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Cultural consumption practices of visitors to the National Museum / UFRJ in social networks

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Abstract
This article aims to understand representations of cultural consumption experiences performed by posting images on Social Networking Platforms (SNP) by lower-class individuals who visited the National Museum/UFRJ. The study was carried out employing ethnographic-inspired research, which comprised the stages of participant observation in the exhibitions, interviews with visitors, and digital observation of their publications in SNP. Among the results achieved, it is possible to highlight that the publications largely reflect practices and values that already existed before the so-called "digital life," such as the importance of kinship and bonds of friendship in everyday relationships.
Keywords: Cultural consumption. Museums. Social networks. Low-income groups. Brazil.

Introduction

Social media platforms provide an intriguing arena for observing identity practices and their construction through dialogue with everyday customs. The convergence of various tools, such as messaging, album creation, and videos, among others, fosters an environment where it is possible to manage "one's own identity, lifestyle, and social relationships" (LIVINGSTONE,

2012, p. 93). The language of social relationships undergoes restructuring, and the habit of posting on these platforms becomes integrated into individuals' modes of expression in contemporary society. Therefore, social media, as a part of everyday life, should not be perceived as a distinct sphere (MILLER *et al.*, 2019), but rather as a platform that provides us with another ability to express our sense of "social self." Another aspect is that this phenomenon does not unfold in a "symmetrical" manner worldwide, despite occurring globally, as context and cultural differences serve as markers for non-planetary homogenization.

From a relational perspective, individuals select the uses of various media according to the type of interaction they are willing to engage in, as proposed by Madianou and Miller (2012). The authors initiated a discussion on the interconnections between the social and the technological through the concept of polymedia, suggesting that the analysis of digital platforms or various media should not be conducted outside their social context. In this manner, factors such as place of residence, social class, religion, and politics, among others, will converge without any of them being overly generalized, given the potential overlaps.

Specifically, regarding the appropriations by segments of the lower socio-economic classes in new technologies, it is widely observed that they largely dissolve hierarchical frameworks by establishing more egalitarian relationships with others. These relationships are rooted in the idea of "having access" to the "new world" of contemporary connections (SILVA, 2012). However, within the digital realm, new forms of hierarchy and social distinction emerge due to the conflicts between social classes (BARROS, 2012, p. 110).

Regarding cultural assets, due to globalization and the increasingly widespread circulation of works considered "sacred," the access and popularization of museums and art centers have facilitated engagement among diverse groups. Although the economy of cultural assets has historically been associated with powerful groups, their conversion into symbolic capital (BOURDIEU, 1989) occurs in diverse ways, depending on how they are appropriated. As highlighted by Enne (2012, p. 12), because they serve as significant social markers, studies on cultural consumption practices should consider their interconnection with the realms of "taste and distinction as well as the intersections between knowledge, power, and social control."

Given the interplay between social media and identity self-presentation, coupled with the rising involvement of individuals from underprivileged classes in a digital realm — one that mirrors the offline world, where consumption serves as both a mode of representation and a means of distinction — this article[1] seeks to explore these groups' access to cultural assets. Specifically, it aims to decipher the representations of cultural consumption experiences showcased through image posts on social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook by individuals hailing from these socio-economic backgrounds.

1 This work was conducted with the support of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel - Brazil (CAPES) - Financing Code 001.

The study defined the profile of the underprivileged classes not solely based on low income but also considering factors such as formal education levels, employment in roles deemed as low-skilled, cultural consumption habits – such as visits to museums and theaters – residence in peripheral regions, and the prominence of hierarchical perspectives in their worldview. Duarte (1986) suggests that within these underprivileged classes, beyond the centrality of the "family value" for social reproduction, a series of hierarchical distinctions exist, such as the elder taking precedence over the younger and men over women, among others.

