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Consumption praxis: a study of the search for freedom from gender oppression in the context of online games

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Abstract

The article theorizes how women face the gender oppression present in consumption. Using data from the context of online games in Brazil collected through 15 in-depth interviews and netnography, we introduce the concept of consumer praxis, defined as a reflective action that seeks liberation of the oppressed and is performed in consumer environments that reinforce the subordination of the other. The results reveal that women seek liberation through dialogical action in the face of gender oppression, mobilization, and market occupation. The research advances in the cultural studies of consumption, demonstrating how a consumption practice can help in the search for liberation from the oppressive relations existing in our society.

Keywords: Gender. Liberation. Feminist Studies. Online Games.

Práxis de consumo: um estudo sobre a busca da libertação da opressão de gênero no contexto dos jogos

Resumo

O artigo teoriza sobre como as mulheres enfrentam a opressão de gênero no consumo. Utilizando dados do contexto de jogos *on-line* no Brasil coletados por meio de 15 entrevistas em profundidade e netnografia, introduzimos o conceito de “práxis de consumo” definido como uma ação reflexiva libertadora do oprimido em ambientes de consumo que reforçam a subalternização do outro. Os resultados revelam que as mulheres buscam libertação mediante uma ação dialógica frente à opressão de gênero, com mobilização e ocupação de mercado. A pesquisa avança nos estudos culturais do consumo demonstrando como uma prática de consumo pode auxiliar na busca pela libertação das relações de opressão em nossa sociedade.

Palavras-chave: Gênero. Libertação. Estudos feministas. Jogos *on-line*.

Praxis del consumidor: un estudio sobre la búsqueda de la libertad frente a la opresión de género en el contexto de los juegos en línea

Resumen

El artículo teoriza cómo las mujeres enfrentan la opresión de género presente en el consumo. Utilizando datos del contexto de los juegos en línea en Brasil, recopilados a través de 15 entrevistas en profundidad y netnografía, introducimos el concepto de praxis del consumidor definida como una acción reflexiva liberadora del oprimido, realizada en entornos de consumo que refuerzan la subordinación del otro. Los resultados revelan que las mujeres buscan la liberación a través de la acción dialógica frente a la opresión de género, con la movilización y la ocupación del mercado. La investigación avanza en los estudios culturales del consumo, demostrando cómo una práctica de consumo puede ayudar en la búsqueda de la liberación de las relaciones opresivas existentes en nuestra sociedad.

Palabras clave: Género. Liberación. Estudios feministas. Juegos *online*.

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INTRODUCTION

Social life is full of gender archetypes and stereotypes that label and limit women's access to consumption, reinforcing gender inequality and treating women as social subjects in an inferior position to men (DaMatta, 1997). In the field of consumption, women are subject to regulations and restrictions that influence their appearance (Rocha, Campos, Casotti, & Nascimento, 2020), such as the use of the Islamic veil (Lamrabet, 2014), clothing (Sandikci & Ger, 2010; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), and erotic products (Walther & Schouten, 2016), as well as sports activities (Thompson & Üstüner, 2015) and participation in brand communities (Martin, Schouten, & McAlexander, 2006).

According to research in the field of culture and consumption (Martin et al., 2006; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Thompson & Üstüner, 2015), to deal with the unequal relationship of gender in consumption, women negotiate greater access to the market with the market actors; however, by negotiating, they establish an agreement that maintains the hierarchical conditions of gender. Based on the liberation of the oppressed (Freire, 2019) perspective, our study aims to understand how women, as subjects oppressed by the gender hierarchy, seek to change consumer relations that reinforce the gender hierarchy. How do they seek to free themselves from gender inequality in this area?

To answer this question, we conducted a qualitative study in online games communities in Brazil; this was chosen for being an ecosystem considered toxic for all users but whose negative aspects, such as frequent verbal abuse, harassment, expressions of sexism, and threats, affect mainly women. Such behaviors are revealed as expressions of the dominant hegemonic masculinity in this environment, which is culturally and symbolically controlled by men (Caramello, 2016; Bristot, Pozzebon, & Frigo, 2017). However, according to research conducted by the company PGB, specialized in producing and publishing annual surveys on the gamer audience, 53% of online gamers are women (Pesquisa Game Brasil, 2020), making this a fertile field for gender studies.

