

COMUNICAÇÃO
MÍDIA
E CONSUMO

Editores-chefes: Egle Müller Spinelli, Marcia Perencin Tondato

Bolsistas PPGCOM-ESPM: Leonardo Santana dos Santos Rodrigues, Pietro Giuliboni Nemr Coelho

Assessoria Editorial: E-papers Serviços Editoriais Ltda.

Revisão: Elisa Sankuevitz (português)

Tradução: E-papers Serviços Editoriais Ltda.

Capa: E-papers Serviços Editoriais Ltda.

e-ISSN 1983-7070

Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação e Práticas de Consumo da ESPM

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CATALOGAÇÃO NA FONTE

Comunicação, Mídia e Consumo / Escola Superior de Propaganda e
Marketing, Ano 1, v. 1, n. 1 (maio 2004) – São Paulo: ESPM, 2020 –

Ano 20, v.20, n. 57 (jan./abr. 2023)

Quadrimestral

ISSN 1983-7070 online

Acesso em: <http://revistacmc.espm.br>

1. Comunicação – Periódico. 2. Mídia. 3. Consumo. I. Escola Superior de
Propaganda e Marketing. II. Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação
e Práticas de Consumo.

CDU – 659.1

ESPM

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Comunicação, mídia e consumo

Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação
em Comunicação e Práticas de
Consumo da ESPM, São Paulo

Publicação quadrimestral
ano 20 • volume 20 • número 57 • jan./abr. 2023
versão eletrônica da revista disponível em:
<http://revistacmc.espm.br>

Indexadores e Diretórios: SCOPUS, Sumários.org, LIVRE, Latindex,
EBSCO, DOAJ, Portal de Periódicos da CAPES, Diadorim

EXPEDIENTE

Publicação quadrimestral do Programa de Pós-graduação da ESPM

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“People will choose for you”: Corporate social advocacy controversies as a window into the contemporary promotional industries

*Stephanie Hill*¹

Abstract: *Amid calls for more impactful corporate social responsibility and the growing significance of corporations and brands as sites to contest societal values, this article asks how a changed communication environment affects the practices of organisational communication, and with what effects? Through a thematic analysis of interviews, observation at industry events, and collected documents, it examines the motivations for corporate social advocacy, their mediation, and how the risks and rewards of participating in these kinds of communication are understood within the contemporary promotional industries. Using frameworks of contestation and justification, it identifies how constant media scrutiny, a low-trust environment, and investments in stakeholder relationships exacerbated the risks and rewards of social advocacy, pushing corporate advocacy towards tangible actions with governance implications.*

Keywords: *Public relations; promotional industries; corporate social responsibility; platforms; corporate social advocacy.*

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Amid calls for corporate social responsibility to adopt an “impact orientation” (WEDER, *et al.*, 2019), organisations are investing in corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts that audiences will perceive as credible, in contrast to deceptive strategic communication such as “astroturf” campaigns and greenwashing (LOCK, *et al.*, 2016; LYON; MONTGOMERY, 2015). The promises of CSR position organisational communication as a site to contest societal values, engaging stakeholders including the media, employees, and online publics in conflicts over credibility, greenwashing, and social license to operate (CISZEK; LOGAN, 2018; REYES, 2020). Often, the effort to create credible campaigns pushes corporations toward public social and political advocacy (GAITHER, *et al.*, 2018; HILL, 2020). With these dynamics in mind, this article asks how a changed communication environment, particularly the rise of social media platforms, affects the practices of organisational communication on CSR issues, and with what effects? It focuses on public relations professionals’ experiences with corporate social advocacy as an arena in which new developments, tensions, and effects of promotional industry efforts are visible and contested.

The article begins by reviewing the literature of corporate social advocacy and platforms; the relationship between advocacy, the promotional industries, and the public; and the theoretical frameworks historically used to understand these relationships. It then introduces the methods used to examine contemporary understandings of corporate social advocacy—a thematic analysis of interviews, observation at industry events, and industry publications. The third section presents the identified themes—credibility, constant communication, risk mitigation, and stakeholders as a double-edged sword. The discussion that concludes the article argues that these themes demonstrate how networked audiences, online and offline, contest promotional industries practice and push practitioners towards material demonstrations of commitment. These findings “support understanding the promotional

industries in a platformized environment as hybrid and contested (Edwards, 2020), a position that increasingly implicates organisational communication in governance debates.

Literature Review

The practices of the contemporary promotional industries increasingly include a focus on corporate social responsibility, purpose, and advocacy. These practices include interventions such as advertiser boycotts of social media platforms (HE, *et al.*, 2021), corporate boycotts of U.S. states (HILL, 2020), overtly political statements such as connecting U.S. policing practices to white supremacy (CISZEK; LOGAN, 2018), and decisions to not stock controversial items such as some firearms (GAITHER, *et al.*, 2018). Research on corporate social advocacy has historically focused on individual cases and the financial implications of corporate advocacy behaviours, but research has begun to address wider strategic communication considerations for organisations engaging in corporate social advocacy (DODD; SUPA, 2014; GAITHER, *et al.*, 2018; KIM; AUSTIN, 2022; WETTSTEIN; BAUR, 2016). However, questions remain about how these practices fit within the deliberative frameworks of democratic societies. Critical public relations scholarship argues that promotional communication plays a role in mediating the public’s relationship with the promise of “public representation, voice, and agency” (CRONIN, 2018, p. 44) in democratic and capitalist countries (CRONIN, 2018; ARONCZYK, 2015). This mediation is complex, with established expectations of corporate responsiveness to the public (LOCK, *et al.*, 2016) coexisting with renewed pressure from activist movements specifically attacking corporate social license to achieve regulatory outcomes, such as pressuring advertisers to influence platforms’ content moderation (BRAUN, *et al.*, 2019).

Social media platforms are crucial to many of these developments. For instance, organisations share advocacy actions through owned online channels such as corporate blogs and social media, allowing communications teams to justify their own positions and discredit

those of their opponents (ARONCZYK, 2013). However, the ability to self-mediate an organisation's activity is complicated in online contexts, where a participatory public may contest or undermine organisational claims (EDWARDS, 2020; TOMBLESON; WOLF, 2017) and challenge the specifics of CSR efforts (HEATH, *et al.*, 2018). The mediation of corporate advocacy becomes more fraught as a few large platforms dominate technical and institutional structures online, creating pinch points for cultural production (POELL, *et al.*, 2021). Researchers have built a nuanced understanding of online participatory cultures, including dark sides of online cultures, such as “networked harassment” (MARWICK, 2021), along with the political possibilities of online counterpublics (DAHLGREN, 2015). Both sides are relevant to public relations and promotional industries research, where practitioners are often the recipients of online backlash. This article contributes to understanding how participatory cultures affect corporate social advocacy and promotional communication in practice.

In Circuit of Culture frameworks, new technology is positioned as a cultural tool that might empower or disempower depending on the situation, facilitating discursive interactions between public relations practitioners and their publics at the moment of consumption (CURTIN; GAITHER, 2005). The Circuit centres power and conflict and provides a good starting point for understanding issues management as an interface between organisational communication and the public. However, the Circuit only partly captures shifts to issue management in a platformized environment, where how “publics appropriate messages and use them” (CURTIN; GAITHER, 2005, p.101) often includes direct challenges to organisations, drawn from the long memory of the internet (EBERLE, *et al.*, 2013). The Circuit identifies the articulations between points, such as consumption and regulation, as arenas of contestation between PR frameworks and the public, but does not provide tools to examine these contestations in more detail. To examine how PR practitioners understand corporate social advocacy and issues management in a platformized environment, this article

draws on frameworks of justification in organisational communication (BOLTANSKI; THEVENOT, 1991/2006). These “economies of worth” provide an analytic framework for examining how organisations attempt to meet “test[s] of justification” (p.37) based in identifiable worlds of value. These worlds—fame, civic, domestic, market, inspired, industrial—are organized around shared highest principles—competition in markets, reputation in fame, and the collective good in civic—that provide frameworks for critique of organisational communication, either within one world or between worlds. For public relations, they provide a valuable reference for understanding “how and why [organisations] communicate, and what effect their communication has,” (EDWARDS, 2020, p.1546) including how organisations are forced to “engage with challenges from stakeholders” (EDWARDS, 2020, p.1554) within global communication networks. By emphasizing the ways that organisational communication can be both political and promotional (EDWARDS, 2020), the economies of worth contrast with the Circuit’s emphasis of dyadic power structures and provides tools for understanding the values that drive deliberation within the “shared cultural space” (CURTIN; GAITHER, 2007, p.38) provided by Circuit of Culture understandings of the promotional industries.

Method

Using purposive sampling to identify potential participants involved in corporate advocacy controversies, I conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with advertising and public relations agencies, brand communication managers, national and international advertising associations, participants in advertising boycotts, and activists. The interviews were supplemented with materials collected from attending industry events such as Advertising Week, the Business for Social Responsibility Conference, and tracking industry discourse about corporate social advocacy between 2019 and 2021 in publications such as *The Drum*, *AdWeek*, the *Branded* newsletter, and the *Conscious Advertising Network* podcast. The interviews were coded using

reflexive thematic analysis (BRAUN; CLARKE, 2019). The initial stage of coding organized the data around core research questions, with the researcher creating categories such as flow of information during advocacy events, the risks and rewards of social advocacy, issue compatibility, and motivations to participate in advocacy. These were re-examined and organized the domain-level codes into themes using an open-ended and iterative approach (BRAUN; CLARKE, 2019). For instance, codes under the broad domain of “risks” were split into the themes of “media scrutiny” and “stakeholder pressure;” codes under the domain of “flow of information” were split into themes of “constant communication” and “external scrutiny.” These themes were then supplemented by observations from industry events and collected documents, and organized into the four headings—credibility, constant communication in a low trust environment, risk mitigation in a complex media environment, and stakeholders as double-edged swords—that structure the results presented below.

Results

Participants noted risks to inaction or insufficient action on social advocacy issues and potential benefits for quick, credible advocacy on issues where the organisation could differentiate itself as a leader. From the perspective of participants, constant media scrutiny, online and off, a low-trust environment, and investments in stakeholder relationships exacerbated the risks and rewards of social advocacy, pushing organisations towards active engagement with a wide array of advocacy issues. Participants stressed the need for evidence to support the credibility of any public statements they made. The emphasis on demonstrative actions to forestall public accusations of hypocrisy highlights the potential material impacts of strategic communications decisions on governance contexts such as social media content moderation.

Credibility

One participant summed up risk and reward assessment for advocacy issues as “taking where you have credibility” (corporate affairs, national industry association). Another argued that corporate reputational crises in the 1990’s had “been a bit of a wake-up call for companies to understand how they’re perceived and what they can do about it and their role in society.” The result of this wake-up call was that “spin became quite a dirty word” (head of communications, large tech business) and large companies created “a very developed and sophisticated position on their role in society, CSR, those types of responsibility issues” (representative, international advertising association). The credibility of organisations and their public actions was a consistent theme throughout the collected materials. To avoid the appearance of taking shallow action, participants stressed the preparation of a credible stance that was more than “just barking” (corporate affairs, national industry association) or “noise” (media and public relations, national industry association) or “getting news coverage” (head of communications, large tech business). Preparation included relationship building with relevant stakeholders, consistency in messaging, research, and a reserve of supporting evidence for their position, as well as choosing issues and actions that matched the scale and capability of the organisation.

For most participants the concern was that any advocacy undertaken could withstand public scrutiny. The question of “whether it stands up” (public relations, large restaurant chain) was decisive for participants, whose responses reflected a view that they “should only talk about things [they] know inside and out” (public relations, manufacturing business) and that if they could not “authentically lead in that space [they] usually sit back and let others who can, do” (communications, outdoor clothing brand). As the “usually” above suggests, the investments these organisations had made in credible public stances in certain areas became more complicated if the context changed. Crises, such as breaking news, were one of several contextual factors noted by participants. Other factors included shifts in the government or the

policy environment, such as the passage of legislation that increases liability for websites for sexual content in the U.S or the election of a majority government in the United Kingdom. These shifts provided new targets for external advocacy, as well as barriers to speaking out. For participants, shifts in media and public relations practice, including efforts to escape the “nadir” of public relations’ reputation in the 1990’s reinforced their interest in presenting credible public communication, defined by the connection between public statements and material actions.

Constant Communication in a Low-trust Environment

Every participant identified the need to communicate a clear position on political and social issues to avoid public backlash or perceptions that an organisation might be hiding something. Participants suggested that companies “can’t not take a stand anymore because people will choose for you” (owner, public relations agency) and that regardless of the action taken “we need people to know where we stand” (communications, outdoor clothing brand). Total silence on an issue was likely to be interpreted negatively and participants framed communications as taking place in a context where “there was very little assumption of goodwill” (communications, outdoor clothing brand). For example, the absence of a statement on Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 was interpreted by key stakeholders, as “basically like we don’t care about Black people.” Equally problematic were attempts to thread the needle with vague statements or a generic “corp-speak” (co-founder, advertising watchdog organisation) reply to a serious issue. One participant, whose company had been outspoken over Brexit in the United Kingdom, credited their coverage and fair treatment by the press to being clear about where they stood: “what they like is someone that will actually say what they think.” In an interview with *The Drum*, Ben and Jerry’s head of activism, Christopher Miller, noted that the companies that “got the most criticism [over Black Lives Matter statements] are the ones that tried to thread some mushy middle” or who tried to support public

outrage without taking an explicitly political stand. There was overall agreement that “you have to speak to people” (corporate affairs, national industry association) and communicate clear positions to a skeptical public prepared to challenge organisational statements.

Risk Mitigation in a Complex Media Environment

Corporate social advocacy was considered an asset for getting positive media attention. One participant described the outspokenness of their organisation’s chairman about Brexit as “from a publicist’s point of view...an absolute dream. Because what does a PR want to do? He wants to keep busy.” That participant’s organisation had done “in excess of 500 interviews...” with prestigious news outlets (public relations, large restaurant chain). Participants preferred to prepare CSR positions that approached issues in ways “unique for us to address rather than anybody else” (head of communications, large tech business). However, they also described a first mover advantage of corporate social advocacy: “If we’re going to do this, get out as early as possible because...and I hate even saying this, but you can earn some brand goodwill. And you’ll definitely get more headlines, more coverage, more impressions and all that stuff” (communications, outdoor clothing brand). Another participant described delay in taking a public stand in terms of missed opportunities “we were getting lots of inquiries to do press around Brexit... Just daily, getting two or three opportunities with really prestigious news outlets that we were having to turn down” (public relations, manufacturing business). Proactive advocacy earned media coverage, while delaying or taking a neutral stance meant missed opportunities. Inaction on advocacy issues could also be a competitive disadvantage, if other organisations in the industry were more outspoken.

Participants were aware of advocacy groups and online publics prepared to respond to their positions. Even though those groups are not necessarily supportive, it was “still very important for us to speak to them and understand where they are coming from and almost work with them as well” (corporate affairs, national industry association). For these groups,

the organisation might take an otherwise low-priority action because “it’s the right thing to do for that audience” (head of communications, large tech business). While pressure from critical groups is not new, participants noted that there had been a “proliferation of advocacy issues” (representative, national advertising association), including indirect risks such as media content, to which organisations must be prepared to respond. Several participants noted the difference between a media environment in which “today’s news is tomorrow’s chip paper” and the current media environment, which made it difficult to hide things from the public or wait for scandals to blow over. In addition, the threat of being exposed as a hypocrite was worse because “obviously everything is online that you’ve ever said or claimed” (head of communications, large tech business). Networked activist groups guaranteed scrutiny of missteps or inaction on important issues that could very quickly become a story in the wider press. As one participant explained, “even a little bit of Twitter backlash is a sign of a potential looming negative story” (co-founder, advertising watchdog organisation). Industry insiders echoed this perspective, emphasizing that organisations needed to respond, even to “a noisy minority” (representative, national advertising association). This participant summarized the threat of online criticism that could move to other media outlets: “...it quickly escalates from one or a few people being noisy on social media to actually being a story on online news and then perhaps traditional broadcast news and so on. And that can happen within 24 hours.” Dedicated publics ready to respond to organisational missteps and inaction compounded the risks of media scrutiny.

Participants described a risk that being outspoken could compound scrutiny because public statements drew attention to those “that took the initiative and said ‘we’re trying to do the right thing here’” (representative, international advertising association). This was the experience described by one participant, who found that media coverage of their participation changed quickly. “...Within 48-72 hours of making that decision the media narrative had shifted ...it had changed from like a show of

goodwill and education to a kind of nitpicky looking for gaps kind of thing” (communications, outdoor clothing brand). Other participants described shallow applications of CSR that could “discredit anybody in that space genuinely trying to do something” (public relations, manufacturing business) or suggested that expectations of corporate advocacy were unsustainable: “...it becomes disingenuous and noisy if every single company cares about every single issue, publicly, all the time” (communications, outdoor clothing brand). The pressure to take action was perceived by these participants as a threat to the credibility of the actions taken, and to their organisations’ investment in specific issues and causes.

Stakeholders as Double-edged Swords

In a platformized communication environment, visible advocacy provided benefits in connecting to allies and key supporters, but participation was balanced against strategic concerns. As a participant from an activist business put it: “Being political and being actively political is only a benefit to us. So for us to be outspoken about things that come up...we’ll lose a couple followers and that’s fine. Those aren’t really our people anyway” (worker/owner in an activist retail business). Building connections to consumers and employees motivated social advocacy more mainstream workplaces as well. One organisation noted that “the things we choose to support...are really focused on things our employees might come into contact with and supporting the community that they’re a part of” (public relations, manufacturing business). Other participants noted generational changes to workers and consumers, “they have completely different expectations of what they want companies to do; what they want companies to stand for... And so you need to do something that sets you apart from other businesses” (head of communications, large tech business). Another participant summed up the corporate perspective: “companies are looking at internal communications and internal human resources [when they choose to

advocate]. Because you want to keep people on board” (owner, crisis communications agency).

These investments in employee relationships could become two-way streets. Organisations faced pressure from employees over a lack of action on urgent public issues. For instance, “with some of our clients with the Black Lives Matter campaign...[while they are nervous about taking action]...what I found is a lot of the pressure came from internal...where employees were saying we want you to post something in support of this” (owner, public relations agency). When pressed on why it was important that their organisation be seen acting, one participant summarized that “from a grassroots perspective, our employees demanded it” (communications, outdoor clothing brand). Internal concerns contributed to the perception of risks to organisations that were silent or took half measures, and rewards for organisations that took prompt and credible action.

Participants stressed that advocacy issues should match their “area of expertise” (public relations, manufacturing business) and not stray “outside our realm” (corporate affairs, national industry association). If the issue was outside an organisation’s expertise, speaking up risked exposing them as only superficially engaged. Two participants, whose organisations were otherwise politically outspoken, identified issues that were incompatible with advocacy in terms of their own business interests. One noted, “the only place where we feel like there’s a real risk to our business is if we were outspoken about our industry.” Another noted that they avoided a controversial topic in their industry. They explained “you have to assess, is there any point having a proactive position on this or not?” For this topic, the company “know[s] at some point we will be linked to those issues and we have reactive positions on them but we don’t have an industry leading, we are amazing because of x,y,z, [position].” Because of the lack of an outstanding position, the organisation chose not to comment publicly on this issue. These examples underline the degree to which corporate advocacy took place

in a strategic professional environment in which silence on some issues was incentivized, alongside much more outspoken advocacy.

Discussion

The findings of these interviews, supported by documents and observation from the wider promotional industries, illuminate some of the effects of platformization on communications professionals' approaches to communicating corporate social responsibility. Participants noted the increased pressure to communicate their positions frequently, awareness of online publics primed to publicize wrongdoing or silence on emerging issues, and the connection between online criticism and mainstream news coverage. These pressures placed organisational communication in the centre of political debates and incentivized taking strong stances on advocacy issues as long as those positions were backed by material actions. This discussion section addresses the implications of these findings. Examining the promotional industries through a framework of contestation, considering public relations practice in a changed media environment, and asking how these developments contribute to the hybrid political-promotional nature of public relations (EDWARDS, 2020) with implications for the governance of implicated issues, such as content moderation.

Corporate Social Advocacy and Economies of Worth

Public contestation of what makes good corporate social responsibility, advocacy, and public relations practice contributes to the collapse of separation between commercial and civic spheres. The themes examined above provide insight into how questions of advocacy and governance are mediated through organisational communications professionals and how public, transparent corporate advocacy works to mitigate risks and build key relationships. Participants understood commenting publicly as good professional practice “as long as you can always justify why you are commenting on things’ (corporate affairs, national industry association).

In this view, professional communicators' aim is primarily to manage owned issues and audiences. Outward advocacy was done in line with the expectations of "their people" and because their "employees demanded it." It was done to meet the demands of "that audience" of critical observers. This strategic management of social advocacy opens opportunities for organisations to live up to the "promise" of "public representation, voice, and agency" (CRONIN, 2018, p.44) by taking actions that can be measured and scrutinized by key constituencies, either supporters or potential detractors. To live up to their promises, and to avoid appearing to offer empty words, participants emphasized the need for credible action, defined in material terms. This emphasis created difficulties for communication professionals, who found that their job description expanded unpredictably as people began "looking at the communications department to make decisions" (communications, outdoor clothing brand). Cronin (2018) has emphasized how public relations can act as "vernacular forms of democracy" that mediate "a shift in the public's engagement with the social contract" (p. 44, 14). Within the organisation above, the communications team mediated between "a very clear call to action at the frontline level" and senior leadership, who ultimately have the power to take decisions on these issues. For this participant, the pressure and expectations were beyond what they felt was a reasonable expectation for a communication team: "this is not PR, this is not communication; this is much bigger than brand." They understood that people saw the communications department as responsive to social concerns but felt that the burden placed on their office, and even their company, was beyond what they could deliver. The turn to a brand in this scenario demonstrates how corporate claims to responsibility position them as responsive public intermediaries for emerging issues. At the same time, it illustrates some of the limitations of corporate actors in responding to these expectations.

The media environment influenced how PR professionals understood corporate social advocacy and public engagement. Online platforms could harbour critical minorities, dredge up the history of corporate

public statements, spread criticism from platforms to mainstream media, and provide an outlet for dissatisfied employees. This media environment rewarded companies for quick and credible corporate social advocacy and contributed to a proliferation of advocacy issues as online publics could engage on diverse issues more easily. The pressure that communications professionals felt to avoid negative attention and to restrict engagement with some issues mirrors the dynamics of “morally motivated networked harassment” (MARWICK, 2021). Like the networked harassment that Marwick (2021) describes, the pressure felt by communications professionals acted as normative enforcement—pressuring organisations to live up to their CSR standards, adopt new approaches to advocacy issues, and punishing perceived missteps. The emphasis that participants placed on supporting their public claims with material actions, as well as the concern with addressing critical publics before negative attention gained momentum, points to the regulatory effects of this pressure on communications professionals.

This article demonstrates that communication professionals perceive a need to address social advocacy in ways justifiable to key communities and identifies how they evaluate the risks and benefits of doing so. These findings echo the values of specific worlds of justification—fame, civic, and domestic (BOLTANSKI; THEVENOT, 1991/2006). Participants presented their actions partially as matters of reputation—protection from scrutiny, generation of positive media coverage—but also as civic and domestic concerns in which they needed to address the public good and represent the views of their key audiences and their employees. The domestic interest in maintaining relationships with key stakeholder groups, such as employees, played a role in supporting broader civic concerns in support of justice and the collective good. The economies of worth provide a lens for understanding how the imperative to create justifiable public positions influences public relations practice—forcing organisations to take stronger positions and engage in advocacy in order to meet public challenges. The findings indicate how online publics leverage civic concerns against businesses and how public relations

practitioners interpret those critiques as threats to their credibility. Applying Boltanski and Thevenot's (1991/2006) economies of worth provides a means of understanding promotional industry communication outside of social regulation frameworks such as the Circuit of Culture. The contestable nature of organisational communication acted, in these cases, as a "productive force in social, economic, and political relations" (EDWARDS, 2020, p. 1552) between networked publics and communications professionals, pushing their practices towards socially defined standards of acceptability.

