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Abstract

The vulnerabilities faced by social minorities in Brazil, such as women, Black people, and LGBTQ+ people, are also very prevalent in local gaming cultures. Because of this, members of these groups organize collectives through social media to debate strategies and to provide mutual support for their esports initiatives. In the last few years, many of these activist collectives were absorbed by formal esports organizations, with some of their members now leading equality and diversity initiatives for esports in Brazil. Nevertheless, the movement from grassroots activists to PR representatives has contradictions, especially considering how social media platforms mediate the transition between activism and cause marketing. This paper aims to highlight some of these ambivalences, and how they impact the most vulnerable esports workers in Brazil.

Keywords

Esports; feminism; Brazil; activism, gamer culture

Gender inequality in the digital games culture has been an extensively documented and debated issue for at least the last 20 years (Cassel & Jenkins, 2000; Shaw, 2015; Burrill, 2008). Despite being a global phenomenon, it has multiple specificities shaped by different interactions between class, race, and locality (Kafai et al., 2016; Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009). This essay will address some of these characteristics in the Brazilian video game industry, focusing on feminist activism in the regional esports scene.

The Brazilian video games market boasts impressive numbers, reaching the value of 5.4 million dollars in 2021 (PwC, 2022), and Brazil has become a relevant site for

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hosting big esports competitions, such as the IEM Rio Major in 2022 and the ESL One in 2018. The popularity of live streaming is one of the defining characteristics of Brazil's gaming culture. For instance, one of the biggest streamers in the world with 4.2 million followers on Twitch is Gaulês, a Brazilian man focused on the game *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive.*

Despite the success of many Brazilian gaming content creators, such audiences are not as easily accessible to the women living in the country. Official competitions focused on women and non-binary people are relatively new. Also, none of the many Brazilian female streamers have reached the same metrics as the most popular male influencers, in part because they are not so favored by digital platforms' algorithms (Dallegrave et al., 2021).

Yet, conditions are slightly better nowadays than around ten years ago. Today there are a few inclusive[1] competitions supported by companies such as Riot Games (Ignis Cup[2] and Valorant Game Changers[3]) and an emerging LGBTQIA+ scene composed of young influencers such as trans woman Sabrinoca.[4] These professionals are not as famous as Gaulês, but relevant enough to be hired for marketing purposes for regional events as niche digital influencers whose audiences are mostly composed of women and queer people.

However, it was not gaming companies who started these niche initiatives aimed at more inclusivity and diversity. They were built by multiple organic, and often decentralized grassroots initiatives, organized, attended, and promoted by and for women and queer esports fans. Despite the essential role these activists play and their importance in the ongoing gains in inclusivity in Brazil's esports' scene, many of these enthusiasts remain volunteers. On the other hand, corporate-sponsored initiatives, such as Riot Games' inclusive tournaments have gained a wider audience and more marketing attention.

By analyzing the trajectory of the feminist collective of Sakuras Esports, and taking into consideration how the collective of its early years has been increasingly absorbed by influencer-centered logics guided by digital platforms, I propose the following research question:

[1] I have adopted the term 'inclusive' for teams and tournaments that are exclusively for female and non-binary athletes because this is how they are referred in Brazilian-Portuguese.

[2] https://lol.fandom.com/wiki/Ignis_Cup_2024/Split_1

[3] https://playvalorant.com/pt-br/news/esports/valorant-game-changers/

[4] https://www.twitch.tv/sabrinoca?lang=pt-br

RQ: Does the alliance between feminist grassroots collectives and cause-driven marketing initiatives help to improve conditions for the women working in the Brazilian esports scene?

Theoretical background: being women and LGBTQIA+ in the Brazilian esports culture

The consequences and causes of gender imbalance in esports and the broad video game culture are in many aspects different manifestations of the same problems. Nevertheless, since this paper focuses not only on gender inequality in esports, but on the Brazilian esports scene specifically, esports' inequities are shaped by Brazil's position in the Global South.

