Commitment to Freedom: A Fannish Struggle for the Representativeness of Political Identities

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of the current study is to investigate how fans behave towards the greater introduction of political identities in pop culture.

Theoretical framework – The idea of consumption as an identity-building instrument, the growing discussions on political identities and the emergence of the entertainment industry as an arena for consumer resistance are associated with each other.

Design/methodology/approach – Foucauldian archeogenealogy was applied to the online forum called TheForce.net.

Findings – Militancy and sympathy were identified as moral agencies of consumers. Despite their uniqueness, they show commitment to freedom and indicate how fans see the representativeness of political identities as a continuous struggle vis-à-vis dominant ideological forces.

Practical & social implications of research – Foucauldian analysis and interpretation allow us to discuss the ethical articulation produced by fans as a social commitment. This is a fan culture response to the recent inclusion of representativeness in the entertainment industry. Thus, the current research provides the basis to think about the applications and potential consolidation of ethical productions in CCT investigations.

Originality/Value – Foucault's theory about the constitution of the moral subject was adopted here to analyze consumption as a practice aligned to the growing demand for representativeness in the entertainment industry.

Keywords: Subjectivity, political identity, pop culture, archeogenealogy, Star Wars.

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1 Introduction

Consumption presents countless possibilities for a range of cultural behaviors. According to the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), consumption is understood as the way consumers produce identity projects (Arnould & Thompson, 2007; Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Belk, 2013; Kaptan, 2016; Mikkonen et al., 2011). This process is increasingly engaged with social movement agendas, such as ethnicity or race (Banks, 2021; Pittman, 2020), gender (Arend, 2016; Kuehn & Parker, 2021; Walther & Schouten, 2016), and sexuality (Kaptan, 2016; Neal, 2018). Thus, there seems to be convergence between the elaboration of identity projects through consumption and discussions about the formulation of political identities based on discourses observed in social life (Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Parsons, 2010).

Based on the post-structuralist perspective, identity politics are addressed in association with the subjectivity issue (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1987; Laclau & Mouffe, 2014), sometimes in homologous terms (Hall, 1992). Within the scope of CCT, this articulation involves the very constitution of consumers' subjectivity (Belk, 2013; Coskuner-Balli, 2020), which has been mainly treated from a critical viewpoint based on Michel Foucault's theoretical production in this regard (Arnould & Thompson, 2015).

According to Foucault (1988a, 2012a), subjectivation takes place as individuals try to know themselves. Such a process presupposes a movement between morality and pleasure, which culminates in an ethical statute. Thus, the idea about who we are and the world we live in pervades the constitution of ethics, which is inherent to social and desire practices exercised during continuous self-transformation processes (Foucault, 2012b). Such practices have epistemic foundations and enable the building of subjectivity based on incorporated and reframed truths, either through knowledge propagating discourses or through agencies carrying out behaviors (Foucault, 2011). This process results from positions taken at the time to cope with power forces, through resistance acts that affect the way power is conducted, rather than nullifying it (Foucault, 2012b).

Therefore, it is evident how subjectivity in Foucault's theory intersects with the concept of political identities (Ivic & Lakicevic, 2011; Parsons, 2010). Accordingly, Hanna (2013) indicated that Foucauldian thought allows us to interpret how individuals find themselves in the middle of a dispute involving dominant positions and autonomous subjectivities – these subjectivities are made possible through the exercise of resistance.

In a context where technologies enable audiences to appropriate the media they enjoy, consumers are no longer subsumed to the cultural industry (Sauter, 2014). According to Martín-Barbero (2018), subjects are capable of appropriating the language diffused by the media. Accordingly, Kellner (2020) points out how contemporary ubiquitous media culture provides a connectivity space for consumers to appropriate content to express their subjectivities.

The entertainment industry has emerged as an arena of increasing possibilities for the exercise of consumer resistance (Martin, 2019; Monaghan, 2021; Press & Liebes, 2016), since it plays an important role in creating and maintaining political identities (Cooper et al., 2010; Kozinets, 2001; Walther & Schouten, 2016). Its *modus operandi* is aligned with new configurations of capitalism; thus, it implies not only economic, but political and cultural relevance as well (Hackley & Hackley, 2019; Toubia et al., 2019). On the other hand, it is also associated with the way new information and communications technologies and the media have reconfigured social life (Chen, 2021; Sugihartati, 2020).

This process enables consumers to converge and act in the so-called pop culture in a participative way (Fuschillo, 2020; Seregina & Schouten, 2016). Fans are best defined as active consumers who engage with pop culture by interacting with each other, as well as with media texts and content developers (Guschwan, 2012; Hills, 2012). This engagement often enables them to express political positions (Fuschillo, 2020; Jenkins, 2006a) and, consequently, to create or maintain identity projects (Booth & Kelly, 2013; Kozinets, 2001).

The aim of the current study was to investigate how fans behave towards the greater introduction of political identities in pop culture. Such an investigation can contribute to the CCT field by focusing on the association between fan practices and media products as an interdisciplinary topic (Hackley & Hackley, 2019; Sugihartati, 2020), as well as by articulating how political identities guided by consumption practices (Arend, 2016; Crockett, 2022; Kates, 2004; Lamont & Molnár, 2001) can be interpreted based on Foucault's theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2015; Holt, 2017).

