

The consumption of technology as a structural element of identity: a theoretical and methodological discussion based on French Semiotics

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Abstract

Adopting the Consumer Culture Theory- CCT as a basis for the discussions, this theoretical essay aims to present discursive French Semiotics as a theoretical-methodological alternative for the study of the role of technology consumption in the process of consumer identity construction. The proposal is based mainly on the Technological Ideologies of Kozinets (2008) as possible semantic structuring, and on the use of the generative trajectory of meaning (GREIMAS and COURTÉS, 2013) to analyze the discourses of the technology-consuming subjects.

Keywords: Consumption. Technology. Consumer Culture Theory. Semiotics.

O consumo de tecnologia como estruturante identitário: uma discussão teórico-metodológica fundamentada pela Semiótica francesa

Resumo

Adotando a perspectiva da teoria da cultura do consumo (*consumer culture theory* – CCT) como base para a discussão, este ensaio teórico tem por objetivo apresentar a semiótica discursiva de linha francesa como uma alternativa teórico-metodológica para o estudo do papel do consumo de tecnologia no processo de construção identitária do consumidor. A proposta se baseia, sobretudo, nas ideologias tecnológicas de Kozinets (2008) como possíveis estruturantes semânticos e na utilização do percurso gerativo de sentido (GREIMAS e COURTÉS, 2013) para análise dos discursos dos sujeitos consumidores de tecnologia.

Palavras-chave: Identidade. Consumo. Tecnologia. Teoria da cultura do consumo. Semiótica.

El consumo de la tecnología como eje estructurante de la identidad: un debate teórico-metodológico basado en la Semiótica Francesa

Resumen

Al adoptar la perspectiva de la teoría de la cultura del consumo (*Consumer Culture Theory* – CCT) como base para la discusión, este ensayo teórico tiene como objetivo presentar la semiótica discursiva de línea francesa como una alternativa teórico-metodológica para el estudio del papel del consumo de tecnología en el proceso de construcción identitaria del consumidor. La propuesta se basa, sobre todo, en las ideologías tecnológicas de Kozinets (2008) como posibles estructurantes semánticos, y en la utilización del recorrido generativo de la significación (GREIMAS y COURTÉS, 2013) para analizar los discursos de los sujetos consumidores de tecnología.

Palabras clave: Identidad. Consumo. Tecnología. Consumer Culture Theory. Semiótica.

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, studies on the behavior of technology consumers have focused on psychological processes related to users' responses at the moment of adoption and diffusion. Gutman, Joia and Moreno Junior (2014) points out that it is possible to highlight some approaches, such as the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (FISHBEIN and AJZEN, 1975), the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) proposed by Ajzen (1991) and the classic Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (DAVIS, 1989), as one of the main approaches of these studies. According to Davis (1989), essentially, TAM points to the adoption of technology being affected by two variables internalized in the user: the perceived ease of use, which is the perceived level of effort in the use of the resource, and the perceived utility, which is understood as the level perceived by the user with respect to the increase of performance in a certain task.

Thus, the author suggest that these two variables support the positive intention to use a specific technology. As the latest approach in studies of this nature, there is the Diffusion of Innovation Theory (DOI), originally proposed by Rogers (2003), that seeks to explain the process by which innovations are adopted and consequently diffused. In its original formulation, DOI takes into account attributes related to technological innovation to justify large-scale adoption, such as relative advantage, complexity, compatibility, observability and experimentation.

Since the 1980s, there has been a vast amount of knowledge generated by research with these perspectives that, to a certain extent, underlie much of what is understood about the technology consumption behavior (SOUZA, 2010; COOREVITS and COENEN, 2016). Here, it is possible to view the subject as a rational agent in a consumer decision-making processes and not as an interpretive agent, influenced on several levels and symbolic dimensions by the social interactions and cultural aspects that surround it.

In view of the above and in response to suggestions for future research done by Kozinets (2008), Souza (2010), Pace (2013), Belk (2014) and Kozinets, Patterson and Ashman (2017), when they recommend research focused on the experiential and symbolic aspect of technology consumption, it is possible to suggest new perspectives, research proposals and alternative methods that explore, for example, the meanings of these consumptions and their implications on consumer discourses and identities.

As suggested by Burrell and Morgan (2005), the interpretative approach has the premise of a world made up of multiple realities in which subjects and objects play relative roles in varied scenarios. Here, it is assumed that reality is a continuous stream of evoked meanings, transformed and attributed to objects, people, discourses and contexts, in line with the one proposed by the family of theoretical perspectives called Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (ARNOULD and THOMPSON, 2015; CASOTTI and SUAREZ, 2016).

In a changing and transient reality as is assumed, consumer identity accompanies these contextual dynamics and becomes something susceptible to mobility, given its frequent transformation influenced by cultural systems around the same subject (HALL, 2014). Therefore, there is the imperative of change and identity fluency according to the semantic movement promoted by the dynamics of the context in which it is inserted (CHARAUDEAU, 2009). Complementing the idea, McCracken (1986) suggests that consumer practices, whether of products or services, function as symbolic sources of culturally constituted meanings and for this reason contribute to the construction of social and discursive identities.

