Semiotic analysis of cultural production as a way to understand today's target audiences[1]

Análise semiótica da produção cultural como forma de compreensão dos *targets* contemporâneos

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ABSTRACT

Target audiences are becoming increasingly fluid, imprecise and unpredictable - ever changing - and no longer respond to rigid patterns, making it necessary to find new ways to define and understand them. This article proposes a new methodology to understand target audiences, addressing issues of communication, branding strategies, trends etc. We explore consumers' own self image as the key to access the answers needed for marketing, not by asking them questions, but by interpreting the universe of cultural production that surrounds them. With this, we introduce a new way to study target audiences, based on semiotic theory and the anthropology of consumption, offering companies new opportunities to create innovative and well-aimed strategies.

KEYWORDS: Consumption; Semiotics; Anthropology; Target groups; Cultural production.

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RESUMO

Os *targets* se revelam cada vez mais fluidos, imprecisos, imprevisíveis e em constante transformação, não respondendo mais a qualquer padrão rígido, sendo preciso buscar novas formas de defini-los e entendê-los. Este artigo apresenta a proposta de uma nova metodologia para a compreensão dos *targets*, abordando questões de comunicação, estratégia de marca, tendências etc. Discutimos a figura do próprio consumidor como chave de acesso às respostas necessárias ao marketing, mas não lhe fazendo perguntas e sim interpretando o universo da produção cultural que o envolve. Como resultado, apresentamos uma nova forma de se estudar os *targets*, baseada na teoria semiótica e na antropologia do consumo, oferecendo às empresas novas possibilidades de criar estratégias inovadoras e certeiras.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Consumo; Semiótica; Antropologia; *Target*; Produção cultural.

1   INTRODUCTION

All of today's professionals, in any given area, when asked about their daily routine at work, report there are challenges: challenges that are imposed by our times, caused by structural and contextual transformations that are changing the world in general. Teachers face issues associated with new technologies and their adoption in lecturing and learning processes. Doctors are surprised by patients who visit various websites before arriving at the office with complete self-diagnosis and imagined treatments. Lawyers working on public and private areas have to deal with increasingly subjective explanations of legal rules. This list could go on forever, as we recall situations in which contemporaneity affects everyday procedures, causing nuisance, casting doubt, raising questions or simply posing challenges.

This article is also a product of these challenges, having as its starting point an issue that is common to everyone who deals with consumer markets: changes in consumers' behavior and companies' growing difficulty to understand them.

It is true that we have been witnessing a massive quest for creative and innovative solutions to these challenges, including many successes, but also a number of mistakes. This proposal doesn't pretend to be the only possible solution, the best solution or the first solution offered for this problem. On the contrary: at the same time that the work is prompted by daily routine situations faced in consumer markets, it also feeds from this context, with great debt to many other existing initiatives. This proposal can be combined, paired or merged with other methodologies, and it also welcomes contributions, improvements and continuity efforts.

This article is organized in a linear fashion, moving from overarching and abstract issues towards specific and concrete examples. We start by discussing the most challenging contemporary issues and explaining the primordial viewpoint of our research. This is followed by an exploration of the relationship between consumption and language, introducing a very particular perspective of this phenomenon, focused on the processes of representation and signification. Next, coming closer to the main object of our study, we briefly address generational issues, characteristics of today's targets and how brands relate to their audiences. We then move from theory to empirical knowledge, introducing the methodological procedures that compose our research. At this point we make a brief presentation of the findings obtained, keeping in mind that this is not an eminently practical work - but rather a theoretical-methodological study -, so there are no definitive or absolute results. The findings are followed by a section explaining that the study is open to improvements and continuity, and we close the article with its conclusions and unfailing bibliographic references.

It is important to note that this study brings together two distinct universes that may sometimes seem incompatible: 'the market' and academia. But these approaches can and should advance together as they have common goals (to answer questions, solve problems, bring people closer to the truth), use the same investigative tools (epistemology, theory and method) and have been dealing with the same dilemmas: a challenging context and ever-changing human beings. While this study focuses on advertising and the bonds of meaning established with consumers, contemplating potential gains for brands and companies, we will be discussing semiotics, analysis protocols, the anthropology of consumption etc. This work is supported by a solid theoretical foundation and in-depth examinations, while the objectivity and concreteness of the market give it the possibility of rapid implementation.

1.1 CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT: CHALLENGES POSED TO THE MARKET AND TO RESEARCHERS

To study the present is to face an object that will not stand still, cannot be fully observed and does not respect the time needed for market or academic research. But the growing urgency of research projects, shorter deadlines and eminent need to understand the "now" is squeezing everyone in the brief period between "a short while ago" and "in a little bit".

The solution, in this situation, is to resort to two major devices: one is to be constantly attentive, always aware and available to our surroundings, actively observing what is near (but which sometimes slips away). The street, the landscape, our neighbors, the people, news, facts, information, art, youth, what is on the screen and beyond the screen - everything is a source of content that may inspire researchers or serve as building blocks for more up-to-date research projects in line with our times. The other device is to take advantage of the established and legitimized perspectives of those who dedicate themselves to understand (and explain) the unsettling details of today's world.

Social scientists (sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists), philosophers and historians are some of the professionals whose bibliographical production best fits the purposes of this study. In other words: it is from the perspective of the fields represented by these scientists that we can find, with more clarity and ease, the foundation to solve the problems we face. Yes, because we're talking about people, consumers, human beings.

People who are constantly asked to be consumers (Bauman, 2008, p. 70), who are adopting consumerist values as the primary rules for their lives, bringing into the parlance words such as immediacy, ubiquity, superficiality, fragmentation, ambiguity, mobility and transience. This is the root of the growing difficulties faced by companies, brands and all professionals dealing with the consumer market. Because today

> The subject takes on different identities in different moments, identities that are not unified around a coherent "self." Inside us there are contradictory identities, pushing in different directions, on such a way that our identifications are being continually moved. (Hall, 2006, p. 13)

Classic market segmentation methods are losing their effectiveness, making decision-making process incredibly difficult, and challenging market research professionals to find new ways to reconnect brands and consumers and to inform companies' strategic and operational decisions.

