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Classifying and classified: An interpretive study of the consumption of cruises by the “new” Brazilian middle class



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ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to make a contribution in addressing a theoretical gap related to how emerging middle class consumers utilize consumption as a classificatory practice. We adopted an interpretive approach and used the method of participant observation combined with in-depth interviews. Drawing from Bourdieu and Veblen, two main categories were used to explain the use of cruises as a means of classification: distinction and conspicuous consumption. It was found in addition to consumers classifying themselves in relation to others, they classify the time spent, space, artifacts, and the very experience of the cruise itself. The cruise simulates, for a short period of time, the life of the “leisure class,” with its attendant conspicuous consumption and waste.

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1. Introduction

The social ascent of a significant mass of individuals toward the middle class in emerging markets has changed the face of consumption (Pralhad & Hammond, 2002). However, the phenomenon has, as yet, not received enough attention from researchers, who either focus their interest on consumption at the lower strata of the social pyramid, or persist in studying affluent consumers (Barros & Rocha, 2009). Moreover, as pointed out by Üstüner and Holt (2010, p. 37), the current view of how consumers consume is based on a more universal perspective, rooted in empirical studies developed in the United States and Western Europe. These studies suffer from a “crucial limitation” for failing to recognize that the consumption patterns in emerging countries may differ from those of developed countries.

Emerging consumers are faced with two different and often conflicting influences on their consumption choices. On the one side, following Bourdieu (1984), it can be assumed that the consumption by social actors who move from one class to another has been shaped by the preferences and practices of their original

social group. Emerging consumers are therefore expected to have developed their taste during their socialization processes, which is strongly influenced by their family and peers. Taste is defined here, following Bourdieu (1984, p. 173), as “the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices”. On the other side, as individuals ascend in the social structure, they also seek to emulate the lifestyle of their new peers. In this sense, Brazilian urban anthropologist Velho (2013, p. 93) observed that “the experience of social mobility, ascent or descent, introduces significant variables in the existential experience, whether for people from the working class or middle class”, thereby creating conditions distinct from the “situation of stability or permanence.” This new situation of liminality (Van Gennep, 1908/1978; Turner, 1966), or threshold, in consumption has been rarely studied, reinforcing the need for research that looks at status consumption from the perspective of social mobility.

Our study addresses this research gap, by contributing to a better understanding of how emerging consumers – those still in transition from one class to another – use consumption as a classificatory practice. In fact, these consumers may have accomplished the transition from poverty to the middle class in economic terms, either permanently or temporarily, but they are still in the process of enacting their new social status. We sought specifically to understand the issue of status consumption associated to the experience of social mobility from the

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perspectives of two different groups of actors: the “new” middle-class consumers and those belonging to the traditional middle class.

We chose the consumption of leisure cruises as the locus of our study, since this is a form of consumption that appears only after one has reached a certain level of disposable income. This type of consumption markedly differs from the simple increase of consumption of, or switch to, more expensive brands—also characteristic of the phenomenon examined. In fact, the consumption of cruises in Brazil has increased significantly in recent years, due in large part to this “new” middle class (Neri, 2010). This change parallels similar developments in other countries in the early 1900s. In Britain, for instance, the development of mass tourism was the result of changing conditions that gave the working class access to new types of consumption that were until then a privilege of the wealthy. However, although the very capacity to travel no longer served as an element of distinction, other expressions of distinction were used by different classes of travelers (Urry, 2001).

The study was informed by the following research questions: *How do emerging consumers use the consumption of sea cruises as a classification practice?* and *How do consumers from the traditional and the “new” middle class perceive the experience of sharing the same social space?* In order to answer these questions we adopted an interpretive approach, in which what is at stake is the symbolic construction of reality – simultaneously subjective and collective – by those sharing the experience.

