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“Symbolic Territories of Identity”, Geeks: Fantasy and Fiction Consumption in the Construction of Collective Identities in an Urban Tribe

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to investigate how the consumption of geek products acts in the identity of individuals who see themselves as members of this urban tribe. Geeks are taken as committed members fascinated by topics related to fantasy and science fiction universes; if we take into account a micro-scale, they form an identity territory. Based on its theoretical approach, the goal of the current research lies on promoting a dialogue between studies that have adopted the *consumer culture theory* (CCT) and organizational identity research, by taking into consideration that urban tribes are a kind of organization. The research corpus comprised interviews with seventeen people who identify themselves as geeks; these interviews were analyzed based on thematic categorization. Based on then results, geek-products' consumption starts at childhood and goes all the way to adulthood; this process is influenced by characters in the fantasy and fiction universes. The consumed products hold symbolic elements of fantasy and fiction, so that they end up representing the extension of this tribe's members 'self'; moreover, they are a way of building collective identities within an urban tribe, in this case, geeks. We have shown that organizational identity studies can lead to greater dialogue with CCT in order to better understand complexities

added to identity and multiple affiliations, and links in the identity construction of people forming an organization.

Keywords: urban tribes; organizational identity; collective identities.

Introduction

Based on a post-modern perspective, people replace individuals by identifying themselves with a group in order to form emotional communities, such as urban tribes; they replace large mobs to the detriment of a collective emotion. Maffesoli (2006) suggests the “urban tribe” metaphor to refer to social groups forming the post-modern society; it is also a stimulus for the reasoning about identity processes in the urban context. Accordingly, studies on organization identity construction gain greater relevance, since they can point out several articulations acting in this process. Hall (2011) argues that individuals’ identity is at permanent construction, since it is formed from unconscious processes that take place based on a person’s experiences. Cultural and social relationships are taken into consideration, so that the individual’s inner features are added to the public world (Hall, 2011). Assets can symbolically represent the extension of the ‘self’, since they preserve the sense of individual identity (Belk, 1988).

Members of an urban tribe follow a given aesthetic pattern and consume similar products in order to be different from other individuals (Casotti, Farina, Lino, & Americano, 2013); therefore, consumption can be understood as strategy adopted to choose a life style, i.e., it is an element forming identity. Thus, specific symbols and shared feelings gather individuals who belong to urban tribes (Cova & Cova, 2002), such as geeks.

Geeks are a variation of nerds, they are individuals mostly interested in technology; they culturally and physically oppose to the hegemonic straight masculinity (Quail, 2011). Fernandes and Rios (2011) explain that the word ‘nerd’ was used for the first time to introduce a weird creature in the book “If I ran the zoo”, by Theodor Seuss Geisel, from 1950. From this point on, this word started being used as adjective related to outsiders, given their hard time dealing with social interaction, and their interest in computers and elements related to the fantasy and scientific fiction universes, such as movies, comic-books, TV series, books and games (Quail, 2011). Individuals who presented these features started being demeaned and stigmatized due to the construction of a stereotype marked by features taken as weaknesses by other members of society (Goffman, 2004).

Sugarbaker (1998) sees geeks as engaged individuals fascinated by a topic that is often related to science, technology and culture (fantasy and scientific fiction); they use to meet other people who share their interests in order to exchange experiences related to these topics. The ascension of the geek culture resulted from internet’s popularization and the worship of Silicon Valley’s characters, such as Steve Jobs, as well as from expansion in the consumption of super-hero-related products (Santos, 2014).

The popularization of the geek group was supported by the adoption of characters typical of this tribe in TV series and movies, mainly in the US, and by changes in approaches concerning the outsider stereotype in comparison to other individuals; this stereotype was shown in previous art pieces, such as the movie “Revenge of the Nerds”. The success of the TV series “The Big Bang

Theory”, which was originally shown by CBS in the US, addresses the story of four geek characters who work as researchers in a university and who deal with stable relationships. They gave birth to a new image of geeks and made it possible popularizing this behavior type. They mainly depicted a more positive image of this group, although they were still a little stereotyped (Galvão, 2009; Oliveira, 2016).

Products chosen by geeks for their daily consumption can bring along a whole set of different meanings that substantiate the lifestyle of a given consumer, based on the use of their social values (Douglas & Isherwood, 2004). Belk (1988) states that consumption gives meaning to life, so that the acquired assets represent an extension of the ‘self’, since the individual is built by the sum of his belongings. According to Campbell (2006), consumption produces feelings and identities in contemporary society. Identities regard what individuals valorize, think, feel and do at several social scopes; therefore, in order to understand organizational processes, it is essential understanding the organization identity, itself (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Based on Carrieri, Paula and Davel (2008), it is essential understanding collective identities in organizations, since they are built from the dialectics between external social identities and inner sense of self-identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

Since we agree that consumption is something relevant for contemporary society and the core element for identity construction (Belk, 1988), we aim at understanding how the consumption of geek products acts in the identity construction of individuals who see themselves as members of this urban tribe. The research was based on a micro-scale, urban tribes that fix identity limits by using a given space and by getting possession of it; consequently, they form territories (Sturmer & Costa, 2017). In order to reach our goal, we sought to promote the dialogue between organizational studies – that hold the organization identity topic – and *Consumer Culture Theory* (CCT), which is a consolidated group within the consumption research field that takes the consumer culture as a dynamic network covering a whole range of material, economic and symbolic limits, as well as relationships and social connections (Arnould, Press, Salmine, & Tillotson, 2019).

