



Article

Language, neoliberalism, and human rights: Erotics of signs on a dating app

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to address the naturalization of a neoliberal individualism online, the performance of profound inequality as a sexualized stylistic resource, and the equalization of capital and sexual relations. This is done by highlighting the kinship between the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Neoliberalism. We then argue that Grindr is designed to keep us coming back to it, subjecting us to misconduct by the app developers. We then proceed to report on the data generated by the erotics of signs (BONFANTE, 2016), methodology that highlights sexual-capital performances which bring two related phenomena to our attention: the spread of neoliberal practices on Grindr and the dissemination of the perspective of sex as a commercial good. Finally, we consider the ethical and epistemological gains of our paper.

Keywords: Human Rights; Grindr; Neoliberalism; Erotics of signs; Indexicality; Applied Linguistics.

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Erotics of signs refers to a sexual netnography that is, unlike semiotics, an analytic practice which approaches performances of self-stylization in cruising apps via the sensations and affections they convey to the body, in a narrative flow of which researcher and informants are necessarily part. It assumes they are both touched by desiring performances. Based on Queer (HALBERSTAM, 2005; 2011) and Undisciplined (MOITA LOPES, 2006; 2008) approaches, it is designed to mock the seriousness devoted to the excavation of meaning common in much language research while aiming at mitigating suffering. Indeed, the field presented evidence that performances termed “intimate-spectacular” (BONFANTE, 2021, p. 13) are relevant not only for the meanings they communicate and help crystallize socially, but especially for how they act upon bodies and how they inflict sensations to the body. The action of turning intimacy into spectacle through performance should not be reckoned as a symptom of a narcissistic society, but as a sexual act *per se* (RACE, 2018, p. 1326), and as a neoliberal practice as well, as we will argue in this paper. The erotic aspect of the methodology is central to the investigation of acts of stylization on Grindr for a number of reasons: the affective nature of intimate-spectacular performances; the researchers’ inevitable erotic involvement with the field during the process of data generation; the haptic relationship of the smartphone with the body (we touch it for commands and it touches us back affectively); and the meaning-effects concerning sensuality, nearness, and intimacy involved in the analytic reconstructions of sensual depictions of the self. The erotic component of the field overshines not only the economic motivations of the cruising-app-disguised-as-a-social-network, but also the layer of human-machine interaction that is not visible: the algorithms, protocols, defaults, software, hardware, and information processing that structure our experience online, according to neoliberal ideologies of commercial success.

One of the neoliberal ideologies that was not addressed in Bonfante’s previous works (2016; 2018) in his immersion in the world of online dating is precisely the intricate relationship between erotics and neoliberal experiences of the self since neoliberalism and sexuality are intertwined in unpredictable ways which abound on the dating app under scrutiny: the cake seller that rubs his bulge as an advertisement strategy, the janitor who describes his professional characteristics while showing off his naked torso, and the new generation of users that equate relationships with capital. These examples, which combine an economy of sensuality and labor, are examined in the analytic section of this chapter. This copula between sex and capital has at least one point of intersection: the body, a central figure for traditional forms of understanding work and sex. The body and its performances can reunite a grammar of sexual possibilities entrenched in capital affordances in a way that sex and work come to construe an online identity for which the body is central. Indeed, our bodies and the information uploaded about them feed algorithms that allegedly improve the invisible layer of our current experience online.

This invisible layer of the human-machine interaction may improve our sensual experience online, for “the algorithm translates bodies into digital information” (RAMPTON, 2014, p. 12), as app developers would have us believe. Accordingly, the body would be transformed into a chain of 1s and 0s without altering our subjectivity. However, this translation serves motivations¹ other than the enhancement of one’s experience. More importantly, it is used against our bodies and our freedom, and in favor of a neoliberal and individualistic pedagogy that disguises the enrichment of companies and their shareholders behind allegedly harmless social networks.

Unveiling what hides behind number arrangements and coding may be one way to move forward. Political control, human rights abuse, facilitation of aggression, political persecution, and addiction are the terms we agree to when we accept the privacy policy applications such as Grindr impose. Social networks present themselves to society disguising their economic interests through the placement of advertisements that project them as spaces of freedom that operate outside of economic constraints. This is especially true for Grindr as it forbids commercial exchanges in the app. However, the price paid for the services is unclear²: little information is given to us about the sharing with third parties of navigation and preferences data, as if they were mere information rather than commercial goods that we produce to pay for a service that is marketed as ‘free’. The development of Grindr has been taking place within a private business model with little social regulation. In this hegemonic business model, the Internet’s potential for democratic participation has been losing ground in favor of the commercial exploitation of a handful of platforms that today concentrate most of the online traffic (VAN DIJCK, 2013; MISKOLCI, 2021). These data are the most precious capital of contemporary society, and their commercialization is the main instrument of disrespect for Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Article 12

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honor and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.³

Several reports on the safety of the internet for sexual dissidents have mapped and described how online violence causes isolation, thus reducing access to the public sphere, which can be considered a civil rights violation (CORREA; SÍVORI; ZILLI, 2012; NORWAY, 2020; SÍVORI; ZILLI, 2021). These reports have highlighted the importance, for sexual minorities, of being connected through social networks (UN, 2011; CORREA; SÍVORI; ZILLI, 2012; SÍVORI; ZILLI, 2021), even though participation in dating apps involves risks (PHAN; SEIGFRIED-PELLAR; CHOO, 2021), which may go from a simple mismatch with

¹The algorithmic character of social network interactions draws on the users’ emotions to generate reactions and shares. Fisher and Taub (2019) *apud* MISKOLCI, (2021) suggest that YouTube’s algorithm might have contributed to the establishment of far-right politics in Brazil.

