

# ARTICLES

Submitted 06.01.2020. Approved 02.02.2021

Evaluated through a double-blind review process. Scientific Editor: Leticia Casotti

Translated version | DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0034-7590202020203x>

## FANS' (ESTH)ET(H)ICS ELABORATION: POACHING AS TRUE LOVE PRACTICE

*Elaboração (est)ética de fãs: Poaching como prática de verdadeiro amor*

*Elaboración est(ética) de fanes: Poaching como verdadero amor*

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### ABSTRACT

The current study takes the subculture of fans as being the core of productive consumers, and assumes consumption to be a subjectivation practice based on Foucault's theory, which defines subjectivity as the result of an ethical and aesthetic elaboration process. The aim of this study is to analyze how fans elaborate fannish (est)et(h)ics by positioning themselves about media products during their interactions. In order to do so, the main fan community of the TV series "Game of Thrones" (GoT), a major media phenomenon, was analyzed. The genealogy of the subject was the method adopted for analyzing fans' comments about the saga. Results pointed towards two subject-forms, namely likers and guardians. They are based on moral stylizations that modulate fans' relationships with media products through a single ethics, which was interpreted as poaching the different pleasures that arise from consumption. The study's suggestion is that this process reveals what Foucault calls true love, which corresponds to the completeness of self in its relationship with the other.

**KEYWORDS** | Game of Thrones, subjectivity, genealogy, Foucault, Consumer Culture Theory.

### RESUMO

O presente estudo toma a subcultura de fãs como seio de um consumidor produtivo e assume o consumo como prática subjetivadora, baseado na teoria foucaultiana que define a subjetividade como resultado de uma elaboração ética e estética. Com isso, o objetivo do estudo é analisar como fãs elaboram uma (est)ética fânica por meio de posicionamentos de si em relação a produtos de mídia em suas interações. Para tal, analisamos a principal comunidade de fãs da série de TV Game of Thrones (GoT), que se tornou um grande fenômeno de mídia. A genealogia do sujeito foi método adotado para a análise dos comentários de fãs sobre a saga. Os resultados apontam duas formas-sujeito: curtidores e guardiões. Elas se sustentam em estilizações morais que modulam a relação dos fãs com o produto de mídia por meio de uma única ética, a qual interpretamos como poaching, uma "caça" por diferentes prazeres advindos do consumo. Propomos que esse processo revele o que Foucault denomina verdadeiro amor, uma completude de si na relação com o outro.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** | Game of Thrones, subjetividade, genealogia, Foucault, Consumer Culture Theory.

### RESUMEN

Tomando la subcultura de los fanes como el seno de un consumidor produtivo y asumiendo que el consumo es una práctica subjetivante, nos anclamos en la teoría de Foucault, que define la subjetividad como el resultado de una elaboración ética y estética. Así, el presente estudio analiza cómo los fanes elaboran una (est)ética fandomera a través de posiciones en relación con productos de medios en sus interacciones. Para ello, examinamos la principal comunidad de fanes de Game of Thrones (GoT), que se ha convertido en un importante fenómeno mediático. El método utilizado es la genealogía del sujeto. Con este fin, analizamos los comentarios de los fanes acerca de la saga. Los resultados apuntan a dos formas temáticas: likers apreciadores y guardianes. Se basan en estilizaciones morales que modulan la relación de los fanes con el producto de los medios a través de una ética única, que interpretamos como caza furtiva, una "caza" de diferentes placeres derivados del consumo. Proponemos que este proceso revele lo que Foucault llama amor verdadero, una completitud de sí mismo en la relación con el otro.

**PALABRAS CLAVE** | Game of Thrones, subjetividad, genealogía, Foucault, Consumer Culture Theory.

## INTRODUCTION

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) studies have recently expanded their understanding of cultural contexts that are formed through market interactions (Arnould & Thompson, 2015; Denegri-Knott, Nixon, & Abraham, 2018). Such is the case with investigations that address fan-consumption subculture (Chen, 2021; Fuschillo, 2017). These consumers are characterized by the proactive and specialized way they act in order to be productive, both towards the cultural objects they consume, and the participatory culture context in which they are inserted (Guschwan, 2012; Jenkins, 2006).

Fans converge on social spaces where they can come together and interact with their peers, mainly thanks to technological and social advances provided by Web 2.0. The aim of these interactions is to address the intense relationship that exists between consumers and media objects associated with pop culture (Fuschillo, 2017; Jenkins, 2015). This intense consumption relationship often works as a transgressive force that enables consumers to continuously improve themselves (Beighton, 2017; Ritzer, 2014).

This self-improvement process based on consumption works as both esthetics and ethics simultaneously. Esthetics is seen in the novelty of the pleasures experienced, whereas ethics is seen in the self-updating process resulting from questioning projects, relationships or concerns with new opportunity horizons (Jantzen, Fitchett, Østergaard, & Vetner, 2012). According to Michel Foucault, esthetics and ethics are overlapping concepts: the ethical condition is enabled by esthetically materialized moral practices. Esthetic sense has ethical value; it is both a concern for oneself and a relationship that reaches the other when individuals form a moral image of themselves in order to position themselves before social alterities (Foucault, 2004).

Ethics is a topic of the Foucauldian ulterior cycle, which addresses subjectivation processes generated by the wide range of practices and elements that formulate the subject by negotiating socially established truths (Foucault, 2016). When subjects are associated with different social contexts, they implement practices of the self that are not limited to themselves: they perform an activity that has an impact on their self-constitution and on that of others (Foucault, 2020c). Practices of the self emerge as proper ways of exercising the freedom inherent to the journey of ethical beings. This exercise of freedom enables rules and moral values to be adopted that derive from subjects' relationship with the different truths they coexist with (Foucault, 2010, 2020b).

