

## A Pleasant Ride: Vintage Aesthetics as a Strategy to Deliver Sex Education and Harm Reduction on Instagram

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses the possibilities and limitations of delivering transformative sex education and harm reduction on highly regulated platforms such as Instagram and what are helpful strategies in this process. I use the Brazilian project *Sento Mesmo* (SENTA) as a case study. SENTA is a multiplatform project that uses vintage aesthetics and deploys explicit language to address its topics. It is an activist project as it challenges current paradigms, particularly the way sex-ed and drugs are hegemonically addressed, and targets groups excluded from public policies. SENTA is explicitly inspired by Freirean pedagogies, and I argue it can be framed as pleasure activism (brown, 2019) as it understands sexuality as more than just a site of oppression and as an indissociable part of our lives.

Through a mixed-methods approach that included content analysis and a semi-structured interview with the creator, I analysed SENTA's content to understand the creative strategies chosen to evade Instagram's ban or censorship. There are intentional and numerous contrasts: between text (explicit) and images (vintage, evoking the "good old times"), present and past, invisibility and visibility. In sum, visual, textual and engagement concessions have to be made to be able to circulate in such a highly regulated environment, but such concessions can still be filled with meaning. In SENTA's case, the contrasts create a dialogue whilst trying to balance attractiveness for the readers and being harmless to the algorithms. This constant dialogue between past and present also reaffirms SENTA's political alignment, including its alignment with historical LGBT actors in the country. I conclude that despite SENTA's content being very context-specific, its strategies can be applied elsewhere, and become more important as public policies and traditional sex-ed approaches continue to overlook people who do not comply with every single norm.

**Keywords:** harm reduction, sex education, Instagram, Paulo Freire, pleasure activism

### INTRODUCTION

I was scrolling through my Instagram feed when a friend of mine posted that he would be DJing at a Zoom party organised by *Sento Mesmo*, or *SENTA* (here translated as *Shamelessly Riding*), a project focused on sex education (sex-ed) and harm reduction. The unapologetic name caught my attention, and I was drawn in by the profile's use of vintage images, reminiscent of the 1970s or 80s visuals, but combined here with contemporary fonts, memes, print screens, and, above all, explicit language on sex and drugs.

Building on previous insights on the importance of phrasing sex-ed in a grounded and non-medicalised language (Paiva, 2000), this article explores *SENTA*'s style, to understand the reasons behind their particular linguistic and visual choices and how they contribute to the project's goal of delivering transformative sex-ed.

This analysis indicates that *SENTA*'s choices express contrasts in the society itself, such as between traditional/disruptive morals, which are values that the project wants to intervene in. This article also discusses the possibilities and limitations of delivering transformative sex-ed and harm reduction on corporate social media platforms such as Instagram, which is highly regulated, and makes some suggestions about what strategies can be helpful in this process.

*SENTA*'s posts cover multiple topics, delivering their message both through more traditional educational posts or through meme culture. I consider *SENTA* an activist project as well as an educational one, as it seeks to mobilise for changes that go beyond the individual. Lewin and Jenzen (forthcoming), when talking about LGBTQ+ visual activism, stress that politics is not only related to elections and political parties but also comprises other realms, like everyday life. In this article, I argue that by considering the realms of sex and pleasure as political forces and as tools to build a new society, *SENTA* can be framed under a pleasure activism approach (brown, 2019). Moreover, for *SENTA*, education and activism are not two separate realms: sex education is an intrinsically political process in which people's autonomy must be respected. In this sense, it also has a clear alignment with Freirean methodologies (Freire, 2013, 2014), which value consciousness-raising through mutual learning and transformation. These ideas are delivered through an interesting use of contrast between explicit language and vintage aesthetics, a contrast that also reflects the project's need to be simultaneously visible to its audience, whilst invisible to social media algorithms and moderation.

The first section of this article describes *Sento Mesmo*: what it posts about, on which platforms, and the most common patterns in its publications. I used mixed methods in this exploration, applying principles from content analysis in found images (Rose, 2016), in combination with interviewing *SENTA*'s creator, as the creative process and intentionality are equally important for this research.

Next, I detail my methodology and explore important concepts to understand *SENTA*'s work, such as pleasure activism and Freirean pedagogies applied to sex-ed. This review is then followed by a discussion, which focuses on *SENTA*'s use of text and image and its effects: they symbolise contrasts such as traditional/disruptive morals and values, activism from the past/present, visibility/invisibility on social media. This section demonstrates how *SENTA* preserves and updates the legacy of previous LGBTQ+ (Lesbian Gay Bi Trans and Queer) activists in Brazil, adjusting its activist strategies to social media. Lastly, the conclusion stresses the need for this form of activism in contemporary Brazil, and I argue that although the work of *SENTA* is context-specific, its strategies can be applied elsewhere.

This article, of course, has its limitations. The greatest and inescapable one is the language barrier and what gets lost in translation. Every syllable of *SENTA*'s texts is embedded in Portuguese slang (particularly common expressions amidst young, urban and LGBTQ+ communities) and Brazilian cultural references and meme culture. Translating the meaning of the messages with all their nuances has been a challenge. In my attempt to translate the selected pieces, I prioritise equivalent English slang over exact terms.

## SENTO MESMO

Created in 2020, *Sento Mesmo*, or *SENTA*, is a multiplatform project for sex-ed and harm reduction, although it addresses more than these topics. On its website, there are two 'about us' descriptions, using different language styles. The more informal one defines *SENTA* as:

a place talking about drugs, dirty sex and everything that gives pleasure. In a mocked and real way, it discusses and exchanges ideas in the most democratic and didactic form possible, trying to answer the questions everybody has and [trying] to say what everybody wants to say (QUE PORR\* É ESSA, n.d.; My Translation).

