


Strategic or Cultural Communication? Content and signification within cultural expressions in the context of an advertising case study

*Comunicação estratégica ou cultural?
Conteúdo e significado em expressões
culturais no contexto de um estudo de
caso de publicidade*



Nelson Pinheiro Gomes

PhD and Post-Doc in the area of Culture and Communication by the University of Lisbon. Assistant Professor at the School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisboa. Researcher at ULICES - University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies. nelsonpinheiro@campus.ul.pt





ABSTRACT


This paper aims to understand the construction of cultural expressions within the scope of brand communication. It takes into account an articulation of emergent cultural elements present in symbolic peripheries, like those we can find in urban tribes and subcultures. The approach in question is an in-depth case study - Moschino's Toy Boy perfume - based on a cultural triangulation where we apply three methods: content analysis; semiotics; readings from the position of the observer. The discussion allows us to understand the production of meanings in a cohesive narrative, as well as the origin of certain elements that inhabit the composition. The results from applying the three methods are clearly articulated, suggesting a solid interpretation that emphasizes proximity, as well as the idea of intimacy and sensuality. This exercise makes it possible to highlight and confirm an analytical and diagnostic practice that can be applied in the management of brand communication. As a result, we propose this cultural triangulation approach to obtain strategic insights, regarding the process of generating cultural expressions in strategic communication and its impact on the nature of brands. The articulation of these tools places the process of Douglas Holt and Douglas Cameron on cultural strategy in a methodological context within the scope of cultural analysis.

KEYWORDS

Strategic Communication; Semiotics; Content Analysis.

RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo passa por compreender as construções de expressões culturais no âmbito da comunicação de marca, tendo em consideração uma articulação de elementos culturais nas periferias simbólicas, conforme podemos verificar nas tribos urbanas e subculturas. A abordagem em causa pressupõe a análise em profundidade de um estudo de caso - o perfume Toy Boy da Moschino - com base numa trian-

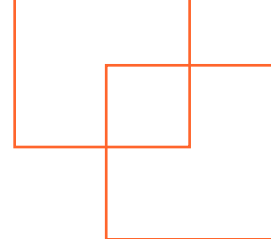


gulação cultural onde aplicamos três métodos: a análise de conteúdo; a leitura semiótica; e uma leitura no âmbito da posição do observador. A discussão gerada permite compreender a produção de significados numa narrativa coesa, bem como a origem de determinados elementos que habitam a composição. Os resultados da aplicação dos três métodos estão em clara articulação, sugerindo uma interpretação sólida que sublinha a proximidade, bem como a ideia de intimidade e de sensualidade. Este exercício permite evidenciar e confirmar uma prática analítica e de diagnóstico que pode ser aplicada na gestão de comunicação de marcas. Como resultado, propomos esta abordagem de triangulação cultural como forma de obter pistas estratégicas sobre o processo de geração de expressões culturais na comunicação estratégica e o seu impacto na natureza das marcas. A articulação destas ferramentas coloca o processo de Douglas Holt e de Douglas Cameron sobre estratégia cultural num contexto metodológico no âmbito da análise cultural.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Comunicação Estratégica; Semiótica; Análise de Conteúdo.

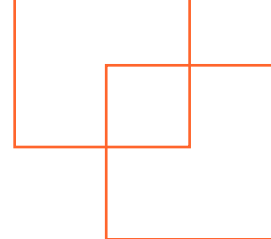




INTRODUCTION

The success of advertising campaigns is associated with the ability to create a cohesive and meaningful narrative, capable of generating identification processes, interest, and desire in audiences. A brand advertising narrative involves the construction of a cultural expression (HOLT AND CAMERON, 2010) which implies its organization with cultural elements in a context of authenticity and in the right place in the code. Based on the conceptual and analytical framework of cultural strategy by Douglas Holt and Douglas Cameron (2010), and the cultural branding perspective of the first author (HOLT, 2004), we approach the architecture of the cultural expression present in the Toy Boy perfume advert by Moschino. The objective is to understand the different elements that make up this cultural expression and perform a diagnosis, keeping in mind the strong symbolic associations that are present and come from urban tribes. For this, we use a cultural triangulation (PORTA AND KEATING, 2008) that entails the crossing of analytical methods to answer a question.

Considering the chosen texts - advertising images and videos - and a cultural analysis framework, this work applies: (i) a content analysis based on the process proposed by Wimmer and Dominick (2011) - in a quantitative perspective, it verifies the number of certain occurrences to identify repetitions of elements; (ii) a semiotic analysis based on the Barthesian perspective (1986; 1991) to understand the signs present in a denotative and connotative readings, and identify the myth(s) present in the campaign (iii); an analysis that expands the semiotic readings from the perspective of the observer, framed by Kress and Van Leeuwen in a visual grammar, to understand the communication pieces in terms of the relationships between the viewer and what he observes (KRESS AND VAN LEEUWEN, 2006). The combination of these three methods contributes to the diagnosis process implicit in the cultural strategy of Holt and Cameron (2010) and emphasizes the role of cultural analysis. This takes place from a textual perspective, in terms of strategic communication and the construction of meanings in brand management. The articulation of the three methods and their results points to a cohesive reading of proximity, intimacy and sensuality within the scope of the case study. In addition, it also underlines the benefit of crossing these three methods in textual analysis and their potential in the review of strategic brand texts. Overall, it encompasses an empirical process of diagnosis, evaluation and generation of strategic guidelines.

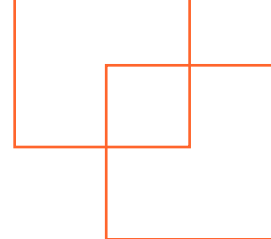


2 Cultural Strategy, Cultural Branding and the Management of Culture

As Douglas Holt indicates, “the power of the brand lies in these abstract associations” that go beyond functional attributes, that is, values, thoughts, and feelings that the consumer associates with the brand (HOLT, 2004, p. 15). Thus, brands inhabit the symbolic world beyond their institutional structure, permeating meanings and impacting the cultural horizon. Schroeder stresses that brand culture refers to cultural codes that include history, myths, images, and art that influence brand meaning and implies knowing cultural influences and understanding the implications. Also, that we live in a world of brands, where they the latter allocate meanings to culture and influence society (SCHROEDER, 2009).