As a theoretical contribution, our research introduces the concept of "consumer praxis," explained in this article's results section. In the following sections, we present the theoretical framework that addresses the negotiations conducted by women for greater inclusion and access to consumption as well as the concept of praxis proposed by Paulo Freire (2019) to explain the liberation of women subjected to gender inequality in consumer relations. Next, we present the qualitative methods used in data collection and the empirical context of the research, namely online games. Finally, we analyze how women seek liberation from gender oppression in the consumer relations that subordinate them and discuss the results obtained in the research.

GENDER NEGOTIATIONS IN CONSUMPTION

Although tensions and oppressions in consumer relations reveal gender inequality and the subordination of women in society (Chedid & Hemais, 2022; Duarte & Quintão, 2021; Lamrabet, 2014), research in the field of culture and consumption explains how women make efforts to deal with this situation, negotiating greater access and inclusion with other market actors.

Martin et al. (2006), for example, explain how women used the gender tensions arising in the Harley-Davidson motorcycle consumer community to reframe their own sense of femininity. However, they do not seek to change the aspect of hegemonic hypermasculinity as this is a factor that attracts them to the community and is used to express different femininities.

Thompson and Üstüner (2015) show how women who practice roller derby, a contact sport on skates, negotiated their own sense of femininity in the United States, expressing hybrid femininities and mixing masculine and feminine cultural signifiers in a reflexive practice of gender resistance. However, the signifiers considered socially feminine continue to be synonyms of subalternity, and the practice is not considered liberating in this aspect.

Market negotiations are also conducted by women seeking greater access to specific consumer goods. Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) show how obese women claim greater inclusion in the fashion market, demonstrating that consumers make use of institutional logic to seek legitimacy as consumers and claim the right to have their consumption needs met. Excluded from the

mainstream fashion market, they are involved in an effort to transform this reality through institutional entrepreneurship; thus, they are searching for inclusion rather than the opportunity to modify the market or the consumption practice of which they are part.

Along the same line, Sandikci and Ger (2010) analyze the effort of Turkish women to have the right to wear the Muslim veil, which carried the stigma of female oppression but which for them meant the expression of faith and an escape from male harassment. Although the item was destigmatized, this negotiation was influenced by male oppression as the veil was used as a protection against harassment.

Finally, women's negotiations for the expansion of socially imposed limits on consumption also cover sexuality, as demonstrated by Walther and Schouten (2016). The authors identified that women make use of erotic products to overcome internalized social barriers. However, the study does not deal with the liberation of women from stigmas related to sexuality, among other social and structural problems.

In conclusion, previous research explains how women act to deal with regulations and restrictions, seeking greater inclusion and access to consumption. However, how do they face and seek to change gender oppression in consumption? To answer this question, we discuss the process of liberation of the oppressed in the next section.

LIBERATION OF THE OPPRESSED

Unfortunately, gender is a factor of social exclusion on which modern societies were built. In this system, women are placed in a situation of social inferiority in relation to men (Lugones, 2014; Spivak, 2010). The oppressor restricts the freedom of the oppressed, dehumanizing them—transforming them into a thing, an inferior being, or a non-human. Over time, the oppressor naturalizes a dichotomous and hierarchical discourse that legitimizes their privileged position and silences the oppressed (Fanon, 1968; Freire, 2019; Lugones, 2014).

The liberation of the oppressed is a historical movement for the recovery of humanity (Fanon, 1968; Freire, 2019) and is only possible because social reality is a human construction. Only the oppressed can change this relationship, and their struggle is undertaken through reflection and critical insertion into their own reality. In this way, the oppressed emerges from the experience of inequality and seeks to transform the world, freeing themselves and the oppressor and overcoming the oppressor-oppressed contradiction (Dussel, 1977; Freire, 2019). Thus, for Freire (2019), the reflection-action binomial is the discursive unit of praxis in which reflection corresponds to the theorizing or subjective process, while action deals with doing in the concrete world (i.e., in social reality).