In addition to the website, there are Facebook and Twitter pages, a Telegram channel, a podcast and an Instagram account (first @sentomesmo, now @sento.mesmo), which is the project's main platform, gaining over 70,000 followers in just one year<sup>1</sup>. *SENTA*'s posts on Instagram are the focus of this article. The creator is a young man with a background in graphic design and medicine, and he launched *SENTA* as a project after one of his designs – a chart detailing the effects of mixing different drugs – went viral. [Figure 1](#) shows a sample post, so English-speaking readers can have a gist of the visual and language choices.

I suggest that a major contributing factor to *SENTA*'s traction on social media is the use of the visual style in their designs. They frequently feature images from the 70s and the 80s, like stock-like pictures, religious images, and stills from old movies or advertisements. Visuals come in all sorts of colours, but *SENTA* privileges vivid ones, particularly red. The crucial message is typically incorporated as text in the images, leaving only superfluous

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<sup>1</sup> On the first profile @sentomesmo. The second one, @sento.mesmo, currently has 13,700 followers (November 2022).

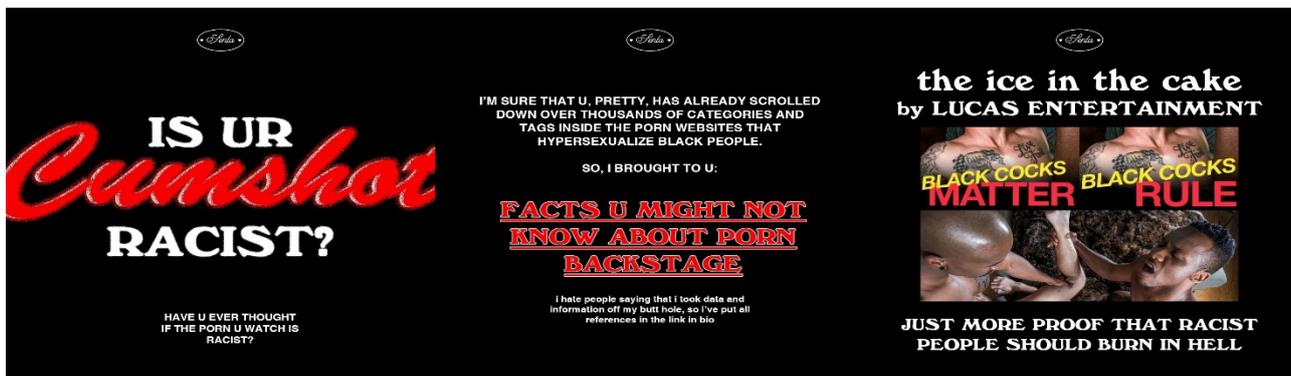


Figure 1. Three images of a 10-picture carousel on racist porn.

information for the captions. This strategy makes sense as the content is published on a platform that privileges the visual and also because, as the creator stated in the interview for this research, he designs the pieces so they can be displayed in public spaces.

In contrast, the text is very explicit and playful; there is no euphemistic language or patronising of the audience. *SENTA* frequently calls the audience out: for instance, for gathering at the peak of a COVID-19 wave or reminding them that unsolicited sexual touching is harassment regardless of your sexual orientation. But to be (sexually) explicit in an environment as regulated as Instagram requires creativity, and so to circumvent platform surveillance, letters are often replaced by numbers or symbols (Example: sex/S3X or ass/A\$\$) or excluded. For example, typing C\_msh\*t, means audiences are still able to identify the word, whilst avoiding getting caught by a platform's regulatory algorithm. Wordplays are another common strategy.

The central presence of the creator is a major *SENTA* feature, to a point that the project is indissociable from him. He usually shares his own experiences and impressions before explaining a topic in-depth to the followers and, particularly more recently, has relied more on videos of him explaining or reacting to different things. According to him, making the project so personal was intentional to consolidate an approachable and imperfect *persona* who speaks the same language as the audience. Someone they can contact without fearing being lectured to; someone they can ask what they *really* want to know.

## ANALYSING THE VISUAL

To identify and discuss how *SENTA*'s unique combination of image/text on Instagram is used, this research initially drew on writings on visual critical methodology (Mannay, 2015; Rose, 2016) and visual political communication (Veneti et al., 2019). Rose (2016) differentiates four sites – production, the image itself, circulation and audiencing – and three modalities – technological, compositional and social – of visual analysis. Using her categories, my research question focuses on the production and on the image itself. Although audiencing and circulation are also important, I primarily seek to explore the strategies to openly address issues that are almost 'taboos', or at least not frequently talked about: heterosexual men being penetrated, consciously combining different drugs, condomless anal sex, etc. What are the project's choices? How do they express *SENTA*'s intentions? For this purpose, the research employs a combination of content analysis and an interview with the creator of the content in question.

An online semi-structured interview through Zoom with the creator was conducted in January 2022. Questions focused mainly on the (political and visual) inspirations for the project, the production process, and the feedback from *SENTA*'s community. Collecting Instagram posts for the content analysis posed particular challenges since at the time of this research *SENTA*'s Instagram page (@sentomesmo) had recently been shut down after numerous reports claiming obscene content. Whilst content posted on other platforms were still accessible these were less relevant for the purpose of this research, mainly because they followed different patterns depending on the platform – TikTok, for instance, relies on videos. After the interview, the creator added me on Facebook, where he kept a copy of many Instagram posts, images and captions.