Arnould et al. (2019) highlighted that CCT can be a research field focused on complexities of the consumer culture, since it is connected to other social sciences fields, such as Anthropology and Sociology. The approximation between organizational studies (OS) and the consumption dimension is addressed by Faria and Guedes (2005), who encourage inquires about the distancing between these two fields; they argue that consumer groups deserve to be treated as organizations and suggest that “the consumer market must be approached by the organization studies field in Brazil...” (p. 8). Similarly, Arnould et al. (2019) point towards other fields that also have the opportunity to dialogue with CCT: interaction with industries, entrepreneurs and other institutions, ecosystems and business legitimacy, innovations and new business models, supply chain, among others.

Research on organization identity carried out based on the post-modern perspective understands that organizations deal with the public, which can hold tribes of consumers from different aspects; therefore, they need to understand the several connection sources set with the post-modern individual, such as consumption, labor, and others (Carrieri et al., 2008). The idea of this dialogue may contribute to advance the understanding about how consumers from certain groups and communities, or from a given organization type – that does not exist as fixed and static

entity – build and outspread their identities by creating a territory based on the culturalist concept by Haesbaert (2007).

The present article is structured as follows: after the introduction, we discuss the theoretical perspective of the research, namely: consumption based on a cultural and symbolic concept, as well as the approximation between organizational studies and consumption research; subsequently, it introduces the research procedures and results. Final considerations close the article.

Consumption based on a cultural and symbolic perspective

Studies on consumer's behavior represent a dynamic field opened to different approaches, with emphasis on three different perspectives: *behavioral decision theory*, based on economy and cognitivist psychology, focused on the rational aspects of consumption; *information processing*, which assesses consumers' decision-making process by taking into consideration emotions and information processes; and the *consumer culture theory* (CCT), which holds an interpretative perspective (Casotti & Suarez, 2016) – it was the herein adopted approach.

The post-modern turn in CCT, as well as in other perspectives, was based on criticism to modernism and on skepticism towards the modern project. It argued that marketing institutions create meanings and representations by building the realities we live in (Arnould et al., 2019).

CCT suggests the interdisciplinary context (Vera, Gosling, & Shigaki, 2019) to understand how consumers take part in the creation and signification process (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This approach takes into account the existing cultural complexity by exploring the heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of cultural groups, rather than works with culture as homogeneous system of unified values and collectively shared meanings. On a broader sense, CCT studies explore how “consumers formulate and change symbolic meanings codified into advertisements, brands, sales or material assets in order to express their particular personal and social circumstances, and to promote their identity and lifestyles” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 871).

CCT approach puts interpretation, researchers' reasoning and narratives in the very core of the research (Arnould et al., 2019); it takes into consideration the concept of culture based on the analysis of heterogeneous distribution of meanings and on the multiplicity of cultural groups within a broader historical, social and cultural context. CCT works with a set of different theoretical knowledge on consumption behavior and market observed in studies about consumers' behavior (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). It is done by using theoretical perspectives that seek to understand the dynamic relationships among consumers' actions, market and cultural meanings (Casotti & Suarez, 2016; Gaião, Souza, & Leão, 2012; Vera et al., 2019)

Arnould and Thompson (2005) advocate that “culture consumption triggers a social arrangement whose relationships between experienced culture and social resources, and between significant ways of life and the symbolic and material resources they depend on, are measured by markets” (p. 869), which assess the relationship between culture and consumption. Accordingly, by working with individuals' perception of themselves as consumers, CCT emerges as an

independent line of thinking within this field; it comprises several theoretical perspectives that share the same research orientations (Gaião et al., 2012).

Although CCT has gotten relevance in national and international research on consumer's behavior, it was not free from criticism, such as the argument that it is essential building a hegemonic view of polyphonic and diverse field, and that CCT labelling regards the existence of a consumption-culture theory. However, it is an approach and analytical perspective, rather than a theory; the individual is the focus of the theory, mainly because of the prevalence of qualitative methods in research. These methods impair extrapolations and "lead to shallow results in social reality descriptions and categorizations" (Vera et al., 2019, p. 24).

Arnould et al. (2019) agree with some of the criticism towards CCT, they understand that it cannot be taken as a unified system of theoretical propositions; they consider that the four domains systematizing CCT's theoretical contributions (Arnould & Thompson, 2007) are nowadays approached as directions and trends for future research in this field. Such domains are (a) working at individual level (consumer identity projects); (b) at group level (market influence on culture and on cultural resources); (c) at social level (intersection of social categories, social organization and consumption); (d) at macro level (consumers' strategies to interpret ideologies and mass market discourses) (Arnould et al., 2019).

Culture is socially built from a system of meanings that change among different social groups; therefore, it is necessary making a social and historical interpretative analysis of it (Burke, 1989). Culture was understood by Geertz (1978) from a semiotic viewpoint, according to which, culture consists in a context where different interpretable symbols are built from, since "the human behavior is seen as symbolic action" (Geertz, 1978, p. 8). So, meanings change depending on the adopted and perceived life standards, on the organization of connections between interpretations and theoretical formulations. According to this author, cultures' substance in anthropological studies encompasses different forms of society; it is essential understanding the symbolic acts observed in social groups and the conceptual structures related to them in order to build an analysis system applicable to individuals' behavior, because "understanding the culture of a people exposes its normality without reducing its particularities" (Geertz, 1978, p. 10).

