

“Memes are good for thinking”... about consumption and material culture: an evaluative activity using starter packs

“Memes são bons para pensar”... sobre consumo e cultura material: atividade avaliativa com o uso de starter packs

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Abstract: *The text addresses an evaluative activity applied to a Consumer behavior class in which students were asked to create and describe a meme starter pack, correlating it with issues inherent to the anthropology of consumption and cultural material. After gathering the assignments developed over three semesters, I put together 59 starter packs, which allowed me to observe seven topics that most interested the students: sports; class; technology; music; lifestyle; sexuality; politics; and others. The content of the memes reveals that students chose to illustrate identities to which they belong, but also explored social groups from which they radically distance themselves. This evaluative activity has proven to be effective in promoting an understanding of the importance of practices and objects for the production of identities in the contemporary world.*

Keywords: *pedagogical resource; starter pack; consumer behavior; consumption; identity.*

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Resumo: *O texto aborda uma atividade de avaliação aplicada a uma turma de Comportamento do consumidor na qual os(as) alunos(as) deveriam criar e descrever um meme starter pack, correlacionando-o com discussões inerentes à antropologia do consumo e cultura material. Após acumular os trabalhos desenvolvidos ao longo de 3 semestres, reuni 59 starter packs, que permitiram observar 7 temas que mais interessaram aos(às) alunos(as): Esporte; Classe; Tecnologia; Música; Estilo de vida; Sexualidade; Política; e Outros. O conteúdo dos memes revela que os(as) estudantes optaram por ilustrar identidades às quais se filiam, mas também exploraram outros grupos sociais dos quais se afastam radicalmente. Esta atividade avaliativa se demonstrou efetiva para promover a compreensão da importância das práticas e dos objetos para a produção de identidades no mundo contemporâneo.*

Palavras-chave: *recurso pedagógico; starter pack; comportamento do consumidor; consumo; identidade.*

Introduction

In Advertising and Propaganda courses, the topic “consumer behavior” is usually included, either as a standalone subject or under other names, such as *Consumption Studies*, *Consumer Psychology*, or simply *Psychology*. In this text, I use the term “consumer behavior” to refer to the subjects covered by it.

For the aspiring advertising professional, approaching an understanding of human complexity is a fundamental task. Subjects such as Philosophy, Anthropology, and Sociology, almost always offered in the early semesters of the course, provide the foundation for a humanistic approach to professional practice. The course on *Consumer Behavior* usually appears in the curriculum after the student has been introduced to the propedeutic subjects mentioned, typically around the third or fifth semester. Generally, it addresses psychosocial issues inherent to the purchasing process and consumption practices, which may take different forms depending on the course syllabus and the profile of the instructor. Later on, I will more thoroughly discuss the specific aspects of the subject based on my teaching experience, which I intend to share here.

In this article, therefore, I intend to discuss the experience of applying an assessment activity in which the meme starter pack was used as an educational resource in the *Consumer Behavior* course. The assessment was proposed to a class of the aforementioned course, which is part of the Advertising and Propaganda program within the Department of Social Communication at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (Decom/UFRN). Beyond explaining the teaching experience, I aim to frame the discussion about the central role of using new languages in pedagogical practices in higher education, especially within the Advertising and Propaganda course, against the backdrop of the possibilities for educators to navigate such many transformations.

Since the beginning of this century, this has already been a concern in the field of Educommunication. As Soares (2000, p. 12) pointed out,

“another issue gains relevance and pertains to the conditions that teachers have to coexist with the new *modus communicandi*, characteristic of new technologies and inherent to the nature of virtual communities.” Peterossi and Meneses (2005, p. 105) also diagnosed the change of times in the technological landscape and its repercussions on the teaching-learning process, claiming that “new technologies are altering the nature of what needs to be learned, who needs to learn, who teaches, and how it can be taught.”

More recently, Citelli, Soares, and Lopes (2019) discussed the challenges imposed on Educommunication. Among them is the issue of dialogue in the teacher-student relationship, a situation in which — increasingly — the teacher often ends up performing a monologue during the course of expository classes. A second point worth highlighting is the issue of devices, whose use could represent an opportunity to promote the circulation of new languages. The authors acknowledge that “[the] classroom experience [...] is not always attentive to such landscapes, as it tends to restrict the circulation of languages to the verbal modality (whose importance is undeniable), overlooking the rich suggestions offered by iconographic, chromatic, sound, etc.” (CITELLI; SOARES; LOPES, 2019, p. 19).