The current research analyzed the repercussions of new Star Wars movies among fans. Star Wars was created by George Lucas in the 1970s and became one

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of the most famous and profitable movie franchises, so far (Benson, 2020; Watson, 2020). For more than four decades, the saga has won over fans and admirers from several generations (Hills, 2003; Wood et al., 2020), as well as playing an instrumental role in a movement aimed at legitimizing consumers who used to inhibit their bond to pop culture (Hills, 2003; Taylor, 2014).

New movies released after the franchise was acquired by Disney in 2012 have provided greater narrative space for characters representing political identities associated with gender, ethnicity and sexuality (Brown, 2017; Condis, 2015; Proctor, 2018). Such identities stand out among the most addressed ones in consumer research focused on analyzing the market as a political arena for the elaboration of identity projects (Kuehn & Parker, 2021; Neal, 2018; Pittman, 2020).

Thus, the present research analyzed how Star Wars fans behave towards the introduction of political identities in new movies belonging to the franchise. In this sense, we follow Kozinets' (2020) understanding about choosing an online interactive platform that brings together consumers who address the investigated object that is representative, relevant and current. Thus, the study focuses on the interactions of Star Wars fans in the largest forum of the film saga, which is constantly fed with new comments and content produced by the fandom (Proctor, 2013; Whitney, 2017). Additionally, the study aligns with Denegri-Knott and Tadajewski's (2017) understanding of the validity of performing a Foucauldian analysis on data obtained via netnographic treatment.

2 Demand for representativeness in the entertainment industry

The entertainment industry has consolidated itself as a global market of cultural relevance (Hackley & Hackley, 2019; Toubia et al., 2019). The movie industry stands out among the main branches, since it introduces and legitimizes identity projects (Kozinets, 2001; Walther & Schouten, 2016), as well as enabling consumers to identify with them (Cooper et al., 2010; DeLorme & Reid, 1999). Movie consumption enables individuals to identify with characters and narrative contexts, a fact that shapes the experience of fruition (Choi et al., 2014; Walther & Schouten, 2016). This happens because movie plots often show social representations prevailing in ordinary life (Cobb & Horeck, 2018; Lugowski, 1999; Wright, 2014).

The movie industry has attributed secondary functions (e.g., comic relief) or supporting roles (e.g., romantic partner) to non-dominant social groups (e.g., women, non-whites, homosexuals) for a long time (Bakhitiari & Salimi, 2015; Molina-Guzmán, 2016). This process has contributed to reproducing and perpetuating stigmatized stereotypes (Courtney, 2005; Lugowski, 1999; Wright, 2014). However, during the 2010s, this approach was put in check by the sum of events that shook the image of the entertainment industry, such as boycotts due to the prevalence of white people in leading roles and awards nominations (Molina-Guzmán, 2016), as well as sexual harassment complaints against men holding important positions in the industry (Cobb & Horeck, 2018). In addition, segments of the audience started demanding major representation in bigger Hollywood productions (Martin, 2019; Monaghan, 2021; Press & Liebes, 2016).

The discussion about the new Star Wars movies produced after Lucasfilm was acquired by Disney has been extensively observed due to the presence of non-dominant identities in leading roles (Proctor, 2018; Wood, Litherland, & Reed, 2020). Three topics have become prevalent, namely: female (Brown, 2017; Wood et al., 2020) and black male protagonism (Proctor, 2018), as well as conjectures about the potential homo affective relationship between two main characters (Condis, 2015).

This type of repercussion sheds light on the role played by fans as specialized and highly involved consumers who act proactively, as well as emphasizing how different market agencies overlap and are negotiated (Kozinets, 2002; Scaraboto, 2015). According to Jenkins (2006a), fans are the maximum representation of participatory culture, in which individuals increasingly and spontaneously try to become active participants in the cultural context they belong to (Fuschillo, 2020; Jenkins, 2006b).

Accordingly, they take advantage of technologies available in the market in order to interact with peers and produce in a collective way (Chen, 2021; Guschwan, 2012). This happens due to media convergence (Jenkins, 2006a), since the development and popularization of new devices and technologies allows different social agents (e.g., market players) to converge their interests in an economic, sociocultural and political microsphere that is increasingly hard to dissociate from.

Fan consumption practices have led to discussions about identity (Booth & Kelly, 2013; Kozinets, 2001). On the other hand, the construction of identity projects through consumption has been associated with consumer

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productivity (Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Büscher & Igoe, 2013; Cova & Cova, 2012). Fans are seen as productive consumers (Chen, 2021; Sugihartati, 2020), since they produce identities in their relationships with media products and keep them as a reference (Fuschillo, 2020; Seregina & Schouten, 2016). This happens because identities can manifest through cultural and market relationships; thus, individuals can express a range of identities while assuming different social positions and roles (Pittman, 2020; Polese & Seliverstova, 2020).

