

# Disinformation about gender and sexuality and the disputes over the limits of morality<sup>1</sup>

## *Desinformação sobre gênero e sexualidade e as disputas pelos limites da moralidade*

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### ABSTRACT

The article analyses the disinformation circulation in Brazil from its socio-cultural ground. It examines the false stories about gender and sexuality shared in 2019, arguing that they take part in a field of moral disputes. The research involved mapping fake news and rumors regarding these two markers through fact-checking agencies' databases. Narratives' characteristics of false stories were examined by qualitative textual analysis, and their publication sources were identified by reverse search in search engines. Among the main findings, it is stated that at least 65 disinformation pieces addressed gender and sexuality, most of them referring to events that guided the public agenda.

**Keywords:** Disinformation, gender, sexuality, morality

### RESUMO

O artigo analisa a circulação da desinformação no Brasil considerando seu substrato sociocultural. Investiga histórias falsas sobre gênero e sexualidade compartilhadas em 2019, argumentando que elas se inscrevem em um terreno de disputas morais. A pesquisa coletou *fake news* e boatos sobre esses dois marcadores nos bancos de dados de agências de *fact-checking*. As características narrativas das histórias falsas foram averiguadas via análise textual qualitativa e as fontes de publicação foram identificadas por pesquisa reversa em motores de busca. Dentre os principais resultados, constata-se que ao menos 65 peças de desinformação abordaram gênero e sexualidade, a maioria delas referindo-se a eventos que pautaram a agenda pública.

**Palavras-chave:** Desinformação, gênero, sexualidade, moralidade

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INTRODUCTION

IN RECENT YEARS, the literature focused on apprehending the characteristics, the production infrastructure and the circulation of disinformation has grown (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2018). There is some consensus that the recent shift in this field stems from the unexpected result of the 2016 US elections and the referendum in favor of Brexit voted in the United Kingdom in the same year (Gelfert, 2018; Humprecht, 2018). Suspicions that these decision-making processes were severely affected by the profusion of false stories, which would have compromised the rational competencies of citizens to make well-informed decisions (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Nelson & Taneja, 2018), stimulated considerable attention on the topic in the public sphere. In a global aspect, since that year, governments of different countries have prepared laws and produced coordinated campaigns to supposedly contain the harmful effects of disinformation (Tenove, 2020).

From 2018 onwards, annual global reports such as the Digital News Report and the Edelman Trust Barometer began to include issues regarding citizens' concerns about the circulation of rumors and unfounded narratives. Since the first investigations on the subject, Brazil places at the top in the ranking of nations where the population affirms to be apprehensive about not knowing how to discern what is real or false on the internet. According to the latest Reuters Institute survey (2020), 84% of Brazilians are concerned about this possibility (the global average is 56%), and according to the most recent Edelman report (2020), 80% of the population is afraid that fake news is used as a political weapon. Nevertheless, the 2019 Global Corruption Barometer Report (Pring & Vrushi, 2019) indicated that four out of five Brazilians said they believed that uninformative content was disseminated to influence the results of the 2018 elections, which elected former federal legislator Jair Bolsonaro – at the time a member of the Social Liberal Party (PSL) – to the Presidency of the Republic.

The accusations of the instrumentalization of digital platforms for political purposes increased the number of questions about the influence of disinformation on the result of the 2018 election<sup>2</sup>. Such suspicions were intensified when considering, for example, a study by the consulting company IDEIA Big Data/ Avaaz (Avaaz, 2018) released after the elections' second round: 74% of interviewees said they had heard the story that Fernando Haddad, a candidate for the Workers' Party (PT), would implement a *gay kit*<sup>3</sup> in schools if elected. Moreover, 46% had access to the rumor that Haddad had invited the then federal legislator Jean Wyllys to be the Minister of Education in his eventual government; and another 44% heard the rumor that the presidential candidate had defended pedophilia and incest in one of his books. Among Bolsonaro voters, circulation

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the representatives of the WhatsApp messaging application themselves recognized, at a journalism event at the Gabo Festival, in Colombia (occurred in October 2019), that in the 2018 Brazilian election, automated systems hired by companies fired mass messages at public groups, distributing political content often favorable to – the then candidate – Jair Bolsonaro and potentially hurting the electoral legislation in force in Brazil (Mello, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Pejoratively dubbed this way by reactionary critics, the *gay kit* refers to a set of educational materials that would be aimed at discussing homophobia in public schools, the result of a public-governmental cooperation project proposed by the National Plan for the Promotion of LGBT Citizenship and Human Rights, in 2009 (Romancini, 2018). However, given the conservative reaction to the project in the following year (2010), such educational materials were never implemented by the Ministry of Education. In the 2018 elections, the issue returned to the public agenda as part of Jair Bolsonaro's defamatory campaign strategy against his main competitor in the dispute, Fernando Haddad.

rates for these false stories are even higher: 85% reported having received the *gay kit* story; 60% heard about Haddad's false invitation to Wyllys; and 55% read the complaints about the fictitious criminal publications of PT's candidate.

Finally, it should be noted that, in the Brazilian case, as in other countries ruled by far-right populist leaders (Bennett & Livingston, 2018), Bolsonaro himself qualifies as a systematic diffuser of disinformation, not merely benefitting or falling victim to rumors shared by users or interest groups in digital media. For example, in an interview with *Jornal Nacional* on August 27, 2018, still as a candidate for the presidency, Bolsonaro showed to the cameras a book entitled *Aparelho Sexual e Cia* (Sexual Apparatus etc.) that, according to him, would be part of a *gay kit* distributed to libraries of public schools in the country<sup>4</sup>. As early as 2019, in his first year in office, a survey by the fact-checking agency *Aos Fatos* indicated that Bolsonaro made 607 false or distorted statements, which corresponds to an average of 1.66 untenable statements per day (Ribeiro, 2020).

<sup>4</sup>In October 2018, the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) prohibited Bolsonaro from reproducing untrue content ("TSE Diz que 'Kit Gay' Não Existiu", 2018).

