

# “MEN’S VOLLEYBALL ARE FOR MEN”: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE HOMOSEXUAL AND THE SUPPORTER ON AN EPISODE OF HOMOPHOBIA

*“VÔLEI MASCULINO É PRA HOMEM”: REPRESENTAÇÕES DO HOMOSSEXUAL  
E DO TORCEDOR A PARTIR DE UM EPISÓDIO DE HOMOFOBIA*

*L“VOLEIBOL MASCULINO ES PARA LOS HOMBRES”: REPRESENTACIONES  
DEL HOMOSEXUAL Y DE LOS HINCHAS EN UN EPISODIO DE HOMOFOBIA*

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## Keywords

Homosexuality.  
Homophobia.  
Sports.  
Mass media.

**Abstract:** Based on a case of homophobia that took place in a volleyball match, this paper examines representations of the categories of “homosexual” and “fan”. Its sources were texts published on the case on websites of major Brazilian newspapers. Understanding representation as a product of meaning ascribed to things, we discuss the arguments used to construct the representations found – which are mostly guided by stereotypes of sports and the homosexualities that, regulated by power networks, are taken as naturally established truths.

## Palavras-chave

Homossexualidade.  
Homofobia.  
Esportes.  
Meios de  
comunicação de  
massa.

**Resumo:** Com base em um episódio de homofobia ocorrido em uma partida de vôlei, esse trabalho analisa as representações construídas das categorias “homossexual” e “torcedor”, utilizando como fonte textos acerca desse caso, veiculados em alguns sites de jornais de grande circulação nacional. Entendendo a representação como o produto da atribuição de sentido que damos às coisas, problematizamos os argumentos utilizados para a construção das representações encontradas que, em sua maioria, são pautados em estereótipos dos esportes e das homossexualidades que, regulados por redes de poder, são tidos como verdades naturalmente estabelecidas.

## Palabras clave

Homosexualidad.  
Homofobia.  
Deportes.  
Medios de  
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**Resumen:** Basado en un episodio de homofobia ocurrido en un partido de voleibol, este trabajo analiza las representaciones construidas de las categorías “homossexual” e “hinchada”, utilizando como fuente textos sobre ese hecho vehiculados en algunos sites de diarios de gran circulación nacional. Entendiendo la representación como el producto de la atribución de sentido que damos a las cosas, problematizamos los argumentos utilizados para la construcción de las representaciones encontradas que, en su mayoría, se guían por estereotipos de los deportes y de las homosexualidades, que, regulados por las redes de poder, son tomados como verdades naturalmente establecidas.

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Recebido em: 21-10-2013  
Aprovado em: 18-08-2014



## 1 BREAKING SILENCE FOR A WHILE

On April 1, 2011, at Ginásio Poliesportivo do Riacho, a sports gymnasium in Contagem, Minas Gerais, Brazil, Sada Cruzeiro (MG) faced Vôlei Futuro (SP) in the first match of the semifinals of Brazil's Men's Volleyball Super League. Both sides had high expectations, since the winner of the three-match face off would be at the final for the first time. However, in the days that followed, sports news were not focused on the expected showdown at the court, but by manifestations coming from the stands. During the match, an almost unison chorus of supporters of the local team constantly offended Michael – a player for the opposing team – using homophobic expressions.

After that first instance, homophobia and homosexuality in sports were in the media's agenda for weeks. For a while, that fact broke the common practice of avoiding discussion of the topic. Homosexualities, especially in the sports field, seem to be considered too undesirable or intolerable to become news, thus remaining under silence as something not to be perceived<sup>1</sup> (MOUILLAUD, 1997). Using the repercussions surrounding the “Michael case” as a corpus, I approach a number of representations about homosexualities and sport that gain little visibility in everyday life. This article is based on my master's dissertation and its sources were comments made on websites of major<sup>2</sup> Brazilian newspapers, including *Estado de Minas*, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, *Folha de S. Paulo* and *O Globo*. This research is qualitative, and source selection was not intended to provide generalizable impressions about the episode in question. I believe, however, that it contains a sufficient volume of texts to raise relevant discussions with respect to issues of gender and sexuality raised by the case.

