QUEER MASCULINITIES ON THE DATING WEBSITE BADOOR.COM: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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Abstract: Based on a social semiotic perspective on language and a social constructionist approach to masculinity, in this paper we analyze queer men’s representations of masculinity on the dating website Badoo.com as an initial step towards a broader investigation on queer masculinities in Brazil (NASCIMENTO, 2012). Ten profiles were randomly collected and analyzed in terms of ideational/representational meanings (HALLIDAY, 2004; KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006). Preliminary results suggest that some Brazilian queer men tend to refuse a ‘gay identity’ possibly because of its association to ‘sissy’ gay men portrayed in the mass media or because of its reference to a ‘commodified’ gay lifestyle. This choice of assuming or not assuming a gay identity seems closely related to the social class of members and their level of engagement in the LGBT movement and other political movements (e.g. Feminism).


Introduction

Popular conceptions of masculinity tend to frame it as a timeless essential quality that someone holds, as a set of well-defined body characteristics produced by hormones, the possession of a penis or a reward granted by elders to young boys who have successfully completed an initiation ritual (KIMMEL, 2005). Contrary to popular belief, a growing body of research in the social sciences since the 70’s has demonstrated that masculinity is a historical phenomenon created in/by culture instead of a biological, innate quality. Early studies on men focused on the social construction of masculinity in different institutional contexts (family, work, school, etc.) with an emphasis on the practices of white, middle-class men (EDWARDS, 2006). Later, it has expanded to include the experiences of black, Latino, Asian, working-class and gay men as well as the link of masculinity with crime and violence (KIMMEL; MESSNER, 1989). Despite the expansion of the scope of men’s studies, there is still little research on masculinities at a local level, especially describing the experiences of sexual minorities (e.g. queer men) in the global South.

In an attempt to fill this research gap, in this paper we analyze the semiotic choices present on online profiles of ten members of the dating website Badoo in order to investigate the ways Brazilian men represent their own masculinities. In the analysis, we look at the website’s profiles as a multimodal genre which expresses the “semiotic potential” of language (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 8). In other words, the profiles provide members with a number of semiotic

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resources (written text in combination with pictures) that allow them to perform the two basic functions of language: to construe human experience (in terms of ‘models’ of masculinity) and to enact social relationships (the ways members interact with viewers).

To construe human experience (ideational/representational meanings), website’s members can describe, through verbal language, their attributes and likes and dislikes, their ideal match and also, through visual language (pictures), represent aspects of their own identities (conceptual processes) or they engagement in some activities in the world (narrative processes) (see KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006). Analyses of choices in both the verbal and visual modes of language are revealing of the ways queer men represent specific embodiments of masculinity in order to attract potential dates and which practices or ideals of masculinity are pursued or are more valued by Brazilian queer men.

We use the term ‘queer masculinities’, instead of ‘gay masculinities’ (NARDI, 2000), to make reference to men who have sex with other men (homosexual men) and also to refer to men who have sex with both men and women (bisexual men). However, queer masculinities can be approached as a broad category and include heterosexual masculinities who fail to strictly follow the expected male gender norms; other ‘types’ of (gay) masculinities (such as Asian, black, bear, Latino, working-class masculinities), women performing masculinity - female masculinities (‘butch’ lesbians and drag kings) (see HALBERSTAM, 1998) and transmen (female-to-male transsexuals).

Specifically in this paper, we take as a point of departure the concept of hegemonic masculinity devised by Connell (1987). The term has been cited in hundreds of publications around the world, in different areas of knowledge and, despite its popularity, it has been the focus of much debate in the area of men’s studies. In simple terms, hegemonic masculinity refers to a specific type of masculinity that holds a powerful status in society and outranks other ‘subaltern masculinities’. One major criticism to the concept is related to its usage as a fixed, transnational model which underscores the historicity of gender and changes and contradictions in the experience of masculinity (CONNELL; MESSERSCHMIDT, 2005, p. 838). In order to clarify the concept, Connell has acknowledged that hegemonic masculinity may refer to the lives of a minority of men and does not describe exactly the characteristics of actual men (ibid.). In view of such limitations in the term, Beasley suggests that it should be regarded as ‘a political ideal or model, as an enabling mode of representation which mobilizes institutions and practices’ (p. 94). Besides the shift of focus, the author also argues that hegemonic masculinity should be seen as hierarchical and plural
in order to take into account local level experiences and “to highlight the ways in which different hegemonic masculinities are negotiated and even resisted” (p. 99). Conceptualizing masculinity, therefore, would require a greater focus on the symbolic, the analysis of representations and discourses and also a focus on local/cultural ‘histories’ of masculinity. Based on such claims, at the end of the paper we return to the concept of hegemonic masculinity to check to what extent our data reflects the current social thinking on hegemonic masculinity or poses a new set of questions regarding the social construction of masculinity.

