

Cultural consumers' gatekeeping in cosplay: cynical truths established through fans' practice

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Abstract

Purpose – Cultural consumer gatekeeping shapes interactions with the marketplace, indicating that participatory culture and fans' practices – such as cosplay – can establish truth games in fan culture. Thus, this study aims to examine how cultural consumers' gatekeeping establishes truth games in fan practice.

Design/methodology/approach – The methodological approach integrates Foucault's analytical framework with the netnographic data collection, which considered cosplayer interactions over five years.

Findings – Two power diagrams structure cosplayers' resistance. Disillusion reflects opposition to perceived distortions, such as external appropriations and the politicization of cosplay. Depravity captures the tensions surrounding hypersexualized performance, balancing artistic expression and community norms. By navigating these conflicts, they enact the consumer truths that regulate participation in a gatekeeping process, where community members assert authority over acceptable practices and reinforce participatory culture through internal governance and exclusionary mechanisms.

Social implications – This study reveals how consumer communities self-regulate through internal truth production, shaping participatory cultures. Practically, it provides insights for marketing researchers to navigate cultural sensitivities, helping them engage with fandom while respecting governance and authenticity.

Originality/value – This study contributes and conceptualizes cultural gatekeeping as a disposition of cynical consumer resistance and expanding knowledge on how consumer truths shape inclusion, exclusion and power structures in digital fandoms.

Keywords Gatekeeping, Cosplay, Consumer communities, Cynicism, Netnographic Foucauldian genealogy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Gatekeepers are marketing agents traditionally studied to understand the retention of relevant information in the buying center of the organizational market (Keller & Kotler, 2022). They are agents capable of limiting access to information that may harm previously established marketing relationships (Webster & Wind, 1972).

In consumer research, gatekeeping manifests itself when consumers directly or indirectly control the information or practices of other consumers (Drenten, Harrison, & Pendarvis, 2023), indicating the presence of hierarchies and power relations perpetuated by marketing (Thompson, 2019). Among gatekeepers who appropriate available technologies, those who



evoked their leadership role in virtual communities that increasingly determine the way in which goods, services and brands are consumed today stand out (Obiegbu, Larsen, Ellis, & O'Reilly, 2019).

An emblematic example of consumer cultural gatekeeping can be seen in the way fans monitor, control and determine correct ways to consume the media products they relate to (Scott, 2019; Lynch, 2022). Fans are a specialized type of consumer, marked by a strong connection with both the media objects they consume and with other fans (Fuschillo, 2020; Moura & de Souza-Leão, 2023). This topic has a transdisciplinary nature and is relevant to cultural studies. Since the seminal work of Kozinets (2020), it has been widely investigated using the culturalist approach to consumer research.

Fans are considered emblematic members of participatory cultures when individuals consider themselves responsible for maintaining and expanding the ethos in which they interact (Jenkins, 2006; Scott, 2019). This responsibility gives them the confidence to share opinions and content they produce (e.g. fanarts, fanfictions, cosplays and fan videos) and to publicly express their intense relationship with the pop culture media objects they consume (Chen, 2021; Fuschillo, 2020).

Among the content produced by fans, cosplay has been highlighted as emblematic because it is an authorial, corporal and collective performance in which consumers momentarily experience the media products with which they relate intensely (Moura & de Souza-Leão, 2023; Seregina & Weijo, 2017). Cosplay is the act of dressing up in costumes and playing certain characters to be recognized by other fans (De Mello, De Almeida, & Dalmoro, 2021; Moura & Souza-Leão, 2024). Therefore, it is a practice that is simultaneously an individual elaboration and permeates community recognition and is subject to this validation (Gn, 2011).

The content produced and shared by fans, such as cosplay, has been investigated using the culturalist approach to consumer research so that marketing managers can understand their position regarding changes in products and brands (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022). Other studies consider whether such content shared in consumer communities is a manifestation that maintains, questions or endorses previously established marketing truths (Cavalcanti, Souza-Leão, & Moura, 2021).

The way consumers propagate marketing truths indicates their alignment with the economic and cultural logics embedded in their consumption practices. It is common for consumers to exercise participatory empowerment over what they consume, producing truths that adjust to the government forms that conduct their consumer relations. Thus, when consumers produce truths that allow them to position themselves, they assimilate or resist norms that can be expressed through their consumption practices (Denegri-Knott, Abraham, & Nixon, 2018; Mikkonen, Moisander, & Firat, 2011).

According to Foucault (2017), truths are present both in the knowledge we produce and in the behaviors we exercise but also in the values and moralities that position us socially. Truths emerge from the positions we assume and delimit the relationships and practices we exercise throughout our existence. They can be produced both to deal with our wills and the moralities that are part of our lives. Likewise, there are truths that are external to us: those produced by other subjects, government forms, knowledge institutionalization and so on (Foucault, 2011).

The truths discussed in Michel Foucault's works can be seen in the way consumers often express resistance to certain marketing practices or when they build relationships with products and their peers based on morality, desired ethics and personal truths (Thompson, Henry & Bardhi, 2018). Such relationships are derived from consumer narratives that function as regimes of truth produced by consumers themselves and that determine the forms of government that guide the marketing practices in which they are inserted (Camargo, de Souza-Leão, & Moura, 2022). Consequently, real games can and are created by fans since these specialized consumers are recognized for constantly positioning themselves before their peers and the media products with which they relate (Souza-Leão, Ferreira, & Moura, 2024).