In this text, therefore, the discussion of the activity aims to modestly contribute to the debate within the field of Educommunication, attempting to think about how a different *modus communicandi* mediated by the opportunities opened up through new technologies and languages — such as memes — can help mitigate current problems, such as the limited dialogue observed between educators and students.

Initially, I present to the reader the main objectives of the course in which the activity was developed and the context of its application; then, I discuss the relevance of memes in contemporary society and the specificities of the “meme starter pack”; subsequently, I examine the potentialities of this assessment proposal based on the elaborations made by the students.

Consumer behavior: a multi-faceted discipline

As already pointed out in the introduction, *Consumer Behavior* is a central discipline in undergraduate programs in Advertising and Propaganda in Brazil, since, besides its pedagogical importance in the training of students, it also encompasses some institutional obligations outlined in official documents. In the Opinion of the CNE/CES No. 146/2020 (BRAZIL, 2020), which addresses the National Curriculum Guidelines for the Advertising and Propaganda Course, the importance of developing skills so that future advertisers can understand consumer habits is highlighted. Additionally, among the competences to be developed is the ability of students to critically connect with consumer subjects and their practices of meaning-making in response to advertising, for example, as well as “solidary sensitivity; social connection; fascination with people; investigative attitude; psychological, cultural, and social interpretation of subjects.” (BRAZIL, 2020, p. 32). The course Consumer Behavior — but not only it —, because it essentially deals with the study of macro-social aspects and individual practices and their relation to consumption, is largely responsible for developing the previously mentioned competencies.

At Decom/UFRN, the said course¹ has a workload of 60 hours, is offered in the 5th semester, and has the subject *Social Psychology and Communication*². I taught this course at Decom/UFRN on three consecutive occasions: 2021/2, 2022/1, and 2022/2, aiming, based on the syllabus, to develop a program with a strong interdisciplinary inspiration, aware of the inherent challenges of such an approach, which mainly lie in its ambiguous nature: “[n]avigating ambiguity requires accepting the madness that interdisciplinary activity awakens and the lucidity that it demands” (FAZENDA, 1998, p. 21).

1 According to the current curriculum framework, which came into effect in 2018/2.

2 A 4th-semester course, totaling 60 hours, which, according to the syllabus, addresses contemporary social forms and new processes of subjectivation (SIGAA, 2023).

For this, I developed a series of classes and readings³ aimed at understanding consumption as a complex sociocultural practice with diverse facets, aligning with my deep epistemological approach connected to Latin American Cultural Studies.

It was divided into four approaches: anthropological⁴; sociological⁵; psychoanalytic⁶; and marketing⁷. Here is not the place to discuss theoretically how each of the approaches contributed to the understanding of what consumption is. However, I simply reiterate that, given the affiliation with a sociocultural approach to understand this phenomenon, I aimed to adopt a more comprehensive and thoughtful perspective — that is, less pessimistic or denunciatory regarding the role of consumption in contemporary societies. From developing a program aligned with this perspective, it was possible to establish interdisciplinary dialogues to understand consumption as a fundamental axis of modern life, the importance of material culture, conscious and unconscious motivations for purchasing, and the mediating power of sociocultural variables. After presenting the general guidelines of the course and how it was structured during the three semesters in which I taught it, I will proceed to introduce the proposed assessment activity.

Evaluative Activity: General Instructions

At UFRN, students are required to complete three assessments. The evaluation discussed in this article refers to the first activity, which involves debates about the emergence of consumption studies in Brazil and the anthropological approach to discussing material culture. The guidelines for the assessment were explained during class and also published in a

3 Both theoretical and “practical”.

4 Through authors such as: Livia Barbosa, Colin Campbell, Mary Douglas and Rosana-Pinheiro Machado.

5 Through authors such as: Livia Barbosa and Néstor García Canclini.

6 Through authors such as: Sigmund Freud, Clotilde Perez, Naiara Pereira de Vaz and Anna Isabel Araújo.

7 Through authors such as: Philip Kotler and Michael Solomon.

.pdf document made available to the class via SIGAA. In this document, the assessment was introduced as follows:

As Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood stated in 1979, paraphrasing Lévy-Strauss, “*Consumption is good for thinking.*” Contemporary, in the landscape of postmodern identities (fragmented, fluid, and unfinished), consumption presents itself as a fundamental axis of aesthetic and behavioral ways of living. Depending on the theoretical framework, the name for these identity groupings will be recognized as “groups,” “cultures,” “tribes,” etc. Regardless of this, it is evident that many individuals strongly connect to a specific identity organization, reproducing its symbolic and moral systems. To name just a few, we can refer to: *Fariálimers*; *Emos*; *Funkeiros*; *Otakus*; *Hippies*; *Hipsters*, etc.

