



## ***Photography in the Family Universe as an Expression of Material Culture and Consumption***

### ***A Fotografia no Universo Familiar como Expressão da Cultura Material e do Consumo***

### ***La Fotografía en el Universo Familiar como Expresión de Cultura Material y Consumo***

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**Ligia Boeze**  

Holds a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration and a Master's degree in Business Administration, with an emphasis on Marketing, from the State University of Maringá (UEM). She currently works in the field of photography. Her academic and professional interests focus on marketing and consumer culture, with an emphasis on the meanings of photography consumption.

**Francisco Giovanni David Vieira**  

Holds a PhD in Social Sciences from the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP). He is currently a member of GIPEM (Interdisciplinary Group of Research and Studies in Marketing - UEM/CNPq) and volunteers as the executive editor of RIMAR (Interdisciplinary Journal of Marketing).

**Vitor Koki da Costa Nogami**  

Holds a PhD in Business Administration with an emphasis on Marketing from the School of Economics, Business Administration, and Accounting (FEA) at the University of São Paulo (USP). He is currently an Associate Professor at the State University of Maringá (UEM), where he works in the Department of Administration (DAD) and the Graduate Program in Business Administration (PPA). He is the coordinator of the MBA program in Business Management and Performance (UEM), coordinator of GIPEM (Interdisciplinary Group of Research and Studies in Marketing - UEM/CNPq), and editor-in-chief of RIMAR (Interdisciplinary Journal of Marketing).

#### **Abstract**

This study aims to understand how the consumption of photographs in their material condition is articulated within the family universe. To this end, Consumer Culture Theory is employed, supported by discussions on Material Culture understood as artifacts that involve a subject-object relationship, here specifically between families and photographs. Accordingly, a qualitative and interpretivist perspective is adopted, using interviews, observations, and photographs as data collection techniques, conducted through fieldwork with families. Data analysis procedures involved content analysis. The main findings concern the artifacts through which families store photographs, namely: shoeboxes, albums, picture frames, and framed photographs, indicating that printed photographs possess materiality not only in themselves but also through the places in which they are kept, serving as carriers of stories or as elements of decoration within the family environment.

**Keywords:** consumer culture, material culture, photography.

#### **Resumo**

*Este estudo tem como objetivo compreender como o consumo de fotografias em condição material se dinamiza no universo familiar. Para tanto, articulou-se a Teoria da Cultura de Consumo com a discussão sobre Cultura Material para análise dos artefatos que envolvem uma relação sujeito-objeto, aqui, em especial, entre famílias e fotografias. As perspectivas adotadas foram qualitativa e interpretativista, além disso, as entrevistas, observações e fotografias funcionaram como técnicas de coleta, realizadas por meio de um trabalho de campo com famílias. Quanto ao procedimento de análise, foi utilizada a análise de conteúdo. Os principais resultados encontrados consistiram nos artefatos utilizados pelas famílias para armazenarem as fotos, tais como caixa de sapato, álbum, porta-retratos e quadro. Constatou-se que as fotografias reveladas têm materialidade não apenas por si só, mas também pelos locais em que estão guardadas, servindo como repositórios de histórias ou como decoração do ambiente familiar.*

**Palavras-chave:** cultura de consumo, cultura material, fotografia.

## Resumen

*Este estudio tiene como objetivo comprender cómo se dinamiza el consumo de fotografías en su condición material en el universo familiar. Para ello, se articuló la Teoría de la Cultura de Consumo con la discusión sobre Cultura Material para analizar los artefactos que implican una relación sujeto-objeto, en este caso, especialmente entre familias y fotografías. Se adoptaron perspectivas cualitativa e interpretativista; además, las entrevistas, las observaciones y las fotografías se utilizaron como técnicas de recolección, aplicadas mediante un trabajo de campo con familias. En cuanto al procedimiento de análisis, se utilizó el análisis de contenido. Los principales resultados encontrados consistieron en los artefactos utilizados por las familias para almacenar las fotografías, tales como cajas de zapatos, álbumes, portarretratos y cuadros. Se constató que las fotografías impresas poseen materialidad no solo por sí mismas, sino también por los lugares donde se guardan, y sirven como repositorios de historias o como decoración del entorno familiar.*

**Palavras chave:** cultura de consumo, cultura material, fotografía.

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## Introduction

Each photograph carries within it an aggregation of information, such as appearances, possessions, clothing, and places, that is open to interpretation (Kossoy, 2001). In the constant exercise of recovering its form of presence within a given context, photography represents the visualization of part of a story that is interpreted based on the experiences and cultural background of the person who observes it.

Initially, photography was restricted to a select group of people due to the technical knowledge required and its high cost. Gradually, it entered social life and left traces of important meanings within each biographical context, whether as a form of documentation, news dissemination, or family representation (Mauad, 1996). In recent years, technological advances have brought about a profound transformation, as photography has become widely popularized and has enabled the recording of almost any moment an individual considers worth capturing (Souza & Neves, 2018; Pérez, 2022; Niese et al., 2024).

Photography is an artifact through which it is possible to identify characteristics of the time in which it was produced, such as subject matter and technology, as well as information regarding the space-time depicted. If material culture can be described textually, it can also be expressed through photographs, which may even reveal issues not captured by writing (Soilo, 2012). Thus, material culture can be considered synonymous with artifacts, in the sense of encompassing the extensive universe of objects used by individuals to deal with the world, relate socially, and understand their own history (Hicks, 2010).