One way fans build their own identities is by appropriating the available technologies that allow them to converge and express values and meanings within the cultural contexts in which they interact (Moura & Souza-Leão, 2020). This behavior reflects the existence of an overlap between the use of technologies and the understanding of their impact on mediatized cultures. Accordingly, Martín-Barbero (2018) argues that subjects can and do appropriate the media discourses and the mediatized language, as opposed to a generalized notion that audiences simply reproduce ideologies widespread by the mass media.

This perspective is aligned to Kellner's (2020) critique about consumers of popular culture and the industry's discourses. The author argues that media culture is appropriated by consumers, in a rupture from critical studies that understand that the cultural industry shapes subjects. This reasoning represents a significant change of thought, since media content is understood as the mainstay for consumers to demand changes in popular culture discourses (Hasson, 2015), as well as to manifest and elaborate on their subjectivities and moral values (Sauter, 2014).

3 Understanding consumption as an arena for political identity and moral subject building

According to Belk (2013), identity projects emerging from consumption enable consumers to manifest different facets of themselves, depending on social, cultural and temporal contexts. Therefore, consumption makes ground for individuals to define, reinforce and express different identities. If we take into consideration the dependence between culture and symbolic material resources, consumption can be understood as the basis for identity projects in any social sphere, including

the political one (Kaptan, 2016; Neal, 2018; Polese & Seliverstova, 2020).

Therefore, identity manifestations grounded in consumer practices can both incorporate and (re)produce political agencies (Banks, 2021; Kuehn & Parker, 2021). Consumption, in turn, can be understood as an agency to allow political positions, including the so-called minorities (Neal, 2018; Polese & Seliverstova, 2020). Racial (i.e., ethnic) (Banks, 2021; Crockett, 2022; Lamont & Molnár, 2001; Pittman, 2020), gender (Arend, 2016; Kuehn & Parker, 2021) and sexual (Kates, 2004; Neal, 2018) identities are major interests in consumer research. Fans, who are often aligned with, or even belong to, these political identities, struggle for social emancipation through identity building based on their consumption practices (Booth & Kelly, 2013; Kozinets, 2001).

The concept of identity runs through political actions observed in interactions between social agents and structures, based on discourse production (Ivic & Lakicevic, 2011; Parsons, 2010). The struggle against dominant forces makes ground for individuals to become subjects capable of producing new knowledge about themselves and reaching new ways of being (Bernauer & Mahon, 2005; Clifford, 2001). In his philosophical trajectory, Foucault (1988b) described political identities as ethical subjectivation pervaded by normalizing institutions, social conducts and discourse production. In line with the Foucauldian Theory, consumer culture research has connected the subjectivity issue with the exercise of power to enable resistance (Mikkonen et al., 2011; Moisander & Eriksson, 2006) and self-government (Hanna, 2013) in consumption practices (Shankar et al., 2006).

According to Foucault (2012b), individuals are constituted as subjects deriving from an ethical formulation. This works as production that takes place through two simultaneous and inseparable processes, namely: subjection modes, according to which individuals reproduce behaviors established in the social context they live in; and subjectivity practices, according to which individuals perform acts to live in the most pleasant way possible. Thus, humans are social and desiring individuals constituted as subjects based on a given morality, on ethical work comprising a set of elements and interactional practices (e.g., models of conduct, knowledge constituted as truths). According to Deleuze (1988), this happens through assemblages that associate us to heterogeneous elements through compatible interests and relationships.

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According to Foucault (1988a), contemporary society lacks oppressive morality. This subjective gap allows individuals to manifest based on interests and values that define who they are and how they ethically acknowledge themselves. This happens because subjects are constituted in relationships in which they get rid of moral or desiring impediments by establishing intimate relationships (Clifford, 2001). Thus, individuals must exercise certain political productivity by positioning themselves in the socio-cultural context they live in (Foucault, 1988b).

Political positions taken by individuals reflect the way they relate to different government forms; it is not possible for one to formulate one's subjectivity without relating it to certain forces and exercises of power. Thus, subjectivation results from self-governing, since individuals live in social environments featuring disputes involving subjections and subjectivities that arise from positions anchored on resistance to power (Foucault, 2000). According to Foucault (2006), resistance inherently results from the exercise of power rather than being a mere opposition to it. Therefore, both power and resistance are productive forces acting to connect different social agents (e.g., subjects, institutions) that coexist in the same cultural context, based on shared knowledge (Foucault, 2000).

Knowledge grounds any possible power; it is based on discursive arrangements produced in certain social trajectories and gains the status of truth when it is (re)signified by subjects who recognize themselves as such (Foucault, 1988a). According to Paltrinieri (2012), discourses have a relational nature that does not require the intention to exist (i.e., *cogito*), regardless of any creating activity; truths derive from verifications made by subjects.

Thus, different truths are combined to constitute subjectivity. They are the mainstay for formulating government forms that guide subjects. They are not linear or universal constructs, but the dynamic result of continuous knowledge disputes, amid certain conducts and moralities. The transition between different truths is the time when individuals can understand who they are and the world they live in; the way they deal and negotiate with truths produces their moral subjectivity (Foucault, 2012b).

4 Methodological procedures

The current study adopted the Foucauldian methodological trail to conduct the present investigation.

