

## Digital activism about gay fatherhood on Instagram: male homoparenting in the picture

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THEMATIC ARTICLE

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**Abstract** *In contemporary Brazil, the number of male fathers taking care of their sons and daughters and the initiatives to produce content about fatherhood on Instagram have been significant. This article aims to analyze the concepts that support the digital activism of homoparenting on Instagram, based on gender studies with men. To this end, a qualitative study was conducted using the life narrative method in a digital environment. The results were analyzed and divided into the following sections: parenting project, personal experience of fatherhood, articulation with LGBT political agenda when parenthood becomes a “business”, and haters, criticism, and adverse reactions. It was concluded that the reflection on the experience of fatherhood/masculinity itself is crossed by the social marker of the difference in sexual orientation and the activism for rights that sustain content production. Thus, the uniqueness of each fatherhood is highlighted since the fact of being gay constructs the fatherhood experience for each man. Despite the initiatives brought forth in this study, changes are still in progress, as rights activism coexists with the advancement of conservative forces, which limit the expressions of sexual and gender otherness.*

**Key words** *Paternity, Masculinity, Homosexuality Male, Political Activism, Social Media*

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## Introduction

In contemporary society, although more and more men are taking on roles to care for their sons and daughters, women are still the protagonists of care work<sup>1</sup>. In Brazil, although the role of family provider is still present, it can be observed that several men have chosen to face the challenge that every change imposes, exercising more gender-equitable attitudes, revealing that fathers can and should be encouraged to carry out care work<sup>2</sup>.

Regarding public policies, the National Policy for Comprehensive Attention to Men's Health (PNAISH), created in 2009, has two core axes that dialogue with the issue of parenthood: "Sexual and Reproductive Health" and "Fatherhood and Care." The document "Partner's Pre-Natal Guide for Health Professionals" highlights the need to contemplate the diversity of family arrangements, especially in the interaction of paternity with color/race, sexual orientation, and gender identity<sup>3</sup>. Although reproductive planning and health actions related to the period of pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period include women, with a focus on the mother-child binomial, there is a growing movement that argues that men can and should be fully involved in reproductive decision-making, from choosing to be a father to supportive participation in pregnancy, childbirth, and child care<sup>3</sup>. However, there are challenges, such as extending the five-day paternity leave, which can only reach a maximum of twenty days for workers in Brazilian companies<sup>4</sup>.

It was observed that the presence of male fathers is increasing in digital media, a space in which content production initiatives about fatherhood and care have been expressive and diverse, with profiles that address socially marked fatherhood experiences, such as homoparenting, black or atypical fatherhood<sup>5</sup>. Although fatherhood is still socially seen as a prerogative of heterosexual men, the visibility of fatherhood for gay men and trans men is increasing as they face the challenges of being recognized in this role in a society with cisheteronormative cultural mandates<sup>6</sup>.

It is important to remember that the relevance given to the nuclear family, comprised of the father, mother, and children, and to the affiliation based on the heterosexual couple is a historical production. The naturalization of this family model produces the belief that a child can only have a father and a mother who encompass

biological, kinship, filiation, and child-rearing care in the same person. Reflecting on differences, considering an intersectional perspective<sup>7</sup>, can help to understand how and why different subordinated groups – black male parents, homosexuals, transsexuals – have demanded different attention to their identity demands for access to rights and guarantee of citizenship<sup>8</sup>.

In this sense, one can observe the growing use of social media, such as Instagram, as a locus of political activism, in which topics, such as possible arrangements for the implementation of a fatherhood project and its unique experiences, as well as the social challenges faced and clues for the promotion of childcare among male couples, are shared. Therefore, this article, in an unprecedented manner, aims to analyze the concepts that support the digital activism of homoparenting on Instagram, based on gender studies with men.

### Digital activism and fatherhood: a contemporary reality

We live in a reality where no separation exists between the real and the virtual, online or offline. To assume anything in this dichotomous sense is to continue "to live in the 20th century"<sup>9</sup>. There is talk about a post-digital era in which all things are connected and interconnected, with no borders to make interaction between different societies impossible.