In this study, the expression material condition of photography refers to photography as a physical object, that is, printed photographs incorporated into everyday practices of storage, display, circulation, and preservation within the domestic space. By emphasizing this material condition, the analytical focus shifts from photography understood exclusively as image or representation to its concrete existence as an artifact of consumption, embedded in family relationships, memory construction, and everyday cultural practices.

According to Schroeder (1998), photography is an important way of understanding consumers, both through their life histories and as a means of transmitting information about the world. For the author, the practice of photography is part of consumer behavior not only through the purchase of photographic equipment, but also through the acts of photographing, classifying, selecting images for albums and frames, showing them to others, and viewing photographs taken by others.

Despite the consolidation of studies addressing photography within visual culture and symbolic consumption, much of this literature privileges photography as image, language, or representation, paying less attention to its condition as a material object embedded in everyday practices. In particular, there is a gap regarding the understanding of printed photography as an artifact of consumption in the family universe, that is, as an object that circulates, is stored, displayed, selected, and resignified over time, articulating memory, morality, and family relationships. Consequently, the dynamics through which the materiality of photography participates in the constitution of family life and associated consumption practices remain underexplored.

Given this context, the present study is guided by the following research question: how do families relate to photography in its material condition, that is, to printed photography, and how is this relationship articulated with consumption practices, memory, and material culture in the family universe? To address this question, the study adopts the lens of CCT (Consumer Culture Theory), supported by discussions on Material Culture (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Miller, 2013). Accordingly, the objective of this study is to understand how the consumption of photographs in their material condition is articulated within the family universe, considering practices of storage, circulation, and display of these artifacts, as well as the meanings, memories, and family relationships associated with them.

The originality of this study lies in addressing photography not merely as image or symbolic representation, but as a material object of consumption that actively participates in the organization of family life. By shifting the analytical focus to the materiality of printed photographs and to their practices of circulation, storage, and display within the

domestic space, the study expands the understanding of family dynamics from a consumption perspective. From a theoretical standpoint, the research directly engages with Consumer Culture Theory by demonstrating how ordinary objects embedded in everyday contexts contribute to the construction of meanings, memories, and social relationships. Moreover, the study has social relevance by shedding light on family practices that are often naturalized but central to understanding how individuals and families deal with memory, identity, and belonging over time. In doing so, the study contributes to CCT and to material culture studies by highlighting how the materiality of photography structures consumption practices, memory, and family relationships.

Finally, from a methodological perspective, this study adopts a qualitative and interpretivist approach, based on interviews and the use of photographs, aimed at understanding the practices and meanings associated with photography in the family context.

## **Theoretical Background**

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is primarily influenced by cultural anthropology and considers sociocultural reality, emphasizing human subjectivity and the symbolic dimensions of social relationships (Gaião et al., 2012). It explores the “heterogeneity of the distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of cultural groupings that overlap and coexist within the broader socio-historical context of globalization” (Casotti & Suarez, 2016, p. 355). Consumption articulates objects and human beings, offering a means of understanding the world. Through consumption, culture is expressed in ideals, lifestyles, principles, and social identities. Culture shapes everyday life experiences, and cultural codes provide coherence to practices and consumption (Rocha, 2000).

Within Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), this study engages more directly with investigations that emphasize the sociohistoric patterning of consumption, by examining how consumption practices associated with photography are constituted and transformed over time in the family context. At the same time, the study maintains proximity to research on consumer identity projects, insofar as the materiality of photography participates in the construction of memories, identities, and family relationships. This transversal positioning reflects the interpretive character of the investigation and the relational nature of the phenomena analyzed.

Culture can be understood as a set of practices through which individuals orient themselves in the world. Material culture, in turn, comprises the set of objects, whether created by individuals or not, that are imbued with meaning through practices and simultaneously help to give meaning to those same practices (Sassatelli, 2007). For Ferreira and Scaraboto (2016), consumers and objects are co-constitutive elements in their relationship through a dialectical process. Materiality is capable of connecting and transforming objects and consumers at the same time. Material culture includes objects that are part of a set of open meanings that require agents in order to become meaningful (Sassatelli, 2007).

In the twentieth century, the term material culture emerged through an intersection between the disciplines of archaeology and anthropology. During the late nineteenth century, there was concern with the analysis of objects, making them central as a means of documenting the past, understanding the present, and envisioning the future. In the early twentieth century, anthropological interests shifted from objects toward closer engagement with living societies through fieldwork (Hicks, 2010).

According to Hicks (2010), at the end of the 1980s there was a conceptual shift from technology to material culture in response to structuralist approaches, in order to unite structure and meaning within a single analysis. In the same decade, Daniel Miller conceptualized material culture studies as a social anthropology of consumption. Thus, discussing material culture is a way of aligning CCT with anthropological studies (Arnould & Thompson, 2007; Miller, 1987).

Miller (1987) shows that the concern with focusing on materiality is not immune to criticism. One critique of materialism is that pure individuals or relationships are contaminated by objects. However, the author argues that the moral question of consumption should not be confused with the act of consuming itself, since people have always consumed what was produced by themselves or by others. In this sense, a material culture approach entails a deep and non-simplified understanding of humanity. The focus is not on objects in themselves, but on the subject-object duality (Miller, 1987). Material culture can be considered synonymous with artifacts, in the sense of encompassing the extensive universe of objects used by individuals to deal with the world, relate socially, and understand their own minds (Hicks, 2010).

If material culture can be described textually, it can also be expressed through photographs, which may even reveal issues not disclosed by writing (Soilo, 2012). Photography is an artifact through which it is possible to identify characteristics of the time in which it was produced, such as subject matter and technology, as well as information regarding the space-time depicted. It is simultaneously object and image: object as physical materiality and image as singular representation (Kossoy, 2001).

