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Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Streaming Series on Folklore Interest: Tracking Internet interest on Brazilian Folklore Legends as a Backdrop

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Abstract: This study investigates the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on online interest in Brazilian folklore using Google Trends data from January 2018 to December 2022, providing valuable insights into the evolving interplay among technology, culture, and human behavior. Our analysis unveils distinct regional and seasonal trends in the relative search volume for Brazilian myths/legends, with heightened interest noted in the North and Northeast regions and a peak in August, coinciding with Brazil's "Folklore Day." Unexpectedly, during the pandemic years (2020 and 2021), a decline occurred in folklore-related searches, possibly linked to limited internet access among specific demographics and challenges in adapting to online education. A notable surge in search volume occurred in February 2021 for myths/legends featured in the Netflix series "Invisible City," underscoring the impact of streaming platforms on online search behavior. Our findings emphasize the significance of folklore as a cultural identifier and its vulnerability to external factors, including technological shifts and pandemics. While specifically focusing on Brazilian folklore in our investigation, further research is warranted to assess analogous influences on folklore interests in diverse global cultural contexts.

Keywords: Google Trends; Brazil; Coronavirus; myths, streaming platforms

Introduction

Folklore elements are important in the popular imagination and in the identity of a people because they provide a connection to the past and to traditional cultural values and beliefs, helping to define a people's identity by providing a common language, symbols, and shared experiences (DORSON, 1963). By understanding and appreciating folklore, we can better understand and appreciate our own identity as well as the identity of other groups. Folklore can also be a way to preserve cultural values and beliefs in the face of changing times (DUNDES, 2007; JANTHALUCK; LAILA, 2012).

Regional mythologies, legends and traditional beliefs are integral elements of folklore (BERK, 2016). They contain stories that are passed down from generation to generation, mainly by oral transmission, and often include supernatural elements such as gods, goddesses, magical creatures, and other mysterious beings

(ARMSTRONG, KAREN, 2022). In Brazil, folklore encompasses various regional myths and legends, which are heavily influenced by the culture of the indigenous peoples, as well as the African and European cultures that have settled in the country (PESSAR, P R, [s.d.]).

Nowadays, we live in a world where communication is increasingly mediated by information technologies on a global scale (KIRCHOF, E R, 2020). Digital technology is continuously growing popularization, impacting on the social, economic, and leisure activities. The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the role of digital technologies in our lives, allowing us to maintain our daily activities and social interactions from home despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic (LIU et al., 2020). The use of digital technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic period to avoid face-to-face activities has been widespread, and the internet has allowed students and workers to continue their activities, and to keep their interpersonal interactions on from home despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic (HILBURG et al., 2020).

Folklore is built through the popular imagination, and it is made up of elements linked to social interactions. Considering that COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted social relationships and promoted an increase in the use of digital tools, the present study verified the interest in Brazilian folklore themes through Google Trends, which is a web-based tool that allows users to explore how often certain search terms are entered into Google's search engine over time (EFFENBERGER et al., 2020). Google Trends was used to measure the relative popularity of search Brazilian Legends/Myths, and to compare trends across different regions and different time periods.

Materials and Methods

This study examined how COVID-19 impacted the interest in folklore in cyberspace from Google Trends data about Brazilian myths/legends from January 01, 2018 (first week of 2018) to December 01, 2022. The years 2018 and 2019 were considered as the pre-pandemic period, 2020 and 2021 representing the pandemic period in which people maintained a predominance of stay-at-home behavior, and

2022 as the pandemic period when there was a return to face-to-face activities mainly due to the greater vaccination coverage of the population.

An important issue in performing the analysis was to choose search terms which corresponded closely to 12 Brazilian legends/myths (Tab. 1) (CASCUDO, 2023). So, Portuguese terms were used. To avoid search bias for terms that would not directly refer to the myth/legend (example: Saci could refer to a Brazilian legend or the popular name of a bird), we added the term "Legend of" in Portuguese ("Lenda da/o") before the name of the legend/myth. All categories were allowed in the search. The Google Trend data were accessed and downloaded in December 2022 and restricted to Brazil. The data points downloaded represented the relative search volume, defined as the total number of searches for that term divided by the total number of Google searches for the specified location (Brazilian states) and time (256 consecutive weeks for the sampling period). The data points were downloaded as .csv files for analysis.