Following the concatenation of the arguments presented, the present study was designed to understand **how cultural consumers' gatekeeping establishes truth games for fan practices.**

Such an understanding reflects the study's aim to expand insights for marketing studies based on Michel Foucault's concept of truth games produced by fans, which can guide their perceptions about consumption practices, narratives of media products and brand knowledge.

Although Foucauldian truths have long been explored in consumer culture theory (CCT) studies (Denecri-Knott *et al.*, 2018; Mikkonen *et al.*, 2011), including addressing those produced and discussed among fans (Cavalcanti *et al.*, 2021), most of these studies explore ethical elaboration. Consequently, there is a literature gap in exploring truths manifested among members of consumer communities that institutionalize the truths that govern their practices. Additionally, our study aimed to expand the concept of consumers' cultural gatekeeping in contemporary contexts when their practices are exercised collectively and internationally when they move between material and virtual environments.

In this sense, we adopt the suggestion of Arnould, Thompson, and Press (2020) by adopting cosplay – a material and virtual fan practice – as an empirical phenomenon that highlights the richness of reflections that can be proposed by the culturalist approach to consumer research. Nevertheless, we consider that Foucauldian theoretical concepts continue to deepen our understanding of the power relations inherent in contemporary consumption practices (Holt, 2017; Thompson, 2017).

Literature review

Cultural consumers' gatekeeping through social media

Gatekeeping is a marketing phenomenon that has long been investigated to understand the role of certain agents in maintaining relevant information, especially in the management of purchasing centers in business-to-business markets (Keller & Kotler, 2022). Thus, gatekeepers were initially presented as market agents who act to limit other individuals' access to certain aspects of marketing relationships (Webster & Wind, 1972).

To expand the initial concept, consumer research studies consider that gatekeeping can occur when some consumers exercise power and control over other consumers (Drenten *et al.*, 2023). According to Sihvonen, Luoma and Falk (2021), the gatekeeper role played by a customer is based on their knowledge of the products consumed. The authors reiterate how gatekeeping can illustrate the intrinsic Foucauldian relationship in marketing phenomena in which power relations are inseparable from the conditions that allow the elaboration of knowledge (Korai & Souiden, 2019).

For CCT researchers, gatekeeping is a dynamic process that simultaneously reveals hierarchies between marketing agents and maintains or perpetuates previously established practices and knowledge (Thompson, 2019). Gatekeepers commonly assume privileged consumers with access to economic and symbolic capital networks and may limit the participation of third parties for cultural or ontological reasons (Sakdiyakorn & Chirakranont, 2024).

More recently, gatekeepers' existence has become even more emblematic in the context of social media, because despite the considerable content and information available on the web, social networks have led many users to seek content established by gatekeepers (Heinderyckx, 2015; Vos, 2015). According to Wallace (2017), contemporary gatekeeping occurs in digital media because of the multiple actions of the algorithms and users. For the author, the online information selection process cannot be explained by the classical gatekeeping theory. Thus, he proposes the existence of archetypes among gatekeepers – journalists, strategic professionals, algorithms and individual amateurs – that determine how information is propagated and validated in contemporary society so dependent on social media.

Thus, one of the emerging themes in discussing gatekeepers' role in CCT studies is collective consumer communities (Obiegbu *et al.*, 2019). Among such communities, fandoms – that is, fan groups – are highlighted because their members can assume a power position over their peers (e.g. they have more knowledge, social relationships, time in the fandom, etc.). Such possibilities indicate how fans begin to act as gatekeepers of consumption practices that unite them. By becoming gatekeepers, fans become peer monitors (Scott, 2019; Lynch, 2022).

Cosplay and fans participatory consumption

Fans are a specialized type of consumer characterized primarily by a high degree of interest in and relationship with their consumption practices (Chen, 2021; Fuschillo, 2020). Originally introduced to consumer research by Kozinets (2020), fans have become an emblematic theme in recent marketing studies because they show high loyalty to the products they consume. According to Jenkins (2006), fan culture exemplifies a broader phenomenon, participatory culture. In this context, individuals' appropriate available technologies, converging them to move between cultures that interest them and experience consumption with their peers – other people who share the same interests.

The participatory characteristic established among fans derives from their spaces in which they experience social interactions, notably fandoms. Such spaces allow fans to feel free from prejudices and stimulate collaborative fan production based on their attachment to consumer media objects and with other consumers (Fuschillo, 2020). Among fan production, cosplay is an emblematic phenomenon because it indicates continually seeking to improve their relationship with the media objects they consume and interact with their peers (Moura & Souza-Leão, 2024; Winge, 2006).

Cosplay is defined as a typical fan production when consumers use costumes to interpret fictional characters from pop culture in themed events or by sharing their performances on social media (Moura & de Souza-Leão, 2023; Seregina & Weijo, 2017).