After this preamble, I presented the objective in a more focused manner: “The aim of this assessment is to select a certain identity and illustrate which elements of material culture are part of its system of representations. The idea is to create a ‘starter pack,’ that is, the essential items and/or activities that a ‘rocker’ (for example) should possess and/or do.” In order to achieve this, students were required to fulfill three specific objectives, each with its corresponding weight, which would constitute their final grades:

- a) Presentation of the identity (where it originated and what is the central element around which its members organize themselves?) (3 pts.);
- b) Elements of material culture that characterize this group: present and describe between 3 and 5 items or practices (3 pts.);
- c) Based on the presented identity, conduct a brief reflection on the importance of elements of material culture in consumer society regarding their integrative nature, citing at least two authors discussed in class (4 pts.).

Since it is not a course focused on graphic developments, I waived the requirement for students to produce a visual meme for the starter pack. However, I can preview that most students created it using the language

codes of memes that circulate popularly on the internet, which will be discussed in the next section. Following what is discussed by Scolari (2010, p. 55), “encouraging the creation of content in the educational context means moving from the realm of *user-generated content* (a concept originating from the media ecosystem) to *content generated by students*”⁸. The work was to be completed individually or in pairs and did not need to be presented orally; it was only to be submitted in writing via the system, adhering to the limit of 1,500 words.

Before presenting the results of the assessment, it is important to contextualize some discussions around the role of memes in contemporary digital culture, specifically about the meme of the starter pack, highlighting its emergence and main features.

THE meme: brief notes

In 1976, biologist Richard Dawkins, in his search for a universal truth in biology, identified in genes a very peculiar behavior with the potential to become a general principle applicable to all organic beings: their replicator character. Extending beyond the microscopic level of genes, the scientist questions whether other types of replicators could potentially be found in the universe. His imagination leads him to suggest that a new replicator is right before us, on our planet, constantly evolving: culture. Dawkins (1989) refers to the replicating nature of culture as a “meme,” which he defines as the unit of cultural transmission, a unit of imitation.

Examples of memes include melodies, ideas, slogans, fashion trends, ways of making pots, or constructing bows. Just as genes propagate within the gene pool by jumping from body to body through sperm or eggs, memes also spread within the meme pool by jumping from brain to brain through a process that, in a broad sense, can be called imitation (DAWKINS, 1989, p. 254).

8 Our translation. In the original: Fomentar la creación de contenidos en el ámbito educativo significa pasar del *contenido generado por el usuario* (un concepto proveniente del ecosistema mediático) a los *contenidos generados por los estudiantes*.

The original concept of “meme,” as discussed by the biologist, remained virtually dormant until the emergence of Web 2.0⁹ and the rise of participatory culture¹⁰, when ordinary people and researchers began to observe, in discussion forums and social networking sites, the circulation of a type of material that is aesthetically simple, with images and text, and generally humorous in nature. These graphic contents were spontaneously created and shared by users of the World Wide Web. Thus, the concept of “memes” reemerges, now coupled with the suffix “of the internet,” referring to mimetic and remixable content developed and shared in the digital environment. Shifman (2014) summarizes that the mimetic condition relates to the internet meme’s ability to be imitated by others. The author affirms that imitation is something people have always done: they imitate their parents, teachers, friends, and celebrities. What changes with the emergence of Web 2.0 is the expanded visibility of this practice. On YouTube, it becomes possible to find thousands of user-made versions of a single video that has gone viral¹¹. Remixability is considered a more recent element, involving a practice that becomes possible only through access to technological tools that allow creating/editing content for subsequent publication on the web. In remixing, the user edits the image or video, altering visual and/or auditory elements, proposing a reinterpretation of the original version of the meme. Thus, it requires a certain level of technical knowledge to perform it.

Therefore, the internet meme becomes a cultural artifact of the contemporary world, capable of representing content related to local

9 According to Jenkins, Green, and Ford (2015), it is a business model on the internet that enables user participation. If, until then, subjects had a “passive” relationship with web content, the rise of Web 2.0 made it possible to produce content such as blogs, forming communities and discussion groups.

