Sex, Soccer and Samba: Portraits of Brazil in US Sitcoms

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Abstract

In a contemporary world dominated by communication and information, it is hard to deny that, for a nation, the way it is portrayed in the media influences how the international community perceives it. Considering television as the primary source of information and entertainment in a large part of the world, this study examines how Brazil is seen through the lenses of US-produced sitcoms. Episodes featuring an allusion to the country are classified by type of content (image, dialogue, soundtrack or storyline), text (the exact word or image that refers to Brazil), context (what ideas are associated to the reference), and subtext (the value connected to that reference). The study finds that, although sitcoms portray Brazil in a mostly positive light, many of the stereotypes traditionally associated with the country are still being disseminated.

Keywords: Brazil, stereotype, sitcom, television, globalization

1. Introduction

We live in a mediated blitz of images. They fill our newspapers, magazines, books, clothing, billboards, computer monitors and television screens as never before in the history of mass communications. Something is happening. We are becoming a visually mediated society. For many, understanding of the world is being accomplished, not through reading words, but by reading images. (Lester, 2006, p. 1)

1.1 Brazilian Identity

It is not easy describe a nation. It is hard to decide what are the defining attributes without omitting its multiple traits, especially in a media-oriented world (Morley, 2005). Trying to define Brazil, for instance, is almost a synonym of contradicting oneself. How can one connect happiness and violence, carnaval and poverty, political corruption and the fact that, for the first time in history, the country lends money to the International Monetary Fund?

> (...) this is not a Brazilian problem, but a problem inherent in the symbolic construction of modern nations (…) Nations with a recent colonial past had an additional difficulty, because the determining factors of a nationality, according to the 1800s ideals, were intrinsically connected to the colonizer. How do you base nationality in a language, when it is not your own? Or in history, when it is not autonomous? Or in origin, when it is not common? The key factors in defining a nationality were missing. The problem is still current in the 20th century. (Rocha, 2009, p. 8)[1]

Contemporaneity has moved away from characterizing identity as a permanent, fixed characteristic; instead, "identity" has been termed a continuous process, and expressions such as "liquid identity" (Bauman, 2005) and "fluid identity" (Hall, 2006) have emerged. Hall (2006) considers there are many (and possibly contradictory) identities inside each human being, and a person can take on a different identity in diverse moments. Moreover, identity is not only built based on an element that is already inside us as individuals, but also on a missing part which is "filled" by the exterior, through the way we imagine the other sees us.

Mazzara (1999) adds to this thought by explaining that the way the other sees might be through stereotypes, a word that comes from the Greek *stereos* (rigid) and *tupos* (impression) and can be understood as "rough simplifications, usually too rigid"[2] (p. 13).

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[1] Quote originally published in Portuguese and translated by the author.
[2] Originally publish in Spanish and translated by the author.

> Stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is a an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in defying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations (Bhabha, 2004, p. 107)

Stereotypes are deeply rooted in culture, and, therefore, hardly alterable and easily acquired by individuals, who utilize them when trying to quickly comprehend reality.

In the Brazilian case, the other has influenced the national identity since the Portuguese expeditions arrived in the country and Pero Vaz de Caminha wrote a letter that became known as Brazil's baptism certificate. He described paradisiacal scenery, where the beautiful and nude inhabitants lived in supposed harmony with the tropical nature. Based in this and other similar letters, a reference system was created and a strong recognition permeated the European popular imaginary and, afterwards, the rest of the world. According to Amâncio (2000), seen through this Eurocentric mirror, Brazil became a synonym of exotic:

> Brazil is an "empire of the imaginary", which will feed pirates, scientists, merchants, philosophers, writers, who will build an image through stories, magazines, graphics, books, paintings, memories, souvenirs, maps and drawings. (p. 45).[3]

Throughout the years, the communication and entertainment industry continued to disseminate this image, first through (mostly Hollywood) cinema and nowadays also through television shows. (Amancio, 2000; Vidal, Abou-Ajoule, & Murat, 2005; Xavier, 2004)

1.2 Television, Society and Globalization

> What is television? And, equally problematically, what is culture? (…) Television-as-culture is a crucial part of the social dynamics by which the social structure maintains itself in a constant process of production and reproduction: meanings, popular pleasures, and their circulation are therefore part and parcel of this social structure. (Fiske, 1987, p. 1)

Public knowledge, the press and, sometimes, even the television industry itself consider television as an unimportant media, lacking in artistic value, and not worthy of academic research. "There has never been a general consensus among scholars as to why or how television should be studied or even whether television should be the object of scholarly inquiry at all" (Allen & Hill, 2004, p. 2).

