

ARTICLES

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LIVING A FASCIST LIFE? – PURGING THE “ABNORMAL” THROUGH ANTI-FANNISH BEHAVIOR

Viver uma vida fascista? Purgação do “anormal” por meio do comportamento antifã

¿Vivir una vida fascista? – purga de lo “anormal” a través del comportamiento antifan

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ABSTRACT

This study uses Foucault’s theory of subjectivity for a deeper understanding of how anti-fans react to the insertion of political identities in the narratives of media products. The research considers the growing insertion of representativeness in the entertainment industry and the fact that fan communities are conducive to disagreements and resistance. The study assessed how Star Wars anti-fans reacted to the introduction of characters representative of political identities in the new phase of the saga. Foucault’s archeogenealogical method was used to analyze messages posted on the franchise’s biggest fan forum from 2014 to 2020. Results pointed to two moral agencies descriptive of intolerance and amorality, which converge to a subject-form searching for “normality.” These findings have indicated a segregation behavior, which perpetuates a given social status quo and mobilizes desires to impose it, a fact that features what Foucault defined as fascist life.

Keywords: anti-fan, fascist life, political identity, Archeogenealogy, Star Wars.

RESUMO

Este estudo utiliza a teoria da subjetividade de Foucault para compreender melhor como os antifãs reagem à inserção de identidades políticas nas narrativas dos produtos midiáticos, levando em consideração a crescente inserção da representatividade na indústria do entretenimento e o fato de que as comunidades de fãs são um ambiente propício para desacordos e resistências. Para tanto, avaliamos como os antifãs de Star Wars reagiram à introdução de personagens representativos de identidades políticas na nova fase da saga. O método arqueogenealógico de Foucault foi utilizado para analisar as mensagens postadas no maior fórum de fãs da franquia entre 2014 e 2020. Os resultados apontaram para duas agências-morais descritivas da intolerância e da amoralidade, que convergem para uma forma-sujeito que busca uma “normalidade”. Esses achados indicaram um comportamento segregacionista, que perpetua um determinado status quo social e mobiliza desejos de impô-lo, fato que caracteriza o que Foucault definiu como vida fascista.

Palavras-chave: antifãs, vida fascista, identidade política, arqueogenealogia, Star Wars.

RESUMEN

El estudio actual utiliza la teoría de la subjetividad de Foucault para ayudar a comprender mejor cómo reaccionan los antifanes a la inserción de identidades políticas en las narrativas de los productos de los medios, teniendo en cuenta la creciente inserción de la representatividad en la industria del entretenimiento y el hecho de que las comunidades de fanes son un entorno propicio para desacuerdos y resistencia. Para ello, evaluamos cómo reaccionaron los antifanes de Star Wars ante la introducción de personajes representativos de identidades políticas en la nueva fase de la saga. Se utilizó el método arqueogenealógico de Foucault para analizar los mensajes publicados en el mayor foro de fanes de la franquicia entre 2014 y 2020. Los resultados apuntaron hacia dos agencias morales descriptivas de la intolerancia y la amoralidad, que convergen en una forma de sujeto que busca la “normalidad”. Estos hallazgos han indicado un comportamiento de segregación, que perpetúa un determinado statu quo social y moviliza deseos de imponerlo, hecho que caracteriza lo que Foucault definió como vida fascista.

Palabras clave: antifan, vida fascista, identidad política, arqueogenealogía, Star Wars.

INTRODUCTION

The entertainment industry has become one of the main global productive sectors that stands out for its economic performance and cultural impact (Monaghan, 2021). In recent years, this relevance has been associated with how different media products extrapolate the market scope by highlighting political discussions, mainly those linked to identity manifestations (Fuschillo, 2020; Kozinets, 2001). On the other hand, fans of media products are a unique type of consumer, with consumption practices that promote the product and intensify the relationships between fans and the product and fans with each other (Fuschillo, 2020; Souza-Leão & Costa, 2018). This process typically happens collaboratively within communities known as fandoms (Sugihartati, 2020).

However, members of the same fandom can also disagree with each other (Hewer et al., 2017). This happens when anti-fans attack media products that do not meet their expectations and other fans do not share their perceptions (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). This relationship tends to be toxic and spreads prejudice and social asymmetries that are not limited to the fandom (Hills, 2018). It can be seen in positions opposing social movements and questioning the introduction of political identities in media texts (Serazio, 2015).

Therefore, political identities are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed by the consumers' perceptions and consequent positions when dealing with social delineations that indicate what is right or wrong through their consumption practices (Cherrier, 2009; Ulver & Laurel, 2020). Thus, political identities are formulated by connecting, disconnecting, and reconnecting conceptions that indicate how an identification process occurs (Asenbaum, 2021).

For Mouffe (1992), political identity is non-homogeneous, as it reflects the multiple nuances of social relations that can be experienced. In this post-structuralist perspective, political identities can be associated with issues of subjectivity produced by ideologies, discourses, and forms of government (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). Such concepts often overlap with a critical perspective of marketing relationships (Coskuner-Balli, 2020), enabling the investigation into political identity projects through consumption practices intrinsically related to the processes that allow the elaboration of consumer subjectivities (Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Parsons, 2010). Thus, consumption is used to manifest political identities and legitimize or reinforce dominant ideologies and discourses (Anderson, 2014; Ulver & Laurel, 2020).

Ideologies play central roles in consumer decisions, actions, and practices (Arnould & Thompson, 2015; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004) and are commonly associated with conflicts between consumer desires and consumption systems, which reproduce or criticize movements as fascism (Schmitt et al., 2022). Considering that consumers tend to incorporate values into what they consume, some consumer research studies indicate the presence of pro and anti-fascist values in the history of products and brands (Lindridge & Eagar, 2015; Sredl, 2017). This illustrates how culture and ideology are overlapping aspects of power relations perpetrated in the market sphere (Miller & Stovall, 2019; Pineda et al., 2022).

Accordingly, consumption can be understood as a power device forged in institutionalized structures and ideologies (Mikkonen & Badje, 2013). Such an understanding complies with how

consumer ideologies have been treated as a form of government (Coskuner-Balli, 2020) since they are used to oppress performance and identity projects aimed at subverting pre-established conditions in the social structure (Üstüner & Thompson, 2012). Based on this line of reasoning, consumer culture theory (CCT) studies have investigated this process in light of Foucault's theory to increase the understanding of how consumer practices show forms of government capable of outlining subjectivities (Denegri-Knott et al., 2018; MacGregor et al., 2021).

According to Foucault (2006), forms of government and subject-producing processes are inseparable: every subject is governable; thus, all forms of government work as subjection forces. In both cases, Foucault (2012) considers that subjects try to elaborate a way of living that simultaneously obliges the will of the self and moralities ruling social relationships. Some try to resist and subvert such moralities to manifest certain truths they align with, whereas others incorporate and reproduce certain truths as legitimation forms.

It happens because subjectivities are forged by a confrontation between truths that emanate different desires and moralities. Thus, truths that clash with other truths that support a given subjectivity can be fought, so this subjectivity can prevail. Thus, rejecting the other can become a commitment to a given way of life that reproduces institutionalized moralities through devices ruling subjects rather than representing their will (Foucault, 2003a). This process is based on government forms capable of producing objectified subjects who reproduce repressive social asymmetries (Foucault, 2003b).

