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REVIEW ARTICLE

NOT MEANT TO BE SUSTAINABLE: A STUDY WITH LOW-INCOME
CONSUMERS IN SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to examine low income classes attitudes towards sustainability. The study was justified by the importance of the theme sustainability, by the growth of the low-income segment and finally due to the shortage of scholarly work focused on low income conscious consumer. After reviewing the literature a quantitative study (survey) was conducted. A convenience sample of 410 individuals was selected considering socio-economic classification, belonging to the classes CD and residents in the city of Sao Paulo. A structured questionnaire was used. Data were analyzed with the use of descriptive statistics. Results indicated that conscious consumption is still low for this segment and there is a gap between the declared intention and the actual behavior towards conscious consumption. Thus both Brazilian enterprises and the government need to invest in educational initiatives.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper aims at analyzing the attitude of low-income consumers living in São Paulo regarding conscious consumption. There are many explanations for choosing this theme. On one hand, the increased interest in the topic of sustainability (Carrigan and Attala, 2001; Pelsmacker and Carrigan, 2009; Chauvel, Macedo-Soares and Silva, 2010; Chauvel and Suarez, 2009; Cohn *et al.*, 2009; Fabi, Lawrence and Smith, 2010; Ottman, 1994, 2007) and on the other hand the importance of low-income segment in Brazil (Almeida Prado, 2008; Chauvel and Mattos, 2008; Hemais, Borelli Casotti and Dias, 2011; Souza and Lamounier, 2010). Issues related to the depletion of the production system, ecology, and preservation of the environment represent a social concern that has been consistently growing since the second half of the twentieth century. The growth of planned obsolescence systems, accelerated replacement of goods and their consequent disposal, dispense with garbage and recycling issues have gained space as the subject became more urgent, considering the discarded amounts and the consequences of this disposal on the environment. From the end of the twentieth century, the concern with environmental degradation in society has increased significantly (Chauvel, Macedo-Soares and Silva, 2010). Discussions on sustainable development began with the Brundtland Commission, formally known as the World

Commission on Environment and Development, recognized by the ONU, whose agenda was to discuss the environmental problems of the planet and ensure sustainable human progress. The goal of sustainable development is "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Bacha, Santos and Schaun, 2010).

The demand for eco-friendly products has led to the emergence of a new kind of marketing, resulting from the issues that fall within the area of environmental responsibility. A different perspective from that which prevailed in the 80s, when growth at any cost dominated the "yuppie" thinking of businesses and industries. Today, many businesspeople consider elements such as the sustainability of their actions among the most important issues when making industrial, commercial and distribution decisions. With the increasing social and political pressure, companies have gone beyond simply dealing with pollution and waste disposal. Nowadays, there is concern with design, development of alternative products, procedures, practices and behaviors (Fabi, Lourenço and Silva, 2010; Rocha, 2006; Souza and Lamounier, 2010; Tamer, 2011).

Theoretical approach

The theoretical framework is mainly focused on sustainability, conscious consumption and consumer's behavior. It can be said that the pursuit of sustainability involves the consumption equation. Sustainable consumption and social responsibility could be the answers to this question (Cohn *et al.*, 2009; Okada

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and Mais, 2010; Ottman, 2007; Portilho, 2005; Sheth, Mittal and Newmann, 2001; Tamer, 2011; Toderó, 2009). Baudrillard (1998) was one of the first authors to address the issue of consumption and base his theories on the existence of a consumer society, characteristic phenomenon of developed societies from the second half of the twentieth century. For Baudrillard (1998), societies have always spent, or wasted, or produced waste and consumed beyond what is necessary for survival.

According to Beck (2010), the word consumption comes from the Latin *consumere*, term first used as a synonym to destroy, use all, spend, waste, exhaust. In this sense, consume would be similar to consummate, which can mean either to happen or to end, or both. An interpretive effort could lead us to believe that the syndrome of consumption by which we live would be effectively rooted in the duality happen / end. The pleasure of consumption is at its end. It does not last except for memory, rough nostalgia or inert possession. Consumption causes pleasure and once it is consumed, the pleasure ends. That is the reason of such criticism of consumerism because at the end, the consumer feels the need to consume again in order to return to the climax of pleasure obtained earlier (Slater, 2001). This quick-action, short term narcotic will certainly have a number of consequences on the individual, which will not be discussed in this article. However, the discard generated by consumption has to do with the object that is analyzed here. According to Azevedo *et al.* (2009), the first studies to address the relationship of consumer's behavior and environment date from the late 1960s, but only in 2000 the study of the conscious consumer began (Chauvel and Suarez 2009).