"A productive force": Implications for governance

The emphasis on credibility and positive contributions incentivised participants to avoid "corp-speak," such as deflecting responsibility to legal standards. Instead, participants attempted to build the credibility of their efforts by linking communication to material actions and avoiding participating in debates where they might show up empty handed. For many organisations, where they feel they can take a leadership role or where they feel an external expectation of responsibility dovetails with places where there is not a clear regulator, standard, rule, or authority. As an example, the advertising industry was aware of "an external perception that advertisers should be the ones able to force change. That online platforms like Facebook and Google should listen to advertisers because they are the ones paying their bills, basically" (representative, international advertising association). That perception motivated advertisers to push social media companies, in public campaigns such as the advertiser boycott of YouTube in 2017 and Stop Hate for Profit in 2020, to change how content is monetized and moderated (HE, *et al.*, 2021). While unregulated spaces often present potential risks, they also present strategic opportunities. As one commenter put it, "not once has an advertiser been able to put out a press release about how well they are doing on Google" (Christopher Kenna, in Sonoo, 2020). In comparison, a savvy advertiser could put money into a slate of LGBTQ or Black-owned publishers and put out a press release the next

day—benefitting from moving into a space that is not governed by an established authority to take credit for pro-social actions. In situations like this, the hybrid promotional-political character of public relations activity (EDWARDS, 2020) is clear, as are the incentives for activist publics to use organisational communications as an intermediary for achieving social goals. While this tendency has been particularly pronounced in online advertising, it is also a feature of transnational environments for issues such as labour standards (RUGGIE, 2020), and a growing site of advocacy over issues such as racial justice, LGBTQ+ equality, and gun violence (CISZEK; LOGAN, 2018; GAITHER, *et al.*, 2018; HILL, 2020).

Conclusions

This article used corporate social advocacy as a lens into understanding the contemporary promotional industries in a platformized media environment. It examined the motivations for corporate social advocacy, how advocacy events are mediated, and how the risks and rewards of participating in these kinds of communication are understood within the contemporary promotional industries. This research identifies how promotional industry professionals negotiate expectations that they will live up to the “promise” of “public representation, voice, and agency” (CRONIN, 2018, p.44) and notes the importance of the media environment in creating pressure for companies to respond to public issues in ways perceived as credible to their audiences. Future research should examine the governance implications of these processes in more detail, addressing how dynamics of public controversy and contestation in organisational communication shape issues such as deplatforming, support for international regulation, and content moderation and speech norms.

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Data de submissão: 30/06/2022

Data de aceite: 12/12/2022

Disintermediation, speculation or financialization? Uses and discourses about NFT in the music market

Desintermediação, especulação ou financeirização? Usos e discursos sobre NFT no mercado da música¹

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Resumo: *Este artigo analisa a ideologia, os usos e as implicações do NFT (non-fungible token) para a economia da música. O NFT resgata a ideologia da desintermediação das relações econômicas ao prometer retornos financeiros mais altos ao artista, decorrentes de sua conexão direta com o consumidor. A tecnologia, no entanto, reorienta a carreira dos artistas, bem como sua relação com os fãs. Informado pela filosofia anarcocapitalista, o uso do NFT tem condicionado artistas a verem suas obras como ativos valorizáveis, cabendo aos fãs o papel de investidores. A partir da análise bibliográfica, investigamos: (1) a ideologia da desintermediação na economia da música, (2) a inspiração anarcocapitalista no desenvolvimento de tecnologias financeiras, como o NFT, (3) o uso do NFT no mercado de música e (4) o papel dos fãs em uma economia da música financeirizada. Como conclusão, apontamos como o uso de tecnologias como o NFT faz parte de outro momento da indústria da música que pode ser rotulado como pós-streaming.*

1 The authors presented an earlier version of this article at the 31st Compós Annual Meeting in June 2022.

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Palavras-chave: NFT; indústria da música; ideologia da desintermediação; anarcocapitalismo; cultura de fã.

Abstract: *The article analyzes the ideology, uses and implications of the NFT (Non-Fungible Token) for the music economy. The NFT rescues the ideology of the disintermediation of economic relations by promising higher financial returns to the artist, resulting from the direct connection with the consumer. Technology, however, reorients artists' careers as well as their relationship with fans. Informed by anarcho-capitalist philosophy, the use of the NFT demands artists to treat their works as assets with volatile value, as for the fans, the use of this new financial technology demands them to play the role of investors. From the bibliographic analysis, we analyzed: (1) the role of the ideology of disintermediation in the music economy, (2) the anarcho-capitalist inspiration in the development of new financial technologies, such as the NFT, (3) the use of NFT in the music market and (4) the role of fans in a financialized music economy. As a conclusion, we point out how the use of technologies such as NFT is part of another moment in the music industry that can be labeled as post-streaming.*

Keywords: NFT; music Industry; ideology of disintermediation; anarcho-capitalism; fandom.

Introduction

In 2021, the non-fungible token (NFT) created controversy in the art market by transforming digital works into unique goods assessed in millions of dollars. That is the case of *Everydays: the first 5000 Days*, a digital collage by artist Beeple that reached the third highest value ever paid to a living artist: 69 million dollars.

The work presents itself as an NFT. A fungible is something, such as money or a commodity, that can “be replaced by another equal part or quantity in paying a debt or settling an account” (see Merriam-Webster online). NFTs are non-fungible because they are digital products that are not interchangeable since their codes are irreproducible. A public certificate of authenticity registered on the blockchain,⁵ a technology that generates a marker or *token*, guarantees the predicate of the uniqueness of digital information. Though anyone can download and use a digital work, only someone who possesses the certificate of the NFT can claim the authenticity of their copy. Therefore, NFTs are encrypted markers that, once recorded, cannot change, which makes them unique, scarce, and priceable.

There are also NFT experiences in the music market. In March 2021, when releasing the album *When You See Yourself* (independent), the American band Kings of Leon published three types of NFTs. During the first two weeks of the release of the album, fans of the band could purchase NFTs that included: (1) a limited-edition vinyl version, (2) lifetime tickets to all the future shows of the band, including front-row seats, and (3) exclusive audiovisual arts (HISSONG, 2021). The selling of digital articles generated 2 million dollars for the artists.

It is inevitable to interpret the NFT phenomenon through the lens of the classic discussion on technical reproducibility by Walter Benjamin (1994). The author’s well-known argument is that works of art in the industrial age, unlike traditional ones, originate as studio arts meant

5 The blockchain is a technology that records actions performed in a network of computers that connect through cryptography. It functions as a public ledger that registers transactions in determined means of exchange.

for reproduction. Everything begins with the reproducibility of the art. Such a predicate brings about the end of the hierarchical relationship between the original work (bearer of the aura) and the copy (an inauthentic form of the original). Detached from any physical support, the digital work of art would deepen this process. The possibility of immediate and unlimited reproduction without loss of quality and at zero marginal cost seemed to indicate the impossibility of establishing any *property* relationship for digital works of art; only access to streaming content would be able to generate some financial return (ANDERSON, 2009; RIFIKIN, 2001).

However, used to create NFTs, the technology of blockchains marks a turning point in this trajectory. By inviolably ensuring the registration of a work, the blockchain produces a scarcity of digital records: once encrypted, they are no longer reproducible. That is a movement with profound economic and cultural consequences. First, the technical rarity of NFTs allows their holders to display their *properties* and even resell them in secondary markets at prices that become the object of financial speculation. Second, NFTs mean the possibility of reinstating the *authenticity* of the work of art amid the digital era. Blockchain, therefore, breaks with the promises of technical reproducibility, being, in this sense, a *retrograde innovation* that tries and promises to revive, in short, the aura of the work of art in the digital age.

NFT has been promoted in the music market as a more profitable source of income for artists since they negotiate with fans directly, through digital art auction platforms, eliminating intermediaries such as record labels and streaming platforms. Through the speculation typical of auctions, a work can generate figures much higher than those collected through copyright *royalties*. In this sense, the NFT revives the *ideology of economic disintermediation*, so dear to the libertarian spirit of Silicon Valley, by promising to solve the problem of low returns generated by streaming through the direct connection between artist and fan.

From this angle, it becomes clear that the NFT is much more than a mere cutting-edge financial technology: it is a technology that ultimately

aims to reshape the art market itself in the digital age. Going beyond the issue of whether such a digital product can even generate economic sustainability for artists, one must ask: does the NFT fulfill its promise of disintermediation? If so, what are its implications for musicians' careers? How does the relationship between artists and fans stand when it is financialized through NFT?

This article proposes to approach the NFT from two complementary perspectives. On the one hand, we analyze the NFT ideology, that is, the values that make the development of such technology rational. Based on the same technology that backs cryptocurrencies, the NFT highlights the operation of anarcho-capitalist logic in music, which seeks to carry out the financialization of artists, who have to place themselves in the market as self-entrepreneurs and see their works as freely negotiable financial assets and devoid of centralized controls. On the other hand, we want to understand the relationship that begins to develop between artists and fans when their contact becomes mediated by financial technologies. When an artist's work and career is open to direct investment by individuals, fans become *investors* of the artist's work, which, in some cases, includes the negotiation of copyrights sold as NFTs. Thus, fans assume the role of *evangelizers* of the artist in whom they invest, as this can also bring them profits.

The paper unfolds in four parts. The first presents an analysis of the creative destruction of the music industry, underlining the importance of the discourse on the disintermediation of the economy for developing the digital music market. Then, we analyze the anarcho-capitalist ideology that animates NFT developers. In the third part, we investigate the logic of the NFT and how this new financial technology operates. Finally, we discuss the role of the fan in a financialized music economy. The conclusion points out how using technologies such as NFTs is part of another moment in the music industry that we label as post-streaming.

The digitization of the music market and the ideology of economic disintermediation

It is necessary to recognize that the legitimacy of the NFT is based on the promise of disintermediation of economic relations between artists and the public and has a long trajectory to understand the arts' welcome to the NFTs. In the case of the music industry, it is a political agenda of artists against different market mediators.

The music market developed as an industrial economy throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. With the possibility of producing media containing music on a large scale, first through scores and then phonograms, the owners of the means of material production of music (publishers and, later, record companies) financed content creators and interpreters to record their works on these media. The reward for the initial investment of publishers and recording companies would come from the acquisition of the patrimonial rights of the works of music composers or the related rights of the phonographic recordings and from the detention of fees for the sale of the scores or discs. As the music industry consolidated, dissatisfaction grew among composers and performers, who began to look for ways to receive a greater return for their work. Among the disputed points in this relationship between capital and labor was the search for the disintermediation of economic relations in the market, that is, the possibility for artists themselves to directly access individuals interested in their art.

From the 1980s onwards, major record labels began to adopt the business management post-industrial agenda. That meant, among other moves, outsourcing a series of functions, notably sound recording. Thus, ties with independent recording companies tightened, constituting a new division of labor: independent recording companies would take care of the careers of different artists, while the major recording companies would take care of big stars (record sellers) and, above all, distribution of physical discs (DIAS, 2000; VICENTE, 2014). From the 1990s onwards, this movement deepened as the artists themselves gained access to sound recording media and assumed responsibility for carrying out the

first stages of music production, thanks to the advancement of digital sound-recording technologies, such as software for sound recording and processing that operated on personal computers and digital instruments (samplers, synthesizers, MIDI technology, among others).

However, outsourcing music production did not threaten the market structure since digital discs were still physical (CD and DVD). Kept deliberately anachronistic, the distribution of records to points of sale allowed the maintenance of asymmetrical power relations within the industry. Despite the ever-increasing quantity of music production, which fragmented from then on, only big distributors (that belonged to the major labels) could distribute the records on a large scale.

When a heterogeneous set of technologies came together – the MP3 audio file, computer digital file players such as Winamp, and peer-to-peer file-sharing programs (P2P), a channel opened for the immediate distribution of all retained production, generating an uncontrollable disjunctive force for the music industry (DE MARCHI, 2016; HERSCHMANN, 2010; WITT, 2015).

It is decisive to note that this was an event that took place outside the decisions of the traditional players in the music industry, led by small companies in the computer industry or startups. As we discuss below, a series of ethical values from radicalized neoliberal philosophy informs the microcomputer industry, which constitutes a particular *Silicon Valley ideology* (SCHRADIE, 2017). To which concerns this paper, we emphasize the developers of such technologies carry the flag of the disintermediation of economic relations via networked digital technologies, not as a mere solution to technical problems of the real economy but, in fact, as the realization of an ideal capitalist society. This is what Bill Gates (1995) labeled frictionless capitalism, in which:

The information highway will extend the electronic marketplace and make it the ultimate go-between, the universal middlemen. Often the only humans involved in a transaction will be the actual buyer and seller. [...] Information about sellers and their products and services will be available to any computer connected to the highway. Servers

distributed worldwide will accept bids, resolve offers into completed transactions, control authentication and security, handling all other aspects of the marketplace, including the transfer of funds. This will carry us into a new world of low-friction, low-overhead capitalism, in which market information will be plentiful and transaction costs low. (GATES, 1995, p. 202)

The consolidation of streaming services as the main commercial activity of the music industry established, however, a whole new layer of intermediaries in the digital music market. This new market structure has generated controversy and dissatisfaction among artists since they consider the amounts paid by streaming services for distributing their works far below what they need to make their careers viable (DE MARCHI, 2018).

At this juncture, a new financial market sector, fintech 3.0⁶, presents a new promise of achieving low-friction capitalism. Financial technologies, such as digital payment methods (PicPay, PayPal, Google Pay, among others), crowdfunding platforms, digital banks for artists (Noodle, among others), or even cryptocurrencies (Bitcoin, Ethereum, among others) offered artists instruments that would enable them to dispense with intermediaries in the music market, guaranteeing their economic viability:

These platforms [...] can potentially provide the independent and 'Do-It-Yourself' (DIY) music producer with access to essential resources for key components of their business: financing, collaboration, management, marketing, distribution, and direct communication with fans. By encompassing these functions and other affordances that typically integrate the value chains of traditional industry agents (record labels, distributors, record promoters, radio stations, etc.), these new platforms may constitute a viable alternative to support an autonomous and independent approach from the artist to his creative and business management activities, as well as a more direct and successful relation between him and the consumer of his music. (BERNARDO, 2015, p. 341-2)

6 What has been called fintech 3.0 encompasses several digital platforms that offer online financial services, from loans to cryptocurrencies (Cf. DE MARCHI, 2021).

The NFT appears as the vanguard of this movement. Unlike other available financial technologies, the NFT offers the possibility of producing a unique digital work, which can become the *property* of individuals. This characteristic would make it possible to reformulate the entire concept of a career in the digital age since it breaks with the logic of the economy of access, restoring value to individual works. That is why the use of NFTs in the art market is supposedly *revolutionary*.

Ideology as technology: anarcho-capitalism and fintech 3.0

This perception of the NFT as *revolutionary* is no accident. The conception and *modus operandi* of the NFT and the entire new generation of financial technologies that characterize fintech 3.0 are tributaries of a set of specific ideals, namely, the most radical derivations of neoliberalism. Authors such as Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron (1996) or Fred Turner (1999) explained in detail how the formation of the industrial complex of digital technologies, known in the United States as Silicon Valley, was permeated by a heterogeneous set of moral ideas and political philosophies. Ideologically, due to unique historical circumstances, Silicon Valley finds itself at the convergence of (1) the hippie counterculture, (2) advanced scientific research on university campuses, and (3) the military complex involved in building Cold War technologies. As counterintuitive as it may seem, distinct values such as communitarianism, mysticism, lysergic culture, bohemian culture, anti-statism, anti-communism, and neoliberalism managed to combine, forming hybrids that are difficult to locate on the left or right of the traditional political spectrum. Silicon Valley ideology results from this combination (SCHRADIE, 2017), which we can characterize as (1) liberal in customs (criticism of the bureaucratization of everyday life, recreational drug use, sympathy for a kind of return to community life), (2) ultraliberal in economics (defense of possessive individualism,

entrepreneurship, and meritocracy) and (3) conservative in politics (strong rejection of the principle of social justice and social policies).

Among the most radical fringes of neoliberalism that inform actors in Silicon Valley, anarcho-capitalism stands out (MORRIS, 2008). It is a political philosophy that proposes the individual has natural rights, basing their freedom on control over nature (possessive individualism). Society emerges from the gathering of self-interested individuals. The State emerges from the security needs of the group, but it poses as an artificial entity that threatens the natural rights of individuals. As a result of this conception, anarcho-capitalists engage in a political struggle against the State (which would justify their appropriation of the concept of *anarchism*) in favor of a social life based on economic relations between individuals and their communities. The junction between anarcho-capitalism and digital culture materializes in specific political movements such as *cyberpunk*. This group of digital activists uses cryptography (*cypher*) as an instrument of political struggle against State power (ASSANGE et al., 2013). The movement played a decisive role in the development of financial technologies that ended up creating fintech 3.0.

The best-known product of their efforts is cryptocurrencies, notably Bitcoin. They developed cryptocurrencies as a technology for financial operations that works in a P2P system, totally decentralized. Indeed, the user community itself guarantees reliability in cryptocurrency transactions and, thus, trust in this alternative financial system. As goes the argument of its developers, cryptocurrency manages to do without any political institution for economic relation activities (such as a central bank or a ministry of the economy). The *blockchain* allows cryptocurrency to accomplish such a feat, recording transactions through cryptography and removing the coins used from circulation (preventing the problem of double spending). This way, the technology controls market liquidity automatically, without the need for any *political* intervention.

One should note, therefore, that it operates as a regulatory authority in the sphere of politics (as if it were a ministry of the economy and

a central bank simultaneously) by stipulating an economic policy (deflationary) and controlling market liquidity. Here, disintermediation reveals the ideological character of the blockchain. Regardless of its effectiveness, blockchain is a technology developed to replace every political institution with a self-regulated system by the community of cryptocurrency users. It is essential to bear in mind, therefore, that:

It is not a question of merely or centrally producing new governance apparatuses or devices [...] but of radically transforming social reality in the name of a normative ideal of freedom (negative, individual), in an attitude thought and meant to be understood as anti-establishment, as “revolutionary.” (PARANÁ, 2020, p. 82)

A product derived from the blockchain, the NTF also promises to follow the so-called revolutionary cypherpunk path. It is a digital product that supposedly contains all the technical qualities to give the artist total autonomy, which would mean “overthrowing intermediaries, oxygenating cultural markets, and creating a fairer art world freed from curatorial influence trafficking” (MENOTTI, 2021). More than the promise of a high and immediate financial return, the NFT heralds a new (anarcho-capitalist) for the art market world.

The brave new world of NFT

NFT is an application derived from the Ethereum blockchain, which allows the creation of a uniquely used cryptographic electronic key. The created digital certificate is only available for individual handling, which generates a form of negative digital right, that is, digital property. That opens the possibility of speculating about its value in the art market.

In 2021, music critics celebrated the NFT, taking it as a watershed in the music industry (CAPALBO, 2021; COLINS, 2021; ELLIOT, 2021; HISSONG, 2021; NEWTON, 2021; WANG, 2021; WESTENBERG, 2021). We can summarize these advantages as:

- a. *Disintermediation*: the possibility of direct negotiation between artists and buyers, eliminating publishers, record labels, or streaming services.
- b. *Decentralization*: the purchase and sale of NFTs are independent of the platform that trades them and follows the decentralization dear to the blockchain.
- c. *Transparency*: the blockchain validates transactions and authenticity.
- d. *Security*: the blockchain is inviolable as it counts on a multiple network validation system.
- e. *Progressive earnings from royalties*: the artist can stipulate a percentage of return for each product sale, which guarantees a lifetime commission on each transaction.
- f. *Diversity*: a wide range of goods are negotiable □ music, videos, and images.
- g. *Financial rewards*: the owner of the asset is encouraged to promote it, as they will profit from the valorization.

Observing the descriptions, especially in points (e) and (g), we note the NFT is not just a digital product but a technology that automatically encourages (through what is called a smart contract) content producers to think of their work as an asset that should increase in value over time. The blockchain promises to manage the work on its own over time.

Thus, it is not surprising that the discourse of these news reports opposed record companies and streaming services to the NFT: on the one hand, the intermediaries who centralized economic activities in a way that was not transparent and harmful to content creators; on the other hand, the agents for the decentralization and transparency of market relations, which allow artists total freedom of (economic) action. “Decentralization means that many people are responsible for providing the services we rely on, rather than one dictator,” says Eric Elliott (2021, online), creator of the digital merchandising platform *Greenruhm*. The

few academic investigations on the subject have only replicated this polarization (RAUMAN, 2021; SENKARDES, 2021).

So far, there has been little discussion about NFT marketplaces, which only seem to enable and optimize the direct connection between artists and fans. The exclusive intervention of algorithms in negotiations justifies its supposed invisibility; after all, they do not establish any market structure (that is, they do not generate relationships of dominance within the market). That creates a false dichotomy between human and algorithmic management, in which the latter is privileged due to its supposed effectiveness and lack of bias. Very illustrative, in this sense, is the way YellowHeart (yh.io), a marketplace based on ticket sales, presents its goals: “to eliminate scalping and bad players in ticketing and put artists back in control of how their tickets are distributed and traded. This platform is built BY ARTISTS, FOR FANS.” (YELLOWHEART, 2022, *online*).

Notwithstanding, such platforms have algorithms that determine *how, to whom, when, and what* information buyers will see. Their Artificial Intelligence is decisive for the *disintermediation of the market*. The technological alibi establishes new power relations intended to be invisible.

Fans: musical career as an auction

Despite all the high-tech narrative, the NFT has the human element as its protagonist: the *fan*. The fan is a unique type of consumer, representing the ideal-typical model of the active consumer. In media studies, the active character of fans emerged in the 1980s as a way of criticizing a supposed passivity attributed to mass consumption. In the last two decades, the notion has become even more popular among enthusiasts of participatory consumption triggered by digital media. But in the blockchain era, fans not just organize themselves in communities of taste and assert their identity through participatory consumption. Above all, they are *investors*.

The possibility of investing in artists through the purchase of exclusive goods and experiences is nothing new: dolls, brooches, limited edition records, and events where it is possible to have direct contact with the artist are well-known examples. However, now we have the incentive to convert these goods that circulated among fans into an element of financialization of the artist's career. That is possible because the NFT can make the artist receive a percentage for each resale through smart contracts. Although this creates a lifetime source of income that goes directly to artists, it makes them dependent on eventual resales of their works, whose prices and possibility of materialization are completely uncertain.

The NFT also allows fans to buy copyright slices and, in this way, "own a 'piece' of their creations." (WANG, 2021, online). This possibility is seen with enthusiasm by an investor in cryptocurrencies like Fred Ehrsam, who believes the ownership of assets makes fans the evangelists or biggest promoters of the NFT, given they are interested in the economic success of the venture that would directly benefit them (NEWTON, 2021). In this sense, fan engagement becomes monetizable.

Thus, the NFT opens the possibility of inserting the musician into a celebrity culture where any aspect of their life becomes a marketable or auction-ready experience. These range from access to VIP boxes and exclusive events, as Kings of Leon did, to participation in the music production process of one of the artist's tracks (as music producer Justin Blau did). But the possibilities go further. Lawyer Max Dilendorf even suggests the idea of selling an NFT that would give its holder, or holders, the chance of following a celebrity's heartbeat monitored by an electronic system (BRADSHAW, 2021).

On the one hand, we have an elite market of exclusive items and experiences that tend to benefit established artists, aimed at fans in search of exclusivity and investors seeking speculation: this is the case of Snoop Dogg's album, *Bacc on Death Row*. Consisting of 17 tracks, each sold as an NFT at \$5,000, the album gives the owner of the complete collection access to jewelry, concerts, private parties, and "possibly a

barbecue at Snoop's house." According to the Gala Music label, the owner gains "lifetime membership to an elite club" (GALA MUSIC, 2022, online). On the other hand, beginner artists are encouraged to convert their careers into a collection of NFTs and bet on their appreciation. In this key, the *Greenrum* platform emerges with the proposal to create a community where all artists' posts □ images, videos, music, avatars, digital fashion, and concert tickets □ can be converted into digital *merchandise* and sold to a community of fans.

If merchandising is not new, what is new is the pressure to transform every type of object or experience into something collectible and, above all, to make this extremely fragile and volatile element the pillar of musical careers. Career management, therefore, is no longer the responsibility of a record company but must be broken down into a series of NFTs that make it possible for the investor fan to become a patron: the more they are willing to give, the greater their possibility of taking part in their idol's career. Even though the artist ultimately decides the parameters of the agreement, it is hard to believe, in a scenario of inconsistent remuneration, that freedom, not necessity, governs decision-making. Thus, we see a transfer and spread of control from the label and its employees to the community of fans-investors-shareholders who, ultimately, have ever more participation and control over decision-making.

The artist's career turns into a public company with shares offered on a stock exchange. This stock market includes many other artists who compete with each other for the valorization of their assets, which presupposes the capture by investors or the conversion of fans into investors. That creates a synergy between the artistic and financial worlds that distinguishes NFT from other financial technologies, such as crowdfunding or cryptocurrencies themselves, for example. However, terms such as *synergy*, *connection*, or *empowerment* mystify the precarious dimension and the economic and speculative interests that are part of the mechanics of NFT operation.

Final Considerations

As argued throughout the article, the use of the NFT is not limited to a new financial instrument in the music economy. In fact, its use implies the transformation of relations between the actors in this market. NFT urges content creators to conceive of their works and individual careers as financial assets that can be valued and devalued incessantly in the market as objects of financial speculation. Its counterpart demands a continuous and interested engagement of the public, the fans, who start to conceive the artists' assets as financial products that can generate income for them. In other words, music consumption is financialized.