According to Soilo (2012), photographs represent ways of living, rituals, and memories, and enable an understanding of material culture and its transformations over time. The stories constructed from photographs are constituted both by the content of the recorded moment and by the social and affective ties that confer meaning on them in everyday life (Santos, 2016). Photographs are artifacts that carry the memories of an individual or group, mobilizing emotions and bonds associated with these objects (Belk, 2014).

The contributions mobilized in this study stem from distinct disciplinary traditions but engage in complementary dialogue in the construction of the theoretical argument. Miller (1987) provides an anthropological foundation for understanding the constitutive relationship between subjects and objects, while Hicks (2010) contributes to the historicization and epistemological consolidation of material culture studies. Belk (2014) brings these discussions closer to the field of consumption by highlighting the role of objects in the construction of memory, identity, and affective bonds. Soilo (2012), in turn, emphasizes the potential of photography as a privileged means of accessing dimensions of material culture that are not always revealed through writing. The articulation of these perspectives supports the analysis of photography as a material artifact in the family context.

The interrelationship between Consumer Culture Theory and material culture studies has been explored in research analyzing domestic artifacts as central mediators of social relationships and consumption practices. Classical studies, such as those by Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) and Arnould and Price (1993), already demonstrated how objects and materially situated experiences participate in the construction of bonds, meanings, and forms of belonging. More specifically, Epp and Price (2008) show how family artifacts embedded in the domestic space organize narratives, memories, and relationships over time, articulating consumption, materiality, and family life. More recently, Belk et al. (2016) reinforce this convergence by highlighting the role of material culture in understanding consumption phenomena, showing how ordinary objects actively participate in the constitution of social life. These studies support the relevance of investigating photography as a material artifact in the family context, in direct dialogue with CCT.

Through photography, moments from the past recorded in images can be revisited as a way of recalling lived experiences. When narrating an image, discourse enables the mobilization of memories and emotions associated with these records (Kossoy, 2001).

In a similar vein, Schroeder (1998) argues that speaking about an image implies relating it to the worldview it represents. The interpretation of photography results from the framing produced by the photographer and the cultural background of the observer, being closely related to the values and social and historical contexts in which the image was produced and appropriated (Kossoy, 2001; Soilo, 2012).

Interpreting images depends on the historical context and the social relationships involved, since photographs store records of lived experiences that remain as present memory (Mauad, 1996). Photography thus integrates a set of objects, such as furniture, books, clothing, and letters, capable of evoking a sense of the past through their association with people and significant moments (Belk, 2014).

Today, adults can visualize how parents and grandparents looked as children with greater precision, something that did not occur before the invention of the camera, when visual records were restricted and often associated with the reaffirmation of social positions. With the popularization of cameras, it became common to have multiple photographs referring to different stages of life (Sontag, 2004).

The concepts mobilized by the literature on photography directly inform the empirical analysis developed in this study. Understanding photography as both object and image (Kossoy, 2001) makes it possible to examine simultaneously its materiality and its symbolic meanings in everyday family life. The contributions of Sontag (2004) and Mauad (1996), by emphasizing the relationship between photography, memory, and historical context, inform the interpretation of the narratives associated with images, showing how visual records participate in the construction of memories, affections, and meanings over time. Thus, these theoretical references function as analytical lenses for reading the empirical practices and discourses investigated.

Photography originated nearly two centuries ago, which motivates an investigation into how the relationship between consumers and photographs, especially in the family context, has been constructed over time, considering subjects and objects as mutually related and non-static elements. In this study, the family is understood as a relational space in which symbols, values, beliefs, and narratives are shared, giving meaning to everyday experience (Silveira, 2000; Fonseca, 2004). It is in this environment that memory assumes a shared character, being continuously constructed, negotiated, and transmitted through practices and material artifacts. As photographs circulate within families, they function as privileged supports of this shared memory, articulating individual experiences and broader family narratives, enabling the apprehension of ways of life and the understanding of material culture and its transformations over time.

The concepts mobilized throughout this theoretical framework are not conceived as isolated elements nor organized into an *a priori* model, but are articulated around a common interpretive axis. Photography is understood as a material artifact embedded in social practices, through which consumption, memory, and family relationships are articulated in historically situated contexts. When stored, organized, displayed, and narrated in everyday domestic life, photographs integrate ordinary consumption practices that structure family bonds and senses of belonging over time. This articulation guides the empirical analysis developed in the study, enabling the construction of situated interpretations through continuous dialogue between theory and data, in line with the qualitative and interpretivist approach adopted.

## Methodological Procedures

In seeking to understand a phenomenon more deeply through the lens of Consumer Culture Theory, this research was conducted from an interpretivist epistemology of a qualitative nature (Ayrosa & Sauerbronn, 2004; Vieira, 2013). From this perspective, meaning-making occurs through the contextualized interpretation of observed

discourses and practices, recognizing the active role of the researcher as an analytical mediator in the process of understanding the phenomenon under investigation. Accordingly, the findings are not treated as objective reflections of reality, but as situated interpretations constructed through continuous dialogue between empirical data and the theoretical framework. In line with qualitative interpretivist approaches, strategies such as triangulation of different data sources, the production of thick descriptions, and the explicit acknowledgment of research limitations were adopted (Creswell, 2007). To ensure interpretive coherence and robustness, three data collection techniques were employed: in-depth interviews, observation of the domestic context, and the use of photographs. Interviews enabled access to the meanings attributed by participants to photographs and family memories; observation contributed to understanding practices of storage, display, and circulation of these artifacts in everyday life; and photographs functioned simultaneously as empirical objects and as narrative-evocation devices, being mobilized during interviews to deepen participants' accounts. A total of 12 interviews were conducted with 6 families, involving 8 women and 4 men, interviewed individually. The relationships among interviewees were consanguineous, involving parents and their sons or daughters residing in the same household.