The online dating website Badoo.com and profile collection

The dating website Badoo, founded in 2006, has more than 150 million members distributed across 180 countries and is available in thirty-five languages, including Portuguese, English, German and Italian. According to Alexa, a company which provides web-based information, Badoo is the 53rd most retrieved website in Brazil, presenting a global average member’s profile with the following characteristics: male, age between 25 and 55, postgraduate and no children. Registration on the website is free and gives access to almost all its functions (such as sending and reading messages; visiting profiles unlimited), except the function “superpowers” which allows the visualization of the profiles of the members who wish to meet the profile owner.

Figure 1 – Example of profile from the dating website Badoo.com

Profiles of the website Badoo can present the following information (see Figure1):

- member’s name
- age
- location
- an activity which he/she wants to do with a boy, a girl or someone and the age of desired partner (e.g. ‘Fabio wants to talk with a boy 18-55’). The activity is chosen by the member in a list of suggestions or he/she can enter information manually.
- likes (Interesses) from a list of suggestions or manually added by the member.
- personal description (A Meu Respeito) – a small text written by the member to describe himself.
- ideal partner/relationship (Busco) – a small text written by the member to describe his/her ideal partner and expectations about relationships.
- other information (Mais Informações) – relationship status (single, in a relationship or open relationship); sexual orientation (heterosexual, bisexual, gay, open minded); appearance (height, weight, body type, hair color, eye color); living condition (alone, with a partner, with a friend, in a room or with parents); children (already have, already gone, one day [in the future], no/never); smoker (no/never, no, yes, social smoker, regular smoker); alcohol (no, no/never, yes, social drinker); languages; job/profession; salary (minimum wage, average or high).

Ten profiles were randomly selected for this preliminary analysis. The choice of members’ location is Florianópolis. This city was chosen because, according to the Brazilian National Survey 2010, it is one of the Brazilian cities with the largest number of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual) inhabitants, therefore considered the ‘gay capital’ of Brazil. The profiles were collected by using the function print screen which takes a picture of the computer’s screen. Two criteria informed the selection of profiles: (1) members aged between 18 and 35 who ‘wants to ____ a boy or somebody’ and (2) members aged between 35-55 who ‘wants to ____ a boy or somebody’. These two age groups were chosen in order to check if age is an influential feature in men’s experiences of masculinity Each profile was labeled with the letter M followed by a number

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6 Website members do not need to fulfill all required information, except name, age, location and information regarding desired partner.
(M#1), members’ names were omitted and a black strip was used on their photographs in order to protect their identities.

‘They are not gay, just open minded’: Queer Brazilian masculinities

In the profiles of the website Badoo, images (photographs) seem to be the predominant mode for making meaning and the role of verbal language is very limited sometimes. Although members provide a good amount of information in the slots, self-descriptions and descriptions of ideal partner/relationship are usually small (2 lines average) or absent. Only one profile (M#8) presented a longer description, if compared to the other profiles analyzed.

In the ten profiles analyzed in this study, three members (M#2 and M#4) identified themselves as ‘gays’, despite the fact that seven members were looking exclusively for a male partner. An informal browsing through other profiles has indicated that a great part of members avoid labeling themselves as ‘gays’. This preliminary finding corroborates the existence of a ‘very straight gay’ masculinity as described in the seminal study conducted by Connell (1995) with eight Australian men. In her study, participants refused to assume a ‘gay identity’ because it could go ‘out of control’. In order to remain in control, those men reported that they exercise wariness and controlled disclosure, with a very cautious participation in gay networks.