Based on the understanding that concepts addressed by Michel Foucault enable the ethical notions manifested in practices such as consumption (see Arnould & Thompson, 2015; Mikkonen, Moisander, & Firat, 2011) to be interpreted and understood, the aim of this research was to analyze how fans elaborate fannish (esth) et(h)ics by positioning themselves vis-à-vis media products during interactions with their peers.

In order to investigate this phenomenon, the focused on the Westeros.org fan community, which is the main forum for information, news and discussions about one of the greatest recent pop culture events, namely: the TV series Game of Thrones (GoT) (Sarikakis, Krug, & Rodriguez-Amat, 2017; Young, 2014). GoT premiered in 2011 and was widely promoted as the television adaptation of a renowned literary saga written by George R. R. Martin (GRRM), namely: A Song of Ice and Fire (ASoIaF) (Fathallah, 2015; Young, 2014). The fictional universe, which is characterized by its singular narrative that combines different genres (e.g., action, adventure, political discussion), through the language and esthetics of cable TV (e.g., special effects, exposure to violence and sexuality), has found the means of becoming one of the biggest phenomena in the 21st century entertainment industry (MacNeill, 2017; Wells-Lassagne, 2013). Throughout its eight seasons, which were aired between 2011 and 2019, GoT accumulated various economic (e.g., revenue, cost per episode) (Clark, 2019; Maas, 2019; Spanò,

2016) and cultural records, and was constantly being acknowledged by way of favorable reviews, awards (i.e., Emmys), an unprecedented number of simultaneous global airings, and the piracy of its audience (Sarikakis et al., 2017), among others. The universe created by GRRM and its broadcast as a TV series were so impactful that fans of the saga started to transit between consuming these two different products and engaging in online communities to find new contents and expand their experiences about the saga and with it (Fathallah, 2015; MacNeill, 2017).

The current study helps broaden discussions about the subjectivity manifestations that are explored by the field of CCT (see Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Jantzen et al., 2012; Thompson, Henry, & Bardhi, 2018). It also shows how, as an interdisciplinary knowledge field, fan studies make room for understanding new consumer relations in the consumer research field (Fuschillo, 2017; Guschwan, 2012). The current investigation intends to contribute to CCT studies that combine and expand the discussions that occur in cultural studies. Fan interactions are the means of producing subjective experiences (Booth, 2015) that are capable of revealing how consumer subcultures produce a shared ethos in the marketing context (Fyrberg-Yngfalk, Cova, Pace, & Skålén, 2014; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

The current research, therefore, employed a semi-inductive approach, which was materialized in the way in which the theoretical framework was adopted. The next section will address Foucault's theory of subjectivity and analyze how consumer interactions enable the exercise of "fanity", based on an interdisciplinary dialogue with the research field (i.e., CCT). Subsequently, the study will present the theoretical-methodological approach developed by Foucault in order to investigate ethical subjectivation (i.e., the genealogy of the ethical subject). Finally, after presenting and exploring the results, we return to the concepts established in the literature review to broaden the discussion and propose new insights based on our findings. In this sense, we seek to rationalize and contribute to studies that deal with the investigated phenomenon..

## SUBJECTIVITY BASED ON THE FOUCAULDIAN THEORY

According to Foucault (2016), in their relationship with social rules and conducts, individuals face the process by which they produce themselves as subjects. Thus, an apparently adequate approach is developed to form subjectivities, based on decisions that include practices associated with rules and values, as well as with the needs of each individual.

Subjectivity manifests itself in sharing the ways individuals relate to themselves and to others, through which they can organize and establish their existence (Foucault, 2020c). According to Foucault (2020b), there are certain criteria to be followed in order to produce subjectivity, and they both overlap and affect each other. Each individual must establish an ethical substance for him/herself in order to simultaneously achieve the individual desires and moral norms that rule his/her life. The way in which individuals relate to these norms is what enables them to understand the subjection modes that make them who they are. On the other hand, the way in which they follow these rules and fulfill their desires in a balanced way is materialized in activities that are carried out on and for themselves, which can also be understood as the elaboration of ethical work. Thus, individuals follow a path that can turn them into ethical subjects, something that is only possible through the production of a teleology of the moral subject, i.e., through the relationship that individuals establish with the different truths found in their desires and in the norms they follow throughout their lives.

This process is guided by the idea of truth, which concerns the knowledge comprising individuals' perceptions about themselves and about others (Foucault, 2016). Truth refers to mobile knowledge that does not reside in anyone specifically, but in each individual, as social construction that leads to existence itself. According to this process, different truths are simultaneously influential on, and influenced by, other individuals' truths, based on knowledge amalgamation (Foucault, 2010).

Games of truth underlie power relations in subjectivity formation processes. According to Foucault (2020a), the exercise of power is a productive force inherent to social relations and underlies the way individuals are governed and govern themselves in a continuous subjectivation process based on exercising freedom. Such exercise is based on adopting moral practices that are seen as adequate for oneself; these practices work as a reference in individuals' relationships with others. Thus, the freedom of individuals lies in the negotiation between their desires and socially defined morality.

This process is based on techniques of the self, which indicate how subjects operate changes in themselves (e.g., their bodies, their thoughts); consequently, they have an impact on their behavior towards themselves and others. These operations are configured amid broad dynamics associated with the performance of different social practices (Foucault, 2020c). These techniques, therefore, present an ethical dimension that is capable of producing subjects. Foucault (2020b) defines ethics as the practice of behaviors aligned with the moral foundations of social life. These foundations are not endowed as an external imposition, but as a constitution formulated by and for itself.

Therefore, subjects are built based on the will in them, although they are guided by different truths that derive from the moral foundations presented to them. These truths are exactly what makes it possible for subjects to undertake ethical work by practicing a set of techniques of the self (Foucault, 2010). These practices connect subject to truth, and enable the establishment of reflective social positions (Foucault, 2020c).

