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Descrição

Política e economia são dois dos principais domínios de comunicação na esfera pública, graças à sua inevitável mediação. Os fenómenos políticos e económicos são práticas sociais discursivas e perspectivas conceptuais sobre o mundo e a sua comunicação envolve estratégias psicológicas e discursivas de persuasão e manipulação. Os estudos reunidos nesta obra exploram as dimensões cognitivas, socioculturais e discursivas da comunicação política e da comunicação económica, empresarial e de negócios. No enquadramento geral das Ciências da Comunicação, o volume integra estudos orientados na tradição da Análise Crítica do Discurso, trabalhos desenvolvidos na perspectiva da Linguística Cognitiva e alguns contributos da Ciência Política e das Ciências Económicas e Empresariais. Especial atenção é dada aos processos cognitivos e discursivos e suas interfaces que estruturam o pensamento e a comunicação política e económica, instauram ideologias e potenciam estratégias persuasivas e manipuladoras. São estudados diversos temas de comunicação política e económica: ideologia, poder político e económico, opinião pública, identidade social, modelos cognitivos

de identidades, cidadania, democracia, populismo, marcas, mercados, crise económica global, retórica política e económica, metáfora conceptual, mediatização da política e da economia, jornalismo político e económico, entre outros. A obra oferece modelos teóricos e metodológicos de investigação das relações entre cognição, discurso e comunicação política e económica.

Índice/Conteúdo

Introdução: Comunicação política e económica – cognição e discurso
Augusto Soares da Silva P. 1

Parte I

Comunicação política e económica: teorias e modelos

The triumph of emptiness. The social limits of grandiosity
Mats Alvesson P. 23

As condições comunicacionais dos discursos persuasivos
Patrick Charaudeau P. 39

What is the purpose of metaphor in political discourse? An answer from Critical Metaphor Analysis
Jonathan Charteris-Black P. 57

Socio-cognitive approaches to corporate discourse
Veronika Koller P. 77

Economics as Leviathan
João César das Neves P. 93

The ‘new face’ of politics: Recontextualising transnational discourses into glocal contexts
Ruth Wodak P. 105

Parte II

Comunicação política

Metaphors in rap texts. Local architecturings of political agendas
Maria Clotilde Almeida, Bibiana de Sousa and Teresa Cardoso P. 127

The differences in the discursive approach of political and economic issues in Brazilian and German popular newspapers: A case study
Poliana Coeli Costa Arantes P. 141

Simultaneous interpretation of political speeches: Tackling vagueness and framing the context
Emanuele Brambilla P. 155

Representações do político no texto humorístico em Portugal. Uma abordagem cognitiva
Rosa Lídia Coimbra P. 173

Representação política dos candidatos a presidente do Brasil por agências de notícias transnacionais nas eleições de 1989 e 2010
Fernando Ewerton Fernandez Jr. P. 189

Complexity, invisibility and multi-temporality. Public issues and serial TV: White-collar political corruption in the TV serial *The Good Wife*
Rita Figueiras P. 203

Discourse constituent structure in political commentary
Joaquín Garrido P. 219

Image schemas and political ontology
Karey Harrison P. 239

Expressive means in charismatic rhetoric
Iaroslav Kovalchuk P. 255

Imagens (entre)vistas. A construção de identidades na entrevista política televisiva
Maria Aldina Marques P. 271

O processamento metafórico em discursos sobre a crise econômica e a corrupção política no Brasil
Paulo Henrique A. Mendes e Milton do Nascimento P. 289

Uma Musa em Maquiavel? Discursos políticos em Matthew Bellamy
Nelson Nunes P. 305

As palavras de Gramsci nos discursos da Sociologia Política. Hermenêutica da produção do saber nas relações entre indivíduo e Estado
Simone Petrella, Valerio Leone Sciabolazza e Elena Maranghi P. 315

Preguntas y preguntas: La gestión de la interacción en la entrevista política
Vicent Salvador y Maria-Josep Marín P. 329

Metáforas da crise econômica e das políticas de austeridade na imprensa portuguesa: mente corpórea, discurso e ideologia
Augusto Soares da Silva P. 349

Discurso e violência contra a mulher no contexto midiático: a representação metafórica de Dilma Rousseff no jornal *Folha de S. Paulo*
Luciana Soares da Silva e Ana Rosa Ferreira Dias P. 369

Discourse, cognition and figurative language: Exploring metaphors in political editorials
Solange Coelho Vereza P. 383

Parte III
Comunicação econômica

Mudanças tecno-econômicas e seus reflexos no português brasileiro: as formações lexicais

com partículas do inglês

Maria Lucia Leitão de Almeida e Carlos Alexandre Victorio Gonçalves P. 397

“By the time I’ve counted to 10, you’ll be an homeless!” O estigma como estratégia de dissuasão no Marketing Social

Eduardo J. M. Camilo P. 409

Branding and contemporary cognition: a semiotic approach to communication effectiveness

Patrícia Dias P. 421

Desafios da comunicação empresarial em contexto de crise económica

Luísa Peixoto de Magalhães P. 439

Legitimação do campo económico-político no discurso jornalístico sobre alterações climáticas

Cláudia Herte de Moraes e Ilza Maria Tourinho Girardi P. 451

A discursivização do conceito da troika em artigos da imprensa escrita portuguesa: um espelho do que a troika é para nós?

