

*Research Paper*

## **Looking into nostalgia and the Boca Doce brand in online communicatons: a netnographic exploration of a Portuguese instant dessert.**

Pedro Oliveira \*

### **ABSTRACT**

As in many other geographies, in the Portuguese context, especially in academic literature, qualitative methods in marketing research are clearly under-represented when compared with quantitative methods. This happens all the more as qualitative methods are used in isolation over mixed-methods approaches. It follows that in the Portuguese context, netnography, the ethnographic/qualitative study of social networks conceptualized and developed by Robert Kozinets (e.g. Kozinets, 2002, 2009, 2015) remains largely unused.

The following research is a first attempt at bringing netnography to the Portuguese context by studying online communication around one of its most popular dessert brands, Boca Doce, an instant dessert produced by Kraft foods and distributed in Portugal by the AMD company. Netnography is herewith used as a qualitative method in isolation while the structure of the study follows other netnographic research examples, such as the study of Listerine (Kozinets, 2010) or Nutella (Cova & Pace, 2006). Results point to two major themes in online communication around the brand: emotions and feelings about Boca Doce (generally coupled with feelings of nostalgia) versus consumer-driven innovations. Some final considerations are given to possibilities of brand innovation that can unfold when cultural and netnographic views are brought into play.

**Keywords:** netnography; instant dessert; cultural strategy.

\* Brunel University, London. E-Mail: pedrooliveira232@yahoo.com

**Received on:** 2017.07.22

**Approved on:** 2017.10.24

Evaluated by a double blind review system

## **1. INTRODUCTION: Netnography in the Portuguese Context**

Netnography is a research approach consisting of the active use and exploration of the online world from a qualitative viewpoint, as conceptualized by Robert Kozinets (2002, 2009, 2015). Netnography is the online kindred soul of ethnography, a qualitative approach predominant in anthropology; although netnography carries a deep connection to the world of brands and marketing, this is not exclusive to anthropology where other forms of anthropological online research focus on different concerns (e.g. Hine, 2000).

In the offline world, ethnography implies spending a substantial period of time amongst a group of people, observing and participating in their practices, rituals and everyday life in order to write about their sociocultural life (e.g. Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

Its online version carries the same sense of participation in that the ethnographer uses different platforms (blogs, online consumer forums, social media pages, etc.) by doing deep ‘online hanging around’, observing and participating in discussions, with a view to gaining a familiar sense of what a particular online community stands for (Kozinets, 2001, 2007) or by researching a product or brand across more than one user ‘community’ (Kozinets, 2002, 2010). By using culture as one of its central frames of interpretation, ethnography connects directly with adjacent consumer research fields such as consumer culture theory (e.g. Sherry & Fisher, 2017) and market and business anthropologies (Denny & Sunderland, 2015). Netnography carries the same flexibility of ethnography in that it is more of an approach rooted in a set of techniques than a technique carrying a specific approach. Hence, the kind of qualitative exploration enabled by netnography can work alongside quantitative methods and a computerized approach or it can stand on its own as a full-fledged approach. More than committing to a particular balance between qualitative and quantitative, netnography’s objective is to shed light on the ‘networked sociality’ existing online in which ‘stories intertwine with other stories in the process of people interconnecting with one another through online social

experiences’, a research approach which cuts across oral tradition and the study of folklore and culture (Kozinets, 2015:50). This article consists of a first netnographic exploration of a Portuguese brand, in this case, an instant dessert produced by Kraft foods and distributed by the AMD company.

‘Boca Doce’ is an instant dessert known to all in Portugal<sup>1</sup>. For the purposes of this study, I have used a ‘transversal’ approach to netnography, similar to the one put into practice by Kozinets on the study of Listerine (Kozinets, 2010) or Cova and Pace in the study of Nutella (2006). Hence, rather than interacting with the same online community for a longer period of time (longitudinal), data gathering occurred transversally across a multitude of ‘communities’ appearing in blogs, social network pages, consumer forums, YouTube videos and other social media sources.

Like Cova and Pace’s netnography of Nutella (2006), ‘Boca’ Doce is a study of meaning being hijacked from the corporate place (the company) to a consumer that manipulates both its contents and meaning into an object of collective nostalgia. The brand’s potential of identification for those of Portuguese Generation X makes it an ‘iconic’ object in that, more than holding identity value in itself, it allows people to construct their identities against similar challenges facing the shared idea of a nation (Holt, 2004). In so doing, ‘Boca Doce’ does not define a consumer tribe, but rather, it signals the online existence of a generation of people, part of a country linked together by strands of historical and symbolic ties. Particular attention is given to the role of nostalgia connecting Boca Doce, biography and national images conveyed in kinship relations.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Over two hundred entries were gathered through the Portuguese version of Google (Google.pt) using the search terms <Boca Doce>, <Boca Doce, Dessert> and <Boca Doce, Kraft foods>, from January 2017 to July 2017. Entries containing the two Portuguese words that form the name of the dessert, ‘Boca’ (= mouth) and ‘Sweet’ (=