Heding et al. underline that this cultural branding approach is inspired by Culture Studies and allows for “the exchange between macro-level culture and brands” insofar as it deals with the ways in which we “use cultural forces to build strong brands (ultimately brand icons) and what brands and branding do to culture” (HEDING ET AL., 2009, p. 209). More than giving attention to the micro level, or even to a single entity, cultural branding allows for an understanding of brand performance in a broader cultural level. It frames the socio-cultural context as a complex whole and the consumer as part of the mindsets, practices and representations that act in a structured way according to different movements. For Cayla and Arnould, this cultural approach implies understanding consumer culture as a symbolic repertoire and analyzing brands as symbols, as these are cultural forms that carry meaning and are part of a popular culture, inhabiting current mythologies (CAYLA AND ARNOULD, 2008). Today, brands function as promoters of cultural artefacts and as constructions that articulate representations and promote practices that impact patterns of behavior. They impact the collective imagination in a cycle of influence and mutation of existing narratives. This, without ceasing to drink from that same imaginary, adapting it and using it as a reference point for the construction of new mythologies or to generate new derivations from them.

As Holt (2004) points out, the goal of cultural branding is to build iconic brands (iconic should not be understood here specifically in the semiotic context), that is, brands with a high impact and symbolic value. According to the author:



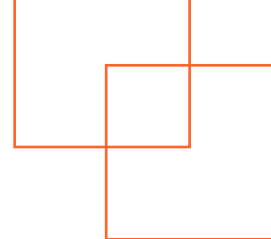
All iconic brands enjoy the characteristics of strong brands described by the conventional models: They have distinctive and favorable associations, they generate buzz, and they have core consumers with deep emotional attachments. But these observed characteristics are the consequence of successful mythmaking, not the cause. The identity myth embedded in the brand leads customers to associate the product with category benefits, to spread the myth by word of mouth, to emote, and to gather together. (HOLT, 2004, p. 35)

Batey adds that these brands are easily recognized and that they have a “cultural resonance”, transcending their product category and becoming symbols for many people (BATEY, 2016, p. 174). Thus, by having a strong identity and an easily recognized symbolic narrative, they can articulate complex elements that inhabit the collective mindset. They partially alter their meaning and make them serve a specific purpose in the construction of brand meanings. Thus, these brands manage to build narratives that activate identity associations in the consumer mind. The latter recognizes elements that are in the composition (they inhabit his imagination) and associates his mental ideas with the brand according to said elements. The iconic brand uses emerging and solid elements from collective mindsets and articulates them in a narrative of its own to activate associations already present in the consumer’s mind and then generate new associations with the brand itself and its identity.

As Holt points out, consumers buy products to experience stories, so communication is central and “the product is simply a conduit through which consumers can experience the stories that the brand tells” (HOLT, 2004, p. 36). Cayla and Arnould argue that this approach implies understanding branding as a form of communication that tells stories and that presents “a particular way of talking about and seeing the world” (CAYLA AND ARNOULD, 2008, pp. 88-89). Emphasis is placed on the role of communication as a way of articulating the elements, composing the stories, and communicating them to the consumer. This, while allowing access to a set of associations and to symbolic experiences and a constant review of a group/individual identity construction process.

2.1 The Cultural Expression

Brands function as a set of meanings (BATEY, 2016) that are articulated to build their own identity narratives. O’Reilly stresses the potential of analyzing brand discourse as a way of critically evaluating the re-

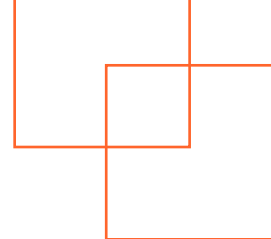


relationships between companies and culture, as branding is a symbolic exercise (O'REILLY, 2005). The author also suggests that brands can be read as cultural and performative texts and as symbolic articulators of production and consumption, which rely on consumers to generate their meanings (O'REILLY, 2005). As Gomes indicates, "the study of culture, in this context, immerses the brand agents in the cultural field and allows them to identify symbolic elements and changes within the socio-cultural fabric, taking strategic guidelines from this information that are translated into specific and innovative actions, with a focus on communication, marketing and product/service development" (GOMES, 2019, p. 32). The construction of cultural expressions meets this context and enhances the generation of narratives with impact. As Douglas Holt illustrates:

From Abstract Associations to Cultural Expressions. Conventional branding models propose that the brand consists of a set of abstract associations. [...] With cultural branding, in contrast, the brand's value resides in the specifics of the brand's cultural expression: the particular cultural contents of the brand's myth and the particular expression of these contents in the communication. [...] To create identity value, brand managers must instead detail the brand's stakes in the transformation of culture and society and the particular cultural expressions the brand uses to achieve these transformations. (HOLT, 2004, p. 36-37)

Holt and Cameron suggest that these cultural expressions are specific narrative constructions that articulate elements present in the collective mindset in a certain way to communicate the brand's identity traits and generate an associated myth. The correct and authentic construction of the story, in the right context, is very important for the success of a cultural expression (HOLT AND CAMERON, 2010). The different cultural elements must be aligned to produce a specific interpretation that builds an association to the brand and a relationship with movements and emerging expectations at the consumer level - the "highly desired ideology" (HOLT AND CAMERON, 2010, 160). The authors also contextualize the composition of the expression:

All mass-cultural expressions - whether a film or a retail store design or packaging graphics - rely on elements for which the meaning has been well established historically in the culture. It would be



impossible to compose an expression from scratch, because, without no historic conventions to fall back upon, each and every element in the composition would have to be defined for the audience in a way that would allow for the proper interpretation. Cultural codes provide a shorthand for consumers, allowing them easily to understand and experience the intended meanings. (HOLT AND CAMERON, 2010, p. 175)

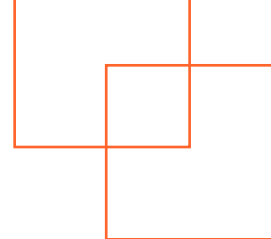
As they emphasize, the important thing is to observe the changes with enough impact to destabilize the mainstream and that end up generating the need for new cultural expressions, enabling the advance of innovative brands that “deliver the right expression” (HOLT AND CAMERON, 2010, p. 185). To understand the construction of cultural strategies and the process for their development, it is important to review the process outlined by Holt and Cameron and the steps that the authors indicate:

1) The first step is to map the cultural orthodoxy, that is, the conventional cultural expressions and cultural codes that can be found in marketing. Then, it is important to identify the social disruption that can remove the orthodoxy from the central position. Social shifts that can change the identification process of the consumer with conventional expressions (HOLT AND CAMERON, 2010, p. 196-197). This is related to emerging socio-cultural trends that derive from changes in the collective mindset, in mentalities, and that reveal new behavior patterns associated with new artifacts, practices and representations (GOMES, COHEN AND FLORES, 2018).