The definition of cosplay involves the interaction between fans who dress up as fictional characters and/or immerse themselves in pop culture. This phenomenon is composed of a set of skills and emotions that contribute to the creation of remarkable experiences capable of strengthening fans' bonds and increasing their participation in fandoms (De Mello *et al.*, 2021; Gn, 2011).

Thus, cosplayers seek to balance the fidelity of their costumes with the aesthetics of imitation to create and experience authentic and recognizable performances (Gn, 2011). Such cosplayers' effort represents both a way of demonstrating commitment to the cosplay phenomenon and a means of experiencing their own desires by positioning themselves productively in the face of the power relations previously established in their consumption practices (Moura & de Souza-Leão, 2023; Winge, 2006).

Truth games in consumer practices

Consumers' efforts to manifest their own will reflect broader strategies when they develop and disseminate truths about their consumer relationships with other market agents with whom they interact (Denegri-Knott *et al.*, 2018). Consequently, it represents how the different contexts that consumers incorporate into their attitudes converge in Michel Foucault's concept of truth games (Cavalcanti *et al.*, 2021).

According to Foucault (2012), truth games allow subjects to constitute themselves both as beings of will and social beings. Such truth games occur in negotiations produced by the subject. Consequently, they allow subjects to better understand their role in the social fabric in which they live. It is a resistance exercise when they test their own will or assimilate the moralities and wills of others.

These resistance exercises can be observed in the marketing context when consumers produce and corroborate their relationships with what they consume and with their peers in a way that manifests the moralities to be followed, ethical conditions they pursue and truths about their experiences (Thompson *et al.*, 2018). Such a possibility is due to how consumer relations are associated with certain narratives that have the character of truth regimes for consumers. Therefore, consumers conduct themselves and are led to follow ethical or unethical forms depending on their positions and the consumption practices of peers with whom they interact (Camargo *et al.*, 2022).

According to Souza-Leão *et al.* (2024), these regimes of truth can be seen emblematically in interactions between fans, since they are consumers who are continually positioned in

relation to their peers and the media products they consume. For the authors, the participatory condition that defines them as fans leads them to establish truth games in which they confront their opinions and positions with those of other consumers and managers of the products they consume.

It is worth mentioning how truth games are exercises in taking truths for the self, or defending one’s own truths before others, to ensure that they become true in the context in which one lives (Foucault, 2011). These exercises are fundamental since subjects constitute themselves as such and know the ethics that they seek throughout their existence through the various truths that are present in their ethos (Foucault, 2017).

Methodological procedures

The current research employed a Netnographic Foucauldian Genealogy (NFG) approach, integrating Michel Foucault’s analytical framework to analyze data from online consumer communities. This methodological fusion expands the application of Foucauldian concepts in consumer research, as observed in prior studies (Cavalcanti et al., 2021; Chen, 2021; Denegri-Knott et al., 2018) and follows Kozinets’ (2020) suggestion to incorporate analytical perspectives into netnographic investigations.

According to Kozinets (2020), netnographic data collection begins with a systematic approach across social media platforms. Figure 1 was designed to list the author’s suggestions and detail the ways in which they met. Additionally, Figure 1 presents the analytical categories presented by Foucault (1981) for his genealogical approach. The next two subsections explain the data collection and analysis procedures used in the present study.

Data collection procedures

We followed the five steps outlined by Kozinets (2020) using Instagram search tools to find, select, monitor and archive the interactions of cosplayers who posted photos and videos about the phenomenon. Although we reached public profiles or received consent from interviewees to use their data during the research, we chose to follow the author’s suggestion to preserve the identity of the participants.

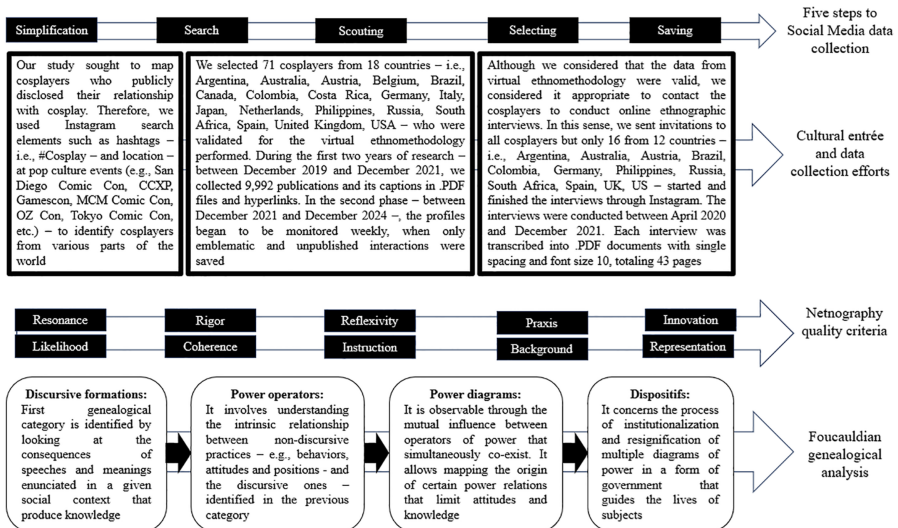


Figure 1. NFG methodological procedures. Source: Elaborated by the authors following Kozinets (2020) and Foucault (1981)

During the two phases over five years, we conducted two major data collection procedures: virtual ethnomethodology and online ethnographic interviews. On the one hand, virtual ethnomethodology allows researchers to map and familiarize themselves with the intrinsic relationship between consumers' routines and the practices of the cultural grouping to which they belong (Jacobsen & Hansen, 2021). On the other hand, online ethnographic interviews give a direct voice to members of the virtual cultural context investigated on platforms where interviewees interact with their peers, allowing researchers a holistic perception of the phenomenon investigated (Cristofari & Guitton, 2017).