Labor conditions in the Brazilian esports scene

Concerning the gender imbalance in esports job positions and salaries, some manifestations of it are more visible than others. While it is easy to verify the deep gender gap in esports through rankings such as 'The Most Watched Twitch Streamers' (Twitch-metrics, 2024), or in the biggest teams' lineups, there are other aspects of vulnerability that are not as easy to quantify.

Brazilian esports workers are not protected by national labor laws, because the country does not recognize the esports industry as a formal labor market. As a result, they are hired under contracts defined only by their employers without any government regulation. In theory, these workers would be able to negotiate their terms and priorities. However, this does not happen due to the scarcity of paid work opportunities, resulting in a significant power unbalance between employers and employees. Léria and Maciel (2022) discuss how this impacts Brazilian professional players, concluding that it makes them more vulnerable to exploitation such as unpaid overtime, lack of guarantees in case of unfair firings and punishments, and no benefits covering health care and financial stability. The scholars also point out that minorities (including but not limited to women) are more vulnerable to these issues since there are fewer job positions available to them.

Grassroots feminist activism in esports

Besides the issues concerning labor rights, Falcão and colleagues (2020) highlight the entanglements between the lack of regulations in the Brazilian esports scene and the neoliberal discourse on work and meritocracy. This discourse—particularly prevalent in the conspiracy theories of extremist right-wingers—frames initiatives pushing for equality and better labor laws in esports (and elsewhere) as manifestations of left-wing activism. Since esports still lacks governance and legal regulation in Brazil, labor relationships are, predictably, highly informal. Macedo and Falcão (2020) analyze how social ties and camaraderie play a central role in the local esports scene as a strategy to deal with its precarious conditions. These practices

are a consistent feature of grassroots activism among Brazilian esports workers; here, grassroots activism is understood as bottom-up strategies in which the practices, guidelines, and goals are driven by community members themselves (Loue et al.,2002).

Digital platforms are central for activist collectives in Brazil, allowing groups to connect with their members, publish their work, and search for sponsors. Hence, grassroots practices are deeply shaped by the logic of these platforms, especially concerning algorithmic curation and economies of visibility. Many members of these groups are at the unsettled intersection between social activist and digital influencer. Brazilian scholar Issaaf Karhawi (2021), in her study of local fashion bloggers' trajectory from niche informal creators to professional digital influencers, observed that the more institutional acknowledgment the bloggers receive through sponsorships, the more distant from their original communities' needs they become. There are parallels between this phenomenon and the disbandment of activist collectives in the Brazilian esports scene, as EDI (Equity, Diversity, Inclusion) initiatives funded by big companies displace grassroots activist practices, and (some) community members become corporate-sponsored digital influencers.

Cause Marketing

The lack of regulated job positions and specific labor laws, makes sponsorships the most viable way of earning an income in the regional scene. So, cause marketing has a central role in the labor dynamics of activist esports workers in Brazil. As defined by Varadarajan and Menon (1988), cause marketing or cause-related marketing is a marketing strategy in which a company's support for a social cause, results in profit-making for that same company. In the esports industry, for instance, a common cause marketing approach is to target some minority group for selling a product, such as selling a team's uniforms showing the Pride Flag or hiring queer digital influencers to promote cosmetic items on a game. The inclusive tournaments, analyzed in this essay, are also examples of cause marketing.

Support and self-organization

Brazilian scholar Gabriela Kurtz (2019) analyzes symbolic violence against women during gameplay by watching live streams in which female streamers competed with and against male players, concluding that gender-based violence occurs not only through verbal and textual interactions but also through the gaming platforms' affordances, a phenomenon named by her as ludic-discursive violence. This sociotechnical arrangement highly impacts women's performance and confidence during gameplay, as observed by Ruvalcaba and colleagues (2018). Because of these multiple levels of vulnerability, Kurtz noticed that many women react via internalized misogyny, replicating their partners' sexist comments. Cullen (2022) observed similar occurrences in her analysis of women who are self-identified feminists in video game culture, and states that to be accepted among male gamers in virtual

communities, many feminist gamers decry more vocal and assertive feminists as 'bad ones' who make the 'real feminists' seem aggressive and unpleasant.