The number of interviews was determined according to the criterion of analytical saturation (Saunders et al., 2018), understood as the point at which accounts began to show recurrence of themes, practices, and meanings related to the materiality of photographs in the family context, without the emergence of new elements relevant to the research objectives. Data collection was concluded when additional interviews were observed to contribute primarily to deepening interpretations already identified, thereby reinforcing the analytical sufficiency of the empirical material for constructing the proposed analyses.

The profile of participants is presented in Table 1, with fictitious names used in order to preserve the identity of the interviewees.

**Table 1**

*General profile of the research participants*

| Family | Kinship  | Name     | Age | Occupation       |
|--------|----------|----------|-----|------------------|
| 1      | Mother   | Mariele  | 67  | Retired teacher  |
| 1      | Daughter | Patrícia | 39  | Therapist        |
| 2      | Mother   | Luisa    | 62  | Retired          |
| 2      | Son      | Lorenzo  | 25  | Psychologist     |
| 3      | Mother   | Amanda   | 51  | Businesswoman    |
| 3      | Daughter | Anita    | 21  | Student          |
| 4      | Mother   | Natalia  | 61  | Businesswoman    |
| 4      | Son      | Luan     | 30  | Insurance broker |
| 5      | Father   | Vitor    | 51  | Doorman          |
| 5      | Son      | Daniel   | 24  | Student          |
| 6      | Mother   | Sara     | 56  | Teacher          |
| 6      | Daughter | Helen    | 26  | Lawyer           |

Source: Research data

The information presented in Table 1 is descriptive in nature and aims to situate the general profile of participants. Variables such as household income or geographic location did not guide the research design or data analysis, as the focus of the study lies in understanding practices and meanings associated with photography in the family universe, rather than explaining cultural variations based on socioeconomic or territorial criteria.

Qualitative research is an experience of direct engagement with participants (Pinto & Batinga, 2023). The process of entering family homes and viewing photographs that may be intimate therefore involved an issue of trust. Accordingly, the most appropriate way to approach families involved their introduction through an intermediary.

With regard to selection criteria, based on the understanding of the consumption of photographs as sociocultural, it is assumed that surrounding circumstances are relevant and directly affect the field. Thus, a chronological summary of the history of photography was used to establish criteria for family selection. From the invention of photography in 1839 until the mid-1980s, photography gradually became present in social life, although it experienced few technological advances. The camera remained analog throughout this period, with black-and-white printing being most common, since despite the emergence of color film in 1907, its cost remained high until the 1970s. In the transition from the 1980s to the 2000s, a major milestone was the invention of the digital camera, which transformed image dynamics from film to sensor (Humayun & Belk, 2020). Over the past 25 years, access to photography has expanded through compact cameras and camera-equipped mobile phones, along with the emergence of the Internet and virtual social networks.

This synthesis made it possible to visualize the main technological changes over time. Although the focus of the research is not on technological issues, this observation is relevant in highlighting that the materialized images encountered in the field would differ as a result of technology itself. Accordingly, the study sought families with at least one person born before 1980 and another born after 1980, aiming to find records of individuals who experienced different moments in photographic history. In addition, families were required to have at least some form of stored material record. Here, material is understood as that which is tangible and physical.

The generational criterion adopted aimed to ensure the presence, in the empirical field, of different historical experiences with photography and distinct materialities associated with it, rather than to guide analytical comparisons between generations. Data analysis was conducted transversally, seeking to understand how the consumption of photographs in their material condition is articulated within the family universe, regardless of specific generational distinctions.

Fieldwork was conducted in the families' homes through prior scheduling. In-depth interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview script. Observations and audio recordings of participants' accounts were made, alongside photographs taken with participants' consent, in order to capture information that would assist in the development of the research.

Regarding data analysis, content analysis was employed following Bardin (1979), adopted as an interpretive strategy to organize and render intelligible the empirical material. The analytical process followed the stages proposed by the author, which includes pre-analysis, exploration of the material, and treatment of results, inference, and interpretation, in a non-mechanistic manner, in continuous dialogue with the study's theoretical framework.

The Atlas.ti software was used as a support tool for organizing and systematizing the empirical material, without automated or inferential purposes. Transcripts of the 12 interviews were uploaded to the software and coded interpretively, resulting in four central analytical codes: recording devices, recording event, recording object, and recording medium. These codes enabled the organization of thematic recurrences related to the materiality of photography in the family context, supporting the interpretive process conducted by the researchers. The analysis was not based on frequency or co-occurrence metrics, but on the contextualized interpretation of coded excerpts in dialogue with the adopted theoretical framework. Analytical inferences were constructed through interpretive reading of the coded excerpts, articulated with theory, and exemplified and developed in the results section.

