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Articles

Environmental Journalism and Citizenship: notes on burning in the Amazon

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Abstract

This article aims to reflect on the speeches present on the covers of the newspapers *Estado de Minas* and *Extra* about the fires that occurred in the Amazon region in August 2019. In this sense, based on the principles of environmental journalism and the events, the information gained repercussions, with a provocative and questioning potential of how public agents and citizens relate to the environment. From the textual discursive analysis, we show that the analyzed journals bring elements that problematize the relationship between human beings and environmental issues and encourage them to change behaviors in a conscious and engaged manner.

Keywords: Environment. Amazon. Environmental journalism. Discourse analysis. Fires.

Introduction

This research becomes even more critical since environmental disasters are gaining media coverage daily. Nevertheless, Bueno (2008) states that environmental journalism still has little visibility, and the lack of scientific knowledge on the part of professionals could be the reason for the delay in covering environmental issues. When they do, they focus on tragedies more as a criterion for newsworthiness than on stories of an environmental educational nature.

This article searches the covers of the *Estado de Minas*¹ and *Extra*² newspapers for elements that, beyond the tragic or the risk (or fear) journalism, are concerned with the environmental specialty of journalism. According to Girardi *et al.* (2011), environmental journalism must present a plurality of voices and a systemic vision, going beyond factual, superficial, or programmed coverage.

This work is structured, at first, to conceptualize and present the characteristics of environmental journalism in which the holistic issue is prioritized to understand the parts and the whole, which, in addition to informing, also has the mission of environmental education and clarification by the community. Environmental journalism has a scientific and multidisciplinary character, in which the sources should not only be scholars, technicians, and specialists in the field. However, it should also include the voice of the citizen. The reporter's commitment contributes to the vision of the whole and a greater clarification of the matter. In other words, the agenda must attract people's attention without spectacularizing it, which says a lot about how the journalist relates to the relevance of environmental issues.

Methodologically, this paper chooses the covers of the *Estado de Minas* and *Extra* newspapers about the fire tragedy on the Amazon that occurred in August 2019. As a temporal

1 It belongs to the Diários Associados group, and it is considered one of the most traditional newspapers of Minas Gerais. Throughout its history, it has established itself as a leading daily newspaper.

2 Based in the city of Rio de Janeiro, it is one of the arms of the Organizações Globo in Brazil. In June 2020, it registered an average circulation of 88,100 copies from Monday to Saturday and 157,100 on Sundays. According to the paper, 58% of its readers belong to Class C and 15% to Classes D and E.

selection, we collected records from the first day after the fires, taking advantage of the emergence of the topic for print journalism. The two publications were chosen because they contrast the so-called mainstream media - traditional newspapers in *standard* format that strive for journalistic objectivity - with sensationalist media that explores other ways of covering the facts. In turn, the data was treated using the principles of Textual Discourse Analysis (TDA), showing the perspectives of newsworthiness, the advances, and the challenges of environmental journalism during a crisis.

In this paper, we highlight at least two conceptions of environmental journalism. The first is that one must overcome the thinking that the origin and the solution for environmental problems are centered in the framework of communication/information. These are important, no doubt. These are essential mediation processes, and we will see throughout the text that the media must better inform citizens about environmental issues. As for the second concept of environmental journalism, it is necessary to guarantee more in-depth agendas, narratives, and positions, overcoming sensationalist and spectacular news. In this sense, environmental journalism must help so that cultural and behavioral changes happen regarding the environment. Therefore, it is not possible to look just for the event. We need to think about people, citizens who are aware of their presence in the environment in which they live and act in favor of that place.

The Importance of Environmental Journalism

The awareness of the imbalances in natural systems marks the shift in society's concern with environmental issues. Countries worldwide gathered to discuss and sign agreements to halt the rise in global temperatures and the scarcity of resources and food, among others, based on the initiatives of the United Nations (U.N.), which has held major environmental conferences over the last 40 years.

Originating from scientific findings, terms such as "holes in the ozone layer" and "global warming" were disseminated in societies, above all by the media, which gave extensive coverage to environmental issues during events such as the United Nations Conference on the Environment in Stockholm (1972), Rio de Janeiro (1992), Johannesburg (2002) and when the world met once again in Rio de Janeiro in 2012 for Rio+20 (LÜCKMAN, 2008; NETO, 2008).

