



**TO BE OR TO CONSUME? THAT IS THE QUESTION:
SEMIOTICS ANALYSIS OF ADVERTISEMENTS OF LARGEST
RETAIL SUPERMARKETS IN BRAZIL**

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ABSTRACT

The study of representations and images involved in advertising campaigns is a recurrent resource of marketing managers. Therefore, understanding and analyzing advertisements and their semiotics becomes an important source of research. In this context, the following research problem arises: what are the complementarity, contrariety and contradiction relations that carry the advertisements of supermarket retailers? Thus, the main objective is to analyze semiotic advertising of national supermarket chains through the constitution of a semiotic square. For that, the greimasian methodology (GREIMAS, 1973) was used, which sustains a generative path of meaning, where the relations existing between the signifiers produce signification. We investigated the advertisements of the largest retail supermarket brands in Brazil, by price, product and people variables. Thus, the semiotic square was created for the advertising of supermarket retailers in Brazil.

Keywords: Advertising, Retail Supermarkets, Semiotics



1. INTRODUCTION

In general, the formation of the discourse present in advertisements is one of the issues that marketers are concerned about. The centrality of this question lies in the fact that the speeches are influenced by individuals as well as its opposite - individuals are also influenced by the speeches.

Featherstone (1995) argues that the commercial manipulation of images, through publicity, media and expositions of the urbanized plot of daily life, determines a constant reactivation of desires through images. Tavares (2005) mentions that every advertising structure supports an iconic-linguistic argument that leads the consumer to convince himself or herself of something consciously or unconsciously.

In other words, the images employed in an advertisement, as well as their textual elements, seeks to establish a discourse that influences consumer behavior. Such influence is possible, in part, by the appropriate symbolism of consumption. To consider not the value of use or exchange of a product implies seeking instead of utility the sign that it communicates, the distinction, the hierarchy, the position in a society governed by consumption (BAUDRILLARD apud THIRY-CHERQUES, 2010).

However, in this research there is an element that exceeds such symbolism. In the case of supermarket retailers, should take into account the basic fact that permeates their existence: the human need. According to Kotler and Keller (2012), supermarkets are characterized by relatively large, low-cost, low-margin and high-volume self-service operations designed to meet all food, hygiene and household cleaning needs.

Although there is great similarity of the products offered by retail supermarkets, there are points that differentiate them. Emphasize here the experience of buying offered by the same. The shopping experience has many dimensions, including store location, cleanliness, courtesy of its employees, variety of products and availability of services such as parking (MATSA, 2011).

Notwithstanding these are classified as direct experience, that is, occurring at the time the fact that the consumer realizes its purchase, may also occur indirectly -

when consumers are exposed to advertising communications and marketing (BRAKUS; SCHMITT; ZARANTONELLO, 2009).

According to study accomplished by Nielsen (2016), many shoppers are constantly changing retailer whenever they find a better price offer (42%), look for superior quality products (28%), better customer service (18%), better assortment (7%) and better resources (3%). Whatever the differentiation that retail set against concurrent, advertising can be an effective tool to communicate it. Martineau (1958) states that advertising is a particularly important factor to express the image you want to build for the retail.

Thus, it is understandable that the speeches made by supermarket retailers address both their products, as the values, experiences or images who wish to associate their brand retailer. However, how this sense is produced? To answer that question, becomes necessary to analyze the discourse employed by supermarket retailers in their advertisements.

Established in the foundations of structuralism, greimasian semiotics is therefore an important tool for the analysis proposed here. French semiotics, as it is also called, is conceived in a generative course of meaning, in a process that goes from the simplest and abstract to the most complex and concrete; from the fundamental level to the discursive level.

As a visual representation of the fundamental level, it's proposed the elaboration of a semiotic square that illustrates the articulations underlying the advertisements. Also, carry out interviews with experts in semiotics to validate them.

Although there is a growing interest in combining the semiotic study to marketing, there are few studies about the speech semiotic analysis produced in advertisements. The number is further reduced when limited to retail supermarket.

