

# From advertising to consumer culture studies: The long and productive process of creating a shared theory

## *De la publicidad a los estudios sobre la cultura de consumo: El largo y productivo proceso de creación de una teoría compartida*

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### ABSTRACT

This text seeks to synthesize the relationship with the Post-Graduation Program in Communication Sciences of the Universidade de São Paulo, established by the work with professors Clotilde Pérez and Eneus Trindade, more than fifteen years ago, when moved by mutual research curiosity, due to the shared certainty about the need to expand the field of study of the advertising discipline, a professional and human relationship was born, one that has grown during all these years, in which our way of understanding and approaching the advertising phenomenon has been consolidated as interdisciplinary, exploratory and collaborative, thus generating ideas that transcend the study of the advertising phenomenon to encompass the consumer culture.

**Keywords:** Advertising, brand, trends, consumer culture

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### RESUMEN

Este texto pretende sintetizar la relación con el Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências da Comunicação de la Universidade de São Paulo, establecido por el trabajo con los profesores Clotilde Pérez y Eneus Trindade, hace más de quince años, cuando movidos por la mutua curiosidad investigadora, por la certeza compartida sobre la necesidad de ampliar el campo de estudio de la disciplina publicitaria, nació una relación profesional y humana que ha crecido durante todos estos años, en los que nuestra forma de entender y abordar el fenómeno publicitario se ha consolidado como interdisciplinar, exploratoria y colaborativa, generando ideas que trascienden el estudio del fenómeno publicitario para abarcar la cultura de consumo.

**Palabras clave:** Publicidad, marca, tendencias, cultura de consumo

**M**ORE THAN 15 years ago, I became aware of the existence of the Post-Graduation Program in Communication Sciences of the Universidade de São Paulo (PPGCOM-USP), when I met professors Clotilde Pérez and Eneus Trindade during the organization of the 2nd seminar *Imagens da Cultura / Culture of Images*, in Oporto. It is now time to compile all that time in this article, but I will not do it in an enumerative way, but reviewing a long and productive history of collaboration in its most important stages.

From that first contact, driven by mutual research curiosity, by the shared certainty about the need to expand the field of study of the advertising discipline, a professional and human relationship was born, which has grown over the years, in which our way of understanding and approaching the advertising phenomenon has been consolidated in an interdisciplinary, exploratory and collaborative manner.

With the organization of the I Encontro ProPesq PP (Encontro Nacional de Pesquisadores em Publicidade e Propaganda) I had the pleasure of participating in all of these events and in the development of a first class forum for scientific exchange, which is always enriching. The event was organized by the Associação Brasileira de Pesquisadores em Publicidade (Brazilian Association of Advertising Researchers) – of which I have the honor of being a member since its foundation – and the Grupo de Estudos Semióticos em Comunicação, Cultura e Consumo (GESC3), which since 2010 was formed by professors from PPGCOM and the Department of Public Relations, Advertising and Tourism, and to which I have belonged since 2012.

The year 2012 was decisive in my relationship with PPGCOM-USP, since I obtained a scholarship for a postdoctoral stay there, thanks to the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq – National Council for Scientific and Technological Development), and I taught a graduate course, in addition to many other activities that allowed me to know the high academic level of its members and to become definitively linked to this school.

Since then and until now, even during the confinement imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, we continued working, thinking and sharing the numerous publications of articles, books and conferences that we have in common. It was accompanied by funded research projects, co-directions of theses and participating in national and international research forums, such as the International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS-AIS), the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), the Asociación Latinoamericana de Investigadores de la Comunicación (ALAIIC), the Asociación Latinoamericana

de Semiótica (FELS), the International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction (HCHCI), the Congresso Brasileiro de Ciências da Comunicação (INTERCOM – Brazilian Congress of Communication Sciences) and the Associação Portuguesa de Ciências da Comunicação (SOPCOM – Portuguese Association of Communication Sciences). In all these works, the name of PPGCOM/USP was present.