²The Norwegian Consumer Council, however, has detailed what is shared when one inadvertently accepts Grindr’s privacy policy (NORWAY, 2020).

³Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>. Last access on Feb 22, 2022.

internet regulations to death risks, as we discuss later in this paper. These threats to life, justice, and freedom are the most undeniable turnoffs of online dating, for they may and will eventually jeopardize ethical participation in society. However, **the humanitarian risk we want to address in this paper is the naturalization of a neoliberal individualism online, the performance of profound inequality as a sensualized stylistic resource, and the equalization of capital and sexual relations.** In sum, we want to signal the inculcation of a neoliberal regime on dating apps as a turnoff for an ethical and democratic society. Such rationality normalizes ideologies supposed to fortify the model of the free market in every livable aspect of our lives: the disposability of people, the end of privacy, the privatization of safety, the abuse of personal user data for covert economic exploitation, and the insistence that the free market and the government are at odds, even though they frequently have the same moral and capital agenda. In this neoliberal rationality, “[t]he market is presented as the space of virtue and the ideal model for all social relationships, including love and family” (CASARA, 2021, p. 23). An anti-neoliberal critique towards the discourse of the free market as a pedagogical tool, brought to life by the intricacies of dating apps will frame our discussion on stylization, technology, and human rights. To do this, we first supply more depth into the issue at hand, providing historical context to both the Declaration of Human Rights and Neoliberalism, while stressing their kin. We then argue that Grindr is designed to keep us coming back to it, where we are subjected to unethical conduct by the app developers. Next, we analyze some data generated during fieldwork, highlighting sexual-capital performances. We then proceed to consider the ethical and epistemological gains of our paper.

Contextualizing the problem

“Any sociocultural analysis of language is incomplete unless it acknowledges the relationship between systems of power and the ways that they are negotiated by social subjects in local contexts.” (BUCHOLTZ; HALL, 2004, p. 492). Considering the desire of social platforms like Grindr to completely control and influence the lives, emotions, and behaviors of their users, we dedicate the linguistic reflections presented in this paper to discuss an ongoing question of power negotiation between Grindr and users’ rights, especially human rights, without forgetting to address the key element of the equation: neoliberal governmentality. Following Foucault, we understand cruising apps as “technologies of the self”

which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (FOUCAULT, 1982, p. 18).

They are a means through which one achieves and molds existence. These technologies of the self are enmeshed in structures of coercion and are the fulcrum of subjectivity in neoliberal societies, articulating attempts to manipulate conduct with the practice of self-government. Indeed, as Foucault (1982) posits, the way individuals are manipulated and known by others is connected to how they conduct themselves and know themselves. This can be called “governmentality” (FOUCAULT, 1982, p. 19). There is, indeed, an explicit and growing interest in producing technology that influences our behaviors, molds us, and governs us: “[a]s companies combine their increased connectivity to consumers, with the ability to collect, mine, and process customer data at faster speeds, we are faced with a future, where everything becomes potentially more habit-forming” (EYAL, 2014/2019, p. 8). The aforementioned author⁴ provides a glimpse into the phenomenon of subjective control, suggesting that deliberate attempts to shape conduct are part of the lives of every application’s user. It is, however, no bet for the future, but one of our biggest current concerns given that it attacks human rights by demolishing their guiding principle: freedom.

⁴His description on Amazon site as a bestselling gives us an idea of how many readers have the actual interest to launch themselves in the enterprise of governing others through applications.

Human rights are mainly protected by a contrived agreement with the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. In the preamble of the document that achieved a purported moral and political consensus as an ethical guideline for human conduct towards humanity, relevant considerations are made about the recognition of equality and dignity as foundations of freedom, justice, and peace. Freedom and justice are described in the document as preconditions of peace since their achievement is presented as the only ethical way to establish better living conditions and social progress. The document emphasizes the respect and commitment of States to recognize, apply, and cooperate with unconditional compliance to the thirty paragraphs. In addition, it encourages a commitment to teaching the values of equality and respect. However, this claim for engagement is directed to States solely. The text is addressed to a disciplinary society, whose power is centralized in the hands of the State, in the model of governmentality that Foucault (1996, p. 213) termed “pastoral power”, which refers to the coercive power the State and other institutions exercise over individuals and social groups. Dardot and Laval (2009/2016) believe our current neoliberal rationality, – a desire to reorganize society by intensifying the mechanisms of ideological maintenance of market relations and behaviors – directs us through self-control. As they explain, “[t]he great innovation of neoliberal technology is to directly link the way one is governed to the way one governs himself” (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2009-2016, p. 332-333).

The UDHR places a great deal of emphasis on governmental regulation, although most governments are also submitted to the laws of the free market and the desire to thrive economically. The emphasis on governmental power is the first discursive aspect of the declaration

that needs to be stressed here, for it places an anachronistic form of power in the hands of States, obliterating new forms of government based on surveillance, consumerism, and addiction, led by big tech companies. Economist Susan George (2015) suggests that big profit-oriented companies are seizing governmental power and even legislative power, leaving governments alone in their responsibility to provide a less precarious life, a human right guaranteed by Article 25 of the UDHR. George (2015) postulates that large companies intervene in legal decisions on the most diverse sociopolitical themes like feeding and agriculture, public health, labor regulations, tax implementation, and safety, exercising control over any political decision that could jeopardize their profit. Although they are not committed to governing directly, they use their capital influence to customize worldwide public policies to maximize their own profits. These *Shadow Sovereigns*, which provide the title for George's (2015) book, are assaulting democracy, mocking basic human rights, and instigating, in an organized manner, a neoliberal understanding of public affairs, advocating a way of taking part in society that deserves serious reevaluation.