The 175 posts were published on Facebook – in sync with the first Instagram account – from January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021, to exactly one year later, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022. They were all coded and constituted my sample for the content analysis<sup>2</sup>. At the time of the analysis, there was nothing posted after this date, and there was not much posted before January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021 (and it was all personal content or relying on Facebook-specific features – events, sharing of posts, etc.). Therefore, it was not difficult to draw the line between what was *SENTA* content and what was not. Confirming

<sup>2</sup> This proved to be a lifesaver as the new profile @sento.mesmo started from scratch. A few images were already reposted but not all of them. And I noticed there are some minor changes in the strategies in this new profile.

what *SENTA*'s creator said in the interview, it was also clear the 175 posts were not primarily planned for Facebook, as they used hashtags (not clickable on Facebook), and other Instagram engagement tools (referring, for instance, to 'stories', 'carousel' or linking to specific profiles).

I relied on the interview to understand the production site and on content analysis to explore the images. As Rose (2016) describes, content analysis is a methodology that privileges this site of analysis (the image itself) over the other three. I applied its principles (selecting, coding and quantitative analysis) to observe general guidelines and main features – in my research, they matter more than the exceptions or deviant images – and then critically analyse the strategies adopted. I coded the 175 posts I have found<sup>3</sup> on the basis of the main topic (sex-ed/harm reduction/other); if they were part of a carousel or not; the use of prevalent colours; the presence/absence of illustrations/pictures; and, if the images were religious or not, contemporary, vintage or both, sexually explicit or not. Furthermore, as I did the coding after the interview, I added the variables 'religious symbol?' and 'sexually explicit?' because the creator explicitly addressed in the interview his intentions to reference religious values and not depict explicit images. I wanted to see how this was put into practice.

I noticed interesting things: at first, *SENTA* did not rely that much on vintage aesthetics and there was no distinctive visual identity (patterns in the use of colours, fonts and images) yet. As it developed, vintage images became more prevalent, however, memes also remain important. In general, the 'serious' or educational posts are interspersed with humorous ones, which reflect the creator's effort to show his *persona* as 'normal' in the eyes of the audience, someone who is not their teacher but a peer, a guy you can send a meme to. Most posts also come as an Instagram carousel. Of the 175 posts, 21 directly addressed harm reduction, 60 directly addressed sexual education and 94 addressed other topics. Only 10 publications depicted more sexually explicit images and 9 had explicitly religious images (Jesus, nuns, etc.). However, many more relied on images that evoke 'traditional' Christian values: a happy heterosexual couple or a happy heterosexual family out in the fields, for instance. After analysing the coding results, I chose images that displayed the more prevalent patterns to illustrate this article and images that express the central topics from my interview.

## CONCEPTS WORTH REMEMBERING

In this section, I present the main conceptual frameworks for theorising *SENTA*'s work: pleasure activism, Freirean methodologies applied to sex-ed, and intersectionality. I indicate how these concepts are put into practice in the project, also introducing key specificities of Instagram and social media algorithms that help understand *SENTA*'s work.

Lewin (2019) and Lewin and Jenzen (forthcoming) define four forms of (queer) visual activist practice – protest, product, and process and partying, – which can all be observed in *SENTA*'s work at some level. The project is connected with product-based LGBTQ+ visual activism as the visual pieces is made for display both digitally and physically. It is also possible to frame *SENTA* as partying and protest, as it has always been concerned with building a safe space for people to share their experiences and real doubts related to pleasure – doubts which are not usually covered in sex-ed traditional approaches. And, by doing this, *SENTA* criticises and challenges traditional sex-ed and calls for change at the societal level.

However, *SENTA* is more strongly and directly framed as process-driven visual activism as it uses 'art to empower or engage with participants' (Lewin and Jenzen, forthcoming). Projects in this category tend to be influenced by the work of Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire (2013, 2014). Freire's pedagogies value consciousness-raising through an educational process based on dialogue and mutual learning and transformation. Freedom, autonomy, love, hope, reflection and *praxis* are key words in Freirean thought, in which Education is not politically neutral: it is aligned with the oppressed.

Although sexuality is not a primary theme in discussions on Freirean pedagogies, applying his methodologies to sex-ed is not unusual (Beserra et al., 2011; Dias, 2015; Demartini and Silva, 2016). Freirean-inspired sexual education values dialogue, and sees education as an intrinsically political, transformative and emancipatory process (Warken and Melo, 2019; Sousa, 2021). It also frames sexuality as an inseparable part of our beings. Sousa (2021) highlights how writings from Freire and bell hooks (1994) potentially lean towards a transgressive sexual education, which favours the autonomy of the self, questions heteronormativity and promotes a language of resistance. Such language of resistance is central to LGBTQ+'s (or sexual dissidents, in her terms) fight for liberation because by appropriating language once demeaning, it is possible to imagine and create the Freirean 'untested feasibilities' (Sousa, 2021:13). This means imagining and building through transformative practice a new reality beyond the

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<sup>3</sup> Carousels, although containing more than one frame, were coded as one post, as I was analysing the posts in their entirety.



Figure 2. An explicit mention of Paulo Freire.

current structures<sup>4</sup>. In this sense, Sousa argues, transgressive sexual education is also decolonial, as it encourages people to free themselves from the shadow of the oppressor.

In the interview, *SENTA*'s creator reflected on how the project invites people to be open about sexual and gender diversity and explore their own sexuality beyond heterosexuality - he mentioned, for instance, that people have messaged him saying they now saw themselves as LGBTQ+ after engaging with the page, accepting their (previously unexplored) desires. This process of questioning the *status quo* - heteronormativity - including at the personal level, resonates with Sousa's definition of transgressive sexual education. In addition, in terms of language, *SENTA* brings theoretical concepts closer to the audience's reality, a methodology aligned with Freire. This can be observed in Figure 2, where theory and humour are combined to describe *SENTA*'s work and inspirations. It recommends readings by Freire, Marcuse and Lopes Louro, and explains its Freirean alignment, as follows:

Education according to Paulo Freire is freeing. It sets you free and it emancipates you. Therefore, sexual education sets you free, allows everyone to freely explore their sexualities and has the power to fight against oppression.