The consumption process is the element contributing to society's structure, and it implies a mutuality relationship between culture and consumption, since consumption is a cultural activity driven by cultural considerations. Consumption can become a "source of cultural meanings" used to the "construction of individual and collective worlds" (McCracken, 2003, p. 15) in a post-modern context where the world is more and more formed by simulations and reproductions (Baudrillard, 1981).

Douglas and Isherwood (2004) deal with consumption as the way individuals say something about themselves, so that assets gain social meanings, because "the most general aim of consuming can only be built in an intelligible universe with the chosen assets" (p.110). Accordingly, these authors argue that assets "establish and keep social relationships" (p. 103); such assets are seen as material parts of the cultural study, since they gain meaning from social interactions.

The meanings of assets can change overtime and throughout social interactions if one takes into account the study composed of different groups; however, rituals in a given society help building meanings. Thus, Douglas & Isherwood (2004) believe that assets can be considered

instruments in these social rituals, because “consumption is a ritual process whose primary function is to give meaning to incomplete flows of events” (p. 110).

Individuals’ attitudes towards materials highlight the features of cultural dimensions related to the consumption process; there is close association between the properties of several materials and “the cultural patterns that give meaning to such properties” (Fisher, 2006, p. 104). Campbell (2006) states that consumption has core relevance in individuals’ lives; it became a standard in contemporary Western societies, in which individuality is the main criterion for consumption choices (Barbosa, 2004). Consumption can be considered a reaction from meaning creation and subject identity in comparison to sense of insecurity; this process sets the very basis for reality perception in society, it makes it possible to extract the aim of life.

With respect to symbolic consumption, studies such as that by Quintão, Brito and Belk (2017) about the consumption of some coffee varieties, have approached the perspective of consumers who appreciate this product in comparison to other individuals, and introduced consumption construction and appreciation of rituals that generate the perception about differences. Andrade, Pinto, Leite, Batinga and Joaquim (2017) understand that consumers can develop beliefs and attitudes linked to meanings taken as true, so that the product overcomes the barrier of usefulness and embodies symbolic-hedonic features. Yet, about the symbolism and hedonism attributed by consumers, Rodrigues and Casotti (2017) pointed out that a given product can have a cultural meaning that can be further seen as element helping the identity construction and projection of the ones possessing it.

According to the post-modern perspective, based on which, the modernist belief of science loses room for the plurality of narratives, consumption carries a high load of symbolism; real and appearance are entangled, consumer markets produce their own needs, products previously desired by their usefulness are nowadays replaced by waste and pollution. Implications of this perspective are fluid and fragmented social relationships; therefore, the identities of consumers who seek identity projects are also fragmented, since consumption approaches a whole variety of projects and it does not derive from rational and useful choices, but from symbolic ones (Arnould et al., 2019).

The literature review on CCT is important for the contemporary context, where micro-cultures or tribes more and more get to drive such a behavior (Moraes & Abreu, 2017). The study of social meanings and practices that are shared by members of a consumption group or community (Casotti & Suarez, 2016) - in the case of the current research, the urban geek tribe - has contributed to the understanding on how consumption acts in identity construction in this group, community or tribe, by deconstructing segmentation precepts through individual features (Cova & Salle, 2008) and by challenging the sense of a single integrating organizational identity (Carrieri et al., 2008) designed by an organizational summit. Accordingly, proximity between CCT and organizational studies is promising to the best understanding of organizational identity constructions in organization types rather than the ones traditionally considered by organizational theorists (Caldas & Wood Jr., 1997).

Organizational identity: theoretical articulations between CCT and organizational studies

Theoretical articulations between consumption studies and organizational research are possible and necessary (Faria & Guedes, 2005). Knights & Morgan (1993) weighed that organizational studies fail in neglecting the consumption research field. According to these authors, groups in the Sociology field have been interested in consumption studies and such a motivation was encouraged by writers like Castells, back in the 1970s. However, the main journals in the organizational studies field did not evidence that consumption would be a relevant topic for it, but, based on these authors, this gap in interest is a case of institutionalized myopia, because “in industrial societies, consumption takes place through organizations’ mediation. Organizations are the places where people buy goods and services” (Knights & Morgan, 1993, p. 212).

Besides matters related to production and consumption, Knights and Morgan (1993) have shown how consumption is relevant for organizational studies, mainly when it comes to subjects concerning power and identity in modern societies, since consumption acts in social identity construction.

Identity is a concept that crosses different knowledge fields and encourages research at individual, group and organizational level, as well as differentiated and contextual analyses that call researcher’s attention (focused on organizational studies) to the very nature of identities, to how they are implemented in organizational processes and outcomes, and to micro-policies of their construction (Brown, 2019). Carrieri et al. (2008) address three items used to treat identity in the organizational studies field: multiplicity (multiple identities in organizations), fluidity (identities are continuously built and rebuilt) and autonomy (developing an autonomous identity, regardless of belonging, or not, to collectivity).

The fluidity approach emerged in the post-modern scenario where individuals create multiple identities (Carrieri et al., 2008), since shapes, including organizations, are fluid and fragmented (Bauman, 2005). It happens because individuals’ identity construction is related to the exposure of communities formed by both ideas and a whole variety of principles. Therefore, sense of belonging and identity are changeable and renewable throughout individuals’ lifetime; they are changed based on the choices a person makes in life and on the paths it takes (Bauman).