For Foucault (2004, 2010, 2020b) esthetics are the foundation of ethics. Whenever individuals look for an adequate form and meaning for their existence, esthetic concepts underlie what guides the practices they use in order to formulate themselves. Practices of the self often contemplate lifestyle as art, as the possibility of constituting oneself as a being living a beautiful existence. The ethereal journey enabling individuals to constitute who they are – the so-called esthetics of existence - comprises overlapping truths, which set the conditions for self-acknowledgement. This process indicates constant vigilance of oneself, as one negotiates ways of fulfilling individual desires and the norms regulating one's existence (Foucault, 2004, 2010).

The current research is aligned with studies that use Foucault's contributions as a theoretical lens for reflecting on empirical investigations into CCT (Mikkonen et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2018). More specifically, it explores how the marketing context allows consumers to improve themselves in order to shape their own subjectivity (Ashman, Patterson, & Brown, 2018; Thompson & Kumar, 2021) and to propose ethics for themselves (Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Mikkonen & Badje, 2013).

## FANITY: CONSUMER SUBJECTIVITY

The marketing context presents certain narratives that work as truth regimes for consumers, and makes all the investigated phenomena based on CCT capable of determining ethical and unethical positions for individuals (Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Mikkonen & Badje, 2013). Similarly, the way consumers increasingly engage with the objects they spontaneously consume can be understood as a manifestation of Foucault's subjectivity (Ashman

et al., 2018; Thompson & Kumar, 2021). Based on such an understanding, consumers' subjective manifestations can also lead to the stigmatization of individuals, trigger interpersonal social conflicts, or even question the legitimacy of certain cultural movements (Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Thompson et al., 2018). It is no coincidence that the subjective positions taken by consumers have been addressed in CCT investigations as an extrapolation or overlap of identity manifestations (Mikkonen et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2018).

If consumption can be understood as identity-related social practice, consumers position their identity through otherness, by comparing their practices to those of the community in which they are inserted and of society as a whole (Jantzen et al., 2012; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). Among consumer identities, that of fans stands out for being based on practices that simultaneously express political positions and individuals' intense relationships with the media products they consume (Booth, 2018; Souza-Leão & Moura, 2018).

Understanding fans has been linked to the participatory culture context, which has enabled changes in the way individuals interact with each other by way of the different technological resources available in the market, and through the convergence of media that enable them to share different contents, which are resources necessary for establishing interactional experiences about the entertainment industry (Guschwan, 2012; Jenkins, 2006).

Interactions between fans enable the exercise of creative and collaborative practices that are typically carried out in communities known as fandoms. These clusters are social spaces that work as private subcultures, which have their own articulation based on community members' attachment to the consumption of different media products (Moura & Souza-Leão, 2020; Schau et al., 2009). Fandoms are consumption communities established by mutual care and attachment between fans and the consumed object uniting them (Guschwan, 2012; Moura & Souza-Leão, 2020).

Fanaticism is expressed in fans' interest in creating contents about these media products (Fathallah, 2016; Jenkins, 2015), when they feel motivated to expand their relationship with the product they consume and with those who also consume it (Booth, 2010). Such contents are called fan productions (e.g., fan fictions, fan blogs, fan videos, fan wikis). These productions are private experiences in fandoms; they target the common interests shared by fans around media products (Booth, 2010; Guschwan, 2012).

The formation of fan subjectivity, therefore, is based on interactions that involve media products. Their practices centralize these products as the body of knowledge guiding their behavior (Chen, 2021; Souza-Leão & Moura, 2018), and this knowledge boosts fans' access to the resources they socialize with and relate to (Fuschillo, 2017).

## METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

The current study adopted the Genealogy of the Ethical Subject as its methodological strategy, in compliance with Foucault's theoretical basis. It is a qualitative approach of a post-structuralist matrix and an emerging research position in the CCT field (Arnould & Thompson, 2015). This method was proposed by Michel Foucault as a means of understanding how subjects are shaped by relations of knowledge and power, through practices of the self (Foucault, 2020b). It also derives from his Genealogy of Power.

According to Foucault (2016), the actual behavior of individuals is what they call moral conduct. Thus, individuals become subjects through their behavior; subjectivity, in its turn, is a form that reveals a given ethics. Foucault (2020b) established criteria he called moral agents, a means of identifying these subject-forms; these criteria are based on his theoretical development of subjectivation processes (see Table 1).

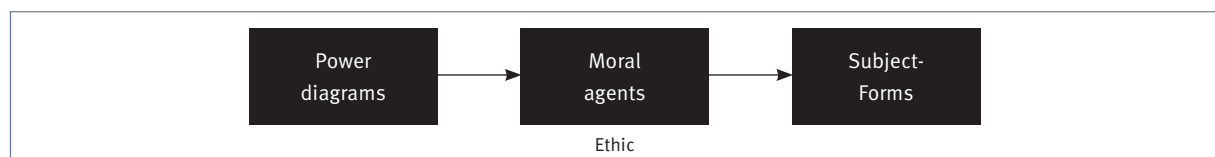
## Exhibit 1. Moral agents' description

| Category                       | Definition  |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Ethical substance              | Refers to the way individuals must constitute part of themselves as the main subject of their moral conduct. It can be achieved by mastering their desires, respecting the prohibitions and obligations in their own actions, as well as through the continuity and reciprocity of feelings experienced in relation to others.  |
| Subjection Modes               | Refers to the way individuals relate to moral rules and acknowledge themselves as obligated to put them into practice. It can take place through individuals' adherence or submission to certain principles and behaviors of the groups or communities they are part of, through the understanding that they belong to a certain tradition that must be preserved and/or revived, and through their response to appeals (esthetic) shaping their personal life. |
| Ethical work elaboration       | Refers to the activity performed on oneself in order to make one's conduct comply with rules and moral values. It can occur through the process of learning the principles of a given moral rule, of evaluating one's conduct in relation to adherence to the rule it follows, of renouncing pleasures, and deciphering the movements of desire.  |
| Teleology of the moral subject | Refers to one's pursuit of becoming a particular moral subject. One can aspire to several likely moral subjectivities, namely: being pure or honorable in relation to certain codes, being freed from certain judgments or traditions, becoming expert in a certain practice.   |

Source: Adapted from Foucault (2020b).

