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The Battle of the Barbers:

a photographic essay

Abstract

This visual essay documents a competition that brings together hundreds of barbers – most of whom are young men who live in Rio de Janeiro's favelas (Brazil). Ethnographic evidence suggests that this segment of the informal labor market has been flourishing in the last few years and that digital platforms have radically transformed it. The photographs have been taken as part of a more extensive research project. In the broader investigation, I explore how social media have reshaped longstanding modalities of informal work in Brazil, including autonomous, self-employed, gig work, and petty entrepreneurship. Combining ethnographic observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups, the research examines the drastic economic, social, and political consequences stemming from the encounter between socioeconomic struggles in a peripheral capitalist society and algorithm-driven companies based in Silicon Valley.

Keywords

Social impact of digital technologies; transformations on work and labor; platform economy; social media platforms; informal labor.

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The *Sambódromo* parade grounds, the main venue for Rio de Janeiro's world-famous carnival, looked and sounded somewhat different on October 9, 2023. On that day, two events were taking place simultaneously. The first was a music festival called *Rio Parada Funk*, allegedly the world's biggest gathering for dancing carioca funk, a rhythm born in the city's favelas that became increasingly popular over the years. The second event is documented in this photographic essay. It is called the Battle of the Barbers (*Batalha dos Barbeiros*, in Portuguese). In its 8th edition in Rio, the contenders, most of whom were young men who lived in Rio's favelas, attempted to win the prize for the best barber.

This photographic essay is part of a more extensive research project in which I explore how new digital technologies, particularly social media, have reshaped longstanding modalities of informal work, including autonomous, self-employed, gig work, and petty entrepreneurship in Brazil. Combining ethnographic observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups, the research documents the economic, social, and political consequences stemming from the encounter between socioeconomic struggles in a peripheral capitalist society and algorithm-driven companies based in Silicon Valley.

While digital technologies have profoundly transformed various sectors of the informal labor market in Brazil (Marins, 2020), the effects of social media platforms on the work of barbers are evident. The use of multiple platforms is intense among barbers, even more so among the younger ones. Barbers rely on their smartphones for essential activities. For communicating with the clientele and scheduling appointments, for example, WhatsApp is a fundamental tool. Barbers also interact with one another using WhatsApp groups, exchanging advice, or negotiating work supplies. Instagram and TikTok are used by barbers to reach new clients, build their brands, and learn new techniques. For many of those workers who spend hours on social media every day, creating content to post online and trying to figure out the opaque algorithms that will get this content promoted are activities carried out with the hope of finding new opportunities, improving working conditions, overcoming financial struggles, and ultimately finding an effective avenue of upward social mobility.

As a few workers manage to grow their customer bases, they start charging higher rates for their services, and their workspace becomes more elaborate. Evidence of successful trajectories is extensively publicized on social media. Those atypical individuals who manage to grow their businesses often become aspirational models for young men who dream of upward social mobility through the barber business. As documented by scholars who carried out research among workers in different contexts, they monetize as they cascade models of success (Soriano and Panaglian, 2019; Guerra & Carlos d'Andréa, 2022). This dynamic in which algorithm-controlled platforms mediate the relationship between particular types of influencers and barbers who dream of achieving success displayed on social media is at the heart of the Battle of the Barbers. One of the main event's attractions is the opportunity to meet in person with barbers who gained national fame by growing audiences on Instagram.

I first heard of the "Battle" from a 39-year-old barber who lives in a low-income suburban neighborhood at the north edge of Rio de Janeiro. He participated in a focus group I was moderating then (Marins and Rezende, 2022). When I asked the other participants whether they also knew about *Batalha dos Barbeiros*, they all replied as if it was obvious: "Everyone does; the Battle of Barbers is quite well known" one said. Later that week, when searching for the Battle online, I was convinced to incorporate the event into my fieldwork activities. Spending a day surrounded by barbers from different parts of Rio and some who traveled from other Brazilian states provided a clearer picture of these workers' techniques, socialization dynamics, hierarchies, and aspirations.

The Battle of the Barbers was conceived by Erica Cristina Santana Nunes, a 40-year-old woman best known as "Madrinha" (the Portuguese word for godmother), herself born in *Maré*, a complex of 16 *favela* communities in Rio de

Janeiro. Since its first edition in 2016, *Batalha dos Barbeiros* has gained popularity through online videos shot on smartphones and shared on social media. The reputation of The Battle of Barbers became so well known that Erica and her husband developed it into a variety of businesses: besides being an annual event that takes place in Rio and other Brazilian urban centers, it is a brand for men's grooming and styling products, a barbershop as well as a private institute that offers professional training courses for adults who work or aspire working in the beauty industry (as barbers, but also as manicures or eyebrow designers, for example). The event I photographed for this essay is simultaneously a showcase of such businesses and a nodal point for a cultural movement around the barber world that emerged in Rio's *favelas*.

The day when the 8th Battle of the Barbers in Rio took place was particularly warm. The heat, however, did not put off the crowd. As I wandered along the event for the whole afternoon, I saw mostly young men and a few women who seemed excited to be at the Battle. Not all attendees were competing that day, but those who watched the Battle of the Barbers were absorbed in every round of competition that went on for hours to the sound of carioca funk music.

The loud music that played without interruption made it virtually impossible for me to hold conversations with the Battle participants. As attendees saw me shooting, they would pose, ask me to see the images, or request that I send the picture so they could keep it in a file or post it on their social media accounts. In this same direction, the organizers of the events welcomed me at all times to photograph as I wished, allowing me, for example, to get up on the stage in search of the best angles. I interpreted this attitude as a sign that the publicity of the event and of its participants was, for them, a measure of their success.