Table 1: Brazilian popular myths used in the search

Legend/Myth	Search descriptor in portuguese*	Description
Boitata or Fire-Serpent	Boitatá	A giant serpent of fire with flaming red eyes that lives in the forests and preys on livestock and humans. Looking at its eyes blinds people.
Boto or River Dolphin	Boto	Amazon river dolphin that shapeshifts into a handsome man to seduce young women. After impregnating them, he abandons them and never returns.
Cuca	Cuca	She is described as a menacing old hag that attacks and tortures children who do not go to bed early.
Dried-Corpse	Corpo-Seco	A man so evil that the earth could not rot his bones and flesh, and the devil would return his soul to hell. He was condemned to wander fruitlessly around the world until judgment day.
Headless Mule	Mula sem Cabeça	A woman that takes the shape of a headless mule if she has intercourse with a priest. It has a medieval origin, and was brought to Brazil in the early colonial era.
Iara	Iara	Iara is a type of freshwater mermaid that is also called "mother of the waters".
Little Black Farmer	Negrinho do Pastoreio	A slave boy that died an awful death for not keeping his owner's horses. He helps people who are looking for lost things.

Mandioc or cassava	Mandioca	A legend about an indigenous girl with very fair skin. It belongs to Tupí indigenous people and is related to the cult of manioc, a native staple food that grew from her tomb.
Werewolf	Lobisomem	The Brazilian version of the werewolf.
Saci	Saci	A mischievous single-legged black creature who is blamed as the culprit of anything that goes wrong at a farm, and usually appears inside wind swirls.
Giant Water Lily	Vitória-Régia	The story is about the origin of giant water lily. A Tupi-Guarani young woman named Naiá falls into a lake and drowns after trying to kiss the reflection of the moon-goddess Jasy. Moved by the incident, Jasy transformed her into the giant water lily, also called the "Star of the Waters."
Tutu	Tutu Marambá	A scary creature similar to the Bogeyman that comes after children who don't want to go to bed.

*All search descriptors were in Portuguese and we added "Legend of" (in Portuguese "Lenda da/o") before the name of the myth to avoid search bias for terms that would not directly refer to the myth/legend.

Seasonality was assessed by visual inspection of graphs produced by Google Trends data of the relative search volume throughout the time series, and by circular statistics using the Rayleigh test (KWIECIEN et al., 2022; ZAR, 1999). The Rayleigh test determines the seasonality if the angles are distributed evenly throughout the sampling period and the length of the vector r indicates uniformity of observations (mean angle ranging from zero to one, where zero indicates total uniformity of observations and one indicates the total concentration of observations around the middle angle). We also analyzed the number of myths/legends with an unexpected peak of relative search volume in February 2021 by Fisher's exact test. The circular analysis and Fisher's exact test were performed using Software BioEstat version 5.3 (Instituto Mamirauá, Belém, Pará, Brazil).

To assess the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on search interest in Brazilian folklore, the highest values of the relative search volume for each year and for each myth/legend were collected. We did not add the data of "Legend of Tutu" because there was no spike in relative search volume in August as observed in other myths/legends. The data were expressed as means \pm standard deviation and the normality was checked using the Shapiro–Wilk test. The data are matched by each term and analyzed by the non-parametric Friedman test followed by a Bonferroni

test. Two-tailed statistical analysis was planned using GraphPad Prism 6.0. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results

During the analysis of the relative volume of research for Brazilian stages, we observed a regionality in relative search volume of Brazilian myths/legends, with searches occurring predominantly in the states of the north and northeast of Brazil (Fig. 1). The only exceptions were the “Little Black Farmer” and “Tutu”, with the relative volume of searches predominating in states of the south and southeast, respectively.

