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# Me, my place, and I: exploring consumer-place attachment in Brazil's Northeast region

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## Abstract

Consumers, whether more or less consciously, attach their identity to places in order to give meaning to their lives. In this research, we discuss the process by which consumers attach their identity to commercial settings, based on the extended self and place attachment theories. Through observations, in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis, this study explores the bonds people make with a place, taking a Brazilian heritage market as a research context. The findings suggest that the link between consumers' identities and commercial settings occurs in different forms, based not only on their self-narratives but also on the physical space.

**Keywords:** Extended Self. Place Attachment. Commercial Settings. Semiotics. Brazil.

## *Eu, meu lugar e eu mesmo: explorando a ligação entre consumidores e lugares com um tempero do Nordeste brasileiro*

### Resumo

Os consumidores, mais ou menos conscientemente, conectam sua identidade a lugares para dar sentido às suas vidas. Nesta pesquisa, discutimos o processo pelo qual os consumidores fazem a ligação entre sua identidade a ambientes comerciais, baseando-se na teoria do Extended Self e perspectivas do *Place Attachment*. Por meio de observações, entrevistas em profundidade e análise de discurso, este estudo explora esse vínculo, tendo como contexto de pesquisa uma feira regional que funciona como um centro cultural de tradições do nordeste brasileiro. Os achados sugerem que o vínculo entre consumidores e lugares comerciais ocorrem de diferentes formas, com base não apenas em suas narrativas pessoais, mas também pela espacialidade física do local.

**Palavras-chave:** *Extended Self*. *Place Attachment*. Comércio. Semiótica. Brasil.

## *Yo, mi lugar y yo mismo: explorando la conexión entre los consumidores y los lugares con "sabor" de la región noreste de Brasil*

### Resumen

Nuestra existencia como seres humanos está directamente vinculada a lugares donde se vive una experiencia particular. Los consumidores conectan más o menos conscientemente su identidad a lugares para dar sentido a sus vidas. En esta investigación, discutimos el proceso mediante el cual los consumidores vinculan sus identidades a los entornos comerciales, con base en la teoría del yo extendido y las perspectivas del *place attachment*. A través de observaciones, entrevistas en profundidad y análisis del discurso, este estudio explora este vínculo. El contexto de la investigación fue una feria regional que actúa como un centro cultural de las tradiciones del noreste de Brasil. Los resultados sugieren que el vínculo entre los consumidores y los lugares comerciales se produce de diferentes maneras, no solo en función de sus narraciones personales, sino también de la espacialidad física del lugar.

**Palabras clave:** Yo extendido. *Place attachment*. Comercio. Semiótica. Brasil.

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## INTRODUCTION

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A part of us is definitely related to the place where we were born, where we choose to live or not, and to places we frequent, as each one of them is composed of a set of meanings and values that are articulated in our self-narratives (GAVIRIA, CARDOSO, SCARABOTO et al., 2019). In these places, of greater or lesser influence, objects, as well as people and their stories, contribute to the enactments of the most varied types of identity projects. Therefore, when we say that “I am from this place” or “that place is my place,” besides implying belonging to somewhere, it indicates that the very same place belongs to us. That is, we are part of the place as the place is somehow part of us. In light of this and in agreement with James (1890), a place can be seen as a possession that is directly attached to one’s identity.

Throughout the years, consumer researchers have been exploring the consumer-possession relationship adopting different approaches (e.g., BRAGA and SUAREZ, 2018). On considering the Extended Self theory (BELK, 1988), its counterpoints (e.g., AHUVIA, 2005) and its development (e.g., BELK, 2015, 2013; RUVIO and BELK, 2018), it is possible to contaminate and to be contaminated by the aura or magic of the place, as well as (BORRAZ, 2019), have meaningful bonds with a house, a city, or even a commercial setting, as in the case of Holbrook (1998) and his love for a jazz music store. Regardless of its seminal contribution, Belk (1988) briefly presents the place, commercially-driven or not, as a form of possession and considers its relationship with identity building.

Although much consumer research has demonstrated that meaningful experiences can be provided by managers whose aims are to establish emotional bonds, the process through which consumers attach their identity to these commercial environments has been largely neglected. While these studies contribute to our understanding of a servicescape role, for instance, in sparking emotions and meanings, little attention has been paid to how it happens (EROGLU and MICHEL, 2018; DEBENEDETTI, OPPEWAL and ARSEL, 2014). In this scenario, there is an opportunity for investigations that consider the process of bonding with commercial settings, and the transformations that occur in the self-narratives of consumers, as suggested by Kreuzer, Mühlbacher and von Wallpach (2018), Seamon (2018), and Debenedetti, Oppewal and Arsel (2014). Hence, this study is guided by the following research question: how do consumers attach their identities to commercial places?

A better understanding of the attachment between consumers’ identities and commercial settings is important for theoretical and practical reasons. First, this knowledge can contribute to research efforts focused on the process by which consumers attach their identities to commercial places (DEBENEDETTI, OPPEWAL and ARSEL, 2014). Second, as a managerial contribution, since our focus is on contextual meanings and the lived experience whereupon this study can also help managers in their development of brand experience strategies (PULH, MENCARELLI and CHANEY, 2019).