The second aspect we would like to highlight is the shared origins from the UDHR and neoliberalism. Bofante (2021) argues that both liberalism and neoliberalism are born from the Enlightenment's desire for freedom, an idea that also inspires the proclamation of the UDHR. Both the desire for knowledge and the desire for capital accumulation are children of the Enlightenment's drive for freedom. As uncomfortable as it may be, it is necessary to understand that liberal thought is one of the Enlightenment's transformations, with which the 18th century was filled. If the Enlightenment planted new ideas that brought about social transformation, human emancipation from traditions required subjection to the individualistic and precarious laws of capital appreciation. However, their kinship goes beyond the Enlightenment.

Simultaneously to the diplomatic efforts to create a set of basic universal rules that are shared among all human beings as a condition of dignity and of a better future, a group of economists founded the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS), an intellectual and political group dedicated to planning a purportedly better future envisioned as free mercantile relations, more freedom to invest and no limits for profit, which they believed would enrich the world – needless to say unequally. Indeed, both the UDHR's and neoliberalism's motivations are precisely the fact that they stand up against abuses of government power. Each one is against what it understands as power abuses towards either human or economic relations. A third aspect is the commonality of their geographical birthplace. The UDHR was signed in Paris less than six months after the foundation of the MPS, in an attempt to popularize what its organizer Hayek later termed 'the neoliberal movement'. The neoliberal character of the UDHR is expressed most evidently in Article 23, where market relations are seen as privileging a capitalist society whose productivity was ready to soar.

Article 23

1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
2. Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
3. Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.
4. Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests (UN, 1948).

Although Article 23 represents a significant step towards the regulation of labor rights such as equitable remuneration, unemployment insurance, and old-age pension, it fails to provide parameters or regulations for this to happen. Moreover, humanity is performed and thereby defined as a labor-oriented existence, which goes well with the neoliberal need for an abundant and cheap workforce. Work is not an abstract entity, it is value-laden. Consequently, some occupations are seen as guaranteeing more humanity than others, with the effect that humanity has been equated with the workforce. Eagleton attributes centrality to the role of a poorly remunerated mass that “makes the system work” (EAGLETON, 2011, p. 36), postulating that in a neoliberal society they represent “an immense human mass” (EAGLETON, 2011, p. 36). It is possible to catch a glimpse of the workings of this mass on Grindr. The fact that the precarious contemporary working conditions in Brazil have spread to an unexpected place such as a cruising app is worth noting. These commercial possibilities do not emerge without risks, however, which is what we discuss in the next section.

Banalizing human rights with neoliberal practices

‘Grind’ is “[a] word used in any [online video game] representing the **repetitive** actions taken in order to make the character stronger. The grind is also a substitute for normal life functions” (our highlight)⁵. Such daily life actions include sleeping, eating, drinking, and going to the bathroom, which become part of our routine and rarely receive much attention. Building on this idea, online video games usually have a design grammar based on grinding gear, which includes killing the same monster countless times to eventually get an item with a very low drop rate. Grindr dates back to 2009⁶, which means that it is younger than online video games. The performative naming of a dating app as ‘Grindr’, however, should not be taken lightly: it is about including the app as part of its users’ routine, like something you might do without giving much thought.

It is common to find profiles on Grindr whose stylization strategy explains the app is used to cope with boredom, with no real intention of connecting people. On Grindr, the concept of community takes on very peculiar contours: there is little communal feeling and many profiles

⁵ Retrieved from <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=grind> on March 2, 2022.

⁶ Retrieved from <https://www.grindr.com/about/> on March 2, 2022.

insult others. One profile, for instance, reads: “There are only sick people here!”. Rather than seeing this as exceptional behavior, we argue that this is an engineered response to produce docile liberal subjects - although in competition. Bown (2015) explains that many video game players feel that they can escape their work responsibilities by engaging in an apparently subversive activity: playing video games during work hours, thus reducing their employers’ profits. However, the author explains that there is nothing subversive about it as these moments of escape are necessary to keep the working-class violence levels at bay (BOWN, 2015). A similar phenomenon happened in Victorian England, where company owners created country clubs and collective sports so that their workers would channel their violent drives against one another, instead of against their employers (BAILEY, 1978/2007). We see a similar phenomenon on Grindr: users will inadvertently log into the app and direct their dissatisfactions towards other members of the community rather than against their undesirable working conditions. All in all, many users literally get off on violence instead of sex.