Butzke *et al.* (2001) claim that environmental awareness is a set of concepts acquired by people through the information perceived in the environment. Barros and Costa (2003) point out that there is no consensus about what conscious consumption is. The "owner / author" of such term in Brazil would be Akatu Institute (2010), which defines conscious consumer as the act or decision of consumption practiced by an individual, taking into account the balance among personal satisfaction, environmental possibilities, and the social effects of his decision, and should not be confused with non-consumption. Conscious consumption can be daily practiced through simple gestures that take into account the impacts of purchase, use or disposal of products or services, or the choice of companies from which to buy because of their commitment to sustainable development. Thus, being aware of the environmental impact of the urge for individual pleasure would make individuals stop their impulse and redirect their shopping choices to products with less impact on nature and society.

The subject attitude is studied in the context of marketing in the topic consumer's behavior. According to the classic definition, attitudes are learned predispositions to respond to an object or a set of objects consistently favorable or unfavorable. Three basic characteristics of attitudes can be identified: they are learned – they are formed based on the experience with an object or some information about it; they are relatively enduring; and influence behavior, because they demand consistent responses proceeding and producing behavior. Attitudes correspond to evaluations, feelings and tendencies of

action, long-lasting, and that are in favor of some idea or object, or not (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 2005; Sheth, Mittal and Newmann, 2001).

It is considered that the concept of attitude consists of cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions. Attitudes are closely linked to purchase intent, which directly influences consumer's behavior. Attitudes influence the behavior of individuals, which are noticed through intentions and linked to the probability of an individual to buy a certain product or brand. However, none of the two concepts can be taken as the determining factor of behavior, because when other aspects, such as habits or other non-cognitive issues, play an important role in purchasing decisions, attitudes and intentions often have decreased relevance. In fact, neither attitudes nor intentions determine purchasing behavior, but in general they are good indicators of behavior toward a certain product (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 2005; Sheth, Mittal and Newmann, 2001). It is worth emphasizing that some authors stress the difference among attitude, behavioral intention, and purchasing behavior or conduct. This study uses the Theory of Planned Behavior in particular (Ajzen, 1985), according to which individual human behavior would be the role of behavioral intention, which depends on the combination of attitudes and the influence that behavioral beliefs exert on them, of subjective rules and individual perception on the perceived behavior. On the international scene, studies on consumer attitudes regarding conscious consumption stand out (Cova, Kozinets and Shankar, 2007; Bekin, Carrigan and Szmigin, 2007; Iyer and Muncy, 2009).

Empirical research

The empirical part of this paper aims to answer the following question: what are the attitudes of low-income consumers in the city of São Paulo regarding conscious behavior? A quantitative empirical research was conducted along with a non-probabilistic by convenience sample (Hair *et al.*, 2006; Malhotra, 2001) composed of 420 individuals from classes C and D living in São Paulo and selected in places of intense flow using the Brazilian criterion of socio-economic classification (ABEP, 2011). A structured questionnaire was used as an instrument for collecting data. The approach for data collection was personal interviews, which were conducted in neighborhoods of East Zone, South Zone and North Zone of São Paulo. The answers were tabulated using the SPSS software research.

Table I outlines the profile of the sample by gender, socio-economic status, age, and education.

The analysis used assertions based on Ribeiro and Veiga (2010), and Azevedo *et al.* (2009), and the choice of the statements took into account the opinion of Stone, Barnes and Montgomery (1995), according to whom consumption with ecological responsibility reflects awareness, personal values and a genuine desire to act in accordance with this goal, and demands knowledge and skills from the agent. Environmental responsibility of the consumer would be a construct with the following dimensions: consumer's opinions and beliefs about human relationship with the environment, awareness of

environmental impacts of consumption, willingness to act in order to protect the environment, attitudes to remedy environmental problems, consumption activities ecologically responsible, ability to act in defense of the environment, and knowledge about ecological issues.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the sample

