

# Christmas, consumption and materialism: discourse analysis of children's Christmas letters

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article reports the results of an empirical research that sought to understand the many meanings referring to Christmas that appear in letters written by children and sent to Santa Claus. It is based on the idea that, by means of a playful activity such as writing Christmas letters, children would be able to bring up a variety of issues referring to their daily lives.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This research, which is of interpretative nature, made use of elements belonging to discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is a theoretical and methodological field linked to Linguistics, which studies language in movement, producing meaning since it is a social practice.

**Findings** – The results point to discursive marks that suggest traces of materialism and secularism in the narratives and stories created by children concerning Christmas. Moreover, Santa Claus is directly associated with the date and stands out as an emblematic figure in children's imagination.

**Originality/value** – Reporting Christmas imagery and the creation of its meanings by children can help unveil essential issues, or at least point out "clues" referring to the degree of symbolism that is present in the various social and cultural manifestations of contemporary society.

**Keywords** – Christmas; consumption; materialism; secularism.



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## I Introduction

The celebration of Christmas is a paradox in itself, since it is considered a prominent religious holiday as well as one of the most profitable occasions for tradespeople in the Christian world. There are those who also consider it part of the non-Christian world – after all, thanks to the influence of American hegemony and the popularity of the mythical Santa Claus, the date also increases sales in countries where Christianity is not the main religion (Belk, 1989; Schmidt, 1991).

In this context, Christmas can be considered one of the main events that increase sales and consumption. It is interesting to note that few articles which take the fields of marketing and consumer research into account have devoted attention to issues involving Christmas. In Brazil, one can mention only the work of Casotti, Campos and Walther (2008), Oliveira and Vieira (2010), and Pinto and Cruz (2014). However, one can find interesting discussions about Christmas in texts from other fields of research. For example, in an introduction to a 1993 essay called *Unwrapping Christmas*, Daniel Miller discussed the topic under the title *A Christmas Theory*, exposing the dilemmas associated with the date – seen as a ritual that has lost many of its characteristics, and that has been influenced by the intense consumption brought about by the obligation to exchange gifts.

From a critical standpoint, Miller (1993) emphasizes the fundamental tension between the conception of Christmas, a Christian festivity, a ritual of family celebration – a place marked by affection – and the idea that this celebration is being corrupted by a “commercialization” process – with its association with the impersonal sphere of the market (Coelho, 2006).

In the same sense, Miller (1993) also conducts his essay with reflections on recurrent criticism of the “materialism” associated with the market as instances of the “contamination” of Christmas, capable of “destroying its spirit.” In

this analysis, the family is central to establishing opposition to commerce, a relationship that Miller understands as a version of a classic opposition in anthropological thought: Marcel Mauss’ opposition between gift and commodity.

Mauss’ paradigm (2001), proposed in his book *Essay on the Gift*, presents a situation of opposition between industrial society, which represents the commodity system, and preindustrial society, which represents the system of gifts. In his book, the author discusses the intentions behind exchanges in so-called “primitive societies” which, in the form of a gift, are opposed to the systems of buying and selling of “Western societies.” Both types of society harbor the two systems: markets and gifts, but the difference between them lies in the rules that govern the system of exchanges, present, above all, in the relationships between people and objects. In this context, the obligation to “give a gift” is expressed in a mythical or symbolic way in which the established communion and alliance are relatively indissoluble (Duarte, 2010).

The act of giving can also be defined as a symbolic exchange in social relationships (Belk & Coon, 1993), since, according to McCracken (2003), goods, here represented by gifts, are imbued with cultural meaning and symbolic properties that go beyond their commercial and utilitarian values, and are in constant movement, moving from a culturally constituted world, transferring themselves to the good itself to only then distance themselves from it and transfer themselves to consumers, who shall then give the good its final meaning.

Thus, the act of gift-buying – with emphasis on affectionate family relationships as the main recipient of gifts – would be a way of moving from the universe of commodities to the world of gifts, in a role that Miller points out as increasingly common in mass consumption: “the negation of the abstract nature of the commodity through rituals of appropriation through which social groups (in this case particularly the family) are created” (Miller, 1993).

The so-called “Christmas spirit”, an allusion to Dickens’ work, *A Christmas Carol*, is supposedly responsible for bringing about a change capable of making impersonal goods become gifts exchanged within families, with affection as the fundamental motivation for the establishment of social bonds, thus allowing for distance from the commodification and impersonality that characterize the contemporary world. This is the criticism of the “commercialization” or “materialization” of Christmas, to which the counterpoint is the urgent need to resuscitate this “Christmas spirit.” To Miller (1993, p. 31), “it is from the spirit of Christmas that one expects the transmutation of the image of fetishized commodities as the death of authentic social life into the very instruments of this crucial idea of a pure society.”

In this context, something crucial to this discussion gains importance: the establishment of meaning through consumption. It is assumed that individuals interpret their relationship with the world, in its various spheres, not only in terms of projects and goals, but also in social conventions and rules imbricated to a human society (Slater, 2002). Therefore, according to this same author, all consumption is cultural, because it is through it that we (re)produce cultures, social relationships and society itself. In addition, all forms of consumption are culturally specific, since as they are continually articulated in relation to meaningful and specific ways of life.

