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Food for thought: Consumer culture ideology in *Regular Show*

Master's Thesis

Media Education

Autumn 2015

Faculty of Education

UNIVERSITY OF LAPLAND

Faculty of Education, Media Education

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81 pages, 6 appendix pages

Master's thesis

Autumn 2015

In this study, the aim was to analyse the representation of consumer culture in an American animated television series, *Regular Show*. Under this main goal, four subquestions were designed 1) How is junk food depicted in Regular Show cartoons? 2) What kind of junk food products are presented more often? 3) How does Regular Show contribute to maintain brand awareness in its audience? and 4) What kind of connotative readings can be made of Regular Show content that directly or indirectly emphasize consumer culture?

The study design was based on the triangulation of two different methodologies: the content analysis of 46 episodes and a semiotic analysis of 3 images.

The analysis revealed junk food items to be strongly depicted in the series, being sweet snacks and soda the items with the highest representations. Evidence showed how Regular Show series could be a possible contributor to maintain the brand awareness of its audience. The connotative readings of the images disclosed how consumer culture is emphasized and applauded in different ways.

In the discussion, Regular Show was interpreted as a purveyor of *nothing*, a concept central to the theory of globalization that supported this study. Based on its content, Regular Show is perceived as a threat to the local and glocal forms of *something* that exist in the world.

Keywords: Globalization, consumer culture ideology, animated cartoons, junk food, branding.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Children, media and consumerism

The contextualization of this study lies on the love-hate debate between media and childhood as a concern that many academics coming from different fields have contributed to. In the impact of media violence or the issue of consumerism and advertising, children have been identified as a focus of attention. There are those who claim that we need to protect the children from the market place while others consider that instead we should find ways of preparing them to deal with it (Buckingham, 2000; Kline, 1995; Postman, 1994). These debates are now increasingly focusing on the Internet, where there has been a similar proliferation of commercially based sites targeted at children.

On the one hand, technology has been approved for its advancement on children's education. This discourse, commonly known as *technological determinism*, argues that technology is able to motivate learners in and of itself. Moreover, technology is seen to provide guaranteed pleasure and fun in a way that older methods fail to do. Technology is believed to have created a digital generation that differs from those that preceded it; the most influential exponents of this idea are Seymour Papert and Mark Prensky with the concepts *digital natives* and *digital immigrants*. Children are characterized in this view as sophisticated and demanding audience who are difficult to reach and satisfy. Far from being passive victims of commercial culture, children are seen as all-powerful, sovereign consumers (Prensky, 2006; Papert, 1993).

On the other hand, another approach to media education derives from a fear of media and intends to protect children against media manipulation. Media technology has been accused of interfering with children's development, physical and emotional. It has been argued that these technologies isolate children from their peers and that children's leisure activities are becoming steadily more privatized and commercialized. There are critics who perceive the market as harmful to the true interests and needs of the children. They conceive commercial media as an incitement to consumerism and an exploitation of children's vulnerability (Kline, 1995; Hill, 2011). Moreover, as pointed out by Buckingham (2000), in the last couple of decades capitalism's restless search for new markets has come to focus persistently on children. Children and teenagers are becoming one of the most sought after

targets for niche marketing. There are academics (Kline, 1995; Hill, 2011; Postman, 2004; Schor, 2004) that consider that childhood, as we conceive it in the West, is fading out. These authors and others define this tendency as the death of childhood or the endangered childhood. For Kline (1995) the commercialization of children's culture has affected and destroyed the traditional activities ad natural experiences of childhood. The author considers that the cultural industries exert a powerful dominance over children's imaginations and that they undermine their capacities for critical thought and creativity by manipulating them. He claims that children require high ideals and positive images of the personality, and that they need help to adjust and mature; such things can only be provided for them by well-meaning adults who are free from commercial motivations (Kline, 1995).

Another author stating this position is Hill (2011), who complementing the argument of Kline considers that consumption plays a major role in the day to day lives of children through the endless availability of technologies in the form of television, computers, smartphones and other digital devices. She argues that children, in the last two decades, have experienced a barrage of media encouraging purchasing behaviour and consumption in the same way as adults have (Hill, 2011). Childhood has been absorbed by marketing conglomerates and represents nowadays an enormous lucrative sector of consumer society. In the words of Hill, "nowadays media forces compete with adult caregivers in their ability to capture the attention of children and guide them accordingly" (Hill, 2011:348).

Postman (1994), arguing about television programming and the fact nowadays there is no adult exclusive information, affirms that when adult secrets are easily accessed childhood dissolves. Television is a technology without restraints that makes no difference whether the audience is 5 or 50 years old. He continues his argument explaining that television programing is for the most part not governed by theories of child development or mediated by child's parental figure. Rather, it is driven by a profit-seeking conglomeration with few regulations.

Despite the criticism I position myself on the fact that adults and children are intellectually, physically, emotionally and psychologically different and therefore children (especially until they enter the early adolescence) are not able to reach the same conclusions or judgements that adults do about the media. I do not intend to deny children's agency or autonomy, nevertheless I want to make explicit that the pace of marketing and commercial interest targeting children is growing dramatically fuelled in most cases by global media

companies. Moreover, my intent is not to assume that media are the only variable affecting or promoting consumerist values for children, there are other important variables that play their role as well such as the family, geographic location and the peer groups. However, since the media are acquiring a central role in children's leisure time, it is worth considering it and recognizing to what extent these consumerist forces and values are presented.

1.2 Relevance and motivations of the study

Over the past years consumerism has infiltrated progressively younger demographics. Children from a very young age have become a source of income for many companies in the field of entertainment and education and targeting the diaper demographic as a new market has become a new phenomenon. Targeting toddlers and children in the early years of their life is a practice that major global companies have already started to implement in their marketing strategies; the threat this poses is that the programmes they are selling or promoting are generally commercially based and the children are actively receiving a lot of branding, consuming values and attitudes while they watch their favourite series. Good and Borden (2010), pointed out that a key ideology corporate advertisers present to the parents is that the product they are selling would help to develop their child. These companies would constantly foreground the benefits children receive while consuming a certain product, from a specific type of milk to a cartoon series. These issues have raised important ethical questions and put forward whether the early engagement with the media is as beneficial as the companies maintain. Another ethical dilemma connected with this topic is whether children are able to comprehend advertising and its intent and persuasion. Researchers pointed out that children do not understand the persuasive intention of advertisement until they reach eight or nine years old. Therefore the main question identified by the authors and that inspired this study is whether it is ethical for marketers to target children as a demographic. These controversies have made me raise concern about animated cartoon series as an entertainment product of media culture and encouraged me to conduct a small research on this direction in order to obtain new answers.

The present study focuses on animated cartoons as a powerful medium. Animated cartoons series are conceived on the one hand as a way of entertainment mainly for children and on the other hand as major transmitters of culture. Animated cartoons do not only tell the

stories and practices of our time but also reinforce them. Contextualized in the approaches to media pedagogy and motivated by the diaper demographic as a new market, this study analyses Regular Show, a series of animated cartoons from a consumer culture ideology perspective focusing primarily on the content of the series. Regular Show has been chosen among other cartoon series partly due to its popularity and notorious presence on the television and internet and also because of its vast recognition on the media among children and teenagers.

In the context of an increasing proliferation of information and communication technologies and a market based media culture, this study looks at Regular Show from a critical perspective in order to measure to what extent the series induces and reproduces the dominant ideologies of a global consumer culture.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

The present research has been divided into eight major chapters. The first chapter dealt with the introduction to the research, motivations and relevance of the study. Chapter two concentrates on the theoretical context of the research, globalization theory, focusing principally on Ritzer's contribution. This chapter also introduces previous empirical studies on cartoons, branding and junk food. In chapter three, the research questions and the connexions between concepts are presented. Chapter four introduces the research design and the methodologies applied in the study are discussed. Moreover, the object of study is explained here. The methodology chapter ends with a detailed clarification of the data collection procedure. Chapter five discloses the results from the data analysed with content analysis. This chapter introduces the findings that helped in answering the research questions and attaining the research objectives. In chapter six, the semiotic analysis is conducted. The findings derived from both methodologies are interpreted in chapter seven based on the theory and on previous empirical results. To conclude, chapter eight provides the discussion and conclusion of the study together with the limitations and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Media and ideology

Fiske (1987) indicated that in industrial societies, resources and social power are distributed unequally. This may be obvious in the domain of economics, but it is equally true in the related domains of culture and language. Within the sphere of culture, these inequalities are disguised in the media taking the form of films, news, advertising campaigns and cartoons series. Meanings are produced in the interaction between text and audience. The reader and the text together produce the preferred meaning of a text, an in this collaboration the reader is constituted as someone with a particular set of relationships to the dominant value system and to the rest of society (Fiske 1990). What is being implied here is that a person, with his or her beliefs and ideas may read and interpret a text differently than others; the ideas and beliefs of this person feed a particular ideology. This ideology works to produce the meaning of a particular text based on its signs. As simply outlined by Fiske (1990:171) "my ideology determine the meanings which I find in my interaction with those signs".

For Marxists, the social fact that determines ideology is class, the division of labour. Marxist approaches to questions of media and society argue that, the predominant socio-economic order is exploitative and that media form an essential part of this system reflecting the interests of wealthy and powerful groups through content saturated with stablished ideology (Hodkinson, 2011). The concept of ideology as *false consciousness* was so important in Marx's theory because it managed to explain the reason why the majority in capitalist societies accepted a social system that harmed them (Fiske, 1990). A well-recognized Marxist thinker in this domain was Althusser (1971) who developed a more complex theory of ideology than the one of Marx, based on class and economic base. Althusser defines ideology in his theory as an ongoing and all-pervasive set of practices in which all classes participate. Ideology, for Althusser, is deeply inscribed in the ways of thinking and ways of living of all classes. In order to demonstrate this, he created the concept of *interpellation* to suggest that all communication addresses someone, and in this task places them in a social relationship. Another Marxist contributing to the theory of ideology was Antonio Gramsci with the concept *hegemony*. In the words of Fiske (1990:176), "hegemony involves the constant winning and re-winning of the consent of the majority to the system that subordinates them". This concepts are crucial because the dominant ideas and ideology constantly meet

resistances to overcome in order to win people's consent to the social order that is promoting. One of the key hegemonic strategies is the *common sense*. When these ideas of the ruling class are accepted as normal and common, then their ideological work is disguised, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter.

All these three theories add concepts and highlight and emphasize different aspects of ideology, however they all agree that the possibility to scape it is null. In order to cope with it, the critics of the media, in the words of Fiske (1987:42) "Must never be content with asking and revealing what view of the world is being presented, but must recognize that someone's view of the world is implicitly or explicitly inscribed within it".

2.2 Globalization theory

The theory of globalization is multidisciplinary in nature and it covers a wide range of different phenomena. Among the key topics involved under this theory are the economy and the politics. Nevertheless, the aspect of globalization that concerns this study is the globalization of culture, and particularly of consumer culture.

Within the cultural aspects of globalization there are two main approaches that, due to its various contributors and its relevance in the literature, have to be developed here. These approaches, in general terms, discuss whether the consequences of globalization of consumer culture, and of cultures in particular around the world, are converging and coming together into a homogeneous kind or whether they are dispersing and resulting in a heterogeneous hybridised type.

Cultural convergence

The paradigm of cultural convergence defends the idea that globalization guides us to a world becoming increasingly similar. The theories of *Cultural imperialism, Westernization, Americanization or McDonaldization,* mainly associated to the United States, operate in this direction. Contrary to the utopic image of a globalized world that in the 1960s Marshall McLuhan expressed with his concept *global village*, cultural imperialism theories assume a more critical approach to globalization. Herbert Schiller (1919-2000) was one of the best-known writers arguing in favour of the term cultural imperialism. He suggested that traditional and local cultures are destroyed by the external pressure of more powerful

countries and their exports, so that new forms of cultural dependency are shaped, mirroring older imperialist relations of power (Branston & Stafford, 1996). Cultural imperialism theories, originated from Marxist roots, focused specifically on the role of global mass culture as a form of Western, capitalist ideology (Hodkinson, 2011).

One of the most salient authors who has extensively written and contributed to the discussion of Americanization and McDonaldization is George Ritzer (1993; 2007). Within Americanization, the author has mainly focused on the example of the global spread of the credit card, invented in the United States and which has become a global phenomenon. However, he has also acknowledged the cathedrals of consumption as another American invention. Under this terms he highlights the fast food chains, shopping malls, theme parks and the modern cruise ship, ideas that have aggressively been exported to the rest of the world, with the result that many people in many nations around the world consume in settings that resemble, if not being identical, to the originals created in the United States (Ritzer, 2007). Focusing on another force that exports great homogeneity, Ritzer has introduced the theory of McDonaldization (1993). By this concept, the author wanted to transmit the idea, not about the homogeneity of the fast food products but of the globalization of a set of principles and systems of operation under which McDonalds and other systems work nowadays.

As we have seen with the previous theories, the most common interpretation of globalization is that the world is becoming more and more uniform and standardized all originating in the West. Homogenization theorists claim that global media companies, which are located mainly in the United States, transmit homogeneous messages that are delivered throughout the world with similar effects (Rantanen, 2004). Other scholars have also discussed the increasing global homogeneity. Albrow's definition of globalization refers to "all those processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society, global society" (Albrow, 1990:9). The single world society of Albrow does not have room for different outcomes, but rather a homogenous global world.

Cultural hybridization

The next generation of theorists argue that globalization may have different outcomes and may be originated by different factors too. The heterogenization school claim that the

messages of the media may be homogeneous and originated from the West but they do not have similar effects (Rantanen, 2004). For the authors in this approach, the results of globalization are the integration of the global and the local in new unique hybrid cultural realities. One of the most important concepts in this approach is *glocalization*. Robertson (1995) proposes replacing the term cultural globalization for the term glocalization. The latter term was coined to make explicit some issues going on about the problematic local-global. Robertson contends that the tendency to address this problematic is in terms of one concept against the other. This tendency is based in the very idea of locality understood as a form of opposition or resistance to the hegemonically global. Local and global, argues Robertson, are not mutually exclusive, on the contrary, the local must be understood as an aspect of the global. Globalization, therefore, also means the coming together of local cultures. However, in disagreement with Robertson, Rantanen (2004) argues that this processes do not happen between the global and the local but rather between the global and the national. According to Rantanen (2004), global companies have started to nationalize their products and national companies to globalize theirs. For Appadurai (1990), globalization consists on the junctures and disjunctures of five scapes and global flows: ethnoscape (flows of people), mediascape (media flows), technoscape (technological flows), financescape (flows of money) and ideoscape (flows of ideas). For the author, the relations of these scapes produce unique cultural realities around the world.

2.3 Grobalization and glocalization

For Ritzer (2007), the term glocalization and its heterogeneous essence tell only half of the story of globalization. The author considers that the cultural convergence paradigm has also a considerable utility in thinking about globalization. In that sense, he points out the need for a neologism to parallel and complete the understanding of globalization, which according to him encompasses both cultural heterogeneity and cultural convergence. This concept is what he has named *grobalization*. Grobalization focuses on "the imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations and the like and their desire and need to impose themselves on various geographic areas" (Ritzer, 2007:15). The main interest of the entities involved in grobalization is seeing their power and influence as well as profits *grow* throughout the world. Some of the subprocesses involved in grobalization and which at the same time are central driving forces of it are Americanization, McDonaldization and Capitalism (Ritzer, 2007). Ritzer understands globalization as a conflict between two forms, glocalization and grobalization. First, he claims that globalization is a too broad process to represent only one

side of the coin. Globalization, in this sense, needs further refinement to be used such as the distinction between grobalization and glocalization. When this differentiation is made it is noticeable that globalization cannot be only one side of that conflict. Second, the other side of the coin, the local, has a secondary importance in his conceptualization. The author considers that it is increasingly difficult to find anything in the world untouched by globalization. Little of the local remains that has been untouched, it is either shaped by the global or its nature is altered by the fact that it is reacting against it. Based on the fact that is it increasingly difficult to find anything in the world that has not been touched by globalization, the major alternative seems to be the choice between that which is deeply globalized- grobalization- and that in which the global and the local meet- glocalization-(Ritzer, 2007). In the world, there is always a combination and an interaction of the two processes.

Below, a table with the essential elements of these two theories is presented.