After organizing the material under categories created from the content found, data analysis is conducted based on a discursive approach (HALL, 1997), using Foucault's notion of discourse. According to that perspective, discourse is necessarily associated with power and the establishment of knowledges. Thus, the comments analyzed here are seen as discourses that reflect not a world “as it is”, but representations as products of meanings ascribed to everything around us. In this sense, a discursive approach is concerned with understanding how knowledge produced by discourses relates to power, thus regulating behaviors, constructing identities and subjectivities, and defining the way things are represented, thought of, and practiced (HALL, 1997).

Analysis of comments suggested that, mainly because one of the teams – Sada Cruzeiro – is linked to a football club – Cruzeiro Esporte Clube – several issues raised were linked to football. In fact, the creation of a volleyball team by Cruzeiro has probably brought part of its fans – traditional football spectators – closer to volleyball. Therefore, some of them probably started attending gymnasiums to root for their favorite team in volleyball. And the controversy surrounding Michael took place amidst the emergence of the football fan ethos at the volleyball arena.

Thus, although it took place in a volleyball court, the fact raises a series of observations on the behavior of football fans. Therefore, it is interesting to note that similar offenses classi-

<sup>1</sup> It should be mentioned that, although rare, other news stories have reported or discussed episodes of homophobia in sports. Examples are the situations involving football player Richarlyson, currently at Clube Atlético Mineiro. The athlete, although he says he is heterosexual, is often associated with homosexuality, which is sometimes mentioned or questioned in the media. This issue was exploited when Sociedade Esportiva Palmeiras's administrative director José Cyrillo Junior hinted that the player would be gay in a television program, leading Richarlyson to file a lawsuit against him. In the ruling that acquitted José Cyrillo Junior, Judge Manoel Maximiano Junqueira Filho said, among other things, that “football is a virile, manly game, and not a homosexual one”, which further fueled the debate. In volleyball, in turn, the debate was really driven by former player Lilico, who assumed his homosexuality in 1999 and was also a frequent target of fans' prejudice.

<sup>2</sup> The stories were also part of the analysis of the dissertation, but a good analysis of both would be beyond the scope of this text.

tying opponents as homosexuals or referring to passivity in sex routinely occur at stadiums, without raising discussions or controversies about their homophobic character. Thus, a different scenario was necessary for those offenses to cause discomfort.

As previously stated, such discomfort turned fans’ manifestations into a newsworthy event. The process of newsability, however, is neither naive nor casual. Highlighting the intentionality of choice of topics to be ignored by the media, Leal and Carvalho (2009) state that “silence and omission, guided by interdiction or indifference, are so dehumanizing as name calling and offense” (LEAL; CARVALHO, 2009, p. 6).

The inclusion of that episode on the media agenda brought the incident to the attention of a larger number of people, some of whom chose to express their opinions on the online comment areas of the stories they read. This text focuses on representations in readers’ comments about two groups present in the episode: homosexuals and fans.

The concept of representation adopted here is based on a constructionist approach, which advocates separation between the real world and the world where language, meanings and representations operate symbolically (HALL, 1997). Under this view, we are able to understand the world and attribute meanings to it by communicating through a system of somehow common representations. It considers the existence of the real world and subjects’ capacity to re-signify hegemonically established meanings. However, it does not place them as the sole cause of representations, but rather under a complex system of interaction with culture. This process is not only technical; it is above all historical and political. Thus, representations can be seen as knowledge building tools that assume a truth value when driven by power and control technologies (FOUCAULT, 2012). In this sense, for Foucault (2012), truth does not exist as an absolute value; it is socially built and sustained through discourse. Thus, challenging supposed truths expressed in certain representations contributes to destabilize a state of affairs that represses the multiplicity of ways of being in the world.

## 2 GENDER, HOMOSEXUALITIES AND HOMOPHOBIA

Simply put, homophobia is defined by Daniel Borillo (2001) as revulsion against homosexuals, marked by hostility, rejection or hatred. In this manifestation, the other is seen as opposed, lower or abnormal. This definition seems clear and objective. However, perceiving prejudice in practice does not seem as simple as the way it is noted in the comments analyzed in this research, which include many views on whether or not Cruzeiro fans’ manifestations are acts of homophobia.

I agree with several theorists<sup>3</sup> that such a discomfort or aversion towards homosexuality is the result of a historical-cultural construction that emerges from heteronormativity, understood as the process of determining heterosexuality as a person’s only natural option for affective and sexual experience.

