

Soccer, gender and homo-sociability on social media: masculinity on a WhatsApp communication circuit

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Abstract

Soccer is a fundamental issue on Brazilian culture and national identity. Defined by a bias of male identity, soccer in Brazil is related to values as honor, sexuality and dignity. The inclusion of social media in everyday life has changed the way ordinary fans talk about soccer. Elements of ordinary soccer sociability pointed out in other studies, such as playfulness and the affirmation of dominant male stereotypes are renewed on social media. Departing from a netnographic research, this study identified a number of interactional arrangements on the communication circuit of a group of informal soccer players on WhatsApp. The results point out to patterns of re-affirmation of masculine hegemony, in terms of “male homo-sociability”, “gender playfulness” and “political satire”.

Keywords: Soccer. Gender. Identity. Social Media. WhatsApp. Male Homo-sociability.

Introduction

“Vasco is three times champion in losing 4-0. They can ask for a song in *Fantástico*,”¹ writes a *Flamengo* fan to tease his *vascaíno*² friends after their team was beaten by *Cruzeiro* and practically eliminated from the 2018 *Libertadores* tournament. “Is that *real* or *cruzeiro*?”³ adds another rival fan. “I don’t care,” answers a *vascaíno*. This playful debate could have happened in a bar, a public square, an after-game barbecue or during a coffee break at work. Yet, the conversation took place in a WhatsApp group formed by amateur soccer players or “*peladeiros*”⁴. In these online environments, traditional jokes of soccer culture are renewed

1 This is a humorous reference to a segment of the Sunday television show *Fantástico* on *Globo*. Professional soccer players who struck three or more goals in games during the week can ask for a song which is then partially played in the program.

2 *Vascaíno* is a fan of the *Vasco* soccer team.

3 The joke alludes to Brazilian currencies. The *real* is the present official currency, which replaced the *cruzeiro* in 1994.

4 In Brazil, “*peladeiros*” are amateur and/or unskillful soccer players who gather to play recreational soccer matches known as “*peladas*”.

in text, audio, and video formats and diffused in the pace of digital communication circuits. The practice of teasing fans of rival teams, a staple of soccer social relations, is present in diverse digital environments.

This article analyzes, from a netnographic perspective, the social interaction between the participants of a group of amateur soccer players from the records of their messages in a WhatsApp group. Thus, after this introduction, we discussed the social interaction mediated by smartphone, the relationship between soccer and masculinity and aspects of the applied netnographic technique. The analysis explores a general characterization of the phenomenon followed by a reading of the interaction through the texts and images conveyed.

This investigation follows the principle of media ecology (STRATE; BRAGA; LEVINSON, 2019), which indicates communication environments offered by technologies reconfigure symbolic-cultural spectrums, identities, subjectivities, and language (LOGAN, 2002), change how we perceive the world – our thoughts, interactions and expressions –, and remodel power arrangements (POSTMAN *apud* BRAGA, 2012, p. 7-8). It summarizes the famous aphorism “the medium is the message” (MCLUHAN, 1964), new technologies condition new uses and habits derived from new sociocultural, intellectual, and political standards.

In this sense, technological innovation is not neutral: it promotes costs and benefits that are asymmetrically distributed in society and with which society members have to *negotiate* (POSTMAN, 1994). Technological innovation imposes new symbolic, lexical, spatial, and interactional repertoires that, once applied to the media dimensions of soccer, alter the types of experience and interaction of that sport.

Soccer is a fundamental element in Brazilian culture and the constitution of national identity. In terms of masculinity, this identity trait acquires even greater proportions for being connected to moral values, honor, sexuality, and dignity. Boosted by Information and Communication Technologies, the incorporation of digital processes is reconfiguring communication about soccer among team supporters in online social networks. Elements of soccer fan sociability identified in previous studies (RIAL, 2003, DAMO, 2007, GASTALDO, 2006), such as the predominant playfulness and affirmation of masculinity, renew themselves in digital platforms. Through a netnographic approach, this research seeks to show identity and interaction arrangements in the communication circuit of a group of “*peladeiros*” in WhatsApp, composed by residents of Zona Sul, in Rio de Janeiro, in 2018.

Hence, this study identifies specific communication patterns related to the cultural ideal of masculinity (GASTALDO, 2006, 2010, DAMO, 2003, 2007). We aim to contribute to the understanding of how, with the simplification and multiplication of digital content interfaces, communication circuits become meaningful environments “for presentations of the *self* that convey representations of identity and individuality in a similar dynamic to what Goffman (1998) called *impression management*” (BRAGA, 2008).

Smartphones and soccer

Since the development of the so-called Web 2.0, in the early 2000s, a series of social networks and applications have become popular. Currently, in Brazil and in many other countries, one of the most popular social networking applications is WhatsApp, due to its unique characteristics of group formation and account registration from the phone number, using the smartphone as an interface. The following excerpt clearly exposes these characteristics:

Although free sharing of information over the Internet is common to many social networks and other public messaging services, such as Twitter, it does exist, the private nature of the WhatsApp network makes it unique.

A similar difference between WhatsApp and other social networks is that the association is created and updated directly through people's smartphones. Registration is not done exclusively through a person's phone number, but the smartphone is the main interface for sending and receiving messages. Third, WhatsApp interpersonal conversation groups are the only means of communication on the network and are formed by adding people's phone numbers to that group. On the other hand, other social networks are based on user association and focus mainly on public messages in which these messages are sent to all connected users (that is, these messages are called Facebook Posts and Twitter Tweets), and not through private groups (ROSENFELD; SINA; SARNE, 2018).