Alexandra Guedes Pinto e Isabel Margarida Duarte P. 469

Estratégias discursivas visuais em análise: a paisagem na publicidade da Qashqai 2011

Helena Pires P. 483

O comércio sexual financiado/propagado pela mídia: análise dialógica de um anúncio de classificados de serviços sexuais

Kelli da Rosa Ribeiro P. 493

The food metaphor in structuring the global financial crisis in Serbian – Magazine covers a multimodal discourse

Nadežda Silaški and Tatjana Đurović P. 507

A Bolsa e a vida: Sistemática e metaftonímia no discurso económico

José Teixeira P. 521

Parte IV

Comunicação noutros domínios da esfera pública

Conversação e emoção em emissões nocturnas de rádio: a ironia verbal como tropo ilocutório e como estratégia discursiva de gestão interaccional do conflito

Carla Aurélia de Almeida P. 539

O discurso mediático e o conceito de estereótipo. A construção da personagem Ginano programa Café Central

Bruno Bernardo de Araújo P. 553

A retórica dos automatismos intuitivos. A lógica autoritária dos intermediários computacionais

Vania Baldi P. 569

A importância de um canal generalista público de sinal aberto para a informação televisiva

Felisbela Lopes, Ivo Neto, Sílvio Correia Santos e Luís Miguel Loureiro P. 581

Na saúde a palavra mediática não é dos doentes
Felisbela Lopes, Teresa Ruão, Sandra Marinho e Luciana Fernandes P. 597

A indústria farmacêutica na imprensa portuguesa: uma assessoria de “low profile”?
Teresa Ruão, Felisbela Lopes, Sandra Marinho e Luciana Fernandes P. 611

Branding and contemporary cognition: a semiotic approach to communication effectiveness

Abstract

This paper explores the role of cognitive structures and socially shared meanings in communication effectiveness, focusing concretely on brand communication. Traditionally in communication sciences, ambiguity and polysemy have been considered prejudicial to the effectiveness of communication. However, we argue that in branding, the more possible meanings a brand alludes to, the more people are able to identify with it and emotionally connect to it, thus contributing to the effective communication of the brand, understood as the building or reinforcement of a positive relationship between the receiver and the brand.

Our main argument is explored within a theoretical framework that is founded on the following assumptions: a) the new media are one of the main factors that shape the contemporary society; b) this shaping takes place on a cognitive level, thus originating concrete cognitive structures that are characteristic of the contemporary society; c) brands are more effective if they allude to meanings shared on a social and cultural level and if they are adjusted to contemporary cognition.

We empirically test our arguments by exploring 15 cases of rebranding of Portuguese enterprises. We focused on the logotype as the main element of the brand, and we conducted a comparative visual analysis which combined the methods of content analysis and semiotic analysis. Plus, we complemented our visual analysis with qualitative interviews to one member of each organization who was involved in the rebranding process.

Our findings showed that the brands which allude to more meanings and to more ambiguous meanings and which have more levels of meaning (denotation, connotation, myth) are more effective in generating identification and emotional relationships. Furthermore, they are cognitively more engaging and involving. We hope that our research contributes in an applied way to enhance creativity and communication effectiveness in brand design and in branding.

Keywords

Brand, communication, semiotic, cognition, digital media, mediation, effectiveness

Introduction

Contemporary society has often been described by references to the widespread, frequent and intense use of digital technologies. Digital technologies are intuitive, seamless and pervasive, and they have become ubiquitous yet imperceptible in our daily lives. Most of our experiences are therefore mediated, as we communicate, coordinate, collaborate, learn and

perform so many other activities via digital technologies. Some have suggested the concept of mediatization to describe the fact that, even when we are performing an activity that is not technologically mediated, it is happening in a mediatized context, i.e. in a social context where digital technologies are ubiquitous yet imperceptible.

As communication, or connection, is one of the main functions of digital technologies, most forms of communication are nowadays digitally mediated, and all of them are mediatized. That includes the communication of brands.