Analysis of these moral agents is substantiated by power and knowledge relations; it is based on identifying power diagrams concerning the association between discursive (i.e., knowledge) and non-discursive (i.e., power added to knowledge) practices. This association leads to a configuration that Foucault (2020a) called *dispositif*; it addresses the way certain knowledge domains underlie the exercise of power. According to Deleuze (1988), this process reflects the way Foucault's philosophical path has always dealt with an ulterior topic, namely: the investigation of how ethical subjects are formed. This formation process is only possible through the forms of government and power relations (i.e., diagrams) that exist in subjects' lives. Similarly, there are no power relations without the formation of a given knowledge field, just as there is no knowledge that does not simultaneously formulate or suppose power diagrams, which, in their turn, do not exist without the formation of social arenas that are capable of producing subjectivities. This is the way ethics become elicitable through a process that is capable of revealing subject-forms that result from moral agents based on power diagrams (Foucault, 2016, 2020c). Based on these directions, it was possible to systematize the analytical method adopted here, following the steps shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Analytical process steps



Source: Adapted from Foucault (2016, 2020b).

The Genealogy of the Ethical Subject focuses on three layers of practices (see Figure 1), namely: discursive practices (i.e., what is said about a given phenomenon); these take place in a context of non-discursive practices (i.e., direct and indirect power relations), which guide practices of the self (i.e., behaviors) (Foucault, 2020b). Since discourse analysis – a tradition in which Foucault's methodological approach is located – reveals itself through text and context, through what is said and unsaid, these layers of practices can be accessed by way of these same texts. In fact, Foucault's philosophical *corpus* was entirely based on the analysis of documentary sources.

The current investigation has adopted the interactions between A Song of Ice and Fire fans at Westeros.org as its analysis data; the aforementioned webpage is the main virtual forum about the fictional universe, since it hosts the largest fandom of GRRM's work (Young, 2014). The website is organized into sections that focus on several discussion topics in the form of texts published by participants. Fan discussions that refer to each GoT episode were collected; they were available as one of the specific contents of the virtual community. All topics and comments referring to all 73 episodes of the series were downloaded and filed. In total, they comprised 19,660 messages that were posted between 2011 and 2019, which corresponded to the period the series was being broadcast. Data were analyzed in chronological publication sequence to enable an understanding of the productive context of interactions represented in the posted messages, as well as the ongoing changes in fan practices (i.e., discursive, non-discursive and of the self) over time.

## RESULTS' DESCRIPTION AND DISCUSSION

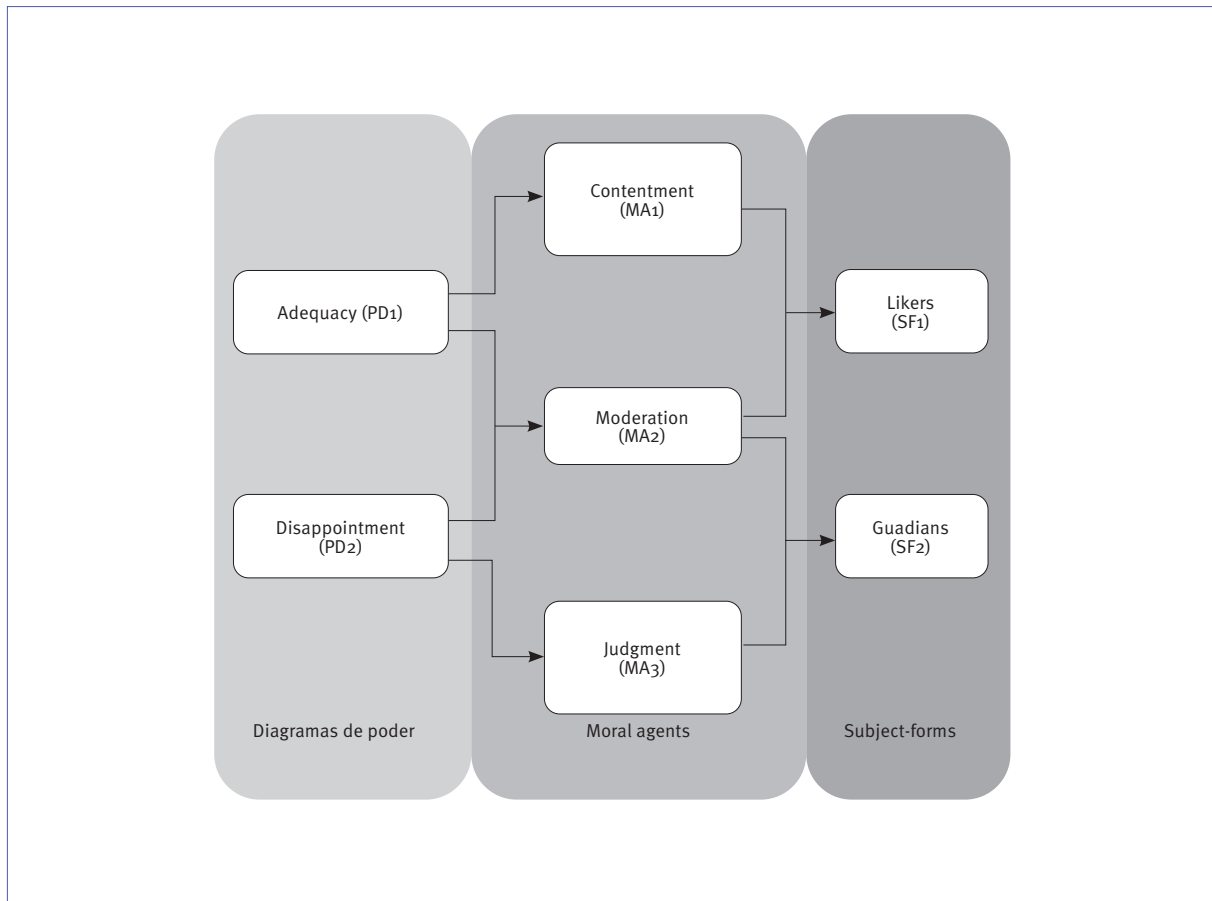
This section is organized into four analytical process categories. The first three categories refer to the analysis categories themselves, whereas the fourth corresponds to the result of the procedure (see Figure 1). Figure 2 presents the result of this process. Power diagrams are presented in a descriptive manner, with an emphasis on the empirical contexts in which they were identified. Accordingly, moral agents also rely on their constitutive criteria. The current study resorted to empirical examples taken from the original material, in order to describe the subject-forms and, retroactively, the analytical categories underpinning them. It was done not only to illustrate the ulterior category, but also the full analysis bundles (i.e., power diagrams – moral agents – subject-forms). Finally, the ethics elicited from this process are addressed by returning to the theory.