Kurtz and Cullen's separate observations highlight the importance of supportive women's communities, as they lessen peer pressure to conform to male expectations. As observed by Macedo and Falcão (2020) in the Brazilian context, the support provided by community dovetails with a culture of camaraderie and self-organization. The convergence of these factors has resulted in the emergence of collectives formed by minoritized gamers, such as women, LGBTQIA+, and black people. These groups started as informal organizations, often using social media platforms such as WhatsApp or Facebook to connect with other players without being targeted by bullies. Some of these collectives grew into more institutional organizations that ran exclusive tournaments and acted as career advisors for their members. The group analyzed in this paper, Sakuras Esports, is one of the most relevant examples of this practice in Brazil, but there are other collectives still in activity such as Valkyrias, Wakanda Streamers, and Project Fierce.

Methodological approach: The Sakuras Esports case

This analysis relies on the trajectory of Sakuras Esports to discuss the broader conditions of possibility for EDI initiatives in the contemporary Brazilian esports scene. The primary sources for this study is content posted on the collective's social media profiles and articles published by the local press, analyzed through exploratory case study methodology (Yin, 2009). This approach focuses on contemporary events that can be studied through multiple sources, such as documents, interviews, experiments, and field observations. The data is then analyzed according to a suitable theoretical framework, considering the context of the focal case; in this instance, theories on labor, gender, and esports, both globally and in the Brazilian context. The Sakuras Esports organization is not anonymized because all the information presented in this text is public, and the details and events mentioned in this study are fundamental to the analysis.

I also mention, for context, some narrative interviews (Rosenthal, 2018) with women who work as content creators and streamers in the Brazilian gaming industry who participated in my doctoral research on this subject. I interviewed seven professionals, between November of 2023 and August of 2024. All work as gaming streamers in Brazil and all are openly feminist in their live-streams and on their social media profiles. Their ages vary between 20s and mid-30s, they are from multiple ethnicities, and their follower numbers range between 200 and 30,000. They are anonymized for safety reasons, and their interview data was stored offline in a password-protected hard drive, according to the research protocol suggested and approved by the University's Research Ethics Committee.

The interviews were conducted online on Discord using the narrative method proposed by Gabriele Rosenthal (2018). This approach has two main stages: first,

the interviewees were invited to speak freely, without theme or time limitations, about their experiences as feminist women working in the Brazilian gaming industry. After this narrative step, I asked them about three main subjects:

- Which strategies do they deploy to communicate their feminist views to a gaming audience?
- How does their political positioning affect their relationship with sponsors and gaming companies?
- Do they participate in any form of collective organization with other female gamers?

The coding process followed the extended narrative analysis method proposed by Webb and Mallon (2007). This approach combines the grounded theory coding stages (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) with the narrative structure organized by Chatman (1978), preserving the former approach's broad categorization, which is useful for generalization, but also bringing the causal relationships mapped by the latter. So, the narratives were first classified in general concepts, and then organized in a narrative structure in which the main actors were categorized according to their participation and agency in the facts described by the interviewees. Finally, I identified contextual relationships and I classified the narrative sections into thematic categories.

I chose Sakuras Esports due to its relevance to the local market since it was the first group that had planned an inclusive tournament with relevant organizations and companies as commercial partners, and because this trajectory was extensively covered by local niche media outlets, making it easy to track the key events in its history. Furthermore, the rise and dissolution of Sakuras Esports occurred in parallel with the formalization of inclusivity and equality initiatives in the region, and serves as a compelling example of how grassroots activism has been gradually replaced by cause marketing in the Brazilian scene.

Analysis: From Projeto Invocadoras to the companies-sponsored inclusive tournaments

Sakuras Esports' trajectory

Sakuras Esports emerged as a collective in 2018, first named Projeto Sakuras (Sakuras Project, in English). It began as a women-exclusive WhatsApp group formed by people who wanted to find partners for playing *League of Legends* (LoL) without being targeted by sexist cyberbullying. Its founders were two young women, then approximately 20 years old: Juliana 'Moonded' Alonso and Thais 'Misa' Queiroz. In an interview about the motivations for creating the collective (Oliveira, 2019), Moonded stated that Projeto Sakuras' main goals were to organize women-exclusive

competitions, create content focused on women's participation in esports, and publicize female streamers who play LoL.