The environmental conferences and scientific releases on ecology and the environment made headlines in the press, putting these issues on people's discussion agendas. Currently, the importance of environmental knowledge to the public is notable because evidence indicates that media information on environmental originated concrete changes (FROME, 2008) or at least concern and the search for alternatives on the part of society (GIRARDI *et al.*, 2012).

In terms of quantity, over the last four decades, environmental coverage has expanded worldwide. In Brazil, especially during the conference held in Rio de Janeiro (1992), known as Eco-92, there was a peak in environmental coverage (NETO, 2008). However, in the following years, the topic did not remain frequent. Nevertheless, it is important to note that environmental crises, such as the revelation of the planet's imbalances, coupled with constant catastrophes

such as tsunamis, hurricanes, and the increase in the greenhouse effect, have led to a particular frequency of environmental agendas in the media (NETO, 2008).

Nevertheless, it was not enough for the environmental agenda to take root in environmental journalism. The journalistic function has failed to exploit the potential of this theme, even with the population's growing interest in the environment (GIRARDI *et al.*, 2012). This failure manifests itself in various ways, either by neglecting the complexity and scope of the issue or by preferring a reductionist and occasional approach to a systematic one. Girardi *et al.* (2012) attribute the non-exploitation of the environmental agenda to the lack of space in the media and the economic value of well-crafted reports on the subject.

Neto (2008) states that Brazilian newsrooms have not adapted to the routine of producing print stories about the environment. This means that the professionals could not maintain the investigative characteristics inherent to environmental journalism, which led to a loss of identity in the journalistic approach to the subject. "Many of the editorials related to the environment have lost their characteristics and have fallen more in line with the science editorial model" (NETO, 2008, p. 276).

Environmental journalism lacks specific practice, and this justifies the need for specialization. According to Bueno (2008, p. 111), environmental journalism "must create its own *ethos*, even though it shares a significant part of its DNA with all the journalism (specialized or not) that are practiced out there." *Ethos* represents a segment of journalism comprised of journalists who follow the same set of practices, fundamentals, and peculiar characteristics (MONTEIRO, 2015).

Lückman (2008, p. 125-126) highlights that there are two types of journalism dedicated to the environment: "the mainstream media, usually sensationalist and produced by non-specialized professionals; and the alternative media, where specialized journalists migrate to." According to the author, specialized journalists are professionals capable of gathering and disseminating environmental information with all the peculiarities required by specialization, which includes the educational character to which she pays attention. Frome (2008) also points out that when journalists venture into the environmental specialty, they lose their adherence to traditional media because of the interests at play in companies. He defines the extension of the distance between environmental and traditional journalism:

[...] Environmental journalism [...] is played according to rules based on a conscience different from the predominant one in society. It is more than a way of reporting and writing, but a way of life, of looking at the world and to oneself. It begins with a concept of social service, gives voice to the fight and demands, and expresses itself with honesty, credibility, and finality. It almost always involves, in one way or another, somewhere, risks and sacrifices (FROME, 2008, p. 60).

Environmental coverage indeed has its own unique *modus operandi* (MONTEIRO, 2015), which today even justifies the existence of university training in the area (TRIGUEIRO,

2008). Bueno (2008) defines the practice of environmental journalism as “[...] the process of capturing, producing, editing and broadcasting information (knowledge, know-how, research results, etc.) committed to environmental issues and aimed at a lay, non-specialized audience” (p. 109).

Through this perspective, environmental journalism can be conceptualized as the one dedicated to the environment and its countless sub-topics from a systemic and holistic viewpoint, including inter- and multidisciplinary approaches. It is essential in this specialization that the characteristics of scientific journalism and citizen journalism are equally mixed because environmental journalism connects with the various fields of knowledge, amplifying the voices of citizens in the debate on the environment. It is a practice openly committed to protecting life, environmental balance, and preserving our shared home (BOFF, 2017). For this reason, it is also part of the educational proposal that helps individuals change their behavior to benefit the environment.

The characteristics of environmental journalism

We highlight some of the characteristics of environmental journalism, including a systemic and holistic vision, a scientific and multidisciplinary nature, the centrality of the citizen’s voice, environmental education, and the reporter’s commitment.