Foucault (1983) warns about the persistence of fascism in contemporary society, as people are continually attracted to play some role in the devices that institutionalize certain moralities. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1983), such a warning refers to the dangerous neglect of their desires when individuals perform a libidinal investment that homogenizes subjectivities to options already provided by social structures. This warning can be a possible interpretation of the relationships between consumers that deal with the elaboration of positions in the face of fascist values associated with consumption practices (Miller & Stovall, 2019; Schmitt et al., 2022; Sredl, 2018).

Therefore, this study investigates how anti-fans react to the introduction of political identities in the narratives of media products. The research analyzes CCT discussions addressing political positions articulated through consumer practices (Serazio, 2015) by exploring transformations operated in the entertainment industry (Griffin, 2015; Monaghan, 2021) based on movements capable of perpetuating social asymmetries (Arend, 2016) and on the fruitful theoretical and methodological framework by Michel Foucault (Arnould & Thompson, 2015).

The study used Star Wars, one of the biggest phenomena in the entertainment industry, as an empirical locus to achieve such an understanding. The cinematic saga created by George Lucas in the 1970s has one of the most notorious and emblematic pop-culture fandoms (Wood et al., 2020). Despite such longevity, Star Wars fans often disagree with the expansions of the fictional universe (Brown, 2017) and behave in a toxic way when new productions in the saga do not meet their expectations (Gray, 2003; Hills, 2018). More recently, this happened when the new Skywalker Saga trilogy was launched, starring characters representative of non-hegemonic political identities, namely: a woman, and black and Latin men, whose relationship was hypothetically homoaffective

(Brown, 2017; Wood et al., 2020). Thus, the research analyzed how Star Wars anti-fans reacted to the introduction of these characters in the saga.

Investigating anti-fan interactions is a way to understand how media consumer relationships with media products can sustain preexisting prejudice and bigotry discourses (Jane, 2019) and how fandoms – reactionary or not – can reproduce external domination structures that are inherently toxic to the participation of some of their members (Proctor et al., 2018). Thus, the originality of the research lies in exploring how the typically productive nature of fan interactions (Sugihartati, 2020) may not comply with the interests of producers of media products that bring them together (Hewer et al., 2017) but that also leads to divergences among members of this consumer subculture. Accordingly, the study assumes consumption as an arena capable of enabling consumers to take stands and develop ethics (Coskuner-Balli, 2020), such as those supporting moralities interested in maintaining the *status quo* (Thompson, 2014). Besides, adopting high social theories (i.e., assemblage, Foucauldian) enables critical reflection about consumption practices (Arnould & Thompson, 2015).

Nevertheless, it is valid to characterize the study with double deductive-inductive planning, following Leão and Mello’s (2011) model. Thus, the study explores both the theoretical aspects which developed the research problem and, specifically, interprets the results in light of concepts that align with the theory used in constructing the problem.

The remainder of this work unfolds into six sections. The first three sections are a literature review about anti-fans, the production of consumer subjectivity, and “normality” developed between marketing practices. In line with this theoretical framework, we present Foucauldian methodology as an analytical step to treat netnographically obtained data. Subsequently, the results description and discussion answer the research question and establish a ground to highlight the study’s contributions.

FROM FAN DISAGREEMENT TO ANTI-FANNISH HARASSMENT

Collective consumption practices are a way to question social structures (Fuschillo, 2020; Kozinets, 2001) and to maintain privileges or reproduce prejudices (Arend, 2016). Both movements are identifiable in the consumption of products deriving from the entertainment industry (Griffin, 2015; Monaghan, 2021) since their texts often provide subsidies for political positions. Thus, their most emblematic consumers – i.e., the fans – tend to take ownership of the content to manifest identity projects (Kozinets, 2001) and assume a position about ideologies and social asymmetries (Hills, 2019).

Since the study conducted by Kozinets (2001), fans have been addressed in CCT studies as a specific subculture of consumers who seek to legitimize intense practices and relationships with media products. Most recently, the topic has gained room among studies conducted in this field, which focused on investigating how fans, gathered in communities known as fandoms, productively consume media products (Fuschillo, 2020; Souza-Leão & Costa, 2018; Sugihartati, 2020).

Although fandoms were created to enable interaction between fans, it is possible to observe disagreements among its members (Hewer et al., 2017) and even toxic behavior by some participants (Hills, 2018). Notably, these actions are practiced by conservative fans who consider themselves responsible for preserving values set at the fandom foundation time or who consider these values fundamental to the media product (Scott, 2019). Consequently, they react to changes they consider threatening, such as the representation of social and political segments (Hills, 2019).

The radical behavior of discrediting transformations introduced in these products leads fans to position themselves as anti-fans, i.e., fandom members who promote disagreement movements within the community by establishing negative links between peers based on attacks on the media product, on other fans, and on the fandom itself (Gray, 2003; Hills, 2019; Stanfill, 2019). By practicing non-collaborative sociability, anti-fans are often seen as haters since they act to boycott or discourage fan relationships with certain media products (Hattie, 2019). However, unlike haters, who instigate the cultural cancellation of media texts (Hattie, 2019), anti-fans engage in disagreements because they understand this attitude as a commitment to defend their fannishness (Fuschillo, 2020; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). More than that, anti-fans believe they act for the fandom productively since their criticisms attack positions they classify as superficial (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Souza-Leão & Costa, 2018) or useless (Fuschillo, 2020; Kozinets, 2001). According to Gray (2003), this behavior is their response to frustrated expectations about media products, which turns the anti-fan behavior into a natural effect of fan culture and their intense relationship with the products they consume.

However, as Stanfill (2020) ponders, anti-fan behavior is part of a broader circuit of power relations that goes beyond the relationship with peers or media objects. Furthermore, anti-fans attack what bothers them, be it what they consume, the fandom they are a part of, or even specific groups of others for issues unrelated to the aspects of consumption that unite them (i.e., gender, race, sexuality). Therefore, it is valid to indicate how these dynamics occur.

Some studies examine the progressive rhetoric to relativize the existence of obsessive men as they drive the growth of post-trauma female characters in abusive relationships (Salter, 2020) and can redeem themselves as homosexual characters (Burkhardt et al., 2022). Other studies examine fans' dislikes of the inclusion of racial agendas in consumed media through discussions which distorts elements that made them become fans. Some of these dislikes are observed when they sustain attacks on black athletes based on an accusation that their presence produces politicization in sports (Johnson, 2020; Serazio & Thorson, 2020) or complain by attacking their peers for discussing racial agendas, considering that these conversations spoil interactions on social networks (Christian et al., 2020).

Recently, this behavior has evidenced how some fans react to transformations observed in the entertainment industry (Stanfill, 2019), mainly when recent productions give more space to certain political identities (Brown, 2017). Several fans are against introducing political agendas in media texts because they believe it can ruin them (Hewer et al., 2017). However, this behavior can evidence biased views, help maintain the conditions and prerogatives supporting them, and spread and reproduce social asymmetries (Griffin, 2015).

SUBJECTIVITY BASED ON DENYING THE OTHER

According to the Foucauldian theory, government forms delegate behaviors capable of producing subjectivities to individuals (Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Varman et al., 2011). According to Foucault (2012), a subject's constitution involves the exercise of power and knowledge production in a subjection dynamic that does not concern submission but the way subjects are constituted. It happens when they are ruled or when they rule themselves (Deleuze, 1988), which corresponds to objectification and subjectivation in subjectivity production processes (Foucault, 2003a, 2012).

