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# Co-viewing a lesbian kiss between two elderly characters: Unveiling axes of oppression through the Brazilian telenovela Babilônia

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**Abstract:** This article looks at how digital spaces not initially designed for co-viewing become places for resisting the dominant heteronormative discourses of female sexuality spread by different sectors of Brazilian society and which are reinforced in television and social media. The article is part of a study on co-practices in connected platforms related to Brazilian prime-time viewing. We used a qualitative and multi-method approach with data from participant observation, interviews, and a questionnaire with users who co-viewed the Brazilian telenovela Babilônia in two unofficial Facebook groups. A kiss between two elderly female characters of the telenovela Babilônia caught the attention of religious and conservative politicians, who organized a boycott in accordance with patriarchal values. Therefore, co-viewers discussed the representation of female sexuality and reflected on its intersection with the characters' age, gender and sexuality, as well as the country's current political situation and its interweaving with religion. The co-viewing practices were examined with a feminist critical discourse analysis, focusing on the practices that emerged inductively during co-viewing in relation to elderly female lesbianism. The findings indicate that, through connected co-viewing, users create alternative public spheres that can challenge the social order in which sexuality is constructed based on heterodeterministic media representations of gender.

**Keywords:** *Intersectionality; Gender; Ageism; Sexuality; Feminist critical discourse analysis; Co-viewing; Telenovela; Counterpublics*

## **1. Introduction**

*“Babilônia had everything to be very good. But the religious homophobic reactionary group that defends moral and traditional values got shocked with a kiss between two old ladies and decided to promote a boycott.” (Thaís, interviewee).*

*This interviewee sums up one of the main social issues that emerged during this study of the co-viewing practices of followers of the Brazilian prime-time telenovela Babilônia (Ambitious Women) from Globo Network in two unofficial Facebook groups. The general aim of the research was to understand for what reasons and in which ways co-viewing practices were being carried out within unofficial Facebook groups that followed a Brazilian prime time telenovela. To study co-viewing practices, the researchers selected the next prime time telenovela to air to be able to co-view with the groups that had formed some weeks before it began, when the network released teasers and trailers. The telenovela was called Babilônia.*

*Babilônia* was aired on the Globo network from 16 March to 28 August in 2015, Monday to Saturday at 9 p.m. Like all Globo telenovelas, it brought up an important topic of debate, in this case elderly lesbianism. The Globo network includes contemporary social issues in their prime time telenovela plots to spark debate, a practice that is known as social merchandising (Atencio, 2014; Lopes, 2009). This works similarly to product placement, but instead of a product, a current or pressing social issue is inserted into the telenovela plot to generate discussion. During *Babilônia*'s airing period the elderly kiss was the focus of much debate in the general media as well as social media, and even reached the Brazilian Congress. The religious and political group called Evangelical Parliamentary Front publicly attacked the series, both on social media and in an official statement. They encouraged viewers to boycott the telenovela. In addition, Marco Feliciano, a congressional representative and pastor, requested his two million Facebook followers to boycott the telenovela under the pretext that *Babilônia* would destroy the traditional Brazilian family and impose a gay dictatorship.

During the co-viewing of *Babilônia*, reflective discussions on elderly female sexuality and its intersection with religion and heteronormative values in national politics were recurrent in the studied groups. This article aims to understand how the studied Facebook groups' responses to *Babilônia*'s inclusion of elderly lesbianism (as part of Globo's social merchandising agenda) expand and generate new spaces for resisting the dominant heteronormative discourses of sexuality, gender, and age that are reinforced by the Brazilian religious and political groups in power.

We used a qualitative multi-method approach that included participant observation within the Facebook groups during the six months that *Babilônia* was on air, semi-structured interviews with group users, and a questionnaire. The data related to the focus of this article were analysed through the lens of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) (Lazar, 2005, 2007), which helps to reveal the complex and subtle (or not so subtle) ways that gendered practices are produced, maintained, negotiated and challenged in particular social contexts. Therefore, the article focuses on the relationality of gender as a heterogeneous category, part of a constant process of gender co-construction. This process is mutually shaped through the various intersecting aspects of identity, such as sexuality, race, social class, and age, as well as through the multiple aspects of social life, such as people, institutions, media (Crenshaw, 1991; Lazar, 2007; Shotwell & Sangrey, 2009), and media representations that resonate in the way discourses permeate socio-cultural practices.

As we detected reflective practices concerning the different axes of oppression in the representation and reception of the lesbian kiss among elderly characters in *Babilônia*, we decided to use the intersectionality concept as an analytical tool. Intersectionality helps to reveal the different vectors of oppression and inequality that interconnect with each other in a particular phenomenon (Crenshaw, 1991). In this case, the *Babilônia* kiss involved the axes of gender, sexuality, and age.

## **2. Social merchandising of sexualities**

The plots of Brazilian prime time telenovelas tend to show the Brazilian contemporary reality with a touch of critical debate on socio-historic issues and on the social conditions experienced by telenovela characters (Lopes, 2009).

Since the 1990s, Globo has partnered with a social responsibility consultancy company called Comunicarte. They did this to introduce social merchandising (Schiavo, 2006) into their

telenovelas. This is an institutionalized practice of including a problem or social issue in prime-time plots in order to stimulate public debate (Atencio, 2014). Social merchandising can be considered part of a global trend of neoliberalism, in which companies take the responsibility that was usually attributed to the states to create corporate value when social actions are promoted (Sadler & Lloyd, 2009). Thus, corporations can increase the value of their brand and, at the same time, become involved with governmental and non-governmental actors as well as various social groups. However, in Globo's case, it can also be considered as a way of detaching from the image of the previous authoritarian period (1964–1985).