Reiteration of such sexual experience model as a standard occurs due to societal recommendation, prescription and control on the use of our bodies through family, school, religion, science, government, law, etc., which hierarchically divide right and wrong, normal and abnormal. This distinction is embodied not only in words and attitudes, but also in the organization of

<sup>3</sup> Among several, I cite Foucault (1988), Borillo (2001), Louro (2009) and Butler (2006).

our health, education, legal or media systems, which are established to fully serve only those who meet the imposed standard (LOURO, 2009). This dispersion of multiple normative stimuli has the effect of naturalizing and hiding those control mechanisms.

As a dynamic and changing process, management of bodies and sexuality has not always been what we see nowadays, as shown by Foucault (1988). To approach a genealogy of sexuality, the philosopher demonstrated that, until the eighteenth century, although there used to be certain border control on what was proper in terms of sexuality, violations were based on their seriousness, with no distinctions about their nature. Therefore, sodomy was a serious sin, along with rape, adultery and incest – all subject to court sentences.

According to Foucault, in the nineteenth century, adult sexuality became more discrete, even though it might have operated under stricter rules. Previously ignored figures (crazy people, children, criminals), in turn, are questioned, heard and convicted, but most of all identified in order to establish the outlines of peripheral sexualities that would limit the boundaries of regular sexuality. Previously condemned practices gain autonomy and start to be seen as essentially different things.

While the severity of the codes imposed by justice was attenuated in the nineteenth century, another entity emerges in the control of sexual deviance: Medicine. By determining a “normal development” and classifying pathologies and disorders, it becomes the core factor for the management of desires. What must be examined here is not the transfer of authority, but the change in power mechanisms we resort to. Not by chance, that is when scientific discourse overcomes religious one – controlled by legal structures – and homosexual emerges<sup>4</sup> (FOUCAULT, 1988; LOURO, 2009). While people engaging in sodomy used to be only legal subjects before that time, the creation of the label, rather than identifying and naming, determines the creation of a character. While “the sodomite was a repeat offender, now the homosexual is a species” (FOUCAULT, 1988, p. 51).

This new species is then relationally positioned toward its direct opposite: the heterosexual. This differentiation and this classification, guided by scientific discourse and from the point of view of health, moral and hygiene, also established a hierarchy between the two categories – one taken as a norm or standard and the other seen as deviation (LOURO, 2009). Homosexual deviants, thus, should be given contempt, segregation, rejection and violence.

Beyond control of sexual practices, the heternormative matrix imposes references also in the field of behaviors and identities. That is because it assumes that the idea of masculinity rests on the necessary repression of feminine aspects – the subject’s bisexual potential – and introduces conflict in the male/female opposition.

The notions of masculinity and femininity, in turn, relate to the concept of gender, understood here as a social and historical construction of male and female subjects that is produced in power relations (LOURO, 1997). Social expectations of how men should behave include their involvement in competitive and physically intense activities like sports. Women, in turn, associated with fragility and sensitivity, are encouraged to engage in practices considered more delicate. In order to deconstruct essentialist views on this process under which such forms of being in the world would be the result of different natural skills or preferences between men and women, Butler (2006) uses the concept of performativity. According to the author, gender is built

<sup>4</sup> Foucault states that a first reference to the term might be Westphal’s 1870 article.

under expectation that eventually produces a kind of essence to be discovered. This expectation encourages and even compels repeated engagement in certain behaviors, values and ideals, finally producing the exact planned phenomenon. Thus, genre anticipation itself produces what is postulated to be out of the subject.

Butler (2006) also points out that, under normative heterosexuality, policing gender is sometimes used as a way to ensure heterosexuality. That regulatory tool is built on the expectation of consistency between the categories of sex, gender and sexuality. Under this logic, men (males) should necessarily develop affections and desires for (heterosexual) women and possess (masculine) traits of masculinity and aggression. Women (females), in turn, should be sexually and affectively attracted to (heterosexual) men and have traits linked to sensitivity and grace (femininity).

In the event analyzed in this work, the belief in that linear relationship is quite evident, as can be seen in the following excerpts: “ekaliu alencar: Isn’t he gay??? Why be offended if they call him a fagot? If they called him man, man, man ... then he should certainly be offended, since it would be contrary to his sexual will (‘orientation’)” (BASTOS, 2011).

In the quote, the term *man* is used to refer to a heterosexual male individual. Thus, sex and sexuality are seen almost as a single category, thus generating a new binary: man/gay. Focused on sex-gender alignment and the male-female binary, some readers-commentators end up defining the homosexual as undefined, placeless, as in the following excerpt:

Ronaldo Mitt: A basic thing. When I registered at [the website] UOL to make this comment, they asked me about my sex; male or female. Do you realize the subtlety? There is no other. If the guy chooses to be gay, no problem, in fact, it’s his problem. [...] (EQUIPES..., 2011).