For the present study, the data collection process began with virtual ethnomethodology; when we monitored the accounts of cosplayers, we reached out on Instagram for three months. In this sense, the archiving of the interactions made available by the cosplayers on their Instagram profiles was carried out in two phases. In total, 71 cosplayers were monitored over 5 years and during 2 phases of data collection that met the saturation point (see Figure 1).

Additionally, we conducted online ethnographic interviews directly on the Instagram platform using text messages. After sending an invitation, one of the researchers initiated a dialog that could be concluded on the same day or extended over up to a week – depending on the availability and speed of the interviewees' responses – and which, once concluded, was no longer repeated. It is worth noting that the guiding topics – cosplay history, social media use, presence in the routine, relationship with characters and other fans and local singularities, etc. – accessed in the interviews were developed based on inferences observed during the first three months of virtual ethnomethodology. In total, 16 interviews were initiated and completed (see Figure 1).

To validate the collected data, we sought to meet the quality criteria indicated by Kozinets (2020) (see Figure 1). Namely, the selected profiles needed to have public access and share content mainly about cosplay at least once a week on the feed or through stories. Such content attests to how they are a locus that would allow researchers to observe the human dimension – i.e. “resonance” – and the singularities of the cultural grouping in a credible way – i.e. “likelihood.” Consequently, both criteria reinforce the researchers' attention to carrying out rigorous netnography data collection.

After this process, the data were organized based on their collection source and following chronological order in spreadsheets to be analyzed following the Foucauldian proposal (see below). This effort elucidates the researchers' interest in proposing contributions that are “coherent” with the phenomenon under investigation and derive from the “reflexivity” operated through the rounds of analytical triangulation. In this sense, the presentation of results – see the homonymous section – was prepared in such a way as to “instruct” readers and respond to the observed “praxis,” considering that the study gives voice to the members of the cultural phenomenon under investigation. Finally, these results were interpreted with a theoretical “background” to establish an “innovative” and “representative” reading evidenced in the main contribution of the study – see the results discussion section.

Data analysis procedures

After an initial reading and data organization, we conducted a genealogical analysis based on Foucault's work (2012). Thus, it is possible to perform NFG using four analytical categories: discursive formations, power operators, power diagrams and dispositifs (see Figure 1).

Discursive formations represent speech, and conceptions express the same phenomenon. Therefore, they can be identified by researchers when analyzing speech and the context in which such speech is produced together.

Considering that everything that is spoken alludes to certain non-discursive practices, such as behaviors, norms and values, it is possible for researchers to abstract discursive formations into an analytical category that is analogous to them: power operators. Such operators reveal the forces that direct the social postures employed and illustrate previously identified discourses.

By contrasting the power operators that they identified in their analysis, researchers can finally observe how these operators affect each other, establishing networks that guide a given social context. These networks are the next analytical category, called power diagrams, which allow the understanding of socially institutionalized government structures.

Understanding the co-existence of multiple power diagrams and the elements that give them substance – discursive formations and power operators – gives researchers the possibility of mapping the existence of a broader government form, considering the finalistic category of Foucault's genealogy of power. Called dispositifs, these government forms encompass and include all previous analytical categories, highlighting how power relations are inseparable from the production of knowledge that deals with the same social phenomenon.

Results presentation

We identified the existence of gatekeeping dispositifs, a government form that indicates how cosplayers organize themselves to reject behavioral changes and knowledge production in the cosplay phenomenon. Consequently, they focus on two main themes – disillusion and depravity power diagrams – that seem capable of threatening the existence of the cosplay phenomenon.

Both power diagrams revealed the truths performed by cosplayers seeking to establish limits to preserve their understanding of cosplay. Thus, to understand the aspects that make up these power diagrams, we elaborate on two subsections to present their elements – power operators and discursive formations – and examples.

Disillusion power diagram

Disillusion is a diagram that reveals the complex relationship between cosplayers in the face of a growing movement to promote incoherent agendas or appropriate cosplay to gain notoriety for themselves. On the one hand, they reject most demonstrations that defend social and political agendas through cosplay, since these movements commonly distort these agendas, often hindering or attacking other cosplayers in a gratuitous or disproportionate manner. However, they contest and are bothered by the appropriation of characters and media products by individuals who seem unaware of the content they are performing. Thus, the two power operators can sustain this diagram.

Militancy was the first power operator associated with a disillusion diagram. It refers to the positioning of cosplayers who oppose what they consider distorted and radical political agendas. For cosplayers, issues of race, gender and sexuality are very important, but they are often misappropriated, promoting hatred among the cosplay community instead of institutionalizing respect for these issues.