In this context, this essay aims to present the French line of discursive semiotics (GREIMAS and COURTÉS, 2013), hereafter referred to as semiotics only, as a theoretical-methodological alternative for the study of the role of technology consumption on the consumer identity construction process. To do so, the text is structured in five sections in addition to this introduction: the second section addresses the CCT perspective on consumer identity projects; the third section raises questions about the processes of social and discursive identity construction; the fourth section discusses the consumption of technology and its underlying ideologies from a work by Kozinets (2008), as a basis for discussing in a comprehensive manner the perspective of contribution of semiotics as a theoretical-methodological proposal of analysis. Lastly, the concluding remarks present reflections and possible paths for future research.

THE CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY

In an interdisciplinary way, in many cases, the studies conceived from the theoretical perspectives of the CCT focus on the ways in which consumers create and modify the meanings of their consumption, whether directed to brands, advertisements, goods or services. Relationships and interactions between social and cultural contexts are considered and explored as influencers of the construction, alteration and meaning sharing acts (BELK and CASOTTI, 2014). As suggested by Baudrillard (2007), in the consumer society, objects are treated not by what function or utility they promote, but by their symbolic aspect, once their value is related to what they mean culturally. It can be said that consumer goods, in this sense, have a direct relation with the social and cultural sphere, interfering significantly in the social interactions and relations, causing different identity narratives to be established from their consumption.

As shown by Belk (1988), consumer culture is an arena for the production and circulation of identity representation, in which the market is a source of symbolic and mythical resource used to construct identities connected to objects and symbols of varied nature. By a semiotic perspective, the cultural premise assumed by the study of CCT approaches the idea of the web of meanings proposed by Geertz (1973), which, by this view, allows us to observe the culture of consumption as an interconnected system of culturally constituted meanings, that are transferred to the consumer through rituals and consumer goods, as McCracken (1986) points out.

On studies linked to the CCT, more specifically from the consumer identities projects perspective to which this work belongs, one can find a consistent academic production on the subject. It is worth mentioning the seminal work by Ahuvia (2005) on the relation between objects and identity narratives, the research by Fournier (1998), which deals with the relationship between consumers and brands, as well as other studies that consider situations of stigma, such as one from Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) about plus size customers, and other one about sexuality and their implications in the identity construction process written by Kates (2002).

Promoting an extract for the studies that have relation with the technological universe, it is necessary to highlight the work developed by Belk (2013), where it updates the concept of extended self for a digital world. In it, the author points out the relationships between contents, individuals and digitized contexts as elements of the identity construction process as not less important or intense as non-materialism. Giesler (2012) proposes a discussion about the technological advances of medicine and the consumption of Botox® as a tool to deal with aging, and consequently, the impact on the notion of the identity of the product's user. There are also other authors who promote arguments based on the Actor-Network Theory (LATOUR, 2005), such as Bettany, Kerrane and Hogg (2014), in their research on the consumption and function of technology in the process of paternity and related identity issues during this period.

Regardless of the object's nature or context, Hellman, Schrage and Ostergaard (2010) point to consumption as one of the main activities of the human being, which allows it to establish a relationship with practically all the dimensions of a given culture and society. It means, in this regard, that the central and articulating element of social life has an anchor in consumer practices and that, in contemporary times, identity becomes a project in which consumers, in a dynamic and fluid way, organize and carry out their symbolic repertoires in the attempt of a coherent construction of an identity, even if fragmented and temporary (BELK, 1988; HALL, 2014).

IDENTITY: A SOCIAL AND DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION

As it is present in several studies, the discussions about identity are based on varied natures, however having social psychology as one of the main theoretical bases. From this perspective, the identity of a subject, a term that from here on, merely for reasons of methodological language, also refers to consumers and/or individuals, would be related to the personal dimension and the social dimension, both supported respectively by the Identity Theory (MCCALL and SIMMONS, 1966), which considers the subject specific characteristics as an identities structuring, and by the Social Identity Theory (TAJFEL and TURNER, 1986), whose premise is based on an identity construction by the characteristics shared with members of a given group or social category.

Deepening the conceptualization, as Charaudeau (2009) shows, identity is what allows the subject to become aware of his own existence, once he perceives his body, his knowledge, his judgments and his actions. However, in order for the realization

of full consciousness to occur, it is necessary to have a relationship of differences with the other, since only then is there a parameterization of the *self*. It can be said that identity emerges from the opposition sustained by the consciousness of the other, always in relation to the *self*, constituting what Charaudeau (2009) calls the *otherness principle*. To corroborate the idea, Hogg and Abrams (1988), Stets and Burke (1996) and Greimas and Courtés (2013) emphasize that this principle is fundamental to the proper understanding of the constitution of identities.