During all these years, in a rigorous but always exciting way, we have worked on what now, in view of the shared history, seems to be the overcoming of advertising studies towards a new alignment with studies on consumer culture from an advertising perspective, considering Semiotics, Anthropology, Sociology, Philosophy and Visual Studies. We will try to synthesize this path with the professors of PPGCOM-USP and others, with whom I shared work and good times thanks to the good work of the School of Communications and Arts of the Universidade de São Paulo (ECA-USP).

### **ADVERTISING AND IMAGES OF CULTURE**

As I explained above, my first contact with PPGCOM-USP arose from mutual interest in a seminar, which I co-organized in ten editions. It explored the relationship between anthropology and communication to articulate research projects. My initial methodological position was a mix between Cultural Studies (of sociological and Marxist inspiration) and Social Semiotics, proposed by Eliseo Verón and continued by others. Thus, we understood that the theory of the social production of discourses cannot be reduced to a study of the immanent text, but has to be articulated within the factors of production, circulation and consumption, which are part of any productive system. Putting these ideas together with Cultural Studies also highlighted the existence of an intertextual network resulting from the ideological dimension of discourse, that is, from its location in a specific historical, social and cultural space.

What was learned in those years, by introducing the anthropological perspective in the study of advertising, was very useful for the continuation of the work with professors Eneus Trindade and Clotilde Pérez. In this context, by using the Anthropology of Consumption – based on McCracken's ideas – to ask ourselves about the role of communication in consumer activities from an interdisciplinary perspective, we obtained results on consumption in everyday life and cultural trends in consumption, and thus understand the articulation of links of meaning between brands and consumers.

In the same way, we began to work with Professor Fernando Contreras – with whom I have shared a good part of my relationship with the PPGCOM-USP – on the

idea of technoculture, interested in the continuous exposure of individuals and collective identities in the new communication channels, which led to the creation of personal fictions and hyperconstructed identities adopting appropriation, a postmodern artistic technique, as a method of creativity and social innovation. This appropriation is carried to its extreme consequences in the processes of social interaction (citizen and commercial) without taking care of its risky consequences. The aforementioned idea later evolved, thinking about advertising and consumption with the addition of Semiotics, which implied talking about appropriation and proposing a Semiotics of irradiation, presented and widely debated at the ECA-USP, to finally explore the relationship between advertising and art, and visual studies from a philosophical perspective.

Thus, Anthropology contributed to create the idea that it is necessary to historically locate the processes and products of mass culture in order to understand the cultural matrices from which our global media culture is nourished; and to contextualize media products with the other products of our global consumer culture.

### **THE BRAND AS A SOCIAL ACTOR**

Since the beginning of our work, we have been interested in knowing the links between the brand and consumers, with the aim of understanding the discursive and cultural mechanisms articulating the social meaning that makes them desirable. Thus, mainly with Dr. Clotilde Pérez, but also with other professors of the PPGCOM-USP, we are working to open a reflection on the use of universalized social values in the field of corporate advertising messages. Our intention was to draw a map that would allow us to create the necessary epistemological bases for the development of the question. Starting from the contrary to the atomistic and destructuring conceptions idea that we must consider advertising as a creative and conditioning communicative process of culture, whose internal grammar, by means of its pragmatic component, conditions and is conditioned by its contextualization in the not very well defined field of mass culture.

In their permanent search for new arguments, in the changing world we are living and participating in, large corporations have to direct their interests towards immutable ideas. Looking for arguments that vary as little as possible and that can be transferred from one country to another, following the market, maintaining their meanings (even if it is through the most universal symbols). These arguments are social values, understood by transnational companies as ideas shared by a large part of the population and extrapolated to different

countries. So that your advertising messages can be disseminated and understood by huge audiences without modification. The social values chosen are those common to Western industrialized and democratic culture. It is clear that it cannot be demonstrated that a certain type of culture necessarily leads to economic development, nor that economic development necessarily produces a certain type of cultural pattern. It cannot be said either that certain cultural patterns have the capacity to generate a democratic political regime or that democratic institutions make certain cultural systems of values and beliefs appear. In any case, the predominant culture in a society and its values can help to clarify the relationship between value, economic and political systems.