The importance of the sector chosen for this work is justified by its high economic impact. According to data from the Brazilian Association of Supermarkets (ABRAS), the 500 largest companies in the Abras / SuperHiper Ranking registered, in 2015, a turnover of R\$256.8 billion, employing around 638,672 thousand employees. In the same year, the sector accounted for 5.4% of goods and services produced in the country.



This work is divided in six parts: this introduction, theoretical background, methodology, analysis of results, conclusions and future studies.

1.1. Research problem and objectives

The main objective of this work is the semiotic analysis of the national supermarket retailer's advertisements through the constitution of a semiotic square. The secondary objective is the discussion and analysis of variable presents in advertising campaigns and conducting unstructured interviews with semiotics experts.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. The advertisement

According to the American Marketing Association (AMA), advertising is defined by the placement of ads and persuasive messages in time or space purchased in any mass media by commercial companies, non-profit organizations, government agencies and individuals seeking to inform and/or persuade members of a particular audience about your products, services, organizations or ideas.

For Zenone (2013) it can be said that advertising is a technique of mass communication, for the purpose of providing information to a particular audience, to provoke positive attitudes and actions towards a particular product/service or idea. Correspondingly, Kotler and Keller (2012) defines advertising as a cost-effective way to disseminate messages, whether to develop a brand preference or to educate consumers. Las Casas (2009) notes that through advertising, companies can familiarize their customers with the use of products, create credibility, create loyalty to the brand, among many other purposes.

For Moriarty et al. (2014), advertising does more than convey information. It has the power to transform a product by creating an image that goes beyond the facts. According to the authors this is possible through two different approaches: rational, which uses reason as an element of persuasion and emotional, which creates an image for a brand that appeals to the emotions of the public.

Using both verbal and non-verbal techniques, for Beasley and Danesi (2002), advertisements have become a category of modern social discourse designed to influence attitudes and lifestyle behaviors, suggesting the satisfaction of impulses



and aspirations more intimate through consumption. The reason the consumer is induced to buy things through such appeals, according to Dyer (2008), is because advertisers cannot rely solely on rational arguments to sell their goods in sufficient quantity.

Although there are controversies among scholars about the effectiveness of advertisements, several studies confirm your applicability. According to Rajagopal and Montgomery (2011), an ad's exposure may increase the likelihood that a consumer will believe that he or she has experience with a product, even when it does not. The authors point out that the attitudes driven by these false beliefs are strong as those based on true beliefs.

Johar and Sirgy (2013) note that such persuasion brought about by advertising can increase their effectiveness when their appeals are in line with their intended purpose. From this perspective, advertisements can be promoted by utilitarian appeals when the products for which they are intended are perceived as utilitarian, as well as using expressive-value appeals when the product for which it is intended is also perceived as such.

According to the authors, persuasion is provided in terms of self-congruence and functional congruence. Self-congruence explains the correspondence experienced by the consumer between the image of the user of the product and his/her self-concept as an individual. Functional congruence explains the correspondence experienced by the consumer between the functional characteristics of the product and the set of expected characteristics of the product.

2.2. Semiotic speech

Semiotics, inspired by phenomenology, is interested in the "opinion of meaning", which is perceived through the forms of language and, more concretely, of the discourses that manifest it. (LARA; MATTE, 2009).

According to Bacha (2005), semiotics is the science whose objective is to examine the modes of constitution of any and all phenomena that produce meaning and meaning. This work is based on the French semiotic discourse approach, also known as greimasian semiotics.

To analyze the production of meaning of a discourse, the greimasian semiotics uses the generative path of meaning. The generative path of meaning is a

succession of levels, each of which is susceptible of receiving an adequate description, showing how the meaning is produced and interpreted, in a process that goes from the simplest to the most complex. (FIORIN, 2011) This course is divided into three levels: the deep (or fundamental), the narrative and the discursive (GREIMAS; COURTES, 2008).

The first level of discourse, deep or fundamental, simpler and more abstract, is where signification arises as a simple semantic opposition. In the second level, called narrative, the narrative is presented from the point of view of a subject. The third level, more complex and concrete, belongs to the discourse or discursive structures, where the narrative is assumed by the subject of enunciation. It is the level of the generative path of meaning in which abstract narrative forms are lined by concrete elements (FIORIN, 2011).