For our exploration, we focused on the National Museum/UFRJ as our primary research site. We drew upon data from an ethnographic-inspired study carried out between 2016 and 2018 with institution visitors[2]. This research formed the basis of the Master's thesis by Guedes (2018), entitled "A Visit to the National Museum: The Cultural Consumption of Underprivileged Classes as Expressed on Social Media Platforms." Our focus was on the image posts made by these groups to examine their motivations and how their museum visits are reflected on, or omitted from, social media. We analyzed this from the perspective of lived experience, pinpointing how cultural assets are taken up and how the utilization of smartphones influences the trajectory of their visit. In light of the concept of symbolic capital (BOURDIEU, 1989) and its overlap with the mediation between museum artifacts and individuals, we endeavor to contemplate the expressive modes that emerge from the engagement with the museum space.

Founded in June 1818 by D. João VI, the Museum was envisioned to catalyze the country's cultural and economic development. Originally situated in Campo de Sant'Anna, in the heart of Rio de Janeiro, it was only in 1892, a mere three years post the Proclamation of the Republic, that it transitioned to its new abode at Paço de São Cristóvão, which once served as the residence for the Brazilian imperial family. Today, as an affiliate of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), it boasts scientific collections encompassing fields like Zoology, Archaeology, Ethnology, Geology, Paleontology, and Biological Anthropology. Moreover, it hosts graduate programs in Social Anthropology, Linguistics, Botany, Zoology, and Geosciences.

Located in Quinta da Boa Vista Park, Rio de Janeiro's northern district, it is notably recognized as the "Playground of the Periphery" (MARFETAN, 2016) due to its predominant appeal to working-class groups. This unique positioning differentiates the Museum[3] from other institutions in the city, offering a distinct class-oriented profile among its visitors. With an annual visitor count averaging 200.000[4], as per Valente (1995), the institution has not typically catered to the "regular museum audience" — those with a more elevated social and cultural capital. Instead, it has been a magnet for individuals from the "middle and lower economic tiers of the Brazilian populace" (VALENTE, 1995, p. 130).

2 During the weekdays, the institution almost exclusively hosts scheduled school visits – individuals who are not in the museum by personal choice and have their tour itinerary set by teachers or monitors, with specific times for entry and exit – this segment of the audience was not considered for the research. Thus, the focus was placed on the adult public that visits the National Museum on Saturdays and Sundays.

3 We begin the word with a capital letter as a way to denote respect towards the National Museum/UFRJ, rather than museums in general.

4 Data obtained from the administration of the National Museum/UFRJ in 2018.

The research data for this article was compiled prior to the devastating fire that struck the main headquarters of the National Museum/UFRJ on September 2, 2018[5]. Acknowledged as one of Latin America's foremost Natural History and Anthropology museums, it houses an estimated 20 million items in its collection and is the country's oldest museum institution. These were the last pieces of information gathered from the National Museum/UFRJ in its original state, serving as a physical and tangible ground for accessing research interlocutors.

Methodology

The methodology used in this study is "ethnographically inspired" (ELLIOT, JANKEL-ELLIOT, 2003). It aims to capture, from the "native's perspective," how certain experiences assume significance for a group, even within a timeframe more condensed than that of traditional ethnography. For this purpose, we executed several phases: active observation during exhibitions[6], post-visit interviews with attendees at the National Museum/UFRJ[7] — totaling 63 interviews—and a digital scan of their social media posts, specifically spotlighting the hashtag #museunacional on Instagram. In this last phase, beyond the principles of conventional ethnographic approaches, it is imperative to recognize this domain as a digital, tangible, and sensory realm (PINK *et al.*, 2016) in which the methodological dimensions should accompany these aspects. Without a direct presence, it's possible to observe the social and cultural dynamics of agents' daily lives as "visible"[8] on social media. This perspective aligns with Ramos (2016, p. 30) assertion that the internet is "both a product of modes of subjectivation and sociality as well as a producer of both."

