

The background image shows a large, weathered metal structure, possibly a sign or a small building, with a corrugated metal roof. Two men are visible: one on the left wearing a pink cap and a high-visibility vest, and another in the center wearing a denim vest. On the right, a third person is partially visible. The text is hand-painted on the metal surface.

RÓTULOS & *ROTULISTAS*

EXPLORING MEXICAN POPULAR
HAND-PAINTED SIGNS AND SIGN PAINTERS
THROUGH DESIGN ANTHROPOLOGY

Candidata: Dana Segovia Garduño

Relatore: Cristian Campagnaro

Co-relatori: Nicolò Di Prima e Silvia Stefani

Politecnico di Torino

Laurea in Design e Comunicazione



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INDEX

Abstract

Key words

Introduction

Lecture guide

Context

What is *rótulo*?

Concept
Categories

Methodology

Design Anthropology

Research method

Scenario of the research

Techniques and resources for the research

Interviews

Position of the researcher

Individuation of subjects, sample and first contact

Structure of the interview

Interviewees - The *rotulistas*

Analysis

Graphic analysis

Rótulo commercial hand painted

Categories

Elements

Design phases of a *rótulo*

Lettering vs *rótulos*

Design, craft or art - evolution of the function of *rótulos*

Social Analysis

Armando Téllez

Isaías Salgado

Giovanni Bautista

Erika Varela

Genaro Ramírez

Overview of the topics emerged

Conclusions

Acknowledgements

References & bibliography

Images



ABSTRACT

English

Given the phenomenon occurring in the Cuauhtémoc neighborhood in Mexico City, where hand-painted signs called “*rótulos*” are being dismantled from informal and local commerce premises. This thesis conducts a Design Anthropological analysis of these *rótulos* and their context to shed light on their significance in Mexican popular culture and their influence on society’s visual culture. By utilizing the tools and techniques employed in the field of Design Anthropology, this research aims to explore the cultural and social aspects intertwined with these iconic graphic elements. Through interviews and visual analysis, this study will examine *rótulos* from two perspectives, firstly, as a graphic sign, and secondly, as a profession, the *rotulista*. Furthermore, this study aims to contribute to the broader understanding of the popular visual culture in Mexico and the preservation of unique expressions that act as symbols of cultural and artistic significance within Mexican society.

Keywords

Mexican popular culture, *rótulos*, *rotulistas*, hand-painted signs, visual culture, Design Anthropology, visual design and Mexico.



Italian

Dato il fenomeno che si verifica nel quartiere di Cuauhtémoc a Città del Messico, dove vengono smantellati cartelli dipinti a mano chiamati “*rótulos*” dai locali di commercio informale e locale. Questa tesi conduce un’analisi di Design Antropology di questi *rótulos* e del loro contesto per far luce sulla loro importanza nella cultura popolare messicana e sulla loro influenza nella cultura visiva della società. Utilizzando gli strumenti e le tecniche impiegati nel campo della Design Antropology, questa ricerca mira a esplorare gli aspetti culturali e sociali intrecciati con questi elementi grafici iconici. Attraverso interviste e analisi visiva, questo studio esaminerà i *rótulos* da due prospettive: in prima prospettiva, come segno grafico e, in seconda prospettiva, come professione, quella del *rotulista*. Inoltre, questo studio mira a contribuire a una comprensione più ampia della cultura visiva popolare in Messico e alla conservazione di espressioni uniche che agiscono come simboli di importanza culturale e artistica all’interno della società messicana.

INTRODUCTION

During my last winter vacation in Mexico, I had a conversation with my sister about an illustration contest she was participating in for a surf festival in the north of Mexico. She mentioned that the theme for the poster was the “*rótulo*,” and, naively, I asked her, “What is a *rótulo*?” She explained that it’s a cultural design found throughout Mexico, used to publicize, and decorate stores and businesses with vibrant typography, colors, and images, often infused with humor that is considered part of the popular culture of Mexico. As I listened to her explanation about *rótulos*, I realized that I had grown up seeing them everywhere, yet I had never taken a moment to admire them. She went on to tell me that during her research, she discovered a phenomenon happening in Mexico City, specifically in the Cuauhtémoc neighborhood.

This phenomenon originated from a campaign initiated by the local government of the neighborhood in February 2022. Under the slogan ‘The cleanliness and beauty of the city is everyone’s responsibility,’ the campaign aimed to conduct a census of street vending in the city and reorganize it. Part of its strategy included removing the type of *rótulos* mentioned earlier, commonly used to advertise local and informal businesses. At the time, I didn’t quite understand the history behind the *rótulos* and why they were being removed.

I found it intriguing that I grew up seeing them, often laughing, and maybe even entering some establishments just because I saw a *rótulo* on the facade of the business. However, I had never been fully aware of the existence of this graphic expression. It was part of my day-to-day life, perhaps already taken for granted in the Mexican landscape. This complex situation intrigued me so much that it inspired me to make *rótulos* and its context the topic of my bachelor thesis.

This thesis conducts an Anthropological Design analysis of these *rótulos* and their context to shed light on their significance in Mexican popular culture and their influence on society’s visual culture. By utilizing the tools and techniques employed in the field of Design Anthropology, this research aims to explore the cultural and social aspects intertwined with these iconic graphic elements. Through interviews and visual analysis, this study will examine *rótulos* from two perspectives. Firstly, the visual perspective, as a graphic symbol, and secondly, the social sphere, as a profession (the *rotulistas*).

This thesis is divided into four chapters: in the first chapter, we respond to the question, “What is a *rótulo*?” From the definition of the word to the categories found in the general *rótulo*, this chapter explores the general aspects to consider, providing a basic contextual understanding of the topic discussed throughout the thesis. The second chapter explains



the methodology, detailing the process, techniques, and tools used to investigate the thesis topics. Also, at the end of this chapter, the five *rotulistas* who were interviewed are introduced. The third chapter, presents the results and is divided into two main sections. The first section analyzes the *rótulo* from a visual standpoint, treating it as a graphic manifestation. It explains the elements and characteristics and also presents some reflections. The second part of this chapter exposes the social aspects of the *rótulos*, starting with the central figure, los rotulistas - the creators - and the social context, explaining some of the most important themes that emerged during the interviews and the research. The last chapter presents a conclusion where it is finally stated how this research served to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of this traditional art form.

In the end, I hope this thesis serves as an important reminder to appreciate our own cultures and to care for the traditions and visual heritage that, sometimes, when it's your own culture, you take for granted. As Enrique Soto Aguilar cites Octavio Paz, **“People live immersed in and unaware of their own cultures and never pay much attention to their forms of creative expression.”**

I hope this text helps to understand and honor such historical manifestations that create the collective identity of my country, Mexico.



The rótulo featured in the cover with the title was made by the rotulista Erika Varela.

The font used for the titles is “Luchita Payol” La Ruda. This font is based on the letters used in traditional Lucha Libre (Mexican wrestling) posters printed by Imprenta Payol. Designed by Quique Ollervides.

LUCHITA PAYOL 123



Lecture Guide

“It is often said that the translator is a bit of a traitor, and perhaps this is partly true also regarding anthropology, where translation is often twofold. This is because the researcher, from the moment they are in the field, is forced to translate into their own language all those cultural expressions that are expressed in the culture of the locals. The problem is not only linguistic but also of a semiotic and symbolic nature” (Aime, M. 2008, p. 279).

With the objective of further conserving the whole meaning of some of the words of this thesis, I deliberately choose to use the central terms in Spanish. It is also worth mentioning that the reason for not translating the word *rotulo* to English is that the translation will not represent the whole significance or history that the Spanish word “*rotulo*” encompasses.

Rótulo – is the singular word for a hand-painted sign.



Rotulista – is the word used to name the artisan master that paints the *rotulos*.



CONTEXT

What is a *rótulo*?

Concept

For Spanish speakers, the term '*rótulo*' refer to different types of signs or inscriptions, depending on the context and how it is employed within a sentence, which can result in varied interpretations. Recently in Mexico City, the word *rótulo* has become closely associated with a specific kind of *rótulo*, the popular hand-painted commercial *rótulo*. This association of the terms originates from a campaign initiated by the local government of the Cuauhtémoc neighborhood in February 2022. Under the slogan 'The cleanliness and beauty of the city is everyone's responsibility,' this campaign aimed to conduct a census of street vending in the city and reorganize it. Part of its strategy included removing the type of *rótulos* mentioned earlier, which are commonly used to advertise local and informal businesses. While this thesis will primarily focus on the popular hand-painted commercial *rótulo*, it remains crucial to present an overview of the general context of the *rótulo* for a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

The formal definition of the word *rótulo* originates from the Latin term 'rotulus,' which means 'little wheel.' The following definitions are sourced from the dictionary of the Real Academia Española (RAE), the official authority responsible for regulating the Spanish language. The RAE provides additional definitions for *rótulo*. However, not all of them are pertinent to the context of this work. The relevant definitions are as follows:

1. Title of a writing or of a part of it.
2. Sign or inscription indicating or publicizing the contents, object or destination of something, or the address to which it is sent.
3. Sign to publicize the contents of other things.
4. A sign posted in corners and other public places to give news or notice of something.¹

These definitions share a common thread of using signs or inscriptions for communication, yet they diverge in their specific functions. The first definition refers to the use of *rótulo* as a title within written works or their sections, focusing on their use in texts. In contrast, the second definition expands its scope, highlighting how *rótulos* serve as signs or inscriptions to convey information about contents, objects, destinations, or addresses. The third definition takes a promotional function, emphasizing the utilization of *rótulos* as signs that advertise or promote the contents of other items, often seen in advertising or marketing. Finally, the fourth definition specifies the role as a signal in public spaces, emphasizing their placement on street corners and other areas to convey news or information to a wider audience, referring to the people that might walk past the sign.

¹ The source RAE was accessed on August 5, 2023. The original Spanish text was extracted from this source, and translated it into English.



General *rótulos*

Categories

As can be seen from the definitions of the word *rótulo*, the term has several connotations, resulting in a wide variety of signs. When used to name an object, it encompasses a wide range of meanings, including tag, sign, advertisement, label, inscription, and some others. Likewise, when using it as a verb, rotular can also be applied in various contexts, such as labeling an invitation, a jar, a CD, a postcard, a cover, and many others.

As the analysis of *rótulos* covers a wide field that can be explored through different perspectives, it enhances the need for its categorization. However, attempting to classify them poses a challenge due to the intricate interconnections among them. It might seem that there are no well-defined rules or guides, nevertheless, some authors have undertaken the task of segmenting the variety of *rótulos*, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of this subject.

Category based on expressiveness

Starting from a general perspective, Enriquez (2020) purpose in her thesis two categorizations, the formal *rótulo* and the popular *rótulo*. This first category talks about a more academical *rótulo* that is more standardized, limited by rules and less artisanal. It is normally used by established businesses, government, architectural projects, and educational purposes. It follows the marketing or academic rules and responds to composition and parameters already established by visual design. They are found in contexts such as, the ones used in government buildings to indicate the offices of different departments, opening hours and access restrictions. Another simple example could be the traffic signs on highways and streets. These signs follow specific standards in terms of colors, shapes, and symbols to communicate traffic rules and warnings.



Formal *rótulos*



The second type is the popular *rótulos*, “these are a communicational instrument that transmits a concrete, synthetic and easily apprehensible message, key characteristics to determine its essence” Checa-Artasu & Castro (2015). Although, “these signs have been included under the term “popular graphics”, they are only a part of this universe that encompasses an indeterminate number of graphic elements that are applied with different techniques and styles on a wide variety of surfaces and that do not necessarily have a commercial use” (Ayuso-Guzmán, 2019, p. 32).

In this categorization, “the social stratum appears as a characteristic and limiting aspect of this, when we show who are the producing agents, who are the clients that demand it and who are the receivers of this popular graphic design” Checa-Artasu & Castro (2009).

“The popular classes are the creators, as well as demanders, they develop and assume it as their own form of communication”
Checa-Artasu & Castro (2010).

Unlike the other category, there are no clear rules in this category. It represents an informal expression of culture, not bound by academic standards and often unconstrained by traditional artistic conventions. However, it should not be seen as inferior or lacking in discernment for these reasons (Mena & Reyes, 2001, p. 5). Yet besides it does not follow most of the graphic preestablish rules the message arrives effective to the recipient because as Enriquez (2020) writes

“these groups become executors of a set of visual elements, which are symbols for the same community to which they belong.”



**Popular
*rótulos***



Category based on type of message

A categorization that addresses the challenge of interconnections among *rótulos* is proposed by authors Checa-Artasu & Castro (2009). They establish two categories based on the type of message delivered and the use of graphic resources. These two categories can complement each other, and when compared, as the authors do in their article titled ‘Notes for Conceptualizing Mexican Popular Graphics,’ they provide an overview of the extensive variety of sub-categories within *rótulos*.

In the first category mentioned, ‘type of message,’ four sub-categories are proposed: political campaigns and proclamations, institutional campaigns or promotions, commercial advertisements of all kinds, and musical or similar events. When analyzing these categories and comparing them to the ones mentioned earlier, we can conclude that the first two categories belong to the formal *rótulo* group. These categories serve a more formal and institutional purpose, adhering to pre-established parameters, conveying carefully curated messages, and following intentionally designed aesthetics that adhere to previously decided visual patterns.

Political campaigns and proclamations *rótulos*



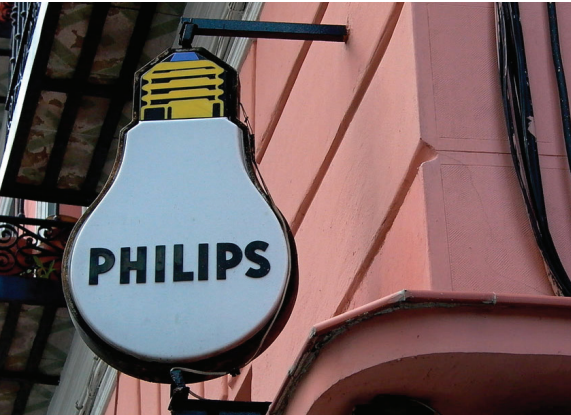
Institutional campaigns or promotions *rótulos*



The third category, being the broadest and encompassing a wide variety of *rótulos*, can be considered the prime example of a popular *rótulo*. Its primary objective is advertising, and it represents one of the main purposes of these *rótulos*. As De Orellana (2009, p. 7) suggests, ‘They seem to be specifically directed at us, without any kind of inhibition, to convince us that we should enter the store and buy what it sells.’ As Checa-Artasu & Castro (2009) pointed out, this is precisely where popular *rótulos* excel, showcasing their full range of possibilities and their significant impact on identity. It’s in this category where we find

“... wealth of expressiveness, color, and variety stands in stark contrast to the overwhelming uniformity of mayor shopping centers” (Soto-Aguilar, 2009, p. 71).

Commercial advertisements *rótulos*



Lastly, the fourth and final category also falls under the popular category. This type of *rótulo* is primarily used to promote musical events at town fairs or carnivals, typically attended by the lower and working classes. Furthermore, it falls into the popular category because there are no strict rules governing its graphic design, apart from occasionally featuring the logo of the musical group at specific times.

Musical or similar events *rótulos*



Category based on graphic resources

In the second category of the same authors, Checa-Artasu & Castro (2009), which focuses on graphic resources, the authors attempted to organize seven sub-categories, as follows:

- 1. Use of transnational or national logos.
- 2. Use of logos created by the business, store, or industry itself, giving them a distinct local character.
- 3. Combination of letters with drawings of real objects.
- 4. Combination of letters and caricatures, cartoons, or other types of comic drawings.
- 5. Integral use of letters, with or without variations in form and color.
- 6. Utilization of letters in combination with symbols and signs.

To explain the interconnection that was mentioned before the authors created a comparison table type of message/ graphic resources. This table illustrates how the subcategories can interrelate, potentially leading to the creation of additional subcategories. It serves as a demonstration of the immense diversity of *rótulos* that one can encounter in Mexico. Notably, within this comparison table, the subcategory of 'commercial advertisements of all kinds' displayed the highest number of correlations. The authors matched it with all the subcategories of graphic resources, apart from the last one 'Use of letters in combination with symbols and signs.'