The systemic view in environmental journalism refers to understanding the facts and the characters within a system, which refers to the interconnections between all the elements of nature, including humanity (BUENO, 2008). In fact, Santos (2020, p. 23) explains that human life “is a tiny part (0.01%) of planetary life”. This way, Bueno (2008, p. 109) warns that “people, nature, the physical and biological environment, culture and society are inextricably connected.” In other words, the defense guarantees all survival because the system is compromised when there is a change in one of the units, whether the physical or the living environment.

Neto (2008) reminds us that the concept of ecology itself predicts a systemic view, thus the need to integrate it into environmental journalism. Günther e Vianna (2008) points to the ineffectiveness of the journalistic precept applied to environmental journalism of listening to both sides of the information. According to the author, the notion of two sides does not encompass the complexities of environmental issues since it would present multiple sides. Therefore, in addition to a systemic view, a transversal vision is needed “to fulfill the mission of contributing to the understanding of a complex subject - the environment - within the reality of an even more complex society” (NETO, 2008, p. 419).

The mantra of objectivity, speed, and the market logic in which journalistic activity is inserted have not allowed this approach, which could make the treatment of environmental issues more in-depth. The current reality of environmental coverage is broadcasting few pieces of information isolated from their context. Fonseca (2004) and Vila Boas (2004) suggest that information fragmentation is one of Brazil’s most significant problems with environmental

journalistic production. Overcoming fragmented perspectives makes it possible to see reality integrally, paying attention to its social, economic, political, and cultural aspects - all of which form the human perspective of specialization (MONTEIRO, 2015). Thus, it is impossible to approach environmental coverage from an inter- and multidisciplinary perspective (BUENO, 2008).

The fact that it connects all the units of nature and all aspects of society, which drives the journalist to work with various areas of knowledge in the same story, making it inter- and multidisciplinary, guarantees environmental journalism its scientific character. The specialization recognizes the principles of the so-called scientific journalism (GIRARDI *et al.*, 2012) since environmental matters almost always involve technical and academic truths, where scientists and researchers are pieces of the power relations in which environmental journalism is involved (FIORAVANTI, 2008). According to Neto (2008), in addition to providing stories, scientific knowledge serves environmental journalists as a tool for efficiently monitoring environmental impacts.

The scientific character is vital to environmental journalism and the interlocutor because it provides some sort of scientific dissemination on issues that are fundamental to people's lives (MONTEIRO, 2015). In this sense, Bueno (2008) points out the "high wall syndrome," which gives priority to the voice of the technical source in the report, and the "lattelization of sources," which refers to the predominance of academic voices. These syndromes should be avoided in environmental journalistic productions. If the scientific source is necessary and a characteristic of the specialization, regular people, citizens who routinely live with environmental issues, are the voices that ensure balance in the environmental journalistic text so that it is not only referenced in specialized sources.

The importance of citizen participation is emphasized, but it is also fair to give journalists responsibility for environmental issues, moving away from the notion of a detached observer to that of a fair participant (DORNELLES, 2008). In this way, environmental journalism is practiced with a specific intention; as Frome (2008, p. 12) states, the journalist writes "with a purpose". With this, it is understood that he is engaged, which is the fifth premise of specialization: the reporter's engagement. For the author, the exercise of questioning and critical comment "on any issue that affects society and environment" is the journalist's right (*ibidem*, p. 86).

Popular and reference journalism

Before analyzing the front pages proposed in this paper, it is important to explain what we mean by mainstream and popular or alternative media. This definition is necessary to properly develop the analysis of the speeches shown in the next section.

Popular journalism has editorial differences from the so-called mainstream media, especially regarding news value, the editorial criteria that dictate what the media is primarily

concerned with. The newspaper *Extra* fits this segment, while the *Estado de Minas* works in the reference journalism division.

From this perspective, popular journalism always has a closer approach to its readers, focusing mainly on facts that are geographically or culturally close to their target audience and are entertaining. This is shown in the table below, suggested by Amaral (2006):

Table 1 – News value for reference and popular newspapers.

Reference Newspapers	Popular Newspapers
The involved people are important;	To have entertainment capacity;
To have an impact on the nation;	It is geographically or culturally near to the reader;
It involves many people;	It can be simplified;
It is related to public politics;	The characters identify with the readers. (personalization);
It can be disclosed exclusively.	It is useful.

