Audiovisual Branded Content and interactive systems: reflections on the online customer engagement ¹

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Abstract

This paper reflects on different interactive practices associated to the dialogue that takes place between brands and consumers – as well as users of digital interaction channels. To do so, we analyze a Branded Audiovisual Advertising piece following the studies of emerging communication regimes (DONATON, 2007; COVALESKI, 2010), current dynamics of digital social media (LÉVY, 1999; SANTAELLA, 2003) and interactive regimes from a social semiotic approach (LANDOWSKI, 2014). Our investigations points to Landowski's theoretical approach as a valuable method to understand the nature of discursive exchanges established between brands and audiences in persuasive discourses. **Keywords:** Advertising. Branded Content. Consumption. Interactive Regimes. Digital Engagement.

Introduction

We have witnessed a quick transformation of media, its technologies, and the communication practices associated with them and their possibilities of interaction. We see changes in the way individuals interact with each other, with media platforms, and, especially, how they dialogue with brands.

However, it is important to realize that the resulting cultural transformations cannot have been caused entirely by the rise of technologies such as smartphones, portable computers, or e-readers. They reflect, rather, signs that flow in these spaces, the message types and communication processes engendered in them, since they are what is responsible for shaping the thoughts and sensibilities of human beings, as well as enabling the emergence of new social and cultural environments (SANTAELLA, 2003).

Such a complex and collaborative scenario has prompted the rise of new advertising formats – starting in the 2000s – that favored content that brought to the fore values and concepts to which companies wished to attach themselves – the so-called *Branded Content* (CIACO, 2014). According to Covaleski (2010, p.24), such content depends on a synergy between brands and entertainment – or in "advertising mixed with content and transformed into entertainment, thereby becoming suitable for interactivity and sharing."

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Among the many manifestations of Branded Content that promote a deeper interaction between advertisers and the audience in digital media, short videos seem particularly promising. From a market standpoint, they operate in tandem with the users' participation, as they are designed to circulate primarily – or exclusively – in a digital environment. Whereas content had been previously designed to reach a single destination, now the consumer is expected to act as a distributing point so that brands can claim ever growing fractions of the consumer public, in a centrifugal motion. For that reason, the audiovisual format is widespread in digital social media: as of August 2014, such content had amassed 12.3 billion views on Facebook and 11.3 billion on YouTube.2 From an expressive and interactive standpoint, the format makes use of narrative and sensory tools to present different characters in specific functional and social roles – the so-called thematic roles, as per Landowski's (2014) social semiotic approach.

These brand efforts will be analyzed according to conversational dynamics present in the digital environment and the studies of the interaction regimes proposed by Landowski (2014) – programming, manipulation, adjustment, and accident (or assenting). Our method focuses primarily on the observation of meaning production beyond the text, enabling the analyst to incorporate the situation, the act itself, not only to the cognitive plane, but to the esthesic plane – the order of the sensory.

Thus, this article will reflect on the interactions with advertising in the digital environment that stimulate and *program* the participation of the public – that now assumes a significant discursive role within the current content distribution system.

Emerging advertising configurations

The fast growth of the larger cities and the awesome pace of transactions and individual relationships worldwide – typical of contemporaneity – have led to the rise in importance of time optimization. Leisure time has come to be widely valued and generates new expectations due to its scarcity. Thus, a search for unique and significant experiences - justified selfindulgently by the "I deserve it" excuse - has become widely supported and turned into a convergence point between the desires of consumers and the goals of the companies.

As such, we have seen an approximation of advertising and entertainment.

The word *entertainment*, of a Latin root, comes from *inter* (between) and *tenere* (to have). In English, the word entertainment has evolved to mean "something that amuses with distraction and recreation" and "a public spectacle or showing that intends to arouse interest and to amuse". (TRIGO, 2003, p.32 -Our translation).

According to a ComScore research, available at: . Accessed on: July 22, 2017.

As the meaning of the word makes clear, entertainment is an activity generally performed in the intervals of daily duties. Therefore, it is connected to moments of distraction and recreation, creating a sensation of fun and leisure for those who can enjoy it. Trigo (2003, p.150) also states that it is "something new that emerges in new social formations and has to do with the increasing value of pleasure, hedonism, idleness, and time as something ever more significant to people."

In such a scenario, characterized by the interweaving of advertising and leisure, Branded Content presents itself as a promising alternative to promote a closer relationship between companies and their public. An interactive game created for digital social media, a concert designed for a specific group of people, a trip with an exotic destination, or short videos directed by well-known cinema directors, or any kind of initiative that aims to entertain the public and make them participate can all be turned into engagement strategies – both emotional and interactive –, especially in a digital environment.