---

<sup>1</sup> To avoid misunderstandings between Portuguese and English, I have used the term ‘dessert’ over ‘pudding’ to characterize Boca Doce in the English language. Although its closest Portuguese equivalent (‘pudim’) seems to stand closer to the English ‘pudding’ than the term ‘dessert’, in the Portuguese language ‘pudim’ is used to describe deserts with the form and consistency of a flan (or similar), i.e., with milk, eggs and a gelatin-like consistency. On the other hand, the English terms ‘pudding’ can include stodgy, moist desserts such as the British Christmas pudding, which in the Portuguese language are referred to as ‘cakes’, based on their consistency. Dessert, therefore, seemed like the fairest cultural and linguistic equivalent. I am indebted to my proofreader Dave Tucker for drawing my attention to this.

doce) yet with no relevant connection to the brand itself were not considered in the final sample. Entries were subject to a first reading after which parts were selected both in text, image or both. A preliminary classification of the initial two hundred Google entries was followed by a finer Google search under terms like <Boca Doce, blog> or <Boca Doce, consumer forum> with a view to extending knowledge on the major themes identified around Boca Doce. Consumer threads (online discussions between consumers around 'Boca Doce') were stored and analysed separately. Social networks-wise, the brand was searched for on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. Images found on each of the social networks were scanned and stored in relation to the analytical notes.

Data were initially divided according to two criteria: a) the predominant kind of platform they figured on (consumer forums versus blogs, social network pages versus YouTube clips, etc.); b) according to two major themes cutting across the various online forms. Thus, from the onset, data emerged as falling predominantly into either of these two categories: emotions and feelings around Boca Doce versus homemade innovations/product extensions. From the start, analytical notes were taken against these two themes. Hyperlinks and images gathered in the first search were set against the two thematic sections and against the analytical notes for each section. Analysis-wise, the procedure used resembles thematic networks (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Oliveira, 2010). Networks of sub-domains were drawn against the two major themes and set iteratively against one another, with a view to testing their robustness and validity. Elicited data was obtained by contacting blog writers, both with a view to obtaining permission for publication of material belonging to the blog but also with the aim of interviewing them about the brand. Although not scheduled specifically as a member check (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994, Hirschman, 1986, Lincoln and Guba, 1985, Kozinets, 2002), the occurrence of written, online interviews with blog guests at the end of the research process served to confirm various interpretations of the material as well as the validity of the overall thematic structure.

### **3. RESULTS**

#### **3.1 Boca Doce in the Portuguese Zeitgeist**

A simple translation of the brand name into the English language brings out the contrast

between a mere linguistic interpretation and the kind of culturally-sensitive interpretation that netnography calls for. In English, 'Boca Doce' literally means 'Sweet Mouth'. In the Portuguese language, 'sweet mouth' corresponds to the English 'sweet tooth'. Someone with a penchant for sweets in Portugal is likely to be described as someone with a 'sweet mouth' in the same way that in the English language a sugar lover is said to have a 'sweet tooth'. Yet indulgence through sugar is not the only meaning occupied by Boca Doce in Portuguese culture.

Exploding into the public awareness through a series of successful commercials running in the 70s and 80s, at a socio-historical time in Portugal where commercial borders were not as fluid and brand options for instant dessert were far more limited, Boca Doce managed to single itself out as the instant dessert for family occasions. The cheap price of the dessert combined with a country yet to gain greater economic power and subsequent access to mass-produced sweets helped to launch it to success. In terms of Portugal's history, the explosion of Boca Doce into the Portuguese market coincides with the years following the fall of the Portuguese dictatorship and an increased social appetite for democratic choices in voting and consumption. As at the end of any dictatorship, a celebration of personalized, individual and family choices, over state restrictions and measures, created a desirable space for products unfolding in different flavours and varieties. With flavours like caramel and vanilla announcing novelty and disruption, a touch of familiarity and comfort needed to become its ally. The ads married a meaning of indulgence through sweets with the fewer sugary restrictions in the relation between grandparents and grandchildren, and the naughtiness stemming from it<sup>2</sup>.

In the first ad, dating from the seventies, an older man sits at a table ready to eat a whole, family-sized dessert, while sensing some movement behind him. He turns his head and looks behind his shoulder to see what's going on, as if someone coming from behind him touched his right arm. A little girl with a naughty smile comes round his back on the left and steals away the dessert. The old man looks surprised. The jingle accompanying the ad, talking of a grandfather and a granddaughter points to a kinship relation between them. In a country strongly influenced by Catholicism as Portugal is (if no longer by dint of religious obligations, certainly by dint of history and culture), the

---

<sup>2</sup> For a quick visualization of some of the adverts here described see the following blog entry with links to the YouTube versions: <http://herdeirodaecio.blogspot.pt/2010/08/o-pudim-boca-doce-ao-longo-dos-tempos.html>

sin of gluttony is safely encapsulated in a family context while a touch of humour added to it deflects any religious connotation.