This process occurs through the manifestation of wills and adopting moralities. Such moralities are produced within cultural practices, such as consumption. Moreover, they allow individuals to lessen their doubts about everyday behaviors (Coskuner-Balli, 2020). Thus, one seeks congruent moralities in different contexts (e.g., social, cultural, political) to validate truths capable of manifesting wills, just as one's wills are redefined to align with such moralities (Foucault, 2011).

Consequently, subjects live in continuous war, both with respect to the balance between adopted morals and their own wills and the implications of establishing these truths to form other subjectivities (Foucault, 2003a). In line with such an understanding, and based on Foucault's thought, Roux and Belk (2019) suggest that, despite the efforts of marketing agents to create places and relationships they believe to be perfect and unharmed, their attempt to counterbalance their failures force them to prioritize certain aspects over others. Furthermore, like a mirror, it has illusory nature, and it highlights existing aspects and omits others. Thus, consumer relationships neglect singularities that do not interest their articulators (Rokka & Canniford, 2016).

It is possible to interpret these singularities in a post-structuralist view as identity politics that address subjectivity (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1987; Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). This interpretation is close to Foucault's (1988) understanding of subjectivation as a process when individuals seek to know and position themselves, considering morality and pleasure, to establish ethical statutes.

This factor is evident in how the constitution and maintenance of certain subjectivities – including marketplace ones – permeates the delegitimization of other subjectivities, when one considers that the knowledge and government forms supporting them represent threats to their foundations (Varman et al., 2011). According to Foucault (2003a), such an aspect is evident when part of a given population incorporates the function of defending certain established truths to defend their own subjectivity by imposing the government form they follow upon others.

According to Foucault (2003b), although the arts of governing are based on the association of subjecting knowledge, knowledge by itself should not determine the rationality of those who rule and are ruled. Repressive rationality is reproduced when the subjectivity of others is denied. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) criticize how post-modern thinking accesses consumption to propose an alternative for freeing individuals from a repressive rational/technological regime. Thus, defending one's own subjectivity by rejecting another subjectivity is a form of denying the rationality of others and repressing what is different.

The assumption of lack of rationality is dangerous to society. If there is no balance between different truths supporting different subjects, there is no rationality; subjects who neglect the set of moralities perpetuated in the context where they live cannot coexist with others (Deleuze, 1988).

The subversion of moral values comprising some subjects' subjection, leads others to evoke the difference produced by devices that rule and objectify them (Ibrahim, 2017). This difference is based on the repetition of knowledge confirmed and manifested in subjectivity formation based on the use of forces underlying the exercise of power (Deleuze, 1994). According to this perspective, conditions enabling the production of subjects are part of a dynamic multiplicity, i.e., of a range of likely conducts guided by power relations observed within society (Arnould & Thompson, 2015).

Moreover, only a few individuals reach the means to produce themselves as subjects (i.e., subjectivation), whereas all individuals tend to be objectified. It happens because not everyone tries to become moral subjects: it is possible to deny norms and truths that are alien to oneself – by rejecting moral concepts and not validating their values – as well as not ruling oneself and others properly (Foucault, 2012).

The elaboration of the Foucauldian notion of subjectivity involves resistance to two contemporary forms of subjection. The first is how lives are individualized to the demands of power structures arranged in the lived context. The second is how each person needs to manifest a known identity as a productive role in society (Deleuze, 1988).

According to Tadajewski (2006), these aspects can be seen in how the external world is ontologically objectified, indicating how the subjectivity elaborated by consumers presupposes their performance. Similarly, Hanna (2013) indicates that the Foucauldian understanding of how subjects are produced allows us to understand how consumer relations guide the dominant positions or resistant identities that sustain consumers' subjectivity.

THE DANGEROUS “NORMALITY” AMONG CONSUMERS' SUBJECTIVITY

Subjectivities considered deviant from certain consumption practices are usually associated with a threat to institutionalized marketing discourses (Blocker et al., 2013; Denegri-Knott, 2004). The “normality” is present in how market relations function as a mainstay to institutionalize moral orders that legitimize dominant groups of consumers and everyday consumption patterns (Mikkonen et al., 2014; Özçağlar-Toulouse et al., 2009). In addition, Gicquel (2017) considers that these institutionalizations are assimilated by conservative movements that consumers propagate when they label as “abnormal” others consumers who they consider as deviant, in an attempt to remove those ones from the consumption context which they share.

According to Foucault (2003b), when subjects seek to remove the other to protect a “normality” that represents their rationality, they propagate repressive practices through the imposition of convenient knowledge and segregating behaviors that jeopardize society's ability to produce free subjects. Thus, the author constantly criticizes how individuals defend these devices that

rule and differentiate us. According to him, in order to escape these repressive rulings, we must produce a reticent impermeability, based on which different epistemes are superimposed to manage subjects' morality in a joint and non-repressive way. Such management comprises a multiplicity of subjecting relationships, which enable producing an art of living – an art that does not belong to living subjects, but to the entire society one lives in – in addition to ethics for oneself (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983).

Foucault (1983) has reasoned about this management process and indicated that, in order to escape the conditions capable of producing repressive subjects, it is not enough to produce and defend oneself as a subject; it is necessary to experience one's own ethics and, mainly, contrasting it to the prevailing moral values. Therefore, defending “normality” is a mistake. It means to insist on similarities that distort our own subjectivities. The difference (i.e., the singularity), rather than similarity, leads us to produce a subjectivity capable of freeing us from institutionalized government forms and from living a fascist life. According to Foucault (1983), fascism persists in contemporary society through the desire to exercise some level of power linked to domination and exploitation contexts. It is a *modus operandis* based on determining a correct way of living, which encourages individuals to not think or create by massively mobilizing generic desires.

Moreover, Foucault (1983) warns that the continual formulation of contemporary western society runs through the attractiveness of assuming functions of the power devices that govern us. Such an attraction to power is reckless and one of the ways fascism persists in contemporary society. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1983), it reflects a more complex movement: neglecting subjective – and creative – desires through institutionalizing moralizing – a micro-fascist rationality.

However, how is it possible to avoid living a fascist life? Foucault (1983) has pointed out that the answer to this question lies in trying to live a beautiful life, guided by difference and exercised through resistance to the likely privileges provided by the exercise of power. It is necessary to acknowledge the uniqueness of the self, set ourselves free, and subvert universal and totalizing policies to live a non-fascist life. Likewise, it is necessary to commit to practices aimed at encouraging creative thoughts and capable of respecting the singularities of others. After all, ethical subjects are those who constantly and continuously develop themselves while relating to what is different, producing truths, and practicing balance between their own will and moral values in force in their lives (Foucault, 2011).

Despite presenting interesting perspectives on interpreting fascist movements or values disseminated among consumers, it is worth noting that the approaches brought by the authors above are not the only ones for interpreting this theme in consumer research. Other studies indicate fascist values inherent to ideologies and political and cultural movements disseminated through consumption practices (Cambefort & Pecot, 2020; Lindridge & Eagar, 2015; Pineda et al., 2022).

However, both Foucault's essays, as well as those of Deleuze and Guattari, allow consumer research to investigate and understand the presence and relationship between fascist practices and the elaboration of subjectivities – in favor of and opposed to – in the face of morality institutionalized by consumption practices (Miller & Stovall, 2019; Schmitt et al., 2022; Sredl, 2018; Tadajewski, 2006).