The ubiquity of internet-connected devices in the routine of soccer world, as in other contemporary social environments, is remarkable. According to FIFA, Brazil's upsetting defeat against Germany in the 2014 World Cup semifinals was watched by 428 million spectators and contributed to the record of three billion posts on Facebook⁵ during the championship. Other apps like Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram, which were mostly used on smartphones, also served to disseminate messages. The media protagonism of the match on television was shared with the digital dynamic of simultaneous posts and decentered narratives on smartphone screens.

The suspension of everyday time and, symbolically, historical time during the World Cup is essential to reinvigorate the unifying representation of the Brazilian team as national *identity*. But, that does not mean that such events are immune to historical circumstances, as discussions about defeats of the Brazilian team show (GUEDES, 2002, p. 2). In 2013, one

⁵ Launched in 2004, Facebook had reached two billion users by mid-2017 and is currently the most accessed social media in the world. Facebook bought two of the other leading social networks, Instagram and WhatsApp, in 2012 and 2014 respectively. WhatsApp had about 1.7 billion active users in 2017 and is the most used messaging app in Brazil. According to IBOPE Conecta, an online research institute, 91% of Brazilian internet users access WhatsApp. Available at: <http://conecta-i.com/?q=pt-br/whatsapp-%C3%A9-o-app-de-rede-social-mais-usado-pelos-internautas-brasileiros>. Accessed on: May 10 2019.

year before the World Cup in Brazil, popular demonstrations, which became known as the June Journeys, happened all over the country.

In this sense, team fans incorporate smartphones that expand and attribute new meanings to their soccer experiences in online environments, either through digital contents produced during matches or through the maintenance of the symbolic-interactional system of soccer in social networks, which is done, for example, by the members of the investigated WhatsApp group.

Netnography: theoretical-methodological notes

The potential of ethnography for digital communication lies on the researcher's centrality as the main source of data through his/her immersive experience within a group for a long period of time. The object of ethnography is the "stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures" (GEERTZ, 1973, p. 7). Hence, the researcher chooses between different "meaningful structures" and characterizes their importance and social basis in his/her analysis. Multiple, complex, superimposed, interconnected, and irregular conceptual structures have to be comprehended and described. One of the purposes of the personal experience of ethnography is to contribute to the broadening of the universe of human discourse, which entails extensive theoretical study and fieldwork data saturation. Through examining the events and symbolic systems of social groups, ethnography seeks to understand the informal logic that articulates cultural forms (GEERTZ, 1973, p. 17).

Netnography presents a methodological challenge: to preserve the rich details of ethnographic field observation while using an electronic media to "follow" social actors. The immersive experience in the researched environment includes participation, observation, and description: categories that give unity to ethnographic practice (BRAGA, 2012).

One characteristic that should be noted concerns the interrelation of the Internet with other preceding media. A fundamental point in the characterization of social spaces available on the Internet refers to the subordination of online activity to locally situated actions, to the interaction order. Interactions in social networks spread through their various structures, extend beyond digital limits, and configure a kind of "media complementarity", an interactional dynamic in which different media channels are used complementarily in communications between interactants (BRAGA, 2008). Moreover, online activities are inserted in practical use conditions and draw on resources from other communication contexts in specific combinations according to the demands of each specific case. The Internet environment is a meeting place among others. Participants often establish relations beyond the digital environment and use diverse communication techniques. In WhatsApp interactions, they refer to email, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, besides face-to-face reunions. Each one of these media are activated to satisfy the specific demands of different situations, such as privacy, promptness, collectivity, sociability, and legitimacy (BRAGA, 2008).

On the Internet, it is possible to recurrently examine the creation of communication circuits that include the gathering and dispersal of participants in various digital environments with active exchanges of links, texts, images, and sound files. The use of complementary channels surpasses digital boundaries in face-to-face meetings. These circuits have been called “communicational-circuits” in previous works (BRAGA, 2008).

The investigated WhatsApp group was created three years ago to help the organization of “*peladas*” that have been played twice a week for over 18 years in a condominium in Rio de Janeiro. The group gathers about 30 members, all of them male, and is named after the condominium that hosts the weekly reunions. The condition of member, player of the weekly “*peladas*” for decades, provided a belonging that made possible the netnographic study carried out with the authorization of the administrator and participants of the WhatsApp group, in addition to a long period of time in the field. Even though most participants do not live in nor own an apartment in the condominium, the group’s name indicates their identification with the social status of the meeting’s place is more significant than with the sports practice that brings them together. The men, who are between 25 and 65 years old, share not only the recreational sport agenda, but also the taste for soccer and its specific culture. They regularly tease each other by exploring their affective attachments to rival Rio de Janeiro soccer clubs. For this work, we followed messages posted in the group between April and June 2018. The names of the “*peladeiros*”, the condominium and the WhatsApp group were omitted, seeking to preserve the identities of the members.

Each research object requires a specific methodological device. This work considers dynamic points of interaction and complementary data such as: i) an ensemble of posts and comments retrieved from the WhatsApp group, ii) fieldwork, participant observation in the weekly “*peladas*”.

Sociability and soccer on WhatsApp

Simmel (1983) defines association as the way through which humans come together to satisfy their interests in a movement of reciprocal influence. According to the author, the content of association is made of the characteristics of individuals, such as their impulses, motivations, and mental states. From their purposes and practical conditions, individuals arrange their creativity and feelings over life materials as elements of specific use in the lives of each one of them. These autonomous forms, freed from their original contents, become attractive precisely for that independence.