Glocalization Theory (R. Robertson)	Grobalization Theory (G.Ritzer)
The world is growing more pluralistic. Glocalization theory is exceptionally sensitive to differences within and between areas of the world.	The world is growing increasingly similar. Grobalization theory tends to minimize difference within and between areas of the world.
Individuals and social groups have great power to adapt, innovate, ad maneuver within a glocalized world. Individuals and groups are important and creative agents.	Individuals and groups have relatively little ability to adapt, innovate, and maneuver within a globalized world. Grobalization theory sees larger structures and forces tending to overwhelm the ability of individuals and groups to create themselves and their worlds.
Social processes are relational and contingent. Globalization provokes a variety of reactions- ranging from nationalists entrenchment to cosmopolitan embrace- that feed back on and transform grobalization, that produce glocalization.	Social processes are largely one-directional and deterministic. Grobalization tends to overpower the local and limits its ability to act and react, let alone act back on the grobal.
Commodities and the media, arenas and key forces in cultural change in the late 20th and early 21st century, are not seen as totally coercive but rather as providing material to be used in individual and group creation throughout the glocalized areas of the world.	Those commodities and the media are seen as largely coercive.
Core concepts include hybridization, creolization, and heterogenization	Core concepts include capitalism, Americanization, and McDonaldization.

Table 1. Elements of two globalization theories (Ritzer, 2007:21)

For the author, globalization is therefore seen as a broad social process that encompasses both glocalization and grobalization. On the one hand, glocalization involves the integration of the global and the local, producing a unique and singular outcome wherever in the world occurs. On the other hand, grobalization involves the imperialistic ambitions of corporations, states, and others and the imposition of their ways of doing things, products, and so forth on the local. Glocalization is associated with the idea of heterogeneity while grobalization tends to produce some degree of homogeneity throughout the world.

2.4 Conceptualizing *Nothing* and *Something*

Ritzer's conceptualization of nothing and something relate to the objective characteristics of a wide variety of social forms and are central to his theory of globalization. It is important to note that these terms are conceived and defined by the author as having little relationship to the conventional or ordinary use. However, although this conceptualization is introduced in his theory as an original definition, the terms *something* and *nothing* could be thought as relating, at least in its essence, to other authors' theories and terminology. I refer here to the Frankfurt School and particularly their conceptualization of the culture industry and their analysis of the ideological role of media and culture. The concept of mass commodity in the theory of Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) alludes to a form of standardized product which has little difference from the other range of industrial products in the market. The Frankfurt school then, criticizes the content of this culture industry products for being wholly standardized. The allusion of this cultural commodities defined based on its sameness and standardization makes a link to the concepts of nothing and something introduced in this chapter. The metaphor created by Ritzer appears innovative, however, its content and what it implies seems to have been thought already a long ago on the field of social sciences.

Ritzer (2007) underlines that the social world and particularly in the realm of consumption is increasingly characterized by *Nothing*, "a social form that is generally centrally conceived, controlled and comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content" (Ritzer, 2007:36). Meeting this definition would mean that a social form is likely to have been designed at some central locale, to be controlled from such a location (not necessarily the same one), and to lack distinctive content, that is to be very much like others, perhaps many others of its kind (Ritzer, 2007). On the other hand, *Something* is defined as "a social form that is generally indigenously conceived, controlled, and comparatively rich in distinctive

substantive content" (Ritzer, 2007:38). These terms, rather than being conceived as a dichotomy or opposition must be conceived as the two poles of a continuum from something to nothing. For the author, all the social forms contain elements of both something and nothing and therefore they all fall somewhere in between these poles. Moreover, neither nothing nor something exists independently of the other, they are relative and make sense only when paired with, and contrasted to, the other.

For a more complete understanding of the concepts introduced below, the nullities are introduced in Ritzer's globalization theory. Four different types of phenomena can be analysed using the nothing and something conceptualizations: *non*places, *non*things, *non*people and *non*services. These phenomena are key elements of and important contributors to consumer culture and all of them are progressively being branded**.** Each of these concepts implies a continuum with *places, things, people* and *services* as the opposing *something* poles. Therefore, to be on the *non*-end of the four continua, phenomena must meet the definition of nothing and tend to be centrally conceived and controlled forms lacking in distinctive substance; similarly those entities that are to be found at the other end of each continuum must meet the definition of *something* and be locally conceived and controlled forms rich in distinctive substance. Put into the author's words "people around the world are spending more time in nonplaces (the shopping mall, Las Vegas casino) and with nonthings (old navy t-shits, Dolce & Gabbana dresses), nonpeople (the counter people at Burger King, telemarketers), and nonservices (those provided by ATMs, Amazon.com)" (Ritzer, 2007:59).

Place and placelessness are recurrent topics emerging in discussions about globalization and its possible consequences or manifestations. Augé (1995) defines a *nonplace* as "a space which cannot be defined as relational or historical, or concerned with identity" and uses terms such as *solitary, anonymity, lacking in history* to describe them; contrarily, he describes *places* as involving fantasy and myth. Similarly, in an attempt to differentiate between place and nonplaces, Ritzer makes a simile between *great good places* and *McDonaldized settings*. A diner is described as a great good place based on the fact that it is not a part of a chain, the food is idiosyncratically cooked and its existence is independent of any entity. On the other hand, a McDonaldized setting would qualify as a nonplace based on for instance the drive-through window, designed to keep people out of the restaurant, the uncomfortable furniture design or the colours used for decoration. Places and nonplaces are defined by Ritzer based on four dimensions; *complexity* evaluates if a place is generic

or unique, interchangeable rather than one of kind. *Spatial* defines a place evaluating the degree of presence or absence of local geographic ties and whether it is localized in place. The *temporal* dimension measures the degree of time free or time concreteness of a place while the *human* dimension assesses if a place is dehumanized or characterised by personal human relationships. The presence or absence of the latter dimensions would help to define a place or a nonplace, as well as all the other nullities, and therefore help to locate them in the something-nothing continuum.

Although nonthings are usually offered in nonplaces, the amount of nonthings surrounding us is bigger than the amount of nonplaces. Following the definition of nothing, a *nonthing* is an empty form centrally created and controlled often lacking in distinctive substance. There are, based on this definition, innumerable examples of nonthings in the contemporary world, such as a coffee from Starbucks, a t-shirt with the Lacoste logo or a lamp from Ikea. These products are centrally conceived and produced over and over in the same way millions of times and additionally any of these products can be said to be lacking in distinctive substance. The four dimensions introduced earlier (complexity, spatial, temporal and human) are applied in the same manner to determine whether a product can be defined as a thing or a nonthing and if it approaches more the nothing or the something end of the continuum.

The places (and nonplaces) and things (and nonthings) introduced above require also the analysis of the human relationships within it. That will serve to make clear if they are something of nothing. In this sense, settings become places or nonplaces because of the thoughts and actions of the people who create, control, work in and are served by them. Also objects are turned into nonthings by those who manufacture, market, sell, purchase or use them and even humans become people or nonpeople as a result of the demands and expectations of those with whom they interact (Ritzer, 2007).

Nonpeople, for Ritzer, are human beings acting as if they were not, without interacting with others as a human, and perhaps more important not being treated by others as a human. Ritzer's clearest example of nonpeople are the humans who wear the costumes of the Disney characters in Disney's theme parks. In addition, the idea of nonservice closely parallels the preceding discussion of nonpeople. Nonservices depend on the nonpeople and it is likely that nonpeople provide a nonservice, and at the same time nonservices are more likely to be offered in nonplaces and to involve nonthings.

While each of the four types of nothing have been discussed independently there is a powerful tendency for these types to vary together. The development of the nullities in one domain tends to foster their development in the other domains.

In relation to the previous conceptualizations of grobalization and glocalization, Ritzer indicates that all those phenomena that stand toward the nothing end of the continuum are far more likely to be grobalized than those that stand at the something end of the continuum. Based on the four nullities, the author conceives that the various forms of nothing are more significant players and forces in the grobal market. The forms that lie at the something end are far more likely to be glocal than grobal phenomena because they retail local creativity, spatial and temporal elements of the local characteristics. These characteristics serve to make it more likely that they remain glocal but also highly unlikely that they can be grobalized (Ritzer, 2007). The pattern suggested in this theory is that those nothings that are grobalized relate more to the cultural convergence of globalization, whether those somethings that are usually glocalized have deeper relations with the cultural hybridization of globalization. The relationship between the grobalization of nothing and the glocalization of something represents a key point of tension and conflict in the world today, generally in the realm of culture and particularly in consumer cultures. There is in the world a great pressure to produce and grobalize nothing and its nullities.

Ritzer considers that the global spread of nothing is fuelled by grobalization, a force pushed by global markets producing large numbers and varieties of nothing to satisfy its demand in a consumption oriented society. This is what defines the great affinity between global markets and nothing, the great demand it has in the world. Behind this demand, there are a widespread distribution of companies that profit from this sale by creating advertising and marketing of the nothing. However, the production of so much nothing and the quest of profit describes a capitalist system which, as already pointed out by Marx, is in constant search of new global markets to gain expansion and profits.

2.5 The globalization of consumer culture

As it has been made clear throughout the chapter, the focal interest of Ritzer is on globalization, especially the grobalization of nothing within the realm of consumption which is severely proliferating throughout the world. The globalization of consumer culture is not only important in itself, but also because it fosters all sorts of consumption not only of nothing but also of something. Consumption is playing a growing role in the lives of

people in developed countries and it's increasingly being dominated by nothing. People's lives are similarly involved with nothing to an increasing degree. However, it is not just consumption itself that is of interest here, but also the existence and global proliferation of a more general consumer culture. In this task, the process of branding acquires its relevance. What defines today's consumer culture is the predominance and ubiquity of brands, the efforts to maintain and expand the successful ones as well as the effort to launch new ones (Ritzer, 2007). In the proliferation of consumer culture, brands play a central role because their ultimate objective is the grobalization of the brand. Within the proliferation and mass production of nothing, brands are increasingly important because they play a role in the differentiation of nothings that is, in distinguishing that which is not distinctive. At the same time thanks to the expansion of nothing branding has grown exponentially, they have a positive feedback relationship: the bigger the amount of nothing the more branding is needed.

In a consumer culture there are certain elements that may occur together. Generally, consumer culture means that a large number of people have come to value consumption, the society as a whole values it and generally these people are mainly interested in the consumption of nothing. People who value consumption necessarily *practice* it often as well. In a consumer culture people act out and reaffirm that culture by engaging in the process of consumption and in displaying that which has been consumed. The practice of consumer culture has also been globalized being *objects and artifacts* the final expression and manifestation of consumer culture. They are not only an expression of culture but become critical components of it. Moreover, a culture, especially a culture which is valued, has to be *enforced* by the people. Last but not least, consumer culture involves the search for *meaning* through consumption.

2.6 Empirical Review

The nature and breadth of the previous research review of this study encompasses three main areas of research (cartoons, food advertising and branding) which create an extensive amount of empirical studies. Accordingly, in this chapter, the review of previous empirical studies is categorized into three different sections.

Cartoons research

Over the years, several cartoon series have been chosen as the object of study for different researches. The world most famous animated family, *The Simpsons,* has been studied by Meskill (2007) focusing on their discourses about education. The author concluded that the satirical portrayal of schools in The Simpsons- teaching, learning, administrating- is brilliant in the cleverly suggested conflicts it portrays and provokes. The contradictions portrayed in The Simpsons, according to Meskill, can illuminate the humanistic side of the society in which we live and help to improve its institutions. Another cartoon series that has received many critiques and attention is *South Park*. Schulzke (2012) analysed the episode "The F Word" to illustrate how the show uses sophisticated strategies of contesting meaning. Schulzke concluded that since the episode plays some part in dissociating the meaning of "fag" with homosexuality, the intention of the episode should not be qualified as harmful but the contrary. In the same line, Klein & Shiffman (2011), focusing on the prosocial content of animated cartoons, concretely on *The Animaniacs* and *Pink and the brain*, found that there was a prevalence of positive content and messages and pointed out that this prevalence has risen dramatically over the course of the past several years.

The quest for previous research on cartoons has led to the main topic researched in this field: the Disney phenomenon. Researchers from different fields have focused on different aspects of Disney to carry out diverse studies. One of the best known in the field of politics and communication is Janet Wasko. Wasko (2001) makes a political and economic analysis of Walt Disney and the Disney Company from a critical perspective. The article consists of five assumptions typically made about Disney and in the challenge of these myths relying on different approaches such as critical theory, reception research and cultural analysis.

However, one of the best examples of Marxist analysis applied to Disney is the work of Dorfman and Mattelart (1971). The authors presented their critique to Disney ideology based on a sample of 100 comics. These comic books featured mostly the Disney ducks-

Donald and his nephews, Huey, Dewey and Uncle Scrooge- as well as other characters including Mickey, Minnie and Pluto. The study highlighted the notion of cultural imperialism, a concept actively discussed and debated in the 1970s. In the words of the author*s* "In the world of Disney, no one has to work in order to produce. There is a constant round of buying, selling and consuming. All employment is a means of consumption rather than production" (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971:48). The emphasis of consumption and consumerism as well as on money that the authors found in their analysis constitutes the content of the ideological messages of their study. Class analysis, semiotic and psychoanalytic approaches were used to conclude that the global circulation of products such as Disney comics are vehicles for the spreading of ideologies that make capitalism and consumerism seem natural and inevitable.

Another phenomenon that has seduced children around the world is Pokémon. Emerged in the mid-1990s, Pokémon has been a globally obsessive brand for children in the 21st century. The Pokémon phenomenon has caused moral panics; news of children entering in stores to steal merchandise or the prohibition of Pokémon cards in the schools constitutes stories aired in the media during the climax of the brand in the 2000's. Jordan (2004) takes Pokémon as a case study with the aim of understanding the logics of the brand merchandise. Based on the proliferation of diverse range of Pokémon commodities (cartoons, cards, videogames and movies), the author points out that the creation of different commodities has always fuelled capitalism. The corporations that control Pokémon, he argues, have encoded its material with some of the characteristics of advance capitalism in the search for a product that continually entices new purchases (Jordan, 2004). Putting the slogan of the phenomenon as an example, *Gotta catch them all*, the author concludes that the Pokémon phenomenon, in its urge to profit from everything, was born into hyper-capitalism and is fully shaped by it.

Food advertising research

To date, the vast majority of advertising research has focused on the impact of television commercials on children. However, recent advertising trends imply that the Internet can be a good place for advertisers to increase children's and adolescents brand awareness with the objective of increasing their purchasing request and behaviour (Moore, 2006).

Moreover, on the light of increasing childhood obesity announced by the World Health organization (1998), many researchers have focused on the role of food advertising seeking for evidence and interpretations of this phenomenon. Food marketing on the television and on the internet targeting children has become a field of interest for many researchers coming from different fields (medicine, media, communications...). Concerning the Internet, Lee et al (2009) from the field of marketing researched the content of 251 food advergames targeted to children using content analysis methods. Their conclusions showed that most of the food marketers in the US heavily used advergames for children to advertise products. Interestingly, they found that 88 per cent of the games analysed were advergames designed to promote a company's brand. In addition, the results showed that the most common products advertised were gum and candy. Also, less than 3 per cent of the Advergames appeared to educate children about nutrition and health issues. In the conclusion, the authors condemn top selling food marketers for the persuasive potential of their advergames to affect children's preferences and behaviours regarding food.

Under the same concern, Batada & Wootan (2007) assessed in their study the nutritional quality of the food marketed by one of the largest companies of children entertainment, *Nickelodeon*. The authors evaluated the nutritional quality of the food advertised via Nickelodeon media: advertisement on the Nickelodeon channel, magazines, and with Nickelodeon characters (product packages with Nickelodeon characters). The results showed that out of 168 television food ads, 88 per cent were food of poor nutritional quality. Regarding the magazines they found out that out of 21 food ads 16 (76 per cent) were for nutritionally poor foods. Moreover, from the fifteen grocery store products that were identified with Nickelodeon characters on the packaging, 60 per cent were for food of poor nutritional quality. The authors concluded that the Nickelodeon entertainment company, through its food marketing, influences the diets of millions of children.

Television food advertisements have also attracted criticism outside North America. Dixon et al (2007) focusing on the Australian context, completed a study about the TV advertising of junk food and compared it with nutritional food. Nine hundred nineteen grade five and six students participated in their experiment in Melbourne. Their results supported the contention that cumulative exposure to TV food advertising promotes beliefs and attitudes supporting of those foods. TV exposure was associated with more positive attitudes towards junk food. Their findings are consistent with the cultivation hypothesis that heavier TV viewers are more inclined to hold beliefs that reflect TV's dominant and recurrent

messages. They concluded that changing the food advertising environment on children's TV to one where nutritious foods are encourage and junk foods are relatively unrepresented would help to normalize and reinforce healthy eating among children.