Given this situation, this article intends to focus on an aspect little discussed in studies on the circulation of disinformation so far, namely, its sociocultural background (Cabañes, 2020; Humprecht, 2018). Along with the profusion of research portraying Brazil as a country severely affected by false stories and rumors (Baptista et al., 2019; Bastos dos Santos et al., 2019), there is also a large volume of works dedicated to discussing the emergence of a liberal-conservative shift in Latin America (that would reconcile globalized neoliberal thinking with authoritarian values), even tracing its socio-historical roots (Gentile, 2018; Messenberg, 2017; Sanahuja, 2019).

We thus seek to argue that the profusion of disinformation in a given country also results from their attunement to the prevailing moralities, and not exclusively from the population's discredit towards the institutions that make up the democratic system or from the manipulation of citizens' beliefs by external agents. In particular, this argument will be developed considering the recurrence of disinformation on gender and sexuality issues in Brazil in 2019 (Bolsonaro's first year in office as the president of the republic), given its relevance in the Brazilian context at least since the presidential elections.

Despite the resurgence of inequalities in the period mentioned – according to data from *Gênero e Número* (Bulgarelli & Fontgaland, 2019), during the 2018 elections, more than 50% of LGBT+ individuals said they suffered some kind of intimidation –, there is a historical persistence of gender and sexuality asymmetries in Brazil. The country currently ranks 92nd in the ranking of gender equality according to the World Economic Forum (Carvalho, 2019) and 68th in the list of safe nations for the LGBT+ community, according to the Spartacus website (2019), which lists 197 countries. In addition, Brazil remains



<sup>5</sup>The term *travesti* is used especially in South America to designate people who were assigned male at birth but develop a feminine gender identity.

the country that kills the most *travestis*<sup>5</sup> and transsexuals in the world, according to data from the National Association of Travestis and Transsexuals (Benevides & Nogueira, 2020).

Investigating the expressiveness and narrative configuration of disinformation about gender and sexuality in Brazil will therefore enable a discussion about the moral sensitivities triggered by false stories on these issues. We hypothesize that the potential for circulation of these unfounded narratives stems from their link to the country's sociocultural context, which would, therefore, amplify their reverberation in public opinion. For this purpose, the study design chosen was an exploratory qualitative research that intends to survey disinformation about gender and sexuality in circulation in Brazil during 2019. Through this mapping, a textual analysis of the collected narratives will be carried out (covering its central themes, dissemination format, and privileged circulation spaces).

The next topic starts from the effervescent literature (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2018) on the phenomenon of disinformation to discuss the lack of studies dedicated to understanding its sociocultural roots and the moral values activated in unfounded stories of high appeal among citizens. This epistemological redirection is considered fundamental to contain a certain *mediacentric* and technicist tendency in this literature, restoring the phenomenon's properly communicative dimension. Next, operational concepts are presented for two of the main disinformation subgenres, rumors and fake news. The subsequent topic revisits the concept of morality, contextualizing the ongoing moral disputes in Brazil and in the hegemonic normativities reiterated by negative representations of gender and sexuality minorities. Then, the methodological operationalization of the study and the composition of its analytical corpus are presented. The results and the main inferences obtained by the research are discussed soon after. Finally, in the final considerations, the pertinence of examining the production and circulation of disinformation from a contextual perspective is highlighted, as well as indicating possible limitations and outcomes of the article.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The sociocultural context of disinformation

Amid the recent shift in studies on disinformation, several authors (Anderson, 2020; Andersen & Søe, 2019; Cabañes, 2020; Marres, 2018) began to question the resumption of a strong media effects paradigm, which hypothesizes that disinformation would be *the evil of the century*, capable of harming the ways of acquiring human knowledge (Levy, 2017) and polluting the

epistemic environment (Blake-Turner, 2020). Its harmful consequences would range from the corrosion of citizens' cognitive skills (Brown, 2019; McKay & Tenove, 2020) to the production of intellectual vices (Meyer, 2019), and the reinforcement of extremist and sectarian worldviews (Rini, 2017). Some studies have even suggested an association between the spread of false stories and viral contagion, proposing solutions to the problem that would act as antidotes to disinformation (Roozenbek & Linden, 2018), such as corrections promoted by fact-checking agencies (Morris et al., 2020) and media literacy campaigns (Jones-Jang et al., 2019).

According to Anderson (2020), the effervescence of this literature reflects a mediacentric mythology<sup>6</sup> in which social media owned by the *big techs*<sup>7</sup> would take over the place formerly attributed to radio or television to distribute messages on a large scale that act on an atomized mass of individuals. For the author, the dominance of research aimed at tracking the collective effects of contents that circulate predominantly on digital platforms is based on an understanding of human action proposed by the very platforms. In his words, "Facebook categorizes its human users as subjects who act, and whose acts are influenced by short-term communicative stimuli" (Anderson, 2020, p. 16). In this sense, the endorsement of this behavioral and anti-interpretative approach to the communicative process in the literature on disinformation would be motivating a disregard for its necessary sociocultural roots (Andersen & S e, 2019; Caba es, 2020), subsumed by its quantifiable digital footprints.

Restituting the interactional component in the circulation of disinformation is an important step to recognize that such phenomenon is not restricted to a merely instrumental problem that can be solved by the aforementioned *inoculation* tactics or even by an update in the platforms' content moderation policies (Andersen & S e, 2019; Caba es, 2020; Marres, 2018). As a counterpoint to a *technicist* treatment of disinformation (which equates the phenomenon to a *noise* that disorients cognition and deteriorates the functioning of democracy), it is argued that the persuasive force of fraudulent stories and false rumors stems from the moral judgments that resonate in them (Andersen & S e, 2019; Caba es, 2020; Humprecht, 2018).

Although empirical research on the subject has only recently been redirecting its analytical lens towards an axiological and contextual foundation of disinformation<sup>8</sup>, articles such as those by Humprecht (2018) and Caba es (2020) attest to the pertinence of this approach. In a comparative international perspective, Humprecht (2018) detected how the main promoters of disinformation in Austria and Germany are alternative websites of anonymous authorship, linked to fascist groups that broadcast fake news referring to immigrants who reside

<sup>6</sup>By mediacentric we mean an attempt to hypertrophy the role of the media as the only explanatory factor for any social transformations taking place in contemporary times.

<sup>7</sup>The term refers to the Silicon Valley technology companies that currently control the digital market, notably Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft, also identified by the acronym GAFAM.