Graphic resources of *rótulos*



Category based on elaboration technique

Through the research process, which involved gathering information and conducting analysis, it became apparent that, for a more in-depth examination within this thesis and a clearer explanation of the types of *rotulo*, it is pertinent to propose that they can be broadly classified into two distinct yet interconnected categories: digital and handmade.

The reason for introducing this categorization comes from several factors. First and foremost, it reflects the dynamic nature of the signage industry, which has witnessed a significant transformation in time due to advances in technology and changing artistic trends. Additionally, the proposed categories align with the evolving methods and materials employed in *rotulo* creation, acknowledging both traditional craftsmanship and the digital tools that have reshaped the field.

Under the digital category, we encompass *rotulos* that have been produced using digital resources, such as digital design software, computer-generated graphics, and high-tech printing techniques to achieve the final result. This category highlights the impact of technology on signage, including the precision, scalability, and versatility it offers to creators. Examples of this type of *rotulo* include self-adhesive vehicle labels, printed or electronic posters, banners, billboards, and much more.

Notably, this category does not include *rotulos* for which, although digital tools may have been employed during the production process, the result is achieved through handmade methods.



Digital made *rotulos*



In contrast, the ‘handmade’ category of *rotulos* are appreciated for their artistic quality, attention to detail, and the human touch that goes into their creation. They can be found in various settings, ranging from small businesses to public spaces, where their uniqueness and craftsmanship contribute to the visual landscape. This category pays tribute to the cultural significance and artisanal craftsmanship associated with handmade *rotulos*.

One of the most inherent and distinctive characteristics of these *rotulos*, setting them apart from other forms of communication, is their lack of automatic reproducibility. Unlike methods such as engraving, lithography, linotype, serigraphy, offset, and more (Checa-Artasu & Castro, 2015), handmade *rotulos* add a layer of complexity to the creation process. They demand specialized training and skills to achieve the final result.

This category acknowledges that in the final stages of the creative process, craftsmen known as rotulistas in Spanish employ traditional techniques. They paint or create the result by hand, using brushes and other artisanal tools. However, it’s worth noting that, although this category is considered ‘handmade,’ some stages of the making process might also incorporate digital technology. Nevertheless, as long as the ultimate outcome is a handcrafted result, these *rotulos* are considered part of this category.

Despite the growing prevalence of digital techniques in recent times, the expert rotulista Martín Hernández Robles (Sensacional de Diseño mexicano, 2009) underscores the enduring significance of hand lettering. He observes,

‘Hand lettering is a craft that held immense importance in the past. Today, it may have lost some of its prominence due to the use of computers and digital printing machines. Nevertheless, there remains a significant demand for our humble craftsmanship.’



Handmade *rotulos*



For further information and understanding of these two categories, table 1 presents some of the advantages and disadvantages of the digital *rótulos* and hand-made/painted *rótulo*

Elaboration technique		
	Digital	Hand-made
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• High precision and accuracy in design and details• Easily adaptable for various sizes and formats• Suitable for mass production and consistency• Faster production and shorter turnaround times• Easily scaled up or down in size• Lower-priced	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cannot be replicated.• Each piece is unique and authentic.• Highly customizable, tailored to specific needs.• Aesthetic.• Cultural significance.• Has a human touch.
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lacks the artistic uniqueness of hand painted.• Can be easily copied.• May appear less authentic.• May have limitations in customization.• Lacks the human touch.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Higher production costs.• Slower production due to manual craftsmanship.• Precision depends on the artist’s skill and tools.• Often created on-site.• Limited scalability may require larger surfaces.• May require maintenance and touch-ups over time.

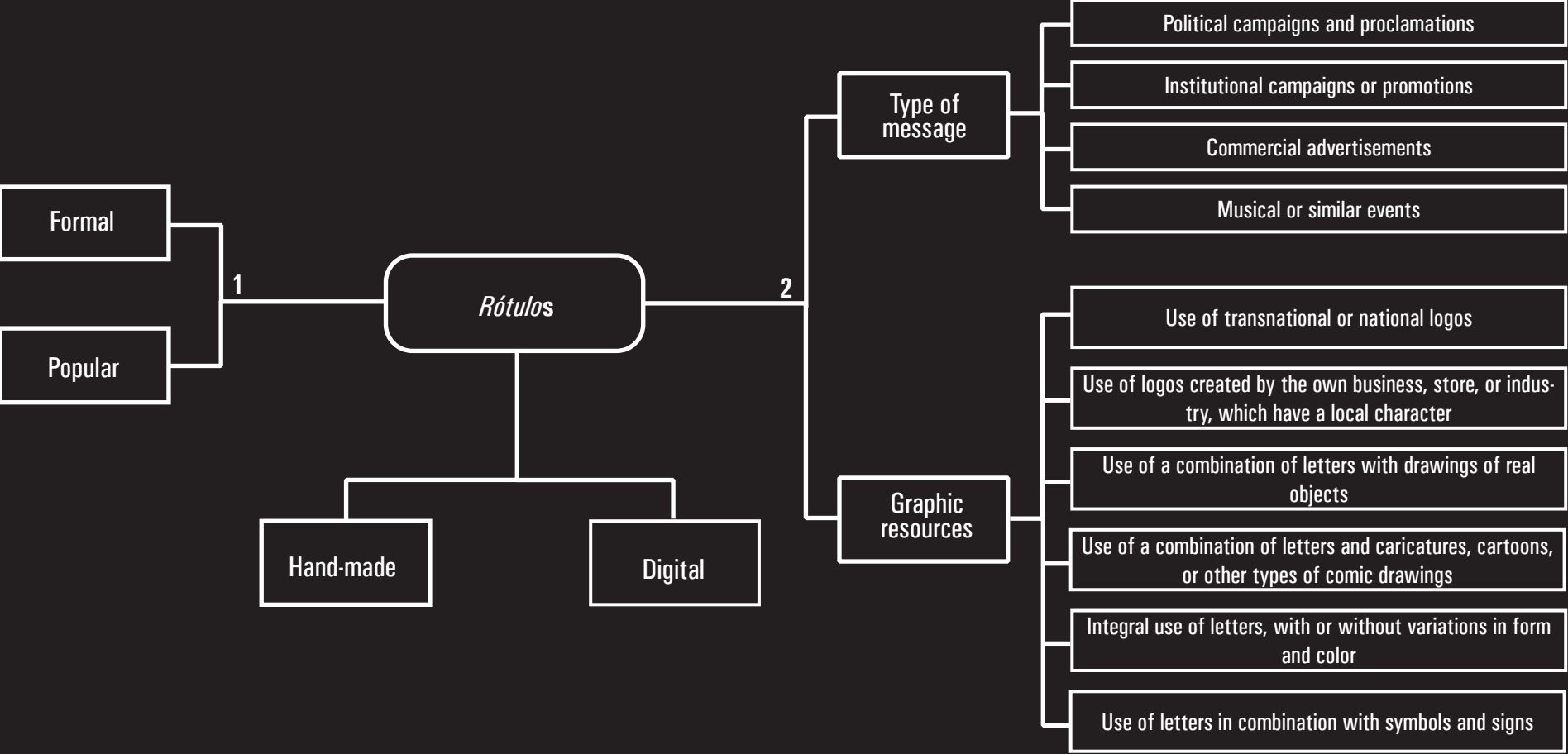


The different categories

In figure 13, a summary of the different categories discussed above is presented exhibiting how diversified they are. Ultimately, however, it is essential to understand that interactions can occur between them, and the results of these connections are the wide variety of *rótulos* that we can observe in Mexico.

The colored categories are the ones in which the specific type of *rótulo* (that is the study of this thesis) is found.

- 1. Enriquez (2020)
- 2. Chaca & Castro (2009)



METHODOLOGY

Design and Anthropology

“Where and when can anthropology inform practices of design? Where and when can design inform practices of anthropology? Both disciplines have distinct identities. Each discipline has its own methods and methodologies” (Gunn & Donovan, 2012, p. 6).

In his book "Artist and Designer," Bruno Munari (1972) defines the role of a designer as “someone with an aesthetic sense, that works for the community” (p. 28). This encapsulates the intrinsic social significance of design, a discipline that acts as a bridge, harmoniously uniting disparate branches. Design not only delivers functional and visually appealing solutions but also incorporates the values and societal needs of our community (Dilnot, 1982).

On the other side, Anthropology, as described by Aime (2008), is a study of human beings in their cultural, historical, and environmental contexts. It serves as a generous, open, and critical inquiry into the conditions and potential of human life within the unique world we all inhabit (Ingold, 2015, translated by Murall).

However, as authors W. Gunn and J. Donovan (2012) state, professionals from the fields of design and anthropology recognize the advantages of gaining knowledge through mutual learning, resulting in Design Anthropology, which intertwines and integrates both disciplines. These authors proposed in their book "Design and Anthropology: Anthropological Studies of Creativity and Perception" three types of practices that differ upon methodological and disciplinary perspectives: design Anthropology (dA), Design anthropology (Da), and Design-Anthropology (DA).

dA - The higher contribution is for anthropology rather than design. Design follows anthropology and adopts its theoretical frameworks, or it may even become the subject of anthropological investigation. (Gunn & Donovan, 2012, p. 8)

Da – Fieldwork primarily serves the field of design. The framing of this approach originates from design methodologies aimed at addressing specific problems rather than the in-depth study of people. Anthropology is utilized to serve the purposes of design, such as employing ethnographic studies to define design requirements. (Gunn & Donovan, 2012, p. 8)

DA – Both the fields, design and anthropology, have the same importance and are involved in a collaborative effort where each one draws insights from the other. The purpose of this discipline is to unite both design and anthropology, which cannot be classified into a single discipline or subgroup of it. Symbolizes a change in anthropology and design from merely providing information to radically altering social, cultural, and environmental relationships. (Gunn & Donovan, 2012, p. 8)

The objective of this thesis is to use the modality of (DA) Design Anthropology, integrating both disciplines and their methodologies in a uniform way to explore the visual and cultural narrative of *rótulos*.

Research Method

Due to the social nature and complexity of the topic chosen for the thesis, the research employed qualitative methods. I opted for this approach because it made it possible to capture several cultural aspects, based on the perceptions of the participants, that are difficult to translate into quantitative data (Aime, 2008, p. 18). This methodology allowed me to focus on understanding and deepening the topic of the thesis with a holistic approach, exploring it from the perspective of the rotulistas and experts on the subject, delving into their experiences, perspectives, opinions, and meanings, especially the way in which they subjectively perceive their reality and the topic. (Hernández, Fernández, & Baptista, 2010). Yet also help me to analyzed it from a graphical part and as a visual expresion.

Scenario of the research

At the beginning of the research, I initially limited the study of *rotulos* to Mexico City and its metropolitan area due to the significant influence of the phenomenon of cancellation within that region, that inspired the topic for this thesis. However, as I investigated deeper into the research and identified the individuals I intended to interview, it became evident that considering the geographical and cultural diversity characterizing Mexico was crucial. This realization prompted me to broaden the research scope to the whole country, facilitating a comprehensive analysis of the impact of *rotulos* in various contexts. This expansion proved highly beneficial as it captured diverse experiences across the Mexican scenery and highlighted the prevalence of *rotulos* throughout the country. Furthermore, this choice enabled a comparative analysis of differing or similar perspectives within different parts of the country.

Mexico, officially known as Los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, is situated in North America. It shares its borders with the United States of America to the north, Guatemala and Belize to the southeast, and the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea to the east, while the Pacific Ocean lies to the west. Mexico's vast territory covers 1,953,162 km², distributed on both sides of the Tropic of Cancer. The primary language spoken by the majority of Mexicans is Spanish, but there are 68 indigenous languages representing 11 linguistic families, each with over 360 variations. According to INEGI², as of 2020, approximately 77% of the population identifies as Catholic, 11.2% as Protestant, Christian, or Evangelical, while 8.1% align with no specific religion. Mexico's population has grown significantly over the past seven decades, expanding more than four times. In just one decade, from 2010 to 2020, the population increased by 14 million inhabitants, reaching a total of 126 million. Mexico ranks as the 11th most populous nation globally, with its capital³. The Mexican capital, Mexico City, is the sixth most populated city in the world (National Geographic, 2023). The country's climate is characterized by its lack of distinct seasons, being predominantly temperate with an average annual temperature of 18 degrees Celsius.

Based on the Ministry of Economy's classification (1983, as cited in Forbes, 2014), Mexico is divided into six social classes determined by factors such as, occupation, customs, economic status, and power. The first group is the "Low-Low" class, representing 35% of the country's population, approximately 39 million. This class consists of temporary and immigrant workers, informal traders, the unemployed, and those reliant on social assistance. The second class, the "Low-Upper," accounts for 25% of the population or around 29 million individuals. It includes

workers and peasants who engage in strenuous labor for slightly better-than-minimum-wage incomes. The third social class is the "lower middle class," which encompasses office workers, technicians, supervisors, and skilled artisans. This class comprises approximately 20% of the national population, nearly 23 million people, and is characterized by moderately stable but not substantial incomes. The fourth social stratum is the "Upper-Middle" class, representing 14% of the population, or around 16 million Mexicans. This class includes many business owners and professionals who generally enjoy good and consistent incomes. The fifth class is the "Upper-Lower," consisting of families that have been affluent for a few generations. They possess substantial and steady economic resources and makeup approximately 5% of the national population, around 5.6 million. Finally, at the peak of the socioeconomic hierarchy is the "Upper-Upper" class, composed of "old wealthy families that have been prominent for generations." According to the Ministry of Economy, these families have held their wealth for so long that its origins have been forgotten. Approximately 1% of the national population, or 1.1 million Mexicans, belong to this class.

2. National Institute of Statistics and Geography of Mexico.

3. Datos reportados por el Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), de acuerdo con el censo de población y vivienda 2020.

Techniques and resources for the research

Starting from the qualitative method, a variety of techniques and resources have laid the foundational groundwork for this research. These diverse mediums have added depth and enriched the understanding of the explored topic. Due to not being physically present in Mexico, I encountered a constraint that compelled me to find creative ways to gather the necessary information for a more profound comprehension of the subject. The interview was the central part of the research, and we will delve deeper into this instrument in the coming subtopics. However, there were other crucial materials that significantly enhanced the investigation and allowed me to structure the interviews in the best way possible in order to be able to obtain the necessary information for the research.

Literature on the subject

The research started with an extensive review of the literature related to the subjects under investigation. This initial phase facilitated a deeper comprehension of the context and the key actors involved. Due to the limited existing research on this particular topic, obtaining relevant literature was notably challenging. Nonetheless, one of the primary sources consulted, Artes de México⁴, a specialized magazine, featured an issue about *rotulos* entitled 'The Other Muralism.' In this publication, the editorial letter introduced a range of artists, photographers, and graphic designers who had not only documented but also critically analyzed *rotulos*. This discovery significantly expanded the literature available and deepened my knowledge of the topic, including the prior research done by these authors and various approaches to it. Additionally, it provided valuable insights into how to present the final results of the research.

Videos and documentaries

In parallel with my literature review, I watched some videos and documentaries that discussed *rotulos* from different angles. These materials offered insights more from the viewpoint of the individuals involved rather than providing a purely analytical perspective. This approach was valuable because it allowed me to gain a better understanding of the actors within the field of rotulismo. It also helped me determine some important characteristics to consider when choosing the participants of the interviews.

Websites

After gaining a general understanding of the general context through literature and video documentaries, I initiated my research using internet resources, such as websites and social media platforms. I opted to begin my research with printed materials, online literature, and video documentaries rather than relying solely on the net. This approach provided me with a solid foundation to undertake a more focused investigation on the internet. It enabled me to address several issues typically associated with Internet research, such as concerns related to data quality, prolonged search times, and issues regarding the accuracy and precision of the information obtained (Farber, 1994).