This paper approaches branding from the standpoint of the communication sciences, conceptualizing it as a communication process in which organizations communicate a brand and expect stakeholders to perceive, apprehend and interpret corresponding brand images, culminating in (positive) reputation. Regarding branding in this way, communication effectiveness in branding can be thought of as the maximum correspondence or similitude between the brand communicated by an organization and the brand images perceived and interpreted by its stakeholders. In addition, society can be regarded as the context of brand communication.

Within this alternative approach to branding, this paper explores the factors that contribute to a brand's communicational effectiveness, and suggests that the most influential ones are the cognitive structures of its receivers and the sociocultural context of meanings, reference frameworks, concepts and categories shared among them.

This argument is empirically tested in a longitudinal comparative case study that encompasses 15 rebranding processes of big Portuguese enterprises. The logotype is the focus of the empirical methods adopted, as it is considered the most important element and form of expression of a brand. A visual analysis and a semiotic analysis were used to compare the previous and new brands of each enterprise, and also to compare the 15 cases among them. Interviews to a member of each enterprise who were involved in the rebranding process complemented the empirical work.

This paper reports specifically on the findings from the semiotic analysis, highlighting the relevance of the sociocultural context for brand communication effectiveness and showing that connotative meanings play a pivotal role in making a brand more engaging and in driving identification with brands.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1. Scientific positioning and assumptions

This paper results from research within an interpretivist scientific positioning. Regarding the relationship between technology and society, it assumes an interactive perspective (Fuglsang, 2001), arguing that our daily experience results from a dynamic interaction between technological features and its effective use. However, it considers that the technological features of each technical artifact determine, or at least restrict, its possibilities of use.

In addition, this research is also positioned within an emergent trend in communication sciences that Jensen (2002) conceptualized as cognitivism. This research trend explores the role played by cognition in communication and combines concepts and methods of the communication sciences with contributions from other fields, namely biology, cognitive sciences and medicine.

The formulation of the hypothesis tested in this research is grounded on two main assumptions. On the one hand, schools of thought within communication sciences such as Symbolic Interactionism and Semiotics point to the social context as the common framework that enables and supports communication (Mead and Morris, 1967 [1934]; Blumer, 1986 [1969]; Hoopes, 1991; de Saussure, 1995 [1916]; Barthes, 2007a [1957], 1990 [1967], 2007b [1985]). On the other hand, several authors, in communication sciences but also in diverse fields such as sociology, management, marketing, cognitive sciences, computing or philosophy, refer to digital technologies as one of the most important and distinctive features of contemporary society (e.g. Toffler, 1980; McLuhan, 1994 [1964]; Drucker, 2001; Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992 [1986]; Bauman, 2000; Castells, 2005 [1996]; Perez, 2002; Jenkins, 2006; Prensky, 2006; Tapscott, 2008; Pink, 2005; Levinson, 1999; Rheingold, 2002; Rainie and Wellman, 2012; Li and Bernoff, 2008; Qualman, 2009; Shirky, 2010; Carr, 2010). Thus, following an interpretivist approach towards the literature review on this issue; we argue that the contemporary context of shared meanings, cultural references, mental categories and cognitive structures is shaped by the widespread proliferation of digital media and its frequent and intense use. We also suggest the designation of semiotic-cognitive context to describe the factors at play in the apprehension, comprehension and interpretation of messages, following the work of Turner (1998 [1996]), Fauconnier e Turner (2003 [2002]), Damásio (2000 [1994]) and Castells (2009) on the relationship between communication and cognition.

1.2. Research questions to explore

Following the proposed approach to branding as a communicational process, this paper explores the application of some assumptions which gather general agreement within the communication sciences tradition to the process of branding.

The first of the explored assumptions is the notion that in communication sciences, the sharing of the same context between sender and receiver has been traditionally considered to facilitate the effectiveness of communication, and this context has been characterized in cultural and cognitive terms.

Taking into account the above stated view of the contemporary semiotic-cognitive context as shaped by the use of digital technologies, we explore in our empirical work whether references (both on a semiotic and on a cognitive level) to this shared context in brands are correlated to its communicational effectiveness, i.e. to its ability to generate the intended brand image.

The other assumption analyzed refers to the fact that in communication sciences, ambiguity and polysemy have been traditionally thought of as prejudicial to the effectiveness of communication, understood as the maximum correspondence between the message sent by the sender and what is perceived and interpreted by the receiver. We contrast this view with the argument presented within branding that the more the more possible meanings a brand alludes to, the more people are able to identify with it and emotionally connect to it, thus contributing to the effective communication of the brand, understood as the building or reinforcement of a positive relationship between the receiver and the brand (Aaker, 2002; Balmer, 2002; Davis, 2009).

