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To cite this article: Rafael Rodrigues de Mello, Stefânia Ordovás de Almeida & Marlon Dalmoro (2020): The emperor's new cosplay: the agency of an absent material on the consumption experience, Consumption Markets & Culture, DOI: [10.1080/10253866.2020.1756268](https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2020.1756268)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2020.1756268>



Published online: 27 Apr 2020.



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# The emperor's new cosplay: the agency of an absent material on the consumption experience

Rafael Rodrigues de Mello <sup>a</sup>, Stefânia Ordovás de Almeida <sup>a</sup> and Marlon Dalmoro <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Business School, Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul, PUCRS, Porto Alegre, Brazil; <sup>b</sup>UNIVATES, Lajeado, Brazil

## ABSTRACT

Experiences are not limited to the apparent. Something absent can invade one's perception of the world and become heavier and more forceful than what is present. Absent material can feel imposing, even commanding and restricting the consumer's interaction with the world. In this study, we investigated the cosplayers – consumers at geek conventions who voluntarily dress as a fictional character, to have a theatrical experience – and their experience consuming the same themed marketplace stage without its core material. To these consumers, the experience is mainly one of absence, with the absent cosplay making itself present to remind them that they cannot use the convention as a stage, a conflicting experience of free and disengaged anonymity.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 January 2019

Accepted 8 April 2020

## KEYWORDS

Consumption experience; materiality; absence; consumer agency; object agentic capacity

## Introduction

In the popular short tale, the emperor's new suit of clothes is both something and nothing, both present and absent. In that case, the “nothing” is a thing with presence and agency to move and make people move or stop moving. How important is an object's physical presence to its taking shape and influencing consumers' interpretations and interactions with the marketplace? In this paper, we argue that consumer research has focused too much on the object apparently there and too much, too little on the absent object to understand its role in shaping a marketplace experience.

A recent body of research recognizes the agentic capacity of objects (Latour 2007; Goulding, Saren, and Pressey 2018; Hoffman and Novak 2018; Epp and Price 2010), arguing that material objects with no sentience can nonetheless display agency, the power to make people or other objects move (Hoffman and Novak 2018). In this context, objects are depicted as actors in a network with roles symmetrically relevant to humans' (Latour 2007; Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman 2017; Epp and Price 2010); as something to construct a subject socially (Miller 2005, 2010; Epp and Price 2010); as a fetish with an aura, containing power and influence to help a consumer to perform otherwise impossible deeds (Fernandez and Lastovicka 2011; James, Handelman, and Taylor 2011); or even as a subject with agency over the consumer, who ends up taking on the role of the object (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Firat, Dholakia, and Venkatesh 1995). Hoffman and Novak (2018) expand the notion of the agentic role of objects and call the attention to overcoming the human-centric conceptualization of the consumer experience. They recognize that consumers and objects connect interactively, and objects can enable or constrain the consumers' experience. In this sense, such emerging object-oriented perspectives on consumer research have made clear the role of materiality in the consumption experience (Türe and Ger 2016).

However, while present material objects have received too much attention, consumer-experience studies only partially consider physically absent objects (Goulding, Saren, and Pressey 2018). When consumption experience is largely characterized as phenomenological (Vargo and Lusch 2016), we must start understanding that more than what our senses can capture invades our worlds. This is more than just our interpretation in response to the stimuli of a thing in itself (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Hill and Cromartie 2004). Absence is not a simple case of what is not there. As in the case of the naked emperor, absence can be a relational element in producing experience, sometimes more noticeable than what is present (Goulding, Saren, and Pressey 2018). Despite the relevance of what is absent, researchers tend to focus their attention on the apparent, leaving unobserved and undiscussed a complementary part of the consumption experience (Hill and Cromartie 2004). Our focus on the apparent, the material, and the perceptually present can imprison us.

We defend the idea that experience transcends the senses. Our own thoughts can invade us and construct reality without something materially present, or we can really sense something when others around us would not. Sartre (1965) argues that the human consciousness perceives the presence of something absent, interacting with the nothingness. We are not interacting exclusively with factual objects (being-in-itself); we acquire a sense of being by constructing our reality with the “not thereness” of rules, purposes, and self, all largely defined by what they are not (being-for-itself). We can interact and judge things as much by what they are not and what they lack as by what they are and what they have. Sartre’s (1965) tale of an appointment with Pierre at a café is illustrative, positing that when he arrived at the shop before his friend, he found the “lack of Pierre” more present than the presence of tables and chairs.

Recognizing the presence of materiality, the material object’s absence assumes a relational position in the consumer’s construction of experience. The research question that guides this study is: *How can the absence of an optional object influence a marketplace experience?* To address this question, we investigate the cosplayer experience, whose occurrence depends on both a specific marketplace and an object. Cosplays are the optional adornments to the image of a fictional character from geek media, which some geekcon consumers wear inside those spaces (Winge 2006; Scott 2015; Seregina and Weiyo 2016). The word “cosplay” is a combination of the terms “costume” and “play,” and cosplayers are consumers who dress and perform (to varying degrees of excellence) as fictional characters from comic books, manga, anime, video games, and movies. Consumers can “consume” the geekcons (geek conventions) with (presence of the object) or without (absence of the object) the cosplay. Each situation allows consumers to perform distinct roles during the geekcons and, consequently, produce distinct consumption experiences.

Our methodological approach explores the cosplayers’ geekcon experiences – with and without the cosplay – by describing the agentic relation between consumers and present or absent materiality. In this sense, the object’s agentic capacity, a central concept in our study, is not in a dualistic relation of humans with material substances. Rather, it occupies space in an intersubjective spectrum, in which objects and individuals will acquire different agentic capacities, depending upon their situation (Coole 2005, 2013). The agentic properties of objects emerge and interact across the spectrum, borrowing agentic momentum from singularities that other parts of the spectrum define (Coole 2005).

We understand that agency and materiality are intertwined. Materiality is associated with the way in which materials are not just representations of something previously existent but also nonhuman agents constructing our realities and regulating our human agency (Miller 2005; Latour 2007; Hoffman and Novak 2018). To understand materiality’s roles in a consumption experience, we must explore the materials’ agentic capacity.

From this perspective, the agentic capacity constitutes and is constituted by the consumer experience. Therefore, we define agentic capacity in the cosplayer context as the capacity for a cosplayer (a human who dresses and performs) or a cosplay (a nonhuman object used to perform) to act in the world in relation to others. However, the agentic capacity of objects in the cosplayer experience is not restricted to the counterpart or cosplay presence and also occurs in its absence.

Next, we present the theoretical background of this study, exploring how consumer-experience research has discussed materiality and agency. Later, we detail our method and present our findings and a discussion of how the seasoned consumer can feel the absent object as omnipresent in the consumption experience.

## Theoretical background

### *Materiality in the consumption experience*

“Material” comprises the things, tools, technologies, spatiotemporal geography, and physical body within a practice (Schatzki 2002). Markets use material resources to create stages for the consumer to live an experience away from everyday life, with elements of spectacle (Kozinets et al. 2004), fantasy (Sherry 1998), and/or performance (Tumbat and Belk 2013; Scott, Cayla, and Cova 2017). The Consumption Culture Theory (CCT) literature presents such spaces in multiple ways, including theatrically themed retail, e.g. American Girl Place (Borghini et al. 2009), ESPN Zone (Kozinets et al. 2004; Sherry et al. 2004), Las Vegas (Firat 2001; Firat and Ulusoy 2011); conventions and festivals that center on brands, products, activities, or ideologies; and even public/natural spaces, where the market provides equipment and instructors for producing performative experiences, e.g. river rafting (Arnould and Price 1993) and climbing (Tumbat and Belk 2011, 2013; Lindberg and Mossberg 2019).