We live in a period where we are all potential actors in digital political action simply by identifying with a cause. Political action is no longer the responsibility of large regional centers, nor are they centralized, since any citizen can make his/her demands<sup>9</sup>. In this sense, digital activism can join to convene the masses or act in the streets, along with a complementary character geared toward in-person activism. It also enables the linking of different fronts of struggle simultaneously, in a transversality of interests and agendas, allowing for the connectivity of a network of agendas<sup>10</sup>.

Access to information that previously did not have the space to circulate in the dominant media makes it possible to raise and qualify the political debate, in addition to enabling the flow of identity expressions, ways of experiencing sexuality and corporality that are different from already established moral standards, proposing other micro and macro political agendas in health, in which people, groups, and algorithms are intertwined in a complex scheme<sup>10</sup>. This way, we have a social, cultural, and technological sit-

uation that favors subjects' participation. Participation becomes associated with revealing oneself, breaking the dichotomy between the public and the private<sup>11</sup>. This context generally supports new professional profiles, such as blogger and digital influencer<sup>12</sup>.

A digital influencer is a term widely disseminated by the media and present in everyday discussions, also indicating the existence of statements in circulation, although notoriously dispersed. Therefore, each of these transformations depicts practices, dynamics, and changes in the market in which influencers are inserted. Furthermore, it represents the social capital of its relationships and the power of influence over traditional media<sup>12</sup>.

In the specific case of fatherhood, national and international networks encourage discussions about masculinity, fatherhood, and care<sup>13,14</sup>. These networks emphasize that fatherhood, like motherhood, is a social construction that accompanies the fluid character of different identity positions interconnected by social markers of difference, such as age, color/race, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

Although the diversity of masculinities is recognized, as postulated by Connell<sup>15</sup>, the model of hegemonic masculinity, that is, that of the white, heterosexual, virile, middle-class, male family provider, still prevails in the social imagination and the men who escape this model have their masculinity subordinated. Likewise, the current conception of paternity still concerns the framework of heterosexuality, and non-heterosexual fathers, in many cases, have their paternity made invisible, under suspicion of not knowing how to take care of the children, of possible disorders that the children may have, or even of pedophilia<sup>16</sup>. In this sense, these masculine positions concerning fatherhood are also expressed in digital activism on social media.

### Methodological paths

This article is an excerpt from a broader master's thesis in Public Health. This work is a qualitative study, with a socio-anthropological approach in a digital environment, conducted with male fathers who produce digital content about fatherhood on Instagram, aiming to understand the conceptions of fatherhood and care that support the creation of content based on their experiences, their desires, and their challenges of being activists in this scenario.

The method chosen for this study was the life narrative, as it seeks to study a particular fragment of socio-historical reality, with an exploration of the field, with individual and/or pair interviews being conducted. The inclusion criteria for this study were to be a man, a father (biological or not), aged 18 or over, and producing content about fatherhood on the social media Instagram. Participants were selected based on content productions that discussed fatherhood based on social markers of sexual orientation, color/race, and disability. The institution's Research Ethics Committee approved this study, logged under CAAE No. 52206221.9.0000.5269.

The interlocutors were contacted via private message on their Instagram accounts and promptly agreed to participate in the study. Both parents managed one of the profiles and chose to participate in the interview together. The interviews were based on the following trigger questions: Tell me about your paternity story. How did the idea of creating an Instagram profile about fatherhood come about? What difficulties do you face as a gay man, and how did you deal with them before and after fatherhood? We sought to pay attention to issues surrounding the organization of the work routine, the target audience of the profile, the relationship with this audience, and the production of content. Based on Bertaux<sup>17</sup>, subcategories were chosen in light of the comparative analysis of the interviews, which will be presented in the next section.

The data production work took place between 2021 and 2022. The interviews were carried out individually or in pairs via the Google Meet platform. None of the participants requested anonymity of their identification. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full for later analysis. For this article, we began with reflections on two public profiles created by male fathers who produce content about homoparenting, which are: @papai\_e\_papia (André) and @2depais (Gustavo and Robert); André, 46 years old, who has a 12-year-old son and an 11-year-old daughter; and Gustavo and Robert, 31 and 29 years old, who have a son and a daughter who were 29 weeks pregnant at the time.