The post-modern perspective about organizational identity is driven by the sense of flow and changes in language use, because organizational identities are discursive sanctuaries, they are a malleable product of floating meanings; therefore, they are not manageable (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). Yet, from such a perspective, the sense of identity is defined as “transitory and fragmented reflections about ‘who do we assume ourselves to be?’” (Borges & Medeiros, 2011, p. 135). Studies following this line of thinking advocate that meanings are undetermined, identities are accidental in their formation in time and space, organizational identities are a paradox, as well as plural and multiple, they are continuously built and rebuilt (Brown, 2006; Czarniawska, 2000; Fontenelle, 2007; Ybema, 2010).

Carrieri et al. (2008) suggests that there is no organizational identity, but, yes, there are collective identities in organizations. It is so, because these authors understand the “concept of identity as a relational and comparative concept prone to face a dynamic construction process”. Therefore, organizational identity is built “by interaction among individuals who dialectically

interpret, recognize and legitimate the agents with whom they make exchanges depending on their subjectivity” (p. 137).

Individuals’ identity is not formed at birth, but through unconscious processes taking place overtime (Hall, 2011); it remains incomplete, since it is always under a construction and formation process. Based on the Social Theory, the word ‘community’ regards a social formation marked by a dense network of social interactions, by shared territories or, at least, by identity (Arvidsson, 2013). Thus, Stets and Burke (2000) argue that an individual’s identity can be affected by the social identity, so that people that see themselves as members of the same social categories, or to individuals who have similar identification to them, form the same social group. The sense of belonging to a given group can make the individual confident and authentic, because it feels like its identity was observed.

According to Bauman (2005), because we live in a poly-cultural world, individuals’ identity is formed from their exposure to the so-called communities they have social conviviality with, since these communities are formed over ideas and principles. Nevertheless, he highlights that by taking communities into consideration, it is possible stating that individuals’ identity is formed after it finds the real sense of belonging to such a social context, it is important having in mind that “... the sense of belonging and identity are not as solid as a rock, they are not assured for life, they are quite negotiable and revocable...” (p. 17).

Staring over consumption with lens alternative to the individualist approach means assuming that consumption practices do not derive from isolated consumers’ decisions, but from a system in which individuals and context interact to each other. Practices consist in interconnected elements, in other words, practice, itself, is not limited to any of these elements, in separate. Consumption practices concern routine actions that are “orchestrated by tools, knowhow, images, physical space and by a subject who performs such a practice” (Korkman, 2006, p. 27). The practice approach focuses on the process, i.e., on how things are made, formed, the used resources and how such doing evolves overtime (Rindell, Korkman, & Gummerus, 2011), with emphasis on experience and identities (Hargreaves, 2011).

As for the post-modern context, the traditional ways of rational consumption gave way to a more diverse and pluralist form of consumption patterns, according to which, individuals somehow seek to differ themselves from others. This process leads to “multiplicity of identities and the exhibition of differences due to a highly differentiated set of goods” (Knights & Morgan, 1993, p. 226). This multiplicity of use value potentiates the combination of several identifications applied to create consumers’ sense of identity.

Individuals’ identity influences their lifestyle, since the individual is related to a set of tastes and preferences that are expressed by it in a symbolic way, through clothing and body language in the different media it is observed in (Bourdieu, 1983). Fanaticism for something can act in individuals’ lifestyles and consumption choices. Therefore, according to Seregina and Schouten (2017), individuals join the group of fans of a given cultural product, the so-called fandoms, in order to get status and sense of belonging. Yet, according to these authors, by making part of a fandom, individuals become capable of learning the ability of identifying and accumulating a relevant cultural capital, of transcending the group and accumulating general forms of cultural capital.

With regards to association among lifestyle, fanaticism and identity, young individuals who are driven by passion for their idols can use movies to learn new ways of acting and dressing. This process reproduces what is shown in cultural art pieces; thus, the cinema can be taken by groups of youngsters as the way to extract and show off their identities (Kozlakowski, 2003).

By assessing the consumption practices of individuals belonging to the *potterheads* tribe (Harry Potter's fans), Souza-Leão and Costa (2018) point out that they set bonds with the production of content about this fantastic universe. According to these authors, the proximity to the franchise at the time to transit to adulthood gives these individuals a sense of security, as well as ensures "the maintenance of an identity formed from its long-term consumption" (p. 83) – they reinforce the fact that consumption acts in identity construction.

Groups such as *potterheads* can be understood as urban tribes. Based on Maffesoli (2005), urban and contemporary tribes are formed by networks of people who share common interests and goals to create a specific society which is "impossible to be understood from our classic and remarkably rational analysis instruments" (p. 190). Still, according to him, individuals belonging to a given tribe share values, as if it was a sort of religious spirit. Hunt (2016) explains that the emergence of contemporary urban tribes comes from three main aspects, namely: (a) disruption of stable identities; (b) awareness of and affiliation to the chosen identity, rather than to provided or imposed one; and (c) development of narratives based on identity. According to Hunt, when a specific narrative is not supported by society, people seek alternatives by joining groups that have made the same choices as theirs.

Members of a tribe follow a given aesthetic pattern and consume similar products in order to differentiate themselves from others who do not belong to their social group. On the other hand, when they are among peers, individuals dress similar cloths in order to be accepted by the group and to help setting the behavioral pattern of the other members (Casotti et al., 2013). Accordingly, the consumption of a given product is related to tribes' bonding values.