Source: Amaral (2006, p. 63).

It can be seen that the primary news value for the popular media is its ability to entertain and its geographical or cultural proximity to its target audience, which outweighs any other link to the news. In contrast, the mainstream media prioritizes the individual and the impact on the nation.

These differences are fundamental for better understanding how journalism is produced and assimilating the journalistic approach to fires in the Amazon. The seriousness of the situation led even popular journalism to shift from its traditional news values to deal with an event of national and international proportions, reinforcing our premise that tragedies or catastrophes are the main drivers of environmental content in the news media.

Fires in Amazon

As of August 10, 2019, fires have increased significantly in the legal Amazon and, as a result, would decimate a total of 29,944km of the biome, the equivalent of 4.2 million soccer pitches. The “day of the fire,” as the date came to be known, was the convergence of clashes between the policies of the new Brazilian government at the time and extractive capitalism against scientific data from the National Institute for Space Research (INPE) and environmental protection organizations.

A month earlier, in July, news outlets were already reporting data from INPE on the 278% increase in deforestation in the Amazon rainforest compared to the previous year. The publication of this information caused the government to take a stand against the methodologies used by INPE, generating accusations from the president of Brazil about the reliability of the data and attributing interference from non-governmental organizations with the aim of demoralizing the government’s image.

This clash had already led the world press to focus on deforestation in the Amazon and the diplomatic weakening of Brazil vis-à-vis France and Germany, which were concerned about the investments they had made in Brazilian government programs to preserve the Amazon biome on national territory.

The “day of the fire,” as reported by the newspaper *Folha do Progresso*, from the city of Novo Progresso, located in the state of Pará, was a way for owners of pastures and land ready for deforestation to show President Jair Bolsonaro that they were ready to work. The *modus operandi* of the demonstration was to promote burning in the biomes flanking BR-163, the federal highway that cuts through the state of Pará. For months, these events were on the national and international press, which had at their disposal a vast amount of journalistic material on the burning and devastation of the Amazon rainforest and its effects on the local climate, the greed of exploitation by land grabbers, mining companies and ranchers, as well as revealing a diplomatic imbroglio over the funds received from other countries for the conservation of the Amazon rainforest.

The methodological path

The covers of the newspapers *Estado de Minas* and *Extra* from August 23, 2019, were examined in this research from a Discourse Analysis (DA) perspective. This type of analysis has a variety of approaches to the study of texts, and it is impossible to have a single “discourse analysis.” However, all understandings of analysis share “a rejection of the realist notion that language is simply a neutral means of reflecting or describing the world, and a conviction of the central importance of discourse in the construction of social life” (GILL, 2002, p. 244).

According to Mutti (2003), Discourse Analysis (DA) intends to interrogate the meanings defined in various forms of production in verbal or non-verbal texts, and it is only necessary that their materiality produces meanings for possible interpretations. Orlandi (2015), on the other hand, points out that DA looks beyond what is said, looking at the text not only in its structural form but also taking into account social and cultural aspects.

The framing of the coverage of the fires in the Amazon on the front page of the newspapers, together with the newsworthiness criteria that defined it, reveals the image’s ability to summarize and compose the perception of the coverage through a particular and predominant feeling. In this analysis, we have newspapers, one from the state of Minas Gerais, that develops reference journalism (*Estado de Minas*), while the other is from Rio de Janeiro and is known for practicing popular journalism (*Extra*).

Therefore, in addition to discourse analysis, it is relevant to analyze the images themselves, considering the photographs that appear on the covers of the analyzed editions, which show the devastation of the Brazilian Amazon on August 23, 2019. With that, we can understand the importance of the visual selection in the publications. According to Coutinho (2011), each image represents a cross-section of society or a fact or situation. Hence, this process

presupposes various choices were made when defining the ideal image to illustrate the covers. In other words, discards are part of the process.

Thus, the concept of photography as a reality construction tool, being subject to subjective interpretations, “both from the producer and the receiver of the visual message, does not, however, detract from the validity of Image Analysis as a document” (COUTINHO, 2011, p. 332). Therefore, this type of research is especially valid when investigating images printed in communication vehicles, such as magazines, newspapers, posters, advertisements, etc.