2. Review of the literature: Consumption as classification

Positional consumption, or status consumption – the use of consumption to express one’s social standing – is a well-accepted concept in the social sciences. The bases for the study of positional and ostentatious consumption were established by Veblen (1899/1965) in his *Theory of the Leisure Class*. Until Modern times, leisure was the most visible manifestation of one’s high social standing. The leisure class, as envisaged by Veblen, comprised mainly noblemen and priests, whose activities were temporary, such as war, religion, and sports. The “gentlemen of leisure” used conspicuous consumption as “a means of reputability”. The amount and the excellence of the goods consumed serve as “evidence of wealth,” while their lack “becomes the mark of inferiority and demerit.” But it is not enough to be able to consume; it is also required to know “how to consume [...] in a seemly manner” (Veblen, 2000, p. 190–191). Reputability comes therefore not solely from the accumulation of wealth, but also from a life of leisure and from the conspicuous consumption of goods, both marked by waste: on one side, leisure, the “waste of time and effort;” on the other, conspicuous consumption, the “waste of goods” (, p. 196). The urban middle classes tried to emulate, to the extent possible, conspicuous leisure and consumption. Veblen (2000, p. 194) observes that among the lower middle-class families at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century it was the function of the wife to perform conspicuous leisure and consumption “for the good name of the household and its master”. Since then, although the ideology of work has increasingly pervaded all social classes, conspicuous consumption remains the ultimate means of displaying power and prestige in Western societies.

Bourdieu’s (1984) influential work on distinction establishes a bridge between the role of wealth and an individual’s social and cultural assets. Taste differentiates and locates individuals in established social classifications and is, therefore, a “marker of class”. Social practices (including social manners, aesthetic preferences, use of grammar, clothing, home decor, and so on) express taste: they are discernable, distinctive and reproducible. Access to, choice of, and form of using goods reflect the economic,

social and cultural capital of the individual. Cultural capital, in particular, is relevant to understand consumption, because it provides a roadmap to how to select, use, and consume products. Judgment of taste and its attendant practices although on the one hand are affected by an individual’s upbringing – formalized and institutionalized – on the other hand are also subject to the influence of friends, acquaintances, and neighbors, throughout the individual’s social trajectory. Formal education plays a role, but it alone does not explain differences in taste, especially when dealing with certain categories of goods that are not part of the educational process:

The effect of mode of acquisition is most marked in the ordinary choices of everyday existence, such as furniture, clothing or cooking, which are particularly revealing of deep-rooted and long-standing dispositions because, lying outside the scope of the educational system, they have to be confronted, as it were, by naked taste, without any explicit prescription or proscription [...] (, p. 77)

The process is dynamic; the symbolic meanings attributed to consumer goods and the beacons of distinction between groups are subject to an ongoing construction and reconstruction. Nonetheless, access to consumption, manner of consuming, and the relations established between different social groups can reveal aspects of distinction inherent to the classification that consumers establish among themselves.

The idea of consuming as a classificatory system, both in terms of representations and in the concrete practices of social actors, has been further developed in the field of social anthropology by Douglas and Isherwood (1979). Goods are used by consumers with the purpose of classification, for inclusion and for exclusion: “Goods are neutral, their uses are social; they can be used as fences or bridges” (p. 12). However, individual goods are not relevant to this purpose; rather, it is the flow of goods that reveals how classification systems are developed and established. Consumption as a system and as a practice of classification is thus used by consumers to articulate similarities and differences between goods and social identities (Rocha, 1985, 2006).

The symbolic use of consumption as classification first appeared in the consumer behavior literature in the second half of the 1950s. Martineau (1958) notes that consumption is an important element in defining social class, and is used by consumers to indicate their social status. Levy (1959, 1981) also draws attention to the symbolic character of goods and to the various “rationales” that guide their choice by consumers.

However, it was only with the emergence of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) that the symbolic meaning of goods gained serious consideration in the marketing discipline. The name CCT was proposed by Arnould and Thompson (2005, p. 868) to designate “a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings.” This new “family of theoretical perspectives” arose as an alternative to the mainstream consumer behavior research, based on a cognitive and experimental tradition, and grounded in quantitative methods.

Holt (1995) identifies three meanings associated with consumption in the CCT literature: consuming as experience, consuming as integration, and consuming as classification. Meanings associated with products are decoded and influence the selection of goods to be consumed (Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982; McCracken, 1986). Thus, the same products that serve physical and biological needs are used to confer status, build identity, and establish boundaries between groups and people in their social relationships (Addis & Holbrook, 2001). Arsel and Bean’s (2013, p. 902) study confirms that the “practice of taste” is not only influenced by social class but also by consumers’

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