While going through the grind of their daily lives, users will take their cellphones, open the app, scroll down, double-click to open a conversation channel, share intimate-spectacular performances, exchange a few text messages, and - more often than not - drop the conversation. To keep Grindr working, this drill must be done over and over on a daily basis. To make sure its users return, Grindr has established a learning method: it floods its users’ phones with pop-up messages which tell you someone has sent you an emoji - a cookie, a fire, or a devil’s face -, a message or a picture. Interestingly, it is not uncommon for one to be sent their own naked picture, which raises serious privacy concerns on how Grindr handles private semiotic material and whether it abides by both the Brazilian and the European General Data Protection Regulation (EU, 2016; BRASIL, 2018). Besides intimate-spectacular performances, other sensitive information is taken, such as body metrics, geolocation information, emotional state, ethnicity, sexual preferences, political and religious beliefs, and HIV status (NORWAY, 2020). Although we would like to believe that information would remain only in the dating scene, they are shared among Grindr’s mercantile partners (NORWAY, 2020), to whom it surrenders, through detailed profiling, a rich tool for future exploitation both for marketing purposes and for ends not yet imaginable, as the scandal surrounding Cambridge Analytica proved in 2019. Users are usually blissfully unaware of what they are forfeiting to obtain the right to use Grindr. This then begs the question: Can there be consent without a clear understanding of what is at stake? Hardly.

As Phan, Seigfried-Spellar, and Choo (2021) have noted, much data is transferred to third parties, who may use it for cyber-stalking, doxing, rape, other crimes, and violent behaviors. This is clearly a

violation of Article 12 of the UDHR and of Article 2 of the Brazilian General Data Protection Regulation (BRASIL, 2018). Grindr, therefore, generates information to feed its advertising partners while keeping its users docile, after all, they submitted to a privacy policy they never read or understood. Because users' relationship to the app is as habitual as washing their hands or going about one's job duties, we contend here that Grindr users do not even become aware that they are exposed to risks, and even if they were, Rigot explains that "the drive for sex, love, intimacy, and association is often stronger than the fear of risks" (RIGOT, 2018, para. 3). Taking risks, then, is a mundane experience for app users, and this has particularly dangerous effects for minorities. Some common risks include cyber-flashing, sexual racism, rape, stalking, nonconsensual pornography (the distribution of sexually graphic pictures without permission), doxing (the distribution of personal information without permission), and deception (PHAN; SEIGFRIED-SPELLAR; CHOO, 2021). Even though women are usually more affected, gay men are also easy victims of technology-facilitated sexual violence (PHAN; SEIGFRIED-SPELLAR; CHOO, 2021). In knowingly homophobic countries, such as "[Egypt, Lebanon, and Iran,] authorities have manipulated dating apps in order to identify LGBTQ+ individuals and prosecute them for supposed 'indecent acts'" (KATSONI; STEVENS, 2021, para. 8).

Although freedom is the most echoed value of neoliberalism (LUDWIG, 2016), it is rightly the opposite of the goal of multi-connected social platforms like Grindr that invest in sophisticated addiction techniques based on a desire for appraisal and positive feedback. Our interactions on and with platforms profoundly affect the way we think and feel (MARTINS, 2019; ALEGRE, 2020). Both authors would agree that apps have been producing changes in the liberal subject's mindset that hurt the principle of free thought and liberty, by manipulating our ways of feeling, conducting our actions, normalizing neoliberal ideologies, and having access to the most vulnerable and helpless core of emotions and feelings. This harmful invasion sounds even more disheartening if one considers that "[t]he business models of these companies thrive on continued use of their apps, not on successful relationships that no longer require their use" (ALEGRE, 2020, para.3). The way social media and dating apps infers with and influences our thoughts and feelings may have serious consequences not only for privacy, but for our own desire for it, given that privacy is often performed as irrelevant by neoliberal agencies and that the right to freedom can only be assured by a real right to privacy. Any interference with these rights, which are crucial to the dignity and autonomy of individuals, degrades us as individuals and societies in ways one cannot predict or repair because these rights are performative of what we understand by humanity, even though humanity has been more and more epitomized by capital success.

Erotics of signs: Methodology and research ethics

In the previous section, we argued that using Grindr and taking risks on the app are banal activities. Banalizing evil inevitably takes us in the direction of Arendt (2013[1964]) and her renowned description of how atrocious actions were talked about in mundane notes. While Arendt (2013[1964]) describes the banalization of a genocidal enterprise conducted through bureaucratic means, we focus on the banalization of risks and rights, conducted by profit-oriented enterprises. The nonchalant manner in which we forfeit our rights is worthy of note. Inspired by Arendt (1951; 1954), Silva and Palma (2018) postulate that human rights are the propelling force of contemporary philosophy. They move not only the thinking itself, but the methodology and ethics behind any socially responsible research. Methodology and research ethics have fundamental relevance in the research design, in the interaction with the field, and in data generation. More importantly, human rights bias the results of philosophical inquiries politically. It is precisely with our ethical and humanistic commitment to research results in our attention that we decided to revisit Grindr to analyze the stylization of profiles from an anti-neoliberal critique. Thus, we discuss here the subjective-commercial stylization of profiles on Grindr to understand how they converge in the valorization of profiling that encourages the affirmation of an indissoluble copula between sexual subject and economic subject. Although the presence of the so-termed “capital profiles” (BONFANTE, 2016, p. 239) (which encompasses escorts, masseurs, clubs’ publicity, sex shop sales, and drug dealers) were acknowledged during his mentioned ethnography almost ten years ago, their performances back then were connected to sexual semantics in an almost automatic indexical way, for the advertised goods were sexual. Here, we analyze profiles that offer goods, that are not connected with sex, such as cupcakes, barbershop services, and cleaning services, for instance. These goods perform their workforce. While they offer a service or a good, they stylize their profiles as sexually promising. The investigated acts of stylization were selected because they attack neoliberal indices of self-performance with a certain crude shamelessness, which permits not only to draft an anti-capitalist critique, but to notice that in ten years, the mindset of “spectacularizing intimacy” (BONFANTE, 2016, p. 16) has deeply penetrated even the non-sexual performances on Grindr as an odd neoliberal backlash which elects self-objectification as a stylistic path to existence.