In this sense, when we bring the discussion to one of Christmas’ most relevant audiences – children –, the previously discussed issues gain complexity and lead to the following questions: What are the symbols present in children’s imagination referring to the Christmas celebration? How do children establish, based on socially shared meanings, their imagination concerning Christmas? Are materialism and secularism in fact connected to Christmas? It was from the doubts brought about by these questions that this empirical research emerged, aimed at unraveling the meanings related to Christmas gifts

in the letters written by children and addressed to Santa Claus.

We started from the idea that, through means of a playful activity such as writing Christmas letters, children could bring up different issues related to their daily lives. Taking into account that consumption can be considered an “operator” of current society, that is, researching consumption can be an enlightening way of understanding society, since it reflects and refracts various aspects of society, the idea of “deciphering” “naïve” Christmas letters written by children, since different cultural meanings are involved, can be a revealing way of unveiling issues already mentioned here – such as materialism, secularism and Christmas. It is at this point that lies the gap in which the research proposal rests.

A few justifications of why this work is timely and relevant for researchers aligned to the studies of marketing and consumption in Brazil are briefly presented below. Firstly, as emphasized by Barbosa (2006), there is still a lack of discussions about consumption in national consumer and marketing literature, as well as about practices, patterns and consumption rituals in different social groups in the Brazilian context. Taking children into account, this finding seems to make sense. Secondly, the study sheds light on Christmas, a festivity with an expressive symbolic richness, in which different cultural constructions are articulated. Finally, the option of using the theoretical-methodological approach of Discourse Analysis seems to be relevant in the study, since, in the field of marketing and consumer studies in Brazil, the choice can still be considered innovative, while at the same time considering the ambiguities, fluidity and contradictions of “real life” and exploring the constructed meanings and experiences of those who are researched.

To this end, the text was structured in five sections besides this introduction. Initially, a section was named “Christmas: origins and meanings” to present issues related to the origin and meanings linked to the feast. In addition, we considered it appropriate to find a space in

the article to discuss the relationship between materialism, secularism and Christmas. Another section was created to present the methodological course adopted in the study. Next, the letters are analyzed and, finally, the closing considerations of the article are made.

## 2 Christmas: origins and meanings

Christmas is a Christian feast celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. Although there is no historical account to prove the exact day of his birth, the Christian church began celebrating the “Feast of Nativity” on December 25<sup>th</sup> from the 4<sup>th</sup> century on by the Western Church, and from the 5<sup>th</sup> century on by the Eastern Church. Many historians dated its first celebration in Rome in the year 336 AD, when Roman emperor Constantine I made Christianity the new official religion of the empire. Despite its Christian origin, its celebration, from the beginning, was always associated with pagan rituals that celebrated the end of the year. Thus, when the North American continent was colonized by English Christians, they brought with them customs, rituals and religious feasts interspersed with religious and pagan traditions (Karnal, Pundy, Fernandes, & Morais, 2007).

Christmas, as it is seen in Brazil, is a very close reproduction of American Christmas. McKechnie and Tynan (2006) recognize the influence of American Christmas practices on the celebrations of many Western cultures, so understanding the history of Christmas in the United States is relevant to understanding the meanings attributed to this date on Brazilian soil.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Christmas celebration had not yet spread, and faced opposition in England and by many American settlers, specifically Puritans, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Quakers. At this time, Christmas was the most important feast for the Church of England, but the English Puritans disagreed with the way the feast was carried out, for in their opinion it had lost its Christian centrality and had become a secular and profane

party, with the inclusion of rites and festivities that were far removed from their genuine and pure sense (Barnett, 1954, *apud* Miller, 1993).

Miller (1993) reinforces the idea that the Puritan founders of the United States were not, in fact, responsible for implementing the practice of Christmas. The author believes that the influence spread from the work of certain writers who wrote on the subject, but mainly from English writer Charles Dickens’ book *A Christmas Carol*, which brings back the spirit of Christmas. It is only in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, that the author finds records proving that the tradition of celebrating Christmas settled in once and for all in the US, and “it is only from this point on that we begin to find the crystallization of a range of attributes of modern Christmas from a variety of regional sources into a single, homogenized version that has regional basis” (Miller, 1993, p. 4).

Another fact that collaborates to establish the celebration of the date is the officialization of December 25<sup>th</sup> as a national American holiday. The formal recognition of the holiday diminishes the initial resistance of the Puritans to the date, and perhaps this fact contributed to their eventual acceptance. “It is suspected that the recognition of the date was a sign of an emerging national self-consciousness, which found symbolic expression in the Christmas festival” (Barnett, 1946, p. 19-21, *apud* Belk, 1987).

In its earliest conception, the celebration of the date was associated to the religious rituals involved in celebrating and worshipping Jesus Christ in Christian temples, permeated by prayer, devotion, and reading of biblical passages. Celebrating in the family – a space marked by a purely affectionate relationship – was also a tradition. Even with the ritual of exchanging gifts, this was represented by an exchange motivated by the establishment of affective social bonds, as opposed to the commodification and impersonality that characterized the modern world (Miller, 1993). Although the tradition of “donating gifts” was an unusual practice at the time, American settlers maintained an old

“obligation” to offer gifts to the poor. At that time, there was no “exchange” of gifts, but rather donation. Following socioeconomic changes and developments, practices changed and thus began the ritual of exchanging gifts among friends, relatives and neighbors. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this custom spread significantly throughout the US and became a traditional seasonal practice among adults and children (Barnett, 1946, p. 80, *apud* Belk, 1987).