10 The taxonomical framework of Web 2.0, which defines a “culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content (JENKINS, 2013, p. 323).”

11 According to Jenkins, Green, and Ford (2015), labeling a particular content as “viral” means indicating that it has spread extremely quickly among audiences via the internet (news portals, blogs, social media sites). Internet virality, therefore, characterizes a networked behavior in which agents actively and rapidly propagate a specific content.

and global sociocultural aspects through the use of imagery, textual, and sound resources. At the extreme, as affirmed by Shifman (2014, p. 182), “internet memes play a key role in contemporary formulations of political participation and cultural globalization.

Similarly, Miller et al. (2019) explore memes as an indirect form of expression and control of moral norms on the internet. They observe that memes not only reinforce what is believed to be normative but also provide people with a way to position themselves critically or express values without direct confrontation through more elaborate textual posts (the long texts or “*textões*”). This is largely facilitated by the visual nature of this language, amplified by social media. In this way, memes are seen as a form of “moral surveillance,” through which users promote and reaffirm cultural norms in a humorous and accessible manner.

Obviously, not every message posted on the web will have the capacity to propagate. Specific socio-cultural conditions, literacies, and interpretative skills are necessary for a particular content to be effectively imitated and/or remixed. As Blackmore (2000, p. 73) aptly notes, “the perspective of the meme is the one that considers its surrounding environment to see what replication opportunities it has. What does a meme need in order to make more copies of itself, and what will prevent it from doing so?¹²”.

Since the emergence of Web 2.0, countless contents uploaded to the World Wide Web have become memes, enabling, beyond the description of their main characteristics as mentioned above (SHIFMAN, 2014), the identification of a certain typology of memes. The author, for example, recognizes nine types of memes that, according to him, are important formats that guided meme production over the last decade (2004-2014). Among them, we highlight *LOLcats* and *rage comics*, respectively represented in Figure 1 below:

12 Our translation. In the original: “*el punto de vista del meme es aquel que contempla su entorno para ver de qué oportunidades de replicación dispone. ¿Qué necesita un meme para hacer más copias de sí mismo, y qué le impedirá hacerlo?*”.

Figure 1 – Memes



Source: available at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mafaioz/5567019183> e <https://tinyurl.com/yc-44cmsa>. Access on: Nov. 1st, 2024.

Identifying categories of memes, of course, is an ongoing task, given the speed at which new memes emerge in digital culture. A more recent study, published in 2020, considers 11 types of memes (IBÁÑEZ, 2020). Among them, the author highlights the starter pack meme, which I will focus on from here on.

Starter pack: prototyping identities

The starter pack is a meme, and like all content of this kind, it has a history, that is, an original and first post that was catapulted to the status of a “meme.” According to the portal *Know Your Meme*¹³, its origin dates back to September 27, 2014, when a Twitter user posted three images representing parts of a head/face of a (supposedly) white woman, arranged in a grid. These images showed: one of hair styled in a bun; one of an ear with a large, gold hoop earring; and a photograph of a face focusing on the area between the nose, mouth, and chin, in which the woman had a

13 This site presents itself as a portal that researches and documents internet memes and phenomena of virality. It was founded in 2008 and has since been cited as an official source by media outlets as well as for scientific research. I would like to highlight that in Brazil, we have a similar meme repository called the Museum of Memes, a project led and coordinated by Viktor Chagas and his research group coLAB at the Federal Fluminense University

piercing just above the lower lip, located on the right side. These three images, representing parts of a human body, probably of a female, were captioned “The ‘I date black guys’ starter pack” (KNOW YOUR MEME, 2014), as observed in the following image (Figure 2):

Figure 2 – First “*starter pack*”



Source: Know your Meme (2014).

What the user of the platform was suggesting is that all white women who date black men tend to wear that type of earring, have a piercing near the mouth, and style their hair in a bun. These elements, therefore, would be like the basic signs that constitute the identity of this specific kind of woman whose practice is “dating black men,” a sort of initial kit. According to the consulted website, in less than a month, X (formerly

Twitter) already had hundreds of posts with starter packs of all kinds, being mentioned more than 640,000 times per week. Since then, starter packs continue to be created to represent all sorts of relationships between individuals, groups, and practices.

Obviously, the production and replication of these posts reveal — like all memes — cultural specificities, simplifications, and often prejudices against certain groups. In general, Eschler and Menking (2018, p. 2) consider that starter packs “illustrating a prototype of a cultural artifact, member of a community, or shared experience”. In the study conducted by the authors, the following question seeks to be answered: “How is social identity conveyed or expressed in starter pack memes?”.