Foucault (2012a) developed methodological procedures which were consistent with his research topics and addressed in his theoretical cycles. Based on his philosophical trajectory, each cycle represents an improvement over the previous one. Thus, genealogy, which supports the work developed based on his later thinking, succeeds archeology, which is his most notorious method associated with the knowledge cycle (Clifford, 2001; Deleuze, 1988). The genealogy of Foucault is subdivided into two stages, which correspond to cycles of power and the ethical subject (Foucault, 2006, 2012a, 2012b). Thus, the Foucauldian method, in its entirety, can be understood as archeogenealogy (Paltrinieri, 2012). The Foucauldian corpus was used here as a source of systematization and identification of analytical categories, in order to make them operational.

The *archeological step* focuses on discursive practices; it is set by relationships between statements, which correspond to basic discourse units and whose grouping form discursive formations. This process starts by identifying such **statements** and their **enunciative functions**, which concern the way statements act discursively. Criteria constituting such functions are analogous to, and allow the identification of, **rules** constituting **discursive formations** (Foucault, 2002).

Beyond the knowledge dimension, discursive formations are immanent to, and ground, power relations (Deleuze, 1988), making it possible to observe non-discursive practices. Thus, the *genealogy-of-power step* maps relations that are constituted amidst discursive and non-discursive practices, and reveal **power diagrams**. Such diagrams are grounded on **power operators**, which can be identified through discursive formations, based on some constitutive criteria (Foucault, 2006), namely:

- Since every power relationship works as condition and effect, they are based on *differentiation systems* that indicate how different forces act on each other.
- These power relationships reveal certain *types of objectives*, which are purposes established to guide the conduct of individuals.
- This process is materialized through *instrumental modalities*, which correspond to technologies of power that enable its exercise.
- This happens amid *institutionalization forms*, which enable the knowledge and rules underpinning conducts.

- Such a process is guided by **rationalization degrees** since power relationships take place amid different and contingent possibilities.

Similarly, by establishing conducts, power diagrams substantiate individual acts (Paltrinieri, 2012) and make it possible to identify practices of the self. Thus, the *genealogy-of-the-subject step* reveals subject-forms by covering the relationships of self, non-discursive and discursive practices. These subject-forms emerge from moral agents elicited from power diagrams; they are also constituted through some criteria (Foucault, 2012a), as follows:

- The way individuals negotiate wishes and moral norms leads them to produce **ethical substances**.
- This happens through **subjection modes** that concern how individuals deal with forms of conduct.
- This happens through individuals' actions on themselves, which relates to the **elaboration of ethical work**.
- This process evidences the **teleology of the moral subject**, which is based on the relationship individuals establish with truths produced by themselves and by the sociocultural context they live in.

In order to build the research corpus compatible with the Foucauldian analysis, we adopted the suggestion of Denegri-Knott and Tadajewski (2017) to use data obtained through netnographic data collection. Consequently, we rely on Kozinets' (2020) suggestions on identifying an empirical locus that is representative and relevant to the phenomenon investigated, as well as on the way to organize research data and the ethical criteria to be considered during the study.

TheForce.net, which is the largest Star Wars fan forum, was adopted here as the research locus. It is an interactive platform created and managed by the fans themselves, continuously updated with the publication of official news from the producers and creative activities produced by the fans (i.e., fanarts, fanfics, fan theories, fan videos, memes). Both contents are intertwined, as the number of interactions increases exponentially after news about Star Wars productions (i.e., movies, series, books, comics, games) (Proctor, 2013; Whitney, 2017).

The forum structure has several topics that propose discussions about different media. The most notorious are those that deal with news about movie releases and, more recently, television series considered as canonical to the saga. In this sense, of the 119 topics opened in the "Sequel Trilogy" filter between October 2013 and January 2020, we selected the ones associated with political identities introduced in new productions of the saga, after Lucasfilm was acquired by Disney in 2012. These topics focused on discussing the role of female characters, people of color (POC), and - possibly or explicitly - non-heterosexuals. In total, 24,459 messages produced in 40 discussion topics were analyzed in the present research.

Additionally, we believe it is worth noting that our study meets the ethical criteria for conducting qualitative research using data available on online platforms (Ravn et al., 2020). As it is a public space - i.e., TheForce. Net allows users to browse anonymously and provides unrestricted access to the contents of the forum - it was possible to make use of the available data as long as the study did not harm the members of the cultural context investigated and protected their identities (Kozinets, 2020; van Dijck, 2013).

5 Result description

Considering the study's objective of understanding the representative movements associated with the inclusion of political identities in Star Wars fandom, the results focus on the behavior of fans who defend this point of view. This choice reflects the research scope, since the movements regarding this agenda establish a struggle among fans that would lead to an in-depth understanding of movements that endorse major representation of political identities in popular culture.

The analysis conducted here enabled us to identify a single subject-form, which manifested through two moral agents, whose set of relationships revealed congruencies and singularities (see Figure 1).

Thus, the results presented here were organized based on these moral agents in order to explore such aspects. The following subsections present the definitions of the empirical categories identified (in bold) and the constitutive criteria of moral agents and power operators (in italics) based on the empirical context. In addition, each subsection presents a description of the analytical data, illustrating both the set of relationships of each moral agent and the analytical procedure. Theoretical reasoning is carried out in the subsequent section in order to address the subject-form identified.