It is clear, however, that we should not simply seek new methods and magical solutions for old market practices, without first acknowledging the existence of a new consumer in the very center of the market and of society, who is changing the rules, inverting positions and demanding that brands adopt a new posture towards him. "The individual appears more and more opened up and mobile, fluid and socially independent" (Lipovetsky & Charles, 2004, p. 83).

This reminds us of an anecdote: the director of a mobile brand once rejoiced when she saw, from behind the mirror - always at a distance - a consumer choosing in a magazine the image of a deep sea diver to represent her relationship with the client brand's pre-paid mobile service. Asked about her choice, the consumer answered vaguely: the image is beautiful, blue, it conveys freedom. 'See? Things aren't so bad', said the executive, her eyes shining. Sure, but the image selected didn't show just a beautiful ocean, blue and filled with wonders. The diver at the center of the photo was inserted in that universe of beauty and enchantment, but carrying oxygen cylinders, breathing artificial replacement air that can be gone anytime, and if that happens unexpectedly, it may cause death.

The image was definitely beautiful, and this had indeed been taken into consideration in the consumer's choice: it is common knowledge that mobile technologies provide access to an enchanting and wonderful world. But beauty was not the heart of the issue - what was actually revealed by the photo - something of great value for the study - was a relationship of dependence with the service provided by the phone company. Instead of the wonders of the relationship, the image actually emphasized this fragile dependence, characterized by constant risk of death - and, yes, losing phone service is a type of death.

This is an example of the challenges we face today. Consumers are ever-changing, unstable and ambiguous, as we know, and can no longer be regarded from a straightforward (ana)logic perspective. Today's consumers - and tomorrow's consumers even more so - have frivolous hearts and tricky brains, with one tactile eye glued to a screen that is never off and another smart eye on a

search engine that reaches into infinity. This demands new perspectives of these consumers, taking into consideration the meanings and values that support the bonds they establish with brands - bonds that are certainly guided by consumption, but not necessarily the purchase of something - as well as the complex and varied modes of representation and signification that guide their choices and behaviors.

Not to mention all the crises we are currently facing, and that seem to intensify feelings of anxiety and increase the scale of the challenges. According to Pompeu (2015, p. 50), these crises have something in common:

> The issue of language permeates all crises we face today. When we think about representation - such as political representation, for instance -, we're talking about language. When we think about technology and its impact on various areas of the daily routine, we're also talking about language. Economic, currency exchange and financial issues - bubbles, booms, speculation, interest rates - are also characterized by language. The relationships between people and institutions - brands, churches, the state, family -, are also based on language, due to their symbolic character. The many conflicts taking place around the world always have language features in their cores - religion, money, the market. The law, ethics, money, politics, generation, religion, brand, government, these are all codes, signs: all of this is language.

1.2 CONSUMPTION AND LANGUAGE

To consume and to purchase are two different things. A person who makes a purchase invests money on something, a product or a service - we're talking about a financial exchange, an agreement that involves payment and delivery. A person who consumers may also purchase something, but must necessarily establish bonds of meaning. While purchasing is something concrete and effective, consuming is symbolic, immaterial and transcendental.

This deceivingly simple conclusion is drawn from a debate that has been carried on by a number of authors in the last few decades - or rather in the last century. The idea that products (commodities or goods) have meanings and that these meanings are the foundation for the consumption phenomenon is old.

Sociologist Jean Baudrillard, for example, had already realized in the middle of the last century that all products "serve" for something, meeting rational and concrete needs, such as grinding, storing, supporting etc.; at the same time that they "work" as something else, acquiring meaning, producing an effect of meaning, emanating values, such as sophistication, belonging, pride, confidence etc. This was the so-called sign-function of the product (Baudrillard, 2010, p. 89).

Mary Douglas, a seminal anthropologist dedicated to studying consumption, takes the idea further, extending the field of vision to include the relationship between goods and consumers:

> What happens to material objects once they have left the retail outlet and reached the hands of the final purchasers is part of the consumption process. (Douglas & Isherwood, 2009, p. 102)

Moreover: "the agreement of other consumers endows goods with value" (Douglas & Isherwood, 2009, p. 123).

These ideas assume that consumption is a phenomenon based on meanings. In a world where the logic of consumption overrides all other logic (Lipovetsky, 1989, p. 155), it is understandable that its symbolic and semantic issues reach a state of plenitude and growth.

Grant McCracken, a more current author, elaborates on these ideas, establishing a sort of consumption cycle that illustrates the flow of meanings through three interconnected spheres: values, products and people.

According to McCracken (2003, p. 106), all meanings belong in an abstract dimension he calls the "culturally constituted world" and are transferred to products through advertising. With this advertising is no longer regarded as manipulative, influencing or persuasive discourse, and it is seen

instead as something that contributes to meaning transfer within the social dynamics of consumption:

> Advertising works as a potential method of meaning transfer by bringing the consumer good and a representation of the culturally constituted world together within the frame of a particular advertisement. (McCracken, 2003, p.106)

Consumption rituals exist to bring these meanings to people. This is another extremely important element in McCracken's work (2003) and in the anthropology of consumption as a whole, but it is beyond the scope of this text.

Once we know that consumption is directly associated with meanings, we must now understand that the world, made of consumption, also becomes a world composed of meanings, and vice-versa. This is where the issue of language becomes relevant, and where consumption and semiotics meet. If "making sense of the world involves interpreting the world as sensible" (Douglas & Isherwood, 2009, p. 120), we must acknowledge that "the market is a communication scenario, a communicative space where producers and consumers exchange not only products, but also ideas and values" (Santaella & Nöth, 2010, p. 30).