### Power diagrams

Two power diagrams were identified in the analyzed data. Although disparate, they are not opposite. The first points to praise for the television series, which is here called adequacy (PD1). According to this diagram, fans believe in the autonomy of a television language that is capable of contributing to the fictional universe. The TV series is praised for expanding the way the saga is presented, both by completing its content and by using sensory resources that are not available in the books.

This praise is associated with the technical quality of the production (e.g., casting, special effects), which fills gaps in the narrative that were omitted in the books, but mainly for materializing a complex plot full of twists and turns for the mass media. GoT has introduced this fictional universe to a new audience, which has increased the ASolAF fanbase and fandom growth, a fact that has intensified and made interactions among fans easier. The way in which the series was presented also enabled readers of the books to reinterpret the saga and expand their enjoyment.

Figure 2. Configuration of analytical categories



The second diagram was called disappointment (PD2), since it reflected the criticisms of the way in which the fictional universe was appropriated by television. By evoking their own knowledge about the fictional universe, which was acquired by reading the original content, fans argue that the series does not respect the canon established in the books and makes changes they consider to be inconsistent with what is constructed by the original narrative.

This aspect appears in several arguments, according to which the role played by secondary characters is disregarded; the political and philosophical issues addressed in the work are treated in a superficial manner; geographical aspects of the fictional world are detailed; and the supernatural dimension of the books is relegated to the background. These issues are the most evident, since GoT goes beyond the content of the published books; fans are frustrated with the series finale and do not accept that it is the proper outcome of the plot – they even attack GRRM for not having completed the last two planned books and fear that it is not going to happen, given the author's old age.

Although these diagrams provide evidence of an opposite concept of GoT, they are not shown in a radical way: the legitimacy of the translation of the literary work made by the TV series (PD1) is obvious, ranging from excited compliments to sober acknowledgements; similarly, dissatisfaction with the way this transposition was carried out (PD2) ranges from sharp attacks on it to rational criticism. This threshold becomes evident when features of the two media (book and TV series) are confronted and compared: a less euphoric appraisal of the



series acknowledges the good translation of the literary work, if one takes into consideration the specificities of television language. A non-contumacious criticism argues that this language does not justify the exclusion of crucial points in the saga.

On the other hand, these diagrams lie in the framework they assume. Although they are based on different viewpoints, they share the effect that the TV adaptation brought to the saga. They are fan movements that, although using different tones, reflect on the existence of the television series in comparison to the way the canon of the fictional universe is translated through other media.

## Moral agents

Since the morality addressed here reflects the ways in which subjects position themselves vis-à-vis the construction of different truths, the dynamic between the two power diagrams has evidenced three moral agents in the current research. Two of them are singularly aligned to each diagram and point to different, although not separate ways of viewing the TV adaptation of ASolaF. The other lies on the forcefulness threshold that enables this relationship.

There is this feeling of contentment (MA<sub>1</sub>) among fans who acknowledge the series' contribution to the saga (PD<sub>1</sub>). This moral agent has the concept of enjoyment; that the transmedia adaptation can provide a hedonic experience as ethical substance. It stands for the premise that being a fan of the saga cannot be limited to expecting a faithful reproduction of the literary content. According to part of the fandom, fanity vis-à-vis the fictional universe also means understanding the autonomy of each media type (the teleology of the moral subject), which, in their turn, are able to present their own language. This language plays distinct roles and has different purposes in producing the narrative and enabling the experiences (subjection mode) that account for defining fanity. These fans legitimize the experience (work ethic elaboration) by highlighting the quality of the series and by valuing its great media success.

On the other hand, it was possible to identify judgment (MA<sub>3</sub>) by fans who assume that the series should be completely faithful to the literary work it is based on (PD<sub>2</sub>). This moral agent indicates how fans proclaim the primacy of canon values (ethical substance) and, in order to do so, they act in such a way as to implement their claim (subjection mode). This is done to emphasize that the authenticity of the media product (teleology of the moral subject) is the basis for the existence of fanity, which is characterized by a commitment to the consumed object. These fans act to preserve the canon (ethical work elaboration) by evoking what they call the foundation of fidelity to the literary work, and by seeking to ensure this basis as the depository of the knowledge that defines the fictional universe.

Among these positions, moderation (MA<sub>2</sub>) is evidenced on the threshold of understanding, in which the transmedia dialogue between the two cultural products is inserted. This moral agent refers to a hedonic television experience committed to fidelity to the literary canon (ethical substances). There is an understanding that fanity should benefit from the combination of the different media languages (teleology of the moral subject) by which the saga is materialized. Fans who stand at this borderline reconcile (subjection mode) the different opinions about the TV series; they even shape their own opinions to enable consensus within the fandom. In order to do so, they proclaim respect for differences (ethical work elaboration), try to establish dialogue to mitigate discrepant positions about the series, encourage a reflective attitude at the time to elaborate opinions, and help new community fans adapt to the discussions.