We intend to test the applicability of these assumptions by comparing the perceived communicational effectiveness during 15 rebranding processes, reported by the organizations themselves, with a semiotic analysis of each brand.

1.3. Theoretical contributions to finding answers

The theoretical framework of this research is multidisciplinary and benefits from the comparison and complementarities between different fields and scientific mindsets. Drawing on an extensive literature review on the concepts of context, communication, cognition and technology and the way they articulate and interact among themselves, this paper suggests as

theoretical development the notion of semiotic-cognitive context to describe the common biological structures and sociocultural references that encompass our daily lives in contemporary society.

Furthermore, we describe the main features of this semiotic-cognitive context we live in.

In what concerns shared meanings, thought categories, metaphors, sociocultural references and mental categories (the semiotic context), the contemporary society is commonly described, both inside and outside the academic sphere, as determined, shaped or influenced by, or at least generally related to, digital technologies. This main idea is further developed along three main axes: a) digital technologies shape contemporary society because they are associated with a transition to a new economic model (e.g. Drucker, 2002; Castells, 2005 [1996]; Perez, 2002; Tapscott, 2008; Li and Bernoff, 2008; Qualman, 2009; Shirky, 2010); b) digital technologies shape contemporary society because they are associated with changes in the sociological structures (e.g. Castells, 2005 [1996]; Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992 [1989]; Rheingold, 2002; Rainie and Wellman, 2012); and c) features of digital technologies are used as metaphors to describe the society we live in (e.g. Toffler, 1980; McLuhan, 1994 [1964]; Jenkins, 2006; Prensky, 2006; Levinson, 1999; Carr, 2012; Pink, 2005; Tapscott, 2008).

In each of these axes, the notion of digital technologies somehow shaping the way we work, coordinate, have fun, communicate, interact, love and live is also associated to what Barthes (2007a [1957], 1990 [1967], 2007b [1985]) describes as myths, i.e. connotative meanings deriving the signified of another signification order becoming the significant in another signification order. Thus, digital technologies are commonly associated, for instance, to progress, economic development and social welfare. Digital technologies are also commonly associated to characteristics such as speed, innovation and modernity, and to values such as freedom, transparency or collaboration.

This paper empirically explores if a brand, by alluding to this shared semiotic context, can transfer to itself and/or to the products/services/organization it represents some of these characteristics and values.

Regarding cognition, several authors point to digital immersion as the cause of changes in the way people focus attention, perceive information, interpret meaning and multitask (e.g. Tapscott, 2008; Prensky, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Manovich, 2002). Others go further on their claims, arguing that digital technologies determine or at least influence the formation of synaptic connections and preferred synaptic paths for certain stimuli, thus determining the

way we perceive and react to our environment and to others (e.g. McLuhan, 1994 [1964]; Pink, 2005; Damásio, 2000 [1994]; Castells, 2009; Shirky, 2012; Carr, 2012).

To describe the cognitive dimension of the contemporary context, we depart from McLuhan's description of the cognitive structures determined by immersion in electronic media, and therefore associated to the electronic age (McLuhan, 1994 [1964]). Taking into account, on the one hand, the lack of empirical work as one of the main criticisms pointed to McLuhan and, on the other hand, the increasing relevance of his thought and works among contemporary researchers, we articulate McLuhan's proposals with recent contributions and findings on cognitive structures resulting from digital immersion.

Recent studies from diverse scientific fields such as the social sciences, cognitive sciences, biology and health sciences or computing show that the frequent and intense use of digital technologies cause significant changes in the human cognitive structures, which are coincident with those early described by McLuhan (1994 [1964]). Along with very specific findings – such as the fact that playing videogames improves tridimensional perception (C.S. Green and Bavelier, 2003, 2006; S. Kutcher and M. Kutcher, 2007) or features such as the ability to process more visual information, better hand-eye coordination, quicker response to stimuli, better ability of multitasking, better ability to learn by trial and error, better ability to improvise as the result of digital immersion or better networking skills (Gee, 2005, 2007; Johnson, 2006 [2005]; Prensky, 2006; Tapscott, 2008) – some authors have suggested more encompassing concepts, most of them related to the heavier users of digital technologies, i.e. teenagers, such as Tapscott's (1998) net generation and Prensky's (2001) digital natives. On more general terms, Pink (2005) states that we are living in a conceptual age, Prensky (2001) refers to a hypertextual brain and Federman and de Kerckove (2003) to a collective intelligence, Jenkins (2006) talks about a participatory culture resulting from a distributed cognition, and Manovich (2002) analyzes the language of the new media.

Figure 1 synthesizes the description of the cognitive dimension of the contemporary context, by comparison with McLuhan's view of the cognitive structures of the electronic age.

