

# Branded Content and Entertainment Hybrid Narratives<sup>1</sup>

## Conteúdo de Marca e Entretenimento: Narrativas Híbridas

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**Abstract** *The research observes narrative strategies in contemporary advertising discourses where Branded Content and Entertainment and hybridized. Starting with the concept of Hybrid Publicity, which considers four elements in its make-up - persuasion capacity, entertainment bias, level of interaction, and encouragement to share - this reflection analyzes the hybridization of the social film The Beauty Inside, regarding the visibility provided to the brands advertised, the audience engagement, and the effectiveness of the results.*

**Key-words:** Advertising; Hybridization; Narrative; Entertainment; Brand content

**Resumo** *A pesquisa observa estratégias narrativas presentes em discursos publicitários contemporâneos nos quais se hibridizam o Conteúdo de Marca – Branded Content – e o Entretenimento. Partindo do conceito de Publicidade Híbrida, que contempla quatro elementos constituintes – capacidade de persuasão, viés entretivo, nível de interação e estímulo ao compartilhamento – essa reflexão analisa a hibridização publicitária do social film “The Beauty Inside”, quanto à visibilidade propiciada às marcas anunciantes, ao engajamento do público e à efetividade dos resultados.*

**Palavras-chave:** Publicidade; Hibridização; Narrativa; Entretenimento; Conteúdo de marca

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## Introduction

As a continuation of our research<sup>3</sup>, this article observes narrative strategies in contemporary advertising discourses where Branded Content and Entertainment are hybridized. Starting with the concept of Hybrid Publicity, which considers four elements in its make-up - persuasion capacity, entertainment bias, level of interaction, and encouragement to share - this reflection seeks to understand advertising hybridization practiced by advertisers in current communication, examining the visibility provided to the brands, the audience engagement, and the effectiveness of the results achieved.

We begin with the presupposition that the individual who acts in the communications process, especially through interactions in contact networks and through the production and sharing of content, contributes to the construction of meaning, transforming these interconnections into an act of communication. Supporting us in this understanding, Manuel Castells (2012, p.23) says that the act of communicating means sharing by exchanging information. He believes that in a broad understanding of contemporary society, the main source of socialized production is that which prevails in the public sphere, imposing itself on interpersonal communication. He concludes that, considering the configurations which evolve daily, the continual transformation of communication technology in the digital era extends the reach of the means to all of the spheres of social life, in a network that is simultaneously local and global, broad and specific, generic and personal. Thus, the process of constructing meaning is characterized by great diversity. Such as what we have seen in the meaning reached by the advertising narratives that instigate the public to participate in the discourse of the advertisers.

To demonstrate, we will propose the reading of the case *The Beauty Inside*, a cooperative campaign between Intel and Toshiba that makes up the observation *corpus* for this article. It is a well-known case due to

<sup>3</sup> “Imaginários midiáticos: uma reflexão a partir de narrativas intertextuais e imagens híbridas”, text presented at the 23rd Annual Meeting of Compós, at Universidade Federal do Pará, Belém, in May of 2014; and “Narrativas da publicidade contemporânea”, paper presented at the 2nd Iberian-American World Congress at the Universidade do Minho, Braga, in April of 2014.

its impact among expert critics and the results achieved by the advertiser with the target-audience of the campaign, but it is not, in and of itself, an innovation of the “model” considering the variety of different activities that have been suggested by several advertisers the last several years as we already addressed and analyzed previously - see Covaleski (2010) - or strategies that established foundational marks for new communication “models” such as the BMW case – *The Hire*, called the inaugurator of branded content - as the concept is currently understood. However, it is worth noting that the very idea of brands inserting themselves or appear as sponsors of media content, reminds us of the early days of cinema and the golden age of radio. What we can see more clearly is that in recent years the mass media, especially television, has been searching for the application of the branded content strategy as an alternative to the drop in advertising effectiveness facing the arrival and competition from more interactive means (MARTÍ PARREÑO, 2010).

It is worth noting the landscape in which we observe this construction of brand meaning from hybrid narratives. With the acceleration of the loss of hegemony of the mass media over the last few years, in this context specifically regarding television, the arrival of new screens, the slow diffusion of televisual ubiquity in mobile devices, or peer-to-peer TV, which promote collaborative sharing systems such as YouTube entails new production practices and media consumption. As Carlos Scolari (2009) says, a large part of the researchers consider the disappearance centralized, unidirectional, and mass media model to be a given. The author is emphatic regarding the current condition of television:

*Esa televisión ya está muy herida. El modelo centralizado, basado en la producción de programas y en la venta de audiencias a los anunciantes, está obligado a compartir su espacio con otras formas de producir, distribuir y ver la televisión. La aparición de nuevas lógicas productivas y de consumo abre una brecha en el viejo reino del broadcasting.* (SCOLARI, 2009, p.198)

For Scolari, television’s loss of competitiveness in its broadcasting format will intensify as long as its executives don’t understand the audience

as a public that is also formed by users of new technologies and new media, that cooperate in the construction of new media meaning and that they evolve along with them.