Considering the affiliation of this essay to semiotics and, consequently, to the structuralism characteristic of many seminal works in CCT, such as *Interpreting consumer mythology: a structural approach to consumer behavior* (LEVY, 1981) as well as others based on structural anthropology by Claude Lévis-Strauss, as shown by Arnould and Thompson (2005) and Özçağlar-Toulouse and Cova (2010), it is assumed that identity is something changeable and in constant process of construction.

In an in-depth and evolving way, for Hall (2014), the question of identity can be discussed from three conceptions, the Enlightenment subject being the first one. This conception is based on the centered individual, unified, holder of his consciousness and control of actions, whose essence emerged at the moment of his birth and thus fully remains until his death. Moving forward, according to Hall's (2014) second conception, there is the sociological subject as a reflection of the increasing complexity of the modern world and its respective awareness of a false autonomy until considered to be true. Once values, ideas, meanings and cultural aspects were mediated by other individuals important to the subject, the idea of a self-centered identity no longer made sense. Mead's (1934) symbolic interactionism, a classical sociological view of the topic and which underpins this notion, suggests that identity is structured from the interaction between the self and the society. Hence, the subject has its essence formed and transformed by dialogue and continuous symbolic negotiation with cultural propositions, ideologies and existing narratives.

Exactly because of the changes pointed out by symbolic interactionism, the subject begins to present a certain fragmentation of the self, which results in a multifaceted identity, incoherent and contradictory in certain contexts, resulting in what Hall (2014) calls *identity crisis*. The meanings that once operated as stabilizers of the social world no longer support the subject's identity system, since it becomes variable, ephemeral and complex. The identity crisis, thus, becomes part of a major shift in which the central structures of modern society, such as family and church, are shifted, reshaping the frame of symbolic references to stability in the social world (GIDDENS, 2002).

Taking these changes into account, as a consequence, there is the postmodern subject that holds transient and fluid identities, a point corroborated by the concept of *liquid modernity* proposed by Bauman (2001). For Hall (2014), in his third conception, identity becomes something susceptible to mobility, given its constant formation and transformation influenced by cultural systems that surround the subject. This means, having multiple disunified identities in a coherent self throughout life.

In line with that proposed by Hall (2014) and deepening the discussion, Charaudeau (2009) suggests that identity can also be understood as a product constructed of complex social mechanisms, composed of biological traits (the body itself), psychosocial (impressions on the subject), and behavioral (actions and speech of the subject). From this perspective, the identity of a changeable and transient nature is in line with the idea of something socially constituted and, therefore, discursive, given that the subject is structured through everyday interactions. As Gouveia and Ayrosa (2014) show, identity is therefore linked to discursive and narrative structures which reinforces the need to consider its entire system of significance that gives it fundamental meaning for its understanding.

From a social perspective, identity is in constant process of construction because there are intertwined social relations between individuals, their characteristics, social practices, discourses and positions. It is possible to say that social identity is what gives the subject the "right to speech," which, to some extent, operates as a legitimator of the *self*. It is important to emphasize that this legitimacy attributed and/or achieved is based on institutionalized norms that govern some social practices, functions or even roles in diverse contexts, such as a judge in the legal domain (CHARAUDEAU, 2009).

There is also legitimacy based on performance or practice that makes the subject a prominent person, which presupposes direct approval of the social group in question, since it is performed in the form of a prize, title or that of *knowing-how-to* recognized and validated. Therefore, it is assumed that social identity is predominantly charged with psychosocial traits and attributes given and/or recognized by the subject's social group, because it derives from a institutionally accepted knowledge, from *know-how-to* which is recognized by the actions of the individual and possibly from a position of power given by social affiliation or attribution, as well as a past testimony (CHARAUDEAU, 2009).

Completing Charaudeau's (2009) vision, now from the discursive perspective, identity is also constructed based on the word (spoken or written), on the enunciation of discourse and, consequently, on the manipulation strategies of the imagination of the interlocutors of the subjects that also involve a set of gestural and visual practices. For this, all discourse is related and depends on two types of strategies: credibility and captation. By credibility, the author points to the subject's need to make them believe in their speeches, actions, and, undoubtedly, in their sincerity. Hereby, there is the imperative to defend an image of oneself in a way that strategically guarantees a relevant social position.

Captation strategies, however, emerge when the subject is not in a relationship of authority that favors him or her, for if it were, a simple order would solve the question of influence. In this situation, the objective of the subject becomes that of *make-to-believe*, so that the interlocutor is placed in a position of *must-to-believe*. For this, persuasion is used when reason is the means to the end that is desired or seduction when the subject understands that the emotions are the best way to fulfill his discursive goal.

