

Escaping to a Better Self: The Well-Being in the Cosplay's Escapist Experience

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Resumo

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ABSTRACT

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Keywords: Cosplay; Geek; Eudaimonia; Hedonism; Well-Being.

1 INTRODUÇION

We live in an era of hyperreality, as it is easily represented by our consumption and desire of spectacles (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Kozinets et al., 2004). We spend time and money to flee from the dullness of our mundane, daily life commitments, be it for a brief moment (e.g. a quick check in a social media), a few hours (e.g. play videogames) or a longer window of time (e.g. a yearlong backpack). It is usually seen just as an escapism, a way to find pleasure outside real life stresses (Addis & Holbrook, 2010). In a modernist, functionalist mentality, which is still very predominant, escapism can be seen as a futile, non-productive endeavor, where money is spent just for an ephemeral pleasure (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

However, by subscribing, affirming and reaffirming a mainstream of cultural values, some escapisms are broadly accepted (e.g. watch some soccer games, a weekend on the beach), even seen as a necessary and a healthy way to relax. On the other hand, some escapisms with a more marginal position are labeled unhealthy, repulsive or sick by not complying with the mainstream values and norms.

The geek community, a subculture built on traditionally obscure and marginalized fantasy-themed media (comics, animes, role-playing games, video games, sci-fi movies and fantasy literature, McCain, Gentile, & Campbell, 2015), is well known to suffer with stigmas. Seen as far too into a fantasy world, geek consumers, products, activities and media can be labeled as an ill consumption that range from childish to delusional (Kozinets, 2001; McCain et al., 2015; Seregina & Schouten, 2017).

One of the most stigmatized geek subgroups are the cosplayers: the geekcon (i.e. geek convention) consumers who dress themselves like a fictional geek character (Seregina & Weijo, 2017; de Mello, de Almeida, & Dalmoro, 2020). As they represent a greater aesthetical and bodily performative commitment than the usual geek consumer, they are special targets of harsh comments. In Brazil, the mainstream media even reached the point of diagnosing them with dissociative identity disorder (UOL Notícias, 2015), which generated the hashtag "#CosplayNãoÉDisturbio (#CosplayIsNotADisorder)" from the community.

Within this scenario in mind, we were interested in understanding how this stigmatized subculture builds experiences related to their well-being inside and outside the geekcon. With this purpose, we did not limited our understanding of well-being as a concept of hedonism, pleasure and a happy life (i.e. hedonic well-being, Diener, 1984; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). We mainly explored how this activity sometimes labeled as sick can be understood as an eudaimonic activity as well – that is, a way of self-understanding and self-growth (i.e. eudaemonic well-being, Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Studies of consumption and well-being generally follow a logical positivism thinking, with deductive methods of surveys and experiments, or they have other epistemological positions and fall in the transformative consumer research agenda, which are normally more interested in context of scarcity and unhealthiness (e.g. poor people, diabetics). We opted to explore a consumption of hyperreality instead of a reality of scarcity, which, even though arguably less impactful to our collective well-being, can have a very foggy relation to well-being beyond pure pleasure.

With that in mind, we studied the cosplay experience at the geekcons through a series of observations and interviews, which helped us to understand how it can range from a pleasurable and playful afternoon with friends and other members of the subculture to a personal challenge and a transformative experience. Next, we review the literature in hedonic and eudaimonic well-being and how both relate to each other, followed by a description of the context of this study. Later, we describe the method, succeeded by the findings. Finally, we discuss this study's findings and their theoretical implications.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Consumption is so perennial in today's society that it became our main way to search for pleasures, self-expression and realization (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). These goals are ways to describe well-being, depending on the theoreticals behind it. Well-being is, per se, an ethic theory aroused from Greek philosophers trying to find the way to the "good life" (Ryff & Singer, 1998). It mainly diverged in two groups of thinkers: hedonics and eudaemonics. As we will explain next, the former is related to the idea that well-being and happiness are interchangeable (Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1999), while the later understand that well-being is not a state, but the continuous process of self-growth and self-understanding (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

2.1 HEDONIC WELL-BEING

Hedonists understand that well-being is summed up as happiness: the self-evaluation of how filled with pleasure and lacking pain one's life is (Diener, 1984). It is a subject evaluation, as happiness is phenomenologically defined by each person's understanding of what generates pleasure in his or her life. For some, happiness can be a quiet and peaceful life, while for other people happiness is an intense and dangerous-driven life (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014). It is mainly studied in the positive psychology, where they try to understand and quantify what are the antecedents to people's happiness.

Lyubomirsky and colleagues (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006) argue that three elements are what define the individual's happiness: personality traces, life circumstances and intentional activities. To them, personality is the main definer, as it establishes one's natural state of happiness, the "set point" (e.g. extroverted people tend to have a higher set point than neurotic ones, Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1999; Suh, Diener, & Fujita, 1996). Life circumstances is a poor indicator, as it is a constant in one's life and suffer little to no change in long term (e.g. one's job, income, marital status), making the individual adapted to it and lacking hedonic responses (Myers, 2000). The intentional activities, even though not as much a great indicator as the personality, is a good predictor of happiness for its possibility of changeability (e.g. if one finds pleasure in a pub, one can go to a different one each week, Huta & Ryan, 2010). So, at the same time as it has a deterministic top-down approach to people happiness, the positive psychologists also agree that individuals have some degree of agency to make themselves happier.

