changes made and not with the performer. Such discursive formation is equally equivalent to the power operator called Disclaimer. Additionally, this operator is also analogous to the discursive formation "Cosplay needs courage", indicating that making your performance public is an invitation to receive praise and criticism, and you cannot be offended by those who disagree or attack you.

We highlight an example to illustrate how Vigilantes among cosplayers often act, believing they are protecting the phenomenon itself (see Fig. 2). This is an excerpt from the interview carried out on Instagram in April 2020 with a cosplayer from Italy, about how the cosplayer sees the relationship between people who don't practice cosplay and the phenomenon itself.

There are cosplay and cosplay, as you well know. because there are people who want to wear the role of their favorite character and people who just want to show off their body.
This in my opinion has helped to give a wrong idea of cosplay because some people think that cosplay is only a woman wearing skimpy clothes or that the least covered possible! no, that is not cosplay or better that is cosplay of some manga or some anime hentai, which is a separate category. I hope that sooner or later people will open their eyes and understand how beautiful this "FAIRY" which we are protagonists. That's all

Figure 2: Vigilant example
Source: Elaborated by the authors from an online ethnographic interview *corpus.*

In her understanding, the cosplay phenomenon doesn't allow strangers and, simultaneously, has a tradition since she rejects peers who, according to her, are "people who just want to show off their body". Such understandings are analogous to her behavior that seems to humiliate and reject people who perform performances that she considers misrepresenting and marginalizing third parties' understanding of cosplay.

These behaviors fall within two broader government forms: Toxicity and Harassment. By considering herself better than those who perform sensual performances, the cosplayer considers it valid to institutionalize the toxicity of such people and that they deserve to be harassed, to be held responsible for creating what she considers to be a bad reputation for the phenomenon.

Both diagrams are analogous, respectively, Segregation, in which it is placed as different from these individuals, and Obsolescence, when it incorporates as a truth that sensuality does not belong and should not be associated with cosplay. In this opportunity, she positions herself as a Vigilante willing not to tolerate changes in the phenomenon in which she operates.

Close to this perspective, we identify the next subject-form among cosplayers. The Gatekeepers represent those who intend to maintain the phenomenon they are part of, choosing to minimize or ignore friction between their peers. It is a subjectivity that is positioned to institutionalize the idea that cosplay is bigger than the personal problems of its practitioners. Therefore, they are individuals who believe that the problems that exist in the cosplay community are ways to improve their performances; an opportunity to improve as cosplayers.

Like the previous one, this subject-form is associated with two moralities. The first is exactly Obsolescence – presented previously – which, in this subjectivity, indicates the cosplayers' tendency to protect and maintain relationships or behaviors that have already been established in the cosplay community. The second morality was called Liberalism, which indicates that these cosplayers propagate positions that encourage their peers to seek autonomy without victimizing themselves in the face of possible friction that exists regarding their performances.

Consequently, such moralities are analogous to three power diagrams. Both are analogous to the Stimulus power diagram, which brings together attitudes that try to romanticize and present an optimistic view of the difficulties experienced with cosplay, as a journey to improve themselves as cosplayers. As previously presented, the Obsolescence morality represents the Harassment power diagram, revealing an omission behavior that bothers cosplayers attacked by, in a certain way, endorsing the attitudes of those who carry out such attacks. As a novelty, Liberalism morality reflects the Trust power diagram, indicating how some cosplayers consider the critics as an endeavor to face negative comments or shyness.

These power diagrams are founded by four power operators. The power operator Rejection – presented previously – only grounds Harassment, dealing exactly with a position against supposed victimization from peers who do not seem to know how to deal with criticism. Disclaimer – presented previously – points to Harassment and Stimulus, representing a relativization about conflicts between peers not being as serious, negative, or personal as some complaints suggest. Deliberation converges to Stimulus and Trust, revealing negotiation behaviors between peer discussions. Emancipation only points to Trust, reinforcing how cosplay work as a community where comments from others, even those who sound critical, are an opportunity to grow up as a person.

Such power operators represent the existence of three discursive formations propagated by the Gatekeepers. "Cosplay must be canon" – presented previously – is analogous to the Rejection and Disclaimer power operators. Cosplay needs courage – presented previously – converge to Disclaimer and Deliberation behaviors. As novelty, "Cosplay must be satisfying" points to Deliberation and Emancipation attitudes. It is a discursive formation that represents how cosplayers must fulfill themselves with their performances, regardless of other people's opinions.