The academic sphere traditionally does not give much importance to television. While cinema is considered a high form of art, TV shows usually are associated with banality. Those programs are accused of giving up quality for popularity, mostly due to large-scale production and commercial demand (Machado, 2009). Many scholars even declare that Academia has a prejudice towards this form of mass communication (Duarte, 2004).

> It does not sound very intelligent to declare that you love television. If professing your love for literature or other sophisticated form of art demonstrates (and, sometimes, imposes) high education, sophistication, and high spirit, a passion for television is usually seen as a symptom of ignorance, or even of mental disequilibrium. (Machado, 2009, p. 9)[4]

Despite those preconceptions, Television Studies has slowly emerged as a relatively new field of concentration in Academia, and the main motivation seems to be the fact that television has an unique reach within the world (Balogh, 2002; Bignell, 2004) and has became "the main source of information in our society" (Mitu, 2010, p. 242). Moreover, contrary to the cinema, which is a specific environment, television shows have the power to enter our own homes (Lewis, 2009).

Furthermore, TV programs are not only watched live. Popular TV shows tend to rerun for many years after its first airing, continuously finding new audiences. It is also important to consider DVR and TiVo playbacks, online streaming, Internet downloads, and DVD box sales (Pompper & Choo, 2008).

Television influences many spheres of life. It creates fashion trends and inspires haircuts (Russel & Puto, 1999).

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[3] Quote originally published in Portuguese and translated by the author.
[4] Quote originally published in Portuguese and translated by the author.

It is a social ice-breaker but it also excludes people from conversations — popular TV shows often have a established "water-cooler effect", where groups congregate and discuss last night's episode, automatically assuming everyone in the group has seen it and excluding someone who has not (Putnam, 2000). The younger generation has likened 'being informed' to 'watching tv' (Mitu, 2010). Furthermore, it sets the rhythm of our lives, working "as a collective agenda, overdetermining the other spheres of the social" (Duarte, 2004). Deeper effects on spectators have been extensively discussed and, although those studies are considered controversial, they cannot be completely discarded. For example, although it is not possible to affirm that the media is responsible for real-life violence just because it shows fights, the movie director Jean-Luc Godard used to say that "cinema and TV do not provoke violence, but they teach us who we are supposed to hate"[5] (Pereira Junior, 2002, p. 207).

In fact, many scholars agree that "television radically reshapes the world. (…) The media can influence people's perception about a particular topic or person, it can change attitudes, feelings or behaviors. The television has the strongest influence on the general public" (Mitu, 2010, p. 240). Futhermore,

> Media dominates contemporary culture and, as a consequence, communication and entertainment industries become the fuel of a new cultural pedagogy, teaching us how to behave, what to think, how to feel, what to believe in, what to fear, and what to wish for. (Leite, 2003, p. 8)[6]

Baker (1997) argues that "television programs are not simple reflections of the world but specific constructions of it and thus represent forms of knowledge about the world" (p. 12), which will, consequently, frame the knowledge of the population (Rodrigues, 2009).

Television can teach and entertain, but it can also stir anger. It can transport the viewer to a number of different worlds and force them to establish their position towards them. More and more, television shapes people's opinions and behaviors, building notions and ideas of how the world should be (Mitu, 2010). However, "television repeatedly convey misleading messages" (p. 240) where there is an "absence of a coherent vision of the world" (p. 242), which will be propagated and even believed in. After all, communication and information are essential sources of power and social change, because "the fundamental battle being fought in society is the battle over the minds of the people" (Castells, 2007, p. 238).