Websites were instrumental in enhancing my research in several ways. They facilitated access to up-to-date information, which proved invaluable in keeping me informed about recent developments. They also allowed me to access information from mexican relevant sources for this investigation. Although the primary focus of my research was not the phenomenon of cancellation, the abundance

of news articles found online on this topic enriched my understanding and allowed me to connect with rotulistas, initiatives, and various elements relevant to the context of *rotulos*. Moreover, websites offered me a vast array of sources. This diversification significantly broadened my perspectives on the subject.

Social media

Another internet source that was crucial in this research was social media. These platforms unite and connect people worldwide, making it possible to conduct research remotely that was traditionally limited to in-person fieldwork. Instagram deserves special mention as it not only provided a space for communication and interaction but also, being primarily a visual platform, allowed me to focus on the graphical aspects of the research. Since most individuals, I intended to interview were active on Instagram, it facilitated interaction and helped immersion into the study field. In addition to its role in locating and contacting potential interviewees, Instagram also assisted in gathering information about these individuals, enabling the creation of a comprehensive contact database that was crucial for selecting the interview sample. While other platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp were used for the research, Instagram had the most significant impact on the early steps of the investigation.

4. Artes de México is a specialized cultural magazine in Mexico, founded in 1953.

Podcasts

Motivated by the challenge of conducting anthropological research solely online and from a far distance of research topic, I attempted to investigate in less conventional sources like podcasts. To my surprise, these podcasts proved to be valuable resources for gaining insights into the subject. Some of them were recorded while the phenomenon of *rótulos*' cancellation was unfolding, providing a platform for informative discussions on this subject. Listening to these podcasts allowed me to stay informed and engaged with the ongoing discourses around *rótulos* from that time.

One of the noteworthy outcomes of this podcast exploration was the opportunity to connect with a graphic design student from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). She is also conducting research on *rótulos* for her thesis. We exchanged texts and even had a video call to discuss our respective research findings and sources. This interaction provided valuable insights, particularly in identifying relevant articles and some areas where I could find rotulistas.

While relying on podcasts, I adopted a critical approach. I chose to engage with podcasts hosted by individuals with expertise or experience in the field or reputable academics, as their information held greater credibility and relevance to my research. This selective approach ensured the reliability and consistency of the information I incorporated into my study.

Anthropological techniques

In conducting this research, the use of anthropological techniques and approaches was pivotal to ensure the qualitative research was conducted as effectively as possible. Undertaking anthropological research within a culture

considered one's own yet simultaneously strange is like practicing anthropology at home, as described by Kum Awah (2017, p. 172).

Considering that this research was carried out remotely, away from the actual research topic, it was not possible to conduct traditional participant observation or fieldwork. Nonetheless, some techniques commonly employed in these activities were adapted for this research, embracing all stages of the research process: immersion into the research context, data collection, analysis, and the reporting of results. These techniques enabled the study to unfold with an emphasis on openness, adopting a critical orientation, and maintaining a reflective posture (Tealdi & Gianforte, 2022). As a researcher working within my own culture and as a graphic design student, there was an inherent insider perspective. However, in the initial phases of the research, it was vital to consciously set aside preconceived notions and beliefs by adopting a stranger approach. This approach required the practice of refraining from making assumptions and consistently seeking explanations and insights from those directly engaged in the subject that is being investigated. This phase was particularly challenging in the beginning, as there was a subconscious inclination to rush to conclusions and develop misconceptions about the subject. Guidance from my advisors, emphasizing the importance of maintaining an open mind and withholding judgment until the research was complete, helped overcome this challenge.

As the research progressed, I incorporated the "emic" and "etic" perspectives, two contrasting yet complementary approaches from anthropology. The "emic" approach involves an insider's perspective, focusing on understanding the cultural meanings and significance of particular behaviors or practices from the perspective of those within the culture. On the contrary, the "etic" approach is an outsider's perspective, concentrating on observable behaviors

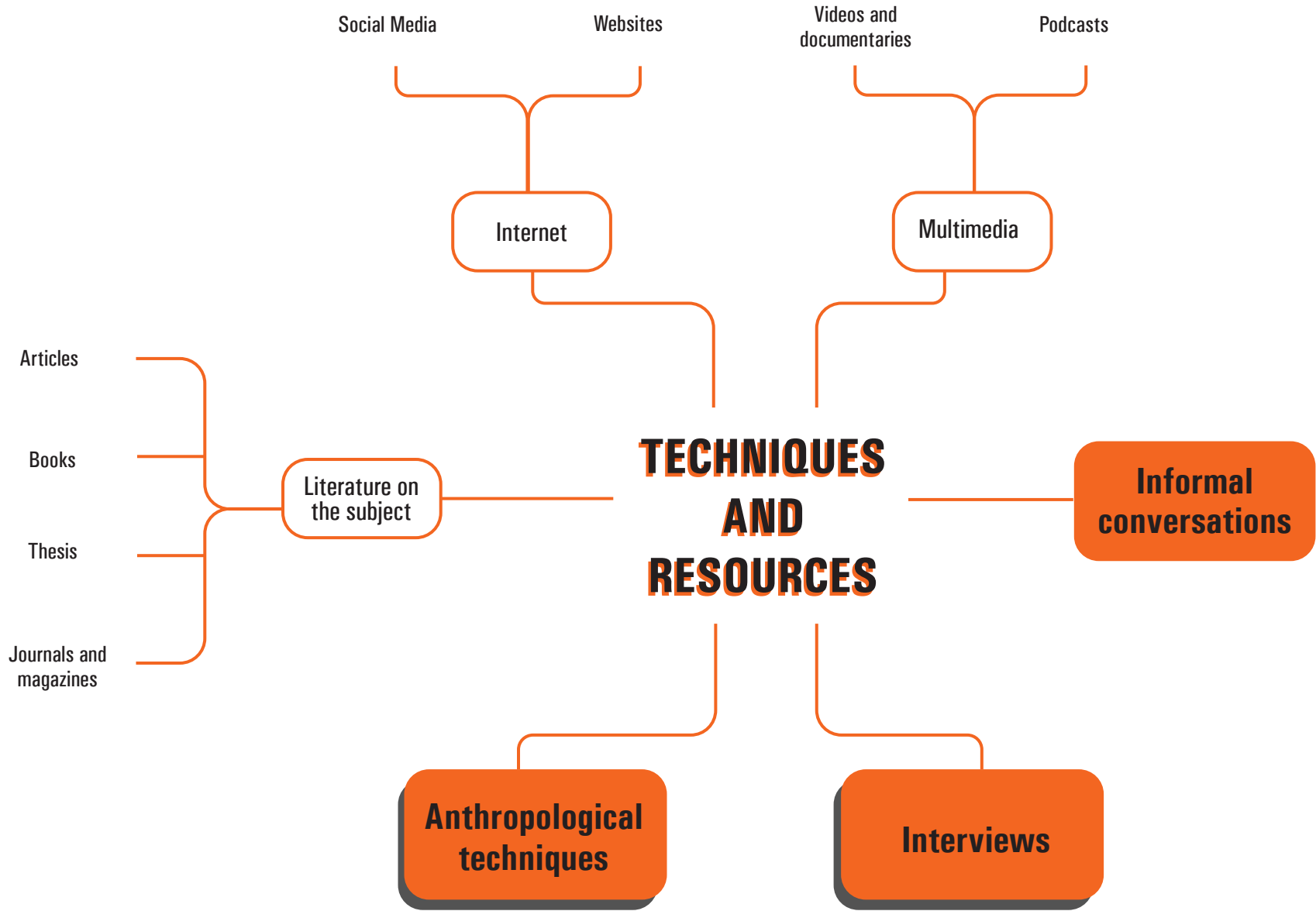
and practices and seeking to understand them in terms of their functional or evolutionary significance.

The integration of both emic and etic perspectives was deemed essential for a comprehensive understanding of the culture. My background provided the emic approach, while the etic approach served as a balancing element, facilitating a more well-rounded and balanced role as a researcher.

Additionally, the holistic approach played a significant role. To comprehensively explore *rótulos*, it was necessary to adopt a holistic perspective, considering how various facets of the topic interconnect and influence one another to form a complete picture. This involved examining elements such as the profession of rotulistas, the cultural significance of being a rotulista, the businesses utilizing their services, graphic designers who promote *rótulos*' style, activists advocating for their value, and government and the policies and laws that they create impacting *rótulos* and related aspects.

The simultaneous application of these three anthropological approaches —stranger, "emic" and "etic," and holistic—effectively underpinned the achievement of this research. The stranger approach, by compelling me to set aside my preconceptions and to approach the research context with fresh eyes, allowed me to delve into the investigation without bias, thereby ensuring a more authentic exploration of the subject matter. The incorporation of both "emic" and "etic" viewpoints enriched the analysis by embracing both the insider's understanding and the outsider's observation, offering a more well-rounded and comprehensive understanding of the culture under scrutiny. Moreover, the holistic approach enabled a thorough examination of the intricate interplay between different facets of the phenomenon, thus providing a complete, multifaceted view of the topic.

In Figure 14, a multi-flow map presents a summary of the resources and techniques used in the research and explained before.



Interviews

The interview was the central part of the research. An interview is "a meeting to discuss and exchange information between one person (the interviewer) and another (the interviewee) or others (interviewees)" (Guzmán & Alvarado, 2009). Through this method, questions and answers, communication, and the collaborative construction of meanings concerning a given topic are achieved. Qualitative interviews are characterized by their intimate, flexible, and open nature, distinguishing them from quantitative interviews.

The main objective of conducting interviews was to acquire responses related to the subject, problem, or topic of interest, expressed in the interviewee's own terms, language, and perspective – 'in their own words.' The interviewees themselves are the 'experts' in this context, and I approached them with careful and attentive listening to understand the content and narratives within each response.

Interviews were employed as a tool for collecting qualitative data, primarily due to the nature of the research problem. Since the subject couldn't be observed directly, and the research was conducted remotely, interviews provided a valuable means of gathering information. Furthermore, interviews allowed the participants to express their experiences using their unique perspectives and language, preserving their individual viewpoints. This was vital for comprehending the subtle aspects of the research topic. Additionally, interviews offered flexibility and adaptability, enabling me to explore and modify the research direction by tailoring questions to suit each participant.

Position of the researcher

In this section, I engage in self-reflection regarding my role

in this research. As Hernández, Fernández, and Baptista (2010) noted, " 'Reality' is defined through the research participants' interpretations of their own realities. In this way, several 'realities' converge, including those of the participants, the researcher, and those produced by the interaction of all the actors. Moreover, these 'realities' change as the study progresses and serve as sources of data." Therefore, I consider it essential to clarify my researcher role, as it complements the findings of this thesis.

Doing research in my home country had its advantages. Having been born and raised on the outskirts of Mexico City, I not only spoke the same language but could also comprehend the local slang. This familiarity enabled me to establish connections and communicate efficiently with people, greatly facilitating the process of securing interviews. Consequently, I rapidly gained insider status compared to a researcher from another country. Furthermore, my background in graphic design provided me with an understanding of the specific terminology used in interviews and made me more knowledgeable about the research topic. Additionally, conducting research from a distance motivated me to experiment with different information mediums, such as podcasts and Instagram, further enriching the depth of the research. On the contrary, one of the disadvantages was that it was more difficult to main an external perspective. However, it was imperative to do so. Additionally, living in Italy during the research period prevented me from returning to my home country for the study. This limitation ruled out the use of certain anthropological tools, such as participant observation and capturing visual materials like photographs of *rótulos*.

The interplay of these advantages and disadvantages placed me in a complex position. My intricate status allowed me to navigate a middle ground, enabling me to access, study, understand, and interpret this investigation

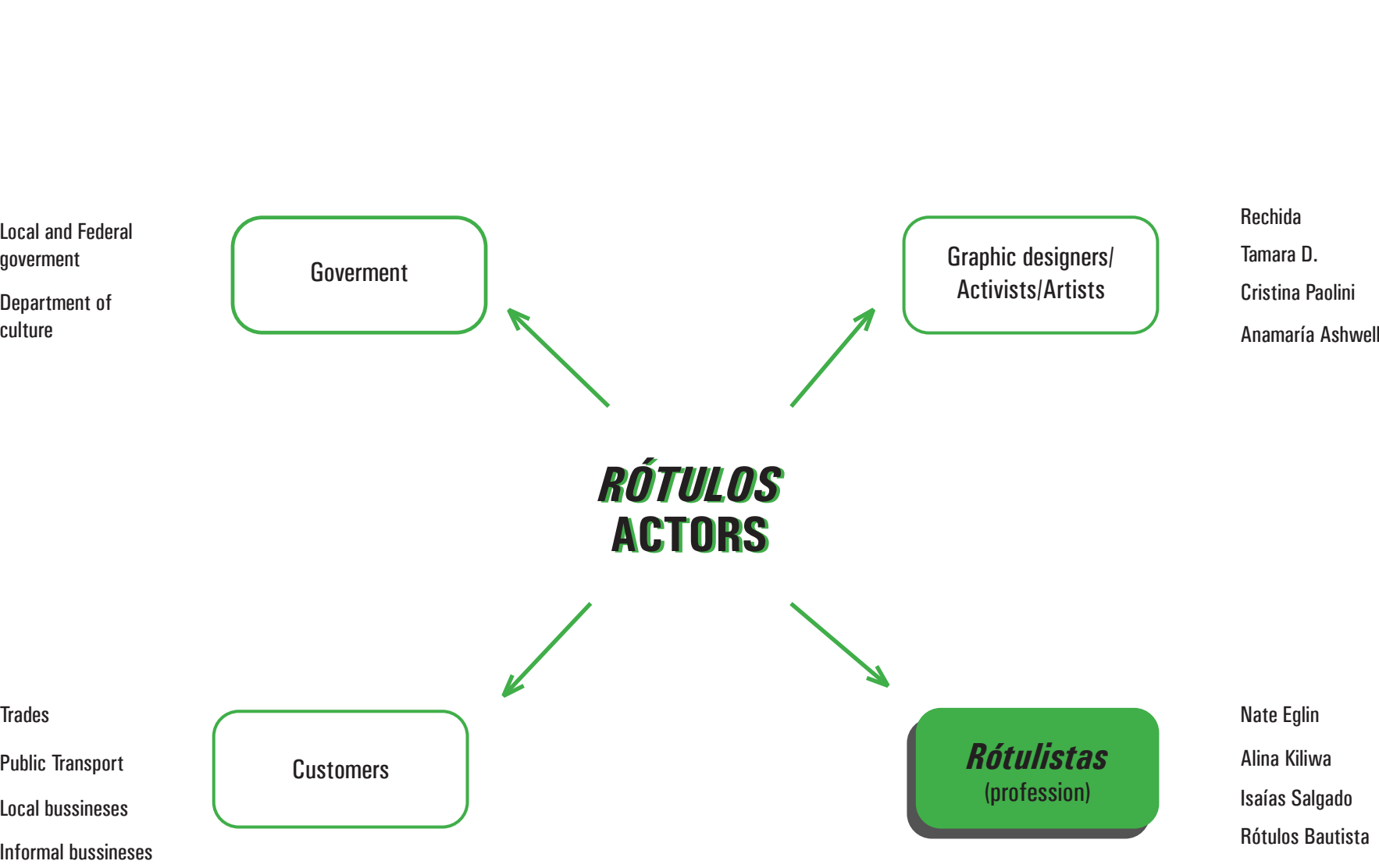
from both an insider and outsider perspective. This unique vantage point furnished a more nuanced set of comparative data compared to a completely foreign researcher or someone who could conduct ethnography or fieldwork.

Individuation of the subjects, sample and first contact

After my initial comprehensive research involving literature, video documentaries, and online sources, which allowed me to gain a better understanding of the *rótulos* context, I started mapping potential interviewees for my research. Employing the holistic approach discussed earlier in the context of Anthropological perspectives, I aimed to create a panoramic view of the various actors involved. It resulted in the categorization of these actors into four primary groups: the rotulistas, who are the creators of these distinctive signs; the businesses that rely on the services of rotulistas; local or federal governments, which have the potential to impact the rotulistas' profession through regulations and policies; and graphic designers and activists who, in recent years, have become more closely associated with the world of rotulistas. Graphic designers often employ and draw inspiration from the unique *rótulos* style, while activists promote both the style and the profession. In this initial mapping, I was also able to identify some specific contacts for each of the categories. This categorization is presented in a multi-flow map in Figure 15.