In consumers' shared memories of the ad, the jingle is the element most often evoked in blogs and consumer forums. It is described as a catchy tune that stays in mind, whether or not you're a Boca Doce aficionado. A literal translation of the jingle into English would be something like: 'Boca Doce is good, oh yes, it is. Boca Doce is good, oh yes, it is. The grandfather says so and so does the baby' ("*O Boca Doce é bom, é bom é. Diz o avô e diz o bebé*"). The huge success of the first ad led to a Boca Doce revival in the 80s adverts creating a symbolic continuity in the series of ads and brand image. This time it is the grandfather, bearing a naughty smile, as if in payback mode, who steals the Boca Doce dessert from the granddaughter, while she wears a look of amused complicity. The tune remains the same. Another ad, finally letting go of the iconic tune, involves the three generations. A woman in her forties observes a child happily eating a Boca Doce Dessert. While she turns away facing the sink, she senses some movement behind her. She turns again to the child, only to find a big portion of the dessert missing. Eventually she catches an old man hiding under the table, caught red-handed with a spoonful of Boca Doce and a guilty look, as if asking for forgiveness. Once more, at this point, we no longer need to be reminded of the relation between them. A final ad reiterates the relation between the grandfather and the granddaughter, recovering the catchy tune and seeing the grandfather surprising the granddaughter with a Boca Doce dessert. Here, the model that plays the granddaughter has clearly grown up from a child to a teenager, suggesting a link which remains indelible over time.

Emotional memories of the ads, childhood moments and family gatherings around Boca Doce and mentions of the catchy tune are abundant online. The product seems to have coloured the childhood memories of the Portuguese Generation X whose childhoods took place in the 70s and 80s. The ad tune, with its magical evocative power of happy childhood memories, seem to carry over to the Millennium generation, as found in an online column of a national newspaper ('O Observador'), written by Afonso Reis Cabral, a young and award-winning Portuguese writer currently in his twenties. The passage, which I will not reproduce in its entirety, talks of a moment where the author had a near death experience at sea while on a school trip with a teacher and some friends. Despite being aided by some friends, overcoming the tide and getting back to

the shore was an experience of great difficulty and fear for the author and his friends. All of this until a reference to 'Boca Doce' came about and a sense of hope and tranquillity gradually took over the group:

«That day, I lost control over my dance with the ocean. When I tried to carry on, the deep of the ocean became deeper, the waves more intense than before. Even fighting the tide, the tide wanted to take me far away in its embrace (...). I knew that it was unfair of the ocean to proceed that way. It wanted from me that which didn't belong to it: a full life to feed the tide. This was an equivocation. I couldn't give the tide anything beyond a short and empty life, not fully lived. At each moment, I tried to deny it that gift, but the ocean had put any politeness aside: it had decided to stay with me and it refused to acknowledge its mistake. When half of my body had turned into water and become cold, I saw two heads coming together. The heads belonged to two classmates of mine (...) We formed a whole fighting against the waves, despite the tide insisting on pulling us into the deep sea. Into isolation. (...) Behind us, a fishing boat tried to save us, I don't know why. (...) Here, between the motion of the ocean, the boat and a siren, a voice emerged singing: 'Boca Doce is good, oh yes, it is'. And he carried on, as if trying to outdo himself 'The grandfather says so and so does the baby». (extracted from <http://observador.pt/opinio/boca-doce>).

The passage ends with the group of friends and a teacher reaching the shore in safety. It beautifully illustrates how in a situation of shared danger, Boca Doce emerges as a common, soothing signifier with the capacity to cut across the different generations in a group. Yet in most social media, Boca Doce is more often coupled with childhood nostalgia over childhood safety. As exemplified by the following post, extracted from a Portuguese blog suggestively entitled 'I am still of the time when' (a direct allusion to the age of the blogger as Gen X):

"In the eighties, desserts were strong in our lives, it was something that mothers did abundantly for the kids' desserts, for tea. Boca Doce was one of our favourites and that was very much due to the mythical advert that played constantly on RTP<sup>3</sup>.

The Boca Doce desserts came out in different flavours: Vanilla, Flan, Pineapple, Caramel and Chocolate, all of them very tasty and big rivals of El Mandarin, the other brand which ruled the 80s (...) the jingle, very fun and quick to assimilate, stayed in

---

<sup>3</sup> Portuguese Radio Television (RTP) was the first state-owned, national channel, which has now been broadcasting for more than half a century.



everyone's collective memory while the advert images varied over time (...). They are still present in many Portuguese homes, indeed, they have existed since 1955 and they have accompanied several generations who still enjoy the simple flavour of this dessert which they can then change with little details to enjoy it even more." (extracted from: <http://aindasoudotempo.blogspot.pt/2013/07/dos-pudins-boca-doce.html>)

Beyond nostalgia, the post talks of the simplicity of confection of the Boca Doce dessert as well as the immense possibilities of personalization (consumer-generated 'uses') put into practice by Boca Doce aficionados. Deeply linked to nostalgia is the notion of 'Saudade'. Saudade is perhaps the concept which best self-identifies Portuguese cultural identity and a word that the Portuguese often claim does not exist in other languages. Saudade aggregates a multiplicity of meanings and feelings from nostalgia, to home sickness, longing, mourning, absence and loss. Of particular interest is the temporal dimension of 'saudade', as theorized by the philosopher Duarte Nunes Leão in the 16th century as a "memory of something that is experienced as strongly missing" (Teixeira, 2006, p. 14 via Félix Neto and Etienne Mullet, 2014, p. 661). A form of longing for a lost childhood felt as missing is a recurring motif in blog posts about Boca Doce:

"Because today I am feeling 'saudade' (it must be because of the rain which keeps falling this spring, I felt like going back in time and preparing a dessert which I used to do when I was very young (now I'm already in my thirties!). This is a very well-known recipe (I've seen it in almost every blog :) but since we don't all do it the same way, I thought of telling you how I generally do it.

