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Between Media Discourse and Public Reading: Audience Appropriations of the Meanings of Success

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Abstract

Media discourses on success circulate widely in journalism and digital platforms, frequently articulating individual merit, voice and regional belonging. Discourse analytic studies of such materials have concentrated on their production and circulation, often without examining how readers receive them. This article presents the theoretical foundation and the methodological design of an exploratory sounding of the effects of journalistic texts on success, voice and regional identity, based on reader comments publicly available on the internet, together with a first pilot reading. The corpus comprises eight news and opinion texts from Brazilian outlets of different editorial orientations, previously described in discourse analytic studies.

Comments could be partially recovered for one text, an interview in which a male singer disqualifies the voice and conduct of a female singer. Of thirty comments displayed, five were visible and analyzed. Using the encoding and decoding model, one comment ratified the vocal judgement, one negotiated it, one contested the interviewee's authority on gender grounds and two displaced the discussion toward the interviewee or the outlet. None addressed the singer's trajectory of success. The small set only demonstrates the applicability of the analytical matrix and does not support generalization. Ethical procedures for publicly accessible data are specified.

Keywords: Reception Studies, Success Discourse, Media Voice, Regional Identity, Online Comments, Interpretive Communities

1. Introduction

Discourses on success occupy a central place in contemporary media. Journalistic profiles, entertainment coverage, political reporting and platform content repeatedly present trajectories of achievement, associate them with effort and talent, and propose models of conduct to be emulated. Thompson ^[1] argues that the symbolic forms circulated by the media cannot be understood apart from the conditions in which they are received and appropriated, so that their meanings are never fixed at the point of transmission. In the materialist discourse analysis developed in Brazil, success is described as an injunction that presents itself as aspiration and operates as a technology for the production of subjects and meanings, and not merely as a celebration of individuals ^[2-4].

A productive line of this research has taken voice as its privileged object. Studies of what the media say about the voices of singers, politicians and other public figures have identified an aesthetic of vocal success that validates certain voices and erases others ^[5,6], as well as mechanisms such as vocal metonymy, silencing and the autonomization of voice, through which media visibility is converted into political representation ^[7]. When these narratives are anchored in a territory, they also mobilize regional identity and the legitimacy to speak for a place or a group, a legitimacy that is historically constructed through discourse ^[8] and never closed upon itself ^[9].

Most of this work, however, concentrates on the production, formulation and circulation of meanings. Its analytic gesture is to describe how a text constructs success and voice, and the studies themselves indicate that the examination of reception remains an open agenda ^[10,11]. The tradition of reception studies provides the conceptual means to address it. Hall ^[12] proposed that messages are encoded under institutional and ideological conditions and decoded from different social positions, which may yield dominant, negotiated or oppositional readings. Morley ^[13] tested this proposition with groups of viewers and showed that interpretation varied with class, occupation and cultural frameworks. Jensen and Rosengren ^[14] situated these developments

among the main traditions of audience research, and Latin American scholarship added the notion of mediations ^[15-17]. Empirical studies have shown that audiences take pleasure in, criticize and reuse texts in ways that texts alone cannot predict ^[18-20]. These contributions support the principle adopted here: the public does not automatically reproduce the meanings proposed by the media, and the relation between text and reader must be investigated rather than presumed.

Today, a considerable part of this reading becomes visible. Readers comment on articles on the outlets' own pages and, above all, under the posts through which outlets circulate them on social networks, and in doing so they leave public traces of how they interpreted what they read. Conversation in networked environments has been studied as a legitimate object of communication research ^[21, 22], and participatory culture blurs the line between receiving and producing meanings ^[23]. Comments are not a transparent window onto the audience, since commenters are a self-selected fraction of readers, but they offer unobtrusive and naturally occurring evidence of effects of meaning that no interview prompted.

Discourse analysis and reception studies are not rivals in this design. For Orlandi ^[24], reading is itself a discursive process, historically determined and shaped by the reader's position, and the gesture of reading that an analyst performs on a text ^[25] is only one among several possible gestures. The analyst describes the conditions of production of the text and its preferred meanings ^[26, 27], while the analysis of comments examines traces of its reading. The general objective of this article is to present a theoretically grounded and ethically sound design for an exploratory sounding of the effects of journalistic texts on success, voice and regional identity, using public comments, and to test it in a first pilot reading. The specific objectives are to define the corpus and the preferred meanings of each text on the basis of prior analyses, to describe procedures for collecting and analyzing comments, to propose a matrix for classifying reception effects, to apply it to the comments that could be recovered for one text and to specify ethical safeguards. The central question is the following: how do commenters ratify, negotiate or contest the meanings of success proposed by journalistic texts, and what do they leave unsaid?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Success, voice and political projection