According to Simmel (1983), sociability is an autonomous, aesthetic, and playful form of association. Phenomena categorized as play seem to operate in a similar way. Needs, impulses, and real forces produce behavior forms appropriate for play. These forms, which are pure and autonomous, give symbolic significance to play and distinguish it from mere

pastime.⁶ Sociability prevents friction with reality in such a way that motives for association implicated in practical life are not important in this interactional context. In Goffman's perspective, everyday social interaction is for the most part enabled through the common and voluntary engagement of participants in a kind of "working consensus" (GOFFMAN, 1959, p. 10), meaning they agree to set aside their personal positions in favor of a shared definition of the situation.

Participants renounce the objective qualities of their personalities. But, if interacting with objective purposes, they cross a "sociability threshold" (SIMMEL, 1949, p. 256) and undo the formative principle of the group, as examples below show. However, it is possible to observe in the group's participants a tolerant disposition, an amiability that could be understood as a regulator of the thresholds of the established sociability.

We then proceed to the more general characterization of the culture established by the group members on the court and on WhatsApp, followed by the analysis of the corpus from the digital environment, data analyzed using the netnographic technique, where the researcher's own experience is a source of data, such as described above.

In the environments of the weekly pelada, as well as in the group on the social network, reciprocal provocations are common, themed from their affective bonds to antagonistic Rio de Janeiro clubs. Daily exchanges between the "*peladeiros*" in WhatsApp point to the expansion of soccer culture as a prominent space for the expression of male stereotypes that are culturally associated to hegemonic power and social status. Frequently, they share more content related to masculinity than strictly related to soccer. Consistent, therefore, with the large volume of content of this nature, often superior even to that strictly related to soccer. Thus, the expression of stereotypes of masculinity observed in the exchanges of the WhatsApp group under study seems to be close to the notion of Connell and Messerschmidt (2013), who work with hegemonic masculinity as a strategic position obtained through discursive practices:

we should understand hegemonic norms as defining subject positions in the discourse that is strategically carried out by men in particular circumstances. Hegemonic masculinity has multiple meanings (...). Men can shy away from multiple meanings according to their interactional needs. Men can adopt hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable, but the same men can strategically distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity at other times. Consequently, "masculinity" represents not a specific type of man, but, instead, a way in which men position themselves through discursive practices (CONNELL; MESSERSCHMIDT, 2013, p. 257).

⁶ For a comprehensive study on the notion of play, see Huizinga (1971).

Thus, participants reassert and reinforce the masculinity model naturalized in soccer culture invariably with a mocking tone. Even from different generations, the group's participants seem to reproduce the traditional soccer culture of expressing hegemonic male identities.

Participants use the WhatsApp group to arrange the sports meetings and subsequent “reviews” (“*resenhas*”). Facts, conversations, and comments that took place during games are extensively recapped in the online environment in the form of memes, photos, jokes, etc. As mentioned above, a convergence and interactional overlap characterized by media complementarity (BRAGA, 2011) leads to singular soccer-joking relations (GASTALDO, 2010).

The use participants make of such environment clearly defines the limits between content that is intimate and private and content that can be published. Really intimate topics are discussed on WhatsApp, which participants consider an undoubtedly private space. Social activity on WhatsApp creates an online interaction circuit among participants. Many of the topics that participants talk about in their weekly face-to-face meetings, the recreational soccer matches called “*peladas*”, concerns their online activity over the previous days. Reciprocally, participants describe and discuss their face-to-face meetings over WhatsApp and share photos taken at the game through the digital environment.

It is important to stress that, as it often happens in online social networks, most of the content shared in the group is not made of materials produced by participants themselves, but of memes, photos, and videos obtained and forwarded from other groups or profiles. Participants forwarding content from elsewhere frequently write a brief comment to customize and adapt the post to the context of the “*peladeiros*” group.

All the images presented in this article are part of the corpus of work, composed of the posts published in the WhatsApp group “*peladeiros*” between the months of April and June 2018.

The data set of this research enabled us to identify some of the thematic patterns in the interaction established between participants of the WhatsApp group, who are all players in the weekly “*peladas*” and fans of Rio de Janeiro soccer teams. These patterns allowed us to specify three analytic categories termed:

- a. *Male homosociability – being among peers*, the most significant pattern of the material, indicating the preferred mediation of the interaction established in that environment;
- b. *Gender playfulness*, which unfolds in three modalities called ‘beer and soccer – men, games, and alcohol’; ‘women – mothers, wives, and the others; and ‘no faggotry – soccer is for men’;
- c. *Political satire – hegemonic power and social status*.

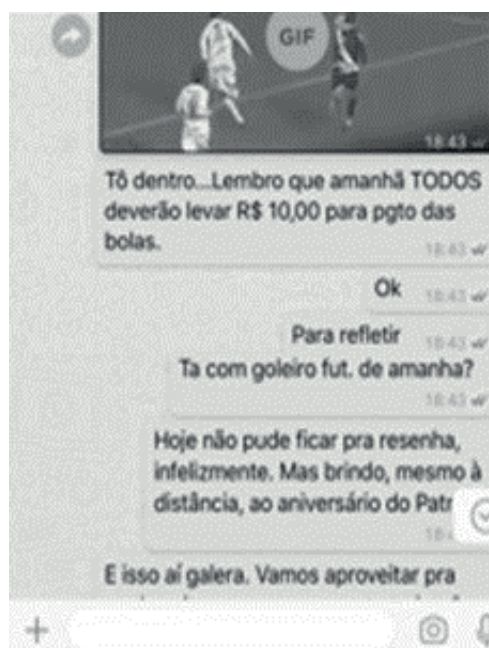
Below, we will detail each of these categories.