The ritual of giving and the intense commercialization of Christmas became more evident with the rise and growth of department stores in the early 1870s. “Emerging from simple and small establishments, department stores grew after the Civil War to become giants of modern retail, great bastions on the skylines of urban America and primary institutions in the rise of consumer culture” (Schmidt, 1991). Department stores became a “threat to churches, because of their high popularity; they were considered the new cathedrals of Urban America, places elected as the new centers for celebration of the holiday” (Schmidt, 1991, p. 12). Perhaps that is why they are considered one of the greatest promoters of Christmas, often more than churches themselves. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, department stores began to promote advertising campaigns on a large scale. The first Macy’s store was opened in 1862, and, in the mid-1870s, it was already an attraction in itself, drawing in thousands of consumers during the holiday season (Schmidt, 1991).

The review of national marketing literature on the subject points to a “silencing” about the date. This is curious, given its economic, social, cultural and symbolic relevance, and its status as rich phenomena for marketing researchers. A review of *Portal Spell* and of the annals of the Meeting of the National Association of Postgraduate in Administration, both maintained by the National Association of Postgraduate Courses in Administration (*ANPAD*) brought only three papers, namely: Casotti, Campos and Walther (2008), who carried out a study with

young upper middle class university students in Rio de Janeiro, about the meanings attributed to Christmas by young people. The results indicated that young Brazilian people value traditions, although they do not participate actively in it, since it offers few elements that are to their liking. However, childhood memories are a place of refuge, and raw material for future plans.

Oliveira and Vieira (2010) sought to understand the influence of religious aspects on the establishment of meanings attributed to Christmas gifts exchanged by young Christians, based on the religious aspects related to the individual perception of the lifestyle and the meanings that these goods represent in individuals’ relationships. Religion appears as an important value in the individual cognitive structure of these consumers, because material and symbolic religious practices, such as those performed at Christmas, guide the individual decision-making process, as well as the establishment of meanings and, consequently, the processes of individual and collective decision within the consumer market.

The most recent and also more focused article, written by Pinto and Cruz (2014), describes an empirical research with the objective of studying consumption experiences related to Christmas in cities in the Minas Gerais countryside, in order to investigate consumption in this important date, from a regional, Brazilian perspective. The results suggest that Christmas represents a symbolic-imaginary place in the experience of these people, and is an important moment for a better understanding of consumption acts, their subjects and contexts.

In international literature there are articles that, in some way, mention issues involving the celebration of Christmas. In the late 1980s, Russell Belk published texts on the issue of Christmas. Belk’s (1987) text defends the idea that Christmas is more than a feast based on abundance, prosperity and wealth, because it is also a celebration of consumption, materialism and hedonism. Belk (1989), in the same sense, emphasizes that Santa Claus can be considered

a god of materialism and hedonism in modern consumer culture. A few years later, Belk and Bryce (1993), based on analysis of films produced at different times, came to the conclusion that Christmas has become a postmodern spectacle. Both researchers have claimed that Christmas celebration has moved from churches to shopping malls. From a managerial perspective, Laroche, Saad, Kim & Browne (2000) sought to identify the effects of moderators such as general information, specific information, and vendor assistance in shopping for clothes on Christmas.

Other more recent articles can be mentioned, however. Among them, we can mention the works of Clarke (2006; 2007), who sought to measure the spirit of Christmas. Tynan and McKechnie (2009), in an experiential approach, sought to understand how consumers establish hedonic meaning through the family Christmas celebration. Through the analysis of 422 letters sent to Santa Claus by Australian children, O’Cass and Clarke (2001) suggested that children, in their Christmas buying behavior, are oriented towards famous brands. Also through analysis of children’s Christmas letters, Halkoaho and Laaksonen (2009) concluded that children’s letters for Santa Claus contain expressions of need, wishes, desires and dreams related to Christmas. These authors also emphasized that Christmas seems to be more of a “festival” of gifts than a feast with spiritual characteristics.

Among the various possibilities of “reading” and theoretical “cuts” related to the phenomena attached to the date, this article chose the materialism imbricated in all situations of consumption on Christmas, a theme that will be unveiled in the next section.

### 3 Materialism and secularism in Christmas

Materialism is the importance that a consumer attaches to worldly possessions, and at the highest levels of materialism, such possessions take center stage in the life of the individual, and are seen as powerful sources of satisfaction

or dissatisfaction (Belk, 1984), or, yet, “it is the importance attached to the possession and acquisition of material goods in the attainment of desired life goals or states” (Richins & Dawson, 1992, p. 304). Materialism is also linked to conspicuous consumption, whose satisfaction is sustained much more in the reaction that can be caused in others than in the usefulness of the goods/services that are acquired. Moreover, it is common to associate it also with an excessive search for status through possessions and negative feelings, such as envy, self-centeredness, possessiveness, insecurity, lack of principles and moral values (Ponchio, Aranha & Todd, 2007).

Thus, articles on materialism occupy a place of importance in the studies of consumption and allow for numerous conjunctures, such as: formalization of materialism among children and adolescents; materialism and indebtedness; materialism, well-being, satisfaction and/or happiness, environment, family stress level, relationship between community and material values, relationship between materialistic and post-materialist values with social structures, gender, age and education differences, among others (Ponchio et al., 2007).

In the context of this article, it should be mentioned that materialism has a close relationship both with the concepts of possession and consumption as well as with the act of giving. This articulation seems to be obvious, since the ownership of goods, as emphasized by Richins and Dawson (1982), is at the core of the concept of materialism. Possession that can be provided not only by purchasing, but also by the consumption of the good and by acquisition through the receiving of gifts.