Our decision to focus on Instagram and Facebook as platforms for observation was influenced by participant feedback during the study, who consistently pointed to these platforms as the primary destinations for their museum photos. During the active observation phase, photography was not just frequent; it was integral to the visitor experience throughout the museum, becoming an intrinsic part of the visitation ritual. Mobile devices emerged as the primary tools for this photographic endeavor, a phenomenon also highlighted by Silva (2018) in different museum settings. Silva (*ibidem*, p. 73) interprets this trend as an exemplar of the prevailing culture of self-representation, positioning users as "architects of the visual landscape."

5 It is estimated that approximately 80% of the institution's collection was lost in the fire. Currently, the *Museu Nacional Vive* (National Museum lives) Project, which is responsible for the reconstruction and restoration actions of the Museum, is working on fundraising, and the development and execution of construction work at the main site, with a reopening forecast for 2027.

6 December 2016, January, March, April, November, and December of 2017.

7 November and December of 2017. January, February, and March of 2018.

8 Here we contemplate what is visible to the researcher's eyes, which does not encapsulate the entirety of an experience lived in the realm of reality, such as a visit to the Museum. There are those who articulate their impressions, those who distill their experience into images, and still others who choose not to share that particular experience on their social networks.

Initially, participant observation was undertaken as a means of acclimatization to the field[9]. The researcher aimed to shadow the museum visitors covertly, blending in anonymously with the crowd. This initial phase proved challenging since, as an employee[10] of the institution, the author conducting the fieldwork was inevitably approached by colleagues and security personnel, inadvertently revealing her affiliation with the museum environment. This experience echoes Velho's (2013, p. 82) assertion that "familiarity and physical proximity are not synonymous with understanding [...] and if estrangement is not thoughtfully processed, it may result in nothing more than a prejudiced reaction of surprise to the unexpected".

Since most visits were conducted in groups, isolating a single individual for interviews was challenging. This dynamic ultimately enriched the interactions, prompting the inclusion of other group members in the conversations, particularly when these individuals were responsible for posting about their museum visits on social media. Out of the 63 interviews conducted, which were divided into two phases – initially between June and July 2017 and subsequently from October to December of the same year – we have selected data from six participants[11] for inclusion in this article.

Throughout the field research, findings related to the visitor profile echoed what previous investigations had indicated: the majority of individuals approached belonged to the working class, residing in neighborhoods of the northern and western zones of the city or the municipalities of Baixada Fluminense. Slightly more than half of the participants were already familiar with the National Museum; for many, it was the sole museological space they had visited. Regarding the motivation for visiting, many respondents happened to be at Quinta da Boa Vista Park and spontaneously decided to visit the museum. Furthermore, among groups with children, there was an explicit intention to bring them to "acquire knowledge." On average, these visits lasted 50 minutes. All this compiled information will form the basis for much of our subsequent discussion on the data gathered from the research.

To facilitate the identification of the participants selected for this article, they are listed below using their name initials and a brief description.

L. M., 24 years old, a male navy corporal from Duque de Caxias. He has completed high school and earns between two and four minimum wages.

T. T., a 27-year-old bidding assistant and resident of São Cristóvão. Wife of L.M., she has completed high school and has a family income between two and four minimum wages.

K. S., a 24-year-old male, Navy corporal, and resident of Duque de Caxias. He has completed high school and earns between two and four minimum wages.

9 As noted at the outset of this article, the field research corresponds to a portion of the work conducted for the master's thesis of one of the authors (Guedes). Therefore, this section of the paper pertains to her fieldwork experience.

10 One of the authors (Guedes) has been active at the National Museum since 2003, coordinating the Communication & Events sector from 2015 to 2020.

11 In preserving the anonymity of the interviewees by only using the initials of their first and last names, we also maintain this approach when referencing the electronic addresses of their social media profiles. For this reason, we will not indicate the source of the images either.

M. A., 38 years old, a self-employed graphic services salesperson from São Cristóvão. He has some higher education (course undisclosed) and a family income between ten and twenty minimum wages.