In 2018 the group became popular in the local esports scene after organizing its first women-only tournaments, quickly noticed by Riot Games. The company then started to support the collective by advertising its events, allowing the group to use the Riot Games brand, and providing money for the tournaments. Sakuras Esports also caught the attention of INTZ, one of the most high-profile LoL teams in the Brazilian competitive scene, which resulted in a partnership for the realization of Projeto Invocadoras competitions in 2019, intending to find female players to join INTZ's main team (Mackus, 2019). The two players chosen by the organization were Mayumi and Yatsu. Mayumi was a member of the INTZ lineup until 2020 when she left the organization and sued it, alleging violation of Brazilian labor law. The details of Mayumi's departure are analyzed in the next section of this paper.

Moreover, in 2019 Projeto Sakura announced a rebrand, changed its name to Sakuras Esports, and started some sub-organizations focused on specific aspects of esports careers, such as PR advisement, special training for streamers, and psychological support for pro players. Its official statement, published on its website, affirmed that the group did not identify itself as a collective anymore, but as an organization, the same word used to describe established teams and companies in the Brazilian esports market (Blanco, 2022). Also, the text stated that, despite not positioning itself as a feminist collective anymore, it was still rooted in feminist values. At this time, the group representatives affirmed having around 100 volunteers working with them, organized according to professional skills and career goals (Camillo, 2021).

In 2021, after being exposed on social media by its members as a toxic working environment, Sakuras Esports announced a hiatus, still in progress. The denouncers reported abusive behavior by the collective's leaders, including transphobic and ableist comments, besides excessive work charges on volunteers. In the official note announcing the hiatus, the group's leadership recognized the issues, apologized, and affirmed that this pause would be used to make the organization better (Blanco, 2022).

The companies that supported Sakuras Esports were not directly related to the collective's dissolution. Still, the lack of remuneration for volunteers played a central role in the disbandment, a consequence of these companies' partnership model, which involves media visibility but no remuneration. Although this volunteer-based minority-led model is common worldwide (Witkowski & Harker, 2024; Taylor & Stout, 2020; Saiz-Alvarez et. Al, 2021), its impact on Brazilian pro players is amplified by the country's more precarious labor market. Despite its huge audiences for esports, Brazil is still on the margins of the global video game industry, having fewer and more disputed job positions. Without remuneration or career prospects, women

abandon these collectives to focus on other, more financially stable professional plans.

Projeto Invocadoras

Sakuras Esports' beginning is a typical example of grassroots activism in the Brazilian video games culture: often, it starts with a group of friends, all or most of them amateurs and fans, organizing meetings for playing together. Then, some people in these meetings join teams with each other, and the group starts to promote tournaments and search for commercial partners. The more attention the collective draws from esports organizations and sponsors, the more it distances itself from the amateur grassroots tactics employed until then, such as organizing informal competitions through social media groups in which the members fully and collectively decide the rules. The commercial partners replace the collective members in defining priorities and strategies for promoting diversity and equality in esports, and the activist practices get closer to cause marketing (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988).

To illustrate this phenomenon, I consider Projeto Invocadoras, a significant initiative and commercial partnership oriented towards women's inclusion in Brazilian esports. The project promoted two tournaments in March and August 2019, exclusively for female athletes. It was organized by Sakuras Esports (then Projeto Sakuras) and supported by the Brazilian esports organization INTZ, which holds a central position in the local professional scene. The competition's main goal was to find women athletes to join INTZ's main LoL team, where they would play side-by-side with male teammates. Projeto Invocadoras' announcement was the final step of an INTZ advertising campaign focused on Women's History Month, named #JogoÉCoisaDeMenina in Portuguese (#GamingIsAGirlThing in English). Two pro players were hired by INTZ after the competition: Mayumi and Yatsu.