Identification with a look and with cultural products consumed by a given tribe is a factor acting in choices to be made by the group. Individuals find in group interactions, in virtual environment, a getaway from physical and symbolic violence, which is felt in other media, given the built stigma, their specific features, looks and cultural consumption. Therefore, living in a group can work as means of protection (Serrão & Santana, 2013).

However, if one takes into account the growing will for affiliation, which opens room for a series of affiliation and electronic urban tribe possibilities, "*e-tribes*" (Kozinets, 1999) – post-modern urban tribes – seem to be fluid and ephemeral, their members can move themselves in other tribes. Thus, consumption communities do not need to be defined based on a specific common interest, but by shared emotions and passions, although these feelings are also driven by consumption (Alon & Brunel, 2007).

Urban tribes comprise people who isolate themselves from the prevailing social life, they form personal networks presenting specific interests, whose strong bonds are an emotional shelter to their members (Watters, 2003), with emphasis on cultural consumption (Murty, 2012), without delimited physical space. In case of an alternative socio-affective context, "[urban] tribes are empathic communities based on sharing tastes and leisure types" (Oliveira, Camilo, & Assunção, 2003, p. 63). Values surrounding a given subject help sharing emotions; the individual feels more

socially important by being part of a tribe where it shares common opinions, and experiences complicity concerning consumption emotions and rituals applied to a given product (Moraes & Abreu, 2017).

From the perspective that approaches urban tribes as organizations, it is important taking into account the culturalist sense of symbolic territory, which is created to encourage the identification and development of affective bonds. The space-time relationship in urban tribes takes place in a very specific way (Oliveira et al., 2003) if we have in mind that territory, in primitive tribal societies, mattered as physical spaces (Maffesoli, 2006). Similarly, in order to understand the construction of collective identities of an urban tribe - that has cultural consumption as core element -, it is essential setting dialogues among groups of knowledge about organizations and consumption.

Methodological procedures

We herein adopted the qualitative approach; the research's empirical material comprised interviews, since this technique allows the collaborative construction of meanings based on cultural chats available for critical examination (Moisander, Valtonen, & Hirsto, 2009). Sixteen interviews were carried out with Brazilian self-declared geek consumers; these interviews were enough to provide information to help better understanding the herein assessed phenomenon in a very specific context. Initially, the corpus was set by search in social networks: Facebook and WhatsApp, based on the virtual engagement of potential interviewees. It was done by observing posts in groups and comments in posts, besides information found in the personal profile of one of the researchers in Facebook. The following Facebook groups were used in the search: "**Eu vou! Comic Con Experience – Brasil**" (26,512 participants) and "*Multiverso Geek*" (18,307 participants); and the WhatsApp group "*Vida Nerd UFU*" (74 participants). Subsequently, the snowball method was adopted, the first interviewees indicated other people matching the research profile. The following inclusion criteria were adopted: to be in the age group 18 years or older, to be self-declared geek and to consume products related to this urban tribe.

The semi-structured interviewees followed a pre-set script, which is "vital part of the research process, since it provides the necessary support to set research ends and goals" (Gaskell, 2002, p. 66). This script was developed based on the study's aims and on literature review. Interviews were conducted in October and November 2018; they were digitally recorded and lasted 35 minutes, on average. Recordings were authorized by respondents, they were later transcribed and generated a report with 12,293 words; this report has enabled analyzing and interpreting the *corpus*.

Thematic analysis - which allows examining how events, realities, meanings and experiences derive from discourses operating in society (Braun & Clarke, 2006) – was used to assess the perspectives by different research participants. This process enabled highlighting similarities and differences, a fact that has led to unpredicted insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis application also helped summarizing the main *corpus* resources, and it has supported the production of a clear and organized final report (King, 2004).

The thematic analysis followed the six recommendations by Braun e Clarke (2006); initially, (a) researchers' sought familiarization with the collected data - they read and reread the

transcriptions and highlighted the initial ideas that could respond to the research question, for instance, the ones related to identity construction -; subsequently, (b) the initial codes were generated by codifying data's interesting features – this process led to 12 codes -; thus, (c) the topics were sought, i.e., codes were grouped into three themes, namely: “geek”, “geek consumption” and “to be geek”; (d) the themes were revised through intense digging into the empirical material, as well as in the literature review and in the study aim; (e) themes were named based on the found thematic definitions. Finally, the analysis report was elaborated as shown below.

Geeks: a symbolic territory of collective identity

We herein address the idea that geeks form a symbolic territory in order not to disregard the conceptual dimension of territory, but as metaphor to help understanding the sense of collective-identities territory, which is not marked by physical boundaries

We started from introducing the research results, whose *corpus* consisted of interviews carried out with sixteen self-declared geek individuals. Most of the *corpus* comprised people who declared themselves as belonging to the male sex, four were women and twelve men – effort was made by researchers to interview geek women. However, such attempts did not succeed. Interviewees' names were kept secret; they were replaced by names of male and female heroes in order to identify them in the article.

With respect to interviewees' schooling, ten had college major and six were still enrolled in higher education institutions. Only one interviewee - identified as Thor - did not have a job when the interview was carried out. Most interviewees were single (10), two were in a relationship and four were married. None of the interviewees had kids. As for mean individual income in the family, most interviewees (10) declared income higher than four minimum wages. The group of interviewees encompassed people in the mean age group of 25 years, the youngest was 19 and the oldest was 37 years.