According to Barros and Fiorin (1988) in the most superficial stage of the discursive structures, a syntax organizes the relations between enunciation and discourse and a semantics establishes thematic paths and figuratively covers the contents of narrative semantics.

Barros and Fiorin (1988) define thematization by the abstract formulation of values and their dissemination in routes. The figuration refers to the simple installation of semiotic figures, that is, the passage from the theme to the figure, and iconization, its exhaustive coating with the purpose of producing referential illusion. (BARROS; FIORIN, 1988) Figurative discourses have a descriptive or representative function, while the thematic ones have an interpretative function; those are made to simulate the world, these, to explain them (FIORIN, 2011).

For the constitution of an operational terminology, the name of signifier is designated to the elements or groups of elements that enable the appearance of meaning at the level of perception, and which are recognized at that moment as external to man (GREIMAS, 1973).

The name meaning is meant the signification or significations that are covered by the signifiers and manifested thanks to their existence (GREIMAS, 1973). Thus, the existence of the signifier presupposes the existence of meaning, just as the existence of meaning presupposes that of the signifier (GREIMAS, 1973).

It is possible to conceptualize here, also, the semiotic square. The semiotic square can be defined as the visual representation of the logical articulation of any semantic category (GREIMAS; COURTÉS, 2008 apud PESSOA, 2017). Part of the assumption of structuralism, which defines that every system constitutes a game of oppositions, presences and absences (SEVERINO, 2007).

Its construction depends on one of the fundamental discoveries of structural linguistics, the identification of two different types of opposition in operation in the languages: privative and qualitative relations, also known as contradiction and contrariety (FLOCH, 1988). The structure of the semiotic square, as suggested by Greimas and Courtés (2008) is illustrated below.

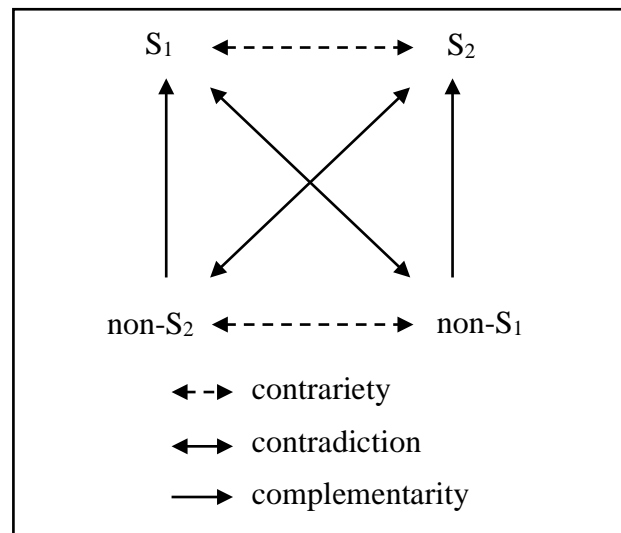


Figure 1: Semiotic square
 Source: Costa (2013)

S₁ opposes S₂ by a relation of contrariety by establishing a semantic axis, i.e., a qualitative relationship. Each of them can design a denial involving them in a private relation, thus establishing their contradictions (non-S₁ and non-S₂). For further clarification, take an example.

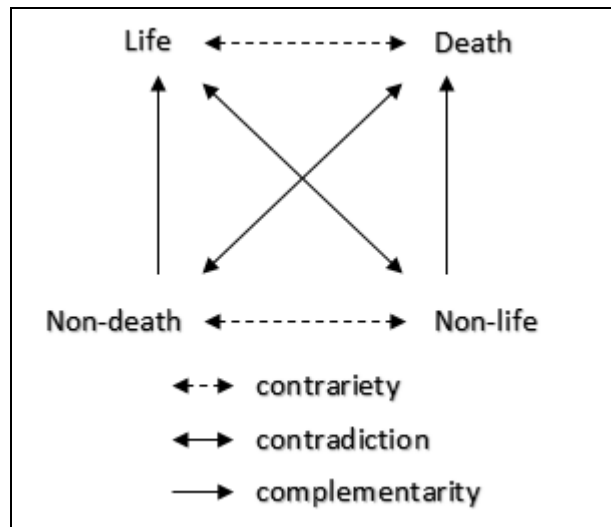


Figure 2: Semiotic square

In the above example, the opposition between life and death establishes a semantic or qualitative axis, since one term presupposes the other. Any of the terms (life, death) can project a denial, involving them in a private and contradictory relationship (life/non-life and death/non-death). In affirming the proposition not death, potential life is implied. In affirming the non-life proposition, potential death is implied.