According to the INTZ official statements at the time, the two players would be prepared in a special training program while also training with the main team, all male, aiming to join them as soon as possible in the most important competitions, such as CBLoL (*League of Legends* Brazilian National Championship). Nevertheless, in 2020 Mayumi announced she was leaving the team, alleging neglect by INTZ. According to the pro player, her participation in the organization was limited to attending non-competitive events or advertising campaigns, while Yatsu and herself were not training with the main team or being prepped for the most relevant competitions (Mackus, 2020; Oliveira, 2020). Mayumi sued INTZ and gave up on being a pro player, focusing on her work as a streamer and digital influencer. Yatsu stayed on with the team until 2021 and was the first female player to participate in a CBLoL Academy match as part of the INTZ team, in the same year. However, CBLoL Academy is the second division of CBLoL, so the athlete never played a first-division match with the main team. Today, Yatsu is in another organization, MIBR, participating in the inclusive LoL team, which is composed of non-male players.

Thus, she still is competing only in inclusive tournaments and is not part of a mixed main team.

The case of Projeto Invocadoras is illustrative of the co-opting of a grassroots and community-centered initiative for cause marketing purposes. The two tournaments were advertised by INTZ as a first step for the inclusion of women in the professional LoL scene, but it resulted in one woman giving up on the pro player career and another one going back to women and non-binary exclusive competitions. Also, Mayumi's complaints about having her work as an athlete limited to advertisement and PR campaigns show how companies often align with social activism mostly for marketing reasons, not engaging in relevant structural changes that could improve diversity and equality in their professional context. In other aspects of the gaming industry, this phenomenon is described by Shaw (2015), Ruberg (2019), and Harvey and Fisher (2013, 2014). Shaw affirms that many initiatives for more inclusive representation in the gaming industry are limited to big companies recognizing minorities as a niche market and making their products more appealing to them, but still do not bring relevant structural changes. Ruberg presents a similar reflection regarding the queer indie video game developers whose work is often praised as innovative and fundamental for making the gaming industry more diverse and inclusive. On the other hand, these workers are rarely compensated for their contributions to video game culture and often live in critically precarious financial conditions. Harvey and Fisher observed how feminist initiatives are frequently co-opted by post-feminist discourse (2014), which focuses on individual initiatives and self-entrepreneurial tactics instead of collective mobilization. These scholars also highlight how such tactics can serve to reify dominant narratives of the mainstream industry even in feminist spaces (2013).

From team member to digital influencer

Today, there is a rising inclusive competitive scene in Brazil, in which two main tournaments are sponsored and organized by Riot Games. These competitions catalyzed all-female and queer team formation, and also brought visibility to many female journalists and commentators covering them. Nevertheless, the collectives that started the Brazilian gender-inclusive circuit through their grassroots tournaments, such as Sakuras Esports, were never financially compensated by the biggest esports companies that are now controlling the scene. While some former collectives' members and volunteers were able to work in the new inclusive scene, many others were never acknowledged or paid for their hard work in bringing more diversity and equality to the local esports culture, similar to the cases observed by Shaw and Ruberg. Hence, many activists aim to work as digital influencers because it is perceived by them as the only way to have an income, even though it is often low and uncertain. Following this trend, in its last years, Sakuras Esports concentrated most of its activities in the Sakuras Aurora subdivision, which was focused on giving career advice to female streamers. As I analyzed in another article (Blanco, 2022), the collective's discourse around working as a digital influencer was

much more focused on teaching the streamers how to better manage social media platforms' affordances than to mobilize women to engage in collective action in resistance to platform logics, a very post-feminist approach which is common in the gamer culture, as observed by Harvey and Fisher (2014).

Mayumi is an example of how cause marketing compels public personalities allied to social causes to distance themselves from grassroots organizations and focus instead on the companies' demands, managing their careers, and finding sponsors. As soon as INTZ hired her, Mayumi's activism was defined and limited by the organization's needs, neglecting her development as an athlete who could inspire more women to join the competitive LoL scene (Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018). The strategy adopted by the pro player to keep her career viable was to focus on her work as an influencer instead of going back to feminist collectives such as Sakuras Esports. This movement is the same one described by Karhawi (2021) concerning niche fashion bloggers, as mentioned before.