This leaves us with a challenging contemporary context, characterized by a dense and complex language crisis. In this sense, consumption is the transversal axis permeating all human behavior and thought, and imposing its own logic. Consumption takes on an increasingly symbolic dimension, and is no longer restricted to practical, utilitarian or functional roles, growing to include affective, sentimental and abstract spheres. If the idea is to understand consumption, i.e. the relationship between people and goods, companies and brands must consider input that accounts for the symbolic, semantic and linguistic aspects of consumption: semiotics.

"A science to read the world as language" (Santaella, 2007, p. 23), semiotics is coming increasingly closer to market issues, serving as a method to analyze packages and logos, and contributing to strategic aspects such as branding, positioning, communication concepts, target definition, developing strategies etc. (Perez, 2004, p. 143; Yasuda & Oliveira, 2012, p. 100).

Having established the theoretical foundation for our methodological propositions, we can now advance with more confidence towards the key object of this article.

2   BRANDS, TARGET AUDIENCES AND GENERATIONS

Defining the target audience of a company or a brand is not an easy task. The first segmentation processes were established decades ago and the current scenario (after numberless transformations in this area, including major lessons from sociology) is filled with challenges and uncertainty (Pompeu, Santos, & Sato, 2011). There are a great number of methods and each company seems to follow its own path.

Some still adopt traditional segmentation methods, using age and social class as the main criteria. Others, bolder, try to reach people by creating attitudinal profiles. As we look closer, more possibilities appear. What we know, however (and something difficult to deny), is that

> Target audiences will never be - as they were in the past - sociologically defined static objects, surrounded by concentric circles that are closer and closer until they reach the focal point: this point - the consumer - is no longer there, docile and still, waiting to be caught. (Canevacci, 2012, p. 45)

Or even:

> Permanent protagonism and performative action in the consumption scenario are features of contemporary consumers. Plastic semblances that aim to create new transitory and fickle characters for themselves and for others. Characters that reveal versatile and easily adaptable

actors who are always ready and open for change and inconstancy. Characters that carry inside endless ephemeral social images. Fragments that soon melt. Such are consumers in postmodern times: fragmented and perishable. (Perez, 2009, p. 3)

But one important issue is often neglected when we think about defining target audiences and the strategies adopted by companies. In the past, in a less complex and unstable context, we were inside the companies, planning, producing, delivering and communicating products and ideas to people who were similar to us: with habits, tastes, behaviors and world views that were relatively close to ours, or at least familiar to us. Today we almost never work on a product or service for people who are similar to us. This fact introduces new difficulties, caused by the growing distance between the offices of companies, agencies and institutes and regular people's homes and hearts.

We have chosen for this article two target audiences that are among the farthest from the universe of executives leading the market. We could have chosen to research lower social classes, another unfamiliar realm - but for that we would have to consider today's socio-cultural context, which has particularly interesting characteristics in Brazil.

We chose instead to deal with the issues of time, age groups and generations. We will look at two extremes of society's age pyramid: very young and very old people. Specifically: the so-called digital natives - those who were born in a fully digital world - and older people - above 65 years of age. And how do these groups relate to the professionals leading the market? In a very relevant way: the youth that is immersed in new technologies will soon occupy decision-making positions, while in a few years we will become the older people, so often considered outdated.

Both the kids and the old people consume - a lot - and are targeted by companies and brands, being offered a growing offer of products and services. We will now discuss, albeit briefly, the relationship between these two groups and our world, in order to consider how to understand them better later on.

Those who have small kids or spend any amount of time with children and teenagers must have noticed that things have changed for good. We now have among us boys and girls who learned how to read without a book, a pencil, a dictionary or a calligraphy notebook. Studying this new human contingent in their book *Nascidos na era digital* [Born digital] (2011, pp. 11-16), authors John Palfrey and Urs Gasser established an interesting rating system that classifies people according to their relationship to the digital world. "Digital natives" are those who were born immersed in the era of new technologies, and who see no difference between being online or offline. For digital natives to live is to be online all the time, without distinguishing between the digital dimension and what people insist to call the real world. "Digital settlers" are those who entered the digital environment quickly and bravely. They were not born in this environment, but were able to take advantage of it and even helped shape it. These are basically adults who are well acclimated to the digital era. There are also "digital immigrants": those who adopted the new technologies after a while, and were not involved in their configuration. They use technology merely as a tool and with different skill levels, but are never completely integrated.

Of these three audiences, we are mostly interested in the digital natives, of course, as they are the ones who "will move markets and transform industries, education, and global politics" (Palfrey & Gasser, 2011, p. 17). More than this: the logic that rules the lives of these new generations is the same that will prevail in society as a whole. To understand this new logic is fundamental for companies, not only to be able to sell more products, but to survive.

Older people, on the other hand, have their importance justified by other reasons. One of them and perhaps the most important, is the financial issue. Researches conducted by the *Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada* (IPEA, Institute of Applied Economic Research) reveal that older people are becoming the main source of family income. Those who guess this is due only to retirement funds and pensions are mistaken. The fact is that many older people are staying professionally active or productive. With this, they are not only responsible for most of the income that supports the family, but also in clear conditions to choose and decide.

But the point that interests us here is how to establish bonds of meaning between brands and these two distinct audiences. When it comes to youth, it is important to note that we still have a media-advertising system based on rules established many decades ago: rules that make little or no sense to this youth. Television channels, radio stations, weekly magazines or any other tradition communication vehicle have very little relevance for these boys and girls who learnt from an early age that content is what matters, and that when content is unimportant, it is time to change the channel, replace the screen, seek another way to access the desired information.