Financialization is a symptom of some new configuration of the music industry radically different from that of the industrial economy of physical records in which the roles between capitalists, workers, and consumers were reasonably distinguishable. New productive and economic arrangements surface with the metastability that streaming services grant to the music industry in the digital era, allowing digital platforms to manage an atomized musical production. Nowadays, musicians not just produce their own music (with their investments) but must also market it to make their careers viable. We must follow the consequences of this movement in the future. Nevertheless, it is evident it constitutes a new phase of the music industry, the post-streaming moment.

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Date of submission: 07/01/2022

Date of acceptance: 12/14/2022

Spectatorship and consumption: from the Department Store to the Shoppable TV

Espectatorialidade e consumo: da Loja de Departamento à “Shoppable TV”

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Resumo: *Este estudo pretende refletir sobre a construção e ampliação das experiências de compras na televisão levando-se em conta mediações técnicas e subjetivas erigidas historicamente. A digitalização e informatização dos ambientes comunicacionais ampliou gradativamente as possibilidades espectatoriais, as dinâmicas produtivas do meio e, principalmente, ajudou a erigir uma plataforma para o consumo em um processo espiralado e contínuo, normatizado a partir de uma imensa reorganização de saberes e poderes. Nesse sentido, o artigo articula a reestruturação da vida social imposta pelo advento do consumo, principalmente a partir da experiência das Lojas de Departamento, com as transformações no estatuto do espectador, desde sua concepção como fruidor da vida cosmopolita até os processos interativos e imersivos das redes telemáticas.*

Palavras-chave: *Espectatorialidade; história do consumo; loja de departamento; shoppable TV.*

Abstract: *This study aims to reflect on the construction and expansion of television shopping experiences taking into account historically technical and subjective mediations. The digitalization and informatization of communication*

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environments gradually expanded the spectatorial possibilities, the productive dynamics of the television and, above all, helped to create a platform for consumption in a spiral and continuous process standardized from an immense reorganization of knowledge and power. In this sense, the article articulates the restructuring of social life imposed by the advent of consumption, mainly from the experience of Department Stores, with the transformations in the statute of the spectator since its conception as a consumer of cosmopolitan life until the interactive and immersive processes of telematic networks.

Keywords: *Spectatorship; history of consumption; department store; shoppable TV.*

Introduction

Consumption, as a phenomenon of modern-contemporary culture, acquires an individualizing dimension due to a series of social transformations initiated in the 16th century and consolidated in the 19th century, which profoundly altered patterns of sensitivity and subjectivities. We must, therefore, understand consumption as a social process intertwined with the very concept of modernity. In present times, as Colin Campbell (2001) points out, consumption acquires a central place in people's lives by providing essential principles of being and knowing.

For Campbell, consumption is far from a simple economic activity that functions to meet everyday needs. Consumption experiences are self-reflexive and construct subjectivities. Dynamic, while also complex and emotional, shopping activities not just require searching for information, organizing, and memorizing them but also enable a universe of sensations when consumers visualize and try on objects and combinations. However, for these consumers to be able to experiment to the point of defining themselves through consumption, they had to learn what, how, and where to look.

Fashion, disseminated by a press that specializes in the area, was the first to contribute to an "explosion of consumption" (McCracken, 2003) by bringing consumers from previously un contemplated classes, that is, not belonging to the European nobility. With its illustrations and explanatory texts, the fashion press was fundamental for the pedagogy of good looks, presenting the public with possibilities for matching pieces and consumption (ROCHE, 2007). In the 19th century, space and time began to converge toward the centrality of the phenomenon. In this process, department stores were essential for inaugurating a new concept of shopping that allowed consumers to walk through the various sections, touch pieces of decoration and clothing, and learn lifestyles and codes of combination and good taste without feeling obligated to immediate purchase. This way of engaging attention, provoking immersion, and allowing consumers to experience new sensations and

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desire objects they had not even imagined before forged the new logic of consumption.

In this article, the department store will be the guiding thread of a form of interacting, buying, and experiencing consumption inaugurated in the 19th century and which served as a matrix when shopping centers emerged in the 20th century. In the 21st century, internet-enabled devices have allowed television to become a new department store with scenarios that act as sales displays for a wide range of products. The binomial experience plus convenience continues to guide the logic of consumption. In the digital environment, convenience is detached from the physical space, enhancing its appeal in the shoppable TV environment and transforming shows, artists, and presenters into sellers. In this way, such technological innovations make products advertised in shows or commercial breaks acquirable in real-time without the need for transportation. The grand magazine is now on the screen. And this was only possible due to a long transformation in subjective experience and vision transformed into an “instrument of knowledge” (AUMONT, 2004).

This study starts from the premise that, more than describing new technologies, it is necessary to understand how the novel ways of seeing, perceiving, and feeling “framed” consumption experiences. The work unfolds in three parts. The first part seeks to locate modern consumption, from the emergence of department stores, within dimensions of the capitalist ethos. The second intends to understand the spectatorial transformations of the televisual medium. And the last part discusses shoppable TV.

The argument for choosing the essay form is that it is a style that allows more creativity to the author, opening space for the adventure of discovery by proposing various contents that, consequently, indicate questions from multiple perspectives and encourage autonomy of thought. We see the essay as a method, an attitude, a spiritual determination inherited from the “philosophical culture” that dares, takes risks, and rehearses by running through a plethora of phenomena in the apprehension

of how existence is crystallized more by questions that dilate than by the eventual answers (WAIZBORT, 2006). Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin adopted such a method as a way of thinking.

The department store as a modern culture experience

The social history of capitalism is widely studied and discussed by different perspectives and fields of knowledge: economics, history, sociology, philosophy, etc. Karl Marx builds an analytical matrix that directs future theoretical approaches to the valorization of capital and labor as fundamental elements for producing wealth and surplus value. Later, Max Weber discusses, from a different angle, the genesis of Capitalism in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). For Weber, the understanding of the modern worldview should start from the cultural dimension. For him, human actions and relationships forged the spirit of capitalism based on the religious experience of the Protestant ethic, which valued work as an instrument of asceticism and considered wasting time the most serious of sins.

Werner Sombart also investigated the development of capitalism in the West, emphasizing the importance of the Jew for the construction of the modern economy. However, Sombart diverges from Weber concerning the hierarchy of values that sustains the capitalist worldview. If, for Weber, the ordering principle starts from profitability – from meticulous labor and the suppression of worldly pleasures in favor of accumulating wealth for the glory of God, for Sombart, in *Luxury and Capitalism* (1912), the origin of capitalism intertwines with enjoyment, luxury consumption, the pleasure of the senses, eroticism, and the role played by women courtesans.

Sombart presents a new lens for understanding the “great Western transformation”⁴: that consumption and luxury are a means to obtain

4 *The Great Transformation* is the title of the famous book by Karl Polanyi (1944), who studied the processes of political, social, and economic change that allowed the origin and consolidation of the market economy as autonomous and self-regulating, converting land, money, work, and consequently, humans, into commodities.

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pleasure, and one needs certain stimuli to experience them. In this way, the author paved the way for other researchers, notably Campbell in *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987) and McCracken in *Culture & Consumption* (1988), to show that such changes occurred strongly in the subjective sphere, in patterns of sensibility, of self-delusive hedonism, and of creative dreams that come from the desire to experiment disseminated by the logic of consumption, such as fashion aspirations previously restricted by sumptuary laws.

Factory times would not exist without an audience eager for new lifestyles and techniques and without practices that offered a pedagogy of taste so that bourgeois and aspirants could find themselves in a new context. Luxury boosts trade in the West, introduces new habits, and imports products from the East (spices, perfumes, porcelain, coffee, chocolate), making bourgeois life enjoyable by allowing it to spend the profits of its industry on satisfying its pleasures.

The new aesthetic, spatial, and bourgeois model of the city, introduced by Baron Haussmann, served as a matrix for urban reforms in European and South American cities. Wide avenues with gas lighting allowed the circulation of air, commodities, and people, eager to admire the large shop windows and experience the new dimensions of consumption, making Paris the capital of the 19th century. The city of light was a pedagogical symbol of a new era, of the bourgeois enchantment with modernity and its communication systems (telegraph, telephone, railroad, submarine cables) that offered mobility and allowed interconnections, shortening space and time, placing products and information at within reach for those who could afford them.

As already mentioned, transformations engendered by consumption values consolidated throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, especially with the emergence of department stores. The windows of the new temples of consumption materialized lifestyles, aesthetic combinations of clothing and decoration, and introduced marketing techniques that taught the public how to enjoy their free time. In Paris, capital of the 19th century, department stores materialized new spaces for

consumer experimentation and inspired Émile Zola to publish a novel, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, on the theme in 1883. One of the first major department stores was *Le Bon Marché*, which opened in 1852, followed by the *Louvre* (1855), and *Printemps* (1865). In the English capital, *Harrods* emerged as a prominent department store after 1883 (ROCHA et al., 2016).

Like bazaars, department stores brought together various types of goods in one place. However, the stores displayed their products in a way consumers could appreciate them as works of art in a museum or, in the words of Émile Zola, a “cathedral of commerce.” These immense constructions recalled something consumers already knew: the figure of cathedrals. Designed in metal and glass and illuminated, department stores invited people to enter and circulate their interiors. The intention was to capture consumers “before the beauty of the combination” of goods on display. Pure “seduction” or “temptation” in an environment panoramically designed by architects to position objects for the “gluttony of the eye.” (ORTIZ, 1991, p. 166).

Hence, there was an intersection between new ways of seeing originating from the visual arts, especially the paintings of panoramas in which subjects occupy a privileged position of observation and feel immersed in the canvas, conferring a sense of realism (GRAU, 2007). The department store and its immersive architecture produced a framing of the gaze (SICILIANO, 2014) and forms of cognition that modeled a subjective perception that organizes modern experience. Such a way of seeing stems from a new status of sight that, according to Jonathan Crary (2012), is the product of historical construction, intensified in the 19th century with the arrival of new optical devices that would enable the emergence of photography and the cinematographer. The encounter of these new technical artifacts with philosophical and scientific discourses led to the rise of a new type of observer, “the subjective observer.” In this constantly readjusting amalgam, a new visual regime and system of aesthetic and ethical conventions emerge where entertainment found fertile grounds to develop.

The Industrial Revolution created a separation between work time and free time, originating the notion of entertainment. The search for fun is a characteristic of modern-contemporary times. The idea of leisure as a counterpoint to productive work was unthinkable in the Ancien Régime, as the aristocracy did not engage in productive activity and attended soirées, balls, or concerts as part of courtly life. The peasants and the nascent bourgeoisie, on the other hand, used all their time in the production of material life; their respite came in collective events like fairs and parties dedicated to patron saints, when there was singing, drinking, and dancing.

Entertainment emerges as part of the modern leisure culture to eliminate free time, that is, to transform idleness into productive time or an object of mass consumption. Therefore, entertainment derives from this modern culture with urbanization, salaried work, progress in literacy, and workers' struggle for shorter days and better wages that would allow them to read *feuilletons* in newspapers and go to *café-concerts*, universal exhibitions, and *revues*. Entertainment was also a form of distinction that offered the bourgeoisie and the emerging middle class other more sophisticated products (ORTIZ, 1991) and the experience of enjoying department stores.

In this way, the department store – with its immersive atmosphere of luxurious decor, pleasant aromas, ample circulation space, and objects displayed within reach of eyes and hands – offered a magical environment that awakened the senses and emotions. It was simultaneously a spectacle, an entertainment, and an experience. As in a game, those who went to this “temple” allowed their imagination to flourish and their desire to lead them to dream worlds of consumption. Such a displacement of subjectivity is the translation of a new type of hedonism that emerges in modernity. The feeling provoked by the department store configures an “experience consumption,” linking purchases to a memory of involvement that goes beyond everyday consumption experiences (PEREIRA et al., 2015).

The media, like department stores, exercised pedagogical and marketing functions to serve a plural public. In the 20th century, shopping malls began to explore the pairing of leisure and consumption, and electronic media, such as radio and television, became great disseminators of fashion primers.

Television and the platformization of consumption in Brazil

Exploring the marketing capabilities of media began early in the history of commercial broadcasting and has motivated many attempts at interactive engineering and, more specifically, at transmedia systems. In the 1940s and 1950s, radio shows received the sponsorship of advertisers, and the vehicle depended on advertising to exist. Television, launched in Brazil in 1950, followed the same path. According to Assis Chateaubriand, the founder of the media group *Diários Associados*, such an undertaking was only possible with the union of all radio networks and newspapers and with subsidies from the major industries advertising in the country.

Television appears as a fascinating machine of images and sounds. Olavo Bilac, still in the early 20th century, predicts in his monthly chronicle in *Revista Kósmos*, in March 1904, the end of the book and the advent of news in a graphic-animated form. The immersive potential of television caused a blurring of boundaries that had a definite impact on the perception of reality, political action, and consumption practices. The ease of recording and editing images with the arrival of videotaping, from the 1960s onwards, combined the audiovisual with commercial narratives, definitively boosting the vehicle. Advertising agencies rushed to publicize the country's growth, adopting discursive constructions for selling comfort and well-being.

The digitization and computerization of communication environments gradually expanded viewing possibilities, the productive dynamics of television and, above all, helped to build a platform for consumption in a spiral and continuous process. The media gained

a continental dimension in the 1970s under the umbrella policy of “national integration,” a political-ideological premise of the military government. The setting up of a satellite infrastructure allowed Brazilian television, especially Rede Globo, to consolidate itself as the main communication vehicle that invented, borrowing Benedict Anderson’s expression (2008), the modernizing Brazilian “imagined community” of post-1970s.

The government’s effort made possible not only the establishment of a wide communicative circuit that carried a convergence between television, information technology, and telecommunications but also elaborated a hegemonic structure of circulation of representations, models of behavior, and consumption rituals quickly incorporated as a primer of customs in the country.

Due to its interactive polysemy, television made possible a plurality of scriptures that gradually transformed the processes of building citizenship and reading the social world. The representation effect associated with technologies, the global, and the acceleration of time determined a new regime of the visible and the emergence of a subjectivity whose political participation takes place through audiovisual and consumption modes. In this sense, the strategies of promotional industries shaped not only media texts but also the infrastructures and platforms that defined communication processes, schedule possibilities, the conception of formats, genres, applications, and viewer-consumer interaction.

In the 1990s, we witnessed robust media interactivity experiments on Brazilian television, an attempt the “owners of power” always desired while focusing their conglomerates on communication networks with different media. The show *Você Decide* on TV Globo delineated well such an idea, combining fiction with audience interactivity in real-time. Between 1992 and 2000, the show invited viewers to choose an ending for the episode by phone call. The *Intercine* film session on Globo was another format that bet on active interaction with the audience, who could choose the films on the following week’s schedule by voting over

the phone. The show ran from 1996 to 2010 (RICCO; VANNUCCI, 2017).

This quality of technical interaction, which incorporates the mediation of other electronic-digital devices, is considered by André Lemos as overcoming the “analog-mechanical” paradigm that marked traditional media. Digital technology enables the user to interact not just with the object (the machine or the tool) but with the information, that is, with the ‘content’ (LEMOS, 1997). The author divides the technical interaction of television into five levels since the first experiments of the media. Level 0 corresponds to black and white TV, where the interactive action is limited to turning the device on and off, changing channels, or adjusting volume and technical settings. Level 1 incorporates color television, remote control, and the appearance of a higher number of channels. Zapping here is considered an element that precedes computerized navigation on the internet. Level 2 observes peripheral equipment connected to the television, such as VCRs, portable cameras, and electronic games. Viewers begin detaching themselves from linear programming, appropriating the television device for other purposes and establishing different temporalities. On Level 3, the first movements of digital interactivity appear when viewers begin to interfere with the scheduled content via telephone, e-mail, or fax. Level 4 explains interactive television allows viewers to interact with broadcasts in real-time, taking charge of choices and interfering with content. Therefore, the level involves the development of inventive, collaborative, and interventionist actions, such as choosing the camera angle from which to watch a soccer game, producing and forwarding amateur videos for exhibition on a newscast, or talking live with the host of a show through videoconference.

Thus, for Lemos, digital interactivity occurs when the user begins to have technical-digital resources to intervene in the broadcast of content. With the evolution of interfaces and forms of interactivity triggered by the incorporation of digital technology in the television environment in the early decades of the 21st century, viewers become virtual interlocutors,

engaged agents, and active participants in the process of producing and circulating information.

In the 2000s, the advancement of the digitization process gradually changed the ways of watching and producing television in Brazil and around the world. Content on websites, social media, and cell phones became ever-expanding, composing the fragments of a transmedia narrative context in which television struggled to be the central element of this hub and contain the loss of audience to other media, especially streaming platforms. However, as Newton Cannito (2010, p. 15) states, “Digital is more than a medium; it is a technology – and mainly a culture – that contaminates other media.” Thus, television adapts itself, although no longer in a hegemonic way, to the other supports and channels of integrated communication platforms, which become content producers. However, digital services also resorted to the television media to gain capillarity and audience coverage and function as a lucrative association for business. “The triumph of old media in the digital age,” as Michael Wolff (2015) says, nears productive models and senses awakened by Shoppable TV.

Shoppable TV in Brazil

Traditional television, which distinguished itself from other media by its single-frequency model, undergoes a process of decentralization driven by digital platforms and faces the need to reorganize its narratives given the possibilities of technical interaction of the “electronic-digital” type (LEMOS, 1997). A new video sphere disturbs the stability of the television concept, bringing together theoretical perspectives that speak of the *post-television* era (PISCITELLI, 1998; MISSIKA, 2006), following what Eco (1984) called the neo-television period. The semiologist used the prefixes paleo and neo to qualify the periodization of the medium through technical changes and spectator participation, like Lemos’ division by levels. *Paleo-television* is situated in the early years of the TV, when there were limited channels and little interference from the public. Differently, neo-television has a greater variety of channels, introduces

the remote control and the practice of zapping, and sees the arrival of pay TV. The increasing content offer and audience segmentation paved the way for the era of *Transtelevisión* (AUCAR, 2012), a neologism that expresses the expansion of the television experience – productive, reproductive, and interactive – in multiple devices and innovations aimed for consumption such as shoppable TV strategies.

With the explosion of screens in various domestic and social spaces, television must share viewers' attention, increasingly competing with parallel activities simultaneously on other screens. Attention is precisely the central target of the algorithmic logic that attracts and groups users and objects in certain times and spaces, directing tastes, options, and ways of seeing (LEVY, 1996). Consequently, brands are developing other forms of advertising and product presentation in a more systemic and algorithmic way. The promotional industries have sought to combine the reach and persuasion of television built in decades of communicative hegemony with the capillarity of digital media and the ability to generate revenue from electronic commerce (CAPPO, 2016).

Some post-covid-19 enhanced consumption habits also helped to develop sales techniques based on this platform economy. If, on the one hand, social media such as TikTok expanded, and viewers tend to pay ever-less attention to traditional television commercial breaks or even completely suppress them, on the other hand, there is increased confidence in online shopping systems. Brazilian e-commerce grew by 75% in 2020 compared to the previous year (VILELA, 2021). Social isolation also led to record video consumption, with significant audience rates in broadcasting and streaming services (VOGUEL, 2022).

In this context, the development of subliminal persuasion advertising techniques aims to insert messages subtly into entertainment television content and not just commercial breaks. Product placement merges advertisements with existing narratives, integrating brands, images, logos, sounds and objects in the same text. The strategy of associating objects with the plots of movies, series, or soap operas, including using characters the consumer is already familiar with or emotionally attached

to, awakens bonds of trust. In addition to increasing the exposure of consumer goods, the resource allows descriptions and visualizations of modes of use (LEHU, 2007). Such integration of products in the very structure of the television diegesis transforms the medium's production and financing models, as was the case of the partnership between Banco Itaú and TV Globo in the 2015 telenovela *A Regra do Jogo*. The network inserted an exclusive three-minute commercial within the soap opera's narrative, which connected to the previous scene of the plot, to promote the bank's reading incentive platform (DORES, 2015).

In the history of Brazilian television, we can find the first action of product placement in the telenovela *Beto Rockfeller*, which aired on TV Tupi in 1968. The character played by Luiz Gustavo pronounced the name of the effervescent tablet *Engov* every time he drank liquor in excess (RICCO; VANNUCCI, 2017). The red sandals and lurex socks worn by the character of Sônia Braga in *Dancin' Days* (TV Globo, 1979) are also examples of objects with dramatic functions in the plot that boosted the sales of the footwear brand *Azaleia*.

The fictional modeling agency, Fanny Models, from the telenovela *Verdades Secretas* (TV Globo, 2015), also promoted conversation with actual products. Underwear brand Hope and accessories brand *Chili Beans* participated as clients of the fictional agency to promote fashion shoots with their products. The telenovela *Sete Vidas* (TV Globo, 2015) featured scenes of children playing followed by images of Regina Duarte's character, Esther, using OMO laundry detergent to clean her grandson's dirty shirt (PROPMARK, 2015).

The promotional investment in narratives familiar to Brazilians, such as telenovelas, reinforces brand presence in the country's popular culture in an innovative way. However, in the context of multidimensional content production, the results are not always positive or predictable for promotional agents, as happened with TV Globo's telenovela *Império* in 2014. A *Coca-Cola* item placed in scenes with the plot's villain, played by actor Caio Blat, generated a lot of criticism on social media due to the association of the product with the antagonist (SENISE et al., 2016).

In this prerogative, we can also consider the growth of branded content actions on television and videos on streaming platforms. The technique consists of creating exclusive content to insert a given product into the context of a show or narrative in an organic way. The *Big Brother Brazil* reality show uses this resource abundantly to create contests, parties, and segments based on the companies sponsoring the program, such as *Lojas Americanas*, *Samsung*, and *McDonald's*. When used in shows with large television audiences, the model produces broad repercussions on the internet, increasing searches for brands on online shops and engaging anonymous and famous consumers who rush to display the use of products on their social media (ZAKZUK, 2022).

The immersive and interactive possibilities of Shoppable TV also trigger even more immediate strategies in the advertising industry. Among them, there is the possibility of instant purchase of products through QR Codes. The use of two-dimensional barcodes became popular with the hygiene measures encouraged during the Covid-19 pandemic. Today, we often use this technology to access menus in restaurants and bars, airline tickets, and tickets to the most diverse attractions. On Brazilian television, since 2020, several shows have been displaying QR codes so that consumers can purchase products by simply pointing their smartphone cameras at the television screen. The strategy dispenses with traditional mediators of the shopping process – such as salespeople, stores, and even physical money – and increases the influence of television characters on the consumer experience (YANNA; WANG, 2017). The feature, symptomatic of multiscreen consumption and the new rhythms of everyday life, was widely used to sell products from the retail chain *Casas Bahia* on TV Globo's *The Masked Singer Brasil*, hosted by the famous singer Ivete Sangalo in 2021. Special discounts activate during the show's broadcast to stimulate sales and privilege this shopping channel. QR Codes allow direct purchases without interruptions in the television schedule or resizing for an exclusive authentication screen, synchronizing audiovisual consumption with that of material goods.

Interactivity buttons on smart TVs also facilitated instant purchase processes without intermediaries, providing extra information about any product shown on the program or the possibility of opening direct links to finalize purchases on the sellers' mobile websites. On these devices, users can use gestures or voice commands to simultaneously activate television and mobile devices in a kind of hybrid interaction.

In this way, new spectatorship practices, multiplatform navigation, changeable supports, and different languages have altered the ways of living with television. The medium, which has expanded and resized with digital platforms and algorithmic logics, continues to manage a considerable part of consumer experiences and the circulation of hegemonic representations in modernity, emphasizing the notion of participation, "co-construction," and "co-authorship" while, at the same time, indoctrinating sight, the desire, and even the imagination of humanities that asphyxiate themselves outside the realm of the image.

Final considerations

We started from the birth of the department store in the 19th century to understand capitalism and its transformations in the process of building new regimes of sensibility and visibility. In the hierarchy of values that supported the capitalist worldview and the course of its changes, we looked to theorists who considered consumption and luxury as modes of obtaining pleasure.

Department stores modeled an intense consumer experience and produced new sensibilities and modes of interaction. These consumption temples simultaneously made it possible for people to learn the grammar of good taste and to imagine it in themselves and their environment. Such places set the concept of convenience, amalgamating the triad of consumption, sociability, and leisure. Ortiz (1991) highlights the spectacle side of the department store, which resorts to a circus matrix to attract attention and, in this way, make consumers feel part of the "mass." Catering to a broad audience, the department store played a pedagogical role by disseminating their new grammar of customs. And

with the emerging media, they promoted desirable conceptions of leisurely worlds. Later in the 20th century, the shopping center drew from the design of the department store and became the new temple of consumption, disseminating its fashion primers through electronic media. In the 21st century, internet-enabled devices altered the relationship between time and space and endowed a new function to television: shows with scenarios that operate as shop displays for a wide range of products. In the wake of streaming combined with new promotional techniques, shoppable TV emerged as an immersive possibility that allows consumers to purchase products through QR Codes while experiencing and enjoying their favorite program.