When it comes to research in a more interpretative spectrum, happiness generally is not a focal topic of investigation, but it is present when trying to understand individual's worldview as it becomes apparent in a more symbolical way. Adrenaline junkies cannot find happiness in a risk-free life (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993), and some American bikers finds happiness in riding a loudly roaring Harley-Davidson on the road as a way of consuming the feeling of American freedom (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Furthermore, the idea of hedonism is both arbitrary and mutable, as it can change related to our sociohistorical context. Historically, hedonic consumption has evolved from one of sensations to one of symbolisms (Jantzen, Fitchett, Østergaard, & Vetner, 2012).

2.2 EUDAIMONIC WELL-BEING

To the eudaemonists, a pleasurable life is not necessarily a good one. They understand that pleasure is ephemeral and can be reached in the expense of one's functionality and self-discover (e.g. the obese who find pleasure in eating just fast food is harming their body and preventing themselves to reach their potential). To this line of thought, well-being is a life aimed to understand one's real self (i.e. daemon) and to seek personal growth (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2001; Waterman, 1993; Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008). That is, know who you are and who you should become and live a life to develop your potential in that direction (e.g. if one understand oneself as an artist, he or she should act in a way to develop their skills as an artist, Ryff & Singer, 1998, 2008).

An eudaimonic act should be intrinsically motivated, possessing a meaning that goes beyond pure pleasure (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2001). It can be an act of social expression (Waterman, 1993; Waterman et al., 2008), virtuosity (i.e. with inherent value, an end in itself, e.g. altruistic communitarian work, Huta & Ryan, 2010; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008), acts of self-discover (Ryff & Singer, 1998, 2008), acts of bonding (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2001), or skill development (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 2008). It is a never-ending journey to understand oneself and one's own body, acting accordingly to what both should become and develop them, leading to feelings of competence, autonomy and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Many studies in the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) approach themes of this kind, but, similar to the hedonic well-being, it is not properly named. CCT literature has a special interest in extraordinary experiences or in subcultures of people bonded by a strong commitment to a certain kinds of consumption. Extraordinary experiences has the premise of being one of self-renewal, with the consumer changing his or her self-concept after an unprecedented, absorptive and intensely emotionally driven experience (Arnould & Price, 1993; Tumbat & Belk, 2011). The subcultures, on the other hand, are communities that the membership can be one of the central pillars of one's identity, with the members displaying individual and social commitment to theirs and the community's growth (Celsi et al., 1993; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Thomas, Price, & Schau, 2013).

2.3 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HEDONIC AND EUDAIMONIC WELL-BEING

Mainly, the distinction between a hedonic and eudaimonic act is in its motivation. The same act can be done with either mere pleasure (e.g. casual sex) or with a more meaningful end in mind (e.g. sex with the beloved one, Huta & Ryan, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Waterman, 1993; Waterman et al., 2008). As in the example before, hedonism and eudaimonism are not exclusionary, as eudaimonic acts can be pleasurable (Waterman, 1993; Waterman et al., 2008).

Eudaimonia can even contribute to the hedonic well-being, as the individual develop resources that enables new pleasurable experiences (e.g. a well-trained guitarist can have a good time with some friends and music, Huta & Ryan, 2010; McMahan & Estes, 2011; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008; Waterman et al., 2008).

Arguing against the deterministic point of view that personality is the definer of one's set point of happiness, Huta and Ryan (2010) reach the point of claiming that eudaimonic acts can elevate one's state of happiness in the long term. On the other hand, hedonic act can help eudaimonia as well, since happier people are more willing to live through meaningful experiences (Deci & Ryan, 2008; King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006). With that in mind, both concepts of well-beings are interrelated, such that some positive psychologists argue in favor of a life balanced with both eudaimonism and hedonism. The former will give meaning and develop skills to the individual and the later will be an emotional regulation, a way of relax after the stresses that the former can generate (e.g. aimlessly watch TV after a martial arts training session, Huta & Ryan, 2010; Steger et al., 2008).

In summary, well-being can be understood as either a pleasurable life or a life of self-discover and development and both are related to each other. Next, we will describe the geek culture, geekcons and the cosplays, as all of it is relevant to the context of this study as a community stigmatized and labeled as a childishly hedonic consumption with identity problems.

2.4 GEEK CULTURE, GEEKCONS AND COSPLAY

Geek refers to the subculture that gravitates around traditionally obscures and marginalized fantasy-themed media, like comics, animes, role-playing games (RPGs), video games, sci-fi movies and fantasy literature (McCain, Gentile, & Campbell, 2015). The term "geek" has been historically used in a pejorative tone to refer to the consumers of these media (Kozinets, 2001; McCain et al., 2015). In recent years, these media have been increasingly entering a mainstream sphere, mainly because of blockbuster super-heroes (e.g. Iron Man, Batman, Avengers) and fantasy movies (e.g. Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter). Nowadays, a growing number is proudly calling themselves geeks, competing for cultural capital in contests of knowledge, collection and theoretical debates (Seregina & Schouten, 2017). However, groups of greater commitment are still badly received and seen as excessive, especially those with a embodied and aesthetic commitments (Seregina & Schouten, 2017; Seregina & Weijo, 2016).