Building on the data interpretation, Eschler and Menking (2018) disagree with a reading that might suggest that such a meme is a “categorizer” of groups and individuals or a producer of stereotypes and caricatures. They argue that starter packs represent a more complex “semiotic bricolage,” since they offer a series of isolated figures that need to be interpreted as a whole based on textual guidance (the caption). They prefer, therefore, to refer to starter packs as “prototypes of identities.” Citing Donath (2014), they explain that the term “prototype” refers, from the perspective of identities, to the activity of reducing the peculiarities of social groups to the smallest common denominator, that is, “a set of minimal social cues that a person can use to infer other information about an individual’s social world (ESCHLER; MENKING, 2018, p. 9).

Despite the moderate approach toward starter packs, which are less politically concerned and, I would say, slightly relativist, it is necessary to recognize that such memes can indeed operate as a form of symbolic violence of significant magnitude against certain social groups. Treating the stereotyping process merely as “social tips” neutralizes the symbolic — and therefore political — dimension that resides within the meme. Hall (2016), a key reference in Cultural Studies and a fundamental author in identity studies, considers that stereotyping always involves an articulation between representation, difference, and power.

Thus, according to the author, “the first point is that stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes, and ‘fixes’ difference” (HALL, 2016, p. 191). Returning to the post that originated the starter pack meme (Figure 2), it is essential to recognize that within it lies an articulation of symbolic violence operated in the dimensions of gender and race, disguised as subtle humor — a device, as mentioned earlier, almost always present in meme language.

Returning to the findings of Eschler and Menking (2018), through a content analysis of 500 starter pack memes posted on *Reddit*, the authors observe that 71.6% of them use signs of consumption to encode the meme, representing, through products and brands, a specific group or practice.

The dominance of using signs of consumption to represent social groups is not surprising. In contemporary societies, abstract values and ideologies that underpin the premises of a social identity are predominantly represented through rituals that find, in the practices of consuming goods and services, the possibility of their materialization. Products and brands, as Douglas and Isherwood (2006) argue, become the visible part of culture, responsible for organizing and reflecting the social structure and power relations within a society, and whose use extends beyond the utilitarian dimension, transforming into a vehicle of symbolic meanings. Barbosa (2004) complements this by recalling that things, beyond serving for the biological reproduction that ensures our survival (food, shelter, clothing), also secure our social reproduction, producing symbolic boundaries between us and others and providing material inputs for the stabilization of identities¹⁴: we do not eat, live, and dress “generically,” but rather in a way structured by multiple cultural, economic, and social conditions, which can reveal everything from the customs of a nation to its deep social inequalities.

14 Many other authors and researchers delve into this issue. Cf. Clotilde Perez, Elisa Piedras, Grant McCracken, Rosana Pinheiro-Machado, Everardo Rocha etc.

The anthropologist Daniel Miller (1998), acknowledging Mary Douglas's influence on his reflection, addresses the topic of material culture by suggesting that any analysis of the materiality of concrete artifacts should be conducted through a methodological strategy that recognizes how this materiality (re)produces subjectivities. Thus, material culture is not merely a material reflection of tastes and preferences but also a means through which identities are forged. Building upon his research on material culture, the author offers the following definition: "an indirect way to understand people and relationships, but one through which we can reach our destination more quickly and go much further than many other more tempting and direct routes" (MILLER, 2013, p. 225). The author also highlights the active, living, and productive nature of things and objects, which help people become "someone," referencing the example of the sumptuous garments of emperors. Therefore, objects possess symbolic value and serve as a way to reflect on relationships, values, identities, and society itself.

In this sense, the starter pack meme gains relevance because it encourages us to reflect on the function of material culture and ritual practices in the reproduction of social groups and the symbolic structuring of identities. Both understanding and creating such a meme require exercises in abstraction and, most importantly, a keen anthropological perception capable of weaving together the signs of material culture to prototype the identity in question. This "weaving" can be understood through the concept of "intertextuality," which, within the circulation of starter packs, "can help establish symbolic boundaries around a culture through a system of mutual referentiality" (MILTNER, 2020, p. 506).

Thus, understanding the relationship between the starter pack meme and its function in "thinking" about consumption and identities, I proceed to the next section with the report on the results of the application of the assessment activity, which, as a reminder, aimed at producing starter packs to discuss the importance of material culture.