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

The Foucauldian perspective endorses the possibility of expanding CCT’s research agenda through a post-structuralist perspective (Arnould & Thompson, 2015; Thompson, 2017). The Foucauldian methodology was applied to conduct the research in compliance with the adopted theoretical framework. Multiple studies evoke these theoretical concepts (Gicquel, 2017; Hanna, 2013; Mikkonen et al., 2014) and, most recently, methodology to investigate practices (i.e., discursive, non-discursive, and of the self) within consumers’ cultural contexts (Camargo et al., 2021; Denegri-Knott et al., 2018; Denegri-Knott & Tadajewski, 2017; Tadajewski & Jones, 2021).

Foucault’s work overlaps the theoretical cycle and methodological approach (Foucault, 2012). Thus, on the one hand, Foucault has developed his archeology of knowledge to investigate discursive practices, and on the other hand, he developed genealogies in his advanced studies on power and on the subject – each phase was complementary to the previous one (Deleuze, 1988; Denegri-Knott & Tadajewski, 2017). Foucault’s method was called Archeogenealogy (Paltrinieri, 2012).

Thus, the Foucaultian analytical categories presented throughout several works (Foucault, 2002, 2003a, 2006, 2012) were systematized in the first subsection to explain the operationalization of this methodology adopted in the present study. Next, the second subsection presents the context of data collection and the quality criteria for qualitative online research adopted for consumer and marketing studies (see Dijck, 2013; Kozinets, 2020; Ravn et al., 2020).

FOUCAULDIAN ANALYSIS

Brownlie et al. (2009) have mapped Foucauldian methodologies used in marketing studies and suggested benefits to this investigative analysis at two different levels. First, it allows consumer researchers to understand how certain marketing lines of thought are contingent, although not necessarily inevitable. Second, it presents interpretations capable of transforming or changing the conditions producing marketing knowledge.

Similarly, Thompson and Tian (2008) recommend this methodology to critically reflect on the consumption intimacy with popular memories establishing a hegemonic status of certain social groups. According to Tadajewski (2006), it is an approach to understand the transversality of marketing knowledge and the possible productions that go beyond the marketing scope.

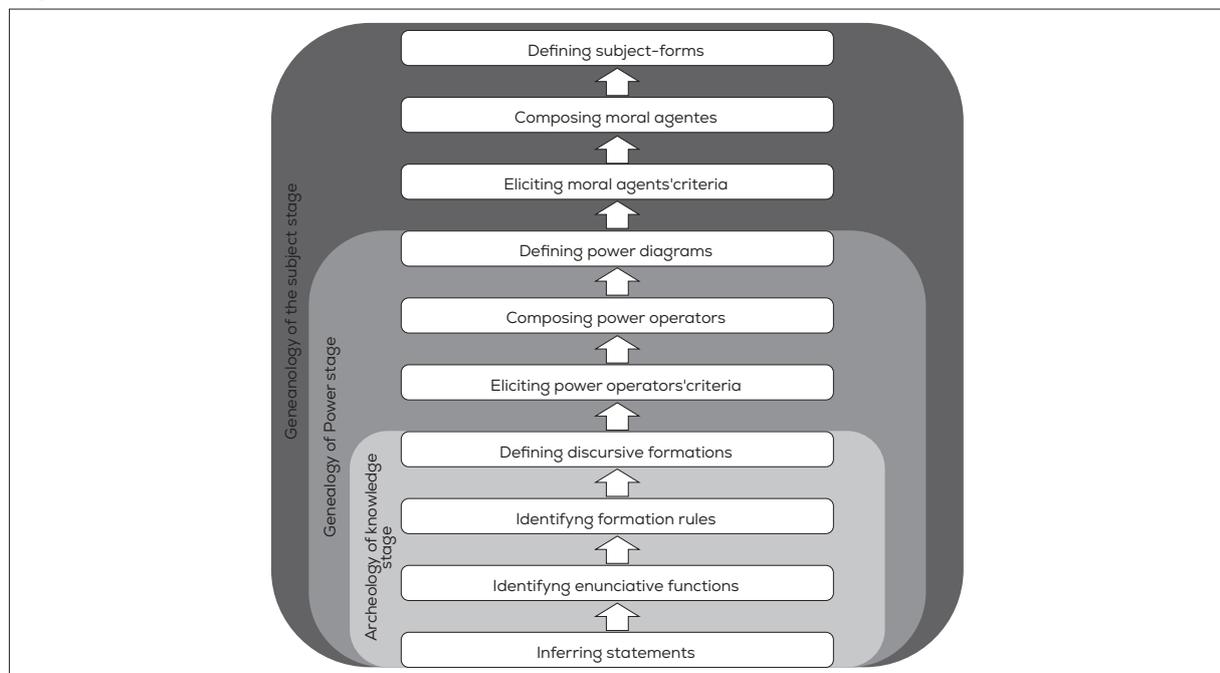
The initial stage of this methodology, called archeology of knowledge, was explained in a homonymous work by Foucault (2002), who explained how to find discursive practices dispersed in certain social phenomena. It is possible to observe how discursive formations are produced, based on the identification of statements - which are the most basic discourse unit - and their grouping. In order to do so, it is necessary to analyze the actions shared by statements forming enunciative functions by considering certain criteria that, in a similar way, allow identifying formation rules supporting discursive formations.

By expanding his investigations to the analysis of power, Foucault (2003a, 2006) has analyzed how non-discursive practices emanate from discursive practices. Thus, his genealogy of power used discursive formations to reveal power diagrams connected through power operators that can be identified through certain criteria (Foucault, 2006), namely: different forces are associated with each other in power relations, and it indicates differentiation systems; purposes pursued by the exercise of power indicate objective types; technologies of power materializing in the exercise of power reveal instrumental modalities; rules and moral values enabling the exercise of power are based on institutionalization forms; and the arrangement of likelihoods of establishing power relations concerns rationalization degrees.

Similarly, by expanding the scope of his investigations to analyze the constitution of the subject, Foucault has identified the practices of the self, which allow producing subjectivities based on the combination of discursive and non-discursive practices (Paltrinieri, 2012). This methodology stage was presented by Foucault (2012) as a genealogy of the subject, which uses power diagrams to reveal subject-forms based on moral agents that can be identified in the combination of certain criteria: the way subjects balance their wills and moralities observed in the context they live in is represented by ethical substances; the way subjects try to adapt to different conducts reveal subjection modes; the actions that subjects perform on themselves in order to know their own subjectivity corresponds to the elaboration of ethical work; and finally, associations established between subjects' inner and outer truths, which reflect their will and moralities of their social context, concern the teleology of the moral subject.

Figure 1 presents a diagram to facilitate the understanding of Foucauldian analytical categories and their relationship or stages - specifically, the contiguity between them.

Figure 1. Analytical map



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

DATA COLLECTION AND QUALITY CRITERIA

This research follows the proposal adopted by recent studies that use netnographic data in association with Foucauldian analytics (Camargo et al., 2021; Denegri-Knott & Tadjewski, 2017). Therefore, the directions Kozinets (2020) pointed out for choosing a relevant, representative, and current cultural context were taken into account when we chose the cultural context to carry out our investigation.

The biggest Star Wars fan forum, TheForce.net, was selected as the empirical locus of the study. The website is a platform with more than two decades of continuous and numerous interactions of the fandom of the cinematic saga, whether in response to news of new productions or related to the fictional universe or when sharing content typically produced by fans (i.e., fanarts, fanfics, fan theories, fan videos, memes) (Proctor, 2013; Whitney, 2017).