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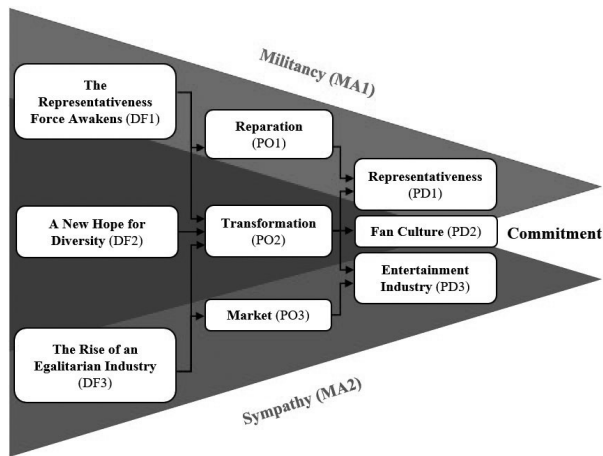
Figure 1. Analytical map
Source: prepared by the authors

5.1 Militancy

Militancy (AM1) involves a fannish movement that criticizes the way political identities are represented in the new Star Wars movies. It demands greater space for this topic and better use of characters who are representative of such identities. The moral agent presents *engagement* (ethical substance) when fans behave in a way that represents *adaptation to social demands* (subjection mode). Such a stance expresses the *obligation* (teleology of the moral subject) of the Star Wars franchise fans towards social guidelines. Therefore, the fandom elaborates ethical work aimed at *defending the interests of political identities* – in pursuit of more adequate representations – and at *empathy with social demands* – by acknowledging that the subject must be discussed among fans.

Such moral agency lies in two power diagrams. These refer to fans' behaviors towards the use of characters representing political identities, taking into consideration their value in the fictional universe and the reception of other fans. **Representativeness** (PD1) is observed in comments demanding reliable political identities not only in the Star Wars universe, but in the movie industry as well. **Fan culture** (PD2), on the other hand, represents articulations to encourage fans to support representativeness in Star Wars productions.

Both power diagrams are linked to **transformation** (PO2), which is a tendency in the cinematography and entertainment industry, which, like Star Wars, has shown growing interest in diversity issues. Thus, conducts that fail to show alignment with greater diversity of characters

are questioned and rejected by fans. This power operator is configured in two paths that have in common the *market configuration* as an institutionalization form. On the one hand, it is possible to observe the *empowerment of political identities* (instrumental modality) that aims at enabling *coherent representation* (objective type) linked to *change* (institutionalization degree), which reverberates the validity of a *social representativeness* (differentiation system) that emerged in the new movies of the saga. On the other hand, *cinematographic production* (differentiation system) has *adaptation to the market* as an objective type, since it considers its *adequacy* (institutionalization degree) as the *monitoring of trends* (instrumental modality) that is not limited to the Star Wars universe, rather than as a policy.

Power diagram representativeness (PD1) is also linked to **reparation** (PO1), which is a power operator referring to how new movies in the saga put characters representing identities that were previously neglected by the fictional universe in leading roles. This operator evidences the pursuit of *coherent representation* (objective type) that supports demands for political identities in the entertainment industry. This factor leads fans to conceive a *change* (rationalization degree) in the way they deal with *social arrangements* (forms of institutionalization) observed within and beyond the fandom and the fictional universe. These features underlie the *empowerment of political identities* and the *monitoring of trends*, which are instrumental modalities manifested by *social representativeness* and *franchise production* (differentiation systems), respectively. The first relationship concerns the strengthening of social demands in order to minimize hegemonic patterns in pop culture based on a set of values focused on promoting equality. The second relationship concerns the promotion of practices aligned with social, economic and cultural trends observed in guidelines that have been implemented in the new productions of the saga.

Both power operators are linked to the discursive formation called **the representativeness force awakens** (DF1), which refers to the understanding that there is a movement around the franchise – both in the narratives and in the fandom – which seeks to legitimize greater space for political identities. This discursive formation is based on two rules. One of them concerns **fan changes**, which refers to fans' commitment to pursue greater space for discussions about representativeness. This is based on three enunciative functions. The first one refers to **demanding adequate representations** and encompasses statements about how characters associated with political
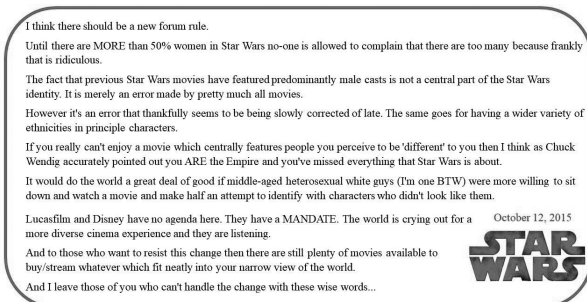
identities must be developed in a non-stereotyped way and be presented in a way that is organic to the narratives. The second enunciative function – **repudiating prejudice in the fandom –** is observed in statements reporting the behavior of certain fans who show selective empathy towards political identities – for example, by preferring women rather than representations of non-Caucasian ethnicities and homosexuals – or making direct criticisms of female protagonists. Finally, the last enunciative function in this group – **resonating the diversity in the saga –** points out statements highlighting how the Star Wars saga has always made room for representatives and affirming that anti-diversity behavior by heroes (e.g., rebels, Jedi) would be abhorrent in the fantastic universe.