V. Y., age 9, is M. A.'s son.

G. S., 44 years old, currently unemployed but earns income through odd jobs and renting out two houses he owns in Imbariê. He has completed high school and has an income of up to two minimum wages.

M. G., 17 years old, an apprentice in the transportation sector from Imbariê. He has completed high school and has an income of up to two minimum wages. He is G. S.'s son.

G. M., 36 years old, a tourist guide from Lapa. She has a postgraduate degree and earns ten minimum wages.

M. P., 28 years old, a merchant from Magé. She has a high school education and an income of up to two minimum wages.

Motivations for Cultural Consumption in Museums

While art museums are associated with spaces for contemplation and silence, with research focusing on "the visitor's taste and their perception of the artworks" (ALMEIDA, 2005, p. 31), science and natural history museums are ascribed to the role of knowledge transmitters. This is because, as Köptcke (2003) posits, these institutions often assume a role complementary to that of schools, serving as a venue for updating teachers' knowledge. According to the author, this facet is particularly pronounced in countries of Latin America, where the formal education system is experiencing a structural crisis. For instance, T. T. (a 27-year-old bidding assistant) and her husband L. M. (a 29-year-old beverage and cereal salesman), took their three and eight-year-old children (a boy and a girl, respectively) for an outing at Quinta da Boa Vista Park and, while there, decided to "show them a bit of culture and the dinosaur, the mummy, things they see in movies but had never seen in person." Reflecting on studies of museums in Latin America, García-Canclini advocates for an examination of the visual and scenic construction of meaning (GARCÍA-CANCLINI, 2000, p. 162), recognizing the role of museums in democratizing and transforming the concept of culture and ritualizing social action. He posits that museums and schools are predominant in constructing modern identities.

The participants' accounts also revealed an identification of the Museum as a "repository" for collective memory. M. A. (a 38-year-old self-employed salesperson), on his second visit to the National Museum/UFRJ with his nine-year-old son (V. Y.), reported that the motivation for returning to the institution was related to the child's school project on the colonial and imperial periods. Although the Anthropology and Natural History exhibitions were a priority, many

Museum visitors participating in the study reported similar motivations to M. A. and his son—that is, they were seeking information on the country's history, particularly the imperial period. This role of museums as a "house of knowledge" (MCCRACKEN, 2012) is intertwined with the commitment of these institutions throughout the 19th century to "enlighten" their visitors and to foster in them a quality that they lacked. Gonçalves (2007) emphasizes the significance attributed to objects, buildings, or other architectural structures that attain the status of heritage within individuals' social and cultural life. As such, they come to represent, through their materiality, the foundation of a memory or an identity.

The experience observed among visitors of the National Museum/UFRJ, particularly among individuals from working-class backgrounds, typically bifurcated in two ways: during the interviews, they either reported that it was their first visit to any museum, or they were revisiting the only museum they were acquainted with. In other words, whether it was their inaugural visit or a return, the institution represented the sole cultural consumption experience in museums they had encountered (GUEDES, 2018).

From the initial observations conducted within the Museum, the use of cell phones was predominant as an accessory to the visit. Many visitors carried their devices in hand, even when not actively using them. According to Lasen (2004), an affective bond exists between users and their phones, a condition she terms "affective technology."

The interlocutors G. S. and M. G., father and son, employ their cell phones in distinct ways, and they seem to differ in terms of the significance these devices hold in their respective social lives. While the former uses an older device and is unconcerned with the "technical limitations" that prevent the use of apps like Facebook, the latter appeared frustrated. M.G. did not have a cell phone at his disposal for taking photos and potentially posting them and also lacked prospects for acquiring a new device. Barros (2012, p. 14) notes that the consumption of technologies among youth from working-class backgrounds is highly significant, as it represents inclusion in "a social dynamic perceived as very important in contemporary life, which is the connection mediated by technological devices."