In this study, materialism will be analyzed in the context of the celebration of the most important holiday in the Christian world, perceived not only by the religious tradition of celebrating the date, but also by the economic representativeness that has long been contaminated by “commercial interests exploiting its traditions and feelings, aiming only for profit.” Recognized

as the “Christmas paradox,” materialism and consumerism intensify at this time of year; this is a paradox because the Christian religion rejects materialism (Barnett, 1946, p. 79 *apud* Belk, 1987).

Although often treated together or alternately when discussing the holiday, there is a significant difference between materialism and Christmas secularism; however, both are evident during this time, in the call for consumption and the emphasis on Christmas shopping. From October on, it is possible to observe in supermarkets, department stores and malls the symbols and elements of Christmas – decorations, trees, Santa Claus, *panettones*, advertisements and elaborate shop windows. “It is during the Christmas season that shopping malls and department stores gain strength and stand out as the most favorable place to celebrate the date, even more than church itself, which suggests the degree of materialism and secularism embodied in the date” (Schmidt, 1991, p. 18).

The increasing secularization of Christmas is associated with the evident emergence and formalization of its image. Among the elements that point to the secularization of the date, Santa Claus stands out. His emblematic image associated with the tradition of giving, often considered the “god of materialism,” Santa Claus appears in shopping malls, department stores, charity campaigns, advertising, and decoration, among others. His figure has become the most popular and visible symbol of the festival. His origins and variations “reflect in an interesting way the persistent struggle between religious and secular forces for the dominance of Christmas.” Nowadays, Santa Claus is a “central figure of secular Christmas, which represents a total distance from religion;” many people believe that Christmas only survives because he represents a motive for those who do not celebrate the date as a religious feast (Barnett, 1946, p. 24, *apud* Belk, 1987).

Santa Claus can also be seen as a means of sacralizing gift-giving to children, distinguishing

these gifts from other ones that are given throughout the year. Thus, Christmas gifts acquire a different form from common goods and services (Belk, 1987). Whether he is or not considered a sacred or secular figure, the fact is that he has been described as the most famous brand in the world – and his physical presence, represented by fat and bearded old men with rosy cheeks, is often the center of attention (Barnett, 1946, *apud* Belk, 1987) and part of children's imagination up to a certain age; it also usually inspires countless advertisements (Belk, 1987).

Having discussed certain essential theoretical questions for this study, the text will contemplate points related to the methodological course adopted for the empirical research.

## 4 Method

This study, taking into account the nature of the phenomenon investigated, was based on a qualitative research strategy. Therefore, the adoption of an interpretative perspective for the conduct of all work is implicit. This perspective assumes multiple and emergent realities; historical and socially constructed contexts; facts and values; truth as provisional; and social life as processual (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006, Charmaz, 2009).

To reach the proposed objectives, this study used Discourse Analysis (DA) elements. In the process of data analysis, DA proposes to go beyond the text in order to find the conditions that produced it, to access its meanings, considering the social, historical and ideological conditions in which it was produced (Gondim & Fisher, 2009). DA “[...] considers language as a phenomenon that must be studied not only in relation to its internal system, as a linguistic formation, but also as an ideological formation, which manifests itself through a socio-ideological competence” (Brandão, 1986, p. 18).

The data that is object of analysis in this study falls within the literary genre “personal letter”, since children's Christmas letters written for Santa Claus can be included in this genre since they are written for a recipient, who, in

their imagination, is a real and concrete figure, to whom they relate in the extent to which he responds to their letters. Personal letters appear as a “textual gender, present in interpersonal relationships, as one of the key elements for the construction of verbal interactions, thus enabling, the effectiveness of the processes of socialization and sociability of individuals” (Silva, 2002, p. 22).

One of the oldest communicative practices in the history of mankind, letters represent at the same time the medium and the very object of analysis of this study. Personal letters establish direct communication between two parties (sender and recipient); reliability conferred on the document; the possibility of interlocution (of exchange); and the construction of specific (social) relationships in specific circumstances (Bazerman, 1999). The author explains that personal letters, although they resorted to models, always sought to demystify formal and elaborate writing, without, however, breaking with the social norms present in the communicative routines developed by the social groups to which the subjects belong. Their primary purpose was to nurture social and affectionate relationships, maintaining a tone of sincerity, warmth and informality.

It is emphasized that letters, the corpus of this study, were examined assuming that the discursive statements that are found in them are “socially based practices that explicitly or implicitly present the marks of the ideology that constitutes them, and are therefore not neutral” (Saraiva, Carrieri, Pimentel, & Souza-Ricardo, 2009, p. 17), which say more than what is expressed through speech (Bakhtin, 2006).

The process of organizing and preparing for the analysis of the charts followed the orientation that is inherent to the adopted method. In this sense, to DA, there is no clear distinction between this stage of organization and the stage of analysis. In DA, organizing data means manipulating it theoretically, questioning it, and confronting it with the theory used in the study – and it is in this process of reading, of coming and going, that the categories are

identified and analysis begins. The analyst has the role of looking for the discursive marks used by the enunciator, the images constructed and sustained in the text, manifested in linguistic materiality, which point to what one wishes to find: a) the main aspects of lexical analysis; b) the main themes and figures (explicit or implicit) in the discourses, c) the main semantic paths structured from the themes and figures; d) the main interdiscursive and intradiscursive aspects; and e) the main aspects of the discursive syntax.