Studying stylization involves drawing on Butler’s (1993, 1997, 2002) work on how one comes into being by semiotically styling oneself as a desiring neoliberal subject. Therefore, language is here conceived as a powerful entity capable of creating the very body we inhabit through ideology circulation and performative sedimentation. Language stylizes and thus creates the body so that it may be said that bodies are constructed discursively (BUTLER, 1993; 1997). Assuming that bodies

are constructed through repeated acts of stylization, we invest in a methodology whose specificities emerged not only as an epistemological response to the peculiarity of language use in cruising apps in Brazil, but also as an ethical response to methodological challenges, such as: “decomputerization” (VARIS, 2014, p. 6), the need to forget and erase sensitive data (BONFANTE, 2021), the profound changes of concepts like field, participation, and community (GUPTA; FERGUSON, 1997), and the pre-defined role of the researcher (WILSON, 1996 [1995]); the investments on researchers as objects of desire or of insult (BONFANTE, 2018). The erotics of signs is a hybrid and interdisciplinary methodology which combines ethnographic description and the tracking of indexicality, suggesting performances of desire as semiotic phenomena that construct our personas which in turn touch other bodies, making them respond with erections, orgasms, disgust, and contempt. These feelings, in turn, have effects upon the performances and help to crystalize specific social values for bodies, performances, and actions, as stylization is an act that has an aesthetic-affective dimension that intervenes in the social world. The erotics of signs is considered a political-ideological enterprise, whose highly subjective narratives embrace the ethical responsibility for the discursive production of the subjects they describe. Thus, the erotics of signs is concerned with the production of contextual ‘truths’ while it is legitimately concerned with the well-being and freedom of the subjects it researches with: users of Grindr in Brazil.

Analysis

Specific variables emerge from symbolic repertoires in social life, becoming semiotic signs or emblems and serving as semiotic resources for stylizing and typifying the self. According to Coupland (2007), understanding the meanings of a style is an inherently contrastive exercise; however, style is not just difference, but references an aesthetic dimension of difference. Stylization, “the activation of stylistic meaning” (COUPLAND, 2007, p. 2), consists of the summoning of semiotic facts (such as the fire emoji 🔥, foreign words, such as “Archangel”, images, such as gold necklaces, and language morphology, such as the suffix *-in* in “Novin”⁷) employed as semiotic strategies of performances of differentiation and individuation that point to social characteristics as signs of the subject. What are the semiotic strategies commercial profiles employ? How does the relation of erotics and economics both as epistemology and as real consequences of money flow in a neoliberalist world are performed on Grindr? Why is that a turnoff for human rights? We will answer these questions with an ethnographic account which highlights three distinctive moments that took place while we were cruising the app.

⁷This suffix *-in* in Portuguese corresponds roughly to the English suffix *-ie* in ‘Charlie’. The word ‘Novin’ (Novo [Young] + *-in* [*-ie*]) might be translated for *Twink*, although we would like to highlight that unlike *Twink*, *Novin* does not usually index femininity.

Sexual-economic relations

One of the profiles that caught our attention was *Archangel* 🏹⁸, 21 years old. He filled his profile with some of his favorite songs and a well-planned picture with black clothes. He had his crew cut bleached and an emoticon of two swords crossed, which in Portuguese indexes the concept of sword fighting: a sexual practice in which two men rub on each other and masturbate with no penetration. Although he provided limited bodily information other than his height (165 cm), he wrote something quite interesting on his profile:

⁸For ease of reading, we have indicated the names of the profiles with italics.

Extract 1: *Archangel* 🏹's profile

Archangel 🏹 21
with the bourgeoisie I am a top, to fuck the ass of capitalism.
with the proletariat, I am a bottom, because he who gives to the poor, lends to God.
If I can't have love, I want power

Archangel 🏹 21
com burguês eu sou ativo, pra comer o cu do capitalismo.
Com o proletário eu sou passivo, porque quem dá aos pobres empresta a Deus.
If I can't have love, I want power.

The verb 'give' in Portuguese may mean both 'to give an object to someone' and 'allow oneself to be penetrated'. He thus provides us an understanding of how sex and capital are interlaced, since rich and poor people are allocated within two different repertoires: while the bourgeois/capitalist/powerful require fucking, the proletariat/poor/hungry require (sexual) charity. He ends his profile with a moto in English, which is usually employed as a strategy to perform sophistication, high culture, and mobility, indexing international citizenship. It reads: "If I can't have love, I want power". The moto which at first glance may seem quite confusing plays with opposites: while being in love would render him powerless, having sex with others would locate him in a powerful position. This is a portrait of a neoliberal ideology that produces the other as someone disposable unless you have plans to invest together in a marriage, or a marriage-like relationship. Being capable of loving others would then be a threshold that positions people as either powerful (sex-prone, abuse-prone, collector of sexual experiences) or powerless (hostage of feelings, hostage of other people's desires). This polarization suggests that in love relations, one could either perform a neoliberal understanding of power which refers to an individualistic and competitive collection of sexual experiences, or be subjected by this same neoliberal power, allowing feelings that weaken and make one vulnerable.

Some other profiles participate on Grindr expressing their turn-ons, or the kinds of guys and girls (trans women abound on Grindr) they appreciate, in the process of self-stylization, such as the one below.

