



ISSN: 2230-9926

Available online at <http://www.journalijdr.com>

IJDR

International Journal of Development Research

Vol. 10, Issue, 06, pp. 36471-36475, June, 2020

<https://doi.org/10.37118/ijdr.18989.06.2020>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

BETWEEN NERDS AND GEEKS: CREATIVITY AT COMIC CON

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 03rd March, 2020

Received in revised form

11th April, 2020

Accepted 06th May, 2020

Published online 25th June, 2020

Key Words:

Creativity, Education, Comic Con.

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ABSTRACT

Based on the complexity theory, this objective study aims to acknowledge and characterize creativity at the *Comic Con Experience 2017/2018/2019* pop culture event for young people, held in São Paulo, Brazil. This is a case study, using a qualitative approach involving observation, filming, photographs and notes of the social and cultural context favoring creativity developed not by chance, but constructed in synergy with environmental, conative, cognitive and emotional factors. In environments that encourage flexibility and divergent thinking, the imagination soars and creative levels rise. As a result, new cognitive and communicational connections are forged, in addition to perspectives capable of generating creativity and discovering new skills that may innovate outdated systems.

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Citation: *Juliana Berg, Carla Luciane Blum Vestena, Cristina Costa-Lobo, Jamile Santinello and Wesley Kozlik Silva.* "Between nerds and geeks: creativity at comic con", *International Journal of Development Research*, 10, (06), 36471-36475.

INTRODUCTION

The present study aimed at acknowledging and characterizing the creativity observed at Comic Com Experience 2017, 2018 and 2019, a pop culture event for young people known as geeks and nerds, held in São Paulo, Brazil, where an attempt was made to understand the environment and their creative behavior based on complexity theory. Defining creativity by associating it with the new is a time-honored discussion. However, not everything new has been or will be considered creative, because over time it has been defined differently at specific moments in mankind's development. In addition, the current speed of communication and digital information media brings people closer together, making it increasingly difficult to define what is creative or original (COSTA-LOBO, CAMPINA & MENEZES, 2017). Creating is not limited to privileged or highly talented individuals. Everyone can be creative in a wide range of ways. For something to be considered creative, it must be judged by groups who identify with the topic and/or society as a whole (OLIVERIA & VESTENA, 2017).

In this respect, when assessing/judging creativity a sensitive and highly specialized task is required, since utilitarian or linear logic cannot be restricted or repeated in an attempt at normalizing or framing an idea in sequential metrics that may compromise the creative process (BERG, VESTENA & COSTA-LOBO, 2020). Creativity is the expression of the intangible and the objective, which are peculiar and sensitive perspectives of human ability that may not necessarily agree with the opinions of those who momentarily judge it (BERG, VESTENA & COSTA-LOBO, 2020; OLIVERIA & VESTENA, 2017). It reflects the concept of a creative product, but can equally appear in art, conflict resolution, learning, and behaviors, and be expressed in several fields of knowledge through innovative solutions. It is a "dialogical, rational and imaginal result capable of incorporating mythical and artistic itineraries, transforming itself into a new attitude" (LIMENA in ALMEIDA & PETRAGLIA, 2008, p.19). Its development/movement occurs in a complex field (AUTOR, 2017; LUBART, 2007) and requires a critical and self-critical person, a free spirit, "multiple subjectivity, the pursuit of ecstasy, meditating on the ups and downs..." (CARVALHO in

ALMEIDA & PETRAGLIA, 2008, p. 31). In this sense, creativity involves valuable and often conflicting phases. These are different insights that result from common/uncommon connections, analogies or happenstances that can be developed and stimulated. Thus, attributing value must consider far more than an “original new result” and its social or financial status”. It should also involve perceiving individuals, their diversity, culture and context, encompassing equally diverse assessment methods (ALENCAR & FLEITH, 2003; LUBART, 2007; ROBINSON, 2012; BERG, VESTENA & COSTA-LOBO, 2020). In terms of the end goal, creativity involves thinking about the whole and its parts, from divergent to convergent. It is an imaginative, cognitive, inventive and intuitive exercise, as well as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, with dynamic interaction between elements related to the individual, environment, culture, society and opportunity of expression. Its human value is in its capacity to solve problems and create solutions for the world, and is therefore currently receiving considerable attention (COSTA-LOBO Et al., 2016; COSTA-LOBO, CAMPINA & MENEZES, 2017; OLIVERIA & VESTENA, 2017). Its ethical, political, economic, social and human nature underlies its importance in offering adapted sustainable solutions capable of resolving problems and conflicts resulting from how rapidly the world has become a different place, with individual and collective challenges that persist because “we continue to be anthropocentric and narcissistic” (CARVALHO in ALMEIDA & PETRAGLIA, 2008, p. 23). According to Carvalho in Almeida & Petraglia (2008, p. 23), humanity participates in an inauthentic and unhappy society, degrading and exploiting nature in a predatory fashion, destroying the ecosphere and increase intolerance and economic, political and ethnic cynicism.