<sup>8</sup>By way of illustration, through the prism of social epistemology, Levy (2017) pointed out that rumors about social minorities could reinforce prejudiced representations about their members.



in these countries, while in the United States and in the United Kingdom the main subjects of false stories are political elites. Cabañes (2020), on the other hand, approached the anti-elitist, misogynistic, and racist imaginaries that emanate from the disinformation circulating in the Philippines, strengthening the populist rhetoric of President Rodrigo Duterte. In his words, the pull of these stories hinges on “aspirations that ordinary Filipinos had about discipline brought about by their fears about the country’s rampant disorder and criminality” (Cabañes, 2020, p. 11).

Considering the above, this article intends to investigate the incidence of a conservative morality – specifically linked to issues of gender and sexuality – in the Brazilian disinformation ecosystem after the 2018 elections<sup>9</sup>. Understanding disinformation as a type of information that configures deliberately distorted world representations capable of reverberating in the values shared by a social stratum or group (that is, it is not about forgeries that are completely disconnected from the context of their interlocutors’ lives) (Fallis, 2015), it is known that its forms of manifestation in the digital environment (this research’s object of study) can range from news production to image manipulation (Gelfert, 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018). Therefore, in line with Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019), we propose to think of disinformation as an umbrella concept that branches out into operational notions for empirical research. This article focuses on two of them: rumors and fake news.

Although rumors are not necessarily based on disinformation – they can refer to narratives that support social relationships and a sense of intersubjectivity in a given community (Andersen & Søe, 2019; Gelfert, 2018) –, those that are subject to verification and eventually labeled as fake by content moderation on digital platforms or by partner fact-checkers (Marres, 2018) often fall into this category. Often published by apocryphal profiles with a narrative configuration that does not emulate the stylistic resources of journalism – taking more advantage of the technical architecture of the very platforms to amplify their visibility, being shared inadvertently or deliberately by other users –, rumors are a central component of the Brazilian disinformation ecosystem due to their capillarity in messaging and social media applications, as previous studies on the context of the 2018 elections have shown (Bastos dos Santos et al., 2019; Gomes & Dourado, 2019).

Fake news, on the other hand, correspond to publications with deliberately false or misleading content that actually mimic journalistic language – typically containing a title, handle, and photographs –, are broadcast predominantly in

<sup>9</sup> As correctly noted by one of the anonymous reviewers of this article, the 2018 presidential elections did not inaugurate a period of accentuated circulation of disinformation based on gender and sexuality in Brazil. For example, the impeachment process of former president Dilma Rousseff, which took place in 2016, was supported by a disinformation campaign in which gender was used to morally disqualify the president (Piaia, 2018). That said, we argue that, unlike other presidential elections in the post-redemocratization period, the 2018 election was strongly marked by the production of moral panics (Miskolci & Campana, 2017) that claimed, via disinformation, the restoration of a declining conservative morality. Considering that this discursive formation was victorious in the elections, we considered pertinent to observe its developments in the year immediately following the electoral dispute.

digital environments and produced to deceive different audiences, whether for commercial purposes – as in the case of clickbait articles –, whether for ideological interests – as in the pages of hyper-partisan groups that intend to convert or reinforce the beliefs of their audience through disinformation (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Gelfert, 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018). Despite some authors questioning the heuristic validity of the concept, considering it a discursive weapon used by authoritarian politicians to restrict freedom of expression (Coady, 2019; Habgood-Coote, 2018), the concept's operability must also be considered, given that it is not a subgenre of disinformation homologous to correlated notions more established in the literature, such as advertising and journalistic errors<sup>10</sup> (Tandoc et al., 2018). Therefore, the proposed characterization reserves the term for content that has been published on pages that exploit journalistic authority for disinformation purposes, that is, false stories and statements that do not make use of this journalistic camouflage are excluded from this definition.

That said, when examining fake news and rumors referring to the themes of gender and sexuality in the first year of Bolsonaro's government, this article does not disregard that the architecture of digital platforms and the information and ad targeting filtering algorithms enhance the creation of low investment content capable of generating high revenues via monetization of virtual traffic (Bakir & McStay, 2017). Nevertheless, it moves away from causal explanations for the phenomenon of disinformation since, given the technical and political conditions for its production at an industrial pace, its circulation will depend on the resonance of shared moral values in a given sociocultural context. In other words, if the technological infrastructure of digital media provides the extraction of value through the quantification of accesses regardless of the type of content broadcast, the concentration of users in an "attention market" (Wu, 2016) fertile in disinformation is not the result of a cognitive distortion effect that would distance them from the factual truth (Anderson, 2020). As will be argued in the following topic, the moral substratum on which certain normativities rest is an important factor to be considered when scrutinizing the particular traction of false histories in a given society.

### **Moral life, gender norms and sexuality**

The moral dimension of social life is considered to be eminently constitutive, and not just regulatory, of everyday practices (Vandenberghe, 2015). There is a normative horizon that underlies human action in the world, providing

<sup>10</sup>In line with the argument presented by one of the anonymous reviewers of this article, it is a fact that, historically, mistakes made by the press cannot be fully classified as accidental since, in various circumstances, media organizations deliberately aired rumors in order to respond to economic and/or political interests contrary to journalistic ethics. By way of illustration, between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries, it was common for tabloids to publish intentionally fictional stories to increase their circulations (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018). As much as we agree that the distinction between professional journalism and disinformation should not be established by an approximation criterion to the factual truth, we argue that, in analytical terms, it is important to differentiate professional journalistic coverage from the deliberate production of disinformation since, in the second case, the very narrative construction is inspired by social reality with the sole purpose of deceiving the audience.



“evaluation standards (principles, values and norms) by which actions (own and others) can be judged” (Vandenberghe, 2015, p. 69). By composing “the shared cultural order that is institutionalized in structured social practices” (Vandenberghe, 2015, p. 69), morality is not the property of specific individuals or groups and is not confused with worldviews, whether conservative, progressive, or partisan biases, widely studied by social psychology as variables that influence the predisposition or not of individuals to believe in disinformation (Faragó et al., 2019). Simultaneously, as it is inherent to the socialization process of individuals, basing their more or less conscious value judgments on the situations they experience and the affective reactions that emanate from them, such as rancor, anger and indignation (Fassin, 2008), morality is an indispensable component of action and effectively materialized in practices.