To conduct the narrative, the market can use the materials as props and the employees as guides to dramatically stage the expected experience and orient the consumers to performing their expected role. In these scenarios, finding a duality between the roles of a spectator and of a performer is common (Deighton 1992; Moisio and Arnould 2005). For example, some museums try to orient their consumers to playing the role of a spectator, implementing norms and instructions that seek to restrict the visitors’ interactions with the museum’s attractions and props – e.g. “do not touch” signs (Joy and Sherry 2003). The consumer surely could use her agency in a resistive fashion and act in a way different from the expected (e.g. touch the piece of art with the “do not touch” sign), but that could be reprehensible. On the other hand, some play-demanding meetups, such as Live Action Role Playing games (LARP), where all the participants dress up and perform as fantasy characters from a certain fictional media (e.g. Harry Potter, Star Wars, Lord of the Rings), promote the role of performer (Seregina 2019, 2014).

In both situations, some element of the market acts somewhat on the consumer, either forcefully limiting her autonomy at the museum or forcefully moving her to a perform. Some other marketplace stages will be more suggestive than forceful, with the consumer negotiating her role with the stage’s props. For example, in the ESPN Zone Chicago, virtual reality (VR) games are at the disposal of any visitor who dares to play them in front of everybody else (Sherry et al. 2004; Kozinets et al. 2004).

Following these examples, objects clearly seem to produce the consumer experience. In Miller’s (2010, 135) words, “things make people just as much as people make things.” People use objects to facilitate communication, empower themselves, and disempower others, while “stuff” objectifies and constrains them in unanticipated ways. The process of making and using things can take on an agency of its own, developing a kind of power over us. Here, “agency” is understood also as an unintended consequence of a thing, since objects have no intentionality (Miller 2010).

A key aspect resides in recognizing that things do not operate themselves as entities, but people transform things in a way that has consequences for people (Miller 2010). Looking at the cosplayer experience, Seregina and Weijo (2016) demonstrate that consumers are active in crafting outfits to produce and sustain ludic consumption experiences, even if that requires extra effort and resources. Materiality is not a mere mechanism for companies to create scripted experiences; it also resides in a particular connection between consumers and the object itself.

Focusing on this specific relationship between consumers and materiality, the experience also can be an ongoing interaction in an assemblage that integrates consumers and objects (Hoffman and Novak 2018). Along this line, experience results from the exchange of agentic capacities in bidirectional interaction within a range of spatiotemporal depths and degrees of interactive complexities. Experience can involve both short and long-time frames and can also contain several experiences. In this sense, objects can help to connect an episodic or momentary experience nested in cumulative experiences (Hoffman and Novak 2018). As Kuruoğlu and Ger (2015) detail, objects and the experience's circulation, its capacity to establish and share emotional repertoires, and its ability to integrate individuals and collectives into common emotional dispositions can animate the emotional character of the experience. This reinforces the notion of an entwinement of object materiality and subject emotions, which generates, shapes, and assembles the experience (Kuruoğlu and Ger 2015; Hoffman and Novak 2018). Thus, from the consumer's point of view, the consumer-object interactions are responsible for the subjectivity production and, consequently, the experience is contingent upon the existence of a consumer-object interaction (Hoffman and Novak 2018). The intermixing of material objects and consumer experience production reinforces the notion of materiality as an agent of cultural change (Chitakunye and Maclaran 2014). Next, we detail the agentic capacity of materiality.

### ***Agency and materiality in consumer culture***

Even though not sentient, objects can have agency. We see personality in them, and they make us move. Fernandez and Lastovicka (2011) argue that fetishes, personified objects with an aura, have the power and influence to enhance the consumer's performance to the point that it stops being clear how much of someone's success is to their merit or the object's. Every object we create develops its own interests, gains agency, and slowly defines who we are as humans (Miller 2010). Miller (2010) suggests that objects have the power to determine our actions in ways that leave us blind to their ability to do so. In other words, the less we see objects in our space, the more power they have over us while disappearing in our everyday life.

In this sense, we can argue that the agentic capacity of objects operates directly or indirectly in consumer practices. For instance, Scaraboto (2015) observes that objects shape the boundaries between a monetary exchange, gift-giving, and sharing in a geocaching communitarian experience. In the case of the consumer-driven emergence of a Minimoto market, Martin and Schouten (2014) also suggest the object's agentic capacity in the co-constitution of consumption practices and infrastructures that, in consonance with human actors, result in the market catalysts. In other analyses, looking specifically at the capacity of objects to act in consumption practices, Hagberg (2016) describes the agentic capacity of shopping bags. He suggests that the object acquires the agentic capacity from the continuous arranging of practices, in which shopping bags contribute to shaping practices, and in turn, these practices transform them. Objects are interlaced with consumption practices, brokering communal practices, shaping market structures and consumption practices, affecting consumption even after its "life" (Gollnhofer, Weijo, and Schouten 2019).

The notion of agentic capacity has also been present in postmodern consumer studies that frontally attack the dichotomy of Subject (consumer) and Object (product) (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Firat, Dholakia, and Venkatesh 1995; Firat and Dholakia 2006). In a process of production, the consumer acts upon consumption material as it acts upon her. In particular, more than just representing what somebody already is, clothes have the power to construct someone socially (Miller 2010). As the clothes define the consumer, they also determine the consumer's actions, persuading her to act as they desire.

Miller (1987) engages with the dialectical Hegelian notion of "object" to describe a valuated analysis of how objects interact and become essential for a subject's constitution. This approach contributes to our study, at once reinforcing a dialectical and co-productive subject-object interaction, despite the prevalence of subjects over objects. Miller (1987) recognizes the phenomenological

process through which subjectivity aligns with a circular objectification process. The process of objectification creates our sense of ourselves as subjects, through appropriations of the materiality in a continuous balance between subject and object. Within this dialectical process, objects may not merely be used to refer to a given social group, but may themselves be constitutive of a certain social relation (Miller 1987).

Furthermore, the consumer can lose the position of a subject when objectified by the market or by others, as feminist studies often point out (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Joy and Venkatesh 1994; Matich, Ashman, and Parsons 2019). Someone reduced to one's body or physical state can understand the frustration of lacking agency for one's own representation in a social setting, with other actors defining who they are, how they should be, and what they are for (Thompson and Hirschman 1995).

Woermann and Rokka (2015) even argue about the material provisional presence in shaping practices in temporal experience. They maintain that the practice depends on material set up to support it, which will set the pace. Exploring the meaningful experiences from the practice (e.g. freeskiering) to the practitioner (e.g. freeskier), they argue that a bystander will live through a different temporality and coexist with different body conduct, norms, and goals that material elements shape. Türe and Ger (2016) also identify a processual interaction on multiple levels of coexistence, between a consumer and heirloom objects. Following their description of the object transformation over time, objects' interaction predicts, routinizes, and configures the sociomateriality of practices. It is not about "being," but about becoming an agent in the process, not in a state of manifestation. As Coole (2013) describes, object agency is a lively, vibrant, dynamic, in-motion process. However, in a society with constant tension between materiality and liquidity and dematerialization of singularized physical objects into alternative formats of experimental consumption, the indexical connections between consumers and objects go beyond the physical presence of the object (Arcuri and Veludo-de-Oliveira 2018). In the next section, we explore the object's agentic capacity, even in its physical absence.

### ***Absence in the consumption experience***

Even when the focus of studies involves material experience, consumer-culture literature rarely considers the enhancement and restriction that the absence of materiality in the experience provokes. In particular, it recognizes the agentic capacities across animated and present entities, rarely those of absent entities (Coole 2013). How the materialist ontology stresses the immanence of the objects, rather than transcendence, largely invokes their agentic capacities (Coole 2013). However, absence also has agency and can constitute practice, dominate sociocultural discourses, and shape historical perceptions and memories in a form that, even when physically absent, influences the subjects' experience (Goulding, Saren, and Pressey 2018).