From the Freirean perspective, dialogue is a means of liberation, the pronouncement of the world that arises from the encounter of people and mediated by the world itself. Dialogue is a way of transforming realities and an essential element to human existence, since human beings cannot exist outside of it. Furthermore, it is the means by which subjects signify themselves—a crucial element in overcoming the oppressor-oppressed contradiction. The word must be pronounced in a way that is committed to liberation. The true word comes from reflection and action; it communicates an understandable message to the subject and others, revealing reality (Freire, 1959).

Therefore, the praxis proposed by Freire, which is constituted by reflection and human action on the world, seeks to change the world through a dialogic and historical process undertaken by subjects that are knowledgeable and critical about their experiences in search of liberation. Praxis is collaborative in its essence: “No one frees anyone, no one frees themselves alone: men free themselves in communion” (Freire, 2019, p. 71). Through dialogic action, the oppressed seek their own humanization (Freire, 2019).

The way Freire looks at the liberation of the oppressed through praxis allows to reveal the relations of domination perpetuated in society and promotes social change. We consider the liberation of the oppressed as a means to recover women's right to be recognized as human beings no longer suffering hegemonic male impositions (Lugones, 2014; Spivak, 2010) in consumer relations. Next, we present the empirical context of our research and the research methods used.

EMPIRICAL CONTEXT AND RESEARCH METHODS

Online games

In today's world, approximately 2.8 billion people play games. In 2020, this industry earned almost 166 billion dollars – a growth of more than 20% compared to the previous year. Brazil is the 13th largest market in this sector and leads the ranking of Latin American countries, having moved about 1.6 million dollars (Newzoo, 2020).

Male domination under cultural and symbolic aspects in the gaming world is a prominent reality (Cerdera & Lima, 2016; Gasoto & Vaz, 2018; Paaßen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, 2017). Games are developed by people who reproduce hegemonic patterns (Amorim, Leão, Gallo, & Liao, 2016; Bayde, 2019) and are essentially aimed at the male audience (Caramello, 2016). This domination can be perceived in female representations, which are mostly sexualized, obtuse, and/or submissive (Amorim et al., 2016; Portinari, Chagas, & T. L. Souza, 2019). Another problem is the lack of female characters (Bristot et al., 2017; Caramello, 2016), which triggers the creation and perpetuation of prejudices and negative stereotypes about the female audience (Bristot et al., 2017).

Women are the main video game players in Brazil, accounting for 53% of the players (Pesquisa Game Brasil, 2020, Game Brazil Research, 2020). This reality inserts them into a universe that is considered “toxic” for them (V. Carvalho, Teixeira, & B. Carvalho, 2015; L. G Pereira, Silva, V. P. Souza, & Rezende, 2017; Flores & Real, 2018; Rodrigues, 2019), who face negative comments regarding their skills as well as harassment, defamation, threats (V. Carvalho et al., 2015; Duarte & Quintão, 2021), and sexism (B. V. Souza & Rost, 2019). Women are purposely disturbed during matches and suffer more from cheating (Flores & Real, 2018; Rodrigues, 2019); these violent acts affect how they perform in the game, how often they play, and the type of game they choose (L. G Pereira et al., 2017).

These problems occur due to the interactive characteristic of online games. Known as multiplayer online battle arena (or Moba), these games are real-time team competitions (Gasoto & Vaz, 2018; B. V. Souza & Rost, 2019). A team is formed randomly, unless the player already has partners to play with, and interaction takes place during matches through voice or written conversations (Flowers & Royal, 2018). Thus, although the development of this consumption practice requires cooperation, it is marked by high competition and segregation between men and women (D. S. Souza, Pereira & Ventura, 2019).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

To understand how women face gender oppression in consumption, we conducted a qualitative study using netnography and in-depth interviews for collecting data. The first author conducted the netnography for 13 months to familiarize themselves with the context, following the recommendations of Kozinets (2019) and observing, interacting, and participating daily – especially in Facebook groups linked to games (see Box 1), which were chosen for their relevance in the gaming world. The studied groups existed for at least 3 years, had more than 200 participants, published new discussion topics weekly, and had cases of harassment or hostile attitudes against women at some point in the conversations.