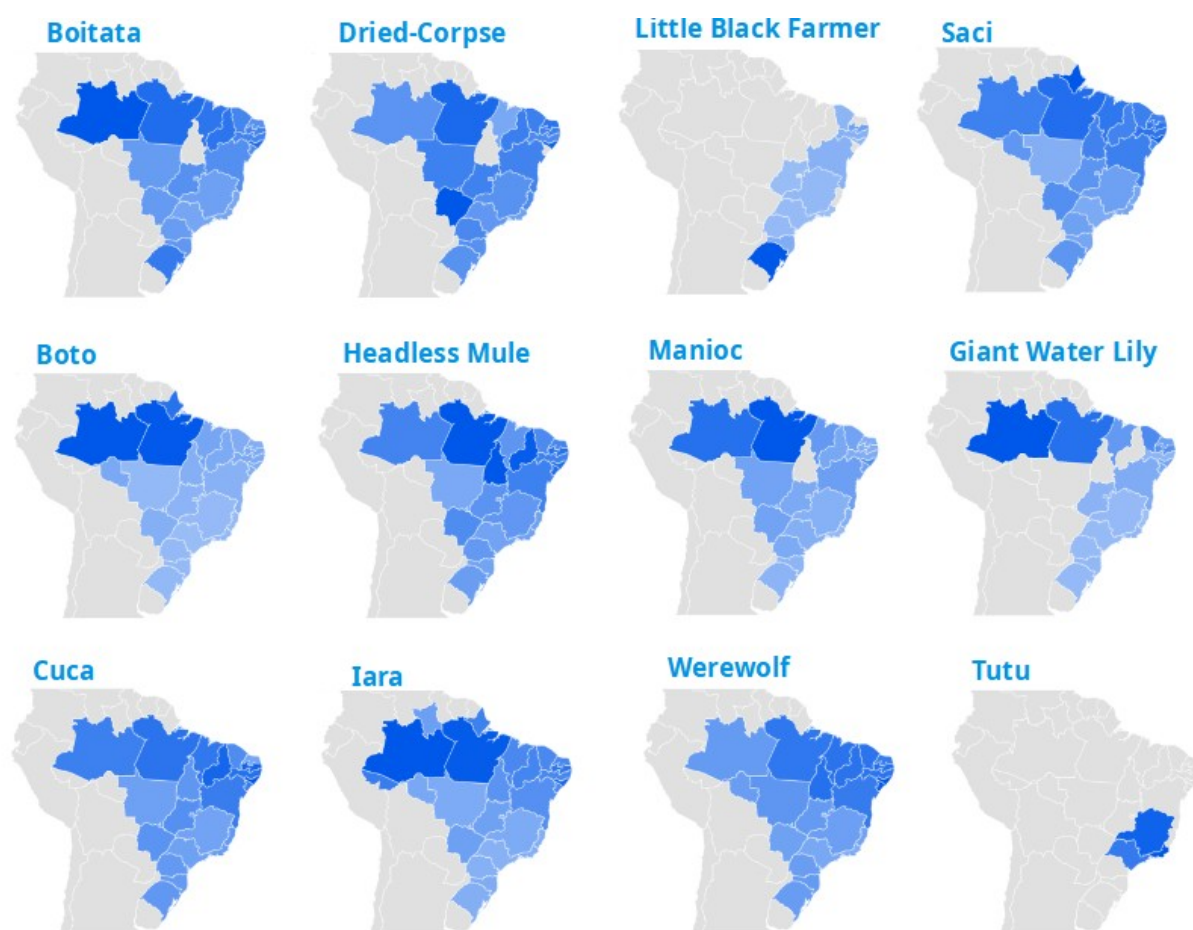


Figure 1: Regionality in relative search volume of Brazilian myths/legends from January 01, 2018 to December 01, 2022. The darker stages indicate a higher concentration of relative search volume. The maps were directly extracted from Google Trends.

Figure 2 allows visual inspection of seasonality in the relative search volume of Brazilian myths/legends from the time series. Most myths/legends showed the highest values occurring in August for all years, except for “Dried-Corpse” and “Tutu”. They exhibited the highest peak in February 2021 and no peak in August 2020 and 2021.