Arguably, some studies have put the distance from the mundane context of life – fleeing and trying to reach the absence of daily norms and social context – as central to some experiences, usually the nature-driven and spiritual (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019; Canniford and Shankar 2013). There is a tiredness of the mundane world that some consumers want to depart, by leaving either physically (Scott, Cayla, and Cova 2017) or spiritually (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019), through alien experiences that distance them from their ordinary lives, searching for escape from (absence of) their workplaces and homes.

As a way to search for affirmation and essence in life, unobtained objects are desired (Sartre 1965) and ever more craved and fantasized as time goes by, with the consumer being fed and feeding her craving with social and media discourses, imagining how transformative the consumption will be (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003). As an imaginative experience, the desired object can feel as if it were magically influencing the consumer to buy it, starting a negotiation, describing how it will be as magical as possible when acquired (Jenkins and Molesworth 2018).



Epp and Price (2010) propose that an absent singularized object, such as an heirloom, can display agency over a family by motivating the family members to reorganize the house network of objects and practices. The family keeps performing their identities and activities with similar objects, but the heirloom will keep asking to be reincorporated in their lives in a warm and active way. Hill and Cromartie (2004) argue that forgetting is part of the experience, with the absent taking part in a process of being and becoming. Memory ends as construction that needs some forgetting to shape itself. Besides this bit of relevance, we have not found a paper that focuses on a marketplace experience lacking a central material resource and still displaying agency over consumers. In this sense, taking it to the foreground will help us to better understand how the material's presence and absence participate in the consumption experience.

## Method

We investigated the cosplayers (i.e. consumers who dress as a fictional character to have a theatrical experience at geek conventions) and their experience of visiting the convention without the cosplay. Our interpretative approach looks specifically to the cosplay and material aspects in the cosplayer experience, dealing with the agency that an absent object has over the marketplace experience, with the intention of elucidating the complexity of meanings, practices, and feelings of the cosplayers' experience within the geekcon. The first author attended nine events in the south of Brazil (23rd, 24th, and 25th editions of AnimExtreme, Comic-Con RS, Geek Weekend, Anime Buzz, Anime Angel, Anime Fan, QI Geek Day), each with a duration from one to three days, plus three informal meetups of cosplayers and geeks that occurred in a public park in Porto Alegre (a southern Brazilian capital), for a total of 18 days of observation between August 2015 and November 2016. Disclaiming his role as a researcher, the author observed the convention's imagery and layout and the cosplayers and their interaction with their cosplays or regular clothes, other cosplayers, other people, and the convention as a whole. He also conducted informal interviews with the cosplayers. His pre-existing geek knowledge helped in interacting with informants and understanding their speech and the imagery of the conventions. His observations were descriptively written in notebooks and also captured via cellphone.

The observed geekcons occurred in a variety of places, such as a futsal (i.e. indoor soccer) field (e.g. Anime Buzz), a Jewish clubhouse (e.g. Anime Fan), an elementary school (e.g. QI Geek Day) or a big event center (e.g. AnimExtreme), with the visitor numbers varying between a couple of dozen (e.g. QI Geek Day) and thousands (e.g. more than 20.000 visitors in two days at AnimExtreme's 2016 edition). The majority of the Brazilian geekcons have "anime" in their names, but their content, visitors, and cosplays are not limited to Japanese animation, usually encompassing a vast range of geek culture.

All the geekcons displayed vending stalls with geek merchandise and products, themed rooms, cosplay competitions, and guest interviews. In the smaller cons, the typical guests were voice actors, Brazilian comic-book illustrators, and local cosplayers, while the AnimExtreme, the biggest geekcon in southern Brazil, invited YouTubers with millions of followers. As Internet celebrities, the YouTubers attracted a non-geek segment inside the conventions, usually young girls, throngs of whom were seen constantly running around in search of YouTubers, occasionally stumbling upon the cosplayers, sometimes damaging their cosplays. This kind of interaction led to tensions between the cosplayers and the non-geek public (Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013).

The meetups at the public park usually had a couple of dozen geeks and cosplayers hanging around outdoors. Organized by a cosplayer, such meetups would involve some trivia games, padded sword fights, and other jamboree-like activities, with the winner taking a pinback button as a reward. One of the observed meetups, attracting more than a hundred participants, promoted the "Naruto<sup>1</sup> run," a race with cosplayers and non-cosplayers running together, mimicking the Naruto running

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<sup>1</sup>An anime.

style (i.e. torso forward and arms pointing back). The meetups displaying scenarios different from those at the geekcons provided some contrasting and complementary insights, enriching our interpretations (Spiggle 1994).

We conducted formal interviews with 16 cosplayers, 12 of them interviewed individually and four interviewed in pairs (i.e. two sisters and a boy–girl couple). All interviews were recorded on video with consent (a written agreement obtained from all participants), lasting from 45 min to 2 h. Eleven interviewees were women and five were men, of ages ranging from 19 to 35 years. Six were students, while the professions of the rest included teacher, hairdresser, designer, pharmaceutical worker, illustrator, and administrative assistant. The informants had been doing cosplay from 2 to 13 years, creating between 5 and 92 different cosplays. To protect the informants' privacy, all names are disguised here.

While still fresh in the field, we read the transcribed interviews and field notes several times while analyzing and interpreting them. This iterative process helped in the identification and exploration of several themes that could have gone unnoticed between methods and texts (Spiggle 1994; Corbin and Strauss 2008). We analyzed every transcript and coded excerpts that could be an example, represent, or constitute part of the cosplayer's worldview or view of the cosplay, its agency while present or absent, and the geekcon experience; then, further abstracting the selections using broader codes. With an interpretative eye, we compared these codes within and across texts of different sites and interviewees, leading to our elaboration of this study's themes.

In the next section, we present our findings. Our main goal and our contribution concern the absence of an optional object and its influence on a cosplayer experience. To bring it to the foreground, we must clarify the experience of presence that will serve as background for our later discussions (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). With that in mind, we start our findings by describing the cosplay experience and its agency negotiations and interplays with the consumer. From that point on, our interest advances to the experience of absence and how the cosplay can feel greater in its absence than in its presence. Based on this evidence, we then discuss materiality in the consumption experience and the agency of an absent material.

## Findings

The cosplay experience occurs in the presence of geek imagery, materials, and a supporting community cumulatively lacking mundane norms and stigmatizations (Kozinets 2001; Seregina and Weijo 2016). The bracketing space of a geekcon will have colorful and iconic imagery of the geek culture, supported by a constant walking sea of aesthetically heterogeneous visitors, ranging from civilians<sup>2</sup> casually dressed in t-shirts with superhero images to fully characterized cosplayers. The materiality and discourse of the geekcon, added to the cosplay's own agency, will allow and influence the cosplayer to behave as a character in some situations, as an attraction in others, and as just a fan in still others. Next, we argue that the cosplay inside the geek convention leads to both agency enhancement and restriction of the cosplayer's experience. While she is free to perform as a fictional character, sometimes it is more of a demand than a desire. Later, we assert that an experience lacking materiality (i.e. cosplay) for a seasoned cosplayer will be filled by its "not-there-ness," occupying more space than the materials and the people present.

### *Cosplay agency enhancement and restriction*

At the beginning of the 24th edition of the AnimExtreme, the first author was strolling around when a Joker from the movie "The Dark Knight" appeared running among the civilians, flapping his purple trench coat with a grin on his face. Known as a trickster, the Joker allowed the cosplayer to play tricks with some early visitors. As such, he poked the right shoulder of an unwarned girl and walked past

<sup>2</sup>The emic term the cosplayer uses when referring to the non-cosplayers, non-lolita, and non-furry consumers of the geekcons.



her on her left side while faking an innocent face. Later, he stopped right in front of a group of girls and asked them, “Why so serious?” while holding a hardly alarming fake knife in his right hand.