In order to frame our insights, our arguments are based on the Extended Self theory (BELK, 1988) and Place Attachment perspectives (SEAMON, 2018; ALTMAN and LOW, 1992). Regarding the collection of data, we used multiple sources, such as observations and interviews (BELK, FISCHER and KOZINETZ, 2013), and analyzed them by using a combination of Discursive Semiotics of the French line (GREIMAS and COURTÉS, 1983). These approaches are well-suited to this study mainly because of the usage of the Generative Trajectory of Meaning (GREIMAS and COURTÉS, 1983) and the Axiology of Consumption (FLOCH, 1988) as analytical frameworks since they allow the researcher to observe both the intelligible and the sensitive aspects of the phenomenon.

As a research context Feira de São Cristóvão was chosen, which is a heritage market located in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The reasons for this context are: (1) it is a physical commercial setting specialized in a variety of Brazilian Northeastern services and products; (2) it is a traditional representation of the Brazilian Northeastern culture in the Southeast of the country; (3) the place is considered “home” for Brazilian Northeastern immigrants (JÚNIOR and PORTO, 2002). In order to present our ideas, this paper is organized as follows: First, the effort of reviewing the vast literature and the structuring of arguments on consumer-place attachment forms, followed by the research methods. Next, the findings are presented, followed by theoretical discussion and managerial implications. The final part of this study covers the limitations and suggestions for future endeavours.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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### Identity and The Extended Self

Consumer identity cannot be seen as stable or fixed because the context can be full of possibilities of competing representations of who we can or should be. Instead, it must be taken as an ongoing project, an endless narrative, a permanent state of becoming (SCHAU, 2018; ZANETTE, LOURENÇO and BRITO, 2013; RUVIO and BELK, 2018). Given its nature, it has to be created and recreated, constructed, and de-constructed during our daily social interactions. In this context, the role of consumption in identity creation has been investigated by using several approaches, in which the central tenet is that the act of consuming is a key to enabling identities, since we are what we consume and we consume to communicate who we are (ABDALLA and ZAMBALDI, 2016; BELK, 2013, 1992, 1988).

Contemporary consumer culture is viewed as a place where consumers, individually or collectively, can find the production and circulation of meanings as well as discursive representations for their desired identity projects (FERREIRA and SCARABOTO, 2016). Considering consumer goods, services, information, or even experiences, meanings are not only inscribed in their use but also in their symbolic aspect in a given context (MARCOUX, 2017). In this regard, what we buy or receive, that is, our possessions, have the power to act as extensions of our selves since they are fundamental to our lives.

The Extended Self theory (BELK, 2015, 2013, 1988) proposes that our attachment to places, objects, body parts, for better or worse, is essential in defining identity. Here, there is the addition of the “mine” to the “I.” As highlighted by Belk (1988), our ability to master an object (e.g., mastering sculpture), the act of creating it (e.g., purchasing a product), and knowing it (e.g., desire for it) are ways by which possessions can become part of the self and structure identities.

For instance, the most obvious site that can be attached to the self is probably the one that we live or lived in: our home (GOWRICHARN, 2019). It is possible to deduce that it can be seen as the focal point of emotional bonds, leisure activities, and financial duties (ROSENBERG, 2012). It has the power to shape, define, and guide us in the quest for our spot in the world (GIOVANARDI and LUCARELLI, 2018). A place, such as our home, is a site for self-expression (BELK, 1988), and can be as important as objects in the process of enacting identities (ISABELLE, DOMINIQUE and STATIA, 2019). Hence, possessions that are attached to the self have the power to promote and communicate different levels of identity (i.e., individual, family, community, and group), which are fundamental to our existence in a given social reality (BELK, 2013, 1988; THOMPSON and TAMBYAH, 1999).

### Place Attachment perspectives

Places of birth, marriage, graduation, death, and so forth are definitely part of our history and identity. Due to its nature, a place can spark intense emotions, memories, and several types of behavior (CANNIFORD, RIACH and HILL, 2018). In other words, our sense of self could be directly attached to geographical places in which rituals occur that generate meanings, since bonding with them shares the same phenomenology as our bonding with our body and other objects (CASEY, 2009; BELK, 1992).

From a phenomenological perspective a place can be understood as any environmental locus in and through which a person acts, experiences a given reality, and conceives meaning, spatially all at the same time (LIMA, CORRÊA, ZANINI et al., 2019; CHATZIDAKIS, MCEACHERN and WARNABY, 2014). A city, a house, a heritage shop, for instance, cannot be seen as separate from the person associated with it; rather, it must be seen as a person-experiencing-place phenomenon (SEAMON, 2018). Hence, the meaning conceived and articulated in these experiences is incorporated into the identity and narratives of the consumers, making the place part of their possessions (BELK, 1992, 1988).

Consumer researchers have been investigating place attachments from several perspectives (e.g., GIOVANARDI and LUCARELLI, 2018). On the one hand, relationships tend to be nurtured in a private place such as a house. In this case, as an example, Hirschman, Ruvio and Belk (2012) studied American garages to understand the roles of liminal spaces in the management of possessions, their meanings, and their significance to identity. Another example of this approach is the study from Mehta and Belk (1991), who observed possessions and place attachments of Indians residing in India and the US, to understand how they articulate and secure their identity. On the other hand, a different perspective on the importance of geographical

dimensions in marketing research is ground by a more structural view of its constitution. For instance, Castilhos, Dolbec and Veresiu (2017) presented a geographical approach in order to observe the creation of market system dynamics. Given uncontrollable factors deriving from these dynamics, consumers enact their identities projects without being conscious of their practices. As highlighted by Veresiu and Giesler (2018), there are cases in which institutional factors, such as neocolonial power imbalances between colonized (immigrant-sending) and colonizing (immigrant-receiving) cultures play a fundamental role in the consumer-place attachment dynamic.