		Other Authors								
		Carr	Gee	Jenkins	Johnson	Levinson	Pink	Prensky	Shirky	Tapscott
M. McLuhan	From unisensorial to multisensorial stimuli	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	From intense to engaging stimuli	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	From left to right hemisphere of the brain				X		X	X		X
	From linear to mosaic thinking	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Form linear to acoustic space					X	X			X
	From reason to emotion and intuition			X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	From cause-and-effect to holistic understanding	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Figure 1: Cognitive features of the contemporary context (compared to McLuhan's description of the cognitive features of the electronic age).

2. Empirical Research

2.1. Methods

This paper reports on results from an empirical research conducted in order to approach the concepts of brand and branding from the communication sciences' point of view, exploring the interaction between brand, context, communication and digital technologies.

This empirical research followed the case study method, presenting a longitudinal and comparative perspective (Bouma and Atkinson, 1995 [1987]). The research followed 15 cases of rebranding of big organizations in Portugal, operating in diversified sectors and industries, which took place between 2004 and 2011. Several methods were articulated in order to triangulate results (Berg, 1989), following a qualitative approach.

On the one hand, two types of visual analysis were applied to the logotypes representing each brand, taking into account that the logotype is considered the main form of expression, identification and representation of the brand by several authors in the field (Kapferer, 2000 [1991]; Schultz, Hatch and Larsen, 2000; Olins, 2003; Seruya, 2009). A content analysis was applied in order to evaluate the relationship between the rebranding processes and the cognitive features of the contemporary context, and a semiotic analysis was applied in order to evaluate the relationship between the rebranding processes and the semiotic features of the contemporary context, both as reported above. In addition, documental analysis and in-depth interviews were used to determine how each organization evaluated the communicational effectiveness of their rebranding. The interviewees were a total of 15, to one member of each organization that was or had been involved in the respective rebranding process.

This paper only presents results from the semiotic analysis and relates them to the findings resulting from the documental analysis and the interviews. SPSS was used to process the data resulting from the semiotic analysis. The interviews were face-to-face and the audio was recorded and later processed in NVIVO. The documental analysis focused on news dating from the week after the launch of each rebranding process in the main Portuguese mainstream media, traditional and online, and also on documentation provided by most organizations studied. This information was organized in analysis grids and later integrated with the results from the interviews.

2.2. Description of the case studies

The 15 cases of rebranding studied were the following, presented chronologically and with the indication of the sector of each organization:

- a) RTP; media group; rebranding in January 2004
- b) CTT; mail distribution; rebranding in October 2004
- c) EDP; energy provider; rebranding in 2004 and July 2011
- d) TAP; airplane company; rebranding in February 2005
- e) TMN; telecommunications; rebranding in September 2005
- f) BES; bank; rebranding in January 2006
- g) Crédito Agrícola; bank; rebranding in September 2006
- h) Montepio; bank; rebranding in October 2006
- i) Optimus; telecommunications; rebranding in January 2008

- j) BANIF; bank; rebranding in January 2008
- k) PT; telecommunications; rebranding in May 2009
- l) Porto Editora; publishing; rebranding in January 2010
- m) SONAE; retail and distribution; rebranding in February 2010
- n) Novabase; IT; rebranding in December 2010
- o) SIC Radical; TV channel; rebranding in May 2011

Figures 2 to 16 present the logotypes that constituted the *corpus* of the semiotic analysis.



Figure 2: Logotypes of the former (1998) and new (2004) brands of RTP (black and white version for print).



Figure 3: Logotypes of the former (1993) and new (2004) brands of CTT (black and white version for print).



Figure 4: Logotypes of the former (1993) and new (2004 and 2011) brands of EDP (black and white version for print).



Figure 5: Logotypes of the former (1979) and new (2005) brands of TAP Portugal (black and white version for print).



Figure 6: Logotypes of the former (1991) and new (2005) brands of TMN (black and white version for print).



Figure 7: Logotypes of the former (1990) and new (2006) brands of BES (black and white version for print).

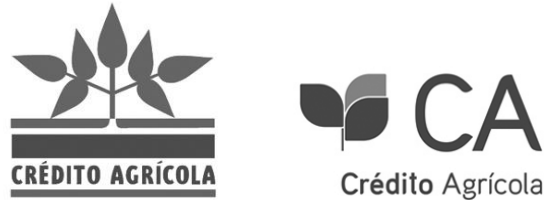


Figure 8: Logotypes of the former (1996) and new (2006) brands of Crédito Agrícola (black and white version for print).



Figure 9: Logotypes of the former (1983) and new (2006) brands of Montepio (black and white version for print).