However, the Joker’s victims responded to the villain. After being questioned about her seriousness, one of the girls answered, “I am hungry.” Two other girls looked for help from a Batman who was passing by, running in his direction and yelling, “Batman, the Joker is loose, catch him!” With the most dramatic voice he could manage, the Batman asked, “Where is he?” and, theatrically seizing his cape, ran alongside the girls toward the colorful villain.

This scene shows the ludic, playful, and interactive role the cosplayer has inside a geekcon, supported by his own cosplay, the “civilians,” and the other cosplayers. This kind of organic and spontaneous dynamic is supported by and helps to sustain the liminal space, where people who interact with the cosplayers, calling them by the character’s name, allow themselves to suspend the social constraints normally present in their everyday contexts (Seregina and Weiyo 2016).

With their presence and performances, the cosplayers understand that they are responsible for the thematic ambiance of the conventions and for providing an attraction for other visitors. They see themselves as one of the pillars of the geekcon and one of the reasons people buy the ticket. As Julia argues, they are an unofficial attraction of the geekcons, as they do a service for the convention but receive no money for it:

As much as you are there as part of the public, you are also an attraction. So, you have to have some patience with the other people there, because they are there to see you, in some way. Even with you paying the same as they do, you are also an attraction of the con, you are part of it. [...] If not for the cosplay, the con would be much weaker. It would not be themed and attractive to the majority of these people. [...] Even though we pay to enter, without us, the con does not happen. It does not have all the cosplay magic, you know? (Julia, 20 cosplays)

As an attraction, the cosplayers understand that they have some responsibilities to the civilians. As a norm, they do not deny a photo and are cordial with the civilians, except when the character gives a cue for a little rudeness (e.g. Fernanda, when dressed as Levi, a character with a demeanor of superiority from the anime *Attack on Titans*, gives a pretended sigh when asked for a photo). As an attraction, the cosplay itself seals a contract with the other consumers at the geekcon, which the cosplayer feels the need to sustain. Even when in uncomfortable situations, such as eating or half-dressed, the cosplayers rarely deny a photo (Seregina and Weiyo 2016). As Veronica explains, “If I am around those folks, I am disposing myself there to take a photo with everybody.”

However, this commitment applies as much to the civilians and the geekcon as to the cosplay itself. The materialized character establishes the cosplayer’s responsibility to please the civilians, and that can demand playfulness. The clothes and materials they have crafted, entirely or partially on their own, now have their own demands to be enacted (Miller 2005).

As cosplayers conduct and help the other consumers to live a richer experience, they display a role similar to that of an employee (Arnould and Price 1993; De Almeida et al. 2018), finding themselves in a chimeric role: neither entirely consumer nor paid staff (Cova, Pace, and Skälén 2015; Seregina and Weiyo 2016). In some way, having these obligations to the civilians can limit the cosplayer’s agency, as it is an additional norm to observe. Some civilians even ignore the cosplayers’ agency by objectifying them, thinking that civilians are the agents to be pleased and the cosplayers are the pleasurable object. Julia makes the link between the cosplayer role and the objectification of cosplayers, noting that “as much as I am an attraction at the geekcon, I am not made to be touched, you know? I am part [of the geekcon], but I am not an inanimate object that you can come close and, whatever, take home, turn inside out.” Such toxic interactions are mainly done by male civilians to female cosplayers, as Veronica’s reports:

When I was not dating, at the beginning of the year, at the AnimExtreme, I was cosplaying as Castiel (from *Supernatural*), which is not even a vulgar cosplay, you know? It has a skirt that goes till my knees, all closed up at the top, and there was a guy who almost touched my butt. And there was another guy when we were going to take the picture with a lot of people around. I opened the wings (of the cosplay) so the photo looked cool, and the guy simply said, “Wow, I got her so horny that she opened her wings,” you know? That kind of thing is just

... I just closed the wing, turned my back and did not take the picture, I was so furious. Why would you say that?  
(Veronica, 8 cosplays)

These deprecating interactions, depicted as dark plays by Seregina and WeiJo (2016), can diminish the cosplayers' sense of agency and leave them feeling more like something to be acted upon than a subject. However, when talking about their interactions with the civilians, the cosplayers often remember positive and highly emotional episodes, many involving children. The cosplayers like the attention and the responsibility; many arrive in the morning and spend the whole day walking around the convention. Unlike other performative activities, the majority of cosplayers do not seek money for their acts, just recognition (e.g. photos, compliments, interactions, random people pointing and smiling at them) and their public's appreciation (Kozinets 2002). A pleasurable experience for the civilians even seems the main focus of the activity for some cosplayers, who find pleasure in providing it, as Claudio argues:

So, the satisfaction of seeing people looking at you, smiling, laughing, you know, or saying "wow," like that, you know ... That is the coolest of it all, the most fantastic. It is a hobby that, for me, brings a lot of satisfaction, because the people are having fun and I am having fun, you know [...] I like to see other people happy, you know, and the cosplay helps me with that. (Claudio, 20 cosplays)

The cosplayers find pleasure in the mere act of performing and feeling in the role of the character. When performing, the cosplayers can experience an imaginary episode where they see themselves as the character (Martin 2004; Fernandez and Lastovicka 2011). For example, Fernando describes how he imagined himself flying when he climbed a stage dressed as Goku from Dragon Ball Z and sang the intro song of the anime with a band:

Sometimes you imagine you are the character. Sometimes, with the music ... When it played "no-ten p-kan, the sky is clear ...," I jumped in the air, kind as if I were flying like the character. Oh, sometimes it is good for you to imagine as if you were the character. I can imagine the intro in my head or some action ... I imagine I was in the anime, with the characters by my side. (Fernando, 18 cosplays)

Sometimes, the cosplayer can feel the character taking the wheels, letting her command the actions and the speech. It can become an autotelic play of disorder, pleasurable for the escapism from the daily and mundane constraining social norms (O'Sullivan and Shankar 2019). The most popular characters usually are the unrestrained ones, such as the Joker and Deadpool, as they can have greater agency over the cosplayer, calling to be played, at the same time that they allow the cosplayer to be more expressive. Many cosplayers find this a great way to get beyond some social awkwardness, as the character will take charge of interactions with strangers. By letting the character take the wheel, the cosplayer ends up enhancing her agency to act and behave in a stranger, more expansive, or sexier way (Seregina and WeiJo 2016). For example, Amanda describes feeling "the greatest" when walking as the Catwoman:

So, when I use my Catwoman, it is as if I weren't myself. I feel lighter, looser, more at ease and, incredibly, as it is a tight outfit, you know, and I shouldn't feel like this, I feel so good wearing that mask, the glasses, the whip and walking like the Catwoman ... I feel super ... the greatest, you know? (...) You can strike a character's pose without looking like a crazy person, you can say a character's phrase without looking like a crazy person, you know? Simply because you are dressing as the character, you are dressing in the clothes that the character has in the anime or the comics, whatever. At that moment, you can be the character. (Amanda, 16 cosplays)

This feeling of agency goes beyond the freedom to act and speak in abnormal ways. Understanding herself as an attraction hands the cosplayer the authority to conduct games and activities, joyfully commanding how civilians should behave to be a part of the play she is directing. Cosplayers conduct dances (e.g. climbing band stages and starting a dance; carrying her own stereo and dancing with a following crowd of civilians; leading a queue of people mimicking her moves) and YouTube-inspired interactions with involuntary participants (e.g. chasing girls who would agree to kiss a boy who had never kissed before).