The dominance of media worldwide became even more significant when globalization started to play a role in this story, and television expanded across transnational boundaries through digital technology, gaining new international viewers (Thussu, 2007). In this context,\

> Television constitutes, and is a consequence of, the inherently globalizing nature of the institutions of modernity. Television is globalised because it is an institution of capitalist modernity while at the same time contributing to the globalization of modernity through the world-wide circulation of images and discourses (Barker, 1997, p. 13).

The danger of televisual globalization, according to some social theorists, is the expansion of some inappropriate behavior patterns or false human models — especially when televisual globalization leads to a reduction of local television, and, consequently, partial loss of identity, uniformity of taste and cultural values (Mitu, 2010).

As a result of the increased global interest in the relationship between globalization and media, US-produced shows have been closely examined. This is easily explained by the fact that the United States is the leading exporter of cultural and entertainment products, characterizing a dominant media flow, with American television programs being broadcast in over 125 countries (Lewis, 2009; Mitu, 2010; Moran & Keane, 2006; Pasamar, 2005; Thussu, 2007).

Inquiries about cultural conflicts arise, and scholars question whether or not the importation of American values and ideologies through television to countries without a strong media production affect that domestic culture. This fear has been mostly discussed in relation to developing countries, with reflections about the significance of commercialism in American media and the pleasure associated with American products, which influence the lifestyles of those living outside of the United States. However,

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[5] Quote originally published in Portuguese and translated by the author.
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This fear is not confined solely between the American entertainment complex and struggling domestic media industries. Since the rise of television, American media and exportation has been at the center of debate within nations whose own industries have been strong. (Lewis, 2009, p. 12)

1.3 Sitcoms

Originally a North-American tradition, sitcom is short for situation comedy. They are "formulaic weekly programs featuring a recurrent real-life group of characters such as families or office colleagues" (Stern & Russel, 2004, p. 372). The 30-minute episodes usually have a specific theme, a core and small group of characters, regular sets and recurring narrative strategies. Duarte (2007) equates the genre to "chronicles of everyday life", whose aim is "to entertain through the exposition of the small troubles of everyday life, flaws to which we are all exposed daily"[7] (p. 09). Among the discursive strategies deployed in the sitcoms, the author highlights the repetition of situations, behavior, attitudes; the inversion of roles, situations; irony; caricature, parody; exhibition of casualty (the incoherencies inherent to life). Lewis (2009) adds to this thought, affirming that members of an audience watching the same television series should be able to distinguish particular values, ideologies, and ways of life, which are either being subverted or confirmed through comedy and, therefore, are able to laugh together.

Despite the popularity of comedy in both television and film, the genre is not a popular topic of television study. The value of comedic television, however, should not be disregarded (Lewis, 2009). Sitcoms — considered "the 'signature' genre invented for television" (Stern & Russel, 2004, p. 372) — have long been an audience favorite, through different countries in the world (Sandoval, 2009).

Because both television and comedy operate on exclusivity and a mutual understanding of issues within societies, together, both reveal the ways in which identity plays out on television sets. Work has been done on both the roles and functions of humor and television in individual nations, yet only a few (…) have done in-depth analysis on how comedic television functions within nations. Individually, television and humor both have the ability to bring people together. Literally, people have the ability to group around a television or watch a stand-up comic, but television and humor are also able to serve as a means to unite those living in the society in which both programs and comedies are produced. (Lewis, 2009, p. 28)

In this context, it could be very useful for a country that is searching for its own identity while trying to establish itself as a big player in the world such as Brazil to try and understand how television is portraying it, especially programs with a worldwide reach as broad as US sitcoms.

2. Method

This study examines how US sitcoms mention Brazil, and what ideas are associated with those scenes. A previous study conducted by the researcher was composed of a larger collection of mentions of Brazil in different genres of US television shows (200 in total), obtained through popular response to an online survey. This study draws from the same sample. However, an additional filter was applied, reducing the television genre to sitcoms only. Therefore, 52 mentions were investigated.