Results of the activity: how to be a young bus rider and other identities

Over the three consecutive semesters¹⁵ during which the activity was implemented within the *Consumer Behavior* course (Decom/UFRN) while I was the instructor, a total of 59 starter packs were created by students, either individually or in pairs. After collecting them in a chart, I aimed to categorize them under seven labels that summarized the “type” of prototyped identity for the creation of the meme. The categories were as follows:

- Sports: identities that refer to sports practice or fan groups;
- Class: refer to economic variables as the main element;
- Technology: organized around the appreciation and consumption of technological and digital devices;
- Music: sound scenes are the main source of aesthetic and behavioral reference;
- Lifestyle: adhere to everyday practices based on affiliation with a certain type of movement, trend, or behavior;
- Politics: refer their identities to political ideologies;
- Others: identities that are structured around highly niche and isolated practices.

In Table 1, it is possible to observe the identity groups produced by the students, organized based on the categorizations I subsequently developed:

By examining Table 1, we can consider that some identity groups may overlap. For example, “Tango Dancers” might also be categorized under *Music*. The group “Wine Lovers” could be included in the *Class* category if we assume that wine enthusiasts tend to have a more privileged economic status. Although a more complex organization of the categories could be very beneficial, for the purposes of a more objective systematization, I chose to remain “faithful” to what the identities most directly and superficially resembled. The goal was simply to demonstrate

15 In 2022/1, 11; In 2022/2, 21; and in 2022/2, 26.

Table 1 – *Starter packs* produced by the students

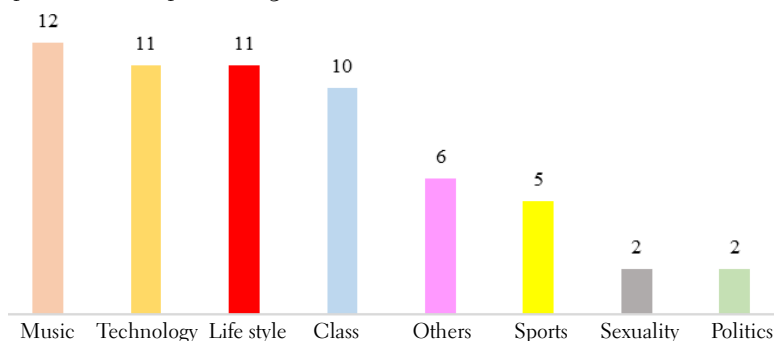
2021/2	2022/1	2022/2
Bikers	Brazilian Sports fan	Brazilian in the world cup
Skaters	Sports fan from the ABC region	Gay casanova
Brazilian University student living alone	Preppy girls	Heterotop from Natal
Tiktokers	Preppy girls	Rich person's stunt double
Tiktokers	Fariálimers	Fariálimers
Indies	Geeks	Young bus riders
Emos	Geeks	Preppy girls
Kpopper	Gamers	<i>Pintas</i>
Rocker	Pagode lovers	<i>Pintas</i>
Otakus	Harries	Bolsonaro supporters
Mystical Young person	Rockers	Bolsonaro supporters
Beach person	High school Teen Rocker	Bloggers
	Beliebers	BookToks
	Gothics	E-girls / E-boys
	Otakus	Gamers
	Futurists	Gamers
	Clubbers	Vsco girls
	Hippies	Emos
	Tango dancers	Funkers
	Quadrille dancers	Indies
	Brazilian sluts	Clean girl
		Dark gym
		Hippies
		Vegans
		Cat lovers
		Wine lovers

	Sports
	Sexuality
	Class
	Technology
	Music
	Life style
	Politics
	Others

Source: Elaborated by the author, based on the activities developed by the students.

which elements the young students most connected with to complete the activity, as shown in the Graph 1 below:

Graph 1 – Starter pack categories

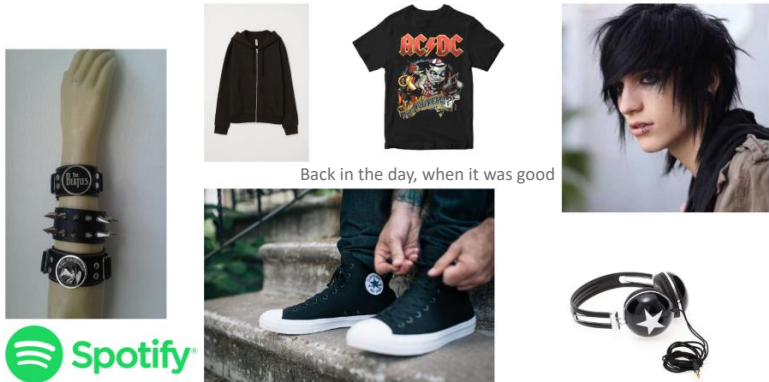


Source: Elaborated by the author, based on the activities developed by the students).