During the dictatorship, the few telenovelas which touched on themes that deviated from what the military considered to be correct behaviour were censored. The subject of sexuality was represented in a heterodeterministic way and often censored by the military regime, which ended in the mid-1980s. The few times queer characters were included it was to ridicule them or use them as a way of demonstrating what was an aberration in that society (La Pastina & Joyce, 2015).

In the mid-1980s, power was transferred from the military to the civilians (La Pastina, Patel, & Schiavo, 2004). Thus, Globo's prime-time telenovelas could increase the social issues discussed in the plots, shifting from purely entertaining content with limited socio-political discussions to more educational and political content (La Pastina et al., 2004). In the 1990s, there were attempts to portray lesbians and gays without falling into the typical dualist stereotype gay/effeminate and lesbian/masculinized (La Pastina & Joyce, 2015). Nonetheless, they often failed due to external forces, such as religious groups, sponsors, and audience rating companies (Joyce, 2013). Most lesbian characters in the telenovelas ended up dead or separated.

Only in the past decade have these themes gained greater attention so that these characters, and their stories, are now being portrayed with broader multidimensionality (Joyce, 2013). LGBTQ couples have now begun to be represented without getting killed, although they still do not have the intimacy that heterosexual couples are portrayed with. LGBTQ characters in television are “infrequently allowed to kiss, when they are allowed such displays of affection, it will often be through the idea of a kiss, rather than seeing the kiss between two people of the same sex” (Martin, 2014, p.156). As an example, the third largest network in Brazil, SBT (Brazilian System of Television), was the first network to portray a female gay kiss in 2011 after the approval of marriage between people of the same sex in Brazil, showing a small increment in ratings. While at Globo, a female gay kiss between young women only occurred in 2014 in the telenovela *Em Família* (Helena's Shadow). This kiss occurred after a successful build-up from the previous telenovela called *Amor à Vida* (Trail of Lies), in which the first male gay kiss was shown on Brazilian TV.

### ***3. The Brazilian prime time telenovela: format and star system***

Brazilian telenovelas are often mistaken with soap operas when they are referred to in the English language. However, there are some differences between these serialized genres. Brazilian telenovelas are less melodramatic than soap operas, as they include representations of pressing problems and social issues that are part of current events happening in the country, as well as possible real-world experiences experienced by the characters (Lopes, 2009). They have a planned final date, but they can always have a few more or a few less episodes according

to the audience's response (Pires, 2017). A Brazilian telenovela airs Monday to Saturday at 9 p.m. and lasts around 180–200 episodes depending on their success.

The Brazilian telenovela can be considered an open work as it begins to air with some footage already shot. There is footage material for twenty episodes, and the rest is written and produced while the telenovela is airing (Atencio, 2014). In Portuguese they are called “folhetins” because of their similarity to French Feuilleton from the 19th century (La Pastina, 2001; Ortiz, Borelli, & Ramos, 1989). This analogy is because like the popular narratives that were written and distributed two centuries ago in France, Brazilian telenovelas are written while they are running and changes can be implemented on the go. Despite having a more realistic orientation, they have a touch of melodrama and good and evil are present in the plot and characters that represent certain moral standards. In addition, the story lines the scriptwriters and producers develop can include feedback from the viewers (Atencio, 2014).

The telenovela is considered one of the interlocutors in national political debates (La Pastina, 2001) and a form of collective imaginary. People look to telenovela plots and celebrities for information on behaviour, beauty, lifestyle, products, and fashion (Martins & Martins, 2016; Ronsini, Brignol, Despexe, Marques, & Chagas, 2017). Telenovelas were fundamental for the creation of the Brazilian Star System. The Brazilian Star System began in the theatre, though it was consolidated with the telenovelas of Globo Network (Cunha, 2017). Usually, the actresses and actors gain the status of celebrity. They are sold as role models and mark tendencies in other media outlets and on social media platforms (Cunha, 2017; Ronsini et al., 2017). Therefore, well-established celebrities play an important role in how the followers of the telenovela identify with the narrative.

#### ***4. The relationality of gender and an intersectional approach***

In the previous sections, we saw that the Brazilian prime time telenovela generates debate using its celebrities as social role models and plots to represent diverse social groups, social contexts, and social problems. In this section, we will reflect on how heteronormativity can oppress media representations and social practices related to intersecting aspects of identity like gender, age, and sexuality. This is because Babilônia tried to break heteronormative representations and revealed multiple axes of oppression still present in Brazilian society.

Colebrook (2004) defined the concept of gender as “the model of all difference” and not as a homogeneous category. Nevertheless, this does not mean considering only the differences between men and women. In the nineties, Crenshaw (1991) showed that the model of all difference included more than just one variable based on sex, and called it intersectionality. This approach critiques an only-gender problem or an only-race problem, and examines a social problem by looking at the overlap of power structures that generate oppression, inequalities, and exclusions, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and age, among other identity group categories. Therefore, an intersectional approach emphasizes that, when looking at a social phenomenon, the multiple and simultaneous systems of oppression and axes of inequality should be taken into account (Meyer, 2012).

This study focuses on the reactions and consequences of this television kiss for Brazilian society based on the data obtained from the studied groups. This automatically leads to thinking about gender as a relational category in which an intersectional approach highlights how a kiss between two lesbians, who belong to a specific age group, disturbs the hegemonic socio-

cultural discourse. Therefore, the homophobic reactions and symbolic violence revealed by the kiss do not seem to be a problem of just gender or sexuality. This is seen as an overlap of axes that also includes an often-overlooked axis: age.