Thus, complex challenges require complex ideas from talented people to generate benefits, collaboration and (re)create practices, as well as educational context that develops instruction, autonomy and (self) criticism by questioning frameworks in a creative search for alternatives and solutions (COSTA-LOBO Et al., 2016; COSTA-LOBO, CAMPINA & MENEZES, 2017; (BERG, VESTENA & COSTA-LOBO, 2020). In this respect, it became essential to apply creativity in educational contexts and challenging and multifaceted practices, with epistemology that integrates different approaches based on awareness and complexity. As such, there is a demand for broader proposals and new pedagogic trends that require an integrative approach for these new demands (COSTA-LOBO Et al., 2016; COSTA-LOBO, CAMPINA & MENEZES, 2017; STOLTZ, 2016). The concept of current creativity, which is cognitive and complex, demands a multiple approach that combines “relevant elements of individuals, such as intellectual abilities and personality traits, in addition to contextualization” (LUBART, 2007, p. 17). The complex approach of creativity aims at (re)connecting individuals, their talents, groups as well as the cognitive, conative, emotional and environmental factors that interact and are often formed through the logic contained in feedback systems in social and/or cultural fields (ALENCAR & FLEITH, 2003; CSIKSZENTIMIHAYI, 1996; GARDNER, 1995; LUBART, 2007; ROBINSON, 2012). Thus, the cognition of individuals open to creative potential acts in information and knowledge analysis processes, locating, coding, observing evidence, (re)grouping data and phenomena, varying possibilities, simulating, reflecting, assessing and moving away from the common, making task selection flexible (ALENCAR &

FLEITH, 2003; LUBART, 2007; COSTA-LOBO, CAMPINA & MENEZES, 2017). Simultaneously, conative factors related to personality-based behavior and habits, cognition and motivation drive behavior as a complex network (ALENCAR & FLEITH, 2003; AMABILE, 1996; COSTA-LOBO, CAMPINA & MENEZES, 2017; BAHIA, 2014; CSIKSZENTIMIHAYI, 1996; GARDNER, 1995; LUBART, 2007). From a macroscopic perspective, the environment joins these factors in interfering as a motivator and judge, since it can provide unprecedented elements according to the identity of each group, and interferes in decision making and/or acts as a regulator that normalizes acceptability in terms of the creative act (OLIVERIA & VESTENA, 2017). The family, school and community and the microscopic perspective also have a direct influence, where creativity is compromised in repressive or totally liberal environments/people. By contrast, spaces that define limits and are also flexible regarding rules and habits stimulate and promote ideas (ALENCAR & FLEITH, 2003; AMABILE, 1996; CSIKSZENTIMIHAYI, 1996; GARDNER, 1995; LUBART, 2007). Thus, creativity predicts unpredictability and intersubjectivity, that is, the development of factors required for its expression, which only become real elements if activated and/or motivated in complex synergy (VASCONCELOS, 2002).

Despite having defined limits, potential spaces of experiences and objects that represent or not individual and/or collective realities that are motivators and unintentionally and spontaneously give voice to the imagination, illusion or fantasy form sociocultural contexts or accessible symbolic fields where creative individuals are able to present ideas and create (CSIKSZENTIMIHAYI, 1996; SAKAMOTO, 2012). From this standpoint, the present text analyzed this complex environmental creativity movement for three consecutive years, selecting the Comic Book (CB) Convention as study object. It can be assumed that environments where artists, writers, scientists and game developers gather would exhibit high creative potential. At the same time, it is hypothesized that the manifestation of novelty analyzed by those who master the issue in question could hamper the expression of creativity. In this respect, we propose to answer the following questions: Can a CB convention be analyzed to understand the complex nature of creativity? Does the event produce creativity? Does it motivate or hamper creative expression?