2) Once the disruption is found, it is important to detail it and its impact and understand how it relates to the identity projects and the desires of consumers. We must collect the material to build these expressions and cultural innovations from elements that inhabit subcultures, social movements, media myths and the brand itself (HOLT AND CAMERON, 2010, p. 198-199).

3) Finally, we have to design the cultural strategy. This involves identifying the specific opportunity that arises at a given moment and answer with a cultural expression built around an ideology, myths and cultural codes (HOLT AND CAMERON, 2010, p. 199).

2.2 Cultural Expressions, Communities and

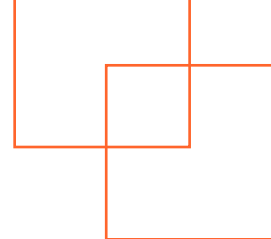


Urban Tribes

Like Heding et al. suggest, brands are assets immersed in culture, being influenced by its changes. A brand manager capable of understanding the most relevant cultural movements is able to write an appropriate “manuscript” to “benefit from pressing cultural issues of the time. In that sense, the brand gains competitive power by providing the consumer with the appropriate web of associations and the most powerful myths of its time” (HEDING ET AL., 2009, p. 211). These elements play a role in the construction of identities and the associated structures that, according to the authors, are divided into “subcultural, national and global” levels (HEDING ET AL., 2009: 211).

A brand supports the individual process of symbolic construction and the response to needs in terms of structuring social identities (BATEY, 2016; TORELLI, 2013). It does this to achieve the desired and idealized identity through the consumption of goods that act as symbols and signifiers of taste and lifestyles (BATEY, 2016). Batey adds that consumers articulate the assimilation of shared meanings (at the collective level) and an interpretive skill specific to symbols to create their identity. This, considering the multiple symbolic meanings that are printed in the cultural environment, and learning to accommodate shared meanings (BATEY, 2016). Consumption and the narratives associated with brands, together with other cultural codes present in the socio-cultural environment, help to manage the construction of multiple identities. On this issue of social identities, Torelli states:

When social identities correspond with cultural categories in a society, we refer to them as cultural identities. Thus, a cultural identity relates to the membership in a particular cultural, or subcultural, group that is clearly distinguishable from other cultural groups. (...) culturally symbolic brands are public expressions of the abstract meanings of a cultural group. Because culturally symbolic brands symbolize the beliefs, ideas, and values of a cultural group, consumers with a heightened need to symbolize a cultural identity will judge culturally symbolic brands as highly instrumental for fulfilling such needs. By being a patron of a culturally symbolic brand, one can emphasize the possession of the cultural identity and the alignment with and adherence to the culture. (TORELLI, 2013, p. 102)

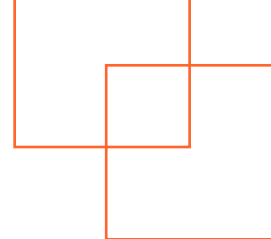


1 - Within these groups, as Batey suggests, subjective shared meanings arise from associations between members of a group and a particular object (BATEY, 2016).

2 - This calls attention to the construction of lifestyles that, as Solomon et al. indicate, suggest consumption patterns within the scope of group identities that reflect choices on how to invest in terms of time and money, as well as the attitudes associated with these patterns of behavior (SOLOMON ET AL., 2013, p. 223).

This connection to a brand with a high symbolic power underlines the possession of symbolic capital and the path to build identities in conjunction with emerging movements and within certain group parameters. Holt and Cameron suggest that cultural innovations in brands (which allow these strong identity links) “adapt alternative ideologies, myths, and cultural codes that are lurking in subcultures and social movements”, as these prove that there are emerging mindsets and concepts (the ideologies which the authors refers) that present themselves as a viable and credible perspective for building brand expressions (or cultural expressions) (HOLT AND CAMERON, 2010, p. 187). Acting as articulators between brands and audiences, cultural expressions are important narratives that audiences consume and use in the management of group identities and as a symbolic repertoire to the level of communities of practices and brand communities (HAWKINS, 2018; CANNIFORD, 2011; MUNIZ ET AL., 2001), subcultures (CANNIFORD, 2011; HEBDIGE, 1979), and tribes (CANNIFORD, 2011; COVA E COVA, 2002; RICHARDSON, 2013).

These four social constructions function as symbolic communities. Hebdige points to subcultures as “independent organism functioning outside the larger social, political and economic contexts” (...) “the picture of subculture is often incomplete” (HEBDIGE, 1979, p. 76). In turn, Richardson indicates that tribes are current ways in which consumers experience this (solid and traditional) idea of community (Richardson, 2013), while Bennet adds that they reveal “series of temporal gatherings characterized by fluid boundaries and floating memberships” (BENNETT, 1999, p. 600)¹. Richardson points to the importance of proving that one belongs to the tribe, through association with objects and activities (RICHARDSON, 2013). For Cova and Cova, the tribe finds its cohesion in the context of connection, of a shared passion or emotion, rather than in a material thing. There is a feeling of identification and narcissism, as well as of joint action, despite being a heterogeneous group (COVA AND COVA, 2002)². The authors also suggest that the meanings of tribal symbols are negotiated within the tribe (COVA AND COVA, 2002). In an applied perspective, Cova and Cova and Richardson address the issue of tribal marketing and its benefits. They stress that we should identify the meanings that aggregate consumers and create sharing experiences, where the brand becomes an important vehicle for cohesion (RICHARDSON, 2013; COVA AND COVA, 2002).



3 - According to the three categories proposed by Yin, we categorize our case study as exploratory and descriptive (YIN, 2003). We opted for a specific case study, but with a series of different data/pieces, to better understand a specific phenomenon and the potential for applying the analytical model in an empirical and business perspective.

4 - Different works (among others, we highlight: PELKEY, 2020; WHITE, 2018; RAAPHORST ET AL., 2017; EDGAR AND RUTHERFORD, 2012; ANDERSON ET AL., 2006; MANNING AND CULLUM-SWAN, 1994), and even dissertations (such as BEVINS,

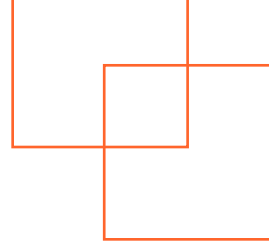
3 Case Study

The aim of this work is to understand the construction of cultural expressions capable of activating a process of association and identification with audiences and with specific tribal and subcultural narratives. In this sense, it is important to explore two research questions: (1) how the articulation of different cultural elements is managed in the construction of a cultural expression narrative capable of generating strong group identification processes; and (2) how to build a diagnosis process that articulates different methods of analyzing the visual/audiovisual text, to identify the construction of signs and cultural expressions. For this purpose, we choose the in-depth case study approach³, specifically the communication of a product, the Toy Boy perfume, by the Moschino brand. The choice of this object is related to: the initial hypothesis that its communication appeals to a set of tribal/subcultural associations within a community; the recognition and symbolic capital of the brand; the existence of communication pieces with different natures, from static images to audiovisual.