The process of extending the self through places and making them part of our possessions, whether it be an individual or collective experience of place, can be seen to share the same principle as the visiting of religious sites, as we try to incorporate their magical and symbolic aspects, in an attempt to achieve a certain level of transcendence and to find new layers of our selves (TERZIDOU, SCARLES and SAUNDERS, 2017). By having places as possessions and observing our attachment to them, it is possible to define who we are, the narratives of our lives, and the approaching future.

## CONTEXT AND METHODS

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### Research context

Feira de São Cristóvão (FSC), completed 75 years of existence in 2019. The Market began as a meeting place for immigrants from the Northeast of Brazil in 1940 when they arrived in Rio de Janeiro after the Rio-Bahia highway was finally completed. This area became the arrival place and meeting point for Northeasterners, for whom it was not only a place in which to party with their own, but also where they could trade their goods and wares. Aside from its commercial characteristics, the Brazilian government has considered it to be an Immaterial Cultural Heritage of Brazil since 2010. In terms of selecting FSC as the research context, our justification is sustained by the fact that it is a physical commercial setting specializing in Brazilian Northeastern products, services, and cultural experiences. Additionally, the heritage market is considered to be “home” for Brazilian Northeastern immigrants far from their former region (JÚNIOR and PORTO, 2002).

### Data collection

The data collection initiated in 2013 as part of a longitudinal research project that observed diaspora, history, and consumption practice. With the aim of unveiling media-based ideological discourses, the first stage lasted until 2015 (MANCEBO, 2016). Throughout these first two years, we collected archival data, had informal talks, and engaged in participant observation (BELK, FISCHER and KOZINETS, 2013). From 2015 to 2017 interest shifted to institutional discourses thus enabling the comparison and contrast of different discursive perspectives on the same focal object. In this case, using a netnographic approach (KOZINETS, 2019) data was retrieved from FSC's official communication channels, such as its Facebook page. Similar to previous studies (e.g., KOZINETS, PATTERSON and ASHMAN, 2017), the exploratory and (n)ethnographic approaches helped in the outlining of the interviews and insights. Getting a close-up look at FSC's day-to-day activities, while listening to stories, meeting its visitors, stall owners, and some of its managers, played a critical role in the understanding of the bonding and meaning-making process of consumers and their attachments to the place.

From 2017 to 2019, given the second author's continuous visits to the Market, saliences of different consumer profiles became clear. During social interactions the narratives, purposes, and meanings of the FSC for Northeasterners resonated differently from those born in other Brazilian regions. These serendipities, somehow, outlined the third stage of our longitudinal research project, which is the present study. Therefore, the focus was narrowed down to unfold the consumer-place attachment phenomenon by only considering those born in the Brazilian Northeast and currently living away from there. The selection criteria for interviewees was based on purposive sampling (MILES and HUBERMAN, 2014). Since we kept a record of our interviewees (e.g., name, age, hometown, current residence, the purpose of the visit, e-mail, and telephone number), we got in touch with them and performed 15 in-depth interviews in May 2019. The interviews ranged from 30 to 70 minutes on average and started with a brief presentation of the investigation followed by a grand tour question in which they were asked to talk about experiences in the place (BELK, FISCHER and KOZINETS, 2013).

## Data analysis

Bearing in mind our major research project and its epistemological and methodological approach based on discourse, our dataset of interviews was analyzed following the Discursive Semiotics of the French line postulates (GREIMAS and COURTÉS, 1983). This semiotic approach comprises of both the intelligible and the sensitive aspects of the phenomenon (PESSÔA, COSTA, MELLO et al., 2020; LIMA and PESSÔA, 2018; FLOCH, 1988). In so doing an adaptation of the Generative Trajectory of Signification (GTS) model was used, considering its three parts: (1) Fundamental Level; (2) Narrative Level; and (3) Discursive Level. As predicted at the initial level of analysis, the Fundamental one, our first step was to observe primary oppositional values (e.g., nature and culture) that emerged from our dataset. Given the outcomes of the opening coding, we decided to combine our analytical framework with Floch's (1988) Axiology of Consumption, helping us to achieve a better understanding of the phenomenon. Based on the semiotic square, Floch (1988) designates values attributed to physical spaces into the following categories: Practical, Utopic, Critical, and Ludic. Next, at the Narrative Level, we paid attention to several elements of consumers' lived experiences, which could be seen as narratives of consumption. At this stage of the GTS, the process of how consumers attach their identities to commercial places started to become clearer since we were able to unfold it into the Canonical Narrative Schema (CNS) (e.g., which object enabled someone to do something). Finally, for the Discursive Level, we identified both the interviewee's notions of the thematic roles of temporality, and spatiality within FSC, and the previously identified values enacting different forms of identities. For the sake of the trustworthiness of this research, we performed several discussion rounds (WALLENDORF and BELK, 1989). Individual reflections on data promoted insights about the phenomenon and were cross-checked by a collective process of triangulation for comparing classification, patterns, and coherence with that which was proposed.