Some feel the liberty to conduct activities they have not started, as they jump straight to a commanding role, refusing to be just a part of the pack being led. During the Anime Buzz convention, the first author observed an incident where a live band was playing anime songs and a group of civilians started dancing by rhythmically throwing their arms from one side to the other. As new civilians started to join the dancing mass, their dancing moves started to lose their synchronicity. At a certain point, a cosplayer dressed as Mu, from Saint Seiya, joined the group, but instead of adding volume to the dancing bodies, he went straight to the front, at the prow of the performance, and started to set the time of the dance. The civilians accepted the cosplayer as the lead dancer, shouting “twerk, golden knight,” timing their movements and attracting more people to join the dance. The incident shows that the cosplayer felt he had enough authority to jump to a leading role and be well accepted by the civilians. At the same time that they are an attraction, with demanding commitments to perform when asked, they also gain the agency to move civilians around, attesting to a power relationship between the civilians’ desire to consume the experience the cosplayer creates and the cosplayer’s authority as an attraction.

Overall, performing with the cosplay is liberating and pleasurable, but comes with its expectations, both enhancing the cosplayer’s agency to act freely and checking her to please the civilians. As an activity that requires a public and a suitable space, the geekcon is the right social space for it, but its physical spaces can get too tight for larger or more fragile cosplays (Seregina and Weijo 2016) – a cosplayer’s performance includes heavy clothes and running civilians. Cosplay not only provides opportunities for personal expression but occupies a unique space in the intersubjective spectrum, involving distinct individuals (cosplayers, civilians) and objects (Fron et al. 2007; Coole 2013). In this sense, cosplay agency enhancement and restriction reside not in a specific space; they emerge while individuals and objects interact across the spectrum (Coole 2005). Many times, the conventions do not have a specific space in which the cosplayers can perform, so the cosplayers must negotiate by themselves where they must go when they want to be less restricted when acting. Next, proceeding with our construction of the agentic interplays between cosplayers and cosplay, we discuss how cosplayers negotiate when and where they perform, as a character or not.

### ***Performance negotiations***

Cosplay is a performative experience but differs from other themed and act-driven experiences, such as the Mountain Man Rendezvous (Belk and Costa 1998) and LARP (Seregina 2014, 2019). Cosplay does not have a set of established rules about when the participants will perform. In the aforementioned examples, all participants are dressed up and instructed to play the characters all the time, sustaining the themed atmosphere. They do not have to decide when to perform a fantasy; they are free to act unrestrained but not allowed to stop doing so, according to the practice’s rules. The cosplay, on the other hand, is optional. The cosplayer is stuck in neither the role of the geek character nor the role of geek consumer; she alternates between the two. Cosplayers and civilians share the same spaces at the geek conventions, with many conventions lacking any structure to welcome and help the cosplayers to dress and store their belongings. They have no set of rules or a space designated as to when and where they should play, so they must negotiate who they will perform in each situation, the cosplayer or the cosplay.

The cosplayer’s own idea of proper audience and dramatic scene usually shapes cosplay practice. An “audience” can range from any passerby to only a camera lens. While the former includes a sense of commitment to keep performing for the longest time possible, sustaining the geekcon magic for the present civilians and an internalized audience, the latter offers greater value in the controlled performance of recording the image of her performing body, by putting the character in the foreground and hiding her own essence in plain sight. As Veronica puts it, she carefully aims at being unnoticed while the character is being recorded:

I think that acting is by situation. For example, when there is ... now there are a lot of people asking, instead of taking a picture, to record little videos, and then I have to prepare my face, right, what I will tell, all the gestures that I will do, to not let them see the Veronica there, it is just the cosplay's character. (Veronica, 8 cosplays)

These two contrasting ways of performing highlight different types of interplay between cosplayers and cosplays. The camera-centered practice of cosplaying is controlled and rehearsed, with the cosplayer having agency over the cosplay, holding it down until a camera is pointed at her. The cosplayers usually have a set of prearranged poses, rehearsing in front of the mirror to make sure the pose sustains the image they desire. Other cosplayers let the cosplay take the wheel for as long as possible, letting it conduct her corporeal doings (e.g. strolling around as the character) and sayings (e.g. answering and addressing strangers as the character).

Either way, be it for a short or a long period, a central part of the cosplayer experience is the desire to be observed while she performs and practicing a fabrication of the identity in a liminal stage of experimentation (Kozinets et al. 2004; Kozinets 2002). Supported by the gaze of the civilians and their camera lenses, the cosplayer can perform in a stronger, funnier, or sexier way. As the cosplay is a theatre-like performative experience, the cosplayers find it imperative to have an audience. The lack of acting in less crowded geekcons and informal meetups clearly reflects this requirement.

Cosplayers often take advantage of situational cues to improvise a dramatized scene. On one occasion, the first author was talking with Fernando, who was dressed as Goku from Dragon Ball Z, when a microphone on a stage nearby started emanating an increasingly loud feedback noise. Taking the cue, Fernando promptly stopped talking, entered into character, went in front of the stage, and pretended that he was “charging his ki,” flexing and clutching his arms near his body while growling with his head facing up, like the character in the anime. The crowd noticed him and started laughing, and the interviewer on the stage noticed it, saying, “Oh, it was Goku the whole time! Everybody, let's give him strength,” whereupon the audience lifted their arms, replicating a classic scene of the show. The performance was the result of Fernando's quick thinking when he noticed an opportunity for Goku to take charge.

The cosplayer performance is a complex and unstructured negotiation between the cosplayer, the cosplay, the geekcon's spaces, civilians, other cosplayers, other objects (e.g. cameras), their bodies (e.g. how tired they are), multiple selves – e.g. their cosplayer, geek, and even digital selves (Belk 2013) – and situational cues. Even though tiring and demanding, the chaotic experimentation with one's possible selves can be pleasurable on its own (O'Sullivan and Shankar 2019).

As we have argued, cosplay enables the consumer to live through an experience in which she can dynamically negotiate her role at the geekcon, while negotiating her subjectivity and pleasing the civilians. However, cosplayers sometimes decide to go to the geekcon in a civilian outfit, restricting their play and dynamicity. Arguing in favor of the cosplay's centrality to the geekcon, next we explore cosplayless geekcon experiences.

### ***The agency of the absent cosplay***

Cosplayers tend to resist visiting a geekcon without cosplay. Some, like Clara, refuse to do so, saying that any cosplayer that goes as a civilian is “throwing away their [ticket] money.” For Claudio, you go cosplaying “even if you have to put a plastic bag on your head and say you are whoever, but you go,” arguing that any improvisation makes a better suit than regular clothes. For instance, Claudio adapted his whole cosplay style so that he could fit it into his schedules and budget, to avoid going cosplayless to geekcons. For most of his 11 years as a cosplayer, he aimed at accomplishing the best cosplay he could, with astonishing aesthetics and complex materials used to look as close as possible to the character's original image. By the time of his interview, fleeing from the cosplay's ever-growing money and time commitment (Seregina and Weijo 2016), Claudio had negotiated a new way of cosplaying and converted himself to a “cospoor,” an emic term that Brazilian cosplayers use for intentionally ill-made cosplays, aiming for comicality:

I started [cosplay] doing that cosplay identical to the character, you know? To make it the most similar as possible. And, man, what a headache. My God, making it identical is so hard. You pick those things that are on the screen and you bring it to reality ... for example, there is no gravity in anime, there is no gravity, and here there is, so you have to craft it in a way so that nothing falls (laughs). [...] So, for a long time, I fitted in this first type of cosplay, which granted me a lot of satisfaction, but also a lot of headaches, because it is too hard to make the cosplay look exactly the same, you know? Today I fit myself in a second type, today I only do ... The majority of my cosplays are something very simple, very clumsy, but that everybody looks and says, “oh, it’s so and so” and starts laughing. Mainly the meme cosplays, you know? In Brazil, there are a lot of people that like memes, so I try to make cosplay of a lot of memes. (Claudio, 20 cosplays)

Even so, some cosplayers eventually go civilian, usually feeling imposed upon by the lack of time to craft a decent cosplay. Often a demanding production requiring money, time, skill, and emotional resources (Seregina and Weijo 2016), it can cause cosplayers to appear to be navigating the boundary between work and play (De Almeida et al. 2018). The non-existent cosplay fails to have sufficient agency when negotiating its crafting (Epp and Price 2010), even though its consumption is still central to the geekcon experience. However, even though it never materializes, the absent cosplay makes itself present by blocking the cosplayers’ participation on an imaginary stage and sucking out their subjectivity inside the geekcon. Next, we argue how the experience is still cosplay-centered, making the civilian clothes so unexpressive that they feel non-existent, and how the seasoned cosplayer loses access to the imaginary cosplay stage by being restrained to the docile role of a spectator.