It is, therefore, concluded that social identity is partly constituted by the communicational situation in which the subject finds itself, which means that there must be a relation of relevance to the act of communication. It can be pointed out that social identity alone is not sufficient to support the complete discourse signification, since it is not capable of providing in advance the subject with a full influence. On the other hand, discourse alone is not simply language, since it is directly related to the speaker social identity. The discursive identity is always something "to be built under construction", as it is the result of the subject's choices and is based on psychosocial traits, which allows us to assert its function of reactivating, masking and displacing social identity (CHARAUDEAU, 2009). Thus, it is possible to find, in the same subject, different discourses anchored in multiple identities, reinforcing the idea of fragmentation of the postmodern subject proposed by Hall (2014) and Bauman (2001).

Reinforcing the conception of the plurality of identity matrices, Bauman and Vecchi (2005) argue that in a fragmented and plural context, regardless of the place or culture, consumption plays a major role in the process of identity construction. For Schau (2000), consumption contributes to the process of constructing identities, whether they are based on objects, images, speeches, symbols or even ideologies. Since consumption is a social process, as proposed by Arnould and Thompson (2005), it is therefore assumed that there is an overlap between consumer practices and the construction of social and discursive identity, since goods or services are symbolic sources of culturally instituted meanings (MCCRACKEN, 1986).

THE CONSUMPTION OF TECHNOLOGY AND ITS UNDERLYING IDEOLOGIES

Given the importance of looking at the phenomenon of technology consumption, considering its nature, generated experiences, and mainly their meanings, as suggested by Giesler and Venkatesh (2005) and Kozinets, Patterson and Ashman (2017), the discussions on the subject should contemplate a certain sensitivity to the plurality and symbolic complexity of social practices involving the use of technology, such as smartphones, computers, TVs and other Internet-connected devices. Corroborating the line of thought, Kozinets (2008) and Pace (2013) point out a long way to be explored by researchers, since, even though there is some knowledge about macrosocial and cultural conditions that involve the consumption of technology, there is a considerable gap related in nature and to the processes by which these same conditions become ideologies and, consequently, they become thoughts, narratives, speeches, that is to say, discursive practices that support identity projects.

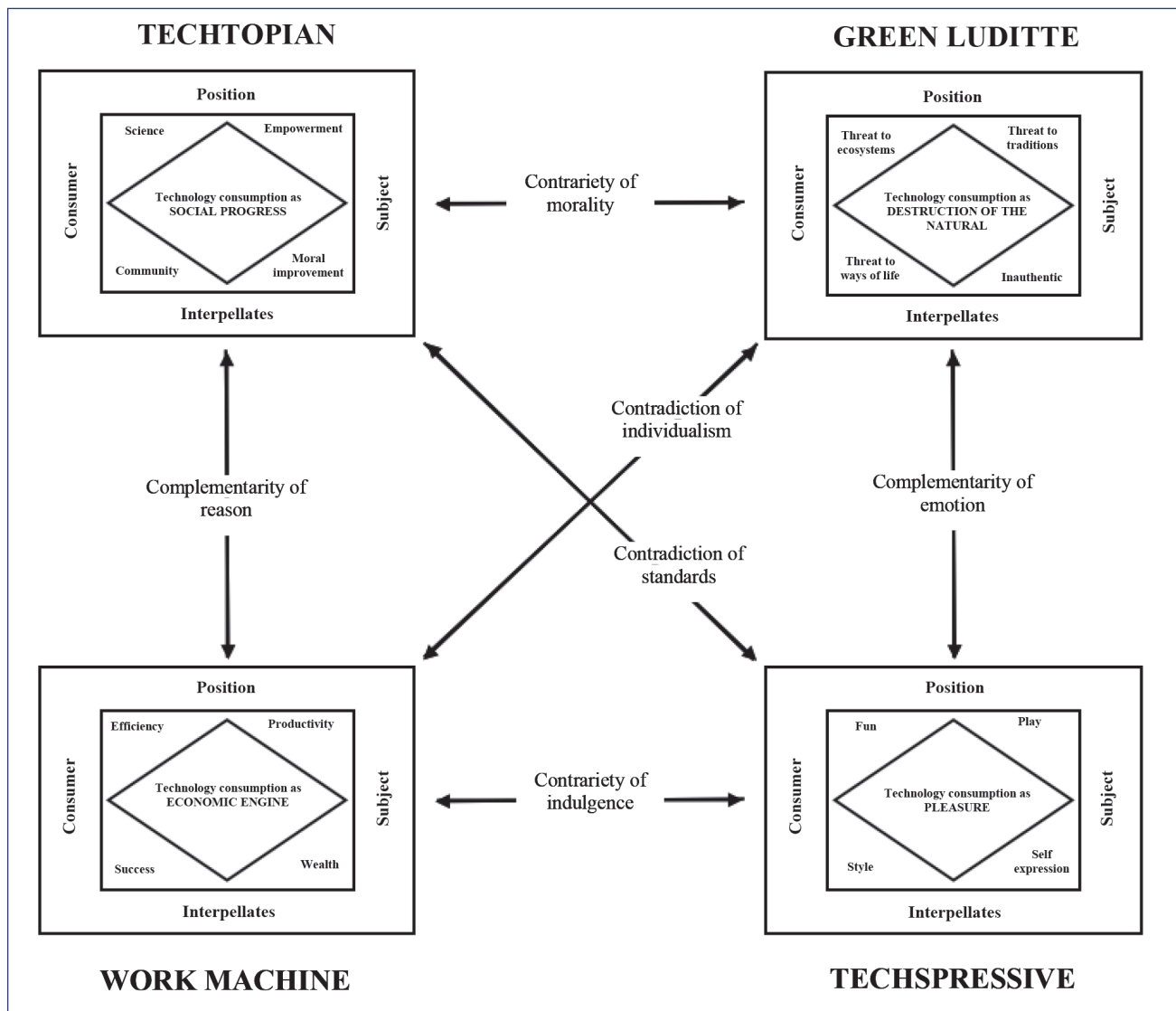
In consumer culture researches, there are various definitions for discourse, such as Belk, Ger and Askegaard (2003), in which the concept can be understood as a group of spoken or written acts expressed in, for example, interviews, or even in the form of narratives and/or social values, such as modernity and individuality. Yet for Thompson and Haytko (1997), the discourse is characterized as a cultural system of complex meanings structured by the speech in a certain context, complementing what was pointed out by Fitchett and Caruana (2015) when they suggest that it can be defined as a set of social practices used to achieve some goal through speech. Here, one can see that the definitions found address, to some extent, a process of signification, being in line with the semiotics studies.