Economic development and cultural and political changes are linked in a coherent way, structured in reciprocal causal links. Moreover, the historical evolution is not linear, since modernity creates a subsequent current, postmodernity (hypermodernity, liquid modernity) with different characteristics. If it is not linear, social change moves in a different direction from the one pointed out by the previous one. In fact, postmodern authors have pointed out some characteristics of the new direction. They move away from economic efficiency, bureaucratic efficiency and the scientific rationality associated with modernity, towards a more flexible society, with more room for personal autonomy, something more human-like.

In this context, brands use advertising to achieve personality, just as people use fashion to individualize their appearances. Advertising works as a cosmetic for the brand, it dresses it with exclusivity, distancing it from everything that is ordinary and commonplace. Thus, the phenomenon of brand competition and industrial standardization raised a race whose goal is to achieve the unprecedented, the exclusive, in order to capture the attention of consumers. Advertising, by its postmodern nature, always leaves the possibility of escaping its persuasive action: change the television channel, change the screen or turn the page. Advertising tries to influence a collective whole, without trying to reform man and customs, it takes people as they are, trying to stimulate only the thirst for consumption that already exists in them. By continually proposing new needs, advertising is content to exploit the common aspiration for well-being and novelty. It is more a matter of pragmatically utilizing the existing taste for material pleasures, well-being and novelties than of reconstituting the human being.

The consequence of overproduction is that advertising does not show us the products as they are, but dresses them up with values born in society. Advertising manufactures sign-objects whose function is to be exchanged for certain experiences and social values. The obsolescence and rapid replacement

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of objects does not respond to their strictly functional expiration of use, but to their symbolic expiration. In the past, objects were inherited from fathers to sons. Now, for each generation of people, there are several generations of objects: people feel they are surviving, enduring in the face of the repeated mortality of the objects passing through their hands. However, advertising is not therefore relegated to a sign of an object-sign, a subsidiary sign, or at best a semantic fuse that activates a meaning embodied elsewhere, since advertising is useful in two different and complementary ways. Firstly, advertising is not simply an intermediary between the object and its consumer, but is also consumed as a cultural and aesthetic object. Secondly, advertising offers us the adaptation of the consumer society to our needs in images, while we are required to adapt to the real order of the consumer society.

Consumer culture is for Baudrillard a postmodern culture, without depth in which all values are revalued and art triumphed over reality. The aestheticization of reality puts the importance of style in the foreground, proposes a constant search for new fashions, styles, sensations and experiences. Thus, the old artistic countercultural notion is more vigorous. The interest in lifestyle suggests that consumption practices, the purchase and display of goods and consumption experiences in everyday life cannot be understood merely through ideas of exchange value. The new consumer culture makes lifestyle a life project and exhibits its individuality and sense of style through its goods, clothes, practices, experiences and body appearances that it brings together in a lifestyle. The modern individual of the consumer culture knows that he speaks not only with his clothing, but also with his house, furniture, decoration, automobile and other activities that must be read and classified in terms of presence or absence of taste.

In the immensity of purchasing possibilities, supported by access to information and improved technology, contemporary people are becoming more and more critical in their decisions. Probably much of these decisions are based on a more conscious relationship with consumption, including the role of brands in our daily lives, which includes the positive dimension that brands can have in contemporary society, hedonistic, emotional and technological – following Lipovetsky – as promoters of multiculturalism and consumption as an experience producing values. Thus, brands are a symbol of economic success and status, as well as a tool for identity, authenticity and personalization.

Then, the use of brands is a possibility of visibilization for people in contemporary society, and although there are different modes of presence of the visible in our environment (Landowsky), the advertising made by brands is configured as a privileged manifestation of contemporary society, based on synesthesia,

polyphony and the visualization of the concepts of singularity and exclusivity. This fact, as we have already mentioned, is evidenced by the displacement of the material in the product, in favor of symbolic dematerialization, eroding the concrete with the intention of creating links of meaning from subjectivity in order to establish complicity and identification. Advertising is an effective, involving and intentionally accessible presence, resulting in a synthesis of the tension between the promise of permanence (strategic objective of products and brands) and the relentless transience, characteristic of the pragmatism and ephemerality of contemporary supply and demand.