The way the attendees of the Battle of the Barbers approached me spontaneously, asking that I added them to my list of contacts on Instagram, as well as the way several interactions developed into conversations through this social media platform in the following days became one more indication, among many others in the field, of the impacts of new digital technologies on longstanding forms of informal work in Brazil. Before the popularization of smartphones, working as a barber essentially meant cutting, trimming, and shaving hair or beard, usually in low-key barbershops scattered throughout the city. But even if the core activities of the barbers remain the same, digital technologies – and social media, in particular – produced significant changes in their business model, created new professional hierarchies, and brought aspiring barbers to the core of a new consumer market. Rio's Battle of the Barbers is both a consequence and an expression of such transformations.



Figure 1 The 8th edition of Rio's Battle of the Barbers occurred in one of the city's most emblematic landmarks, the *Sambódromo* parade grounds. The picture's background shows the Arc of the Apotheosis, designed by Oscar Niemeyer, a Brazilian architect considered one of the key figures in the development of modern architecture. The picture also displays one of the city's *favelas*, "*Morro da Mineira*." The men seen in the foreground of the image are either competitors or members of the jury. Even though the Battle of the Barbers takes place in several cities in Brazil, the one in Rio is known for attracting the most participants, some of whom are visitors from states such as São Paulo and Minas Gerais.



Figure 2-3 While haircuts in well-off districts occur in luxurious salons, the barber's workspace is often improvised in favelas and peripheries of Rio. Margarine containers are used for mixing bleach and developer, while kitchen vegetable brushes are used for styling. Beginners usually give haircuts in a corner of their houses or on the sidewalk. This ability to improvise a workspace in different environments could be seen in the Battle of the Barbers event. This image shows the surroundings of the main stage. During the afternoon, barbers would use whatever free space they found to practice.



Figure 4 Although scholarly work often refers to non-traditional employment such as informal, autonomous, self-employed, gig work, and petty entrepreneurship as precarious jobs, ethnographic evidence shows that young men who work as barbers in Rio mostly reject the idea of precariousness. Instead, barbers often emphasize the freedom of not having a boss and say they consider their daily activities fulfilling. They also hope to achieve upward social mobility by cutting and styling men's hair. That ambition shows in the young men's choice of clothing and accessories used in their professional activities. Walt Disney's Uncle Scrooge – "the richest duck in the world" – theme on the barber cape is an example of these carefully chosen accessories.



Figure 5 As is often the case in economies where informality is a structural feature of the labor market, it is hard to tell the size of barbers in the Brazilian economy. Ethnographic evidence suggests, however, that this is one segment of the informal labor market that has been booming while radically transformed by digital platforms. The predominance of young men among the Battle of the Barbers attendees is one of several qualitative indicators of a flourishing work segment. Everton, on the right, wearing a cap, works in a barbershop located in Piabetá, a district in the Metropolitan Area of Rio de Janeiro. Everton was 20 years old and attended the event accompanied by his friends (from right to left) Rafael, 21 years old, Kevin, and Davi, both 18 years old. This photo has been taken at the youngster's request.



Figure 6 Some Battle of the Barbers participants were accompanied by their families. In this picture, the mother of one competitor wears a custom jersey. The inscription on the back of the jersey translates as “Mom of Xandin [her son’s nickname].”



Figure 7 The Battle of the Barbers hosts competitions in three different categories: traditional haircut (*corte*), artistic drawing (*desenho*), and lined-up highlights (*reflexo alinhado*). This photo shows a barber giving a boy the finishing touches for a traditional haircut. It is not rare to spot boys as young as five years old serving as models throughout the competition.



Figure 6 Lined-up highlights (“Reflexo alinhado”) became extremely popular in Rio’s favelas in the last few years. This style takes time and requires that barbers work meticulously, first by placing a pierced rubber cap on the model’s head. Then, barbers pull loops of hair using a metal crochet hook. Next, they prepare a mixture of bleaching powder and hydrogen peroxide and apply it thoroughly to the model’s hair. After the bleaching process, which usually takes around half an hour, barbers remove the chemicals and carefully pull off the rubber cap for the final finishing touches.



Figure 12 Barber practices artistic drawing on a model at the side of the stage where the competition took place.



Figure 13 It is common among young Brazilian barbers to engrave symbols of their profession. Scissors, straight razors, combs, and barber poles were the most popular tattoos in Rio's Battle of the Barbers. While research on tattoos reveals that marking one's body with indelible symbols expresses a deeply felt and enduring identity (Sanders, 2008), inked barbers signal a renewed professional identity in this Brazilian informal labor market segment.



Figure 14-15 According to the report State of Mobile 2022, smartphone users in Brazil spent, on average, over 5.3 hours per day on their devices, making mobile usage in Brazil higher than in any other country. This intense use of smartphones and social media platforms, particularly, was ubiquitous in the Battle of the Batters. Photo 14 shows Erica Madrinha, the Battle of the Batters founder, creating content to post on her accounts. Spending time on social media was also the most popular pastime among those who waited for their hair to be done (photo 15).



Figure 16 Once all rounds of the competition have been completed, the judges determine the winners of each category. Different rules apply to each category, and evaluation follows distinct criteria. Barbers are not allowed to use hair pigmentation for traditional haircuts and artistic drawings. Evenness and symmetry are essential for the line-up highlights category. The first, second, and third-best barbers in each category win cash prizes and barbershop supplies.



Figure 17 One of the winners wipes his tears while holding his much-expected award.



Figure 18 Besides attracting much attention on social media, the 2023 Rio's Battle of the Barbers appeared on one of the most watched shows on Brazilian television. The organizers considered the coverage on national television a significant sign of the event's success.

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