Profile of the sample	Sample n=420
Gender	
Female	57
Male	43
Socio-economic status	
C	76
D	24
Age	
Up to 15 years old	7
16 to 24 years old	15
25 to 29 years old	19
30 to 39 years old	17
40 to 49 years old	23
50 to 60 years old	12
Over 60 years old	7
Education	
Up to incomplete middle school	26
Up to complete middle school	20
Up to incomplete high school	19
Up to incomplete higher education	23
Complete higher education	12

Source: The authors

The results are corroborated by Vialli (2009), according to whom Brazilians have high degree of awareness about sustainability, but have great difficulty in bringing the concept to their daily lives. According to the theoretical reference, the statements were grouped into three categories: attitudes (beliefs, feelings), behavioral intention, and behavior (what people really do). Initially considering beliefs, the highest percentages refer to: "using less plastic bag protects the environment" (73%), "Everyone should use recycled bags" (68%), "the government is not concerned about the environment" (63%), "I feel responsible for protecting the environment" (58%), "compared to most people, I know very little about organic products" (56%). Regarding behavioral intention, the highest percentages were observed for "I try to save water / I try not to leave the tap open" (77%), "I try to buy home appliances that do not consume power" (67%), "campaigns against environmental pollution deserve my support"(63%).

When it comes to behavior itself, it can be highlighted the highest degree of agreement for "I bought expensive light bulbs that save electricity" (64%), "I write on the back of sheets of paper that have already been used" (59%), "I ask for an invoice when I shop" (57%). Table 2 resume thee comments above.

Table 2. Conscious Consumption: attitudes, behavioral intention, behavior

Assertions	2011 %
Attitudes (beliefs, feelings)	
Using less plastic bag protects the environment.	73
Everyone should use recycled bags.	68
The government is not concerned about the environment.	63
I feel responsible for protecting the environment.	58
Compared to most people, I know very little about organic products.	56
Concerns with the environment interfere on my purchasing decisions.	32
Most people i know would easily buy organic products.	26
If the government does not do anything to preserve the environment, the population do not have to do anything either.	26
Behavioral intention	
I try to save water / I try not to leave the tap open.	77
I try to buy home appliances that do not consume power.	67
Campaigns against environmental pollution deserve my support.	63
Whenever possible, I always choose products that cause less pollution.	50
When I have to choose between two identical products, I always choose the one that is less harmful to people and the environment.	43
Whenever possible, I always buy products with reusable packaging.	41
I am willing to pay a little more for products and food that are free of chemical elements that harm the environment.	40
Whenever possible, I buy products made of recycled material.	37
If I wanted, I could easily buy organic food instead of conventional food.	37
I always make an effort to reduce the use of products made of scarce natural resources.	32
I always try to use home appliances off-peak consumption.	32
Buying organic food instead of conventional food would be very difficult for me.	28
I avoid buying products with non-recyclable packaging.	26
Behavior (What people really do)	
I bought expensive light bulbs that save electricity.	64
I write on the back of sheets of paper that have already been used.	59
I ask for an invoice when I shop.	57
I read package labels carefully before purchasing a product.	43
I separate garbage for recycling.	42
I prefer products and food without pesticides because they are eco-friendly	39
When I know the potential damage that a product may cause to the environment, I do not buy this product	39
I do not buy products and foods that can cause the extinction of some animals and plants.	34
I do not buy products for my home that harm the environment.	32
I leave the car at home at least once a week.	32
I usually carry a (non-disposable) sturdy bag when shopping.	30
I buy organic products because they are healthier.	29
I have resorted to consumer protection agencies.	28
I do not buy products made or sold by companies that disregard or harm the environment.	28
I avoid buying products with packaging that is not biodegradable.	26
I have returned or stopped using products for ecological reasons.	25
I do not buy a product to punish the manufacturer.	25
I have already convinced friends and relatives not to buy products that harm the environment.	24
I buy organic products for more than 6 months.	18

Source: The authors, adapted from Ribeiro and Veiga (2010), and Azevêdo *et al.* (2009).

When analyzing the results of the research, it can be concluded that there still is a long way to go, because there is a clear gap between theory and practice, and respondents claim not to behave accordingly. For example, regarding the attitudes, 63% of low-income consumers have the perception that the government is not doing its part in relation to the theme of the environment, but in contrast only 28% have resorted to consumer protection agencies, which may indicate that the government is still largely responsible for the issue. Finally, in practical terms, only 25% stop buying products to punish the manufacturers, and 24% persuaded friends not to buy products harmful to the environment. Such percentages may confirm that in theory the low-income consumers have a conscious discourse, but in practice they behave otherwise. The perception gained of the data analysis is that the consumer is used to giving "the right answers", according to what is socially expected from them, that is, in terms of information dissemination, it can be said that the individuals belonging to the lower class in Brazil have already assimilated the sustainability discourse. However, this discourse is socially hypocrite, like many others in our country, because the individual has learned to give appropriate answers, which do not correspond to their real behavior.