## Subject-forms

The association between the previous analytical categories enabled a perception of two different subject-forms: the first comprises fans who take advantage of the saga's expansion to a different media type, whereas the other comprises fans who undertake the mission of protecting the canon. Although these subject-forms are directly related to power diagrams, they reflect their modalization, which is prominent in moral agents. Consequently, the identified subject-forms are not antagonistic, although they simultaneously compete with and complete each other, since they reflect positions that focus on negotiating different fan legitimacies about the same media product.

Likers (SF<sub>1</sub>) are the subject-form of fans who enhance their relationship with the saga by expanding their hedonic experience. This fanity is a fun-based manifestation conducted through openness to different experiences, depending on the potential of the different media. The way fans enjoy (MA<sub>1</sub>) this transmediation (PD<sub>1</sub>) is a mark of the singularity of this subject-form. The excerpt below highlights a message posted by a saga fan after he watched the third episode of the series' first season:

I've read the books twice, and have loved Martin's work for years. This HBO series is fast becoming my favorite television program ever. The quality is all I've come to expect from HBO. The casting is impeccable and I'm loving every minute. [...] the heart of the story, the deep, well-rounded characters that we love and hate, are all there. Thank you Mr. Martin and HBO. Job well done.

(Source: <https://asoiaf.westeros.org/index.php?/topic/49576-poll-how-would-you-rate-episode-103/page/4/>)

The fan's words, which were published after he watched the third episode of the series' first season, points out how the adaptation of the books written by GRRM for TV has become his favorite television show. At the time, there were two prevalent feelings in the fandom. On the one hand, the excitement expressed since the announcement that the ASolaF transmediation process was being undertaken by HBO, which is acknowledged in pop culture for producing television series with above-average narrative quality. On the other hand, there was fear about the way a plot as complex as that of the books created by GRRM would be adapted for presentation to a TV audience (i.e., the viewers) that prioritizes entertainment over political issues.

The message expresses the sum of the two feelings observed in the fandom, with the first (i.e., excitement) prevailing over the second (i.e., fear), probably because at the time it appeared to be unjustified given the quality of the initial TV show episodes. By allowing himself to revisit the saga he already admires, the fan considers GoT to be a delight for ASolaF (MA<sub>1</sub>) readers and emphasizes how the quality of the television series highlights details that could not be adapted from the books, so he considers that the TV adaptation has translated these details in a proper way (PD<sub>1</sub>).

On the other hand, there are fans who consider themselves Guardians (SF<sub>2</sub>). This subject-form reinforces the fans' relationship with the media product based on the priority they give to the canon established in the original content. Fanity is herein expressed as loyalty to the foundations and details of the literary work, which is established as canonical truth. This condition is singled out through satisfaction (MA<sub>3</sub>) in highlighting the limitations of the series in delivering such loyalty (PD<sub>2</sub>). This aspect is exemplified in the message from a fan below:

Then perhaps this series is not for you two, as the prologue set it up as a big part. Not everyone likes the dragons or the magic either, but they're all part of the big picture. I'm just disappointed the show runners did not end with the book ending because they claim to be adapting the books, yet do a poor

and biased job. It wasn't just this omission though. I've already had one foot out the door, so to speak, and this plus last week has lost all my confidence in the showrunners.

(Source: <https://asoiaf.westeros.org/index.php?/topic/112364-how-would-you-rate-episode-410/page/6/#comments>)

The perception of this fan about the season four finale challenges another forum member's argument about the use of a narrative resource typical of GRRM (i.e., a characters' death). By then, GoT had already consolidated its position as one of the great pop culture phenomena, which led to the emergence of members who had only watched the TV adaptation of the saga within the ASolaF fandom.

A split movement, therefore, started among fans of the cultural product, largely due to narrative changes introduced in the television adaptation that no longer strictly followed the content of the books. The aim of this movement was to delegitimize GoT's content in order to reject the presence of "poser" fans – those who have never read the books – in the fandom and, consequently, to advocate that ASolaF was significantly better than its TV adaptation. In the above statement, the fan advocates that each particularity of the canon – even if it is not interesting to some individuals – should be appreciated, since it is part of a great work (MA3). He is disappointed with the show, because he understands that neither its producers nor its audience seem to understand the saga (PD2).

As previously mentioned, these subject-forms overlap in their search to maintain fandom cohesion (MA2). This is done by showing appreciation (PD1) for the series, or disappointment (PD2) with it in a reflexive way. Fan statements often show these movements separately, which attests to the moderation in each subject-form. Sometimes, however, they can be seen in a simultaneous way, as observed in the message posted by a fan about the seventh (and penultimate) season finale.

As the last episode of the season, I have to say, this episode conclude some arc that felt dragging or that required to be ended in order for the show to progress. Pros: [...] DRAGON destroying the wall. Honestly, it's been 8 \*\*\*\*\* years and it's finally down. For some reason who started reading the books when the started (90's?), even on the tv show, it must be cool and nice to see it tumbling down. I only started reading the book when the show started so for me not that big of a wait compared to readers. [...]. Cons: [...] Golden company is now strongest army? Really? I thought it was the Dothraki. They got 20,000?

(Source: <https://asoiaf.westeros.org/index.php?/topic/148147-poll-how-would-you-rate-episode-707/>)

The narrative divergence between ASolaF and GoT – and the consequent split within the fandom – became increasingly latent over time. On the one hand, there was the movement established by fans to disown the TV series as an adaptation of the literary saga. On the other hand, part of the fandom acknowledged how the TV show managed to maintain its initial quality level, regardless of its fidelity to the original content, and even if it was based on other aspects that are inherent to this media type (e.g., cast performance, the use of special effects). There were also those who were “in between” and acknowledged the validity of the arguments on both sides.