However, it also calls Paulo Freire 'a gorgeous daddy' and argues that 'riding is freeing' and 'blowing is an act of love'. This is a very good representation of *SENTA*'s strategies towards the sexual liberation of his audiences.

Like Freire and his followers, *SENTA* values autonomy, resistance and liberation. It also values education through dialogue instead of abiding by a 'banking model of education' (Freire, 2014: 82), where there are subjects and objects: one side teaches, the other one learns, one holds the knowledge and speaks while the other passively listens. A model where one part decides and the other one obeys. *SENTA*, on the other hand:

Is not to spread information, but to create a dialogue about it. What I am proposing is that we discuss information (...). It is by discussing that we truly learn. If I just say 'use a condom in this situation' people will quickly forget (Personal Communication, 2022).

One way this intention is put into action is by showing his own face and strengthening his *persona*, with his own opinions and preferences – not only on sex and drugs but on other mundane topics. By doing this, *SENTA*'s creator is positioning himself horizontally with the readers to facilitate the dialogue. It allows that at the same time he is seen as an authority in that field of knowledge, he is also subject to critiques and disagreements from the audience.

This approach is welcomed considering Brazil's history with sexual education. Under the strong influence of the Catholic church and successive conservative governments, sexual education has been historically repressed in the country (Demartini and Silva, 2016). There was some opening after the AIDS outbreak, and individual responsibility lost some ground to approaches focusing on social and collective vulnerability (Monteiro, 2002; Ude et al., 2020). Yet even then, sexual education was still predominantly delivered vertically, aligned with the 'banking model'. Even now, the focus remains on preventing STIs and pregnancies (Demartini and Silva, 2016), and sex-ed is barely a political concern (Sexuality Policy Watch, 2021; Guimarães, 2022). *Sento Mesmo*, on the other hand, makes sexual education political and frames it as more than just preventing diseases but also as a site of pleasure.

<sup>4</sup> In Freire's work, there is no direct definition of the 'untested feasibilities', although the concept is present in many of his books. Paro, Ventura and Silva (2020) offer great insights about the term at <https://doi.org/10.1590/1981-7746-sol00227>

Such an approach is exemplary of ‘pleasure activism’<sup>5</sup> (brown, 2019), a concept inspired by Audre Lorde’s ‘Uses of the Erotic’ (1978, republished in brown, 2019). It is defined as ‘the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy’ (brown, 2019: 11). It considers pleasure as coming not only from the erotic realm but from a broad range of sources, and as a natural and safe aspect of life. This strongly resonates with *SENTA*’s approach, as project does not try to regulate or control how people experience pleasure – it encourages them to do so and tries to help them to do it safely.

brown (2019: 11) argues it is possible to ‘offer each other tools and education to make sure sex, desire, drugs, connection, and other pleasures aren’t life-threatening or harming but life-enriching’. Pleasure activism focuses on moderation, a concern also echoed in *SENTA*’s harm reduction strategies. For instance, *SENTA*’s first post in 2020, which went viral<sup>6</sup>, teaches ‘how to use drugs during Carnival’. It is not a tutorial on how to use each drug, but rather a guide on how they safely or dangerously interact with each other. In addition, brown understands moderation as opposite to excess and not to abundance, and excess is classified as a symptom of capitalism’s unequal distribution mechanisms. According to her, it ‘destroys the spiritual experience of pleasure’ (2019: 12-13). In other words, pleasure activism opposes capitalist values and aims for a new system in which pleasure and collectivity are central and regards pleasure and collectivity not just as the *products* of this new system but the *tools* to build it. Such perspective connects brown’s ideas with Freirean pedagogies, as both authors value dialogue, collectivity and emphasise not just the goal but the process as fundamental. Such perspectives, reflected in *SENTA*’s work, also stress that respecting people’s autonomy is crucial towards liberation from current structures.

Lastly, a few words on intersectionality are required to better understand *SENTA*’s work. brown defines pleasure activism as a black feminist project (2019: 62) both for the need to approach sexuality as more than just a site of oppression and for the centrality of intersectionality in black feminist thought. Coined by Crenshaw in 1989, various schools of thought have worked on intersectionality ever since, and it remains an important topic in feminist theory (Piscitelli, 2008). Crenshaw recently defined it in an interview as:

A lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. (...) The experience is not just the sum of its parts. (Steinmetz, 2020: n.p.)

The concept matters because, even if the word intersectionality is not used in *SENTA*’s posts, it is not possible to ignore its concern with it. The primary focus on sex-ed and harm reduction does not exclude addressing topics such as racism (Figure 1), misogyny and ableism, amongst others. In his attempt to make his audience explore their sexualities and fight against oppression, *SENTA*’s creator intentionally makes connections with other struggles at stake. In *SENTA*’s approach, sexual education is knowing that people with disabilities have sex too, that gay men can be abusers even if they are also an oppressed group, and that pornography can be racist and violent, and one should choose it wisely to not reinforce racist practices. In sum, that one is free to explore as long as no one else is hurt in the process. These topics are addressed with seriousness despite the jokes and explicit language.

Having connected *Sento Mesmo*’s practices with contemporary theories, the article will now attend to how *SENTA* navigates social media and how it connects with Brazilian LGBTQ+ activism.

## DISCUSSION: THE MEDIUM MATTERS

Interviewing *SENTA*’s creator evidenced – especially considering the account’s ban – that the medium matters when it comes to delivering sex-ed. Although one can print and display *SENTA*’s work, the project is rooted in the digital world. Delivering sex-ed online is not exactly new: Oosterhoff et al. emphasise that, just like ‘offline’ methods, it remains common for online sex-ed to focus mainly on negative aspects, such as risks of STIs. ‘[Online sexual education] rarely offers any practical suggestions on what young people really want to know: how to give and receive pleasure, and how to engage in sexual relationships in ways that make them happy’ (2017: 1-2). Thus, there is a gap when it comes to a more open, realistic and non-judgmental approach. A gap *SENTA* aims to fill.