### Discussion

From the analysis of the interviews, the following categories were listed: parenting project, difficulties faced as a gay man, personal experience of fatherhood, articulation with the LGBT political

agenda, fatherhood as a “business”, and haters, criticism, and adverse reactions.

### The Parenthood Project

There are several ways to achieve parenthood, and an analysis of the literature reveals that the choice of method is directly influenced by the social context and legislation in force in the countries where the couples live. In Brazil, gays and lesbians can have children through adoption, heterosexual relationships, assisted reproduction techniques, and co-parenting agreements<sup>18</sup>. For the interlocutors of this article, the desire to have children was linked to the joint exercise of parenthood, resulting in adoption and *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) as the chosen methods.

Fatherhood emerges as a desire, marked by the weight of responsibility and with a perspective of care beyond financial provision. It is essential to highlight that becoming a father is seen as a process to be lived and acquired throughout the fatherhood experience. André claims that: “*I have always wanted to have children... my partner also always wanted to have children...*”.

Regarding the beginning of the adoption process experienced by André and his partner, he recalls that they were not married at the time, so it was necessary to choose who would enter the process:

*It was in June 2010, we started the adoption process [...] the STF [Brazilian Supreme Court] had not declared the legality of homosexual marriage, so we had that stable union document, but that does not serve as a marriage certificate, it is a contract of mutual coexistence, what I can do between you and me [...] we entered under my partner's name, for several reasons, including the issue of income.*

André expresses that the social recognition of paternity is revealed in the ability to provide for the child financially, corroborating one of the mandates of hegemonic masculinity<sup>15</sup>, in which men are responsible for the financial responsibility of the family. In the case of a gay couple, this is even more valued as a positive prerogative for adoption.

However, with the approval of Resolution No. 175/2013 of the National Council of Justice<sup>19</sup>, which obliges registry offices to celebrate same-sex civil marriages in Brazil, André and his partner are required to get married, and soon after, the latter is qualified in the adoption process. André explains that:

*In the middle of the process, we made friends with the Forum's social worker, who introduced*

*us to the judge, and we did not need to ratify the process. Since we were already married, the judge accepted, so he issued definitive custody of the children in both of our names, even though the initial process was only in my husband's name. In the end, definitive custody was issued in both of our names.*

Regarding the restrictions in the adoption form, André states that:

*They placed a single restriction, which was something that both of us we didn't know how to deal with... which was if there was a child HIV positive, okay? [...] I don't know if I would have the emotional structure to deal with this and not to deal with the disease [...] I wouldn't know how to deal well with the situation of my son having the virus, which would cause him suffering and prejudice.*

Due to the lack of knowledge about the reality of raising a child or adolescent with a disability or illness, prejudice exists even among those seeking adoption<sup>20</sup>. Although current law ensures that children's needs must be prioritized over those of adults, adoptions are defined by the desires and expectations of adopters – who request babies with specific desired characteristics (healthy, white, newborn, among others). Meanwhile, older children remain institutionalized, with no prospect of returning to their families of origin or going to foster families, as they have characteristics that are undervalued – black, over two years old, with disabilities or health problems or who form groups of brothers<sup>21</sup>.

André makes a comparison, on an emotional level, between the adoption process and pregnancy. For André, both go through a gradual process of recognition and excitement. He reports that:

*For obvious reasons, any couple, whether heterosexual, homosexual, or a single man or a single woman, when they adopt, will not go through, obviously, the physiological processes of pregnancy, but all others... anxiety, you go through the anxiety process, of fear, of happiness [...] all those processes that women have...*

During his analogy, André presents the idea that the feeling of motherhood begins earlier for women than for men, as they live this experience bodily. He believes that one of the reasons for paternal abandonment is this difference in experiences, as being a father is a “slower” process that becomes stronger after the birth of the child. For some men, fatherhood is scary because of the responsibility; for others, it is experienced as a process and a mark of their masculinity, as Connell<sup>15</sup> points out:

*As [the belly] grows and the baby moves, you are flooded with that feeling of having a child...*

*for women, you know, men don't have as much of that... perhaps this is... it's the most significant, most important factor.... causing so much... excuse the word... so many idiots abandoning a woman with a child on her lap, because [...] the woman, she becomes a mother when she gets pregnant... the feeling of being a father, many times, doesn't even appear after the child is born.*