The most famous ingredient is some of the very famous instant desserts in Portugal, Boca Doce. The flavours are extremely varied and for this one I have chosen my favourites: vanilla and chocolate. I was also careful to tell you exactly how I do it, because I know that this thing of layering different flavours of dessert on the top of one another is not as easy as it looks. I hope you like my suggestion" (extracted from <http://vitamina-abc.blogspot.pt/2008/05/boca-doce.html>)

In the excerpt above, Boca Doce is presented as an antidote for 'saudade', something that can fill the object space of longing carried in 'saudade' through the consumption of something synonymous with childlike pleasure. The self-proclaimed age of the blogger as someone in her thirties renders Boca Doce an object available to others in her generation who, while making the dessert in different ways, may be occasionally torn



by the same feeling and in need of an antidote themselves.

In another Portuguese blog entitled 'Man without Filters', a similar exchange is found. Starting in 2012, the blog consists of the musings of a Portuguese, journalist in his mid-thirties, going from his personal life to reflections about life and society in general. 'Without filters' suggests a tone of rawness or authenticity about the author and his thoughts:

"Monday. Early morning. The body craves caffeine. The week is long. There is a lot to do. There is a lot to think about. A lot of things to work out. The result of this equation is my head feeling like water, the most common symptom at the beginning of the week. Until then, I open the professional email and I find someone talking about sweets. There is really a promise of someone sweetening the mouth. I find myself drooling. It's an email about the mythical dessert Boca Doce. I start drooling the moment I look at the photos. I forget it's Monday and I can only think of a time to eat this delicious dessert. As if that weren't enough, I'm going to be singing this "The Boca Doce is good, is gooooo. The grandfather says so and so does the baaaaaaaby" the whole day."

(extracted from:<http://homemsemblogue.blogspot.pt/2012/11/boca-doce-e-babada.html>)

The post is followed by forty-three replies. As in other blogs, some respondents take the hint of the Boca Doce jingle and expand on it by stressing the uncontrollable desire to start singing it themselves («*That jingle is addictive, God*»; «*Goddamit, I had only read the title and I started singing straightaway (mentally, or here they would think that I am even crazier than usual*»; «*Now I'm going to have this on my mind for the rest of my day. What a pain. But it's good, oh yes, it is*»'. A first examination could lead one to believe that the sound memory of the product (the jingle accompanying the grandfather-child advert plot) is the main signifier resisting the proof of time in Portuguese brand culture. A closer inspection, beyond the jingle, denotes respondents with vivid visual memories of the adverts and packaging:

«I remember the advert with the grandfather taking the dessert from the kid had at least two versions, I have to see if I have one of them.

Lately the packaging is a bit different, the letters look different, a little changed to a more modern design. But here goes an old package to remember this one is from 2000 and it is still in paper and with a plasticized lining. Currently the packaging is made of plastic».

«I remember the advert being listened to in my dad's car radio...and me singing in a low pitch in the back seat of the car»

(extracted from the blog: <http://misteriojuvenil.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=165>)

Nostalgia and 'saudade' are inter-subjectively evoked by sharing images of adverts and the old packaging, but also by reminiscing publicly through images of parents and caregivers. The shared assumption seems to be that growing up in Portugal in the seventies and eighties, readers must have had a connection to the dessert in all ways similar:

«I think everyone had Boca Doce, my mother did it sometimes, I think she was trying to get me to eat more...I think she even added a bit of Maizena flour (cornstarch) so it wouldn't get as sweet...»

«I remember listening to the advert in my father's car...me whispering on the back seat of the car». (extracted from <http://misteriojuvenil.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=165>).

Starting from Davis's distinction between personal and communal forms of nostalgia (David 1979), Brown & Kozinets and Sherry suggest that times of communal chaos increase the appetite for nostalgia-ridden brands as carriers of an idealized past (2003: 29). Portugal's current socio-political scenario partially sustains this point. Like other countries in Southern Europe, following the economic crisis of 2008, Portugal has been absolutely drained by policies of austerity doing little more than increasing overall instability. Moreover, the discourse of 'crisis' and the idea of Portugal as 'a country in crisis' is deeply embedded in Portugal's cultural code, clearly preceding 2008 (e.g. Rodrigues & Reis, 2012). Hence the idea of brand revival happening in Portugal as a direct consequence of the present, of which Boca Doce stands as a case in point, is only partially true. A desire for nostalgia has long preceded 2008, all the more as nostalgia is deeply connected to 'saudade', a major signifier in the Portuguese cultural map.