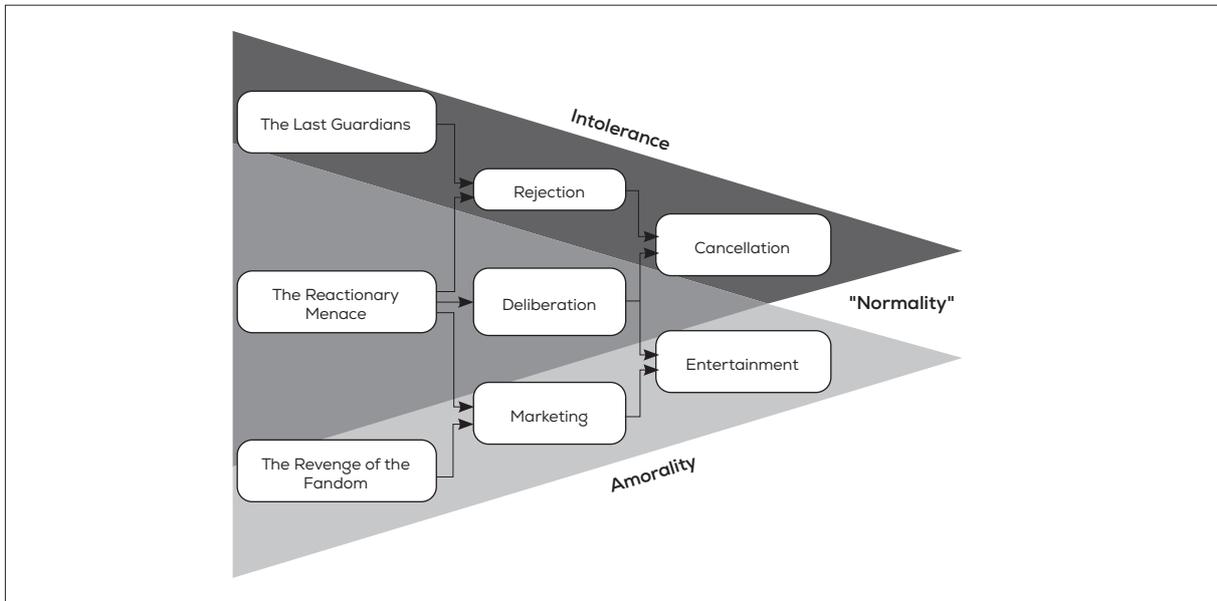
The forum subdivides fan interactions into specific categories and topics, the most prominent of which are those dealing with news and discussions about the saga’s trilogies: Original Trilogy (i.e., Episodes IV, V, and VI), Prequel Trilogy (i.e., Episodes I, II, and III), Sequel Trilogy (i.e., Episodes VII, VIII, and IX). Among the discussion topics available on the website, the research focused on the Sequel Trilogy category, with 119 topics launched between October 2013 and January 2020. We selected topics that address the recent introduction of characters representative of political identities. In total, 24,459 posts comprising 40 different topics published from March 2014 to May 2020 were collected and analyzed.

The study follows the ethical criteria for using data obtained from online platforms (Ravn et al., 2020). Considering that TheForce.net is a public space that authorizes any web user to transit and access the discussions held in the forum, we adopt the proposal that it is possible to use such data as long as the study does not harm the individuals or the cultural context under investigation (Dijck, 2013; Kozinets, 2020).

DESCRIPTION OF RESULTS

Data analysis revealed a subject-form derived from two categories of moral agents, which were used to describe the results in the following subsections. Fig. 2 presents a visual representation of the relationships between the analyzed categories: arrows are used to indicate the relationships between the categories and, in the background, different colors indicate the categories related to each moral agent, as well as those that overlap.

Figure 2. Analytical map



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The moral agents were presented based on analytical categories (in bold) and on the criteria forming the categories (in italics); in addition, they were described based on the way they were evidenced in the analyzed data. Table 1 explains the nomenclatures and levels of the analytical categories that are equivalent.

Table 1. Analytical categories

Subject form	
"Normality"	
Moral agents	
Intolerance	Amorality
Ethical substances	
<i>Vehemently</i>	<i>Saga's omnipotence narrative</i>
Subjection modes	
<i>Defend the status quo</i>	<i>Divinization of the canon</i>
Teleology of the moral subject	
<i>Exclusion</i>	

Continue

Table 1. Analytical categories

Concludes

Elaboration of ethical work			
<i>Narrative debugging</i>	<i>Eugenics of fans</i>	<i>Omission of fans</i>	<i>Debugged narrative</i>
Power diagram			
Cancellation		Entertainment	
Power operators			
Rejection	Deliberation		Marketing
Differentiation system			
<i>Legitimized saga</i>	<i>Averse to representativeness</i>		<i>Fandom is self-sufficient</i>
Instrumental modality			
<i>Respect to the formula</i>	Dominant social patterns		<i>Dissatisfaction with the adoption of trends</i>
Institutionalization form			
<i>Canonical foundations</i>		<i>Question the context of changes</i>	
Rationalization degree			
<i>Maintenance</i>		<i>Stay faithful</i>	
Objective type			
Repudiation of what is different	Disquiet about the novelty		<i>Shielding the saga</i>
Discursive formations			
The Last Guardians	The Reactionary Menace		The Revenge of the Fandom
Formation rules			
Fannish annoyance	Canon fidelity		Closed universe
Enunciative functions			
<i>Discredit what is new</i>	<i>Making changes unfeasible</i>	<i>Criticizes external interests</i>	<i>Prioritization of the past</i>

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Furthermore, the analytical procedure was illustrated through messages from the research *corpus*, referring to bundles of relationships sustaining each moral agent. Finally, the study reflected on how such agencies can be interpreted in light of the study’s theoretical framework.

INTOLERANCE

Intolerance represents the behavior of fandom members who attack the representativeness of political identities that have become a recurrent agenda in contemporary society. Intolerance materializes in a movement of unwillingness toward any transformation of such representativeness in the fannish context and in the narrative of the fictional universe. The argument used as a basis for such a behavior is that the saga was not built by its involvement with social issues and that it should remain that way. Thus, these fandom members reject and attack these representations introduced through new characters, based on the allegation that transformations implemented in the new phase of the fictional universe and the repercussion of a political perspective in discussions held by part of the audience can ruin their relationship with the saga. Consequently, they demand that the new movies do not explore social agendas and even threaten to boycott them. Thus, this part of the fandom expresses itself with *vehemently* to defend the saga’s status quo, amidst a process of advancement of political agendas. In order to do so, they demand a narrative debugging that requires the eugenics of fans.

This moral agency unveils a power diagram of cancellation. The reaction to the new movies under the justification mentioned above reveals the disfranchisement behavior toward the movies themselves and their very political identities. This diagram is supported by two power operators: in a more forceful tone, there is a rejection of political transformations both in the fictional universe and in the fannish context; on the other hand, one evokes purism in the saga’s narrative in order to deliberate for rejecting innovations brought about by the new movies.