Such discourses, which claim the alleged impossibility of being gay and man at the same time, are symbolic forms of emphasizing the distance between homosexuals and heterosexual men. The reader-commentator uses the website registration to show the binary organization present in many other social contexts that, according to him, does not include homosexuals. In Ronaldo Mitt’s argument, Michael’s abject situation would be a problem caused by his option.

Another set of comments argues that a gay man, by relating affectively with other men, comes to identify himself as a woman and should thus have interests supposedly suitable to them. Watch Tower: “If the guy is a lady and he wants the crowd to be quiet, he should dance ballet” (VÔLEI..., 2011).

Even admitting the possibility of irony in such comments, they reiterate that values associated with homosexuals are those hegemonically linked to the feminine – sensitivity, vanity, fragility – again reinforcing the distinction between homosexual and heterosexual men.

It is worth mentioning that the association between homosexuality and femininity found in some of the comments, as with the previous quotation, was always accompanied by an essentialist perspective on gender, in which women – and, in this context, therefore, gay men – would not be able to practice physically demanding, aggressive and competitive activities such as sports. Thus, to understand the complexity of conflicts present in the event analyzed, we need to evaluate gender and sexuality issues as imbricated.

I also found some readers who questioned the legitimacy of homosexual rights claims, based on certain negative representations of that group:

Gil Queiroz: Don't forget: minorities who preach sexual depravity as normal, who want to appear dressed as drag queens and make out anywhere, who love to scream and have public fits of hysteria and euphoria, walk naked through the streets, have parties where anything goes (drugs, tobacco, beverages, sex), gay parades that look like Rome orgies updated, and then when they come to their senses for a few minutes, they demand rights to equality, dignity, PLC 122<sup>5</sup>, congressmen's mandates revoked. (BASTOS, 2011)

Note that, for this reader-commentator, homosexuals are related to all kinds of depravity. His description shows prejudice rooted in stereotypes that relate gays to misconduct. Under that argument, the reader-commentator seems to suggest that homosexuals justify the rejection and prejudice they receive due to their "inappropriate" behavior.

There are also readers who see homosexuality as a disease.

André Duque Grijó: If they want to make homosexuality normal, then dementia, psychopathy, pedophilia and all diseases associated with personality disorders should also become normal, because that's not normal and will never be, considering human nature!!! (EQUIPES..., 2011)

It is clear, therefore, that medical and biological arguments that have served to proclaim interdiction of homosexuality for decades are still strongly present. However, the stance taken by the World Health Organization, which removed homosexuality – then called homosexualism<sup>6</sup> – from its list of mental illnesses, is remembered by a reader-commentator:

Rodrigo Santos: See the WHO website. There is no disease or disorder, bro. If you want to speak on the basis of science, be scientific: do some research. [...] It should also be said that in the rest of the animal kingdom (group of living beings to which we belong), there are other species with homosexual individuals, check it out. (EQUIPES..., 2011)

The example is one of the few in which a reader-commentator attempts to deconstruct a previous comment based on heteronormative perspectives to define homosexuals. Although other subjects criticized Cruzeiro's fans' manifestations by preaching respect and tolerance, few challenged restricted and prejudiced representations of homosexuals. Thus, in the comments analyzed in this study, homosexuals are markedly established as the Other.

### 3 FANS AND THEIR COMPULSORY MASCULINITY

Even though the society we live in already has strong heteronormative standards, sports arenas stand out as places in which there is greater permissiveness to express such constructions in explicit, offensive and aggressive ways. Therefore, it seems that, in this environment, the norms that keep the sex-gender-desire alignment show certain specificity. This hypothesis is supported in the comments examined in this study, which, in order to justify what happened with Michael as natural, resort to arguments related to the establishment of the sports scene, as "that's how fans traditionally root", "players must be prepared to be offended", "cases like this often happen", etc.

Naturalization of homophobia occurs together with other forms of prejudice as well as

5 Bill criminalizing homophobia.

6 The term homosexualism was used to refer to the disease, perversion or disorder that homosexuality was identified with in Medicine, especially from the late nineteenth century on. Using pathological remission, the Brazilian LGBT movement sought to root out the term from any reference to homosexuality.

verbal and physical aggression that are considered normal in those spaces. However, we should ask how that view has been legitimized through the social constitution of what we call sport.