Sex-ed can be a sensitive topic, which makes the digital environment a privileged medium for delivering it, as it allows people to remain anonymous when looking for the content they want or need (Waldman and Amazon-Brown, 2017). To properly enjoy this potential, sex-ed projects must share content that not only reflects common doubts and questions but also rightfully adjust their language and tone to their audience. Moreover, at least theoretically, the content is accessible to larger audiences. However, a digital sex-ed project also has to abide by the medium rules. *SENTA*, like other projects, needs to comply with social media community guidelines and is

<sup>5</sup> I am incredibly thankful to Bárbara Paes for introducing me to brown’s work whilst I was researching for this article.

<sup>6</sup> At the time, the project was not yet named ‘*SENTA*’. The post can be found here: <https://medium.com/@unovulpino/como-se-drogar-no-carnaval-4993b6325ae7>

dependent on the algorithm at some level to deliver its content, as just posting on Instagram does not guarantee it will reach its audience.

Rose (2016) notes that social media algorithms now play an important role in visual communication. And although I did not focus on the circulation of content for this article, it is still relevant to reflect on how the medium can influence online sexual education as it directly affects the production of every social media post. As Gillespie (2018) stresses, all platforms engage in processes of content moderation, and although moderation is more noticeable on social media platforms that have algorithmically curated timelines instead of chronological ones, this is a feature of every platform. In fact, content moderation is essential to the constitution of platforms and helps shape the public conversation. However, the process of moderation has to be ‘hidden, in part to maintain the illusion of an open platform and in part to avoid legal and cultural responsibility’ (Gillespie, 2018: 21). A consequence, Gillespie notes, is that only those culturally privileged at some level can experience this process as if it was invisible or unnoticeable. Or, as Olszanowski (2014: 85) states about Instagram, censorship ‘has a consequential role in the way particular subaltern communities are built and maintained’. *SENTA* is a good example; as a project aiming to subvert current norms and targeting people not usually targeted, battling moderation is a fundamental and inescapable aspect of the work.

In addition, moderation has to respond to the values and interests of each platform - and even Facebook and Instagram differ despite being part of the same company (Leaver et al., 2020). And although there are rules and community guidelines stating what is permitted and not permitted, there is still room for interpretation. Platforms, after all, are made up of various communities, with diverse and sometimes conflicting interests and values. That is when moderation gets trickier. For instance, users can police themselves – through the function of ‘community flagging’, a commonly used tool. In this configuration, users might flag content because they disagree with it, and not because it violates any rules. And if the content is subversive at some level, like *SENTA*’s, it may be subsequently understood by the platform as a violation, in which case the sanction – exclusion, suspension or ban – is collectively interpreted as a platform’s statement on that matter (Gillespie, 2018).

To escape sanctions, creators often engage in strategies to circumvent the platform’s automated algorithms. For instance: misspelling words, expressions or hashtags (Cobb, 2017), using synonyms, covering nudity (Olszanowski, 2014) and more. One problem is that even automated moderation has its biases (Noble, 2018), including toward conservative and cisheteronormative norms (Jenzen, 2017). Furthermore, there is still user flagging to deal with, and content creators constantly complain about content removal or a profile/page ban without further explanation (Olszanowski, 2014). Phrasing it differently: users experience first-hand the lack of transparency of social media platforms when it comes to moderation. They don’t have clarity of what is allowed or not and why. And, more importantly, they don’t feel like they have the space to present their side of the story. Then, they act (and react) on their own account, creating their strategies to navigate in such an environment.

Tactics vary depending on each page’s topic and type of content, but the common goal remains to circumvent censorship. In this matter, Olszanowski (2014: 93) summarises it well that ‘recognizing the polysemic ontology of censorship while at the same time ‘playing’ with it is one way to destabilise its repressive power’. In other words, it is a powerful move by subaltern communities. The tricky aspect is that subaltern communities encompass diverse and, in fact, oppositional actors: from sex-ed providers to communities promoting eating disorders (Cobb, 2017). From feminist artists to white supremacists or, important in the Brazilian context, groups trying to undermine democracy. These are all trying to remain active and visible on social media.

Specifically talking about Instagram, the platform is primarily visual, unlike Twitter and Facebook, for instance, and this focus is fundamental to its success. As Leaver et al. (2020, n.p.) argue, Instagram has become so prevalent in everyday life that it is now ‘synonymous with the visual zeitgeist’. The platform has been through significant changes, particularly after being purchased by Facebook, but its original focus is of particular relevance: Instagram launched heavily relying on retro and vintage aesthetics. This was expressed in its early iconography, filters and square photos (Leaver et al., 2020) – features that were minimised over time. Maybe because, as the authors argue, ‘commercial accounts advertising and selling their products through the platform may have considerably less desire to make their content seem like it was from the 1970s’ (2020: n.p.). Now, the everchanging platform offers more possibilities for users, like more editing tools, Instagram Stories, marketplaces and more.

Like other social platforms, Instagram also relies both on automated and manual moderation, both of which are targeted by *SENTA*’s creator in his efforts to not be censored. The platform is particularly strict on banning nudity (Leaver et al., 2020; Olszanowski, 2014), regardless of context, which might explain why *SENTA* uses so few explicit images. However, there were some changes in the Community Guidelines over time, responding, for instance, to very vocal protests about censoring breastfeeding (Leaver et al., 2020). These changes reaffirm the platform’s never-stopping changes in its rules, which force users to constantly adapt.



Figure 3. A collage of some images from a carousel on how to take a shit (sic) during a date.