Age can be seen as one axis of inequality that comprises three aspects: “First, age serves a social organizing principle; second, different age groups gain identities and power in relation to one another; and third, age relations intersect with other power relations” (Calasanti, Slevin, & King, 2006, p. 17). This happened during the airing of *Babilônia* with religious figures and conservative politicians.

Age by itself is not inherently oppressive; however, like gender and sexuality, it can become oppressive when subjected to heteronormative patterns. As Utrata points out (2011) “Women who are perceived as being of a certain age, and are seen as grandmothers, are constrained to do gender differently” (p. 619) from younger women and are held accountable by different institutions. Media can be considered one of these institutions as they broadly reproduce discourses for their audiences that can be heteronormative and give women an immaculate position, in which they should dedicate themselves to the home and family only (Ronsini, Dexpexe, Coutinho, Corrêa, & Dahlehh, 2019). Media can also stipulate correct behaviour based on age parameters (Walters, 2003).

Moreover, the aspect of sexuality intersected with the concept of gender unveils the heteronormative patterns that create the norm (Butler, 1990; Wittig, 1986). The construction of heteronormative patterns has for a long time now been ascribed to phallocentrism in the gaze of the audience (Mulvey, 1975). That is, the relationship between the concepts of gender, sexuality and age in television studies entails an embodiment of a male audience, and therefore a male gaze that encourages an interpretation of lesbian plots as always fulfilling a heterosexual desire. At the same time, this heterosexism has to do with a particular configuration of the female body as it is represented in neoliberalism, usually as sexually active for a male gaze (Tsai, 2010), or as the “alpha female”, a young, heterosexual and empowered woman (Lazar, 2007), in which elderly women are usually excluded. Thus, as the interviewee’s statement at the beginning of this article indicates, the telenovela kiss was aimed at something other than a male gaze. Therefore, homophobic and heteronormative reactions quickly appeared.

For instance, Raley and Lucas (2008) identify four stages of the representation of LGBTQ characters in television series (based on Clark's theories). These four progressive stages are non-representation, ridicule, regulation, and respect. Non-representation is the invisibility of these characters in the media. Ridicule is when LGBTQ characters are used only for humour. Regulation is when they are represented only in a limited way, but within socially acceptable roles. Finally, respect is when characters are represented in both negative and positive roles that are part of everyday life, such as having romantic relationships and interacting with children. These authors claim that the media are slowly moving towards regulation and respect, but also state that these stages can be fluid and certain representations may regress to previous stages.

However, reflecting on the age of the *Babilônia* characters, the ridicule or the non-representation stages are altered, and progression towards respect and regulation is interrupted in favour of the androcentric representation of the female body. The plasticity of the female body is a factor regulated by patriarchy around two specific axes: age and femininity. It is normalized through the discourses of health, psychology, mass media and religion (González Ramos, Enguix, & Revelles-Benavente, 2018). Thus, the presence of lesbian partners on

television is fine as long as they fit the male gaze, that is, their bodies are heteronormatively perfect.

Nonetheless, when becoming old, the body, as Krekula (2007) indicates in her study about the intersection of gender and age with women above 75 years old, can have a twofold meaning. The negative meaning is part of the above mentioned androcentric regulative aspects of the body, “the physical body” that falls out of the media standards of beauty and youth. While the more positive meaning, is “the dressed-up body”, a body that can show empowerment, experience and elderly women’s capability of taking care of themselves in their later life. Nevertheless, in the media, this type of aging characterized by the dressed-up body tends to remain invisible or, as Hess (2017) points out, older people are frequently represented and imagined in decline, as asexual, or marked by the perpetuation of youthfulness in the media (p.2).

Therefore, an intersectional approach makes it possible to identify the different layers that complexify and constitute oppression in a situated manner. In this study, this approach is used to show how “social divisions also exist in the ways people experience subjectively their daily lives in terms of inclusion and exclusion, discrimination and disadvantage [...] at the level of representation, being expressed in images and symbols, texts and ideologies, including those to do with legislation” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p.198) and religion, when a show that touches these problems is co-viewed.

### ***5. Co-viewing within connected and unofficial Facebook groups***

Co-viewing is considered a peer phenomenon (McDonald, 1986) that allows viewers to exchange their impressions of a TV show, as well as learn and enjoy from it. Before the use of connected platforms and SNS as we know it now, co-viewing referred to the practice of sitting in front of a TV set watching and discussing a television program together (Pires & Roig, 2016). Usually, co-viewing impressions are grounded in the viewer’s expectations about the show they are watching combined with their previous experiences, which may imply debating about related social issues (Pires, 2017). The genre of a co-viewed show plays an important role for such practices to occur. The kind of media content that is co-viewed could spark different practices related to the process of reasoning about it, and the companionship co-viewers want to have (Pires, 2018b). Thus, we understand that the particular features of the Brazilian telenovela genre, for example that it includes social merchandising, is broadcast daily, and is an open work, contribute to shaping the way co-viewing practices occur, even in social media platforms. It sets an agenda to be discussed, a time and place (digital and/or in-person) to be co-viewed and generates expectations that viewers’ opinions will be heard. Therefore, this study aimed to contribute to recent studies carried out since 2009 by the Brazilian team of the Ibero-American Observatory of Television Fiction headed by Lopes that have aimed to understand the viewing activities on connected platforms from the users’ viewpoints, fan activities, fan activism, among other topics that are further explained in a related study (Pires, 2018).