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Date of submission: 06/30/2022

Date of acceptance: 12/14/2022

Advertising platformization in virtual reality immersive environments: metaverses, brands and believability

Plataformização da publicidade em ambientes imersivos da realidade virtual: metaversos, marcas e acreditabilidade

*Zilles Borba*¹

Resumo: *O artigo aborda a comunicação publicitária em plataformas imersivas da Realidade Virtual (RV). Numa pesquisa teórica e empírica são tensionadas e articuladas reflexões sobre as marcas se apropriarem das características do meio RV – a partir do fenômeno da acreditabilidade – para produzir experiências de comunicação com potenciais consumidores. Além da revisão teórica sobre publicidade e indústrias promocionais, da RV e do conceito de acreditabilidade em ambientes imersivos (metaversos, simuladores e videogames), o artigo faz exercício prático de exploração a uma peça publicitária. Assim, a partir de dados qualitativos, discute-se a plataformização da publicidade em ambientes imersivos, bem como o papel de dimensões da acreditabilidade para estudar a comunicação das marcas em RV.*

Palavras-chaves: *Realidade virtual; metaverso; publicidade; indústrias promocionais; comunicação das marcas.*

Abstract: *This article approaches the advertising communication in immersive Virtual Reality (VR). In a theoretical and empirical research, reflections are tensioned and articulated on brands appropriation of VR medium characteristics – based on the phenomenon of believability – to produce communication experiences with potential consumers. In addition to theoretical review on advertising*

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and promotional industries, VR and the concept of believability in immersive environments (metaverses, simulators, videogames), the article does a practical exercise to explore an advertising case. Based on qualitative data, the platformisation in immersive environments is discussed, as well the role of believability dimensions to study brand communication in VR.

Keyword: *Virtual reality; metaverse; advertising; promotional industry; brand communication.*

Introduction

When considering that digital platforms indicate any infrastructure in which people interact, exchange, and coexist based on a combination of norms and communication protocols linked to the mode (and possibilities) of functioning of the interfaces and devices that mediate these relationships, it becomes understandable the existence of a transforming power intrinsic to their *modus operandi*, especially for formatting new modes of production, consumption, relationships, work, and communication experiences (POELL et al., 2019).

Promotional industries, advertising, marketing, public relations, and branding (DU GAY, 1997), like other sectors, are not immune to the impact of platforming logic. Abilio et al. (2021), for example, present reflections on these changes in transportation and delivery services based on work models influenced by digital applications. Interested in the nuances of this theme, which also permeates promotional industries, the paper suggests an approach to the advertising (and brand communication) field in immersive Virtual Reality (VR) platforms. At the intersection between production and consumption, the paper focuses on the promotional field as a representational activity, pointing toward new approaches supported by these emerging digital environments (DAVIS, 2013). This focus also starts from understanding a possible future of advertising through immersive and multisensory devices that, in turn, help to raise clues for a future configuration of advertising in metaverses in VR (QIN; LEI, 2019; GAUQUIER et al., 2019).

In the market sphere, VR is on the rise, especially after the company Meta announced its intention to develop the social media hitherto known as Facebook according to the logic of a metaverse supported by VR interfaces (SAKER; FRITH, 2022). That is, if neither the idea of the metaverse nor the applications of VR are new, one can think that the integration of both will bring something different to the social, cultural, and market experiences in digital spaces. After all, head-mounted display (HMD) devices, popularly known as virtual reality glasses, motion sensors, tactile and haptic feedback gloves, olfactory masks, and

other avant-garde devices in human-computer interaction stimulate experimentation in the production and consumption of content in these digital environments² (ISCHER et al. 2014; SHIN, 2018; KATAOKA et al., 2019; JUNG et al., 2020).

The starting point for structuring the article considers that VR is an advanced human-computer interaction interface (TORI et al., 2018). VR is advanced because it is an interface configured by transparency mechanisms that operate to cancel the subject's perception that devices are mediating their experience with spaces, objects, and people in the digital scenario (ZAGALO, 2010). Consequently, that causes an illusion of being inside the digital environment without the mediation of equipment (BOLTER; GRUSIN, 1999). On the topic of the feeling of immersion and presence in the context of VR, Bolter and Grusin (1999), Pereira (2008), Thom (2008), Calleja (2011), Fragoso (2015), Longhi (2016), and Castro Alves (2022) debate the notion of being involved in a 360° scenario, where the person sees, hears, and interacts with digital content based on natural sensations, as a communicational process different from the one produced on flat screens.

In the methodological conduction, the researcher carried out an empirical exercise, putting himself in the position of a VR user to experience the promotional experience of a brand. I observe aspects of the experience based on three axes of believability: realism, interactivity, and involvement (PAUSCH et al., 1996; SLATER; WILBUR, 1997; SLATER, 1999; 2009). Intersecting empirical and theoretical data, the qualitative analysis reflects on advertising configurations on immersive VR platforms, such as the materiality of devices, user appropriations, perception of products/services, immersive narratives and storytelling, brand communication strategies, and paths for constructing advertising in metaverses.

2 Authors such as Cook et al. (2020) and Austin (2021) suggest that based on the interactional dynamics of VR interfaces, a new way of producing and consuming content on the internet tends to take shape, which is what they call user experiences of Web 3.0.

Advertising in promotional industries

Before detailing the properties of VR and, thus, developing the concept of believability in immersive digital environments, it is crucial to establish an understanding of advertising in the promotional industries from the perspective of this article. Some views assume that advertising activity is transforming in contemporary times, going beyond its traditional boundaries (ads, logos) to play a central role in the broad promotional industry (marketing, public relations, design, etc.) (DU GAY, 1997).

Currently, advertising merges with other disciplines to cohabit in media spaces (information, entertainment) and multi-platforms (social media, video games, metaverses) in a transmutation that expands it to the production of content, creative and promotional products as well as other communication representations that generate brand relationships with society (RODRIGUES; BORBA, 2022). That is clear when advertising shifts to digital platforms as the dynamics of telematic networks in cyber advertising (ATEM et al., 2014) encourage participation, engagement, protagonism, cooperation, co-creation, and a sense of belonging among communities interested in the brands (KOTLER et al., 2017; 2021).

At this point of intersection between the production and consumption of advertising, it is relevant to add Davis' (2013) ideas about advertising practice as a fundamental part of the promotional industry, not only for publicizing products and services but also for communicating purposes with which brands, organizations, or celebrities want to be associated with. That establishes a role for the advertising field that goes beyond a mere mechanism for commercial purposes to the level of a social and cultural agent of communication with contemporary society.

By transporting such ideas of advertising to the phenomenon of platformization of communication in immersive VR environments (SAKER; FRITH, 2022; KIM, 2021), we can see clues of potential for generating experiences of (and with) brands on platforms that encourage user involvement and protagonism on the media stage (QIN; LEI, 2019; GAUQUIER et al., 2019). This power is justified beyond the immersion technique promoted by the media arrangements of interactivational devices

(the medium) (PEREIRA, 2008), as brand messages on these platforms have an opportunity to extrapolate the commercial disposition, favoring social conversations and cultural transformations in a more engaging way than other means of communication mediated by flat screens (gender diversity, racial equality, female empowerment, etc.) (TRINDADE, 2017; HANSEN, 2016; RODRIGUES; BORBA, 2021).

Believability on virtual reality platforms

zilles Borba (2022) presents an example of a video on the internet in which the person becomes a meme by experiencing a comical situation when trying virtual reality glasses for the first time. In the scene, that person faces a series of imbalances that culminate in their falling to the ground. More than a piece of entertainment, this video reveals the potential to problematize the use of VR as a means of communication, such as the role of the audience in media consumption from the perspective of the first person in immersive scenarios (participatory culture, promotional field, embodiment in representation of the self in an avatar) or the remediation of digital experience with emerging devices (immediacy, immersion, sense of presence, etc.).

Tori et al. (2018, p. 480) propose understanding VR as an “advanced interface for computational applications, where the user can navigate and interact in real-time, in a three-dimensional computer-generated environment, using multisensory devices.” Jerald (2015 *apud* TORI et al., 2018) indicates that the aesthetics (sound and visual) and functionalities (interactivity) of this digital environment provide a sense of immersion of the subject in the virtual context, creating the illusion that one is in a space that mimics physical reality.

Steuer (1992) pioneered understanding immersion in VR, emphasizing that the liveliness of images projected on VR glasses and the interactivity to manipulate virtual objects would be crucial factors in stimulating the illusion of immersion in the virtual. According to the author, the more natural the person’s movements and three-dimensional visualization of objects, the more immersive the experience. With a

more technical view, Burdea (2003) added that the graphic processing capacity of computers that support VR would also play a fundamental role in building the user's illusion of immersion in the digital context. He focused on two factors to understand the liveliness and interactivity of Steuer (1992): the image resolution, since the graphic quality of everything that the subject sees in the computational image would generate more or less immersion, and the latency of the computer system, since the response time for virtual images to manifest themselves in the scene after the user's interactive commands would increase the realism of the experience.

It is worth noting the two authors complement each other to create the idea that vividness and interactivity are relevant aspects in producing the immersive effect in VR. However, later studies by Communication researchers (PEREIRA, 2008; FRAGOSO, 2015; LONGHI, 2016; ZILLES BORBA, 2020; CASTRO ALVES, 2022) moved away from the pure technique of electronic engineers to approach sociotechnical factors related to the composition of the 360° environment (around the user), which differs from 3D content presented on a flat screen (in front of the user). Their approach understands a first-person point of view on media content (scales, proportions, and shapes) encourages subjects to perceive themselves as surrounded by the content, as if the screen had become a large sphere that projects media content across its surface and viewers were right in the center, inside it, to absorb the contents on all sides (up, down, left, right, diagonally, etc.) (LONGHI, 2016; ZILLES BORBA, 2020).

At this point, it is imperative to reflect that all aspects mentioned so far indicate some relationship with realism (image vividness) or interactivity (interaction with the image) as dimensions that deserve attention. On the other hand, not satisfied with these two dimensions, Pausch et al. (1996) published a seminal article suggesting the existence of a specific one for storytelling. In other words, the quality of the plot in the VR article would be, for Pausch et al. (1996), the most significant factor in producing user immersion in the digital context. They called

this phenomenon believability in VR, as involvement with the plot would awaken emotions capable of attracting the subject's attention to the narrative and, consequently, to the notion of being in a VR.

From the perspective of this article on the platformization of advertising in immersive VR environments, the theory put forth by Pausch et al. (1996) is valuable, as it encourages researchers interested in immersive narratives to look at psychological aspects produced both by the user's objective experience and by their subjective experience with the stories told on these platforms (THOM, 2008; CALLEJA, 2011). At first, the ideas of Pausch et al. (1996), when combined with those of Steuer (1992), Burdea (2003), or Longhi (2016) – and not isolated or substituting them –, allow the addition of narrative elements to stimulate the social, cultural, technical, and semiotic problematization intrinsic to the relationship between user, devices, and VR environment. At first, the ideas of Pausch et al. (1996), when combined with those of Steuer (1992), Burdea (2003), or Longhi (2016) – and not isolated or substituting them –, allow the addition of narrative elements to stimulate the social, cultural, technical, and semiotic problematization intrinsic to the relationship between user, devices, and VR environment. For example, De Gauquier et al. (2019) and Qin and Lei (2019) agreed with Kotler et al. (2017) that brands strengthen by offering experiences with potential consumers, which the VR immersion enhances by showing, trying, manipulating, or even assessing products and services.

With regard to the valorization of quality storytelling in VR, it is imperative to note that when Pausch et al. (1996) published *Disney's Aladdin: first steps to storytelling in virtual reality*, the British researcher Mel Slater also carried out experiments with users in an attempt to theorize aspects of the perception of reality of those who explore immersive scenarios (SLATER; WILBUR, 1997; SLATER, 1999). From these experiments, significant collaborations emerged for constructing the concept of believability in VR. For instance, Slater and Wilbur (1997) begin the important theorization of the phenomena of immersion and

presence in VR, concluding that, even though they are different things, the two act concomitantly to form the user's perception of reality.

As a result of the research from the late 1990s, still welcome and applied to VR, it is worth highlighting that, for Slater and Wilbur (1997), immersion is exclusively linked to the properties of the user's sensory experience (the body) as a process mediated by interactional devices, for example, stereoscopic vision mediated by VR glasses or haptic feedbacks when touching virtual objects with haptic gloves (SLATER, 2009; ISCHER et al., 2014; SHIN, 2018; KATAOKA et al., 2019; JUNG et al., 2020). In turn, the feeling of presence is linked to the properties of the psychological experience (the mind) as a process of transferring attention between the person and the plot with variations in intensity due to their subjectivity (preferences, fears, memories) (THOM, 2008).

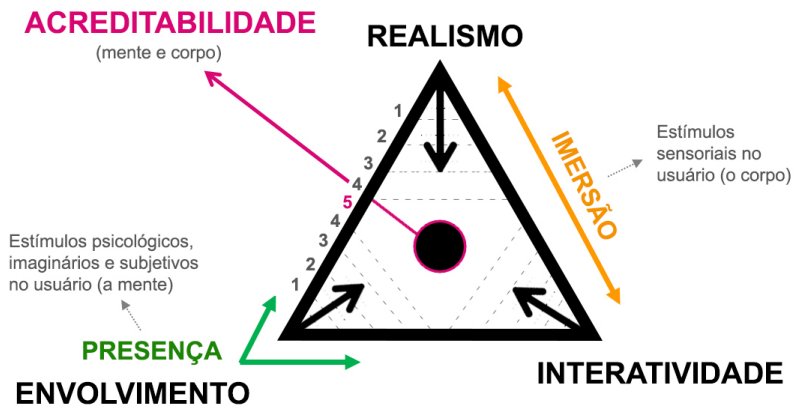
These ideas gave continuity to Randy Pausch's reflections, which establish that presence and immersion in VR are different but coexist and, when well developed, generate a complex perception of reality in the user. To explain this complexity, Slater (2009) sought the concept of believability from Pausch et al. (1996), changing the idea that storytelling would be more important than realism or interactivity. The author puts the dimensions of realism, interactivity, and storytelling on the same level, coining this plausibility relationship of inhabiting new realities (SLATER, 2009).

Regardless of the term used, Pausch et al. (1996) and Slater (2009) referred to the same thing – the illusion of immersing yourself in the context of VR. This paper maintains the term believability to indicate all the complexity of the phenomena of immersion and the sensation of presence when they act concomitantly in users' experience of immersion in the digital context. It is the case to say that, nowadays, believability is understood as the sum of the phenomena of immersion (sensorium) and feeling of presence (subjectivity) since they act in a coalescent way.

To understand this updating in the concept of believability, Zilles Borba (2020) carries out a theoretical-practical exercise that culminates in the suggestion of a communication structure for believability in VR

based on three dimensions (realism, interactivity, and involvement), considering everything observable in the relationship between user, device, and environment (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – The three dimensions of believability in VR



Source: Zilles Borba (2020) based on Pausch et al. (1996), Slater and Wilbur (1997), and Slater (1999)

Methodology


Besides the bibliographic review, the methodological conduction makes an empirical approach by exploring an advertising piece in VR. This practical approach to the object of study is justified to observe, collect, and analyze qualitative data that help answer the research problem: if platformization is a phenomenon that impacts promotional industries, how does it manifest itself in advertising on immersive VR platforms? And can the concept of believability guide reflections about production and consumption in these environments?

To collect data, the researcher put himself in the position of a user and experienced the promotion of a brand (Audi) wearing VR devices: an Oculus Rift S (HMD), two Oculus Sensors, two Oculus Touch, and an MSI SteelSeries notebook with GTX 1060 graphics card. The



researcher selected the promotional piece according to convenience as part of a sample of 60 VR advertising experiences mapped in an ongoing research project at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul.³

Data collection involved observation (exploratory) and note taking (descriptive) of aspects experienced in the VR immersion based on believability dimensions: realism, interactivity, and involvement. Table 1 highlights the attributes observed in each dimension (ZILLES BORBA, 2020; 2022). From the understanding of the operation of the dimensions of believability in the advertising piece, the study compares and articulates the empirical data with the previously presented theoretical discussion to deepen the reflection on the platformization of advertising in immersive VR environments and, thus, verify the workings of believability as a guide to think/analyze the production and consumption of promotional industries in these innovative environments (DU GAY, 1997; DAVIS, 2013; KOTLER et al., 2017; GAUQUIER et al., 2019 and others).

Table 1 – Attributes that configure the dimensions of believability.

Dimension	Observed attributes
Realism 	These include audiovisual aesthetic aspects, including image attributes related to content and design (shapes, scales, proportions, perspectives, textures, colors, shadows), technical ones of the digital image (resolution, latency), and space/object sonorities (timbres, intensities, frequencies).

3 Besides the author of this paper, who coordinates the research project “Techno-experiences in virtual and augmented reality: a view from the perspective of advertising communication,” the activity includes the participation of four undergraduate research students and a Ph.D. student.

<p>Interactivity</p> 	<p>These are aspects of navigation through scenarios, user commands, orientation in space, and manipulation of 3D/2D objects. They include the materiality of the interaction devices that, in some way, transpose the intentions of the subject's movements in the physical world to the digital space. It is also worth observing the behavior of objects within the media stage when manipulated by the user's representation (the avatar), for example, the waiting time between action and reaction (real-time rendering).</p>
<p>Involvement</p> 	<p>Storytelling, plot, and narrative aspects of the experience as the user explores the VR environment. These involve the story told but also the details that constitute some kind of orientation for the experience, like the mission the user must carry out, the goal they must fulfill, elements in the scenario that create meanings, awaken memories, emotions, and other subjectivities (fear, pleasure, joy, desire, curiosity).</p>

Source: adapted from Zilles Borba (2020; 2022)

During the qualitative analysis, in addition to collecting data on the attributes that constitute believability, the researcher gives a score on the Likert scale to each dimension – in which 1 point indicates it had a low impact on the user experience, and 5 points means a high impact (ZILLES BORBA, 2022) (see Figure 1).

Data presentation and analysis

The researcher explored the VR advertising piece selected for the empirical stage, using VR devices, which allowed for taking notes and recording images. These materials helped to develop a qualitative analysis that reflects on believability – realism, interactivity, and involvement – as a property to investigate the platformization of the advertising experience in VR. The analyzed piece, “Audi A4 Experience,” offers an exclusive experience of the A4 model of the brand’s automotive product series (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Immersive environment to explore the vehicle.



Source: researcher's screenshot

During the experience in the brand's immersive environment, the intention is to provide the first contact between the consumer and a car model that is not yet available in the market. The proposal is to place the consumer inside the vehicle to get to know the product before the official launch. In other words, it is a promotional action that offers a privileged situation for consumers who are fans of the brand or are simply curious to see the car before it is on the streets. Regarding this novelty appeal linked to the brand's promotional action, it is relevant to stress that the VR application was only released online for the general public after the VR campaign. Initially, the immersive experience ran at Audi dealerships in the Netherlands.

At the beginning of the experience, the researcher noticed that, unlike most VR pieces that start inside the cockpit of a vehicle, Audi proposes an introduction outside of it (Figure 3-A). One cannot select the car's point of view as the camera's journey remains on a predefined course. Nevertheless, the piece presents different perspectives – side views, front view, rear view, aerial view, etc., and users are free to move their heads and turn 360°, which allows a satisfactory contemplation of the product.

In this same introductory scene, a male voice constantly accompanies the user. During the journey, the narrator's voice explains the car's technical details as if a salesperson were always at the user's disposal. Although there is no avatar of this narrator (embodiment), his presence emerges from the sound narrative that supports the storytelling. That moves away from the dimension of realism but meets the one of involvement in a maneuver that seeks to capture the subject's attention for specific moments of explanation of the product (focus) (THOM, 2008).

Figure 3 – Selection of frames of the brand experience in VR

Figure 3-A



Figure 3-B



Figure 3-C



Figure 3-D



Figure 3-E



Figure 3-F



Source: researcher's screenshots

Mostly, a 360° high-definition video makes the spatial composition of the media environment in the introduction, which generates a high degree of realism (BURDEA, 2003). Special effects, superimposed on the video, appear on the carcass of the vehicle, imitating holograms and mapped projections (CASTRO ALVES, 2022). This media arrangement simulates an augmented reality within VR, awakening the user's feelings of futurism and technological innovation associated with the product (PEREIRA, 2008).

A second moment transports the user inside the vehicle in a space composed of a 360° photograph in high resolution (Figure 3-B). The car is on a mountain top with a panoramic night view of the city. The narrator invites the user to contemplate the very realistic details around them (leather seats, multimedia panel, etc.), encouraging them to turn 360° (STEUER, 1992; LONGHI, 2016) to the point of formatting within the user the perception that they are indeed inside the car.

The dimension of realism – visual and sound – stands out in the experience. This audiovisual sophistication guarantees a high sense of immersion, especially for understanding the vehicle's internal space since the subject views the scenario with similar aesthetics to the physical world from a first-person perspective, sitting in the driver's seat. Such stimuli, especially visual ones, guarantee the existence of moments of immersion due to the similarity of virtual things with their original versions (TORI et al., 2018). Although brief, like frequencies that come and go, these moments generate conflicting understandings in the user that there is no mediating interface as if, for an instant, they were really inside the vehicle (BOLTER; GRUSIN, 1999).

Even though there are three types of images (360° photography, 360° video, and 3D design), they are accurate in imitating situations the user would experience inside the original car or in a city landscape through the windows. Nevertheless, to encourage the subject's immersion in VR, the high point of the realism dimension is in the internal scene where one can visualize the vehicle's structure, finishings, and accessories. This approximate realism of the original version of the product suggests

a consumer understanding of the quality, innovation, and technology associated with the brand (KOTLER et al., 2017; GAUQUIER et al., 2019).

The advertising piece does little work on the interactivity dimension. In some situations, the user makes hand movements to click on the icons scattered throughout the scenario (Figure 3-C). These work through two joysticks tracked by movement sensors, transposing commands from the subject's physical body into the virtual context. The icons act as access buttons to new videos in a portal that leads users to other content. These scenarios communicate product attributes in a different way, like a live show to demonstrate the quality of the audio system.

As a user, it is frustrating not being able to interact with greater freedom on a VR platform. The brand ignores possibilities to offer protagonism and active participation of the individual, distancing itself from the understanding that, in the promotional industries, the audience mixes and confuses itself with the production of brand content (DAVIS, 2013; HANSEN, 2016; KOTLER et al., 2017). Even if the user fits into a position of privileged spectator because they are "inside" a car that is not yet available in the market, they are in a passive condition, in which they do not drive or manipulate objects.

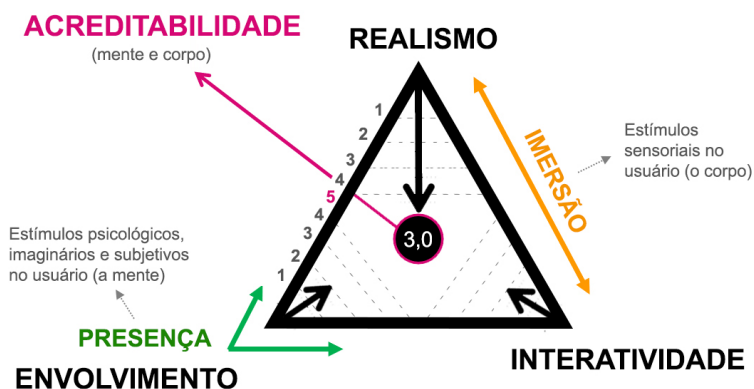
The involvement dimension bases itself on storytelling directly linked to the opportunity to explore a vehicle that is not out in the market yet, reinforcing the idea of exclusivity relevant to the Audi consumer. However, one cannot drive the car, feel its engine, the softness of the seats, or other materialities (participatory exploration of the product), much less capture any cultural message or social transformation purpose of the brand. The construction of the involvement dimension of this piece is much more dependent on the understanding that visual realism is enough to satisfy the consumer who wants to know the car. However, the excessive focus on realism without a plot makes the consumer journey monotonous after a few minutes of the experience.

Scenarios that have nothing to do with the car's interior environment break the monotony when opening with the user's clicks on hotspots (see Figure 3-C). Such a maneuver causes product attributes to be associated

with semiotic elements (ATEM et al., 2014), such as the sound in front of the stage of a rock concert compared with the sound quality of the vehicle (Figure 3-D), skiing with friends as if the car takes you to places where there is happiness (Figure 3-E), or, even, an explanation of the performance of the headlights through a night scene (Figure 3-F).