That is, the relation established between the contradictory of a term and its opposite is of complementarity. From the ontological point of view, propositions state something about beings, truth and falsity assessments allow one to affirm or deny something (COSTA, 2013). Thus, the semiotic square makes it possible to analyze the binary relations of opposition, contradiction, and complementarity that are meaningful.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Type of research

The present research is based on a qualitative approach. According to Severino (2007), the differentiation between a qualitative and quantitative research resides in the fact that the first refers more to its epistemological foundations than to specific methodological specificities. That is, researchers focus on the process and not simply their results or products. For this, the observation technique has a central role in the present research.

According to Severino (2007), observation is every procedure that allows access to the studied phenomena. According to Godoy (1995), the researcher who

proposes to a qualitative research must learn to use his own person as the most reliable instrument of observation, selection, analysis and interpretation of data. At first, a literature research allowed the researchers to develop the corpus of the research.

The method consists in the collection of information available in diverse sources like books, articles, journals, institutes of research, reviews, among others. After the experiment was carried out, the researchers used the content analysis methodology.

According to Severino (2007), the methodology makes possible the critically understand of manifest or hidden meaning of communications. Content analysis allows to describing, analyzing, and interpreting messages in all forms of discourse - be it verbal, written, or imagery.

3.2. Population and sample

According to Sweeney et. al (2015), the population refers to all the elements that are of interest to a given study. In the work in question, the population investigated is made up of advertisements from retail supermarkets. Due to the impossibility of analyzing all elements of a population, a sample is taken, that is, a subset representing it.

As this research is concerned with a qualitative approach, it is understood that the number of advertisements is not a determining factor for the suggested analysis. A total of 20 ads were collected and analyzed from the 4 largest national supermarket retailers, selected on their own websites. The choice of supermarket retailers followed the criteria of most valuable brand rankings, developed by Interbrand and Brand Finance.

They are Carrefour, Extra, Pão de Açúcar and Walmart. According to the ranking of the most valuable brands in the world made in 2017 by Brand Finance, retail Walmart appears in 8th position. In the same ranking, Carrefour ranks 157th. In the ranking made by Interbrand of Brazil's most valuable brands in 2014, Extra retail appears in 17th place, while Pão de Açucar, in the 24th.

3.3. Methodological procedures



After collecting the commercials, a flipchart containing all printed material was drawn up and listed sequentially for the authors' observation. Following the approach of greimasian semiotics, we tried to find out which significant variables were present in these advertisements. According to Pessoa (2017), the semiotician always starts from the search for oppositions between variables that present their enjoyment. Since the binary opposition was the basis of the semiotic square, it was possible to structure it.

A total of 3 (three) semiotic squares were elaborated. After their elaboration, unstructured interviews with semiotic experts were conducted to offer their considerations about them and to designate, according to their opinion, which semiotic square best fits the advertisements analyzed. According to Mattos (2005), an unstructured interview is one in which the interviewee is allowed to decide how to construct the answer. In this type of interview, the researcher seeks, through the conversation, data that are relevant to the qualitative analysis in question (BARROS; LEHFELD, 2007).

4. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

4.1. Variables in the advertisements analyzed

Table 1: Variables in the advertisements analyzed

Present variables in the advertisements	Number of advertisements	Sample percentage
Price and Product	3	15%
Product and People	7	35%
only People	8	40%
Price, Product and People	1	5%
None of the variables described above.	1	5%
Total	20	100%

This stage of the work consisted in describing which significant variables were present in the advertisements, offering the basis for later elaboration of the semiotic square. As explained above, the name of signifier is designated to the elements or groups of elements that enable the appearance of meaning at the level of perception (GREIMAS, 1973). The results are shown in the table above. The following is an individual analysis of each of the categories found.