### ***Nakedness***

When asked about how the geekcon experience feels without a cosplay, statements like “I feel naked,” “it is dull,” “it is boring,” and “it is missing something” appeared in every formal interview and several informal ones. Although it is a practice of using one’s own body to conceal one’s self and put a fantasy character in the foreground, cosplay is consumption of authentic self-expressiveness, a feeling of freedom similar to that of other liminal marketspaces (Kates 2002). The inability to perform a fantasy character constrains the cosplayer to a realistic realm, where ordinary obligations and limitations are still present and glooming. The practice of cosplaying becomes central to their subjectivity in and out of the geekcon, intrinsically linked to the adornment that is the cosplay.

As the ornaments construct subjectivity beyond being a passive representation of one’s identity (Miller 2005, 2010), the cosplayer in casual clothes feels restrained to the less fantastical everyday world, never reaching a fantasy flow, unable to perform as herself. Amanda’s speech highlights the contrast between the feeling of nakedness from the absent cosplay and the liminal freedom of the present cosplay:

I can’t go to a geekcon without cosplay. I feel, sorry for the language, naked. I think I am so used to this universe that I feel like, “oh, a convention, cool, I’ll go with a cosplay.” I don’t even think of other clothes, just cosplay; it doesn’t matter what it is. I went to two conventions without cosplay, and they were great, but I will never do it again; I will always go with a cosplay because I feel good. It is a moment that I can be myself, a moment where I can return to desiring the things I always desired, without the pressure from society, without the pressure from work, without the pressure from family. (Amanda, 16 cosplays)

As the cosplay is not just an expression of self but a material construction of one’s subjectivity (Miller 2005) – that is, the cosplayer identity is not an essence of the consumer, but the bodily construction with the cosplay (Schatzki 1996) – the cosplay makes itself present by sucking the expressiveness out of the cosplayers’ casual clothes. The absent cosplay shows itself as both part of who the cosplayer is and a distant and alien ill-motivated agent (Miller 2005). It is so huge in the experience by its absence that it obfuscates the presence of the cosplayer wearing clothes. One may have years of cosplaying, but the time that she goes to a geekcon as a civilian, she is not the cosplayer she practiced to be.

The feeling of nudity is not one of exposure, but the opposite – what they are wearing is expressionless and restraining. Their civilian clothes are uninteresting, saying nothing and not material for conversation. They still wear clothes with the cultural capital of a certain fandom, trying to be

noticeable and expressive. However, as it does not initiate interactions with interested strangers, it is the same as wearing nothing. Julia contrasts the expressiveness of cosplay and the aloofness of civilian clothes:

It is that thing: You are there (wearing a cosplay) and your friends are wearing cosplays too, and everybody calls for a photo, you know? People asking “oh, how did you do it?” ... So, it is a way to let people know you and start a conversation, right? And that is something I don’t have without the cosplay. People don’t stop me to ask me about my t-shirt or how I made it, you know? (Julia, 20 cosplays)

So, it is not the same as wearing clothes unfitting for the marketplace, as that would call for extra attention – undesired or not – instead of the lack of it. It is not misplacement; it is being so undistinctive at that site that the cosplayer will blend in. As they go unnoticed, they could feel like a strolling ghost, stripped of presence. If the cosplay is not present, they may as well not be present either. As the cosplayer cannot practice the cosplay, her subjectivity becomes at risk.

### *Disengaged anonymity*

The practice of cosplaying resignifies the geekcon as a site from a geek convention to a cosplay stage. Cosplay performance is the site’s meaning and objective. The geekcon’s attractions and geek products may have little relevance. What is present inside the geekcon can fade so much into the background that it goes absent, as exemplified by Clara’s disinterest in the convention’s attractions:

What is going to happen inside the geekcon? If there are some interesting themes, if the guests are interesting, if there will be some themed rooms ... cool, but some people go there just to put those clothes on, just to wear the character. I do not care about what is going on in the convention. (Clara, 30 cosplays)

Even in the absence of the cosplay, the attractions still fail to conquer the foreground. By going absent, the cosplay just becomes more noticeable. The expressionless casual clothes put the seasoned cosplayer in the comfortable but anguished role of an anonymous spectator. The unexpressive clothes are both bodily comfortable and practice-binding, as they force the consumer to walk freely. As Joana contends, she is free to walk so uninterruptedly that it is almost offensive:

I arrived home frustrated because ... to tell the truth, I shouldn’t have this thought, right? Like, that people don’t like (civilian) Joana as much as they like cosplay Joana, right? I have this thought because it is true, it has already happened, I did the test, you know? You go there and, like, you pass by the same photographers and they simply don’t even send you to hell, you know? Or you pass by people and they don’t know who you are. You go unnoticed in there; you are just one more fan in there. (Joana, 24 cosplays)

Inside the geekcon are rediscovery and experimentation with one’s own face and body as an expression (Scott, Cayla, and Cova 2017), recognizing them as insufficient to be noticed. Also, even though undressed cosplayers have the agency of an anonymous person, able to walk freely without worrying about being seen and pleasing others, their behaviors become notably restrained to those of a regular person. Maura finds it a physically comfortable experience, as she can peacefully walk among the public and wear her glasses without worrying about colorful contact lenses, but the civilian experience is no different from any other ordinary experience, carrying a feeling that “something is missing”:

It is comfortable (laughs). It is different because, first, the people don’t recognize me, right? So I think it is funny because I cross, like, beside people that normally would be, you know, asking for photos or asking, like ... and they calmly pass by my side. Another very good thing is that I am seeing, you know, when I am without the cosplay because the majority of the cosplays do not use glasses and not all of my colored contact lenses are corrective ones. In this aspect, it will be more comfortable, but ... then it is not that different from, I don’t know, a shopping mall stroll, a walk in the park, something like that. So, it is comfortable, it is nice, but something is missing. So, normally, when I go without a cosplay, I even go as a photographer. Me and my little camera, so I can look at what the others are doing, right? So, even without cosplay, I end up putting myself in the middle of the cosplays. (Maura, 92 cosplays)



Used to being an attraction at the convention, with the advantage of transitioning between the roles of spectator and performer, the cosplayers feel trapped in the spectator's seat. Their range of socially acceptable behaviors and interactions suffers a considerable reduction, leaving them unable to disrupt and exchange an ordinary consumption experience for an extraordinary one. For example, João states that without the possibility of jumping into the performer role, the geekcon experience is "boring," as it is "too normal": "Without the cosplay [the geekcon] is boring. I don't know, I feel too normal. I stay there, without anything to do. I don't have the character's clothes; I can't do anything different. If I go without that clothing, that's me there, what can I do? Just look."