Box 1
Studied groups

Group (names in Portuguese)	Creation date	Topics discussed	No. members
Garotas que jogam videogame	09/23/2013	Games in general	1,613
League of Legends Brasil	01/02/2014	Focused on LoL	167,708
Mulher Gamer	01/13/2014	Games in general	806
Garota Gamer – Apenas Garotas	01/25/2014	Games in general	724
Garotas Geeks	08/19/2014	Geek culture	6,395
League of Girls BR (Só meninas)	10/03/2016	Focused on LoL	6,527
Grupo Garotas Gamer's - GGG	11/20/2018	Games in general	240

Source: Research data.

Netnography allowed the first author to familiarize herself with the relationships built among community participants as well as their values, meanings, tensions, and disputes. She also followed YouTube channels of gamers and read and followed thematic blogs, game developer websites, and news related to the gamer ecosystem in the mainstream media, some of which were shared in the communities. A total of 8 hours and 15 minutes of videos were collected and analyzed, in addition to 277 pages of textual information, including posts and reports, which are part of the corpus of analysis.

In addition to netnography, the first author conducted 15 in-depth interviews virtually (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994) due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first interviewees (Box 2) were recruited from a discussion topic in one of the communities monitored through netnography. The author identified herself as a researcher in the online groups and, after a period of observation, contacted potential interviewees. After the first interviews, the snowball sampling strategy was used (Miles & Huberman, 1994), with each new interviewee indicating other possible research participants, expanding the range. The inclusion criteria required that the participants identified as women and gamers, which implied close and daily involvement with games. The interviews aimed to broaden the understanding of the ways in which women act in the community and their interactions with other actors in the ecosystem. As a result, we identified topics such as socialization in this consumption practice, problematic situations experienced and (re)actions, and relationships with players and institutional actors.

Box 2
List of interviewees

Interviewee*	Age	Occupation	City where she lives
Agate	23	Unemployed	Calves (PE)
Bianca	30	Advertising	Chapeco (SC)
Carla	19	Student	São Paulo (SP)
Daniela	42	Translator	São Paulo (SP)
Livia	32	Student	Ribeirao Preto (SP)
Luciana	34	Nurse	Belo Horizonte (MG)
Joana	24	Nurse	Taubaté (SP)
Marina	21	Student	Chapeco (SC)
Rita	24	Photographer	Marica (RJ)
Vanessa	20	Student	Londrina (PR)
Michele	34	Graphic designer	Governor Valadares (MG)
Anny	26	Game designer	São Paulo (SP)
Fabiola	27	Game designer	Novo Hamburgo (RS)
Lavinia	21	Game designer	Guaramirim (SC)
Aiko	22	Game designer /entrepreneur	São Paulo (SP)

* Pseudonyms.

Source: Research data.

The collected data were analyzed and interpreted based on hermeneutics (Thompson, 1997). Through a series of “from the part to the whole” interactions, we developed an understanding of the practices and discourses of female and male online gamers as well as of companies operating in the sector. We started coding the data by identifying the different aspects of the ways in which women and men act in the community and their relationships with other actors in this market. Practices and discourses in the interviews and the netnography that revealed gender oppression, as well as their consequences (i.e., actions and reflections conducted by women to change the system of domination in the toxic environment of online game consumption), were analyzed and categorized. To refine the analysis, data were grouped into female, male, and institutional practices. The actions of these actors were investigated and related to each other to better understand the phenomenon.

The second author followed the data collection and analyzed the data with the first author. Throughout the process, they worked together to find a balance between intimacy and distance from the context (Arnould, Price, & Moisio 2006), improving analytical sensitivity to gender issues in the phenomenon studied.

RESULTS

In the online gaming market, women seek liberation from gender oppression through the praxis of consumption, which is a reflexive action that liberates the oppressed in consumer environments and that reinforces the subordination of the other. Consumer praxis is constituted by three elements – oppression, mobilization, and occupation – which comprise practices and reflective dialogues that drive and foster the awareness of the oppressed while seeking liberation. Gender oppression in consumption works as a trigger for gaining and expanding awareness through the mobilization of the oppressed, who articulates and occupies market spaces for changing the social systems that reinforce their subordination. Below, we explain each of the elements of consumer praxis.