Contextualization and Method

Influenced by comic book fairs and illustrators from England, the creation of these events in Brazil adopted the name Comic Con, which emerged in the 1970s at newsstands, cafes, bookstores or galleries where ideas on comics, films, science fiction and cartoon characters were discussed (CCXP, 2017; CG, 2017). Created by Shel Dorf, Richard Alf and Ken Krueger, all directly connected to comic book story creation and production, the original aim of the fair was to gather illustrators and writers to exchange experiences. Over the years, the event transformed into an entertainment fair for fans of comic books, games, books, costumes, cosplayers, Japanese comic books, television series, movies, animes, music, technology, among others. Nowadays, fairs are held around the world, but the largest are in San Diego, New York and Salt Lake City, USA and São Paulo, Brazil (CCXP, 2017; CG, 2017). The Comic Con selected as a case study was held in São Paulo in 2017, 2018 and 2019. The event welcomes diverse participants, but primarily those interested in CBs,

predominantly pop culture, and labeled nerds and geeks (CCXP, 2017; CG, 2017). In a diverse, complex and even contradictory sense, pop culture is characterized by excessively capitalist production and consumption, in addition to being related to a high level of information, access to technology and consumerism, linked to issues that are sustained by a dynamic movement that transforms culture itself, as a “zone of conflict in which languages and tools are (re) territorialized” (JANOTTI, 2015; SOUZA, 2016, p. 213). Thus, from disqualifying adjectives, the event contains ingredients that affirm “cosmopolitan sensitivity, ways of inhabiting the world that relativize the weight of local traditions and project globally shared sensitivities” (JANOTTI, 2015, p.47; SOUZA, 2016), underscoring the diversity between subjects and, based on common interests, the (re) connection of thoughts and interests, placing them in a dialogical movement. These participants are characterized by particular choices and original creations that break paradigms and established logic. Commonly described as being obsessed with books and studying, introverted and socially awkward, nerds were long scorned in American high schools. However, they currently enjoy a privileged status because of their interest and skills in games, films, science and technology (BICCA 2014; CHAGAS, 2011). With respect to geeks, initially associated with circus performers and trapeze artists, they are currently directly linked to technology and novelty. Characterized as experts interested in videogames, books, collecting objects, technology, among others, they became a new way of changing the initial pejorative connotation of nerds (BICCA, 2014; CHAGAS, 2011). They are young people who participate in a post-modern identity constitution, “continuously formed and transformed, influenced by how it is represented or interpreted in and by the different cultural systems in which it takes part”. This constitution is processed in languages that need in-depth study for their characteristics, attributed resistance and for the widespread use of the means of communication and digital technologies that are changing the appreciation of the new (BICCA, 2014; CHAGAS, 2011; HALL, 2006, s/p).

In this environment, and using nerds, geeks and other participants, we adopted a qualitative approach and the participatory research procedure, in a natural meeting environment of the public under study, with the researcher as the key instrument throughout the process, seeking to “understand a particular case, in all its idiosyncrasy and complexity” (STAKE, 1994, p.256). A bibliographic search was used to understand the context and the subjects investigated, and due to the scarcity of studies, websites, blogs, reports and scientific articles were consulted (CRESWELL, 2014; FLICK, 2009). A case study and tools such as diary notes, films, photos and the perception of researchers as participants immersed in the culture were used in an attempt to understand the environment, actors, behaviors, objects, acts, feelings, time and the objective of the people involved (CRESWELL, 2014; FLICK, 2009). Next, the researcher’s perspective was investigated regarding aspects essential to the study issues raised. Finally, the evidence and indications previously presented were selectively observed by applying in-depth analysis of the phenomena (CRESWELL, 2014; FLICK, 2009). A case study is defined as “an empirical investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the limits between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly defined” (YIN, 2010, p.32) A limitation of the study is the fact that not all phenomena could be

observed at the same time, and analysis is based exclusively on the experience and observation of the researchers. However, the methodological flexibility and appropriateness in terms of the study object are advantages of this research procedure (CRESWELL, 2014; FLICK, 2009). The field of study was accessed in 2017, 2018 and 2019, totaling 60 hours (20 hours per year). The route followed inside the event was random and covered an area of 115 m², encompassing the food court, stages, seven study areas, exhibition area for four hundred comic illustrators, a hundred and twenty stands, the robotics arena, game areas, press room, youtuber space and three auditoriums (CCXP, 2017). The event organizers confirmed that more than two hundred thousand people attend the event every year, most from outside the city and some from other countries, with the vast majority between 18 and 30 years of age, belonging to socioeconomic classes B and C (middle and lower middle, respectively) and predominantly men (CCXP, 2017). Multiple sources were used to validate the strategic scientific constructs adopted and the issues investigated to describe creativity from a complex perspective were triangulated using a combination of the notes taken through direct, interpretative and personal observations, in addition to the sites analyzed. “Triangulation is the simultaneous exposure of multiple refracted realities” where “each of the metaphors acts to create simultaneity and not the sequential or linear” (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2006, p. 20).