In relation to co-viewing, audience research has shown that television viewing is largely a social experience and the use of television cannot be separated from anything else that surrounds it, which includes the macro and micro socio-political context (Morley & Silverstone, 1990). It is well known that this kind of research offers insights “into the

interpretive processes and everyday contexts of media use, where audiences rearticulate and enact the meanings of mass communication” (Jensen, 1993, p. 26). Therefore, this study focuses on co-viewing and post-viewing moments because they represent a shared consumption between peers of an entertainment product. Moreover, when performed within social media platforms and across multiple screens, co-viewing practices allow people to connect easily. These platforms and devices can be considered “multitasking-facilitating media technology”, which further aid people to control when, where and how they consume media (Wang & Tchernev, 2012). Lang and Chrzan (2015) point out that tasks similar to connected co-viewing, such as watching and surfing the web, may require a simultaneous processing of information or may require the user to switch back and forth to make sense of multiple information sources. In addition, different co-viewing practices include non-synchronous activities that can be seen as a mode of collaboration rather than competition (Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012). Therefore, connected co-viewing is seen as a practice that can be marked by both synchronous and asynchronous activities and interweaving practices. This is because the expansion of co-viewing to connected spaces has become a practice that includes sharing content with others during viewing and post-viewing activities (Haridakis & Hanson, 2009). It also includes discussion of social issues among remote viewers that are not necessarily acquainted, but who participate in the same digital space (Pires, 2018b). Furthermore, co-viewing in its connected format leads to the creation of a mediated public sphere (Lee & Choi, 2017).

The idea of a public sphere developed by Habermas (1991) supposed that all citizens would become equally involved in critical public debate and the generation of moral values. However, it excludes other collectives like women from this participation and access to deliberation, and therefore it has been largely criticized for being somewhat idealized (Papacharissi, 2002). Nonetheless, this idea is still valid as there is not only one public sphere, but rather multiple spheres that have counterpublics from the dominant public sphere (Warner, 2002). Counterpublics are groups of the society like the LGBTQ community that are less “..privileged, and which give voice to collective identities and interests” (Papacharissi, 2002, p.11). In this study, we look at co-viewing groups as spaces for viewers in connected platforms to debate about politics and social problems during their viewing activities while participating in communities online, and therefore *addressing their concerns about other publics and counterpublics* (Warner, 2002).

## **6. Methods**

In this study, we used multi-methods, which helped to better understand the studied cases and the complex relationships (Stake, 2005) Facebook group users had with Babilônia’s inclusion of elderly lesbianism. This approach also provided an overview of how these unofficial groups serve to expand and generate new spaces to resist heteronormative discourses of gender, age, and sexuality.

The multi-method approach included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a qualitative questionnaire. This article focuses only on the data from participant observation and the interviews because this topic was more evident in the data from these sources. During the six months in which the show was broadcast, the telenovela was co-viewed with users in the two studied groups while the telenovela was being broadcast. The researchers connected on Facebook and watched the telenovela while participating in the conversations held while Babilônia was on air. In group 1, the administrator created a space for co-viewing every day

through a Facebook post encouraging comments on each episode. In group 2, conversations were less structured.

Datasets were first mined with the N capture plugin from NVIVO 10 to extract data from the groups and later hand-recorded, as Facebook's application programming interface has changed and prevents mining data from closed groups. In both cases, these datasets were imported to NVIVO and coded (categorized) according to themes that emerged in the viewing discussions. The study applied non-probabilistic purposive sampling (Rubin & Babbie, 2016) by selecting the two most active Babilônia groups on Facebook before Babilônia started to air. The general goal of the research project was to recognize the reasons and ways co-viewing practices were being carried out within unofficial Facebook groups that followed the next Brazilian prime time telenovela to air. Therefore, the research team selected the group in which users posted every day. The other identified groups did not have many posts or only the group creator posted comments.

The researchers focused on the connected co-viewing activities performed within unofficial Facebook groups as it made it possible to observe practices without interference or censorship from the Globo network. It was decided to study co-viewing in unofficial Facebook groups in order to focus attention on the activities performed within these spaces instead of within official spaces mediated by the network. In mediated spaces, it would be difficult to see practices that might be considered illegal, such as file exchanges (Pires, 2018b), or other practices also identified during the study, such as debates about the function of the telenovela, the way it represents reality, and its technical features, and finally, the representation of lesbianism in the elderly. Nevertheless, moderation did occur in the unofficial groups, as group creators and administrators tended to ban users when co-viewing discussions became heated. This usually occurred after people started to become aggressive and began to swear at each other or share conservative and extreme-right content against the telenovela. Therefore, in the analysis section, it can be noted that all the comments are in favour of Babilônia's social merchandising because the administrators did not allow the negative comments to circulate.

One of the researchers' personal profiles was used to present the study to group owners and administrators and gain informed consent from the members. New members were then informed through a dedicated and regularly updated Facebook page about the research project, a page that helped to acquire informed consent (Pires, 2016, 2018, 2018b). The groups had a large variety of members during the broadcasting months. Although they reached more than five thousand users at certain points, only a few users were constant participants in each group. The anonymity of socio-demographic data in the Facebook profiles made it impossible for the researchers to access identity-based data, such as the participants' gender and age. It was only possible to guess gender information based on the users' names and comments, which are usually associated with a particular gender in Portuguese. Twenty of these users were interviewed.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted to compare and contrast what was being observed within the groups. During the interview, the respondents were first asked to describe their experiences as co-viewers of the telenovela format in connected spaces, the type of devices they used, the practices they did while watching within the groups and outside with family and friends. They also talked about their media consumption not only in relation to the telenovela but also in relation to other media products. Second, they were asked to explain their experiences within the Facebook groups dedicated to Babilônia and their perception of media realism in the telenovela plot due to the social merchandising. The reflections about the kiss and female sexuality emerged at this point. The respondents were asked more or less specific

questions based on their responses. The interviews lasted from approximately thirty minutes to an hour and a half. The interviews were then imported to NVIVO, and were between 3 and 6 pages in length.