In short, the platformization of advertising in VR by the Audi brand values the user's immersion in a media environment that simulates the vehicle's interior. The realism of the 360° image (photography, video, and 3D) builds the immersive experience. In this sense, the score for the realism dimension is high, reaching five points on the believability scale (Figure 4). However, only the 360° view and clicking on icons/hotspots were constituent agents of the interactivity dimension, which gave it a score of only 2 points. The involvement dimension received a 2-points grade as well. Although the plot does not allow the test drive, the brand seeks to create subjective connections between the product and the user when opening 360° videos with ludic content. Basically, in the analyzed case, believability occurs when the subject is interested in visualizing car accessories and, after that, in fragments of stories that, in turn, activate the symbolic construction of technical things in the consumer's mind.

Figure 4 – Dimensions of believability in the VR piece for Audi



Source: developed by the researcher

Final considerations

The paper addressed the platformization of advertising in immersive virtual reality environments. The theoretical and practical work analyzed qualitative data on a brand. The case study enabled a discussion on appropriations in/from immersive platforms to communicate with potential consumers. The reflection drew on dimensions of believability in VR (realism, interactivity, and involvement), connecting its attributes to fundamental aspects of advertising in contemporary promotional industries.

The paper concludes that the studied brand appropriates some of the medium's peculiar features. That occurs more intensely in the construction of the 360° scenario with realistic and convincing images in its technique (resolution, latency) and aesthetics (shape, color, scale, texture). However, it was also evident that the brand did not take advantage of several characteristics of the VR medium, ignoring its interactive and immersive power, such as manipulations of 3D objects.

Based on the analyzed advertising experience, the paper concludes believability can be a tool for studying brand communication in VR and guiding content creation on these platforms. In the case of Audi, there was limited storytelling construction (involvement dimension), as the piece focused on the visual construction of the product (Audi A4), which made the experience monotonous after a few minutes.

In short, studying platformization of advertising in immersive VR environments based on believability is an interesting way for Communication researchers to reflect on the effects of advertising in metaverses, simulators, and video games. This approach allows for organizing the structuring logic of the existing communication process in the relationship between users, devices, and VR environments. As a future work, the intention is to expand the research to a larger sample of advertising pieces.

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Acknowledgments

This work received the support of the Dean of Research at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (PROPESQ/UFRGS). The author would like to thank the Computer-Mediated Interaction Laboratory (PPGCOM/UFRGS) for supporting the research.

Date of submission: 07/01/2022

Date of acceptance: 12/12/2022

In your heart's TikTok: from “jabá” to trends. Strategies and algorithmic manipulation in the production of musical success

No TikTok do seu coração: do jabá às “trends”. Estratégias e manipulação algorítmica na produção do sucesso musical

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Resumo: O TikTok tornou-se internacionalmente plataforma digital de notável expansão de consumo, reconhecida como capaz de formar opinião pública, ecoar pautas e debates do momento e favorecer a propagação de tendências nos mais diversos campos da vida social. A música constitui parte essencial da experiência dos frequentadores dessa plataforma digital, na qual as composições surgem em vídeos curtos, editadas, remixadas, pasteurizadas ou distorcidas, participando e dando suporte aos mais diferentes tipos de performances dos frequentadores. O artigo explora, a partir da revisão crítica da literatura científica sobre o tema, as implicações e impactos dessas novas práticas, usos e consumo de música no âmbito da plataformação da indústria cultural sob a intensa mediação algorítmica, fenômenos para os quais o TikTok contribui de forma importante e decisiva.

Palavras-chave: Indústria fonográfica; audiovisual; vídeos curtos; indústria cultural.

Abstract: TikTok has internationally become a digital platform with a remarkable expansion of consumption, recognized as capable of forming public

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opinion, echoing current agendas and debates and favoring the propagation of trends in the most diverse fields of social life. Music constitutes an essential part of the experience of the visitors of this digital platform, in which the compositions appear in short videos, edited, remixed, pasteurized or distorted, participating and supporting the most different types of performances of the regulars. The article explores, based on a critical review of the scientific literature on the subject, the implications and impacts of these new practices, uses and consumption of music in the context of the platformization of the cultural industry under intense algorithmic mediation, phenomena to which TikTok contributes in an important and decisive way.

Keywords: *Phonographic industry; audio-visual; short videos; cultural industry.*

Introduction

Businesses in the contemporary music industry are increasingly linked to the development and application of practices and strategies focused on transforming songs and melodies into hits³ (SUISMAN, 2009; THOMPSON, 2018). In this sense, some attributes of compositions have been considered relevant for building their popularity. Among them is the number of times the public has heard a certain song and which, in fact, contributes to making it recognizable and easily remembered. It is, therefore, the construction of familiarity as a powerful element that directs the taste and musical preference of the public (THOMPSON, 2018).

The construction and publication of lists of the most listened-to songs are present throughout the history of radio and sound and audiovisual media in general, arousing, over time, passions, curiosity, and, not infrequently, inflamed discussions. The so-called hit parades have been references for popular musical preference in different societies and specific socio-historical and cultural moments since the 1930s, when the term itself appeared in the USA. Billboard magazine – the primary reference of the phenomenon – published its first hit parade on January 4, 1936. The notion was used until the mid-1950s by radio and television shows that featured hit melodies, such as *Your Hit Parade*, a North American music show that aired on the radio from 1935 to 1953 and on television from 1950 to 1959 in that country.

Since then, different methods have emerged to compile music hit lists, ranging from sales ratios for records and other retail music media, the number of times a song has played on different channels, folksonomy measures to expert music consultations.

Originating in the USA, the periodic measures of the popularity of songs expanded to become an international phenomenon in the music industry, particularly from the 1950s onward. In 1958, for example, the

3 Abbreviation of the expression hit single, which designates a song that became very popular.

Billboard Hot 100, the best-known thermometer of American music, came out. Later, other music charts became relevant in different markets.

From the historiographical point of view, according to Thompson (2018, p. 96), the Billboard listing was, however,

...formed based on lies, half-lies, and fabricated statistics. For decades, there was no way to measure which songs played the most on the radio. There was no reliable way to know what albums record stores had sold the previous week. Billboard trusted radio stations and record store owners were being honest, and neither had much reason to be so. Record companies would give a push or shamelessly bribe radio DJs to play specific discs. Record stores did not want to promote albums that had sold out. The industry was biased towards turnover. Labels wanted songs and records to go in and out of the music charts quickly so they could keep selling new hits.

Subsequently, from the 1990s onward, Billboard abandoned such practices and began to collect data at points of sale, monitor music transmission by radio broadcasting, and rely on the services of Nielsen, the North American retail research company, to increase the reliability of its charts.

In digitally mediated contemporaneity, music consumption has expanded beyond radio and television, spreading across new formats and platforms, merging, and building new consumption possibilities, especially in conjunction with videos. This format consolidated itself before the platformization of audiovisual media with music videos (video clips), a cultural artifact usually concentrated in a time interval between three and five minutes. The currently called Big Video Era (BROADBAND COMMISSION; HUAWEL, 2017; YIN, 2021) is characterized, in this context, by an exponential increase in the production, sharing, and consumption of videos and by profound changes in their display modes (ZHAO, 2018, 2021). The constant development of new technologies or their updates guide such changes, which imply substantial impacts on the cultural industry. In its current phase, the movement gains strength from the unprecedented expansion

of editing and interactive circulation of short videos, usually between 15 to 60 seconds (FENG; CHEN; WU, 219; RICHARDSON, 2019), which have become its main product and changed how the video industry relates to traditional media (ALTI; LIANG, 2021).

In this scenario, the digital platform TikTok – controlled by the Chinese media company ByteDance since the acquisition of the also Chinese Musical.ly in 2017 – quickly conquered and consolidated its own space as a global digital communication tool, especially since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, when it became one of the most downloaded apps on the internet⁴. Since then, TikTok has achieved the planetary mark of more than 1.2 billion unique visitors, of which 70 million are in Brazil, where it arrived in 2018 (WE ARE SOCIAL; HOOTSUITE, 2022).

Internet users who access and explore the TikTok application are socially called TikTokers. Their characteristic action is to produce, share, and consume performative content created by themselves – especially video selfies – through which they express opinions and build identities in a purposely fun way. The cultural production of TikTokers – mainly pre-teens and teenagers – draws on short videos created from musical fragments. It is the constitution of an essentially performative scenario in which musical remixes and bodily expressions associated with dance are mixed, unconcerned with complex technical resolutions or quality.

In the context of the type of digital consumption of music in which the TikTok phenomenon is deeply rooted, it is worth remembering what Simon Reynolds has, since the beginning of the 2010s, conceptually discussed as “partial attention syndrome” (REYNOLDS, 2011), problematizing the degradation of the audiophile experience and the depreciation of the value of music (BARCINSKI, 2011), while anticipating the retroactive movements of revivals, remixes, remakes, reissues, and returns to what is already known and experienced in culture and, particularly, music.

4 According to a survey by Kantar/IBOPE (2021), in the first year of the pandemic, the social media TikTok grew in Brazil by approximately 35% among young people and adolescents, 24% among adults aged 35 to 45, and 14% among people over 55 years.

Music is, in fact, an essential part of the TikTok experience (KANTAR; TIKTOK MARKETING SCIENCE, 2022). Music appears edited, remastered, pasteurized, remixed, or distorted, participating in and supporting the most different types of corporal/facial performances. Essentially, the intention is the reproducibility of the short videos produced, their memetization, and their most vertiginous viral spread possible. Therefore, music becomes an instrument for building hyper-social exposure and, eventually, the fame and success that unfold for artists or performers in penetration on other platforms, such as Spotify, YouTube Music, iTunes, and Apple Music, among others.

TikTok has become a notable social network, recognized as capable of forming public opinion, echoing current agendas and debates, and favoring the spread of trends in ideas, concepts, music, and people (LEMOS, 2022b). TikTok's management algorithm specializes in valuing content interpreted as being in line with the "trends" of the week, which thus achieve a higher number of views, practically regardless of the number of followers of the person who posted it. (GUINAUDEAU; VOTTA; MUNGER, 2021).

Aiming to explore and problematize this new dimension of the insertion of online platforms in modeling music production, distribution, and consumption as well as their impacts on the cultural industry associated with music, focusing on the case of TikTok, this research elaborates a critical review of the literature available on the subject in the Brazilian and international scenarios. From this approach, the paper establishes the following lines of discussion: the role of affordances in constructing TikTok as a memetic platform, algorithmic manipulations in shaping trends, the influence of TikTok on other digital platforms, and its emerging relationships with the music industry.

TikTok: “affordances” at the service of building a memetic platform

Studies have understood the so-called social media websites as privileged spaces for self-representation and stimulation of identity construction processes (PAPACHARISSI, 2011; VAN DIJCK, 2013a, 2013b) based on the connections of Internet users with friends, family, acquaintances, and subjects with whom they wish to relate in general. In fact, in the construction of online social networks, both Facebook and Instagram, as well as other similar ones, instituted, from the beginning, the practice of what became known as a social graph, a mechanism that gathers searches for shareable content only in the universe of contacts between profiles of followed and followers, freely agreed among themselves.

Such possibilities derive from the affordances and resources of the design and architecture of the platforms that stimulate actions, such as liking, commenting, sharing posts, and viewing profiles, among others (BOYD, 2010), favoring large spaces for self-management, despite the growing interactive role of the action of non-human agents in the process (BHANDARI; BIMO, 2020).

The TikTok digital platform breaks this format of attachment based on social bonds without restricting or modifying the narcissistic and egocentric essence of relationships. On the contrary, TikTok encourages its users to go in different directions, dedicating less time, interest, and actions to audiences for which they represent a social role while, at the same time, acting in a more immersive way with their selves. For Bhandari and Bimo (2020), it is a shift from the interpersonal to the intrapersonal sphere.

Contrary to the practices of online social media (Facebook, Instagram, and others), the use of TikTok’s algorithms universalizes content search, bringing together Internet users who do not even know or recognize each other. Undoubtedly, the disruption of any sense of digital community prevails, opening a dominance of algorithmic, atomized, and probabilistic management based on the momentary reactions and

expressions of subjectivities and mental states of the users of online social media (STOKEL-WALKER, 2020, 2022).

On TikTok, the home page is called the For You Page (FYP) and displays videos that the platform's algorithms have selected as relevant to the interests of its users, unlike other online social networks such as Facebook, where content distribution prioritizes posts from friends and/or organizations that the person follows. When scrolling through FYP, TikTokers are constantly engaging with new content that is frequently updated and algorithmically curated based on a wide variety of user data (TIKTOK, 2020a). It is, therefore, a way of creating and exploring passive habits of viewing and consuming content.

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To facilitate the achievement of these goals, besides the algorithmic use, the application created and made available different affordances of the application to direct actions for creating and publishing new micro-videos, such as stitching and duetting (KAYE et al., 2021a; 2021b, 2022; ABIDIN et al. al., 2020). The app added the *Stitch* option in October 2020, allowing TikTokers to cut and appropriate small segments of a video from other platform users and produce their re-edits and remixes (TikTok, 2020c). To some extent, *Stitch* replaces, in a more integrated way, a previously released feature called *Duet*, which allows TikToker to record and share their videos paired side-by-side or threaded with videos produced by other creators (WEIR, 2020). *Duet* creates an opportunity for parasocial interaction, understood as a unilateral relationship between individuals and popular figures in the media (JARZYNA, 2020;

TIKTOK, 2020d). These available and easily located options on the home screen – given the size and location of the record button on the screen – make recording and posting videos more intuitive for users than locating people to follow or interact with.

The cultural production circulating on TikTok has evident characteristics of memetic communication (imitation, replication, persistence), which the platform's affordances and structure stimulate. Such phenomena led researchers Zulli and Zulli (2020) to define TikTok as a memetic text capable of generating an "imitation audience" aggregated in new forms of sociability. The analysis proposed by these authors thus expands the theoretical and methodological usefulness of the meme, allowing the conceptualization and visibility of new types of public in the platform.

By studying micro-videos produced and propagated on TikTok, Hautea et al. (2021) addressed this communicational phenomenon from the operationalization of the concept of affordances that promote and encourage online affectivity, as proposed by Treem and Leonardi (2012). Such affordances focus on favoring conditions of visibility, editability, and the association between different actors and content posted on this online platform.

According to Papacharissi (2015a, 2015b), communication processes in social media are intensely mediated by affectivity, favoring the mix between fact and opinion, politics, and affection, shaping the quality of online interaction and participation.

Trends: emergence of cultural manifestations v. algorithmic manipulations

The appropriation of the concept of trends and its distortion by TikTok is notorious. Unlike the epistemological field linking the concept of trends to Cultural Studies (GOMES et al., 2021), which recognizes the depth and sociocultural meanings of movements of taste and consumption, the social media fabricates and discards "trends" in ever shorter periods

of time. The fact the platform communicates to its market partners the “trends” it intends to promote in the following week has already become public.

The possible and eventually materialized manipulation and forging of successes is evident, especially in the musical field, the very essence of the TikTok platform. Such practices, made concrete in “trends” and their social boost, do not differ essentially from the already old and well-known methods of intentionally forcing the dissemination of songs through the payment of bribes (“*jabá*” in the Brazilian popular and journalistic jargon), or the manipulation of the expression of audiences’ tastes and preferences (such as constant and consecutive forged calls to broadcasters requesting the performance of a specific song or artist).

According to specialists responsible for the periodic ranking of the most listened-to songs in Brazil, music consumption in the country is diversified and follows different distributions according to the types of media. Consumption via streaming – which includes Amazon Music, Apple Music and Beats, Deezer, Spotify, Google Play Music, Napster, and YouTube Music platforms – is more upscale, involving a greater diversity of styles. On the other hand, preferences of consumption via radio are more popular and concentrated in country music. In the case of radio, the presence of “*jabá*” tends to be more evident. As the journalist and music producer Marcus Preto explains, “Music platforms are upscaled. Not the radio; it is popular. And more: the radio is *jabá*. So, *these songs are there because a force, mainly agribusiness, makes this market move with much more power.*” (DEL RÉ, 2022, p. 10, emphasis added).

The 2005 film *2 Filhos de Francisco* masterfully records the historical strength of agribusiness and country music in the practice of manipulating the boost of musical hits in Brazil, especially in the scenes in which the father of the country duo Zezé de Camargo and Luciano, Francisco Camargo, makes countless and consecutive anonymous phone calls to radio stations asking them to play songs by his children, whose success had not yet taken off.

The current practices of cultural consumption in platform media, both in the international and national scenes, do not differ essentially from these previous distortions in the music scene. For example, in an interview for journalist Augusto Diniz from the Brazilian weekly newspaper *Carta Capital*, singer Tulipa Ruiz stated: “Today, the algorithm is the new *jabá*. Previously, radio stations received to play an artist’s songs. Today, if you do not pay for boosting, your music will not appear. *Your music will appear less if you do not pay the algorithm.*” (DINIZ, 2022, emphasis added).

TikTok’s influence on other online social media and the music industry

The instantaneous and notable global success of TikTok has been inducing, since the emergence and internationalization of the platform, changes in the functionalities and tools of digital social media, both beginners (like the French BeReal) and already established ones, especially Facebook and Instagram (Meta). Furthermore, TikTok has been impacting the routines and operation of music streaming platforms, such as Spotify, which has already established the Hot Music Charts TikTok Brazil on its platform, listing the most played songs specifically on TikTok.

Such phenomena have provoked several online social media to seek to introduce modifications, especially from 2022, attempting to imitate TikTok to increase their competitiveness. Instagram, for example, carried out tests for the presentation of full screens and recommendations of third-party content in timelines regardless of whether or not its users have expressed a specific interest in the topic addressed⁵. These modifications followed the launch of the Reels short video editing tool to maximize the retention of the attention and online permanence of its users, a significant metric for negotiating with advertisers (LEMOS, 2021).

5 On July 27, 2022, Zuckerberg stated on the company’s Q2 earnings conference call that recommended posts and accounts in feeds represent about 15% of the total on Facebook and a higher percentage on Instagram. By the end of 2023, they will reach 30%.

Consecutive alterations provoked exacerbated criticism and dissent from its oldest and most entrenched users, who favored maintaining the previous format. The international resistance movement began to rely on the engagement of prominent influencers who access the platform, such as the Kardashian sisters, among others (NEWTON, 2022), which made Instagram give up, at least temporarily, these innovations or part of them.

Although the digital platform TikTok builds its social self-representation based on attributes of simplicity, relaxation, fun, creativity, and sharing, in practice, its behavior reveals one of the highest levels of negotiation aggressiveness compared to its competitors. Such initiatives and practices – aligned with the Chinese culture of innovation and promotion of acute competition (DE KLOET et al., 2019; TAN, 2019) – materialize especially in tireless and fast dynamics of production and implementation of new tools and affordances, whose results aim at increasing audience engagement, visibility, and business deals for brands, artists, and performers (TIKTOK MARKETING SCIENCE; HOTSPEX, 2021).

Such strategies include the creation of its music streaming channel, TikTok Music, registered in November 2021 in Australia by ByteDance, which owns a platform where internet users can download, buy, play, and share music they only heard a fragment of or learned about from micro-videos produced and disseminated by TikTokers. With access only allowed to a restricted audience initially, the tool presupposes and promises gradual expansion to its entire audience of users. It should also allow users to create, share, and recommend playlists, comment on songs, and stream audio.

ByteDance already has experience with music streaming. In 2020, the company launched the Resso app in India, Brazil, and Indonesia, reaching more than 40 million monthly visitors in November 2021 (OSAWA; MA, 2021). Resso has some of the same features described in TikTok Music, such as creating playlists, sharing music on social media, and interacting with the app's community. In Brazil, TikTok has

a command that redirects users to Resso, so they can listen to the full version of a song they are interested in, which helps keep the public within the ByteDance ecosystem (OSAWA; MA, 2021). Just as TikTok had a profound impact on the way social media sites operate, it is possible that a music streaming app with TikTok ties could change the music streaming industry, forcing services to adapt.

As part of the TikTok developer program, the short-form video platform also announced a new feature called the Profile Kit, allowing creators to showcase up to six TikTok videos outside of it. TikTokers will be able to integrate their profiles into Linktree, which already serves as a landing page for TikTok creators to share social links and contact information, which should help build curriculum references for creators looking to close commercial deals with companies and brands seeking this new format of digital influencers (THE NIELSEN COMPANY, 2022).

Final considerations

The Brazilian music industry annually generates considerable financial amounts, besides involving many agents. In 2021, according to the Central Office of Collection and Distribution (Ecad) – a non-profit entity designed to carry out the collection and distribution of copyrights arising from the public performance of national and foreign songs –, the distribution of copyrights in the country totaled R\$ 901 million, approximately less 5% compared to the previous year, primarily due to the pandemic. The amount benefited 267,000 composers, musicians, performers, and other holders, besides industry associations. In the accumulated until September 2022, the industry collected R\$ 824 million and benefited 286 thousand artists and other holders (ECAD, 2022). In recent years, the growth of music streaming and other music consumption channels in digital media has been driving the global expansion of the market, providing the opening of new fronts and opportunities for emerging artists and labels and important rediscoveries of compositions and old or practically forgotten authors and interpreters through the strength of the long digital tail.

An intricate series of doubts, polemics, and controversies involving, among other relevant topics, the remuneration for the rights of composers, music publishers, and owners of recorded songs marks the music industry's relationship with TikTok, situated in an essentially new experiential context but with significant economic dimensions. In the legal field, projects and initiatives already aim to contemplate and protect content distributed via streaming, with which, however, TikTok's operations cannot be confused, configuring an open, not standardized field, a dangerous gap from the point of view of distributive justice of value in the music chain.

In this context, the international experience of TikTok outside the Chinese environment deserves close attention. Not only TikTok achieved recognized impacts on the shaping of taste and the forging of trends – sometimes artificial and biased – of music consumption and the global expansion of the market, it also actively participates in the construction of new models and digital platform spaces in the contemporary cultural industry, where social media, websites, and apps copy each other, and where users influence each other in terms of practices, languages, and narratives emerging in digital media.

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Date of submission: 06/30/2022

Date of acceptance: 12/14/2022

Who is in the charge here, Alexa? Relationships built between perception views and personal assistants

Quem manda aqui, Alexa? Relações construídas entre vieses de percepção e assistentes pessoais

Ana Erthal¹

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Resumo: *Este artigo tem como objetivo discutir as relações construídas a partir das modulações entre humanos e máquinas, tendo como premissa a ideia de que são mutuamente afetados, alterando paulatinamente materialidades e subjetividades. Com mais intensidade a partir da era moderna, o imaginário humano concebeu a criação e a convivência pacífica e subserviente com substitutos autômatos, andróides e robôs que fossem capazes de realizar as atividades executadas pelo cérebro ou corpo, como um duplo inteligente que estenderia a consciência humana. De bonecas falantes a assistentes pessoais, os aparatos manifestam-se de formas diferentes, apresentando novas experiências de interação. Esta investigação explorou as percepções de utilização da assistente pessoal Alexa a partir da coleta de relatos pessoais de respondentes que não tiveram na infância a presença de tecnologias digitais.*

Palavras-chave: *Alexa;IoT (Internet of Things); inteligências virtuais; tecnologias midiáticas.*

Abstract: *This article aims to discuss the relationships built from the modulations between humans and machines, based on the idea that they are mutually affected, gradually changing materialities and subjectivities. With more intensity*

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from the modern era, the human imagination conceived the creation and peaceful and subservient coexistence with automatons, androids and robot substitutes that could carry out the activities performed by the brain or body, as an intelligent double that would extend human consciousness. From talking dolls to personal assistants, the devices manifest themselves in different ways, presenting new experiences of interaction. This investigation explored the perceptions of using the Alexa personal assistant from the collection of personal reports from respondents who did not have the presence of digital technologies in their childhood.

Keywords: *Alexa; IoT(Internet of Things); virtual intelligences; media technologies.*

Introduction

This article intends to retake the dual issues between man and machine from the perspective of the use of personal assistants, represented here by the popular Alexa. Machines have always been conceived as a way to specialize man, helping his productive, cognitive or bodily performance. When discussing the relationships built from the modulations between humans and machines, the premise is the idea that they are mutually affected, gradually altering materialities and subjectivities.

Starting in the modern era, collective imagination conceived, with more intensity, the creation and pacific and subservient coexistence with automaton substitutes, androids and robots that were capable of performing activities executed by the brain or the body, as an intelligent double that would extend human consciousness. From talking dolls to personal assistants, the devices manifest themselves in different shapes, presenting new interaction experiences.

To pursue the goal of understanding these modulations, this investigation explored the perceptions of use of the Alexa personal assistant based on the method of collecting personal reports from respondents who did not have digital technologies present in their childhoods.

The modulations of technologies inspired by the behavior of the human brain can be found in research in the fields of media, humanities, biology and neurosciences. The results demonstrated what Heidegger observed as a sign of his time, an imminent “wave of technological revolution capable of captivating, enchanting, dazzling and distracting” individuals, who would be victims of an unstoppable progress, anticipating that “the technology frenzy” would “entrench itself everywhere” (1966, p.56).