Coutinho (2011) states that, in general, the analysis of one or more photos highlights, “besides the relation of the photographic image with the object immortalized by her, a symbolic perspective of the static visual record” (2011, p. 340). According to the author, photography can be more than the reproduction of a part of reality, being possible to discover in the scene construction “what our daily observation exercise cannot do” (NEIVA JUNIOR, 1986, p. 63).

One fact: two perspectives

On August 23, 2019, much of Brazilian journalism was focused on the fires in the Amazon. Given the flames’ extensive proportions and the incapacity of combating the fire, it was only natural that the attention focused on the tragic aspects of the fact, mainly to characterize the lack of control and the impact on both the environment and human health. In this context, we selected the covers of the *Estado de Minas* and *Extra* newspapers to understand them as two different segments of journalism that covered the same fact (Figure 1). On this date, the front pages of the publications hit the newsstands in this way:

Figure 1. Covers from the *Estado de Minas* and *Extra* newspapers.



Source: *Estado de Minas* e *Extra* (8/23/2019).

In their respective covers, each publication brings to readers the news of the devastation in Amazon. While *Estado de Minas* is direct and objective in the discourse, with the headline “Caught Fire,” *Extra* shows a clear direction to the reader by questioning: “Is this Progress?” stamped precisely in place of the phrase on the national flag, which was originally “Order and Progress.” Despite the discursive difference, which could lead us to distance ourselves, the sensationalist aesthetic prevails on both covers: the image of the fire blazing its way through the forest, with a purposely blackened background, present in the *Estado de Minas*, provokes the reader by demonstrating the lack of control of the flames and the destruction of the region’s flora and fauna. *Extra*, on the other hand, uses an aerial photograph on both its front and back covers, which, when opened, as shown in Figure 1, simulates the Brazilian flag and encourages the reader to see that the green of the forest, in the lower space, is drying up and losing its life until it reaches the top. As the green of the flag is always associated with the richness of the country’s forests, the message is clear: our green is running out.

In this way, we can say that sensationalism is present in the aesthetics, supported by the discourse displayed on newspaper covers. In this context, we understand sensationalism as:

[...] the journalistic style characterized by intentional exaggeration of the importance of an event in the reporting and exploiting a story to thrill or scandalize the public. This exaggeration can be expressed in the theme (content), the form of the text, and the visual presentation (layout) of the news item (RABAÇA and BARBOSA, 2001, p. 666-667).

On the covers under analysis, we find its materialization in form, framing, and content with the question from the newspaper *Extra*. At this point, the two publications are faced with an anthropocentric discourse, in which the fire catastrophe is explained by human action, an open structure that distances itself from the *fait divers* treated by Roland Barthes (1966).

Even with a difference in the approach of the main headline, we found points of closeness between the two covers. They certainly cater to different segments of readers. However, we must remember that newspapers are part of society’s desires, wishes, and reality; as such, they help interlocutors understand the daily life in which they are inserted.

Each new edition and exposition of the discourse taken by the publications affect this perception of the exterior world. In this respect, Charaudeau (2006) points out that the media have a well-defined purpose in choosing the cut and the treatment of events. Even with artifices to create an effect of objectivity and distance, they also conceive a “dramatizing description, producing an emotional effect likely to arouse instincts of voyeurism or fear in those who are informed” (CHARAUDEAU, 2006, p. 129).

The author goes on to point out that the media choose how they will report the facts, assuming discourses that can be descriptive, narrative, or argumentative and that can be based

either on the reports ascertained and observed by the reporter or on reported discourses. In other words, the narrative of the sources and interviewees.

By choosing the ways they will explain a fact, the media takes advantage of the effort of clarifying the reasons that led to that situation, “what were the intentions of its authors, the circumstances that made it possible, according to which logic of chaining, finally, what consequences can occur” (CHARAUDEAU, 2006, p. 154).

On the front pages of the newspapers shown in Figure 1, the possible explanations are present in the texts of the headlines, which mainly aim to clarify and reinforce the main headlines. From the *Estado de Minas*, beyond the journalist text present at the headline, the letters and fonts are also noteworthy, inserted between quotation marks that reproduce President Jair Bolsonaro’s statement: “There are suspicions of rural producers taking advantage and setting fires. Do you want to increase the production area? All right. However, it is not like this. - Jair Bolsonaro, President of the Republic, last night”.