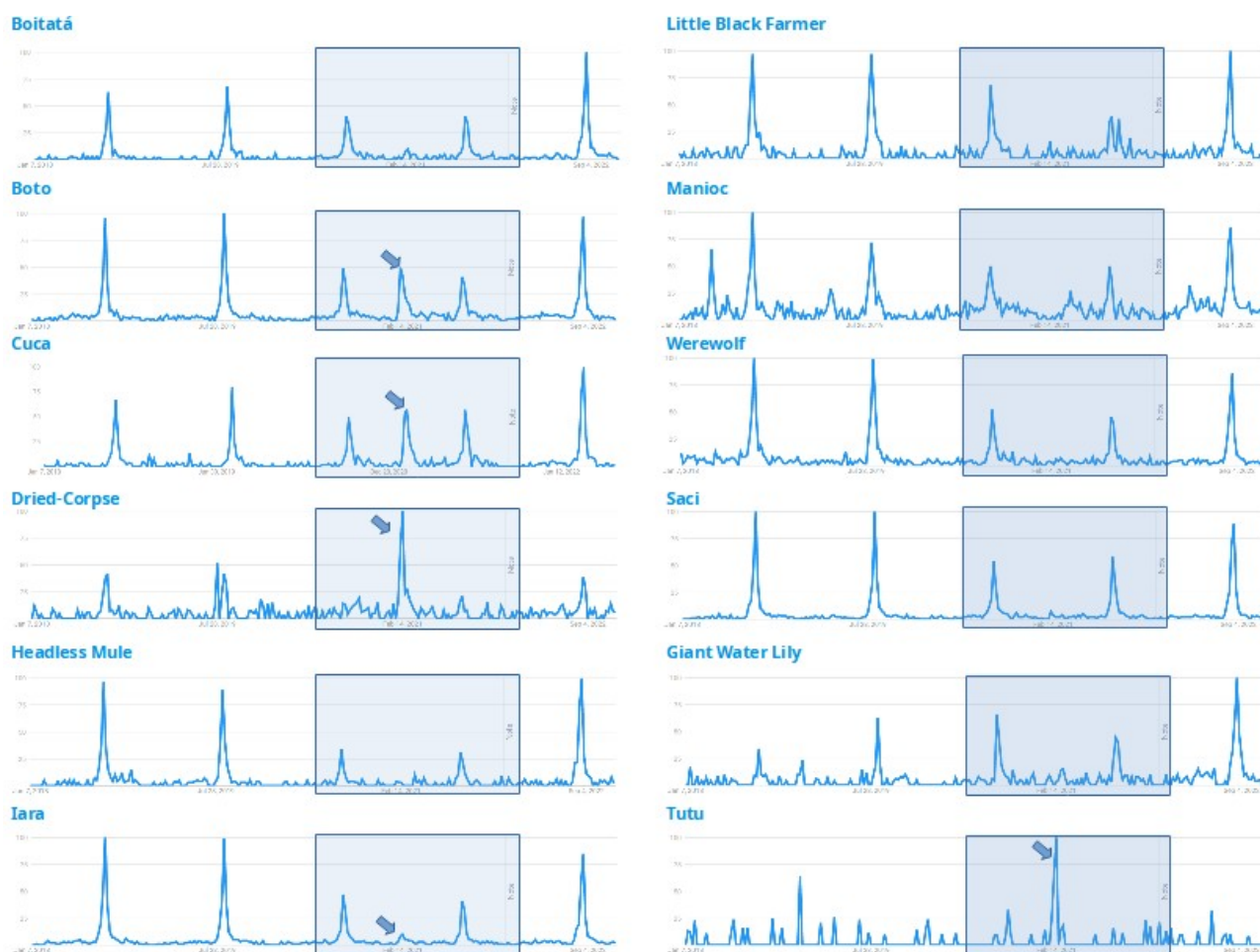


Figure 2: Relative search volume of Brazilian myths/legends in the time series from January 01, 2018 to December 01, 2022 (data from 256 consecutive weeks). The graphs were directly extracted from Google Trends. The area highlighted represents the pandemic period in which emergency remote teaching occurred and people maintained a predominance of stay-at-home behavior (2020 and 2021). Arrows indicate a peak relative search volume in February 2021.

Circular statistics analysis using the Rayleigh test also showed seasonality in the relative search volume (p values < 0.01) and homogeneity of the data (r values > 0.97) (Table 2) for all myths/legends. Interestingly, besides “Dried-Corpse” and “Tutu”, other myths also exhibited a peak in relative search volume in February 2021. With that in mind, we looked for what could explain this change in the profile of

searches on Brazilian myths/legends in February 2021, and we found the premiere of the series “Invisible City”, a Brazilian series produced and presented by Netflix streaming platform. This series draws upon Brazilian folklore, featuring a range of creatures from Brazilian mythology. Following we have the creatures investigated in the present study that appeared in “Invisible City”: Boto, Cuca, Dried-Corpse, Iara, Saci and Tutu. These myths exhibited a peak of relative search volume in February 2021, except for Saci. When analyzing the appearance of the February peak of relative search volume among the myths presented in the “Invisible City” series comparing with myths from the present study (Table 3), we observed a significant difference by Fisher's exact test ($p = 0.0152$)

Table II: Seasonality analysis of relative search volume of Brazilian myths in the time series from January 01, 2018 to December 01, 2022.