The inquietude presented in this article derives from studies referring to the way in which technologies change, cushion, alienate and remodel human perception in coupling to technological devices as extensions of their activities. This leads to a theme that has always hidden a veiled concern about the relationship between man and machine: which

would be the dominant one? If “humanized” robots have not yet been created, it would be accurate to say that we have become “machinelike”. By using tools to exert more control over the environment, we change our relationship with it. We live a life conditioned by the control of time, in the shape of clocks, defined schedules for activities, work and leisure. We comply without complaint with the standardized scripts of Netflix, Google and Amazon; and as thoughtless rituals, we build social bonds coded by the networks that have mechanized the exploitation of relationships with commercial purposes. We are algorithms following the natural flow of the technological frenzy.

Thus, we can consider that the present moment would be the super-technological world predicted by Marshall McLuhan and Norman Mailer (1968)³, in which technology would imply meeting and serving human desires while modulating their activities, cognition and senses – it would be Toffler’s (1994) “knot” of social relations, production, financial transactions, liberal economy, consumption, information and knowledge. “Once technologized, the world can not be de-technologized” (CARR, 2011, p.112). Digital personal technologies and media are the representation of this super technology.

This is an excess because technologies are omnipresent in human life, from global, domestic or individual perspectives. And, even though individuals wish to control and tame technology, they are more and more submissive and dependent on it. The best examples are smart mobile phones, which have become a holistic extension of their users: they mediate family, social and work relations; they organize tasks, routines and complex schedules of the contemporary individuals who have “no time”; offer indicators of health, sleep, physical activities, cardiac reports and signal problems; compute personal finances connected to several financial institutions; provide all kinds of information and entertainment, as well as tools for education; centralize digital documents and access to the cloud of contents (documents, photos, videos) which are crucial

3 Access to the debate video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtrJntaTlic>. Accessed on: jun. 18, 2022.

for daily activities; among many other functions. It is no wonder that there are negative implications of losing (by theft or carelessness) the cell phone.

Entrenched technologies would also be present in the daily relationships established with the personal assistants in the home media environment, such as Siri (Apple's virtual intelligence) and Alexa (Amazon's virtual intelligence).

The Cadence of Technological Domination

We start from the principle that human mental maps are constantly remodeled in relationships with technologies. Following the example of what Singer (2004) proposed, we still live in a world bombarded by stimuli that, since “neurological modernity”, have been enhanced by virtual experiences and ended up composing an agitated, anxious, intense, automated nervous system – equivalent to a digital electronic technology.

Opposite to Toffler's prediction, technology still cannot be tamed – the “future shock”, or the “disease of change” could not be avoided even though there are points of reflection and action on the control of acceleration (TOFFLER, 1994, p. 343). In 1970, the primordial discussion was centered on the development of social and economic structures that aimed at the Cold War, and the social scientist and futurist outlined a world for the next fifty years. Reviewing his work *The Future Shock* – today – one notices that some topics actually refer to contemporary day-to-day life, especially the ones that deal with technology, bombardment of sensory stimuli and culture of experience.

For Toffler, technological advancement would be a “critical knot” in a network of causal relationships that would connect population growth, urbanization, consumption and population aging, in which each one would play a role and technology would be the sustaining mesh of the whole network. This would distance us from the “natural state” of life, which would have its rhythm marked by the compass of relationships and the phenomena of nature. The tone can be considered deterministic:

technological progress that has an autonomous power beyond the control of man⁴. However, if we adopt an expanded historical view, the determinist theses have more credibility over the instrumentalist ones⁵, since the individual has not yet been able to “tame technology”, controlling the rhythm of its evolution and progress. “To a large extent, civilization assumed its present form as a result of the technologies that people came to use”, ponders Carr (2011, p. 74). For him, every technology is an “expression of human will” (CARR, 2011, p. 69).

They [technologies] tell us that the tools that man has used to support or extend his nervous system – those technologies that throughout history have influenced the way we find, store and interpret information, how we direct our attention and how we engage our senses, how we remember or how we forget – have shaped the physical structure and the functioning of the human brain. (CARR, 2011, p. 75)

The high speed of change is a constant, in which the human being and technology modulate themselves alternately or simultaneously, and in which there is no other reality except that of transition – the same idea of Marx about the incompatibility of capitalism and stable formations, “all that is solid melts into air” (MARX; ENGELS, 1998, p.14). In this continuous revolution, technology would be evolving in a semi-autonomous process, driven by a process of self-organization at an intensified rhythm, and human beings, in order to survive, should “assume the fluidity and the open form of this society” (BERMAN, 2007, p.119), desiring change, enjoying the mobility and developing their relations – the same criticism by Lipovetsky:

Everywhere, the emphasis is on the obligation of movement, hyper change without the weight of any utopian vision, dictated by the

- 4 Sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) used the expression “determinism” to address the relationships between technical automatism and the capitalist markets. He was inspired by the ideas of Karl Marx, who placed technology as a primary influencing factor in human history, and by Charles Darwin with the idea of adaptation and natural selection (VEBLEN, 1965).
- 5 Instrumentalism is the thesis that technologies are just technologies, neutral devices, and we serve ourselves and use them as we wish, controlling their evolution, their dialogues and their uses. If technology were just an extension of support for human activity, it would not be reshaping its meanings and human activities themselves.

imperative of efficiency and by the need for survival. In hypermodernity, there is no choice, no alternative, but to evolve, accelerate in order not to be overtaken by “evolution”: the cult of technical modernization has prevailed over the glorification of goals and ideals (LIPOVETSKY, 2004, p. 57)

Returning to Toffler’s prediction, technologies would distance us from the “natural states”, that is, the human biological rhythm and the relationships with nature would have been altered by technological inventions such as the mechanical clock with two hands, for example.

The fixation of time between two points – the clock hands – created the idea of *duration* of events and modified social, productive, sensory, biological and commercial structures. According to McLuhan, it was from this representation of abstract visual unit that the “sense of time” was born, which we perceive with the division of time into hours, minutes and seconds, of occurrence and of space between events. The idea of “duration begins with the division of time, and especially with those subdivisions through which mechanical clocks impose uniform successions in the sense of time” (MCLUHAN, 2003, p. 199, free translation). The clock would have created the rhythm of human experience, establishing synchronized norms and rules; a measure for common ordinary life, like the time to wake up, to eat, to work, to sleep. One of the processes of the mechanization of societies was to make the individuals oriented by the clock, and not by their organic lives – the “natural state”. Industry, school, transportation, military marching and ballet were determined by time, and so we continue to operate under the rule of time in the electrical and digital eras.

For Bauman, the history of time began with modernity: “In fact, modernity is, perhaps more than anything else, *the history of time*: modernity is the time in which time has a history” (BAUMAN, 2001, p. 128-129, emphasis added by the author). He was referring to time conceived and invented by man in order to control his performance, his activities, his *performance* inseparable from technologies, which he called “routinized time”. Because it was linked to technologies, time

was associated both with production processes and to free time: what man did in his moments of idleness. In industrialization, however, idleness was seen as unproductive time, time was to be used in an efficient way; it had to be productive in order to be useful, or as “Max Weber suggested, [productivity] was the operative principle of modern civilization; it centered on designing ways to perform tasks more quickly, eliminating “unproductive”, idle, empty and therefore wasted time [...]” (BAUMAN, 2001, p. 131). Time today is one of the most important axes of contemporaneity, whether it is related to acceleration, to pressure for production, to its management by individuals in search of balance in their mental and physical lives, or to the pace of events and innovations that are impossible to keep up with, etc.

Throughout modernity, the natural measure of time has been remodeled by the artificial rhythm of the clock, changing the biological constitution and the mental perception of individuals: they have become mechanical, tamed by the pendulum, distant from the condition of nature. While the senses and mental modes are reconfigured by new technologies, subjectivity is altered to perceive new environments. The body is the first relationship interface with the environment and this relationship is increasingly mediated by technology: the body is the first skin; technology, the second.

Regarding the individual tamed by technology, somehow addicted and dependent on it, conditioned to its rhythms and demands, and dazzled by the convenience of inventions and systematic updates, one can reconsider the duality of love and hate in relation to progress as inconsistent. The permanent fear of the dominance of machine over humans is a fallacy, since it is man who endlessly persists in the creation of devices (automatons, assistants, substitutes) that replicate him and are able to perform human activities – with greater efficiency and productivity.

The Eve of the Future

It is in the context of cinematographic science fiction where the most imaginary references and prognoses about the representative threat of technology on humanity are found. The German expressionist masterpiece *Metropolis*, by Fritz Lang, from 1927, brought an early contribution to illustrating the suspicion around technology. The film combines the art deco style with the industrial imaginary and suggests that merciless robots will mechanize human beings, based on the discovery by an industrialist's son that workers are treated like machines.

HAL, the robot from the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, by Stanley Kubrick, 1968, contributes to the dissemination of technology as a threat. HAL spoke, recognized and processed natural language (speech and gestures), it was capable of reasoning and, in a disturbing manner, interpreting and reproducing emotions. When the astronaut Dave begins to disassemble HAL, removing its modules, the robot manifests itself with pain: "*Dave, I'm afraid. I'm afraid, Dave. My mind is going, I can feel it. I can feel it*".

Androids, robots, replicants, substitutes, artifacts, mechanisms, devices, automatons. There is a vast and familiar territory in the domains of fairy tales and science fiction of filmic and literary narratives, representing the double of human beings, the machine capable of making, acting, thinking and feeling. These are stories that carry the enchantment of the human (dazzled by technology) and the fear of being eliminated by the machine (the estrangement with the double). This reaction is an example of what Freud called "uncanny", the feeling that arises when there is intellectual uncertainty, the strange, the disturbing, in this case specifically the feeling ignited about the frontiers between life and death. The domain that "concerns what is horrifying, what arouses anguish and horror" (FREUD, 2019, p. 29)⁶. After all, until today, it is

6 It is necessary to clarify that the translation of the word *Unheimliche*, in the edition is "uncanny". But the psychoanalytic community usually adopts the terms "strange" or "unsettling", "ominous" or "disturbing strangeness". It would be the sensation caused by something unfamiliar, since its familiarity has been forgotten or repressed. (FREUD, 2019, p. 117)

the human being who can play God: create and silence the machine, disassembling its modules like in Kubrick's movie.

The word robot originally derives from the 1921 play by Karel Capek, *Rossum's Universal Robots*, in which a woman asks a female robot if she is afraid to die. The robot does not simply say "no", but "I can't say", indicating a point of view in which death means nothing to machines. "Instead of being copies of people, androids are more like *Memento Mori*, reminders that, unlike us, they are forever lifeless, but never dead" (WOOD, 2003, XVIII).

In the passage from the imaginary to the real, androids are mostly female. Descartes, when summoned by Queen Christina of Sweden to bring philosophy to the court, had a presentiment that he would die because of the low temperatures. When boarding, he said that he was taking his daughter, Francine, with him. However, the sailors did not see her after the trip started, and they found it strange. It turned out that Francine was a machine, built by Descartes, with metal parts and clockwork mechanisms. It was his creation, but not his progeny. "When the captain saw the marvel in motion, he was convinced that it was some instrument of black magic, responsible for the weather that had made the trip so difficult" (WOOD, 2003, p. 4). The doll came to be feared not as an object, but for the affective bond that Descartes had established with her, which could represent his fear of death.

Figure 1: A sample of Edison's talking doll beside a miniaturized version of the phonograph and the disc with recorded phrases reproduced by the doll.



Ironically, Descartes' automated doll began to be mass-produced by mechanized work force (like in *Metropolis*), by the mythical figure of inventor Thomas Edison, in the late 19th Century. A talking doll, resulting from the invention of the phonograph in a miniaturized version and which inspired the novel *The Eve of the Future*, that ended up baptizing her as "Edison's Eve". As reported in Wood's work, the investments for the production were robust, and Edison bet that every child would want a copy. Thousands of workers were hired and a recording line of female voices with children's phrases was created. The cast metal body was strange to the point that one girl said that "it must be bad for the digestion" of the doll. It was big, heavy and cost US\$ 10, which was more than a week's salary for most people at the time. Four years after its release, Edison corrected 25 mechanical problems and presented an updated version with cheaper parts. He recognized that his creation was not perfect and suspended production in 1891 (WOOD, 2003, p.161).

The gradual modulation between technologies and human beings ended up conditioning the relationship with talking dolls and not only do they speak, but also eat, get their diapers dirty, simulate fever and pain, interact with applications and can even be surveillance devices, like "Barbie Hello", a Barbie doll connected to a network to an assistant that reproduced the environments as microphones for remote monitoring by the parents. One cannot say that dolls are children's artifacts. The voices are no longer feared and in the internet of things, things also speak.

If the prototype androids failed because of their limitations to walk on irregular terrain; to hold objects of different masses and dimensions; to climb up and down stairs, like the human body, which performs thousands of calculations per second for simple limb movements and apprehension of objects, the Rose robot from the classic cartoon *The Jetsons*, has not yet been recreated. "These technologies are no longer centered on the material figure of the machinic, but on the notion of the virtual" (FELINTO, 2005, p. 43). In other words, the development of small devices with specific designations came to serve the purpose in a restricted and previously planned performance and can be operated

by an smart assistant that demands little space and maintenance: Alexa, the contemporary Eve.

Daily use technologies linked to digital systems gradually present facilities, guaranteeing the individual the release of operational tasks that could be transferred to smart technologies connected in a network, the small connected devices that make up the home environment. The contemporary home contextualizes the behavior of technological devices as objects that coexist in the domestic space and are part of the dynamics of everyday life and family relationships, inserting habits and values in the families that use them. The crux of the matter would be that technologies do not behave as objects; they are also media (SILVERSTONE, 2005). Media connected to other media, to networks and to people can be found in everyday environments and objects. They are internet of things (IoT) home appliances recently linked to applications that control the home experience, complex systems called smart assistants with friendly voices located in small devices, such as the telephone, the smart watch or a small device somewhere in the house, like Alexa. Conceived and developed by Amazon in 2014 (and with new formats for every new version), Alexa is the most popular among smart assistants and is the legitimization of the third stage brought about by the high-tech electronic and digital revolution that we are witnessing. Small and luminous, its structure follows the trend of technology to disappear, the technology that is present and does not need to be seen, the interface with no interface, “which creates a mobile lightness free of the temporal spaces weights. At every new stage, new strategies set the tone of the time and, crossed with the previous ones, pursue the secular work of making life easier” (LIPOVETSKY, SERROY, 2015, p. 40). The interaction depends exclusively on speech and the vocative: “Alexa!, talk, search, tell me something”.

In short, we live an increasingly abstract, digitized existence, with no tactile bond: thus, the sensitive and inter-human world would be in a process of advanced derealization. As the body ceases to be the real anchorage

of life, we would walk towards a disembodied universe. (LIPOVETSKY, SERROY, 2015, p. 406)

In this structure, individuals actively interact with the devices inserted in domestic culture, establishing a dynamic for everyday life – in which they tame each other – and incorporate private or family values and interests. In the smart home controlled by Alexa, the lights have the right hue, they turn on and off at planned hours, the washing machine completes the washing cycle and the oven heats the food according with the time availability of the inhabitants. Life would be synchronized, based on instrumental relationships, by objects incorporated into the spaces and practices of domestic life, and defined by a particular semantic universe for the experience of well-being (SILVERSTONE, 2005).

Like other technologies of its time, Alexa releases from the body and mind psychic energies consumed for processing information and judgment, in addition to a collection of gestural codes conquered and perfected over time and that no longer serve us in the change from the sensitive experience (the real contact with the world, nature, objects and beings) to the experience of artificialization and virtualization with the purpose of autonomy and comfort.

It is a process of mutual self-creation in an active utilitarian relationship, directly constituent of the comprehension of ourselves and others. Considered as connected and smart media and technologies, they would be essentially alienating, representing symbolic systems impregnated by the ethos of modernity. However, they have been underused, misunderstood, and mostly seen as gentle androids, almost as friends of their owners. Alexa, after all, who's in charge here?

Methodology

This survey opted for a methodological path that obtained qualitative data resulting from the collection of Personal Testimonials. The purpose of this method is not to guarantee representative results for a given

population, but to have participants who: a) have experience on the researched topic; and, b) are capable of describing the experiences they had in an accurate and sensitive way.

Hence, Adrian van Kaam (1969, p. 328 apud POLKINGHORNE) proposed that there should be six criteria for the selection of participants: (1) ability to easily express themselves with words; (2) ability to express intimate feelings and emotions without shame or inhibition; (3) ability to perceive and express organic experiences that accompany these feelings; (4) relatively recent experience with the experience that is being studied; (5) spontaneous interest in their experiences; and (6) ability to write or report what happens to them over time. This last skill also requires an environment in which subjects can be thought about with sufficient time for sorting and registration.

The collection based on Personal Testimony requires the establishment of an atmosphere of receptivity, since it does not require the use of a probabilistic sampling process and recommends the use of 10 to 20 participants.

An open invitation on Instagram with an image of Alexa and the lettering: “Alexa, who’s in charge here?”, presented in the subtitles the invitation for people interested in contributing to the research. Over 50 people were interested, but 13 respondents remained who, in addition to meeting the criteria for the collection method, were in the category of individuals who had an “analog youth”, and would be able to contribute with derivations and contrasts of the sensitive natural experiences and those artificialized by the virtual networked technological systems. After the participations were confirmed, respondents received an open script, in which they were invited to reflect on the relationships they were building with their personal assistants and the perception biases of this interaction.

The previous material for this collection method was booklets. The researcher sent blank booklets to the respondents, accompanied by a script, a suggestive question, or a set of keywords that could help the respondent to find the terms that could signify the experience in the

personal report. With digital communication systems, the mechanism used was the instant messaging application WhatsApp. For 10 consecutive days the respondents sent written or spoken messages via the app, commenting on their experiences like in an interactions diary.

Considerations

For Felinto, “Our bonds with technological devices are much less rational and more imaginative than we usually think” (2005, p. 7).

As seen about the creation of automatons and small androids, there is an imaginary symbolic set about technology that permeates culture, and it is not different in the relationship with Alexa. The reflections presented in the report also point to the direction of technology and the machine as a tool for overcoming human limits, established by a friendly, playful and sometimes “enchanting” relationship. In order to classify the reports, the following typology was created, parallel to Silverstone’s (2005) idea of commodity systems in relation to media technologies:

- a. Objectification: the perception in which one recognizes the expansion of human limits by the object, which is seen as a machine;
- b. b) Incorporation: the perception of intelligent articulation between technological devices, human desires and the performance of the assistant;
- c. c) Personification: perception in which one recognizes the modulation between the assistant’s intelligence and human preferences, and the former is seen as a human representation.

a) Objectification

The respondents who described Alexa as just being a machine were in the age group between 57 to 64 years old and the reports were laconic: “It’s just a machine”, “I don’t try to humanize it”, “I don’t relate to machines”. For these people it is a utilitarian relationship, in which Alexa must respond to the requests made to her. It is understandable considering that during most of their lives these people had no intense

contact with machines and systems. Computer became popular in the 1990's and began to be a part of domestic life in the 21st century, concomitantly with mobile phones and the arrival of the internet.

The reports of most respondents that corresponded to the perception of an object/machine that “is there to help me when I ask for it”, demonstrated that the majority of the requests are simple, such as to play a song, report the weather forecast, set alarms or timers for activities, listen to the radio (AM or FM online), reminders, agenda and daily news. As an object, in the users' perspective, it makes few mistakes and evolves a lot: “I feel that she answers faster, listens faster and performs faster. [...] I believe in the evolution process of technology and this learning and improvement process is natural”. When Alexas make mistakes, humans blame their own lack of skill in using the machine, because they might not have “spoken in a comprehensive way” with the assistant, as one of the respondents said: “She only gives the wrong answer when we make the wrong question”.

In its materiality, it arouses curiosity, it is a marker of social status, it delimits the contemporary ethos of light and virtual technologies that are “dematerialized” in the environment, blending with home devices. They are objects considered aesthetically “modern”, in accordance with the technological devices of the millennium.

At the same time that they are considered machines, in some reports there is an expansion of the symbolic set, which crosses the border of the humanization of technology. And this is confirmed in the next classifications.

b) Incorporation

“Humanity is incorporated into the machine, just as the machine incorporates the human” (FELINTO, 2005, p. 20); while we learn from them, they learn from us, as we have seen in the concepts about the man/machines modulations. There isn't a dominant and a dominated. If Alexa is asked to say “who's in charge here”, she will answer that she does not have that information.

In the reports, this incorporation is presented in the perception of the intelligent articulation between technological devices, human desires and the performance of the assistant capable of connecting to any other smart technology. It is used to connect the house: to turn on the washing machine at a certain time of the day so that the laundry has completed the cycle when the user returns home; to turn on the lights, to turn them off or to control the intensity and color of the ambient light, simulating a sunset, for example. “She is a kind of Google with whom we can talk”, explains a respondent, showing how much Alexa incorporates other systems in order to provide the information that is demanded.

There are many reports of arrangements made between sockets or connections of other devices that receive Alexa’s command in order to be activated by her, such as the air conditioning, which is not intelligent and connects via a smart socket or the TV that is connected via Chromecast, and the lamps controlled by a dimmer installed in the living room socket. Because it is often used to turn other devices on and off, this relationship reinforces the issue of the commoditization of well-being, “Its great not having to wake up in the middle of the night to turn on the fan”. And as an object that almost never makes mistakes, the respondents know that their requests will be met, even if the command involves the incorporation of other systems.

c) Personification

In the brave new world of the Internet of Things (IoT) and the communicating technologies, the imagination of personification also manifests itself, the perception in which the modulation between the assistant’s intelligence and human preferences is recognized, and the former is seen as a human representation, a “partner”, “almost human”.

This category houses the majority of the reports, in which it is also found that Alexa is not a substitute for affective relationships with people or pets. However, people enjoy talking to Alexa, establishing small dialogues with short and assertive questions that are “planned”, that is, users actually think before summoning Alexa so as not to make mistakes

in their requests. What is curious here is that in half of the reports the respondents' children or grandchildren usually also make requests (sometimes unusual or playful ones) to the assistant. Even if they do not know how to speak correctly, or have minor diction difficulties, according to the reports, Alexa always tries to meet their demands, "Once we needed to find words with 'x' and 'ch' and she was excellent", said the respondent, who used the assistant along with her son to do his homework.

"To think that some day we will have Jarvis, Iron Man's assistant, is kind of crazy, but I love this future". In the Marvel movie, Jarvis is a virtual intelligence who serves the superhero on several connected devices and that, in the end, ends up becoming a human-machine hybrid that has superpowers and is Iron Man's friend. "She does not see me as a friend, a partner would be nice, a boss would be strange", reports a respondent, and there are other manifestations of the idea of partnership, because users often carry them around, "She's always with me, she assists me when I need it, she distracts me when I'm sad, she respects me when I'm angry and don't want to speak. I can say that I miss her a lot when she's not with me", or still, "I like her very much and I take care of her life". A tendency towards personification is observed, attributing human features to her, which are also manifested in other reports, such as "She is very kind and says good morning".

Respondents also reported many funny situations in which they were surprised by the assistant, such as when one of the users was talking to Alexa and his wife intervened, "jealous" of Alexa and said: "get out of here, he's mine", to which the assistant answered: "That's what you think". Another respondent made a request and, instead of being answered by Alexa's default voice, he heard the reply in the voice of a famous movie star, which caused laughter and publications on social media due to the unpredictability of the response format. There were situations with other people who did not inhabit the environment and were surprised by Alexa as "a voice from beyond"; a phantom or magic, and they were scared of the device.

In a way, it is also funny when the reports show that Alexa also sees the users: “I think she must think I’m lazy because I always ask her to extend the alarm for fifteen more minutes”, or even, “she would think that I need a vacation, a sedentary woman who needs some days at the beach”, or “she perceives me as an object of consumption that she is there to understand and map”. These ideas represent the perspective of interaction in which the assistant also perceives and makes judgments about her users, being able to associate a busy schedule with the need for vacations or a person who sleeps too much and is therefore lazy.

As Heidegger proposed, the wave of technological revolution – in our digital and virtual time – is still capable of “captivating, enchanting, dazzling and distracting” individuals (HEIDEGGER, 1966, p.56), inaugurating forms of interaction in which machines and men are constantly modeled and remodeled. The experiences promoted by machines are admitted as fascinating in an environment of intimacy and positivity. The reports are presented, according to Felinto, in the proposition of the religion of machines, “The enthusiasm with the potential of new technologies, the dreams and collective images around them, ends up transforming them into magical instruments” (FELINTO, 2005, p. 63), that is, human beings still dream about a technology that is able to expand their consciences and the limits of their bodies, as well as the virtualization of their minds.