Sport is a modern phenomenon that emerged in the eighteenth century, and more markedly in nineteenth-century Europe, particularly in England (BRACHT, 1997). According to the author, it would have emerged from the regulation (sportivization) of elements of body culture, both of popular and elite origin, among which popular games are the most recurrent examples. Along with urbanization and industrialization, sport has developed and spread beyond European boundaries as a symbol of the new and modern, somehow denying the values of preceding times.

According to Elias and Dunning (1992), in that germinal moment of modern sport, it emerged as softened forms of confrontation, which carried stricter violence control instruments than those present in existing popular hobbies. Thus, the authors demonstrate that, from its inception, modern sport is based on conflict, supported on the difficult balance between anger and violence.

Toledo (2002) also supports the view that sport can become a distinctive space where forms of expression of emotions are controlled in different, more flexible ways. Therefore, when analyzing football, he argues that behaviors in a match have ritual nature, as opposed to other social experiences of everyday nature. That ritualistic nature legitimizes certain practices considered unusual in other areas or activities, including aggressive manifestations.

The emergence of various emotional states can be seen not only in the practice of sports, but also in their audience. Let us remember that, for centuries, crowds gathered to watch theater plays or gladiator fights as a form of entertainment. So, as audience we are also invited to move across different states of mind, expressing them in different ways. Reactions depend not only on the spectacle being watched, but, above all, on the relationship established with it. In this sense, when commentators-readers claim legitimacy of name calling in a sports arena, they seem to show that that attitude is a key part of expressing the sensations felt during that leisure activity.

However, that does not make them natural and unquestionable. It should be pointed out that a number of practices that would be considered intolerable today, such as fights between humans and animals or public hanging, used to be forms of entertainment in ancient times. Other dynamics of violence, in turn, albeit disguised, are still legitimized as fun, indicating the complexity and apparent inconsistency of our civility standards. To that effect, I can mention media programs depicting murder images and MMA fights<sup>7</sup>.

Again, it is clear that the social meanings of manifestations are the result of a fluid historical constitution that is constantly changing, not always consistent or linear, causing social changes to lead to modifications in the scenario of permissiveness seen in sports arenas.

In general, however, some behaviors are maintained to a certain degree over time. Looking specifically at fans’ practices, I argue that this happens through the learning that takes place in different social contexts related to sport. I understand that such learning, although it was under the influence of a culturally and socially structured world, does not happen by transmission of previously discovered information or knowledge. Thus, the continuity of traditions takes place by a kind of “directed rediscovery” that Tim Ingold (2010) calls “education of attention.” Thus:

<sup>7</sup> Mixed Martial Arts.

[...] each [generation] contributes to the knowledgeability of the next not by handing down a corpus of disembodied, context-free information, but by setting up, through their activities, the environmental contexts within which successors develop their own embodied skills of perception and action. Rather than having its evolved capacities filled up with structures that represent aspects of the world, the human being emerges as a centre of awareness and agency whose processes resonate with those of its environment. (INGOLD, 2010, p. 21)

From this perspective, there is no essence in “rooting” that would naturally emerge in the individual, not even an a priori, fixed, single and stable way to do it that is taught from one generation to the next. Thus, dynamically, fans of different sports, in different countries and from different generations support their teams more or less enthusiastically, more or less aggressively, among other variations. This is because their learning, attention and education processes, and emergencies from the relationships established in practice have converged to different points in their particular times, spaces and contexts<sup>8</sup>. Thus, although there is some stability in certain practices, they are not the result of the fidelity with which we copy rules of conduct, and there is no guarantee that aspects will not change over time.

I analyze rooting as the preference for a club materialized in an affective and identity-based relationship called “club belonging” by Damo (1998). Although, in theory, there are many ways to express affection for the club one roots for, that construction of the fan-being ended up also legitimating specific forms – representations – of rooting. Readers-commentators explain it as follows:

W. P.: [...] calling opponents fagots or another thing is common and is part of stadium's and gymnasiums' environments. It is not politically correct, but it has always been like that. Is there a manual for allowed name-calling? *To root is to encourage one's team, to perturb the opponent and to put pressure on the referee.* [...] (... VÔLEI, 2011).