We start with a hermeneutic approach where content analysis emerges as a starting point and support for further interpretative readings at the semiotic and the position of the viewer levels⁴. Considering the number of objects in the chosen corpus, the case study and in-depth interpretative approaches are presented as the best option to achieve the set objectives and answer our questions.

To promote a comparative perspective, we selected a first corpus for analysis, composed of the visual posts present in the official Instagram account of the brand that are related to the Toy Boy perfume, launched in 2019. We reviewed all publications related to the object and published between May 27, 2019 (date of the first post) and March 11, 2020 (date of data collection), in a total of fifteen publications composed of images and videos. For this corpus, we apply the three analytical methods, according to the outlined categories. The objective is to understand the process involved in the construction of the cultural expression. In an initial phase, we analyzed only the static images present in the posts, in a total of ten posts out of fifteen.

For analysis purposes, we propose a second corpus, another set of data. We first considered the three advertising videos for the Toy perfume in Moschino's official YouTube account⁵. The first video dates from 2014, the second from 2018 and the third from 2019⁶. The latter being



2014; SMITHSON, 2013), have understood the analytical benefits of crossing semiotics and content analysis, and in some cases visual analysis, in different areas/perspectives and applications, including advertising. Setting aside the objects and also the resulting interpretations of each one, which are not under consideration here, these works illustrate the growing space for the articulation of these methods and map the typology of possible results and process settings.

5 - www.youtube.com/user/moschinoficial/videos

6 - www.youtube.com/watch?v=5e2OH5Yc7aM

the analysis target because it is specifically about Toy Boy; and because of the articulation with the first corpus and the time frame on which the analysis focuses (2019-2020). This 2019 video is analyzed considering a content and semiotic approach, as well as the position of the viewer, to understand (i) the production and printing of narratives in visual objects; (ii) the evolution of this product and brand narrative; (iii) the cultural expressions present in each visual object.

Content analysis, semiotics and the position of the viewer interpretations are articulated to understand the production of meanings and to allow a tripartite reading on the construction of cultural expression that are linked to the product. Now, we move on to the case study, methodologically framing the different methods.

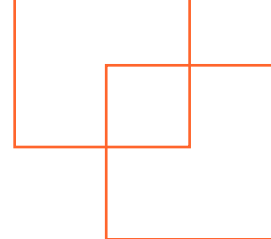
3.1 Content Analysis

As mentioned, we identified fifteen publications in the official Instagram account dedicated to the promotion of the Toy Boy perfume (first corpus). Selecting the publications with static images, we reached a total sample of ten⁷. They will be addressed first at the level of content analysis. Wimmer and Dominick underline the steps involved in content analysis:

1. Formulate the research question or hypothesis.
2. Define the universe in question.
3. Select an appropriate sample from the population.
4. Select and define a unit of analysis.
5. Construct the categories of content to be analyzed.
6. Establish a quantification system.
7. Train coders and conduct a pilot study.
8. Code the content according to established definitions.
9. Analyze the collected data.
10. Draw conclusions and search for indications. (WIMMER AND DOMINICK, 2011, p. 160)

As Bardin suggests, content analysis can focus on meanings (like a theme analysis), or lexical elements, among others, and the units of coding can be a word, a minute or even a square centimeter (BARDIN, 1979, p. 34-36).

Following these perspectives, we reviewed the following variables in the static images: when the product and a model appear simultaneously [variable 1]; the presence of the main campaign model (Jhona Burjack)



7 - We present the list of static image posts with the respective link and the publication date of each in the official Moschino Instagram account:
 05 de Janeiro de 2020: www.instagram.com/p/B68-HzYhdyw/
 16 de Novembro de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/B46M-T2Bl_sM/
 15 de Outubro de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/B3p2YEWBqZC/
 09 de Julho de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/BzsvC-chBj_A/
 10 de Junho de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/Bygh_QlhCjv/
 01 de Junho de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/ByK2v-qohzEi/

[variable 2]; mention of the product name [variable 3]; mention of the brand logo, in addition to what appears on the product itself [variable 4]; garments [variable 5]. These are the results:

Variable 1: eight occurrences.

Variable 2: eight occurrences.

Variable 3: two occurrences.

Variable 4: two occurrences.

Variable 5: the leather cap is in all appearances of the model (eight occurrences); the leather jacket, inspired by bikers, appears four times, but one time is in another male model; the leather harness appears once; leather pants appear five times.

In the promotional video also under analysis⁸ (second corpus), we reviewed the following variables: the total number of sequences [variable 1]; the sequences in which the model looks at the camera, that is, at us [variable 2]; the sequences in which we see the product [variable 3].

Variable 1: we divided the one-minute video into six sequences, considering its different moments and the most expressive plan divisions: 0.01 to 0.08 seconds; 0.11 to 0.18 seconds; 0.18 to 0.28 seconds; 0.28 to 0.36 seconds; 0.36 to 0.46 seconds; 0.46 to 1.00 minute.

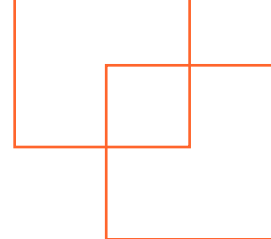
Variable 2: the model looks directly at the camera in three sequences, respectively the second, the fifth and the sixth.

Variable 3: the product is visible in all sequences.

This data is relevant to support the following two analyzes, as well as the articulated interpretation of point 2.4. However, we must underline: the importance and weight of the presence of certain pieces of clothing that allude to the represented symbolic imagery; the prominent role given to the main model and the important presence of the product (the perfume bottle).

3.2 Semiotic Analysis

The semiotic approach in the interpretation and reading of visual advertising pieces is used frequently, having been contextualized by authors such as Judith Williamson (1978), Gillian Rose (2001), Ugo Volli (2003), George Rossolatos (2018)⁹ and Laura Oswald (2012; 2015). Here, following in the footsteps of Gomes (2020), we delimit an analytical pro-



31 de Maio de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/ByI24IMBJKl/
 30 de Maio de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/ByGKhWZh_CO/
 28 de Maio de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/ByBc5LshzAP/
 27 de Maio de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/Bx-cykIBjwR/

8 - www.youtube.com/watch?v=5e20H5Yc7aM

9 - The author also reflected on the connections between semiotics and cultural branding (ROSSOLATOS, 2014; 2018).