In addition, it is important to remember that television products are complex and hybrid subjects of study, because they associate moving pictures and speech (Duarte, 2004). Therefore, analyzing television content requires a method that allows the examination of both words and images. For this reason, content analysis was the method of choice, for it is a text-based method that can be adapted for images (Muller & Griffin, in print).

2.1 Coding Scheme

In order to understand the basic characteristics of the sample, the units of analysis were categorized by year of first airing and program title. Another factor that was explored was type of mention, where the possible coding was (i) image, (ii) dialogue, and (iii) soundtrack. As coding progressed, a forth and more complex category was added, (iv) storyline, used when the Brazil mention extended throughout multiple scenes.

After that, the analysis developed in three categories, as follows:

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[7] Quote originally published in Portuguese and translated by the author.

2.1.1 Textual Level

This category intends to capture what exactly makes the viewer think of Brazil. It is usually a word, but it could also be an image. The codes involved in this category are explained in Table 1, and are not mutually exclusive.

2.1.2 Contextual Level

This category aims to analyze the context in which the mentions happened and which ideas are linked to those scenes. The possible coding is shown in Table 2. These codes are not mutually exclusive.

2.1.3 Subtextual Level

This category aspires to understand what kind of judgment is associated with the mentions. They can be positive (ideal circumstances, happy moments, good memories), negative (bad consequences, situations to be forgotten, unpleasant recollections), or neutral/undefined. This is the only category where the codes are mutually exclusive.

3. Analysis

The sample was composed by 52 episodes from 23 sitcoms. The series with the most mentions was *Frasier* (6), followed by *Friends* and *The Office* (5 each). Most of the mentions came from episodes that first aired between 2001 and 2010 (65%); although some aired in the 1990's (29%) and unexpected three episodes from the 1980's were also part of the sample (representing 6%). The oldest episode examined was produced in 1983, for the TV show *Family Ties*.

Considering the mention type (i.e. image, dialogue, soundtrack or storyline), an astounding majority (43 mentions) falls into dialogue (Image 1). This can be explained by the fact that TV is a media with a strong spoken characteristic, where images are mostly an acessory for the script (Sodré, 2001). It is worth noting that, although not frequently, some mentions correspond to two categories at the same time (i.e.: when talking about Brazilian soccer players, one character recreates a famous goal in *The Office*).

3.1 Textual Level

Considering the abundance of "dialogue" in the characterization of the sample, it is not surprising that most mentions happened in the form of specific words (Image 2). In fact, the most frequent way to mention the country is using the word "Brazil" (17 occasions) or "Brazilian" (11).

As far as specific places go, the city of Rio (with or without "de Janeiro" accompanying) was mentioned five times and the Amazon forest twice.

Brazilian music is fairly popular. *Samba* is repeatedly mentioned (six times, including two dance lessons) and played as soundtrack once — the song is *Aquarela do Brasil* (composed by Ari Barroso in 1939). The *Bossa Nova* music genre can be heard twice, in instrumental versions of the songs *Desafinado* (Tom Jobim and Newton Mendonça, 1958), and *Garota de Ipanema* (Tom Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes, 1962).

Among national symbols, the language is the most used, with characters saying entire phrases (such as *"Eu sou brasileiro com muito orgulho, com muito amor"*) or just specific words inserted in a dialogue, such as *samba* or *tapioca*. Other symbols are the national flag and the colors green and yellow combined (seen one time each).

When the subject is food, there are conversations about the Brazil nut (4) and *tapioca* (2). There is also one invented spice: a kind of pepper typical from the south of the country, made with scorpion's poison.

The most famous Brazilians seem to be athletes. Soccer stars *Pelé* and *Kaká*, jiu-jitsu's *Gracie Brothers* and former table tennis Pan-American champion *Hugo Hoyama* were all mentioned by name once. Other than sports, there were commentaries about the eternal Brazilian symbol (even though she is originally Portuguese) *Carmem Miranda* and the Brazilian candidate on the beauty pageant *Miss World* (even without an actual name).