This line of work has reported and continues to contribute, from the understanding of consumption rituals shown in brand messages, the perception of consumption trends from advertising manifestations that are expressed visually, textually and synesthetically. Such trends opened a perspective of study on consumer culture, since corporate advertising builds the values of the organization seeking its consolidation in the sphere of action of citizens in their daily lives and its main objective is to give meaning to brands, much more than to promote products. Therefore, brands build meaning by responding to the desires and aspirations of their target audiences. They stimulate the imagination and provide answers to the everyday problems of their consumers. In addition, brands shape sensibilities and guide cultural practices of consumption, because although the ways of seeing the world vary from society to society, reflecting the diverse historical experiences of different people, what remains as commonplace are those spreading advertising messages and forms of consumption.

### THE MEDIATIZATION OF CONSUMPTION

The third line of work, shared with Professor Eneus Trindade and other PPGCOM-USP researchers, was the exploration of the emerging concept of mediatization and its application to the study of consumption from an initial phase of understanding the phenomenon to the following attempts at applied research. Once the concept that advertising is an economic, cultural and social activity that has been playing an essential role at the dawn of modern capitalism and the most advanced economies was consolidated by most authors in the strictly advertising field and other social sciences, it became clear that advertising is an economic, cultural and social activity. In this line are the ideas that the advertising system plays a decisive role in shaping identities, consumption habits, desires, aspirations and collective imaginaries, allowing the time to adapt the idea of *mediatization* to the field of consumption.

The concept of mediatization is widely used in areas such as religion, politics and sports. In these cases, media presence, together with sociological discussions on the social interaction of the media, makes mediatization a phenomenon that, despite appearing to be contemporary, has its roots beyond the current configuration of the media ecosystem. This phenomenon is, even today, one of the central discussions in communication, from which several applications and studies are developed in Humanities and Social Sciences, in order to understand processes of social, cultural and material change. The origin could be placed as a way of understanding the centrality and growing relevance of the media in the social processes of industrialized countries. This has to do with the fact that the increase in the speed of internet access, the universalization of mobile devices and the emerging culture of knowledge sharing through digital platforms constitute a central reference in people's lives. There is a shift from a conception of the study of communication based on production-text-audience to a non-linear and open configuration, in which there is a communicative construction of social and cultural reality by the media.

The connections between mediatization and consumption – as pointed out by García Canclini – are twofold, direct and indirect. Direct mediatization is when a certain activity is performed in a different way due to the influence of the media, such as shopping in virtual stores using the Internet, while the indirect form of mediatization refers to the influence of the media on a certain activity, without significantly affecting the way it is performed, such as deciding what clothes to buy or what our style will be for the coming winter. The difference between them is the degree of influence, and indirect influence is the most subtle, although in consumption processes both forms can concur. While online consumption would be a clear example of direct mediatization, the presence of the media in the purchasing process by proposing certain consumption rituals in its different contents would be an example of indirect mediatization.

Consumption is characterized by processes of transfer of meaning from a socially constructed world towards consumer goods and from these towards the consumer through two essential vectors: the advertising system and fashion. Both exert their influence by suggesting ritualistic practices of possessing goods, acquiring them, exchanging them or dispossessing ourselves of them. These consumption rituals act as media devices, since they can be anything capable of capturing, orienting, determining, intercepting, modeling, controlling and securing people's gestures, behaviors, opinions and discourses.

The most radical consequence of the influence of mediatization on consumption is the process of substitution, according to which certain social activities are being replaced by mediated activities: We listen to the radio while driving or



watch TV while eating, although the most widespread case is online shopping. The media also act as catalysts of social change, since their social relevance implies the sustenance of people and institutions, which contributes to a great extent to the growth of wealth and the sustainability of cultural industries. Consequently, different economic agents adapt their actions to the media's operations. This is clearly visible in athletes, politicians, and entertainment and cultural professionals. In short, the media offer new ways of consuming products and services, beyond geographical or time limitations, what Habermas called the implosion of consumption to describe how consumption has ceased to reside in the sphere of intimacy to live in the social sphere.