Male homo-sociability: being among peers

Like other digital channels, the predominant trait of interactions established in the group is sociability. Accordingly, protocols of the communication circuit of the WhatsApp group follow, primarily, the standard of flattering discourses as key elements in the dynamics of acceptance, recognition and belonging in internet environments (BRAGA, 2008), but here this pattern has playfulness as a specific characteristic in a way similar to face-to-face communication dynamics concerned with the soccer theme (GASTALDO, 2010).

The group describes its interactions with the emic term “*resenha*” (“review”), a slang that defines the break for pleasant and amusing conversations that have no purpose other than enjoying the company of their peers. One participant defines this kind of interaction, typical of sociability, as “relaxing with the brothers”. The Figure below of a post retrieved from the WhatsApp group illustrates that notion:

Figure 1 –



Source: research collection.

The mastery of content that represents and reinforces a male model rooted in contemporary as the above post shows, the mastery of contents that represent and reinforce a model of masculinity rooted in contemporary Western society sets the tone of messages exchanged between “*peladeiros*”. There is a tacit consent to the historical social appropriation of soccer for crystalizing values and identity constructions of masculinity.

In the digital environment, it seems that participants who are adept at football mockery guarantee recognition and belonging to the group. Most messages that circulate in the group are playful and connected to jokes about soccer clubs and expressions of manliness. These themes reproduce and even expand conversations among male soccer fans in bars that exhibit the games of annual Brazilian championships or the World Cup every four years.

Occasionally, participants post content related to other themes, such as information on public services, health and quality of life, public safety, and solidarity campaigns. They also send greetings on holidays and commemorative dates like Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day and Father's Day. However, these greetings are invariably sent with a joking tone.

A few participants felt displeased with the excess of "silly" content circulating in the group and decided to create another one to share messages strictly related to soccer or about the "*pelada*". The dissidents planned to exchange only contents concerning the organization of the weekly soccer matches. However, this new group also began to convey jokes and playful messages, which prevailed despite complaints. This recurrence shows that "*peladeiros*" value the sociability operated by soccer culture as a site for the expression of masculinity and a temporary refuge from the serious matters, inequalities, and conflicts of everyday life (DA MATTA, 1982; HELAL, 1997; GUEDES, 2002).

Gender playfulness

Intense daily communications between participants of the WhatsApp group are based on the dynamics of friendly provocations in meetings after "*peladas*". Incentives for these exchanges come from the performance of soccer teams in important competitions and club stigmas present in the everyday interactions of rival fans. Environments of male homosociability that succeed the "*pelada*" – from face-to-face "*resenhas*" to online interactions – extend the typical soccer joking relations to affirmative discourses of masculinity.

Any behavior considered not so manly by the group becomes a joking topic. For example, *Fluminense* fans are often called "*tricoletes*"⁷ to suggest they are gay. In a similar way, provocations associate *Botafogo* to a whining attitude ("*chororô*") that is not supposed to be part of male protocol, as stressed in the popular saying "real men don't cry".

Other gender representations emerge in interactions. Manners regarded as feminine are often the target of disqualification in the form of jokes and teases. Although within the logic of soccer playfulness, such interactions configure a mechanism for the construction of male identity based on the depreciation of femininity (CHODOROW apud GASTALDO, 2006, p. 11). For Kimmel (1998), not only femininity is devalued, but also non-hegemonic and / or subordinate masculinities:

⁷ *Fluminense* is known as the "tricolor" team. The suffix "lete" in "*tricolete*" intends to evoke homosexuality.

While the hegemonic ideal was being created, it was created in a context of opposition to “others” whose masculinity was thus problematized and devalued. The hegemonic and the subordinate emerged in a mutual interaction, but uneven in a social and economic order divided into genders (KIMMEL, 1998, p. 105).

Attributed to a man, an opponent in that interactional system, the possession (even attributed) of an element considered feminine disqualifies him in the masculine environment.

Soccer playfulness incorporates old and new stigmas that contribute to representations of masculinity, alluding to historical images and popular symbols of the major clubs, which simultaneously potentiate and harmonize rivalries (HELAL, 1997).

These interactional practices seem to reproduce the historical appropriation of the sports field to: i) construct and safeguard idealized male identity in contemporary society (DUNNING, 1999); ii) produce gender stereotypes and social representations convenient to dominant ideologies through symbolic dynamics (DAMO, 2003, 2007); iii) repress, in an amusing and naturalized way, expressions perceived in this logic as feminine and that threaten idealized masculinity and playful interactions between men, the male homo-sociability (RIAL, 1998).

Like in other spaces for sociability between men, comments made in the examined WhatsApp group environment are rarely taken as personal insults and tend to be understood as part of the characteristic playfulness of male homo-sociability connected to soccer.

Below, we present three modalities of gender playfulness related to the assertion of masculinity that emerge in interactions established in the WhatsApp group of “*peladeiros*”: alcohol consumption; relationships with women; the constant assertion of masculinity.

Beer and football: men, games, and alcohol

The historical appropriation of football operates as a *locus* for the construction and sedimentation of male gender identity (GASTALDO, 2006; DAMO, 2012). Around this symbolic system, values and social roles attributed to men and naturalized in Western society are built as mechanisms of male hegemony. These mechanisms, abundantly used in playful soccer relations, are evident in the very constitution of the examined group, which is all-male, and in the predominance of gender display messages that assert an idealized masculinity.

In this sense, the ostentation of alcohol consumption in memes, jokes, and comments that frequently circulate in the group becomes a marker and proof of belonging to the male gender. The recurrence of that type of content allows the specification of an analytic category, as the examples below show.

Figure 2 –



Source: research collection.