Participants were assured through Facebook posts within the groups that all data would be anonymized, during the interviews and at the beginning of the questionnaire. Therefore, in the analysis section, pseudonyms are used for the quotes from the participants.

## **7. Analysis**

Performing a FCDA implies situating the co-viewing practices within the context in which the discourse takes shape (Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Wodak, 2015). Thus, we will examine the interconnections between Babilônia's plot, the broader social-political context of the country and the discourse of the co-viewers during their viewing activities in relation to the four analysis sections: 1) The Representation of Female Sexuality; 2) The Representation of Female Sexuality and its Intersection with the Characters' Age; 3) The Representation of Female Sexuality and the Current Politics of the Country; and 4) The Representation of Female Sexuality and its Interweaving with Religion.

As the studied groups generated a space for resisting the status quo of the country, the analysis focuses on those viewers' reflections that aim to change the general social order during co-viewing. This decision was made to better understand the ways connected viewing practices are able to materially alter the social order and reveal the axes of oppression of a determined character identity representation as *“every act of meaning-making through spoken and written language use [...] contributes to the reproduction and maintenance of the social order, and also in the sense of resisting and transforming that order”* (Lazar, 2005, p. 11).

### **7.1. Representation of female sexuality in Babilônia**

The actresses who enacted the lesbian kiss (Fernanda Montenegro and Natalia Timberg) in Babilônia were old celebrities from the beginning of the Brazilian Star System. Generations have grown up watching them, and a part of the traditional audience may have expected that their characters' behaviour would be in accordance with their age (Utrata, 2011) (both were in their eighties during the airing) and star status as usually occurs with old characters.

The kiss occurred in the first episode of Babilônia. At this point, viewers were not familiarized with the characters' storylines, although the network released short videos to introduce the characters before Babilônia began. Estela (Natalia Timberg) and Teresa (Fernanda Montenegro) were portrayed in their room talking about their concerns, about Estela's daughters, one of which was alive and the other had died in childbirth. Their conversation centred on the daughter who was alive, a character called Beatriz. She was coming back from Portugal after her husband died and she escaped from a lawsuit for money laundering with a civil engineer construction company. When the conversation finished, they exchanged an affectionate kiss, like any married heterosexual couple. There was no previous build-up of their relationship for a kiss to happen as is usual with LGBTQ characters in Brazilian telenovelas (La Pastina & Joyce, 2015). Thus, in the first episode, the scriptwriters attempted to represent them with respect, as defined by Raley and Lucas (2008).

However, the airing of the Babilônia kiss meant interference in the general discourse on principles of heteronormativity and Evangelical religion. Public attention was primarily

focused on Estela and Teresa, the two female characters who represented homosexuality in the elderly without any trace of naivety, and who also did not represent the elderly in a process of decline (Hess, 2017). As one interviewee explains, in *Babilônia* “acclaimed elderly actresses were used to represent the contrary to what is commonly defined as correct, as the norm” (Marco) for women of their age.

The characters of Estela and Teresa were socially active, politically engaged, successful and still working in their own businesses (an antique business and law office respectively). Moreover, their relationship represented a non-patriarchal family model: a family with two mothers. As explained in the story, more than thirty years ago Estela left her unhappy marriage with a man to live with Teresa. The two women raised Rafael, the child of Estela's daughter who died during childbirth. The characters' bodies did not attend to the needs of the neoliberal market, they did not inspire sexual desire in a male gaze (Lazar, 2007) and proved that tradition and values are not necessarily safe in the figure of the elderly woman who has always safeguarded the home. Their bodies corresponded to the “dressed up body” described by Krekula (2007), as Estela and Teresa were empowered, active, well dressed, and transmitted non-patriarchal values to their son. For conservative audiences, their space in the media was supposed to be confined to non-representation as in many other telenovelas, soaps and series that follow a patriarchal system of gender and sexual representation around the world (La Pastina & Joyce, 2015; Martin, 2014). *Babilônia* broke through this non-representation stage by airing a prime-time kiss between two elderly lesbians in the first episode. The consequences of this decision included that religious members of the Brazilian congress promoted boycotts of the telenovela and its sponsor in social media and through an official statement. The lesbianism between elderly women represented a symbolic threat to those extreme-right audiences and politicians who seek to maintain the patriarchal and traditional social order in contemporary Brazil and ignore the existence of this social group. Therefore, further kisses among LGBTQ characters were removed from the telenovela as “the public was intolerant, preferred to maintain the same old taboos intact, and follow a 21st century reactionary agenda rather than discuss issues that matter for many people who are in a situation of exclusion” (Caio, interviewee).

It is important to note that Globo Network usually records some episodes (12–18) before the first airing date and produces the rest of them while airing, which allows the company to develop focus groups and implement changes on the go (Atencio, 2014). *Babilônia*'s lower-than-expected ratings led Globo to carry out official focus groups after two weeks of airing. This led to significant changes in the scripting and staging of the program, including the exclusion of kisses among queer characters, which did not happen again until the final episode. According to the scriptwriter, this was due to the influence of the conservative part of the audience (Braga, 2015). Thus, *Babilônia* viewers encountered a real-life situation of two women kissing each other (albeit in the privacy of their home and not in public) at the beginning of the telenovela, but did not encounter it again until the end of the show. This may be partly because women in this age group do not usually kiss in public because they were raised with different values (Walters, 2003, p. 88). In addition, the characters represented two women in their 80s who were not ascribed to be asexual and did not follow the age-appropriate behaviour that is usually established by heteronormative discourses about old LGBTQs (Hess, 2017).