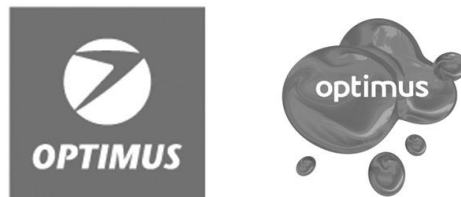


Figure 10: Logotypes of the former (1998) and new (2008) brands of Optimus (black and white version for print).



Figure 11: Logotypes of the former (2002) and new (2008) brands of BANIF (black and white version for print).



Figure 12: Logotypes of the former (1998) and new (2009) brands of PT (black and white version for print).



Figure 13: Logotypes of the former (1990) and new (2010) brands of Porto Editora (black and white version for print).



Figure 14: Logotypes of the former (1993) and new (2010) brands of SONAE (black and white version for print).



Figure 15: Logotypes of the former (1989) and new (2010) brands of Novabase (black and white version for print).



Figure 16: Logotypes of the former (2007) and new (2011) brands of SIC Radical (black and white version for print).

2.3. Semiotic analysis

The semiotic analysis of the logotypes followed closely the thought and work of Barthes (2007a [1957], 1990 [1967], 2007b [1985]), and also methodological guidelines from Rose (2007 [2001]) and van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2004 [2001]). Thus, three main steps were followed: a) identification and description of the signs present in the logotype; b) identification and description of denotative and connotative significations; and c) identification of anchors and meaning transferences. The data resulting from this analysis was later codified into five elements, whose presence and/or repetition was counted, in order to

enable the longitudinal comparison between former and new brands and comparison among all the brands in each of these groups.

2.4. Positioning on the temperature scale

Considering the longitudinal and comparative nature of the case study in analysis, it was necessary to define criteria for comparison. Following McLuhan's thought and work, and also other authors from Media Ecology (Postman, 1993; Levinson, 1999; Watson and Blondheim, 2007; Federman and de Kerckhove, 2003), the concept of media temperature was used both to compare the brands among themselves but also to explore the relationship between their semiotic features and the contemporary semiotic-cognitive context. According to McLuhan, media can be categorized as hot or cool, depending on the amount of senses they stimulate, on the intensity of the stimulus, and on the degree of participation and engagement they raise. The binomial nature of the categorization and the possibility of inconsistencies among the different criteria are problematic features of the concept, to what Federman and de Kerckhove (2003) answer by suggesting a continuum whose extremes are hot and cool, and along which a relative positioning is possible.

Some authors within Media Ecology (e.g. Postman, 1993; Levinson, 1999) claim that the internet is another disruptive technology that drives the transition from McLuhan's electronic age to a digital age. In the same way that mechanic technologies have intensified in the print age the same cognitive features that were already present in the literacy age, i.e. linear thinking, visual space, cause-and-consequence reasoning, digital technologies also enhance in the digital age the same features already present in the electronic age, i.e. multisensorial stimuli, hipertextual thinking, acoustic space. Thus, assuming that the electronic age is cool, the digital age would be cooler (Postman, 1993; Levinson, 1999; Federman and de Kerckhove, 2003).

Grounded on these arguments, we suggest a temperature scale that varies between burning and freezing in order to relatively position each of the logotypes in analysis along that continuum. For the semiotic analysis, the presence and/or repetition of five different elements was counted and added, and the logotypes were positioned on the temperature scale according to the total score obtained. The five main elements considered were: a) number of denotative meanings; b) number of connotative meanings; c) number of metaphors and other style figures; d) number of references and appellation (Williamson, 1978); number of *studium* and

punctum (Barthes, 2010 [1980]). Figure 17 presents the positioning of all the brands along the temperature scale. Figura 18 compares the former and the new brands on the elements counted.