Thus, one can discern the significance of the "materiality" of objects as intermediaries in a "circuit of social exchanges" (MILLER, 2010, p. 83). According to the author, "the whole system of things with their internal order make us the people we are," and further elaborates by suggesting that the paramount lesson of material culture lies in the fact that "the less we notice it, the more powerful and definitive it becomes."

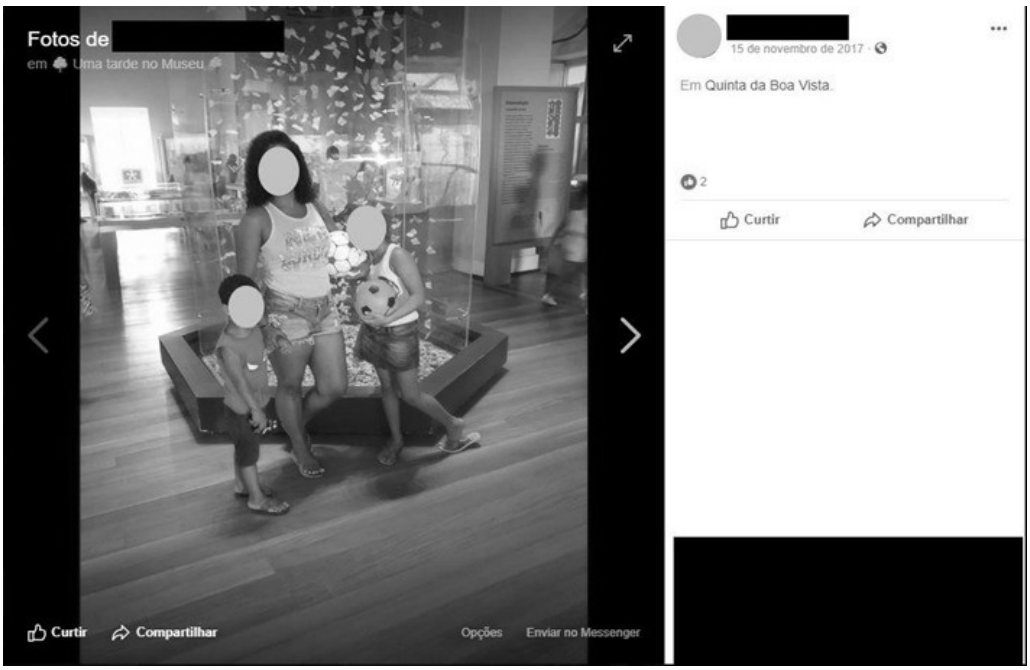
Therefore, considering the centrality that mobile phones have assumed in contemporary society, it becomes essential to contemplate their role in the "symbolic inclusion of social actors" (SILVA, 2012) and in the construction of imaginaries and identities, taking into account the local specificities in the appropriation of a technology that is global.

The Meanings of Photographic Practices in the Museum Visit Experience

The contemporary practice of photography is connected not merely to the velocity of technical advancements but is deeply interwoven with the social aspects that precede it. Thus, as Polivanov (2014, p. 53) notes, it is important to emphasize that this does not constitute a "random hyper-exposure of the self" since individuals make deliberate choices about what they make visible or not on their social media profiles. Therefore, "beyond the exposure of the individuals, the primary forces at play in these spaces are the sociability and the potential for identity construction that they foster."

How individuals from lower socio-economic classes "communicated" their museum visits on social media was strikingly similar across the board. Typically, their posts were photo-heavy, generally without captions and hashtags or featuring very brief captions (see Figure 1). This pattern markedly differed when examining the profiles of middle-class individuals. Their posts often included a variety of hashtags and extensive text describing their experiences at the museum or detailing the space (refer to Figures 2 and 3), suggesting a need to demonstrate knowledge about the institution or the exhibitions they were visiting. It is posited that those from the middle strata, more fully immersed in a "literate culture," tend to exert greater effort in crafting written narratives of their museum visit experiences.

Figure 1 – Image posted without a caption



Source: Facebook[12].