The very act of propagating information to promote awareness or a change in consumer behavior is reinforced by entertainment tools. Advertising, Covaleski (2010, p.20) notes on its hybridization process, "paradoxically gets stronger the less it looks like itself – the less it utilizes traditional elements of advertising discourse." Today, it "increasingly appears inserted into, and hidden as, entertainment; dressed as amusement, but not stripped of its persuasive function, even if concealed" (COVALESKI, 2010, p.20).

Such communication tends to be warmly received by the consumer, since they are predisposed to accept something of their interest (DONATON, 2007; SIQUEIRA, 2013). The barriers erected by traditional advertising – which, historically, presented itself as a break from entertainment – are, thus, brought down or, at least, reduced, because advertising itself supplies entertainment. We should highlight, however, that this warm reception by the audience depends on the logic of *pull content*³ – which means that, not only should the content be able to fulfill the consumer's entertainment expectations, but it should also be the result of an individual search performed by them.

There has been an increase in the supply of interaction and entertainment options with the rise of the internet and mobile devices. By employing the new narrative and sensory tools provided by the new means of communication, advertising has transformed its appeal: rather than an intrusion, it started to be an invitation. Whereas it was previously seen as a hurdle or a "lesser evil" audiences had to deal with to read a story on a news portal or watch a TV show, it is now a point of interest and engagement. Innovative and segmented formats, in their majority, arouse the curiosity and the willingness to share content in a digital environment.

³ The phrase references the active search of information or content by the consumer itself, especially in a digital environment, thus pulling the content.

Even knowing the new offerings of the brands can, at first, turn the audience into some sort of authority if they are more informed than the general public, highlighting what Berger (2014) has called *social currency*. We can quickly jump from this point to mass sharing. One proof of that are the viral campaigns that do not promote, immediately, technical qualities or attributes of the product in question, but rather present something fun, ludic, affective, and, thus, attractive. In other words: content worth sharing.

We should note, however, that this hybrid format, designed primarily for a digital environment through spontaneous consumer actions, solidifies itself and its scope by linking itself to traditional means of distribution. Conceptual unity and participation appeal is necessary for all branding, from the 30 second TV spot, to the marketing-mandated message to consumers, to viral initiatives that require active collaboration from the public.

As Ciaco (2014, p.137) notes — when proposing the integration of a brand's paid, proprietary, and organic media — a *convergent media* would result from the union of those three and "allow the message to reach the public precisely when, how, and where they want, regardless of channel, media, or device they use".

Digital environment and the participation culture

From the inception of the first medium of communication, audiences have tried to establish a conversation with content producers. Newspaper readers sent "reader letters" to express their opinions, listeners called radio stations to ask for songs of their preference or make a comment on the themes discussed, and TV audiences voted on their favorite guests during talent shows. Recipients have always needed to make their voice heard, and as soon as media technologies allowed it, a two-way avenue of communication took hold, as we can see in the current digital media scenario.

The large-scale interaction opportunities the Internet provides are a milestone for content distribution and consumption practices, as well as for the establishment of two-way conversations when it comes to media content.

To understand this transformation, Santaella (2003) categorized the socio-cultural formations that predated the current *cyberculture* – oral, written, printed, mass, and media – and noted that the coexistence of the latter two trained our expectations and behavior for the adoption of virtual media and digital culture. Unlike other thinkers who consider the current media environment a continuation of the mass communication regime, Santaella (2003) identified an important transitional period she called "media culture".

At such a point, communications are marked by hybrid messages and equipment able to replicate content linked to the culture of availability and transience, such as photocopying machines, the Walkman, and video cassettes. In this stage, there is the rise of a behavior that is celebrated nowadays: individualized media consumption.

Cyberculture, therefore, came to be characterized by this dispersed, fragmented, non-linear search for information. A few theoreticians (LÉVY, 1999; LEMOS, 2003) also see it as a social structure whose main feature is the liberation of the producer and emitter of messages, and the ability to reshape the behavior of older audiences through the new possibilities of digital media. Agents that, faced by these new interactive dynamics, become responsible for generating and distributing symbolic goods.

As Murray (2003) states, digital media, characterized as it is by *interactivity*, *immersion*, *agency*⁴, and *transformation*, significantly change the relationship between producers and recipients of media activities. In an environment where consumers have a greater ability to take part in the exchanges, a type of participation culture emerges where dialogue is more democratic and therefore less authoritarian.