Prominent figures	r	Rayleigh test (Z)	P value	Month with higher search volume	Peak of relative search volume in February 2021	Character in “Invisible City”
Boitatá	0.98	247.75	< 0.01	August	No	No
Boto	0.98	243.92	< 0.01	August	Yes	Yes
Cuca	0.98	244.3	< 0.01	August	Yes	Yes
Dried-Corpse	0.98	248.06	< 0.01	February	Yes	Yes
Headless Mule	0.98	245.34	< 0.01	August	No	No
Iara	0.98	245.35	< 0.01	August	Yes	Yes
Little Black Farmer	0.97	241.82	< 0.01	August	No	No
Mandioc	0.97	242.9	< 0.01	August	No	No
Werewolf	0.98	244.09	< 0.01	August	No	No
Saci	0.98	244.23	< 0.01	August	No	Yes
Giant Water Lily	0.98	246.85	< 0.01	August	No	No
Tutu	0.99	248.36	< 0.01	February	Yes	Yes

*Measurements of the concentration

Table III: Numbers of myths that exhibit a peak of relative search volume in February 2021 and were character in the series “Invisible City”.

	Peak of relative search volume in February 2021	Without peak of relative search volume in February 2021
Character in “Invisible City” (Yes)	5	1
Character in “Invisible City” (No)	0	6

When analyzing the highest value of relative search volume of Brazilian myths/legends for each year from the sampling period (from 2018 to 2022), we observed no significant difference among the years 2018, 2019 and 2022 (Fig. 3). However, the years 2020 and 2021 showed a significant reduction compared to the other years, suggesting the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 and 2021) impacted the popularity of myths/legends from Brazilian folklore, mainly in in period with remote activities, followed by a recovery after returning to face-to-face activities.

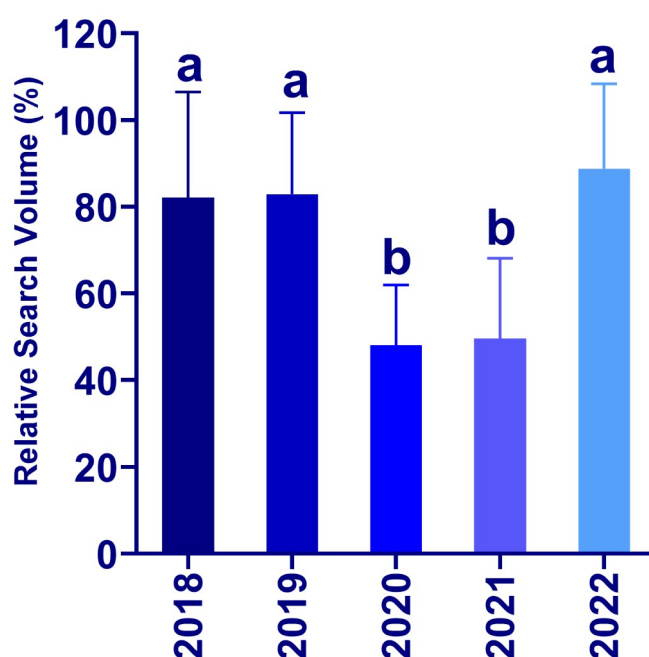


Figure 3: Mean \pm standard deviation of the highest value of relative search volume (%) of Brazilian myths for each year from the sampling period (from 2018 to 2022). Different letters indicate significant differences ($P < 0.05$, Friedman test followed by a Bonferroni test).

Discussion

To our knowledge, this was the first study that used data from Google Trends to assess the popularity of folklore in cyberspace and that verified the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in this field. It is important to note that a worldwide trend investigation about the impact of COVID-19 on interest of folkloric themes would be difficult to interpret due to great folk diversity around the world. So, we threshold our analysis into elements of Brazilian folklore. We observed seasonality and regionality

in the relative search volume for different myths/legends, and a predominance of searches in the month of August with a decline during the pandemic period with predominance of social isolation.

When we investigated the regionality of the search volume, we observed higher values in the Brazilian states in the north and northeast regions. This result firstly suggests that cyberspace users from these regions might be more interested in folkloric themes. The North and Northeast regions of Brazil are known for their rich and diverse folklore, which includes stories, legends, music, dance, and other cultural expressions. One possible explanation for the prevalence of folklore in these regions is their history of colonization and cultural exchange. The Northeast and the North of Brazil have been subjected to different colonial experiences, which have contributed to a mix of cultures, languages, and beliefs that have resulted in a rich and diverse cultural heritage (MACHADO, 2018, p. 1500–2010). This cultural diversity has been preserved through oral traditions and folkloric expressions, which have played a fundamental role in the construction of local identities (NOGUEIRA, 2007).