Graph 1 is quite revealing of the sociocultural context of the young students who completed the activity. Although explaining the reasons behind their choices for the starter pack was not part of the assessment, during class discussions about the results, I inquired with the students about what motivated them. Across all three semesters, the majority highlighted that they chose the identified group because they feel included or very close to it. The fact that the most prevalent starter pack categories are *Music*, *Technology*, *Lifestyle*, and *Class* demonstrates the fundamental role these elements play in shaping the identities of the young students. It is well known that music, especially, exerts a significant influence as a vast symbolic arsenal of references for adolescents and young adults to shape their styles. Many of them, for example, identify as “rockers,” whose identity is summarized as follows by a student¹⁶ (Figure 3):

16 The publication of the authorship of the memes was authorized by the students via email.

Figure 3 – “Rocker” *starter pack*



Source: Washington Câmara, student of *Consumer Behavior*.

Another starter pack that deserves to be highlighted is that of the “Young Bus Rider” (Figure 4). Like others, this meme suggests daily practices of young people, primarily students, who commute by bus every day. Although this issue is approached with humor by the student, the meme

Figure 4 – Young bus rider *starter pack*
jovem buseiro(a) starterpack



Source: Luiz Gustavo Bezerra de Souza, student of *Consumer Behavior*.

reveals the difficulties faced by young people who do not own a car or lack the economic means to travel by Uber and similar services. Crowded and inadequate buses, without air conditioning, arriving at bus stops at arbitrary times, often subjecting passengers to long waiting periods in the sun, are experiences shared by many of the students.

This set of elements, based on the meme above, represents the reification of specific identities marked by generational and class crossings. In this sense, the “young bus rider” identity portrayed in the starter pack can be viewed as a material creation of oneself (MILLER, 1998), revealed through objects, practices, and rituals involved in the “simple” act of commuting by bus.

Another significant portion of students said that their choice was based on observing some groups/identities that are highly present in their daily lives, especially in the digital environment. It is interesting to note that among those who chose to describe one “other” identity, they did so with the intention of subtly criticizing it humorously — whether because of its eccentricity, superficiality, or because it belongs radically to another “universe.” One example was the identity “Preppy Girls” (Figure 5), which appeared three times. Below is an example of a starter pack that illustrates this group:

Figure 5 – “Preppy girl” *starter pack*

PATRICINHA NATALENSE STARTER PACK



Source: Victoria Silva, student of *Consumer Behavior*.

In addition to this aspect, a characteristic quite common and explored in some memes, such as the “Preppy Girl” (Figure 5) and others, was the marker of the Potiguar or Natalense regional identity. This variable appeared primarily in the starter packs related to the categories of *Class* and *Sexuality*. In these, it was possible to observe the influence of a moral dimension in the construction of the memes (MILLER et al., 2019), representing the Other identity with elements that enable an ironic caricature and carry an implicit dose of value judgment. An example of each can be seen in Figures 7 and 8.

In Figure 7, the student appropriates the expression “*pinta*” to refer to Potiguar individuals who adopt specific attitudes and consumption practices, as revealed by the images that make up the starter pack. The “*pintas*” are young people who embrace a style oriented toward ostentation through clothing brands, as well as listening to certain types of music that narrate their daily lives. The meme in Figure 8, the “*Gay Casanova*,” represents the identity of individuals who frequent *Casanova Ecobar*, a nightclub catering to the LGBTQIAPN+ community located in the southern zone of Natal. It is important to highlight that this meme articulates both the axis of sexuality and class, as students refer to objects

Figure 7 – “*Pinta*” starter pack

Started Pack Pinta



Source: Geovanna Nascimento, student of *Consumer Behavior*.

Figure 8 – “Gay Casanova” *starter pack***The “GAY CASANOVA” starter pack**

Source: Moisés Oliveira Lima and João Victor de Souza Coutinho, students of *Consumer Behavior*.

and styles commonly recognized as “more expensive” by the young students I engaged with over the semesters. I particularly note the image of the orange piece of clothing from *Algobão*, a local fashion brand whose shirt prices range from R\$ 130 to R\$ 330.