The phrase *participation culture* contrasts with older notions about the passivity of audiences. Instead of proposing that media producers and consumers take up separate roles, we can now consider them as participants who interact according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understand. (JENKINS, 2009, p.30 - Our translation).

Such a change in message reception has deep implications for the way we think about new communication forms, for the unilateral model, used for decades by media producers themselves, has been superseded by an organization marked by collaboration and sharing.

According to Oliveira (2013, p.244-245), the transitivity or intransitivity of the enunciation devices defines and conditions the roles of the parties in enunciation (the speaker and the recipient) in the interactive process. Transitivity, in this context, assumes a shift of enunciating roles, where negotiation and reciprocity are commonplace – which is something rarely achieved in advertising, although reinforced by the field.

We may note that there is some degree of prudence in brand communication that is directly associated to the greater possibilities of expression by the public. As we well know, audiences feel able to contribute in content production, for whatever reason — to promote general knowledge, to build relationships, or even to gain some media visibility within a group. This participation is dubious: on the one hand, it may be one of the premises of a few advertising strategies that reinforce the message of the producer; on the other, it may offer risks from a discursive standpoint, as it allows the production and sharing of dissonant and polemic content, hurting brands in the process.

Interactive Regimes: thinking the relationship between brands and consumers

Given what we have seen, it becomes evident that we are seeing the establishment of communication dynamics marked by the impossibility of discursive control by brands.

⁴ The rewarding ability to act in a significant way and see the results of one's own decisions and choices.

This new system of content circulation has introduced a different form to communicate: via cooperation, whereby interlocutors are incited to participate, but in an assisted and directed capacity.

This scenario justifies the investigation of the new roles assumed by companies and consumers during the various stages of the advertising work, as well as the limits between the opportunities and risks of these processes.

To understand the importance of the interactions in the construction of meaning in emerging advertising strategies — especially those that employ hybrid formats such as Audiovisual Branded Content — we will utilize the socio-semiotic approach proposed by Landowski (2014): interactive regimes of *programming*, *manipulation*, *adjustment*, and *accident* (or *assenting*). Our method enables the understanding of the sensory-aesthetic component as an element that affects the structure of meaning in the act, rather than reducing communication to an exchange⁵. More broadly, it should help us comprehend the ways by which the individual builds their own relationships in and with the world.

The programming regime, according to Landowski (2014, p.24) is associated to regular behavior, independent of the actor's nature (whether they are human or not), and can be based on physical causality or socio-cultural conditioning. In the former, we observe regularities that are inherent to physical and biological matters of the individual, which have similar effects as response; the latter pertains to acts that are socially determined, "the object of learning that manifests itself by routine practices" — i.e. connected to social coercion, as the author points out.

Programming, in this case, means acting upon the location, the form, or the state of any subject or object based on its thematic role.

A subject can only operate over an object, semiotically speaking, only as long as the object is "programmed"; but the notion of programming reminds us of the idea of a "behavior algorithm"; and finally, that idea translates, in narrative grammar terms, into the precise notion of *thematic roles*. (LANDOWSKI, 2014, p.22 - Our translation).

This specific role establishes the boundaries of what an actor *can do* and makes them a functional agent, while the modal competence, inherent to the interactional regime of manipulation, grants to the actor a *will* that should make them a subject.

Under a regime of manipulation, the foundation of interaction is intention, where the individual's motives and reasons are the building blocks. Unlike programming, there are no functional actors here. Manipulation, due to its persuasive character, demands the "will" to adopt the proposal of the speaker. The individual must, therefore, *want* or *have to do* something.

⁵ An economic logic based exclusively on an exchange (rather than the relationship) between those involved.

Manipulation enabled the emergence of *subjects*: malleable actors who possess intelligence and relative autonomy. Reaching adjustment, we recognize these subjects as possessing, furthermore, a body and, for the same reason, sensitivity. Therefore, interaction ceases to be based on *make believe*, and is then founded on *make feel*. (LANDOWSKI, 2014, p.50-51 - Our translation).

The adjustment regime is closely linked to the idea of *feeling together*, given that under this interaction mode actors are considered peers — unlike previous regimes, characterized by hierarchic alignments of the parties involved.

We are now dealing with an interaction between equals, where parties coordinate their own dynamics by *doing together*. What allows them to adjust to each other is a new ability, or at least a particular competence that the previous model was not able to reach: the ability to mutually *feel*. In order to distinguish it from the so-called modal competence, we called it *esthesic* competence. (LANDOWSKI, 2014, p.50 - Our translation).