In the discourse analytic literature on success, voice is not treated as sound but as a discursive object, constituted by what is said about it ^[6, 28]. Two operations are described. In conservative formations, voice is subjected to an aesthetic hierarchy that separates good from bad voices and presents vocal success as the outcome of individual effort, thereby naturalizing exclusion through merit. In progressive formations, voice becomes a metaphor for political representation and for the expression of silenced collectives, although this metaphor can reproduce the logic of celebrity that it criticizes ^[11]. The extension of these findings to institutional politics shows that voice may designate access to decision making and institutional speaking time, and that formulas such as "giving voice to the silenced" can reproduce, in their own materiality, the erasure they intend to denounce ^[10]. The study of media success and political projection adds that the conversion of media capital into political capital is neither automatic nor neutral ^[7, 29].

2.2 Discourse, reading and preferred meanings

Discourse is understood as the effect of meaning between interlocutors, produced under historically specific conditions and tied to ideological formations ^[26, 30]. Silence is constitutive of meaning, since saying one thing always implies not saying others ^[31]. The production of discourse is also controlled by procedures that define who may speak and about what ^[32], and media discourse operates under a double logic, symbolic and economic ^[33]. These notions allow the identification of preferred meanings, that is, the readings that the text structure tends to favor. They do not determine how a given reader will respond. The distance between the preferred meaning and the meaning visible in a comment is the empirical object of this study.

2.3 Reception, mediations and comments as traces of reading

The encoding and decoding model ^[12] offers a first heuristic. A dominant reading accepts the preferred meaning and the frame that sustains it. A negotiated reading accepts the general legitimacy of the frame while adapting it to local conditions. An oppositional reading recognizes the preferred meaning but rejects it through an alternative frame. The theory of mediations ^[15, 16] insists that these positions are not reducible to class, and that age, gender, religion, work, regional belonging and media use intervene, as do the interpretive communities to which readers belong ^[19]. In comment sections, such communities are partly visible as threads in which commenters answer one another, which allows the observation of collective negotiation without a moderator. The typology is applied as a sensitizing device and not as a rigid classification, since a single comment may combine positions.

2.4 Regional identity, memory and platform authenticity

Regional identities are sustained by collective memory, which depends on the shared frameworks of a social group ^[34] and is anchored in places and cultural forms that serve as referents for present practices ^[35]. Studies of popular song show how a regional imaginary can be built and circulated by a recognizable voice ^[36]. In the contemporary media environment, this process intersects with platform logics in which authenticity operates as a technique and a currency ^[37], and in which visibility, authenticity and engagement shape how users perceive the factors of success ^[38, 39]. Comment analysis must therefore consider that platform affordances, such as reactions, replies and algorithmic ranking, also shape what is said.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Study design and epistemological stance

The study is a qualitative, exploratory and documentary sounding of the effects of meaning of journalistic texts, based on naturally occurring data, that is, comments produced by readers without the intervention of the researchers. It draws on principles of online ethnography ^[40] and on methods for internet research ^[22], but it involves no contact with commenters. The notion of effect is used in a discursive sense: it designates the meanings that readers attribute to, derive from or oppose to a text, as these become visible in their statements, and not a causal impact measured on a population. The unit of analysis is the comment, and the unit of context is the thread in which it appears. The study has two phases. The first, reported here, is a pilot with

the one text for which comments could be recovered. The second, described as a protocol, extends collection to the remaining texts.

3.2 Documentary corpus and stimulus corpus

The corpus has three layers. The documentary layer consists of seventeen analytic studies on the discourse of success and on voice, including books, articles, essays and manuscripts produced under materialist and Foucauldian discourse analysis, together with one study on regional memory and imaginary. This layer is used to establish, before the collection of comments, the conditions of production and the preferred meanings of each journalistic text. The stimulus layer consists of eight journalistic texts that those studies analyze, selected to vary editorial orientation, genre, gender of the main subject, regional anchoring and platform (Table 1). The comment layer, described below, consists of the public comments posted under these texts and, in this first phase, exists only for one of them.