Consistent with this review, in the Swiss context, Keller and Schulz (2010) recorded in their study 1.365 hours of kids programme and 11.613 advertisements were discovered. Their findings revealed that every fourth advertisement was for food, half of them for products high in sugar and fat and hardly any for fruit or vegetables. The authors suggested that long term exposure to this distortion of the pyramid of recommended food should be considered in the discussion of legal restrictions for food advertising targeting children.

The general panorama of food advertising research reveals that TV viewing and advergames have been firmly linked to childhood obesity and degradation of the children's health. The previous studies' results suggest that the regulation of food advertising targeting children has to be considered. These and other studies give serious reasons to discuss the role of food advertising targeting children.

Branding and consumption

The rise of brand consciousness among children and young teenagers has also interested researchers in the field of marketing and psychology. Up to now, from a developmental perspective, we know that children recognize brand names at an early age and that brand recognition and recall increases as children grow older (Kirsh, 2010). By the time children reach middle childhood, 7 to 8 years of age, they can name multiple brands in many product categories, mention brand names as an important type of product information and often request products by brand. Between 8 and 12 years of age, tweens begin to consider value in their purchases.

Based on these findings, we can assert that brands are important to children, and as they grow older they become more relevant for them. In this line, in an attempt to understand what brands mean to children, Achenreiner and John (2003) conducted an experiment with children aged 8 to 16 in which they were asked to evaluate an advertised product with a familiar brand name that was either popular or less popular to them. The advertised product was physically identical on both cases allowing the researches to see if the brand had any meaning to children apart from its name familiarity. Based on their findings the authors concluded that brand consciousness is a very different phenomenon depending on the

child's age. The authors explained that children learn to relate to brand names at an early age recognizing brand names in stores and developing preferences. However, conceptual brand meanings enter in middle childhood, from age 8 to age 12. By the time children reach the age of 12 they are able to think about brands on a symbolic level.

Juliet Schor (2004), a recognized expert on consumerism, carried out a study on media culture and children. Her results revealed that children who are more involved in consumer culture are more depressed, more anxious, have lower self-esteem and suffer from more psychosomatic complaints. Schor's results suggest a strong relationship between consumerism and deterioration of health. Moreover, Schor argues that there is plenty of evidence now that confirms how far-reaching the process of commercialization has become. Contemporary American tweens and teens have emerged as the most brand-oriented, consumer-involved, and materialistic generations in history (Schor, 2004). A survey of youth was carried from seventy cities in more than fifteen countries and the results indicated that 75 percent of U.S tweens want to be rich, and 61 percent want to be famous. Similar to the results reached by Achenreiner and John (2003), Schor points out that more children in the US than anywhere else believe that their clothes and brands describe who they are and define their social status.

The previous studies and debates raise fundamental questions about the relationship between culture and commerce, about marketing and entertainment and especially about the role of the children within them. The present study aims to contribute to this stream of research by examining how is the ideology of consumer culture portrayed in a particular series of American animated cartoons. The combination of the methodologies, the object of study and the theory to contextualize it make this study different from the previous. Moreover, the novelty of the series makes Regular Show a current topic to look at and a new text from which to obtain fresh results.

3. Research Questions

Figure 1: key concepts

The present thesis' main objective is to study the representations of consumer culture ideology in Regular Show. With that intention on mind, the main research question that this study aims to answer is defined as it follows:

How is the ideology of consumer culture represented in Regular Show cartoons?

In order to help answering the main question, some subquestions have been designed:

a) How is junk food depicted in Regular Show cartoons?
b) What kind of junk food products are presented more often?
c) How does Regular Show contribute to maintain brand awareness in its audience?
d) What kind of connotative readings can be made of Regular Show content that directly or indirectly emphasize consumer culture?

The subquestions have been designed on order to help answering properly the main research question.

Although the focus of this work is on consumer culture, the scope and amplitude of the topic together with all the phenomena it embraces requires a delimitation to specific aspects of it in order to get useful results. In this study, consumer culture is addressed focusing on three different elements: junk food, brands and places for consumption. The choice of these specific elements has been motivated mainly because of its ubiquity in society and because of its discussion on previous research on children and consumption.

Considerable scientific evidence stablishes a link between the marketing of unhealthy food and children's choices and purchases of food and consumption. Branding in general and junk food specifically have been identified as key factors that help to raise children obesity and other eating disorders when they are encountered on television programmes and on advertising on children's broadcasting channels. Moreover, brands and junk food are consumed daily in most places in the word, they have become global practices that influence and fuel a pervasive consumer culture.

Subquestion *a* seeks to find the ways junk food is depicted in the series, based on how the characters conceive it, the dialogues about it and its general portrayal in the series.

Subquestion *b* focuses on the representation of the junk food items and pretends to find out what items are most often presented in the series.

Subquestion *c* deals with brands and its portrayal concentrating in the ways brand awareness could be maintained or encouraged through the content.

Subquestion *d* focuses on consumer culture in general and tries to find out possible readings that emphasize or promote this ideology through the content of the series

Consumer culture as an umbrella term

Material culture is the name generally given to the relationship person-thing. This term implies that material objects and culture are combined in different ways, and therefore can constitute an object of study. Consumer culture is seen by Lury (1997) as a form of material culture. For the author material culture is composed by both consumer and production culture forming an interlinking cycle.

Berger (2011) understands consumer cultures as cultures with a considerable expansion of commodity production which leads to societies filled with consumer goods, services and places to purchase them. In consumer cultures, the author expresses, "the game people play is get as much as you can" (Berger 2011:31). Likewise, advertising and branding are centrally conceived in consumer cultures because aside from shaping the values of a society, they teach us about the world of consumer goods. Ger and Belk (1996) point out the four different but connected ways in which global consumer culture has been conceptualized. The first of them refers to the proliferation of transnational corporations producing and marketing consumer goods; the power these corporations have to influence our daily lives is undisputed. The second conceptualization of global consumer culture relates to the proliferation of global capitalism as the dominant world economic system which is characterized among other issues by the increasing world interdependencies. The third perspective pointed out by Geer and Belk is that of global consumerism or a globalized consumption ethic; every day the number and variety of products and goods available on the market grow and new products are introduced frequently. The final perspective is the global consumption homogenization. More and more, consumers from all around world watch the same movies in the cinema, eat the same fast food items in the same restaurants and wear the same brands. (Ger and Belk, 1996).

In the literature, global consumer culture has been conceptualized as involving one or several of the latter trends. Despite the fact that all are related phenomena, the two last conceptualizations -global consumerism as an ethic and global consumption homogenization- are the most relevant for this study because they relate directly to the research questions and to the ideology of consumer culture.

Connection between the key concepts

In figure 1, the connection between the key concepts is visually displayed. In the middle of the graph globalization stands as the theoretical framework behind the study. Globalization is the paradigm of origin and support for the study and interpretation of results. As it is shown, there is a clear link between globalization and all the other concepts, which take an active part of it; Consumer culture and its objects have contributed to the development and diffusion of globalization, and at the same time globalization has encouraged the mass production of commodities and the spread of brands and services all over the world.

The graph wants to make explicit the relationship between the object of study (consumer culture), the text (Regular Show) the theoretical paradigm (globalization) and the key concepts (junk food and brands).

The constant grow of consumer cultures and the values related to it are for the most part owing to the general increase in the circulation, use and ownership of commodities. Economic status is generally an indicator of likely ownership of goods and services, however, a wide variety of goods, especially mass produced items, are sold massively all around the world independently of the income, junk food constitute one of the main categories of these items. Fast food and its related brands have become central not only to consumer cultures but also to many cultures.

Junk food is identified in the McDonaldization theory (Ritzer, 2011) as one of the products that lay at the core of capitalism and globalization practices. Meanwhile, brands and branding are key characteristics of consumer culture, which at the same time involve fast food, advertising, marketing, etc. In a consumer culture, people no longer consume for mere satisfaction but consumption becomes meaning-based, and brands are often used as symbolic resources for the construction and maintenance of identity. Brands are powerful social and cultural institutions that carry a lot of meaning and an important vehicle of globalization. However, a brand may be viewed not solely as a sign added to products to differentiate them from competing goods, but as a semiotic engine whose function is to constantly produce meaning and values. The ideology promoted implicitly and explicitly by brands is also closely related to the main paradigm of consumption that equals consumption with happiness.

According to Klein (2000), the process of branding involves marketing a product with a consistent logo, image or mascot that conveys to the consumer a sense of consistency, quality and trust. A handful of all-American brands- Coca-Cola, Disney, McDonald's- were the first to understand the effectiveness of selling ideas and lifestyles rather than merely goods. Coke sold peace and love in the 60's; Disney sold the American dream. In this way, according to Klein, the strength of a brand is measured by the power it has to stretch and spread across the pop-cultural landscape. (Klein, 2000). Following the latter, brands as a phenomenon and branding as a practice constitute one of the most significant ideoscapes in the process of globalization. Moreover, Oswald (1996) indicates that branding forms a combination between image and story by connecting the gap between the meaning of the

image and the logic of the world in which the brand lives. In this connection, the logo has its importance as it constitutes the site of entry to the world of the brand by transforming the products into a signs.

Closely related with how brands work is the concept of brand awareness, very relevant for this study. Brand awareness is defined as "the state in which a consumer knows the name of a brand, recognises its logo, and knows the product or service sold and its characteristics" (Investopedia, 2015). Creating brand awareness is usually one of the first steps to build advertising objectives and therefore a main goal to achieve by the brands owners. Moreover, Wayne & Steven (1990) add that awareness represents the lowest state of a continuum of brand knowledge that ranges from simple recognition of the brand to a highly developed cognitive structure based on detail information. In this case, the distinction between awareness and recognition is a subtle one, the former denoting a state of knowledge possessed by the consumer and the latter a cognitive process resulting from awareness (Wayne & Steven, 1990).

Globalization can be understood as a number of social practices that are independent of the geographical context. In these contexts, the global brands and their meanings constitute central elements in the communication and identity formation of the consumers. In this sense, junk food consumption highlights as one of the most practised consumer activities and one of the most global categories of products sold in the world. This is evidenced by the global recognition of McDonalds or Burger King, among other brands. The exportations of brands like the previous ones has global implications, from an American base to many other parts of the world. Fast food consumption and other consumerist practices such as shopping would not be possible if there wasn't for the existence of physical contexts where all the brands and products come together to be exposed to the public: the places for consumption. Malls, stores, shops and supermarkets constitute some of the most powerful showcases through which we experience brand bombing and are invited to consume. Ritzer has labelled these places "the cathedrals of consumption", locales to which we make pilgrimages in order to practice our consumer religion" (Ritzer, 2002:162).

Junk food, branding and places for consumption constitute active elements of the definition of consumer culture and of its globalization. Junk food, its logos and the places to purchase these products constitute some of the most pervasive cathedrals of consumption of our society.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

On the panorama of the social sciences, there is a tradition in the literature that encourages the use of multiple methods. This form of research is usually described as multi method, convergent validation or triangulation (Manning, 1987). All of the latter forms imply a research design where both quantitative and qualitative approaches are complemented together rather than perceived as rivals. The combination of two or more methods for a research can be elaborative, however multiple viewpoints increase accuracy and validity of the results of a research project. Various independent measures, if they reach similar conclusions, provide a more multi-dimensional picture of the results of a study.

In examining the same dimension of the research project (consumer culture), this study combined two different visual methodologies: content analysis and semiotic analysis. In its origins, content analysis is defined as a quantitative method whereas semiotics is a characteristic method of textual qualitative analysis. In the field of media studies, it is particularly fruitful to combine semiotic analysis with content analysis. Whilst content analysis determines for instance the frequency of the codes predesigned in a text, semiotics is used to analyse a smaller selection of the text in more details. Content analysis has been criticized (Stokes, 2003) because of its failure to deal with the cultural significance of the images it analyses, or to be an insensitive method, however, semiotics can be a good reinforcement for this deficiency and their combination be complementary. The combination of these methods gives according to Stokes (2003) breadth in terms of the range of codes and depth based on the small selection of images for analysis. The methods complemented each other in a salient manner. The mixed research was applied in this study in a way that the resulting combination of the qualitative and quantitative methods gave the study an advantage. The mixed research approach was able to provide insight into the consumer culture in Regular Show in a way that one model could not have made possible. Moreover, the two research models were applied to focus on the same phenomenon and the results were compared to establish corroboration. By doing so, the study gained evidence to support the conclusion.

The first step of the empirical part of the study has been coding 46 episodes of the series based on pre elaborated codes and categories. The next step consisted in analysing the data

gathered with content analysis. In the third step, the semiotic analysis has been made based on the data previously gathered. In this chapter, the methodology, the object of study and the data gathering are introduced and explained.

4.2 Regular show as the object of study

Regular Show constitutes the object of study of this work; this animated cartoon television series was originally created by J.G Quintel in the United States. The first time it was aired was on September 6, 2010 for Cartoon Networks television channel. Cartoon Network is the number one U.S television network in prime among boys 6-11 & 9-14. The channel is seen in 97 million of U.S homes and in 194 countries around the world (Turner Broadcast system, 2015).

Concerning the plot, the series revolves around two 23-year-old best friends, *Mordecai* and *Rigby*. Mordecai is a blue jay and Rigby is a racoon and they both work in a local park as groundkeepers. The series focus on their adventures and misadventures and in their interaction with other main characters. Mordecai and Rigby are characterized for their *not to* attitude. When they are supposed to be at work in a park managed by a talking gumball machine called Benson, they are playing video games, eating junk food, or watching television. Among the other characters of the serial there is Skips, an albino gorilla who works as a groundkeeper, a macro cephalic being called Pops who technically runs the park for his ancient father, a green unpleasant humanoid character called Muscle Man and his friend, Hi Five Ghost, who looks as his name suggests. Despite their psychical differences no one behaves any differently from a human being. As it has been proven by the characters, the show is distinctly male, with the exception of occasional minor characters like Eileen and Margaret.

While the title of the series could have been chosen to show irony, the fact is that the serial is regular in the sense of uniform procedure. Almost every episode starts and ends in similar ways following the same pattern, the characters start in equilibrium where they define their goals, they need or want something, afterwards they start the journey to solve the problem starting small until the climax, usually the supernatural is a leitmotif, and then when they solve the problem they return to a new state of equilibrium.

The two main characters, Mordecai and Rigby, seem like teenagers in a parentless world. This is reflected by the absence of their parents and relatives in the series. Despite Skips and Pops old age, is Benson, the gumball machine, who plays the role of the father. It is a cliché of the serial to portray Benson in a threatening state which normally explodes with the sentence *Get back to work!* Or also with *You're fired!* His behaviour is stereotypically presented as the bad dad and bad boss. In general as the episodes advance, we realize that Mordecai and Rigby will never learn that their actions have consequences. This perhaps constitutes one of the main attractions of the serial for the audience because as soon as they learn from it, that would suggest they grew up, which would announce the end of the show.

Earlier criticism on Regular Show

Common Sense Media is an independent website aimed at publishing, rating and reviewing cartoons, video games, books movies and TV shows who target the childhood and adolescence. The website rates the material based on age appropriateness and learning potential to help families decide what is best for their children to watch. The personnel behind this website are writers, media professionals, journalists and parents. Regular Show has its place on this website being rated for age 11and with a general punctuation of 2 out of 5. The serial is defined as *edgy* and *irritable* with traces of *crude humour* that are not age-appropriated. Regular Show is accused of promoting ethic and racial stereotypes, images of drinking habits, and bad language. Moreover, sex is rated 1 out of a maximum punctuation of 5 and violence 2 out of 5. The category "positive messages" has a rate of 0 out of 5 with a description that says "Parents need to know that the show is not out to convey any specific constructive messages" (Common Sense Media, 2015).

Looking at the reviews in Common Sense Media from the users of the page and audience we instantly perceive the polarized opinions people have concerning the series. To quote some of the attitudes:

Kid, 10 years old

What is wrong with this show!!! I do not like the language they use at all in this show! My brother is totally afraid of this show in one episode when this car was like running over people and they were bleeding I think! I think this is more of a show that should go on Adult Swim because it is more of a teenagers show.

Adult

A very Enjoyable Show for older children and above

I watched the series premiere the other night and fell in love it. It's a funny, laid back, and imaginative cartoon that both adults and children can enjoy. There are some concerns people might want to watch out for. The show does have some mild crude language such as "pissed", "crap" and "how the H are we gonna fix this S?" It shouldn't be too big of a concern if you have older children of about middle school age or above who may be used to more colorful language already

Kid, 12 years old

PEOPLE ON COMMON SENSE ARE IDIOTS!!!