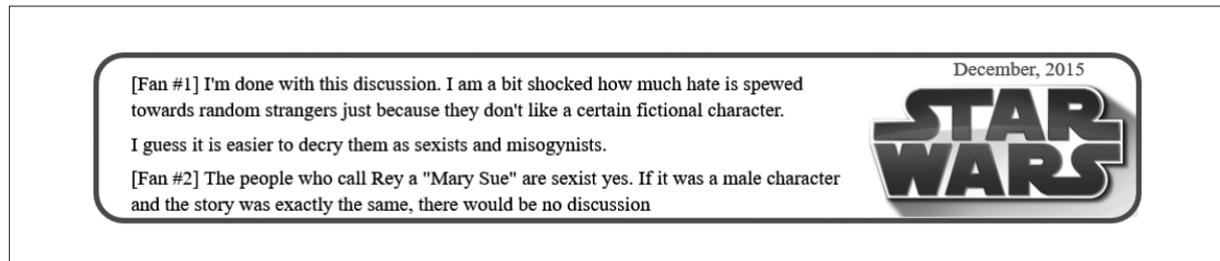
Both operators believe that the new productions are part of a legitimized saga and, as such, they must respect the formula by following the canonical foundations of the original narratives to ensure the maintenance of its essence. They differ in the objective type behind this line of reasoning; on the one hand, there is evidence of repudiation of what is different; on the other hand, there is disquiet about the novelty.

These objectives mark the aspects distinguishing power operators beyond this approach. Thus, in a second line of reasoning, the repudiation of what is different is based on the argument for maintaining the canonical foundations; these fandom members evoke dominant social patterns constituting this construction process. Consequently, they present themselves as averse to such representativeness, and this behavior features its rejection.

On the other hand, the disquiet about the novelty complies with the maintenance of the very way they understand their fannishness, based on the argument that the fandom is self-sufficient. This argument legitimizes them to question the context of changes substantiating their dissatisfaction with the adoption of trends, a fact that features their deliberation ability.

An example (see Fan #1 quote in Figure 3) that illustrates these power relations that culminate in **intolerance** present in the Star Wars fandom is the outburst of a fan in a discussion that proposes to question the narrative validity of the character Rey – the first female protagonist and Jedi of the saga.

Figure 3. Intolerance example



Source: Organized by the authors, original content available at <https://boards.theforce.net/threads/we-must-stop-with-the-mary-sue-putdowns.50036416/>

Intolerance was observed when Fan #1 criticized female characters and considered talking to other fans about the issue worthless. Fan #1 *vehemently excluded* peers who felt offended and reacted to depreciating a female character. For Fan #1, criticizing a female character was not meant to offend anyone. This fan's previous arguments in the thread agreed that the narrative fragility of male characters is not a problem while that of a female one is (Fan #2 pointed out these arguments made by Fan #1, mentioning that these views try to relativize attacks on the female character on the forum). Thus, Fan #1 ends up *defending the status quo* when *demanding a narrative debugging* with male characters, pointing out that, different from what was observed with female characters, they could be criticized without offending hysterical fans.

Thus, Fan #1 proposes the **cancellation** of their peers for accusing him/her of being misogynistic and sexist for attacking Rey throughout the discussion. From Fan #1's point of view, it is possible to **reject** the female character through attacks on her narrative premises while not attacking women themselves. In this perspective, it is possible to consider that the objective of Fan #1's arguments was to repudiate *what is different*, seeking to *maintain* what the fan considers to be the *canonical level* pre-established in previous productions. In this sense, considering that the peers prevent Fan 1 from criticizing Rey, the fan highlight that the same would not happen if the major protagonist were a male character. Therefore, the fan evokes *dominant social patterns* when positioned against *representativeness* inserted with the protagonist of the Sequel Trilogy.

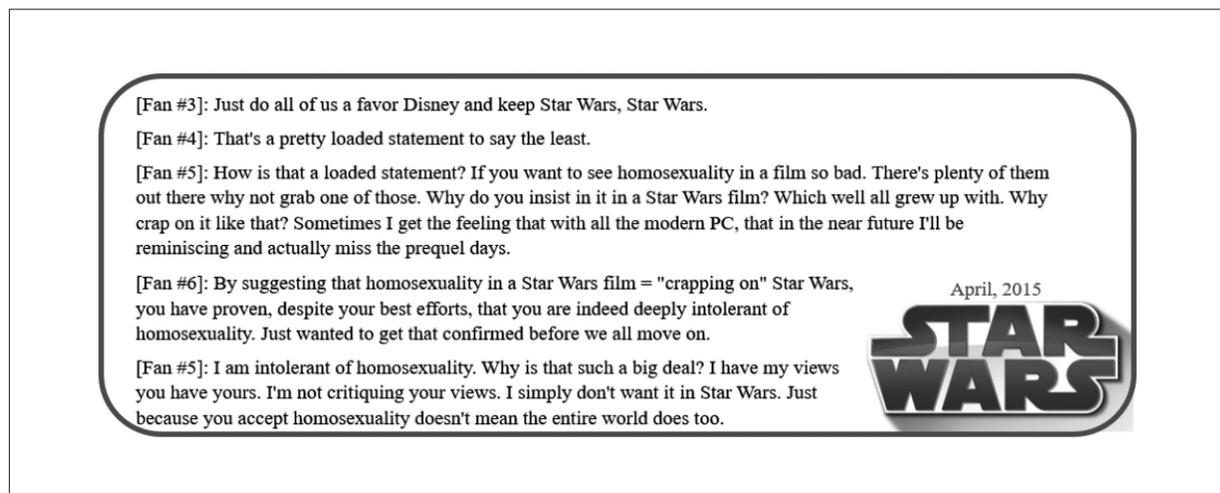
Expanding the archeology of knowledge stage, the fundamentals supporting such deliberation and the line it shares with rejection indicate how both power operators reflect the discursive formation called reactionary menace, which concerns the understanding that self-considered true fans of the saga should take a position against the introduction of political agendas in the new productions of the saga. This discursive formation is based on a rule about fannish annoyance, which addresses the existence of narrative failures resulting from the introduction of representativeness in new productions. This rule, in its turn, is based on two enunciative functions. These fandom members discredit what is new through statements addressing the

inferiority of new leading characters in comparison to those of previous movies and criticizing fans who show themselves in favor of political agendas by often resorting to a “humor” type that points toward certain prejudices. They try to make changes unfeasible by stating that the introduction of these agendas can put in check the hegemony of a saga established in the pop culture, and by emphasizing their discomfort with homosexual or interracial romances and with aesthetic standards other than Caucasian and sensual women.

On the other hand, the unique features of rejection indicate its basis in another discursive formation, herein called the last guardians, which aligns with a more radical view of fandom members about the role fans should play to help preserve the purity of the saga. Such a discursive formation is also based on the rule about fannish annoyance (described above), but it is singularized through another rule, which concerns the understanding of canon fidelity, when fans advocate that the saga cannot be profaned by ephemeral changes, such as the political agendas under discussion. This rule is also based on the enunciative function aimed at making changes unfeasible (described above) and on another, that *criticizes external interests* and is composed of statements arguing that aligning the saga with topics representing political movements or market trends can be harmful and dangerous.

Finally, the interaction about homosexuality (see Fig. 4) exemplifies how intolerance – and the discursive and non-discursive practices that sustain it – is a reality in the Star Wars fandom.