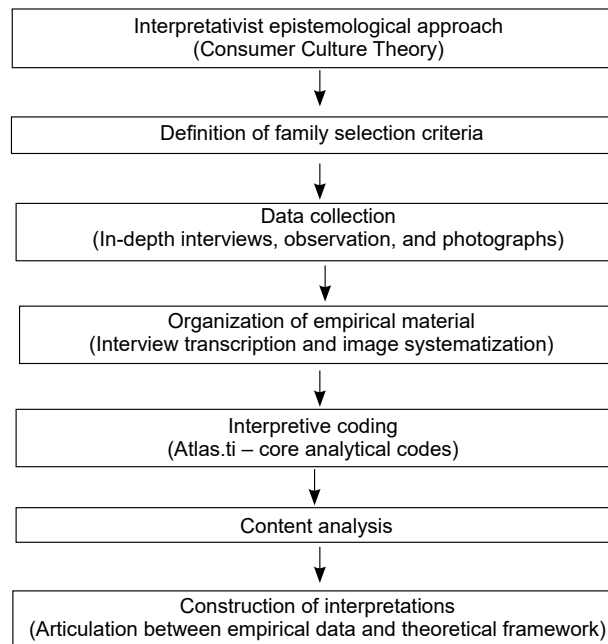
The pre-analysis stage consisted of collecting and organizing the material, which was subsequently systematized. Thus, recorded interviews were transcribed in Word for Windows and combined with photographs. In other words, while audio recordings were transcribed, photographs were simultaneously inserted at the moments in which they were mentioned in participants' speech.

According to Bardin (1979), coding involves transforming raw data into units of meaning, aggregating information based on words, themes, objects, characters, events, or documents. In this study, the units of analysis were coded based on themes referring to the locations in which photographs were stored.

Categories then emerged within each code based on frequency and homogeneity, namely: shoebox, album, picture frame, and framed photograph. According to Bardin (1979, p. 117), "classifying elements into categories requires investigating what each has in common with others, which allows them to be grouped."

Finally, the third stage of the content analysis process involved constructing reflections supported by empirical materials and guided by the study's theoretical foundation. Drawing on material culture, established through the subject-object relationship, the discussion addressed the consumption of photographs in the family universe in order to meet the proposed objective. As noted earlier, all names presented are fictitious to preserve confidentiality. Content analysis proved appropriate to the objectives of the study by enabling the articulation between systematization of empirical material and interpretation of meanings attributed to practices and photographic artifacts in the family context.

With regard to ethical aspects of the research, all participating families were previously informed about the collection and use of photographs as part of the empirical material and authorized their use for academic purposes. The images were treated as material artifacts and analyzed within their domestic context, avoiding any direct identification of participants. No photographs exposing faces or enabling recognition of individuals were used, in order to preserve anonymity and privacy.

**Figure 1***Methodological pathway of the study*

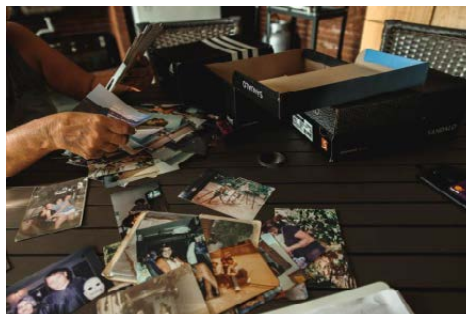
## Results and Discussion

With the spread of digital cameras and mobile phones only in the twenty-first century, photography no longer depended on developing in order to be viewed. Thus, most of the photographs found in the families' homes correspond to records taken with analog cameras, produced in a period in which photography was present in family everyday life predominantly in material condition, that is, printed. It is on these printed photographs that this study focuses.

The images, however, were not analyzed according to aesthetic or compositional criteria, but understood as material artifacts embedded in social practices, with analytical interest directed to their meanings, uses, and forms of circulation in the family universe. In the field, some recurring artifacts through which families store these photographs were observed, namely: shoebox, album, picture frame, and framed photograph.

The shoebox seems to have no rules. Whatever fits inside goes in. When families reach for them, they do not know exactly what they will find, since there are several boxes of different colors and shoe brands. It is not like an album, for example, which may have a distinctive cover identifying its contents. Nevertheless, families revisited many emotions as soon as they came into contact with the photographs stored there.

Several families interviewed use this artifact as a place to store albums or loose printed photographs. Made to hold shoes, the box seems to perform a better and longer-lasting function inside families' closets, where it stores stories. The shoebox, made of cardboard and rectangular in shape, was present in almost all the families interviewed, as can be seen in Figure 2.

**Figure 2***Shoebox with loose printed photographs*

Source: field research

Interpretively, the shoebox constitutes an artifact marked by the absence of formal curation of family memory. Unlike other supports, it does not organize photographs according to a linear or celebratory logic, but houses dispersed records accumulated over time, often forgotten and rediscovered contingently. In this sense, the shoebox not only stores images, but also produces chance encounters with the past, activating memories and emotions that escape the narrative control exercised by more structured supports. Its materiality reveals a mode of photographic consumption associated with spontaneity, informality, and the temporary suspension of memorial order. This form of relationship with photography recalls Miller's (1987) understanding that everyday objects do not merely reflect meanings, but actively participate in the constitution of social and moral relationships, often operating outside formal regimes of ordering and control.

In addition to being kept inside shoeboxes, albums are also stored outside them, mainly in cupboards. The album is an object that contains space for photographs to be placed inside, with a cover protecting the images. The albums found in the field had many different shapes and sizes. Some were produced directly by professionals, such as graduation, wedding, and home photo session albums. The photographs are already printed directly on the page or glued onto it, which does not allow the family itself to make changes. Even without having the possibility of composing the album according to their own logic, it still represents something that was intended to be recorded, given that there was the intervention of another person, a professional photographer hired for this purpose, as can be seen in Figure 3. When the albums were opened, many narratives promptly emerged. Each photograph contains an aggregation of information about something in the past (Kossoy, 2001).