In *Babilônia*, the character Teresa was a lawyer who fought for the justice of ex-prisoners of the Brazilian dictatorship and for the rights of minorities such as women, LGBTQ, and black people who suffered from their heritage of slavery in Brazil. She also fought against political corruption. Her path crossed with a support character, Aderbal, a corrupt Evangelist politician

involved in several scandals, extra-marital affairs, and money laundering in public constructions. She had to deal with this character on two levels. First, on a personal level, because her son had a relationship with his daughter; thus, dealing with prejudices due to her sexuality and family configuration. Second, because she was investigating cases of political corruption in civil engineering companies that illegally financed political campaigns, in which he was implicated. Aderbal represented a politician who used religion to get votes from religious believers, and who attempted to maintain the heterosexual gender order through tradition to deviate the focus from his corruption. This representation led some politicians in the Brazilian Congress to attack the telenovela. They were also unhappy that *Babilônia* represented a similar story to the facts portrayed in the news at the time: operation “Car Wash”. This was an investigation that revealed that construction companies were involved in laundering money in collaboration with various politicians from different parties, including a number of conservative and neo-Pentecostal congress members (Robineau, 2015). Moreover, Globo network’s main competitor, Record network (owned by the founder of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God), capitalized on the controversy and broadcast the first biblical telenovela produced in Brazil, called *The Ten Commandments*, in the same time slot (Thornhill, 2015). The presence of a religious telenovela, as well as the similarities between *Babilônia*’s plot and the on-going political investigation produced specific consequences in the co-viewing practices that were being carried out.

## ***7.2. Representation of female sexuality and its intersection with the characters’ age***

After the first episode of *Babilônia* and the boycott promoted by conservative politicians, users from both unofficial Facebook groups engaged in a co-viewing practice that we have called ‘co-viewing-rating-practices’. They discussed *Babilônia*’s ratings during co-viewing and tried to find the reasons why they were low. Co-viewing-rating-practices pointed out sensitive issues that could influence audience responses. Sexuality became the most pressing issue, leading to different discussions that started during co-viewing and continued after the airing of the *Babilônia* episodes.

In the studied Facebook groups, there was a shared understanding of the general backlash against the telenovela: the presence of homosexuality at the beginning of its airing, as posed by Jonas from group 2 on March 24 during the airing of *Babilônia*: "Do you know what the main sins of the telenovela are? To be called Babylon and to show a gay kiss in the first episode." The user here identifies what he considers to be the main reasons for the telenovela’s lower ratings: the religious name and the kiss. *Babilônia* in Portuguese means Babylon, which is a city referred to in the Bible, although the title was selected to represent a Brazilian slum in Rio de Janeiro. Politicians did not seem to fully understand or did not want to understand this difference in location (Rio de Janeiro versus a kingdom in ancient Mesopotamia) as the user says. According to the Bible, the tower of Babel was God's punishment for humankind wanting to create a tower able to reach the kingdom of God. As a response, God gave the people building the tower different languages to prevent them from being able to communicate and finish the tower. Therefore, the fact that the network decided to entitle the telenovela Babylon and open it with a lesbian kiss was perceived by the traditional sectors of society as an attempt to interfere with God's plans, like the tower, by “imposing” a counterpublic agenda (Warner, 2002; Papacharissi, 2002) on a dominant patriarchal social sphere.

However, as this co-viewing discussion continued, the participants started to identify another problem that goes beyond a simple kiss between two women and started to carry out

intertwined practices with co-viewing-rating-practices that we have classified as ageism-reflective-practices. The co-viewers identified age as one of the main axes of oppression in the reaction to the Babilônia kiss and related it to the low ratings. The ageism-reflective-practices relate to the characters' age and what it implies to conservative politicians: "I am beginning to think that this whole fuss is not about the kiss. It is not about prejudice against the kiss." (Carla, Facebook post in private group 2, March 24, 2015). The fact that lesbianism is presented at the beginning of the telenovela came to qualify as interference in the general discourse that current conservative politicians were trying to promote: a traditional heterosexual family with submissive women. Therefore, the telenovela's social merchandising conveyed a resistance message towards the pre-established social order, which required immediate action through the same discourse, in other words, through public media and social media.

Thus, the two Babilônia elderly lesbian characters returned to living "unkissed in a world of endless kissing" (Walters, 2003, p. 66) between heterosexuals. This is because Teresa and Estela did not even kiss in scenes inside their homes where they could privately show intimacy. For example, Janaina, from group 2, stated that "If it was a couple composed of a man and a woman, kissing wouldn't be a problem" and, as Brazil still has "a very conservative society, people tend to ignore that those kisses happen every day in various corners of the country". This follower's comments demonstrate that the conservative part of Brazilian society expects women to have a heteronormative sexuality and to be represented in the media as such.

### ***7.3. Representation of female sexuality and the current politics of the country***

The government and the conservative public tried to reduce and silence the social merchandising conveyed in Babilônia. As one participant in Facebook group 2 admits, "there is much more prejudice against them being old than being lesbians. In other telenovelas this discrimination didn't happen, on the contrary, in Amor à Vida it was highly praised" (Francesca, Facebook post in private group 2, March 27, 2015). This commentary shows how ageism-reflective-practices go beyond discussing ratings and compare lesbian characters from previous telenovelas. This shows that the three axes of oppression (age, gender, and sexuality) can be identified based on the co-viewers' background knowledge of a range of media they consume.