Within the field of morality, the normativities that govern gender and sexuality play a central role, acting in the constitution of identities and expressions of sexualized and gendered subjects. They are responsible for grounding the sociocultural conventions that permeate these markers, establishing norms and moral principles disputed and reiterated. Based on the premise that disinformation resonates with moral values, it is extremely important to understand how the norms around gender and sexuality are constituted and figured in false stories about these themes.

According to Butler (1990), the normativities around gender and sexuality are established amid the contentious universe of morality, seeking to establish coherence between gender identities and expressions of sexuality that come to be alluded to and reiterated in everyday life. According to the author, these sociocultural norms have a particular *modus operandi*, acting from the requirement and prohibition of certain behaviors and roles. Therefore, they act through vectors of approval and valuation and sanction and punishment, establishing the limits of morality. For Butler (2004), normativities are constituted through their opposite pole, creating a field of abjections that stipulate the boundaries between the morally acceptable and the unacceptable. Threats to norms base their *constitutive exterior*, alluded to and rejected in the symbolic production of gender and sexuality.

The intersection of morality about gender and sexuality institutes a set of socially sanctioned values and practices. Similar to gender, sexuality is based on a system of vertical inequalities established in a pyramid of valuations and sanctions. Rubin (1993) presents the idea of a “hierarchical system of sexuality” in order to show how the punitive environment and formal and informal controls



that fall on this system work. According to the author, there is a symbolic scale that determines the status and sociocultural value of erotic-sexual behaviors and expressions, constituted in a pyramidal way: at the top remain sanctioned practices, such as monogamous heterosexual relationships, and at the bottom are perversions, such as homosexual practices and exchanging sex for money. In sexuality, as in gender, it is the clash between requirements and prohibitions that determines moral values and the attribution of status.

Both the system of gender stratification and sexuality's hierarchies are neither monolithic nor immutable. As proposed by Butler (2004) and Rubin (1993), gender and sexuality are established amid socio-historical processes subject to change. This field of normativities, which corresponds to the affirmation of hegemonic morality, becomes the target of dispute in moments of great social stress and sociopolitical transformations, reverberating in moral panics that try to reinstitute and re-establish the limits of social life also in terms of gender and sexuality through the reconstruction of restrictions and sanctions (Carrara, 2015). Moral panics, according to Carrara (2015), are predominantly aimed at minority groups or practices, expanding the terrain of perversions that must be rejected from the social body. The author states that homosexuals and transsexuals – and women who do not reproduce the normative marks of gender and sexuality – are the main target of such moralizing hysteria. These subjects are taken as an abject constitutive exterior that, in turn, helps to reaffirm the importance of norms for the maintenance of moral hierarchies.

The contemporary Brazilian context is marked by moral panics (Carrara, 2015; Leite, 2019; Miskolci & Campana, 2017), especially those focused on gender and sexuality. Today's moral panics are considered as the result of two main phenomena; they emerge along with the expansion of neoconservatism in Brazil, which surfaced in the public sphere with the protests that took place in 2013, known as the *Jornadas de Junho* (June Journeys), and became commonplace during the cycle of protests that began in 2014 (Tatagiba, 2014), which culminated in Bolsonaro's election to the Presidency of the Republic. Neoconservatism's main ideas are the defense of the *traditional family*, moral conservatism, religion, and nationalism (Messenberg, 2017). According to Leite (2019), among the components of the new national conservatism, the reaffirmation of gender and sexuality norms stands out, seeking to re-establish social roles within the family and the nation, fighting the identities that supposedly would be eroding *traditional values*. In the second instance, moral panics are



accompanied by disputes against the “gender ideology” (Miskolci & Campana, 2017), which arise concurrently with Brazilian neoconservatism. This symbolic front of struggle advocates for a heteronormative model of family and against the advancement of sexual and reproductive rights, seeking to accentuate, according to Leite (2019), the need to re-establish the limits of the moral field that governs gender and sexuality.

This situation, which expresses an intense process of symbolic and moral debate, is associated with the formulation of normativities around gender and sexuality, revealing the background of the circulation of disinformation on these themes in 2019. Therefore, it is urgent to understand how false stories participate in this contentious field.

### METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

In line with previous empirical research on the production and circulation of disinformation (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Humprecht, 2018), the corpus of this research was structured based on false stories about gender and sexuality fully debunked by three of the main fact-checking initiatives in activity in Brazil, namely, the *Lupa* agency<sup>11</sup>, the *Fato ou Fake* center<sup>12</sup> and the *Boatos.org* website<sup>13</sup>.

Data collection and encoding were done manually by both researchers from the 2019 checked files, made available by each initiative on their respective websites. Only publications that referred to issues of gender and sexuality and that were motivated by disinformation on the web were considered, excluding, therefore, statements from public authorities, subject to varying degrees of imprecision and not necessarily based on rumors and fake news.

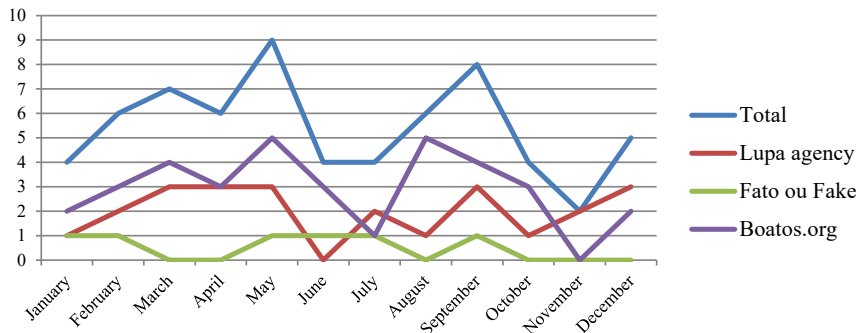
The decision to include or not a certain item in the corpus resulted from a joint discussion between the researchers. Any discrepancies in the codification process motivated its interruption for the proper resolution of the divergence. Considering that the result of the collection does not reflect the totality of false stories about gender and sexuality that circulated in the first year of Bolsonaro’s government, it is expected that the diversity of agencies contemplated will allow covering a more expressive amount of content to be examined, given that *Boatos.org* produced 1,008 verifications in 2019; the *Lupa* agency, 497; and the *Fato ou Fake*, 231.