Figure 3 –



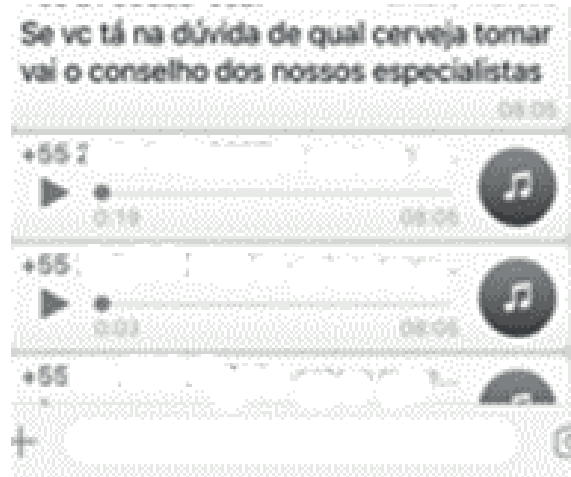
Source: research collection.

Figure 5 –



Source: research collection.

Figure 6 –



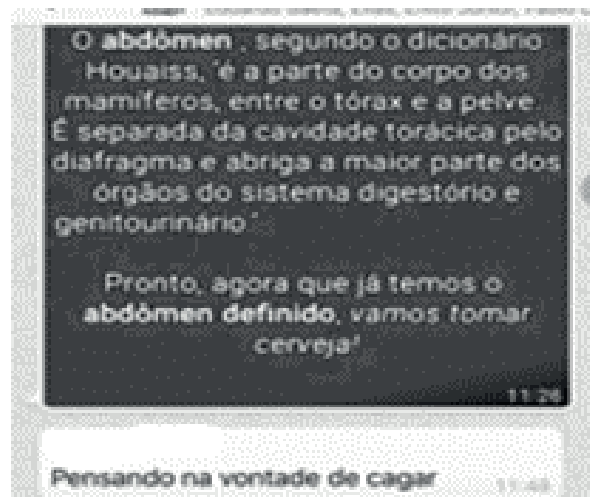
Source: research collection.

Figure 6 –



Source: research collection.

Figure 7 –



Source: research collection.

It is worth noting that alcoholic beverages continue to be a fundamental part of male gender identity: men drink in this system. The notion that excessive alcohol consumption is inseparable from the assertion of gender identity in football appears in various images and analogies, such as a football stadium grandstand made of beer crates (Figure 6) or coffee brewed with *cachaça* instead of water to watch the morning games in the World Cup (Figure 4). Furthermore, there is the strategy of interpreting the wife's instruction as an excuse to buy more beer (Figure 2) and the application of knowledge of the periodic table of elements to beer consumption (Figure 3). It is also interesting to observe that participants activated different resources of communication technologies for their playful interactions of sociability and male assertion, including audios, videos, photos, and memes.

In this environment of gender affirmation, eschatology (Figure 7) and foul language are understood as appropriate elements for male homo-sociability, contrasting with the delicacy and elegance understood and valued as feminine attributes. For example, one of the participants gave the following title to a video: “thinking about the need to take a dump”.

Women: mothers, wives, and the “others”

Materials shared by the group present a recurrent pattern of representations of the predominant male model that seems to objectify women. As Damo (2007) argues, women threaten the traditional use of soccer games in the construction and display of an idealized masculinity.

These environments of male homo-sociability preserve the tradition of designating women to supporting roles (RIAL, 1998) and ensure symbolic domains of male hegemony, as the examples below indicate.

Figure 8 –



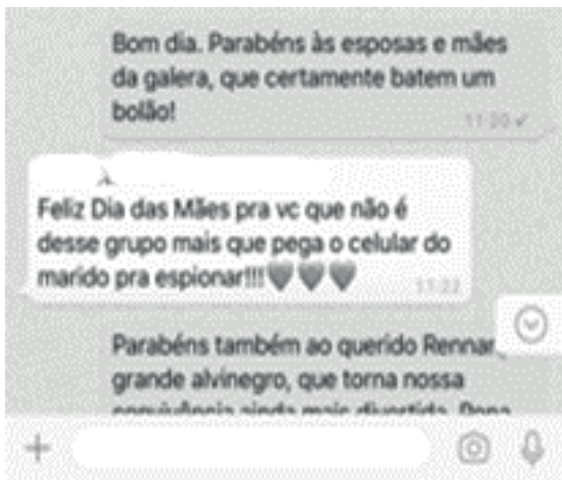
Source: research collection.

Figure 9 –



Source: research collection.

Figure 10 –



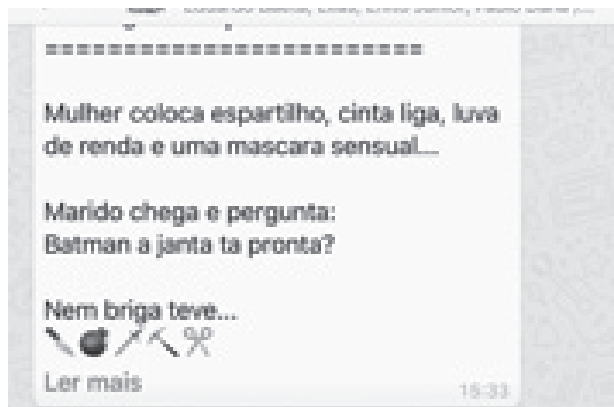
Source: research collection.

Figure 11 –



Source: research collection.

Figure 12 –



Source: research collection.

The above posts clearly point to the definition of three distinct categories of women: mothers, who are deserving of participants' respect; wives, who are playfully treated as intruders in the established homo-sociability between men in the private group; and the "others" who are invariably objects of desire.