## VINTAGE AND YET SO MODERN: CONTRASTS BETWEEN TEXT AND IMAGE

In *Sento Mesmo*, the visual elements are a centrally important part of the project – particularly considering the creator’s background in graphic design – and are carefully planned to provide the best support for the educational and activist content. In this sense, Instagram is the ideal medium of choice. *SENTA*’s intention is to evoke a popular aesthetic and visually represent a paradox of Brazilian society: a society that is both very conservative, and also very libertarian. This paradox is expressed through contrasts between images and texts, but as the next sections will show, *SENTA*’s graphic choices express more than a contrast between conservatism/libertarianism. They also build a bridge between past and present LGBTQ+ activism in the country and express a social media dilemma: how to be visible and interesting for its audience whilst remaining invisible and ordinary to the algorithms.

In *Sento Mesmo*, images – with pictures or letterings – must evoke ‘traditional’ times – in terms of morals and manners – because texts are doing the opposite. *SENTA* talks to people horizontally and considers what they actually do, instead of what they should be doing – which resonates a lot with Freirean methodologies focusing on the lived reality. To do so on Instagram, the creator has to adopt strategies (like omitting/replacing letters or words) to circumvent moderation. All visual elements must make the posts attractive to readers and also invisible to algorithms, as *SENTA* is an easy target considering its language and topics addressed.

*Sento Mesmo*’s images reference western culture and include pop singers, decorations, or stock-like pictures of daily activities (Figure 3). Posts often replicate newspapers (Figure 4 and Figure 5) or magazine covers. Religious images (Figure 6) and, particularly, Jehovah’s Witnesses’ magazines were a visual inspiration for the project, as, in the creator’s view, they were a good visual representation of the ‘conservative’ side of the paradox he was addressing. All these features show how images are carefully chosen to reminisce ‘traditional’ times and maximise the contradiction between image and text.

Figure 4 talks about toxic masculinities; Figure 5, entitled ‘How to fuck up a date’, addresses which drugs are not to mix in this context. At the top, there is a banner saying, ‘Prevention is not the same as [drug] incitement’.

More rarely, there are contemporary pictures (Figure 7) or print screens – either for humour purposes, to depict political figures or to recommend a read. Humour plays a central role in *SENTA*’s content and evidence *SENTA*’s alignment both with pleasure activism and with Freirean sexual education. It is massively used either to call the audience out and/or to create a bond with the followers, emphasising that the creator’s *persona* shares the same culture as them.



Figure 4. A post about toxic masculinities.



Figure 5. How to fuck up a date.



Figure 6. Highlight says: Sexual abstinence hasn't worked even for Mary. // Do you REALLY think it's going to work for teenagers? i.e., people who watch "Elite"?



Figure 7. It says, 'My uterus during Carnival: Wear a condom'.

By heavily using slang and openly talking about common and usually embarrassing situations in relationships or sexual interactions, *SENTA* shows one use of the 'language of resistance' that Sousa (2021) framed as an element of Freirean sexual education. Additionally, pleasure is celebrated, encouraged and seen as a political act, as can be seen in **Figure 8** and **Figure 9**. **Figure 8**, for instance, says:

WATCH OUT, BOTTOMS! Beware of your lower back! I know you lift your butt like crazy when you're near people you want, but please be careful with hyperlordosis. Today is the International Day of Fighting hyperlordosis, so girl please work out more, stretch your back and just lift your butt when it's time (**Figure 8**).



Figure 8. WATCH OUT, BOTTOMS!

Similarly, **Figure 9** states: ‘Masturbating is a political act (...) Uuuuhhh I’m so woke! So obvious LMFAO.’

These choices are not obvious for sex-ed and harm reduction projects, despite the accessible language being almost always described as an important feature. Müller et al. (2017), for instance, show that creative strategies, particularly visual ones, are needed to evade governmental or platform censorship. However, quite often the chosen path is precisely to use more ‘scientific’ and medical language, even if targeting young people (Herbst, 2017), as this would give more credibility and appears to be more ‘neutral’ and less ‘activist’. Other experiences of sexual education through Instagram in the Brazilian context (Castro, 2020; Silva dos Santos, 2021) are not nearly as explicit in their language. For *SENTA*, on the other hand, explicit, non-judgmental language is a non-negotiable feature. This is because the creator considers there are barely any places for people who do not behave by the book:

Brazilian campaigns are always: ‘don’t do it, don’t do it’. It’s never: ‘people will do this. What can we do for them?’ So, these people excluded from Brazilian morality have nowhere to go (...) Even if they are the majority and not the exception (Personal Communication, 2022).

Thus, *SENTA*’s focus is on the gap of knowledge in such communities on how to make safer choices – and it is an urgent concern. The work is, then, a direct critique and a response at the grassroots level to ineffective public policies<sup>7</sup>, which justifies the use of language ‘from the ground’. If *SENTA*’s visuals evoke the ‘good old times’, the text targets those *currently* excluded.

## PAST AND PRESENT: CONNECTIONS WITH HISTORICAL QUEER ACTIVISM

Just as there is a dialogue between visuals and words, there is a conversation between past and present. *SENTA*’s entire visual identity aims for a ‘popular appeal’, to reach as many people as possible. Some of the visual references are popular Brazilian newspapers from the 70s-80s, as well as resistance newspapers from the same period, which evidences the political and contra-cultural affiliation of *Sento Mesmo* from the start. Here, I argue that the project’s visual choices evidence this alignment with the historical Brazilian LGBTQ+ movement and mark *SENTA* as a resistance project, preserving and updating the legacy of iconic activism from the past.

When I asked *Sento Mesmo*’s creator what his first *visual* inspirations were, he told me that at the time he was creating *SENTA* he was working alongside São Paulo’s Diversity Museum on a project to rescue LGBTQ+ Memory in the dictatorship years. The job involved collecting press material from that period, so newspapers from



Figure 9. ‘Masturbating is a political act.’