It is true that considerable effort is being made in the market to try to establish bonds with new generations that make more sense to them. All companies' investments on online communication and sales are aimed at this age group and seek to take advantage of these consumers' behavior. But there is much to improve in a media landscape that still prioritizes investment on TV advertising, considering that youth doesn't 'watch TV', tending to 'search for content' instead.

The situation is arguably worse when it comes to older people. They almost always relate to media and the market in ways that fit the current logic (watching certain stations, liking specific distribution outlets, being loyal to selected manufacturing brands, etc), but they rarely see themselves portrayed in a desirable manner in the universe created by the market as the basis for information, advertising and entertaining (Cunha, 2001).

With this, today's market logic is structured around outdated standards that fail to generate identification or bonds with older people, who could potentially respond to these stimuli more effectively. Meanwhile, the universe created by the market strives to keep up with the cultural references and to create identification with younger consumers, who no longer subscribe to its media and advertising practices, responding with rejection.

There are all kinds of profiles between these two extremes, but we can also see that they are quickly extending toward the middle of the spectrum. With this, there is no hope for salvation for those who are not concerned about finding creative and smart alternatives.

3   METHODOLOGY: FROM SEMIOTICS TO MEANINGS

The theoretical foundation of the methodological proposal presented here freely appropriates the precepts developed by Peirce (1995) and explored by notable researchers such as Santaella (2007, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c) and Perez (2004), who wrote extensively about its abstract and conceptual aspects as well as the concrete application of these concepts.

The aforementioned methodological proposal is organized in three major phases, based on the triadic model of the sign, developed by Peirce (1995, p. 45). According to this line of though, the sign is divided into three constituent elements: representamen, also called sign; the object or semiotic object; and the effect of meaning, also called interpretant. The diagram in Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the three major phases of the methodology.
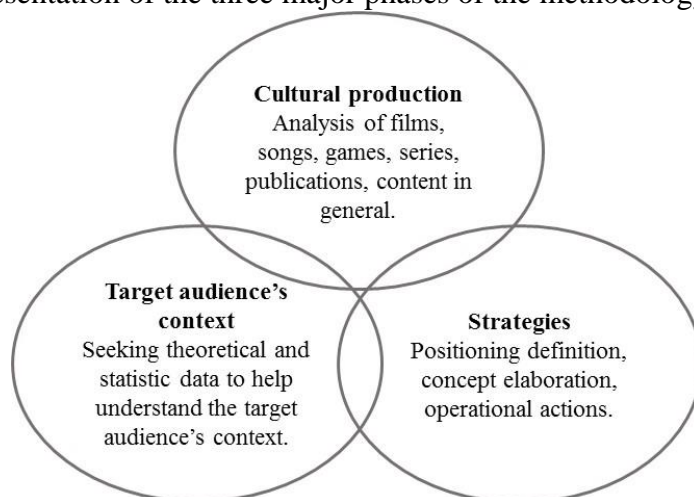

Figure 1 - General methodological foundation
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The first dimension, corresponding to the sphere of the sign, is destined to cultural production in itself. This is the most relevant part of our proposal, as it may be the most innovative. We will describe its procedures in detail later - for now, suffice to understand how it fits in the larger research.

The second dimension concerns the relationship of the sign with the object, that is, its real and concrete aspects, including great efforts to contextualize the production analyzed. Here we are talking about two investments: (1) a theoretical foundation with a humanist background to help understand the target audience, with contributions from sociology, anthropology, psychology and any other scientific fields needed; (2) statistic materials that give the research the objectivity of a demographic, socio-economic and political perspective of the target audience.

Both the theoretical and the statistic foundations must serve to "anchor" the analyses, providing a latent connection with reality. Thus, while the processes of interpretation of the cultural production tend to be abstract, the inferences reflect the target audience's context (as will become clear later on), bringing concrete and factual application to the process as a whole.

We arrive at the third dimension of the methodology proposed, which includes taking into consideration the discoveries of the research as well as the clients' goals and circumstances. This is where the evaluation of specific materials is included (such as communication, visual identity, POS materials etc.), serving as the foundation for recommendations made to the client.

It is important to emphasize that, even from the perspective of Peirce's semiotics (1995), this third dimension may extrapolate the processes and limitations of the research. Once the implementation of the results is not restricted to the realm of investigation (in this case the institute), defining strategies based on the knowledge produced does not depend solely on the effort of the research professionals involved, but also on the client and its suppliers (creative agency, studio, distributor etc.). This does not relieve researchers from framing the results obtained taking into consideration the clients' specific goals and questions.

Having explained this context, we will now analyze in greater detail the methodological definition of the analysis of the cultural production, which is the main focus of the present study.

Assuming that consumption takes place in a two-way flow between brands and consumers, based on meaning and bonds established rather than on one side or another, what we are proposing here is to understand target audiences by analyzing the bonds of meaning that are created between a given group of people (target audience) and the cultural production that surrounds it.

We understand as cultural production: TV shows, movies, music, games, publications, the advertising system itself, etc - everything that is produced for and consumed by a given target audience.

> What seems to make more sense today - in face of such complexity and so many unpredictable situations involving consumption, purchases and new technologies - is an concept of consumption defined by the idea of connection, the emotional bond established between an institution and someone it aims to connect to - out of necessity, identification, aspiration or projection, it doesn't matter which - but there must be a bond. (Pompeu, 2014, p. 20)

With this in mind, we extend the concept of consumption to these cultural products, important keys to access the symbolic landscape, which shapes and composes the behavior of the target audience.

The structural foundation of the methodology presented here is based on semiotics: not its better known branch - speculative grammar - but on the following concepts developed by Peirce (1995, p. 212): (1) abduction, where hypotheses are created, the first step of investigative thought, associated with the unexpected. This is where the researcher first meets the ideas; (2) deduction, an intermediary process that tests the hypotheses and that may also include analyses processes; (3) induction, the final phase, including corroborating generalizations of the facts investigated or implementing the results. And it is good to point out that "methodological issues are at the heart of Peirce's work" (Santaella, 2004a, p. 19).