### **The direction for branding content and entertainment**

Considering what was pointed out at the beginning of this article, and in the midst of the review of communicational paradigms, it is up to advertising to adapt and evolve in such a way as to reach the dispersed attention of an audience diluted among various platforms. It is up to the advertisers and their ad agencies to rethink positions and attitudes with consumers that operate new marketing practices, give opinions about consumption experiences, interfere in communicational processes, engage in social causes, produce and disseminate media content - ultimately, “prosumers” who demand positioning and more humane actions from the brands; pronouncements and dialogue more in line with the vision/opinion of the contemporary consumers. Gisela Castro adds to the understanding of this advertising transitional landscape:

Among other factors, the proliferation of channels and the competition of the internet contributed to destabilize the traditional invasive model, making it necessary to invest in the seduction of the consumer through the insertion of marketing content in the very script of cultural products. The consolidation of the mass media entertainment industry and the possibilities that were opened through the marketing appropriation of the digital social networks contributes to destabilize the already tenuous limits between business and cultural content. (CASTRO, 2012, p.195)

Although it maintains its role as the mediator between industrial production and consumption, advertising attempts to individualize products for the consumer, as pointed out by João Anzanello Carrascoza (2008, p.218): “Once advertising intervention began, products ceased being recognized for their intrinsic value, or for their material utility. They received what Baudrillard calls ‘heat’, since they are attributed with personalized characteristics.”

This personalization of products, inculcated by advertising in the public's perception, has recently extended to communication by branded content, which seeks to associate characteristics to the brands that go beyond the direct consumption benefits. They seek the recreation of meaning in the communication process and the reception of the audience. It intends to deliver media content to be sipped without obvious targeting of the product consumption that it sponsors, but eventually inserts itself in the narrative.

Obviously, it is strategic that this investment of contemporary advertising in the rhetorical constructions is geared less towards the quality of the products and more towards the emotions that they conjure, in order to bring to the reader campaigns that are more fun, and provide them with entertainment. Advertising accompanies the development of the consumption society, and as products become more like commodities, as we mentioned, advertisers needed the best way of presenting them. (CARRASCOZA, 2008, p.222)

These narrative structures, which are different from the mass advertising, are nurtured by the international capacity of digital media and favor the engagement of the public in complex symbolic constructions, where the very internal symbolism of each individual is synchronized and harmonized, as sustained by Lucia Santaella (2010). As a result of this immersion into the digital environment, brands and consumers evolve in a gradual process of symbolic synchronization and harmonization:

With this, we build our own programs as social beings. The prosthetic communication that creates, specifically the interactive entertainment programs, the internet, cyberspace, and virtual reality, is not a matter of shared market or even content. In a McLuhanian fundamental meaning, these things are part of us. As with all forms of discourse, their existence molds us. Since they are language, it is hard to see what they do because they structure vision itself. They act in the systems - social, cultural, neurological - through which we produce meaning. Their implicit messages modify us. (SANTAELLA, 2010, p.125)

We are dealing here with the understanding of the content generated by brands that invite us to participate in their narratives. With authors in cyberspace, we collaborate in the production and sharing of knowledge, stimulated by the seduction of media visibility and by the persuasive game of announcers who entertain us.

### **Hybrid advertising and cooperative narratives**

Inspired by concepts proposed by Henry Jenkins (2009), such as *cooperative authorship* - advertising narratives in which the advertiser makes room for the participation of consumers, maintaining the overall coherence of the story, but allowing the emergence of new themes or the introduction of new elements - and *user generated content* - referring to the content produced by users, sometimes in contexts that reaffirm the intellectual property of the advertiser's brand - we can list other propositions that reflect on the diversity of narrative structures that can be co-opted by the advertising discourse and serve its persuasive interests. By association, we must remember the proposition of Pierre Lévy (1998) of *collective intelligence* - indicating the ability of virtual communities to leverage the knowledge and expertise of its members, usually for productive collaboration and dissemination of the discussions about a topic. In this same vein, but with a more optimistic view, Clay Shirky (2011) believes that we are experiencing the era of *participatory culture* - a knowledge and production accumulation system of content from the collaboration of fans and other consumers for effective participation the creation and circulation of content. Consider also the existence of synergy of bottom-up content - production strategy of the users - with the top-down official content generated by advertisers - as Carlos Scolari (2013) says, the cooperative narratives are gaining form and strength as the strategy of *hybrid advertising* (COVALESKI, 2010), by combining persuasive force, *entertainment* function, interaction capacity, ability and incentive to share. They resemble, by analogy, the design of the advertising discourse itself, in which the idea of *subject-authors* prevails, as pointed out by Fabio Hansen:

Hybrid and collaborative productions have the potential to challenge the traditional notion of authorship as a purely human and notably individual activity. In the case of the creative process of the advertising discourse, there is a unique author. The authorship is shared, composed by the intersection of many subject-authors and, of course, different types of knowledge. This all leads us to the idea of collective authorship, one that, at the end, jointly carries the correspondence of function-author to the effect-author. (HANSEN, 2013, p.161)

The vision of media corporations and also the advertisers of the communication vanguard - usually those with the most capacity for investing in advertising - regarding the growing importance of the role played by fans and consumers, causes them to recognize the emotional capital acquired by brands regarding public participation in media content, as Jenkins says:

Today, script writers and other creators think about narrative in terms of creation of consumer participation opportunities. At the same time, the consumers are using new media technologies to be involved with the content of old communication media, seeing the internet as a vehicle for collective actions - problem solving, public deliberation, and alternative creativity. In fact, we suggest that the reciprocal action - and the tension - between the top down pressure of corporate convergence and the bottom up force of alternative convergence is what is driving several changes which we observed in the media landscape. (JENKINS, 2009, pp.235-236)

In this context, some fundamental precepts of advertising communication are subject to review. Currently, corporations need to accept the contingencies of the post-mass reality, and take on “the role symbolically built by the agents of social movements, humanitarian gestures, social transformations, and the communion of subjects,” as suggested by Vander Casqui (2012, p.78). For the researcher, “the communities imagined by the narratives related to consumption are potent mediators in this process of corporate legitimation projected in a ‘new era.’”

According to Scolari (2013), in the current generation of consumers, there are those who take on an authorship condition, and are capable

of taking ownership of the universe of narratives proposed by the brands and extend them to new developments, generating media sub-product such as fake previews, parodies, and reconstitutions. And the dialogue between the parties - brands and consumers - obviously needs to be conciliatory. Scolari reaffirms (2013, p223): “*Es fundamental que los productores de una narrativa transmedia no vean a estos prosumidores como una banda de piratas textuales que les están robando sus contenidos; no solo deberían protegerlos, sino también conversar con ellos e incluso brindarles espacios donde puedan expresarse*”.

The impact of advertising on the consumption society, dictating standards, establishing fads, and anticipating trends, affects individuals as a benchmark, dictated by an alleged media culture:

Amid the many socio-cultural changes we have experienced in recent decades, we see the spread of various identity codes, encompassing language patterns, clothing, behavior, eating habits, hygiene practices and care of self, existential values and cultural traditions relating to different types of subjectivity and ways of being. Lifestyles manifest themselves through practices, habits and signs that the media culture, falling consumption and icons for consumption. In the set of contemporary lifestyles we see the crucial participation of cultural consumption as a benchmark for status, distinction, and belonging. (CASTRO, 2008, p.140)

According to Gisela Castro, we can infer that much of what we consume culturally have served as raw material for our production of media content: ingredients, from the consolidation and diversification of our cultural repertoire, we combine, juxtapose, and recycle to produce and disseminate new content, and sometimes “textualities” requested by brands open to the contribution of their consumer-fans.

### **Subjectivity in collaborative creation**

Let us now reflect upon *subject* and *diegesis*, understood in the context of hybrid narratives - subjectivity indicators in the collaborative creation of some contemporary advertisements - and for which we assume implications: *subject* – in the Greimasian point of view - is one submitted to



reflection and observation, located inside of an utterance and susceptible to not only possess certain qualities, but also to act; diegesis - as proposed by Gérard Genette - which designates the narrative aspect of the discourse: in this sense, the idea approaches the concepts of history and narrative. Narration and description make up the narrative, thus distinguishing itself from discourse - understood as a way to present the narrated.

In dialogue again with Hansen (2013, pp.157-158), if we give these advertising narratives the reading bias from the Discourse Analysis, “the author’s responsibility is an effect, an illusion that masks the fact that its interpretation - the feelings it produces and reproduces with its words - is the result of subject-position it takes on, which, in turn depends on the way it is questioned by the discursive formation it masters and the inter-discourse that exercises a determination on this discursive formation.”