The accident (or assenting) regime, finally, is closely related to the principles of probability, unpredictability, and randomness. According to the semiotician, the modality is a cross of two trajectories whose cause (regularity) or finality (intentionality) we cannot identify.

Landowskian social semiotics, in that sense, offers us a conceptual basis founded on notions of union that favor reflection on these new modes of interaction of digital media — although it needs some tweaking to be able to think about the media, as Fechine stated when talking about television:

If this meaning that surfaces by contagion presupposes some sort of esthesic face-to-face, "direct access" between the actors, would it not be paradoxical to try to describe it as a *medium*? The operation of this approach on TV research reveals itself exactly by description, from its technical-expressive tools (its "materiality"), a sense of contact and presence anchored less to what we see on TV (the meaning of the shows) and more to the way we relate to and through TV (the overdetermination of programming, of the televisual flow). (FECHINE, 2006, p.8 - Our translation).

To identify the interaction possibilities of the relationship between brands and consumers, we will present an instance of advertising strategy that employs Audiovisual Branded Content as its centerpiece.

Shopping Recife is a leader in the mall business in the state of Pernambuco. It has been in Recife since 1980 and is part of an industry marked by competitiveness when it comes to communication strategies during the entire promotional calendar.

Due to the service and the experience it provides, Shopping Recife's institutional communication has routinely utilized emotional arguments – since the spaces it competes with, which have several entertainment and purchasing options, usually exhibit a strong symbolic appeal as meeting grounds for many people of different generations.

Such an observation was the foundation of the first participatory campaigns, created in a partnership with Ampla Communication: as early as 2012, during Valentine's Day, under the title "Winning Love," internet users were asked to post online declarations of love via text, photo or video in a bid to win several prizes. At the time, the winner was awarded an opportunity to declare his feelings to his loved one through a movie theater's screen – something fairly original, we should say. The mall would provide him with the financing of the video with his marriage proposal and would give him the wedding rings.

Betting on real, touching stories spurred a positive reaction from the public. For that reason, the mall's marketing department partnered with Ampla to invest in new campaigns in the same vein.

The idea for the following year's Mother's Day, in 2013, was to promote the reunion of a person and their mother who had not seen each other for years and were willing to show their reunion on a TV commercial. Extensive research was carried out to locate the protagonists for this campaign⁶ with volunteers from the entire state of Pernambuco, as the production could present significant difficulties, especially in the unpredictability of the outcome.

The film *Reencontro* (meaning "reunion") shows Isabela, a woman from Pernambuco who had lived in Spain for seven years — where she built her professional and personal relationships —, as she goes to work, walks at her favorite places, tells about the experience of living far from home and goes to Shopping Recife to meet her mother, Débora.

During her statements, while she shows herself to be adapted to her new, culturallyenriching lifestyle, the character betrays how much she misses her mother's care by gestures and examples of kindness. The narrative goes on to show Isabela's expectations as she returns to Brazil. Her father joins to take her to a restaurant inside Shopping Recife, where she is surprised by her mother, after two years (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Scenes from *Reencontro*: 26", 48", and 3'04", respectively.







Source: Research archive.

⁶ Thirty equally touching options were found for the commercial. The final decision came about due to the fact Isabela's mother, Débora Salgado, is very reluctant to face strong emotions and unexpected situations.

The campaign was able to blend the wide array of possibilities of the digital environment, characterized by a greater flexibility of format and duration, to the cultural and quantitative benefits of traditional media. A hotsite⁷ went online featuring the full film (three minutes and eight seconds) and a making of the video. A 30 second TV spot was also produced, supported by graphic advertisements and outdoor media. Exhibition dates were strategically set to strengthen the digital engagement of audiences to the story being told – the full film and making of were published a day before the commercial was broadcast on TV, and were spontaneously shared on digital social media.

We should note that this advertising strategy is an answer to the desires of potential customers and at the same time a source of subjectification. Through subtle or stereotypical suggestion of certain modes of living in favorable situations, it incites an approximation – via emotion and affection – to the public.

We started from the premise that advertising communication tends to frame things and events as consumer practices, erasing both conflict and social distinctions while promoting lifestyles that potentialize the production of meaning of brands, services, and products. (HOFF, 2013, p.146 - Our translation).

This strategy can illustrate the interaction regimes alluded to by Landowski (2014). The programming regime can be perceived in the articulation between the TV spot and the material available online. As it was planned, the strategy "programs" the audience to seek the follow-up to the story in another channel after a teaser⁸. Thus, the content enjoys mass penetration (tough restricted by broadcasting imperatives) and has the flexibility afforded by the internet.