Extract 2: B 🔥's profile

B 🔥 22
Libra
wire-transfersexual: in love with wire transfers lol
Looking for new friends

B 🔥 22
Libriano
Pixsexual: apaixonado por pix kkk
Quero novas amizades

B 🔥, 22 years old, for example, started his stylization by indicating his star sign, Libra. To that, he added a selfie, showing his naked torso and a thick gold necklace, which indexes masculinity and social class in Rio de Janeiro. The 180-cm-tall user writes in his profile that he is “wire-transfersexual: in love with wire transfers lol”. Instead of electing a specific sex preference or practice as a means for stylization, he stylizes himself performing his desire for an uncomplicated money transaction. This indexes discourses about arousal as a material service that can be purchased with money.

Another user, *Twink*⁹ read the bio, on the other hand, stylizes his ad by listing his dislikes, or the features he is not looking for.

⁹ A *Twink* is a young man that performs his age as being in the early twenties or younger. They usually perform a thin or slim, and hairless body.

Extract 3: Twink read the bio's profile

Twink read the bio
Only my friendship is free
I don't want to see your ass
Don't want to fuck your girlfriends
Don't wanna see your dick
Not interested in broke guys...

Novin le a bio
De graça comigo é somente minha amizade
Não quero ver teu cu
Não quero pegar suas amigas
Não to afim de ver teu pau
Não to afim de caras quebrados...

Although he does not use any of the typical indexes¹⁰ of male prostitution in Rio de Janeiro such as ‘pix [wire transfer]’, ‘boy’, or ‘only work’, he positions himself as a sexual subject that would only be available through capital benefits. In this way, his stylistic choices index a relation for sale. Moreover, his stylization as a Twink is a choice that sexualizes young people as long as this sexual availability is maintained with a constant flow of capital niceties from their sexual partners. These kinds of features in the semiotic composition of sexual-capital personas insist that sexual relations are not naïve when it comes to capital flow, even non-conjugal ones. In *History of Sexuality III*, Foucault (1985 [1976]) provides a complex and intricate view of the economic origins of marriage in the first centuries after Christ. The economic character behind matrimony

¹⁰ Because the explicit indexes of male prostitution are easily recognizable by algorithms, they guarantee a faster exclusion from the platform. To avoid the exclusion, escorts have started to employ symbols that allude to it metaphorically such as ‘pix’ (a type of wire transfer in Brazil), ‘boy’ (short for ‘call boy’), or other typical symbols such as the word ‘work’.

may be the main historical shift in the sense of capital accumulation. The neoliberal character of the marriage puts great pressure on the use of bodies and sexuality limiting certain practices since procreation was a necessary part of the matrimony, so the accumulated capital would remain in the bloodline.

The performances of *Archangel*, B 🔥 and *Twink read the bio* suggest that not only marital, but also sexual relationships are imbricated in economic obligations, naturalizing Grindr as a locus for distinct non-professional capital-sexual exchange configurations. Particularly, participation in apps has highlighted a cosmopolitan way of performing life that resonates money with success, helping in the solidification of neoliberal understandings of success and in the interlacing of sexuality and economics.

Service offers

A different way of performing capital sexuality is in the offering of services that are not sexual in nature but could be sexualized if one pays extra. Since cruising apps like Grindr provide environments for the user to exercise his entrepreneur side, these technologies work as “devices for subjective capture” (MISKOLCI, 2021, p. 46) to neoliberal rationalities, not only spicing the market with sex, but transforming oneself into a product, that may or may not be sexual. That is the case of the *Naked barber* 🏴‍☠️🏴‍☠️¹¹, 35 years old. His profile is constructed with body metrics, a picture of a barbershop and a telephone number only. A tradition since at least 2 years ago in Rio de Janeiro, naked barbers have been advertising their services not only on Grindr, but also on Twitter and Facebook. These professionals will go to your house (or host), get undressed, cut your hair and/or trim your beard. The sexual tension adds value to the service provided, which could end up in sensual bodily contact or, ultimately, sex. In addition, the barbers assume a sexy stance in relation to the customer’s body as their genitals get very close to the client’s face or their bodies. All of this changes the experience of getting your facial hair trimmed into a distinct sensual experience.

Cupcake, for instance, mixes food and sex in his three pictures¹². The profile picture shows a man with a crew cut, a beard, and the currently trendy eyebrow slit. He also exhibits his bare chest where one can see a silver scapular and a pierced nipple. Finally, we can see that he is holding the camera with one hand and his bulge with the other. The second picture of his profile presented a menu with seven different flavors of cupcakes, and it was complemented by the third picture, which showed the said flavors. He had his own logo (Cakes of D) and urged his audience to purchase his edibles: “Place your order!”. Juxtaposed with the profile picture, his stylistic choices render his ad ambiguous. They imbricate sex (indexed by the bulge, bare chest, and pierced nipple), service transactions (indexed by the sign “Purchase”), masculinity (indexed by the silver scapular, bulge, bare chest, and beard), and femininity (cooking can be associated with nurturing and caring, which are traditional symbols of femininity). The sequence of the pictures

¹¹ As the only information available is his phone number, we do not include a transcription of his profile.

¹² As he does not include any text in his bio, we do not include a transcription of his profile.

included the seller on the menu, or better it placed him as central to the tasting: he performs himself as a symbolic ingredient that comes in all the cakes, after all, he baked them. They are the cakes from D.

Three other profiles offered cleaning services. The first one, *Cleaning.com*, 99¹³ years old, was stylized with a shirtless picture, depicting a muscular black body. He also added some text to his bio, as can be seen below.