## Findings

The process by which Northeastern consumers attach their identities to commercial places can be seen by a three-fold approach following the GTS model (GREIMAS and COURTÉS, 1983). First, consumers' personal experiences were organized into Floch's (1988) Axiology of Consumption, given identified structuring values (i.e., Fundamental Level). Second, we unfolded a pattern in terms of consumer experiences that were structured into the CNS (i.e., Narrative Level). Third, we observed that experiences and the enactment of identities also have a certain connection within FSC's physical areas (i.e., Discursive Level). These relationships were also organized based on Floch's (1988) proposal to connect each of the GTS's levels with different consumer profiles.

### Fundamental Level: The Axiology of Consumption and consumer-place attachment

Given our use of GTS (GREIMAS and COURTÉS, 1983), the conception of the Fundamental Level is essential since it provides the values that work as pillars for a given experience in the world, or an identity project in this case. The Fundamental Level is the more abstract of the GTS. As Floch (1988) found in his research, hypermarkets, markets, fairs, and trade shows can be primarily endowed by a certain kind of consumer with instrumental values. Practical values, thus, are understood as utilitarian values. At FSC, for instance, these values relate to parking, security, different kinds of food and herbs, and spices that cannot be bought in a regular supermarket. From this perspective, FSC is very much seen as a place to acquire essential items for the consumers' personal experiences, as sustained by the act of creating (e.g., purchases) according to the Extended Self theory (BELK, 1988). The following statement illustrates the situation.

Interviewee: "We have to come twice a month here to São Cristóvão and so we come here, spend a little time, look at a few things, have lunch, buy some products from the Northeast, like chili peppers, and manioc flour. And that's if we buy something, otherwise we just hang out and have lunch."

Even though these values are grounded by instrumentality, they are fundamental to the emotional connection between the consumer and the commercial place. Therefore, bonding would also be related to the possibility of not finding the desired item or service. As Belk (1988) and Guillard (2017) highlighted, to be robbed, to lose and/or not to find a possession is somehow felt as losing a part of the consumer's self-narrative. Hence, without the possibility of accessing and buying regional goods and services, the consumer tends to have his/her place attachment and emotional memory negatively impacted (RISHBETH and POWELL, 2013). The following extract illustrates the aspect of absence.



Interviewee: "A market in Rio de Janeiro for Northeastern products, and for those people who come at night...you have the music and shows...you have this additional retail option for Rio, at night. It is safe and you're sure to find what you need from there. I don't know what I would do if the market wasn't here. I love the place."

Conversely, Utopic values are understood as existential values. Floch (1988) stresses that the term utopic is used as meaning "the final objective", in other words, it is when consumers find their fundamental values. As pointed out by several interviewees, being attached to the place relates directly to the notion of "being in their world." In some cases, after years away from the Brazilian Northeast, many people find a reference for their identity at FSC, which could be seen as a place that provides some ontological security for their self-narratives (GAVIRIA, CARDOSO, SCARABOTO et al., 2019). The following statement illustrates the case.

Interviewee: "One has memories of the Northeast, which is the regional tradition "within" the Southeast... And we haven't died, the origin is present here, memories of the homeland. We call it "our backyard", our second home. My city is cozy... everybody knows everybody. This takes me back years ago. Sometimes I can remember my childhood and how happy I was. I wish all my family ere here right now."

Indeed, many of the reported experiences are marked by the search for some contact with the cultural aspects of the Northeast, which serves as a way to satisfy their longing for the homeland, highlighting the act of knowing the possession (e.g., desiring), as proposed by Belk (1988). In this scenario, this kind of consumer-place attachment could be seen as the link that people have with their historical identity of a given place, community, or even objects (LOW, 1992). FSC is primarily viewed as a place to satisfy a longing for the consumers' cities of origin, not only in terms of the products you can buy but also because of the physical structure of the place, which could be seen as part of their sense of homeyness (MCCRACKEN, 1989). The following sentence highlights this aspect.

Interviewee: "These alleyways, the narrow streets are named after neighborhoods from the Northeast, such as Campina Grande, João Pessoa and so on...Every part of the Northeast has its name here and represents the Northeast and us."

Floch's (1988) third category, Critical values, denies the Utopic values but complements Practical values. In this case, it is the idea of cost/benefit that pervades the testimonials of visitors to FSC who go to buy a specific utensil at a lower price, or even to search for a better quality regional product. That is, the lived experience of being at the market and consuming is what sustains a certain type of consumer-place attachment since mastering a possession, such as knowing the right place to be and buy, is one of the dimensions of the Extended Self theory (BELK, 1988). The following extract illustrates Critical values.