Figure 4. Intolerance example



Source: Organized by the authors, original content available at <https://boards.theforce.net/threads/homosexuality-and-tfa.50029463/page-12>

Intolerance of homosexuality is explicitly stated and featured by the cancellation, suggested to the potential presence of homosexual characters in the saga's movies and to fans who agree with that. On the one hand, the speech of Fans #3 and #5 evokes the purism of the saga, a fact that features the power operator “deliberation” and unveils the understanding that the presence of homosexual characters in Star Wars represents a threat to the saga, which could no longer be what it has always been. On the other hand, Fan #5 is even more explicit in their rejection

position since they suggest a split between those who accept homosexuality and those who do not accept it by presenting themselves as the guardian of values they believe constitute the franchise.

In both situations, there is evident annoyance with the fact that the other two fans take a favorable position about the representativeness of homosexuality in the movies since the annoyed fan discredits this position and tries to make it unfeasible based on the argument that homosexuality does not represent the essence of Star Wars. More specifically, regarding keeping this essence, the canon is established as something faithful, and it should not submit to external demands capable of mischaracterizing it.

AMORALITY

The other identified moral agency refers to the amorality exercised by the fandom. Although amorality does not incite the repudiation of the represented political identities in Star Wars productions, it corroborates this position by supporting it. This agency is based on the idea that the saga should not approach such topics and stand aside from these types of discussion. Thus, some fandom members show clear discomfort with causes advocated by political agenda adherents in the movies since they want the franchise to remain impartial in favor of its longevity and declare to be just looking for fun. Amorality is featured both by the omission of fans toward contemporary political agendas and by the demand for a debugged narrative based on the original movies. Thus, they build a saga omnipotence narrative based on the idealization of an imaginary feature to shield their fictional universe. Consequently, they establish the process of divinization of the canon, which presupposes that they encourage excluding any narrative element that may harm the saga.

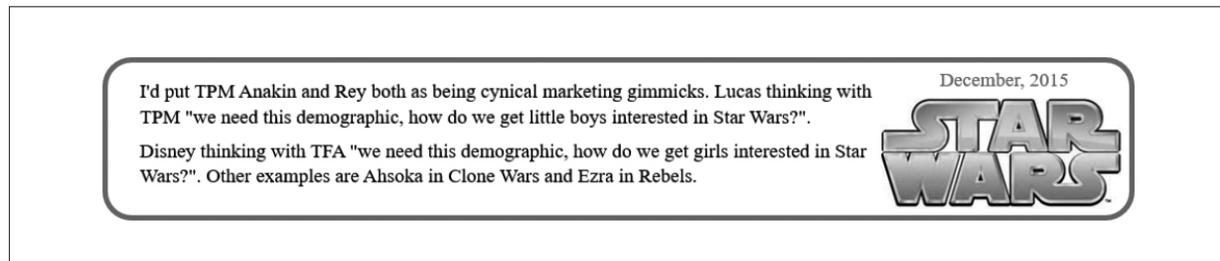
This moral agency reveals the power diagram of entertainment, which emphasizes the idea that Star Wars should strive to fulfill its legacy as one of pop culture’s most iconic cultural products. Thus, like cancellation, this diagram is also associated with the power operator linked to deliberation (described in the previous section). Its uniqueness lies in its association with marketing, which is another power operator that acts to the extent that fans start to think market-wise and believe that the introduction of controversial topics in the saga, such as characters representative of political identities, can have a negative impact on the franchise’s performance. The identification of this operator – i.e., marketing – meets aspects underlying with the other – i.e., deliberation – and both indicates that Star Wars has a self-sufficient fandom and that it does not need to meet social demands in order to expand its audience; this part of the fandom nurtures dissatisfaction with trends that do not meet their expectations; therefore, they question the context of changes adopted by the franchise. The understanding is that the best for the franchise to remain relevant is to stay faithful to previous productions, a fact that demands shielding the saga.

Similarly to intolerance, the association between this agency and the power operator called deliberation, albeit through a separate diagram, relates it to the discursive formation called the

reactionary menace described in the previous section. This discursive formation, in turn, is also associated with the power operator called marketing due to the power diagram of entertainment.

To indicate the power relations between fans that sustain **amorality**, we highlight the speech of a fan (see Fig. 5) about how they think the screenwriters decide about new characters and narratives in Star Wars.

Figure 5. Amorality example



Source: Organized by the authors, original content available at <https://boards.theforce.net/threads/we-must-stop-with-the-mary-sue-putdowns.50036416/page-30#post-53021928>

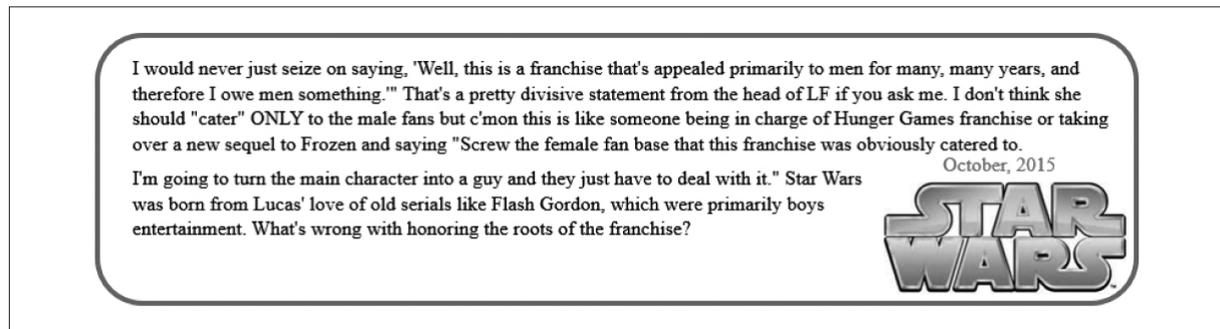
The moral agency “amorality” is willing to propose that the changes in the Sequel Trilogy are a way to get the female audience interested in Star Wars. The indifferent tone indicates that the fan prefers to *exclude* this audience. Therefore, the *demand for a debugged narrative* evokes the *divinization of the canon*. Nevertheless, it derives from a perspective of the *saga’s omnipotence narrative*.

For this fan, the changes in Star Wars are caused by changes in the **entertainment industry**. Thus, Lucasfilm is more interested in addressing **marketing** issues than narratives. Consequently, it elucidates that *fandom is self-sufficient and* does not need female demography. Furthermore, it feeds dissatisfaction with trends when the fan questions the *contextual changes* included in the saga. Nevertheless, the fan assumes a stance as a critic of everything not in the Original Trilogy, proposing that the universe *remains faithful* to these productions, seeking to *shield the saga*.

Reaching the archeology of knowledge stage, the uniqueness of entertainment, in turn, links to another discursive formation called the revenge of fandom, which concerns the understanding that fans need connections to prove their power in order to mitigate changes implemented in the new movies. This formation is associated with two rules: one referring to fannish annoyance (described in the previous section) and another concerning the fans’ understanding that Star Wars must have a closed universe where new narratives must follow the logic established in the previous ones. The rule is supported by the enunciative function that discredits what is new (described in the previous section) and, in a unique way, by one that evokes a prioritization of the past based on statements that indicate how the saga has already made room for female and Afro-American women in the original trilogy (i.e., Princess Leia, Lando) without politicizing its narrative.

Figure 6 shows one of the posted messages about the topic addressing the space given to diversity in the Sequel Trilogy to show how amorality takes place.