**Figure 3**

*Album with children's photographs produced by a professional*



Source: field research

Patricia, 39 years old, showed the pregnancy album (Figure 4) of her only son, who was 8 years old at the time of the interview. It was a photo shoot in which she appears with the child's father. However, she is no longer in a romantic relationship with him and said that she keeps the album only so that it may serve as a record for her son. After all, both will always have the same role in the child's life, that of mother and father.

The pregnancy album will be passed from one generation to the next. It will, in a way, help tell a story in which the son took part but does not remember. He will see, for example, his parents together and happy, recording the moment of his expectation. For these photographs to be there, they were taken and/or selected by a family member. This implies a formation of memory for children based on selections created by others, which thus become an important way of representing family life from a specific perspective, such as that of the mother, father, grandparents, and so on (Schroeder, 1998). Furthermore, albums appear to be artifacts transmitted from generation to generation.

"Oh... It was much simpler back then, now they do something super elaborate. But it's with my ex, right? [laughs]. Ah, but it will stay for Ronaldo [son], right? Gosh, my face, I looked awful. It will be a keepsake for him. Yes, it will be for him. I keep it because of him, you know?" (Patricia, 39 years old)

**Figure 4***Album with pregnancy photographs*

Source: field research

Sara, 56 years old, also recorded her entire pregnancy process, organized in a personalized album she assembled herself, from the ultrasound scans to visits after her daughter's birth, as she reported: "here is another ultrasound, I'm further along in the pregnancy... This one is us at the hospital... this one at the bottom in the hospital is her aunt who came to visit her." Along with the photographs (Figure 5), she added notes as a way of feeding the story being constructed and further enriching the narrative: "Mom and Dad and Grandma already know, I'm a girl!"; "Wow, what a big belly! I'm almost here!"; "I've already arrived, Uncle Nelson helped, he was a great friend!!!"; "What a beautiful family!"; "Aunt Rô was my first visitor"; "I'm in my little room."

The photographs (Figure 6) contain objects that represent this moment: maternity door sign, baby stroller, crib, and changing table. They are part of Sara's construction of motherhood. With photographs, objects, and written comments, it was possible, in a way, to give materiality to this phase. Miller (2013) argues that looking at artifacts from the perspective of material culture moves away from the notion that objects merely represent people and instead suggests that they also shape them, insofar as they become part of the process through which individuals constitute themselves.

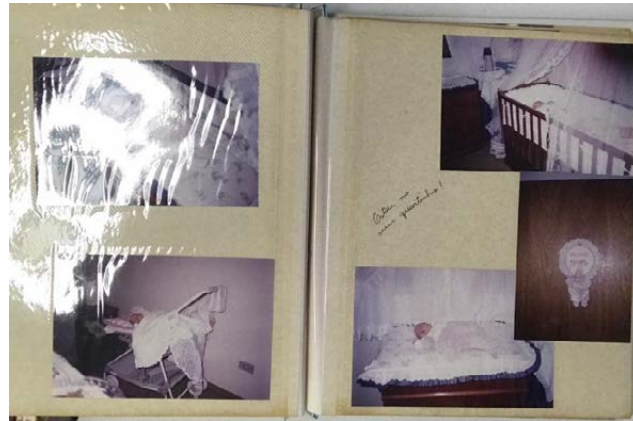
These notes, texts, and annotations incorporated into the photographs can be understood as forms of material narrative, through which images are contextualized, dated, and affectively marked within family life. By adding words to images, family members produce additional layers of meaning that articulate memory, time, and relationship, reinforcing the relational character of photography as an artifact of consumption. Although such practices dialogue with discussions on the extended self (Belk, 2014), in this study they are mobilized primarily to highlight how writing integrates the materiality of photography and participates in the construction of family narratives.

**Figure 5***Pregnancy photographs of an interviewee accompanied by notes and annotations*

Source: field research

## Figure 6

*Photograph of an interviewee's daughter with objects such as a maternity door sign, baby stroller, changing table, and crib*



Source: field research

Most albums, however, had multiple plastic sleeves into which printed photographs were inserted. Some of them were purchased in different sizes and with different covers, while others were stored in the album provided by the photo lab that developed the images, also called *albinho* (little album) by the participants (Figure 7), as Luisa, 61 years old, explained: “We took them, got back, and went straight to have them all developed, you know? And then that little album already came, a tiny little one, I even set it aside to show you.”

## Figure 7

*Album known as albinho by the interviewees*



Source: field research

Photographic albums, in turn, operate according to a distinct logic, characterized by the selection, ordering, and fixing of images in relatively stable narrative sequences. By gathering photographs of events considered significant, such as weddings, birthdays, or graduations, the album stabilizes specific versions of family history, often mediated by institutional or professional criteria. In this process, certain experiences are elevated to the status of milestones in collective memory, while others remain absent or marginalized. Thus, the album acts as a device of memory curation, in which the consumption of photography is articulated with the production of family narratives legitimized over time, contributing to the constitution of a shared family identity through which the family recognizes and presents itself over time. In this sense, the album can be understood as an artifact that participates in the construction of family memory as a symbolic extension of the collective self, in Belk's (1988, 2014) terms, by fixing and legitimizing certain versions of family history to the detriment of others.