Following discussions with my thesis advisors, it was decided to narrow the focus of the interviews exclusively to the rotulistas for several reasons, including the limited research time and the fact that rotulistas were the most central figures on the map. Concentrating on rotulistas would provide deeper insights into the context, and they were also easier to contact for interviews compared to businesses that might not have been easy to track down or contact them.

In Figure 15, a multi-flow map presents a summary of the resources and techniques used in the research and explained before.



After narrowing down the rotulistas as the interviewees, I had a valuable conversation with a graphic design student from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). She happened to be working on her thesis on *rotulos* as well. During our video call, she shared an intriguing piece of information about a street in Mexico City known as "Calle de Perú." This street earned its nickname as the "street of the rotulistas" because it once hosted numerous rotulistas' workshops, and when paint crusts formed on the rotulistas' buckets, they would throw them into the streets. Passing cars spread the paint with the wheels, resulting in the entire street being colorfully painted. After the conversation, I determined to conduct a search on Google Maps Street View for "Calle de Perú" with the objective of identifying active rotulistas workshops and potentially obtaining contact information of sign makers whom I could approach for interviews.

However, my search efforts proved to be unsuccessful. I could only locate a single facade on the street that displayed a sign maker's sign, and despite multiple attempts to contact the listed number, I received no response.

Thinking that Google Maps might provide more information, I began searching throughout Mexico City using keywords such as "*rotulos*." However, the search results predominantly displayed businesses specializing in digital *rotulos*. Consequently, I attempted alternative search terms in Spanish, like "painted *rotulos*," "artisanal *rotulos*," and "paint brush *rotulos*." This effort led me to discover three workshops in the metropolitan area of Mexico. Unfortunately, only one of them provided a phone number for contact. I initiated the first contact by calling this number, and I talked to the rotulista although he didn't appear to be readily available for an interview.

As my progress on Google Maps produced limited results, I decided to turn to Google search with keywords like

"*rotulos* in Mexico City," "painted *rotulos* in Mexico City," "artisanal *rotulos*," and "hand-made *rotulos*." However, my success remained limited, as I found only one business that offered an email address as a point of contact. Unfortunately, my attempts to reach out via email received no response.

Not disheartened by the initial lack of success in my research, I decided to make another attempt by searching with the keyword "rotulistas in México." As I scrolled through the results, I stumbled upon an article published by Coolhuntermx⁵, titled "Rotulistas en México." This article featured profiles of 10 rotulistas, aiming to promote their work. Each profile had a brief description of their work and contact information. I noted that many of them had Instagram pages. So, I proceeded to locate them on this platform to follow their work and gain more insights.

Despite having acquired a substantial number of contacts through this article, I was keen to expand my options and potentially select my research sample from a more diverse group. I decided to extend my search to social media platforms, specifically Instagram and Facebook. I actively sought out profiles and groups related to rotulistas. Thanks to the profiles I had already identified, I was able to discover even more. Additionally, I observed that some Instagram pages served as archives for *rotulos*, as they featured images sent in by their followers.

Simultaneously with my research, I initiated the construction of a contact database, adding every subject I had come across from my initial findings on Google Maps, even if they lacked contact information, to the most recent discoveries. This database was invaluable for potential interviews.

Upon completing the compilation of the contact database, the next step was analyzing this dataset. The objective

was to select a sample of participants that represented the most diversity possible. Although at first the field of research was just Mexico City, in recognizing the diversity and richness of data provided by the participants all over the Mexican territory, as mentioned before, it was decided to expand the research field to encompass the whole country. Based on the disponibility of the participants a selection was made individuated. They were selected to ensure diversity and representation, aligning with the anthropological principles of inclusivity. Additionally, having a diverse range of participants would significantly enhance the data collection process, offering a comprehensive understanding of *rotulos* and the profession of rotulistas within varying contexts. The rotulistas selected were five: Armando Tellez, Isaías Salgado, Giovanni Bautista, Erika Varella, and Genaro Ramirez.

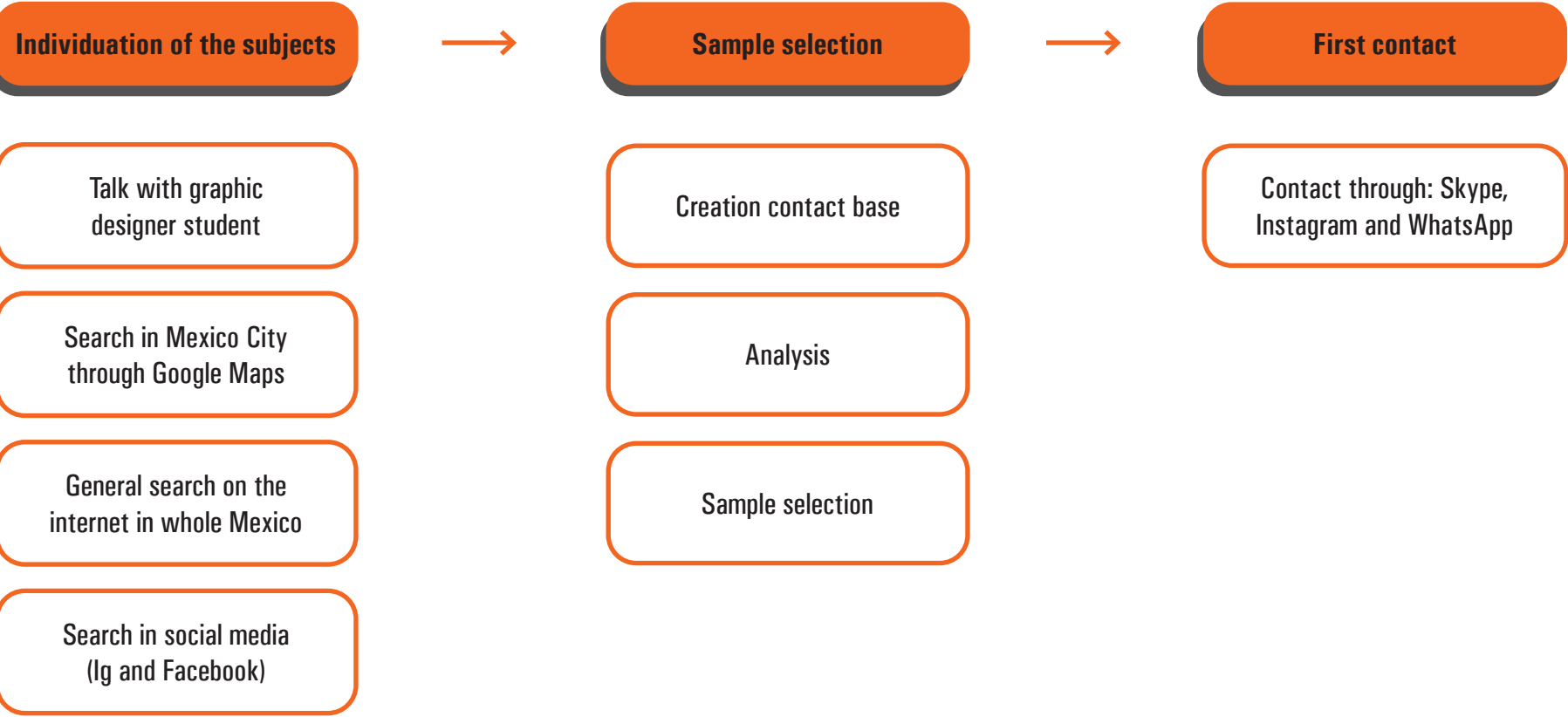
Table 2 presents the characteristics that made each participant diverse and unique.

5. Coolhuntermx is a website focused on developing specific online content on fashion, design, art, and emerging creative industries. coolhuntermx.com

Elaboration technique					
<div>Rotulistas</div> <div>Characteristics</div>	Armando Téllez	Isaías Salgado	Giovanni Bautista	Erika Varella	Genaro Ramírez
Seniority	Historical	Historical	Young	Young	Young
Level of expertise	Expert	Expert	Expert	Background	Expert
Belongs to a family of Rotulistas	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Recognition	Local	International and local	International and local	Local	International and local
Background	Craft masters	Craft masters	Graphic designer and craft masters	Graphic designer and craft masters	Graphic designer and craft masters
Learning	Trained in workshop	Trained in workshop	Trained in workshop	Self-taught	Trained in workshop
Based	Mexico city	Mexico city	Oaxaca	Puebla	Guadalajara

Following the participant selection, I proceeded to establish contact with them. Social media channels, including WhatsApp, Instagram, and Skype, were used for this purpose. Specifically, I reached out to seven rotulistas featured in the Coolhunter article. While I initially had some reservations about the effectiveness of social media as a means of contacting rotulistas, I was pleasantly surprised. Most of my attempts to connect with the rotulistas proved successful. They exhibited enthusiasm and flexibility when it came to scheduling interviews.

The flow map in Figure 16 presents the process from searching rotulistas for the interviews to the first contact with them.



Structure of the interviews

In this research, an anthropological approach was employed to delve into the cultural intricacies of *rotulos* with a specific focus on the creators, the rotulistas. The decision to use interviews as the primary research method was rooted in the methodology's alignment with the holistic nature of anthropological inquiry. Interviews were considered essential due to their capacity to capture not only the social and cultural dimensions but also the more technical and theoretical aspects of the profession, enabling a comprehensive exploration.

Initially, the interview was planned to be structured, with quite a lot of questions. However, during the review with my thesis advisors, it became evident that such a structured approach might hinder the naturalness, spontaneity, and depth of responses, which were essential. As a result, it was decided that conducting open interviews, where the interviewees could freely express their viewpoints, was the most effective approach. This method allowed the diversity of ideologies and unique qualities of individuals, surfacing the most relevant information to emerge naturally without imposing rigid constraints on the topics of interest.

The open interview was structured into macro-areas, which served as guiding points to make initial questions to open the arguments and gather the most pertinent information for this research while providing the flexibility necessary for meaningful interviews. Below is presented the initial list of macro-areas that formed the foundational structure for the interviews.

Nevertheless, the questions of interview and their sequence were personalized for each participant to ease them and to maintain a natural flow of conversation. Before beginning the interview, I adhered to ethical

guidelines by informing the participants about the interview's purpose, the intended use of the gathered information, the possibility of recording the interview for transcription and analysis purposes, and the potential inclusion of their quotes from the interviews. All participants provided their consent, and they were asked whether they wished to be named in the citations to whom they gave consent.

Throughout the interview, a significant emphasis was placed on upholding anthropological principles. The questions were thoughtfully designed to respect the cultural contexts of the participants, encouraging them to express their thoughts freely.

Upon concluding each interview, I asked whether the participants had any photos or graphic materials they were willing to share for potential inclusion in the thesis. Additionally, I asked if they could recommend individuals who would be valuable to interview for further research to expand the pool of potential interviewees.

Macro themes

General questions

Training and education as a *rotulista*

The profession

Method for designing a *rotulo*

Changes in the profession

The cultural rol of *rotulos* in Mexico

Challenges and perspectives

The cancellation of *rotulos* in the Cuauhtémoc neighborhood

Women in rotulismo

The *rotulistas* interviewed

In this section, we introduce the rotulistas interviewed for this thesis. The order in which they are described is the same order in which the interviews were conducted.



Armando Téllez

Mexico City, Mexico
Rotulista



I found the rotulista Armando Telléz in the Coolhuntermx article “Rotulistas in México.” What caught my attention was the description that mentioned he had been a rotulista for 15 years and had recently returned to the profession after a break. I was interested in hearing the perspective of someone with experience in the field and learning why he took a break from it.

He did not have social media presence, and the only contact information provided was his phone number in the article. I reached out to him via WhatsApp, introducing myself, explaining that I was conducting research for my thesis on *rotulos*, and inquiring if he would be willing to participate in an interview over the phone. He responded positively, asking me to suggest a date and time for the interview. After setting a time and date, the call took place over WhatsApp. He was in a taxi on his way to work. During the interview, he mentioned that he worked as a mechanic part-time and spent the other half of his time as a rotulista.

The interview lasted for 55 minutes. Mr. Armando shared his personal journey from when he first wanted to be an artist and how he discovered *rotulos* and developed a deep passion for them. He also explained why he had to stop

working as a rotulista for a period. He said that the business was not doing well, so he needed to change professions to support his family economically. Now, with his children grown up, he had the opportunity to return to sign painting. However, he admitted that returning to the *rotulos* business after such a long break was challenging, mainly because it was difficult to find clients, yet he emphasized that he was doing it for passion rather than financial gain. He mentioned having a friend, also a rotulista, with many clients who would often call on him for assistance with significant projects. He also explained the steps for creating *rotulos* and the materials required for the job. At the end of the interview, he was very cordial and remained at my disposal if I needed him to answer some more questions. He also sent me some pictures of his works for the thesis through WhatsApp.

What Mr. Armando told me shed light on the challenges faced by rotulistas and helped me understand why some believed that the art of *rotulos* was disappearing due to the decreasing job opportunities for these skilled professionals.

Isaías Salgado

Mexico City, Mexico
Rotulista



Another rotulista found in the Coolhuntermx article was Mr. Isaías; they describe him as their “rotulista de confianza” (trusted sign maker). He is a very experienced master with more than 35 years of experience and not just doing *rotulos* but also advertising drawing and a little bit of air-brushing and graffiti (Coolhuntermx 2022). I called him at the number listed in the article, and he answered on the first attempt. He was very cordial and available for the interview, mentioning that he was accustomed to interviews and enjoyed them. We had a brief chat about his work, and he asked me questions about my thesis. Towards the end, he provided some dates for the interview and

suggested we communicate through WhatsApp for better coordination. He also mentioned having an Instagram page where I could find some of his works. Upon checking it, I was surprised to discover that he followed some other rotulistas whom I had identified as potential interviewees. I also noticed his high activity on Instagram, showcasing a diverse range of work.

The interview lasted about an hour and ten minutes. Mr. Isaías shared insights about *rotulos*, and the design involved in it. Being active in the community of rotulistas, he offered an insider’s perspective of the context. He mentioned that he had worked for renowned Mexican artists like Carla Fernandez, Déborah Holtz and Pedro Reyes. Moreover, he has worked with notable brands such as Carolina Herrera, Netflix, Vans, and even a Mexican restaurant in Dubai. During the period when the phenomenon of ‘cancellation’ in the Cuauhtémoc neighborhood was prominent, he attended conferences organized by activists advocating for the protection and appreciation of *rotulos*. He also informed me about his participation in a documentary about Mexican rotulismo. Towards the end of the call, he showed me some of his works, confirming the diversity of *rotulos* on different surfaces like clothes, signs, and books. As we concluded, he encouraged me to reach out if I

needed further information. He also shared pictures of his works for the thesis.

Mr. Isaías’s involvement in the *rotulos* community provided valuable insights into many of the social aspects of *rotulos*. Having been in business for an extended period in a city like the capital, he has accumulated extensive experience and a vast network of contacts within the industry. During the interview, he mentioned that for big projects, he often collaborates with a fellow rotulista. Recalling what Mr. Armando said in the interview, I asked Mr. Isaías for the name of the rotulista, and it turned out to be Mr. Armando who assists him. This revelation made me realize that in the world of *rotulos*, people inside the business seem to know each other.



Giovanni Bautista

Oaxaca, Mexico
Rotulista "*Rótulos* Bautista" and graphic designer



I had already identified Giovanni during the initial mapping of actors in the context of *rótulos*. I came across him in several articles highlighting his family workshop's collaborations with various national and international brands, including Netflix, Levis, HBO Max MX, Gourmet de México, and many others. I specifically recognized him for his collaboration with the jeans brand Levis, and he was also mentioned in the article 'Rotulistas en México.' Giovanni began his journey at the age of seven as an assistant in his father's workshop. By the age of 12, he was already in charge of labeling cabs and crosses for the deceased. Although I observed he was very active on Instagram, I opted to reach out through WhatsApp for a more direct approach. In my message, I asked if he would be interested in participating in an interview for my thesis. He responded positively, and after a few failed attempts, we finally managed to conduct the interview. He was at his workshop during the interview, and I could see some of their ongoing work in the background.