Historically, the dates of creation of the dessert and its first release onto the Portuguese market are hard to determine by netnography alone<sup>4</sup>. In a blog suggestively entitled 'Holy Nostalgia', dedicated, in the author's words, to 'killing saudades', the first advert dates from 1964 and the dessert's creation date is put down as 1995. In all blogs, the 80s

---

<sup>4</sup> In order to gather more factual information on Boca Doce, three companies involved with Boca Doce were contacted, Mondelez and Kraft foods (manufacturers) and AMD (distribution). All companies refused to collaborate in the study. Mondelez was the only company to reply and stated that although recognizing the importance of doing research, they had limited capacity to attend to the many different requests made to the company and as part of internal policy, they could not share data about Boca Doce.

are considered the peak of the brand's awareness and therefore, something that roots the product predominantly in the memories of Gen X and late Millennials:

«These days we have not seen any advertising (about Boca Doce) but the brand continues and the Boca Doce desserts are still selling and still very popular, and it's not rare that they figure as a dessert on the menus of several restaurants» (extracted from <http://www.santanostalgia.com/2016/08/pudim-boca-doce.html>).

Boca Doce is the reaffirmation of belonging to a specific country (space) at a particular point in time. Through Boca Doce, one is constructing an intersubjective memory of a symbol amongst fellow nationals reinforced by a feeling ('saudade'), itself considered distinctive of culture. Via the internet, Boca Doce works as a way of extending the consumer self (Belk, 1988, 2013) by breaking the boundaries of space – interacting with other Boca Doce fans, wherever they are, on the assumption of a shared experience and shared symbology – and by breaking the boundaries of time – navigating collectively between the time of childhood and the time of the present. An excerpt from a humoristic television show ('Canal Q') emerging in the Google search around Boca Doce perfectly exemplifies it.

Two interviewers (male and female) and a guest (male) discuss Ana Malhoa's appeal in Portuguese magazines directed at men. Ana Malhoa is a sultry, sexually affirmative Portuguese female pop star who started out as a child singer in a kids' show called 'Bueréré' and modelled her image to the resemblance of foreign female pop icons like Madonna or Britney Spears. The female interviewer comments that Ana Malhoa is in all the men's magazines and asks the men in the studio for the reason. While the guest offers a more or less shy reason for their Ana Malhoa penchant, the male interviewer takes the self-proclaimed initiative of speaking on behalf of the red-blooded male kind, stating that the singer: *'(...) has that side of secretary slash ladies night (...) every man likes that to a point, no matter how polite they are (...). She appeals to everyone across the age span. She appeals to the Bueréré kid who likely starts out their masturbatory career watching Ana Malhoa to the old man watching her while sitting with his grandkid'*. The male interviewer is interrupted at this point by the female interviewer who exclaims *'That is like Boca Doce! (utters the Boca Doce jingle)'*. Both male and female interviewers utter it in unison, with amusement *'Ana Malhoa is the Boca Doce'*. Perceived gender differences are momentarily abolished for the sake of self extending

into collective memory. The face-to-face interaction observed in the radio show is by no means substantially different from various online interactions about the dessert. As the dessert marries up with historical images of when a given generation (X) were children, the times 'Boca Doce' alludes to are often remembered as easier times in one's biography, an aspect of nostalgia found in other brands as well (Brown & Kozinets & Sherry, 2003). As one of the bloggers has answered in his interview:

'Growing up in the 80s, I associate Boca Doce with my childhood, it's impossible not to remember the mythical ad. It's one of those commercials that has imprinted itself on the country and everyone remembers its musical jingle. It's something very strong, about remembering and singing the ad, even if we had never tried the pudding. This one, El Mandarin, Tulicreme, Planta, Nestum, Tang<sup>5</sup>, all things that we remember and that transport us immediately to times past. Because it's easier times, with less worry, seeing these brands brings back that feeling'.

That the medium is the message, also in the case of 'Boca Doce', connects to a time where Portuguese culture was shaped through televised advertising over internet marketing, as reported in another interview with a blog writer:

'Television has always been the best way to promote products and brands and Boca Doce is the living proof of that (...) There are many brands that cause the same kind of feeling and emotions like Mokambo, Bom-Bokas, Fã, as through the force of television the brands would enter our houses every day with products that we wanted to devour'.

The theme of television as a singular and predominant advertising channel with the capacity to affect culture equally permeates another blogger's account of the dessert:

'If somebody talks to me about desserts I immediately remember the Boca Doce brand. It was the brand of my childhood. There were less channels. Advertising didn't used to take so much space and use so many channels as today and everything was different. When I was a kid I was always listening to the jingle. And I still remember it when someone mentions the pudding.'

Hence, if nostalgia is a symbol of easier times, easier times connect to the idea of simpler times when channels were fewer and so were choices presented to consumers.

---

<sup>5</sup> The respondent provides examples of other Portuguese brands of the same historical period, mainly food and drinks in this case.