If the focus is directed on the rhetoric of consumption, especially advertising language, as a contributing element of the construction of the symbolic universe of brands, we may revisit the perspective of Casaquei (2012, p.173): “corporate culture, when transformed into media strategy, molds itself according to a *communication contract*,<sup>4</sup> which is from the realm of consumption rhetoric; the media presence modes have the role of assigning meanings to corporations, brands, and merchandise that identify with the place of the subject that enunciates the communication”.

This enunciator subject, now elevated from the discrete supporting role to the leading role, through contemporary campaigns based on digital environments, consolidates the role of actor/author/director/producer/distributor that fits the consumer in hybrid narratives. Such intervention capacity in advertising, which is detached from the hegemonic discourse of the mass media, restores the importance that every citizen can play, including a critical role in society, as stated by Professor Maria Aparecida Baccega:

<sup>4</sup> CHARAUDEAU, Patrick. *Discurso das mídias*. São Paulo: Contexto, 2007.

Knowledge of the production/consumption processes, the practices and strategies of the subject to achieve success in their integration or rejection of this consumption era, the subjectivity and consumer identities will allow the critical analysis of society to be more acute and the social intervention project more likely to succeed. (BACCEGA, 2011, p.43)

In dealing with the constitution of subjectivity in the discourses of communication, in earlier research, Baccega (1995) proposes the concept of *individual-subject*. And in dialogue with such a concept, Eneus Trindade (2012, p.65) states that reflection “refers to the category of a person present in discourse [...]. For the human sciences, the individual is a subject that interacts with his world, leaving his impressions. In the case of discourse, the subject is given and analyzed from its brands in the discourse.”

We emphasize, as did José Martí Parreño (2010), that the recurrence of the narrative in advertising communications is traditional in building brand identity, particularly due to the capacity it has to transmit messages with complex meanings, and due to the ease of memorization and sharing among peers. The increased use of narratives in building brands can be seen in the proliferation of media content that includes branded content, “advertainment”, and “advergaming”, among other possible formats, but also can be in television commercials, radio spots, print ads etc. “Traditional” advertising has historically resorted to narrative as a persuasive construction.

However, we reiterate that our reflection is about the active presence of consumers in hybrid advertising narratives, built from the collaboration of brand fans and presented to the public as media content to be sipped as entertainment, stimulating sensory experiences and passing on an affection that endure in the relationship between the consumer and the brand. Hybrid narratives herein understood as those that reproduce what is contemplated in the advertising hybridization process (COVALESKI, 2010), when converging in the history told by the brand - and co-created by the consumer-fan: persuasive force, entertainment function, interactive capacity, and encouraged sharing.

Therefore, we are interested in this subject that now discourses in favor of the advertiser and finds himself inserted into the brand narrative. These are more and more commonly seen symptoms in current day media, where paradigms cease to exist, new capital rhetoric is configured, and unseen identity posture is established. Appropriate indicators to reflect and understand consumption in relation to the collaborative creations, as the Rose de Melo Rocha postulate:

This consumption which builds identities, does so today less for the possession of objects, but essentially for the manipulation of lifestyle images. Consumption begins with materiality and surpasses it. The consumption instinct is the consumption of a rationale. I am not referring here to the debate regarding cultural consumption but am in fact advocating for a new stage of socially negotiated capital management, economic interests and consumption, in which the major investment is made in the administration of subjectivities and great tool is the association between images and the imaginary. This imagery-imaginary capital obviously hinges on the long-lived marriage between production systems and symbolic production, as well as between product and media outlets. To think about consumption is to analyze the shortage/excess pendulum rationale, moreover, considering the moments when it is inclusive, and it would not be too much to affirm the legitimacy of including through this route. (ROCHA, 2012, p.43)

As suggested by the author, we can assume that part of the legitimacy of “individual-subject-consumer” is given from the contributions he produces and disseminates through the media when he fulfills the role of spokesperson for brands that provide him the space to disseminate narratives - of course, these narratives must be convenient and useful to the communication strategies of corporations, because the invitation to participate made by the brands and the “freedom of expression” granted by them, in general, are only for show. We will now begin examining a practical case that involves many of the characteristics from renowned hybrid narratives.

## The success of the hybrid narrative: The Beauty Inside case

To better understand the hybridization stage between brand communication and entertainment regarding the visibility provided to brands, the engagement of the public, and the effectiveness of the results achieved by advertisers, we propose a brief reading of the case of the film social “*The Beauty Inside*” (INTEL/TOSHIBA – PEREIRA & O’DELL, 2012), awarded the *Grand Prix* for the *Branded content & entertainment* category at the “2013 Cannes Lions – 60th International Festival of Creativity”.