Briefly, this study deals with analysis and examination of the discursive and socio-cognitive factors that compose the particularities of this genre, in an attempt to discover elements that point to materialism and the secularization of Christmas in the imagination of children who participated in this study. Thus, its methodological course includes analysis of the textual part contained in its corpus. A total 21 “letters addressed to Santa Claus” were written by children between the ages of 7 and 10, all students from a school in the city of Belo Horizonte. The approach took place in the children’s school environment: the classroom. They were asked to write a letter to Santa Claus about Christmas; beyond that, the contents of the rest of the letter were free. No previous explanation or approach on the subject was made. To write letters, the children used their own school supplies, sheets from their notebooks, and pencils. And although nothing was mentioned about drawings or gifts, all children, as well as writing, “embellished” their letters with drawings and colors that refer to the symbolic elements of Christmas and “asked” Santa Claus for gifts.

## 5 Data analysis

After initial treatment, data was processed through a deep and analytical reading of the charts, using the procedures already mentioned. In the end, three discursive categories (the reading of the letters, the meanings of Christmas and the centrality of Santa Claus) were found to be latent in the course of the analysis. These categories will be discussed below.



## 5.1 Reading of the letters

This category opens the discussion of data because it considers that the whole process of communicative construction occurs with and through the reading of the letters. The writing of the letters, object of this study, consisted of a single style – writing in the first person, requesting something and reporting facts of life,

characterizing them as personal letters. In relation to illustrations, they are in line with the number of handwritten letters, even if the drawing is a simple one. Neatness in calligraphy is emphasized, care in framing the sheet from the notebook with a well-crafted colored border, predominance of green and red point to the importance that the letter has, in this social act, to its senders.



**Figure 1:** Drawings taken from children's letters

**Source:** Research data (2015)

The presence of drawings in all the letters points to the visual expression used by children, who, from an early age, are socialized through children's literature, with books that are, for the most part, full of illustrations. Colors, strokes, and shapes illustrate stories, or, from pictures, words draw plots and write stories. In children's culture, the articulation between the verbal and the visual is constant. Children draw and write, write stories and draw, write letters and draw again (Iavelberg & Menezes, 2012).

The drawings are representative figures of Santa Claus, Christmas trees, gift boxes, stars, toys they want to receive, hearts and human figures that represent themselves, and, in some cases, are hand-in-hand with another child (Figure 1). By observing the drawings, it is possible to read the cultural and symbolic representations about what they believe to be Christmas. The drawings reproduce Christmas elements represented by

symbols, referring to the consumption of products and decoration items, emptied of their meanings and, therefore, depleted of the genuine meaning of Christmas itself. Santa Claus is their most visible face. In addition to the drawings, the letters also contained the expressions "Christmas", "Merry Christmas", "Ho Ho Ho", "It's Christmas", and "Peace", all highlighted in colored pencils.

Personal letters suggest a closeness between the subjects that relate through them. According to Foucault (1992, p. 131), "[...] to exercise writing in the order of the inner movements of the soul, in this sense, has a very close role to confession [...]" and it is from these testimonies, which are almost confessions, that one can understand the uniqueness of each one of them. Each subject is unique, with his or her peculiarities, in the form of exposing his or her thoughts, organizing his or her ideas, expressing his or her feelings through words and illustrations, paying more or less attention

to the calligraphy. It is in the “letter” that these subjects found an appropriate and “cosy” space to establish a communicative bond, to express their feelings, in the search for fulfillment of their dreams, established in their beliefs, aligned with a relationship of intimacy and confidence.

(1) Hi, Santa, my name is Maicon. I’m 8 years old and my mother is here by my side. We’re talking about you sir that God always sends good people to make children smile. On Christmas Eve may you come visit me. I want to be one of the children who smile too, I don’ know what to ask you for, but I ask you not to forget me on Christmas Eve. I like toy cars and Spider-Man. God be with you.

(2) Santa Claus my name is Yan, I’m 9 years old and I have a big dream my dream is to have the giant green Hulk because my mother gave me the little Hulk. Please my dear old man make my dream come true I will be very happy. May God be with you.

(3) Santa Claus, my name is Claudia and I’m only 10 years old, I study in the first grade 1. (...). I really need clothes and also to get a Nonster High [sic] doll. Santa forgive me if I asked for a lot, I just told you my request. Merry Christmas.

The tone of the accounts is loaded with spontaneity. In the fragments (1), (2) and (3) there are several interactive strategies used by the speakers to carry out the purpose of their speeches, which is to establish a relationship that concludes with the objective of sealing a friendship and conquering the sympathy of the reader, as can be seen in “my mother is here by my side. We (sic) talking about you sir that God always sends good people to make children smile;” “On Christmas Eve may you come visit me.” Praise, grace and sympathy are entrances that seek to build negotiating spaces through interactive strategies that translate politeness and at the same time intimacy, by referring to Santa Claus as “my

dear old man.” Now, it is known that referring to someone in this way, in the diminutive and using codenames, is a social norm used by people who are likely to be in a closer relationship with each other.