Drawing on our previous experience with queer men, our hypothesis is that some members indeed refuse a gay identity as a way to preserve a ‘straight’ public persona while other members tend to refuse it as a way to avoid any kind of label which classifies their sexualities. In Brazil, the term ‘gay’, for instance, has been usually associated to the image of stereotyped, flamboyant ‘sissies’ present in media discourse, especially in soap operas and TV shows (see COLLING, 2007). In addition, ‘gay’ can also refer to a specific ‘lifestyle’ disseminated in gay-oriented magazines such as Junior (see NASCIMENTO, 2011) and Sui Generis:

The gay lifestyle would be (…) a prerogative of successful homosexuals. Although we do not find explicit and precise definitions of the gay style which the magazine [Sui Generis] disseminates and rationalizes, we could, in our research, notice some features of it. To dress up according to fancy and contemporary patterns, which implies clothes produced with less conventional fabrics and colors; to acquire knowledge and to be an expert in the chosen profession, considering that, this way, there would not be any space for prejudice in the workplace; to have healthy relationships, which implies monogamy and safe sex between gays, exclusively; to work out at the gym, in order to build a body type which is the opposite of the fragile and delicate individual constructed by heterosexual representations and ‘to act like gay’, even though only in ‘your heart’. (LIMA, 2001, p. 124)⁸

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⁸ Original quote: O estilo de vida gay seria, ainda, prerrogativa dos homossexuais bem sucedidos. Embora não encontremos definições explícitas e precisas desse estilo gay que a revista difunde e racionaliza, pudemos, em nossa empiria, registrar algumas características dele. Vestir-se segundo padrões de requinte e contemporaneidade, o que
Subscribing to this lifestyle seems to be very limiting, especially for young, well-educated, middle-class queers who are critical of preconceived notions of ‘identity’. However, does this subversive act of refusing to label oneself as gay mean that they are engaged into a broader queer politics? To what extent do young queer men present any form of solidarity with other social movements (e.g., Feminism)? Differently from young queer men, our analysis suggests that older men tend to explicitly identify themselves as gays, possibly because they witnessed (or even participated in) the gay movement, based on an ‘identity politics’, which started in the late 70’s in the main capitals of Brazil. However, this very choice of explicitly identifying oneself as gay seems to be also influenced by the social class of the participants.

Member M#2 is 43 years old, holds a university degree, speaks intermediary Spanish and English, “wants to meet a boy” and labels himself as ‘gay’. Some of his likes are: Egypt, Mykonos, Calvin Harris, Psychology and Laguna Beach. In terms of visual meanings, his pictures are conceptual (they represent a generalized ‘state of affairs’ with no action) and emphasize the places where the pictures were taken (landscapes):

![Figure 2 – Picture from profile M#2](image)

According to Altman (1982), gay men who have low political consciousness about gay issues also tend to present lack of solidarity to Feminism.
Figure 2 can be interpreted as a symbolic suggestive process (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006) for the atmosphere or place in which the participant is inserted becomes an attribute that defines his subjectivity. Although M#2 does not provide information about profession or salary, his travelling pictures in combination with his likes (Egypt, Mykonos) gives a clue to viewers about his social class. His performance of masculinity relies on an image of ‘success’ and is grounded on his social status and financial power which, to some extent, enable him to experience a hegemonic ‘gay identity’.

On the contrary, the expression of a ‘gay identity’ by working-class men seems to be very controlled or even denied. M#3 (38 years old) “wants to meet a boy” and labels himself as ‘open minded’ instead of gay or bisexual. By making this choice, this member makes his sexual orientation unclear and implicitly suggests he is a bisexual man, possibly as a way to protect himself from the social stigma faced by men who assume a public gay identity. On the other hand, the choice may also be due to his misinterpretation of the expression ‘I have an open mind’, which he may have interpreted as a way of expressing his willingness to engage in non-conventional sexual practices (such as sadomasochism, fisting, pissing, etc.).