This preliminary work of conceptual definition allowed us to confirm that there is an effective presence of the media that penetrates the daily life of individuals and banishes the logical and interactional processes. In other words, in mediatization, and in the case of advertising by brands, there is a wide menu of strategies for the dissemination of messages, although these are not yet consolidated, but traditional forms of advertising planning have changed and now aim to disseminate the brand on the Internet. These facts indicate the existence of a greater participation of the consumer as a user of social networks and a market practice based on the use of the spontaneous reactions of the consumer-collaborator or prosumer for the expansion of the message. Thus, the growing power of the consumer, who gives brands a voice, but who can also criticize and question them, is evident. The context of the new media seems to reconfigure power relations and encourages a more balanced set of relations between producers and consumers.

Traditional advertising is only a part of the communication possibilities that brands have nowadays. Today the advertising system relates brands to their users by using tags in search systems such as Google, is disguised as journalistic information in institutional and synthetic communication campaigns on Twitter and allows the formation of a critical opinion that, with a new form of management, gives expression to the relationship between the general public and the communities of followers, as happens on Facebook. Advertising is also present in the new social networks and web supports that allow the production of voice and image with aesthetic criteria. All these sites are spaces where brands can advertise with enormous possibilities to cultivate sensory links with their audiences. That is why we believe it is necessary to understand the qualitative nature (and promote its study from this perspective) of these sensory links established in the digital world, included in what we call programmatic or numerical advertising, based on big data and statistics, but deeply rooted in social culture and consumer practices.

### GLOBAL ADVERTISING CULTURE

As a logical consequence of all these years of work, dialogue and shared study, having established the general context of advertising on cultural, technological and communicational issues from a multidisciplinary perspective, a common theory emerged. It is a consensual idea about the nature of the advertising phenomenon, which has to do with the existence of an expanded culture that has as its advertising expression the brand and its aesthetic-cultural universe, an advertising meta-culture between art and algorithm.

As we explained earlier, mediated communication has undergone a radical transformation with the irruption of artificial intelligence, networks, artificial realities and the new attitudes of individuals towards technology. This has led to the emergence of new forms of creation, reception and interpretation of advertising, although it is not the only thing that has influenced the profound renewal of the advertising world. Since the beginning of the century it was accompanied by the digital economy of knowledge, the dominance of technoliberalism, platform capitalism, robotization and the culture of innovation. Thanks to it, today's organizations can introduce new products into the market and stimulate non-stop consumption. This system of mass consumption implies a logic of destruction that eliminates the old in favor of the new by means of a creative process aimed at the permanent diversification of supply through the stimulation of novelty.

This creative destruction typical of advertising acquires a planetary dimension today. Global markets force us to work in a frontier scenario between different cultures, worldviews and different social and political scenarios. That is why advertising cannot be considered a technical discipline, but rather a human paradigm containing philosophical, cultural, ontological and anthropological reasons, in addition to business, commercial or purely communicational reasons. The irresistible expansion of advertising establishes a process of change that is delimited by the passage from an objective vision to one that looks beyond the near and close. The world expands through information coming from other places through digital media and consumption in a market oriented to the profile of an individual with a cross-border vocation. This global expansion of communication needs the symbols of the past to be replaced by their digital simulacrum, more ethereal and faster for global communication. The symbolic transfer between industrial production and advertising images no longer arises from *ex novo* practices, but symbolic creations are born from the appropriation of the authenticity contained in the real object. This appropriation operates with fragmented and organized forms using the syntax of hypertext, the transmedia format and the criteria of the intelligent algorithm, all oriented towards the

dominance of the brand as the unquestionable protagonist of this expanded and expansive project.

This is global advertising culture in which we find the best possible vantage point from which to consider the changes to which our societies are being subjected now immersed at the end of the first quarter of the 21st century. We hope that the PPGCOM-USP, with its initiative and leadership, continues to foster these rich debates, so necessary for the creation of research networks and intellectual advancement. ■

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