Since the 30s, the geeks used to organize their own conventions, initially focused on discussions around pulp science fictions (Gramuglia, 2017). Over the time, it has evolved in a huge mainstream media outlet (e.g. San Diego Comic-Con), becoming a stage for big Hollywood stars and video game developers to display their newest and future releases (Seregina & Weijo, 2016). In Brazil, the geekcons started to show up around the late 80s, usually anime-focused, where the fans used to gather to talk about animes and mangas and to watch some anime and tokusatsu shows in rooms with a TV, a VHS and some chairs (Peixoto, 2013). Nowadays, there are many different cons around the country, englobing several different themes. The size, however, is nowhere near the American ones, with the only exception being the gigantic Comic-Con Experience in São Paulo, which in 2018 had 262 thousand visitors in 4 days (Comic Con Experience, 2019), a public larger than the San Diego's Comic-Con's.

The first cosplays also started to appear in the 30s with a couple of fans dressing themselves as sci-fi characters at an American convention named WorldCon. Around the 80s, a Japanese game designer named Takahashi Nobuyuki saw these striking figures in a visit to the United States and created the term cosplay when returned to Japan, blending the words "costume" and "play" together (Rahman, Wing-Sun, & Cheung, 2012; Winge, 2006). The

cosplay is mainly characterized by the practice of dressing oneself as a character from a geek media (e.g. characters from anime, manga, video games, comics, and fantasy themed series and movies) and use it in geekcons (Ito & Crutcher, 2014). They use it to make made-up performances or to recreate poses and scenes from the characters, taking photos and interacting with the other visitants (de Mello et al., 2020). The performance, however, can be troublesome as the geekcon's structure can be unappropriated, with lots of people walking by and small corridors, possibly damaging the cosplay (Seregina & Weijo, 2016).

The cosplay also involve a creative and crafting phase, which is an artisanal practice with many options of material (e.g. a dress made of fabric, an armor made of real iron), accessories (e.g. jewels, swords, guns) and makeups (e.g. makeup to look like an anime character, a special effect's face painting to look like the terminator). This step can demand a great amount of time, skills and money, possibly increasing over time (Seregina & Weijo, 2016). Also, it is common for the cosplayer to take this time to practice their character's poses and dialogues and to study their background (Seregina & Weijo, 2016).

In Brazil, however, many of the cosplayers do not craft their own cosplays. Usually, they craft only part of it, the other part they draw a blueprint of their desired project and hire a seamstress or a cosmaker (i.e. a professional cosplay crafter) to do it. The Brazilians cosplayers argue they do not have a cultural background that supports the crafting of elaborated dresses and weaponry like the American ones do.

2 METHOD

This study was conducted with an interpretative stance of enquiry, using observation and interviews to understand the cosplayers' worldview, their complex experience with the cosplay and how it can relate to their well-being. For that, from August of 2015 to November of 2016 the first author observed nine different events in the southernmost state of Brazil (23rd, 24th and 25th edition of AnimExtreme, Comic-Con RS, Geek Weekend, Anime Buzz, Anime Angel, Anime Fan, QI Geek Day), with each event having a duration from 1 to 3 days. Also, the first author observed 3 geek informal meetups in a public park, conceding a contrast to the behaviors and meanings of the cosplay experience in the geekcon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Spiggle, 1994). In total, it was 18 days of observation. The first author disclaimed his role as a researcher and observed the spaces imagery, the cosplayers themselves and their interaction with their cosplays, other cosplayers, other people, other objects and their spaces as a whole. During the observations, the first author conducted informal interviews with the cosplayers. The observations were descriptively written down in notebooks and a cellphone¹. The field notes and interviews were transcribed and further analyzed and interpreted following Corbin and Strauss (2008) and Spiggle (1994) directions.

The geekcons are ludic and commercial spaces where the geeks gather to consume the geek media in fan-made activities and attractions (e.g. cosplays, themed rooms, quizzes, dancing shows) and commodities offered by a large number of stalls (e.g. t-shirts, comics, cards). In addition, it is common to have interviews with either an internet celebrity (e.g. youtuber) or a national or regional geek known figure (e.g. a famous cosplayer, voice actors). Competitions are present in every convention, with cosplay competitions, where cosplayers step up on the main stage and show their cosplays, which is scored by judges to win a prize that can range from a box with inexpensive objects (e.g. a notebook and a poster) to money (e.g. R\$2.000) or a videogame console.

The geek meetups, held in public parks, were less structured than the geekcons, generally counting just with the participation of the geeks, some props they brought on their own (e.g. padded swords) and a flag the organizer would bring. It would usually gather some

tens of geeks who would talk, debate and play in games usually related to geek knowledge (e.g. quizzes).

Moreover, 14 formal interviews were conducted with 16 cosplayers: 12 individually and two in pairs (two sisters and a heterosexual couple). The interview addressed the cosplayer's lifeworld, their experiences with the cosplay and how they understood their well-being. All interviews were consensually recorded, each lasting from 45 minutes to 2 hours. The informants were 11 women and 5 men, with their age ranging from 19 to 35 years old and with 2 to 13 years of cosplaying. All names were modified to protect their privacy.

3 FINDINGS

The geekcon is a sociospatiotemporal ludic context, a liminal space where the geeks can express themselves and behave in ways that they could not do in the – as they say – “real world”, similar to other enclavic spaces of marginal subcultures (e.g. Kates, 2002). To a certain extent, at the geekcon the cosplayers feel protected of the judgements of the mainstream media and social norms. They feel free to dress themselves in colorful ways with striking capes and make up, negotiating their cultural capital in loud debates about theoretical fights in the most varied circumstances.