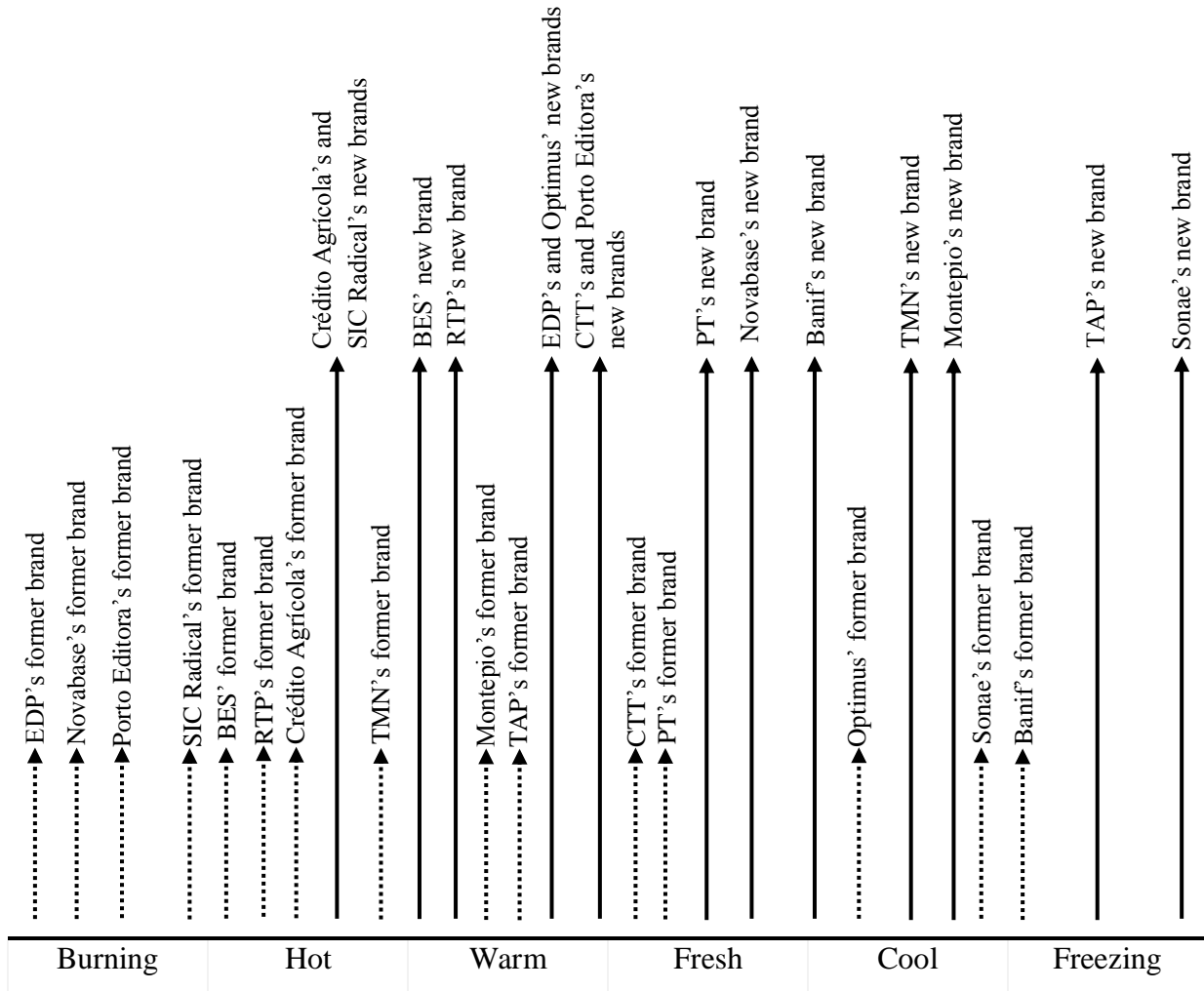


Figure 17: Positioning of the brands along the temperature scale, following the score obtained in the semiotic analysis.