Table 1

Interviewees' profile

Interviewee	State	Sex	Age
Aquaman	SP	Male	25
Batman	SP	Male	24
Captain Marvel	SP	Female	24
Captain America	SP	Male	28
Flash	MG	Male	19
Gamora	SP	Female	24
Groot	MG	Male	24

Iron Man	SP	Male	37
Hulk	MG	Male	29
Green Lantern	SP	Male	22
Wonder Woman	MG	Female	24
Black Panther	MG	Male	24
Robin	MG	Male	24
Superman	SP	Male	29
Thor	MG	Male	27
Black Widow	MG	Female	26

Source: Elaborated by the author.

The thematic analysis took three elements into consideration: objects (products consumed by geeks), representations (to be geek) and values (tastes and emotions). We have agreed with the post-modern perspective about identities within a process that has led to three themes in order to answer the following question: “Who do we assume to be?”

Seeing itself as a geek

There is a whole diversity of features related to an individual presenting geek characteristics, among them, one finds their interest in the fantasy and scientific fiction universes, mostly in super heroes and technological apparatuses (Fernandes & Rios, 2011; Sugarbaker, 1998; Santos, 2014; Galvão, 2009; Oliveira, 2016; Simon, Bahl, & Dropa, 2016). Strict rules about features making participants declaring themselves as geeks were not herein observed; in other words, we did not see an integrating organizational identity (Carrieri et al., 2008) that could be somehow manageable.

According to research participants, this word is related to a lifestyle based on their personal tastes that, in their turn, are featured by imagination and passion. They acknowledge their emotional relationship with, and passion for, cultural elements composing the fantasy and scientific fiction universe – it is a characteristic mix of the post-modern context (Knights & Morgan, 1993) and differentiation towards other consumers in this medium type. It is so, because the ones who belong to the tribe declare to like certain cultural products more than other people. Interviewees see themselves in geek descriptions: an individual engaged to certain topics, concentrated in objects, outsiders focused on culture elements - such as characters in books and movies - and on technology (Sugarbaker, 1998),

Geek means the gathering of everything you like in the pop culture... heroes, books, movies, music, characters. Elements that feature it can be collections, cosplay, comic-cons and fan meetings. (Black Panther, 2018)

I believe that being geek means liking a lot to be in the pop culture and in technology. It means liking movies, cartoons, TV series, including binge watching, online games and table games. I believe that being geek means liking these things more than other people and feeling that you are part of this group helps easily finding people who also like these things, so we can talk, play together, among other things. (Captain Marvel, 2018)

Childhood was mentioned as the time when interest in fantastic universes and in consuming products referring to them start to emerge, so that participants in this research have kept on consuming goods related to characters they like, so far. Identity recognition based on the sense of belonging to the geek group comes overtime in individuals' life (Hall, 2011). Such a consumption and search for more products in this universe give geeks the sense of belonging to a community and influence their identity formation (Bauman, 2005). Souza-Leão and Costa (2018) have concluded, in their study about *potterheads*, that the consumption of pop-culture products by fans helps individuals' transition into adulthood, since it ensures identity maintenance and generates some sort of security that is also expressed in Hulk's testimony:

My mother says that I am geek since I was in her belly. I was always truly in love with everything, geek products in general, that I started collecting later on, when I got my scholarship. Before that, I did not have the necessary financial conditions to buy collectable goods, just stickers, things you can find in free fairs. Overall, I was always in love, I used to stay in movie rentals, I rented movies in general. This was my way of expressing my geek side (Hulk, 2018)

Although interviewees believe that self-declared geek individuals do not follow fashion trends, when it comes to a specific aesthetic pattern to be followed, they use elements concerning the scientific fiction and fantasy universes in their clothing, mainly in t-shirts - it was a common point among them. It was possible finding a clothing pattern and a style to be followed. Such an aspect reinforces the sense of belonging to an urban tribe, since they adopt a common aesthetic pattern that differentiates geeks from other individuals in society (Casotti et al., 2013), given their specific looks (Serrão & Santana, 2013).

According to participants, belonging to a geek tribe has its benefits: social acknowledgement as an intelligent individual, and making part of a consumption tribe that uses products capable of encouraging leisure practices that are beneficial to human beings, since they generate knowledge and good relationships with others (Maffesoli, 2006). Benefits mentioned by interviewees are associated with values outspread by members of the geek tribe; these values are part of a set of elements that feature these individuals (Maffesoli, 2006).

The geek individual is featured as intelligent, but childish; this feature is mainly attributed by family members because of their cultural interest in culture elements related to the fantasy and

scientific fiction universes, such as cartoons, games and comic books. These objects follow these individuals since childhood.

Meanings, contradictions and paradoxes

Research participants wear geek products; however, their responses regard different meanings. We have found the ones who wear such products anywhere, with no problem, at all. On the other hand, we also found those who are afraid of wearing them in certain environments and who suffer with some type of prejudice, mainly from individuals who live in hinterlands. Individuals in the first group believe that their behavior shows their pride on showing off their taste in public, and it reinforces the idea of social meaning creation (Douglas & Isherwood, 2004). It is so, because consumers create meaning for products they use, so that the individual aims at expressing something from the goods they use in society, since these products can be understood as instruments in social rituals.

Nevertheless, there are also the ones who believe that products must be used in socially-accepted locations in order to avoid problems with other individuals – this idea isolates members of this group from the prevailing social life (Watters, 2003). Serrão and Santana (2013) introduced the virtual environment as getaway location from physical and symbolic violence moments, since interactions in social networks allow individuals from the same tribe to meet in specific and closed groups in order to discuss common topics and to share their tastes and values – there is some sort of protection in this environment. Black Widow's testimony highlights such a getaway: *"I do not wear it, not everybody likes it, they say we are showing off. And I also do not wear it because I am afraid of hostilities"* (Black Widow, 2003).

