The Connection Between Symbolic Benefits and Youth Identity: a Hybrid Methodological Approach

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Although the construction of our individual or social identity has been investigated by a number of disciplines, its highly changeable nature requires a continuous investigation. In this paper we seek to analyse the connection between the symbolic benefits of consumption and the formation of identity among the youth. Data collection was carried out through interviews, an auto driving technique and a survey. We found four factors of variables that explain the relationship among identity and symbolic benefits: (1) Self-satisfaction and status achievement; (2) Social acceptance/belonging and relationships; (3) Attachment and importance and (4) Identification and memory.

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live and TV football watching experiences. As suggested by Holstein and Gubrium (1997), we adopted an interview guide with several
themes ordered by topic. Data corpus was analysed according to the context in which they were captured. A hermeneutic perspective of
interpretation (Thompson, 1997) was adopted by the researchers.

As the forms of presentation of the football spectacle can be seen as packets of information, we can bring to this analysis the ideas
of Eco (2001) and McLuhan (1964). For Eco, the value of information is proportional to the richness of choices and possible meanings.
Such approach is consistent with the proposition by Holbrook (1999) that the valuation of consumption experience is derived from
interaction with the world. This way, the degree of interactivity is directly related to the volume of associative connotations preceded by
the spectator. The spectacle in the stadium is more informative than the one seen by television, has a high connotative temperature (Eco,
2001): a vast repertoire of connected imagery. These possible associations transcend the attention on the game itself (or on the ball, as
its position decides the game). The high connotative temperature is opposed to the high informative temperature of the TV game as
proposed by McLuhan (1964): to him, the TV is a cold medium. It’s “lean quantity of information” allows the spectator to build the
message, fill the blanks in the plot. Nevertheless, technological advances have “warmed” the medium, limiting the capacity of the spectator
to fill the blanks, completing the message.

In the stadium, the spectator “fills the plot” with his perceptions and interpretations. The vast number of possible connotations tends
to weaken what is expected—the markings of the aesthetic message—and makes the consumption closer to an extraordinary experience in
which the supporter takes part on the game. This way, the spectator, many times, changes the course of the game, or at least cultivates the
illusion of being able to do so. The spectator becomes the plot itself.

The predominantly aesthetic message—characterised by vast symbolic connections (Dorfles, 1972)—is lived as a tribal experience.
The consumer/supporter/spectator reproduces specific rituals of the supporters tribe, such as cheering songs and choreography. The degree
of behavioural freedom is, therefore, inferior to that present on TV football matches broadcasting, which allows several categories of
interruption, and even suspension of the consumption. To avoid it, and broadcasting companies recreate the original message present in
the game with emotional connotation, transforming any game into a show. And there lies the rhetorical character of TV football matches
broadcasting.

The spectacle seen on the television, predominantly referential, combines a larger volume of denotative messages. There is a larger
amount of primary significants, like the tactical lineup of the teams, the clarification of an important movement or tackle using computer
graphics, or interviews with the scorers, for instance. The spectator has, nevertheless, less possibilities of choice. Despite the growing use
of interactional content, the spectator has less control on the message content, which keeps a low connotative temperature on the experience
of watching a TV broadcasting of a football game lying on the couch.

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Abstract
Although the construction of our individual or social identity has been investigated by a number of disciplines, its highly changeable
nature requires a continuous investigation. In this paper we seek to analyse the connection between the symbolic benefits of consumption
and the formation of identity among the youth. Data collection was carried out through interviews, an auto driving technique and a survey.
We found four factors of variables that explain the relationship among identity and symbolic benefits: (1) Self-satisfaction and status
achievement; (2) Social acceptance/belonging and relationships; (3) Attachment and importance and (4) Identification and memory.