Excluding duplicate publications (that is, fact-checking of the same story produced by more than one of the three agencies), the total number of rumors and fake news about gender and sexuality found in 2019 was 65. That is, every month, on average 5.41 disinformation pieces about these themes circulated in digital environments, as indicated in Figure 1.

<sup>11</sup>Founded in 2015, it is currently configured as one of the main fact-checking organizations unrelated to media conglomerates.

<sup>12</sup>Inaugurated in 2018 as a coalition of Grupo Globo vehicles..

<sup>13</sup>Independent channel that, since 2013, exclusively checks suspicious content shared on social networks and messaging applications.

**Figure 1***Disinformation on gender and sexuality in 2019*

Note. Designed by the authors.

The collected data were treated via open qualitative textual analysis in two steps. At first, we sought to delimit the publication's circulation format. The verification sources were classified as rumors or fake news based on information provided by the fact-checking agencies in their corrections. In addition, two elements of the 65 narratives that make up the research corpus were examined: the main agents mentioned and the link or not of history to social events relevant to the Brazilian sociocultural context, in order to weave inferences about the disputed moralities in these plots.

The second stage of the research consisted of locating publication sources of fake news about gender and sexuality, aiming to track some of the websites they circulated on. The objective was to understand how the apocryphal pages found define themselves – as journalistic channels or spaces for opinion and analysis, for example –, their possible affiliation to certain ideological positions and the journalistic style adopted in the publication – if the text was presented, for example, as news (containing title, subtitle, photographs with captions, and main text) or as a note (accompanied by title and photograph only). The reverse search of sources was carried out using digital search engines, considering titles, keywords and publication date of the disinformation piece classified as fake news in the first stage of the study. Complementarily, based on recent surveys carried out by the *Aos Fatos* (Nalon & Ribeiro, 2020) and *Pública* (Rudnitzki & Scofield, 2020), and by *Coletivo Bereia* (Costa, 2020), a direct search was carried out in nineteen pages labeled as apocryphal (Table 1) to identify which of them published the fake news that make up the corpus of this investigation.



**Table 1**

*List of analyzed disinformation pages*

| <b>Website</b>            | <b>Link</b>   |
|---------------------------|---|
| Jornal da Cidade Online   | <a href="https://www.jornaldacidadeonline.com.br/">https://www.jornaldacidadeonline.com.br/</a> |
| Senso Incomum             | <a href="https://sensoincomum.org/">https://sensoincomum.org/</a>                               |
| Gazeta Brasil             | <a href="https://gazetabrasil.com.br/">https://gazetabrasil.com.br/</a>                         |
| Agora Paraná              | <a href="https://www.agoraparana.com.br/">https://www.agoraparana.com.br/</a>                   |
| Conexão Política          | <a href="https://conexaopolitica.com.br/">https://conexaopolitica.com.br/</a>                   |
| Jornal 21 Brasil          | <a href="https://www.jornal21brasil.com.br/">https://www.jornal21brasil.com.br/</a>             |
| CPAD News                 | <a href="http://www.cpadnews.com.br/">http://www.cpadnews.com.br/</a>                           |
| Gospel +                  | <a href="https://gospelmais.com.br/">https://gospelmais.com.br/</a>                             |
| Gospel Prime              | <a href="https://www.gospelprime.com.br/">https://www.gospelprime.com.br/</a>                   |
| Pleno.News                | <a href="https://pleno.news/">https://pleno.news/</a>   |
| Renova Mídia              | <a href="https://renovamidia.com.br/">https://renovamidia.com.br/</a>                           |
| Terça Livre               | <a href="https://tercalivre.com.br/">https://tercalivre.com.br/</a>                             |
| Revista Oeste             | <a href="https://revistaoeste.com/">https://revistaoeste.com/</a>                               |
| Estudos Nacionais         | <a href="https://www.estudosnacionais.com/">https://www.estudosnacionais.com/</a>               |
| Agência Caneta            | <a href="http://www.caneta.org/">http://www.caneta.org/</a>                                     |
| Brasil Sem Medo           | <a href="https://brasilsemmedo.com/">https://brasilsemmedo.com/</a>                             |
| Conservadorismo do Brasil | <a href="https://conservadorismodobrasil.com.br/">https://conservadorismodobrasil.com.br/</a>   |
| Editorial MBC             | <a href="https://editorialmbc.com.br/">https://editorialmbc.com.br/</a>                         |
| Mídia Sem Máscara         | <a href="https://midiasemmascara.net/">https://midiasemmascara.net/</a>                         |

*Note.* Designed by the authors. Despite having been included in the initial listing, the *Notícia Brasil Online* page is no longer available and therefore it was impossible to consider it in the analysis.

To understand how the pages that shared unfounded stories define themselves, the “About Us” sections of each site, portal or blog considered were consulted. Finally, the data were systematized in order to understand what are the typical formats for publishing fake news on gender and sexuality that most circulated in 2019, what are their predominant dissemination channels, and what moral sensibilities they intend to trigger in their target audience.

## RESULTS

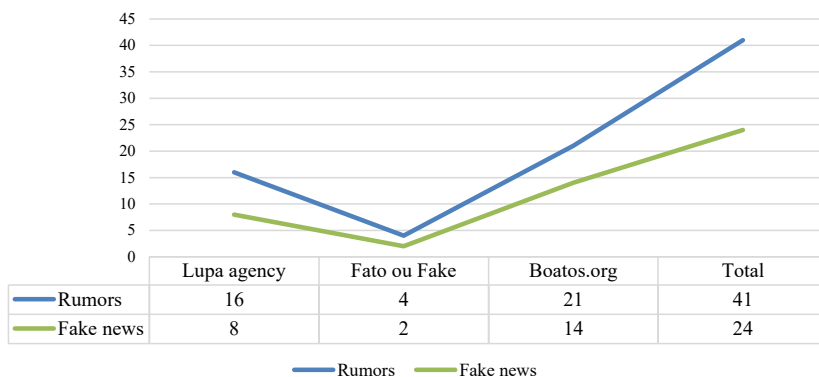
### **Formats and characteristics of disinformation about gender and sexuality**

Among the 65 disinformation pieces about gender and sexuality shared in 2019 in Brazil, most circulated in the form of rumors (41), with a typical configuration of posts on social networks or messaging applications: publication with passionate speeches, caps lock highlights, amateurishly tampered images, misspellings, and use of profanity. Another 24 were disseminated as fake news and verified by fact-checking agencies from their distribution on apocryphal pages (Figure 2). Segmenting the data by the considered initiatives, it appears that

*Lupa* agency verified eight stories with journalistic configuration and another sixteen in the form of rumors; *Fato ou Fake* examined two in the first category and four in the second; and *Boatos.org* analyzed 14 and 21, respectively.