Gender oppression in consumption

Gender oppression in consumption is expressed in the manifestation and propagation of the ideology of hegemonic masculinity. The dissemination of this ideology serves the purpose of male domination and sustains gender inequality in our society (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This is the pattern of practices that perpetuates male domination over women in a hierarchical system that subordinates any subject who does not fit the hegemonic ideal of the white, cisgender, heterosexual male (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The devaluation of women is one of the forms in which this ideology is externalized and permeates behaviors such as disbelief in the abilities of female players, attribution of functions considered less important within the team, and sexualization of female characters. For the interviewee Marina (21 years old, student), the simple fact of presenting as a woman is a motivator for cursing and insults during the games, which leads to the need to prove her skill level as a way of legitimizing her presence in that place. She states,

We have to do twice as much to get half the recognition. So, if we're playing a game, we have to prove to be extremely badass. There are always those who say: "C'mon! Everyone is insulted." It's just that guys need to do something stupid to start being insulted; we, on the other side, are insulted just by being there. We have to prove that we are badass to be there.

Feminine devaluation is also revealed in the sexualized representation of female characters, the low quantity of female main characters, and the creation of narratives that subordinate women. In League of Legends and Dota 2, women represent, respectively, 34% and 14% of playable characters, while male figures are 42% and 77% of the total, and the rest are non-human beings. Furthermore, most female characters on LoL (77%) are sexualized (Riot Games, 2021; Valve Corporation, 2021). Similar to the Harley-Davidson motorcycle consumer community (Martin et al., 2006), the context of online games is characterized as a hypermasculinized environment, with the female presence considered an anomaly.

Another form of externalization of hegemonic masculinity is the intimidation of women, which takes place through moral and psychological violence. They are defamed, accused of cheating, called by derogatory terms, and threatened with physical violence and even death. These actions are crimes provided for in the Brazilian legal system (Decreto-Lei nº 2.848, de 7 de dezembro de 1940). According to Daniela (42 years old, translator), the fact of presenting as a woman in games is a generating source of curses and offenses from the hegemonic players, and the level of aggressiveness increases when any mistake is made. Insults even become crimes of threat and harassment. She says,

For example, if we put "Ladybug" (example of female nick name) there, we are attacked as soon as we log in the game: "Hey! It's a woman. Have you washed the dishes today?" or "Has your boyfriend already fucked you today?" If we miss something in the game: "I'm going to your house to rape you and your mother."

Women are stigmatized, objectified, and placed in a position of inferiority, being silenced by the propagators of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Lugones, 2014; Spivak, 2010). Prolonged oppression leads to the normalization of inequality relations (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Lugones, 2014; Spivak, 2010). However, faced with these situations, women's reflexive process arises as a reaction to the condition of subordination in relation to men. The reaction to gender oppression arises from the reflection on reality and the identification that this needs to be modified. The realization of oppression is the first step toward critical insertion into reality and the search for liberation (Freire, 2019).

The recognition of the oppressors and the reflection on this situation are revealed in the dialogues among the players, which occur during matches and other moments of online interaction in the community. As Vanessa (20 years old, student) exemplifies, during matches, dialogue is prompted—even if quickly—through reflection and the problematization of the violence suffered: “There was one time that a boy was mean to me during the match and someone next to him said: ‘I’m a girl too! Are you really going to insult her?’ So, it is important to join forces there to defend ourselves.” The reflexive process of consumer praxis can be seen in the dialogues and actions of mobilization and occupation of spaces, which will be presented below.