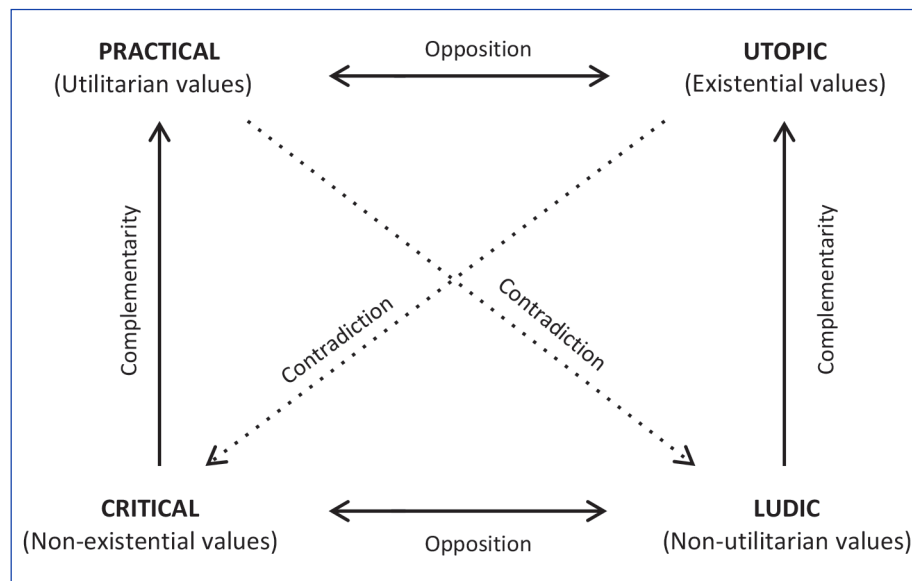
Interviewee: "You already leave here with tomatoes, an onion, a ton of stuff. Typical stuff, for those who like it, dried prawns, at very good prices, there's a supermarket in here. You cannot find cheap products like these outside here. If you go to a big supermarket, you're gonna spend your whole salary there. I don't have money to spend... you know. Here I can have everything I want for a reasonable price, and I know that it is original. There is another place in the center of Rio that sells products from my city, but I don't trust them. Here is the place."

Ludic values are the denial of Practical values, and, as Floch (1988) suggests, they are guided towards pleasure and fun. Several interviewees stated their bonding with the place given their habit of going there to be whomever they want to be and to immerse in a unique experience. As noted by Cova, Carù and Cayla (2018), such experiences, more or less escapists, are fundamental to the identity-building process. To support this argument, the next interviewee's statement presents such values.

Interviewee: "The atmosphere in the Northeast is this one. People relaxing, nobody judging you and so you can sing, eat and take part in Karaoke with no hassle. I can dance my own style... I dance Forró a lot and I don't care. There is a time in the night that I take off my shoes and keep dancing until someone kicks me out of the place. I love to drink my beer, sometimes get a little bit of happiness... you know what I mean. There is a lot of love here. People moved from their city then want to be happy. Come... stop asking me questions. Dance with me..."

That “feeling relaxed” expressed by the majority of interviewees is what allows for the fruition of “free activities *par excellence*” at FSC, which essentially defines ludic valuation. Hence, the consumer-place attachment is aligned with the consumption of experiences for finding feelings, fantasy, and fun, sometimes searching to escape their reality (HIRSCHMAN and HOLBROOK, 1982) and to “go to another place”. At this point, it is possible to articulate all four types of values in a semiotic square, as proposed by Floch (1988). Figure 1 illustrates it.

**Figure 1**  
**Consumer-place attachment experiences axiology**



Source: Floch (1988).

Although Utopic values are most prevalent in the consumers’ experiences while bonding with the commercial setting, it is worth mentioning that each type of value plays an important role for each one of the interviewees in their process of extending their selves.

### Narrative Level: a standard narrative for the consumer-place attachment

Based on the conceived axiology, moving ahead to the development of the CNS, which is composed of regimes of *doings* and *beings* through four stages: (1) Manipulation; (2) Competence; (3) Performance; and (4) Sanction (GREIMAS and COURTÉS, 1983). Considering each interviewee’s lived experience of consumption as a set of narratives, it was possible to organize their common aspects and values identified at the Fundamental Level into a standard narrative. That is, the Narrative Level provided an understanding of manifestations of values in consumers’ identity enactments.

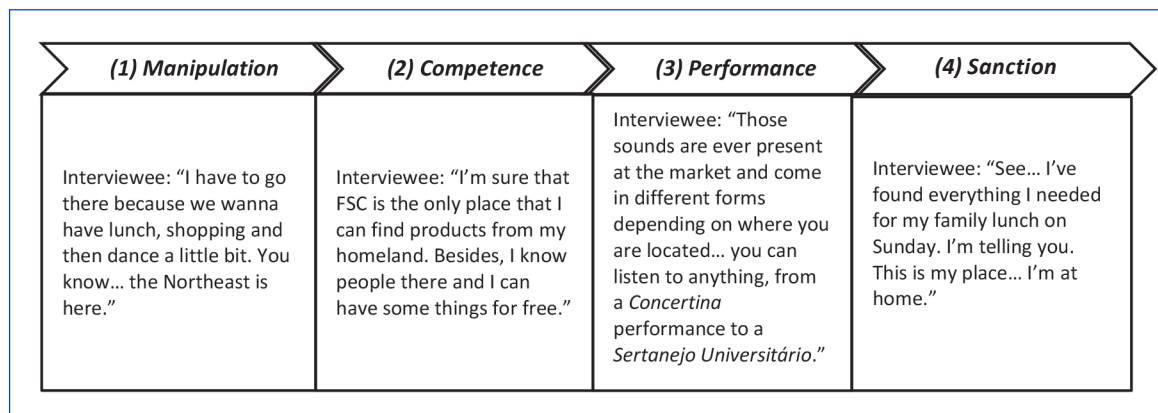
In the Manipulation phase, individuals are influenced by the narratives for wanting-to-do and/or having-to-do, that can materialize in the form of contracts, and is seen in statements about the expectation of finding certain goods, services, and experiences in the place. Thus, it is understood that FSC was built based on the premise of being the Northeast in Rio de Janeiro with all its cultural meanings, and as a place where visitors expect to find not only Northeastern products but also regional symbolism. As Belk (1988) highlighted, knowing, and in this case desiring FSC and what it offers, is one of the forms of emotional and symbolic attachment with a place, and the resulting transformation of the place as part of the self.