As for the post-modern context, it is getting more and more natural to have friends in different geographic locations. Interviewees have mentioned to have friends in the geek tribe all over the world; they are not limited to cities and states they live in. Events based on topics related to the geek tribe are essential for the reunion of these individuals, since they represent a place for gathering friends who live far from each other, but who are pretty close in the virtual world. Events mentioned by interviewees are associated with cultural elements of the fantastic universes, such as with Pokemon, which opened room for products like games, *animes* and *mangas* – which gain relevance as social reference source. These meetings take place because of multiple reasons, there are no rules and procedures to order and organize a fixed space, but the appropriation of a symbolic territory.

The relationship with other individuals in the group is another important factor for the formation of the geek identity. The sense of belonging to a tribe leads to sharing ideas and to individuals' likelihood of naturally expressing themselves, without external pressure from what is socially acceptable and perceived as normal by individuals outside this community. There is sharing of values and the construction of consumption rituals that have impact on identity maintenance.

The geek tribe has its issues, such as prejudice among those who belong to the group. Interviewees expressed the chauvinism in the group. This problem is often observed in environments where gender stereotypes are outspread:

Benefits... I, myself, as a woman, do not see much benefits in being seen as geek, almost no benefit at all. Any man who sees you as geek will make 1001 questions in order to find out if you are a geek so. We, women, are kind of disregarded in this medium and it generates some frustration, you know, we always have to prove things, it is tiring. This is the negative side of it. We are disregarded in this medium and we do not have much representativeness in it, it remains as a very chauvinist medium.

One of the contradictions observed in the testimonies concerns stereotypes socially attributed to those who belong to this tribe. Although these individuals are seen as more intelligent than the average, they carry the stigma of being a geek in society. Interviewees have reported that they have already suffered some sort of prejudice, mainly in family environments; many of them believe that geek products are only for children. Nevertheless, individuals have highlighted that such situations did not change their attitude towards, or the consumption of, these goods during their transition to adulthood.

Despite the mentioned issues, participants have expressed their pride in belonging to the tribe, since it allows them to make friends and to share ideas and common tastes. Furthermore, the group represents a way to be in a location where individuals can express themselves without being pointed out as misfit, as being out of standards, from the perspective of what is socially accepted and considered normal. Such a relationship helps individuals' sense of belonging, which concerns sharing common interests and opinions, as well as the creation of consumption rituals that make them feel important within the social medium they live in (Maffesoli, 2006; Moraes & Abreu, 2017).

The analysis of interviews pointed out that geek identities are built and rebuilt over individuals' experiences throughout life and through consumption practices, such as preference for objects known as geek and the interest in being acknowledged as such – they act in interviewees' purchase and consumption relationships. Interviewees are proud of being geek, although they feel the reflex of stereotypes socially attributed to them – they rather be in compliance with a social standard.

What do geeks consume

Participants have expressed the affective relationships they set with other individuals in the tribe, and the exchanges among them. This behavior seems to influence the acquisition and consumption of geek products. Some respondents believe that to be close to people with common interests helps the individual to get to know more products and to be closer to them – it develops the will to consume. Other participants believe that the will to consume comes from love for the characters and from the will to have its own style, based on its own taste.

As for the first group, it is possible observing that belonging to a tribe makes individuals reflect themselves on other members, so that the individual's identity is built and rebuilt from the contact with the ways of acting, thinking and consuming of other geeks seen as important by the individual in question – this is a clear mention to the relationship among communities, sense of belonging and identity introduced by Bauman (2005).

With respect to the second group, consumption is mainly encouraged by fanaticism towards a given specific cultural product, so that the individual seeks other products to satisfy its relationship with the art piece it is interest in – the individual presents the need of externalizing its tastes, even if it happens in private environments. Such consumption may represent the effort of building identity, since, by purchasing an item – even if it is not shown to other individuals –, the geek person reinforces the importance of that piece for its life, as well as the values represented by it (Moraes & Abreu 2017).

The love relationship set with characters have positive association with consumption, because individuals in this tribe – which has an alternative socio-affective context (Oliveira et al., 2003) – want to put out the importance of these characters to other individuals. Besides, it is important buying products of characters they like in order to feel that these characters are part of their lives. Consumption is an important element in individuals' identity formation (Knights & Morgan, 1993), since meaning is given to products consumed due to social interactions (Douglas & Isherwood, 2004) and to emotions and passions (Alon & Brunel, 2007).

Gamora exposes her identity as consumption geek:

I identify myself with him. I am bringing him to my life by buying boots, a plush, a t-shirt, I feel close to him, I feel represented by him (Gamora, 2018)

The consumption of these products is a source of cultural meaning (McCracken, 2003), given the importance of characters in individuals' lives. Interviewees have reported that they act in the construction of personal values developed throughout life, so that what is consumed in the form of books, movies, games and TV series, acts in individuals' identity construction and collective identities (McCracken, 2003). Characters inspire geeks' way of acting and thinking; as it is observed in the testimony by Black Panther about the influence and importance of geek products on his ways of thinking, as well as in the words by the Green Lantern:

Sometimes they influenced the ways of thinking of, acting in and facing life (Black Panther, 2018)

There is a huge importance, because they have a great influence on my character due to their sense of justice, kindness and resilience (Lanterna Verde, 2018)

Social networks are an important tool for group maintenance and for the daily routines of geek individuals, since they make it possible discussing about several topics in this universe and the interaction among different individuals. The virtual environment was analyzed by Moraes and Abreu (2017) in a study that has introduced social networks as tool to create communities to share the values and opinions of people who belong to the same tribe. Furthermore, social networks can help escaping the physical and symbolic experiences in the physical environment, due to the fact of belonging to a tribe outside the socially accepted standards (Serrão & Santana, 2013).