4.2. Semiotic square of retail supermarket advertisements

After analyzing all the advertisements that make up the corpus of the research, the semiotic squares were elaborated. The four terms of each square are expressed as a function of the variables present in the advertisements. According to Floch (1988), it is understood that for each term there is a corresponding correspondence in the level of the discursive structures (i.e. different figurative universes, here called variables).

As explained earlier in the methodological procedures, the semiotic elaborated squares were presented to experts in semiotics along with the advertisements. The following analysis was performed after interviews.

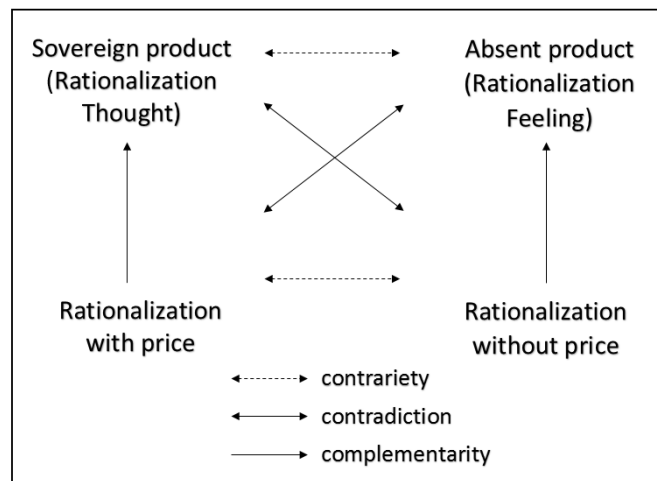


Figure 3: semiotic Square (1) of advertisements retail supermarket

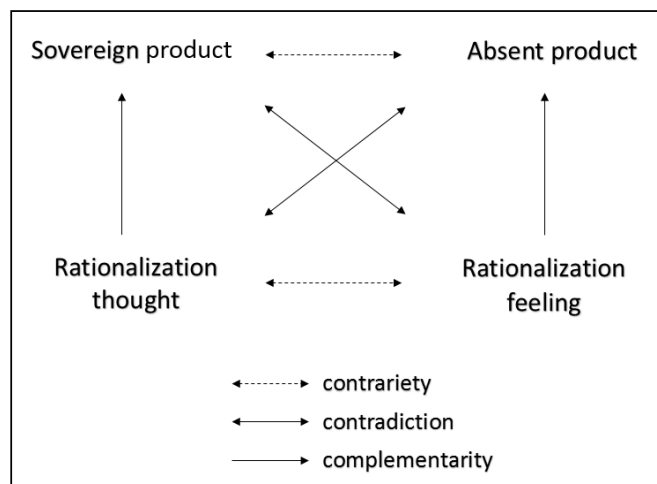


Figure 4: semiotic Square (2) of advertisements retail supermarket

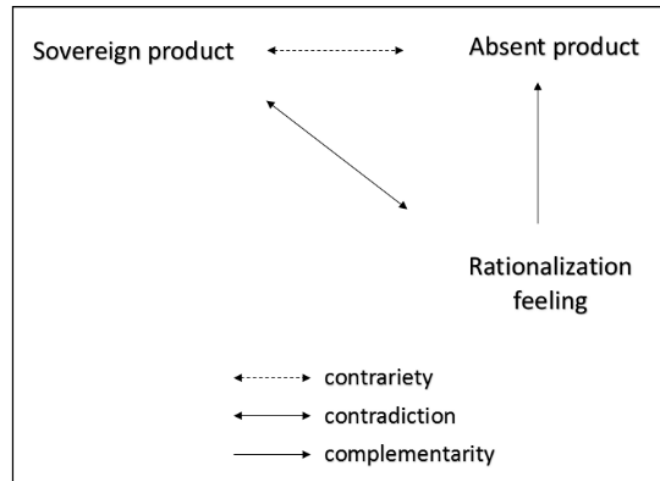


Figure 5: Square semiotic (3) of advertisements retail supermarket

It should be noted, before proceeding analysis, disconsider the semiotic square (3) shown in the Figure 10. Due to the similarity of the variables of the terms established in relation of implication and, based on Pessoa's (2017) statement, that the logical articulation is sustained even if a term is not fulfilled, the authors suppressed a term of the square, as shown in figure 10. However, in interviews with specialists, it was clarified that the semiotic square will always have four terms - what can be (or not) advertisements that fit into each of the categories presented.