As an example of Gatekeepers practices, we highlight a dialogue between cosplayers – and members of the Facebook group "Cosplay" – on August 14, 2020 (see Fig. 3). While the cosplayer who made the publication complains about the critical way she is being treated by her peers, members of the virtual community, other two group members contest her understanding, postulating how she should learn to deal with criticism from others.
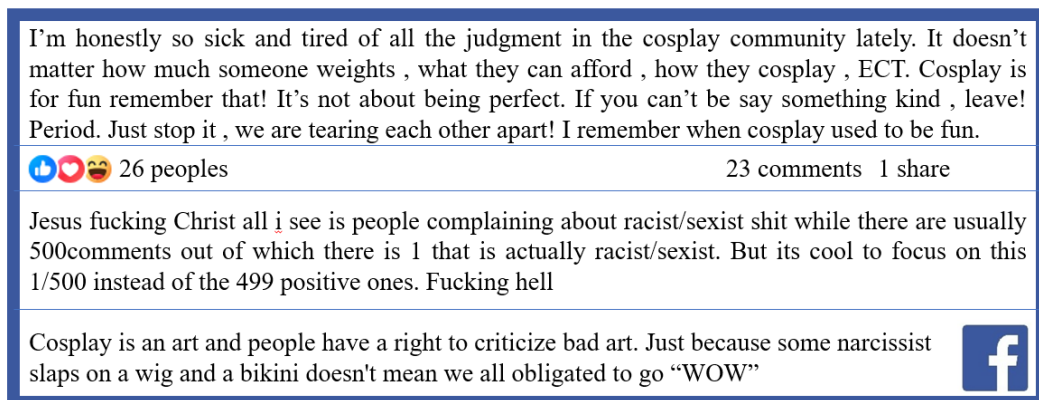
I'm honestly so sick and tired of all the judgment in the cosplay community lately. It doesn't matter how much someone weights , what they can afford , how they cosplay , ECT. Cosplay is for fun remember that! It's not about being perfect. If you can't be say something kind , leave! Period. Just stop it , we are tearing each other apart! I remember when cosplay used to be fun.

👍❤️😄 26 peoples   23 comments   1 share

Jesus fucking Christ all i see is people complaining about racist/sexist shit while there are usually 500comments out of which there is 1 that is actually racist/sexist. But its cool to focus on this 1/500 instead of the 499 positive ones. Fucking hell

Cosplay is an art and people have a right to criticize bad art. Just because some narcissist slaps on a wig and a bikini doesn't mean we all obligated to go "WOW"

Figure 3: Gatekeepers example
Source: Elaborated by the authors from nethnographic *corpus*.

In the post, it is possible to see how the cosplayer complains that she is judged as if her "Cosplay must be canon". In the two comments that respond to her, there is the understanding that "Cosplay needs courage". Both discourses are analogous to a behavior exercised by the three members: Disclaimer. However, while the cosplayer who published the post believes that there is a need for Stimulus among the members of the group, her peers who responded seem to prefer to Harass her perception.

On the one hand, it indicates that cosplayers should adopt a Liberalism that encourages each other's practices. On the other hand, the author of the Facebook post believes that other cosplayers institutionalize an Obsolescence – a morality – that indicates the ways in which certain people only know how to complain about criticism, or by highlighting that it is plausible to criticize an art that they dislike, the phenomenon being a form of art. All comments deal with the existence of Gatekeepers in the cosplay phenomenon, responsible for continuing the practices as they are already established.

The last subject-form was called Avengers, representing cosplayers who articulate their positions to prevent the phenomenon from being shaken by unpleasant situations associated with the performances of their cosplays. For these cosplayers, it is worth demanding respect between peers, and it is worth intervening in the toxic interactions they witness.

Thus, on the one hand, these cosplayers defend the freedom that cosplay can and should be performed how they want, without having to explain it to others. On the other hand, for some people, cosplay is a way of expressing pride associated with identity issues that go beyond the performances themselves. Consequently, such a subject-form is linked to two moralities.

The first morality deals with Liberalism – previously presented – which, for this subject-form, indicates the defense that the individual interest of the cosplayer performing the performance must prevail and not the opinions of others that may hinder or diminish their practices. The other morality is Self-affirmation, which presents how cosplayers consider that the phenomenon is capable of freeing them from shyness and, mainly, allowing them to express ethnic, sexuality or gender aspects thanks to the diversity that they believe should predominate in the cosplay community.