Since discourse is dependent on a network of contextualized meanings to actually make sense, therefore ideology emerges as a system of symbolic support in the midst of this construction process. As suggested by authors such as Lacan (1977) whose thinking fits into structuralist epistemology, as well as semiotics, ideology can be defined as a set of dynamic meanings that float around a semantic axis. Consequently, this "semiotic anchor" is responsible for the alignment and reinforcement of their respective structuring meanings.

Referring to the classical paradoxical view of the consumption of technology proposed by Mick and Fournier (1998) and deepened by other authors (BORGES and JOIA, 2013; BOYD, MCGARRY and CLARKE, 2016), Kozinets (2008) proposes the Technological Ideology, a term that from now on, with capital letters, refers to the model proposed by the author, and its discourses are observed from a family of four ideological elements anchored in four semantic axes. For this, the author proposes the use of the semiotic square developed by Greimas and Courtés (2013), which can be defined as the visual representation of the logical articulation of a semantic category, in which there is the representation of the relation of contrariety or opposition between terms and, from it, the relations of contradiction and complementarity. Figure 1 illustrates the proposal.

Figure 1

Technological Ideologies semiotic square



Source: Kozinets (2008).

The first ideology presented refers to the consumption of technology associated with the idea of progress, being the initial proposition for the understanding of the relations of the meanings explored in the semiotic square. According to Kozinets (2008), the *Techtopian* (technologically utopian) starts from the articulation between humanity's progress and technological development, which is perceived as necessary, favorable and sublime. As noted by Latour (1990), Wright (2006) and Vogt (2016), this notion of advancement accompanies a positive sense of morality, as greater technological development makes

a society ever closer to the utopian state of perfection. Despite the great relevance and attractiveness, this ideology, loaded with moral aspects, has problems and negative meanings associated and is constantly questioned. As an example, its semantic axis can be problematized from historical events, disasters and technical issues that point to a failure in humanity's logic of progress, such as nuclear wars (KOZINETS, 2008).

Operating under the moral contrariety of Techtopian, the *Green Luddite* is based on the negative aspect of using technology, since it eliminates the artisanal factor of making objects, disqualifying professionals, altering traditional lifestyles and destroying the environment. As an ideological foundation, the Luddite movement acted as an organized social force to destroy the progress brought by the Industrial Revolution and its machines that caused suffering (FRIDMAN and VACCARO, 2014). Over time, the initial ideas promoted were weakened and other associations of meanings emerged.

As Kozinets points out (2008), this perspective can be observed with the great focus on issues related to social activism that regard nature and traditional values as sublime. Although the Green Luddite ideology is seen in a romanticized, unpopular, austere way and often associated with environmental issues, violent social movements and others out-of-fashion movements, such as hippies, this ideology is the only one that presents resistance to the consumption of technology, thus questioning its moral value (KOZINETS and HANDELMAN, 2004; HORNBERG, 2014).

Modern economics and technology are ideologically intertwined, having their connection most strongly established during the Industrial Revolution (CASTELLS, 1996). Assuming Techtopian's position of rational complementarity, the ideology of *Work Machine* is an articulation of the plenitude of the technological development with the economic growth of a nation, so that its semantic axis has meanings, such as industrialization, efficiency and professional empowerment related to technology, which would lead, in this sense, to success and wealth. Like the other proposed ideologies, the Work Machine presents contradictory and frequently questioned meanings, as Latour (1990), Kozinets (2008) and Belk (2014) shows, technology generates a high level of dependency, exploitation, conformity, loss-of-control, reduction of the human spirit and other harmful effects on society, for example.