After the interviews, it was concluded that the semiotic square that best represents the advertisements of supermarket retailers is provided in the Figure 8, which comprises the variables sovereign product (rationalization thought), rationalization with price, absent product (rationalization feeling) and rationalization without price.

The term sovereign product (rationalization thought) corresponds to advertisements it was realized the intention to emphasize the products offered by retail, making no mention of the consumer through in textual or figurative ments. In a relation of implication, the term rationalization with price encompasses advertisements that have an emphasis on the price of products. The lack of consumer was perceived as intended to attract customers through logical reasoning that the announcement suggests, without resorting to the possible affective associations.

The term absent product (rationalization feeling), includes advertisements in which there is no mention of products or prices, only people. In addition to the

figurative elements showing people reproducing everyday situations (cycling, listening to music, cooking, cheering for the Brazilian team), these ads have brief textual elements like "here you do it in your way", "expert in making you happy".

This configuration was realized as the intention to promote the idea of the importance that the customer has to retailers and, consequently, induce affective associations to the image that retail has to consumer. Complementary to absent product (rationalization feeling), the term rationalization without price includes advertisements that are made only for people and products.

Through figuration of the relationship between person and product, without the presence of price, it is noted the intention both to simulate the possible use of the product, such a shopping experience in the supermarket retail. Mostly, such advertisements seek to simulate the shopping experience by showing customers shopping at supermarkets. By showing the image of a happy consumer, with a countenance of happiness, is associated such experience to a positive image.

By making a synthesis, can be say that the terms found are defined in two types of rationalization: thought and feeling. The terms sovereign product and rationalization with price stimulate logical reasoning by addressing the informative and utilitarian aspects of products as well as their prices. The presence of the price provides the information necessary for the consumer to analyze its usefulness and the resources that it has, or not, to make the purchase.

The terms absent product and rationalization without price stimulate affective associations as they seek to bring the individual into the center of their perspective. Without the price variable, it intends to attract the consumer by promoting a positive image of the shopping experience that can be provided by the retailer.

Deepening proposition thinking/feeling, it can bring to the discussion a more abstract dimension that permeates the analysis: be versus consume. Advertisements in which the product and the price are absent suggest subjectivizing, while advertisements where product and price are found present emphasize consumption. Not intended to encompass the relationship be versus consuming naively, both approaches ultimately aim to consumption. What differs is the focus of advertising: the subject or object.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Through an intensive process of observation of the authors with the corpus of research, it was possible to analyze and structure the semiotic square that supports the discourse produced by advertisements of supermarket retailers.

The analysis proposed found a match with works previously made. Notes a consultancy developed by Floch, in 1988. In this work, the structural semiotics contributed to the definition of a design for a hypermarket. To this end, the author interviewed consumers in order to understand what were the values they associated the shopping experience in a hypermarket.

Through the analysis of the discourse produced by them, they elaborated a semiotic square to illustrate such values. The researcher found two values that permeated his discourses - utilitarian and existential values. These values approximate the terms found to illustrate the fundamental level of the discourses of the advertisements analyzed here.

Utilitarian values approach the terms sovereign product/rationalization with price - both advertisements as consumers can be classified in terms of information/utility at the expense of emotional associations. Existential values approximate the product absent/rationalization without price - both advertisements as consumers can be classified in terms of affective associations at the expense of information/utility.

6. FUTURE STUDIES

In the present work, the authors sought to analyze the advertisements of retail supermarkets through your perceptions. It is suggested as a future study the elaboration of interviews with consumers in order to investigate their perception of such advertisements, deepening the study in question.

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