RESULTS

Lines at the entrance of the event were very long and waiting times were several hours for those who wanted to be among the first to enter. The event was well signed and organized. The personnel guiding event goers were uniformed and identified. The long waiting lines did not seem to annoy most people. The feeling of joy and concern about fatigue and physical well-being were evident and many people avoided standing before the event in order to enjoy it more. Participants manifested their opinions in conversations, blogs, sites and personal web pages that we followed. Most of the people stated that their main objective was fun and entertainment, as well as acquiring collectible items, CBs, games, films and TV series, because they believed that these forms of entertainment would provide them with an escape from their regimented daily lives. All the objects included in the admission price – badges, wrappings, neck straps etc. -, as well as the public digital information channels - sites, blogs and web pages – established a certain suspense and anticipation for the novelties to come. Joy and enthusiasm were evident in the conversations, which spawned fanciful and whimsical thoughts involving the possibility of other endings for stories previously written and told in children’s books, comics and films. The public consisted of nerds, geeks and families wearing or not a wide range of costumes depicting fictitious characters. The participants were free to use costumes and allegorical performance to express their creativity. All the age groups wore costumes of their favorite characters, such as Spiderman, Superman, and Wonder Woman, among others. Spaces set aside to expand creativity provide an opportunity for “eminently individual and intrapsychic phenomena”, thereby stimulating varying degrees of creativity and generating cohesion based on mutual interests (ALENCAR, 2002). The organizers established rules and limits to ensure participant safety, which were respect by event goers. We believe that this behavior shows the potential for creativity in these regulated, albeit free environments. In this respect, we observed

emotions, flexible thinking and imagination, costumes and adaptation to the guidelines, since the environment requires participants to follow the rules so that everyone can have fun at the fair and freely express their imagination without fear of being stigmatized (OLIVEIRA & ALENCAR, 2008). No prejudice was observed in terms of the costumes participants were wearing, but those with technical and historical knowledge pointed out errors in the essential traits of the characters in question, and exercised certain control over the quality of the original traits. This behavior reinforces the fact that the judgment of what defines creativity is governed by specialized control criteria directly linked to groups of interest who decide what is original or simply a replica. In regards to diversity, the perception of others and of themselves and the instituted climate provided the ideal conditions to help develop the creative spirit. There was freedom, confidence, expectations and creativity promoted by planned strategies (ALENCAR, 2002; OLIVEIRA & ALENCAR, 2008). Event goers tried not to miss any detail, were always smiling, joking with one another, even with strangers, and acting out film scenes spontaneously. All age groups had their picture taken with the costumed characters and professional cosplayers, competed and discussed during the games, became emotional at the stands and even cried when they met their idols. People displayed ecstasy and passion. Creative expansion was encouraged and protected, the environment was prepared for tests, contests, experiences and surprises supervised by trained professionals to ensure maximum enjoyment, and young participants thoroughly explored the environment. Individuality, freedom, discipline, psychological safety and tolerance were respected, and emotional experiences shared, in addition to the positive emotional climate shared by everyone (OLIVEIRA & ALENCAR, 2008).

The overall theme of the decorations was fantasy. The music, smell, touch, vision and flavors consisted of scenarios that involved and motivated the participants. Objects – cars, thrones, ships, places, animals etc. – found in stories and films that used to be available only for viewing, could now be touched in elaborate scenes that recreated unforgettable moments. All five senses were stimulated as well as a set of cognitive skills related to how participants deal with external stimuli – perception, recording information, and additions made by the individuals themselves to what they understood (AUTOR, 2017; LUBART, 2007). In the sector known as Artists' Alley, more than four hundred comic book illustrators and writers gathered to exhibit their work and mingle with the participants, exchanging ideas, techniques, contacts, materials and describing their creative processes, generally initiated after considerable research to achieve technical mastery, followed by reflection, regrouping of ideas, script editing and final revision (BARON, 1969). In the games arena, equipped for board, computer, video and cell phone games, games were developed and apps and software tested in epic contests lasting hours, characterizing a collective creative process. The robotics arena featured a ring for robotics contests, a repair shop and the construction of automated systems to receive study teams and develop the solutions of universities, schools and investors who exchanged their ideas and information about the projects exhibited. In both arenas, participants were encouraged to think, study the problem and offer and exchange solutions. Thus, their expertise was exploited and they were intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to overcome the challenges using the available resources, supervised and supported by professors, professionals or mentors (AMABILE,