Giovanni initiated the conversation by sharing the story of his father and how they entered the world of *rótulos*. He expressed immense pride in his father's legacy. He went on to discuss how he, along with his siblings, ventured into *rótulos* and explained why he chose to study graphic

design. Giovanni provided insights into the *rótulos* context in Oaxaca and how he collaborated extensively with the government on various projects. He also shared his experiences working with different brands, experimenting with both manual and digital techniques to create innovative outcomes.

During the interview, Giovanni outlined future projects, including the organization of the first convention of rotulistas in Mexico, to commemorate the 40th anniversary of his father's workshop. He concluded by expressing his hope to work on future initiatives that would contribute to gaining recognition for the work of other rotulistas.

I observed that Giovanni's experiences with the government of Oaxaca contrasted sharply with what was happening in Mexico City, particularly in the Cuauhtémoc colony, providing an interesting point for reflection.

Erika Varela

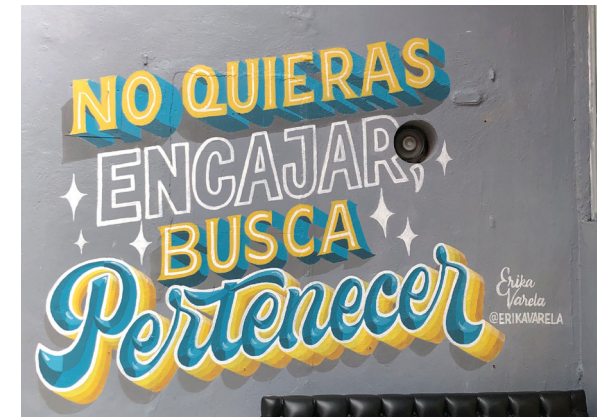
Puebla, Mexico
Rotulista and graphic designer



Erika Varella is a graphic designer who studied at the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP). Her introduction to sign-making occurred during one of her university classes, where she learned the art of crafting letters. She still does not consider herself an expert since she has only been working as a sign maker for a few years as she commented during the interview, there is still much to learn in the craft of sign making. Although her desire lies in dedicating herself full-time to lettering, economic considerations have led her to maintain her primary job as a graphic designer in a studio, yet, in her free time, she passionately engages in the craft she loves.

Erika was part of a women's collective called "Morras Chidas Rotulando" (Cool Girls Creating Signs). This feminist collective was founded during the COVID-19 pandemic by one of her friends. The group united various disciplines such as embroidery, sign-making, and feminist activism. In the article from Coolhunter mentioned before, Erika was featured as part of this group, which is how I was able to find her on Instagram. After sending her a message, she confirmed her availability for an interview. Even though Erika had a cold the day of the interview, the interview proceeded without any problems. At the end of the interview, she sent some pictures of his works for the thesis.

Interviewing a female sign-maker was of great importance to me. Engaging with a woman in the field of *rótulos*, especially one who did not have prior family or close friends involved in the trade and starting from the graphic design world and then passing to the world of *rótulos*, provided a unique and enriching perspective. Her insights and experiences shed light on the diverse narratives within the world of sign-making. Additionally, her recent journey into the field offered valuable contrasts with the other interviewees who began their sign-making careers some or several decades ago, offering insights into the changing dynamics of this craft.



Genaro Ramírez

Guadalajara, Mexico
Rotulista, grapic designer and type designer



After the interview with Erika Varella, she suggested that I should contact Genaro Ramírez, a rotulista who learned the craft from his father. His father was also a rotulista and had a workshop for many years, and Genaro helped him there since he was eight years old. Erika mentioned that whenever she had doubts, he was very helpful in answering all her questions. My initial interaction with Genaro took place through his Instagram profile. It was impossible to overlook the diverse professions listed in his description. Apart from being a rotulista, he was also a type designer, calligrapher, and lettering artist. Notably, he co-directs “Letrástica Festival”, a typography and design festival based in Guadalajara, Mexico, where Giovanni from *Rótulos* Bautista participated. Currently, he runs a Mexican-Croatian type and design studio named Dual Type Design. I sent him a direct message on Instagram to ask if he would be available for an interview, and surprisingly fast, he responded yes. Following a series of messages, we managed to find a mutually convenient time for the meeting. Coordinating the interview was easier because we were in the same time zone because Genaro was in Europe, where he spent half the year.

The interview lasted for over 40 minutes. During the interview, he shared valuable insights about the origins, history,

and characteristics of *rótulos*. His information complemented what I had gathered in previous interviews. In addition to his knowledge of rotulistas in Mexico, he was also acquainted with rotulistas in the United States, providing an international perspective on the field. His perspective as both a type designer and a rotulista enriched the technical aspects of *rótulos*.



Left: Facciata esterna della sede del Sindicat d’Habitatge. Immagine di Alicet T. e Ornella G. Marzo 2022
Right: Logo di Raval Rebel. Immagine di ElLokal.org

ANALYSIS

ANALYSIS

GRAPHIC ANALYSIS

Popular commercial brushed-painted *rótulo*

A possible definition

It is a handmade medium of communication that is part of Mexican folklore and is made by artisanal sign painters called rotulistas. It uses types as protagonists, and with the help of colors, and sometimes drawings and humor, aims to capture the attention of a large segment of society to inform, promote, and communicate a commercial message.

The above definition encompasses each aspect of the general categories of *rótulos* presented in chapter three (see Figure 1).

It is **handmade** because it refers to its characteristic that is brushed-painted by hand and is not reproduced in series, adding a layer of complexity to the creation, and highlighting the skills and abilities that rotulistas have.

It is **popular** because it aims to communicate with a large segment of society and has an improvised inherence.

It is **commercial** not just because it usually communicates a commercial message but also because there is always a principal who requires the *rótulo* and pays for it; the *rótulo* is not created if it's not needed. There is always a rotulista and a client because someone must require the *rótulo* for it to exist. Here, we find a variety of customers, ranging from a business owner from a large business to a business owner of an informal business or vending truck, to a taxi or truck driver, or even from a family arranging for a deceased loved one's cross.



It is worth mentioning that although the rotulismo is a practice that has been carried out worldwide for centuries, in Mexico, this technique has become so folkloric and characteristic that it has acquired a unique and distinctive sense due to the double significance it employs, making it so only Mexicans themselves can fully decode the message it conveys.

“[The *rotulo*] Other countries don’t have it, or it’s different, and in Mexico, it has that touch, that flavor, that graphic humor, and that interpretation of things, and it’s because Mexicans are more witty, funnier, and they have a “carefree” attitude to be more creative in doing things and proposing” (G. Bautista, interview, July 8, 2023).

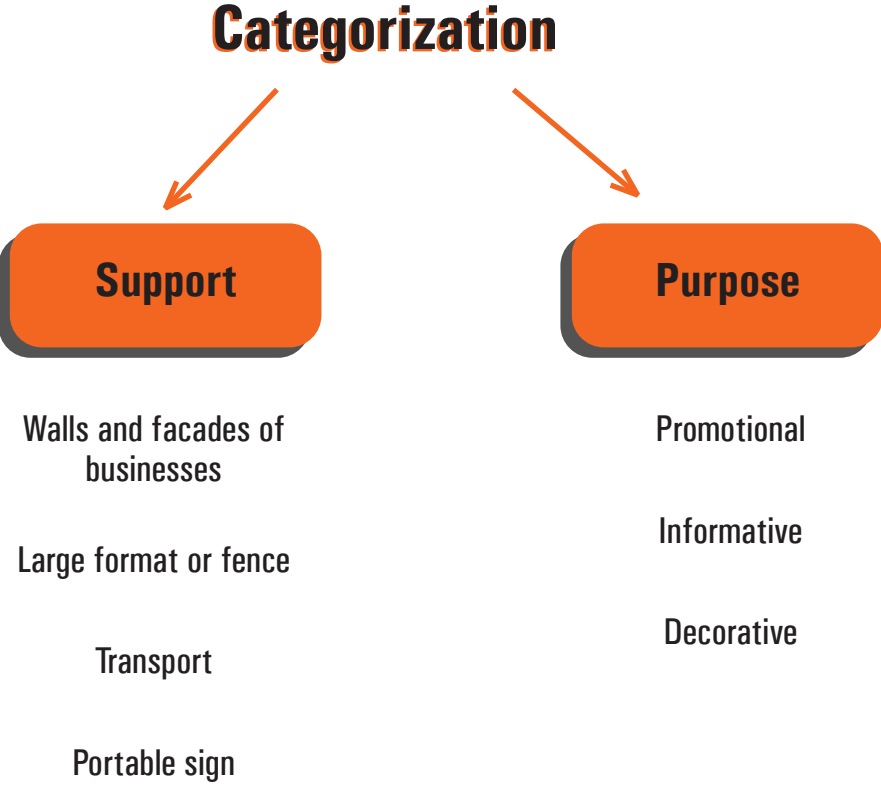
For the sake of functionality, from now on, during this work, the word “*rotulo*” will be used to refer to the specific popular commercial brushed-painted *rotulo*.



Categories

Based on the analysis conducted throughout the research two types of categorizations of popular commercial hand-painted rótulos were identified. The first categorization is based on the support, and the second one is based on purpose. These categories are not mutually exclusive, meaning that a rótulo from a particular support can serve two or more purposes, belonging to more than one category, and vice versa. Next figure presents a diagram illustrating the types of subcategories for each category.

Is important to note that the categories presented in this work, while providing a structured framework for understanding hand-painted signs, are not intended to be exhaustive or exclusive. The dynamic nature of rotulos allows for diverse classifications, demonstrating the versatility and adaptability of this traditional art form. Signs can be categorized in various ways, reflecting the rich tapestry of influences, styles, and cultural contexts that shape the work of rotulistas. The fluidity in classification underscores the complexity and diversity inherent in the world of hand-painted signs, inviting a nuanced exploration of the myriad ways in which this unique art form manifests itself



Categories - by purpose

Firstly, we will briefly explain the categorization by purpose, which will be further elucidated and integrated with the category of support in the following section.

Informational Signs: These are signages that provide clear and concise information about locations, directions, regulations, and relevant data in public, commercial, or institutional spaces.

Promotional Signs: These signs are intended for advertising and promoting products, services, or events. Their main goal is to attract public attention, highlight offers, product features, or special events.

Decorative Signs: Their function is purely aesthetic. These signs are visual elements intended to beautify interior or exterior spaces, providing an artistic, decorative, or ornamental touch to the environment. They do not have a specific informative or promotional purpose but rather seek to enhance the visual appearance of the place.

Categories - by support

Walls and facades of businesses rótulos

This type of rótulo is predominantly located on the facades of stores and informal businesses. The primary purpose is to attract the notice of individuals passing by a specific establishment.

It can be said that this is the biggest typology of this rótulo because its main function is to be commercial, and it was born for this purpose. “Well, the signage is more, like, commercial or most of the... not commercial, but like for promotion, that is what you are going to see outside the businesses” (E. Varela, interview, July 24, 2023).

Additionally, they provide information to potential customers regarding the products or services offered by that business (Soto Eguibar, 2009, p.26). Lastly, though no less important, is that it personalizes the structure, giving it an identity that makes it more recognizable among its competitors. Fernandez (2020) explains that in this type of rótulo, two levels of information can be identified. The first level includes the name of the business and its typology, usually situated in the central-upper part of the business. The second level, typically found on the sides or columns of the facade, provides information about the products or services offered (p. 20).



The variety of business that required their services are various. “The customers throughout the years have been of all kinds, including a wide variety of food businesses and the whole range of trades such as carpenters, blacksmiths, glassmakers, mechanics—all these businesses that require an ad.” (G. Bautista, interview, July 8, 2023).

Purpose

As said in this categories, the main purposes are promotional and informative, the following are examples of each of the purposes of the walls and facades of businesses rótulo. In this category an exception can be highlighted, because decorative signs can be found on interior business walls, although this is a minority occurrence.

Informational



Promotional



Large format or fence rótulo

This rótulo refers to the biggest format of rótulos that can be found on many fences. When this type of rótulo is very artistic, it can be confused with murals. However, what differentiates murals from the rótulos is that these rótulos are used mostly to promote specific events, such as sonideros*, musical events at town fairs or carnivals, sports events, and even some political campaigns use this medium for promotion, while murals serve a more artistic function. It can also be used to promote businesses, but this is less common.

At times the fence rótulo can be one of the most challenging for rotulistas due to its size. The considerations in making one are more extensive than when dealing with smaller rótulos. Factors such as the sketch, proportions, centering, and ensuring that all the letters fit correctly into the space become critical. The specific rotulista that makes this type of rótulo is called “bardero”.

Large-format rótulos must be quick and easily understandable. They have to be read almost immediately since the signs are painted on walls along fast roads, highways, and avenues. They are of a large format to be appreciated from a distance.

In terms of its purpose, it serves as a promotional message as it advertises events to persuade people to buy tickets. Additionally, it holds an informative aspect by including details such as the venue, date, time, and the artists scheduled to perform at the event.

*Cultural movement that emerged in the sixties through recorded music for the entertainment of social and family gatherings. It is a party genre and format that appropriates public space in a somewhat improvised and spontaneous manner (Rivera, 2009; Coolhunter, 2017).



Transport rótulo

In this category, we can identify three main types of transportation: taxis, buses, and cargo trucks. That has mainly the informative purpose but also the decorative. This last one can be found mostly in cargo trucks.

In taxis, rótulos are used to display the registration and identification numbers, and sometimes small phrases that the driver wants to add for personalization.

In public buses, rótulos indicate the route and main stops. This is usually done on acrylic plates that are not permanently attached to the buses, allowing removal in case of a route change. It functions more like a sign. Also, rótulos on buses include the coding of their plate number, and some creative ones may have personalized phrases similar to taxis.

For cargo trucks, unlike taxis and buses, rótulos are not primarily for registration or administrative purposes. They serve to provide identity and/or information about the company that owns them. These rótulos are typically located on the doors or bumper of trucks (Enriquez, 2020).

This also poses some challenges for the rotulistas due to the type of paint used to create these rótulos.

“We need to trace it well, because, well, it was a delicate thing on cars, yes, you can erase it, but almost instantly. When it dries, it’s a little more difficult to erase. So, it should be perfect on the first try. They bring you brand new cars, completely new, and you paint the sign. It’s like, wow, if I made a mistake, it’s the original paint. You can’t erase it so easily because we use the same type of automotive paint” (G. Bautista, interview, july 8, 2023).

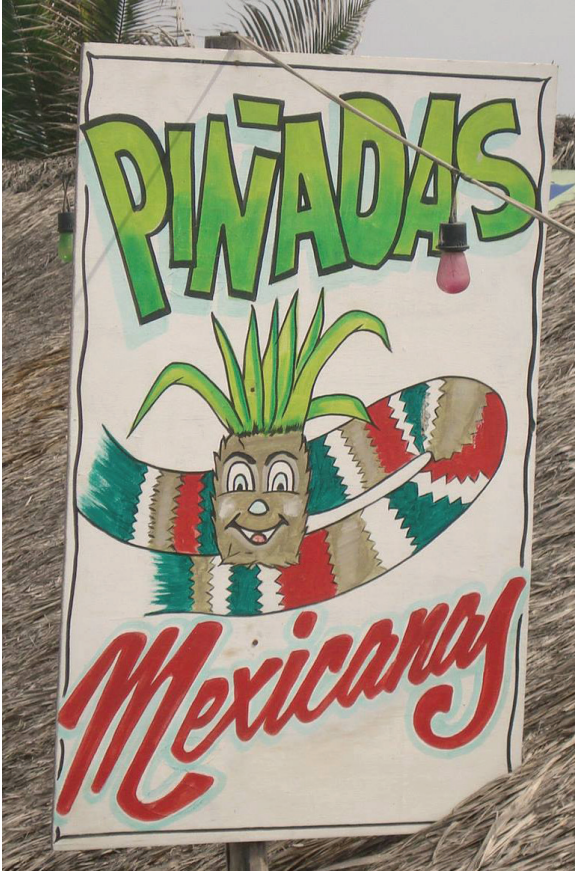


Portable sign rótulo

In this category, we can encompass all those signs that are painted on a small surface and that can be moved. Some examples of these types could be the posters or signs outside restaurants or food stalls that are placed to announce the daily menu, the dishes offered, prices, the nature of the business, or sometimes just an invitation to enter or a welcome message. Other types of signs rótulos include the crosses for the deceased where the name of the deceased person is written, along with a caption or a biblical quote, psalm, or others.