This last enunciative function (i.e., resonating the diversity in the saga) and its statements are also related to the other rule linked to this discursive formation (i.e., the representativeness force awakens). This concerns **changes in the saga**, which, in turn, refer to aligning the franchise to a social transformation agenda. This rule is linked to yet another enunciative function regarding the **enhancement of diversity**, which comprises statements through which fans celebrate the fact that greater representativeness in new productions aligns the saga with social trends reflected in the industry, it helps in overcoming prejudices and it enhances the canonical universe.

Finally, this formation rule also grounds the discursive formation called **a new hope for diversity** (DF2), which is linked to the power operator called transformation (PO2). This reveals the understanding that changes implemented in new Star Wars productions reflect a movement that reaches the entire movie and entertainment industry.
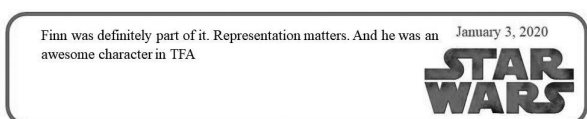
By addressing the data analysis categories adopted here, it is possible to depict how the moral agency called militancy works in the current findings. To this end, it is worth highlighting comments (see Figure 2 and 3) about the importance of announcing more female roles in the new movies of the franchise and the representativeness of having a black character in the main cast and with screen space in recent Star Wars productions.

Militancy (MA1) is based on the way fans reiterate the need for equal space between genders. On the one hand, when it depreciates the behavior of fans who criticize the growing space given to women in the saga, it makes explicit how the **fan culture** (PD2) needs the **transforming** (PO2) effect to be operated in new movies of the fictional universe. On the other hand, this transformation (PO2)

Figure 2. Militancy example

Source: Prepared by the authors, available at https://boards.theforce.net/threads/casting-for-new-female-lead-episode-viii.50033300/page-19 (Accessed on March 22, 2022)

Figure 3. Militancy example

Source: Prepared by the authors, available at https://boards.theforce.net/threads/finn-john-boyega-discussion-thread.50052899/page-4#post-56311073 (Accessed on August 28, 2022)

must be aligned with a conduct of **reparation** (PO1) both in the saga and in the entertainment industry as a whole, a fact that indicates mandatory demand for greater **representativeness** (PD1).

Both power operators are linked to the discursive formation that highlights **the representativeness force awakens** (DF1). The message presents two formation rules associated with **changes in the saga**, since the new productions no longer follow the *modus operandi* adopted by the movie industry in the past, which mostly comprised white men; as well as with **changes in fans**, who started to demand greater representation in the saga, and even confronted those who did not. These formations are aligned with the enunciative function – and its respective statements – that **resonates the diversity in the saga** as something inherent to its canon, since the original narrative is a struggle to free individuals (i.e., rebels, Jedi) from oppressor segments (i.e., the Empire).

Simply and directly, it is also possible to observe the **militancy** (MA1) in the short answer from a fan sent

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in January 2020 in the discussion about the character Finn – and the consequent performance by John Boyega, a African American actor – as the first member of the leading trio in a trilogy from Star Wars. When considering that **representativeness** (PD1) matters, it indicates that inclusion is valid in new productions. In this sense, there is a **transformation** (PO2) in the productions that works organically since the character is credible and part of the narrative. Therefore, when the fan indicates that **changes in the saga** characterize the Sequel Trilogy, it reveals the concatenation of **the representativeness force awakens** (DF1) and a **new hope for diversity** (DF2) since it has excellent characters that **echo the diversity in the saga** for its fans.

5.2 Sympathy

Sympathy (MA2) reflects the position of agreeing with the growing space given to political identities represented in the saga. According to this agency, fans support diversity, although emphasizing that it should be enabled without mischaracterizing the canon of the fictional universe. As happens with militancy (MA1), the teleology of the moral subject lies in the *obligation* fans of the saga must have to support oppressed subjects through *adaptation* (subjection mode) and *empathy* (elaboration of ethical work) *to social demands*. However, this obligation, in relation to the present moral agency, also aims to *preserve the canon* (elaboration of ethical work) through *respect for its legacy* (subjection mode), since the fans understand that changes in the saga should only be implemented without jeopardizing the foundations of the fantastic universe. The combination of the two paths reveals an ethical substance with regards to *tolerance*.

Criteria sharing between moral agents is reflected in both links to the **fan culture** (PD2) power diagram (described in the previous section). Sympathy (MA2) grounds on another power diagram – the **entertainment industry** (PD3) – which refers to how fans perceive the new way of producing media products – including the new Star Wars movies – in compliance with ongoing social changes.