Consequently, this power operator – i.e. militancy – is analogous to the discursive formation called political issues. This discourse by cosplayers corroborates the understanding that many social and ideological issues are improperly inserted into the cosplay phenomenon. Therefore, many cosplayers consider it valid to promote and discuss political issues, but only if it is done in a coherent manner and not as an imposition that can lead to reactionism.

Complementarily, appropriation is the other power operator associated with the disillusion diagram. Such operators present the position of cosplayers in the face of what they consider an invasion promoted by individuals who do not fully understand the cosplay phenomenon as an inclusive and permissive community for all who respect certain unspoken rules. Specifically, they are bothered by the way in which social issues are distorted to promote agendas that are not applicable in certain situations and contexts but also by people who are unfamiliar with the characters they are playing.

Consequently, the appropriation operator is analogous to the two discursive formations. First, political issues – presented previously – indicate the perception of cosplayers about very important social themes that are emptied when they are inappropriately inserted into the cosplay context. Second, shallow issues are discursive formations that represent how cosplay

The superficial (i.e. shallow issues) manner can be seen both in poorly elaborated arguments and mainly in the lack of respect for the characteristics of the characters and media products that are considered very important to their fans.

To illustrate the analytical concatenation between the disillusion power diagram, its power operators (i.e. militancy and appropriation) and the discursive formations that are analogous to them (i.e. political and shallow issues), we organize [Figure 2](#), when we present the response of a Malaysian cosplayer from an interview conducted in July 2020.

When answering questions about aspects that bother her in the cosplay community, the Malaysian cosplayer enumerates how common it has been to observe disproportionate attacks among her peers because of political issues that are unduly inserted into the phenomenon. At this point, she enumerated the existence of political issues that should not exist in cosplay. Additionally, her reflection leads her to think about how the phenomenon can be different in Western and Eastern contexts, with the former being marked by cosplayers who resort to the phenomenon to conduct business. Both accounts reveal the perspective of shallow issues when cosplayers demonstrate that they are in the phenomenon not for the hobby or to perform what they are fans of but for other interests.

The two discursive formations indicate the cosplayer's position in the two spheres. The first is to criticize militancy, since she considers that political agendas have lost their way and are ruining and hindering cosplay. Second, denying appropriation since the insertion of political themes or the performance of cosplay for business interests distorts the phenomenon itself. When added together, the two operators converge on the existence of the disillusion power diagram, in which cosplayers establish countermeasures to preserve the phenomenon in the face of the disservices promoted by other cosplayers.

Another example that allows us to observe the power diagram of disillusion that bothers cosplayers can be seen in the speech of a Turkish cosplayer (see [Figure 3](#)) from an online interview conducted in December 2021. It is his response to how he chooses a character to play and the care he takes when performing.

According to the cosplayer, when he chooses a character, he stops feeling like himself or herself and becomes the person he is playing. In this sense, he understands that some of his peers seek characters who give voice to their personal and social demands. However, this search produces a "huge but," since there are cosplayers who devise ways to humiliate other people.

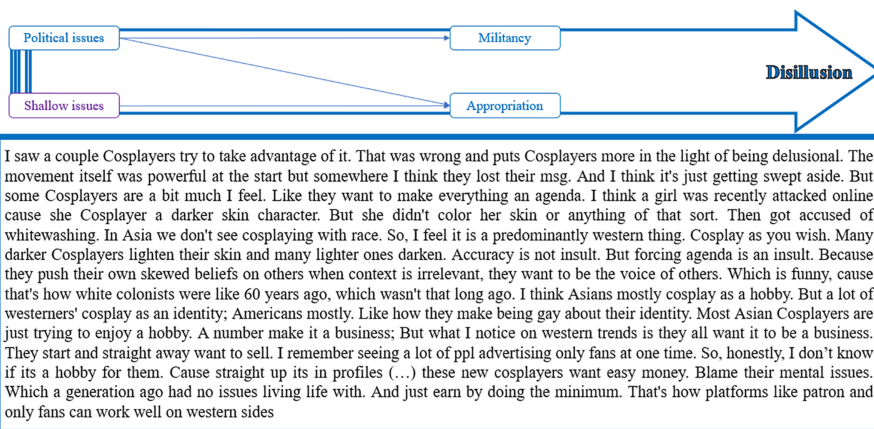


Figure 2. Disillusion example. Source: Organized by the authors from online ethnographic interview corpus

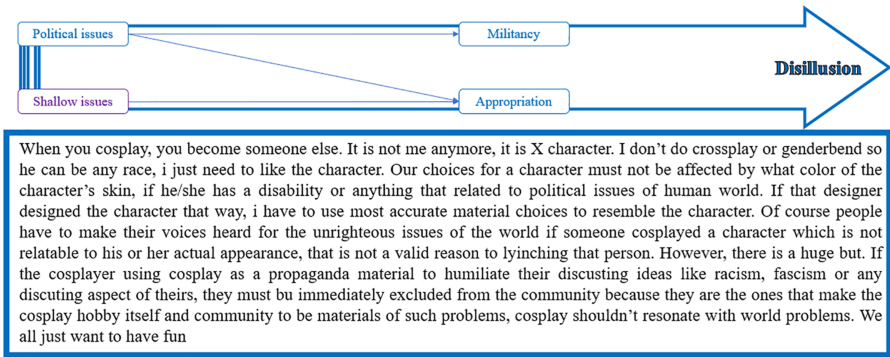


Figure 3. Disillusion example. Source: Organized by the authors from online ethnographic interview corpus

Consequently, bringing real problems to cosplay can ruin the phenomenon. In this sense, it is possible to identify his disillusion, supported by the two behaviors of other cosplayers. On one hand, activism brings factual issues to a phenomenon that functions as escapism. On the other hand, there is an appropriate cause that leads to the dissemination of propaganda materials that distort the playful aspect of cosplay. Each point, respectively, to political and shallow issues that are stated as negative aspects that should be rejected in cosplay.