On the other hand, in its headline, *Extra* has a discursive text that points out responsibility for the fires, mainly on the part of public managers, indicating the importance of taking continuous action in favor of environmental heritage: “We need to hurry! Pointing out the responsibilities of past and present rulers is important and necessary, but that alone will not put out the fire that is consuming the forests and killing animals.”

We can see that environmental news is highlighted on the front pages because of the tragedy and the uncertainty about the origin of the flames, as well as the practical actions to control the fire that devastates thousands of square kilometers every day. In the main headlines, there are different approaches between “Caught Fire” (*Estado de Minas*) and “Is this Progress?” (*Extra*), the first of which affirmatively confirms to the interlocutor what can be seen in the panoramic landscape materialized in the photograph. On the other hand, in the second headline, the text provokes, challenges, and incites the receptor to think, in his own way, of possible answers to the issue. Besides, the *Extra* cover also brings a supporting text indicating a causing agent for these events, that is, places public managers at the center of the tragedy, since for decades they have worked with discontinued actions and the absence of environmental public policies, which has facilitated the process of environmental devastation.

The publications explore and amplify the tragedy, seeking to arouse feelings in their readers, whether political - through the president’s speech - or by proposing a reflection on the meanings of progress at the cost of environmental destruction and the elimination of countless living beings from the Amazon biome. In this point, the discourse of the newspaper *Extra* is more incisive. Even though it is characterized as a media aimed at a segment of readers who, in theory, are not concerned with major national or international issues, the Rio publication provokes its readers to overcome their naive awareness (FREIRE, 1980), inserting textual content that helps to raise environmental awareness, which, on the side of the so-called “reference newspaper,” it is apparently left out in the name of politicization, including all political spectrums in the public arena, citing “past and present rulers” as responsible for the devastation, in other words,

looking for culprits, without impartiality and, to this end, inserting an image on the cover that takes up three-quarters of its front page. In this sense, the newspaper tends to fulfill what its readers expect, involving public figures, important figures, and speeches that impact the local, regional, and national scene. The publication fulfills its communicational agreement, involvement, and engagement from the reports.

When we look at the requirements and assumptions of the news, the burning in the Amazon does not fulfill any of the prerequisites of news value in popular journalism, as shown in Table 1. However, it is what *Extra's* front cover, back cover, headline, and title text are concerned with. As a result, we believe that in the displacement of popular journalism, it proved to be more incisive with its readers than the mainstream media analyzed in this work, making the Rio de Janeiro publication more effectively fulfill one of the most important principles of journalism, going beyond reporting, transmitting the message, but provoking, instigating, and assisting in the process of changing awareness and concrete attitudes.

Final Considerations

One of the main elements differentiating environmental journalism from the spectacularization of an environmental fact is the inclusion of citizens in the debate and how the environment affects people's lives. In this study, we have reflected on the possibility of newspaper covers bringing elements of environmental journalism when covering environmental disasters. To this end, the article outlines the factors that underpin this type of journalism, such as the principles of information and environmental education. On the other hand, it can be seen that journalism still often uses sensationalist discourse to attract the momentary attention of its interlocutors. Thus, based on discursive textual analysis, it was possible to compare the covers of the *Estado de Minas* and *Extra* newspapers published in August 2019, at the beginning of the fires in the Amazon, known as the "day of the fire." We observed that the publications brought elements related to the tragedy, especially in the aesthetic framing. However, in the textual discourse, they expressed concern for the present and the future, indicating the responsibilities of public agents and encouraging people to think and act in defense of the environment.

In view of this, we identified the need to overcome the discourse that the origin and solution to environmental problems are centered on the binomial of communication and information. Communication and information are mediation processes that allow citizens to become aware and conscious of environmental issues. Nevertheless, it is necessary to guarantee more in-depth agendas, narratives, and positions beyond sensationalist news. Finally, we can see that environmental journalism can be a space that encourages changes in behavior concerning environmental issues. Therefore, it is not possible to look only at the event. It is necessary to think about the process, the awareness, and the ways in which people interact and act with the shared home (BOFF, 2017).

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Pedrini, J. C.B. F.: writing – reviewing and editing; Pedrini, I. A. D.: conceptualization - formal analysis; Portari, R. D. L.: writing – original draft - data curation; Almeida, C. D.: supervision and review.

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The data supporting the research is contained in the article and/or supplementary material.

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