Introduction
Nowadays, to talk about identity certainly means to rephrase Shakespeare and ask, ‘To have or not to have? That’s the question.’ Easy
access to a wide range of products and services, all plenty of symbolic meaning fully explored by the media, force us to try to have a better
understanding on how possession of goods and their use construct our identities. Although the construction of our individual or social
identity has been investigated by a number of disciplines, its highly changeable nature requires a continuous investigation. In this paper
we seek to analyse the connection between the symbolic benefits of consumption and the formation of identity among the youth.
Belk (1988) provided the basis and also arose the interest among researchers in trying to understand how the consumption of goods help people to define who they are, as these goods are seen as part of the individuals themselves. The same goods help individuals to see such a possession in terms of an emotional state, a social status and even a whole lifestyle (McCracken, 2003). Consumption brings us two major perspectives, the utilitarian and the symbolic ones. In the past, theoretical works treated the issue of consumption from the perspective of the utilitarian economic theory (Ouchi, 2000). Since the work developed by Veblen (1965), Baudrillard (1993; 1995) and Sahlins (2003) there has been an emphasis on the symbolisms of consumption practices. People consume goods for a series of reasons. Some of the most common reasons is to obtain social status and prestige, to express cultural values, to fulfill physical and emotional needs and, mainly, to reinforce their own identity (Ouchi, 2000).

Works on the relation between consumer goods and the self, such as the ones developed by Belk, 1988; Lamont and Molnár, 2001; Ahuvia, 2005, have a exploratory nature. However, there are not descriptive studies that approach the connection between the symbolic benefits and the construction of identity among young consumers—at least, as far as the reviewed bibliography is considered. In spite of the importance of symbolism to consumption, there has been little effort to develop a framework to analyse symbolic consumption and there are very few empiric studies on the field (Hirschman, 1981). Therefore, this study represents an opportunity to enhance the understanding on the symbolic benefits of consumption and the creation of identity among young consumers, as far as it applies a less usual methodological approach to the topic.

Methodology

Two methodological approaches were used in this study, a qualitative and a quantitative one. The qualitative approach aimed at collecting information regarding the relationship of consumers with their acquired goods and the impact of these goods on their identity. Data collection was carried out through interviews and the auto driving technique. Both techniques were used with 18 young subjects between the ages of 15 and 18. The questions involved an investigation of consumers’ habits, the kinds of products that reflect their self-image and the way subjects choose products and brands. The auto driving technique comprised young consumers talk about their intentions and behaviour referring to photographs taken by themselves (Heisley and Levy, 1991). Each subject took five photos of objects they consider to identify themselves. Content analysis of the interviews was carried out by two independent coders. Based on the results of the qualitative research and the literature, we designed the questionnaire. We carried out a pilot survey with 203 young students to verify the validity of the questionnaire and the need of chances on it. After that, there was another survey with 288 young secondary students in six cities in the south of Brazil.

Results

Factor analysis resulted in the finding of a KMO of 0.861 and a Barlett test result of qui-square 1888.056 and 0.000 significance. We found four factors with values bigger than 1, which are responsible for 60.34% of the explained variation. All the variables presented factor loadings over 0.4. From the 20 initial variables, 17 were kept. The Cronbach alpha found to the scale was of 0.835. Variables were grouped according to four factors: (1) Self-satisfaction and status achievement: includes variables that help consumer to feel different, better, more self-confident and to acquire the identity they want; (2) Social acceptance/belonging and relationships: variables linked to the use of goods that make the individual feel part of a group and even to make friends and allure other people; (3) Attachment and importance: variables that translate the importance objects have in people’s lives and the attachment (especially the emotional one) people have to objects and (4) Identification and memory: variables that demonstrate the capacity of objects of representing different things and people.

Based on the results, we observe that more than a simple preference for certain objects, there is a special sense of attachment and dependence. The relationship between the symbolic benefits of consumption and the formation of the identity of young individuals was demonstrated in the two stages of the research. A young girl who wears the same kind of clothes and the same brands as the most popular friends can produce a sensation of security since the individual feels as belonging to a group with shared consumer patterns and shared symbols. It helps the youth to feel more confident and to reinforce his/her identity.

The variables related to the symbolic benefits found in this study confirm results obtained by other researchers like Ouchi (2000) and Piacentini e Mailer (2004). However, unlike these authors, we identified similar symbolic benefits for more than one category of products, simultaneously. Considering this, the major contribution of this work is to evidence the possibility of having access to this content using a quantitative technique. Consequently, the use of such variables and the respective factors, such as the ones we found in the market segmentation process or advertising strategic definition, seem to be realistic.

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