From a discursive standpoint, we have an even more significant evidence: the thematic roles expressed by the social conventions of the narrative, such as "the mother", "the daughter", and "the father" – roles intended to establish familiarity, a feeling of safety, a safe harbor to those who watch the video. By sharing such content, the consumer endorses values that are both politically correct and socially valued among their peers – which are connected via digital social media, as family is a very emotionally appealing institution. Thus, the individual, by sharing *Reencontro*, is seen as a sociable, as well as sensitive, person towards others.

The regime of manipulation is tied to the fundamental vocation of advertising, since any brand investment ultimately intends to persuade the interlocutor and evokes the principle of intentionality. The visual, narrative, and argumentative resources the campaign presents reinforce this notion.

A short-lived website especially design for the promotion of a specific campaign.

⁸ The technique is often used as a tool to start an advertising campaign. A short message is published on any media to invite the public to look forward to the argument that will be presented. Afterwards, during the campaign follow-up, the subject is revealed.

We should not forget that manipulation is founded on the interdependence of subjects, but that does not mean that the other (the one who is manipulated) is fully taken from his otherness, precisely because they are manipulated *into doing something*. Even so, if we attempt to integrate the sensory dimension to the regime of manipulation, we may reach another type of enunciator-manipulator, mentioned by Landowski: this one is not the "great enunciator" anymore, someone who is on a higher hierarchic position, but sits closer to the audience, for this approximation is necessary for the observation of the "sensory points" we mentioned above. We might even think of the possibility to unite the values of the enunciator-manipulator – through the sensitive – to the audiences, putting their relationship on equal footing. (BUENO et al, 2010, p.26 - Our translation).

The adjustment regime, one of the more obvious ones in this specific instance, can be illustrated by the ability of the content to enable *feeling together* by presenting credible characters and themes that are dear to most individuals. It is also the foundation of the regime of manipulation we mentioned above. The documental inspiration is responsible for the maximization of the processes of identification with the characters, allowing for a greater immersion in the film. Manipulation, as we can ascertain, incorporates elements of approximation and adjustment in order to evoke emotion in a subtle, though effective, way.

According to Walton (2005), in studying emotional aspects associated to the construction of fear in cinema, film and spectator are distinguished by an ontological distance, only transposed by the audience through immersion. In the advertising piece above, immersion and feelings are strengthened by the truthfulness of the story, that features real people, with real dreams, and real-life challenges. In contrast to a production featuring professional actors staging a fictional drama, the feelings of the daughter are expressed naturally. At least, that is the idea.

Such films engage us not with demands or rhetorical imperatives, but with their noticeable sensitivity. The moviemaker's sensitivity attempts to stimulate ours. We involve ourselves in their representation of the world, but we do so indirectly, through the affection we apply to the film and that the author tries to make ours. (NICHOLS, 2005, p.171 - Our translation).

The regime of accident (or assenting), finally, is linked to the possibility of different or polemic discursive responses by the public after *experiencing* the brand's proposal, since the digital environment – where the main piece of the campaign was promoted – naturally stimulates reverberation. In doing so, the enunciator automatically runs the risk of inciting criticism to their content. In this case, the criticisms could touch on the lack of credibility of the documentary, or state a disagreement with the dramatic tone given to the story.

Final considerations

In this brief investigation, we tried to explore emerging forms of advertising that attempt to strike a balance between brand exposure and quality entertainment to engage digital audiences.

As advertising strategies grow ever more complex, considering the unlimited narrative and technological resources they can use, they overcome the classic choices of distribution channels and the types of content. In contemporary discourse, it is as important to define *where* and *how* the message will impact audiences as it is to understand how they actively participate in the process. In social semiotic terms, it is as important to understand the *blending* practices instituted by the communication between brands and consumers as it is to understand the peculiarities of the *unity* that permeates the content distributed in digital media.

Thus, Landowski's (2014) interactive regimes of programming, manipulation, adjustment, and accident (or assenting) appear as a valuable method to analyze the nature of discursive exchanges established between brands and their target markets.

In the case we analyzed, it is evident that the hierarchic arrangement of the discursive roles was maintained and that interactions are located primarily at the poles of prudence or discursive control — regimes of programming and manipulation. Although advertising speech emphasizes the possibility of audience participation, treating them as "partners" in communication exchanges via emotional appeals, there are obvious mechanisms to direct such collaboration, conducting it to meanings and values that reinforce the "official" stance of the brand. While the digital environment appears to offer risks to traditional discourses in advertising, advertisers have adapted their persuasive strategies and created sophisticated tools to control the engagement by audiences.

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