The two power diagrams are supported by **transformation** (PO2), which works as a power operator (described in the previous section). The entertainment industry (PD3), in turn, is also linked to the way the **market** (PO3) operates, since it has catalyzed more space for political identities in response to consumer interests. As happens with transformation, the market is also configured in two paths, one that is common to PO2: a *cinematographic production* (differentiation system) that *monitors trends* (instrumental modality) guided by *adaptation to* (objective type) and *configuration of* (institutionalization form) *the market*, under the logic of *adaptation* (institutionalization degree). Based on the other path, this adaptation (institutionalization degree) to the market configuration (institutionalization form) requires the *franchise* (differentiation system) to implement an *expansion* (objective type) that esteems *respect for the canon* (instrumental modality).

Both power operators are linked to the discursive formation called the **rise of an egalitarian industry** (FD3). Based on fans' understanding, changes implemented in the Star Wars franchise emphasize a movement in the whole industry, which aims to reach new audiences by promoting political identities. This discursive formation is grounded on two rules: **changes in the saga** (described in the previous section) and an **open universe**, which indicates the understanding of fans that the canon already has elements enabling it to meet the demands for diversity and representativeness in order to boost the resonance of the franchise.

Both rules are linked to the enunciative function regarding the **enhancement of diversity** (described in the previous section). The second one (i.e., an open universe) also refers to **attesting a receptive audience**, based on statements indicating that fans feel represented by the new movie trailers regarding the saga and hope that this representativeness can be continuous.

Once again, the data analyzed here depict how the moral agency works in the current findings. Therefore, it is worth analyzing fan statements about it. In the first one (see Figure 4), a fan explained what she/he believes will happen with a potential interracial male homosexual couple in the new movies of the franchise. The second one (see Figure 5) presents a fan questioning the validity of consecutive changes operated in the saga's productions, which became dominated by women.

This statement shows that the fan supports the potential homosexual relationship and shows **sympathy** (MA2) for this possibility. The fan highlights that main characters like Finn (i.e., African American) are a paradigm break for the segment, but his interracial romance, either hetero (with Rey, a white female) or homosexual (with Poe, a Latin male), demands a great amount of courage from producers. By reflecting on how the **entertainment**

Figure 4. Sympathy example

Source: Prepared by the authors, available at https://boards.theforce.net/threads/finns-romantic-future-is-with-who.50047670/page-4 (Accessed on March 22, 2022)

Figure 5. Sympathy example

Source: Prepared by the authors, available at https://boards.theforce.net/threads/star-wars-and-feminism.50045924/ (Accessed on August 28, 2022)

industry (PD3) works, the fan ponders that, despite the **transforming** (PO2) effect operated in the movies, it remains regulated by limits and interests of the **market** (PO3).

Such power operators are linked to the acknowledgement of **the rise of an egalitarian industry** (DF3). According to them, the Star Wars saga has an **open universe** and **is changing**, since new romantic relationship types have become suitable for its narrative. On the other hand, the operator concerning transformation (PO2) is also linked to **a new hope for diversity** (DF2), since it allows fans to wonder about more inclusive narratives, even if they are unlikely to be incorporated into the movies. Both formation rules are associated with the enunciative function that brings together statements that **value diversity**, which echoes not only on the saga, but on the entertainment industry as well.

In the message above, the fan begins and ends her/his argument by signaling his/her **sympathy** (MA2) for the growth given to female roles in the main Star Wars productions (i.e., The Force Awakens, Rogue One, the Battlefront II story campaign), but that she/he is concerned that they – the producers – are not forcing the bar. The fan premise is that the **entertainment industry** (PD3) must be including major roles for women as they are doing in Star Wars. However, the question is whether it is just a matter of **marketing** (PO3).

Consequently, **the rise of an egalitarian industry** (DF3) makes her/him fear that this movement might be treated more as revenge than growth in the egalitarian agenda. Precisely because she/he considers Star Wars an **open universe**, she/he reflects on how the saga must seek a balance in its productions to meet all tastes despite having a **receptive audience**.

5.3 Commitment to freedom

The changes operated in the new Star Wars productions have led their fandom to articulate to endorse these transformations. Such articulation between fans seems to them to be a reaffirmation of what they have learned from the fictional saga, giving a new meaning to the transformations of the entertainment industry as a commitment to providing more space for the representation of political identities beyond the cultural object they consume and based on which they interact.

Thus, the moral agencies identified here relate different positions towards greater representativeness for political identities in the Star Wars saga. On the one hand, militancy indicates commitment to this representativeness in terms of engaged political action, which emanates from a position that closely knows, or even experiences, prejudices and stigmas suffered by social minorities. On the other hand, sympathy reveals support for the representativeness issue, as well as helping legitimize and strengthen this political discourse, based on a position that is sensitive to the subjection imputed into these identities.

Behind their singularities, these agencies reveal a common movement that relates to the will to change the entertainment industry and transform social interactions taking place in the culture of fans. This process, in turn, relates to an agenda focused on implementing broader social and political changes, in line with contemporary social movements. Therefore, we concluded that the moral agents identified here relate to different degrees of expression of a single subject-form, which here is called **commitment**.