The cosplayer is part of the geekcon, as it is one of its core symbols. They understand themselves as attractions, responsible for part of the “magic” of the convention (de Mello et al., 2020). As the geekcon is a place that allows experimentation with the geek imagery and meanings, the cosplayers find in it a space to perform in dramaturgical ways with oftentimes eye-catching outfits resembling geek characters. With the cosplays, these consumers have authority of an elevated fan by their greater commitment to the geek subculture, which allows them to guide activities and to behave in more abnormal ways than the ‘civilian’² visitors (de Mello et al., 2020).

It has clear hedonic, escapist and cathartic values to the cosplayer, but it also gives them the chance to experiment themselves in a more personal growing way. Next, we display a brief description of the cosplayers understanding of fun with the cosplay experience, later we will talk more about how they see it as a chance to challenge themselves and how both hedonism and eudaimonism relate to each other in this experience.

3.1 HEDONIC ESCAPISM

The geekcon is the cosplayer's stage, where he or she can perform accordingly to the character's traces and idiosyncrasies, take photos with the other visitors that are a fan of it, conduct activities or just play around in scenes that would be comical for the character to be in. The cosplayers have a larger range of acceptable behaviors in a geek convention than the other visitors, who normally take the spectator role, an audience member wanting to see the “magic” happen (de Mello et al., 2020).

A lot of cosplayers see it mainly as an escapism of their daily stresses as they can have a carefree performative experience for a day or two (Addis & Holbrook, 2010; L Rahman et al., 2012). It is an especially hedonic concept, as it is understandingly a way to avoid pain and look for episodes of pleasure (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Diener, 1984). For Fernanda, it is a necessary pause in her obligations as she relaxes from a “hard and wearing reality” to visit “a different world” during a weekend:

Let's say the cosplay is important because we live in a hard and wearing reality. People study and work their fingers to the bone and it is stressing, and during a weekend of a month, from time to time, you take that weekend and put the cosplay. Going out with your friends in cosplay is a way, I think, of relax a little, you know? Because you divert your attention from your hard and wearing

reality to enter like a different world with your friends. However, you know, it is more like a way to relax and have fun. This is a way to see the cosplay, you know? (Fernanda, 36 cosplays)

The escapism is clear in their narratives, as they regularly use terms such as “real life”, “real world”, “cosplay life” and “convention life” to distinguish what happens in the geekcon and what happens on their daily lifeworld. It gives them a peak of pleasure and happiness that last for some few days after the geekcon, temporarily invading their daily life. Julia, for example, says that it is normal to feel the pleasure reverberating during the week after:

I come back home [from the geekcon] destroyed. I don't want anything else, you know? I just want to sleep. But on the other day I have to wake up early to work (laughs). Then we come back [to reality]... I always have a smile on my face on the week after. It was a very cool experience and I got cool pictures, or I bought something that satisfied me, you know. I get really smiley on that week and I am already thinking on the next one. (Julia, 20 cosplays)

The cosplay experience, as some cosplayers defend, can be a way to unwind, to emotionally regulate themselves from their stresses. Even with the stresses that comes with the cosplay production (Seregina & Weijo, 2016), wearing it on the convention makes the cosplayer temporarily away from a harder reality to seek an easier one, filled with spectacles and fantasy (Addis & Holbrook, 2010).

It is not to say that it lacks unpleasant episodes. The main complain of the cosplayer is how some of the civilians mistake their role of an attraction with the role of a servant. It is normal to girl cosplayers to have a report on a civilian who abused verbally or physically of them. Others complain of the lack of respect that some running civilian can have as they can bump on the cosplay and damage it. In addition, as the cosplay is a way of gathering cultural capital inside the geek community, some negotiation of status can become hurtful.

3.2 EUDAIMONIA AND PERSONAL GROWTH

In general, the geekcon is a safe space for the cosplayer to behave as a character and not feel judged by it. Even though a little competitive sometimes, the cosplay community is seen as inviting by the cosplayers, having the fair play and nonjudgment as unspoken norms of interaction. It stimulates the cosplayer to behave like the character but also to act more freely in a self-authentic way, unworried with reprisals to his or her attitudes and behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2001). It creates a paradoxical scenario: at the same time as the convention is a place away from their “real life”, it can be where they are their “real selves”.

The convention can be a safe haven to self-expression, exploration and experimentation, with skills and worldview development that can perpetuate beyond the sociospatiotemporal context of the geekcon (Huta & Ryan, 2010; Ryan et al., 2008; Waterman, 1993; Waterman et al., 2008). Joana, for example, describe her first cosplay experience as something unprecedented and highly emotional, an extraordinary experience (Arnould & Price, 1993) that made her think it would be “good to my life”:

It was a cosplay that I bought the fabric and did it, I used my own hair. But then, all that feeling, all that sparkle, you know, that I felt in my heart exploding... it was something like totally different from everything I have ever lived on my life. Then I thought ‘wow, this is cool, this is going to be good to my life. I think I should keep on doing this’. (Joana, 24 cosplays)

The cosplayers can have multiple deeply meaningful experiences with the cosplay at the geekcons, with themes of self-learning, self-acceptance, social skills development, and virtuosity. Next, we explore these themes.