12 We have chosen to preserve the links to the posts in order to maintain the anonymity of the individuals involved.

Figure 2 – Image with description of the Museum

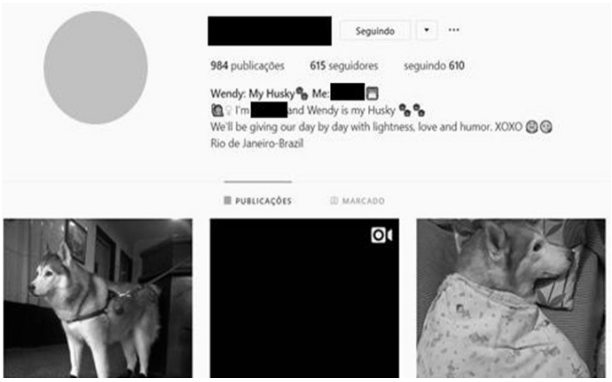
Source: Instagram

Figure 3 – Image of the caption at the Egypt Exhibition

Source: Instagram

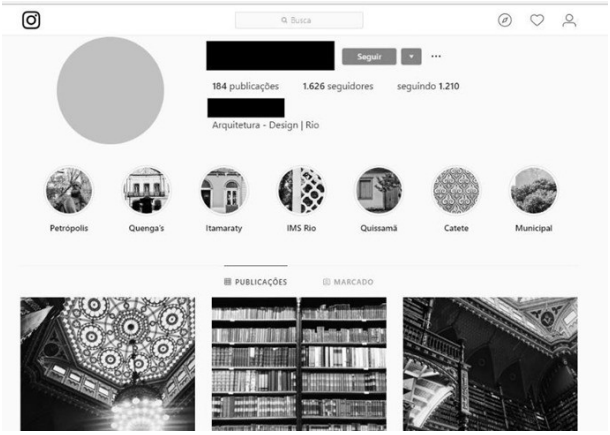
While individuals from the middle classes tend to favor images of the palace, artifacts, or even the descriptions in the display cases - seemingly aiming to demonstrate a comprehensive view of the museum and marking a certain type of enjoyment - groups from the lower socio-economic layers prioritize selfies and group pictures. This finding aligns with those of Spyer (2017), who noted that privileged classes prefer photographs of landscapes, food, and drinks and often seek "artistic" framings. It was also observed that among middle-class individuals, especially on Instagram, it was more common to find images that composed a type of narrative, which could follow an aesthetic script or not. For instance, the Instagram feed of G.M. (a 36-year-old tour guide) narrates not only his own experiences but also the daily life of his pet (Figure 4), having created the account specifically for this purpose. Meanwhile, M.F., an architect, displays a series of well-framed images of libraries, sculptures, or historic buildings (Figure 5). As Silva (2018, p. 92) points out, when viewing a profile on this app, the images are presented in a mosaic format, which, according to the author, aids in "the perception of online self-presentation."

Figure 4 – Screenshot from G.M.'s Instagram feed



Source: Instagram

Figure 5 – Screenshot from M.F.'s Instagram feed



Source: Instagram

Rather than attempting to replicate the exhibits with "accuracy," most of the images analyzed capture various moments of the experience inside the exhibition rooms. Observations and interviews suggest that the large number of photographs taken by visitors may be related to the expression of a type of accumulation and even a collection of the experience enjoyed at the institution. For the couple T.T. (27 years old, bidding assistant) and L.M. (29 years old, beverage and grain seller), who took numerous photos in the Museum, the preservation of images will be through social media because, according to L.M., "we post more to keep it, to save it there as well."

Spyer (2017) notes how emerging working-class groups have started to use social media intensively, often expressing personal and family achievements. The case of K.S. (24 years old, Navy corporal) on Facebook exemplifies this type of engagement. This interlocutor portrays himself in situations that signify types of consumption associated with an expression that blends a desire to appear "attractive and prosperous" (SPYER, 2017). In addition to his posts about visiting the Museum—indicating consumption of culture and the enjoyment of leisure time with his girlfriend—K.S. also shares updates with friends during relaxing moments, outings, and family barbecues, among others.