**Figure 2**

*Disinformation formats on gender and sexuality in 2019*



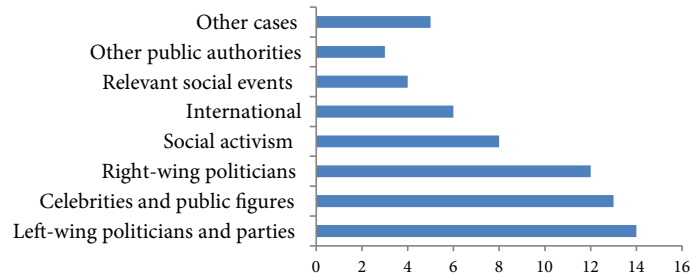
Note. Designed by the authors.

When examining the contents of the disinformation pieces (Figure 3), it is clear that most fomented criticism against politicians and parties linked to the left, accused of corrupting the values of the *traditional family*. Of the fourteen contents that fall into this category, five mention projects by politicians from the left judged morally reprehensible, such as Bill of Law 3.369/2015, authored by federal legislator Orlando Silva (Communist Party of Brazil – PCdoB), which proposed to institute the statute of families in the 21st century, recognizing union forms different from the heteronormative nuclear model. At least three different unfounded narratives on the subject were published between the date the project would be discussed by the Commission on Human Rights and Minorities of the House of Representatives (August 21st, 2019) and early December, all of them accusing the document of normalizing incest, polygamy and pedophilia. At the time it would be put to a vote in plenary, the project was even removed from the agenda due to the false stories that circulated about it, specifically leveraged by PSL federal legislators (Barbosa, 2019). Content associating members of left-wing parties with practices considered reprehensible, contradictory and even criminal appear repeatedly, as in a headline that states that federal legislator Maria do Rosário (PT) would have defended the decriminalization of pedophilia, or in a publication that claims that the federal legislator Glauber Braga (Socialism and Liberty Party – PSOL) allegedly attacked journalist Patrícia Lélis.



Figure 3

Disinformation issues regarding gender and sexuality in 2019



Note. Designed by the authors.

Second, thirteen disinformation pieces relate celebrities and public figures to false events. Among them, there are stories that hint at a plot between artists and the media to undermine the morality of the traditional family, for example the narratives that declare that the singer Pabllo Vittar would present a children’s program on TV Globo entitled *Gay Child TV*; that singer Johnny Hooker would be featured in *Criança Esperança*<sup>14</sup> in 2019<sup>15</sup>; or that YouTuber Felipe Neto would have encouraged children to access pedophilia forums on his channel<sup>16</sup>. Other publications in this category include materials that legitimize forms of violence against women, exonerating the famous figures involved in the cases, as the insinuations that the young woman who accused the player Neymar of rape, in May 2019, was a malicious person; or in a text that suggests that the ex-wife of goalkeeper Jean, who worked until December 2019 at São Paulo Futebol Clube, had been attacked by her husband for sending intimate photos to other men via WhatsApp.

Third, twelve disinformation pieces about gender and sexuality disseminated in digital media during 2019 are about public authorities known for their overtly reactionary positions. In this case, there is a predominance of publications that refer, in a recriminatory or ironic tone, to false statements by the current Minister of Family, Women and Human Rights, Damarens Alves. The evangelical pastor had six mentions, as in a story that proposed that she would revoke the Maria da Penha Law; in another one that said she would have visited the “Valley of the Homosexuals” in hell; and still in a publication claiming that she had created a project to limit sex to procreation only. The current President of the Republic and his family are also protagonists of five disinformation pieces, such as in a material published early in 2019 claiming that Bolsonaro would decree the end of Carnival and the Gay Parade.

<sup>14</sup>*Criança Esperança* is a television program and a national social mobilization campaign held in Brazil that seeks to raise awareness in favor of the rights of children and adolescents.

<sup>15</sup> This fake news assumes a denunciatory tone as it is based on the singer’s defense of the play *O Evangelho segundo Jesus, Rainha do Céu* (The Gospel according to Jesus, Queen of Heaven) in 2018.

<sup>16</sup>This disinformation piece began to circulate after the influencer purchased 14,000 LGBT+ themed books to be distributed at the Rio de Janeiro’s Book Biennial in response to the former mayor Marcelo Crivella’s decision to censor the copies of *HQ Avengers: The Children’s Crusade*, which was being marketed at the event.

False content that rebukes social activism (specifically groups on the left) occupied fourth place in the corpus (eight cases). Four of these stories aired accusations against public universities in the same period that former Minister of Education Abraham Weintraub insulted such institutions and implemented a 30% cut in their funding (“MEC Mira UnB, UFF e UFBA”, 2019). Protests arising from these actions of the federal government, mostly led by students, motivated publications that related the protests to libidinous and immoral activities according to the conservative worldview, such as several montages with images of nude students and text that asserted that the young people would have created an “anal art studio” at a university.

In this list of false stories linked to issues of gender and sexuality, we identified fewer materials denouncing sexual practices and non-normative gender expressions in other countries (six texts), distortions of social events that motivated reactionary actions<sup>17</sup> (four occurrences), accusations that other public authorities would be encouraging forms of “sexual perversion” (three cases) and more diffuse content on the subject (five texts), which reinforce a compulsory heterosexuality, as in the case of a false study that would have assured that men who enjoy anal sex with their partners would have homosexual “inclinations.”

In view of the aforementioned data, it is possible to sustain that most of the disinformation pieces about gender and sexuality considered in this study refer to social events relevant to the Brazilian sociopolitical context (40 out of 65, or 69% of the total). This predominance points to two distinct phenomena: on the one hand, it demonstrates the relevance of these themes for Brazilian society, which appear as elements of tension and concern in the conflicts over “gender ideology” (Miskolci & Campana, 2017); on the other, it reveals how these issues started to compose a picture of *moral panic*, which indicates the urgency to define and establish the “limits of morality” (Rubin, 1993). These two points stand out in view of the data that reveal the most sensitive themes among the analyzed publications, that is, the supposed deterioration of the sustaining values of the *traditional family* and the presumed perversion of conventional positions and expressions of gender and sexuality.