Depravity power diagram

The other power diagram identified is called depravity. This diagram reveals the power relations of cosplayers in the face of the growing interest of their peers and enthusiasts in the cosplay phenomenon with sexualized performances. In these situations, many cosplayers accept the possibility of performing sexualized performances, including canonically sexy characters, but position themselves against the lack of respect commonly experienced in these situations. Two power operators help to understand such a diagram.

The next power operator identified was named fake, indicating the behavior of cosplayers in response to the way some of their peers perform sexy characters without knowing the canon, performing that for their attractiveness on social media or at events. Consequently, they consider that such cosplayers should not perform such performances, as they offend those who really know the characters – that is, fans – or simply promote obscenity.

Therefore, the fake power operator is analogous to the two discursive formations. On the one hand, it is a behavior endorsed by shallow issues – presented previously – when cosplayers consider that many of those who perform sexy characters are unaware of the canon of the media product they are performing. On the other hand, it is positioning that represents the fear of lewd issues when cosplayers consider that sexy performances have attracted prejudice and molesters because of the excessive use of obscenities that do not do justice to the characters themselves.

In a more radical way, lewd issues' discursive formation is analogous to the other power operator that constitutes the depravity diagram. This last power operator is called porn, representing the position of cosplayers in differentiating and rejecting sexual performances from cosplayers and enthusiasts who are interested in adult content. In this sense, they argue and behave in defense of the existence of characters that can be considered sexy but that should not be treated as kinks for other people.

To exemplify the last power diagram and its composition, we selected an excerpt from an interview with a Canadian cosplayer (see Figure 4). It is her response to how she deals with and relates to people who are not part of the cosplay community.

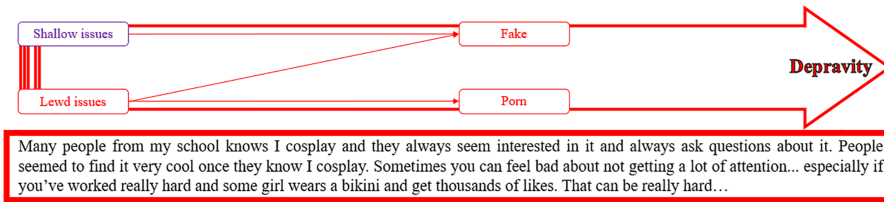


Figure 4. Depravity example. Source: Organized by the authors from online ethnographic interview corpus

In her speech, the cosplayer considered herself lucky that the people around her at school admired her cosplaying skills. However, she also reveals that she feels bad when the characters she plays are not recognized, regardless of the effort she puts into her cosplay. This feeling intensifies when she remembers that there are people who win – that is, especially women in bikinis – who gain public recognition, i.e. likes on social networks, so easily.

Thus, it is possible to observe that she is bothered by the existence of depravity sustained simultaneously by fake cosplayers and by sensualized performances, that is, porn. Respectively, these behaviors are associated with a discourse by some cosplayers that shallow and lewd issues threaten and bother their relationship with the phenomenon.

Another example of depravity’s power diagram, its power operators (i.e. fake and porn), and the discursive formations that are analogous to them, that is, shallow and lewd issues, can be seen in a publication made by a French cosplayer in August 2021 (see Figure 5).

According to the French cosplayer, it seems necessary to constantly remind everyone who has access to her cosplay that her performance is not meant to arouse anyone’s fetish. Although there are cosplayers who perform shallow or lewdly out there, most cosplayers should be respected. After all, they are human beings striving to experience what they are fans of and endorse a phenomenon that should not be limited to the personal use of third parties’ private desires.

Consequently, she reveals both her position regarding those who consider her positioning to be fake cosplayers and the existence of a porn movement that has been growing among cosplay enthusiasts. When added together, both aspects indicate the existence of a depth that regulates the relationship between cosplayers when they position themselves before performances are considered sexual.