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, ‘Bolsonaro says no to sex’: <https://latinamericanpost.com/31957-bolsonaro-says-no-to-sex>



**Figure 10.** Covers of editions n. 16 and n. 20 of *Lampião da Esquina*. The entire digitalised archive is available at <http://www.grupodignidade.org.br/projetos/lampiao-da-esquina/>

the 70s and 80s were fresh on his mind. Popular, almost sensationalist newspapers, costing the equivalent of £0.05, like *Notícias Populares*, *Super* and the right-wing *Bundas* ('Butts'). He also mentioned *Lampião da Esquina*, a queer newspaper printed between 1978-81 and considered the first media of its type in the country. Initially, *SENTA* would be called *Lampião*, which explicitly confirms the inspiration beyond the visual. More than that, it shows a willingness to somehow preserve the memory and the legacy of *Lampião*.

*Lampião* was visually very impactful. It used different fonts, pictures and illustrations, not necessarily abiding by only one graphic identity (Castro and Fonseca, 2021). Stories were told through abundant slang and humour and the first pages were designed to look like street posters (ibid) (see **Figure 10**) – the same features of *SENTA*, but in a different medium.

*Lampião* was a resistance project, traditionally framed as part of the 'alternative press' that acted outside the law, escaping government censorship (Kucinski, 2018). But it was more than that. 'It was a newspaper that disobeyed in various directions' (Trevisan, 2018: 317). Gay journalists that created it felt silenced both in the public arena and amidst left circles (ibid), with no space to discuss and to freely live their sexualities. So *Lampião* was not only to tell their side of the story and talk about their issues but also a space to collectively experiment. Meetings included group nudity and touching (not necessarily sexual) as a way to build collective trust. Trevisan recalls:

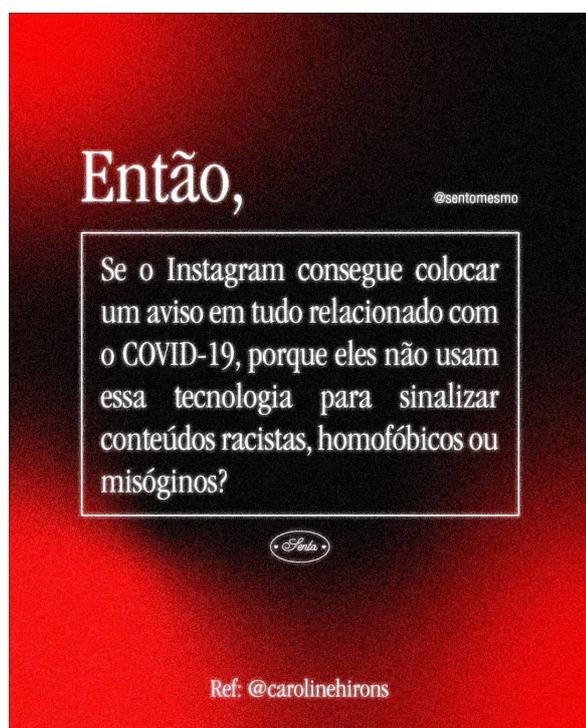
We considered fucking as a political act because our political action should be 'filled with the tenderness we have learned in the bed'. We started thinking (timidly at first) of pleasure as a legitimate right of every citizen. Even more in a country of such poverty as Brazil. We wanted to believe that misery didn't neutralise joy (2018: 318, My Translation).

This sentence evidences the stylistic and political alignment between the two projects: both the founders emphasised pleasure as a core value in their political actions, and as a right of every citizen. Trevisan also stressed the centrality of the collective, who would experience their sexuality and desires together, learn together and from each other, precisely what Freire (2014) states. These connections show that Freirean values and pleasure activism are not only embedded in *SENTA*: they are also core values of its major inspiration.

In addition, both projects rely on humour to ground their political action and focus/ed on building and sustaining a community in the process, and approach other topics in addition to the initial ones: *SENTA* discusses racism, ableism, COVID-19 (and more). *Lampião* discussed sexism, racism, and ecology as well as 'homosexual' topics and the fight for democracy. In both cases, there is a clear understanding of the interconnectedness of many agendas to advance toward a new society. In all of these, *Sento Mesmo* is carrying the legacy of *Lampião da Esquina* and updating it to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and new mediums.

## BEING RADICAL ON SOCIAL MEDIA: HOW TO DEAL WITH ALGORITHMS

Another factor connects past and present in *SENTA*'s work – and it is also expressed in *SENTA*'s use of image and text: living under authoritarian and non-transparent regimes. Then, a former dictatorship with official



**Figure 11.** “If Instagram can put a warning on everything that is COVID-related, why can’t it use its technology to flag racist, homophobic and misogynistic posts?”

press censorship. Now, an authoritarian regime in a weakened democracy (V-DEM Institute, 2022)<sup>8</sup> and, in addition, the omnipresent power of social media algorithms. Both forces – state power and diffuse/omnipresent algorithms – can operate together, as they did when *SENTA*’s original profile was banned: people organised and collectively flagged the page for obscene content until Instagram permanently banned it. What was considered obscene were the topics addressed and the language used by *SENTA*, its unnegotiable features. This means that to deliver sexual education on Instagram, *SENTA* has to fight not only authoritarian political regimes and the algorithm’s omnipresent power but also the conservative morality present in Instagram’s huge user base. This section will address this concern, showing how this struggle is expressed graphically.