In both cases, it is interesting to consider that the proposed assessment allowed for an exercise of reflexivity on the students’ own practices, as well as an anthropological perspective on the Other. Although not discussed here, it is worth remembering that the starter packs should include a brief historical overview of the emergence of the explored identity, along with an explanation of why the objects and practices selected to compose the meme were chosen. This approach allowed students to present both a contextualization based on documentary research, such as in the case of the *Hippies*, discussing the *hippie* movement of the 1970s in the United States; and also a description derived from their own everyday empirical observations, as in the case of “Gay Casanova.”

Final Considerations

This article aimed to present and discuss elements of students' productions related to an assessment activity in the *Consumer Behavior* course of the Advertising and Propaganda program at Decom/UFRN. In this activity, students were expected to create and explain a version of the starter pack meme based on a freely chosen social identity. I collected the works developed over the 3 semesters, totaling 59 starter packs. Subsequently, I organized the materials into seven categories: *Sports*; *Class*; *Technology*; *Music*; *Lifestyle*; *Politics*; and *Others*. The most frequent occurrences of starter packs were in the categories of *Music*, *Technology*, *Lifestyle*, and *Class*. Regarding the memes classified as *Music* and *Technology*, most reflected the students' own identities, almost like a starter pack about themselves. The memes developed in the *Class* category also represented issues experienced by the students; however, most of them served as representations with a tone of mockery and sarcasm, which was more evident in the descriptive explanations provided by the students after the presentation of the meme image. This revealed its moral dimension — a point discussed by Miller et al. (2019).

Based on the developments and results, it is possible to affirm that the application of this activity was successful. The students engaged in creating the meme, fulfilling most of the requirements outlined for the activity. When the guidelines were presented in class, the majority of students displayed signs of enthusiasm. However, some students had some difficulty understanding which meme I was referring to. Although examples were provided and the purpose of the meme was contextualized for those unfamiliar with it, creating an image identical to the typical starter pack memes circulating on social media sites was not a requirement. Beyond being a well-received activity — since, according to reports, students found it entertaining to carry out —, the assessment proved to be useful in achieving the main objective, which was to have them relate the construction of the starter pack to the theoretical framework discussed in class on the anthropology of

consumption and material culture. Most of the students' work referenced authors such as Livia Barbosa, Mary Douglas, Baron Isherwood, and Daniel Miller in a coherent manner to interpret their own starter packs. Some students even incorporated other authors not previously discussed in the course, such as Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Baudrillard, likely because they had encountered these authors in other subjects within the program — which is worth celebrating, as it highlights the connections between disciplines and authors.

The activity involving meme starter packs not only illustrates identities through material culture but also reveals the capacity of objects to act as vehicles for the production of identities, as already explored by Miller (1998), Douglas and Isherwood (2006), and other authors in the field of the anthropology of consumption. This process served to illustrate, in a didactic way, that objects and cultural practices, although simple in their everyday appearance, play a profound symbolic role, functioning as the glue that maintains the cohesion of different social groups. Thus, the meme in question is useful for representing a microcosm of the more complex dynamics involved in the formation of subjectivity through material culture, providing important insights into how contemporary consumption is both shaped by and shapes culture itself.

To conclude, another important point to highlight is the significance of revitalizing assessment processes to better connect with the universe of contemporary students. Memes, specifically, can provide an opportunity for students to synthesize theories and abstractions in a more playful and engaging way (GROHMANN, 2021), so that this genre is not only approached as an object of study, but also as a language resource that students themselves can be appropriated of. This aligns with what Scolari (2010) referred to as “student-generated content.”

This does not mean that all assessments and classroom presentations should turn into a spectacle of memes. It means recognizing that, with the rise of digital culture, new languages are emerging, and memes prove to be a powerful communicative resource. I believe it is possible, in circumstances in which it makes sense, to also consider

memes as a pedagogical tool or, as Grohmann (2021) suggests, an educommunications device. It is not productive to rigidly impose teaching and assessment methods based on the conservative discourse of “it has always been like this.” The COVID-19 pandemic made this quite clear. With the return to in-person classes, it is not only the educator’s responsibility to connect with new realities and dynamics, but also the role of management to promote spaces where teachers can learn about different formats and better understand new habits, practices, and worldviews that shape what it means *to be young* today. In this way, by acknowledging the legitimacy of the changes that have occurred, it may increasingly be possible to establish a teaching-learning environment that embraces the *sensorium* of youth in this still early 21st century.

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