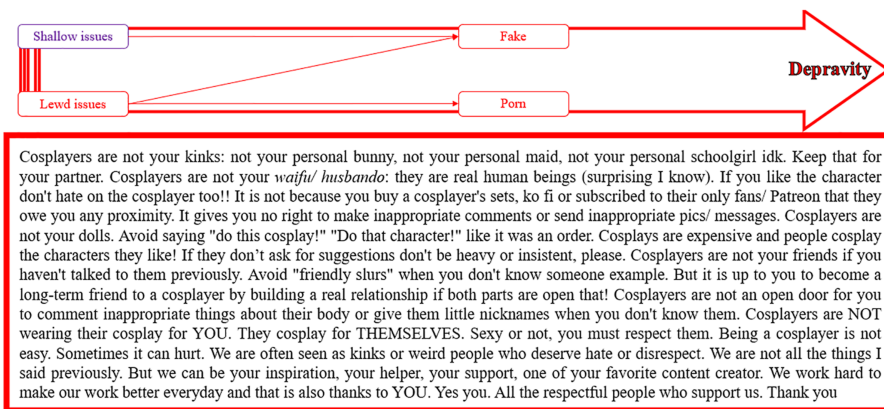


Figure 5. Depravity example. Source: Organized by the authors from virtual ethnomethodology corpus

Results discussion

The combination of the two power diagrams – disillusion and depravity – allows us to understand how many cosplayers have organized themselves to resist the practices promoted by their peers. However, peers' practices are also resistant, since other cosplayers are transforming cosplay considering their own needs.

Consequently, the resistances represented in the power diagrams exhibit other consumer resistances. Such mutual resistance establishes the gatekeeping disposition, which is the major contribution of our study. To elaborate and elucidate such contributions, we established a theoretical reflection in two spheres.

Cultural consumers' gatekeeping through fans truth

According to [Lynch \(2022\)](#), fans act as gatekeepers in their fandoms when they disseminate their preferences or validate their positions through technical knowledge of the media products they consume. Such actions reflect how they seek to accumulate social capital that transcends community content control.

Such aspects can be seen in political, shallow and lewd – debated cosplayers guided by gatekeeping dispositifs. These debates are discourses that can legitimize their personal values and interests, avoid certain behaviors and try to be accepted among peers. Furthermore, it is a way for them to attest to their prior knowledge about what may or may not be appropriate for both the characters they perform in and cosplay.

However, it is the consequent accusations – militancy, appropriation, fake and porn – that represent the novelty identified in this study in the gatekeeping process. For members of the consumer community (i.e. cosplayers), certain attitudes should not be popularized.

Thus, our results illustrate one of the four archetypes of contemporary gatekeeping proposed by [Wallace \(2017\)](#), namely, individual amateurs. When consumers decide to establish themes that should not be shared on social networks about the phenomenon with which they interact, they establish filters on the information associated with this phenomenon.

Consequently, they formulated and endorsed digital gatekeeping by appropriating the participatory aspects of online communities and social networks. Such appropriation was identified when some cosplayers made efforts to gatekeep and preserve the consumption practices that brought them together. Their efforts are exercised primarily by courage to continually tell the truth that allows them to preserve the authenticity of the community.

Based on this perspective, [Cronin and Hopkinson \(2018\)](#) consider it natural for consumers to attempt to assume a role in the gatekeeping process. In this scenario, consumers reinforce the institution of knowledge and legitimization of the power relations that already exist in each market context.

Thus, it is possible to understand that gatekeeping practiced among members of a consumer community is propagated beyond maintaining their positions in this group. Gatekeeping dispositif is a broader elaboration in which consumers position themselves to guarantee the authenticity of the community in which they operate.

Such authenticity is only possible through the production and enunciation of truths with peers. However, considering that these are the truths of fans who practice cosplay, they are also incorporated into the performances they carry out. Therefore, they are truths of fans who are confronted with those of the media products they consume and those of their peers; when their knowledge about the phenomenon is manifested in their behaviors, they reproduce it in the social context in which they experience it.

Gatekeeping through cynical consumer resistance

Broadly, gatekeepers are members of a cultural context who exercise actions to guide their peers and moderate the conditions of participation of those involved in the context. Thus, they propagate power relations capable of changing the perception of what content is interesting, leading people that they have contact with to change their view of a given phenomenon

(Shoemaker & Vos, 2014). It is an exercise that produces truths within the interactional context but is not limited to it. This seems to align with how consumers themselves evoke and institutionalize the government forms that guide them (Mikkonen, Vicdan, & Markkula, 2014).

From this perspective, they legitimize the orientation already established in the market they are part of, preserving the morality that may represent their interests but mainly reflecting conditions pre-established by others (Skälén, 2009). Such adherence to the moralities set forth in consumer practices commonly leads consumers to produce truths that make their perspectives valid (Camargo *et al.*, 2022).

Consequently, it can be interpreted that the cynics pointed out by Foucault (2011), who commit to expressing their own truth in the face of a series of trials that go beyond themselves, express a way of living that transforms the cynic and those with whom they come into contact. Therefore, it diverges from the contemporary understanding of cynic as a behavior that prioritizes only oneself. Cynicism is a continuous commitment to propagating truths that underpin the transformation or maintenance of government forms that allow them to live as they are.

The cynical consumer exercises an intellectual stance through consumption practices designed to incite critical self-reflection about the choices that other consumers make as members of contemporary society. It is a commitment to expressing one's truth, establishing what is valid for one and indicating to others that they can replicate one's own conduct (Mikkonen *et al.*, 2011).

Such cynicism characterizes gatekeeping among cosplayers, who position themselves and comment on problems that limit their cosplay activities. It is a measure they take to deal with the diagrams of power – that is, disillusion and depravity – that they consider need to be exposed to prevent them from perpetuating themselves in the participatory culture in which they operate.