The portable sign category is the most versatile one because it can serve three purposes. When used to advertise the name of a business or its products, it serves a promotional function. When used to indicate exits, bathrooms, or display close and open signs, it becomes informative. Moreover, when utilized to add colors or provide an aesthetic view, it serves a decorative purpose.





Elements



Letters



Colors



Drawings



Composition



Support

Letters

When we talk about *rotulo*, we are talking about the types of the sign, in comparison to what people usually believe is that the *rotulos* refers to the images that accompany these letters, yet the center of *rotulos* are the types. The letters in the *rotulo* do not have the mere function of the language but are also a source of creativity and playfulness, and in their forms, can also transmit visual languages (Checa & Castro, 2010).

Just as there are so many types of *rotulos*, there are as many types of typographies used, yet for the most part, when the *rotulo* is commercial, a “basic” typeface is employed, such as the Helvetica; however, it showcases extraordinary diversity because the composition is given by the space available for the *rotulo*. And besides being based on a typeface, when adapted by the rotulistas can take a freestyle that can sometimes seem very far away from the original one, creating a wide range of similarities yet with distinct type differences. It’s to the extent that among sign painters, they can be recognized by the fonts they make. Moreover, apart from the type itself, a variety of decorations are added.

“Some people use an airbrush, some add sparkles, some shadows, some outlines of colors, others add stars and hearts, you know, it varies. So, it’s very diverse because the same letter can be made more fun, and that’s what sets us apart from other things, from something very formal, let’s say” (I. Salgado, interview, july 30, 2023).

Although the Helvetica typography, known among sign painters as “cuadrada” (square), is the most used by them, they master an infinite variety of typefaces. A rotulista must have a broad repertoire of mastered letters; in many instances, they may not know the specific name of the typeface, but they do know how to reproduce it and the



constructive characteristics that distinguish it. In some cases, rotulistas also utilize more intricate and less easily readable typefaces such as Gothic fonts, which are recurrent in Mexican popular graphics.

The adoption of this typeface in Mexican culture is studied by the Mexican graphic designer Cristina Paolini in her book called ‘Mexican Blackletter’. The Gothic letter, originating from Europe, arrived in Mexico and became entrenched in popular graphics. Gothic letters were also commonly used by rotulistas due to their elegant and intriguing appearance compared to regular letters. In using Blackletter, the idea of having invested more time, resources, and technical skills is conveyed compared to using standard letters. It becomes more than a whim; it’s the sheer pleasure of creating complex and beautiful letters, although perhaps more challenging for the viewer to decode, but it’s worth it because it turns into an ornament in itself, beyond the simple communicative message.

“Yet the final consideration to bear in mind regarding the letters, even if they are highly decorative or a mix of typography, is that they must maintain a minimum level of coherence to ensure readability” (G. Ramirez, interview, august 2, 2023).

To draw the letters, typefaces were obtained from catalogs such as Letraset or Mekanorma, which contained a diverse selection of alphabets in various types and sizes of letters. Knowledge about typefaces was also acquired through “Boca en boca” (word of mouth); the “maestro rotulista” —the term used to refer to the leader of the workshop—instructed the apprentices by explaining and demonstrating how to create the letters. Through practice, the apprentices managed to master them.

In certain circumstances, the choice of typeface was linked to the type of business. For example, for a taqueria,

a squarer and more casual typeface was preferred, while in a beauty salon, handwritten letters were chosen, which were more delicate and refined (Trujillo, 2020).





Color

“We guide ourselves and rely a lot on colors. If you notice, all Mexicans like colors. In other words, we prefer our things to be colorful, to make our business stand out” (I. Salgado, interview, July 30, 2023). Rotulistas have perfected specific strategies over decades to help their clients stand out. With the use of color, even the most formal fonts like Helvetica, which is often used in *rótulos*, can be fun and exciting. Even if they write everything in black, hints of colors are always added to complement and give life to the design.

The colors of the *rótulo* are chosen based on the client’s request, yet the most popular colors were the primary colors, yellow, blue, and red, which could be seen from afar (Ashwell, 2009). These three colors were adopted, due to their accessibility and price, but also because they attracted attention. Nowadays, we can find *rótulos* with every color palette, yet with the popularity of the nostalgia for the vintage *rótulo*, we still find many designs with the primary colors.

Sometimes, the decisions about colors are made based on the type of business. For example, for butcher shops *rótulos*, rotulistas mostly use red because it is associated with fresh meat. Also, brown, yellow, or even pink if it features a pig. In a “polleria”, where they sell chicken meat, it is yellow because it reminds people of the skin of the chicken. For a hairstylist or a beauty salon, there are more purple, fuchsia, pink, or black colors (Hernández, 2012; Salgado, 2012; Huerta, 2012). In doctor’s or dentist’s offices *rótulos* are painted in shades of blue.



Drawings

Rótulos are primarily types, but so many are accompanied by drawings of different colors. These drawings, when incorporated, become another primary element of the design. To the extent that many people mistakenly consider them synonymous with the term '*rótulo*,' they are, in fact, just companions to the lettering, supporting in communicating the message. "Many of these drawings exude feelings of humor, irony, desire, vanity, irreverence, covert sexuality, etc., thus indicating an added value to the *rótulo* and its dimension as a sociocultural artifact" (Checa & Castro, 2010).

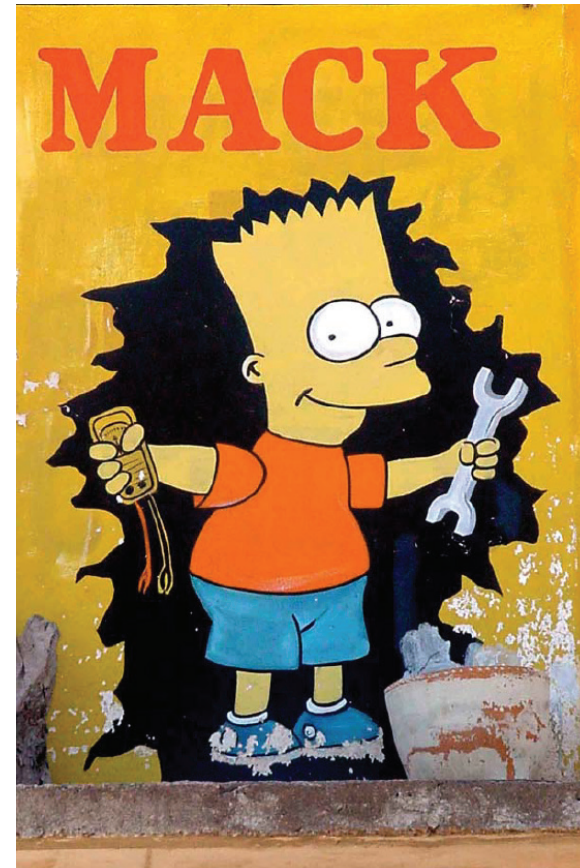
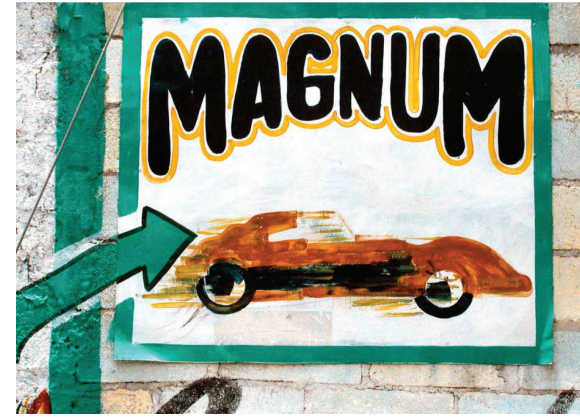
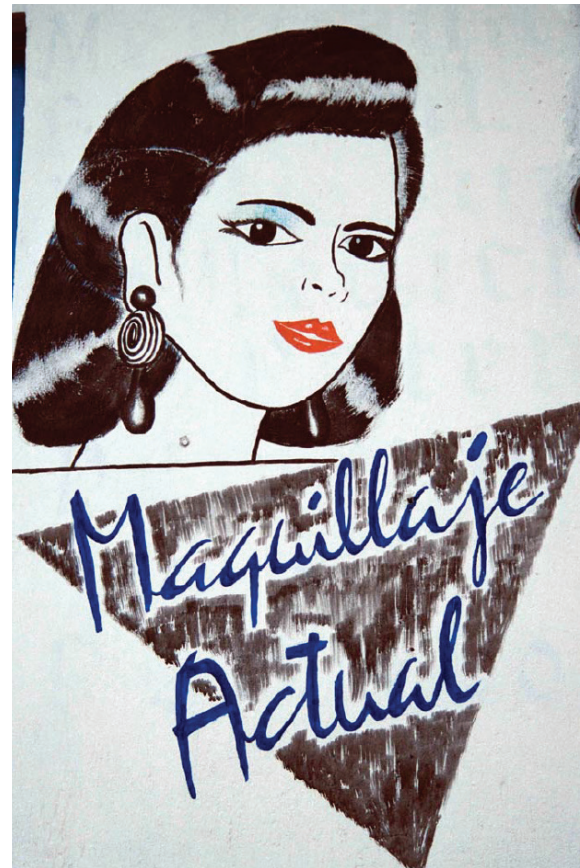
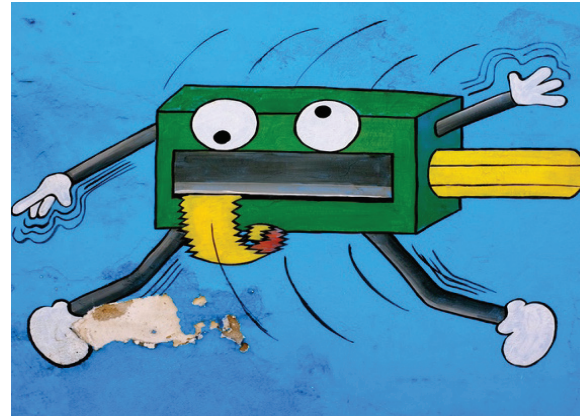
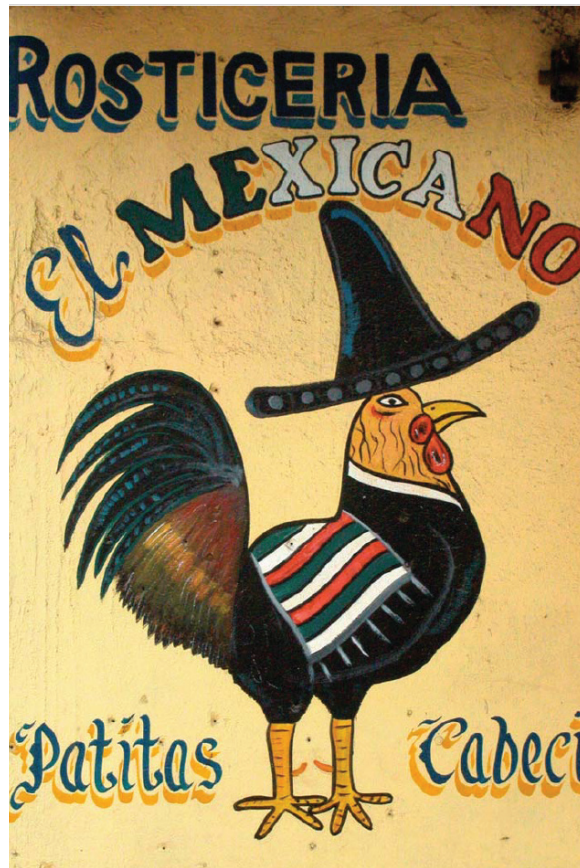
The aesthetic and style of the drawing vary based on the imagination, interpretation, or style of the rotulista who is designing it. Resulting in a range from the most elementary to the most sophisticated, to some that are absolutely naive and others almost like paintings (Soto, 2012).

They arrive and say, "Hey, paint the pollería and name it 'delicious chicken,' 'the chicken of the town,' or something like 'the cowboy chicken.' And you can already imagine a little chicken with its boots and hat, and they draw it the way they can and how they envision it. I mean, I can imagine a little chicken right now, and you put a little hat on it, but everyone is going to do it differently or interpret it differently. Perhaps they interpret a cowboy in another style and with other characteristics, or with a guitar, or singing, or happy to be cooked, or happy to be there. You interpret that, and you imagine it" (G. Bautista, interview, July 8, 2023).

In an attempt to classify these illustrations, Checa and Castro (2009) proposed five groups for categorizing the drawings that accompany the letters. The first group clusters drawings from the world of cartoons and comics and the ones inspired by them. The second category groups

human figures, always in caricature style. A third group consists of caricatured drawings of edible animals and regular objects. The fourth group clusters the representation of food, meals, drinks, cooked dishes, and so on. The last group groups drawings of technical components such as machinery, tools, construction materials, or automotive components.





Support

The support is one of the most important elements for the *rótulo*, along with the letters, as it defines the composition, materials, and cost of the *rótulo*. In the past, when *rótulos* were the primary means of advertising, they could be featured everywhere, even on billboard tarps, where rotulistas would paint the design. Now, with digital means of advertising having gained most of the business, rotulistas have fewer traditional spaces. However, some of these supports that still exist include the fences and walls of cities, the metal curtains of stores, the surfaces of food trucks, signs, headstones, and though less common, public transportation. Even though they are losing traditional supports, they are also gaining new ones. For instance, in the decorative category, supports such as garments, shoes, canvases, or mirrors are decorated with *rótulos*, welcoming new possibilities.



Composition

Typographic composition is determined by the space available rather than by a design decision or layout (Paoli, 2012), sometimes even forgetting the rules of graphic composition. Depending on the canvas, the font and design are also adapted to what looks best on the type of surface.

"When creating a composition, what the client wants to advertise and the business should be placed in the most eye-catching position and in the largest size, making it more noticeable. In the second place is the rest of the information that needs to be communicated, which is generally smaller in size, and if necessary, different types of fonts are combined" (Hernández, 2020).



The design phases of a *rótulo*

How do you make a *rótulo*?

The process can vary from client to client yet there are general steps that rotulistas follow.

1. The request

2. The proposals

3. The agreement

4. The estarcidor (template)

5. Preparation of the surface

6. The outline

7. The paint-brush outline

8. The fill

9. Detailing

The duration of the making process of the *rótulo*, from step 4 (The Estarcidor/Template) to step 9 (Detailing), varies. The simpler ones can take 3-4 hours, and the most complicated or bigger ones can take 3-4 days.

1. The request

This marks the initial encounter between the rotulista and the client. At this stage, the client may present preliminary ideas, references, or even a mood board outlining their vision. Alternatively, the client might arrive with a brief, seeking inspiration or proposals. Discussions about the project’s support, size, and deadline occur, but no formal agreements are made.

2. The proposals

Following the initial meeting, the rotulista may craft proposals based on the ideas or brief provided. This phase often involves creating sketches or small-scale versions of the *rótulo*. Some rotulistas employ digital tools to generate proposals and even produce mock-ups to visualize how the final design will look.

3. The agreement

The rotulista presents the proposal to the client, and upon reaching a design consensus, the cost of the work is determined; factors influencing the pricing include surface area, the number of letters that will be painted, the complexity of the letters, size, the materials required, and the type and quality of paint. Once a price is agreed upon, the rotulista begins the process.

4. The “estarcidor” (template)

It is a 1:1 scale drawing on paper that the rotulistas create of the *rotulo*. This serves as a guide for them to draw a guideline, helping them trace the final *rotulo*. This ensures that when they work on the surface, they can maintain cleanliness without drawing lines and erasing. Some rotulistas prefer the “old school” method, doing everything by hand and using scale rulers to draw everything manually. Others use digital tools to scale the drawing on computers and either print it on a large scale or project it directly into the surface, in which case they skip the next step.