We live in a country where most of the responsibility for flaws and failures is attributed to the government. Few Brazilians take their share of responsibility and engage in daily activities to address the serious issues that block the development of the nation. It is the case of education, health care, transportation, among others. Regarding sustainability, the study carried out clearly shows the flaws of citizens belonging to classes C and D. They understand the issues and give politically correct answers to interviewers. But when their attitudes are further examined, it can be seen that the same respondent seems to be unaware they are part of the sustainability issues, which means that they go beyond comprehension and should move to action.

In the analysis of the influence of demographic variables, it can be observed that in general, for all the assertions mentioned above, the results showed no statistically significant differences in education level and gender. There are statistically significant differences in social class and age regarding the statements "I buy organic products for more than six months", "I leave the car at home at least once a week." According to Azevedo *et al.* (2009), the literature on consumer's behavior in relation to environmental issues has been divided into the analysis of their socio-demographic and/or psychographic features. In most studies, socio-demographic variables alone have shown low power to explain environmental awareness of consumers, and that is why psychographic variables are needed to improve the models. It is also worth mentioning that even though consumers claim willingness and desire to purchase eco-friendly products and seek labels that explain the environmental consequences of the products, many of them feel they are being manipulated by corporations (Furlow and Engelhardt 2009).

Borelli, Hemais and Dias (2011) have analyzed how regular consumers perceive conscious consumers, change their consumption habits and motivations inherent to conscious consumption. The authors concluded that the term has not been

well assimilated and there is unequal access to information on the subject as well as the practices associated with it, because in addition to the effort of changing behavior and access to information, conscious consumption would require availability of time and money. The authors emphasize that there would be difficulty in changing habits or change practices to which people are accustomed.

It is worth noticing that consumers who want to act and shop in a more sustainable way are still constrained by three main obstacles: high prices, confusion and lack of trust and alternatives. Thus, clarity, consistency and credibility are critical to maintain and build consumers' interest in sustainable products (Chauvel and Mattos, 2008).

Final considerations

This article aimed at analyzing the attitudes of low-income consumers living in São Paulo regarding conscious consumption. The main limitation of this paper refers to the type of sample that does not allow generalization to the universe. The literature review showed an evolution of consumers' attitude in adopting a more conscious behavior in relation to the products they purchase, which seems to depend on the pursuit for life quality. Also due to the increased importance attributed to socio-environmental and ecological aspects of society in general, besides the government, legal and competitive pressure, the sustainability issue became a concern of marketing and communication professionals. The results show that sustainable patterns are still very far from being achieved and are lagging behind in the matter of conscious consumption. The increased purchasing power of low-income families in Brazil made this public a very attractive market for companies and communication needs to change in order to keep up with this new demand for quality of life (Chauvel and Mattos, 2008; Hemais, Borelli, Casotti and Dias, 2011; Segabinazzi and Lumertz, 2011; Souza and Lamounier, 2010). Thus, any action in this direction needs to consider the cultural dynamics of this society, characterized by consumerism and very low educational standards, and for which the entry into a new economic class also means a position of power and that power is closely linked to consumption.

According to Sheth, Mittal and Newman (2001), attitudes precede and lead to behavioral, that is, they are learned predispositions, answers to situation, either conscious or not. It is worth mentioning that the change should occur in individual attitudes that precede the act of consumption. Attitudes are formed based on experiences and information, and predispose consumers to an action in accordance with cognitions and emotions related to a given object action. However, the attitudes associated with consumption are difficult to change, especially when one realizes that the change does not mean a significant, overall improvement, and that the effort is not shared by other consumers.

When it comes to environmental issues, people's awareness is a determining factor and new studies become urgent to feed and consciously respond to consumption decisions processes of fast technological changes, and meet the challenges of a new economy based on sustainability. As a suggestion for a new

research agenda, it is possible to deepen the theme by adding other regions and probabilistic samples that allow generalizations regarding Brazil's "new middle class".

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