¹³ When users inform they are 99, they are usually avoiding this detail.

Extract 4: *Cleaning.com*'s profile

Cleaning.com 99
Honest, sincere and truthful, I do cleaning [in] all of rio de janeiro and metropolitan area, with references.

Faxinas.com 99
Honesto, sincero e verdadeiro, faço faxina todo Rio e grande rio, com referências.

Cleaning.com provided several body metrics: 176 cm, 67 kg, black, male. Moreover, he added his sexual preference (vers/top), his tribe (discreet), and signaled his affective availability, letting his audience know that he is not only single, but looking for: "dates, friends, relationship". To affect his audience, he composes a mixed genre. On the one hand, he performs a profile that offers a service and highlights the characteristics one would appreciate in housekeeping: moral values, and previous work references. On the other hand, he designs a profile for the dating market. He performs himself as hardworking, but also an easily objectified body: a muscular body whose sexual preference is to penetrate. While he offers a traditionally feminine service (cleaning), he also makes reference to his capacity as a sexually active male.

The second profile which offers cleaning services presents a man wearing shorts and a T-shirt who identifies himself as *Maid* 🧹. Instead of staring at the audience, he is facing the wall while standing with his barefoot on top of a ladder. Reaching towards an air-conditioning device, he seems to be performing either cleaning or maintenance. This picture is contextualized by an acid reflection in his bio:

Extract 5: *Maid* 🧹's profile

Maid 🧹
Always like this.
The ugly ones want the pretty ones
The pretty ones want the beautiful ones
The beautiful ones want the perfect ones
The perfect ones want nobody, because nobody pleases them.
Doing my job and that's it. Male housekeeper, tidying up, washing and ironing.

Diarista 🧹
Sempre assim.
O feio quer o bonito
O bonito quer o lindo
O lindo quer o Perfeito
O Perfeito não quer ninguém devido ninguém o agradar. Fazendo meu trabalho e só
Diarista masculino, arrumar, lavar, passar.

Maid employs different strategies of stylization. Although he affirms the reason for his profile is to work as a maid, he interacts with the application in a way that performs proximity and hopelessness, both characteristics of Grindr users. In his bio, he denies wanting a relationship even though the droplets next to his profile name index a desire for ejaculating. Given our own personal experience with the app, it may be argued that he was contesting getting lured towards a vicious circle that hinders connection and recognition. However, he still plays by the rules of the dating app but adds a different way of participating: commercial. He fills his profile with detailed body metrics, such as height (164 cm), ethnicity (black), sexual preferences (versatile), tribe (discreet) and goals (professional and relationships). By construing his body on a cruising app with symbols of the working class, he affects other bodies performing the ideology of a working-class body as desirable.

At this point, it is worth questioning if neoliberalism has invaded the sensual atmosphere on Grindr, with its entrepreneurship and individualistic values, or if the sexualization of life is something to be observed invading even the more prudish market relations. The next profile might be helpful in answering that it is not about either/or, but **both** the spread of neoliberalism on Grindr **and** the dissemination of the sexualization of life in market relations:

Extract 6: *Cleaning now's* profile

Cleaning now 29

My name is Alex, I am 29 years old, I created this profile for an alternative to have extra income, I know that this app [is] for dating, but [I] intend to provide cleaning services, if anyone needs, I will be available.

Limpeza já 29

Meu nome é Alex tenho 29 anos, criei esse perfil para ter uma alternativa para ter ganhos extra , tenho conhecimento que esse app de encontros porém o intuito prestar serviços de limpeza , caso alguém precise estarei a disposição.

Alex's picture portrayed a professional janitor cut by the shoulders and waist. He was carrying some cleaning equipment such as rubber gloves, a bucket, and a mop. Similar pictures were easily retrieved on Google search by the string 'cleaning service'. He was the only one who did not perform his body suggesting he would not be open for sex and love relations. He even admits knowing the app was not developed to do commercial transactions. Alex, however, is not gay nor Brazilian. He is a straight immigrant from sub-Saharan Africa, as he told Bonfante in the app's chat. He explained that "Africans in Brazil cannot find jobs that do not involve physical labor. Cleaning is one of the least exhausting". At the time, he said he had not made much money yet, but was optimistic, for the business was "heating up". When asked why he came to Brazil, he said: "I wanted a chance to be part of a big economy."

Interacting with Alex, we were reminded of the words of the black historian Beatriz Nascimento:

Perhaps I would be on my home continent if there had not been a white economic revolution, which I have had nothing to do with to this day, because most of my equals remain socially and economically debased, without access to the riches of the country they built. (NASCIMENTO, 2016, p. 96).

Nascimento (2016) does more than criticize racism in a direct and touching way, she suggests that capitalism uses black people while keeping them away from economic enjoyment. Considering this anti-racist critique towards neoliberalism, and the ethnographic generation of the data, we can assume that there is a political dimension of life that interferes in the visibility of subaltern existences, for subaltern desire is usually seen as a matter of economics. All profiles offering cleaning services were performing blackness, availability to physical labor, and the need to complement their incomes. Two of them depicted sexual involvement as a way to be recognized, and not reported by other users. As Miskolci (2021, p. 46) insightfully writes: "Social networks exploit the deficit of acknowledgment", luring queer subjects into neoliberal behaviors online, which involves "engaging in the competition for attention, media acknowledgment and protagonism" (MISKOLCI, 2021, p. 47). It is important to state that when it comes to performances that sexualize economic desperation, the mediatic participation of vulnerable populations is in the hands of corporations that materialized the contemporary coalition between commercial, political, and military investments.