Without the cosplay, the cosplayers feel their experience is stuck at the civilian/spectator level, which most of them view as frustrating, inferior, profane, or insufficient. The docility of civilians does not allow them to appreciate the geekcon as the spectacle it should be (Bradford and Sherry 2015). The civilian cosplayer takes herself out of the protagonist role, unwillingly playing an extra for the cosplayers in the leading roles (Holt and Thompson 2004). Some cosplayers will try to negotiate their role inside the geekcon by redirecting their agency to other objects and playing at least a role as supporting cast. As Maura's aforementioned speech shows, she brings a camera to the convention to take photos of the present cosplayers, as a way to make it (and herself) more present than the absent cosplay. It allows her to keep a practice related to cosplay and avoid falling into civilian anonymity.

In a contrasting point from the experience of a desired observed panopticon (Kozinets et al. 2004), the civilian cosplayer will live an experience lacking attention, an unobserved experience. Clara describes how frustrating it is, saying that she cannot stop comparing the civilian experience with the usual cosplay experience:

There's no way, we cannot disconnect [the geekcon and the cosplay]. It hurts, it bothers, because you see the others and say "fuck, I could be there," "ah, I wish I could be taking pictures," "I came here for what?" It is unique; you ask yourself, "What I am doing here?" I am not covering a story, I am not judging, I am not a stall vendor, I am nothing. So, what am I doing here? [shouting] Volume! I shouted; I know ... I am doing volume! So I don't want that. (Clara, 30 cosplays)

To the seasoned cosplayer, the geekcon is not a sufficient marketplace by itself, not sustained by its own materiality, attractions, and visitors. The experience is less about the present materiality than the absence of the cosplay. The absent cosplay will block the consumer's access to the cosplay stage, an imaginary space that shares the same physical level as the civilians but feels separated and made distant by the supportive gaze of civilians and their cameras (Kozinets et al. 2004). Lifelong civilians do not notice such a stage, as they have never had access to it, and they do not feel its lack. For the seasoned cosplayer, on the other hand, it gives rise to a feeling of not belonging.

As Rafaela argues, without the cosplay, "you are not a part of that world. It is different, you are only observing that world, you are not participating." Limited to an incomplete experience, the cosplayer does not have access to the full and real geekcon experience. Fernanda explains this stranded feeling when speaking about her first cosplayless experience:

Ah, I don't know, I know that the first convention I went to without the cosplay I felt very excluded, you know? I felt, like ... I am very, like, apart. They are there with their cosplays and I am a nobody there, you know? Everybody having a good time there and I am a little lost, so to speak. (Fernanda, 36 cosplays)

The cosplay takes the form of a blocking bouncer when absent, one who allows the consumer to peek at the complete experience but denies access. The absent cosplay impedes the cyclicity in the cosplayer's life of changing from the ordinary self to something different (Hirschman, Ruvio, and Belk 2012). Its agency becomes more oppressive as it goes absent, a restrictive one that reminds the cosplayer of the experience she could have been living through if only she had brought a cosplay. Next, we discuss how this process leads to a locked feeling of incomplete experience and how the consumer tries to negotiate what is present or absent in marketplace experiences.

## Discussion

Performing the cosplay experience depends on a spatiotemporal context (Seregina and Weijo 2016). Like other studied experiences, cosplay events legitimize abnormal behaviors (Scott, Cayla, and Cova 2017; Kozinets 2002; Belk and Costa 1998) and performative expression (Kozinets et al. 2004; Sherry et al. 2004), promote ludic and organic interaction with strangers (Arnould and Price 1993), and boost the consumer's imaginary consumption (Fernandez and Lastovicka 2011; James, Handelman, and Taylor 2011; Martin 2004). However, these studies lack investigations of how the same promoted space could be consumed with a notably missing material part and its consequences for the experience.

Navigating the interactions between cosplay and cosplayers, consumers noticeably feel the object influencing their experiences, even without its physical presence. The materiality assumes a central role in the cosplayer experience, especially because it is essential and, at the same time, optional. Consumers can experience a geekcon with or without a cosplay. Even though it is an optional object, its absence also is present in the entwining of the subject/object agency relation (Coole 2013), changing the production of the experience when contrasted with the adorned experience. In this sense, an absent material can influence a marketplace experience in a similar or a stronger way than a present materiality.

On this subject, we discuss how the seasoned cosplayer has a transformation of self and context interpretation, which will take the absence of the cosplay to the foreground of a cosplayless geekcon experience. Next, we argue that consumer can negotiate the presence and absence of materials. We finish our discussion with some implications of material absence and presence for the consumer experience.

### *Seasonality and the experience of absence*

Something is just entirely absent, when once it was present. This is not to argue that we cannot feel the absence of something never possessed, as it usually is associated with desire (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003). But a lived experience with a material will give a comparable experience of access, agency, and even restraining norms, both allowing and blocking the consumer's reaching a known and desirable experience. Both desire for an unobtained object and absence of a seasoned one are promises of transformation and completeness, but while the former is a promise, the latter is the certainty of a complete experience, of accessing a known and otherwise unreachable stage of performance. The lifelong civilian does not feel the presence of an absent cosplay blocking her experience, as she does not even see or seek the same imaginary and unreachable stage that the seasoned cosplayer does. Absent objects can display agency over the consumers when the object was previously present in their network of objects, practices, and consumption experiences (Epp and Price 2010).

Materials not only construct one's subjectivity by simply being a possession (Miller 1987; Belk 1988); they support and demand some consumption practices (Latour 2007; Coole 2013), with their own role in constructing one's subjectivity (Schatzki 2002, 1996). With that considered, the absence of materiality can be detrimental to both self-expressiveness and practice. As the consumer usually produces the cosplay – at least partially – the object-subject relations are strongly co-produced in a singular objectification-subjectification process (Miller 1987). We observe that cosplay and cosplayer are in a constant dance of interaction. essential to constructing not only the object but also the subject. In this sense, a cosplayless experience in a geekcon does not mean the absence of experience, but the overwhelming experience of absence – absence of play, of subjectivity, and of what is present.

The idea of transformative consumptions is well known in studies of extraordinary experiences (Arnould and Price 1993; Tumbat and Belk 2011; Scott, Cayla, and Cova 2017). However, we understand that the cosplay experience highlights two discussions of the subject: the transformative aspect

of optional materiality inside a liminal space, and its nature not as a transformation of a core sense of self but rather as an assemblage.

The geekcon's consumers, who first dress as geek characters, live through a more alien experience than those casually dressed, an experience that has the transformational effect on their notion of self, as well as the reshaping of their interpretation of the geekcon as a whole. They are performers and the geekcon is their stage, while the nonperformers are their audience (Kozinets et al. 2004; Sherry et al. 2004). A conceptual elevation of their idea of fans occurs in how they are bodily and intellectually (e.g. studying and displaying a more complete understanding of the character, being worthy to dress as the character) committed to the character, endowing the consumer with the status of an attraction in that marketplace. There is also an elevation of the geekcon from a themed space for social interaction to an imaginary stage on which to promote the cosplay performance. The optionality of the cosplay creates this fragmentation of the geekcon.

However, this idea of elevation is maculated when the consumer is confronted with the idea that they are unrecognizable without the materiality of cosplay, noticing that they cannot reach the stage without it. The seasoned cosplayer sees herself quickly falling into an audience seat and losing her elevation. Even after years of practice, disassembling from the cosplay restricts the consumer to the role and practices of a civilian, unable to act or perform as a cosplayer (Scaraboto 2015). The cosplayer understands that the absence of cosplay leads to an incomplete experience, one without access to its core consumption. Syrjäla and Norrgrann (2019), describing home décor assemblages, identify *agency oscillating between different types of interacting entities in the assemblage – in particular, some specific types of non-human entities exerting more agency than others. In the geekcon experience, the cosplay is the key non-human agent*. As the lack of cosplay is so present, it will keep reminding the consumer that the geekcon present materiality is not sufficient.