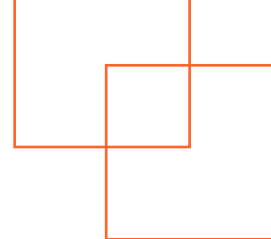
cess based on the tradition of Semiology and Saussure, mainly in an articulation of Barthes's operational concepts (1986; 1991) and Volli's (2003) contributions to them, within the scope of a sign decoding exercise in advertising. This approach is relevant to answer our question, because while asking consumers highlights the opinions regarding the advertising object, it does not allow us to understand the campaign composition process (GURZKI ET AL., 2019). Semiotic analysis makes it possible to envision the printing of meanings in advertising objects at different levels.

This exercise aims to deconstruct the signs that make up each advertising piece and the advertising sign as a whole. We start from the Saussurean dyad of the signifier - the vehicle of expression, that is, the materiality it communicates, like the sounds of a word - and of meaning/signified - the mental idea that appears associated, that is, the concept (OSWALD, 2012). Bearing this and the content analysis data in mind, the objective is to understand the connotative meanings, the readings beyond the immediate, and the myth (BARTHES, 1986; 1991) that is latent in the advertising sign (VOLLI, 2003).

Within this context, there are two things that we consider in our process. First, the processes illustrated by König et al. (2016) and Gomes (2020) based on Barthes (1991). And second, as Gomes suggested (2020), crossing the perspective of the sign as a myth (BARTHES, 1991) with the understanding of the advertising sign by Volli (2003), where the category of myth overlaps that of the advertising sign. It is important to make this articulation clearer to operationalize the analysis process:

a) In a first level we have the denotative sign (BARTHES, 1986; VOLLI, 2003). Here, the signifier (Sr1) and the signified (Sd1) give rise to the denotative sign (SD) that allows a more immediate reading. According to Laura Oswald, this would be the closest reading to the meaning of a word in a dictionary, "the concept as a matter of fact" (OSWALD, 2012, p. 54).

b) In a second level we have the connotative sign (BARTHES, 1986; VOLLI, 2003). The denotative sign (SD = Sr1 + Sd1) becomes a new signifier (Si2) that will have a new signified (Sd2). The connotative meanings give rise to the connotative sign (SC). These are the implicit readings, which are beyond the obvious, the conventional associations that allow a sense beyond the first meaning of the object. Laura Oswald suggests that connotative readings, which may be contextualized by cultural conventions, allow us to see the nuances of meaning that are associated



10 - We also underline here the perspective of König et al. who worked Barthes' s vision: "(...) the first signifié (Se1) means the presentation of the signifier and the first signifiant (Sa1) refers to the first meaning (which is, in this context, one of the luxury values regarding a specific signified phenomenon). The second step then takes this sign (Si1) and transposes it to the second signifié (Se2), referring now to a second, subordinate meaning (Si2). The whole process creates a signified myth, consisting of hidden signifiés and signifiants" (KÖNIG ET AL., 2016, p. 203).

11 - Knowing Barthes' work, Elements of Semiology, Volli

and that are "dependent on the context of the message" (OSWALD, 2012, p. 55).

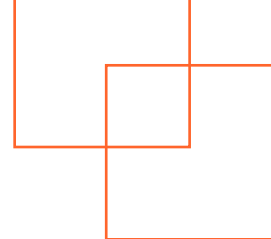
c) At a second parallel level we have myth (BARTHES, 1991). According to Barthes, it represents a second semiological order, adding new senses that were not originally present (BARTHES, 1991), that is, the sign dilutes its original signified (it loses strength) and gains a new signified that will seem natural¹⁰. For the purpose of this research, we understand the myth in both a second and third level that enables a more culturally dense and complex meaning. For Volli (2003), the third level/reading is where the advertising sign takes shape, articulating the connotative associations with the brand or product itself as latent meanings/signifieds. The author explains that "from the definition of a sign, we can infer that it is, in general, something (an image, a phrase, or brand, or more often a mixture of these elements, which may be contained in an advertising film or in a printed ad) that corresponds to the advertised product or brand" (VOLLI, 2003, p. 85, our translation). Thus, the advertising sign overlaps with the denotative sign and the most immediate reading. The objective is to link, as easily and quickly as possible, the articulation of connotative associations with the brand and the product. These connotative associations in the advertising sign can be linked to the myth construction process discussed above¹¹. As emphasized in Gomes (2020, p. 69), "the construction of the advertising sign thus goes through a mythic construction process to generate a sign capable of creating a deeper relationship with the consumer and a more complex decoding process, but easily perceptible".

Following this conceptual and analytical framework of Barthes (1986; 1991) and Volli (2003), and the approaches of König et al. (2016) and Gomes (2020), we move on to the analysis of the ten static images (advertising pieces), followed by the promotional video:

Static Image 1¹²

Denotative Reading: A seated man, dressed in trousers, jacket and a Muir style cap. A perfume bottle in the shape of a bear is in a central position under the model that looks over it.

Connotative Readings: The bear is a constant element in the communication and packaging of the product/brand, generating an immediate association with Moschino. The positioning of the bottle draws attention to a sensual pose.



(2003) proposes his analytical model with three levels (denotative sign; connotative sign; advertising sign). As Perusset (2020) indicates, Barthes does not use in his "Mythologies" (1991) model the concepts of denotation and connotation, underlined by Hjelmslev. Instead, Barthes identifies two semiological orders, one of language and another of myth. In the second semiological order the signifier (the full sign of the first order composed by the first signifier and signified) becomes form and the signified content, generating a process of signification and

Static Image 2¹³

Denotative Reading: Black and white image with the bear bottle of perfume in a central position, semi-immersed in a liquid.

Connotative Reading: the absence of color calls attention to the sensuality and sophistication of the product itself.

Static Image 3¹⁴

Denotative Reading: Black and white image where a male model looks slightly in profile at the camera while holding/balancing a perfume bottle in the shape of a bear. The model is visible from the torso upwards, wearing only a cap that covers part of the face.

Connotative Reading: the absence of color draws attention to the sensuality of the product and the model. The fact that he only wears a Muir style cap, with subcultural associations to the leather culture, draws attention to a sexual archetype with a certain fetishistic stamp. The position of the face in a slight profile and the fact that we only see one eye that looks directly into the camera underlines a direct interaction between the audience and the model, suggesting not only a certain mystery but also a call to attraction.