Hence, mothers are respectfully saluted on Mother's Day, for instance, in a message that resorts to a soccer metaphor to give them a compliment: "congratulations to your moms, who surely can *play ball (bater um bolão)*" (Figure 10).⁸ In a different way, participants' jokes treat wives like spies and threats to the practice of male homo-sociability in the group. This attitude towards participants' wives is exemplified in a humorous post meant to tease them: "Happy Mother's Day to all of you who are not part of this group but are spying on your husbands' cell phone!!!" (Figure 10). In this context, wives are understood as inconvenient and deceitful if exceeding the limits of their culturally assigned territories and social roles, such as getting dinner ready on time (Figure 11).

The "others" – invariably portrayed as a young and slim woman – are always welcome and perceived as an "incentive" (Figure). They are the "miracles of soccer" you will certainly "want to zoom in" (Figure 9). Moreover, they should not be "eaten on the wrong side" unless you are a "fucking stupid animal". Collected data also shows a variation of this pattern is the representation of young and slim women in groups: "the chicks".

No faggotry: "soccer is for men"

According to DaMatta (1982), soccer universe offers a way for understanding Brazilian society, because it dramatizes our tensions, contradictions, ambiguities, fantasies, etc., and

⁸ Depending on context, "*bater um bolão*" can mean a person plays soccer really well or that he/she is attractive and in very good physical shape.

constitutes a kind of ritual spacetime for the expression of feelings, identities, and roles neglected in other spheres of national life⁹. In soccer, masculinity is dramatized according to an essentialist model (RIAL, 1998; DUNNING, 1999, 1999; DAMO, 2007). In this sense, entering the world of soccer means to become a part of the “practical and symbolic operator of diverse modalities of social identities” (DAMO, 2003, p. 142, our translation) and to dramatize naturalized patterns of the male gender.

It is interesting to stress that most members of the group are between 40 and 60 years old, have long and stable marriages, and lead busy routines with work and professional commitments. Yet, discourses conveyed in the above posts suggest participants tend to display masculinity, mostly in a joking tone, in terms of availability to sexual relations outside marriage, excessive beer consumption, and aversion to homosexuality, which they use as a (playful) category of accusation. This phenomenon was observed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2013, p. 253):

hegemonic masculinities can be constructed in a way that does not truly correspond to the life of any real man. Even so, these models express widespread ideals, fantasies and desires in many ways. They offer models of relations with women and solutions to the problems of gender relations. Furthermore, they are freely articulated with the practical constitution of masculinities as ways of living local everyday circumstances. As they do so, they contribute to hegemony in the order of societal gender.

The characteristic friendliness of interactions in online communication circuits (BRAGA, 2009) seems to potentiate playfulness in exchanges within the studied group, sustaining sociability as the main mediation. Messages bearing contents regarded as serious are the most significant threat to sociability, because they can interrupt the flux of joking relations based on masculinity, a theme of central value for “*boleiros*” (soccer fans). Thus, every time a participant tries to bring up a serious topic, someone else posts a meme that caricatures a traffic sign with the image of a deer and the statement “*proibido viadagem*” (“Figure 13”).¹⁰ Serious topics are not just “forbidden” in the homo-sociability context of the group, but can be interpreted as a gay attitude, threatening, even if playfully, participant’s masculinity. In this sense, Kimmel (1998) identifies sexism and homophobia as constitutive elements of masculinities:

masculinities are constructed simultaneously in two interrelated fields of power relations - in the relations of men with women (gender inequality) and in the

⁹ It is important to note that, despite the perspective of Da Matta (1982) representing an original and pioneering contribution to the anthropology of soccer in Brazil, its interpretative limits have been pointed out by authors such as Damo (2003) and Gastaldo (2014), among others, by reduce the universe of soccer in Brazilian culture to the so-called “spectacle soccer”, mediatized, while obscuring other important cultural practices linked to this universe, such as “peladas” and lowland soccer.

¹⁰ In Brazil, “*veado*” is the word for deer and a mocking/disrespectful slang for designating male homosexuals.

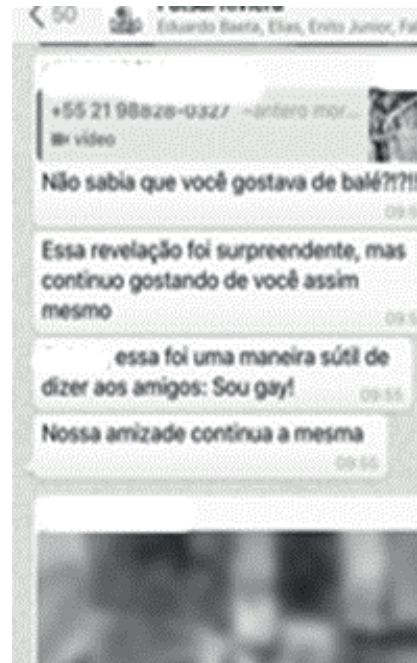
relations of men with other men (inequalities based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, etc.). Thus, two of the constitutive elements in the social construction of masculinities are sexism and homophobia (KIMMEL, 1998, p. 105).

In the messages exchanged by the group there are frequent jokes alluded to other participants in which it is suggested that they are all gay. This happens both in a subtle way, using gender inflections in the feminine (“Envious ... Both!”, Figure 17) and in the accusation expressed directly: “They are faggots!” (Figure 15).

Figures 13 and 14 –



Source: research collection.