In addition to albums, picture frames and framed photographs were also found in the families' homes. The picture frame, as the name suggests, is a place where a portrait, a photograph, is kept. It is an object created for this purpose. When one says “picture frame,” an object that holds a photograph immediately comes to mind. When one says “frame,” other images, such as drawings or paintings, can also be included; that is, it is not an object made exclusively for photographs. A characteristic of the frame is that it is placed on the wall, while the picture frame requires a piece of furniture on which it can stand.

Unlike albums, which are generally stored in boxes or cupboards, picture frames and framed photographs are displayed as visible objects to residents and to those who visit the rooms in the house. They were present in the interviewees' homes mainly in the living room and bedrooms, in various formats, colors, and sizes. On the shelf in the living room of Mariele, 67 years old, there were several picture frames. All of them contained photographs of close family members, such as parents, children, and grandchildren, as in Figure 8.

**Figure 8**

*Picture frames in one interviewee's home*



Source: data collection

According to Money (2007), the living room is a transactional space for the family, in which meanings and identity are housed for those who live there. The objects present in this space are a way of maintaining and nurturing important relationships and social connections. Mariele appeared in the photograph displayed in the picture frame but did not mind having it revealed, as she was present at her grandchildren's christening and that moment was important.

When her daughter Patricia was interviewed, it became clear that, if it were up to Mariele, there would probably be even more picture frames. The two live in the same house, and Patricia, when talking about picture frames, said she considers them "tacky." Unlike her mother, in addition to caring about her own image in the photographs, she is also concerned with the aesthetics of the picture frame itself.

"My mother, if it were up to her, would have picture frames spread all over the house. And now I see that, in terms of decoration, people don't do that anymore. And I already went and took everything down. It's tacky now [laughs]. It's like, you get one picture frame in one style, another in another, another in another. So you have to make something more organized. And sometimes we are prejudiced against our old photos. I don't want that, for the love of God. She puts that photo of me as a child with my lips all chapped [laughs] and she wants to keep it there." (Patricia, 39 years old)

Amanda, 51 years old, for example, placed framed photographs of her daughters (Figure 9) in the hallway that leads to the private part of the house, the bedrooms. According to her, the photographs displayed there have a story, since she used the same outfit on both daughters at the same age. However, she placed them in a spot where visitors cannot see them, since her daughters believe that such framed photographs are no longer appropriate for the living room.

"These here have a story, these photos, because this one is of Liz [older daughter], this one [she points to the photograph]. Then I took and kept that outfit. Then I did Anita's [younger daughter's] with the same age, both were seven months old. So that was intentional. They say that this is jacu [countrified], that you don't put photos on the wall like that anymore, so I keep them in the hallway. It's so nobody keeps seeing them. Yeah. Because before they were in the living room, right? In my other house. But then they said, 'Mom, people don't do that anymore.' So we changed their place." (Amanda, 51 years old)

## Figure 9

*Frame in the hallway with photographs of one interviewee's daughters*



Source: field research

When Amanda mentioned that she moved house and removed the frames from where they had been at her daughters' request, this proved to be, as Miller (2013) discusses, a way for the family to reorganize how it wishes to see itself, something that can be reconsidered through objects. The daughters as children are no longer children and want to be able to decide how they want to be seen. Thus, Amanda, who does not want to get rid of the frames, relocates them to a place that intermediates the public and private rooms of the house and that is acceptable to both parties, where visitors do not see them: the hallway.

Fulfilling the function of visible objects in the home, Sara, 56 years old, said that she printed travel photographs and placed them in the living room on top of a piece of furniture she called a *malão* (trunk). She said she printed them because she had no photographs at home and needed to fill the space with some images. This function of completing an environment is also mentioned by Lorenzo, who said he is not in the habit of printing photographs, but when he did, it was to decorate his bedroom with some of them.

"I don't print. I think that, recently, after everything became digital, you know? Maybe three times, I went and selected some and had them printed, you know? That was many years ago. So I don't have the habit of printing. I think it's really nice. Just once I wanted to decorate my room with photographs, because there weren't any, so I printed them for that purpose. But I'm not in the habit of printing." (Lorenzo, 25 years old)

Unlike albums, which are generally stored inside other spaces, picture frames and framed photographs remain visible within homes. Thus, the first finding is that people use these supports as decoration. Some say that the object needs to match the rest of the environment, shifting the focus away from the meaning involved in the subject–photograph relationship, while it becomes clear that others do not care about this. On the contrary, some even say they printed photographs for this reason, because they needed them as part of the home. Since contact with the house is usually daily, the photographs chosen to be displayed involve people and events that one wishes to see and remember.

In view of the results presented, as well as the analyses and discussions conducted, it is possible to indicate that the materiality of photography in the family universe is expressed through artifacts such as shoeboxes, albums, picture frames, and framed photographs. In turn, the consumption of photographs in material condition is articulated in the family universe through characteristics specific to each of these artifacts, as summarized in Table 2.

Picture frames and framed photographs differ from the other artifacts analyzed because they operate within a regime of everyday visibility. By remaining exposed in central spaces of the home, these supports not only evoke the past but also actively participate in the construction of the family's public image. The choices related to the photographs displayed, as well as the disputes surrounding their location and permanence, reveal intergenerational negotiations about taste, belonging, and the legitimacy of the memories that should be made visible. They also reveal implicit criteria of value and legitimacy, guiding which images should be preserved, displayed, or silenced in everyday family life. In this sense, the consumption of photography through these supports is articulated with practices of exposure and social recognition within the domestic universe. This dynamic dialogues with Schroeder's (1998) approach to visual consumption, by showing how images, when displayed, operate as signification devices that structure social relationships, identities, and forms of recognition in everyday life.