Surprisingly, Carnaval, the most popular Brazilian party outside the country, is only mentioned once and *capoeira*, a fairly popular fighting technique is never mentioned by name — although there is one possible indirect reference to it, as "Brazilian street fighting".

3.2 Contextual Level

This category aimed at understanding the context in which the mentions to Brazil occur. However, out of 52 mentions, 27 could be classified as "example", which does not give any insight, given the coding description. Therefore, that category was discarded, which brings us to seven possible codes (Image 3).

In 18 mentions, Brazil is shown as an exotic place, very different from US's reality. This is shown through content as diverse as a wish to experience Carnaval, an article about a trappist monastery in the Amazon or a mysterious technique which will help someone win a fight. Since it is such an exotic place, it is no wonder many characters want to visit the country — traveling had 10 mentions.

Brazil as a synonym of sensuality is the theme of 11 mentions, mostly concerning physical beauty and, at times, suggesting promiscuity. This category is closely related to "beauty" (6 allusions), where the most mentions are direct references to Brazilian wax (3).

Comments about strength in sports also occur six times. They are related to soccer, different kinds of martial arts, table tennis and "collective tennis", a sport created by a sitcom.

Sometimes, the series mentioned characteristics that do not fit with reality — it does not matter if it was just for a joke, or because the writer just did not know better. Those occurrences, classified as "nonsense" happened four times. They involved aspects as random as inexistent spices, monasteries set up in tree houses or prejudice against the Brazilian Post Office prices.

In addition, Brazil as a poor, third world country that needs humanitarian help surprisingly only came up once.

3.3 Subtextual Level

A great part of the sample (54%) does not carry judgment, and was considered neutral (Image 4). That was expected, given the amount of "examples" in the last level. In fact, most of the mentions coded as "examples" in the last category fell into the neutral description (the overlap is 20 units).

Generally speaking, most of the mentions classified is "positive" were related to the "exotic" factor (8), in moments where atypical realities and out of the ordinary experiences were encouraged and deemed beneficial. A desire to visit the country and Brazilians abilities with sports (5 each) were also a constant. On the other hand, the mentions classified is "negative" were heavily associated to "sensuality" (6 out of 9).

4. Final Thoughts

The results show that, while some new layers, such as sports and music, have been added to Brazil as it is seen through the lenses of US sitcoms, the strongest images associated with the country can, without a doubt, be retraced back to Pero Vaz de Caminha's letter. Brazil is still an exotic place with beautiful people, where strange things, such as a scorpion-poison based (made-up) spice could come from. It is the place you visit when you want to lay on the beach or have an adventure in the Amazon forest, never for business.

In this context, it is impossible not to remember Bauman (2004), who affirms:

> 'identities' float in the air, some of one's own choice but others inflated and launched by those around, and one needs to be constant on the alert to defend the first against the second; there is a heightened likelihood of misunderstanding, and the outcome of the negotiation forever hangs in the balance (p. 13).

In very few words: it is hard to break a stereotype — especially one that is 500 years old. US television is partially helping to keep this stereotype alive, but it is certainly not the only factor. However, if one considers (i) the global flow of information, (ii) the fact that "what does not exist in the media does not exist in the public eye" (Castells, 2007, p. 241), and (iii) the reach US sitcoms gained in the world, it may be a strong aspect.

This research is obviously not enough to reach many conclusions yet. It needs to be expanded to include, for example, viewer reactions to the mentions and the stereotypes within them.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1: Textual Level

CODE	DESCRIPTION
Amazon	When the Amazon was referenced by name
Carnaval	The word "Carnaval", usually accompanied by "Brasil" or "Rio de Janeiro".
Celebrity	When a character drops the name or a picture of a famous Brazilian, such as Pelé or Carmen Miranda.
Food Items	Items such as tapioca and Brazil nut.
Music	Someone (trying to) dance or mentioning samba, or playing Brazilian songs (such as *Garota de Ipanema*).
National Symbols	Use of a symbol which is clearly and officially Brazilian. It includes maps, language, flag and colors.
Rio de Janeiro	Either the full name of the city, "Rio de Janeiro", or the customary abbreviation "Rio"
Word "Brazil"	Direct use of the word "Brazil".
Word "Brazilian"	The word "Brazilian" as an adjective or as an ethnicity.