During the stage of Competence, the second phase, there is a transformation performed by the consumer who can accomplish a given action by knowing-how-to-do and/or being-able-to-do. In this discussion, it is related to the knowledge about offers that allow visitors to interact with and benefit from the Northeastern experience. Interviewees demonstrated their familiarity with the market’s blueprint in a way that they can find different activities, which range from musical events to the sale of herbs, spices, and handicrafts to typical restaurants. During their visits, the experience of consuming



food made by specialists and Northeastern natives intensifies the importance of the commercial setting for the self. This aspect is in alignment with the third phase of the CNS, which is Performance. Here, transformations actually occur, that is, a passage from one state to another through a set of practices, such as having lunch. As shown by Tsai (2016), the act of tasting local cuisine provides a crucial medium for representations and transference of the culture of a given destination providing unforgettable experiences. Moreover, the region's sounds and musical styles, varying from traditional *Forró* to more modern versions of the rhythm, are also fundamental to bonding with the place and identity-building processes. Consuming local products, taking part in presentations and listening to stories about their homeland and the market, in other words, having contact with the Northeastern culture is what allows consumers to be positively sanctioned, which is the final phase of the CNS. The stage of Sanction is related to the realization that the performance was fulfilled, which consequently promotes the recognition of the consumer. In the case of FSC, it can be seen as a positive interplay between what is found in the market with the expectations of the visiting consumer. This aspect sheds light on the act of creating (e.g., purchasing) as a form of extending the self onto a possession (BELK, 1992, 1988), which, in this case is FSC. Figure 2 exemplifies the CNS for the consumer-place attachment.

**Figure 2**  
**Canonical Narrative Schema of the consumer-place attachment**



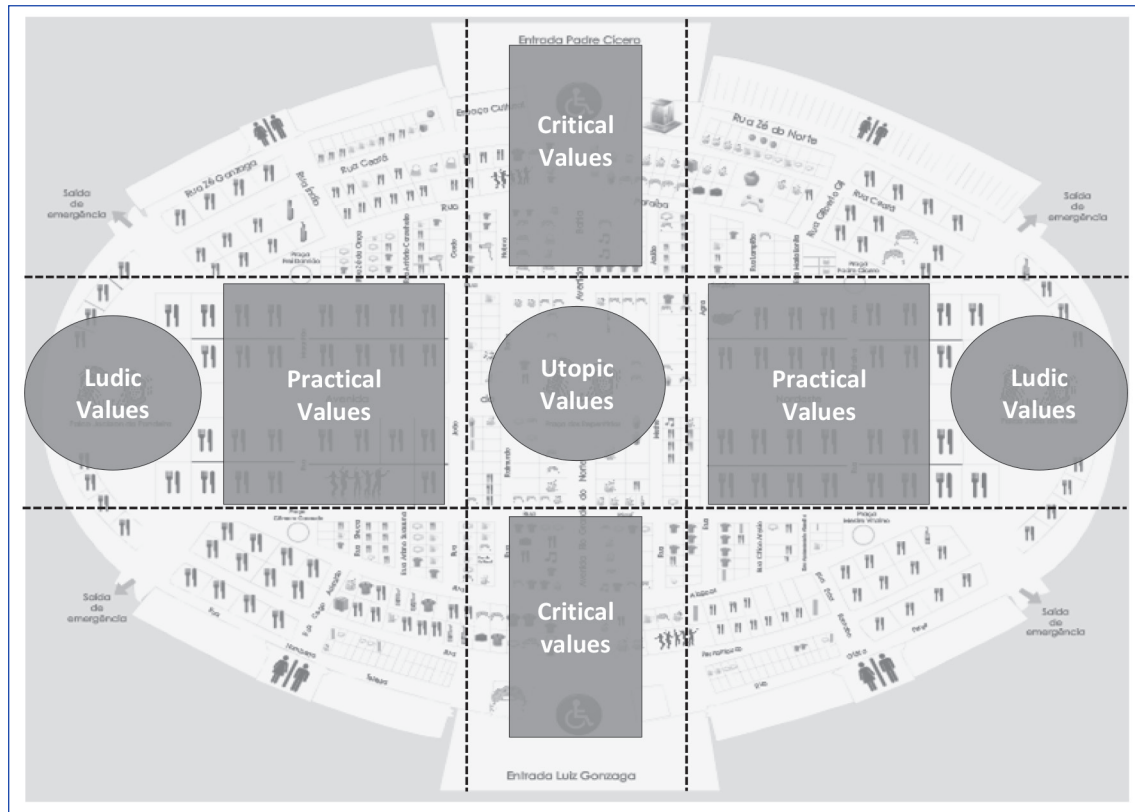
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