3.2.1 Self-learning and expression

It is a moment where I can be myself, where I can return to desire the things that I always desired, without the society's pressure, without the work's pressure, without the family's pressure. So, like, the most important of that moment is for me to erase everything that I have [to worry about]

and become that character because I like that character, because I think that that character is the greatest, because that character is so me. So, it is a special moment for me. (Amanda, 16 cosplays)

Amanda's speech is an example of how paradoxical the cosplay experience is when considering how the theatrical performance outside the "real world" contrast with the expressions of their "real self". The cosplayer sees it as a mix between flee from the mundane reality and a way to act more naturally, with greater safety to behave in a self-congruent way. It juxtapose the hedonism of the escapism with a meaningful self-expression that leads to a better self-understanding.

Even though it can seem contradictory, the performance of a fictional character becomes a platform to act naturally, with more spontaneity and legitimacy, a freedom seldom present on their daily lives when they are wearing "themselves" instead of a character. It is even clearer to cosplayers that live in country towns, where social norms and the expectancy that they follow a more traditional profession (e.g. law) and stigmas against the geek subculture are stronger. As they have a greater range of socially acceptable behaviors wearing the cosplay, they have a *carte blanche* to act in whimsical or eccentric ways that can better represent themselves.

As it is, the cosplay can be better understood as a performance of the cosplayer's real self than of the character. To Rafaela, for example, the cosplay is an experimentation with low risks, a way for her to act more authentically and expose herself with safety before she could feel confident to do it in other areas of her life:

It gives you a freedom you don't have in the real world. It helped me to give me the strength to be who I am, to show who I am in a safer way, in a less painful and aggressive way that I would have in other environments. (...) I can test many of my sides and adapt little by little, bring from there [geekcon] to the exterior world, which is more complicated. There it is already accepted, so it gives you more courage to take the more extroverted personality from there and start putting it in your service, in the way you talk, in exposing yourself... you will keep bringing things to the other worlds that you are part of. At least that's how it was for me. (Rafaela, 78 cosplays)

Some cosplayers even chose the character with the personality exploration in mind. A character with a similar personality can be easier to perform in a way more authentic with the cosplayer's self-concept. Fernanda, for example, says she likes to do a cosplay of Erin, the main character from the anime Attack on Titan, because she "doesn't have to act":

I completely identify with Erin, you know? (...) I prefer doing Erin because I feel more comfortable, because I don't have to act, you know? So, I think it is because of that that I like to pick character similar to my personality, so I don't have to... like I feel more comfortable, let's say so. (Fernanda, 36 cosplays)

Other cosplayers, on the other hand, prefer to choose a character with a desirable personality trace that they feel lacking in themselves. Usually picking characters with strong traces, these cosplayers find in it a chance to explore and develop themselves, with the cosplay being a deliberative way to search for self-growth. For Joana, who prefer strong and sexy female characters, it is a way to perform something different and become a "better" person:

I discovered that way to represent something different and that gave me energy, like 'wow, I can be better, I can show people that I am not that what I was once before and I can change, I can achieve the right things'. (...) It allowed me to know myself better, to tell the truth. (...) With the cosplay, I noticed that I started to like myself better, of my appearance, of what I can be to other people and that they can see myself differently. So, [cosplay] represent all of that: being Joana, but a better Joana. It helped me to discover all this part, like, of liking myself, liking what I am doing, once in my life, be better in what I do. (Joana, 24 cosplays)

In addition, the cosplay can be a strong expression of self when it comes to fandoms membership and nostalgia. Many cosplayers choose meaningful characters to affirm and reaffirm to themselves and to the public how much of a fan they are. Nostalgic characters are vastly present in the geekcons, which, being a figure of beloved earlier time, can be a good window of their "real self" (Baldwin, Biernat, & Landau, 2015). Fernando is an avid and

lifelong Dragon Ball Z fan and he sees in his cosplay of Goku (the main character) a way to reinforce how much of a fan and an otaku³ he is:

You feel happier, because it is something natural to you and other people value it, they think you are a real fan. This is something I carried since I was little. So, for me, for example, it wasn't something like 'oh, now I'll become an otaku', no. There is a lot of people who say 'oh, it is just a phase'. No, it is since my childhood, since I was born, and I kept it. (Fernando, 18 cosplays)

3.2.2 *Body acceptance and confidence*

The exposure and unpredictability of the cosplay experience can be uncomfortable for beginners or to someone unsecured. Talking about their first cosplays, the cosplayers regularly express how they were apprehensive and self-questioning before appearing dressed as a character in front of hundreds or thousands of people. To Rafaela, it is an act of courage recognized by the other consumers of the geekcon. She understands that some of the civilians would like to cosplay as well, but they may lack the courage to do so and respect who does it:

You bothered yourself to wear it in there. People recognize [the effort], just for the fact that you are wearing it, because many people want to do it, many people want to wear it, but they don't have the courage, they are ashamed of doing it. (...) They recognize the work you had to do it and the courage you had to do it. (Rafaela, 78 cosplays)

Pictured as an act of courage out of their comfort zone, it shows how the cosplay can go beyond hedonisms. Even when they find themselves used to the feeling of exposure, some cosplayers try to find new challenges with bigger risks and unpredictability. A regular case of self-imposed challenge is the feminine cosplayers with body insecurity or ashamed of using shorter clothes in public who choose to do a "cossexy" (i.e. an emic term to a more sexy cosplay, usually with shorter or tighter clothes). Eduarda, for example, says she feels uncomfortable using shorter clothes, but, by the time of her interview, she was crafting her first cossexy. When asked about what she expected of it, she stated that she hoped it to be an enriching experience, predicting that the uncomfortableness would make her more open use short clothes:

It is going to be a personal challenge for me. This cosplay has several items that I wouldn't normally do. (...) I think it is going to be a different experience, you know. It has several elements out of my comfort zone that are not what I would normally do. I think it is going to be an experience that will contribute a lot. I think I will break a little bit of this wall, you know. I think that from this cosplay on maybe I can choose other things that I wouldn't choose before. Choose characters, clothes that I wouldn't before. (Eduarda, 15 cosplays)

Eduarda have deliberately chosen a cossexy with the intention to make herself more comfortable with it and do it again in the future. As Rafaela expressed, the geekcon is an environment for experimentation. Joana, who declares to have suffered – and still suffer in lesser degree – with body insecurities – she feels it is a consequence of her upbringing as an overweight girl in a country town –, usually do cosplay of strong and sexy characters, exposing the same body that she had so much discomfort with. To her, the cosplay is a way to promote self-acceptance of both her personality and body:

To me, it goes way beyond the acting, of all that. To tell the truth, it is my own acceptance. Acceptance of who I can become, of my body, of my personality, of me feeling better with myself and of me being able to become a better person. (...) The main point is for me to accept myself and people accept myself, and for me to see all this in a good way. This is my focus with all my work with the cosplay until now. (Joana, 24 cosplays)

This comfort and acceptance can spread to other areas of the cosplayer's life, as they argue how they start feeling less constrained. To Verônica, after some "daring" cosplays, she felt safer to dress as she desired, unshaken by what other people might think:

I think I lost part of my feeling of shame too because, for example, I couldn't use shorts in the summer, because I had too much shame of my body and I would overthink what other people would think about me. I have a lot of more daring cosplays, you know, that are from the character itself, and wearing them made me see that I don't have to have shame in it, it's just clothes. It's that thing they say: just because a girl is using a skirt doesn't mean she is asking to be harassed.

So I started to be less ashamed and think, 'oh, if I want to wear it, I will', I don't have to care to what other people will think. Literally, fuck the other people, you know. You don't have to care about them, you have to care with how good you feel with yourself. (Verônica, 8 cosplays)

As an illustration of this carefreeness, she went fully cosplayed to her interview in a university. The first author easily found her in the bus stop with a neon blue wig amongst the other people's heads. She told she went fully dressed to enrich the image of the interviews. When asked if it was not a problem for her to call that much attention in a public space, she replied that she noticed some old women judging her at the bus, then laughed and said, "I don't give a fuck".

Some cosplayers end up feeling more comfortable to change their everyday looks outside the geekcon to one that can be more striking and closer to their self-concept. Some finally dye their hair or tattoo themselves with something that they wanted for a long time. Rodrigo, for example, commented in one of the meetups how before he "was apprehensive of walking around with a colorful hair" but now "I don't give a shit". He said he used to be embarrassed even to walk wearing a wig on the streets, but 8 months after his interview he went from never dyeing the hair to changing colors 7 times, with colors varying from different tones of blue, red, purple and white.

3.2.3 Belong and social skills development

The cosplayers commonly state a feeling of out-of-placeness in their daily life context (e.g. college, work, family) and the feeling of belongingness at the geekcon. The geekcon on its own is a context of validation and belongingness, as some of the cosplayer's core tastes and media consumption are highly regarded in there, while stigmatized in other contexts (Kozinets, 2001; Seregina & Schouten, 2017). For Fernanda, it is a place to silence her self-questioning of being abnormal:

I was frustrated because I loved animes, I really did, and I liked videogames a lot. (...) I was in love with it and was getting frustrated, you know. Gosh... 'I must not be normal', you know? Then a friend from school told me 'oh, there's going to be a convention, you know? [The name is] I don't know what of anime', and I was like 'does it exist?', and she said 'yes', and then we went and I... wow, like, meeting that bunch of people like you, it was marvelous, you know? So it was an unforgettable experience and since then I started to go to the events and didn't stop anymore. (Fernanda, 36 cosplays)

For Rodrigo, meeting with other people was one of the main reasons to start cosplaying. In an informal interview, he told that he started to think in doing cosplay after following a cosplayer friend in a geekcon and noticing how people would come to talk with her in a curious and friendly way. He also desired to have this organic conversation with strangers, because he was "very shy" at the time. Normally the civilians are the ones who start the conversation with the cosplayer. As a counterpart, the cosplayers has to learn how to interact with strangers. For Verônica, these interactions made her more confident to talk with strangers:

It helped me to lose a lot of my shyness and gain confidence because, gosh, I was ashamed to talk even with the bus charger. That's how much shy I was to talk with strangers. Now, sometime, I start chatting with a person, like... I don't even know their name and start talking with them. (Verônica, 8 cosplays)

This social interactions with strangers can flourish long and significant relationships. Clara says she met her best friend in a convention when dressing as her friend's favorite character. Now, years later, this friend is a cosplayer and Clara was the witness of her marriage. On another case, Amanda tell how she met her 5 years long boyfriend and other friends of hers because of a cosplay:

Moreover, I met my boyfriend because of a character I was wearing [the catwoman], which was his favorite (laughs). He came to talk with me and, like, it attracts people, like it or not. Like, lots of friends of mine from Porto Alegre city, I only met them because of the cosplay. (...)