Static Image 4¹⁵

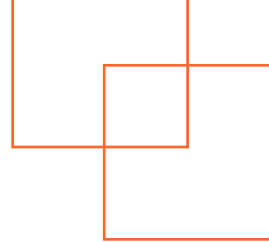
Denotative Reading: Black and white image where a male model is depicted sitting while looking slightly in profile at the camera and holding a large bottle of perfume in the shape of a bear on top of his leg. The model is depicted in a bare torso, wearing only a cap and leather pants.

Connotative Reading: the absence of color draws attention to the sensuality of the product and the model. The fact that he wears a cap and the pants described above, with subcultural associations to the leather culture, draws attention to a sexual archetype with a certain fetishistic stamp. The facial expression indicates some discomfort or discontent, but this may be in line with the very idea of the product, Boy Toy, and it underlines a kind of "tantrum" resulting from the possession of the product, as is clear in the way the model grabs the perfume bottle.

Static Image 5¹⁶

A pencil drawing that emulates the static image 3.

Static Image 6¹⁷



the myth (BARTHES, 1991, pp. 113-126). However, we cannot stop seeing a connection with the model for denotation/ connotation in the Elements of Semiology (BARTHES, 1986). Here, the author underlines the plane of expression (E), content (C) and signification/ relation (R) (ERC, Expression is Related to Content) and that in a second system the ERC becomes the expression (E) of a new content (C) articulating this last one with the concept of connotation from Hjelmslev (BARTHES, 1986, pp. 89-91), also calling attention to the concepts of signifier, signified and signification (BARTHES, 1986, p.

Denotative Reading: Black and white image where we can see a bottle of perfume in the shape of a bear balanced on one arm.

Connotative Reading: the absence of color draws attention to the sensuality of the product. We see an arm flexing muscles while holding/ balancing the perfume bottle. It underlines associations of strength and sensuality.

Static Image 7¹⁸

Duplicate of static image 3.

Static Image 8¹⁹

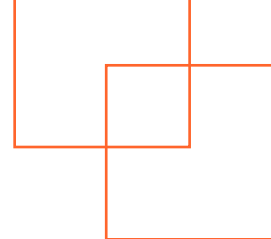
Denotative Reading: Black and white image where a male model is depicted sitting in the direction of the camera while looking directly at it and leaning on a large bottle of perfume in the shape of a bear. The model is depicted with a leather jacket, cap and leather pants.

Connotative Reading: the absence of color draws attention to the sensuality of the product and the model. Again, the fact that he uses the garments described above, with subcultural associations to the leather culture, draws attention to a sexual archetype with a certain fetishistic stamp. The facial expression indicates some discomfort or provocation and appears to be a sign of possession of something precious, the bottle.

Static Image 9²⁰

Denotative Reading: We can see two male models, one of them holds a large bottle in the shape of a bear and the other has a second identical bottle in front of it. The first model (in the front of the image) is seated and wears a cap, leather harness, leather pants and boots. The second model (further back) is standing wearing a jacket and leather pants, as well as a cap.

Connotative Reading: the pose of the model in the back, with legs apart and a hand close to the waist, is an indicator of power and domination, reinforced by facial expression. The main model, at the front, is seated under the first in a lower position that can be understood as subordination. Garments are an element rich in connotative associations, with strong symbolic and subcultural links to the leather culture, drawing attention to a sexual archetype with a certain fetishistic stamp. The biker-style leather jacket and leather harness reinforce this connotative reading.



91). In fact, several practices associate the first level of the mythologies model with denotation and the second with connotation. The latter being understood as a myth. Perusset (2020) calls this relationship into question, suggesting that the myth is linked with the denotative process. We understand his perspective, but Volli's proposal contains a possible solution that we will follow in this work (although it does not seem plausible to reject connotation in the process). In proposing a third level, Volli (2003) separates it from connotation in the second level. There is, nonetheless, a relationship that is

Static Image 10²¹

Denotative Reading: Black and white image where a male model is portrayed sitting slightly in profile towards the camera while looking directly at it. In his lap is a bottle of perfume in the shape of a bear. The model is depicted with a leather jacket, cap and leather pants.

Connotative Reading: the absence of color draws attention to the sensuality of the product and the model. The way the bottle rests on the model's neck highlights possession, but not from a position of strength and protection. The expression of the model itself is one of contentment.

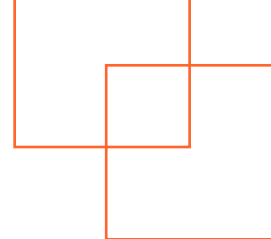
Promotional Video²²

Denotative Readings: A male model runs through corridors with tall bushes and gravel floors; he holds a large object in the shape of a bear; the video image is in black and white; he looks around the environment at certain times when the path ends and others begin; the model presents several facial expressions at different times; in general he does not look at the camera but there are sections where he looks directly at it; at the end of the end of the film he takes the object already mentioned; the model wears a cap, jacket, pants and boots, all leather.

Connotative Readings: There is an idea of escape from something where you sometimes recognize the existence of the camera, although at other times it is not the target of attention. The idea of hurry and being lost at times calls to the nature of a labyrinth from which you must escape with the object you have, the object of desire, which is embraced: the perfume bottle. The final moment of the video where you pick up the bottle is a remission to the beginning of the video, creating an endless axis between escape and capture of the object. It underlines the expression of contentment that stands out in the face of fear and the feeling of being lost. The absence of color and the clothing call attention to a sensual and fetish aesthetic that escapes the everyday space.

Connotative articulations and the campaign myth:

The different connotative readings now allow us to understand the construction of a new order of meanings, in an articulated way. The different promotional images and video point to a sexualized and fetishized anti-mood that highlights issues of possession, pleasure and contentment, as well as a constant provocation targeted at the reader. This is the mythical formula that makes up this cultural expression in its advertising form.



formed in a continuous process from the denotative to the connotative and the advertising sign. In fact, Volli (2003) suggests that there is a direct relationship between the advertising sign and the denotative plane - where the brand, its characteristics and attributes (and possibly identity narratives), is directly linked with the denotative object. In this sense, when analyzing brand objects, it seems possible to extend this premise of the third level to the myth - a sociocultural reading that seems natural and that dwells directly in the denotative sign. In

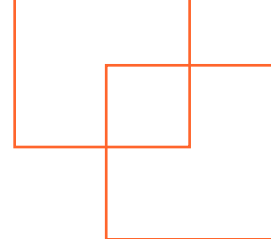
The symbolic context of leather culture, in its different conceptions and references (where we find a parallel with the aesthetics of Tom of Finland and others similar), provides the necessary symbolic elements for a sensualization and fetish mood that do not inhabit the mainstream culture, but rather a tribal or subcultural periphery. This also feeds the myth, with the idea of cultural margins underlying it, outside hegemonic customs, and practices.