Adapting this fundamental triad to the methodological procedures implemented in market research, we can easily arrive at three equally complementary instances, with their own logic among themselves, and that provide a structure to the investigative work. We have: (1) the process of collecting the materials, which we often call "stimuli" - the researcher's first contact with the object of study; (2) all the analytical work, regardless of the theoretical-methodological treatment received - knowing that we will prioritize semiotic procedures here; (3) the application of the results obtained to the client's business, in so-called recommendations or action standard, and the actual implementation of the findings by the client.

The diagram in Figure 2 illustrates these three steps, so we can discuss how to apply them to the specific cases being discussed.
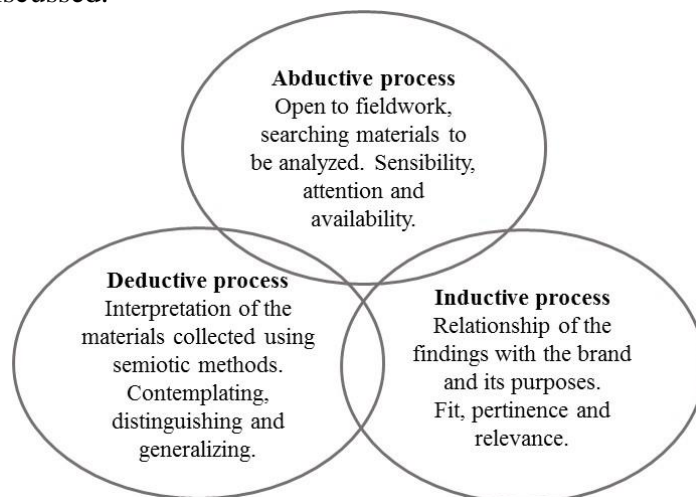
Abductive process
Open to fieldwork, searching materials to be analyzed. Sensibility, attention and availability.

Deductive process
Interpretation of the materials collected using semiotic methods. Contemplating, distinguishing and generalizing.

Inductive process
Relationship of the findings with the brand and its purposes. Fit, pertinence and relevance.

Figure 2 - From Peirce's general method to the proposal's specific method
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Starting with the so-called abductive process, the researcher maps the cultural production surrounding the audience studied, using an approach that is becoming increasingly common in qualitative research: multiplying the reach of this step by involving a multidisciplinary team. This is not a quantitative / statistic study concerned with numeric or quantifiable standards - we are mainly concerned about the relevance and pertinence of the materials. As in many procedures and instances of qualitative research, it is important to employ sensibility and attention, taking advantage of the expertise of the team involved, which may include advertising and market professionals, psychologists and designers, as well as anthropologists, sociologists and semanticists, who are often used to looking at the world from a sensitive and critical perspective.

To anyone who may question the validity and legitimacy of research conducted in this manner, we respond by pointing out that the contemporary context - as described in the beginning of this article - is altering and questioning aspects of scientific methods. The quality of a research (the validity of the results, usability of its findings, its uniqueness) no longer resides on the rigor employed on its steps, but rather on the methodological composition that is determined by the object of study - as opposed to conviction or entrenched habits.

Canevacci (2013, p. 172), another anthropologist, offers a discussion of the scientific method in the contemporary world:

The method is always pluralized for me, that is, it's always 'the methods'. There is no one interpretative method in research; in any discipline, we need to multiply the methodologies. Each person, more or less in their own autonomy, must apply this methodological mixture in the specific context. Each context, in any manner, has its own methodological sensibility, which the researcher needs to understand. We travel from method to methods, pluralizing that kind of imposition.

With this we face a radically new and challenging research problem. While attempting to understand today's target audiences through relatively new objects of study, such as series, computer games, TV shows, movies, songs and whatever else can be considered cultural production, it is advisable to practice this kind of methodological self reflection: the idea is not to seek the best method among existing options in research's secular tradition, but to arrive at the best possible methodological combination, according to the problem and the object of each project.

Once the team of researchers is formed, it must collect as many materials as possible representing the cultural production surrounding the audience studied. Videos, features, images, posts in social media, copies of internet websites, song excerpts, photos taken on the street (fieldwork), anything can be the source for analysis. Again the most important factors are the researcher's sensibility and ability to detect whether a given cultural production material expresses values that are relevant to the target audience.

We then move on to the second step of the process, corresponding to the deductive phase, characterized by the application of semiotic methods to analyze the materials. It is good to point out, from the beginning, that one of the greatest challenges at this point is to avoid rushed conclusions. Peirce (1995) defines three essentials abilities of semiotic researchers (Santaella, 2004c, p. 29): (1) to contemplate, i.e., give the signs, whatever is being analyzed, the necessary time to fulfill its processes of signification, always with sensibility, without rationalizations or hasty conclusions; (2) recognizing the specific occasion in which the sign manifests itself, whether it is in consumers' homes, in the daily routine of the target audience, considering their surroundings, interferences in time and space and (3) generalizing, that is, identifying to what categories or classes the signs belong, which will certainly guide the analysis and its final points (which in turn never cease to be tentative, as we known). These are the meanings of the materials evaluated.

Because the materials have highly diversified natures as signs - after all we're talking about still images, text, movies, games, songs etc., it is not appropriate to detail all steps of the analytical phase, which would demand a lot of space and time. Ech type of material demands a specific analysis protocol, as everything found in the fieldwork (phase 1, abductive) can be analyzed.

It is important, however, to explain the three major analysis dimensions that must serve as the foundation for the interpretation of any material. Here we are talking about some of the main categories developed by Peirce (1995) based on the interconnection between (1) the sign and itself, its foundation (existence); (2) the sign and what it refers to, its object (relationship); and (3) the sign and the effects it produces, interpretants (meaning) (Santaella, 2004b).