### 3.2 Making Boca Doce up

In Boca Doce as much as any other brand, consumers are not passive recipients but people that ‘both absorb and resist the pre-packaged, off the shelf, brand-and-product meaning of marketers’ (Cova & Kozinets & Shankar, 2007: 4). Boca Doce is used in multiple ways which are shared online, the most common innovation consisting of combining different sachets of dessert and making a layered dessert with the different flavours, equivalent to a ‘trifle’ in Anglo-Saxon cultures<sup>6</sup>. Like other Portuguese trifle desserts, of which Serradura (= Sawdust Dessert) and Natas do Céu (= Heavenly Cream) are examples, combining layers of whipped cream or dessert with crumbled biscuits is the most recurring home innovation made around Boca Doce. Consumers tend to buy different flavoured sachets of Boca Doce, make each flavoured dessert one by one and finally set them off in layers interspersed with crumbled biscuits, either dry biscuits or biscuits soaked in coffee. ‘Bolacha Maria’ is a type of biscuit very popular in Portugal and Spain, similar to a Rich Tea biscuit, made of wheat flour, sugar and oil. It is the most common biscuit used in the homemade Boca Doce trifle dessert.

Not exactly a recent trend, the buying of individual flavoured sachets of Boca Doce dessert and their home confection in a layered trifle is something that some bloggers remember as part of their childhood. Other times there is an exchange of different methods of confection of this layered dessert, for instance, by comparing different ways of doing it using a kitchen machine or as they are often called in Portugal, a kitchen ‘robot’ (Bimby being the most popular brand of kitchen ‘robots’ mentioned online)<sup>7</sup>. As the following post illustrates, not having to stir each of the individual desserts by hand which is both effort- and time-consuming, is the perceived advantage of the kitchen machine while making a trifle:

“Maria made the dessert yesterday...

for her and daddy. I know it may seem stupid doing Boca Doce dessert in a Bimby, but I find it so boring to stir and stir and then the dessert gets stuck in the bottom of the pan and that’s why I don’t do them that often, even though my husband loves them. Last

---

<sup>6</sup> A quick search on Google.pt/Images, associating the brand name to the Portuguese equivalent of Trifle (‘Doce de Camadas’) allows for a visualization of the three-layered homemade trifles made with different Boca Doce sachets: google.pt <Boca Doce, Doce de Camadas>

<sup>7</sup> More than an intelligent food processor, a ‘kitchen robot’, as they are called in Portugal, is a set of different cooking appliances condensed into a single machine allowing for different functions, both the usual processing functions (slicing, beating, blending) but also stove and oven functions (e.g. heating and cooking food).

week, I bought 4 different flavours. Yesterday Maria chose to do the strawberry one with daddy. And with the Bimby it's 12 minutes and it's done. All you need is to add half a litre of milk, 100 g of sugar and the sachet of powder in the Bimby. 12 minutes, temperature 90, velocity 2 and 1/2. And after 12 minutes, there, we have Boca Doce. I put it in individual molds to solidify quicker and the dessert pleased dad and Maria (I'm not a big dessert person). (extracted from: <http://aprincesamaria.blogspot.pt/2011/02/maria-ontem-fez-sobremesa.html>)

This suggestion is followed by other readers' comments thanking the reader, stressing the inconvenience of stirring the dessert manually and the additional advantages of doing it in a kitchen machine. This is a constant across blogs where a suggestion and explanation of how to make a Boca Doce trifle in a kitchen machine is invariably greeted with a note of thanks by other readers. Across the Facebook pages of different kitchen machine brands, there are recipes of the layered dessert that users exchange with one another. The image of the layered dessert is indeed so prevalent that it leaves the question of why the manufacturer has not released an ready-made, industrialized version of this dessert yet, showing the kind of opportunities missed when one cannot move from a marketing language of rational and emotional benefits to a language of cultural innovation (Hoult & Cameron, 2010).

Eliciting recipes of Boca Doce in consumer forums leads to a great many uses of the sachets being revealed online. For instance, in a forum exchange about the Boca Doce trifle recipe, consumers swiftly move from the trifle to uses of Boca Doce in a cake recipe, in cupcakes, in yogurts and in chocolate truffles ('brigadeiros'). Tart, ice cream and cheesecake are some of the other novel Boca Doce appropriations often presented in their own right and not necessarily part of a thread about Boca Doce. Due to the simplicity and speed involved in its confection (adding milk, sugar, stirring and leaving it to rest in the fridge), Boca Doce can be used as a dessert that is both personal and improvisational or a testament to one's improvisational skills in the kitchen, as per this blog post entitled 'Boca Doce Tart':

'I made a different dinner and I thought that I deserved a dessert. I wanted it to be easy, quick and of course that it didn't give me much work. I opened the closet and I found a small sachet of Boca Doce (I don't remember how it got there), I'm not a big fan of instant powdered desserts but as the best before date was almost expiring, I decided to

improvise. It came out great! Try it! (a photo of the tart follows) (extracted from <http://dicasedoces.blogspot.pt/2013/07/tarte-boca-doce.html>)

Other exchanges about Boca Doce consist of reinventing traditional Portuguese desserts such as rice dessert (Arroz Doce) or Aletria (a kind of noodle, popular in Portugal and Spain, used mostly in sweets), i.e., desserts that are popular in festivities like weddings, baptism lunches or Christmas, by adding a flavoured sachet of Boca Doce to the custard. Pineapple and caramel flavours seem to be the most often used. Boca Doce is a very flexible dessert in terms of what you can do with it, and is equally flexible in terms of presentation. Plenty of the visual material gathered in blogs and consumer forums shows consumers in a clear and open competition on the aesthetical aspects of the dessert's presentation while singing each other's praises for the beauty of the final presentation, captured in pictures and shared across the internet. This quality is also embodied on the official Facebook page where personalization of the dessert and beauty of the presentation goes hand in hand<sup>8</sup>.