Zolides (2015) describes how pro players need to commoditize their public personas through strategic identity management to build a personal brand attractive to both esports audiences and sponsors, pointing out that this demand is more challenging for women since they also need to navigate hostile and sexist conditions in esports environments (Darwin et. al, 2021). Without institutional support, female athletes are in a precarious position to sustain both a marketable persona and a competitive gaming performance, which can result in privileging aspects that make their feminine identities perceived as more suitable (Taylor, 2012). Mayumi, for instance, declared in an interview she is no longer interested in being a LoL athlete and prefers to focus her efforts on her career as a fashion influencer (Coutinho, 2020).

During the interviews for my doctoral research, this was framed differently by the women who talked to me. One interviewee declared that she avoids being too assertive about feminism on social media because she is afraid of being cyberbullied, as she knows that esports companies offer little or no support to the victims in those cases. Another one told me that she softens her feminist statements to her audience to not be rejected by them, echoing Cullen's (2022) observations about the perception of 'good' and 'bad' feminists in video game culture.

The same woman, a popular streamer, also said that she used to participate in feminist collectives some years ago when few women were working in the Brazilian gaming industry and their work was not acknowledged by the biggest companies. But now, with more female workers in the scene, she does not feel the need to participate in these spaces anymore, attending only events focused on women organized by gaming companies such as Twitch. Her narrative is interesting when juxtaposed to Macedo and Falcão's (2020) study on camaraderie in the scene because, according to the scholars, camaraderie is deployed as a replacement for more formal organizing. While this acknowledgment is positive for bringing more work opportunities to women, it also results in the demobilization of grassroots

collectives, and the replacement of social activism by cause marketing, maintaining the dominant narratives instead of finding new feminist approaches for the gaming industry (Harvey & Fisher, 2013).

Conclusion

This essay has focused on discussing the complex relationship between feminist grass-roots initiatives, here represented by Sakuras Esports, and cause marketing, questioning whether this kind of alliance helps to improve working conditions for female professionals in the Brazilian esports scene. Since Projeto Invocadoras' first announcement, it was positioned by INTZ as part of a marketing campaign, while Mayumi and Yatsu's experiences as team members show that the organization's priority was having these women in advertising pieces focused on female audiences and not in their lineups. I therefore consider the tournament an example of cause marketing.

Hence, the role played by cause marketing in making the esports labor conditions more equitable for women in Brazil is ambivalent. Thanks to the support of gaming companies through cause marketing, the local scene has grown from amateur tournaments to an official competitive circuit, bringing more working opportunities for women and making it possible for many of them, some interviewed by me, to work exclusively in the esports market.

However, due to the lack of labor regulations in Brazil, which could protect these workers from unfair contracts, and the fact that today these initiatives focus on immediate visibility instead of long-term changes in their power structure and gender balance, feminist collectives have been gradually replaced by individual digital influencers. These professionals need to shape their activism according to the digital platform's logic and demands, maintaining them in a vulnerable position. So, while cause marketing is not itself responsible for the challenges faced by women working in the Brazilian esports industry, cause marketing is arguably not enough to build a better working environment for them. Rather, it is limited to creating opportunities and positions that are still fragile, concerning labor rights and financial stability. For future research, there are still some small grassroots collectives active in Brazil, some of them focused more on labor activism than on visibility through digital platforms. These groups offer compelling opportunities to understand how grassroots activism survives in a very competitive and profit-focused context such as the Brazilian esports industry. Another point for further research is the relationship between company representatives and the activism against labor regulations for esports in Brazil, which has been already documented by Falcão and colleagues (2020).

Limitations

This paper presents a reflection on some aspects of the Brazilian esports scene in regard to EDI initiatives, through a very specific case. It is focused on one specific group and it has the expected limitations concerning a single instance; yet it is possible to draw on Sakuras Esports's case to make some generalizations about equality and diversity politics in the Brazilian esports scene, due to its relevance and pioneering work in this context.

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