The first dimension corresponds to the concept of firstness, including abstract, general, vague and imprecise aspects of the signs, their relationships to objects and potential results. Quality is the foundation of this sign, whose relationship to the object is given by similarity and whose meanings tend to be emotional.

The second dimension is associated with the concept of secondness, dealing with issues of functionality, concreteness and uniqueness of the signs and its interconnections. Singularity is the foundation of this sign, whose relationship to the object is given by causality and whose meanings tend to be functional, involving energy expenditures.

Finally, the third dimension, as expected, corresponds to the concept of thirdness, dealing with symbolic, generic and holistic issues of the signs and its correlated terms. Convention is the foundation of this sign, whose relationship to the object is given by arbitrariness and whose meanings tend to be associated with habits and closing a reasoning, as shown in Figure 3.
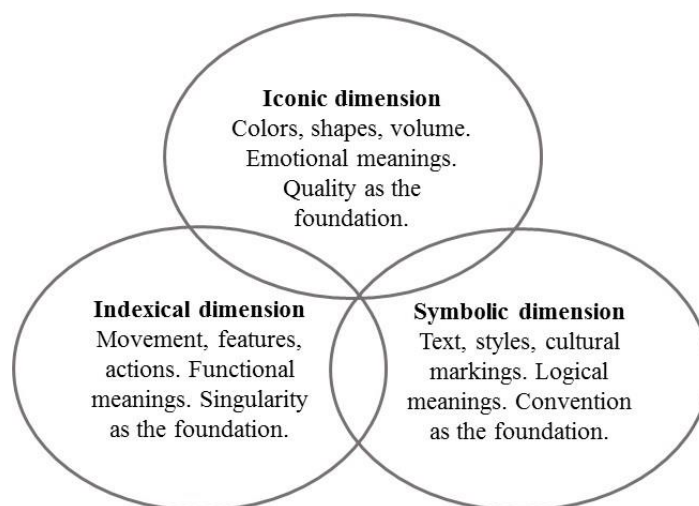
Figure 3 - General dimensions of the analysis
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

All these diagrams may give the false impression that we are dealing with something concrete, precise, that should be handled with the rationality of a jigsaw puzzle. Nothing is farther from the truth. The categorization of the signs, the resulting triads and the search for logic within the processes of signification and cognition are eminently didactic and theoretical rationalizations. In practice, in the rushed daily routine of market research, all this occurs in a disorderly, mixed, incomplete and hybrid way. It isn't impossible - and it is actually most likely - for a qualitative sign (a color, for instance) to relate to its object through causality (the temperature of something), generating symbolic meaning (associated with a style).

We want to emphasize that the analysis procedures explained here must be the base for all interpretative efforts. These efforts come from the researcher's sensibility, of course, but must rely on their experience and on the entire team of professionals. After all, "truth depends on a community of investigators, and not on an isolated individual rejoicing on certainty" (Santaella, 2004a, p. 48).

By the end of the analysis process, we should have a large map of values, a broad semantic overview of the meanings consumed by the target audience we want to understand, and this map of values will mediate the third and last stage of our methodology.

In order to clarify particulars of the implementation of the results obtained in the research, Figure 2 brings a diagram that displays the entire process. The theoretical foundation for this diagram is the same we presented before, adopted by semiotics and by the anthropology of consumption - and in this case, McCracken's ideas (2003, p. 99) have been particularly useful and inspiring.

Everything starts in the culturally constituted world (1), cultural values and meanings are. It is in this abstract dimension that we find the issue of principles, which outlines the entire concrete dimension of reality, composed by various agents, including brands, companies, media, and, of course, consumers.

Sensitive to this abstract world and inspired by the most interesting and pertinent meanings it contains, designers, authors, producers, creative professionals in general (2) develop products and cultural goods impregnated with these meanings (3), which are offered to various markets.

It is through consumption rituals and practices (4), notably purchase, engagement, adoption or agreement, that consumers belonging to the target audience of interest (5) seek to appropriate these values, closing a cycle that goes from abstract to concrete, collective to individual, from a strictly productive dimension to the phenomenon of consumption.
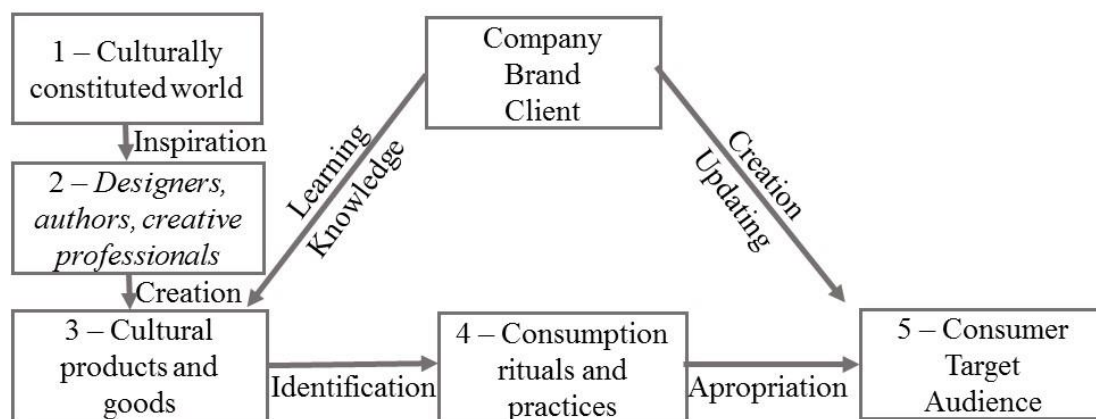
Figure 4 - From cultural values to market strategies
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The company or brand that orders the research finds its place in this complex cycle, precisely due to the investigative efforts presented here. By analyzing the cultural production (3), according to our methodology, the company uncovers findings, acquires knowledge, understands the values that are transferred from the culturally constituted world (1) to the consumer audience (5), and is then able to elaborate strategies that are more up-to-date, pertinent, enticing and accurate.