As seen previously, the Liberalism morality is analogous to the Stimulus power diagram, as many cosplayers consider that other people's opinions should serve to encourage their performances and ideas to be exercised via cosplay. The Self-affirmation morality corresponds to two power diagrams. The first one, called Trust – presented previously – presents an arrangement of actions taken to institutionalize the idea that cosplayers should not fear their own limitations, nor those of others. The other one, named Equality – a novelty – indicates the fight for personal characteristics of the cosplayers, even those not previously seen.

To this subject-form, Stimulus is supported by power operators called Deliberation – presented previously. Trust, in turn, is associated with the Deliberation and Emancipation power operators – both presented previously. Equality has a relation with Emancipation and Exaltation power operators. This latter power operator, not yet presented, concerns the cosplayers' behavior who seek to make their performances a means to fight against social asymmetries that they experience in cosplay and in their personal lives.

Three discursive formations reflect the Deliberation power operator aligned with Avengers subjectivity. Deliberation and Emancipation are analogous to discursive formation named as "Cosplay must be satisfying" – presented previously. Emancipation and Exaltation have, in common, a link with the discursive formation defined as "Cosplay allows individuality" since some cosplayers consider how their performances allow them to know themselves, stimulating personal growth. As singularity, Exaltation is also analogous to "Cosplay struggles disrespect", the last discursive formation identified. It represents the understanding of the phenomenon that allows their performers to manifest their ontological characteristics with pride to fight against prejudice or harassment.

One of the examples selected to illustrate Avengers was a post made on a U.S. cosplayer's Instagram feed on February 6, 2021, when she posted her reaction to criticism of her Little Mermaid performance (see Fig. 4). At that moment, she was performing a version – which was also performed in the 2023 Live Action – in which the main character would be a black woman.
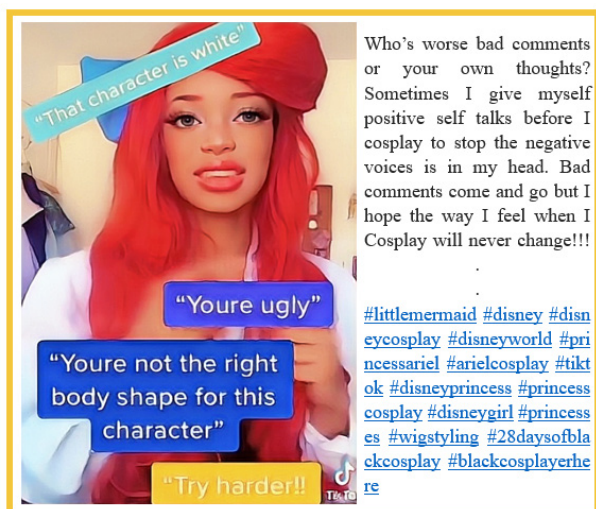
Figure 4: Avengers example
Source: Elaborated by the authors from the virtual ethnomethodology *corpus*.

It is possible to observe in the subtitles of the video and the publication that she considers that, at the very least, "Cosplay must be satisfying" for those performing. However, it is also possible to note that she believes that "Cosplay allows individuality" since she was performing a variation of her ethnicity through changes in a beloved character, but also using hashtags that exalt her identity pride – i.e., #28daysofblackcosplay and #blackcosplayerhere.

Such discourses point to the Deliberation exercise – when trying to deal with bad situations in a conciliatory way, without responding to other people's negative comments – and to the Emancipation – when establishing that she can achieve anything she aims through her performances. Both exercises converge towards a Trust when she positions herself as capable, publishing on various social networks, to perform a beloved character with her ontological characteristics.

Consequently, it is possible to infer the existence of Self-affirmation when she uses cosplay to manifest a social space in the cultural grouping, but which goes beyond the phenomenon itself. Thus, she positions herself as an Avenger, ready to defend her space through the consumption practices she executes and experiences.

Political ethic: agonistic truths produced in a performativity

The three subject-forms are guided by an ethic formulated to give new meaning to the phenomenon based on their own values and how they conceive interactions and performances about how cosplay should work. Among these cosplayers, the phenomenon is an opportunity for them to exercise justified political positions to safeguard the group of which they are part, assuming that the existence of problems in sharing their performances or dealing with their peers is crucial to the ethics that guide how they constitute themselves as practitioners of cosplay. Such political ethic indicates how cosplayers produce constituted truths that evoke civic-political conditions and discussions aimed at governing the group in which they operate, but which are not limited to this environment.