Figure 6. Amorality example



Source: Organized by the authors, at <https://boards.theforce.net/threads/diversity-in-the-sequel-trilogy-see-warning-on-page-11.50042886/>

Amorality is evident in this fan’s speech, such that a discussion about gender is reduced to a matter of the target audience of media products, in which the franchise is only seen as an entertainment product that should maintain its legacy. By arguing that Star Wars is for the male audience – just as Frozen and Hunger Games would be for the female audience – the fan puts himself in the position of market analyst and calls for the maintenance of the franchise’s roots so that its male fan community can use Star Wars to take its revenge on changes observed in the entertainment industry. Furthermore, the fan deliberates against a female protagonist by assuming that this change would threaten Star Wars’ hegemony. Such aspects evidence the fan’s annoyance with the change implemented in the new trilogy and their emphasis on making it unfeasible. In order to do so, they evoke a mythical narrative that prioritizes aspects associated with the saga launching-related aspects in order to keep its universe closed.

BEYOND AND BELOW ANTI-FANNISH: SHOULD “NORMALITY” BE DEFENDED?

This study has considered anti-fannish behavior as corresponding to fans’ reactions to the introduction of political identities in the narratives of media products. However, reflections about moral agencies observed in Star Wars fan interactions in this regard have evidenced a spectrum of positions, which indicated different levels of a broader perspective, namely: how fandoms can establish disagreement and divergent interest practices (Fuschillo, 2020; Hewer et al., 2017).

A more radical version of intolerance reveals the full repudiation of part of the fandom to the introduction of political agendas in the saga. It was done through an angry speech, which materialized in the suggestion to boycott the new productions and segregate fans who accept or even defend this approach. More than anti-fans, this position reveals the behavior of haters who express anger and aggressiveness toward media products and fans who go against their worldview. Haters are seen as toxic to fan culture; they are featured by a destabilized and interrupted doxa, according to which they struggle to maintain the dominance of dominant groups and to spread prejudice or ideologies capable of reinforcing social asymmetries (Hills, 2018).

On the other hand, a soberer version of amorality reveals fans who fear for the franchise’s continuous success after the incorporation of political agendas since they understand that this externality should not contaminate its legacy to pop culture. This position reveals conservative fans - who do not want changes to be implemented and question the extent to which disparate interests (i.e., economic, social, political) can distort values that led them to consume a given media product or to be an active part of the fandom - rather than anti-fans (Gray, 2003; Scott, 2019).

Between these two positions, it was possible to identify the anti-fans who navigate between amorality and intolerance; their speech moves between veiled prejudice and the rhetoric of canon purity. They believe to be acting productively for the fandom’s benefit, even when they resort to behaviors that can put the group’s unity in check (Gray, 2003; Hattie, 2019). Thus, they try to mask their intolerance to identities other than theirs based on the excuse that the saga must remain faithful to supposed fundamental truths.

Positions orbiting the observed anti-fannish behavior at different levels converge to the same subject-form that perpetuates social asymmetries and aims at preserving the *status quo*. It is a rationality rejection exercise that guides the recent social transformations in favor of historically repressed and stigmatized political identities. Therefore, the identified subject-form corresponds to a “normality” one tries to defend.

However, should “normality” be defended? According to Foucault (2003b), the subversion of moral values of the so-called “abnormal” is often a subjectivation exercise based on the use of pleasures. It can threaten subjectivities rooted in moralities that, in turn, are rooted in conservative discourses. These discourses reproduce a repressive rationality that can be dangerous to society since they advocate for a pseudo-“normality” based on the historically institutionalized knowledge that imposes prohibitions and segregation on subjectivities that appear to be threatening them. This subjectivation exercise is a device capable of leading society to produce asymmetries, based on which the incumbent power evokes certain knowledge capable of differentiating individuals; such a power aims at normalizing society by enabling inclusions and exclusions based on parameters of truth deriving from those who regulate and rule social life.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Findings in this study indicate that the anti-fannish reaction to the introduction of political identities in the narratives of media products can lead to a segregation position, either directly or explicitly, through intolerance or the amorality supporting a supposed exemption. This double movement shows different emphases on how this process occurs since both moral agencies evidence the discomfort of these fans with political agendas elaborated, re-signified, and promoted through consumption practices (see Serazio, 2015). Thus, the study reveals how anti-fans can move from this position to a soberer one, from conservative fans to more radical ones, and present themselves as haters.

We can emphasize that this movement considers the media product itself as an alibi by adopting an essentialist interpretation of its narrative and, thus, by spreading the word about its immutability. This process reveals how massively produced and distributed media products overlap as massively mediated market ideologies (Arnould & Thompson, 2015). Among other implications, this process can boost social asymmetries beyond consumption practices and show how consumption works as an arena of power relations (Üstüner & Thompson, 2012).

However, according to the results, this rhetoric only supports an exclusion process by evoking a purity guided by conservative values in the mythology of media texts. Although fandoms are environments conducive to disagreements and resistance to changes in media products (see Hewer et al., 2017), there is evidence of how Star Wars anti-fans practice prejudice and even hate behaviors that go beyond consumption (see Hattie, 2019) by adopting a political discrimination practice.

By doing so, these fans practice what Foucault (2003b) called a divisional practice, according to which a given subjectivity is objectified through a split between what is not “normal” and the perspective of the social *status quo*. This movement aims to guarantee interests and privileges by canceling what is different in order to perpetuate a certain way of life deemed as correct and by mobilizing desires to impose such a way of life by ruling others. This behavior defines a fascist life (Foucault, 1983). Thus, more than being toxic for entertainment consumption and the fan culture, the reaction of Star Wars anti-fans to the introduction of characters representative of political identities in the franchise movies evidences a segregation process of fascist nature.

This may happen because the production of subjectivities amidst consumption practices is based on the connection of different ethics (see Denegri-Knott et al., 2018; MacGregor et al., 2021). However, ethical work is a *condicio sine qua non* for subjectivation rather than something valued *a priori* (Foucault, 2011). Thus, according to Foucault (2006), society must be vigilant and defend itself from repressive subjectifying processes that often focus on domination, which means the very nullification of power as a productive force.

Thus, this study’s social contribution is to unveil a consumption practice that reproduces a social logic of division and exclusion of historically dominated identities. Based on the CCT perspective, the study is part of an interdisciplinary thematic and theoretical discussion. It advances investigations about consumption practices seen as subjectifying power relations through the theoretical lens of Michel Foucault (see Denegri-Knott et al., 2018; MacGregor et al., 2021). Thus, it complies with the understanding that this approach enables further investigation of phenomena in the field (see Arnould & Thompson, 2015).

Moreover, by looking at the behavior of anti-fans who oppose representation in the media and discussions about this agenda among fans, the study expands on the warning made by Stanfill (2020). The anti-fans’ attack goes beyond what bothers them. They defend a status quo and consider that the growing transformation in popular culture challenges the fan culture’s values. Nevertheless, the results of this study are in line with recent research that seeks to understand the impact of anti-fans in the face of greater space given to gender, race, and sexual preferences

in fan culture (see Burkhardt et al., 2022; Christian et al., 2020; Salter, 2020), indicating that when summed these exclusive practices align movements dangerously close to fascist practices.

Defining the research scope to be applied to consumers of a specific media product is a limitation of the study. However, since Star Wars is acknowledged as one of the entertainment industry’s most culturally impactful texts (see Gray, 2003; Wood et al., 2020), the choice to study this saga provides insights for early reflections about a likely theoretical generalization. Thus, other studies following the same line of investigation could contribute to the theorization of subjectivity production processes based on different fannish positions.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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