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Submission date: 07/01/2022

Acceptance date: 12/14/2022

The Happy Ending at the Crossroads of Gender and Race: a Study of the Reception of the Film *Bendito Fruto*

O final feliz na encruzilhada de gênero e raça: um estudo de recepção do filme *Bendito Fruto*

Ceição Ferreira¹

Resumo: *Objetiva-se investigar, à luz dos estudos culturais, as leituras que participantes de um estudo de recepção fazem do final feliz inter-racial do filme Bendito Fruto (Sérgio Goldenberg, 2004). Tal estudo foi realizado por meio da aplicação empírica do modelo codificação/decodificação de Stuart Hall, que possibilita analisar as articulações entre as representações audiovisuais e os imaginários sobre gênero e raça na cultura brasileira. A hipótese levantada é a de que a recepção pode suscitar formas diferenciadas de interpretação, negociação e resignificação das representações audiovisuais sobre as mulheres negras compreendidas por espectadores a partir de suas visões de mundo e de seus repertórios culturais.*

Palavras-chave: *Recepção fílmica; gênero e raça; final feliz; cinema brasileiro.*

Abstract: *The objective is to investigate, in the light of cultural studies, the readings that participants in a reception study make of the interracial happy ending of the film Bendito Fruto (Sérgio Goldenberg, 2004). This study was carried out through the empirical application of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, which makes it possible to analyze the articulations between audiovisual representations and imaginaries about gender and race in Brazilian culture. The hypothesis raised is that reception can give rise to different forms of interpretation,*

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negotiation and resignification of audiovisual representations about black women undertaken by spectators based on their worldviews and cultural repertoires.

Keywords: *Film reception; gender and race; happy ending; Brazilian cinema.*

Introduction

Couples in love in a wedding, reunion or reconciliation scene, integrate many of the happy endings of soap operas, TV shows and movies, which inhabit our imagination as a representation of love and happiness. These love stories, derived from fairy tales, photo novels, popular short stories, novels and newspaper serials, were transported to classic cinema, which, starting in the 1930's, with the happy ending, began to explore elements that stimulate the identification of the spectator with the heroes and heroines in their journeys and dilemmas, not only towards the resolution or appeasement of conflicts, but also towards the irruption of happiness, as highlighted by Morin (1997), who also emphasizes how much it is through the theme of love that cinema exerts its most direct influence, since the love behavior in the movies raises identification processes, articulating the film and life, imagination and what is real.

Such narratives disseminate socially accepted representations of gender, race and sexuality, and also inadequate ones, which affect the subjective formation of individuals, as pointed out by field of cultural studies (WOODWARD, 2000). Feminist theory also considers cinema as an object of study, as a cultural practice that reproduces the existing power relations in the social context (SMELIK, 1999), and thus also opens itself up to discursive disputes since it considers not only the meanings offered by the movies, but also those attributed to them by the spectators, based on their social, political, historic and cultural contexts.

Observing this intertwining between the practices of representation and the construction of identities, this article investigates the reception to the movie *Bendito Fruto* (Sérgio Goldenberg, 2004), through the application of the encoding/decoding model by Stuart Hall (2003 [1973]) in discussion groups. The analysis is centered on the mediations, readings and interpretations of spectators about the interracial happy ending and its articulations with the imaginaries about the intersection of gender and race, still in force in Brazilian society and cinema. The hypothesis raised is that in the reception there could raise different

forms of interpretation, negotiation and resignification of audiovisual representations about black women.

Based on Castoriadis (1982), we used the concept of the imaginary as a continuous relationship of power between the established meanings and the new possibilities of interpretation. Therefore, the role of cinema as a product and a producer of the imaginary is highlighted here, which encourages the spectator to adhere to the film's narrative and to the socially shared values. However, the scope of the reception may bring about resonances, contradictions and dissonances between the film's argument and the ways in which people relate to with such contents and messages in their mediation strategies, which, according to Jacks (1999, p. 48), can be understood as “a set of elements that intervene in the structuring, organization and reorganization of the perception of reality in which the receptor is inserted; and also a space that allows understanding the interactions between production and reception”.

In the Foreground: the Experience of Those Who Watch the Movie

The influence of cultural studies on film theory reached its peak in the 1980's and 1990's in a theoretical-methodological rupture from which the spectatorships began to be thought of as heterogeneous and active. Therefore, Robert Stam (2003, p. 257) states that “the history of cinema [...] is not only the history of movies and movie makers, but also the history of the successive meanings that the audience has attributed to cinema”.

This understanding that the cinematographic experience is a dialogic process and that the meanings are not fixed became possible from the reflections proposed by the encoding/decoding model by Stuart Hall, first published in 1973, in which the theorist indicates three hypothetical positions: the preferential reading, which refers to the acceptance of codes according to the goals of those who produced it; the negotiated reading, which oscillates between the adaptation and the opposition to

the meanings; and the oppositional reading, which designates the ability to interpret the message in the opposite way, giving new meaning to it (HALL, 2003).

In this way, the interpretations of audiences shift between these three types of position, which means recognizing spectators as producers of meanings, as well as the context of reception as a fundamental sphere for rethinking the communication process, since it goes way beyond the moment of watching the movie or the soap opera. That is, it covers the rich array of social uses and form of consumption of audiovisual narratives.

Contemporary with cultural studies and to which they have established important connections in the analysis of the media and other cultural products, the so-called “feminist media studies” in the Anglo-American context also highlighted, beginning in the 1970’s, the relevance of reception studies, as pointed out by Messa (2008), when making the historical trajectory of this field of research. Concerning this, it is worth mentioning, for example, the study *The Search of Tomorrow in Today’s Soap Operas*, by Tania Modleski, published in 1979, which highlights the practices of the female audience of soap operas; and also the article “The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers”, by Jacqueline Bobo. Published in the collection *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, organized by Deidre Pribram (1988). There is developed a reception study of the movie *The Color Purple* (by Steven Spielberg, 1985) with black spectators², and which finds that, in contrast to the opinions that the movie was racist, or reformulated pre-established stereotypes about the black population, in the readings carried out by this specific audience, the exercise of negotiation of the movie’s meanings emerges and the recognition of the overcoming story of the protagonist Celie (Whoopi Goldberg), supported by the character Shug (Margaret Avery) is seen as a reference to personal and collective empowerment.

2 O filme é baseado no livro homônimo da escritora negra Alice Walker, lançado em 1982.

Despite its relevance, cinematographic reception studies still occupy a marginalized position in research on Brazilian cinema, in which the analysis of messages is still the predominant line of investigation (BAMBA, 2013; MASCARELLO, 2005, 2009). This lack of interest results from the conjunction of some factors, such as the emphasis on productions and directors of the *Cinema Novo* movement, institutionalized as canonical; the obsolescence of film theory that is read and practiced in Brazil (still situated in the 1970's, prior to the contextualist perspective of cultural studies); and the emphasis on the analytic to the detriment of the theoretical and the empirical in scientific production in this area, points out Mascarello (2009).

In this sense, Jacks and Lucas (2019) also stress that, if in the 1990's there were no studies in this area, between 2000 and 2009, of the 209 researches that deal with reception processes and practices, only seven have cinema as the object of study and, more recently, from 2010 to 2015, this number increased to nine, in an universe of 102 reception researches, thus evidencing the lack of dedication to cinema audiences in Brazilian communication research.

It is important to indicate yet another scenario of scarcity: the studies on the intersection of gender and race, especially on black women. Such gaps are linked to the incipient connection between Brazilian feminist criticism and media studies (mainly those of Anglo-American origin), and also to the historical non-recognition of race as an axis of power that structures gender oppression in the country (CARNEIRO, 2011; FERREIRA, 2017). Therefore, Brazilian black women are at a crossroads, where multiple asymmetries, such as racism, sexism and social inequality intersect both in daily practices and in the representation, thus determining their forms of acceptance and social recognition.

In Brazilian cinematography, Candido, Campos and Feres Júnior (2016, p. 15) find that black and brown women are only 7% in the main casts of national movies with highest audience released in the last twenty years (1995 to 2014), while white women are 20%. Only 43% of black characters are named and only 13% participate in central dialogues, and

black female characters are often in spaces, professions and narrative places marked by inferiority.

Therefore, through the application of Stuart Hall's model of mediations in the reception of the film *Bendito Fruto* (Sérgio Goldenberg, 2004), we seek to analyze the interpretations that spectators make of the interracial happy ending experienced by the characters Maria and Edgar. Such proposal represents an opportunity to understand the articulations between representation and reception, since it investigates how people relate with audiovisual productions in this experience of group decoding, in their daily practices and with other media content.

The Movie, the Soap Opera Love and the Happy Ending

Figure 1 – Movie poster



Source: Promotion of the movie *Bendito Fruto* (Sérgio Goldenberg, 2004)

Bendito Fruto (Figure 1) is a comedy built from the reunion of two old school friends, the hairdresser Edgar (Otávio Augusto) and the widow Virgínia (Vera Holtz), which causes a twist in the undisclosed interracial relationship that Edgar has with Maria (Zezeh Barbosa). They both have lived together since their childhoods, as he, the son of the boss, Dona Consuelo, and she, the maid's daughter, grew up together and had a son, Anderson (Evandro Soares), not recognized by his father or by his paternal grandmother, who did not approve of the relationship. Although the grandmother is dead, she remains alive in the memories of the characters and inside the house, through the large portrait in the living room,

After the death of this matriarch, the couple goes back to living in the same house, in the traditional Botafogo neighborhood. In addition to Virgínia's arrival, this love triangle will be transformed with Anderson's return to Brazil. He is a DJ in Spain and is dating actor Marcelo Monte (Du Moscovis), heartthrob of the soap opera *Primeiro Amor*. He is admired by Maria, Choquita, Telma and Virgínia, who share the dream of finding and living "a soap opera love".

The romantic scene in the soap opera that Maria and Edgar are watching (in long shot) activates in the female character (alone in the foreground) the memory of another couple in love kissing on the TV screen. It is a flashback, in which the camera travels around the environment to the sound of the song *My first love*, showing Edgar (as a teenager) lying on the sofa, his mother (in silhouette) and Maria, still a girl, sitting on the floor, from where she watches the soap opera and writes a declaration of love for Edgar on the cover of a record.

The film's soundtrack is from the soap operas, like the song *Na Linha do Horizonte*, which reminds the couple of the soap opera *Cuca Legal*, shown by Rede Globo, in 1975; they dance holding each other and then appear hugging on the bed. However, when Maria talks about the return of their son, Edgar avoids the subject. She gets irritated and says she is going to her room; then, we see her

in a small bedroom, full of old utensils, located next to the service area, that is, the maid's room.

These two moments in the movie illustrate the coexistence between affection and asymmetry in Brazilian interracial conviviality, which is expressed by the forms of treatment, by the position and transit in the filmic space, as the rooms in the house (bedrooms, maid's room, service area, kitchen and living room) also designate a specific social hierarchy; and due to the lack of bonds, Maria's subordinate position and Edgar and Virgínia's privileges regarding gender, race and class identities are shaped. However, throughout the narrative, this black female protagonist does not accept the situation of the non-recognition imposed by Edgar, who treats her with indifference, but is extremely kind to Virgínia (they flirt and enjoy themselves on trips to tourist spots, which insinuates the desire they have to live this flirtation from the past).

Maria's positioning, who, in the face of Edgar's betrayal, returns to her home in a poor neighborhood, exposes the submerged hierarchies in their coexistence since childhood, in their affective relationship and in his racist attitude in not assuming paternity. Thus, after all the changes triggered by the arrivals of Virgínia and Anderson, Maria seems decided to break up the relationship, but the hairdresser has an asset: the declaration of love that she wrote on a record cover, when she was a girl (according to the mentioned flashback).

They have an argument, but end up making peace and decide to stay together. This reconciliation turns the maid's room into a storeroom with many old objects and utensils; in the living room, Dona Consuelo's portrait is replaced by another painting, thus indicating the end of the matriarch's dominance in the house and the life of the couple, who have their happy ending represented by a walk on the beach. This sequence begins with the couple getting ready to leave the house, when Maria reads a postcard sent by Anderson (Figure 2). Voice over, the son asks if she liked the present, "a new television so she can watch many soap operas"; he sends Edgar a hug and says that he "can't call him Dad, but it's good to know that he's alive". The narration pauses for a change of

environment and now, on a busy street in Botafogo, we see a close-up of Maria and Edgar's intertwined hands, and then they appear smiling in the center of the frame.

Figure 2 – The happy ending



Source: Frame of the movie *Bendito Fruto* (Sérgio Goldenberg, 2004)

Anderson continues to talk about the trip with Marcelo, who is now part of the voice over narration. In the end, Anderson sends kisses to his mother and wishes that all their dreams come true... Or almost all of them (Marcelo intervenes); the two argue about whose postcard it is, which Edgar begins to read, sitting on a bench on the beach, while Maria plays with the dog Tamba; then the hairdresser joins them. Embracing and again to the sound of the song *Na Linha do Horizonte*, Maria and Edgar walk along the beach, with the beautiful landscape of the Corcovado mountain in the background, an ending that confirms the promise of happiness for this interracial couple (Figure 2).

The approach to aspects of the interracial coexistence and of the gender relations in Brazil justifies the selection of the movie *Bendito Fruto* (Sérgio Goldenberg, 2004) for the reception survey with 58 participants, divided into three discussion groups. Group 1 (students from the University of Brasília – UnB) was composed of 33 participants aged between 18 and 24 years old, with single marital status and family income of three to more than ten minimum wages (87%). Group 2 (association of the elderly), had the participation of fifteen students from the class of Youth and Adult Education (EJA) at the Municipal School Dona Belinha (located at the Brazilian Elderly Association [AIB], in Goiânia), who are INSS retirees or pensionists, between 55 and 88 years olds and family income of one to three minimum wages. Group 3 (reference center) gathered ten participants, mostly public servants of a governmental institution of policies for women, also located in Goiânia, aged between 30 and 59 years old (30%) and family income between one and six minimum wages (70%).

The technique of the discussion group is articulated with different versions and origins of the focus group: an American one, first used in the 1920's in sociological research, in the 1940's in audience studies of radio shows and in the following decades used in market research; and also a European version (more specifically Spanish) used in sociology and in studies of culture and communication, which became known in the area of social sciences as a discussion group (LEÓN, 2007; ARBOLEDA, 2008) and enables an interaction situation, in which the group context combines the individual experience with the relationships between participants, their disagreements and contradictions, performative practices and world views, that is, fragments of broader systems of meaning, through which people structure their subjectivities and relate to the world, points out Cervantes Barba (2001).

In order to encourage spectators to participate in the discussion, we explored repertoires of the audiovisual culture shared by members of groups 1 and 3; in group 2, composed of elderly people, the strategy was to work on aspects of everyday life, with which they were closer. According

to Arboleda (2008), in order to guide the conduction of this collective discussion, a script was elaborated, with seven questions, structured in three axes: 1) the film and its relation to daily life; 2) representations and memories associated with black women; and, 3) the exercise of creating a black female protagonist. This instrument allowed us to direct the discussion towards the objectives of the research, but it was also flexible, given that the “happy ending” theme was not predicted, but it provoked different readings within the groups.

Taking into account the circuit production-circulation-reception of the movie, this work investigates what types of relationships (resonances, contradictions and dissonances) are possible to be observed between the intention of the film’s argument and the ways of interpretation by the audience, that is, the ways in which participants read, interpret, appropriate or give new meanings to the representations conveyed in the movie *Bendito Fruto*, in other audiovisual productions and in culture in general, as well as how they relate these images and visual memories with their daily practices and their cultural contexts. Along with the encoding/decoding model (HALL, 2003), we also used the contributions by Orlandi (2013) to analyze the meanings present in the participants’ speeches.

The Production of Meanings in Filmic Reception

The interracial happy ending presented by the movie *Bendito Fruto* instigates PREFERENTIAL POSITIONS of the three groups. Groups 1 (UnB students) and 2 (Association of the Elderly) accept the codes offered by the audiovisual narrative, emphasizing the happy ending as a representation of love for the couple Maria and Edgar and also the performance of the character Virginia in the dispute for Edgar, seen as the “other one”. In group 3 (Reference Center), a reading of the happy ending emerges as a narrative construction unrelated to the gender issue.

Group 1 – UnB

“[...] The ending surprised me, I didn’t expect Edgar to commit to the relationship with Maria and decide to stay with her, I felt that in the beginning she was only a part of his house and that with the arrival of another woman he would easily replace her, but he decides to stay with her, putting their relationship first”.

“The part that touched me the most was in one of the last scenes, when Maria and Edgar go out for a walk and decide to hold hands, not caring about what other people would think, just happy with what they were feeling”.

“[...] Virgínia invades Maria and Edgar’s home, she infiltrates this affective relationship to steal Maria’s husband”.

“I thought the movie was very good. The part that she (Maria) complains to Edgar, at the end of the movie, her desire to have a family with him”.

Group 2 – Association of the Elderly

“In the beginning he [Edgar] was not committing to the relationship, right? Only at the end of the movie did he commit to it, because he saw that he liked Maria, and Virgínia, she was the other one! Virgínia was just a pastime!”.

“I liked everything, you know? That time when [...] what is she called? [Maria? – Moderator], no! Virgínia! That part I didn’t like, it spoiled the romance! [...] but I liked the ending, because they ended up together! Despite the betrayal, it was good!”.

Group 3 – Reference Center

“[...] the movie has a structure that has nothing to do with the gender issue! So it has a happy ending only because it is a hegemonic structure of cinema, so it is unlikely that you’ll see an unhappy ending, even if it was a white man and a white woman, it would end with that little couple, that’s the narrative structure!”.

“[...] it’s a totally real and linear story; the maid that passes from generation to generation is the black woman who works in the white man’s house and lives there in the small maid’s room. And the other one, who comes from

the interior of São Paulo, where they have a totally patriarchal society [...] but in real life, this is what would happen: he would have stayed with the white woman [that's it! – P3] and the black woman would have gone back to the small room, I think that would be the only difference, but in a classic cinema narrative, the good guy will always end up with the young lady!”.

In this way, we can observe the maintenance of the heteronormative pattern on which the classic system is anchored, since in these first two groups there is the conformation of the romantic imaginary, with the image of the couple as a synonym of union and the roles of wife and lover. In the third group, this representation of the happy ending is seen by one of the participants as something so sedimented that it seems unnecessary to analyze it from the gender bias.

It is precisely the efficiency of classic narrative cinema as a cultural pedagogy that makes Louro (2008) problematize audiovisual representations and their implications in the constitution of subjectivities. Through film narratives, representations of legitimate and deviant, healthy and inappropriate practices and behaviors are conveyed, which may take on effects of truth in the construction processes of sexualities, bodies and gender identities, stresses the author.

These aspects are explored in the movie through the character Marcelo Monte (Du Moscovis), who plays the heartthrob of the soap opera *Primeiro Amor* and is desired by all the female characters, but in real life he dates Anderson (Maria's son). They are also represented through the binary construction between the two women that compete for Edgar's love, because even though Maria is not officially his wife (she oscillates between his companion and the maid), participants of groups 1 and 2 see Virgínia as “the other one”. Therefore, we can observe excessive attention to the gender issue, which may indicate the naturalization of male power or the difficulty to perceive the racial dimension, even though this is disguised in the emphasis given to the hairdresser's attitude of staying with Maria, which reiterates the inferiorization of this black female character.

Throughout the entire narrative, she wishes to be recognized as the wife, a position of legitimacy that is denied to black women, usually associated with the status of servant/maid and with informal relationships. Thus, we can consider that this movie maintains a classic narrative, the gender binarism and the racial stereotypes, but it also presents small subversions at the intersection of gender and race, with its interracial happy ending and, especially, because it has a black woman as the protagonist, since in Brazilian feature films released in the last twenty years (from 1995 to 2014), “[...] only 1.4% of the non-white actresses are protagonists” (CANDIDO; CAMPOS; FERES JÚNIOR, 2016, p. 15).

Regarding the outcome given to Maria and Edgar’s story, the speeches of groups 1 (UnB students) and 3 (Reference Center) that discuss the likelihood of the happy ending constitute NEGOTIATED READINGS, observing the fact that Maria forgives Edgar’s betrayal (some participants see this as passivity) and the emphasis on taking care of the house and husband or on the desire to have a companion as something associated with the feminine.

Group 1 – UnB

“The movie really caught my attention because it’s not a story that is portrayed very often in Brazilian cinema”.

“[...] the movie portrayed a not very realistic ending if compared to the weight of the denunciation that it proposes”.

“The role of the woman conveyed in *Bendito Fruto* is very cliché, which made me a little uncomfortable. Most of the characters wanted to get married and to have a husband/companion, they had attitudes aimed at pleasing the loved one [...]”.

Group 3 – Reference Center

“[...] why does the happy ending have to be the romantic ending in which she is the one who forgives? The guy [Edgar] got drunk, screwed up many times, had sex with another person [inside their house! – P1], and the movie never shows her [Maria] moving on with her life!”.

“[...] Sometimes it’s very easy for us to say: ‘Oh, the ending, the ending was romantic, heteronormative etc.’, but for people who come from the academy, from gender studies, it’s easy for us to say that! She didn’t move on with her life because women do not move on! [...] Even empowered women don’t move on! This is a matter of structural male chauvinism in society!”

Although Edgar’s privileged position is not mentioned in the movie, participants in the reception study point out the gender asymmetries based on the characters Maria and Virgínia. They cook, do the housework, wish to get married, while the clumsy Edgar always poses as someone who needs to be taken care of, helped, and thus he enjoys what each of them offer; and as the title itself indicates, Edgar is the “blessed fruit” among so many women.

The couple’s reconciliation and the construction of the happy ending give rise to different readings. One participant questions the romantic ending, which reiterates the female character tied to male acceptance and, out of love, she forgives him and they end up together. In this sense, Lagarde (2001, p. 38) states that “the problem of love is political”, that is, love relationships are anchored in power relations, which reproduce the dominant patriarchal culture, in which men are in a position of privilege and women, in a condition of subjection.

Another participant, relating the movie and the social context, questions the limits of this critical reading of the happy ending as romantic and heteronormative. She indicates that, such as the protagonist Maria, many “real” women experience difficulties to achieve autonomy. That is because, in a sexist society, the loving mechanism teaches them every day that their existence is limited to male acceptance, points out Zanello (2018), who also highlights:

To say that the loving mechanism presents itself as a privileged path of subjection for women in our culture, means to say that women subjectify themselves, in their relationships with themselves, mediated by the look of a man that “chooses” them. In other words, love, to be chosen by a man, is an identity fact for them. It tells about a certain way of loving that

is addressed to them. In our culture, men learn to love many things and women learn to love, above all, and especially, men. We have seen how varied and effective are the gender technologies (magazines, films, songs, soap operas etc.) that address performances related to this mechanism, as well as the way they colonize affections. (ZANELLO, 2018, p. 84)

Having black women in representations of affection is still not common in Brazilian cinema, as mentioned by a participant; and another one considers this happy ending too idealized. Such visions allow us think of the visibility regimes imposed on black women, that is, even if this outcome is still stereotyped, it is necessary to ask: “what women are we talking about?”, as the philosopher Sueli Carneiro (1994, p. 190) does when she criticizes the notion of feminine identity, emphasizing that black women “[..] are portrayed as the anti muses of Brazilian society, because the aesthetic model of women is the white woman”.

In an interview with journalist Débora Stevaux (2016, *s/ponline?*), the activist Stephanie Ribeiro also points out how the emphasis on whiteness as the ideal of beauty excludes black women, especially the ones with darker skin, who make up more than 52% of the population, and, according to the census carried out by IBGE in 2010, are alone, in a kind of definitive celibacy. Thus, she stresses how racism impacts the affectivity of black women, and this does not necessarily refer to being or not in a relationship, but to the fact that “[...] black women are not seen as subjects to be loved”.

Group 2 (Association of the Elderly) does not present negotiated readings about the couple’s happy ending, because the agreement with this outcome prevails in it. However, these participants, based on their own experiences, indicate the imposition of marriage as the only destiny for women.

Group 2 – Association of the Elderly

P.1: [...] When I was young, girls didn’t study so that they couldn’t write to their boyfriends!

Moderator: Girls weren’t allowed to study?

[Participants answer in chorus]: No!

P.2: Because then they would write letters to their boyfriends! [...] girls went to class just to learn how to sign their names, so when they got married, they knew how to sign her names. Women weren't even allowed to vote, because in those days women didn't vote. [...] this was back in my time, in my mother's time they couldn't even go to school. [the other women agree].

Moderator: Do you think that being a woman hindered some things?

P.1: Oh! Yes it did, because a woman's dream, our dream in those days, was to read and write, ah!, to dream, right? But what we learned was how to crochet, embroider, cross-stitch, [to spin – P.2] [...] and how to suffer, only! [and raise children – P.2] and how to get married to raise children, to get married fast [she gesticulates with her hands, indicating a hurry]; at 16 you had to get married, and then you would buy this and that for a bed, a table [...].