The highlighted part of this fan's discourse shows his excitement with the fact that the show had finally managed to move forward again, something that could calm down fandom members who had divergent opinions (MA2). According to this fan, it is natural that some points may be valued (i.e., pros) (PD1), whereas others might be criticized (i.e., cons) (PD2) for the way in which one of the concluding seasons of the show was conducted. At that point in the fictional universe of events presented in GoT, the series both allowed consuming key ASolaF moments, which had long been anticipated by fans and premeditated by them (PD1), and risked compromising this consumption experience due to the way the plot was conducted (PD2).

## Ethics

In line with the esthetic statute of ethics in Foucault's theory, the current findings were interpreted on the basis of what Foucault (2020b) called the subject's moral stylizations, which represent the ways individuals shape their social behaviors using pleasures. This study presents below a summary of what this is, based on Foucault (2020b).

The philosopher starts his explanation through "Dietetics", which concerns the art of relating to oneself on a daily basis by defining the extent of one's desires. Based on this perspective, although the fulfilment of desires is understood as something natural, it can exceed certain limits if it involves excessive practices, both physically, of bodies themselves, and morally, involving others. Thus, following moral regimes that moderate the enjoyment of pleasures enables one to preserve one's value and image before others, while extending their existence. It is, therefore, an ontic stylization, according to which one's acknowledgement by others attests to one's ability to be and to govern one's own body in order to live in constant attention to desires that are manifested in social practices and relationships.

"Economic" stylization, in its turn, concerns the conduct of oneself that allows one to be able to take care of others: this aspect is addressed on both the family level and extrapolated to include a broader social context. By incorporating moral values that express society's values in broader terms, individuals assume responsibilities that add to those of others in productive support to help consolidate each individual as subject. Thus, economic stylization refers to an ideal behavior stylization aimed at achieving the common good, which requires that subjects acknowledge their moral value before social otherness, so they can govern themselves and others.

Finally, "Erotics" is a scenic game, according to which different actors are attracted by what others can provide them with. It represents how the wishes of a given subject affect, and are affected by the needs of others on a journey of mutual pleasure, in order to establish a positive relationship for both parties. Based on this perspective, pleasure and social relationships, in general, become isomorphic, since freedoms and choices converge on behalf of the pleasure of self and of the other. It is the stylization of sharing, according to which there is no submission, domination or oppression, but a contribution among subjects who are constituted in the mutual retribution of their needs and desires.

Based on these Foucauldian concepts, contentment (MA<sub>1</sub>) expresses "erotics" in the way ASolaF fans try to expand their hedonic experience through GoT. It is about fans' freedom to express pleasures for themselves and for those with whom they relate through the consumption of an entertainment product. Judgment (MA<sub>3</sub>), in its turn, reproduces a logic of "economics", since the values and singularities of the canon are considered by fans to be the source of pleasure with the media product. Trying to rule the way GoT should be performed is an exhilarating activity for ASolaF fans, who feel responsible for preserving its content. Moderation (MA<sub>2</sub>), on the other hand, assumes a "dietetics" role, since it reflects the pursuit of a balance between the pleasure of consuming the transmediation product and care for the saga. This moral conduct aims at stabilizing different perspectives in the fandom in order to help maintain it.

Therefore, positions observed among ASolaF fans, which make them seem like GoT likers (FS<sub>1</sub>), present as their singularity a fanity that is founded on "erotics" in pursuit of hedonic experiences, i.e. fun. According to Hirschman and Holbrook (1982), consumption is a social practice that goes beyond cognitive or utilitarian perception. The aforementioned authors understand consumption as rhetorical practice, since it leads consumers to exercise their ability and willingness to reframe personal experiences for themselves in their pursuit of

pleasure. The hedonic experience considers consumption to be an activity that can amuse, thrill and establish specific meanings. Whenever the act of consuming is based on fun, small personal pleasures are manifested in a social dynamic established between and by consumers (Coulter, 2021; Jantzen et al., 2012). The enjoyment of media products in the fan sphere is intrinsic to consumption experiences related to entertainment content; consequently, it works to bring together individuals who share social and personal practices based on their pursuit of fun (Fathallah, 2016).

On the other hand, fans who assume the role of guardians (SF2) have fanity as “economic” stylization as singularity. They attribute to themselves a series of values and responsibilities vis-à-vis the media product, and establish an intimate relationship with it based on their feelings of guardianship. They relate to the media product as though they collected domains and knowledge that cannot be profaned. According to Belk (2001), the intimate relationship between the consumer and the consumed object may indicate a collecting behavior when consumption is not just about making use of the product, but also about incorporating aspects of it both in intense maintenance and storage forms, and in the enactment of the collector’s everyday life. The collected object gains new concepts in consumers’ biographies, since it is always present in aspects of their daily lives (Woodward & Greasley, 2017). Collecting is the cultural practice of selecting specific artifacts based on their personal importance and meaning, in a guardianship movement (McCracken, 1988). In order to express and establish their interests, fans act as guardians of the media products they consume (Jenkins, 2007; Ryan, 2015), mainly because the way they treat and preserve these products is one of the few matters that can put their permanence in the fandom in check (Kompare, 2018).

Finally, likers (FS1) and guardians (FS2) share a dietetic behavior, which reflects fanity as a fluid social practice involving an emotional connection with, and cognitive interest in media products, as well as relying on interaction as its foundation stone. Different opinions expressed within the same fandom end up being legitimized out of respect for the differences that exist among its members. According to Kozinets (1999), the most emblematic members of consumer communities are those who balance and mix their experiences with the consumed object with social, personal and relational aspects. Although consumer communities have heterogeneous members, they work as the core of the affective or cognitive connection of their members to their consumption experiences. Fandoms work in a similar way, by aggregating different positions about media products through their enjoyment, productive actions and outspread of information (Delwiche & Henderson, 2012; Fuschillo, 2017).