Furthermore, the interest in folklore in these regions can also be attributed to their strong connection to traditional forms of art and expression. Music, dance, and other forms of popular art have always played an important role in the lives of people in the Northeast and North of Brazil, and are often connected to religious and festive celebrations (UNESCO, [s.d.]). Therefore, it is possible that the North and Northeast regions of Brazil have a strong interest in folklore due to their cultural heritage, but further research is needed to confirm this.

It is also important to say we cannot rule out that the chosen legends influenced our results that showed the highest values of search volume data in the north and northeast region, since the relative volume of searches for the legends “Little Black Farmer” and “Tutu”, popular legends in the southern and southeastern states of Brazil, showed exactly higher rates in these regions. In addition, most of the legends/myths of the study are composed by “magic” creatures that belong to the forests (CASCUDO, 2023), and additionally official population surveys show the Brazilian indigenous population is larger in the states of the northern region (INSTITUTO BRASILEIRO DE GEOGRAFIA E ESTATÍSTICA, IBGE, 2012).

When analyzing seasonality, we found that most myths/legends exhibited the highest values of the relative search volume in August. In Brazil, the theme of

"folklore" is an important part of the country's cultural heritage and is typically addressed in schools during the month of August. This is due to the fact that August 22 is considered "Folklore Day" in Brazil (BRASIL, 1965). As part of the country's basic education curriculum, students are introduced to the different types of folklore that exist in Brazil, including traditional stories, songs, dances, and rituals. By exploring this cultural heritage, students can gain a greater appreciation for the diversity and richness of Brazilian culture, and develop a deeper understanding of the country's history and traditions. The teaching of folklore in schools also serves as a means of preserving and promoting this cultural heritage for future generations (MAY, 1980).

The decrease in the values of the relative search volume about folklore in the years 2020 and 2021 also point to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education system across the country. Considering the increase in the use of information technology in order to avoid face-to-face activities and maintain pedagogical activities during the pandemic period (TIMOTHEOU et al., 2023), our initial hypothesis was that there would be an increase in searches about folklore during the pandemic period. Interestingly, we observed a decline in the relative search volume. In spite of the fact that the internet has become increasingly important in today's society for providing opportunities for education, employment, and social interaction (HALEEM et al., 2022), this decline may have occurred because the access to the internet is still limited for many poor people. Many schools demonstrated a lack of experience and low digital capacity, which resulted in widening gaps, inequalities, and learning losses (BLASKÓ, ZSUZSA; COSTA, PATRICIA; SCHNEPF, SYLKE V, [s.d.]). Some studies also highlight how the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a learning inequality catastrophe, leading to lower student learning levels in developing countries like Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and South Africa, suggesting learning deficits have been particularly severe in these countries (AZEVEDO et al., 2022; BETTHÄUSER; BACH-MORTENSEN; ENGZELL, 2023, 2023).

Another interesting result was a peak in relative search volume in February 2021 Boto, Cuca, Dried-Corpse, Iara, and Tutu. After an internet search we found that Netflix produced a series called "Invisible City" that was exhibited in February 2021. This result suggests that streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime,

and Hulu play a role in internet searching behavior. Probably, many viewers turn to the internet to search for information related to the series they are watching, such as cast information, episode synopsis, and characters. Some studies showed that COVID-19 pandemic impacted the streaming services and media consumption, which might influence the People's behavior with the internet. Gupta and Singharia (2021) reported that the COVID-19 lockdown had increased the consumption of media streaming in India (GUPTA; SINGHARIA, 2021). Considering the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health, online media consumption was found to be a coping mechanism for dealing with the negative effects of the pandemic in Germany (LEMENAGER et al., 2021). The study found that the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in binge-watching habits of Netflix users in Bangladesh (RAHMAN; ARIF, 2021). Overall, these studies suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on media consumption, with people turning to online media as a coping mechanism during the lockdowns, which might be reflected in our study.

The main limitation of our study is related to the restricted analysis of elements from Brazilian mythology. Considering that each society has unique elements in its folklore, and that there can be diverse cultural manifestation within the same country, saying that the COVID-19 pandemic promoted the same impact in other countries is somewhat speculative and that needs to be evaluated throughout other studies.

In conclusion, considering the importance of folklore for the identity of a people and the rapid technological changes undergone by humanity in such a short span of time, studies on factors influencing people's interest in this theme in the online environment are necessary for understanding human behavior. They also provide insights into how technology can impact human development, learning, and social relationships. Our findings underscore the significance of folklore, the fluctuations in interest in this theme in the online environment, and the impact of factors such as seasonality, regional differences, and most notably, pandemics and streaming platforms on human behavior.

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Conflicts of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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