Anti-mercantile profiles

Many profiles from simpler backgrounds typically react more aggressively to the presence of commercial profiles on Grindr, devoting spaces from their profiles to harshly criticize sexual participation conditioned by economic interaction. *Top for big ass 21cm* wrote in his profile: "MANY AROUND HERE RUIN THE APP, ASKING FOR MONEY, ASKING FOR WIRE TRANSFERS, WANTING UBER RIDES. Ahhh GET REAL, GO WORK BUNCH OF MOOCHES SONS OF BITCHES" ["MUITOS POR AQUI ESTRAGAM O APP, PEDINDO MORAL, PEDINDO PIX, QEREM UBER, Ahhhhh NAMORAL VAI TRABALHAR CAMBADA DE VAGABUNDOS FPD."]. *Top for big ass 21cm* performs the ideology Nascimento calls our attention to: "The dominant morality is not concerned with establishing rules in favor of those lacking economic power" (NASCIMENTO, 2016, p. 106). This belief imagines Grindr as a territory free from capital relations, a position that is backed up by Grindr itself. Financial transactions are thus forbidden in the app, but the surveillance is tougher on moralized trades like selling drugs and prostitution, for which the penalty is a ban from the platform

¹⁴ That does not prevent a user from creating a new profile with a new email. This policy seems to be just for show since the app has no interest in losing users and their precious data goods.

and blocking the email address used in the account¹⁴. On the other hand, wealthy individuals seem to assume two different positions before commercial-sexual profiles. They either eroticize poverty (BONFANTE, 2016, p. 223) or react strongly against paying for sex, which in turn reinforces the desire of dominant classes to have guaranteed access to free sex, due to their economic privilege, nurturing a colonialist attitude towards sex. We believe that punishing economic transactions on Grindr spoils the fun, but only for the more economically vulnerable users.

Final words

History has shown us that the UDHR does have performative power by bringing together diverse voices in a crusade against the violation of its articles, triggered by a feeling of revolt against inhumane treatment. However, we believe that economic solidarity has a performative power that can evoke effects beyond those declared by the UDHR, precisely because to declare is not as potent a performative as to teach ethically. Big corporations, especially those that profit from our data like Grindr, need to be submitted to the jurisdiction, and to be held responsible for social inequality they help to build. Their accountability regarding ethics and economics is essential in this technological crusade for human rights in order to build a more democratic society.

Although the literature revisited here holds that companies should be more participative when it comes to envisioning solutions for the social problems the use of apps pose to human freedom and safety, we envision a more radical path to control the perverse infiltration of apps in our minds, freedom, and safety: the complete rejection of the signature of the privacy policy companies demand, and the consequent holding of them accountable for the harm they may cause. When companies came up with the privacy policy, they automatically transferred the risk of using harmful technology to us, even though we could not measure the risks and outcomes for what they were. It is clear that users cannot be the ones to blame and that they can no longer support the weight of that burden on their shoulders. It must be shared with (or altogether given back to) the companies that invest in the approximation of neoliberalism and necropolitics. The approximation between neoliberalism and necropolitics takes on a crueler face if we understand the ideological cooptations made by neoliberalism, as depicted here in the approximation of sex and capital. We hope to have convinced that the inculcation of neoliberal values through technologies like Grindr is a human rights infliction and a remarkable turnoff given that it works towards an understanding of the other as a “competitor that needs to be destroyed or an object that can be used and discarded” (CASARA, 2021, p. 23) or even as an abject subjectivity who needs to sexualize himself in order to become economically visible.

Although there are numerous indices that can be performed as affective triggers of abjection, the performance of wealth seems to be a

very determinant index for a full existence which is recognized among Grindr users and thus not objectified. Although there is the glamorization of some sexual services, the offering of products on Grindr encounters violent symbolic reactions from other participants and from the app itself. When it comes to Grindr – and any other profit-surveillance-oriented company –, “[t]he defense of human rights has been carried out in a way that warrants reassessment” (MISKOLCI, 2021, p. 29) as it can profit from the incorporation of an anti-neoliberal critique that pins together capital-sexual performances on the paradigm of wild neoliberalism, poverty, and hunger, suggesting that economic inequality is a real turnoff, not only from the perspective of the erotics of signs – the methodology here – but also from the perspective of an ethical participation in society.

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Linguagem, neoliberalismo e direitos humanos: A erótica dos signos em um app de *pegação*

RESUMO

Este artigo focaliza a naturalização do individualismo neoliberal online, a performance da desigualdade profunda como um recurso estilístico sensual e a equalização entre o capital e as relações sexuais. Para tanto, destaca-se o parentesco entre a Declaração Universal dos Direitos Humanos e o Neoliberalismo. Em seguida, argumentamos que o Grindr foi planejado para nos fazer retornar constantemente a ele, sujeitando-nos, assim, a abusos pelos desenvolvedores do aplicativo. Passamos então à análise dos dados gerados por meio da erótica dos signos (BONFANTE, 2016), metodologia que sublinha performances sexual-capitais que trazem dois fenômenos relacionados à nossa atenção: o espraiamento de práticas neoliberais no Grindr e a disseminação da perspectiva do sexo como produto comercial. Por fim, consideramos os ganhos éticos e epistemológicos do nosso trabalho.

Palavras-chave: *Direitos Humanos; Grindr; Neoliberalismo; Erótica dos signos; Indexicalidade; Linguística Aplicada.*

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