RÓTULOS
&
ROTULISTAS

4. The “estarcidor” (template)

After creating the template with a needle, they start making holes along the lines of the drawing. Subsequently, excess paper is sanded away to ensure a smooth surface.

RÓTULOS
&
ROTULISTAS

5. Preparation of the surface

This involves prepping the surface for the work. For walls, this may include applying patching material to cover holes, while metal surfaces require cleaning and priming. Then a coat of white paint is then applied to the surface (Checa & Castro, 2010). In cases where a previous *rotulo* exists on the wall, letters are painted first, and then the entire wall is painted for uniformity (Salgado, 2012).

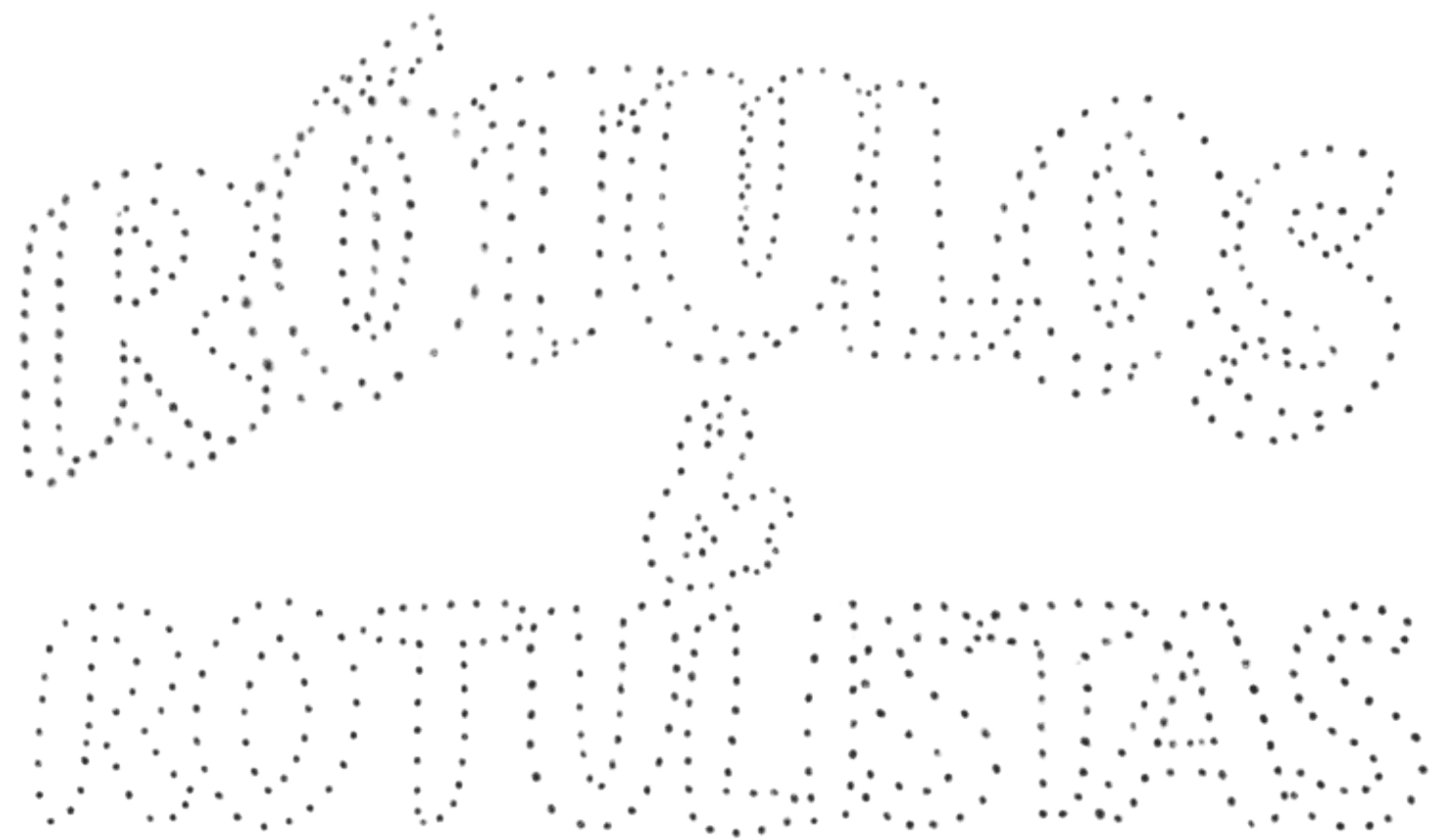
6. The outline

With the surface ready, the template is placed against it aligned to the final position of the *rótulo*, and a motita* (small ball filled with chalk or coal powder) is passed over the holes to mark the *rótulo*'s outline. Then, the template is removed from the surface, and the outline of the *rótulo* remains by the sequence of dots that the powder marks. After this, the rotulista may decide to outline by hand with chalk or coal or proceed directly to the next step.

FOOTNOTE: this small ball is usually made with a sock or a piece of fabric.

RÓTULOS
&
ROTULISTAS

6. The outline



7. The paint-brush outline

Depending on the design's complexity, the rotulista outlines the *rotulo* with the primary color of the letter. In the cases of thin letters, the entire letter is painted in the first stroke, eliminating the need for a separate outline. However, these letters require additional painting for tonal variations and unfinished parts. The rotulista may alter the stroke thickness in this step to achieve the desired final result.

RÓTULOS
&
ROTULISTAS

8. The “recorte” (fill)

Here, the outlined letters are filled with the base color, and additional coats may be applied if needed.

RÓTULOS
&
ROTULISTAS

9. Detailing

In the final phase, the rotulista adds decorations or ornaments to the letters. Depending on the design, this could involve using a different colored outline, shadows, color gradients, or 3D effects.



RÓTULOS
&
ROTULISTAS

The image displays the final detailed design of the text 'RÓTULOS & ROTULISTAS'. The word 'RÓTULOS' is rendered in a bold, red, 3D-style font with a yellow outline and a slight shadow. Below it, the ampersand '&' is in a blue, stylized font with a yellow outline. The word 'ROTULISTAS' is in a yellow, outlined font with a red shadow. The entire text is flanked by two white, stylized starburst or star-like ornaments.

Blank page

Lettering vs *rótulos*

In the field of letters, we encountered words that might seem to have the same meaning or refer to the same. Something that caught my attention during the research is that there was confusion between the terms lettering and *rótulo*, and even though people assure you they are not the same, they sometimes find it very hard to explain the differences between them. These differences also varied from person to person, leaving sometimes more blurry lines between these two fields, leaving to the imagination that there is not a common consensus about what we call *rótulo* and what is not a *rótulo*.

“The thing is that, if we look at the translation in a very literal way, *‘rótulo’* and ‘lettering’ are the same. However, the action of ‘rotular’ refers to placing letters on a surface for a purpose, whether advertising or signage, and that is also considered ‘lettering’. If we focus on documentation, just before the rise of social media, when reading the word ‘lettering’, you could understand that someone was designing letters. It could be for a logo, a newspaper headline, or even for a book cover. All of that fell under the term ‘lettering’” (G. Ramirez, interview, august 2, 2023).



So, at first glance, when we examine the actual definition, there appears to be no difference between the terms; both refer to crafting letters to convey content. One might say that ‘lettering’ is the English equivalent of the Spanish word ‘*rotulo*.’

Upon comparing the final creations of both, they are also very similar. They both present a graphic or phrase in their design that is unique, a characteristic inherent in artisanal and handmade work. This artisanal quality isn’t intended for mass reproduction; even if replicated, each piece will remain distinct from others.

In examining the results of both the piece of lettering and the *rotulo*, they share significant similarities. Each presents a unique graphic or phrase in its design, a defining trait characteristic of artisanal and handmade craftsmanship. This artisanal quality is not tailored for mass production; even if replicated, each piece retains its distinctiveness, remaining separate from others.

“In other words, lettering has the quality of being a unique piece, displayed and potentially reproduced as such. The entire phrase or word maintains uniqueness in its design and composition. In this context, the type of *rotulo* we’re discussing is almost identical” (G. Ramirez, interview, august 2, 2023).

However, one distinction lies in the fact that ‘lettering’ doesn’t connote a specific profession. It refers merely to the object containing the designed letters without specialized individuals or a dedicated trade. The word *rotulo* also means the craft of hand painting, a historical profession that, although not requiring formal education from universities or colleges, practitioners learn through practical experience, possessing the necessary skills for crafting a *rotulo*.

Another point of differentiation is the typical support used:

lettering is generally done on paper or smaller surfaces, whereas *rotulos* can be found everywhere, coming in various sizes but often larger. “We do it on the wall, on the street, and I think the big difference is that we move from paper to very large surfaces; we don’t stay just in the paper.” (G. Bautista, interview, july 8, 2023).

In addition, signs are mainly used to communicate and promote commercial activities, while lettering tends to have a more decorative aspect. Signs take techniques from lettering but seek typographic formality to ensure the legibility of the message. Lettering on the other hand, may prioritize decoration over legibility, making it difficult to decode the message. However, in contemporary contexts, the evolving role of *rotulos* is reshaping their function from mere commercial tools to artistic expressions, aligning them more closely with lettering. As their primary commercial purpose diminishes, *rotulos* embrace a more decorative role over functionality, blurring the distinction further between the two.

In exploring the realms of lettering and *rotulo*, it’s evident that despite their perceived similarities, defining clear boundaries between these terms can be abstract. The distinction between ‘*rotulo*’ and ‘lettering’ seems to fluctuate from person to person, leading to blurred lines and a lack of a unified definition. While ‘lettering’ and ‘*rotulo*’ may appear almost synonymous in a literal translation, they each encompass nuances that differentiate their roles in design and communication. Lettering suggests a more decorative scope, encompassing various design applications, from logos to book covers, while *rotulo* carries a historical legacy tied to artisanal craftsmanship. The uniqueness inherent in each crafted piece distinguishes them, with the *rotulo* emphasizing practical application and lettering often embracing decorative elements. Ultimately, despite their similarities, these terms signify divergent approaches to the art and function of letter design.



Design, craft or art: Evolution of the purpose and interpretation of *rótulos*



The *rótulos* were born in Mexico as an advertising medium to promote and commercialize the local businesses that needed ways and methods to communicate with their clients and attract more and more. The rotulistas were the old graphic designers, and it was a profession that was very required for several decades. Even so, many left their trades to become rotulistas since it was very much required, and they earned an honest salary that could give them the possibility to live a comfortable life.

With the arrival of technology and digital printing, less and less work arrived for the rotulistas, and the places that first hosted a *rótulo* were filled with billboard tarps and plastic signs with perfectly aligned designs and impeccable types made by formally educated designers from the commodity of a desk and at a cheaper price. The colors, the craziness, and the fun suddenly became uniform walls. Rotulistas had only two choices, to evolve

and adapt and use these new technologies to accept this work or struggle with the fewer works that arrived for the traditional hand-painted *rótulo*.

“Craftsmanship was not on the verge of extinction due to being terrible or inefficient, but rather because people were unwilling to pay for the work done. Sign painting is something that requires time to learn, money to invest, practice, and mastering an entire trade, encompassing all that it involves. It’s, in a way, an artisanal way of creating things, and that comes with its costs” (G. Ramirez, interview, august 2, 2023).

Yet, just when it seemed nearly extinct, the digital era reached its pinnacle and society redirected its attention to crafts and handmade items. Seeking ways to distinguish these from the competition, attention turned once again to the *‘rótulo’* as a solution for

communication. In the early 2000s, initial efforts emerged: publications of books, articles, and exhibitions began to feature *‘rótulos.’* Such as, Sensacional de diseño mexicano, by Juan Carlos Mena with the colaboración of Óscar Reyes - that had an exhibition with the same name and a series of videos made by Canal Once, a Mexican public television station belonging to the National Polytechnic Institute-; Gráfica popular mexicana, by Enrique Soto Eguibar, the various articles of Martín Checa-Artsu and María Castro.

However, they were no longer solely serving their traditional function as commercial promotion; they were now admired and analyzed as objects of art while still retaining their practicality in conveying messages, much like a craft.

The profession gradually regained prominence, and across the landscapes of Mexico, *‘rótulos’* began reappearing. Though they remained a minority, their presence was becoming noticeable once more. The most significant surge that solidified the *‘rótulo’* as a craft in the collective consciousness occurred in February 2022. During this time, a local government in a district of Mexico City initiated their removal under the guise of ‘city cleanup’—provoking widespread fury and disagreement among chilangos* and people across Mexico. These actions were labeled as absurd, a classist affront to the artistic community, and a monumental loss of Mexico’s visual heritage.

In defense of the *‘rótulo,’* it wasn’t merely regarded as a commercial medium but rather as a craft deeply woven into our popular visual culture—a crucial part of the collective identity of all Mexicans. *‘Rótulos’* have been a part of our history for decades, covering the cultural landscape to such an extent that they’ve become intertwined with our identity. When walking in other parts of the world, encountering a Mexican restaurant would likely present a graphic reminiscent of a *‘rótulo,’* for it has transformed into an iconic graphic style for the Mexican people. It has evolved

beyond merely transmitting a message to becoming communication itself. This evolution has seen the *‘rótulo’* transition from a medium solely for conveying information and commerce to an iconic style.

“It was not only about the message that communicates but also for the aesthetic, just for the fact that is a *rótulo* it has a strong message of Mexican, local, and hand-made message. We understand from those shapes and those colors that someone is giving a very clear message. They are conveying a message from their locality, from warmth, from identifying with others, with their neighborhood, with the people around them”
(G. Ramirez, interview, august 2, 2023).

In recent years there is another evolution of the *rótulo*, briefly touched upon in the Decorative *rótulo* category and the discussion comparing lettering and *rótulos*. The *rótulo* has transformed into an iconic style, shifting its focus from functional business promotion to an admired aesthetic, bordering more on ornamentation. This evolution is leading the *‘rótulo’* into the realm of art, where its hand-crafted nature and specific techniques are gaining recognition.

“It would be intriguing to witness this craft embracing a different essence. I suggested to my father, ‘Let’s start creating *rótulos* in smaller formats, aiming more towards being pieces of art’”
(G. Bautista, interview, july 8, 2023).



When viewed as art, the *rótulo* completely diverts from its original function, assuming a more passive role, intended for admiration as a decorative or artistic piece. This perspective might aid in safeguarding this craft and art from being dismissed. Nevertheless, the *rótulo* remains versatile, capable of transitioning between various purposes—it can serve as a formal advertising medium, a craft, or as art. What matters most is the ongoing discussion and efforts aimed at revaluing the *rótulo*.

Footnote: the term is Mexican slang used to refer specifically to people who are natives or inhabitants of Mexico City.



ANALYSIS

SOCIAL ANALYSIS

Armando Téllez

Armando is a historic rotulista, born and raised in Mexico City. He ventured into rotulismo after meeting an expert in the field who taught him the fundamentals and Armando assisted him with small jobs. Then started to work at a workshop, eventually becoming a professional rotulista. However, due to financial difficulties in the business, he had to temporarily halt his work as a rotulista to support his family by pursuing a different profession. Now, with his children grown up, he has found the opportunity to return to sign painting. He is a close friend of Isaías and often assists him with complex projects.

In the interview with Mr. Armando Téllez, some of the important topics that emerged were lack of work in rotulismo and generational divergence in the world of rotulismo.

Lack of work in rotulismo

In some cases, it may seem that the world of rotulismo is a highly sought-after area, but in other instances, it has been shown that this is not always the case. The decline in demand for rotulistas, is still affected by the rise of digital methods and printing technologies, which, due to reduced costs and the speed of reproduction, are preferred by a large number of customers. This situation often prevents them from developing the craft they are passionate about, leading them to change their trade field in search of better pay and stability.