As a last Technological Ideology, there is *Techspressive*, which in a unique way leads to an understanding of technology consumption for pleasure and enjoyment. Since the 1970s, youth in much of the world has been influenced by the presence of interactive video games, which for authors like Kuo, Hiller and Lutz (2017) can be considered as one of culture's main hedonistic pillars of the new generations. In the mid-1990s, the notion of technology associated with entertainment was consolidated in such a way that a lot of the equipment and technological objects came to be called toys. Complementing the idea with this ideology, in some cases, the experiential aspect of technology consumption is not only related to physical objects, and therefore it is necessary to observe the relationship of subjects with a virtualized reality and their intangible objects that also contribute to the construction of their social identity, as in the augmented reality phenomenon Pokémon Go (BELK, 2013; MCGIMPSEY, TANNOCK and LAUDER, 2016). Like other ideologies, Techspressive presents questions based on fun, pleasure and a possibility of escape that, due to the freedom provided, becomes easily antisocial, addictive and frivolous (KOZINETS, 2008).

Observing the semiotic square in Figure 1, in summary, it is possible to follow the sense of the contrariness of individualism by the emphasis of Techtopian on the quest for social progress which is not considered in an individualistic and hedonistic context, as proposed by Techspressive. From an emotional point of view, the Work Machine and the Techspressive ideologies differ in terms of the flow of indulgence, in which the former considers the consumption of technology in a rational and instrumental way, and the latter proposes consumption based on pleasure, as an end in itself. On the other hand, Work Machine and Techtopian have a relation of rational complementarity, whereas the Green Luddite and the Techspressive are related by the emotional aspects, having the aspects of fear and pleasure, respectively, more observed in the Technological Ideologies. Therefore, it is assumed that Techtopian and Luddite have a more social and collective perspective, while Work Machine and Techspressive tend to be more individualistic.

Assuming that ideology is a set of values that are updated and assumed by a subject - individual or collective - modified by *wanting-to-be* and, consequently, by *wanting-to-do* (GREIMAS and COURTÉS, 2013), the subject structures his reality and identity from the navigation through to the semantic axes and appropriation of the respective meanings available. Thus, it can be said that the observation process of the construction of identities, by the consumption of technologies, is possible from the understanding of the meanings evoked and transformed along the consumption practices and their associated discourses.

Although fundamental to the structure of this essay, because it is organized from the semiotic square conceived by Greimas (GREIMAS and COURTÉS, 2013), the work of Kozinets (2008) restricts the analysis at the deeper level of the greimasian model.

Therefore, in order to achieve the objectives of the present work, the next section will discuss a broader perspective of the contribution of semiotics to the study of technology consumption as a structurant of consumer identity.

SEMIOTICS CONTRIBUTION PERSPECTIVE

Having ideology as a system of structuring meanings and discourse as a unit of analysis, as pointed out by Pessôa, Sant'Ana and Melo (2015), it is possible to resort to the contributions of semiotics to marketing and consumption studies, allowing an interaction between the areas of knowledge. As shown by Özçağlar-Toulouse and Cova (2010), in the CCT history, it is possible to find several references to the principles of semiotics, mainly related to the works of Greimas and Courtés (2013), with the semiotic square, Floch (1988) and his researches on the visual universe, Semprini (1992) with studies of branding, and Landowski (2005) with the regimes of interaction.

For Cardoso, Hanashiro and Barros (2016), as a theory of signification, semiotics is initially concerned with the conditions of understanding and production of meaning, always considering the differences necessary for an elementary structure of signification (GREIMAS and COURTÉS, 2013). Based on this premise, although with a focus on organizational studies, the authors proposed a methodological trajectory for semiotic discourse analysis in identity studies, reinforcing the interdisciplinarity presented here.

Based on the ideas of Greimas and Courtés (2013), Pezzini and Cervelli (2007) suggest that the discourse, in a broad way, can be understood as the result of an enunciative process, that is, what has some meaning in a spoken chain or of written text, within a certain system of signification, which in this essay, is related to Technological Ideologies. In depth, every enunciation must be analyzed as an instance of establishment of the subject and can be divided into three categories. Taking into account that every person (first category) enunciates in a given space (second category) and time (third category), this context must always be organized around the subject, so that it operates as a point of reference (FIORIN, 2006).