Throughout the interaction, this place is constructed, enunciatively and interactively, or, rather, the legitimacy of this place is negotiated with the interlocutor: sometimes he speaks of himself (“my name is Yan, I’m 9 years old and I have a big dream;” “I’m Claudia and I’m only 10 years old, I study in the first grade 1”), or talks about the sender (“We’re talking about you sir that God always sends good people to make children smile”). Thus, in this dialogical game, in which they are intent on carrying out its purposes, the discourse moves to its central point, when, at last, the children explain their requests: “I like toy cars and spider man”; “My dream is to have the giant green Hulk”; “I really need clothes and also to be given a Monster High doll.”

Assuming, however, that a request cannot be met, there is an appeal not to be forgotten, through the statements “I ask you not to forget me on Christmas Eve;” “Please, my dear old man, make my dream come true, I will be very happy,” summoning the reader to commit himself and to remember them. At the end of the letters, socially recognized expressions that express farewell are used – more usual in face-to-face dialogues –, such as “may God be with you”, or more appropriate on for this time of year, such as “Merry Christmas,” and even an apology – “Santa Claus sorry if I asked for a lot” –, in which we can infer that the sender is cautious, for fear of being misinterpreted. The personal letter is a genre of writing that, interactively and discursively, operates upon the addressee, but also upon the sender. Through a succession of events, a discursive space is created in which the differences of social places are minimized, and relationships are built in an affectionate space, in intimacy and interpersonality. Thus, in a relation to distance, constructed through the letter, Foucault (1992, p. 150) observes that

the activity of writing is presented as the moment of showing oneself, to see and show one's face next to the other. And it must be understood as such that the letter is simultaneously a glance that turns to the recipient (through the missive he receives, he feels looked at) and a way for the sender to offer himself to his gaze for what it says.

More than that, letters are a means by which it is possible to "read" and "decipher" the mechanisms and clues that reflect and/or promote the dialogical movements inscribed in it, capable of revealing intentions and revelations that will be analyzed in the next categories.

## 5.2 The meanings of Christmas

There are different opinions about Christmas in the discourses, which sometimes link it to religious elements and meanings, positive attitudes and values supported, above all, in the Christian tradition, and the discourse reinforces the materiality and consumerism present at Christmas, which, although it is a religious date, has incorporated these aspects over the decades (Belk, 1987).

(1) Christmas is a very special day, it's the day that Jesus was born Christmas, and besides getting gifts, the city is all decorated. I'm waiting for Christmas like crazy because we decorate the Christmas tree. HO HO HO! CHRISTMAS IS HERE. (Lucia, 8 years old).

(2) Christmas is a very special day because we celebrate the birthday of Jesus Christ, and as a symbol we use a good old man called Santa Claus (...). When we think of Christmas, we think of Santa Claus, shooting stars, gifts. etc (Carol, 9 years old).

(3) To me, Christmas represents the day that Jesus was born. He received several presents and so [sic], every Christmas we get lots of gifts and this is very cool. At

the birth of Jesus everyone went there to see him and everyone brought gifts. (...). Christmas to me is the best thing. (Téo, 9 years old).

Discursive fragments (4), (5) and (6), reflect the conception of Christmas constructed by these children. The letters suggest that the festival is remembered as a day different from the others, a special day in their lives (according to the lexical selection "it's a special day"; "it's a very special day"; "Christmas is the best thing to me"), where feelings of pleasure, contentment, and much anticipation for their arrival (the lexical selection "I'm waiting for Christmas like crazy") manifest.

In their reports, the children recapture the most genuine meaning of Christmas by associating it with the birth/birthday of Jesus ("it is the day that Jesus was born", "we celebrate the birthday of Jesus Christ"), however, it is a displacement of the discursive argument, in search of a construction of meaning attributed to Christmas, that distances itself from the reason behind the date, made explicit by themselves. Although it represents the birth of Jesus, it is implicitly understood that the reason why Christmas is such a special day, is awaited with such expectation, is because of the possibility of realizing personal desires to get gifts and have fun with elements and props that constitute the festivity (as can be seen in the lexical selections: "and besides getting gifts, the city is all decorated"; "When we think of Christmas, we think of Santa Claus, falling stars, gifts"; "every Christmas we get lots of gifts and this is very cool"). For them, Christmas is special, above all, because of the possibility of receiving gifts.

Discursive fragment (6) brings a very interesting account that seems to reinforce one of the theories that attributes the act of gift-giving at Christmas to the fact that Jesus also received gifts from the three wise men of the East on the day of his birth, according to the biblical account. Also in this fragment, one observes the idea of a logical sequence, pointed out by the conclusive conjunctive locution "so that", just as Jesus received gifts, we must also receive, ("He received

several gifts and so, every Christmas we get lots of gifts”) And this “is very cool”, pointing once again to the attraction that the date exerts on children, motivated by the strong appeal of the gift ritual.

These interpretations reinforce the argument presented in the introductory section that supports the idea that all consumption has strong cultural components, since it is through it that we (re)produce cultures, social relationships and society itself. In children’s speech, it is possible to perceive the parade of ideas that make Christmas the synonym of consumption of goods, ornaments, toys, receiving gifts, essentially materialistic elements.

Lit and decorated cities, Christmas trees, Santa Claus, falling stars, gifts are all interdiscursive elements, which, together, show the secular meaning that is given to Christmas, confirming the distancing of the religious meaning of the date. These elements, mentioned here, elucidate the syncretism that involves the date, which, since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, was already completely immersed in them (Belk, 1987). To Belk (1987), the confrontation of meanings concerning Christmas is no longer between religious and secular, but between sacred and profane values in a secular world. The culmination of this deconstruction occurs when Santa Claus is seen as the symbolic representation of Jesus Christ himself, to which is attributed the affectionate codename “good old man”, used especially in the Brazilian popular language, according to discursive fragment (5), evidenced in the lexical selection (“Christmas is a very special day because we celebrate the birthday of Jesus Christ, and as a symbol we use a good old man called Santa Claus”).