Thus, our results indicate how the production of truths about one's own interactional practices is a means of positioning oneself in the face of political issues (Mikkonen; Moisander; Firat, 2011; Coskuner-Balli, 2020). According to Zwick et al. (2008), interactions between consumers tend to produce political individuals whose main function is to perpetuate the form of government that already governs them. In this effort, they express themselves through a continuous construction of narratives based on the citation and reiteration of norms, conventions, and other cultural resources that they can access and give new meaning to.

Elaborating oneself through the citation of norms is presented by Butler (1993) as a performativity in which individuals assume social roles to preserve their status; roles granted by the cultural matrix are a means of maintaining power structures and inhibiting performativities that threaten them. Thus, despite being commonly conceived as an act of opposition, performativity is, in fact, a reaction to the devices that govern us (Butler, 2002). Furthermore, it is an ethical disposition when subjects position themselves in political roles according to social norms previously established (Butler, 2005).

Such political roles go beyond the subjectivity itself, being productive of the government conditions in which performativity is exercised. Thus, we glimpse this political reaction in the way in which different cosplayers' subjectivities are articulated to react to the power structures that regulate their consumption practices. Vigilantes, Gatekeepers, and Avengers, each in their own way, take upon themselves the responsibility of producing truths that legitimize their view of the phenomenon and relationships with their peers. They are subjects who consider it possible and viable to take a political stance, even if they need to conflict with others to do so. Their diverse performances compose a performativity that positions them civically and politically on cosplay, but also beyond it.

Consequently, the political ethic identified among cosplayers endorses the understanding that individuals can resist multiple times through the exercise of their own interactional performances (see Thompson; Üstüner, 2015). Specifically, it illustrates how consumption performativity is composed of multiple performances that, at some level, allude to socially instituted knowledge – such as the political positions identified in our results. The performances carried out by cosplayers are subversive of each other, corroborating how consumption practices function as an arena for political demonstrations.

However, such subversion between peers is contradictory to the communal and participatory phenomenon itself, as in cosplay. Historically, cosplayers struggle to be socially and civically accepted (Seregina; Weijo, 2017) and can be oppressed externally – by the social context – and internally – among peers who act in a political manner. Therefore, to deal with this oppression, they exercise political performances that resist others but can also oppress.

In this sense, we corroborate Gicquel's (2017) understanding that consumer resistance is simultaneously a practical and political exercise. They are practical as they depend on the individual's will. On the one hand, whether they are interested in resisting; on the other hand, they choose to act to normalize the conduct of those who threaten their own. In the political aspect, by labeling the other a rationality that compromises its own, revealing a position in relation to the norms: that of being subverted or corrected.

It seems, therefore, that the governing conduct process at a microphysical level: certain oppressed subjects can also oppress. Such oppression of others is a responsibility to oneself that, ultimately and in a more extreme way, is pointed out by Foucault (2003) as the substance that allowed the institutionalization of totalitarian and discriminatory regimes: a danger to contemporary society and multiple subjectivities. To avoid this danger, it is necessary to establish and maintain multiple resistances.

Such an aspect seemed to be how cosplayers' performances produce truths about cosplay when they resist each other. Those who attack peers – the Vigilantes – are resisting what they consider to be threats to what they see as valid for the phenomenon. Those who defend themselves – the Avengers – exercise resistance to the problems of themselves and others that may inhibit their participation as cosplayers. Furthermore, those who preserve – the Gatekeepers – resist the conflicting articulations of their peers, assuming the responsibility of maintaining the community in coalition.

In this sense, it is possible to reflect that they are close to Foucault's proposition about how political movements produce truths about the conditions that produce subjects. These truths are produced in continuous negotiation of knowledge that goes through the process of verification – when truths are incorporated by the subject into their life. Verifying is a process in which one truth is validated against others; also called games of truth, and which can be observed when different truths are put to the test to be legitimized and adjusted in certain contexts (Foucault, 2011).

On the one hand, the Vigilantes create truths to prevent other people's practices and performances that deviate from what they consider plausible for cosplay. It is an impediment that alludes to political behaviors of segregation and even prejudices against identities that they perceive as subject to attack. On the other hand, there are the Avengers who produce truths capable of legitimizing space and conditions that allow cosplayers to perform in a healthy way. This legitimation reproduces political movements of representation, accessibility, mutual respect, etc. On an interim basis, Gatekeepers co-exist, those who proclaim truths that enable the continuity of the phenomenon through surveillance of themselves and others. It is a way of monitoring and refuting the inclusion of political movements that are exercised or guide the practices of others, since, for them, the main concern is that their relationship with the phenomenon is not distorted by the actions of their peers.