1996; COSTA-LOBO *et al.*, 2016; COSTA-LOBO, CAMPINA & MENEZES, 2017; OLIVEIRA & ALENCAR, 2008). In this respect, both the environment – including the organizers and the venue they selected – and the time allotted for the event and participants were involved in generating synergy, which reaffirms the fact that creativity needs certain conditions to develop and that these are directly linked to a number of factors, including similar interests and values reinforced by the feeling of belonging and donating, as well as uncertainty and expectations caused by surprises and challenges (COSTA-LOBO, CAMPINA & MENEZES, 2017; LUBART, 2007). The discourses and behaviors demonstrate that there were cognitive elements that could be activated and stimulated, such as knowledge, understanding, learning, perception, memory and creativity itself, which raises the possibility of training for creativity. Emotion was latent and motivation to cooperate involving tolerance, respect, and perseverance, among others, created a propitious environmental climate, and different self-sustaining experiences (ALENCAR & FLEITH, 2003; AMABILE, 1996; COSTA-LOBO, CAMPINA & MENEZES, 2017; BAHIA, 2014; CSIKSZENTIMIHAYI, 1996; GARDNER, 1995; LUBART, 2007). This level of involvement also included problem solving and inspiration motivated by intense euphoria and satisfaction, in addition to in-depth research. This is because participants included people with knowledge of the characters portrayed, who acted as critics. There was receptiveness to the task and the ideas it gave rise to, that is, predisposition to taking risks (COSTA-LOBO, CAMPINA & MENEZES, 2017; BAHIA, 2014; CSIKSZENTIMIHAYI, 1996; LUBART, 2007). Barriers to creativity, generally linked to common sense and linear/traditional thinking, or even negative attitudes of non-inclusion in the group, disrespect for diversity, fear of ridicule, anxiety and feelings of inferiority appeared tentatively and without representativity. It cannot be confirmed that all those who participated created something or somehow developed their creative potential. Another study and event are needed to answer this question, but it can be concluded that there were sufficient elements for participants to enjoy a moment to experience the new.

Conclusion

The event combined the characteristics of a social and cultural context favorable to creativity developed not by chance, but constructed to establish synergy between environmental, cognitive, cognitive and emotional factors that acted simultaneously on the participants. In this respect, the social, historical and cultural context influenced creative expressions, contributing with studies that demonstrated the importance of the environment as a promoter and reinforcer of individual creative efforts, using aspects and contexts in which subjects are immersed (BERG, VESTENA & COSTA-LOBO, 2020). There was evidence of opportunity, encouragement, expressiveness, acknowledgement and appreciation of the task and involvement, as well as the freedom of individuals to research, explore, question and express their wishes and personalities, in terms of creativity. Thus, in events of this nature, creativity can be promoted and for this reason, it is hoped that this perception can to some extent help optimize other events, as well as prompt reflections on the educational environment, for example. It was concluded that freedom and flexibility to express divergent thinking expands the imagination and raises creative levels, which was made possible in the environment analyzed. Thus, with this

experience, participants had the opportunity to forge new connections and perspectives capable of generating the new and possibly undergoing transformations, discovering new skills or even innovating outdated systems. The convention format used had commercial objectives, but equally important was the desire to entertain and produce new ideas, encourage criticism and self-criticism, in addition to unique and imaginative experiences capable of provoking creativity and transforming the daily lives of the subjects through the development of attitudes that permeate the creative process of those involved. Study limitations include not obtaining input from the event organizers, since we were unable to interview them. It was also impossible to extrapolate the results to the entire event, since only momentary experiences at specific locations were recorded. However, we can confirm that, with respect to the environment, people and time investigated, we were able to conduct an analysis to understand creativity from the standpoint of complexity theory, which suggests a fertile field for new research. Furthermore, in events of this nature, with a start and end date and requiring a high level of imagination, even in a fantasy or real world, ideas must be civilized, since, as Carvalho states in Almeida & Petraglia (2008, p. 27), there is a historic dialogic and recursive process in humanity between “repetition and creativity” and not linear and reproductive thinking of the established “order”.

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