Characters that geeks get interested in become part of their lives through the products they consume; in other words, consumption is not a rational choice, but a symbolic one (Arnould et al., 2019). The importance of it is related to cultural products' influence on the construction of individuals' personal values; therefore, characters become important elements for the construction of their identity, a fact that puts the consumption culture in the mainstream (Murty, 2012).

The relationship between characters' influence and purchase behavior led to different opinions. Interviewees were divided into two consumption groups: the ones who are willing to buy everything related to the geek universe, and those who only wish to buy cultural products of characters they are fans of.

Members of the first group have reported that, by choosing useful products, they rather take items that somehow refer to the geek universe. Such a choice allows the product to cross the usefulness barrier and gives it a symbolic value, since the individual who buys and consumes it also gives it a cultural meaning that helps individuals' identity projection on their conviviality in society (Arnould et al., 2019; Rodrigues & Casotti, 2017), as observed in Superman's testimony:

If I have to buy clothes, I rather buy something I like than something random, that does not match my own self. I will spend my money, and what I buy will be appropriate to be worn anywhere. (Superman, 2018)

With respect to the second group, consumption is related to the cultural product itself, such as movies, TV series, books, comic-books and games. From the time the individual acknowledged itself as a fan of a certain piece, it will start consuming all the produced cultural materials related to it (Campbell (2006); Casotti et al., 2013; Douglas & Isherwood, 2004).

Most geeks use to buy online due to factors such as easiness and price, mainly when variable 'age' is assessed, since interviewees were young. Furthermore, the creation of geek product lines in department stores and by conventional traditional brands was also mentioned by interviewees. The possibility of buying geek products in traditional shops is a market strategy of these establishments. They aim at fulfilling the symbolic needs of their consumers, as well as at making it possible for those who belong to the geek tribe, everywhere, to have access to these products. Shops selling products focused on geeks, and geek events, replace the territory as physical space in tribal societies (Maffesoli, 2006), since this is where the symbolic territory is expressed through representations.

Bonds set by geeks, since they are individuals interested in technology and cultural products related to the creative universe, as well as in elements of the fantastic culture, make them engage in the high consumption and outspread of this product type in comparison to other individuals in society. These bonds are common affections, such as passion for characters and fictions; moreover, they are necessary for urban tribes' construction (Maffesoli, 2006).

Interviewees' consumption can be encouraged by affections for cultural pieces and for their characters, as well as for the relationship with other individuals in the tribe. The consumed products that present geek elements have symbolic value, so that they start representing the

extension of the 'self' of those who consume them. They are a way to express these individuals' personal values; therefore, they act in identity construction, which is featured by concentration, imagination, passion and non-standardized social adjustment.

Final considerations

Our goal in the present research was to better understand how the consumption of products by geeks acts in these individuals' identity construction - since they self-declare to belong to this urban tribe – through the lens of the post-modern perspective. In order to do so, we sought to set a dialogue between two knowledge fields, namely: CCT, which focus on discussions about the complexities of the consumer culture; and organizational identity studies, which concern the organizational studies' field. Such a dialogue was promising, since it opened room for new areas in organization and consumption studies. It is so, because it rose inquires about collective identities within the post-modern context by using a given urban tribe as study object.

We herein turned our sight to places beyond modern narratives on organizational identity, based on the sense of consumption as symbolic act in collective identity construction in an urban tribe. Our research has shown that collective identities are built from meanings linked to the consumption of a given product, since it allows members of this tribe to set bonds surrounded by emotional relationships, such as passion, love and affection for the products they wish to consume. Organizations must learn that identity construction is related to triggered emotions and to developed affective relationships.

We have broadened the understanding about organizational tribes as organizations that get possession of a symbolic territory where identities are accidental, rather than imposed by an integrating summit, including the idea that values and tastes transcend the acknowledgement of one's own 'self' in order to cover collective identity representations. These assumptions suggest that organizational identity construction can be assessed by observing the consumption practices forming or broadening identity limits and its construction.

This research was carried out with a specific urban tribe; therefore, other studies could be conducted in order to learn about other complexities linked to identity constructions in other organizations and contexts, including other organization types. Even by adopting the post-modern perspective, we have acknowledged the possibility of other explanatory approaches applicable to organizational identity construction; our approach was just one more way to picture this matter. Other perspectives about organizational identity, such as the integrating one, could lead to different results, but just as fruitful ones. Other research limitation lies on corpus construction, which could lead to other outcomes.

Organizational and CCT study fields could benefit from other dialogues, since they would review the existing boundaries in order to take into consideration other possibilities of negotiation, cooperation and integration, as suggested by Casotti and Suarez (2016). As for the organizational studies field, in particular, we can say that research focused on gender issues aimed at deepening the investigation on the nature of emotional and affective bonds, as well as on symbolic territories, could bring relevant contributions provided by the dialogue with other social sciences involved in it. This field requires empirical and theoretical research, and a whole variety of methodological and epistemological positions.

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