Dealing with differences and diversity has been seen as a fan culture feature (Hills, 2013; Kozinets, 2001). Therefore, one can understand that this aspect modulates the singularities of the identified subject-forms. However, before that, another aspect featuring this culture lies in understanding that the enjoyment of media products both provides entertainment and leads to engagement (Chen, 2021; Jenkins, 2006). Likers and guardians reveal themselves as adopting contiguous fan positions. Therefore, the present study reveals the unique ethics that are produced in the intense relationship between fans and media objects linked to pop culture. These ethics, in their turn, are based on a fan culture ethos.

It is possible to suggest that the observed ethics refer to poaching. Jenkins (2015) created the term “textual poachers” to designate the type of relationship fans establish with media products. The aforementioned author understands that fan consumption is an immersive act, a constant “hunt” that is characterized by the continuous (re)reading of media texts, which are adopted as part of the experiences lived by fans who use them to promote interactions with their peers. This “hunt” makes them nomads; it transits between and converges on aspects of their personal and social life, and the fictional worlds they feel part of.

## CONCLUSION

The current study addressed how the fans' position vis-à-vis media products, in their interactions, forms a fan ethics through stylizations that show contiguous dialogism. By suggesting that this ethic refers to poaching, the study has stated that it is poaching for different pleasures arising from the consumption of different pop culture objects. Poaching reveals the subjectivation process that expresses the existence of modulations that encompass the different ways in which the fans' relationship with media products is manifested. It is an ethic that reflects the fans' journey, wherein experiences associated with the consumption of a given media product (i.e., liking, guarding and respecting differences) work as alternative and contiguous paths for the ways individuals address themselves as pop culture fans.

If, according to [Jenkins \(2015\)](#), poaching is the main feature that defines fans, the current findings have enabled a deeper understanding of this as the process by which fans exercise their fanity. This study has advocated that poaching both enables the intensification of desires through consumer relations, and produces social relations by configuring these aspects as inherent to the condition of being a fan of the media product, through interactions with peers in a community context (i.e., fandom). Based on this premise, it was possible to articulate the concept of poaching with the constitution of Foucault's ethical subject. Based on [Deleuze's \(1988\)](#) understanding, according to Foucault a subject is simultaneously a desiring and a social being, constituted by its relationship with different truths that are part of its life.

With respect to one's relationship with different truths, [Foucault \(2020b\)](#) describes moral stylizations as a way of finding truth through other individuals in the form of love. In the negotiation of freedoms and truths, true love is established in a combination of looking after oneself and others (i.e., dietetics), caring for oneself and for others (i.e., economics), and pleasure for oneself and for others. (i.e., erotics). The philosopher advocates that, when it comes to true love, body and soul are not additive spheres, but a unifying instance of knowledge of bodies and sharing of souls, which provides one's completeness in the relationship with the other. Furthermore, true love is the possibility of establishing the existential condition of ethical subjects: by sharing desires and feelings, individuals express themselves as desiring beings; by establishing fidelity and a productive role for society, they are legitimized as social beings; by preserving themselves and remaining faithful to themselves, they are constituted as moral beings ([Foucault, 2020b](#)). This theoretical articulation enables an understanding of poaching as true love in relation to being a fan as an ethical subject established in the association between bodily pleasure and spiritual fulfillment with a media product, through interactions with peers in a collective context. Consequently, this true love relationship is intrinsic to fans' ethical concepts in the process of negotiating the internal and external truths that are associated with the consumed object. According to [Foucault \(2020a\)](#), these truths allow individuals to come across their own existence; by negotiating different ways of dealing with truths, it is possible to reach subjectivation modes that are part of the ethical journey in which individuals are constituted as moral subjects.

These results are in line with the understanding that consumption is a social practice that allows subjectivity manifestations as ethical conduct (see [Denegri-Knott, et al., 2018](#); [Jantzen et al., 2012](#)). More specifically, subjectivities manifested through the intense relationship of fans with media products are seen as possibilities for market and social emancipation ([Chen, 2021](#); [Souza-Leão & Moura, 2018](#)).

This investigation also presented a discussion that combined elements addressed in discussions that are associated with cultural studies ([Booth, 2015](#)) and consumer research ([Schouten & McAlexander, 1995](#)), in order

to expand the understanding of how cultural and interactional practices, like the specialized consumption of fans, produce truths that constitute the ethics of the contemporary subject. It gives credit to the interdisciplinary scene between fan study and consumer research, either due to its economic and cultural aspect (i.e., intimate relationship with the entertainment industry and pop culture), or because it allows consumption to be explored as subjectivation practice.

More specifically, by making use of Michel Foucault's concepts to substantiate, interpret and reflect on fan relationships that are, ultimately, consumption practices, the current research showed how Foucault's contributions are a fruitful field for marketing studies (see Arnould & Thompson, 2015). This study has also helped systematize the genealogy of the ethical subject, which is a method developed by the aforementioned philosopher, as a means for investigating the constitution of the subjectivities, ethical formulations and conducts of moral agencies (Foucault, 2020b).

Finally, it is necessary to acknowledge that the study was limited to the best known media product forum explored in this investigation (i.e., ASolaF): Westeros.org. Choosing this forum was incidental, since it is the most fruitful way to observe fan relationships with one of the most resonant transmediations in pop culture in recent years. Future research that focuses on addressing transmedia and the consequent fuss in the fandoms of other media products can further explore what was presented here.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) supported the research. The Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) supports the graduate program to which the researchers are affiliated.

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## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Thiago Ianatoni Camargo worked on the conceptualization, theoretical-methodological approach and theoretical review (literature review), carried out the data collect and analysis, and the writing of the article. André Luiz Maranhão de Souza-Leão worked on the conceptualization, theoretical-methodological approach and theoretical review (literature review), participated in the data analysis and performed the final revision of the article. Bruno Melo Moura worked on the conceptualization and theoretical review (literature review) and participated in the writing and final review of the article.