### 5.3 The centrality in Santa Claus

The figure of Santa Claus is associated, above all, to the tradition of giving. He has become the most popular and most present symbol of the festivity (Belk, 1987). Some characteristics define him as a supernatural being, immutable, eternal, ever present, year after year. Children worship

him through letters and requests and he, in turn, rewards the good and excludes the wicked. He thus assumes the role of a divinity to children, whose belief is enough to characterize him in this way. Although his image is remembered by adults and children, at this time of year the relationship he establishes with children is undoubtedly very particular and special, since his story is told to the little ones, who from the first contact they establish with this narrative, come to believe in his existence. Believing in Santa Claus and other characters is part of childhood, regardless of religion or belief to which the child belongs.

Fragments (7), (8) and (9) represent the strength of this belief.

(1) To me, Christmas represents Santa Claus and gifts; The meaning of Christmas (...), gifts and Christmas trees. (Lucas, 8 years old)

(2) Christmas. I wait for Christmas all year long with lights in the streets in the squares. I want Christmas trees and lots of Christmas gifts. I wait for Santa Claus and expect the best Christmas of all. A hug. HOHOHO: Santa Claus is here. (Dudu, 9 years old)

(3) The Christmas symbol is [sic] the colors green and red, a tree full of lights, star at the top of the tree and “Santa Claus” (...). (Bela, 9 years old)

The success of Santa Claus at Christmas is essentially based on the proposition that he is the social agent responsible for gift-giving on Christmas day; to Baudrillard (2004, p. 176), Santa Claus is “a rationalizing fabulation that allows us to preserve in the second childhood a relationship to the miraculous parenting relationship of gratification that characterized early childhood relationships.” To the author, what stands out in this relationship is not whether or not the child believes in his existence, but what he or she consumes through this image, that

“it is through the solicitude of parents and the precautions they take to be accomplices of this fiction.” Belk (1987) believes that this association is so strong that he has been considered the “god of materialism”, which, in accordance with his image, also reinforces and encourages children to associate Christmas with gifts, according to the fragments (7), (8) and (9) evidenced in “to me Christmas represents Santa Claus and gifts” and “I want Christmas trees and lots of Christmas gifts. I wait for Santa Claus.” In (7) the word “gift” appears twice, in the interval of a single line. However, gift-giving does not occur with “grace”, it is linked to a ritual of “exchanging” based on social obligations of a role that should be incorporated by the child. These social obligations are translated into the facts of obedience to parents, teachers, positive attitudes with colleagues, good results in school, among others.

Here is a brief discussion of the degree of utilitarianism observed in the relationship between the child and Santa Claus. This utilitarian relationship commits more to Lévi-Strauss' condition of reciprocity, since it is built to give, receive and reciprocate and opposes the gift of Mauss, because he believes in the existence of a perfect exchange system. The gift is “any provision of good or service, without guarantee of return, with a view to creating, nourishing or re-creating social bonds between people” (Godbout, 1999, 29). The gift is placed at the service of the affective bond between people, while reciprocity foresees social relationships based on “commercial exchange.”

Mauss differentiates between these gifts, goods, and symbols of utilitarian exchange. To the author, it is not individuals, but collectivities that maintain reciprocal obligations, through family and community groups (Sabourin, 2008, p. 132). However, modernity refuses to believe in the existence of the gift because it represents an inverted image of the material interest of modern society. “The true gift could only be gratuitous” in modern society; since gratuitousness is impossible,

the true gift is impossible, “the free gift does not exist” (Douglas, 1989, *apud* Godbout, 1999, p. 15).

These arguments are explored in the context of the letters and used to move Santa Claus to gift-giving. This conditional, associative and argumentative relationship between meriting the gift, finds adherence to what was defended by Lévi-Strauss (2003, p 11):

[...] throughout the year, we invoke the visit of Santa Claus, to remind children that his generosity will be measured by their good behavior; And the periodic character of the distribution of gifts has the utility of disciplining children's claims, of reducing to a short period the moment in which they truly have the right to demand gifts.

These elements are present in speech fragments (10) and (11):

(1) This year I would like to receive the doll called Elza from the movie Frozen, A Freezing Adventure. If I can't get this doll, it can be a Barbie, because I really like dolls. I was very obedient this whole year and I studied a lot too, I did not fight, I did not hit anybody and I respected all my friends, family and Mom and Dad too (Maria, 9 years old).

(2) I would very much like to receive a remote control police car, I behaved very well this year at school, so I think I deserve to receive this gift. (Leo, 6 years old)

The condition for getting the gift is made explicit in discursive fragments (10) and (11), whose causal relationship is evident in the lexical selections (“I behaved very well this year... so I think I deserve to receive this gift”; “I was very obedient this whole year and studied a lot...”). In fragment (10), the child lists a list of good attitudes and good behavior in various fields of her life. In school, family and social environment

“I was very obedient this whole year and I studied a lot too, I did not fight, I did not hit anybody and I respected all my friends, family and Mom and Dad too”). This association of kindness and obedience with its due reward, materially represented by the gift, dialogues with the thought of Belk (1987, p. 91) who believes that there is an intention to “sacralize the act of giving children at Christmas, distinguishing them from the other gifts received throughout the year, acquiring a differentiated form of common goods.”