The reader-commentator argues that there is no precedent to question fans' manifestations because name-calling “is common”, it is “part of the environment”. Note that, since these aggressive expressions are currently commonplace, W. P. says that “it has always been like that”. This view is contradicted by Toledo's (1993) studies, which show that bad words had been used for some time, but only sporadically, and it was especially from the 1970s on that they started to be said in unison and very often.

The reader-commentator also describes rooting based on two basic actions: encouraging the team and getting in the way of the opponent<sup>9</sup>. According to this interpretation, love for one's club shall be demonstrated by means that help its success in matches. Thus, offenses against Michael are seen also as fans playing their role towards their team. So, whoever does not act like that is not seen as a fan, as shown by this comment: “Marcio Andrade: It's proved that volleyball has no fans; it's got audience. Those people were pampered...” (VÔLEI..., 2011).

Marcio Andrade believes that the fact that offenses against Michael have been questioned shows that the public present there were not fans among whom that form of manifestation is normal and necessary; they would be an audience that, when watching a spectacle, must conduct themselves in a polite and controlled manner. This group is also disqualified, dismissed

<sup>8</sup> It is important to say that even within relatively stable patterns (for instance, in the same country, analyzing groups of the same social class and age, practicing the same sport), we can also observe nuances and distinctions in behavior.

<sup>9</sup> I understand that pressure on the referee can be seen as both, since they are intended both to self-benefit and to harm opponents.



as “pampered”, as people who received excessive zeal when they were raised and became spoiled and too polite as adults. Thus, the reader-commentator opposes spoiled *spectators* and brave and manly *fans*.

Still from that perspective, rooting goes beyond an individual moment of fun in which there is pleasure to enjoy a spectacle. It is also related to the selfless actions of dedication to one’s team to support its success and honor. Such dedication is only justified by the bond established between club and fans, the aforementioned “club belonging”.

Sport space’s permissiveness is enjoyed especially by fans’ verbal and gestural manifestations. Focusing in the first category, which is closer to this study, Toledo (1993), in research examining communication between football fans, shows the strong presence of sexuality in bad words uttered at stadiums. He also points out that while words of encouragement and self-assertion to one’s team mention male attributes of strength and virility, those of protest and intimidation towards opponents often refer to their sexual passiveness.

In the same research, Toledo (1993) finds that attributes used to offend opponent fans are often assumed by them, thus taking away their negative character. This is the case, for example, of Corinthians’s fans who accepted the adjectives of “*favelados*” (slum dwellers) and “dogs” in order to strengthen its role as common people’s team. However, that does not happen when we deal with terms that allude to sexuality or femininity. While an imaginary class conflict<sup>10</sup> between elite clubs and popular clubs can be acted out as rivalry between two teams, the same is not seen when dealing with gender or sexuality conflicts. Society’s heteronormativity, combined with the hegemonic masculinity associated with sports, virtually prevents any group of fans from accepting attributes related to homosexuals or women.

I therefore stress that the core questioning about what happened in the Michael case is not the conduct of fans, seen generically as acts to encourage their club and harm the opponent one, as suggested by some previously cited readers-commentators. What generated such a major conflict was the content of the expressions aimed at harming the opponent’s performance: their homophobic content. Thus, the discourses analyzed that criticize Cruzeiro’s fans do not necessarily suggest a departure from the established ways of rooting, but they demand changes, rejecting an alleged fixity and stability of those standards, with a limit to fans’ freedom of expression.

In other comments, in turn, fans seem conditioned to the framework of volleyball under certain sports representations, establishing standards of behavior for all its agents: players, coaching staff, fans, TV viewers, and they are demanded to behave in a manner consistent with the image constructed and nurtured for that sport. These representations were organized in two opposing pairs: elite sport x popular sport, and fagot sport x macho sport. In both cases, football is used as an important element to classify volleyball.

The comment below is an example of the distance between volleyball and football – the former is seen as an elite sport and the latter is considered a popular sport:

Rodolfo Valentino: One of volleyball’s worst mistakes is to allow football fans to mix with its audience. What is a family, healthy sport may soon be taken over by acts of vandalism, mutual aggression, murders and all the barbarism we see in football matches. (VÔLEI..., 2011)

<sup>10</sup> I say that the conflict is imaginary, because the fact that fans say they are “popular” or “elitist” is at the level of discourse, and major clubs’ fan groups are very heterogeneous and include individuals from different social classes.