There are people who goes to the conventions and end up with a whole new network of friends because of a character. (Clara, 30 cosplays).

The cosplayer usually are very welcoming among themselves as well, praising each other's works and helping each other to fix themselves up. Eduarda remembers her first cosplay, which started to fall apart at the stage during her walk, and tells how a cosplayer she did not know had the kindness to comforting and support her on that moment of fragility:

When I did my first cosplay I had no experience with this kind of stuff. So much that a lot of things went wrong. I ended up redoing many of its items later, and had this episode when I step up at the stage to walk and a part of it broke and fell off. I was so nervous, like, I thought 'oh god, I messed up, everything went wrong', that drama. Then I came down, like, trembling, super nervous, crying, and a girl that I have never seen before said something like 'oh, your cosplay was beautiful, even breaking up and stuff', that kind of talk, like, motivational, and that really marked me, you know? It was a person that I have never seen before in my life and she was there giving me that support at that moment. (Eduarda, 15 cosplays)

To Maura, there is a non-declared norm that cosplayers should be supportive and gentle between themselves, making them a welcoming community:

Between the cosplayers, we have like an unestablished fraternity, right? There is nothing that says that we should help each other, but you regularly see a cosplayer on the bathroom helping the other one to fix their wig, their lenses, their make up, things like that. (Maura, 92 cosplays)

Some find in the cosplay a way to strength their bond with friends, relatives or partners by going to a convention with matching characters. To Rafaela, when she does a cosplay duo or group, she doesn't "have that hard time, that shyness that you can have when alone. There is someone just as crazy as you that agreed in doing it. You are not alone. Am I going to be embarrassed? Yes, but I will do it with other person, I will share it". To her, share it with her sister is what made them so close:

We ended up picking similar character just to have this experience of taking photos together, of... so, when we started the cosplay we did it around the same time, making our relationship stronger. (...) Our bond is very strong, like twins, really, which is the closest bond we both have. Twins that love each other and the cosplay is the greatest culprit for that, really. (Rafaela, 78 cosplays)

3.2.4 *Dedicated to other's happiness*

During the geekcon, cosplayers feel a responsibility to deliver a good and memorable experience to civilians, especially the children (de Mello et al., 2020). They argue that they see themselves as an agent of happiness and magic, performing and interacting with the civilians and building an ambiance of fantasy. They are dedicated with other people's pleasure. To some, it is the richest aspect of the experience, gratifying on its own. To Claudio, making others happy is his main goal with the cosplay:

So, the satisfaction when you see someone look at you, smile, give a laughter, you know. Doing "wow", you know. This is the coolest of it all, it's the most amazing thing. That's why, like, it is a hobby that bring a lot of satisfaction. (...) My main focus is the satisfaction in being happy as I see other people happy as well. (...) This is my nature: [I want to] see people happy. I like to see people happy, you know. And the cosplay helps me with it. (Claudio, 20 cosplays)

These kind of actions, with other's well-being being the main interest by its own, can be seen as a virtuous act, which is understood by some to be a way to grow as an individual (Huta & Ryan, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 2008; Ryff & Singer, 1998, 2008). It can lead to some spontaneous reactions, especially from children, which can flourish in meaningful and highly emotional episodes for the cosplayers. Maura states that her happiest memory with the cosplay is the time she was cosplaying as Maleficent, from the Disney movie with Angelina Jolie, and a little girl hugged her and called her "my fairy godmother":

My happiest memory is... that time when I was as Maleficent was very cool because I was standing at the convention... first because it was really funny that they made a queue to take a picture with me. And then, from nowhere, there came a little girl, a tiny girl, and she jump the

queue. She didn't care about anybody else, if there were other people [in the queue], if someone was taking pictures, whatever, she came running and she hugged me and said... she hugged my leg, that's how little she was, and I didn't care if she was stepping on my cosplay or not, you know? And that's the one who said 'oh, you are my fairy godmother'... 'I've found my fairy godmother', that's what she said. You know... that was the nicest thing, that spontaneity of running... the girl's reaction. That was so nice to see. And after it, like [she said] 'I want it too', you know? 'Will I be like you someday?', 'of course you can be, even better'. Yes, that moment was very unique. It was not a compliment, like 'wow, your cosplay is fantastic', but it was that spontaneity of seeing that it really was real happiness that girl was manifesting. (Maura, 92 cosplays)

4 DISCUSSION

Ludic spaces can be consumed with both hedonic or eudaimonic intentions. It is contingent to what they plan or expect from these enclavic social worlds (Huta & Ryan, 2010; Waterman et al., 2008). To some cosplayers, the geekcon is indeed a place for play and nothing else, an abstraction from their day-to-day worries, a pleasurable pause in the rush of their lives. To others, it is pleasurable but also challenging, facing and overcoming personal issues of social interaction, self-confidence and body acceptance. As they usually take months crafting their cosplays (Seregina & Weijo, 2016), it displays their commitment and how they see in the cosplay a way to better express themselves. It is not an unplanned event with completely unexpected conflicts, but a deliberated attempt to test and improve themselves. Escapism is not necessarily just a pleasurable distraction from everyday stresses; it can also be a self-discover and development endeavor.