During our interviews, several mentions were made regarding the role of spatiality in their bonding process with the place. Since specific parts of the place and their lived experiences can provoke intense emotions, as well as work as extensions of the self (HIRSCHMAN, RUVIO and BELK, 2012), we investigated where these experiences took place within FSC. According to Floch (1988), the study of the consumers' micro-narratives in which the values are highlighted, clearly shows how each kind of valuation can illustrate a specific function of the place. Hence, the next section presents a spatial analysis of the place and its meanings for the consumer's extended self.

### Discursive Level: a spatial analysis of lived experiences for the consumer-place attachment

During the final stage of analysis, we found material manifestations of values and meanings for the consumer's extended self with regards to the commercial setting areas. Differently from the abstract nature of the Fundamental Level, the Discursive Level is concrete. FSC is home to a wide variety of activities and experiences. By walking through FSC, the consumer is, in Belk's (2015, 1988) and Fernandez and Lastovicka's (2011) terms, influenced by the aura or magic of physical places, material elements, and people. Following Floch's (1988) proposal, on examining each area it is possible to observe and frame different profiles of consumers, so too their values, narratives of consumption, and attachment to the commercial setting. Figure 3 shows the market's spatial configurations and how it is deployed in terms of values attributed to those who visit it.

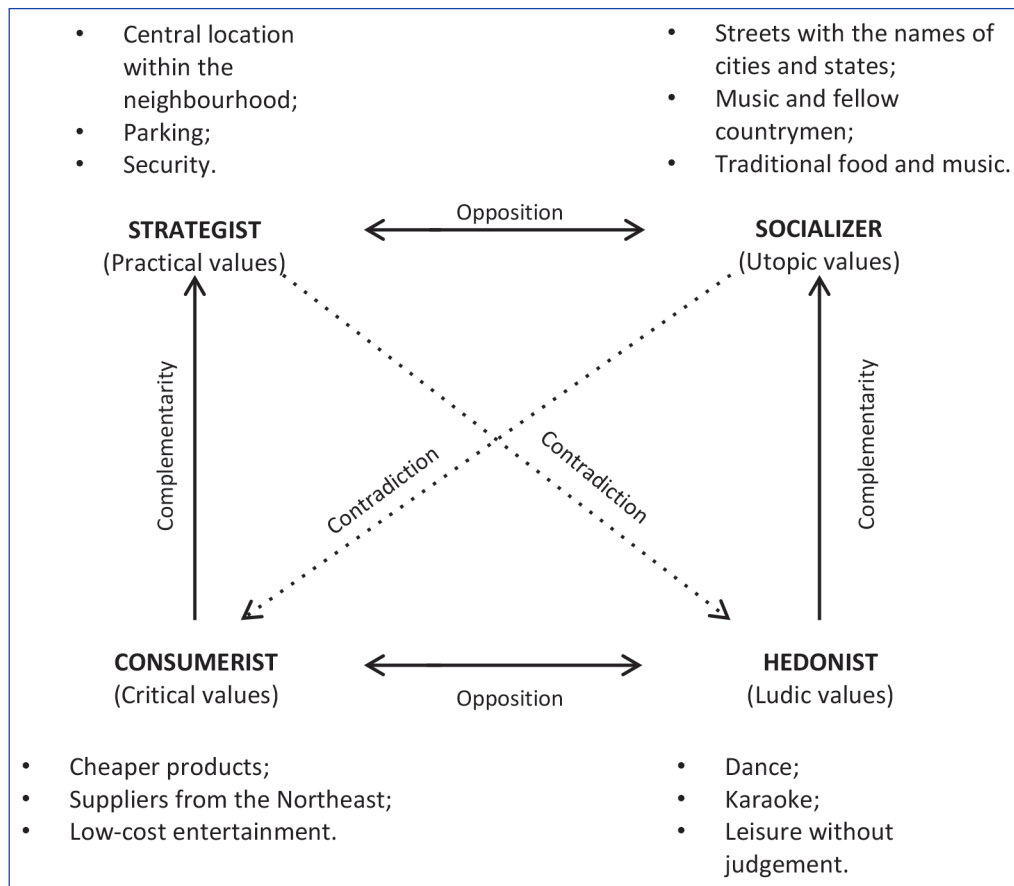
**Figure 3**  
**Map of FSC and its areas of values and experiences consumption**



Source: Based on Feira de São Cristóvão (2018).