## 6 Final considerations

This study dealt with the identification and analysis of discursive and socio-cognitive marks that suggested elements of materialism and secularism present in the plots and narratives outlined in letters addressed to Santa Claus written by 21 children. The particularities of this kind, which promote direct communication between two parties, based on trust, the exchange and the construction of social relationships (Bazerman, 1999) was set up as a corpus that favored reaching the purpose of this study. By looking at the narratives and drawings in children’s letters, it was possible to “read” the recurring cultural and symbolic representations of their discursive memories of what they believe Christmas to be.

Although different opinions about Christmas appear in the discourses, which sometimes link it to Christian tradition and refer to positive attitudes and values, the plots and drawings point to elements that make up materialism and secularism, reproduced in Christmas symbols, consumption of gifts, products and decorating items, which are depleted in their meanings and distance themselves from the genuine sense of the date. Santa Claus is the most visible face of them all. It is also evidenced in the act of giving gifts in the utilitarian relationship established with Santa Claus, opposing the gift of Mauss, which presupposes exchange without any intention other than to “create, feed or recreate the social bonds between people and places themselves at the service of the affective bond between people” (Godbout, 1999, p. 29).

It is worth emphasizing that, despite all the complexity involved, the objective of the work was, without claiming to be conclusive, to bring up provocative questions that serve as a basis for further research. After all, the content generated here cannot answer so many emerging questions, as well as the visualization of possible categories that have arisen throughout the entire process of analysis of the collected data that had not previously been glimpsed. The analysis of discourse as a theoretical-methodological perspective that consists of unveiling the effects of meaning provoked by certain discursive arguments, that is, where they depart, where they depart to, by whom they are used, for what purpose and who consumes them, adhering to the work proposal.

Faced with the discussions conducted from the discursive categories, another reflection to be made has bearing on the inquiries that motivated this study. By going back to them, it is possible to affirm that many are the symbols present in children’s imagination related to Christmas: lights, pine trees, but, indisputably, the figure of Santa Claus and the presence of gifts. This seems to confirm Miller’s (1993) thesis by arguing in favor of the idea that Christmas is losing its “spirit” to give rise to yet another festivity with eminently commercial characteristics. In addition, it can be noted in the speeches that the figure of Santa Claus goes beyond his role of being a “gift-giver” icon to also become an educator, in that it serves to mark out a child’s behavior, rewarding the good and punishing those children who have behaved badly throughout the year.

Going back to the provocative issues listed at the beginning of this paper, we can affirm that, in the light of what was discussed earlier, we revealed, through analysis of children’s Christmas letters, interesting symbolic “codes” related to this important festive date in our calendar.

Considering the characteristics of the article, some limitations are evident. The use of small Christmas letters by children is one of them. The option of not returning to respondents after

the Christmas festivities may also be considered a limitation. The lack of other information about the respondents that could contribute to a deepening of the analysis could also be considered a limitation. Seeking to point out managerial contributions to the study, it is worth mentioning that marketers from different types of organizations, as well as managers of retail enterprises, can use the results and reflections raised by the study to improve their understanding of consumers regarding the symbolic issues involved on Christmas.

Finally, it is not hard, at this point, to defend the idea that further studies need to be undertaken to continue what was begun here. There may be several themes involved, methodological approaches proposed, as well as theoretical "clipping" and articulations assumed in order to understand different traditions and habits, and their contributions to the establishment of social relationships related to Christmas. Thus, surveys that contemplate other strata of children, taking into account age, income profile and different regions, as well as children from families with different formats and religions, can be included in the list of suggestions for future studies. Further research could also accompany children after the Christmas holidays, evaluating the impact of receiving or not receiving requested gifts on their perceptions regarding Santa Claus. Gender issues as well as discussions concerning meritocracy could also be interesting possibilities. From a methodological point of view, research could be conducted on the basis of the drawings made by children, as well as on the results of their speech in groups.

In sum, in view of all these considerations, it is valid to state that the presented results are an interesting contribution to the studies of marketing and consumption, because unraveling the imagination surrounding Christmas and the construction of its meaning by children can serve to unveil essential issues or at least point out "clues" referring to the degree of symbolism present in different social and cultural manifestations of contemporary society. In addition, the results of the study can be added to others that seek to understand all the complexities involved in

constructing meanings linked to the objects and ideologies present in "naïve" Christmas letters written by children, and makes visible the divisions, categories and even social classifications made by social practices of everyday life.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A preliminary version of this article "Natal, Consumo e Materialismo: Uma análise discursiva de cartas infantis de Natal" was presented on XVIII Seminários em Administração – SEMEAD; Georgiana Luna Batinga, Marcelo de Rezende Pinto, Sara Pimenta Resende; São Paulo – SP; 04, 05 e 06 de novembro de 2015

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1. Definition of research problem	√	√	√
2. Development of hypotheses or research questions (empirical studies)	√	√	√
3. Development of theoretical propositions (theoretical work)	√	√	√
4. Theoretical foundation / Literature review	√		
5. Definition of methodological procedures	√	√	
6. Data collection	√		√
7. Statistical analysis			
8. Analysis and interpretation of data	√		
9. Critical revision of the manuscript	√	√	
10. Manuscript writing	√	√	