Following a set of moral disputes that centralized the conjunction between gender and sexuality (Carrara, 2015), the most recurrent disinformation in 2019 challenged the achievement of civil rights by LGBT+ people, as an example of texts that associated the bill of law that proposed an extension of common-law marriage in the Federal Constitution to the incitement of incest and pedophilia, criminalizing family arrangements that clash with heteronormative standards. In line with this, the danger of uprising of the mononuclear family appears as the second most alluded subject in these narratives, recurring in stories about

<sup>17</sup>Essa desinformação passou a circular logo após o influenciador ter adquirido 14 mil livros com temática LGBT+ para serem distribuídos na Bienal do Livro do Rio de Janeiro, em resposta à decisão do ex-prefeito Marcelo Crivella de censurar exemplares da HQ *Vingadores: A cruzada das Crianças*, que estava sendo comercializada no evento.



celebrities from the LGBT+ universe who would assume the post of presenters of children's programs or attractions in televised shows, reinforcing the ideas of danger and threat historically associated with homosexuality and transsexuality (Rubin, 1993). While the discussion of the bill of law focuses on the risks of subverting the compulsory roles assigned to men and women in affective-sexual relationships, rumors involving celebrities focus on fictional harm to children when exposed to *gender ideology*.

Another highlight in the analysis were the pieces of disinformation that pointed to inappropriate behavior by women, using known cases of gender violence to discern the good from the bad, as occurred with the story of the nude photos of the goalkeeper Jean's wife. As Carrara (2015) asserts, these distinctions serve to maintain the hegemonic social positions of men and women in heterosexual arrangements, reaffirming a norm that allows for violent sanctions for eventual transgressions.

The false stories focused on denouncing social activism recriminate forms of exercising sexuality considered *libertine and depraved*, responsible for propagating risky behavior and contrary to hegemonic moralities. These cases convoked valuation hierarchies regarding the expressions of sexuality (Carrara, 2015), using the actions of activists and university students as examples of *immorality*. Working from the opposition, these texts contrasted an imaginary of *correct sexuality* with the *obscene* behavior of students and activists who supposedly used nudity and anal penetration to express themselves. Once again, these are narratives that aim to establish the limits of morality, as pointed out by Rubin (1993), defining a set of possible and sanctioned practices and another of condemned and reprimanded activities. Rubin's system of sexuality demonstrates how heteronormative moral norms establish unequal classifications of sexuality, indicating those that should be persecuted, corrected, and penalized.

Similar inferences were obtained in the analysis of materials that hypertrophied the conservatism of right-wing politicians of prominent public expression, especially Damares Alves and Jair Bolsonaro. Although most of these materials are characterized by an ironic and recriminatory tone, they establish a dialogue with the moral codes mentioned above, distinguishing the exercise of healthy sexuality from the dangerous one. Given this situation, the disinformation that mentioned a decision by the Federal Government to ban Carnival and the Gay Parade refers to the decency and caution needed in relation to supposedly libidinous acts, which were being duly fought in Bolsonaro's government.

The moral axes of false stories demonstrate how they are instituted through a worldview about gender and sexuality based on the dynamics of interdiction that, according to Butler (1990), speaks of the establishment of boundaries



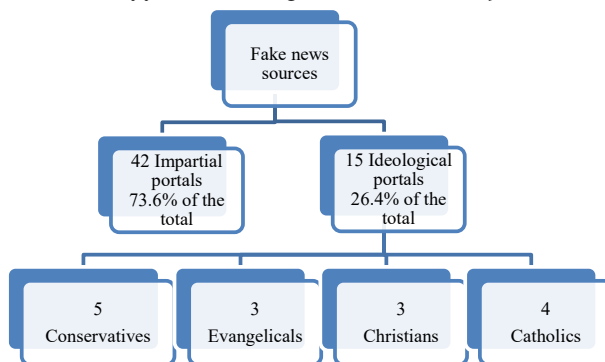
between normativities and their constitutive exteriors, building a set of abjections to be rebuked. Such publications resonate with the prohibition on certain ways of incorporating and experiencing gender and sexuality, acting as mechanisms to demonstrate and ratify social norms. Thought together, and considering their main themes, the texts express the normative content of the conventions, emphasizing its opposite to demonstrate the dangers and threats posed if these same conventions are overturned (Butler, 2004). Consequently, such narratives reflect both a fear of breaking the hegemonic moralities and an instrument of symbolization of these same moralities. Therefore, the discursive format of publications identified as fake news and their publication channels must be analyzed so the elements that make up their social circulation and help to establish their credibility.

### Publication sources of fake news

Regarding the 24 pieces of disinformation classified as fake news and published on apocryphal websites, we found that they circulated in the format of news articles and notes. Five of them appeared in both formats, seven exclusively as news articles and twelve as notes only, all published on pages that define themselves as informative (Figure 4). Considering the frequency with which the 24 fake news were published, we can infer that they circulated at least 43 times in note format and at least 32 times as news articles.

**Figure 4**

*Main publication sources of fake news on gender and sexuality in 2019*



*Note.* Designed by the authors.

Among the analyzed fake news, twenty were published in more than one portal or website, whereas another four appeared in only one portal or website.

# A

Of the 24 fake news, those structured in the classic news format have a prominent factual title, an explanatory subtitle, one or two photos with captions, and the main text headed by a lead and composed of three or more paragraphs. Those published in note format have a highlighted factual title, an explanatory subtitle, a captioned photograph and text of a paragraph beginning with a lead.

All the fake news analyzed were disclosed on self-titled informative internet pages (57 in total), of which 42 (or 73.6%) describe themselves as *impartial*<sup>18</sup>, whereas fifteen others (or 26.4%) are aligned with some ideological position. Among the latter, five consider themselves as *conservative*, three claim to be *evangelical*, three assume themselves to be *Christian*, and four others as *Catholic*. The pages that most shared disinformation were: Pleno News (five stories), Terça Livre (three stories), Gospel Mais (three stories) and Top Mídia News (three stories). The first of these sites identifies itself as *Christian*, the second as of *Catholic inclination*, the third as *evangelical*, and the last as *impartial*.