To understand how the meaning of the text is constructed, semiotics makes use of the generative trajectory of signification, which can be defined as a theoretical model of signification stratified in three levels, going from a deeper and more abstract level to a more superficial and concrete one (GREIMAS and COURTÉS, 2013). In addition, at each level there is a syntactic and a semantic component. Here, it is important to keep in mind that the distinction between syntax and semantics does not stem from the fact that one is more significant than the other, but that syntax is more autonomous than semantics, as the same syntactic relationship can be loaded with a wide variety of semantic investments (FIORIN, 2006; PESSÔA, SANT'ANA and MELO, 2015). In order to illustrate the proposal, Box 1 organizes and illustrates the levels of the generative trajectory of signification.

Box 1

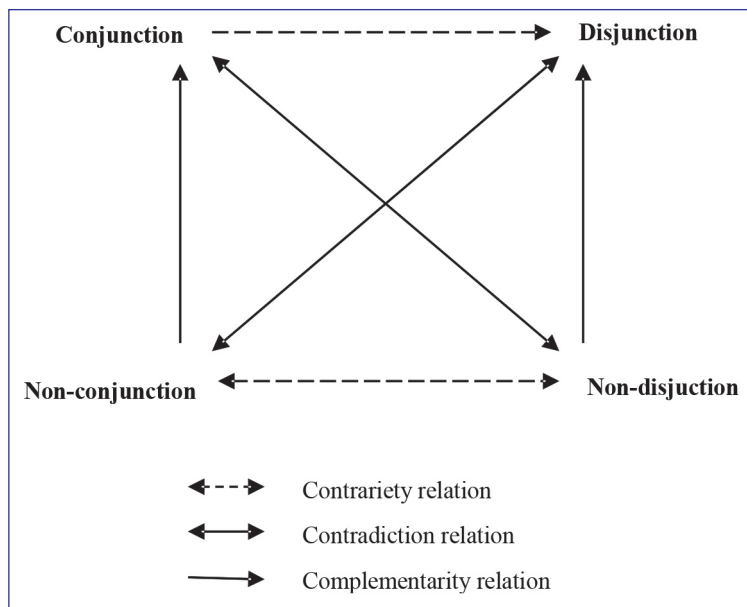
The generative trajectory of signification

	Syntax component		Semantic component
Semionarrative structures	Deep level	Fundamental syntax	Fundamental semantics
	Superficial level	Narrative syntax	Narrative semantics
Discursive structures	Discourse syntax: Discursivization (actorialization, temporalization, spatialization)		Discourse semantics: Thematic level Figurative level

Source: Greimas and Courtés (2013).

The first level of the generation of meaning is the fundamental one, in which an elementary structure is established, where signification emerges by a relation of contrariety, contradiction and complementarity, which can be observed syntactically in the semiotic square represented in Figure 2 (BARROS, 1997). Referring to the Techtopian ideology, as an example in this first level, it would be the structuring of ideological elements, such as the idea of progress (conjunction) and delay (disjunction) and respective relations of non-conjunction and non-disjunction.

Figure 2
The semiotic square



Source: Based on Barros (1997).

At the second, the narrative level, the narrator subject presents its history, values and ideas of the text, where there is a necessary minimal narrative, that is, an initial state, a transformation between states and the final state. Here, a network of relations is constituted with the object of value, which may be the use or not, of a technological apparatus, such as a smartwatch, establishing the state of junction, by conjunction or disjunction, and the narrator subject can affirm or deny the conjunction or disjunction with the same object of value (CARDOSO, HANASHIRO and BARROS, 2016).

The narrative syntax, composed of statements of state and of doing, is based on what Fiorin (2006) calls a *canonical sequence*, in which the first phase is manipulation, which is related to the influence between subjects of the same history for *wanting-to-do and/or having-to-do*, such as adopting a smartwatch. At the stage of competence, this second phase refers to a transformation performed by the subject who can accomplish the action by *knowing-how-to-do and/or being-able-to-do*, which in this discussion would be related to knowledge about the functions and best uses of the device. The performance (third phase) is the action itself, where the transformations actually occur, in other words, there is the passage from one state to another. In this case, the performance occurs when the user of the watch is in conjunction or disjunction with the object. And, finally, the sanction is related to the realization that the performance was fulfilled, which consequently promotes the recognition of the subject responsible for the operation.

The narrative semantic is given by the selection and relationship of semantic elements with the subjects, so that each element is inscribed as value in the objects, which can be of two natures: modal and descriptive. For the first one, it can be said that they are those necessary to obtain an object, as well as for the performance to happen. In other words, it is the *want-to*, *must-to*, *know-to* and the *be-able-to* that promotes the transformation from one initial state to different one. For the descriptive values, it is assumed that they are the values that come into conjunction or disjunction by the fulfilled performance (FIORIN, 2006).