Figure 1: Presentation screen of the social film *The Beauty Inside*

*The Beauty Inside* is a web-series with six episodes<sup>5</sup>, created by Pereira & O’Dell, in San Francisco – USA, an ad agency directed by Brazilian PJ (Paulo Jorge) Pereira and belonging to the Grupo ABC, of Nizan Guanaes. Besides the maximum prize for “Brand & Entertainment Content” in Cannes’ 2013, in the same edition of the festival it also

<sup>5</sup> Episode 1: *Hello my name is Alex*; Episode 2: *Leah*; Episode 3: *It Has to Be Tonight*; Episode 4: *Help Wanted*; Episode 5: *I’d Like to Show You Something*; Episode 6: *That’s It For Me*.

received medals in four other categories: *Cyber, Direct, Film e Promo & Activation*.

The web-series tells the story of a young man named Alex, who wakes up every day as a different person. He's the same person on the inside, but on the outside he's someone new every day, altering the gender, race, and age. When he meets Leah and falls in love, everything changes for him. Even if he searches for and finds her again, she will never see him or recognize him again. Based on this premise, the fans of the web-series were invited to play the "Alex" role, regardless of gender, race, or age. This subjacent social component allowed the public to get involved and participate in the narrative next to Hollywood artists. The audience also interacted with the Alex character through Facebook, cooperating with the construction of the narrative during the entire campaign run.

The Facebook experience presented an omnipresent character and user of a "Toshiba Portégé Ultrabook com Intel Inside." In this device, Alex's character would produce his daily life tale - the narrative discreetly presents the benefits of the product, but without revealing the purchase recommendation or the affective consumption. The co-branding web-series provided Intel and Toshiba with an opportunity to interact and provided a brand experience and entertainment to a generation of young consumers engaged in social media.

Over two dozen fans of the show were chosen to take on Alex's character, from various countries in various continents, extending the social film to a global scale. Facebook served as a platform for anonymous users all over the world to participate with video recordings, simulating Alex's daily recordings.

According to the data of the advertisers, the collaborative narrative received over 70 thousand views, 96,000 likes on Facebook, and a 97% approval rating on Youtube. And surpassing the tenuous limit between advertising and entertainment - considering what we have been addressing in this reflection - the social film *The Beauty Inside* was also awarded an Emmy - the main award granted by American television in the "Brand Content" category.

The episode scripts were written in such a way as to provide a space for the statements of fans, allowing them to take a leading role in parts of the narrative. The gaps in the argument could thus be filled by the collaboration of the viewers of the first episodes.

According to data released by the Pereira & O'Dell ad agency, the campaign provided significant results for the notebook produced as a partnership between Toshiba and Intel, increasing sales by 100% in comparison to the prior year.

By opting for serial fiction, *The Beauty Inside* captivated audiences throughout the global vastness of the internet, and was experienced by the viewers as entertainment. The “peer” participation in the narrative brought social network users an extra ingredient in the attractiveness of the episodes.

### **Concluding Remarks**

As we have seen during this brief reflection, the advertising strategies that promote branded content associated with entertainment have generated differentiated visibility for the brands, strengthened the engagement of the public, and increased the effectiveness of market results. It is evident, however, that the success stories such as the campaign examined are still restricted to advertisers with undeniable investment capacity, assisted by qualified ad agencies and able to break with communication paradigms that for decades have remained absolute.

Therefore, we envision the appearance of new solutions involving hybrid narratives, even if aesthetic production and operational technology costs constrain the adoption of this advertising alternative to a still significant number of advertisers. By the public's receptivity measured in the case of the social film *The Beauty Inside*, we can see that there is plenty of space for new productions of brands that will entertain and engage us. We will be looking for them.

We also saw that concepts and recent theories appropriately apply to the object of this research, lighting the way for further investigation. It comforts us to visualize the theoretical-conceptual basis through which

we can understand the new paradigms of advertising narratives, as well as the new roles assigned to consumers, from the application of the *co-operative authorship* and *user-generated content* perspective (JENKINS, 2009), along with *collective intelligence* (LEVY, 1998) and *participatory culture* (SHIRKY, 2011), the synergy of *bottom-up and top-down* content (SCOLARI, 2013), and the *process of advertising hybridization* (COVALESKI, 2010). Knowledge bases where dialogue will allow new steps toward the understanding of this dynamic and fruitful era in the context of advertising communication.

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