3.3 Position of the Viewer

As Carvalho (2010) points out, in the context of “interactive meanings”, “the articulation and understanding of social meanings in images derive from the visual articulation of meanings in face-to-face interaction, as well as from the spatial positions allocated to different types of social actors in interaction” (CARVALHO, 2010, p. 268, our translation). In this sense, we developed the previous semiotic reading from the position of the viewer and consumer of the image, according to the work of Kress and Van Leeuwen:

the interaction between the producer and the viewer of the image. Another way of saying this is that images (and other kinds of visual) involve two kinds of participants, represented participants (the people, the places and things depicted in images) and interactive participants (the people who communicate with each other through images, the producers and viewers of images), and three kinds of relations: (1) relations between represented participants; (2) relations between interactive and represented participants (the interactive participants’ attitudes towards the represented participants); and (3) relations between interactive participants (the things interactive participants do to or for each other through images). (KRESS AND VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, p. 114)

We approach here the dimensions of contact, distance and perspective. Regarding contact, when the represented participant looks at the viewer of the image, then vectors are formed along the line of the eye connecting the participant and the viewer, even at an imaginary level (KRESS AND VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, p. 117). The contact can take place in the context of a demand where, following Halliday, the authors suggest



fact, Perusset states: “En fait, ce qui permet au lecteur de consommer le mythe innocemment, c’est qu’il ne voit pas en lui un système sémiologique, mais un système inductif: là où il n’y a qu’une équivalence, il voit une sorte de procès causal: le signifiant et le signifié ont, à ses yeux, des rapports de nature. On peut exprimer cette confusion autrement: tout système sémiologique est un système de valeurs; or le consommateur du mythe prend la signification comme un système de faits: le mythe est lu comme un système de faits: le mythe est lu comme un système factuel alors qu’il n’est qu’un système

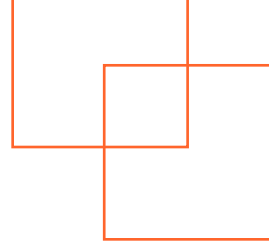
that the facial expressions (like a smile, as in our case study) and the way we look at something (as well as the gestures, when pertinent) require something from the observer (KRESS AND VAN LEEUWEN, 2006).

At the level of contact, in our case study, it should be noted that twelve of the fifteen images/posts²³ from the total publications of our sample show a vector of direct eyeline between the represented participant and the observer. In the promotional video, there are also moments where the participant looks directly at the viewer - the second, fifth and sixth sequences. The smile present in eight images makes the viewer enter into a “social affinity” relationship with the participant, but there are also five images where the participant “seductively pout[s] at the viewer”, suggesting a connection of desire (KRESS AND VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, pp. 117-118). We emphasize contact by demand, instead of offer (KRESS AND VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, p. 119), as these moments are highlighted in both static and moving narratives.

In the scope of the second dimension, we consider the size and framing of the image, which can take the form of (1) close-up, where we only see the subject’s head and shoulders, symbolizing intimacy; (2) the medium shot, which can go up to the waist, knees or even the total figure of the subject, symbolizing a certain degree of social proximity; (3) the long shot, where the human figure occupies half the height of the frame or even more than that, meaning impersonality and distance (KRESS AND VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, p. 124-126). In our first corpus, we have thirteen images where the represented participant is present and we can find seven in a close-up; and five in a medium shot. This means that there is a clear intention to promote closeness, with some images addressing intimacy. The objective is to maintain a spirit of provocation by captivating the viewer, keeping a small distance, which promotes a process of seduction. In the promotional video, all six sequences feature a medium shot. The fifth clearly also features a close-up and the sixth has a shot between the close-up and the medium shot.

In the scope of the third dimension, we approach the perspective. Here, it is important to consider the horizontal oblique and frontal angles, as the authors emphasize:

The difference between the oblique and the frontal angle is the difference between detachment and involvement. The horizontal angle encodes whether the image-producer (and hence, willy-nilly, the viewer) is ‘involved’ with the represented participants or not. The



sémiologique” (PERUSSET, 2020, p. 143). Thus, on the third level, the myth and the advertising sign may inhabit simultaneously, albeit the necessary interferences between them. causal: le signifiant et le signifié ont, à ses yeux, des rapports de nature. On peut exprimer cette confusion autrement: tout système sémiologique est un système de valeurs; or le consommateur du mythe prend la signification comme un système de faits: le mythe est lu comme un système de faits: le mythe est lu comme un système factuel alors qu’il n’est qu’un système sémiologique” (PERUSSET, 2020,

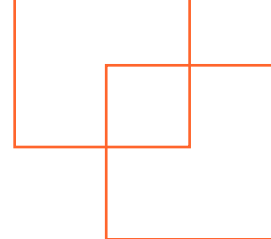
frontal angle says, as it were, ‘What you see here is part of our world, something we are involved with.’ The oblique angle says, ‘What you see here is not part of our world; it is their world, something we are not involved with’. (KRESS AND VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, p. 136)

At the vertical angle, if the represented participant is seen from above, then the interactive viewer/participant “has power over the represented”, and the opposite occurs if seen from below (KRESS AND VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, p. 140). Of the thirteen images where the represented participant is present, twelve are in a frontal plane of proximity and involvement. The viewer and the represented participant are always at the same eye level at the vertical angle in the thirteen images, so there are no clear asymmetries of power.

3.4 Articulated Interpretations and Results

The interpretation and articulation of the results go through the process described above for the development of cultural expressions (HOLT AND CAMERON, 2010):

- 1) The identification of a social disruption to move orthodoxy from a central position is here related to growing mindsets associated with plural identities and the emergence of a greater plurality of narratives, lifestyles and, again, identities, which often inhabit the symbolic peripheries;
- 2) Thus, when calling gay leather culture to the symbolic field of the campaign, we speak of identity projects that manifest in subcultures, which are called here to the mainstream and to the advertising field, pointing out latent desires;
- 3) In order to draw and frame this cultural expression, it was necessary to consider a code and an expression of myth. In the first case, as the results underline, there is: a recurring use of garments associated with leather culture, an important element in the mythical construction, as we will see later, and clearly underlined by the first two methods; a sensualization with a fetishistic marker as we can also see through the first two methods; a relationship of proximity and intimacy between the main model and the public as discussed in the content analysis, referred to in the semiotic analysis and widely present in the analysis of the viewer’s position; the choice for black and white photography, nostalgic in terms of the portrayed elements and myth; the presence of the pro-



p. 143). Thus, on the third level, the myth and the advertising sign may inhabit simultaneously, albeit the necessary interferences between them.