In so many words: in a context where bringing brands and consumers closer is something as needed and desired as it is difficult, to understand the abstract values that unite people and cultures in bonds of consumption is a way to forge a path towards closeness. The methodology presented here doesn't provide an unquestionable step-by-step recipe to sell more or be more successful. There is no such thing anymore, as everyone knows - if there ever was. We believe instead that when we understand the meanings that sustain existing bonds (abstraction) it is easier to plan the bonds - strategies and plans - we want to build in the future (concreteness).

4   FINDINGS

As we know, the main result of an eminently methodological work is the method itself, its structure, steps, connection to other techniques, conceptual background etc. However, in order to add a concrete dimension to this project, we are also presenting some examples of analyses to illustrate our methodology.

This is not a complete, finished study, and it does not aim to play the role of a pilot-project. It is important to keep in mind that this application of the methodology displays only punctual examples and specific concrete aspects, and does not constitute actual empirical implementation (inductive, as we adhere to semiotic principals) of the entire investigative process.

We return to the two target audiences that were briefly introduced before: digital natives (young people who were born in the turn of the century) and older people (over 65 years of age).

To generate the examples that follow we counted on the voluntary participation of a small group of researchers, along with the supervision and analytical efforts of the authors of this article. Receiving concise briefing instructions, each member of the team sought references that characterize cultural products consumed by the target audiences in question. Children, children's friends, nephews and nieces; parents, neighbors, uncles and aunts were certainly sources of information (and inspiration) to arrive at a panel of cultural products.

Right away we see there is a huge number of possibilities. Considering first the universe of youth, we find everything from child-like and straightforward animations (which we tended to believe were for small kids only) to complex online games brand sophisticated publications (some of which adults often find difficult to understand). There are also many options in the universe of older people: period soap operas, radio shows and all types of "news" are mentioned, as well as TV series on demand and 'spicier' soap operas broadcast later at night. Most importantly, it quickly becomes

clear that no assumptions can be made when we're dealing with people, and no preconceived ideas can be used as rigid parameters.

Naturally, we are dealing with extremely broad target audiences, with few screening criteria, resulting in an universe of equally vague and disperse materials. This is only justified in a case such as this, in which amplitude translates into an easier research process, as our main focus is not the analysis itself. The idea here was to have minimal guidelines to select the participants. In a real study, the definition of the target audience would be much more specific (with socio-cultural, attitudinal, regional criteria etc.), which would in turn yield a considerably less eclectic selection of materials.

The materials that stood out the most in the universe of digital natives are foreign TV series. *Sense8* and *American Horror Story* are two of the titles mentioned most often, deserving closer analysis (Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5 - *Sense8*: disconnection, unreality and transgression
Source: https://goo.gl/hHCbSc

Figure 6 - *American Horror Story*: fantasy, dystopia and simulated reality
Source: https://goo.gl/wcrBnH

When we apply semiotic analytic procedures to these series we note that they share important semantic aspects, although we can also identify important differentiating points. *Sense8* has strikingly urban setting, realistic chromatic profile, less fanciful visual treatment and stylized characterization; while *American Horror Story* stands out for visuals that are almost completely detached from reality, its somber aspect and highly stylized chromatic profile. The series are similar when it comes to their nonlinear, unrealistic story lines that introduce worlds without physical boundaries, greatly attached to fantasy and to transcending, escaping everyday life and the reality of the daily routine etc.

The semiotic analysis of these series and other relevant titles such as *Arrow* and *Breaking Bad*, for instance, reveals consumption based on relatively new values that seem to be especially relevant for the behavior and identity of today's youth. The idea of escaping reality is extremely strong, and

it no longer occurs through the rebellious escapism of previous decades, having its own "face", based on stylization, aestheticization and reconstruction of reality. It isn't about migrating to a world of dreams where everything is perfect and only good people exist. No. They seek a world of evils, dilemmas and hardships, but this desire is based on appearances and the flawless aspect of this world: flawlessly beautiful, flawlessly ugly, flawlessly dark, flawlessly ethereal etc.

Not to mention the narrative structure and media of these materials, which also reveal new values: random choices, multiple timelines and spaces, absolutely ephemeral bonds etc. Many of the series consumed by the youth are available in on demand services, such as Netflix. But it is also possible to search episodes directly online - the broadcast logic of based on the traditional media structure is broken.

Moreover: if we include the analysis of digital games such as *League of legends* or reality shows such as *Are you the one?,* the values and meanings that serve as the bridge linking these boys and girls to the universe they want to access become even more clear: timelessness, extreme idealization and horizontal competitiveness (Figures 7 and 8).

Figure 7 - *League of legends*: infinitude, atemporality and aestheticization
Source: https://goo.gl/F6q1Re

Figure 8 - *Are you the one?*: horizontal competition, detachment and idealized aesthetics
Source: https://goo.gl/nCayu2

We are talking about an endless game (an unthinkable logic until a few years ago), with absolutely stylized visuals (combining human features with radically fanciful shapes); and disputes among young people that are not championships per se (lacking the hierarchy that is typical of these situations), replaced by a constant 'take it or leave it' that follows a logic of appearances and seductive behavior, in a world that is reduced to a flawless space, inhabited by beings who are also flawless.

The concrete aspects of the materials analyzed: colors, images, textures, luminosity, pace, sonority, personal characterization etc., are not important. What matters are the meanings that sustain both this audiovisual materiality and the bonds of consumption established with the target audience. These meanings (values) will guide the recommendations that will inform strategies and plans.