Mobilization of the oppressed

Mobilization arises from women's reflection on how to change the oppressive reality. By uniting through mobilization, women find a way to challenge and confront the structure of male domination. Female diligence begins with the search for groups and communities that welcome them, such as *Meninas Gamers*, *Garotas que Jogam Videogame*, *Mulher Gamer*, and *Grupo Garotas Gamers*, in addition to private groups created in instant messaging applications. For Bianca (30 years old, publicist), groups aimed at social minorities are a space where she can be present without the toxicity of general groups, which perpetuate hate speech against these minorities. She states,

Currently, I try to only participate in groups led by women on Facebook, for example. Because, from my own experience, I participated in the moderation of a very large group: Stim Brasil. There were millions of users, and the group was dropped (ceased to exist) due to reporting. I know that people tend to have prejudice, to be very sexist, so I prefer to join those spaces where I know I will have support from women and LGBT people because, in general, it is a very complicated situation. Guys don't even accept women playing games. In more general groups, there are always rape, racist, and sexist jokes, etc., and these people don't see this as a problem. If we complain, we are the ones in the wrong. I don't feel safe in groups like this, so I prefer not to participate.

Women participating in groups engage in reflective dialogues about male oppressive practices. Outbursts and posts related to the gender violence they suffer are easily found in these spaces, in addition to reports of dissatisfaction with the objectification of women in games. Reflection is revealed in these dialogues through the identification of the problem, such as in the post published in the *Meninas Gamers* group, in which a participant asked: “Are all men in LoL stupid? [...] I wanted to know how you deal with these situations. I am not used to going through this, as I've always played single player games (omitting the participant's identification).” This report resulted in several comments and responses discussing the problem and suggesting strategies for dealing with male toxicity—among them, especially, seeking support from other women.

Consumer praxis is revealed in the search for liberation from the situation of oppression through actions such as the creation of tools for disseminating information about professional gamers and game developers (Comunidade Gamer Feminina, 2020) and the promotion of game development marathons (Game Jam das Minas, 2020; Women Game Jam, 2020) and of female professionalization in game development or as professional players (Borboletas Digitais, 2020; Coutinho, 2020; DevGirls, 2020; Meninas Digitais, 2020; Rellstab & Laurence, 2018;). Women are mobilized by joining groups in response to the challenges of the problematized reality, which corresponds to “the action of dialogic subjects on it, to transform it” (Freire, 2019, p. 229), and the reflection is intrinsically connected to this action. Our interviewees are not looking to change individual issues, as investigated by Walther and Schouten (2016), but they are looking for collective transformations.

As mobilization is an element of consumer praxis, it opens a space for transforming the oppressive reality, being another step in the critical insertion and awareness of women in the gamer world. When women suffer from oppression, they reflect on this experience, giving rise to the desire for change, which translates into the creation of partnerships with other women. By mobilizing, they are no longer isolated, hidden, and silenced players. The union between the oppressed

develops a problematizing consciousness and supports them in the next step for achieving liberation from gender oppression in consumer relations. This means being present in community spaces as women, as detailed below. This insertion (or occupation of the market) is an integration process that demands a maximum of reason and conscience from the oppressed (Freire, 1999).

Occupation of the market

Although the online gaming industry is dominated by men (Cerderá & Lima, 2016; Gasoto & Vaz, 2018; Paaßen et al., 2017), the participation of women in this space has increased. Below, we present the forms of occupation of the market by women, namely the assumption of female identity, content production, and game creation.

Assumption of female identity

By getting together, women claim the right to participate in the online game industry as female consumers and producers. Therefore, the first step in occupying this space is the assumption of gender identity before the community as female names were previously hidden using neutral or masculine pseudonyms or were revealed only in female groups.

Consumers assume a female nickname and face the consequences of this choice. As is the case with Marina (21 years old, student), who emphatically states, “Yes, I play with a female nickname.” For her, no other option was possible. Similarly, Ágata (23 years old, unemployed) states that it is essential to assume one’s gender identity so that the situation of oppression becomes evident and can therefore be contested and changed.

I always use a female nickname. I think it would be easier to use a neutral or male nickname, like most girls do, but I don’t want to deprive myself of the comfort of having a nickname I like because of a stupid community. Although I acknowledge that, sometimes, the pressure is hard and that they talk a lot of bullshit — sometimes very harsh ones —, I prefer to keep a female nickname and mute [the toxic player]. If we continue to hide that we are women, there is no way for the company to know that this is a woman complaining about a toxic community not to strengthen other female players.