Table 1: Stimulus corpus

Code	Text	Outlet and date	Comment data
T1	Líder da bancada feminina, Dorinha fala em enfrentar temas desafiadores e dar voz às mulheres silenciadas ^[41]	Gazeta do Cerrado, 12 Apr 2019	Page returned no content; pending
T2	Maior referência feminina na política no TO, senadora Dorinha inspira no Encontro de Mulheres municipalistas ^[42]	Gazeta do Cerrado, 9 Nov 2023	Pending
T3	Aginaldo Timóteo detona Joelma e diz que ela devia ter perdoado Ximbinha ^[43]	Extra, 27 Jan 2016	Partially recovered
T4	Ana Castela, estrela do “agronejo”: “Hoje quem manda é a mulher” ^[44]	Veja, 2023	Pending
T5	Hip Hop e periferia não têm voz sem democracia, dizem artistas ^[45]	Brasil de Fato, 5 May 2016	Pending
T6	Do samba ao funk: a voz dos excluídos ^[46]	Carta Capital, 2017	Pending
T7	Celebridades perdem espaço para IA e humor nas redes nessas eleições ^[47]	Diário de Cuiabá, 29 Sep 2026	Pending
T8	Deepfakes de famosos acendem alerta às vésperas das eleições ^[48]	Metrópoles, 3 Oct 2026	Pending

3.3 Collection of comments

Comments are collected from two kinds of public sources: the comment sections on the outlets' own pages, when they exist, and the comments under the posts through which each outlet shared the text on open social networks, such as Instagram, Facebook, X and YouTube. Only content visible without login to closed groups, private profiles or paid access is collected. For each comment, the following are recorded: text, platform, date, thread position and public reaction counts. Account names, profile images and links are not stored, and each comment receives a random code.

The date of capture is always recorded. In the extended phase, a fixed collection window and a sampling rule by platform and order of display will be defined for texts with many comments, to reduce the effect of algorithmic ranking. In the pilot, the comment section of T3 on the Extra website was consulted after the publication. The section was closed to new comments at the time of capture. The page displayed a total of 30 comments, but only five were visible in the capture, and the remaining 25 could not be retrieved. No other platform was identified on the page, and the sharing of the text on social networks at the time of publication remains to be verified. For the remaining texts, retrieval was not possible: the page of the Gazeta do Cerrado returned no content, and the other outlets would require manual collection or export tools. Exclusion criteria, applied in the extended phase, are comments posted by the outlet or by the people portrayed, duplicated and automated content, advertising, comments that do not refer to the text or its subject, and comments whose authors appear to be minors. Because sociodemographic data are not available, regional belonging, gender and other mediations are considered only when commenters declare them explicitly. Table 2 describes the comment corpus.

Table 2: Description of the comment corpus

Text	Source	Publication and capture	Displayed	Excluded	Analyzed
T3	Extra website, comment section (closed)	27 Jan 2016; capture on [date]	30	[n]	5
T1, T2, T4 to T8	Not yet collected	Pending	Pending	Pending	Pending

3.4 Data analysis

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, a content analysis ^[49] classifies each comment by theme, target (the text, the subject portrayed, the outlet, other commenters) and polarity. Second, reflexive thematic analysis in six phases ^[50] develops themes across texts, combining deductive categories from the framework with inductive codes. Third, the typology of dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings ^[12] is applied to each comment that engages with the meaning of the text, and compared with the preferred meaning established in the documentary layer. Comments that ignore the preferred meaning and move to another topic are coded as displacement, and what is absent from the comments, such as the silenced agents or voices identified in prior analyses, is recorded as a silence of reception ^[31]. In the extended phase, two researchers will code independently a subset of 20 percent of the comments, divergences will be discussed until a codebook is stabilized and agreement will be reported with an appropriate coefficient. In the pilot, coding was performed by a single researcher and is provisional. A reflexive record is kept, since the researchers also authored part of the prior analyses. Table 3 presents the initial matrix of reception effects.

Table 3: Initial matrix of reception effects

Effect	Guiding question	Illustrative codes
Ratification	Does the comment accept the preferred meaning?	merit; exemplarity; admiration; agreement
Negotiation	Does it accept the frame while adapting or qualifying it?	yes, but; conditions; local adaptation
Contestation	Does it reject the preferred meaning through another frame?	irony; accusation; counter-example; denunciation
Displacement	Does it move the discussion to another topic?	partisan dispute; personal attack; football; religion
Responsibility	Whom does it hold responsible for the facts reported?	platforms; celebrities; press; voters; the state
Identification	Does it relate the text to the commenter's own condition or place?	regional pride; gender; class; self-reference
Silence of reception	What is not mentioned that the prior analysis found silenced?	absent women; unnamed agents; ignored risks

3.5 Limits of the design

Five limits are acknowledged. First, commenters are self-selected and tend to be more engaged or more polarized than the average reader. Second, platforms filter visibility, and moderation or deletion may remove precisely the most hostile or the most dissenting comments. Third, the absence of sociodemographic data prevents the inference of positions of class or region, except by self-declaration. Fourth, the presence of automated accounts and coordinated campaigns can distort volume. In the pilot, an additional limit applies: only five of thirty displayed comments were visible, the section was closed, and the comments are about ten years old, so the missing comments may differ systematically from those analyzed. For these reasons, the results are interpreted as traces of reception and as an exploratory sounding, not as measures of audience opinion or as proof of causal effect.