Two large stages, which allow for events to take place at the same time, are located at the extremities of the São Cristóvão Pavilion. These areas have the highest concentration of consumers who prioritize Ludic values, namely Hedonists, since their activities at the market are primarily related to leisure and pleasure (FLOCH, 1988), which comprise of dancing and attending shows. At the center of the market is the *Repentista's* Square where presentations are given by *Cordelistas* and *Sanfoneiros* (types of rapping poets and musicians). This region of FSC is related to Utopic values since the Socializer (i.e., who prioritizes socialization experiences) comes into contact with artists, music, instruments, objects, and other forms of cultural expression from the Northeast. These consumers are positively sanctioned, since the contact they have imbues them with a feeling that they are back in the Brazilian Northeast, with its music, flavors, smells, and objects. The street that vertically divides FSC is the one that is most in alignment with the Consumerist profile, in other words the consumer whose behaviour is based on Critical values (FLOCH, 1998). This is the street where one can find the majority of shops, general stores and fruit and vegetable markets, offering typical regional products often at prices that are below those of high street shops and which have a wide variety on offer. The street that divides the market horizontally is *Avenida Nordeste*, which is almost entirely devoted to restaurants, which aligns with the Practical values favored by the Strategist consumer. Furthermore, the interviewees' testimonials that favored a practical valuation had one thing in common, namely that the prime purpose of the consumer's experience was to go to a restaurant, in part because of the convenience of the FSC location within the neighborhood. Figure 4 summarizes the relationship between the values and meanings of consumption, FSC's characteristics that solidify these values, and the different profiles of consumers.

**Figure 4**  
**FSC's values related to its spatial characteristics and consumer profiles**



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The consumer experience in the different regions of FSC enables different meanings for self-narratives, which can be articulated by the same consumer at different moments and intensities. Both the symbolic and the spatial aspect of FSC play a significant role in the enactment of identities. In light of this, like every possession, FSC has its own magic (APPAU and CHURCHILL, 2019), a power to change realities, and a contribution to the extended self (BELK, 1988).

## Discussion

In this study, we investigated how consumers attach their identities to commercial places by drawing on the Extended Self theory (Belk, 1998) and Place Attachment (e.g., SEAMON, 2018) perspectives. Our analysis focused on the lived experiences of Northeastern visitors at FSC, and their narrative of bonding with the place and therefore, with their homeland. We have shown how meaning is conceived from contact with FSC's physical and symbolic proposals and its influence on the consumer's self-narrative. Findings give new insights into the process through which consumers attach their identity to these commercial environments, as prompted by Debenedetti, Oppewal and Arsel (2014), and also for marketing managerial practices, as follows.

## Theoretical implications

This study reveals different dynamics for the bonding process between consumers' identities and commercial places. Some of them are more material-dependent than others, but all of them have an emotional influence on the self-narrative of consumers. The lived experience of consuming the Brazilian Northeast at FSC, regardless of its meanings, products, or the place itself, can be seen as a journey of transcendence from the embodied notion of a given identity. That is, this kind of notion implies that the commercial setting has the power to spatially enlarge the consumer's sense of self (BELK, 1990). Besides contributing to the Extended Self theory (BELK, 1988) with a phenomenological approach, this research also extends current discussions on consumer-place attachment. Our identity projects, as well as their enactments can vary depending on the place that we are in (BETTANY and BELK, 2011), even when the place is visited for the pursuit of painful experiences (SCOTT, CAYLA and COVA, 2017), or for a blessing (SANTANA and BOTELHO, 2019), or even to experience sexual pleasure (NEAL, 2018).

## Managerial implications

By observing values and meanings conceived inside and outside physical spaces, marketing managers can observe the Axiology of Consumption (FLOCH, 1988) to elaborate better consumption journeys. As noted by Payne, Peltier and Barger (2017), a proper understanding of the buying journey is fundamental in stimulating desired behavior and financial outcomes. Moreover, all consumer practices within the place generate different types of data, which can be tracked and used for digital analytic purposes (FULGONI, 2018). Another practical implication relates to advertising campaigns. The lived experiences within FSC and resulting meanings for the self can be explored in ads, both off-line and on-line. During times of profound connection with and sometimes dependency on the digital world (BELK, 2013), designing an effective integrated marketing communication plan presents itself as a challenge. Given our semiotic approach, a manager who is interested in improving communication with his/her consumers could consider this research to gain an understanding of the articulation of enunciated meanings, expectations and perceptions about narratives of consumption that could then be portrayed in advertising. Moreover, managers can also concentrate their efforts on building a greater sense of brand community since the connection between the Northeastern consumer and the commercial setting is highly significant.

## Limitations and opportunities

Like all research, this qualitative study has limitations that demand attention. As the research context relates to a regional market and because of FSC's history and its relevance to the identities of interviewees, it should not be compared with a shopping mall or a hypermarket located in the Brazilian Northeast, at least at first. That is, FSC is a simulacrum of a particular Brazilian reality, which may lead to an opportunity for researching distinct contexts, such as trade shows, street markets, itinerant markets, other cities, and so forth (e.g., BARROSO, PESSÔA and LIMA, 2020). Regarding the methodological approach, observations, in-depth interviews (BELK, FISCHER and KOZINETS, 2013) and discourse analysis (GREIMAS and COURTÉS, 1983) are limited. Rather than focusing on generalizability, our effort focused on whether the findings and insights from the study could be properly transported to other contexts (MILES and HUBERMAN, 2014). Although consumer research has existential phenomenology as one of its main paradigms, the use of a different theoretical-methodological approach (ASKEGAARD and LINNET, 2011) is suggested for future studies of exploration into the dynamics of macro-social forces that may influence the consumer-place attachment. A further suggestion is that researchers could explore Floch's (1988) proposal by considering a broader audience, given the specificity of the profiles of participants.

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