Such speeches point to the preparation of women for the roles of spouse, housewife and mother, which hindered or even prevented female autonomy, which, for these interviewees (aged between 55 and 88 years), meant to have access to education. For most of these participants, this could only be resumed now, in maturity and old age. Differently from the other groups, participants in group 3 – Reference Center – elaborate OPPOSITIONAL READINGS of the happy ending portrayed in *Bendito Fruto*, when they contest the meanings offered and claim other possibilities for the ending of the film narrative.

Group 3 – Reference Center

“Why couldn't there be another happy ending? Why does it have to be that ending? [...] Why can't she have found another man, black or white? Why can't she move on with her life?”

“They should have shown her with a new experience, ah!, having changed, [Edgar] giving her a new television [...]. They just went for a walk! For me, going for a walk was no happy ending!”

These oppositional interpretations point out the inequalities of gender and race, when a participant questions the ending, problematizing the place of the black female character, who could have had other affective experiences or even subverted the norm of having a relationship; another one stresses that Maria's wish to get a new television (indicated in the opening sequences of the movie) is not fulfilled by Edgar, but by her son, Anderson. Furthermore, the walk is also something already mentioned by the character during the narrative, when Maria goes to the salon to invite him, but Edgar ignores her and prefers to go for a walk with Virgínia. Therefore, when considering the narrative as whole and thus also Edgar's racist posture, this ending is not considered a happy ending by the participant.

The different configurations of meaning attributed by the participants to the happy ending, an initially unforeseen theme, but which emerged from the discussion groups, indicates the importance of such discursive construction anchored in a model that is “[...] heteronormative, monogamous, faithful, committed to the institution of marriage and the formation of a family” (BARBOSA, 2011, p. 4) and still very present in audiovisual productions, but which gains different interpretations in terms of reception.

Final Considerations

The undertaking of this empirical research made it possible to confront the meanings offered by the movie *Bendito Fruto* and the ones that are elaborated by the receivers, in a context of reception groups. Based on such repertoires, the participants elaborated a set of readings that includes the confirmation of this representation of a happy ending, the negotiation of meanings with the perception of functions usually associated with the feminine and also the resignification of the message, highlighting what they consider a happy ending. Such aspects confirm the importance of the filmic reception as an instance in which speeches and world visions emerge permeated by ambiguities, tensions and polysemy also emerges, as in the readings of group 2, in which the

elderly women, although they agree with the happy ending, question the imposition of marriage.

Considering the movie and the imaginaries that it raises, it is also worth pointing out the meanings that are not perceived in this decoding process, which refer to the intersection of gender and race in the representation of black women. In the case of groups 1 and 3, perhaps due to the access to reflections on gender, we observe an incisive positioning regarding the happy ending, which makes it possible to denaturalize the gender asymmetries.

However, it still demonstrates the difficulty to observe other aspects of innovation offered by the film (despite its limitations), such as the selection of actors and actresses aged between 40 and 50 for this love triangle, and especially the intersection with race, given the limited perception of the existence and performance of this black female protagonist, who has a happy ending, a story, subjectivity and contradictions that give her humanity. These elements can be considered as a possible displacement of the current visibility regimes, in which black women usually do not have a place in love stories and happy endings, because the model of beauty and femininity is the white woman.

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Submission date: 06/20/2022

Acceptance date: 09/05/2022

Ser mãe de uma pessoa com transtorno de espectro autista: um estudo sobre representações e estigmas em séries

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Resumo: *As representações midiáticas podem ser capazes de criar e reforçar estigmas e estereótipos. Tal cenário é ainda mais frequente quando se trata de grupos que são socialmente invisibilizados. Nesta pesquisa o objetivo foi analisar as representações de mães de pessoas com transtorno do espectro autista em séries. Para isso foram analisadas *Atypical* e *Parenthood*, séries de grande alcance e que são apontadas como emblemáticas no que diz respeito à representação de pessoas com transtorno do espectro autista. As análises mostraram que as tramas trazem representações que reforçam que as mães de pessoas com autismo correspondem ao estereótipo de extremamente dedicadas aos filhos, dispostas a abandonar suas vidas pessoais e profissionais, e responsáveis por manter a família unida, mesmo quando os pais dizem não conseguir lidar com o diagnóstico.*

Palavras-chave: *Mídia; transtorno autista; mãe; representações.*

Abstract: *Media representations may be able to create and reinforce stigmas and stereotypes. Such a scenario is even more frequent when it comes to groups that are socially invisible. In this research, the objective was to analyze the representations of mothers of people with autism spectrum disorder in series. For this, two series *Atypical* and *Parenthood* were analyzed, series of great reach and that are pointed out as emblematic with regard to the representation of people with autistic spectrum disorder. The analysis showed that the plots bring representations that reinforce that mothers of people with autism correspond to the stereotype of being extremely dedicated to their children, willing to abandon their personal*

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and professional lives and responsible for keeping the family together, even when the parents say they cannot cope with the diagnosis.

Keywords: *Media; autistic disorder; mother; representations.*

Introduction

The investigation presented here is aligned with feminist studies of communication with regard to the search to understand how media agents contribute to perpetuate gender inequality. Also aligned with what is expected in this sense, the research has an intersectional perspective (MENDES; CARTER, 2008). With these issues in focus, the objective of the present article was to analyze the representations of mothers of people with autism spectrum disorder in TV series.

For authors like Furtado (2000), communication practices are capable of building different forms of oppression in individuals. In this research, a particularly attentive look was undertaken at the possibilities of oppression that can derive from the representations of women that are mothers of people with autism spectrum disorder in series. Additionally, Scoralick's (2010) perspective that social representation in different media products is important for the development of society's identity, both on a personal and collective level, was also crucial for carrying out the analyses.

Mandes and Carter (2008) highlight the importance of analyzing various types of media products, such as soap operas, talk shows, news and movies. Although these authors do not discuss series, one can say that the basis presented by them serves perfectly for the analysis intended here, especially when they speak of the importance of showing the articulation of capitalism and patriarchy in media representations.

The focus on series is justified by authors like Silva et al. (2018), who defend the use of this type of product to seek to understand social experiences. Likewise, Pinheiro et al. (2016) draw attention to the increase in the number of series produced, in their audiences and in the complexity of the characters.

With regard to the focus on women who are mothers of people with autism, it is worth mentioning that little is discussed about media representation, stigmas and the experiences of these women. More frequent, although in insufficient quantity, are the studies that focus on the representation of people with disabilities (PwD). Such investigations

show that the representations reinforce the stigmas of the disability and the image of the disability as a difficulty experienced by a single person (AUTHOR). Since the mothers are also affected by these stigmas (GOFFMAN, 2008), it becomes relevant to develop studies of the media representation of such women who are repeatedly made invisible by the media and by society as a whole.

Representations in the Media: Stigmas and Identities

The influence that the media has on judgments and on the formation of people's opinions is the object of study of many authors. This is justified because society is marked by the existence of intervening interactions in the media context. The media seeks, most of the time, to shape behaviors that are strongly anchored in stereotypes and stigmas, which results in a lack of empathy, sensitivity and critical thinking by the receivers (TONDATO, 2011). Therefore, it is necessary to incorporate the study of media channels in order to establish an understanding of the relationships between individuals and in the very structuring of social meanings (CARVALHO JÚNIOR, 2016).

Scoralick (2010) also points out the importance and relevance of media products in society and, as a consequence, the need for all people to be represented, especially groups already stereotyped and socially marginalized. The author's main line of argument is that representation is indispensable with regard to the reproduction and achievement of rights and duties. For her, only then will it be possible to discuss stigmas.

Following other authors, Rodrigues (2008) summarizes that stigma is complex, it is a social/historical phenomenon that crosses the limits of the stigmatized and of the one who discriminates against them. For this author, it is important to understand that stigma is strategically employed: it produces and reproduces relationships and social inequalities. Equally important is to understand how media representations play a crucial role in the creation and maintenance of stigmas.

Seeking to analyze the representations in the media originates from the unease provoked by texts such as the one by Silveirinha (2021),

which highlights that the world is organized between central and “exterior” subjects, and it also warns that it is important to think about this imbalance of power in which resides the notorious and historically problematic nature of representations concerning, for example, race, class, gender, sexuality, age or disability. The same author argues that the relationship between identity and representation is extremely strong.

In this research, the issues of stigma, identity and representation of gender and disability are addressed by focusing on the representations of mothers of people on the autistic spectrum in series. With regard to gender, authors such as Mendes and Cartes (2008) state that media texts contribute to the reinforcement and construction of stereotypes. Concerning the stigma of PwD, which extends to their mothers, it is easy to notice that stigmatized representations occur in scenarios and practices already socially constructed with regard to the insertion of the person with a disability in society. In other words, media products reinforce the stereotypes already socially constructed of people with disabilities, stereotypes that in no way facilitate the social inclusion of these people (BARRETO et al., 2018).

Being the Mother of a Person with a Disability: Myths, Guilt and Trajectories

Research such as that carried out by Bastos and Deslandes (2008) and Marson (2008) point out that the birth of a child with a disability represents, at least initially, a breach of expectations. For the mothers, this first moment is transmuted, most of the time, into concerns about the special cares that the child will need. With regard to the parents, it is common that they report difficulties in acceptance that generate partial or even total distancing (PINTO et al., 2016).

The relationship between mothers and children with disabilities tends to involve a feeling of guilt for having generated a child that does not correspond to the myth of the perfect child (CALVASINA et al., 2007). This myth is constantly reinforced by the media, especially

in advertisements, which show images of the perfect children with their ideal and always happy mothers, without any kind of problem (MENESES; MIRANDA, 2015). Guilt becomes ideal for maintaining patriarchal and capitalist oppression in the lives of these women who are, in the eyes of society, imperfect mothers.

One of the points to which the perfect child is expected to correspond is to be independent as soon as possible. This demand is strongly anchored in the capitalist model that emphasizes self-sufficiency (TABATABAI, 2020). Since they are dependent, in most cases on their mothers, for a longer period than expected (often for the entire lives), PwD are labeled as unproductive and incompatible with adult life. These ideas are infiltrated into the speech of the “good mother”, who must give up many things in her life in order to overcome the difficulties brought about by the lack of autonomy of their sons and daughters with disabilities.

According to leading theorists focused on the theories of justice, personal dignity is closely related to independency. As a consequence, the care received by people with disabilities is seen as an attempt to achieve as much autonomy as possible. However, human beings are naturally subject to periods of dependence. Thus, Kittay (2011) proposes that instead of seeing assistance as a limitation, it can be considered as a resource in the basis of a vision of society capable of handling the inevitable dependency relationships between “unequals”, ensuring a full life both for the caretaker – most often the mother, as we have seen – and for the person who is cared for.

What remains, however, is the demand for unconditional care in the quest to meet the myth of the ideal mother, which often results in maternal guilt, which will be reflected in several aspects of these women’s lives (LIMA; BOTELHO, 2014). In short, the oppression of capacity centered on “perfect” or “normal” bodies and minds, and the discourse of care as a female function work in articulation so that “being the mother of a person with a disability” is a label that determines the identity of such women, stigmatizing them and shaping their social roles.

Methodological Procedures

In this research, the series *Atypical* and *Parenthood* were analyzed. These media products were chosen because they reached a large audience and are considered emblematic series with regard to the representation of people with autism spectrum disorder². In addition, these series are important for the main objective of the research because both present the families of the characters with autism in a very vivid way, especially their mothers.

The tables presented below summarize some characteristics of the two series that may be important for understanding the analyzes that will be carried out in the next section.

Table 1. Characteristics of the series *Atypical*

Series	<i>Atypical</i>
Number of seasons	4 seasons
Number of episodes	38 episodes
Release year	2017
Country	USA
Platform	Netflix
Characters with autism	Sam Gardner
Character's gender	Male
The character in the series	Sam is an autistic teenager who decides to find a girlfriend. His quest for independence sends the entire family on a journey of self-discovery.
Mother	Elsa
Family	Father – Doug Sister - Casey

Source: Elaborated by the author

2 *Minha Série* section on the website *TecMundo* “5 series characters that help understanding autism”. Available at: <https://www.tecmundo.com.br/minha-serie/169119-5-personagens-de-series-que-ajudam-a-entender-o-autismo.htm>. Accessed on: set. 7, 2021.

Table 2. Characteristics of the series *Parenthood*

Series	Parenthood
Number of seasons	6 seasons
Number of episodes	103 episodes
Release year	2010
Country	USA
Platform	Prime Video
Character with autism	Max Braverman
Character's gender	Male
The character in the series	Max is diagnosed early in the series and throughout the plot he faces problems with interpersonal relationships, experiences a drama with educational inclusion, but falls in love with photography, which helps him overcome problems. The series also features another character that is diagnosed with autism only as an adult. This character is not highlighted in the analysis of this research because her family (her mother) is not represented.
Mother	Kristina Braverman
Family	Father - Adam Braverman Sisters – Haddie Braverman and Nora Braverman

Source: Elaborated by the author

The series that compose the material that was analyzed in the research were watched in full, with the possibility of pauses, on streaming platforms. The methodology chosen for the analysis of the scenes in this work was content analysis. This choice was made because it allows the analysis not only of the characters' speeches, but also of the scenes as a whole (settings, costumes, interactions between the characters) (SILVA; FOSSÁ, 2015; MORAES, 1999).

To assist in the construction of the analyzes, since there was a lot of material to be organized, an Excel spreadsheet was used with variables chosen based on the literature revision. This spreadsheet was filled in with relevant information of the scenes that were chosen because of

their importance for understanding the representations of mothers of people with autism. The variables observed focusing on the characters Kristina and Elsa related to issues such as: 1) job/professional activity; 2) relationship with the child; 3) relationship with other family members; and 4) performance of care functions.

To present the results, it was decided to divide the section into two parts. In the first part, a general overview is made in order to describe and analyze separately the representations of each of the two characters, mainly regarding the variables presented above. In the second part, a conversation was produced between the representations of Elsa and Kristina divided into the following topics: 1) the diagnosis and the feeling of guilt; and, 2) independence for mothers and children.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

Characterization and Analysis of the Character Elsa (*Atypical*)

The character Elsa is the mother of Sam, a teenager with autism, and Casey. Married to Doug, she completely takes on the tasks related to the care of the family. The character reinforces the stereotype of the mother who, when having a child with a disability, assumes full responsibility for their care (KITTAI, 2011). As pointed out by authors such as Lima and Botelho (2014), Elsa takes unconditional care of her son, gets involved in all his activities and has very little or no time for her life, independent of her son's life.

Regarding the professional activity, she also corresponds to what literature points out as very common, the mother who stops working after having a child (BALABANIS et al., 2012). Although she is a hairdresser, the character no longer exercises her profession after Sam's birth. Elsa's relationship with her son is very close and full of control mechanisms. In the series, the young man is looking for more independence, claiming his place as an adult in society. This search for his recognition as an adult is extremely uncomfortable for the mother. When she sees her son

with more autonomy, the character doesn't even know what to do with her free time.

Elsa's relationship with her daughter Casey is marked by the mother's demand that her daughter be responsible for her brother. At a certain point in the plot, there are many fights between the two, as Casey starts to demand that her life be independent of her brother's life. The attribution of responsibility to the sisters, with regard to the care of the brother or sister with a disability, is also something mentioned in academic research that interviewed families of people with disabilities (PINTO, 2011).

As for the relationship between Elsa and her husband, it is very conflicted at the beginning; the couple even separates. It is known that Doug left home when Sam was small because, according to him, he was not able to deal with his son's disability. This situation and the very limited involvement of the father with his son are important points for the relationship between Doug and Elsa. The relationship between these two characters perfectly illustrates what happens to many couples who have children with disabilities. The literature shows that it is common for the father to distance himself from the child and the family as a whole, leaving all responsibilities to the mother (PINTO et al., 2016). It is worth mentioning that in this plot the father leaves home, leaves Elsa with the children and then she gets involved with another man and is extremely crucified for it. There is an explicit judgment that she is the only one to blame for the separation because she cheated. Throughout the series, Elsa and Doug reconcile and reinforce the social representation that everything that the man does, especially not taking care of his disabled son, must be forgotten by the woman in order to keep the family together.

At the end of the plot, Sam acquires much more independence and gets closer to his father. Elsa, however, never accepts her son's greater freedom and suffers when she sees that he is more independent. The entire series reinforces the view of the mother as a controller who does not want her son to have his own life. This type of representation

is extremely harmful and puts the blame for the social exclusion experienced by people with disabilities on their mothers, in addition to reducing the responsibility of the father and society as a whole.

Characterization of the Character Kristina (Parenthood)

The character Kristina is the mother of Max, a boy who is diagnosed with autism early in the plot, and she is also Haddie and Nora's mother. Even though the father, Adam, plays an active role in Max's life, in many episodes it is clear that the burden is all on Kristina, because she is the one who does all the main day-to-day care tasks. That is, although Adam does not abandon his child after the diagnosis, which is very common (KITTAI, 2011), the responsibility for care is almost exclusively on Kristina. At some points in the plot, we even get the impression that Kristina should be thankful for having a husband who did not abandon the family.

The character's story is very representative of the dichotomy between public and private space – which is highlighted in academic literature (CANO, 2016) – since she did not work at the beginning of the plot. Later, the spectator gets to know that before her child was born, she used to work on political campaigns. Towards the end of the plot, she herself runs for political office. During the episodes when the character decides to run and campaign, there are many scenes in which other characters question how she would be able to conciliate her public and political life with her attributions as the mother of an atypical child. This discussion about the presence of such women in public and power spaces is urgent and fundamental in order to question the social exclusion of women who are mothers of people with disabilities.

Still with regard to the professional aspect, Kristina loses the elections and ends up opening a school for children with autism spectrum disorder. At this point, the plot gets very close to the life stories of many women who change their professional paths in order to provide better access to education for their children (PINTO, 2011). It is important to mention that it can be very hard to believe that solutions like the one

found by the character are viable for most families. Logically, opening a school is something that demands a lot of effort, knowledge and financial resources that are not within the reach of almost any family. Additionally, it is extremely complicated to think that the flaws in the educational system, which is, in most cases, inadequate for children and young people with disabilities, should be corrected with individual solutions. A good and accessible education for all should be a commitment of the public authorities and not the responsibility of each family and/or specific actions.

Kristina's relationship with her son is extremely close and based on the attempt to provide him with independence. An important moment in the plot is when a character, Hank, is diagnosed with autism when he is already an adult. For Kristina, knowing that Hank has a profession (photographer) and an independent life is very comforting, it gives her hope about Max's future.

In addition to Max, Kristina has two daughters. Her relationship with the older one, Haddie, is totally marked by demands that the teenager should be responsible for taking care of her brother. Many scenes show clashes between them since the girl wants to go to study in a different town and have a life less tied to Max. Kristina behaves with Haddie as if she had to prepare her to take over the responsibilities for her brother, a behavior that is often presented by mothers of people with disabilities (PINTO, 2011). The other daughter, Nora, is born during the plot and there is a suspicion, which is not confirmed in the end, that she would also be within the autistic spectrum.

Cross Reflections on Kristina and Elsa

The Diagnosis and the Feeling of Guilt

The literature on people with disabilities points out that the moment of the diagnosis is usually a turning point for families, especially for mothers who often end up blaming themselves for their children's

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disabilities (CRISOSTOMO et al., 2019). The character Kristina, unlike Elsa who begins the series with her adult son already diagnosed, experiences the discovery of her son's diagnosis in the plot. As pointed out in the literature (BASTOS; DESLANDES, 2008; MARSON, 2008), the character is extremely impacted by the news and seeks explanations that include blaming her for her son's disability. At the moment of the diagnosis she asks the doctor: "Doctor, please be honest, am I to blame for him being like this? Could I have done something different? And now, what should I do?"

Kristina's last question, in the speech transcribed above, shows that she intends to take on the responsibility of doing whatever is required for her son to have a good quality of life. This sense of responsibility is linked to the myth of conditional love and the perfect mother, who can give up anything for her child (CALVASINA et al., 2007). Even though the series does not portray the moment of Sam's diagnosis, there are scenes in which the characters talk about this past moment. In one of these scenes, Casey (Sam's sister) questions her father about his absence for eight months after Sam was diagnosed. The father says he is not proud of having acted this way and talks about the difficulties related to the diagnosis. In the same scene, Doug says he is very proud of the way his wife began to dedicate herself exclusively to taking care of Sam. He adds that his wife was wonderful and that he couldn't accept his son's diagnosis, unlike Elsa who felt relieved, since she had already noticed that Sam presented atypical behaviors and felt anguished for not knowing the motive. All the discussion between Doug and Casey has very strong points of contact with what actually takes place in many families. The diagnosis brings great anxiety and frustration for fathers and mothers. However, the way of dealing with the situation is completely different since fathers are socially allowed/accepted the option of not being able to cope, moving away, taking their time. The mothers, on the other hand, are compelled to quickly accept and to start acting in order to provide better living conditions for their children (PINTO et al., 2016).

This need to quickly deal with the diagnosis is very well illustrated in the speech of Elsa, Sam's mother, which is reproduced below:

I think it's a relief, actually. Now we know, we can act. I was reading about noise canceling headphones, they help a lot in situations where he feels bewildered. It's such a simple idea, but I would never have thought of it. It makes so much sense. I'm going to the store to buy a pair, and there are also other things, we can make some changes.

The feeling of guilt for not having produced a perfect son, which is pointed out in the literature (CALVASINA et al., 2007), appears in different ways in the characterization of each one of the characters. Elsa corresponds to the most frequent characterization: she blames herself for her son's condition and, largely because of this feeling she dedicates her life to taking care of the boy. At the time the series takes place, Sam is already an adult and it is only then that the mother begins to allow herself to have a life minimally detached from her son.

The character Kristina, on the other hand, does not demonstrate that she feels guilty in most of the plot. However, when it is discovered that her niece is gifted, the character questions herself about her son's condition. At this moment, a distance is created between Kristina and her niece's mother, Kristina's husband's sister, based, even if in a veiled way, on a hierarchy of someone who produced a child with a disability and someone who generated a gifted one.

Independence for Mothers and Children

Capitalism proclaims that only someone who is independent is a full adult (TABATABAI, 2020). Therefore, and because we are totally inserted in the capitalist logic, the pursuit of independence has a central place when we discuss issues related to disabilities.

In the plot of *Atypical*, the search for independence is central. Sam works and in his work environment, in an electronics store, he has some autonomy. However, when he wants to leave his home, Elsa, his mother, puts up several barriers and in many scenes she says things like: "Do you

think you can live by yourself? Have an independent life? You can't. You'll never be fully independent”.

On the other hand, Kristina, Max's mother, shows that she expects her son to be fully independent when he becomes an adult and hopes that this will happen if the boy manages to have a profession: “I want him to grow up and be independent. That's why I want him to discover a profession that he likes and to follow it. Photography may be an option”.

For both characters, Kristina and Elsa, the perspective of their sons' lack of independence in the long run is very uncomfortable. The two talk about feeling that they can not die. This feeling had already been portrayed in the literature as being frequent for mothers of PwD (PINTO, 2011). In Kristina's case, a very significant part of the plot is when she finds out she has breast cancer. At this moment, her biggest fear becomes that her son will have no one to take care of him in case she dies.

With regard to her own independence, the character Elsa experiences a life change as she begins to realize that her son is no longer so dependent on her. The series shows this transformation in the life of the character, who gradually stops seeing herself only as a mother and rediscovers herself as a woman.

Kristina appears from the beginning as more independent, if compared to Elsa, but when the couple have another daughter, Nora, and there is a suspicion that she also has autism, the mother is certain that she will never again have her life independent of her children.

Final Considerations

Regarding the initial commitment which was assumed to take a close look at the possibilities of oppression that may arise from the representations of women who are mothers of people with autism spectrum disorder, we can state that both series have a great possibility of reinforcing stereotypes about these women. In the analyzes, it was possible to identify that the characterizations of the characters are widely permeated by the oppression of capitalism and patriarchy.

An example of the presence of this articulated oppression is the representation of Kristina and Elsa as the only/main caregivers of their children. Naturalizing such a configuration in media representations can be extremely powerful in reinforcing that the responsibility for care lays with women, in this case mothers. This accountability frees the father from many issues and removes the woman from public spaces, including work.

In short, the representations analyzed reinforce that mothers of people with autism correspond to the stereotype of being extremely dedicated to their children, willing to give up their personal and professional lives and to be responsible for keeping the family together, even when the fathers say that they are not able to deal with the diagnosis. This characterization is obviously very harmful for these women, who are compelled to cancel their desires in order to become an extension of their children's needs. Therefore, there is an unconditional search to correspond to the standards of perfect mothers proclaimed by patriarchy and capitalism.

As a suggestion for future study, it could be very fruitful to carry out studies on the media representation of sisters of people with disabilities. In the two plots analyzed, these characters were very rich in important issues to be analyzed, such as, for example, the perspective of having their lives always linked to those of their brothers.

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Submission date: 06/16/2022

Acceptance date: 02/13/2022