Finally, narrative structures are converted into discursive structures when assumed by the enunciator subject, so that the concrete establishment of the narrator, actors and meanings occur in a domain of time and space. In this last level, the discursive one, the specification of the thematic roles and social connotations occurs, through which objects of value are related to the discursive subjects and narrated in the form of discourse. In respect to discursive syntax, it is necessary to clarify the relations between the enunciation subject and the enunciated discourse, in addition to the possible relations between the enunciator

and enunciatee (BARROS, 2005). Here, it can be affirmed that the enunciation would be the mediation instance that assures the placement in discursive-enunciation of the virtualities of the language, that is, the materiality between the language and the speeches (GREIMAS and COURTÉS, 2013).

At this point, it is possible to return to the idea that the identity structuring from the consumption of technologies would be directly linked to the communicational situation of the subject, since from the social point of view, it is dependent on a *know-how-to* legitimized by institutions and other individuals to be what it claims to be. From a discursive point of view, it is constructed based on the enunciation of discourse and consequently on the strategies of manipulation of the subject's interlocutors imagery, which also involve a set of gestural and visual practices, so that the enunciatee is placed in the position of *must-to-believe*. An example that can be mentioned, are posts on social media, such as Facebook, that has content linked to the subject's object of value and related narratives associated with the use of a smartwatch. In the discursive semantics, the semantic coherence of the discourses is given by two paths: the thematic and figurative.

The first is related to the thematization that happens by the elaboration of the abstract values, placing them in a certain way, by giving them recurrence of semantic traits in the discourses. The themes, therefore, are of a conceptual nature and promote the categorization of the elements of the subject's world (FIORIN, 2006), such as modernity and progress, which belong to the semantic axis of the Techtopian ideology. The second and last procedure of discursive semantics refers to the figurativization of the themes, in which, through figures of content there is the production of the illusion of reality, since the belief in the truth or validity of discourse is only given by the acknowledgment on the part of the enunciatee of the imageries or figures of the world present in the enunciated discourse.

In summary, it is observed that the semiotic analysis model allows the phenomenon of the identity construction to be analyzed from its most concrete and superficial level (the discursive), to the most abstract and profound (fundamental) level. Taking, for example, the analysis of the practices or the discourse of a consumer as the object to shed light on the construction of his identity, through the consumption of some technological artifact, the researcher who makes use of semiotics can construct the following analysis path: observe the processes of thematization and figurativization, as well as the actorialization, spatialization and temporalization of the discourse of the subject (first level of analysis: semantics and discursive syntax); to propose a narrative about the subject and the technological artifact (narrative level of analysis); to finally arrive at the more abstract values that support the discourse (deep level).

Taking the contribution of Kozinets (2008), a researcher who accepts the suggestion of this essay could, from the discourse of consumers (e.g. obtained through in-depth interviews), reconstitute the discursive levels and narrative of the research subjects' statements and verify if (at the deep level of the discourses) the values of these subjects could be framed in the Technological Ideologies proposed by Kozinets (2008) or, alternatively, propose an alternative axiology. Thus, with a robust and at the same time flexible methodology (the generative trajectory of meaning can be used in a dismembered way), the adoption of semiotics in the studies of identity construction presents itself as an interesting theoretical-methodological perspective for CCT researches.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the discussions involving technology consumption, as shown by Souza (2010) and Coorevits and Coenen (2016), there is predominantly an epistemological orientation for the positivist perspective, having, in most cases, theories such as TAM (DAVIS, 1989) and the Diffusion of Innovation Theory (ROGERS, 2003) as the basis for the discussions. Since this group of theories and their statistical models do not consider symbolic aspects as the premises for the understanding of a given phenomenon, it is believed that an interpretive look at consumer practices, which in this essay is aimed at technology, has relevance for research on the identities projects in CCT. As Miles (2002) points out, in contemporary societies, consumption experiences are dissipated in the most varied aspects of the subject's life, which therefore presupposes the possibility of understanding the phenomenon of consumption through multiple perspectives.

In this sense, this theoretical essay aimed to present, from the perspective of the CCT, the French current discursive semiotics as a theoretical-methodological alternative for the study of the role of technology consumption in the consumer identity

construction process. Essentially, based on the Kozinets (2008) *Technological Ideologies*, it is suggested that the process of analyzing the subjects' discourses is carried out through the generative trajectory of meaning (GREIMAS and COURTÉS, 2013), since, depending on the model level, it is possible to identify the navigation through the semantic axes of ideologies. From the dynamic apprehension of the meanings existing in each of the *Technological Ideologies* and consequent discursive practices of the subjects, it is thus possible to observe the manner in which an identity is elaborated.

As a final comment, without the pretense to delimit, but rather to expand the discussions on the identity construction process, intersections with semiotics and technology consumption, the themes proposed here may represent paths for future investigations that go through:

- Significance of technology consumption, specifically of a particular products, such as *wearable devices*;
- Ways in which subjects of different ages and locations use technology as structuring elements of their identities;
- Narratives in which a more intense and dynamic navigation can be observed through the semantic axes of *Technological Ideologies* by Kozinets (2008);
- Development of manipulation strategies of the recipient for the production of identity discourses whose meaning produced is the one of "reality".

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