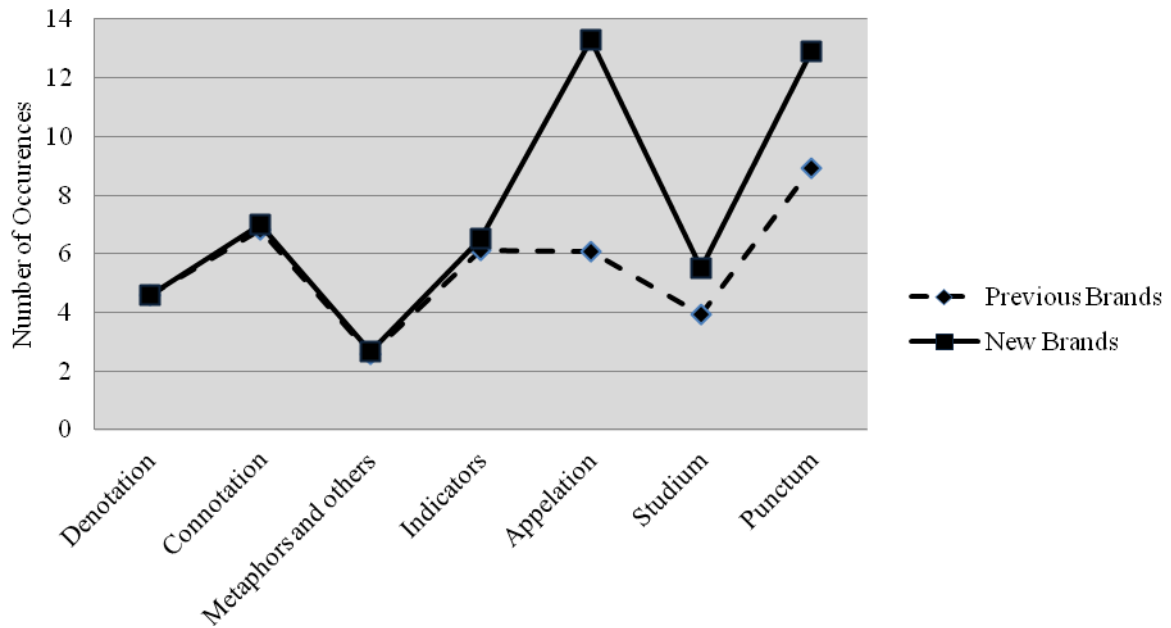


Figure 18: Comparison of the former and new brands according to the total occurrences of the different elements counted.

2.5. Findings on semiotic features and communicational effectiveness

Although the former and new brands are more or less evenly distributed along the temperature scale, there is a concentration of the previous brands in the hotter half of the scale and of the new brands in the cooler half of the scale. This trend is more evident in the results of the content analysis of the formal elements of the logotypes. However, the results are not solid enough to support the claim that the brands adjust their semiotic features to those of the environment by becoming cooler in the undergone rebranding processes.

Relating these results with the findings from the documental analysis and the interviews, the communicational effectiveness of each brand was perceived, by each organization, in relation to the goals defined for the rebranding process. Thus, organizations that defined unspecific and/or unrealistic goals faced disappointing results that might necessarily not be so bad. Besides, a few enterprises were reluctant to provide all the information required by the researcher, particularly financial data.

However, although each rebranding process had specific goals and the organizations studied as well as their stakeholders are diversified, it was possible to draw some conclusions. The new brands which allude to more meanings and to more ambiguous meanings and which have more levels of meaning are more engaging and involving, and generally considered

more successful by their own organizations. Pedro Boucherie Mendes, CEO of the TV channel SIC Radical, whose brand became cooler in the rebranding process, states that “When choosing what to watch, people first exclude and then choose. That’s why it is important to have an ambiguous brand, so that people won’t exclude that option right away.”. Rebranding into a cooler brand helped this cable channel whose main viewers were male teenagers to conquer other segments such as young adults (25 to 35) and females.

Cooler brands are also considered more effective in generating identification and emotional relationships, which is coherent with the fact that the criteria that varied the most between previous and new brands were appellation and *punctum*. Color was the most important feature associated with appellation and *punctum*. For instance, there were several brands maintaining or adopting variations of the national flag’s colors, red and green, and also blue, as the sea is one of the Portuguese’s main cultural references.

On the other hand, the brands with less meanings and/or less levels of meaning are more effective in communication when the goal was to discard unwanted meanings. For instance, Crédito Agrícola wanted to lose the association with rural areas and farmers as its main clients and this goal was achieved by rebranding to a hotter brand. By removing the ground from its logotype, the bank lost its association with the growth of plants and with agriculture, thus becoming appealing to a wider set of targets. The same happened to BANIF, a bank which was founded in Funchal, at Madeira Island. The former logotype was green and blue, inspired in the sea and the forest, and included signs related to sailing, such as chains and knots. By changing completely to an indigo logotype featuring a centaur, the organization was able to keep its brand polysemic while dissociating from its insularity and becoming more close to all Portuguese.

Thus, the adjustment between the semiotic features of the brand to those of the contemporary environment is not related to better communicational effectiveness only when this adjustment occurs by attunement. A contrast at the semiotic level can be more effective in communicating the intended message and in achieving the goals set by each organization. Besides, the contemporary media landscape and organizational environment, particularly in what concerns marketing and advertising, are cluttered with messages, saturated with stimuli (Davis, 2009). Although social media marketing experts highlight the importance of having engaging brands and building active communities (Qualman, 2009; Kerpen, 2011; Tuten and Solomon, 2012), simply becoming aware of the brand is an indispensable step to being engaged with a brand’s digital presence. Thus, the brands which are best suited to the contemporary cognitive-semiotic context are those which are mostly cool but have some hot

features. These brands are more effective in gaining attention in an overcrowded context due to its hot features but are also more effective in retaining that attention, as its cool features are particularly suited to generating involvement, engagement and participation.

Concluding Remarks and Future Research

In conclusion, this paper shows that applying semiotic analysis to brands can be a useful tool to help organizations communicate their brands more effectively. In addition, applying semiotic analysis to brands can contribute to enhance creativity and communication effectiveness in brand design and in branding.

In the future, this research line aims to develop, test and validate a more intuitive and user-friendly temperature scale that combines both the semiotic and the cognitive features and that enables the adjustment, by attunement or contrast, between the organization's goals, its communication tools and the societal context that can be regularly used as a working-tool in organizations.

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