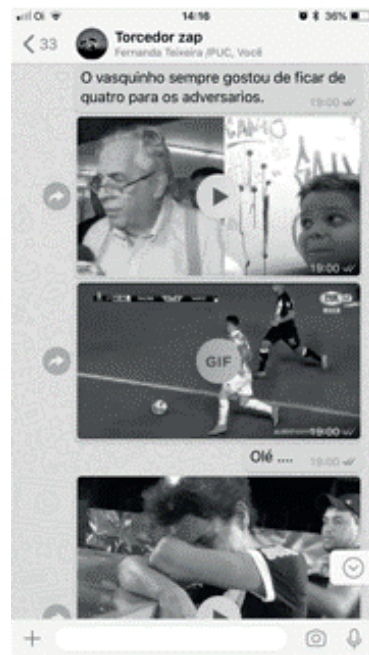


Source: research collection.

Figures 15 and 16 –



Source: research collection.



Source: research collection.

Figures 17 and 18 –

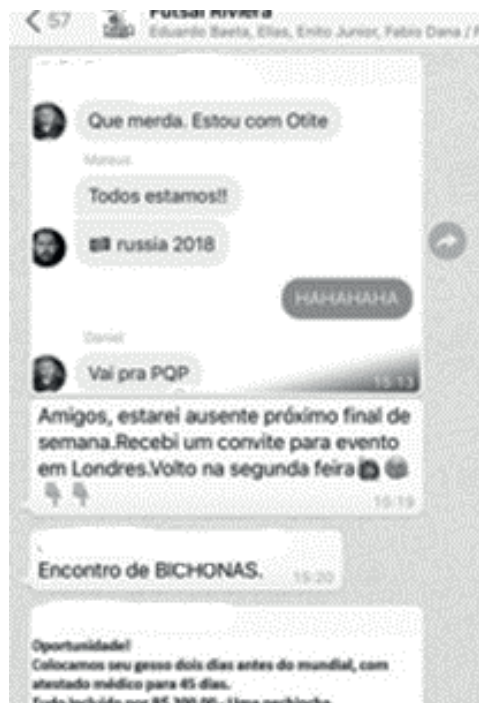


Source: research collection.



Source: research collection.

Figure 19 –



Source: research collection.

As examples above show, male attributes valued in the group are related to a supposed habit of heavy alcohol consumption; some degree of female objectification; and jokes that assert/question the masculinity of participants. But, in the field, another attribute seems to stand out. During the 2018 World Cup, professional player Neymar acquired a bad reputation in Brazil and elsewhere for his somewhat dishonest behavior in the field, exaggerating in falls and accidents, overreacting to physical attacks from rival players, and simulating unbearable headaches. The meme below with the teammate saying “Neymar gets up there, he’s still in the national anthem!”, quips the behavior of the favorite Brazilian team player on the field.

Figure 20 –



Source: research collection.

As the example above shows, an abundance of videos and memes with Neymar circulated in social networks and demoralized the star player of the Brazilian team, the one most cherished by fans, during the main world soccer championship. In this case, qualities such as the ability to attract beautiful women, possessing wealth, and mastering soccer techniques were not enough to assure the player's undoubtful maleness given his lack of stoicism – a fundamental attribute in asserting masculinity in the field. According to this logic, being a man means resistance in face of pain. Attitudes such as whining, simulating fouls, and asking for the referee's protection and recognition leads to the loss of a fundamental dimension of the footballer' masculinity. As the saying goes, "soccer is for men".

Political satire

A significant recurrence we observed in the material refers to the political content of messages, which were normally shared in the playful tone of interactions in the established sociability of the group. The period during which we collected the data was marked by the imminence of the presidential election in Brazil and an unprecedented political polarization. After three victories of the Workers' Party (PT) and twelve years of government with emphasis on social policies, participation on social networks marked the 2018 political campaigns.

Like in the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, among other countries, the right-wing attracted supporters from every social class in Brazil after a period of developments in civil matters connected to the political agenda of the said left-wing parties. During the pre-election campaign, memes, photos, jokes, videos, and candidates' comments proliferated in interactions in online social networks.

Text, audio and/or video messages that circulated on that day oscillated between perplexity, indignation, and mockery. However, many of them were directed toward circumstantial antagonists of the Brazilian political context in pre-election period and not toward Germany, the rival team, as expected in joking relations among soccer fans (GASTALDO, 2006). The Brazilian coach, Luiz Felipe Scolari, and team players shared the spotlight with presidential candidates in memes¹¹ posted on social networks.

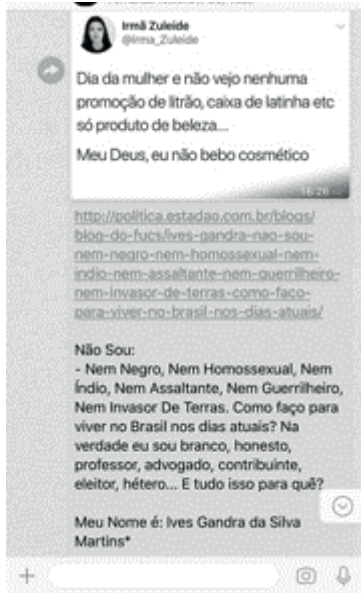
Hegemonic masculinity has distinguished itself from other masculinities, especially subordinate masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in a statistical sense; only a minority of men may adopt it. But it is certainly normative. It embodies the most honorable way of being a man, it demands that all other men take a stand against it and ideologically legitimizes the global subordination of women to men.

Men who have received the benefits of patriarchy without adopting a strong version of male domination can be seen as those who have embraced male complicity. It was in relation to this group, and with the complacency among heterosexual women, that the concept of hegemony was most effective. Hegemony did not mean violence, although it can be sustained by force; it meant ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions and persuasion (CONNELL; MESSERSCHMIDT, 2013, p. 245).