12 - 05 de Janeiro de 2020 www.instagram.com/p/B68-HzYhdyw/ 13 - 16 de Novembro de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/B46MT2Bl_sM/

14 - 15 de Outubro de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/B3p2YEWBqZC/

15 - 09 de Julho de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/BzsvCchBj_A/

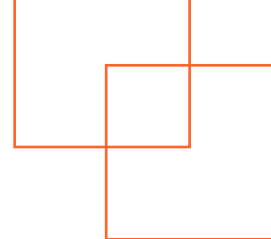
16 - 10 de Junho de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/Bygh_QlhCjv/

duct in most of the corpus according to content analysis. It is in the articulation of all these elements (and of others with a lesser expression) and in their correct context and positioning in the narrative that we compose a full reading of the image, and the model's role, as a journey between provocation, the sensualization of the lack of color and the nostalgia of this trait connected with a non-hegemonic identity that underlines fetish and sexuality, which is outside the ordinary daily life, and which imprints this code on the product and the visible object itself - the perfume bottle.

The base myths for the symbolic construction of this cultural expression inhabits the imagery of gay leather culture, an identity space between community, subculture, and tribe, which is brought here to the field of luxury and fashion. This is performed by exhibiting elements of attitude and clothing in an updated architecture adapted to the brand that takes advantage of the symbolism and its meanings of power, dominance, sensuality and sexuality. Like Peacock et al. indicate, wearing black leather garments is an important element in terms of belonging to the leather group. This presupposes an erotic component and identifies the user as a "member of the leather community" (Peacock et al., 2001, p. 186). MCoun et al., in turn, point out this community as a subculture that "eroticizes leather dress and symbols" (MCOUN ET AL., 2006, p. 93). According to the authors, these pieces are fundamental to the leather identity, showing the commitment to the community, their roles and desires, as well as their affiliation and positioning in the "fringes of gay culture" (MCOUN ET AL., 2006, p 106). In addition, as they suggest, being part of this symbology promotes self-acceptance through the performance of gay masculinities who exploit power within sexuality and provide a "societal fortification of masculine and sexual identities" (MCOUN ET AL., 2006, p. 116). In other words, there is here a revisitation of the masculinity concept that is reconstructed in this ad for the brand audiences, in a process of decoding a male identity with an imprinted idea of domination (dominations) and latent provocation.

4 Conclusions

The proposed cultural diagnosis process of advertising allows not only to understand the potential success and deconstruction steps of narratives by audiences, but also a better understanding of the printed



17 - 01 de Junho de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/ByK2v-qohzEi/

18 - 31 de Maio de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/ByI24IMBJKl/

19 - 30 de Maio de 2019: [www.instagram.com/p/ByGKhWZh_CO/20-8 de Maio de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/ByB-c5LshzAP/](https://www.instagram.com/p/ByGKhWZh_CO/20-8-de-Maio-de-2019:www.instagram.com/p/ByB-c5LshzAP/)

21 - 27 de Maio de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/Bx-cykIBjwR/

22 - www.youtube.com/watch?v=5e2OH5Yc7aM

23 - 14 - 15 de Outubro de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/B3p2YEWBqZC/

15 - 09 de Julho de

meanings to be decoded. Apart from all this, it also helps us to identify strategic insights regarding future processes for developing strategic communication.

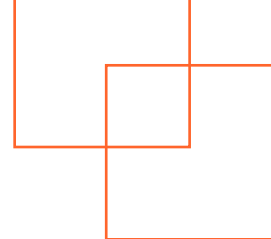
The process associated with cultural strategy by Douglas Holt and Douglas Cameron is presented as a way to understand the construction of innovative cultural expressions (complex narratives with the correct elements in a code that make sense for the consumer) and as a process for designing future actions and understanding the emergence of certain expressions in strategic communication.

The interpretation and application of the cultural strategy process proposed by Holt and Cameron was articulated with a cultural triangulation that addresses three methods for textual analysis, namely semiotics - from a Barthesian perspective; content analysis; and the position of the viewer based on the work of Kress and Van Leeuwen. The triangulation of these three methods confirmed their relevance in this process at two levels: (1) it confirmed the interpretation of certain meanings that resulted from the three methods and others that came from two of them; (2) drew attention to certain elements that were not clear with just one method, but which, through triangulation, provide a more solid interpretation. In general, triangulation generates a more cohesive interpretation that removes much of the subjectivity associated with the application of qualitative methods. The results are thus confirmed through more than one method. In this case study we understand an advertising narrative associated with three key factors: proximity, intimacy and sensuality, as well as an association with symbolic elements of a community, leading us to a specific construct of fetish and masculinity.

Still within our final considerations and future studies, it is important to underline the potential for incorporating an urban tribal analysis with a focus on identity processes within strategic communication. This research highlighted the importance of community identities in this process, but it is important to integrate new procedural/methodological elements to better understand these group dynamics.

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16 - 10 de Junho de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/Bygh_QlhCjv/

17 - 01 de Junho de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/ByK2v-qohzEi/

18 - 31 de Maio de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/ByI24IMBJKl/

19 - 30 de Maio de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/ByGKhWZh_CO/20-8deMaiode2019:www.instagram.com/p/ByB-c5LshzAP/

21 - 27 de Maio de 2019: www.instagram.com/p/Bx-cykIBjwR/

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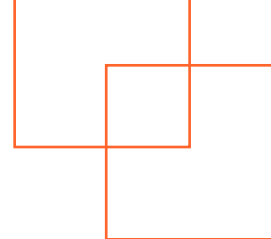
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22 - www.youtube.com/watch?v=5e2OH5Yc7aM

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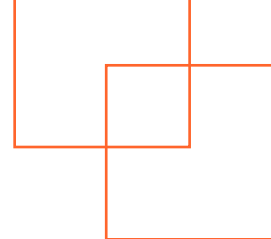
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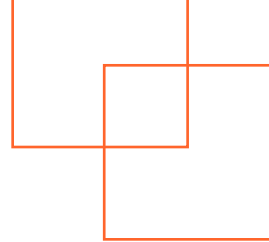
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Nelson Pinheiro Gomez

Nelson Pinheiro Gomes is an Assistant Professor in the Culture and Communication Program at the School of Arts and Humanities – University of Lisbon. He is the Director of the Culture and Communication Studies BA and the Co-Director of the PhD in Culture Studies. In addition to teaching activities, he has developed research in the field of Cultural Management and Strategy, specifically at the level of Trend Studies, coordinating the Trends and Culture Management Lab/Project. He is an integrated researcher at CEAUL.



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