When I asked about the strategies to circumvent the algorithms, *SENTA*’s creator said: ‘I assume I am living under a dictatorship’, explaining that this directly influences his graphic choices. And added, making it more explicit: ‘Visually, I’m in the 60s or 70s’. That is, he suggests that using images from 50 years ago might distract the algorithm. And that by visually locating itself in such a period, *SENTA* would make the content ‘safe’ to present-day moderation mechanisms. It should not be forgotten that, in the beginning, Instagram echoed vintage aesthetics. It was an ode to this style, relying on nostalgia to attract more users. *SENTA*, on the other hand, uses nostalgia to mislead the algorithm, alluding to what its political opponents consider a safer and better time. That is, *SENTA* evokes Instagram’s early aesthetics to safely navigate its current norms.

Interestingly, the 60s and 70s were precisely the most repressive years of the Brazilian military dictatorship. Thus, by visually positioning the project in these decades, *SENTA*’s creator does not simply display a contrast between text and images, it reinforces the connections between current and past political struggles. Moreover, it reaffirms that *SENTA* acknowledges the role of the first LGBTQ+ activists in the country such as *Lampião* founders. That is, the contrasts serve different functions and by no means represent a contradiction. Quite the opposite, they enrich the project’s message and put different elements into conversation.

Including numerous layers of political engagement in each post, *SENTA*’s battle with the algorithms becomes even more meaningful. In present-day Brazil, creators – including *SENTA*’s – often complain about what is considered offensive on each social media or a violation of community guidelines. This is a common complaint among sex-ed digital providers, even when a project is State-sponsored (Müller et al., 2017; Herbst, 2017). *SENTA*’s creator is particularly critical of Facebook and Instagram, saying their verdicts are quite arbitrary and impossible to follow with their constant changes.

This battle is sometimes addressed, as **Figure 11** shows. It says: “If Instagram can put a warning on everything that is COVID-related, why can’t it use its technology to flag racist, homophobic and misogynistic posts?”. It

<sup>8</sup> President Bolsonaro lost the 2022 elections to former president Lula, by a very tight margin, showing concerning levels of acceptance of Bolsonaro’s authoritarian style.

criticises the automated algorithms' double standards and reaffirms *SENTA*'s political position. Other posts seem to respond to the second step of moderation: human judgement. Examples are posts carrying the disclaimer 'Saving lives is not incitement' or 'Prevention [of overdoses] is not the same as encouraging the use of drugs.' These are *SENTA*'s attempts to defend their content against an accusation of violating the medium rules. It is as if he anticipated the moderator's movement and responded to it in advance.

As shown throughout the article, delivering effective and transformative sex-ed on Instagram and other social media requires dynamism, the willingness to adapt, and a constant state of attention. Creators have to pay attention to multiple guidelines as well as to their audience's needs. Visual, textual and engagement concessions have to be made to be able to circulate in such a highly regulated environment, but such concessions can still be filled with meaning. If done effectively, this type of work can fill an important gap with a more realistic dialogue with people who are rarely targeted and even more rarely listened to.

## CONCLUSION

The article sought to discuss the possibilities and limitations of delivering transformative sex-ed and harm reduction in the digital environment, using the Brazilian project *Sento Mesmo* as a case study. *SENTA* shamelessly and unapologetically talks about practices not usually addressed – condomless anal sex, penis sizes, combining different drugs to increase pleasure, heterosexual men being penetrated. And the project teaches how to enjoy such practices safely, or as safely as possible. It is explicitly inspired by Freirean pedagogies and, as I argue, puts the concept of 'pleasure activism' coined by brown (2019) into practice. It frames pleasure not only as an indissociable part of ourselves but one that should be encouraged and that has the potential to disrupt current norms and create new ways of living: a world with more sexual freedom and where labels and identities are not important or definitive. A world where everyone is deserving of care and pleasure. By doing so, it is an activist project as well as an educational one. It fights against current policies and aims for a new collective, not avoiding the political struggles in between.

To accomplish its mission, *SENTA* relies on contrasts between text/image, modern-new/traditional-old, present/past, and visibility/invisibility. In the end, these strategies all work toward circumventing algorithms' censorship, allowing *SENTA* to deliver transformative and radical sex-ed on a regulated platform.

The goal is to be as attractive to the reader as possible while being undetectable and innocuous in the eyes of the algorithm. For that, it depicts vintage aesthetics that evoke the 'good old times' when it comes to morals and manners – at least according to the voices who antagonise *SENTA*. Although the visuals might reminisce conservative values, the written language could not be more contrasting, using abundant slang, curses and sexual terms. Most of such 'dirty' words are, however, replaced, omitted or translated to circumvent the algorithms, usually with humour and irony. And the contrasts are in fact complementary. Visuals and text do not oppose, they create dialogue and make the content more engaging. *SENTA* mixes past and present times to reach its goal while acknowledging what came before. Both sides are in conversation.

The digital landscape has opened new horizons for activist and political action, as well as for educational projects. It is easier to reach larger audiences, who can engage with the content as they don't have to identify themselves. In such delicate topics as sexual practices and drug use, anonymity and privacy play important roles. This is particularly important in a context of strengthening far-right and conservative agendas, which is the case in Brazil in this decade. Such context only reinforces how *SENTA*-like projects are important. Currently, sexual education and harm reduction are in no way a priority for public policies. To fill this gap, civil society acts when the government does not, often being targeted by algorithms for doing so. Because of that, it is reasonable to assume that if there were more similar projects, it would be more difficult to censor all of them.

*SENTA*'s creative use of visuals and text is certainly to be credited to the creator's background in graphic design and digital communications. Despite being a very grassroots project, it looks quite professional, rightfully dialoguing with the mediums it is inserted and drawing from its references to affirm its political alignment. Finally, despite being very context-specific in its references, I argue that *SENTA*'s strategies (particularly regarding image/text choices) can be applied elsewhere. Although this article had its share of translation challenges, I hope that its discussion of *SENTA* can inspire other initiatives worldwide. People need this inspiration, as they will continue to ride. May they do it shamelessly.

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