The growing number of women working as professional players (e-athletes) also reveals a greater commitment to occupying the market. These players have conquered more space; an example is the debut, in 2020, of the first woman in an official championship in Brazil promoted by Riot Games, after years of controversies that included accusations of moral harassment and withdrawal of professionals, preventing other women from debuting in the championship (B. Pereira, 2020; Rigueiras, 2020). Moreover, a growing number of female and mixed teams occupy prominent positions in the community (Flor, 2019; Villela & Tunholi, 2019), and solo players are getting attention (Villela & Tunholi, 2019; Quevedo, 2020). Our interviewees go beyond the search for inclusion in the market (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) and the escape from male oppression (Sandikci & Ger, 2010), seeking to change the oppressive reality also by dialoguing with other members of this market.

Consumer praxis is revealed in the position of assuming one’s own identity for the humanization of relationships. The “being more” (Freire, 2019), in this context, is the right to occupy this space, to consume without suffering reprisals of sexist nature, thus overcoming the limits imposed by the ideology of hegemonic masculinity.

Content production

Another way of accessing the market is by producing specialized journalistic content and creating channels for broadcasting matches—streamers, which make up the consumer praxis. Game journalism is a reality that has grown since the 2000s (Lima & Santos, 2019). Women have promoted initiatives in this area, such as the website Preta, Nerd & Burning Hell (2020), which discusses gender and racial issues; Garotas Geeks (2020), which shows the female point of view on nerd/geek culture; and Liga das Garotas (2020), which presents news and updates about games from a female perspective—all of them having a critical view.

Female streamers assume their own gender and expose their skills to the community. The number of female streamers has been growing in recent years, and the main ones are Ingredy Barbi Games (with a YouTube channel created in 2012 and more than 6 million subscribers, broadcasting mainly Free Fire) and Malena (with more than 6 million subscribers on YouTube and broadcasting various games, especially The Sims).

Although most of the content produced by these streamers is related to games and fun, they also constantly address the difficulties experienced by women in the community. This is the case with Loud Mii, who had published a video entitled “What is it like to be a girl in an online game?” which is one of the most popular videos on her channel. In this video, she is verbally attacked, accused of not being a woman and of using hacking tools to cheat as she was excelling in the game.

Content production and sharing reveal the involvement of female gamers with the community and their openness to dialogue with other market actors. These women believe that they also can occupy this space, that is, they recognize themselves in their humanity as holders of the historical vocation of “Being More” (Freire, 2019), breaking the limitations socially imposed on their consumption. These content production actions, whether as streamers or journalists, reveal a search for awareness and the positioning of females as active and reflective subjects. In this sense, they seek to legitimize their right to occupy spaces within the gamer community.

Game development

Game development is characterized by the entry of women in the game development market and by their efforts to develop games with inclusive and non-stereotyped plots and designs. Women adopt a critical attitude when entering the market, aiming to portray reality in an egalitarian and respectful way.

The limited inclusion of the female universe in online games encouraged Michele (34 years old, graphic designer) to start developing games. She claims to have had the desire to develop games from a very early age and, especially, to see herself represented in them. She states that the growth of the independent scene has contributed to the possibility of diversifying online games.

I’m starting to work in the gaming industry. My game will have address topics linked to racism and the LGBT community... I think I started wanting to invent things for games from an early age. People, who were children and wanted to see themselves represented in the games, are now adults developing them. So, even with the scenario being dominated by these people who don’t like it and such, we are managing to get in the industry. I’m seeing the indie scene (without funding from video game publishers) getting more attention, which gives me hope for my game as well.

The desire for change guides the actions of these professionals. Anny (26 years old, gamer designer) exposes this reality by stating that the desire for transformation comes from how she is inserted in the society as a black woman and from the lack of representation that she has always noticed in all her consumer relations over the years.

It is something that I have been insisting a lot with the team that I work with. Because I spent years of my life, and I still do, without seeing myself represented in things. And I know that, like me, more than half of the Brazilian population also finds itself in the same situation, as well as other women in the world. Game is for everyone; it’s not for one audience only. It is a work of persistence, but it is something that I always insist. If you can’t do it in this way, just don’t make a human character.