First of all, kids are exposed to words much worse than "crap" or "jerk" all the time,(kids say f**k and s**t all the one at my school) so language shouldn't be an issue. Also, this show has plenty of positive messages. (…).

As it has been suggested by the messages above, the interpretations of the serial are various. The criticism continuous if we analyse another website, this time *debate.org,* a free online community that allows online debates. In this website a debate concerning the age-appropriateness of the serial is currently going on and the question proposed is *Should Regular Show be allowed to push the boundaries of TV-PG?*

TV-PG, television parental guidelines is a television content rating system in the United States. The rating, (from TV.Y all children allowed to TV.17 only age 17 or older) are generally applied to most television series and films. The rating for Regular Show under this system is TV-PG, which means that the program contains material that the parents may find unsuitable for younger children. The debate mentioned earlier discusses the option to allow the program to all children. Based on the website's information, the debate seems to be 50 per cent for yes and 50 per cent for no with arguments and interventions of all kinds. These criticisms and online debates make Regular Show a very interesting object of study for a future media educator. Moreover, something to remark is that the presence of junk food items and brands seems not to have concerned anybody from the educational community. One should be concerned about the depiction of junk food items and brands in children's cartoons. Popular television shows influence the shaping of social norms and

identity creation, especially when the viewers are still developing their personalities and values. What we learn from television viewing is vast and important and therefore examining these issues is crucial.

4.3 Research methods

4.31Content analysis

Due to the huge variety of interpretations of content analysis and its applications for research, two authors have been collected to narrow down the definition of the method that better adjusts to this particular study. Content analysis is defined by Berger (2014:232) as "a research technique that is based on measuring the amount of something (violence, negative portrayal of women or whatever) in a representative sampling of some mass-mediated popular art form". On the other hand, Gillian Rose (2007) defines content analysis as "a method of analysing visual images that was originally developed to interpret written and spoken texts". And she continues, "content analysis and qualitative methods are not mutually exclusive, every stage of content analysis, from formulating the research questions, from developing coding categories to interpreting the results entails decisions about meaning and significance" (Rose, 2007:71).

Content analysis was chosen in this study because it offered a clear method of engaging systematically with big amounts of data and also, due to its nature and procedure, it prevented a certain sort of bias. In this sense, content analysis tells us what is in the material being studied. For that reason the method has been chosen; to count the presence of junk food, branding and consumerist places in the content of the cartoon serial. The original medium of the messages of the series are moving images. It is important to specify that moving images include the analysis of text, static movements and audio as well as measures focusing on the image movement. Since there are many ways of carrying out content analysis, it is worth clarifying that in this study the content has been coded based on the presence or absence of the codes and categories.

Definition of the codes and categories

Rose (2007) indicates that the definition of the coding categories must be completely unambiguous. They must be so clearly defined that different researches at different times would code the images in exactly the same way. If the latter is achieved, the coding process is reliable.

Code 1 Junk food

The first code of the coding sheet is junk food. Junk food is a general term under which many food products may enter. Healey (2012:1) defines Junk Food as "items usually low in nutrients and high in salt, sugar and fat"; under this adjective we can find chips, soft drinks, candies, hamburgers, chocolate, cakes and a long etcetera. A regular intake of these foods may develop overweight in a person and involve mineral and vitamin deficiencies and other health problems. The categories designed to cover this code were in part collected from a preliminary watching of the cartoons. This task was made in order to avoid several modification of the coding sheet. The categories designed for this code are: *pizza, chicken wings, burgers, chips/fries, hot dog, sweet snacks, salty snacks, sandwich, soda* and *other*. Since the categories correspond to particular familiar objects, the task of coding them has been very exhaustive and straight forward. In other words the probability to confuse burger with pizza or soda with salty snacks was very low. The only ambiguity was between *chips* and *salty snacks*. Chips was considered as an individual category based on the assumption that it could be interesting to measure it alone. On the other hand, all the other items that did not fit into the definition of chips were coded into salty snacks. The design of the categories tried to cover the whole spectrum of junk food to obtain more precision in the coding and later on in the results. However, the category *other* was useful and served to amplify any product not taken into consideration and that arose during the coding activity. Moreover, all the categories were mutually exclusive, which means that the same object has not been coded into two categories at the same time. The character's consumption of products other than junk food was so rare that they have not been coded.

Code 2 Brands

The definition of the concept brand is not an easy task and it can be very various depending on the literature. However, this study considers the definition of brand made by Levy (1999:134) as "a complex symbol that represents a variety of ideas and attributes. It tells the consumer many things, not only by the way it sounds (and its literal meaning if it has some) but, more important, via the body of associations it has built up and acquired as a public object over a period of time".

The code brands has two possible categories in this study: *brand presence* and *brand promotion*. Although some may consider that the presence of a brand is already a promotion of it, this study has separated these two concepts into two different categories measuring both outcomes to achieve richer data.

By *brand presence*, all those scenes where brands appeared visually, on particular objects, billboards, locales or other support were coded. The category brand presence is defined in this study as all those moments or scenes where a brand name, brand logo or brand spokesperson is present without any accompanying text or comment. Moreover, the mere oral mention of a brand by any character was considered brand presence and therefore data to be coded. On the other hand, *brand promotion* is defined in this study as all those moments or scenes where a brand, brand logo or brand spokesperson is visually or orally presented accompanied by a value judgment, opinion or any other inference relating to the brand. For instance a character advertising a brand to others was considered in this study as brand promotion. Moreover, TV and radio advertisements have also been coded as brand promotions.

The brands encountered in this study were both real and fake brands. Independently of its origin, both were coded into the coding sheet as pertinent data. However, their nature (real vs fake) becomes more relevant in the semiotic analysis of this study.

Code 3 Places for consumption

In our societies, the movement of goods such as junk food and brands between the producers and consumers is possible due to existence of distributors. The code Places for consumption is understood in this study, as its name suggests, as all those physical places

and establishments where there are goods or services for sale and therefore people has to pay with money in order to acquire them. The code contemplates two different categories, restaurant and shop. A *restaurant* is defined in this study as any sort of public establishment where meals are prepared and served to clients under a menu. Some of the expected categories to code under this category are bars, coffee shops, food trucks, bistro etc. A *shop* is conceived in this work as any kind of commercial establishments that has goods of different nature for sale. Some of the expected categories to code under this category are malls, markets, stores, bazaars, etc. However, any other place that fits to the description and was not mentioned has been coded as well under the category *other*.

4.32 Semiotics

Semiotics is the second methodology applied in this study. This method has been categorized by some scholars (Manning, 1987) as a data analysis method rather than data gathering method. Semiotics has been used for textual analysis since content analysis' purpose was to gather the data. Considering that the results from the semiotic analysis are presented in the next chapter, this section aims to provide a brief introduction to semiotics as an approach to visual images and its key terms which are essential for understanding the analysis.

Semiotics or semiology, both being common nomenclatures to refer this this method, literally means the science of signs and are concerned with how images make meanings. In this work the term adopted is semiotics. This methodology offers a full box of analytical tools for taking an image apart and tracing how it works in relation to broader systems of meaning (Rose, 2007). The origins of this methodology draw upon the work of several critical writers such as Saussure, Barthes, Lacan and Althusser to mention some. The most important issue of semiotics stands in relation to the term *sign*. The human culture in general and the media in particular are full of signs, both visual and acoustic. In this sense, semiotics enables us to understand how it is that people find meaning in things. Moreover, semiotics can be used to analyse and comprehend how meaning is generated in a particular medium. For this task, the methodology counts with a specific vocabulary of terms to describe how sings can be connected and signify. The presentation and definition of this set of vocabulary is introduced later on in this chapter.

Ferdinand de Saussure explained that a sign was a unit of meaning and the basic unit of language which was composed by two parts, *signifier* and *signified*. The mental image of marks on a page or of sounds in the air is called the signifier and the abstract concept invoked is the signified. The relationship between the two is called signification. The two terms, signified and signifier, always go together and are useful for emphasising the two different ways in which a sign must behave in order to be a sign. Berger (2014:56) pointed out that, because the relationship between signifier and signified is an arbitrary one, "there is nothing in the nature of the sign itself to tie a given signifier to one signified alone". In other words, there is no necessary relationship between signifier and signified. Words (as signs) are capable of having more than one meaning, and even of changing their meaning with time. For semiotics, differentiating between the signifier and the signified is a crucial task because it means that the relation between meanings and signifiers is conventional.

Relevance of the methodology for this study

Semiotics is a very well-known research method used to challenge mainstream ideas and values of the media. Fiske (1990) indicates that semiotics sees communication as the generation of meaning in messages- whether by the encoder or the decoder. One of the most salient semioticians was Ronald Barthes, who developed the ideas of Saussure and tried to apply the study of signs to many other fields. Barthes was very concerned with how the meaning got into an image, and that is the most important key in understanding and applying this research method. For the study of visual culture, semiotics constitutes one of the best methods to approach interpretation and meaning.

It is needless to point out the omnipresence of advertisements nowadays; they constitute one of the most ideological forms of capitalist societies. Advertisements are one of the most common objects of study of semiotics, but not the only ones. In studying how the advertisements are constructed, social issues and differences are salient. Themes such as class, gender, race or aesthetics are some of the most common themes to analyse. Semiotics has its role here to help deconstructing the images by signs in an attempt to interpret and unmask what has been represented in a first stance. Semiotics believes that all the images are to a bigger or lesser degree ideological constructed, in the sense that they portray taken for granted ways to see the world.

Since meaning is a very wide term and can be found in any sign, this study will focus particularly on the consumerist ideology portrayed in the series. Semiotics in this sense appears as a very suitable approach to study ideology and meaning in a media text. The producers of the images, or in this case the series, make them mean something and we, the readers, get the meaning out; that meaning could be the same or a completely different one. The latter is one of the reasons why it is worth to look at texts with the glasses of semiotics. As Rose (2007:350) pointed out, "precisely because images matter, because they are powerful and seductive, it is necessary to consider them critically".

Interaction between signs

Signs may associate with or substitute for another sign in very complex ways. In the same text, a sign can be doing several things at once, and it is worth describing all of them in order to get a better understanding of the text. Based on the fact that signs work in relation to each other, it is relevant to state at this point that all the signs of this work are syntagmatic. *Syntagmatic signs*, according to Rose (2007:84) "gain their meaning from the signs that surround them in a still image, or come before or after them in sequence in a moving image". Since the object of study of this work is Regular Show animated series, moving images and therefore syntagmatic signs are very important. In this section, different mechanism by which this can happen are explained.

A *metaphor* is an implicit or explicit comparison between signs (Thwaites, 1994:44); it refers to communicating by analogy. Metaphors may be used verbally as well as visual, especially in the advertisements where for instance ice, snow and polar bears are used as signs of the code freshness to advertise a toothpaste.

Metonym is an association of terms. One sign is associated with another of which it signifies either a part, the whole, one of its function or attribute, or a related concept (Thwaites, 1994:47). Fiske (1990) adds that the selection of metonym determines the rest of the picture of the event or idea we construct. On the media there are often conflicts due to the choice of metonyms because they show an incomplete or biased representation of a certain event or incident.

Denotation, whose name was given by Barthes*,* is the first order of signification on which Saussure worked; It describes the relationship between the signifier and the signified within

the sign, and of the sign with its referent in external reality (Fiske, 1990). Denotation refers to the obvious and more stable meaning of a sign, for instance the word *sandwich* denotes an item of food consisting of two pieces of bread with a filling between them. Fiske (1990) claimed that when the sign meets the feelings or emotions of the users and the values of their culture is when connotation occurs. *Connotation,* the second order of signification, deals with the cultural meanings that become attached to a term. The sign can be pictured as having a spread of signifieds, which are called its connotations. Connotation emphasises the plurality of the signifieds. Metaphor and metonymy are processes of connotation. Following the example of the sandwich, we can represent it with cheese and ham, wrapped in paper and with mayonnaise on the top and we can represent it cut in pieces on a musty hard bread. Their denotative meaning would still be the same, a sandwich, however their connotations would change; one would more appetizing than the other. In this moment the meaning move towards the subjective.

In the words of Thwaites (1994:72) "a *myth* is a set of signs which imply extremely familiar and influential social structures of thinking". A myth is complementary defined by Fiske (1990:88) as "a story by which a culture explains or understands some aspect of reality or nature". Within a text, myths emerge at the level of codes. In *Mythologies* (Barthes, 1972) myth is synonymous with ideology and designates a level of cultural connotation. Myths are naturalised codings of social meanings and values that turn social signs into facts. Some of the most recurrent mythic narratives portrayed in Regular Show are the conflict father-son signifying male authority, the myth of the happy family, of femininity and masculinity, etc.

A *code* is a set of values and meanings shared by users, the producers and readers of the text. Fiske defines code as "systems into which the signs are organized". The study of codes, he adds, frequently emphasize the social dimension of communication (Fiske, 1990:64) Cultures can be seen as being collections of codes, which at the same time are collections of signs. Codes are very relevant for semioticians because they help to access the ideology that is at work in a given text. In the series, signs such as food trucks, fast food and eating contest may be signs that relate to the code of what is American.

Applying Semiotics

The semiotic analysis in this study intended to respond to the research question *What kind of connotative readings can be made of Regular Show content that directly or indirectly emphasize consumer culture?*

In the activity of putting semiotics into practice, three images have been the object of analysis. Each image belongs to a particular scene of an episode and they have been chosen randomly from the total of 46 episodes analysed. In the analysis, they were broken down into component parts in order to make the analysis and interpretation. In this sense, semiotics involved putting into words how these images worked by relating them to the ideological structure which organized their meaning. In the semiotic analysis of this study, the terms defined above have been used and applied to describe and interpret the texts. These terms were the frame of the analytical process that unpacked the texts. As a routine, in every analysis there has been an image adjunct in order to support the argumentation and facilitate the understanding. In addition, the analysis has been done following two different stages;

1st Describing carefully the content of the text in the first order of signification

2nd Interpreting the text and its signs in the second order of signification

4.4 Data collection procedure

The empirical data has been collected with the help of a pre designed coding sheet. The layout of the coding sheet has been thought and created manually without the influence of any previous research projects. Every coding sheet contained the same information. On the upper left part, there are different spaces to write down the number of the season, the length and name of the episode coded. This information proved to be very valuable for the later organization of the sheets. Moreover, on the upper right side of the coding sheet there is the name of the serial as presented in its original layout. Afterwards, the codes and its categories come in order in four different columns: code, category, presence and notes. In the column *code,* the names of the codes are visible as well as in the column *category*. Moreover, the column *presence* has been designed as a space to mark whether the category is present or not in a certain episode. Finally, the column *notes* turned out to be very useful to write down

comments about the coding. On the back of the sheet, the section called *observations* is added. This section is composed by *chapter overview* and other spaces to write down specific information about the episode in case of need. (For a better picture of the coding sheet see the appendix I). It is also relevant to mention that before the formal coding started, pilot reliability assessment of the coding sheet has been made and modification of the coding sheet had to be done after testing the material for the first time. There has been several modifications in the codes and categories and an inclusion of a new code. These adjustments were made in order to comprise and achieve richer data to answer the research questions.

A total of 46 episodes have been coded during the months of May and June 2015.The episodes coded represent eight and a half hours of cartoons and they have been chosen to be coded from a total of 191 episodes in 6 seasons. Almost all content analysis rely on some sort of sampling procedure due to the large datasets this method usually implies. The sampling selection had to be made in this study owing to issues of time and space. Krippendorf (1980) indicates there are a number of different sampling strategies that can be applied on content analysis: random, stratified, cluster and systematic. In this work the sample has been chosen by strata or subgroups, being these the six different seasons of the serial. The six seasons were subgroups already made in the original dataset. From each subgroup (season) seven episodes have been chosen randomly, this time numbering each episode from 1 onwards and using random table to pick out seven images from each subgroup. This procedure collected a total of 42 episodes. The 4 remaining were chosen from season one to four in order.

All the episodes have been selected randomly in an attempt to not interfere in the content of each episode. However, the study aimed to contain a representative sample of every season. The basic unit of this study was 11 minutes, the length of an episode of the series. This unit has remained the same during all the coding and it was applied to all the episodes watched.

The object of study of this work has been accessed directly online every time I aimed to code. The choice of the website was based on the legal share of content and easy access to the series at any time. Besides, all the episodes have been watched in its original language, English, with English subtitles in order to avoid misunderstandings in the pronunciation or

voices of the characters. The subtitles have been very useful few times where the messages of certain characters were not clear enough.