The most shared fake news, which appeared on five or more portals simultaneously, were:

1. The so-called Congressional bill of law that would legalize the marriage between parents and their children (pejoratively called the *polyamory law* and published on ten websites). This story appeared in three different versions, sometimes presented as a proposal by federal legislator Orlando Silva, sometimes as a project by former legislator Manuela D'Ávila, and sometimes as a proposal by federal legislator Túlio Gadêlha;
2. The apparent negligence of the press and leftist groups with the attacks suffered by Karol Eller, a youtuber voter of Bolsonaro victim of a possible homophobic attack (published on five websites);
3. The rumor that the singer Johnny Hooker, who would have called Jesus “gay and travesti”, would perform on *Criança Esperança* (published on five sites);
4. The case of a “young woman” who would have said “she is happy to have been impregnated by her father” (published in five portals);
5. A presumed booklet distributed by the City Hall of Fortaleza, advocating for child masturbation as a means of calming children (published on five websites).

Among these false stories, the first three were formatted as news articles. The last two were published as notes, accompanied by images and a single paragraph.

<sup>18</sup>The *impartial* qualifier is commonly used in the “About Us” section of the 42 analyzed pages, seeking to highlight a non-partisan and supposedly exempt character. The use of such a qualifier is a discursive resource that aims to differentiate pages with an informational bias from those with an ideological bias.

It is noteworthy that the most shared publication sources of fake news are self-declared informative websites. The fake news published by them dealt exclusively with events sensitive to the national moral universe. Such narratives sought to weave unfounded complaints of the alleged incitement for incestuous practices and pedophilia by public authorities in Brazil, as well as celebrities who diverge from the normative standards of gender and sexuality – and that, for this reason, would instigate *gender ideology* on national television with the consent of TV broadcasters. Furthermore, one of these stories sought to highlight a *hypocritical* attitude of the press and left-wing movements, which would have ignored a homophobic violence committed against a far-right lesbian. Between the lines, this story would reinforce the thesis that civil rights activism would not really be concerned with fighting injustices but with imposing the *gender ideology*. All fake news appealed to the corruption of moral values and the alleged degradation of the family institution, making social factors identified as belonging to the left or social minorities (centrally LGBT+ people) responsible for this situation, urging the audience to oppose and combat such initiatives.

It is concluded that the potential public targeted by these fake news is consistent with a conservative worldview, since such texts aim to trigger moral sensibilities for an ideological purpose, that is, the promotion of reactionary ideals, discursively mobilized in the narratives. Their credibility rests on a journalistic guise, carefully emulated with more political (of mobilizing actions) than economic purpose (of monetization by increasing traffic on the websites). However, given the fact that the fake news on gender and sexuality included in this study frontally expose the dangers associated with a presumed subversion of heteronormativity – aiming to restore conventions that underpin its axiological system (as the ideality of the mononuclear family based on the complementarity between the male and female genders (Messenberg, 2017)) – one cannot disregard the fact that they imply a prior sharing of meanings with their audiences.

From this perspective, the moral panic scenario shaped by the materials analyzed acts less as a vector of ideological conversion through disinformation than as a reinforcement of moral sensibilities rooted in the audience. In other words, and taking into account the thematic specificity of many of the portals identified in the analysis, the fake news observed take on the function of resonating the bases of a heteronormative morality for an already ideologically inclined audience, reaffirming shared beliefs that are would have been weakened through narratives that are socially recognized and worthy of credibility (Rubin, 1993). Such fake news act as discursive and moral devices of gender and sexuality,



mobilizing and building normativities through their content, formatting, and means of dissemination.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present study shows that the pieces of disinformation related to gender and sexuality in Brazil refer, for the most part, to sensitive issues to Brazilian society, pointing to alleged sexual perversions as a preferential target (such as incest and pedophilia) and the subversion of normative gender identities (as in cases involving celebrities from the LGBT+ universe). In this sense, the pertinence of examining the production and circulation of disinformation is supported, taking as reference the sociocultural context in which they arise and the moral disputes they mobilize, overcoming a mediacentric approach to the phenomenon. Therefore, this study highlights the moral field in which the analyzed fake news falls, focusing especially on the limits and borders drawn for gender and sexuality in these pieces of disinformation. The reinforcement of shared moralities between fake news and their audience is noted, echoing a conservative worldview that intends to be ratified and endorsed<sup>19</sup>.

Although the results offer substantial contributions to the critical observation of the relationship between disinformation and morality (linked specifically to issues of gender and sexuality), the investigation has some limitations that deserve to be pointed out. The main one refers to the fact that the study was based only on false stories detected by fact-checking initiatives, which do not necessarily correspond to the entire volume of digital disinformation that circulated in 2019. Although this methodological choice has been inspired by the literature on the subject, it is considered that complementary mapping efforts (via network analysis, for example) can improve this type of investigation. Likewise, the search for publication sources of false stories on search engines is undoubtedly hampered by the ephemeral nature of these contents, which are often deleted or modified by their creators after they have been exposed. This phenomenon can negatively impact longitudinal analyses, generating a delay in the accounting of disinformation propagating sources.

Possible ramifications of our research would include future studies focused on identifying false narratives based on other social markers of difference – class, race, and ethnicity, for example – and reception studies capable of scrutinizing the audiences summoned and mobilized concretely by disinformation based on ongoing moral disputes in a given sociocultural context. Such investigations would allow us to go beyond the tendency to reduce human action to its digital footprints (Livingstone, 2018), contemplating the interpretative processes adopted

<sup>19</sup> Although the results point to central groups in the circulation of false stories about gender and sexuality, with emphasis on religious groups, this study did not aim to analyze the interests or methods used by these groups to produce and share fake news. It was limited to discussing the delimitation and reinforcement of moral boundaries, a discussion that can aid future investigations on the consider the formation of groups and networks that share disinformation.

by the subjects to understand this type of disinformation and symbolize them in the social fabric. Finally, they would also help to understand the moralities triggered by these untrue narratives, revealing how and through what mechanisms they make the normativities explicit for their readers. ■

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