Generational divergence in the world of rótulismo

In the context of Mexico City, the tradition of sign painting is undergoing a noticeable generational shift. In contrast

to other regions where the interest and willingness of new generations to follow the family trade persist, a different phenomenon is observed in Mexico City. During the interviews conducted in this metropolis, a trend emerged where the children of sign painters do not exhibit a marked interest in following their parents' footsteps in the art of sign painting. This situation contrasts significantly with the attitudes and aspirations of individuals interviewed in other geographical areas, where the inheritance of the trade is highly regarded.



Isaías Salgado

Isaías Salgado is an extremely experienced master with over 35 years of expertise, not only in *rótulos* but also in advertising drawing, airbrushing, and graffiti. Born and raised in Mexico City, he was introduced to the world of *rótulos* by an uncle during his teenage years. He began his journey in a workshop as an assistant, and within a year, he had already become a skilled rotulista. Remaining active in the same neighborhood and deeply involved in the rotulista community, he has built an extensive client base, ranging from local to international clients.

In the interview with Mr. Isaías Salgado, some of the important topics that emerged were the community of rotulistas and rótulistas anonymous behind the works of artists.

The community of rotulistas

Over the years, the number of sign painters has considerably reduced. However, throughout the entire research and as confirmed during Mr. Isaías’ interview, it was found that there currently exists a small yet robust community of sign painters, which has emerged in recent years thanks to social media. This community engages in mutual cooperation; in cases where projects are large or complex, they call upon each other for assistance in completing the work. This sustains and strengthens the presence of sign painting in Mexico, as these peer communities allow efforts to be doubled, enabling the completion of significant projects. An example of such a community is the recent sign painters’ convention, the first of its kind in Mexico, organized by Rótulos Bautista, where all the sign painters interviewed for this thesis participated.



“I’m telling you this because they told me, and I know these girls. We even interacted, and they told me that they wanted to get to know me and all that. I said, well, I’d like to know, share, and see how we can help each other. Well, it turns out I did meet them, and it was actually at several events we had” (I. Salgado, interview, July 30, 2023).

Authorship Recognition

Often, the work of rotulistas is not publicly highlighted. It’s regrettable that sometimes artists use the talent of rotulistas for their projects without granting them the proper recognition. These practices, although common, do not reflect the respect or fairness that rotulistas deserve for their skill and dedication. It’s essential to promote an environment where the work of rotulistas is recognized and valued, ensuring they receive the proper credit for their artistic contribution. However, it’s important to note that in the struggle for this recognition, cases contrary to this are beginning to emerge.

“These are magazines that I made for an artist, and these are magazines that she releases very often. No, I don’t remember how often she releases them, but I created these designs for her, and she sent them to print because obviously, I don’t individually make each one of them. Instead, she sends these to be printed and then incorporates them into some of her garments, not all of them” (I. Salgado, interview, July 30, 2023).



Ig: @isaiassalgadodel



Giovanni Bautista

Giovanni Bautista is a young rotulista and graphic designer from Oaxaca. He is from a family of rotulistas and learned the trade from his father, who has been operating a *rótulos* workshop since 1983. Giovanni enjoys experimenting with handmade *rótulos*, constantly pushing boundaries, and exploring the possibilities of digital media. Together with his father, they are becoming a point of reference for *rótulos* in Mexico.

In the interview with Giovanni Bautista, some of the important topics that emerged were the revalorization of *rótulos*, the cultural importance of *rótulos* in Oaxaca and the influence of politics in *rótulos*.

The revalorization of *rótulos*

An interesting case of how the craft of sign painting was revalued is the case of *rótulos* Bautista. A workshop that, through creativity, new approaches, and social media, has promoted the artistry of rotulismo. Their workshop has even engaged in collaborations with local artists, musicians, brands, and international brands, such as Levis, Netflix, Vans, HBO max, Innvictus, which have resulted in new creative ways of using *rótulos* and brought more visibility to the *rótulos* and the rotulistas. The history of this workshop, with 40 years of heritage, has become a reference point in Mexican rotulismo.

“[...] these brands also force you exactly to that, to think more, What can be done? How the *rótulo* could be applied in this? How it would work better? and so on” (G. Bautista, interview, July 8, 2023).



The cultural importance of *rótulos* in Oaxaca

A very interesting thing to analyze is how signage is perceived differently throughout Mexico. In the case of Oaxaca, a city in the central region of the country nestled between mountains and valleys, known for its ethnic diversity, internationally recognized cuisine, and folk art. The movements of rotulismo there is notably popular, integrating *rótulos* into their collective cultural image. Additionally, the state government strongly supports the use of signs for cultural projects, which stands in stark contrast to what we mentioned happening in Mexico City.

“The *rótulos* movement in Oaxaca is quite strong right now; everyone is associating or wanting to involve *rótulos* in some of their things. They don’t just think about billboard tarps, well, they obviously think about billboard tarps, but this government is particularly inclined towards cool things. They say, ‘Oh, this should be done, but with a *rótulos* touch, we must call a rotulista” (G. Bautista, interview, July 8, 2023).

The influence of politics in *rótulos*

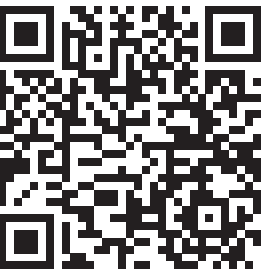
Laws and policies have significantly influenced Mexican popular *rótulos* in various ways, affecting how they are designed, displayed, and utilized. These regulations are subject to change depending on the types of governments and different circumstances. An example, which inspired this thesis, was the case mentioned earlier in the Cuauhtémoc neighborhood where, due to a local government campaign, certain establishment *rótulos* were removed and replaced with neutral paintings and the city hall’s logo. Another instance has been in transportation *rótulos*, specifically taxis, which were initially hand-painted. Subsequently, with the introduction of digital printing, the government mandated the use of vinyl over hand-painted *rótulos*, significantly affecting the craft of rotulismo. Later, due to issues arising from lack of control and duplicate records, authorities reverted to manual sign painting for taxi registration. These cases illustrate how rotulistas are affected by government decisions.

“For example, we’ve experienced a lot of ups and downs with the transportation sector, which has been quite strange. Initially, all



taxis were hand-painted, but then vinyl became trendy. Even the Department of Mobility and Transportation, the authority that regulates the standards and rules for taxis, decided that for a while everything had to be hand-painted because vinyl didn’t exist. Then vinyl emerged, and they said, ‘No more vinyl,’ and that’s when all the work for sign painters dried up. Later, the department said, ‘No, nothing with vinyl, now it’s all hand-painted” (G. Bautista, interview, July 8, 2023).

Ig: @rotulos.bautista



Erika Varela

Erika Varela is a young graphic designer from Puebla who studied at the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP). Her introduction to sign-making occurred during one of her university classes, where she learned the art of letters, and led her to the discovery of *rotulos*. She still does not consider herself an expert since she has only been working as a sign maker for a few years.

In the interview with Erika Varela, some of the important topics that emerged were the learning of the craft, change of clients and feminism in *rotulos*.

Challenges of learning the craft nowadays

In the first topic, the learning of the craft, emerged that the disappearance of traditional workshops has left a profound gap in the transmission of *rotulo* craftsmanship, impacting its accessibility as a learned skill. The absence of formal educational avenues and structured guidance in Mexico, underscores the challenges in preserving this unique visual expression. As *rotulo* continues to evolve in a digital age, the struggle to preserve its traditional essence highlights the necessity for greater recognition, support, and educational opportunities to safeguard this cultural heritage for future generations. Meter parte de la familia de los *rotulos*

“For me it’s like this access to learning this trade, it’s a bit complicated, at least here in Mexico, because in other countries it is more accessible” (Erika Varela, 2023).

The modernized era of *rotulos*

As explained throughout the thesis, *rotulos* are traditions originating in popular areas, created by and for the people. What usually happens with new generations is that these traditions begin to fade or be forgotten, often opting for more ‘modern’ choices. However, with *rotulos*, a phenomenon is occurring wherein new generations of young people from any social class are revaluing this art of lettering. While they modernize the style by changing colors or effects, they try to maintain the essence of the classic *rotulos*.

“Customers have been young people, that’s what’s funny. I think there was suddenly a boom in wanting to use the sign and modernize it a bit. They’re like young people who have their own enterprises, mostly related to restaurants” (E. Varela, interview, July 24, 2023).

Another characteristic that reveals the entry of *rotulismo* into modernity is that individuals who have received a formal education have entered the world of sign painting, viewing it as a craft that is an important part of Mexican visual culture.

An essential element contributing to the phenomenon mentioned above has been social media. These platforms have become tools that help promote the craft of *rotulos* and help *rotulistas* promote their work and connect with

clients.

Feminism in *rotulos*

Rotulos have also been used in activist social movements. Erika was part of a movement called “Morras chidas rotulando” (Cool Girls Creating Signs), which sought to merge embroidery with sign painting to address women’s rights. This movement emerged during the pandemic, providing a space that helped, not only to connect but also to unite women within the realm of *rotulos* and other crafts. This proposal is interesting since, besides providing a new perspective on *rotulismo*, it contributed to strengthening the presence of women in a field like *rotulismo*, that historically was predominantly male.

“It was a project started by a girl who became my friend. She had this project called ‘Morras Chidas Rotulando’ (Cool Girls Creating Signs) and launched a call for participation that attracted a lot of attention, you know? I think there were many women interested in this craft, which is generally dominated by men” (E. Varela, interview, July 24, 2023).



Ig: @erikavarela



Genaro Ramírez

Genaro Ramírez is a rotulista, type designer, and calligrapher. He co-directs “Letrástica Festival”, a typography and design festival based in Guadalajara, Mexico, where he is from. Genaro runs a Mexican-Croatian type and design studio named Dual Type Design. He learned the craft of rotulismo from his father. His father had a workshop for many years, and Genaro helped him there since he was eight years old.

In the interview with Genaro Ramírez, some of the important topics that emerged were the origins of Mexican *rótulos* and the USA influence, difference between graphic designers and rotulistas and the heritage of the knowledge of rotulismo and new tools for learning it.

The origins of mexican *rótulos* and the USA influence

The origins of Mexican sign painting stem from American sign painting. During that period, the majority of rotulistas were influenced by a mix of factors: some received formal training in the United States, learning the techniques there, while others were self-taught. However, predominant influences in major cities and border areas primarily stemmed from the American school of sign painting.

In the United States, there was a structured education system for sign painting, involving books, exams, and certifications issued by unions—an aspect notably absent in Mexico. The main styles and techniques in Mexico closely resembled those taught in the United States. Many Mexicans ventured to the United States to explore job opportunities in sign painting and to acquire the techniques. When they returned to Mexico, they adapted and integrated this acquired knowledge into their own prac-

tices, adding a distinctive Mexican touch.

American sign painting often presented specific compositions and color palettes that didn’t resonate with Mexican sensibilities. While many techniques were imported, the color palettes didn’t undergo direct adoption; instead, they were altered to better suit the Mexican context. This adaptation gave rise to the unique Mexican style of sign painting.

“So, what the Mexican does in many aspects (as in other aspects) is to take something, appropriate it, and give it their own flavor” (G. Ramírez, interview, august 2, 2023).

Difference between graphic designers and rotulistas

During the 1950s and 1960s, there wasn’t a clear differentiation between the roles of the rotulista and the graphic designer, as it was the rotulista who was responsible for any type of graphic work for advertising. It was in the 1990s when this distinction between both figures became more evident, clearly defining the types of tasks or projects each one carried out. Despite this separation, there was always a subtle relationship between both professions; although not entirely clear, one profession drew inspiration from the other.

“Something I really enjoyed was copying logos, but I didn’t know who made them, or I really liked copying typefaces and didn’t know who created the letters. [...] So, from there my curiosity was born of knowing who was in charge of doing those kinds of things, and well, that was when I discovered they were graphic designers. Which for me was like, oh, someone designed that” (Interview Genaro Ramírez, 2023).



The heritage of the knowledge of rotulismo and new tools for learning it

Historical rotulistas acquired their skills in rotulismo through traditional means, either by apprenticing in an old workshop or learning from a family member that mastered the craft. In Genaro’s case, his father, an experienced maestro rotulista, ran a workshop where Genaro learned the craft.

“Almost all the knowledge I acquired came from my dad and the *rótulistas* who were with him” (Interview Genaro Ramírez, 2023).

In an effort to pass on his knowledge and preserve this traditional art form, facilitating the advice and information between rotulistas, Genaro created a Facebook group; this online community aims to provide support, encourage discussions, and address any queries or uncertainties that budding rotulistas might encounter. More recently, Genaro expanded his efforts by launching an Instagram page. Here, through videos that explain the basics of the trade, he continues his mission of sharing and disseminating the rich knowledge and expertise of rotulismo.

Ig: @ genramirez



Ig: @ apoyoaalrotulo



Overview of the topics emerged

The social results of the research has shed light on various critical aspects of the rotulismo in Mexico. Through these discussions, several recurring themes have emerged, unveiling the multifaceted nature and evolving landscape of rotulismo.

Firstly, the generational shift in the world of rotulismo has surfaced as a significant concern. The contrast between regions, notably the divergence observed in Mexico City where the younger generation seems less inclined to follow in the footsteps of their sign painting ancestors, while other areas uphold the tradition with great respect, poses a pertinent challenge. This shift indicates a potential threat to the heritage of rotulismo in certain regions, demanding attention and support to preserve this cultural practice.

Secondly, the emergence of communities of rotulistas, particularly in recent years facilitated by social media, presents a promising development. Despite the dwindling numbers of rotulistas over time, these close-knit communities foster mutual cooperation, aiding each other in tackling large projects. This collective effort not only sustains but also strengthens the presence of rotulismo in Mexico, highlighting the significance of peer collaboration in preserving this craft.

Moreover, the intersection between rotulistas and contemporary issues has been a noteworthy discovery. From feminist movements integrating rotulismo as a means of expression to the impact of politics and governmental decisions on the craft, it's evident that rotulismo is not only an artistic tradition but also a medium that intersects with broader societal changes.

Furthermore, the challenges and opportunities in learning and revaluing rotulismo in the modern era have been brought to the forefront. The disappearing of traditional workshops and the lack of formal educational avenues pose challenges to the transmission and preservation of rotulismo. However, the efforts of individuals like Genaro Ramírez, who utilize social media platforms to share knowledge and sustain the craft, demonstrate the potential for leveraging new tools for learning and fostering community support.

In essence, the qualitative exploration into rotulismo has uncovered both the struggles and resilience within this traditional craft. It emphasizes the importance of preserving this art form while adapting to modern challenges. The findings underscore the need for collective efforts, societal recognition, educational support, and policy considerations to safeguard and revalue rotulismo, ensuring its continuity as an integral part of Mexico's cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the research on Rótulos y Rotulistas has provided a rich and nuanced understanding of Mexican hand-painted folk signs and the skilled artisans behind them through the lens of design anthropology. This exploration has revealed the multifaceted dimensions of this traditional art form, shedding light on its cultural significance, its social and economic milieu that shape the work of sign makers.

Through an anthropological perspective, we have delved into both the signs and the lives of the signmakers, uncovering the stories embedded in their creations and the intricate relationship between the artists and the communities they serve. The study has highlighted the resilience of this traditional craft in the face of modernization and globalization, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and preserving these unique forms of cultural expressions.

Furthermore, this analysis has underscored the role of signs not only as functional markers but as powerful symbols of cultural identity, local pride, and artistic innovation. The dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity within the realm of hand-painted signs emerges as a crucial theme, illustrating how these art forms evolve and adapt to changing times while maintaining a connection to their cultural roots.

While exploring the anthropology of design, this research encourages a reevaluation of how we perceive and relate to traditional crafts. By understanding the cultural, social, and economic dynamics at play in the world of sign makers, we gain insights that extend beyond the aesthetic realm, enriching our understanding of the larger cultural landscape.

In essence, the exploration of Rótulos y Rotulistas serves as a testament to the resilience of cultural heritage in the face of contemporary challenges. The findings of this research contribute to a deeper appreciation of the intricate relationship between tradition and modernity, urging us to celebrate and safeguard the invaluable legacy of Mexican hand-painted signs and the talented artisans who bring them to life.

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