As regard of the coding activity, all the episodes have been coded in the same way applying always the same definitions for all the codes and categories in an attempt to achieve the maximum reliability of the results. The routine of coding the material was carried out in three steps:

1st   Write down the title of the episode, season number and length

2nd   Watch the chapter carefully and start coding the relevant data

3th   Revision of the coding and storage of the sheet in the designated folder

Because of their complexity, few episodes have been watched more than one time and generally during the coding activity there has been many pauses made to transfer the data to the coding sheet. Moreover, in times when I would not know how to code a certain object or scene, I would write it down in the back of the coding sheet for later consideration. The data that has been coded has solely been manifest content, meaning what it was explicitly stated in the episodes.

Although there is nowadays a huge variety of computer based software to report the results achieved with content analysis, in this study, due to personal and financial reasons these programs were considered dispensable. As Neuendorf affirms, "computer advances have made the organized study of messages quicker and easier, but not always better". (Neuendorf, 2000:1). The reduced and manageable amount of data and great time availability made possible to consider the coding and transformations of the data to be done manually. Since human coders are subjects to tiredness and likely to make more mistakes as the coding process, the present coding has been made during two months and with a strict rule of never coding more than two texts per day. This choice increased the attention given to each text reducing coder fatigue which at the end translates to a greater reliability of the data. In an attempt to compensate intercoder reliability, in the beginning of the coding activity, some episodes have been coded twice to verify that the results obtained were the same. This study has tried to achieve reliable data by not manipulating any information coded. Every data has been coded with an objective point of view, in an effort to let aside personal biases or motivations. With this aim on mind, the definition of the codes and categories has been strictly respected and applied all along the coding activity. After the

coding activity of the episodes all the data has been collected in a new version of the coding sheet (see appendix III). This sheet was created in order to sum up the findings and it contains all the codes and categories ready to be summarized. The totality of the data collected from the coding activity was then ready to be transformed into percentages and afterwards into visual graphs. (Detailed information concerning the data analysis can be found on the appendix IV.)

5. Results and findings of content analysis

In the content analysis of this study 46 episodes of Regular Show cartoons have been coded. In order to analyse the data gathered, this chapter aims to present the results obtained with the help of bar charts. Besides, the data is reviewed carefully and the relevant research questions are addressed. The sum of findings can be consulted in the results from the coding activity sheet in the appendix III.

5.1 Junk Food depiction in Regular Show

The results from the coding demonstrated that Junk food was presented in every single analysed episode of Regular Show with the exception of one, *Skips vs Technology* from the third season. In other words, from the total of 46 episodes analysed, 45 contained Junk Food traces. The latter leaves no doubt about the fact that Junk Food is a very recurrent topic in Regular Show. Junk food is so frequent that there has not been any chapter analysed where the characters ate something other than junk food, giving us the impression that there is no other food type to swallow in America. The presence of these products is so repetitive that we can see it not only as a part of the content of the episode but also as titles of the episodes and as one of the storylines' main topics.

The representation of Junk Food in the series varies depending on the way the objects are presented. Most of the times they were presented physically in the form of images. However, the categories were also shown many times orally. Two episodes were found to contain all the categories of the code Junk Food designed for this study. One of them belonging to season four called *Last Meal* and the other from season six, called *House Rules*. In both episodes all Junk Food categories are presented several times. In addition, Junk Food consumption is depicted as the dreamlike activity that everybody wants to practice. In *Last Meal*, Muscle Man is asked to give up eating junk food by his girlfriend. The whole episode revolves around the last pleasures the character wants to have eating a meal in every single fast food restaurant of the city; finally he decides not to quit eating fast food because he loves it too much. In *House Rules*, Benson, the owner of the house, creates several rules to put in practice in the house being one of them "*no food on the table nor on the floor*". When Mordecai and Rigby realize that, they instantaneously leave and look for

a new place to live, since they were used to have a considerable big quantity of junk food and trash constantly all around them in the house. The mood of the characters in this scene shows anger and discomfort towards the rules and therefore towards the fact that they cannot consume junk food in the manner they wish to.

Junk food consumption is depicted in Regular Show as the preferred activity of almost all the characters. Every time there is a scene around a table at a quick service restaurant, the ambiance is depicted as positive, the characters are happy and the climax of the episode is achieved. As it has been explicitly presented in the episodes *Eggscellent* or *Guys night*, consuming fast food is always the best plan and the characters are always ready and predisposed to it.

Additionally, Junk food is also depicted in eating contests as other leitmotif of the series. Usually these contests consist on one or several characters who take the challenge to eat a big amount of a certain junk food product in order to get an award. This award consisted on more than two episodes on a VIP card with special discounts to access the restaurant where the contest was hold. Food trucks, another American invention, were often portrayed as well in the serial. Based on its appearance, these vehicles sold mainly fast food items. In the episode, *The best burger in the world*, a food truck called *Grill'em up* is selling this particular burger.

Based on the titles of the episodes analysed, 10 of them (21 per cent) referred directly or indirectly to Junk food (*Last Meal, Pie Contest, The best burger in the world, Family BBQ, Eggscellent ,Grilled cheese deluxe, Free cake, Meat your maker, Sandwich of death, Take the cake*). On the other hand, in 19 of the episodes (41 per cent) the storyline was directly connected with consuming Junk Food. All of the preceding characteristics of the series demonstrate on the one hand how relevant is junk food depiction for Regular show and on the other hand that the representation of fast food products and related practices is done in a positive almost brain washing way.

5.2 Junk Food products in Regular Show

Chart 1 and 2 introduce the results from the code *Junk Food* and its categories. The data presented in the charts confirms the appearance of all the categories pre-designed for the coding activity and therefore demonstrates the success of its choice.

The categories with the highest scores and therefore which appeared more repeatedly on the episodes were Soda (89 per cent) and Sweet Snacks (74 per cent). Those percentages reveal that these categories were showed in almost the totality of the episodes analysed (chart 1). Concerning the category Soda, most of the times this category has been coded it was due to the appearance on the screen of a blue can with the letters SODA written on it (image 1). Moreover, red and white cans with a straw were also very commonly portrayed in the series and classified as Soda in the coding activity (image 2). From a total of 46 episodes, Soda was present in 41 (chart 2).

 Image1   Image 2

Sweet snacks was found to be the second most common category on the episodes. From a total of 46 episodes it was present in 36, more than the half (chart 2).Within this category, the most common products portrayed were cakes, pies and doughnuts. Frequently, these items were shown linked to a scene in a Coffee Shop or in a Snack Bar, places where the plot unfolds in many episodes. Continuing in order of presence, Chips and Salty snacks came into sight with the same frequency, both in 39 per cent of the episodes (chart 1).This data may lead to confusion due to the similarity of the categories and the results obtained. However, every category has been taken seriously and independently in the coding activity. For instance, what has been coded as chips was not coded twice into salty snacks. Within Salty Snacks, the most common items coded were popcorn and nachos.

Coming up next, Burger was coded in 37 per cent of the episodes watched being its most common displays hamburgers and cheeseburgers. Following the frequencies, the category Pizza was shown in 32 per cent of the episodes. Moreover, Sandwich appeared in 28 per cent of the episodes while Hot dog was shown in 24 per cent of the episodes and to end, Chicken wings got a percentage of 17 from the total (chart 1). Regarding the category *Other,* it included all those items that did not fit in any other category. Within this group, the most common products discovered were dips (ketchup, mustard, hot sauce) and coffee. Based on

the high frequency found in this category (24 episodes) I acknowledge it would have been useful to create two separate categories for coffee and dips.

The charts portraying the results obtained from the coding analysis for the code Junk Food are introduced below. Chart one displays the results by percentages, being 100% the total amount of episodes analysed (46). Chart two reveals the number of episodes in which each category was present, for instance the category Soda was present in 41 episodes.
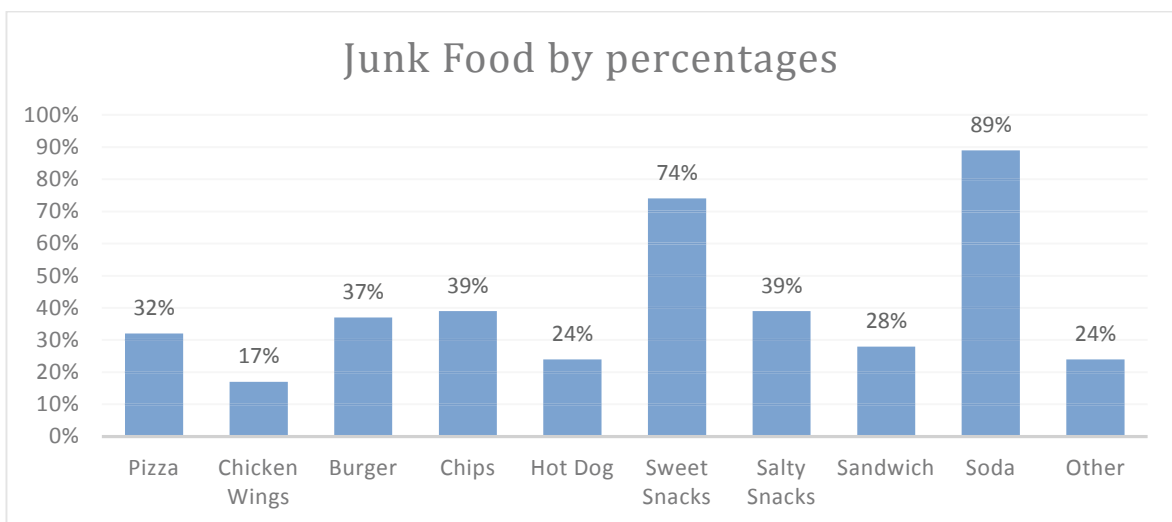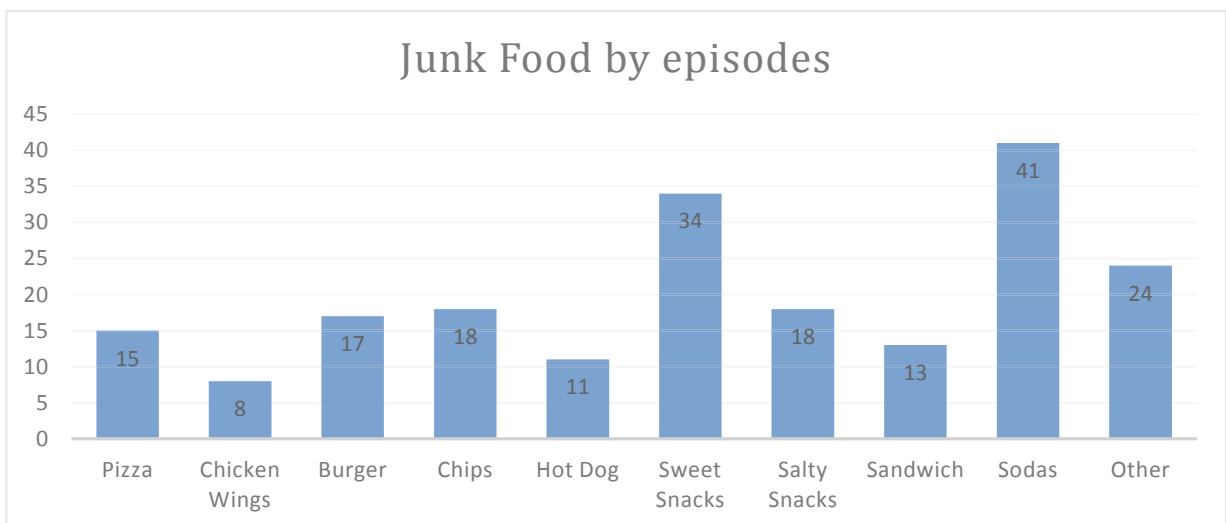
Chart 1. Junk food by percentages

Chart 2. Junk Food by episodes N=46

5.3 Brands in Regular Show
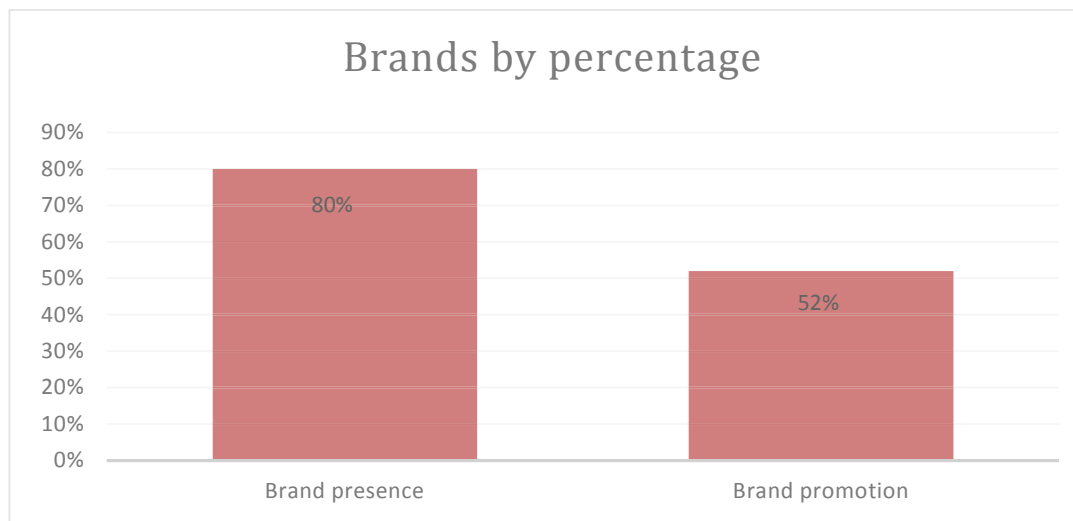
Chart 3. Brands

Chart 3 reveals the results from the code Brands, whose categories were brand presence and brand promotion. On the one hand, the chart manifest that in 80 per cent of the episodes coded brands were present. This is a very high score which translates that only 20 per cent of the episodes were brand free. It is important to note that the 80 per cent represents the appearance of brands within the 46 episodes, it does not inform about the number of brands exposed. Some episodes contained one brand while others more than four.

On the other hand, brand promotions were found in 52 per cent of the episodes coded, more than the half. The brands presented in the serial were very various, from clothes, restaurants, food products, etc. Usually the brands were shown in a written format, on billboards, TV advertisements or directly on objects. However the oral format was also very popular; the most common situation was a character mentioning the name of a particular brand. Brands were also shown visually and orally through flashbacks on several episodes. Few times brands were coded through the appearance of a logo on the screen or an object. After coding every episode a small research on the brand existence was routinely made. Interestingly, as it has been noted in the codes definition, some of the brands displayed in the serial constituted real brands while other fictional ones.

As it has been discovered by the data, the promotion of brands was less frequent but still considerable. The most common scenes coded into this category were TV advertisements,

spokespersons of a particular restaurant or simply a character expressing satisfaction and/or preference for a particular brand. Most of the times a brand was promoted on a TV advertisement the characters used to show a passive and almost hypnotic attitude in relation to the screen that culminated with a visit to the nearest shop to buy the product. This particular behaviour has been display on *The sandwich of death, More smarter, Eggscellent, Rage against the TV* and *Party Pete,* among other episodes.
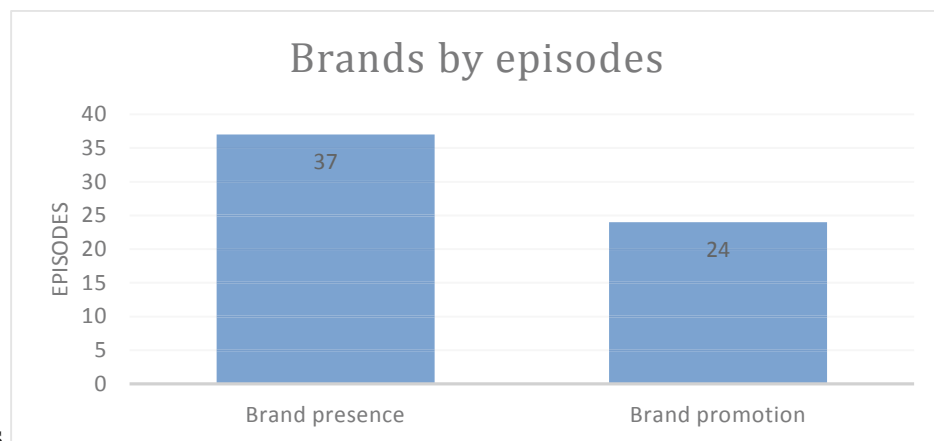
Chart 4. Brands

Chart 4 informs that from a total of 46 episodes analysed, 37 contained the presence of one or more brands while 24 showed one or more brand promotions. Amid the brands that were more often presented, the following were repeated in many episodes and therefore they constitute highly recurrent places where the plot of the serial develops.