Based on the Foucauldian Theory, we argue that this is a commitment to freedom. According to Foucault (2011), freedom is anchored on the elaboration of the ethics of the self in an arrangement of actions that enable the expression of subjectivity. Exercising freedom is a *sine qua non* condition for the constitution of ethical

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subjects. Therefore, it is a fundamental condition in the subjectification process, since it prevents individuals from being objectified through subjection (Foucault, 2012a).

Freedom is revealed by the way individuals balance moral agencies and the use of pleasures, which make up ethical foundations. It results from the negotiation of desires in relation to social roles played by individuals. Individuals exercise freedom when they manifest social choices capable of reflecting singularities (Du Gay, 1996; Weiskopf, 2002). Thus, they acknowledge themselves as subjects before subjecting agents who assume government functions and through the way they cope with them (Foucault, 2012a).

Consequently, freedom is based on the exercise of resistance, which is also a *sine qua non* condition for the existence of power relationships, since power can only be exercised over free subjects who can resist it (Foucault, 2012a). Therefore, resistance is a productive force that does not cancel its founding power, but rather it has a symbiotic and existential relationship with it (Foucault, 2006). Freedom allows individuals to govern themselves (Deleuze, 1988).

Power relationships are established in the dispute between knowledge types. Therefore, truth games support the constitution of subjectivity (Foucault, 2011). Resisting to, and through, truths attests freedom; therefore, it reveals the ethical work of subjects (Foucault, 2012b). However, freedom is not a premise of individuals' autonomy; it is a guarantee for reflection on the knowledge that one comes across (Weiskopf, 2002). Only free subjects can negotiate truths, resist power and constitute themselves in an ethical manner (Foucault, 2011). The fact that individuals are simultaneously social and desiring beings leads to the assumption of political positions (Foucault, 2012b), which, in turn, presuppose freedom (Foucault, 2000).

In line with the current conjecture, productive consumer practices are often associated with freedom due to the co-production of consumers' own consumption experiences (Büscher & Igoe, 2013; Cova & Cova, 2012). This factor can be understood as a type of resistance that Shankar et al. (2006) indicate as freedom, since consumers allow themselves to make choices that are different from the interests of other market agents, such as producers.

6 Final remarks

Our results have highlighted that when fans engage to increase the introduction of political identities

in pop culture, they show commitment to freedom. Such commitment indicates that fans see the representativeness of political identities as a continuous struggle against dominant ideological forces. It attests how consumption, and more specifically fannish consumption, produces ethical subjects. This factor is consistent with discussions that see the market as an arena for constituting ethical subjects through consumer interactions (Denegri-Knott et al., 2018; Hanna, 2013; Jantzen et al., 2012).

In the context of recent transformational movements in the entertainment industry (see Brown, 2017; Martin, 2019), it is valid to understand fans' movements regarding these guidelines. The proposal adopted by the present study observes how such movements lead fans to commit to these transformations, incorporating subjective positions through their consumption practices, but not limited to this context.

Militancy and sympathy represent movements converging to commitment to freedom, although in unique ways. Militancy represents the way fans assume the function of producing truths in order to legitimize the representatives of political identities in pop culture products. Sympathy, on the other hand, reveals a supporting position in this process. Such positions articulate with other political engagements through consumption (see Joy et al., 2020; Lamont & Molnár, 2001; Polese & Seliverstova, 2020). More specifically, fans understand that their interactions with, and about, media products lead to positions that question social norms and structures (Chen, 2021; Kozinets, 2001).

Further research on the commitment movement grounded in consumer interactivity could find fertile ground in the present research. We envision at least two possibilities for a research agenda based on what was explored in the study. On the one hand, there could be an exploration of movements against the inclusion of political identities in productions with major resonance in popular culture, whether in Star Wars fandom or in more recent productions that had to deal with similar problems (e.g., House of The Dragon, Lord of the Rings – The Rings of Power). On the other hand, discussions could seek to understand the nuances that lead fans to engage in broader political movements based on content that re-signifies when they converge among peers to manifest cultural identities (see Moura & Souza-Leão, 2020). Additionally, the approach explored in our study opens up the possibility of future work reflecting on popular culture consumer movements using the theory of

recognition (see Honneth, 2014) and its importance for transformative movements (see Fraser, 2017), including how political movements towards more representativeness (see Safatle, 2017) are articulated.

Broadly, the present study corroborates the use of Foucault's contributions to CCT research (see Arnould & Thompson, 2015; Holt, 2017), as well as providing a unique systematization of his method. It creates the opportunity to use the methodology to understand how collaborative consumption practices allow the elaboration of subjectivities and ethical precepts.

Finally, the scope of the current research is a limitation for theoretical generalization. This limitation concerns its restriction to a specific fandom of a certain cinematic saga, which is justified by the dimension of the empirical work and the relevance of Star Wars as an emblematic cultural product among popular culture and fan movements. Specifically, the study scope exposes fans' receptivity to changes in the entertainment industry but does not explore the movements against expressions about diversity in their community.

Thus, the relationship between defenders and non-defenders of diversity is presented as a research agenda. Broadly grounded through developments of the present study, it is appropriate to mention a research agenda based on Foucault's theory of subjectivity. Further research focused on investigating other contexts of political identity representativeness should be conducted to help in deepening this discussion – such as substantiating the theorization of fan/consumer subjectification processes.

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