The interpretations presented thus far make it possible to systematize, analytically, the different logics of consumption and materialization associated with the photographic artifacts analyzed, as summarized in Table 2. Although the arrangement of photographs in domestic spaces may take on performative dimensions, in this study these practices are analyzed primarily based on their materiality and their meanings within family relationships.

**Table 2***Characteristics related to the dynamics surrounding artifacts in the consumption of photographs*

| <b>Artifacts</b> | <b>Characteristics</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Shoe boxes       | Uniform, closed, with no established rules; stores loose photographs with no order or sequence, contains diverse stories, amateur photographs, and occasional photographs                                                                  |
| Albums           | Of various forms and sizes, including professional photographs and photographs with intervention; it has order and sequence, enables the formation of a specific memory, is transmitted from generation to generation, and stores episodes |
| Picture frames   | Of various forms and sizes, intended for display, with amateur and professional photographs; they decorate spaces, adhere to aesthetic and improvised rules, and reflect moments                                                           |
| Frame            | Of various forms and sizes, intended for display, they decorate and mediate environments, feature professional photographs, follow strict aesthetic rules, and form a memory                                                               |

Source: field research

Taken together, these findings show how different material supports of photography operate as mediators of family relationships, in line with approaches to material culture and consumption that emphasize the active role of objects in the production of meanings, memories, and shared identities over time (Belk, 1988; Miller, 2013; Schroeder, 1998). The synthesized categories should be understood as interpretive constructions that articulate symbolic meanings, relational dynamics, and family memory processes associated with the photographic artifacts analyzed.

In summary, the results of this study address the proposed objective by showing how photography, in its material condition, actively participates in consumption practices in the family universe. By analyzing different material supports, such as shoeboxes, albums, picture frames, and framed photographs, the study demonstrates that photography does not operate only as a visual record, but as an artifact that articulates memory, identity, and family relationships over time. This conceptual advance contributes to Consumer Culture Theory by reinforcing the role of materiality in the constitution of meanings in everyday life, expanding the understanding of photography as a consumption object embedded in historically situated social practices.

### Final Considerations

This study aimed to understand how the consumption of photographs in their material condition is articulated within the family universe. Based on the analysis of printed photographs and their material supports, such as shoeboxes, albums, picture frames, and framed photographs, it was possible to show that these artifacts do not operate only as visual records of the past, but as active mediators in the construction of meanings, memories, and family relationships over time.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study offers three main contributions to the field of Consumer Culture Theory and to material culture studies. First, it advances the field by demonstrating that photography, when considered in its material condition, should be understood as a consumption artifact embedded in everyday social practices, and not only as image or symbolic representation. Second, it shows that the consumption of photographs in the family universe simultaneously articulates individual and collective dimensions, challenging approaches that privilege the individual as the central analytical unit of consumption. Finally, the study contributes by showing that the meanings attributed to photographs are continuously reconstructed in the present, in a relational and contextual process in which memory, identity, and family relationships are dynamically intertwined.

This dual condition of photographs, as objects that belong to specific individuals and, at the same time, to the family as a collectivity, constitutes a relevant conceptual advance. Unlike other consumption artifacts, photographs circulate among different family members, are appropriated, reinterpreted, and re-signified over time, reinforcing their relational character. This finding broadens the understanding of how ordinary objects participate in the constitution of consumer culture by mediating affective bonds and shared family narratives.

On the methodological level, the research contributes by highlighting the potential of photography not only as an object of analysis, but also as an empirical resource capable of activating narratives, memories, and interpretations that go beyond the visible content of the image. The combined use of interviews, observation, and photographs revealed important analytical challenges, among them the non-permanent character of the meanings attributed to images. In this sense, the term heuristic is mobilized to indicate that photography operates as an interpretive trigger, allowing access to processes of meaning construction that are not fixed in the image itself, but emerge in the interaction between artifact, subject, and context. This characteristic reinforces the need for qualitative approaches that are sensitive to the processual and relational dimension of consumption.

Like any qualitative study, this research presents limitations that must be acknowledged. The restricted number of families investigated and the situated empirical scope limit the possibility of generalizing the findings. Furthermore,

although the study adopted an interpretivist perspective, the challenge of dealing with the risk of anachronism in the interpretation of old photographs remains. However, the results indicate that the meanings attributed to photographs do not remain static over time: they are continuously reconstructed based on the present context, family relationships, and the narratives mobilized, which mitigates a strictly anachronistic reading and reinforces the dynamic character of culture.

Future research may expand the findings presented here by investigating families situated in different sociocultural contexts, as well as by adopting longitudinal approaches that follow the circulation and re-signification of photographs over time. Comparative studies between different forms of photographic materialization, such as printed, digital, or hybrid, may also deepen the understanding of contemporary transformations in the consumption of images in the family universe.

In summary, this study contributes to advancing knowledge on consumer culture by showing that photography, in its material condition, constitutes a central artifact in the organization of memory, identity, and family relationships. By shifting the analytical focus from image to materiality and to everyday practices associated with photographs, the research reinforces the active role of objects in the production of meanings and broadens the understanding of material culture as a constitutive dimension of social life.

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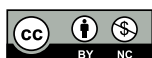
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### Correspondence address:

Ligia Boeze  
E-mail: [ligiaboezee@gmail.com](mailto:ligiaboezee@gmail.com)

Francisco Giovanni David Vieira  
E-mail: [fgdvieira@uem.br](mailto:fgdvieira@uem.br)

Vitor Koki da Costa Nogami  
E-mail: [vitor.nogami@uem.br](mailto:vitor.nogami@uem.br)



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