Cheezers is the name of a restaurant that offers cheese sandwiches. This restaurant is a very common spot in the city where the series is contextualized. Cheezers is commonly known because of the long lines people form to get in. This place is also frequently known to organize eating contests. *Wing Kingdom* is another fast food restaurant repeatedly featured in Regular Show. They serve fried chicken wings and soda and they often organize eating contest for their clientele called *The wing Kingdom wing challenge.* Another usual brand portrayed on Regular Show is *Death Kwon do pizza and subs*, a small restaurant selling sandwiches, pizzas and hot dogs. In the episode *The sandwich of death* the so called sandwich of death is purchased in this shop. The restaurant appears in other episodes as

well. *Radicola* is a very well-known soda in Regular Show which according to the characters contains a lot of sugar. This drink is displayed in a red and white can.

The type of brands that were portrayed most often were fast food restaurants, followed by fast food products and then brands related to clothes and other sort of stores (video club, mall, coffee shop…).

Very closely related to the code brands and its presence is the third code, Places for consumption. Both codes fit well together due to the fact that every time there is a restaurant, a brand and/or a logo are also being exposed. The same phenomenon happens when there is a shop or another kind of store. Places for consumption and brands go hand in hand because they both participate in the process of advertising and incitation to consumption.

Chart 5.Places for consumption
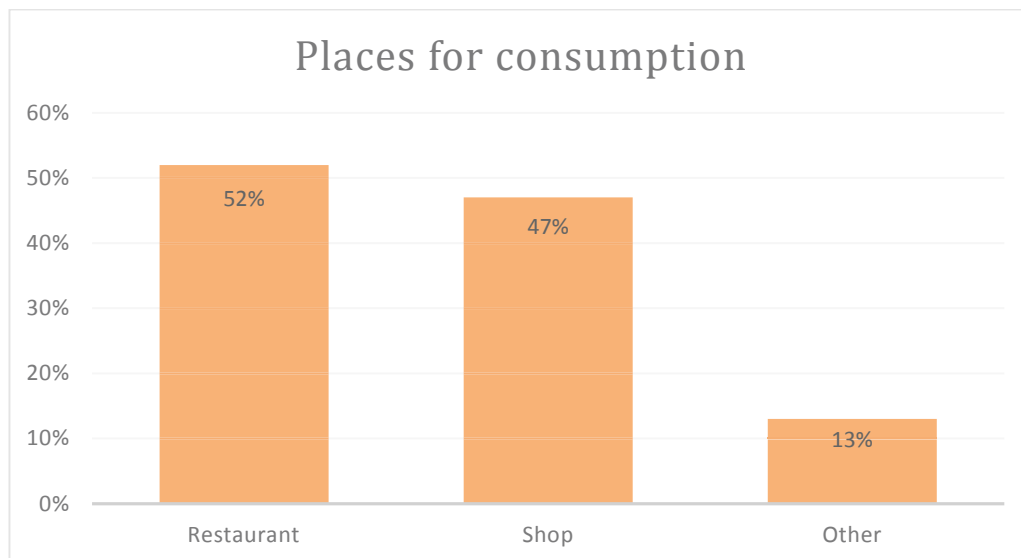
Chart 5 shows the frequencies found on the episodes for the code Places for consumption. In 52 per cent of the episodes there has been restaurants or similar. In 47 per cent of the episodes shops, grocery stores and malls were coded. Furthermore, in 13 per cent of the episodes different places for consumption other than restaurants and shops were found. Among the most common places coded into this category bowling alley and cinema were discovered. The presence of brands in the content of Regular Show is consistent. Moreover,

quick service restaurants were the most common category for places for consumption, which supports and contributes to the portrayal of junk food (code 1).

Regular Show's contribution to maintain brands awareness

In an interview from *Hot Topic* (2012) to G.J Quintel, he expresses "I grew up on The Simpsons that was the one we were quoting constantly". The Simpsons is one of the many references to popular culture done in Regular Show. Films, music and video games are referenced very often by coping characters, sentences or recreating scenes. In *Guitar of Rock*, Xander Mercury, Mordecai's "rock star name" is a reference to Queen's singer, Freddie Mercury. Besides, King Kong is insinuated in the episode *The best VHS in the world* by appearing in the t-shirt of the video club owner.

The mélange of pop culture with entertainment in Cartoon Networks programs seems to be very accepted and practiced also by other cartoon creators. Pendleton Ward, the creator of *Adventure Time*, admitted in an interview (Hot Topic, 2012) that he likes referencing other series, such as Regular Show in his episodes. Nevertheless, films, music and video games are not the only references that the creators of Regular Show use or include in the series; frequently, restaurants, shops and particularly brands of all kinds are shown.

As Gill (2006:74) pointed out, "advertisers, media companies and other business are becoming increasingly entangled and interdependent". The author highlighted the fact that increasingly, advertisement is becoming an important part of the production process of everything (cartoon series included) and in this way it influences everything it touches. Advertising is changing rapidly with consequences for media content, social relations and global capitalism (Gill, 2006). Advertisement and brands have touched Regular Show as well, and although there are no evidences of profit motive interest behind (based on the credits), product placements have been detected in several episodes. The motivations of the creators to include these products and brands is unknown and it could constitute a very interesting research topic for the media education and marketing field. Sometimes they present the brands explicitly as they are and others a remake of them. Independently of their motivations, the brands are considered in Regular Show as an important component of the identity of the series. However, the fact that the brands are present, at least one brand per episode, raises awareness of the role they may play on the viewers. The goal of this study

does not concern the audience, how they react to the series or the pleasures they get from it, the focal point is the issue of brands and their possible mission within the text. The following chapter is an introduction of the evidence of brands found through content analysis.

Brand evidence

Because is animation you can do whatever you want! (J.G Quintel, Regular Show creator*)*

Brand awareness is fostered in many ways in Regular Show. The most straightforward way to raise the alertness of a particular brand is to show it directly to the audience. This and other sort of practices to maintain the awareness of certain brands have been detected in several episodes of the serial.

 Image 3

Image 3 belongs to the episode *Bet to be blonde*, from the third season. On the episode Mordecai is moving out of the house because of a misunderstanding with Rigby. In order to move out, he calls a company called *I-Haul*. In the episode, the name of this company is showed clearly and is pronounced several times by Mordecai.

As it is shown in the image 3, this company consist on a real company. Image 3 portrays a combination between the image showed in the series (left side) and a real image of a company found on the internet (right side). I-Haul is a professional hauling and junk-removal company which provides its services in the United States. Whether this company has an agreement the creators of Regular Show to appear in the series or whether this has been made by Quintel as a reference is not easy to find out. Independently of the reason

behind, the fact that the name of the brand is shown on the series is enough to play an important role of brand awareness.

Image 4

Image 4 belongs to the episode *Bachelor Party! Zingo!* From the first season. As the title suggest, the episode revolves around the organization of the Bachelor party of Skips' brother. Mordecai and Rigby acquire all sort of items to eat and celebrate this festivity, however, among the items they buy there is *Graham Bitez*, as written in the image. Image 4 shows the combination of the real object (left side) and the object displayed on the series' content (right side). This snack corresponds to a real brand of snacks commercialized and easily found in the United States. The image reflects the intention of the creators to show the brand *Grahams*. Grahams, therefore is shown explicitly without any apparent motive behind. This time the characters do not pronounce the brand orally, it is portrayed only visually.

Image 5

Image five belongs to the same episode, *Bachelor Party! Zingo!* In the image we can see a secondary character eating something (most probably chicken wings) from a paper or plastic recipient. On the outside we can clearly read the word *Wingz*. This brand corresponds, as with the previous examples, to a real brand of the American market. On the episode, the brand name is portrayed with the same original colours, yellow and red. The

container of the wings resembles greatly to the original wrap, as showed in the image 5 on the left side. This scene can be considered as another product placement, an attempt to advertise a brand and a product and the fact that this portrayal is not accompanied with any negative assessment or criticism supports even more the hypothesis that is it raw advertising.

Apart from showing explicitly a brand name, another strategy has been found to foster brand awareness in Regular Show: an unsubtle suggestion to a brand.

Image 6

Continuing with the junk food brands, image 6 needs unfortunately no introduction.

Image 6 belongs to the same episode *Bachelor party! Zingo!* which at this points becomes a legend for its brands promotions in only 11 minutes. The particular outfit in the portrayal of the clown has not been made by accident. This character is Skips' brother disguised as a clown in his bachelor party. However, this clown is a direct reference to Ronald McDonald, the spokesperson or McDonalds, the world's largest fast food chain. According to Ritzer (1993) Ronald McDonald's name recognition is second only after Santa Claus and his power and influence has been compared to that of world religious leaders.

As a reference, this character's appearance makes a direct link to McDonalds brand on the audience's head. Although this time the brand name is not written anywhere, due to the physical resemblance to the spokes character of the brand, it is considered as an image which helps to insinuate a brand's name to whoever watches this series.

Schor (2004) pointed out that McDonalds spends $500 million a year on ads, of which approximately 40 percent are targeted to children.

Image 7

Although image 7 belongs concretely to the episode *Gold Watch* from the fifth season, this image could have been taken from any other episode since the appearance of this restaurant is very common in the series. The logo of TV-PG does not have any relevance here, it was shown exactly on the moment this image has been taken.

Wing Kingdom is a highly visited restaurant by the characters of Regular Show. However, its logo, a golden crown and name make a straightforward link to the globally known restaurant Burger King. The reference has been made by the use of the same colours (of the letters and crown) of the same logo and the similar name and style of the letters.

Image 8

The last image of the evidence of brand portrayal is image 8. The image belongs to the episode *Go Viral* from the second season. In this episode Mordecai and Rigby make a bet with Muscle man about who can create the best viral video in the less time possible. On the image a video created by them is shown on Woohoo! Video streaming site.

For a popular culture connoisseur this image needs little or no argument to explain to what it relates. The name used by the creators to call the website where the characters share their videos has a lot of visual links with the original website *Yahoo!* The style of the letters, the colour and the position they have imply a strong connection to the real brand. Even though

this may have been made in an attempt to show humour, it does, one way or another make the connection to a real global brand transforming the image in a deliberate advertising.

All the images referred above constitute examples of brand presence and brand promotion in Regular Show. This factor, together with the positive brand association discourses presented in the character's speeches plus the high amount of plots developed around places for consumption, define Regular Show as a serial which tends to maintain noticeably the brand awareness of its audience. At this point is interesting to note the choice of the concept *maintain* and not *raise*. Since the majority of the brands showed in Regular Show constitute global brands (Coca-Cola, McDonalds, etc.), I assume that the audience may be familiarized with them and therefore the exposition to them through Regular Show acts as a maintenance of the existence brand. However, is it important to consider that there must be a percentage of the audience who is not familiarized with the brands and therefore in this case Regular Show would act as a promotor to raise the awareness of a certain brand. In other words, if a person does not have a previous input of a brand or product, Regular Show would act as a part of the advertising campaign of this particular brand by promoting it to its audience. Nevertheless, at this point, one question arises, and is in which way does the input of brands translates on consumer attitudes. The brand awareness is maintained by the serial by often exposing a high frequency of brands and/or products which can have a direct influence on consumer choices promoting consumer culture. The exposure of the brands with high frequency plus the positive feelings and discourses around the product create the awareness that keeps the brand in the consumers evoked set, thereby increasing the probability that the brand will be purchased feeding a positive correlation between the input given by Regular Show and the sales of a brand. Consumers instinctively prefer an item they have previously seen to one that is new to them.

6. Semiotic analysis

The present chapter introduces a small sample compilation of images taken from several scenes of the series. The link these images have in common is that they, one way or another, can be denaturalised as strong representatives of consumer culture ideology. The goal of this chapter is to analyse semiotically these images following two steps, first a description on a denotational level and afterwards on the connotational level in an attempt to demonstrate that its common sense is ideologically built. The analysis of ideological coding reveals the construction of the social contexts in which readers and texts interact (Thwaites 1994:170). The reading of the following three images seeks to answer the research question: *What kind of connotative readings can be made of Regular Show content that directly or indirectly emphasizes consumer culture ideology?*

Disclosing Consumer Culture in Regular Show

Gold Watch

The two images above belong to one of the episodes analysed for this study called *Gold watch* from the fifth season premiered on June 26, 2014. In the original episode image *b* comes right after image *a*. As a synopsis to contextualize the images, Benson (the character on image *a*) has to get to work on time on his one thousandth consecutive day at work. If he does so his boss, Mr. Maellard, will offer him a gold watch. However, the night before,

Benson is invited to a party and loses consciousness. Now its 6 am and he has to get to the job as soon as possible if he wants to get the prize.

In the image *a*, a main character of the series appears running in the direction of a small plane wearing a military jumpsuit. The sentence popping up below is the subtitle of the series which matches what the character is telling in that specific moment. The context of the scene is outdoors and the weather is rainy and cloudy. The most significant signs in this image are Benson's eyes and mouth, Benson's posture and his sentence. To begin with, Benson's face has the shape of gumball machine, however his body seems to be humanoid. With a closer look, he has wide open eyes and open mouth. Besides, the posture of his body is active with the arms and legs in a running position. Together, these signs, the face expression and the posture, emphasize the codes they have together, connoting that the character is in a stressful situation dealing with a problem. Concerning the weather conditions, the signs rain and dark cloudy sky, due to their signifieds can have connotations of sadness, depression and loneliness which linked to the face expression work together to represent the character in an anxious situation.

The military clothes the character wears could connote he is in a duty, in other words, that he has a task to accomplish, a responsibility that is to get to the job on time to get the prize. And here is where the sentence has its meaning. The scene would probably have a very different interpretation if there wasn't for the linguistic message added below: *No, without that watch, I'm dead.* Benson is telling this sentence while he goes to the plane. Somehow he is telling to himself that without the golden watch nothing is worth and he uses the metaphor of death. As a metaphor *I'm dead* could express a big need or desire to have the object. In this metaphor being dead and not getting the watch are compared by analogy.

Something interesting to remark is that in the image Benson has got already a watch on his wrist. This could be understood as if his desire for the new watch was not in order to see what time is it, for its practicality, but instead for what it represents to wear a golden 214 carat watch on his wrist. This detail portrays the value system of materialism which is preoccupied with possessions and the social image they project. This same detail represents as well a contradiction where the character' main task of the episode is to get a watch when he actually has already one. This contradiction is then resolved in terms of the value of the objects; although he has one watch, the value of the golden shiny watch satisfies him more.

Image *b* shows the small white hand of Mr Maellard holding a squared red box with a golden watch placed on black velvet inside. Under the lid of the box there is a label with a sentence written on it *This box contains –one- genuine 214- carat gold watch.* Image *b* has several interesting signs (the colour of the clothes and skin of Mr Maellard, the size of the box, the colours of the box and the velvet) but two are the most important for this analysis: the label and the watch itself. Regarding the label, the text is reminding us what is inside the box, however its function does not end here. The label is not merely describing the content of the box but reinforcing the meaning and value of the watch itself. This can be seen in the text through the word *genuine* as having its role as a powerful sign on the code of wealth because it related to the myth of the authentic vs the fake. Another important sign adding to the value and importance of the watch is the size of the box, which if compared to the size of the hand of Mr Maellard seems extremely big. The bigness of things (king size, XXL) seems to be a recurrent issue in America. The bigness of the box relates also to the myth of the biggest the better and reinforces the portrayal of the prize. Coming back to the label, the sign genuine as a qualifying adjective of the watch can signify luxe and exclusivity relating perfectly with the other signs to the code of wealth. The clockwise marks nine o'clock, the time by which Benson has to be back, and the watch looks shiny, new and golden. Having or wearing something authentic and therefore expensive is a socially constructed myth of wealth.

In the image *b*, all the sings work together under the same code. The dark colours black and garnet, the velvet and the colour gold all have signifieds of high class and status. As the label described, the watch has the highest amount of carat possible. In the label is written 214 carat, however, the maximum real amount of carat is 24, meaning pure gold. With this choice, Quintel must have wanted to increase the number to express a trace of humour through exaggeration and at the same time give extra value to the object. *Carat* is another powerful sign placed into the image to support the dominant code of meaning (wealth). The watch itself is used metonymically to representing success.

Signs working collectively

The signs of both images work together to build the meanings of the scene. The ideology of consumer culture is present here in many ways but generally through Benson expressing his devotion for an object, without which life is not worth it. Moreover, *Time is money* is another recurrent myth emphasized in this text.