With this, believing that young people will engage in a tournament with phases, rounds, semifinals and finals, for instance, is failing to attract many young people who consider another type of dispute to be their ideal competitive entertainment.

The same is true for the issue of idealization, Many companies, while offering services or products geared at young people (such as college bank accounts, clothes and makeup lines), create a fantasy world where everything is beautiful and pristine, everything fits, things always go well - like a reconstruction of youth's daily routine with a filter against conflict. What we note, however, is that conflict is part of today's youth, who don't reject it, but want to see it far away, in another dimension, disconnected from reality, in a highly stylized universe that can hardly be compared to here and now.

There are possible paths, but hard to reach. This difficulty must not justify the distance some companies see between their brands and their target audiences.

Moving on to the universe of older people, again we find a highly diversified landscape, but with less contact points. The vast majority of the materials found by the team have similar characteristics: prevalence of a known aesthetic-narrative logic, with well-defined temporality, cause and effect relationships, strong and lasting bonds etc. It is important to note that we are not referring only to period soap operas or supposedly conservative content. Not at all. This type of content does appears, but so does the soap opera *Malhação* ('Workout') and the TV show *Papo de segunda* ('Monday talk'), programs that may not seem to be geared at an older audience (Figures 9 and 10).

Figure 9 - *Malhação* (Workout): face-to-face exchanges, well threaded facts and permanence of characters
Source: https://goo.gl/95A1SG

Figure 10 - *Papo de segunda* (Monday talk): long conversations, idea of daily routine and in-depth approach
Source: https://goo.gl/qyfAOb

The analysis of these two shows reveals an appreciation for long text and dialogs and face-to-face exchanges. This taste for chatting stands out, with full sentences being said by all involved. The subjects are varied, as this soap opera has been on air for many years, and the show is known for discussing random subjects - again what stands out is the verbosity of the characters or hosts. In a context in which interactions take on the fast pace, superficiality and laxity of emoticons, long chats have become a value. One of the points that can sustain the bond between institutions and this older audience is the structure of the text and the type of relationships presented. They seek the concreteness of face-to-face encounters, the depth of long conversations, the predictability of continuity and the warranties of the daily routine.

All of this makes even more sense when we look at other titles and types of TV shows selected by the team. Many include the name of the TV station, such as Globo's *Globo Repórter,* or display the subject and approach, such as *Aparecida Sertaneja* (country show), revealing a conservative relationship with the media system, in which the logic of TV stations and classic timetables still persists.

At the same time, the universe of this audience also includes international series and more contemporary entertainment. As shown in Figures 11 and 12, the series *Downton Abbey* and the mobile game *Candy Crush* are in the same roster as TV shows such as *Metrópole* and *MasterChef*, biopics and various documentaries about politics, history or the sciences in general.

It becomes clear that what unites the 'high tech' and up-to-date materials (such as mobile games, international series - which are often watched on demand - and global reality shows) to traditional and predictable materials (such as documentaries, TV news and period pieces) is the presence of so-called 'modern' values: linear and vertical competition in shows that eliminate contestants to arrive at one winner; centralized authority, where only one viewpoint is presented about any given subject; well-defined time and space, with strong presence of families and different generations, dynasties, closed clubs and their members, teams and their players, etc.

Figure 11 - *MasterChef*: linear, sequential competition - everything is well-defined and clear
Source: https://goo.gl/uhfMvi

Figure 12 - *Downton Abbey*: well-defined traditions, time and space, meaning of preservation
Source: https://goo.gl/oXImTZ

It isn't about showing the "hip old man" (who is resourceful while dealing with technology, borrows his grandson's skateboard or turns to look at a young woman at the beach) or the "traditional grandpa" (who is always cold, wears a beret and requires attention). The relationship between institutions and this target audience seems to be more effective when it is focused on time, the preservation of modern values and the superiority of verbal expression over visual representation.

Drugstore chains, tourism companies and credit providers who may want to speak to this target market can take advantage of the meanings pointed out - not to copy the look of this or that series or soap opera, or to repeat the format of a TV show, as content and format don't matter so much - but rather to establish strong, long lasting identity bonds, based on these traditional values.

5   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Without ever forgetting this theoretical-epistemological reference from semiotics: "there is no thought (or cognition, or sign) that is not preceded by an earlier thought" (Santaella, 2004a, p. 51) - the ideas presented in this article should not be regarded as completely new, although they include some innovation. The methodology proposed here is based on established market practices, but it brings novelties in terms of its basic structure, its procedural concatenation and technical interfaces.

As mentioned, this work is more concerned about methodological issues than the actual application of the method. The examples presented were meant to quickly demonstrate how the analyses would be conducted, rather than to reflect the entire methodology. Nonetheless, we hope the content is clear and that eventual doubts are the result of the questioning we wish to provoke.

No method is so perfect that it doesn't deserve to be improved, and this is no exception. Continuity is an important idea here, and we want to leave the door open for future theoretical or practical works, academic or market projects that aim to follow up, complement or improve this proposal.

Weaknesses? There are many. We are aware of the strong appeal of results from statistic-quantitative research projects. We also know qualitative research can provoke endless subjective questionings, due to its own intrinsic subjectivity. The theoretical and statistic foundations ("target audience context" - Figure 1) aim to bring solidity and trustworthiness to the study, keeping it grounded on reality.

How to respond to those who may question the strongly human, subjective and personal character involved in all procedures of the method presented here, from bringing the team together to providing recommendations, including the collection of the materials, analysis and semantic mapping? With the same epistemological endorsement that has brought us this far: the awareness that research is a living body, composed by and advanced by researchers who will always have their own perceptions, trajectories and philosophies. By taking this into consideration and seeking validity in teams as opposed to individual perspectives, it will be possible to attenuate this subjectivity and attain the effectiveness everyone wants.

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