André continues with his comparison, stating that regardless of the sexual orientation of the adopting couple or person:

*The adoption process is comparable, mentally, psychologically, and emotionally, to the biological process [...] when you are filing the documentation, it is the equivalent of a woman who discovers she is pregnant... when you are called for the first interview with the psychologist, it's three months of the pregnant belly beginning to appear... And then, the belly starts to appear, and after the first interview, you start to get anxious.*

Gustavo and Robert's fatherhood project came about as they had hoped. According to them, it was a dream built under the influence of heteronormativity and the idea of biological affiliation. Gustavo states that:

*We created our dream [...] we stayed at that moment, imagining what a baby that was a mixture of the two of us would be like, if that were possible, right? I think it's because of the influence of heteronormativity, right? That dream of having a baby with the genetics of the father and mother we tried to fit into our lives.*

Resolution No. 2,294 of the Federal Council of Medicine, from May 27, 2021<sup>22</sup>, updated the rules for using assisted reproduction techniques in Brazil. Among the changes, the knowledge of the identity between donors and recipients stands out, as an exception, in the donation of gametes for kinship up to the 4th (fourth) degree of one of the recipients (first degree - parents/children; second degree - grandparents/siblings; third degree - uncles/nephews; fourth degree - cousins) if there is no consanguinity.

This modification allowed the couple to carry out their fatherhood project as envisioned. Gustavo's sister made the egg donation, and the temporary concession of the uterus was from his cousin, on a non-profit basis, considering that the donor must have at least one living child and belong to the family of one of the partners in a blood relationship until the fourth degree. Fertilization was done with Robert's sperm.

### Difficulties faced as a gay man

Parenting in the context of family configurations, comprised of individuals of the same sex, has been named *homoparenting*. The term emerged in the French context at the end of the 20th century, referring to the desire of a person with a homosexual orientation to be or have the intention of being the father or mother of a child<sup>23</sup>. When reflecting on the difficulties faced by being a gay man, André explains:

*Heterosexual society has this prejudice against gay men, very rooted in structural machismo, and this machismo is not with the figure of the gay man, it is with the figure of the woman. In heterosexual society, it looks at gay men as wanting to be women. I don't want to be a woman [...].*

The equivalence, pointed out by André, in the subordination of women and gay men is complex. Indeed, being a gay man places his masculinity in a position of subalternity<sup>15</sup>. However, as Connell points out, gay men with a gender expression recognized as masculine (“*very straight gays*”) can enjoy the privileges of hegemonic masculinity. However, the notion of the homosexual as “feminine” or as an expression of deviation from hegemonic masculinity remains.

However, it is important to emphasize that gender inequality is an issue that affects women and girls around the world daily and that still needs to be addressed<sup>24</sup>:

*Heterosexual men have this problem “because if a [heterosexual] man has a gay friend, the man will hit on me!”. A very fragile masculinity... when a man becomes a father, he is tested twice: first, he must prove that he is as much a man as a heterosexual man, and, secondly, he needs to demonstrate that he is as much a father as the heterosexual father. Because the gay man, in the conservative's mind, the gay man wants to have a child so he can abuse that child!*

For several heterosexual men, in coexistence between them and homosexual men, there is the impression of a “demarcation of positions”. This demarcation is intended to defend them from possible questions about their masculinity. Masculinity – understood as a constructed identity that is socially recognized and which finds its ideal of differentiation in the hegemonic model – is experienced with the support of homophobia as a regulatory and surveillance device for heterosexual masculinity<sup>15,25</sup>.

*It's widespread for you to recognize this speech they have about same-sex adoption, a parallel with pedophilia. [...] the highest percentage of rapes of*

*children... of girls, you know, happens within the biological family, the traditional family, and it is usually a father, uncle, or godfather who rapes this girl or boy. None of them are gay [...] so when a [gay] man adopts a child, he needs to doubly prove that he is man enough to adopt a child and that he is as good as any other father.*

The construction of the moral panic of pedophilia, from a gender perspective, takes the figure of the “sexual abuser”, generally related to men. When the figure of the “abused” is “boy”, what stands out is not an intersection of vulnerabilities (as in the case of “girls”) but rather a juxtaposition of perversities since the understanding of this relationship is crossed, at the same time by the concepts of homosexuality and pedophilia<sup>15,26</sup>. This disseminates an idea that correlates male homosexuality with pedophilia, relying on the notion of “contagion”, becoming a tactic of re-stigmatization and re-pathologization of homosexuality<sup>26</sup>.

