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ANITTA'S POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND CONTROVERSIES ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS: THE CASE OF HER SUPPORT FOR LULA DURING THE 2022 ELECTIONS

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Abstract

During the hotly contested 2022 Brazilian presidential elections between Workers' Party candidate Luis Inácio Lula da Silva and Liberal Party candidate Jair Messias Bolsonaro, singer Anitta - one of Brazil's biggest pop singers - declared her support for Lula on her X and Instagram profiles, causing a huge backlash not only among her 60 million followers and fans but also among institutional political actors

This paper is part of a broader research initiative focused on the intersection of Brazilian pop-peripheral music, politics, and activism. Utilizing the frameworks of performance dramaturgy (Taylor, 2013; Schechner, 2009) and the cartography of controversies (Latour, 2015), we center our analysis on Anitta's endorsement to explore the dynamics of political performances and activism by Brazilian pop-peripheral artists (Pereira de Sá, 2021) on digital platforms. We define political performances as strategic actions aimed at enhancing artist presence and fostering engagement with fans on issues related to politics, citizenship, and democracy.

To frame this discussion, we will begin by detailing Anitta's trajectory—from her roots in a peripheral neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro and her rise in the carioca funk genre to her emergence as a prominent figure in both Brazilian and international music scenes. Notably, Anitta has become an outspoken critic of Bolsonaro's administration, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of these actions and positions, she became one of the most influential public figures in the political debate in 2022, and for this reason one of the main targets of the extreme right in Brazil, which operates on social networks through hate speech and the production of disinformation and fake news.

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The paper aims to address two interconnected questions: 1. How is a political performance constructed by pop artists on digital platforms? 2. How do fans react, and how effective is this performance in promoting civic engagement?

Faced with these questions, and starting from the premise that pop culture has become a central mediator of current socio-political and cultural issues, we will develop the following arguments:

1. **Connection with Public Sentiment:** Anitta skillfully taps into the public's mistrust of traditional politicians, reflecting a significant aspect of contemporary political sentiment within the context of culture wars and digital politics.

2. **Informal and Affective Communication:** The significance of informal, playful, and emotionally resonant conversations—rooted in personal experiences and conducted within the "ego-centric" networks of the internet—is emphasized.

3. **Use of Humor and Pop Culture:** Anitta employs humorous language and pop culture references as vital strategies for engaging new audiences on digital platforms. However, this approach also creates tensions with traditional political activism, which often criticizes such forms of communication.

4. **Stimulating Engagement through Connective Action:** This discourse fosters engagement through "connective action" (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), characterized by high levels of personalization of political ideas and the negotiation of frameworks, influenced by affective ties and relationships in decision-making processes regarding political action.

5. **Fandom Engagement:** The episode highlights the active participation of fandoms, who utilize their profiles on various platforms to amplify Anitta's actions. This includes the use of hashtags and mobilizations such as "Lula Day."

In conclusion, our analysis of the effectiveness and impact of Anitta's support for Lula reveals that her performance was instrumental in broadening the political debate beyond the leftist bubble—encouraging ordinary users to engage with crucial democratic issues, such as the presidential election. On the other hand, this strategy comes up against some problematic issues, such as the porosity between entertainment and the bet on controversy and polarization, without space for more in-depth debate on political issues; or even the ephemerality of Anitta's involvement, who in the second round of the elections played a more discreet role. Ultimately, this phenomenon exemplifies "pop activism" (Mukherjee; Bennett-Weiser, 2012), where themes of self-esteem, autonomy, freedom of choice, self-entrepreneurship, and media visibility take center stage.

Methodology:

The intended methodological approach dialogues with aspects of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), especially with the notion of controversy with qualitative data analysis.

Actor-Network Theory is methodologically defined as a sociology of controversies, and according to its authors, observing them is the way to put Actor-Network Theory into action. In this sense, the controversy is the ideal moment or the privileged place to observe the actors circulating in the construction of an association. This is the moment when the complexity of social relations is revealed in the infinity of mediators, in the unequal power relations, in the clashes and finally in their stabilization, when the controversy becomes a “black box”. (Latour, 1986, p. 1994). In this proposal, Latour brings to the fore the craft of cartography, understood as the researcher's activity of following the traces of the actors and describing them from the textual account, (re)placing the researcher's text at the center of research activities. In addition, Latour defines a good account as “one that weaves a network” and where the participants in the action are treated as “complete mediators”; or a narrative in which all the actors “do something and don't just watch” (...) (Latour, 2012, p. 189). In this sense, I intend to use this approach in order to propose a cartography of the actors - human (artist, fans and political community, for example) and non-human (hashtags and other platform's affordances) - involved in the episode in question, privileging the ties and connections and seeking to understand how the agency of each of the actors contributes to the definition of the meanings of this episode, based on a qualitative and quantitative approach to the empirical material.

We will present empirical data gathered from digital platforms, including a collection and filtering of tweets from Anitta's profile on X, along with replies and shares from July 11 to 17, 2022. Additionally, we will analyze tweets associated with hashtags such as #lula and #luladay. Further insights will be drawn from a questionnaire distributed to Anitta's fans between November and December 2022, assessing her political stance and its repercussions on digital platforms.

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