As far as the Boca Doce cake goes, a version of it called 'sachet cake' is mentioned online across different platforms. The sachet cake is a symbolic cousin of 'yogurt cake', a popular recipe in Portugal consisting of making a cake using the yogurt pot as a measure for the ingredients (e.g. two 'yogurt pots' of flour, one 'yogurt pot' of oil, etc, etc). Sachet cake, as the name suggests, uses the empty Boca Doce sachet as a measure for the cake ingredients.

Whether in cakes, tarts or cheesecake, the uses of Boca Doce are clearly connected to indulgence. The kind of innovation that users put into practice with the coloured, flavoured sachets is only partially aligned with the kind of communication enacted on the official Facebook page where suggestions for Boca Doce's novel uses sometimes add fruit to it, in what is likely an attempt at trying to make it healthier. In users' home product innovations, when it comes to Boca Doce, indulgence trumps health trends and concerns. The low price of the product contributes to making it a cross-class item, i.e., one where a feeling of being Portuguese through its consumption can enter consumer's homes without the omnipresent threat of class-based self-evaluation and the expected criticism of its sugary contents, generally attached to a middle-class position. Boca Doce is a unifier, so much so that it trumps familiar forms of social differentiation. In so

---

<sup>8</sup> For a quick look into a refined visual imagery version of Boca Doce, see the official Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/pudinsbocadoce>



doing, Boca Doce stretches out into an idealized time in the past where social differentiation itself is, nostalgically, remembered as less prominent.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The theoretical paradigm of consumer tribes refers to consumers as agents in a brand's creation, actively helping to shape the brand's meaning and future. In this paper, we have tried to show how a collective imaginary of nostalgia (things idealized as staying the same) can co-exist with a product reinvented in the confines of the consumer home. These two dimensions are by no means incompatible. Suffused with a feeling of nostalgia that remains constant, the Boca Doce dessert can mutate into whatever form it wants to assume (cakes, yogurt, ice cream, etc) without losing itself in the process. We have provided examples of the feelings of nostalgia, the home innovations and how they intersect.

Reviewing the notion of temporality in philosophy and consumer research, Thomas Derek Robinson refers to an intersubjective nature of time orientated towards the future (i.e. time as a way of co-designing futures together) running side by side with a perception of time as an 'eternal present' (Robinson, 2015: 143). Online communications on Boca Doce expose the temporal fluidity upon which the brand has installed itself in Portuguese culture. Boca Doce is either something that brings one back to the past, as through the comforting image of a homemade Boca Doce trifle, or rather, something that in carrying an element of childhood and simplicity, can be brought into the present by extending its intended applications into tarts, cheesecakes and complex, often sophisticated, presentations.

The duality between a sentimental past associated with simplicity and a present of complex presentations and aesthetical concern is far from unique. In consumer culture theory, Otnes *et al* report a similar structural polarity in their research on Christmas trees, as objects containing a conflict between aesthetics and sentiment (Otnes *et al*, 2008). While the Christmas tree may be charged with the kind of sentimentality that temporarily abolishes the experience of the passage of time, making the past a succession of present moments (i.e. the tree that remains a constant presence over the years as a season symbol, hence, making present and past coalesce), it needs to be made prettier to become fully rooted in the present; the guarantee of the Christmas tree

continuity rests on accompanying the gradual aestheticization carrying through the whole of present culture.

An aesthetically pleasing sentimentality is at the core of the many blog comments on Boca Doce where praises are sung of the beauty of the presentations shared by cybernauts, living side by side with evocation of memories of the simpler, 'rawer', earlier versions of the dessert and its packaging. As in other objects of consumption, by taking an item of the past and bringing it into the aesthetics of the present is both making it up as an aesthetical object and making oneself up as an aesthetical subject (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2008). Photographing and sharing Boca Doce images is about displaying one's improvisational and aesthetical skills, but also about documenting one's love for one's family. In fact, consumers always speak of it as a shared family good. Even when divided in individual molds, Boca Doce is meant for simultaneous consumption with other family members, rather than for individual acts of indulgence.

Practicality, as one of the product's associated values at the time of its release, is currently a value to be revisited. While the product was considered practical at the time of its release, compared to making a dessert with natural ingredients from scratch, the advent of kitchen machines has rendered the continual act of stirring a dessert – or several desserts in the case of a homemade trifle – redundant. For a product innovator, it does not take long to figure out that producing an already made, industrialized version of the trifle, would likely have great success on reaching the Portuguese market. Whether Portugal as a market is significant enough for releasing 'ready-made' Boca Doce derivatives or extending the product line is a financial and operations issue transcending the realm of netnography. A consumer appetite for extending the product line is certainly out there and being enacted in people's homes.