In addition to the fear that the absence of both sexes is capable of disrupting children’s psychological development, other fantasies inhabit the social imagination, such as the danger of sexual abuse and the definition of the child’s homosexual orientation due to parental influence<sup>27</sup>. Furthermore, there is also a debate regarding the right to subject children to more prejudices, given that society still views a family unit formed by a same-sex couple as abnormal.

Gustavo points out that:

*I came from a conservative, right-wing Bolsonaro Christian family, so it was difficult to grow up among them. There was this whole religious issue, this religious weight in my life as a whole, until I reached a point of empowerment where I said, “no, religion will no longer dominate my life, and I will follow my identity” [...] So there were these issues: school, family, religion and professional life.*

The scenario of conservative reorganization at the national level brought effects on the experiences of sexuality and families dissenting from the heterosexual model. In the last twenty years, significant changes have occurred in the way Brazilian society lives with “dissident sexualities”, especially with the advancement of movements of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transvestites, and transsexual men and women in the contemporary scene. However, the openness of public power to LGBT issues is becoming increasingly narrower nowadays, mainly due to the antagonism of conservative sectors of Brazilian politics, with an emphasis on Christian conservatism groups and leaders, who have gained even more political

space after the strengthening of the political and economic crisis<sup>28</sup>.

Furthermore, Robert points to bullying at school and staying in a job as other difficulties faced by gay men. He states that his work environment was:

*Very homophobic, I had to work without anyone knowing about my sexuality, because many people thought I was married to a woman, so I had to lie at work, you know?*

### **Personal experience of fatherhood**

Despite sharing his experience as a gay man, André states that his content creation does not have a target audience:

*Anyone who finds themselves in a moment of doubt, uncertainty about being a father or mother, doubt about adoption, or who identifies with my content, I embrace them and welcome them to be my audience. If you ask me to map out who follows me today, as a rule, they are women... between 18 and 35 [years old], you know? The majority. But the male portion is minimal.*

André states that, even if he does not explicitly target the female audience, this audience is the one that most accesses publications about their experience of fatherhood and adoption. This data suggests a difficulty in engaging men in discussions regarding paternity and reproductive planning. The inclusion of men in the debate on reproductive rights has occurred in a very incipient way when compared to what happened with women<sup>29</sup>.

### **Articulation with the LGBT political agenda**

The plurality of agendas and the articulation of different agendas are highlighted in all narratives. In addition to the discussion about paternity, the anti-LGBTIfobic agenda is also present on the social networks of the interlocutors.

Regarding the profile managed by André, he believes that other objectives were also included:

*Sharing our day-to-day life, that remains the main purpose... and during that, while sharing this day-to-day life, I thought, “why not share useful information too?” When you share your story with someone, it’s much more than just information... information for information’s sake, you enter the website and you get it, right? You go to the official channels, and you get the bureaucratic information. [...] when I share our story with another homosexual couple, what they are seeing in me is that it is possible, you know?*

For André, the publications made on his profile are also intended to be a spokesperson for LGBT people who are afraid to speak out, stating that:

*If I can give a voice to something, I provide that voice, you know? I've been through countless situations of prejudice. Still, I've always defended myself, I've always had a way to defend myself... if I do this [slightly more controversial content], first it's because I'm confident enough to do it, and some are not...*

Gustavo and Robert argue that one of the objectives of their work fulfills:

*...a powerful social function in people like this [...] very young people who are in the closet and want to come out, want to be empowered, want to discover that they can be happy or are still in that moment of "my God, do you think I can be happy?"*

The couple states that another objective of creating the Instagram profile was:

*To exchange experiences with people who have already gone through this process. So we would like to know what it is like when these gay parents take their children to school for the first time if the boys suffer any prejudice. What does growth look like? What is the food sector like?*

### **Fatherhood as a "business"**

The connective structure of social media favors the circulation of information; at the same time, it promotes a resizing of political repertoires with the establishment of mediated visibility and a fantasy of participation that pressures activists and leads through market and neoliberal repertoires via engagement, empowerment, and individual roles<sup>30</sup>.