This eudaemonic experience can lead to an enduring reflection on the cosplayers' lives, giving them resources to interpret and behave in different ways when they interact with their day-to-day world and the geekcon. The hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of the cosplay in the cosplayer's life can relate to each other in different ways, with one being a step to the other. Next, we will discuss the main theme of this study, arguing how the hedonic and eudaemonic aspects of this escapism can relate to each other in a processual way of supported self-growth that leads to a pleasurable and goalless experience.

4.1 TRAINING WHEEL

Some cosplayers argue never having lived through a highly emotional episode with the cosplay, saying it is nothing more than a good time, a purely hedonic escapism. Other cosplayers state how empowering is an experience they have in each time they go to a geekcon dressed as a loved character or dressed in a challenging way. Others say they had both experiences, with the cosplay changing its meaning with the passage of time.

Cosplayers using the cosplay with eudaimonic intentions often have a personal issue that they want to approach with it. As the cosplay and the geekcon gives them the social acceptance to behave in experimental ways, they perform with that personal issue in mind, as a reachable objective. To some experienced cosplayers, they understand that these experiences did indeed help them to change and grow as a person. They regularly use timelines of "before" or "after" cosplay to inform their understanding of self.

After the cosplayer feeling he or she has overcome his or her personal challenges, the cosplay can lose its function as a supporting prop that enables some behaviors that the cosplayer don't feel safe enough to do in his or her daily contexts (e.g. interact with strangers, wear shorter clothes). As the cosplayer feel changed, they understand that the cosplay is not necessary anymore. Rafaela, for example, argues that initially the cosplay was mainly a facilitator as it enabled her to express herself and communicate with others with greater ease, but now it has lost this goal and became just a pleasurable hobby:

[The cosplay] was very important for me. As I've said, I have many victories, many things that I've acquired during these years that we... it influenced me so much, brought so many positive things. I think that, exactly because I am in a more calm moment of my life, more evolved, easier to deal with myself, the person that I've become is very interesting, it's very calm, the cosplay stopped being a walking stick, a scape valve to finally... I think that since 4 to 5 years ago, it finally is just pleasure. It is something that I do to have fun, a hobby. Since the first year until some years ago, it was a scape valve, it was a walking stick, it was a way so I could get out of my shell and communicate with the world. From the half on, it started to be just pleasure, it is... now, in these later years, it is unique and exclusively pleasure (Rafaela, 78 cosplays)

She understands that the cosplay was necessary to conquer her social skills and self-understanding, but after using it in an eudaimonic way to develop herself (Huta & Ryan, 2010; Steger et al., 2008), it lost this functionality. As a training wheel, she used cosplay in a controlled environment with the expectancy to stop using it as the only way to interact freely with other people. As it is, with the time the meaning of the cosplay and its experiences can change depending on the cosplayer's life moment. It can change from a necessary support to a ludic and fun social activity.

Eudaimonia is not a state by itself but a process of self-development (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 2008). However, instead of feeling compelled to eternally pursue their true selves, we argue that the consumers can feel sufficiently developed by a certain practice to abandon their focus on self-growth and aim at pleasure. What once was a challenge of self-acceptance now is just a fun hobby. We agree that eudaimonic consumption can have a long lasting contribution to the hedonic well-being as it gives resources to pleasurable experiences in context even outside the geekcon (McMahan & Estes, 2011; Steger et al., 2008; Waterman et al., 2008), but we also understand that usage of these resources can be concentrated in hedonisms, with little to none interest in self-development.

We argue that consumers can self-establish a reachable line of growth when consuming an eudaimonic experience, as they deliberately seek a state of sufficient acceptancy or capability. That is not to say that once the goal is reached the consumption will completely lose their eudaimonic meaning. We understand that new goals can be settled, and these can still have deep meaning for the consumer. However, we also understand that some cosplayers find a goal at the independency of the cosplay, expecting to extend what they do at the geekcon to their daily lives without the need to be characterized. Furthermore, new goals with a more hedonic nature can be stated, with the experience being dominantly hedonic.

5 CONCLUSION

Taking a context such as the cosplay consumption, largely stigmatized as something damaging to one's self-concept and stability, this study contributed to better understand how a consumption of an escapism can be a deliberative act of self-improvement, leading to long lasting happiness. It has put some color in the understanding of how the eudaimonic and hedonic consumption can relate to each other in a way that the theoretical discussions and controlled experiments could not.

The cosplay, as much as many other forms of escapism, has the potential to be a fun activity or a self-enlarging one. In this context, self-expression and challenges with social skills and body acceptance were very tangible for the marginality felt by the members of the cosplay community. With a large set of options of what kind of cosplay they want to do, they can choose the best character or cosplay that would help them with their personal issues. Other forms of challenges and development may be more apparent in different kinds of escapisms, being worth of investigation.

In addition, the cosplay main processual consumption started with an eudaimonic intention that would lead to hedonism by its skills and self-development. Other kinds of

consumption could have it in the other direction, being initially hedonic, starting as a way to release the day-to-day stresses that would grow to reach a eudaimonic perspective.

¹ Avoiding potential uneasiness from the informants around, at the risk of damaging the naturalism of the behaviors and speeches of the cosplayers (Belk, Sherry, & Wallendorf, 1988; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011), the first author would eventually write in the cellphone.

² The emic term the cosplayers use when referring to the geekcon's visitors without cosplay.

³ A subgroup in the geek subculture, mainly committed to the Japanese media.

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