This exposure is their commitment to propagating truths that support, but mainly maintain, the government forms previously established in the context in which they live. Therefore, when added to gatekeeping disposition, it indicates a cynical exercise that establishes authentic ways for peers to behave.

According to Cronin and Hopkinson (2018), the commitment to more regulated government forms – with social norms that assimilate the wills of their members – can be seen in the way consumers choose to associate themselves with and re-signify market technologies that they consider aligned with and directed towards broader moral values. Broadly, the propagation of certain knowledge in the market context disseminates behavioral forms that consumers assimilate as representatives of their own desires (Beckett, 2012).

Consequently, consumers interact with each other and produce truths about what they consume and how they consume. These truths guide their positions in relation to their peers and what they consume (Skälén, 2009). Thus, considering that they are fans, gatekeeping through cosplay expands Lynch's (2022) discussion of the actions of certain members who moderate a fandom.

In our findings, more than guiding the conditions of their peers, gatekeepers, who are members of fan communities, are interested in guiding their actions as those that should be validated by their peers. It is an effort to preserve the conditions that they conceive as fundamental for the practice of their performance, since they assume positions that simultaneously encourage the inclusion and exclusion of peers who may distort the phenomenon.

Interpreting gatekeeping disposition as a cynicism exercise through consumer practices expands Mikkonen *et al.* (2011). According to the authors, cynicism is a form of consumer resistance experienced through truth productions. It is possible to resist the institutionalization of market subjectivities that normalize consumers. Thus, cynical consumers do not accept being included in any position or ideology.

According to our findings, their resistance is to the subjective articulations of other consumers through truths that establish limits to the phenomenon that unites them. Thus, the gatekeeping disposition illustrates the existence of cynical consumers who propose their own

ways of dealing with the discourses and toxic relationships that circulate in the context in which they live.

In addition, these results extrapolate the conclusions of [Zwick and Denegri Knott \(2009\)](#). According to the authors, the knowledge generated in market interactions is a gatekeeper that preserves its functioning. It is an element that controls the inclusion and exclusion of agents that interact in this context and continually develops what they call “market intelligence” on the subject. There is mutual production of power relations and the development of knowledge that, when added together, ontologically produces consumers.

Such mutual production is fundamental to understanding our reflection on the cynicism exercised by gatekeeping dispositifs since consumers’ ontology goes beyond the condition of knowledge power. It is an exercise of freedom by consumers who resist the various truth games that guide market relations when they elucidate the will of consumers who re-signify truths to express themselves.

Furthermore, cultural consumers’ gatekeeping exercised by fans attests to how it is possible to simultaneously free oneself – through cynicism – and limit access to others. It is a marketing device that reveals the complexity of power relations established by consumers, who are present in the practices they exercise materially and virtually.

Final considerations

Gatekeeping is a dispositif when cosplayers elaborate on cynical conditions to simultaneously express and prioritize their own truths that allow them to practice cosplay. Through such a dispositif, certain consumers from participatory cultures can produce truths that involve limiting the information and performances to be propagated or associated with the phenomenon that emerges from an aesthetic in which they need to deal with possible conflicts among their peers. Despite limiting their peers, cultural consumers’ gatekeeping frees those who exercise it – or are aligned with it – through cynicism in which they produce truths that simultaneously represent their knowledge and values about the phenomenon and their conduct that illustrates and propagates such proposals.

Thus, the identified dispositif guides consumers to produce truths that prevent certain attitudes that may threaten the community in which they operate, that is, militancy, appropriation, fake and porn – considering its analogous polemic marketing knowledge – that is, political, shallow and lewd issues. They gatekeep community values against power relations established from the presence of strangers who may threaten the authenticity of the phenomenon that unites them. Thus, it expresses their courage to authenticate truth in the face of the contradictions – that is, disillusion and depravity – of certain perspectives that can transform and harass the phenomenon that unites them.

Consequently, the results present two main contributions to the agenda of the culturalist perspective of consumer research exploring alternative forms of gatekeeping. On one hand, by expanding and updating previous discussions, it is intrinsic to cynical consumption acts that resist the agency of other consumers. On the other hand, by characterizing the condition of fans as producers and disseminators of truths about how to relate to the media products they consume, marketing truths are established in the context in which they are inserted.

Both contributions indicate the opportunity for marketing researchers to observe the nuances of cultural gatekeeping already present in the different ways in which entertainment or media products and brands are culturally consumed and have narratives – in this study, treated as marketing truths – established or maintained by consumers. However, although our study findings are contributive, they are limited to the research locus in which they were conducted (i.e. cosplayers).

Considering this limitation, we sought to contact as many active members of the phenomenon as possible to make our results credible and possibly expandable to other participatory cultures. Thus, the study provides valid insights into the cultural marketing perspective, since it observes the conditions, situations and themes that allow the institutionalization of the gatekeeping dispositif in consumer communities.

Additionally, we consider that our findings reveal themes – i.e. political, shallow and lewd issues – emblematic and controversial in the interactions between members of a consumer community. Consequently, it seems promising to conduct studies that seek to understand the impact of political agendas in pop culture media products and, mainly, the perspectives and positions of consumers regarding the creation of porn content derived from this market segment.

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