After creating the @papai\_e\_papia profile, over time, some unexpected proposals emerged, as André mentions:

*Several people started discovering us... wanting us to participate in some LIVES, some podcasts, or something similar, and the intention was never to promote... it was always to show our family, as it is, and it ended up starting to become something that we didn't expect... for example, Nexcare, Sunglass started to appear. Some companies began looking at us as potential partners.*

Gustavo and Robert dedicate a lot of time to Instagram as they produce:

*Two IGTV, two reels, TikTok per day [...] two hours to do each one [...] Robert spends twenty-four hours a day responding. Because there are thousands of messages [...], we receive many mes-*

*sages from people opening up and telling us such intimate things about their lives. Joys, frustrations, future projects in their lives, you know? Asking for advice [...] giving advice, trying to guide, because that's the objective of the profile in the end.*

It is possible to notice that the outreach of digital influencers has increased as content is shared on the web. Currently, they are significant exhibitors of brands and products, as well as effective sales drivers. The visibility granted by social platforms, added to content production for followers instigated by experimentation, transforms these personalities into marketing channels<sup>31</sup>.

Opinion leaders acquire new meaning by propagating products, ideas, and behaviors online. People tend to be more attentive and trusting of information from personal contacts than information sent through messages from companies<sup>32</sup>. The marketing sectors of organizations and advertising agencies are investing in ways to influence recommendations between people, including their products and services within this context.

Due to their potential to disseminate discussions and influence decisions, they are beginning to be sponsored by companies and brands to create advertisements in their content, becoming professionals as "digital influencers". In principle, anyone with access to digital platforms can create content on the internet and possibly become an influencer. However, many who achieve visibility have more financial resources and reiterate hegemonic cultural and aesthetic standards<sup>33</sup>.

### **Haters, critics, and adverse reactions**

Gustavo and Robert encourage a debate about the reproductive rights of non-heterosexual people by sharing the questions they heard:

*"Why didn't they adopt? There are so many children in need of adoption; why didn't you adopt them?" They don't even know behind the scenes that we have already tried to go through adoption, and that's what we always say. LGBT couples are not required to adopt. Whoever does it, it is another way to achieve fatherhood. But it is not an obligation. So, each person has their own choice of how they want to become a father or a mother.*

In Anglo-Saxon countries, individualist philosophy seems to have enshrined the notion of each person's desire. Freedom of choice, not unlike the right to consume, becomes the primary measure of morality<sup>34</sup>. Therefore, people not only choose when and how they will become parents but they also "order" the type of child they want

or “negotiate” to obtain the best possible model without inquiring into the ethical and political implications of the methods used to achieve their wishes. It is a broad discussion that goes beyond the scope of this text.

It is undeniable that parenting is a political issue that goes beyond the boundaries of interpersonal conflicts and evokes collective reflection. Due to its visibility, it helps us highlight topics that require debate and implications that expand beyond the gay or lesbian family. Ultimately, it helps expose current family forms as “co-productions” of cultural values, law, technology, and money. Therefore, kinship becomes a political and cultural issue<sup>15,34</sup>.

## Conclusion

From the results found in our study, two directions can be inferred that support the creation of content about fatherhood in the profiles of the men interviewed. The first is the reflection on their own experience of fatherhood/masculinity, crossed by the fact that they are gay. The second deals with rights activism since the content produced by the interlocutors represents the amplification of voices/discourses about fatherhood, crossed by LGBT issues.

At the same time, activism allows male fathers to mobilize strategies of resistance and cope with processes of exclusion, thereby producing and articulating dialogues with this agenda that precedes the fatherhood agenda. This does not occur without conflicts, tensions, and disputes, with haters, criticism, and attempts at cancellation, revealing the political complexity in contemporary digital activism.

## Collaborations

All authors contributed equally to the preparation of the article.

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