It is possible to observe that, despite being contradictory to each other, it is cosplayers who are ready to deal with others based on political ethics, exerting resistance to government forms and other people's conduct that do not match what they understand as cosplay. Therefore, we reach a broad contribution based on the inference of this cosplay ethics: it works like a Foucauldian agonism, when distinct resistances affect each other without canceling each other out or antagonizing each other.

The agonistic relationship is anti-antagonistic, characterized by the way in which government forms influence each other. As power relations imply resistance, it is possible for government forms to coexist – and the same goes for resistance. More than coexisting, the multiple influences of resistance are what allow subjects to recognize their own wills in the face of other people's moralities and truths. Therefore, agonism is a process that enables the production of subjects; it is a condition for the exercise of freedom (Foucault, 1997).

Agonistic relationships are present in the way individuals use their cultural capital in order to experience anti-antagonistic relationships (Kozinets; Handelman, 2004). Consumers can use relationships, positions, and interactions with peers to experience their own consumption practices that meet their desires without hindering those who do not share these (Camargo; Souza-Leão; Moura, 2022; Roux; Belk, 2019).

Thus, the agonism between cosplayers guides their positions by a political ethic: even when uncomfortable with others, they act to deal with other resistances that clash with their own, aiming to establish government forms that they consider valid for cosplay. To safeguard their truth about cosplay, they elaborate on the phenomenon as a political arena for their own identities. After all, their performances both establish and illustrate how cosplay should work, representing their political positions among their peers and, broadly, to the social context in which they live.

Final considerations

The political ethic observed among cosplayers' subjectivity illustrates how performativity elaborated through contemporary practices positions individuals according to social norms that extrapolate marketing relationships. Each performativity indicates and tries to institutionalize how cosplay should work, representing their political positions among their peers and, broadly, to the social context in which they live. Despite Vigilantes and Avengers positioning themselves against each other, they share an interest with Gatekeepers to guide everyone through their own truths, a phenomenon that unites them.

Thus, each subjectivity represents a performativity when subjects establish themselves in an agonistic relationship exercised among consumers in the same subculture. Such agonism between cosplayers guides them to live the Political ethic: even when uncomfortable with others, they act to deal with other resistances that clash with their own, aiming to establish government forms that they consider valid for cosplay.

Broadly, the present research contribution relies on the inference of how cosplay ethics works: it is both the Butlerian ethical disposition through performativity and a Foucauldian agonism resulting from the ethics that guide consumer subjectivities. Consequently, our study also presents another contribution: the interpretation of the results through the combination of epistemologically close theoretical lenses – i.e., Butler and Foucault – and which are usually accessed autonomously in cultural studies.

In practical terms, study results elucidate how, although some subjective positions appear to conflict with each other, they are not antagonistic. The agonism observed in the cosplay participatory culture indicates that many contemporary interactive communities are composed of members who establish themselves politically through conflict with their peers. Thus, our empirical analysis indicates that many contemporary political conflicts are equivalent to a broader ethical disposition.

However, it is worth pointing out the limitations of this study. Although we believe that the virtual ethnography strategies adopted in our study allowed us to map and reach cosplayers from different locations and cultural contexts, we are still limited to the performances and interactions associated with the use of social platforms. In this sense, the absence of analysis of in-person practices may have encouraged more courageous and conflictual positions – i.e., vigilantes, gatekeepers, and avengers – based on the supposed safety of distance and possible anonymity of social networks.

Therefore, it seems opportune to expand what we discussed through investigations that focus on offline practices. Broadly, it seems valid to expand our discussions to other performativity – i.e., drag queen, carnival – to understand the ethical implications and conditions that produce subjects through contemporary cultural manifestations with media resonance.

Specifically, a possible spinoff to give continuity to the discussions of the results presented here would be to explore how the current groups among cosplayers – i.e., vigilantes, gatekeepers, and avengers – articulate themselves politically due to a need to belong or to act on desires. Respectively, these future studies can draw on the contributions of Boris Cyrulnik or Giles Deleuze, to understand how they assimilate the rules previously established in the community in which they operate.

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informações do artigo

Resultado de projeto de pesquisa, de dissertação, tese
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Apresentação anterior
Não se aplica.

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Não se aplica.

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