Female lesbianism is often represented in a biased way by the mainstream media as stated by a group 2 participant, "This is happening because of the age of the actresses. Kisses between homosexuals have happened before, including on SBT, and nobody made such a fuss. If they were two young women, everybody would love it..." (Carla, Facebook post in private group 2, March 24, 2015). The statement above shows how media can reinforce that women are empowered to express their sexual desire only if they follow a neoliberal system that accepts and represents them as heterosexualized, young, able-bodied, while discriminating against other women's characteristics that do not fit this profile (Lazar, 2007).

According to Walters (2003, p. 60), television offers a much more intimate setting for sending a particular message into the home, traditionally considered to be the families of a particular society. Thus, when a show portrays homosexual intimacy that falls out of the male gaze and the neoliberal standards of normality, like Babilônia attempted to do, it permeates general knowledge, which part of (the conservative) society is not ready to accept. Therefore, the participant's commentary indicates that Babilônia's first episode challenged the traditional invisibility of women who have other identity characteristics that go beyond those accepted by the general heterosexual social order: to be old, lesbian and a woman.

In the same conversation, another viewer highlights a problem that concerns not only older LGBTQ but the entire collective because “the kiss between Teresa and Estela happened without people knowing their history as a couple, how they got together and felt attracted to one another...” (Natalia, Facebook post in private group 2, March 24, 2015). This comment points to the tradition of needing to build up a story before a same-sex kiss can occur in Brazilian prime time (La Pastina & Joyce, 2015). This tradition is ascribed to a heterosexual intimacy norm of representation, as this build up is not necessary when a television show portrays heterosexual relationships. As Martin (2014) points out, the representation of gays and other LGBTQ characters is politically marked by heterosexism. Therefore, intimate same-sex encounters are still not well incorporated into televisual spaces despite their social contexts and representation stage.

Another participant found this tendency to represent non-heterosexual love as “ridiculous” because the user sees it as “an unfortunate fact that the majority of people have a limited view on life and diversity of love” and, disagrees “that their story should be told before their kiss happens” (Elio, Facebook post in private group 2, March 24, 2015). In the case of previous Globo telenovelas, queer kisses were only possible and passed inconspicuously through a conservative audience because of a long-term love construction, and due to a lack of intimacy until the moment they kissed, which was usually in the final episode.

#### ***7.4. Representation of female sexuality and its interweaving with religion***

Conversationally speaking (Lazar, 2005), the reference to the religious intersection comes immediately after the reference to the “world” and before the discourses around what is considered to be “normal” in the data collected for the analysis of this telenovela. That is to say, the conversational flow that these groups develop during co-viewing relates to what is considered normal with religious precepts. Discussions went as far as evangelical groups comparing homosexuality with zoophilia and paedophilia or stating that the only family with rights is the one that fits the heterosexual conception of a traditional family. One participant showed his dissatisfaction and claimed the need to accept new forms of families, “(...)it’s not fair to generalize and affirm that “Brazil” does not approve the telenovela because of the rights of the family, as not every family is Christian, rather, Brazil is not Christian, it is a secular state”. (Laerte, Facebook post in private group 1, March 20, 2015).

The user demonstrates that the pillars on which society is built are not only based on heterosexuality, but also on religious principles that organize private (family relations) and public (social relationships) practices. Issues of race, gender, and religion create (hegemonic) community values and when these are threatened, right-wing populist discourses argue against the potential loss of all that is positive in the community and that is being threatened (Wodak, 2015). This creates an oppositional discourse in which one is a victim (right-wing values), and the other is a monster (in this case, the show and its social merchandising). Therefore, when politicians associate homosexuality with zoophilia or paedophilia, they transform the whole show into a monstrosity that is threatening homes and families (because of daily airings on television). Nevertheless, co-viewers, such as Laerte above, emphasize the need to watch the show not as a threat to the traditional family, but as the representation of a family that is not necessarily linked to religious principles. To support his/her argument the user even states that one of these community (Brazil) values is secularism.

Co-viewing practices dealing with power issues were another interruption of the general flow of the conversation on the telenovela's ratings. Concerning the low ratings a user stated to "believe it occurs because when they show lesbians that are discrete and not stereotyped, the evangelicals do not like people to watch, since they are not a negative role model" (Joaquim, Facebook post in private group 1, April 30, 2015). The user points to the three components (gender, sexuality, and age) that are part of the pluralism that is not accepted by fundamentalist politicians. Babilônia's social merchandising makes these internalized non-accepted components visible and challenges these socially constructed norms.

Another viewer comments further on the power struggle: "(...)I believe they [religious politician] did not even see the kiss between the old women, but are using this [the promoted boycott of the telenovela] to get voters from the supportive churches" (Ricardo Facebook post in private group 1, April 30, 2015). Here, the viewer is referring to the power that religion can have in society. Religion's power in a neoliberal era is linked to a form of consumerism, and in the case of neo-pentecostal religions, to a form of controlled consumerism (Possamai, 2018). Thus, it is not surprising that another user brings up the issue of economic gain, "And don't think that these [religious politicians] are not earning something from this boycott. Behind the boycott flows a lot of money. This can be seen with the competitor telenovela that they just released that has a biblical story." (Ana, Facebook post in private group 1, April 30, 2015).

When talking about economic gain and the competitor telenovela, the user points out a characteristic of controlled consumerism imposed by religions: "... a choice to have access to less choice—text and commodities are consumed only if they fit with a specific (chosen) religion... A culture of consumption of religious products is celebrated, but it is required to comply with a specific doctrine or authority. These groups are also avid consumers, and are fully entrenched in neoliberalism, but their choice is much more focused." (Possamai, 2018, p. 22).