Table 2: Contextual Level

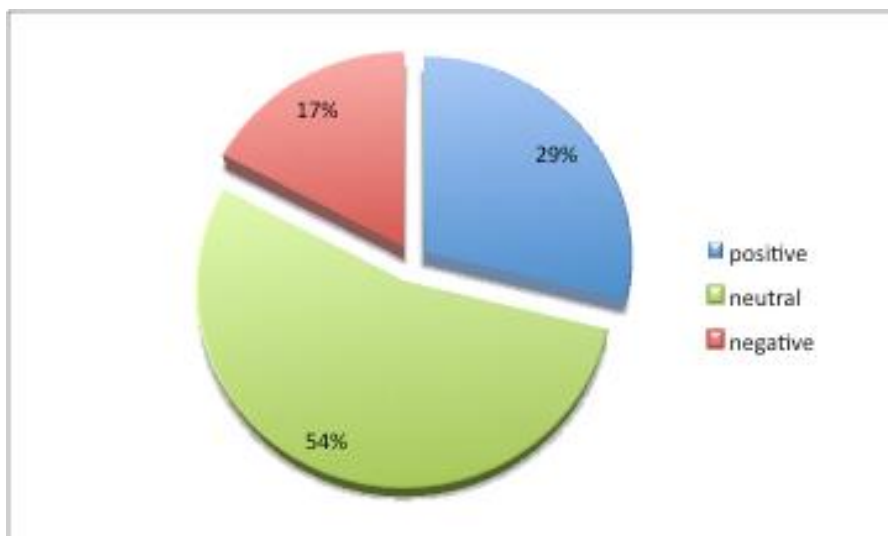| CODE	DESCRIPTION
Beauty	Mentions connected to beauty or beauty cares, usually female, such as Brazilian wax or plastic surgery.
Sports	Sports-related context, usually related to famous athletes.
Example	The mention is just an example among others and/or could be easily traded for an example from another country.
Exotic	The country is deemed an exotic place, far away and very different from the US reality.
Nonsense	Mentions with no ties to reality. They are either totally wrong or were just meant for a quick laugh.