### ***Negotiations of presence and absence in the consumption experience***

The ordinariness of the civilian experience is a profane one for the cosplayer (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989), noticeable in the cosplayer's recurrent refusal (or strong reluctance) to visit the convention without the cosplay and the usage of the "civilian" term, which has a connotation of low hierarchical status (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). The anonymity and lack of stage mobility, imprisoning her in the role of an audience member, makes the cosplayer forcefully aware by the absent cosplay and haunts the seasoned consumer's geekcon experience. The idea of absence, the remembering of how incomplete one is, can be frightening (Sartre 1965; De Beauvoir 1962).

As a way to avoid this feeling of absence, the consumer will try to negotiate the material's presence, once experience is contingent upon the existence of a consumer-object interaction (Hoffman and Novak 2018). When unable to craft a well-developed cosplay in time for a geekcon, some cosplayers will improvise a quick cosplay. The badly shaped cosplay is enough to negotiate access to the stage. The Brazilian geekcons even recognize it, creating a competition category for "cospoors," the intentionally poorly made cosplays. They focus on a comical performance that allows them to act and be requested by the civilians. That is, they and the cosplay are still present in the geekcon, even if it is by comical and self-deprecating performances.

These consumers use the core of the cosplay materiality to negotiate their performance. Even though lacking aesthetic or functional elements of the professionally crafted cosplays, it is sufficient to be recognized and institutionalized by the geekcon and the civilians. Considering that agentic capacity depends upon a continuous arrangement of different elements (Hagberg 2016), the cosplayers can find almost an essence of the cosplay at that moment, which satisfies their feeling of absence. Even with a feeling of absent characteristics, like a well-crafted weapon, the essence of the cosplay will still be present. We are not arguing in favor of a dichotomy of presence and absence, but the presence, even if little, opens the possibility of negotiation, while the absence is more impeditive.

Even so, cosplayless consumers try to negotiate their presence with different materiality, seeking to make what is apparently there seem more present than the overwhelmingly absent cosplay. Understanding that semiprofessional cameras are central to the cosplay practice and experience, some cosplayers find in that aspect a way to force their presence inside the stage, even if in a supporting role for the leading actors. Different materials can be used as a temporary replacement and alleviate the feeling of absence, but the absent material will hardly silence itself (Epp and Price 2010).

### ***Implications of material absence and presence for the consumer experience***

The cosplay context demonstrably provides a useful place in which to understand the implications of consumer efforts to produce and sustain the consumption experience (Seregina and Weijo 2016). As Seregina and Weijo (2016) show, material elements are not mere instruments to support consumers in producing an experience. Consumers actively work to overcome the instrumental cost of producing the materiality with which they will interact, in particular, the clothes that support a performative experience. In this sense, the materiality is not only a managerial resource – i.e. when companies organize the material elements to produce an experience of consumption (Borghini et al. 2009; Sherry et al. 2004; Firat and Ulusoy 2011; Dalmoro et al. 2019) – but a consumer production to provide experience for themselves (Seregina and Weijo 2016), even though it ends up having a life of its own (Miller 1987). With this debate, we contribute to the field by demonstrating how objects' agentic capacity has a role in the experience production, even when absent.

It applies, for example, in reshaping experience design, suggesting the necessity to attend not only to the present materiality configuration but also to the absent elements. Marketplace experience is not isolated in its spatiotemporality. Previous experiences, where the agentic capacity of the objects was influential, are transferred and present in further experiences, even if the object itself is not. Materiality is transformative (Miller 1987); after it transforms the consumer's notions of self and marketplace space, the object absence in a later moment can influence the experience (Epp and Price 2010).

The object agentic capacity in an experience of absence is not the opposite of the agentic capacity of a present object that influences the adorned experience. It operates in a continuum between a "real ongoing" experience and the imagined "could be" experience. Like the emperor wearing nothing, the materiality keeps affecting the experience, even in its absence, supported by the imagining of what is expected in that experiential situation. Reinforcing the comprehension that material objects can display agency (Hoffman and Novak 2018; Goulding, Saren, and Pressey 2018; Türe and Ger 2016), the cosplayless experience shows how absent objects also have a role in creating experiences, preserving agentic capacity to stimulate experience.

Thus, the consequence of the absence in the experience does not reside exclusively in the object's agency nor in the consumers' subjective interpretation of the reality, but in the capacity of both to preserve a relational interaction with each other, even in the absence of the object. In this sense, one of the key implications of this paper emerges in the reinforcement, at the consumer-experience level, of the notion that the object agentic capacity is not in a dualistic relation between humans and non-humans, which confronts and refutes human agency (Coole 2013, 2005). It operates by occupying a relational position in the intersubjective space where consumer experience is produced.

### **Final Remarks**

In this paper, we contribute to a better understanding of the materiality in marketplace experiences by focusing on an absent, yet noticeable material. Material imbrication with human agency not only directs our attention to the material culture (Miller 2005, 2010) but also allows us to understand the particularities of the agentic capacity of the object in consumer experience production. Our findings

indicate that an absent material can have a greater presence in an experience than the present materials.

Along this line, further studies can more deeply explore the transformations in material agentic capacity in temporality. Miller (2010) suggests that objects have power, but how long does the power of objects keep affecting the experience production after becoming absent? One possible departure point for answering this question is to explore the collective imaginary. If a missed object occupies a relational position in the cosplayers' intersubjectivity, the capacity to preserve the objects' agency resides in the circularity of the absent material in collective imagery.

Consistent with the notion of agentic capacity (Coole 2013), humans and non-humans are not in a dichotomic and conflictual relationship, but rather in a continuous encounter, in which agentic capacity can configure and reconfigure the experience production. In this paper, we explore this perspective as a liminal support, to detail the materiality absence in a consumer experience. Further studies could focus on this notion as their main objective, to better detail the fluid spectrum in which the intersubjectivity takes form. It involves recognizing that agentic capacity is not restricted to the human, nor to overestimating the non-human agency. Consumer experience can be analyzed in the intersection between the phenomenological character of the consumer experience production and the present and absent material agency.

We advocate that object agency is a central element in describing consumer experience. However, too much attention has been given to present objects. We hope that our study helps to make clear that consumption experiences are not exclusively related to the here-and-now, thereby assisting other researchers to better notice the overwhelming presence that a missing object can have.

## Acknowledgments

We want to thank all the cosplayers from Rio Grande do Sul, with a special thanks to Dennis and Otavia for being so kind and for opening so many doors for us. We also want to thank Nik Dholakia for his careful reading and tinning contributions to this paper.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nivel Superior – Brasil (CAPES) – Finance Code 001.

## Notes on contributors

**Rafael Rodrigues de Mello** is a Ph.D. candidate in marketing at Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil (PUCRS). His research explores consumer culture, consumptions practices and consumption experiences.

**Stefânia Ordovás de Almeida** holds a Ph.D. in business administration with emphasis on marketing management from University of São Paulo, Brazil (FEA-USP). She has BA and MA degrees in business administration from Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil (UFRGS). She is a professor at Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil (PUCRS). Her research interests are related to the study of consumer experience, especially in services, retail and virtual environments. Studies on cultures, subcultures and other sources of consumer communities, as brand communities, are also an important focus of research.

**Marlon Dalmoro** is an assistant professor of marketing at Business Management Center, University of Vale do Taquari (Univates), Brazil. His research explores the role of actors, culture and practices in alternatives markets organization. He earned his PhD from Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

## ORCID

Rafael Rodrigues de Mello  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6190-1919>

Stefânia Ordovás de Almeida  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4899-031X>

Marlon Dalmoro  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6211-0905>

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