Therefore, it is not surprising that conservative politicians promoted a boycott of Babilônia, because the more an audience consumes other products that fit with what they regard as the tradition, the greater the possibility that this audience will follow them, vote for them and keep them in power. Furthermore, to promote the boycott, these politicians used adjectives such as "traditional", "immoral" and "non-educational", which were scrutinized by the viewers during their co-viewing practices.

The mass media still plays a powerful role in opening debates and forming opinions about socio-political issues, such as education and tradition. While co-viewing, inevitably the discussants debated about education and politics, as the politicians were publicly attacking the telenovela with the excuse that it would destroy the traditional family as well as education. During an interview, Aline, an interviewee, explained that the conversations users have during the viewing "serve to show that human sexuality has many strands". These many strands also helped a user from group 1 to share with other viewers the difficulties she had in explaining to her four-year-old son why two elderly women were kissing. According to the user it was difficult, but as the user states, "I managed to teach my son about the different kinds of love that exist and that this happens at different ages" (Flávia, Facebook post in private group 1, April 8, 2015). In this case, Babilônia helped the viewer to renegotiate the meaning of love and family and explain to her child the plurality that exists while talking with other co-viewers.

## **8. Conclusions**

This article studied the connected co-viewing practices related to female homosexuality in the elderly within two unofficial Facebook groups that followed the telenovela *Babilônia*. *Babilônia*, as with all Globo prime time telenovelas, used social merchandising to highlight social issues to generate debate (Atencio, 2014; Lopes, 2009). The telenovela suffered backlash because of the topic. Thus, the followers of the studied groups engaged in intertwined co-viewing practices during connected viewing. These practices were co-viewing-rating-practices and ageism-reflective-practices, which questioned the dominant power and *Babilônia*'s lower ratings compared to previous prime time telenovelas.

Furthermore, the kiss between the two elderly female characters was discussed during these aforementioned co-viewing practices although it only occurred in the first episode. These co-viewing reflections exposed the intersection between gender, age, sexuality, and the situated social context (Brazil) with larger institutions such as formal politics and religion. At the same time, this intersection was proven to be intrinsic to a heterodeterministic society that has a secular state influenced by religious politicians.

Although social merchandising is a neoliberal strategy, it proved to serve as a strong discursive strategy that aids to resist and contest the social order through its deconstruction during co-viewing activities. In the case of *Babilônia*, the social merchandising of lesbianism was consumed and deliberated through co-viewing within connected spaces, where social merchandising was revealed to have an interconnection with the viewers' political context. This relationship serves as a tool for co-viewers to reflect on how heteropatriarchal discourses permeate and influence the media representation of oppressed groups, such as women, LGBTQ, and older people.

The studied groups were not dedicated to activism related to the LGBTQ collective, gender equality, or older adults' rights. However, they were in favour of representing telenovela characters like Teresa and Estela in the respect stage (Raley & Lucas, 2008) and showed that spaces like Facebook groups that are not initially created for co-viewing, can gain this function and serve the common good.

As the studied groups had moderation, they had a horizontal point of view concerning the studied topic. Despite this single vision, these groups have shown to be spaces for acts of resistance by making meaning while co-viewing. This is because these groups are counterpublic spheres (Warner, 2002). That is, in connected spaces like the studied Facebook groups, public spheres that are not as powerful as the dominant ones can be created with their respective counterpublics to resist "in response to their exclusion from the dominant sphere of debate" (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 11). Therefore, the article offers an argument that unveils how communicative processes with social messages like social merchandising can challenge socio-cultural and political discourses.

This particular case offers a methodological strategy for analysing how 1) lesbianism in the elderly is not the desired representation of homosexuality among the dominant public discourse in comparison to homosexuality in young people; and 2) unofficial online groups offer spaces for critical reflection that question hegemonic conservative discourses. The use of multiple methods, combined with FCDA (Lazar, 2007), and an intersectional approach that has the conceptualization of gender as a relational category, provides a complete overview of the mechanisms in which society tries to infer differences that matter in the way media, social media, and politics intervene in homes, families, and traditions. Co-viewing practices have

demonstrated that despite what the general discourse (or the counter-hegemonic one) might try to spread across the media, socialization is not a straightforward process.

Certain conservative patterns still permeate contemporary Brazilian society; however, these patterns are also challenged during the co-viewing process and with social merchandising strategies, even when the product in question is only aired for a short time or is not very popular. After the attempt of representing LGBTQs in *Babilônia* with respect, other telenovelas continued trying. These attempts can be seen in two different ways. On the one hand, they are positive because, after *Babilônia*, other collectives were represented. For instance, in 2017, in the telenovela *A Força do Querer* (*The Edge of Desire*), for the first time in Brazilian prime time a transsexual character was included. In 2019, in a *Dona do Pedaco* (*The Owner of the Piece*), a character who went through a gender change process was represented by a real transgender actress. Thus, demonstrating that social merchandising can also open doors to this collective. On the other hand, they can be seen as not favourable because LGBTQ people still need a build-up in order to have sexual and affectionate encounters in the prime-time telenovela (9 pm). This was the case of the lesbian couple in the prime-time telenovela *Segundo Sol* (*A Second Chance* - 2018) who went through a love construction process before they could finally begin their relationship. Therefore, there is still a long way to go for promoting social merchandising representations with full equality and which achieve better public policies for social groups like LGBTQ, women, and older people, among other collectives.

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