Poverty	When Brazil is considered a third-world country, full of *favelas* and in need of humanitarian help
Sensuality	Brazil as a synonym of beautiful people (and, sometimes, more in touch with their sexual side)
Travel	A touristic destination, apparently quite popular.
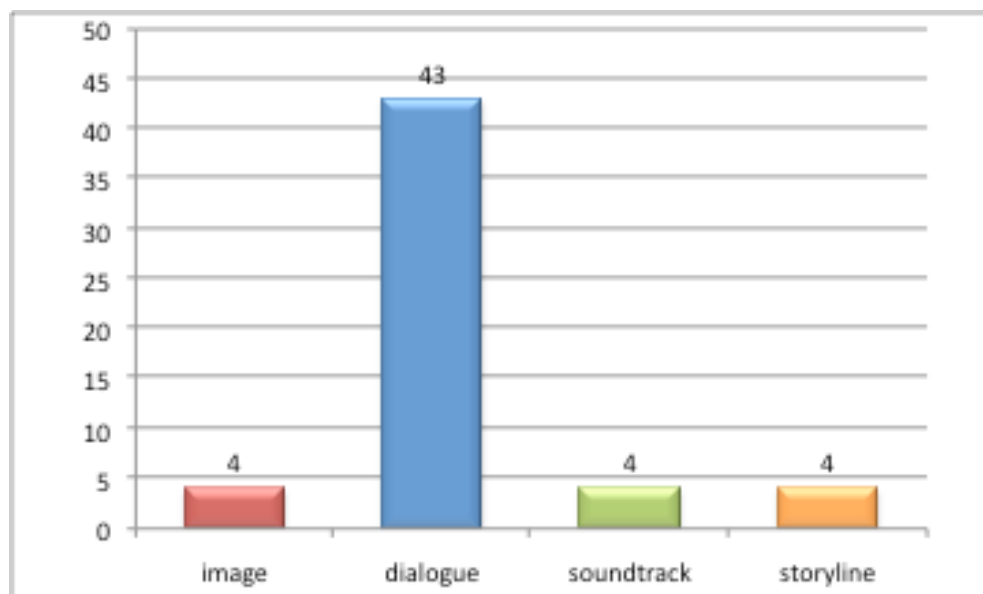
Image 1: Mention Type
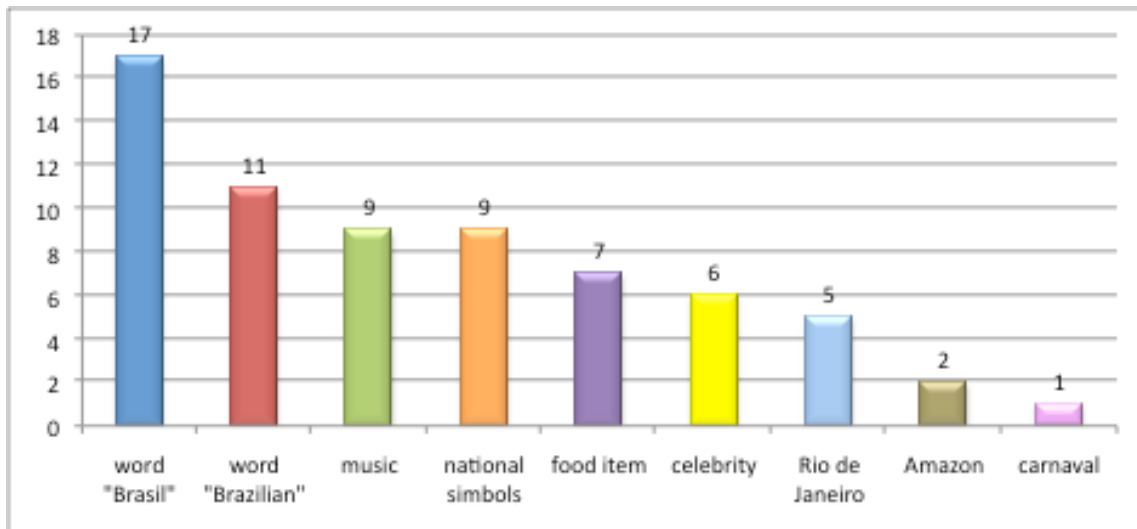
Image 2: Textual Level
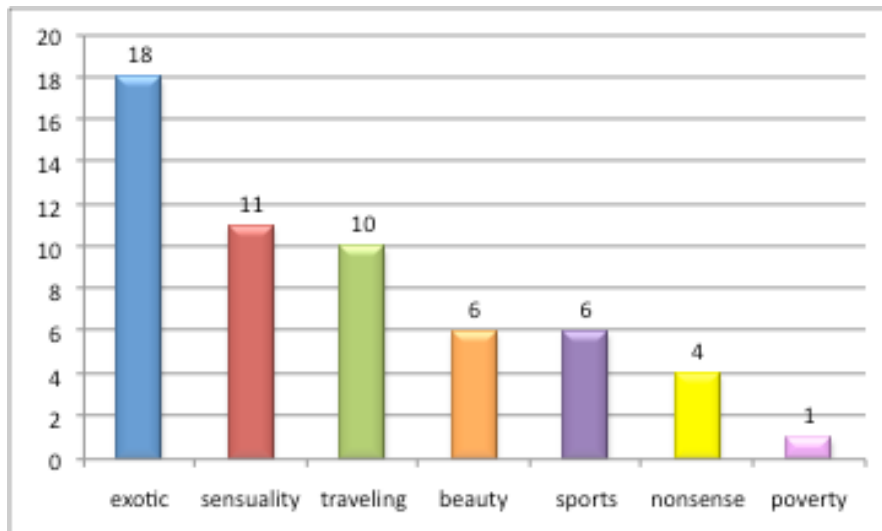
Image 3: Contextual Level

Image 4: Subtextual Level