Research-wise, Boca Doce exemplifies that small, local brands are just as prone to a netnographic approach as the global, American-based brands more often the subject of netnography. Its theoretical rooting in a framework of nostalgia, consumer culture and potential for tribal identification is by no means dissimilar to a bigger, universal brand. Moreover, an academic appetite for applying netnography to smaller brands is yet to come to fruition. As I hope this initial piece has shown, mapping and understanding smaller, national brands through the side of culture is an endeavour worth engaging in, both for a better understanding of consumers and for arriving at the kind of research that

truly embraces the connections between the local and the global without sacrificing the former to the latter. Implications are rife, should other local brand studies follow suit.

## REFERENCES

- Arnould, Eric J. & Melanie, W. (1994). Market-Oriented Ethnography: Interpretation Building and Marketing Strategy Formulation. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 31 (November), 484-504.
- Attride-Stirling, J. (2001). *Thematic networks: An analytic tool for qualitative research*. *Qualitative Research*, 1, 385-405.
- Belk, R. W. (1988). Possessions and the Extended Self. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15 (September), 139-67.
- Belk, R. W. (2013). Extended Self in a Digital World. *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 477-500.
- Brown, S. & Kozinets, R.V. & Sherry, J.F. (2003). Teaching Old Brands New Tricks: Retro Branding and the Revival of Brand Meaning. *The Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 67, No. 3, 19-33.
- Cova, B. & Kozinets, R.V. & Avi Shankar (eds) (2007). *Consumer Tribes*. Oxford and Burlington: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Cova, B. & Pace, S. (2006). Brand Community of Convenience Products: New Forms of Customer Empowerment – The Case “My Nutella The Community”. *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol.40, No.9/10, 1087-1105.
- Davis, F. (1979). *Yearnings for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*. New York: The Free Press.
- Denny, R & Sunderland, P. (eds). *Handbook of Anthropology in Business*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. Third edition. London: Routledge.
- Hine, C. (2000). *Virtual ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Hirschman, E. (1986). Humanistic Inquiry in Marketing Research: Philosophy, Method, and Criteria. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 23 (August), 237-49.
- Holt, D. & Douglas, C. (2010). *Cultural Strategy: How Innovative Ideologies Build Breakthrough Brands*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Holt, Douglas B. (2004). *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Kozinets, R.V. (2001). Utopian Enterprise: Articulating the Meanings of Star Trek’s Culture of Consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28 (June), 67-88.
- Kozinets, R.V. (2002). The Field Behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 39 (February), 61-72.
- Kozinets, R.V. (2007). Inno-Tribes: Star Trek as Wikimedia. In Cova, Bernard, Robert V. Kozinets & Avi Shankar, eds. (2007). *Consumer Tribes*. Oxford and Burlington, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann, pp. 194-209.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2010a). *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Kozinets, R.V. (2010b). *The marketer’s secret weapon: how social media*

- understanding drives innovation* (White Paper). California: Netbase Solutions, Inc.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2015), *Netnography: Redefined*. London: Sage.
- Lincoln, Y. S. & Egon G. Guba (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- McCracken, G. (2005). *Culture and Consumption II: Markets, Meaning and Brand Management*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Neto, F., & Mullet, E. (2014). A Prototype Analysis of the Portuguese Concept of Saudade. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 45(4), 660-670.
- Otnes, C. E & Crosby, E & Kreuzbauer, R. & Ho, J. (2009). Tinsel, trimmings, and tensions: consumer negotiations of a focal Christmas artefact. Sherry, J.F & Fisher, E.M.. (eds). *Explorations in Consumer Culture Theory*. London: Routledge, pp. 171-189.
- Robinson, T. D. (2015). Chronos and Kairos: Multiple futures and damaged consumption meaning. In *Consumer culture theory* (Vol. 17, pp. 129-154). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Rodrigues, J. & Reis, J. (2012). 'The Asymmetries of European Integration and the Crisis of Capitalism in Portugal'. *Competition & Change*, 16 (3): 188–205.
- Sherry, J.F & Fisher, E.M. (2009). (eds). *Explorations in Consumer Culture Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Sherry, J.F & Fisher, E.M. (2017). (eds) *Contemporary Consumer Culture Theory* (Routledge Studies in Marketing) 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, Kindle Edition: Amazon Digital Services LLC.
- Venkatesh, A., Meamber, A.L., (2008). The aesthetics of consumption and the consumer as an aesthetic subject. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 11,45-70.

#### **How to cite this article:**

Oliveira, P. (2017) Looking into nostalgia and the Boca Doce brand in online communications: a netnographic exploration of a Portuguese instant dessert. *International Journal of Marketing, Communication and New Media. Special Number 2 – Marketing and Digital Business*, 48-66, Available at <http://u3isjournal.isvouga.pt/index.php/ijmcmn>.