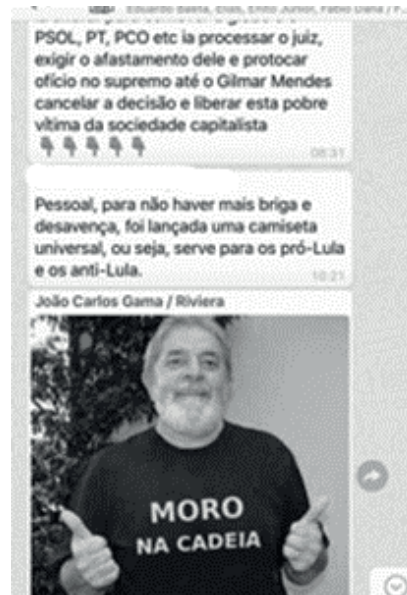
The political bias of posts in WhatsApp groups varied depending on the views of the majority of participants. In the group investigated for this work, posts against established social policies and personal attacks ranged from hatred to mockery and sarcasm.

11 Richard Dawkins coined the term meme in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) to indicate a unit of cultural transmission, or imitation unit, that replicates like a gene. As expressions of digital environments, memes are made and disseminated collaboratively in various ways and with a predominantly playful character (CÂNDIDO; GOMES, 2015).

Figures 21 and 22 –

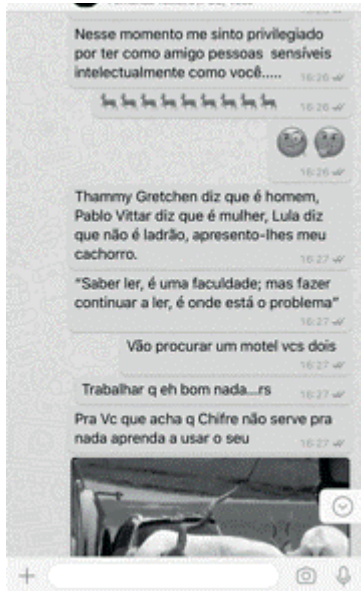


Source: research collection.

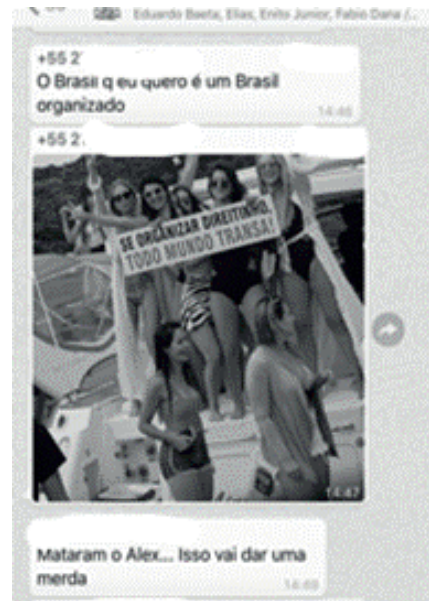


Source: research collection.

Figures 22 and 23 –



Source: research collection.



Source: research collection.

In particular, political associations in the WhatsApp group of “*peladeiros*” were almost invariably related to a right-wing conservative position. An emblematic case of the group’s position is a protest message forwarded by a participant, who declared feeling “aggressively discriminated against by the established government authorities” for being “a common white citizen”. The predominance of that perspective among participants during the mandate of Dilma Rouseff, a woman head of state and chief political executive with good reelection prospects, is not surprising, given their social class and identification with the Brazilian economic elite. These expressions of hegemonic masculinity, therefore, are crossed by practices and logics that circulate among the upper classes of a country with profound social inequalities like Brazil.

In a moment of social unrest, considering the imminent outcome of the electoral process that would determine the future of Brazil, the abovementioned post seems like an ironic summary of the idealized model of country the WhatsApp group participants supported: “The Brazil I want is an organized Brazil... if you organize it right, everyone gets laid” (Figure 23). The post takes the attention away from the political issue, allowing playful sociability to continue guiding interactions like in the previous categories. Gender playfulness is the key trait of that sociability, which has the sexist male model as basis for its humor and treats women (or “the chicks”) as sexual objects available for entertaining white heterosexual men.

Conclusions

The expression of the essentialist notion of masculinity as a value for sociability seems to have lost space in contemporary social environments for being understood in a pejorative way as sexism or *machismo*. Hence, social networks promote the conditions for the creation of closed thematic groups, which become refuges of male homo-sociability, free from broader social monitoring.

Communication processes of digital environments are situated in the sociocultural contexts that surrounds them: they are part of broader processes in the historical sphere and shaped by the social conditions for the production of discourses. Interactional exchanges concerning male identity in the communication circuit of the examined WhatsApp group refer to a specific ideal of masculinity related to the soccer phenomenon in the domain of digital communication.

In these environments, the available technological resources enable the constitution of communication circuits involving links, reposts, memes, videos, and photos made from the thematic interests of the group. These resources generate a specific sociability with the circulation of parodies, satires, and playful contents that offer the formative principles of the group. Thus, the symbolic logic that maintains and naturalizes idealized masculinity is reproduced, expanding and renewing the expressivity and representations of the male gender in digital environments.

The analysis of the interaction dynamics in the WhatsApp group of “*peladeiros*” reveals the symbolic logic that organizes the male homo-sociability established in that space. Gender playfulness and political satire contribute to ensure, symbolically, the hegemonic power and social status of participants of the group.

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