In many posts by individuals from working-class backgrounds, relationships among group members are highlighted, indicating levels of kinship or friendship (Figure 6). Although this also occurs among middle-class posters, it is not as frequent since these individuals often prioritize associating images with information about the Museum. This behavior, especially among the working classes, also echoes what Sarti (1996) identified as a characteristic of working-class groups: the family is considered the center of the moral order. According to Sarti (1996, p. 89), these ties extend to a sort of network involving a series of obligations to "a whole" in a relationship of reciprocities but also dependencies, which ultimately distances subjects from the principles of individualization.

Figure 6 – Screenshot from Facebook

Source: Facebook

If posting is not about oneself but finding a way to connect with others (Miller and Sinanan, 2017), then how everyday practices are displayed on social media contributes to meaning-making by these "others." Consequently, associating oneself with certain experiences may play into this structure of ascribing meanings.

Conclusions

According to Simmel (1973, p. 21), "the individual does not end at the limits of their body or within the area encompassing their immediate activity. Rather, a person's realm is constituted by the sum of effects that emanate from them temporally and spatially". Therefore, each experience described herein expresses the interviewees' identities, negotiated within and emerging from the social environment of the museum. Considering visits to the National Museum/UFRJ and how they are represented by posting objects and experiences on social media, we can understand how such activities are significant for expressing identities among individuals from different social strata.

Among individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, a visit to the museum marks a moment of fun and leisure. There is a pursuit of knowledge, as evidenced by some parents' accounts indicating a desire to expose their children to "a bit of culture," for instance. In other words, there is an understanding that the museum harbors a kind of knowledge that can only be encountered within its space through materializing objects. Consequently, for L. M., going to the museum was a way for the children to have a tangible reference for dinosaurs and mummies they had only seen in movies. When describing what they enjoyed most about the visit, individuals interpreted what they saw in the exhibitions using their own language, adapting what they encountered in the museum halls to their own reference codes, such as "things from the bottom of the sea," "the animals," among others. A similar behavior was also observed in their social media posts. Instead of captions and hashtags, many photos were used, which, in a way, "communicated" what the visit was like. Albums containing more than 20 photos depicted a collection of the experience lived at the museum. The relationship with "beautiful things," as pointed out in some statements to justify the photos, could also be observed in the postings. Expressions such as "everything very beautiful" described what the visitors encountered in the museum. From this, it can be discerned that individuals represented in their posts what could be understood as a lifestyle associated with a moment of leisure and entertainment.

We further add that profiles created on social media platforms present a version of oneself that subjects construct in these spaces. These platforms enable users to represent themselves, concealing or highlighting tastes and interests to identify with other network members as a process of valorization by the other (POLIVANOV, 2014), even though the "other" may not always perceive it as expected. According to Miller and Sinanan (2017), these self-narratives occur predominantly visually through photographs published on social media, a finding that parallels that of this research.

Thus, it can be asserted that publications on social media platforms largely reflect practices and values that predate the emergence of so-called "digital life," such as the significance of kinship and friendship bonds. As a medium of communication, these publications may be tied to symbolic acts that are also carried out in offline reality, that is, the display of practices, achievements, and, as Spyer (2017) suggests, "socio-economic class distinction." Considering that these media are primarily used for contact among close-knit groups (friends, family, work colleagues), it can be said that these "messages" have a specific destination; that is, they are directed to a relatively narrow scope of social networks.

Recognizing that the adoption of technologies does not occur in a cultural vacuum, the study of specific research contexts emerges as a critical path for understanding the diversity of social practices involving the use of images in the contemporary digital environment.

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Guedes, F.: funding acquisition – conceptualization – investigation – methodology – data curation – formal analysis – writing, original draft – proofreading and editing; Barros, C.: project administration – conceptualization – supervision – methodology – formal analysis – proofreading and editing.

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