All the signs analysed, face expression, body positon, sentence, watch and label support the ideology of consumer culture in a way that it compares the value of an object with the life of a human. This simile is characteristic of a materialistic value system. Moreover the scene depicts wealth as something positive to achieve. The images portray the act of seeking wealth as a natural behaviour therefore reinforcing values of consumerism. In the words of Thwaites et al (1994:170), "ideology works by orienting people in social contexts towards accepting certain values about the world as natural, obvious and self-evident". Ideology helps to accommodate values and in this case is trying to accommodate the importance of possessing commodities. In this text, the ideology of consumer culture evokes a world where the objects have a strong value, where showing wealth is a sign of progress and evolvement and where the mere act of purchasing objects makes people happier.

Country Club

Image *c*

Image *c* belongs to *Country Club*, the thirty-first episode of season four which was aired on July 1, 2013. In the episode, Mordecai and Rigby must get the golf cart of the park back from a country club because it was confiscated by the guards of the club.

Among the key signifiers in the text we find the sentence *Here in the Country Club, we can do whatever we want!* (Said by the man seated on the chair to Mordecai and Rigby)*,* the aesthetic of the six people, the spatial structure of characters, the cocktail and the county club context.

Concerning the possible signifieds, the cocktail of the image, as well as signifying "an alcoholic drink consisting of a spirit or spirits mixed with other ingredients such as fruit juice or cream" (Oxford Dictionary), is presented here as celebratory drink they all have signifying fineness and status.

The spatial structure and the positions the characters adopt in the image look very classic, and the male centrally seated on a chair in front of them suggest and ideology of patriarchy and authority. It is frequent to see in the popular culture patriarchy represented with an old man seated surrounded by his family. Here the old man works as a metonym for a traditionally patriarchal system. The disposition of the characters is framed through a mythic narrative which represents male authority as connected to traditional values. These traditional values are also represented by the analogous number of women and men which suggests a perfect matrimonial linkage between them. This choice, besides promoting traditional values suggests an ideology of heteronormativity where love can only be heterosexual.

Regarding the aesthetic of the characters there is a considerable number of signs involved. The jewels the woman wear can signify wealth and high class. Moreover, the golden watch of the old man reinforces his power and status within the group. In general the representation of women is very sexist and reductionist. The ladies' hair colour is blonde, which on the one hand could be a reference to the myth of the dumb blonde and on the other hand signify innocence reinforcing the ideal beauty standards of nowadays. The use of hills, the red lipstick and the tight clothes portrays objectified women for the male gaze. The women are represented as sexual objects to meet men's expectations. The stereotypes used here reinforce these attitudes and contribute to support systems of power inequality between genders. Besides, the constructed opposition of masculinity and femininity provides a binary understanding of gender and helps to maintain gender dichotomy. Another myth that comes out in the image is the old and fat rich man with the young blonde pretty woman.

The colours of the clothes are also relevant to analyse, all the ladies wear pink colour, which is stereotypically connected with femininity while the men wear blue. All the signs working under the code of aesthetic characterize and represent a specific social class and status.

The country club context can signify an outdoor place to practice sport and entertainment but also a place where the high classes meet and interact. Under this reading the country club context signifies wealth, luxury and exclusiveness. This kind of spaces help to promote

the division of classes in terms of economic power. The country club context is used in the text as a sign that connotes privatization, a value highly idealized in consumer cultures.

The sentence in yellow is loaded with important signifiers because it helps to construct the meaning of the whole text. *Here in the Country Club we can do whatever we want!* Note the exclamation at the end of the sentence which adds emphasis and intimidation. Based on the intonation of the old man while pronouncing the sentence, his voice suggest threat and brag. This sentence adds to the meaning of the whole text as it promotes the same idea that can be summarized as with money people can do whatever they want.

When placed together, the different signs emphasize the codes they have in common activating some meanings and excluding others. The signs shown in the image *c* are used in many other social texts to trigger off similar codes of wealth, status and class. These codes come into play very fast when all the signs are put together, they support each other creating a preferred meaning of the text. The combination of all the signs and codes reinforces the meanings of each other being richness and wealth the dominant signifieds of the text. Together the six characters form a metonymy for richness supporting the signs and codes that are frequently used in the media.

In terms of the social structures of thought, the most straightforward message that the text sends is *wealth gives you control*. However, there are other structures of thought activated and reinforced such as the bourgeoisie has the *pouvoir*, class differences, money influence, etc. The text can be also interpreted through the Marxist theory and the idea of class struggle being the characters of the image the powerful class who make the sabotage of the proletariat represented by Mordecai and Rigby, regular park workers who are alienated. Besides, the emphasis of *we* of the sentence suggests otherness. The familiarity and repetition of codes like wealth and status through signs like jewellery, appearance and blondness transforms these connotations into denotations making it more difficult to denaturalize.

The ideology of consumer culture is present in this text because through the codes and signs the image reinforces the idea that money is the key to success and the belief that with money anything is possible. Consumer culture is there because the text (re)produces the idea of wealth as a positive and natural fact therefore acting through ideology to settle and encourage consumerism. The text represents a positive and successful image of richness and power and positions the readers to prefer and value the "us" rich to the detriment of the

"they" poor. At the same time, the *they*, ordinary people (as it is portrayed in many episodes) is always striving to become the *we* materialist dominant group.

House Rules

d

Image *d* belongs to the episode *House Rules* from the third season. On the episode's plot, Benson creates a book of rules to follow in his house. Since one of the rules is *no food on the table nor on the floor* Mordecai and Rigby decide to leave the house. Image *d* belongs to the scene where Benson is informing them about the book.

As a denotational level, the first order of signification, image *d* is a syntagm made up of a number of visual signs. The text shows the feet of the main characters of the series (Mordecai on the left and Rigby on the right) over a table full of food leftovers, cutlery, plates and food packaging. Moreover, on the table there is a videogame console which could be interpreted as a reference to Sega due to its highly physical resemblance to the *Sega Master Systems* console originally released in 1985. Besides, the console seems to be connected to a television through a black cable. The key signifiers of the text are the television, the videogame console, the feet disposition of the characters and the food. These signifiers on the text become signs when we read them, in other words, when we match them with signifieds or mental concepts. Concerning the position of the characters' feet, it describes they are seated somewhere (most likely a couch). The action of placing the feet

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on a table can connote unconcern or indifference and it is commonly portrayed on the media as a stereotypically male gesture.

The television connected to the videogame console suggests that the two characters are playing a videogame together. This supposition is reinforced by the fact that from the console there are two wires visible that go in the direction of each character. These wires represent the existence of two remotes to play. Watching TV and playing video games are actions we have very embedded in our western culture and which are deeply connected to goods acquisition and commodities. Few are the homes that nowadays can live without a television. The text therefore portrays having these commodity as a natural practice. The leftovers present on the table come from different food products such as mayonnaise, burgers, pizzas, fries, chicken wings, soda, chewing gum and other non-easy identifiable wrappers. All these signs relate together to the code of fast food. The connotative meanings of fast food can be that it stands for a certain aspect of the American culture, as a lack of interest in cooking, as indicatives of unhealthy diets, uniformity, as symbols of globalization etc.

It is interesting to see how the text presents a contradiction between the high amount of products on the table and the high amount of non-finished food. This contradiction fuels consumer culture because it shows the value of the newest put into practice. The desire to acquire things immediately, so typical of a culture of consumption, is symbolized with the open packages and not eaten slices of pizza or chicken wings. The immediate need to please satisfaction is showed by the waste created on the table. Individualism and selfishness are also presented by the latter practice and they constitute some of the strongest values of consumer culture. Another contradiction is that although they are supposed to be playing a video game the TV seems to be off.

Through a paradigmatic analysis certain oppositions can be found in this text; junk food vs healthy food, hunger vs satisfaction, entertainment vs boredom, full vs empty and clean vs dirty. These polar oppositions serve to give meaning to the text. Although these oppositions do not discover structures in the text, they help to read it and interpret it.

All the signs come together in this image to convey a message. This text connotes and promotes consumer culture for many reasons. First because it displays the characters with a very sedentary lifestyle. Second because it encourages the activity of watching TV and playing video games.

The arrangement or lay out of the room remains Guy Debord's (1967) conceptualization of the man-mass, the civilization of the television. The room is oriented towards the television, which stands in a meuble made for and because of its existence. The television stands in this room, (and in the rooms of a big majority) as a trophy to admire; the rest of the furniture and the people themselves position around it. The television acquires an almost religious value in the house. The relation between the television and the products of the table is to a large degree casual. As a screen that promotes products in an ambient of spectacle which are bought by the audience and consumers creating an infinite circle, television promotion-buying-consuming-television promotions…And last but not least, the presence of all the junk food products on the table conveys an overconsumption of fast food (in the purchase and intake) which exceeds proportionality. These three factors together create the profile of a person or a lifestyle who is deeply influenced by consumer culture and its practices.

As it has been claimed by Schor in her survey on children, media and consumer culture (2004) in America, many parents described restrictive regimes for their children in which media usage and content were strictly monitored and regulated, the use of internet was limited and fast food was a special treat. Some parents admitted to often see their children eating fast food in front of the TV (Schor, 2004). This kind of behaviours are positively reinforced in Regular Show by showing images and plots like in *House Rules*.

The image *d* naturally links friendship with fast food consumption and videogames. Moreover, it is important to remember that in the episode the characters get what they wanted in order to avoid the new rules. The rules made by Benson are successfully skipped by Mordecai and Rigby when they decide to quit the house. In this case, their behaviour is being supported by the plot of the episode because instead of adapting to the rule they prefer to continue with their consumerist lifestyle somewhere else. Having a thing-oriented attitude is a strong characteristic of consumer culture. The characters showed a preference for fast food and videogames instead of the relationship with another character, that is they chose to serve the interests of commercialization as their priority.

This text acts ideologically in the sense that it places, one more time, the audience to prefer the attitude of Mordecai and Rigby than the attitude of Benson. To emphasize this preference, Rigby expresses his dissatisfaction to Benson: *Oh man more rules? You got to be joking!* and *That's going way too far!* or *Are you nuts?*. All these expressions indicate a reaction based on an addiction to commodities such as the TV, the video console and the

processed food-goods they do not want to give up. This texts portrays consumer culture based on commodity fetishism.

As it has been demonstrated with the semiotic analysis, consumption is celebrated and desired through many images, scenes and entire episodes in Regular Show.

7. Interpreting Regular Show as a purveyor of nothing

Based on the results obtained in this study through content analysis and semiotic analysis methods, one of the interpretations that can be done is whether Regular Show qualifies to be a purveyor of nothingness through its content. This particular interpretation has been done based on the results obtained which at the same time as supporting the earlier research results also add a new dimension to the cartoons research in general and to consumer culture research in particular. This chapter aims to interpret the object of study of this work as a purveyor of *nothing* based on the results obtained and also contextualize these results within earlier research. The interpretation has been done relaying on one of the conceptualizations made in the chapter two, theoretical background, between *nothing* and *something*. Recalling the definition of nothing, it involved "all those social forms that are generally centrally conceived, controlled and comparatively devoid of any distinctive substantive content".

The object of study can be interpreted as nothing in two different ways, first if we consider it a product of Cartoon Networks and second as a purveyor of nothing if we focus mainly on its content. Nothing as a product of Cartoon Networks can be illustrated starting with its title, *Regular Show*. The first word of the title brings to mind the idea that, in principle, the serial does not seem to have any special or peculiar content. The use of the word *regular* to express ordinary or typically common, defines a show whose content is not expected to astonish or surprise anybody, it is not expected to be original. The serial meets the definition of nothing in the first place because with its title it addresses a lack of uniqueness or distinctive content. Interestingly, once one gets acquainted with the serial it is easy to realize how well the title fits; the content is ordinary in the sense that it could be a good illustration of the western capitalist lifestyle. The title of the series then somehow assumes and portrays the norm that our lives are increasingly ruled by the grobalization of nothing and those who violate this norm by acting and thinking differently, like is the case of Pops, a secondary character, are portrayed as subnormal. In this case, Regular Show can be seen as a series that shows the *regular* ordinary lifestyle of any human of the globalized world. By portraying this as a normal lifestyle we can detect an ideology promoting a false consciousness- this is the life of a regular human.

Continuing with the contention of whether Regular show can be defined as nothing being a product of Cartoon Networks it is worth positioning this channel in context. The cross-

border flow of television programming for children has intensified dramatically, and the global television and media distribution outlets targeting this audience continue to expand across Europe (Mjøs, 2010). According to Mjøs, there is nowadays an affluence of programming coming from a wide variety of channels to target children, the national channels and the ones that are imported mainly from the US. This variety is big in quantity but generally poor in quality. In spite of the big number of television channels that target children, the programmes generally lack distinctiveness and diversity, what would have been named *pseudo-individualization* by Adorno (1944).

The latter assumption is based on two reasons: first due to the similar titles and characters the programmes appear to be different, however their narratives and structures are extremely similar (*Clearance, Uncle Grandpa*, *Rick and Morty*). Second because, to a greater or lesser extent, all of them can be thought of *programme-length commercials* (Kunkel, 1988). The latter is so obvious on certain series that several authors (Kunkel, 1988; Buckingham, 2000) doubt what comes first, if the product or the programme. Clear examples of programme-length commercials are *SpongeBob*, *Pokémon*, *Dora the explorer*, which apart from the series and movies, they have also mass produced a massive range of other nothings. Television programing and merchandising are at the core of a commercializing media and communications environment. Although this is not a recent phenomenon, it is still very relevant and Regular Show has also shown its continuation on this business. This is, aside from the six seasons of the series constituting already an extravagant amount of 191 episodes, the seventh season is currently being produced containing more than 40 episodes. Moreover, the series has produced a wide merchandising of products ranging from toys to clothes and not surprisingly has premiered in August 2015 in Los Angeles with *Regular Show: The movie*.

To finalize the first interpretation, Regular Show also qualifies to be a centrally conceived and controlled form of entertainment. Regular Show is a consumer product produced by capitalistic, profit-making American corporations. There are large business organizations conceptualizing the nature of Regular Show. The serial belongs to a global cartoon channel, Cartoon Network which operating under Tuner Broadcast System belongs at end to Time Warner, one of the biggest and most powerful multinational media corporation in the world. All the control exerted by these companies is made in order to market a product which attracts the biggest audience possible and whose viewing rates exceed records in order to make the massive profits to support and maintain the power of all the corporations behind.

The ultimate objective of the creation of the product is the profit, growth and grobalization of the companies behind it, whose goal is to reach new nations and conquest new markets where they can expand. At this point, it is relevant to note that one of the most enabling factors of the grobalization of nothing in the world are the media. And this grobalization of nothing through the media has been made possible partially thanks to the internet. The media are themselves not only purveyors of nothing but "the major outlet throughout the world for advertisements selling the virtues of varieties of nothing, especially that associated to consumer culture" (Ritzer, 2007:134). Nowadays, as it has been discussed in the theoretical part, it is not only easier to produce nothing but also to bring it to the people.

The second interpretation presented in the beginning of this chapter was whether Regular Show could qualify as a purveyor of nothing based on its content. For this interpretation, first we should review the results obtained in this study and contextualize them within the previous empirical research.

The results from content analysis obtained in this study revealed that the series contained an important amount of junk food items in its content; from the total of 46 episodes analysed, only one appeared not to include any junk food item. The results achieved showed that *sweet snacks* was the second highest junk food product portrayed after *soda*. This findings agree to the results from a study by Lee et al (2009) who in their research on food advergames found that the major advertised product in the US was gum. Moreover, the high portrayal of junk food products does not seem to be an isolated case of Cartoon Networks channel. The findings of high junk food portrayal was supported by earlier results by Batada & Wootan (2007), who in their study about childhood obesity detected Nickelodeon entertainment channel to be loaded with nutritional poor foods. These results confirm how two of the largest children's entertainment companies have strong resemblances in terms of what they market to children.

Additionally, the empirical results of this study also revealed a strong representation of brands, both real and fake in the content of the series. These brands were detected by content analysis and its presence has been corroborated with the semiotic analysis. Several authors (Achenreiner and John, 2003; Kline, 2005) have researched the meaning of brands to children based on cognitive development. Others have focused more specifically on brands and the role they play in consumer based lifestyles and the obsession with celebrities (Boden, 2006; Schor, 2004). Nevertheless, although the concrete results obtained in this

study about branding have not been tested earlier and therefore appear in this field as new data, they could stablish an agreement with an earlier finding by Schor (2004). The author, in trying to answer how does children involvement in consumer culture affect their wellbeing, found out that children who are more involved in consumer culture are more depressed, more anxious, have lower self-esteem and suffer from more psychosomatic complaints. Schor (2004) also found that children who spend more time watching television and using other media are more likely to involve themselves in consumer culture. This finding has been partially corroborated with the results obtained in this work, because in fact, an important percentage of brands, logos and brand commercialisations, together with messages encouraging purchasing behaviour and consumption, were detected in the content of the series. Accordingly, the connexion made by Schor between television watching and consumer culture has been supported with this study. Likewise, these results present empirical data to suggest, as Kline (1993) already argued, that the boundaries between content and advertising are becoming increasingly blurred.