The comment argues that volleyball's and football's fans are necessarily different groups of people. While the former's public is made up of families, the latter's would be vandals, bullies, killers. Furthermore, under the concept of "family sport", the author seems to say that this place has a safe and inviting ambience for women and children, seen as fragile groups. The description of what he sees in football – "taken over by acts of vandalism, mutual aggression, murders and all the barbarism" – is also presented not as a point of view, but as a fact, to say that it is a scenario "we all know". The fan also rejects the possibility that the same person can take an interest in both sports. In his view, football and volleyball fans are necessarily distinct groups made up of different people with different characteristics.

Other comments, in turn, placed volleyball next to football as a mass sport, as in the following example:

Otávio Viegas: The intention was to destabilize the player so that his team would lose the match. That was all. It's a volleyball match, and the fans want to take down the opposing team. It was not a tennis match in which fans behave like lords. (BASTOS, 2011).

Opposition here is established with tennis, a sport with few public spaces for practice and costly equipment, thus hindering or preventing its practice by lower classes and justifying that imaginary. Moreover, booing or manifestations aiming to perturb the opponent athlete are uncommon. Such behavior by fans is understood as typical of an elite sport.

Besides being framed as a mass sport or an elite sport, another classification was also proposed: macho sport x fagot sport<sup>11</sup>. "Mind Munch: Since when volleyball fans are in a position to question anyone's sexual orientation? LOL". (EQUIPES..., 2011).

In the cases above, volleyball is framed as a sport for homosexuals, a fagot sport. As already discussed, I argue that such associations are the result of a false alignment between sex-gender-desire, and essentialist and hierarchical views on gender. Thus, the "real" man should practice "man's" – macho – sports, of which football is a recurrent example. Readers-commentators place volleyball outside that range of activities. Within gender patterns, therefore, volleyball is considered a women's activity, and by practicing it, a man automatically raises suspicions about his sexuality. Thus, according to readers-commentators, as a typically female practice, volleyball would attract homosexuals, both in the courts and in the stands.

Other comments, however, without focusing on the issue of fagot sport x macho sport, argue that men's volleyball must be practiced by men. However, these claims use the sex-gender-desire alignment to exclude homosexuals from the category of men and therefore from men's volleyball. "Full Metal Jacket: Male Volleyball is for men." (Ribeiro, 2011)

Thus, the above quote, by saying that "men's volleyball is for men", besides inferring that this is a sport closed to women, seems to refer to a specific model of man in which Michael does not fit since he is a homosexual, but also because he came out and does not fit the stereotype of virility.

Therefore, it is clear that a number of values – not necessarily consistent or unanimous – are associated with volleyball and football. It is also clear, however, that football is defined as a male and popular sport in which values associated with hegemonic masculinity are legitimated.

<sup>11</sup> I propose the use of such terms – macho and fagot (*bicha*) – because they were repeatedly used in readers' comments to refer respectively to stereotypes of heterosexual males – aggressive, rude, interested in physical practices – and gay men – sensitive, fragile, effeminate.

Volleyball’s closeness or distance to this reference is what mainly leads most arguments to be favorable or contrary to Cruzeiro’s fans’ homophobic manifestation against Michael.

#### 4 FINAL REMARKS

It seems clear that building standards that legitimate or not participation in certain activities – in this case, sports activities – potentially alienates subjects that do not fit.

Reader’s comments analyzed in this study, although not consensually, argued that fans’ homophobic demonstrations are consistent with a hegemonic model of sport based on values associated with hegemonic masculinity such as strength, virility, aggression, competitiveness.

Representations about homosexuals, in turn, besides being often negative, are seen as the product of deviation in the expected alignment between sex, gender and sexuality – the last two being natural extensions of the first one. This supposed misfit is constantly reiterated by readers’ comments identifying homosexuality as a problem, depravity, abnormality, disease and particularly as a non-place. Reader-commentators’ explicit view of homosexuals as abject subjects corroborates the normalization of heteronormativity and homophobia. The gymnasium, both in the court and in the stands, proved to be a regulatory and inhospitable place for those who do not conform to hegemonic masculinity, revealing a dispute over ways of life that can and/or should be experienced.

Analyzing stances on the legitimacy of manifestations against Michael is a helpful attitude in the process of questioning sexuality and gender prejudice present in sporting environments. Therefore, it is not only necessary but also urgent to debate discourses that gain the status of truth and help those forms of regulation when affected/produced by a network of power. Breaking the silence is (only) the first step.

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