Anny (26 years old, gamer designer) also reveals that the reality in the market is very oppressive for women—a scenario that has already made her want to change her profession. However, the desire to transform this situation keeps her motivated to continue to work in her field.

I’ve thought a lot about giving up, but this is what I like to do. One thing I’ve always had in mind to not give up and keep mourning is that if I don’t occupy that space, someone else, who isn’t a woman, will. And it will get more and more difficult. So, if I occupy even a small space, I’ll be giving a chance to someone else who comes after me. So, I will recommend another girl, who will recommend another one and who will also inspire children who are watching us doing this and may think about pursuing this career. If it’s not me, maybe no one will do it, so I do it.

The actions of Anny (26 years old, gamer designer) emerged from a reflection on the real situation of oppression, which, for her, involves gender and ethnicity. The continuous work overtime, exemplified in her statement, corresponds to the historical task of transforming reality, considered by Paulo Freire (1999, 2010) as the only real possibility of transforming and overcoming the oppressor-oppressed contradiction. Therefore, in the context of games, the search for liberation is a historical process conducted by women to overcome the oppressor-oppressed contradiction (Freire, 2019).

CONCLUSIONS

We introduced the concept of consumer praxis to understand how women face the gender oppression in consumer relations. Faced with gender oppression in consumer relations, the oppressed starts to reflect in a critical and dialogic way, expanding their consciousness as a subject in the world, developing actions to access the market and thus freeing themselves from the oppressive reality present in consumer relations.

Research in the field of culture and consumption explains how female consumers deal with hierarchies and gender power relations. Through negotiation (Martin et al., 2006; Murray 2002; Sandikci & Ger, 2010; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Thompson & Üstüner, 2015; Walther & Schouten, 2016), consumers reinterpret the ideological meanings of products and services offered by the market based on their own identity projects and objectives. Therefore, negotiation implies a mutually reached agreement through the resignification of objects and services consumed, which maintain oppressive social structures and the subordinating reality.

However, the process of liberation through consumer praxis transforms women into active subjects in the reality they experience, allowing them to promote changes in their consciousness and society. In our study, female consumers go beyond negotiation for inclusion (Sandikci & Ger, 2010) and acceptance (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), not appropriating signs of hegemonic masculinity (Martin et al., 2006; Thompson & Üstüner, 2015) or seeking individual changes (Walther & Schouten, 2016). They are involved in an action to transform the oppressive reality, initiating a process of liberation in a dialogical way between women and other consumers and market actors.

The concept of consumer praxis contributes to studies on consumption—especially those addressing gender hierarchy (Bristor & Fischer, 1993)—by adopting a critical perspective (Murray & Ozanne, 1991) that reveals the system of restrictions produced by human beings and reinforced by structures and identifying the actions to change these social structures. Consumers affect and are affected by the social world and can promote transformations in consumption.

By adopting Paulo Freire's (1959, 1999, 2010, 2019) ontological perspective, our research introduced new theoretical perspectives to the field of culture and consumption research (Arnould, Thompson, & Giesler, 2013). According to Freire, social actors transform the world through reflection and action, adopting a critical, imaginative, and practical approach. Freire's perspective expands the opportunities to reflect on the phenomena of consumption, introducing new possibilities to explain the relationships between the forces of social structures and the consumer subject's ability to act.

Consumer practice considering other oppressed social subjects – social class, ethnicity, race, periphery, and center – is a promising field of research to broaden the understanding of gender oppression in consumption and identify particularities that have not been revealed in the present study. The concept of consumer praxis could refine and extend the understanding of topics such as social stratification, power relations, dominant ideologies, gender hierarchy, and other structuring forces that act in our society (Bristor & Fischer, 1993; Holt, 1997; Murray, 1997; Murray, 2002; Quintão, Lisboa, & Lima, 2021; Quintão, Lisboa, Freitas, & Oliveira, 2019; Shankar, Cherrier, & Canniford, 2006).

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