3.6 Ethical procedures

The study uses only publicly accessible content and involves no interaction with commenters. Resolution 510/2016 of the National Health Council exempts from registration and review by the research ethics system studies that use publicly accessible information or public opinion without identifiable participants^[51], and the authors will confirm this applicability with the institutional committee before beginning collection. Nevertheless, public availability does not eliminate ethical care^[52]. Commenters did not write for research, and comments can identify them. For this reason, usernames and profile data are not collected, comments are stored in restricted access repositories and processed according to the Brazilian General Data Protection Law^[53], and reports use paraphrase or short excerpts altered enough to prevent retrieval by search engines. No attempt is made to identify, contact or profile commenters. Content of minors, private groups and closed profiles is excluded. Where platform terms of service restrict automated collection, manual procedures are used. Because several texts name public figures, the analysis addresses the readings of texts and not the persons who comment or are portrayed.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Preferred meanings of the stimulus corpus

The documentary layer yields a description of the preferred meanings of each text, summarized in Table 4. In T1, voice does not designate sound but access to decision positions and institutional speaking time, and the formula of giving voice to silenced women produces three effects of erasure: the generic designation of women, the suppression of the agents of silencing through passive and nominalized constructions, and a relation of concession between the leader who speaks and the women who receive voice^[10]. T2 articulates voice as possession, as lack and as mandate, grants textualized voice only to the senator and presents her

success as both effect and condition of her political reach, through consecrating nominalization, identification with a valued cause, exemplarity of trajectory and municipal reach^[10]. In T3, the expression about a cracked voice is not only an aesthetic judgement but inscribes the evaluation of a female singer in a meritocratic formation that naturalizes vocal and gender hierarchies. In T4, an utterance of feminist matrix is framed by the formation of media success, which signals only partial adherence of the sertanejo niche to feminist discourse^[6].

In the progressive outlets, T5 and T6 metaphorize voice as the representation of silenced collectives, although this representation is often performed by a celebrity with accumulated symbolic capital, which sustains tensions between speaking for and replacing the other^[7, 11]. The two most recent texts shift the problem to platforms. T7 treats the celebrity's voice as symbolic capital and risk, attributes the decline of political endorsements to the faceless agency of the algorithmic feed and silences the legal and informational risks of artificial intelligence humor documented elsewhere^[54]. T8 treats voice as raw material composed of cloneable parameters, which severs the link between voice and subject, relocates the criterion of truth to the press and verified profiles, erases the agent who fabricates the falsehood and places the warning in a page structured by the spiral of entertaining, informing and influencing^[6].

Table 4: Preferred meanings and what the comments are expected to reveal

Code	Preferred meaning established in prior analyses	Probe for the analysis of comments
T1	Voice as access to decision and speaking time; generic designation of women; leader speaks for the bancada	Is giving voice read as empowerment or concession? Do comments mention the absent women?
T2	Voice as possession, lack and mandate; exemplary trajectory as political capital	Is the senator read as representative or as exception? Is merit invoked?
T3	Vocal evaluation naturalizing gender hierarchy and disqualifying a successful trajectory	Is the judgement ratified as expert opinion, or contested as prejudice?
T4	Feminist utterance framed by media success in the rural music niche	Is "quem manda é a mulher" read as feminist, commercial or both?
T5, T6	Voice as metaphor of representation of the excluded, performed by artists	Do commenters accept artists as spokespersons? Who is missing?
T7	Celebrity voice as capital and risk; algorithm as faceless agent	Who is held responsible for the shift: platforms, celebrities or users?
T8	Voice as cloneable material; truth relocated to press; voter partly responsible	Do comments express trust in the press or generalized suspicion?

4.2 Description of the comment corpus

Comments could be recovered for one text, T3, which reports statements by a male singer about the voice and the conduct of a female singer after the end of her professional partnership. The comment section on the Extra website displayed 30 comments and was closed. Five comments were visible in the capture and were analyzed (Table 2). Because the sample is minimal and was determined by availability and not by a sampling rule, the findings in the next sections are not representative and serve only to test the analytical matrix and to indicate lines of inquiry.