In order to construct his masculinity, M#3 appropriates stereotypical traits of hypermasculinity. He likes popular North-American films such as Die Hard and Rocky (which depict specific embodiments of masculinity displaying male power and strength) and shows himself off performing typical male activities such as pumping iron at the gym and driving a car.

Figure 3 can be interpreted as a symbolic attributive process (KRES; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006) in which an attribute (a dumbbell) carried by a Carrier (represented participant) is a symbol of male strength and virility, helping to construct his ‘identity’.
A more extreme performance of (heterosexual) masculinity is displayed by M#8 (49 years old) who, despite being in a relationship (living with his female partner and their children), “wants to meet someone” and labels himself as heterosexual. M#8 likes Forró, country music (‘música sertaneja’), soccer, Formula 1 and the film *Die Hard*, all typical leisure activities and likes of working-class Brazilian males. In his pictures, M#8 constructs his masculinity not by showing himself off, but doing things that heterosexual men do such as hugging his female partner and playing with his children.

Notwithstanding his constructed heterosexual masculinity, M#8’s choice of meeting ‘someone’ (either a man or a woman) and his discourse about himself point out to some contradictions in his offline experience of masculinity:

people SHOULD have mORE respect for each other. Everybody should live THE life they think it’s best [for them], but without harming other people. your sexual options, your religion, your beliefs DON’T MATTER… the MAIN THING is to be happy.

As shown in Example 1, instead of talking about himself, M#8 surprisingly decides to talk about his personal philosophy of life (“The main thing is to be happy”) and to prescribe a way of acting in the world (“people should have more respect for each other. Everybody should live the life they think it’s best [for them]”). To some extent, he arguably provides a veiled critique of
heteronormativity (“your sexual options don’t matter”), but nonetheless echoes a common-sense discourse of sexuality as a matter of ‘choice’. In short, his embodiment of masculinity and his discourse are in tension, revealing the fragmented, contradictory nature of subjectivity in late modernity.

Final remarks

This paper presented a preliminary attempt to investigate the representations/embodiments of masculinity of queer men on the website Badoo.com. Even though the analysis of the profiles described here is preliminary and does not provide enough grounds for making generalizations, it serves as an example of the analysis which will be carried out as part of a broader investigation of queer masculinities in Brazil (NASCIMENTO, 2012) and helped to point out further movements in the development of the research. The analysis demonstrated the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to the study of queer masculinities and the need to conduct interviews with participants in order to check the degree of similarity between the discourses of masculinity constructed in the website and their offline discourses/actual experiences. In addition, the analysis confirmed the need to approach ‘hegemonic masculinity’ as an open, plural and adaptable conceptual tool, indicating the existence of an intricate, complex dynamics of power between ( queer) men which cannot be explained through a dualistic model of dominant-subaltern. Different hegemonic masculinities (e.g. family-man, white-collar, ‘butch’, etc.) seem to co-exist and to compete with each other, acquiring symbolic value in distinct cultures of masculinity at different times, and their embodiment (which is always partial) depends on the positioning of the participants at multiple axes of social differentiation (e.g. social class, race, sexuality, religion, etc.).

References


Masculinidades QUEER no site de relacionamentos Badoo.com: um estudo preliminar

Resumo: Com base em uma perspectiva sócio semiótica da linguagem e uma abordagem sócio-construcionista da masculinidade, neste trabalho, analisamos as representações de masculinidades de homens queer no website de relacionamentos Badoo.com como uma etapa inicial de um estudo mais amplo sobre as masculinidades queer no Brasil (NASCIMENTO, 2012). Dez perfis foram coletados randomicamente e analisados em termos de significados ideacionais/representacionais (HALLIDAY, 2004; KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006). Resultados preliminares sugerem que alguns homens queer brasileiros tendem a recusar uma ‘identidade gay’, possivelmente porque ela está associada com o estereótipo da ‘bicha afetada’ retratado na mídia de massa ou porque ela faz referência a um estilo de vida gay ‘comodificado’. A escolha de assumir ou não uma identidade gay parece estar intimamente relacionada à classe social dos participantes e ao grau de engajamento deles em movimentos LGBT ou outros movimentos sociais (p. ex. Feminismo).