Regarding brand awareness and Regular Show' contribution to it, the results showed evidence to discuss whether the series could be seen as a contributor to maintain brand awareness among its audience. This has been debated based on several factors: positive brand association discourses, frequent portrayal of places for consumption and visual brand evidence. From latter, several brands have been encountered within the material of this study including McDonalds and Burger King. This findings agrees to the results obtained from a study by Bernhardt et al (2013) who, in their research about fast food marketing aimed at children in America established that from the total of 92 quick service restaurants advertised during the study period, 70per cent corresponded to McDonalds or Burger King 29per cent. Moreover, the authors also found out that from the top four stations to place children's advertisements, Cartoon Networks was found to be the one with the highest scores. The results obtained in their study establish an agreement first on the channel in question and second on the brands (and therefore products) advertised on it.

After the semiotic analysis, some of the key themes identified (either implicit or explicit) were the positive portrayal of wealth, value of money, materialism and emphasis on commodities; substantial themes of the ideology of consumer culture. The themes recognized in the semiotic analysis established a link with the key elements of consume culture identified by Ritzer (2007). The characters were portrayed in situations where they valued consumption, they practiced it regularly often displaying the objects that were

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consumed. Moreover, objects and artifacts, another element identified by Ritzer, were central to the semiotic analysis and were manifested often through values of materialism. Also, as it has been clarified in the example of Golden Watch, the search for meaning through consumption was clearly depicted.

Moreover, the findings of the semiotic analysis also establish an agreement with those from Dorfman and Mattelart (1971) who also studied ideology in cartoons, particularly those of the narratives in Disney comics. In their research, the authors suggested that duck stories featured a quest for fortune, and that in the comics there was a constant portrayal of buying, selling and consuming practices. Disney characters represented a constant quest for money, being the goal everyone strove for. These messages have been similarly found in the semiotic analysis of Regular Show, where the characters were often portrayed as seeking wealth as well as buying and consuming a huge variety of goods and services. In addition, the importance and value the characters gave to money in the serial, has been found to be considerably high and parallels the results from Dorfman and Mattelart about the Disney characters. Their analysis suggested that Disney comics were loaded with dominant meanings and served to normalize capitalist social relations and the American lifestyle. The glorification of consumption, was defined by the authors as one of the key themes found in their study and interestingly, 44 years later, can also be perceived in Regular Show, one of the most recent cartoons series for children.

All of the previous findings qualify Regular Show to be considered as a form of entertainment that lies close to the extreme pole of the nothing continuum. The close connexion made in the theoretical chapter between the nothing and consumer culture, and in view of the results obtained, confirm the positioning of the serial towards the extreme nothing end. However, in order to have a clearer understanding of this argument, the four nullities conceptualized in Ritzer's theory are manifested below.

Based on the fours nullities, *nonthings* were frequently presented along the sample of data analysed. Junk food items, due to its lack of uniqueness are a clear example of nonthings centrally created and controlled by the fast food chains. The items presented in the content of the series had little or none distinctive substantive characteristics and were therefore interchangeable and not easy to differentiate one form the other. Junk food items are products from nowhere and increasingly time-free. Besides, nonthings were also depicted in several scenes where the characters were in nonplaces (supermarkets, malls) which had

the shelves loaded with products lacking in distinctive substance. Moreover, in quick service restaurants the nonthings were often visible in the menus.

Likewise, brands were found to have a considerable presence in the series through the categories brand presence and brand promotion. Brands are also good examples of nonthings because they are usually conceived and controlled by advertising agencies. Although brands in themselves may have distinctive substantial content that differentiates one logo from another, they cannot be defined as *something* due to the fact that their major use is to differentiate that which has little differentiation. In other words, brands serve to differentiate between nonthings (a burger from Cheezers from a burger from Wing Kingdom) and nonplaces, (Cheezers from Wing Kingdom) in a consumerist society. The branding of nothing is present in the series not only through nonthings, but also through nonplaces, nonservices and nonpeople wearing logos. On the other hand, a brand could be considered a nonservice that creates the illusion of distinction between nonthings and nonplaces where nonpeople work.

Nonplaces were also present in the series shaped like fast food restaurants, supermarkets and malls. As it has been evidenced in the theory, all these nullities are strongly connected and often the appearance of one implies the appearance of the rest. Since there is a considerable amount of nonplaces in regular show based on the result, it is implied that there would be also nonpeople working in there, as the cashiers, waiters and sellers in general. These people are conceived as nonpeople not exclusively based on the kind of job they do but also based on how people treat them and in the way they perform their job; their cold attitude together with a strict and impersonal behaviour, the standard uniform, and the non-personal relation they have with the customers defines them as nonpeople in Ritzer's theory. Therefore, the service they provide is a nonservice in the sense that is made in a very routinely way with little or no variations to increase efficiency for the company who exert control over them. Besides, the characters of the series, particularly Mordecai and Rigby, could also be conceived as nonpeople based on how they are portrayed in the series; their lives are totally empty and the only activities they practice are those preferred by a capitalist consumer culture: the consumption of different variations of nonthings in nonplaces. The consumption of these things seems to be what it brings meaning to their lives and at the same time redefines them as nonpeople.

Discussion

Four companies now dominate the children's media and entertainment marketplace. Disney, Viacom, News Corporation and Time Warner. Throughout the world of children's products (serials, toys, movies…), the markets are dominated by a few powerful companies; this monopoly induces an increasing uniformity in these products. The conception of Regular Show as an empty form of nothing produced by a transnational media company plus the combination of all the dimensions of nothing: nonthings, nonservices, nonplaces and nonpeople in its content, supports the interpretation that describes Regular Show as a purveyor of nothing and that defines it as a form of entertainment that lies in the nothing end of the continuum theorized by Ritzer. As a form of nothing, the grobalization of Regular Show series can be perceived as a threat for promoting a naïve and enjoyable representation of consumer culture ideology. The series represent consumer culture as common sense, in a way that we should feel proud about it; it persuades us to buy this ideology and accept it as ours. This practice has been intuited by Aldous Huxley already in 1932. Huxley's main concern was demonstrating how the dominant power exerted control to the people through pleasure. Huxley feared that what would ruin us as a society would be what we loved the most. Likewise, through entertainment, and particularly a series, a form of pleasure, the interest of the powerful groups are camouflaged. Few decades later, Berger shows also concern with the same issue when he pointed out "The price we pay for our so-called free media is much higher than we can possibly imagine" (Berger, 2011:100). Both authors put forward the fact that the media generally act through persuasion often disguised as entertainment or trivial issues and they claim the need of the audience to detect it in order to preserve their freedom.

Yet coming back to the theory, an analysis could be that, because it tends to expansion throughout the globe, nothing in general and more specifically in the realm of consumer culture leaves less and less room for something. With the spreading of the nullities there is progressively less room for places, people, things and services in our societies. Nothing has appropriated the position formerly held by something. In this sense, nothing and its grobalization are affecting not only many countries but a wide range of domains and institutions, especially entertainment and concretely children's entertainment. The exportation of empty consumption-oriented forms of entertainment like Regular Show to other nations is likely to be offensive to some people, especially when these forms act to threaten and extinguish other glocal and/or local forms of entertainment rich in substance.

The grobalization of consumer culture has contributed to a loss of local and glocal forms of something because they are progressively threatened and replaced by globalized homogenizing forms of nothing. The risk at stake here is the loss of something in the face of the proliferation of nothing. The global circulation of Regular Show can be seen as a force pushing towards the grobalization of consumer culture ideology in the world, and therefore defining itself as a promotor of homogeneity through the nothing essence of its content. We are and will be increasingly deprived of the distinctive content that has always characterized places, things, people and services. The grobalization of nothing and its nullities could be encouraging the impoverishment of the world.

8. Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative research was to evaluate how the ideology of consumer culture was represented in Regular Show cartoon series. In order to answer the research question, four subquestions were designed to operationalize the results.

The data were collected with the help of two methodologies, a first approach to the text through content analysis and a second approach with semiotic analysis. The choice of triangulation was made in an attempt to compare and corroborate both findings.

The results of the 46 episodes analysed revealed on the one hand that junk food items, brands and places for consumption were considerably present in the content of the cartoons. Two of the most common junk food products portrayed were soda and sweet snacks. Overall, junk food was depicted very often and its consumption was repeatedly portrayed as positive and desirable. On the other hand, through the visual analysis of several images, an ideology of consumer culture has been observed to be emphasized and encouraged by the characters. The series has been interpreted as a possible contributor to maintain or raise brand awareness in its audience based on the brand representations and the positive discourses linked to them. At the end, an interpretation of Regular Show as a purveyor of *nothing* has been made first as a nonthing produced by Cartoon Network and second based on the essence of its content.

Discussion

This study has adopted a combination of approaches to media education. First, contextualized in the media literacy movement, this study aimed to combine popular culture with education and highlight examples of intertextuality and meaning in the text. However, the further engagement with a more critical pedagogy and with cultural studies was soon adopted. One of the most important parts of this study has been the ideology critique and the representation analysis of consumer culture in the series which included issues of gender, power and class. This study recognizes the need and encourages the practice of a critical and transformative engagement with media texts in order to challenge structures of oppression and power.

The present work contributes to the field of media education research because it constitutes an example of engaging a text critiquely in order to understand the interconnections and systems of power operating on it. Media in general and particularly TV programs, being "tellers" and "sellers" of the stories and culture of our time (Kellner, 2008) constitute also active forces of transmission of messages, values and ideas to our society. In this process, critical media pedagogy acts as the educational framework that filters and analyses all these messages as conveyors of information before we can accept them as right. Critical media pedagogy has been framing and supporting this study as a tool to detect and challenge the myths and taken for granted logic of ideas of consumer cultures.

Media and communications are conceived as social processes and dynamic forces that, apart from entertaining and educating us, also reproduce dominant ideologies. In the context of an increasing globalized world and a market-based media culture, connecting education with critical media literacy to challenge common sense and mainstream ideas is an essential practice of activism and freedom. The mere detection of inequalities and injustices is no longer enough, for that reason, one of the goals of media literacy in education should also involve humans to develop a more active and socially responsible attitude and aptitude. This study constituted an example of connecting media, popular culture and education in the pursuit of a more democratic, representative and pluralistic media scape.

Limitations of the work

The absence of literature and research done about the concrete object of study made this work more challenging. In addition, the nature of this research, being a multidisciplinary study, made it ambitious to draw concrete conclusions because of the various links between animated cartoons, marketing and branding on the media and junk food. These limitations, however, can also be perceived as advantages. First because due to the lack of literature and prior results, this research gains its value and second because the diverse disciplines it encompasses, although demanding, make the task of drawing conclusions very rich and various and therefore benefits simultaneously different domains.

One of the possible limitations of this study has been the sample of data defined for analysis. Although the empirical data analysed resulted sufficient to answer the research questions and draw conclusions, a larger sample of episodes would have improved the authenticity

and generalizability of the findings and perhaps bring about new issues. In the same line, the analysis of consumer culture ideology would have deepen with an increase in the selection of the sample of images.

The choice of the integration of two methodologies translated in richer data and the combination of both results helped to see a bigger picture of consumer culture ideology in the series. However, the data could have been approached in a different manner, choosing for instance another categorization and other representatives of consumer culture for the analysis. Despite the fact that the emphasis of this research was on junk food, brands and places for consumption, attention could have been paid to other aspects of consumer culture focusing for instance on the role money plays on the series or on the lifestyle of each character. I acknowledge that the selection of those representatives has limited the analysis and therefore the discussion about the topic. Perhaps a more broad and complex coding sheet would have provided other valuable insights about the series.

All in all, the choice of the research methodology has been able to successfully answer the research questions of this study. The methodology has fit and helped addressing the main concern of this study gaining knowledge and insight into the phenomenon of consumer culture.

Future research

The topic of consumer culture within cartoon's content has not been widely studied. Often, studies about advertising and marketing form the great majority in this field. Particularly about the same object of study, Regular Show series, there has not been any study identified.

Regarding future research lines, I acknowledge it would be ideal to carry out an audience study of Regular Show focusing on the pleasures the public get from it. An interesting question to address would be whether the audiences are powerless to resist ideologies and what is their role in negotiating meaning. The results of the present study together with the evidence obtained with an audience research would form an interesting multiperspectival approach to draw substantial conclusions about the series. The uses and pleasures that audiences derive from the media are highly valuable for understanding the relationship between the reader and the text. The present study has focused exclusively on the text, however, the ways texts are received is of high importance for media education research as well as for the society in general. I would suggest for the next study, as a continuation of

the present one, to focus on the new season of the series and perhaps also on the film which has been recently released and try to deepen the topic of consumption. A study that analyses the discourses of the characters concerning issues of material culture would also be relevant to complete the picture. The combination of these studies would add an extensive body of knowledge on the phenomenon of consumer culture based on the content of a cartoon series and it could be very valuable for academic disciplines touching education, ethics and media culture.

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Appendixes

Appendix I: Coding sheet sample

Season			
Minutes			
Episode title			
CODE	Category	Presence	Notes
Code 1 **Junk Food**	Pizza		
	Chicken Wings		
	Burgers		
	Chips/fries		
	Hot dog		
	Sweet snacks		
	Salty snacks		
	Sandwich		
	Soda		
	Other		
Code 2 **Brands**	Brand presence		
	Brand promotion		
Code 3 **Places for consumption**	Restaurant		
	Shop		
	Other		

Observations

Chapter overview
Consumerist messages
Semiotics examples (if applicable)
Name of products/brands presented
Other comments

Appendix II: List of episodes watched

1 S05 Take the cake

2 S03 The best VHS in the world

3 S06 Happy birthday song contest

4 S02 Do me a solid

5 S01 The power

5 S03 House rules

7 S03 Diary

8 S04 Last meal

9 S04 Guy's night

10 S04 The longest weekend

11 S04 Family BBQ

12 S02 More smarter

13 S02 See you there

14 S02 Rage against the TV

15 S03 Best burger in the world

16 S04 Picking up Margaret

17 S02 Party Pete

18 S03 Cool Bikes

19 S06 Peeps

20 S05 Bachelor Party! Zingo!

21 S03 Skips vs technology

22 S03 Replaced

23 S04 Country Club

24 S01 Meat your maker

25 S01 Free cake

26 S05 Gold watch

27 S03 Fancy restaurant

28 S04 Sandwich of death

29 S04 Terror tales of the Park II

30 S05 The heart of a stuntman

31 S05 Catching the wave

32 S01 Rigby's body

33 S02 Grave sights

34 S03 Bet to be blonde

35 S06 Daddy issues

36 S02 Go viral

37 S01 Mordecai and the Rigbys

38 S01 The unicorns have got to go

39 S05 Laundry Woes

40 S02 Jinx

41 S03 Camping can be cool

42 S04 Starter Pack

43 S06 Choper flight party

44 S06 Married and Broke

45 S03 Eggscellent

46 S01 Grill cheese deluxe

Appendix III: Results from coding

Results from the coding activity			
Code	**Category**	**Presence N=46**	**Final Percentage**
Junk Food	Pizza	15	32%
	Chicken Wings	8	17%
	Burger	17	37%
	Chips/fries	18	39%
	Hot Dog	11	24%
	Sweet Snacks	34	74%
	Salty Snacks	18	39%
	Sandwich	13	28%
	Soda	41	89%
	Other	24	52%
Brands	Brand presence	37	80%
	Brand promotion	24	52%
Places for consumption	Restaurant	24	52%
	Shop	22	47%
	Other	6	13%

Appendix IV: Data analysis procedure

From the total of the episodes n=46 each category has been manually counted based on the coding sheet of every single episode. For instance the category *Pizza* from the code *Junk Food* has been counted from the total of 46 episodes and founded in 35. The number 35 has been written in the sheet under the column *Presence*. Afterwards, every category was converted into percentages and added under the column *Final Percentage* as in the following example:

Category Pizza: Present in 35 episodes

Total episodes: 46

Percentage calculator: 35/46 x 100 = 70 %

After the calculations it is possible to see that the category pizza was present in 70 per cent of the episodes analysed. This procedure has been followed for every code and category in order to summarize all the data and make sense of it as a whole. After filling in the sheet of the results, all the data was then ready to be transformed into visual graphs.