4.3 Effects of meaning in the comments on T3

Table 5 presents the provisional coding of the five comments, with paraphrased content. The distribution is one ratification, one negotiation, one contestation and two displacements. The numbers are given only as a count of the set, since percentages would suggest a representativeness that the data do not have.

Table 5: Provisional coding of the visible comments on T3

Effect	Comments	Reading of the comment (paraphrase)
Ratification	1	Repeats the aesthetic judgement that the singer has a poor voice, aligning with the vocal hierarchy proposed by the text
Negotiation	1	Admits the fault of the former bandmate but holds the singer responsible for making the conflict public and for the reaction of fans
Contestation	1	Rejects the interviewee's authority to judge the conduct of the singer, questioning his position on women and betrayal
Displacement	2	One comment attacks the interviewee as a person, and another criticizes the outlet for publishing trivial material

The ratifying comment reproduces what the prior analysis describes as the central operation of the text: the evaluation of a woman's worth through the quality of her voice, within a formation that naturalizes vocal and gender hierarchies [5, 6]. The reading is dominant in Hall's sense [12], and it shows that the aesthetic criterion is available to readers as common sense. The contesting comment recognizes the preferred meaning but displaces the frame from aesthetics to gender and, above all, to the question of who is entitled to judge. This is an oppositional reading that mobilizes what Foucault [32] describes as the control over who may speak and about what, and it resonates with studies that show how readers contest the authority of enunciators and not only the content of what is said [13, 20].

The negotiating comment is analytically the richest. It accepts the moral and conjugal frame in which the text places the conflict, but it redistributes the blame and introduces a collective actor, the fans, whose reaction is invoked as a reason. This pattern is consistent with the proposition that negotiated readings accept the general legitimacy of the frame while adapting it to local interests [12], and it points to the mediation of fan communities in the interpretation of media conflicts [15, 19]. The two displacements shift the target of the comment from the singer to the interviewee and to the outlet. The second, which treats the text as a product of low editorial quality, is a meta-media reading that rejects the genre of celebrity gossip and thereby the claim of the text to inform [33].

4.4 Silences of reception

The prior analysis indicates that the text disqualifies the voice of a female singer while silencing her commercial and artistic trajectory. In the five comments, none refers to that trajectory, and the discussion circulates around vocal quality, conduct, the authority of the speaker and the quality of the outlet. This absence is a provisional silence of reception [31]: the success of the singer is not mobilized even by the comment that contests the interviewee. Whether this silence persists in a larger set, and whether it also occurs in other texts, is a question for the extended phase.

4.5 Discussion

Three points emerge from the pilot, always with the caution imposed by the size of the set. First, the readings are not reducible to the reproduction of the preferred meaning: even in five comments, the three positions of the typology appear, which supports the principle that the public does not automatically reproduce the meanings of the media. Second, a substantial part of the visible reception does not engage with success or voice as such but with the authority of the source and the credibility of the outlet, which suggests that the effects of meaning of this genre may be more strongly related to who speaks and where than to what is said about voice. Third, the matrix of Table 3 proved applicable, although the category of responsibility needs to be treated as a secondary code that can accompany other effects, as in the negotiating comment.

The remaining texts are pending. For T1 and T2, whose pages did not return content, and for T4 to T8, collection requires manual capture or export tools, and the sources of comments on social networks must be identified. The extended phase will allow the comparison of outlets of different orientations and of subjects of different gender and regional anchoring, which cannot be attempted with a single text. Table 4 presents the probes that guide that comparison.

5. Conclusion

This article presented a design for an exploratory sounding of the effects of journalistic texts on success, voice and regional identity, moving the analytical emphasis from the production and circulation of discourse to its public reading, and tested it in a pilot with the partially recovered comments of one text. By articulating discourse analysis, the encoding and decoding model and the analysis of reader comments, the proposal avoids two opposite risks: assuming that audiences automatically reproduce the meanings of the media and assuming that texts have no capacity to orient interpretation. In the five comments analyzed, ratification, negotiation, contestation and displacement coexisted, and the contestation concerned above all the authority of the speaker, while the singer's trajectory of success remained unmentioned. These observations are provisional and cannot be generalized. The main limits are the very small and partial set, the self-selection of commenters, the filtering by platforms and the lack of sociodemographic information. Future research should collect the comments of the remaining seven texts, define sampling rules, add a second coder, and may combine the sounding with interviews or focus groups and extend it to audiovisual materials.

6. Recommendations (Optional)

It is recommended that future studies document the preliminary textual analysis separately from the comment

data, register collection dates, moderation and closing conditions of comment sections, and adopt protective procedures for public but identifiable content.

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