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**Habits of Consumption in Low-Income
Rural Communities in Brazil:
Challenges and Opportunities**

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Abstract

In the last census, carried out in 2010, Brazil accounted for 25% of the population earning an average household monthly income *per capita* of up to 79 USD, value which is less than the minimum wage that year (215 USD). The predominant household income *per capita* of 75% of the Brazilian population residing in small municipalities, up to 50 thousand inhabitants, is up to a minimum wage. It is also important to note that 47% of the 16.2 million people living in situations of extreme poverty are in rural areas. The present study aims to understand the consumption habits of people with this profile (extreme poverty, residents of rural areas), in order to i) understand the degree of awareness regarding the impacts of their purchasing attitudes on society and the environment; and ii) raise market opportunities for manufacturers of consumer goods and services companies, through the use of the concepts of Prahalad and Hart on the base of the pyramid. The research will be conducted via survey with a questionnaire divided into two blocks: i) consumption habits and their social and environmental impact; and ii) characterization of the sample, with demographic data and use of basic services (power, water, sewage, waste disposal). The interviews will be conducted from February to March 2014, in all regions of Brazil, so divided: i) Northeast; ii) North; and iii) Central-South (Central-West, Southeast and South). The sample included 100 people from each region, totaling 300 interviews, in order to verify possible similarities or differences between the regions. With the survey results, it was possible to obtain a picture of the basic conditions and habits of consumption of this segment, and thus identify opportunities for public and private organizations. The results also pointed the dreams and ambitions of these consumers, in case there was an increase in their income.

Keywords: Base of the pyramid; conscious consumption; sustainability

Introduction

The theories about sustainability have been discussed by many authors since the decade of 1960, especially with the emergence of the Club of Rome in 1968. The discussion about conscious consumption, on the other hand, is more recent, dating from the end of the decade of 1990 and it has been gaining more importance in recent years. It is the result of heavy criticism related to the current model of the consumer society, whose exacerbated consumerism leads to discussions about its implications for sustainable development.

A study carried out by MIT Sloan Management Review, which released the report *The Business of Sustainability* in 2008, showed that most of the corporate respondents from the research group of global leaders assert that sustainability-related issues already have, or will soon have, a real impact on their business (MIT, 2008).

Given this scenario, many companies have been developing and selling the so-called "sustainable products". However, these products are generally priced higher than the "common products", making it difficult for the low-income population to purchase and consume them. Watkins et al. (2005) suggest that the strong social inequalities, whether they are they based on wealth, gender or ethnicity, are bad for growth, for democracy and for a greater social cohesion. Besides the issue of the high price, several studies (INSTITUTO AKATU, 2005; NGOBO, 2011; HAMZA; DALMARCO, 2011) show that the lower the income and educational level, the less knowledge people have about the topics of sustainability and conscious consumption.

On the side of the companies when it comes to the poorest sectors of the population, in general there seems to be little interest in developing products targeted at this group. In this respect, Prahalad (2010) draws the attention of companies for growth opportunities when working with the poorest sectors of the population, which in general are neglected in terms of consumption potential. The base of the pyramid is made up of people with income of up to US\$ 2 per day, but who account for US\$ 5 trillion in terms of purchasing power parity.

So far there are few articles with a focus on sustainability and conscious consumption specifically in low-income, which motivated the development of the present study. This article deals with the sustainability and conscious consumption in small towns, focusing on low-income consumers, and has as main objective to understand the buying habits of people with this profile in order to i) understand the degree of awareness regarding the impacts of their purchasing attitudes in society and on the environment; and ii) raise market opportunities for manufacturers of consumer goods and services companies, through the use of the concepts of Prahalad (2010) on the base of the pyramid.

Theoretical Framework

In order to contextualize the issues discussed in this paper, some fundamental theoretical aspects will be presented briefly in this chapter, namely: sustainability and the conscious consumption as a response to their challenges, a contextualization of the small towns and the concepts on the base of the pyramid.

Sustainability

In the decade of 1960 the first questions in relation to the sustainability of the planet arise. In 1968 the Club of Rome is formed, an institution that brings together thinkers from all over the world and from different fields of science to promote systematic changes that are crucial to the future of humanity (PECCEI, 1968). In 1972 the flagship study "The Limits to Growth" is published, analyzing the causes and consequences of population growth and the material/capitalist economy. The study concluded that it would be necessary a deep and proactive innovation through technological, cultural and institutional changes in order to prevent the increase of the "ecological footprint" of humanity, above the capacity that the planet can support (MEADOWS; RADERS; MEADOWS, 2004). In the same year the United Nations Conference on Human Environment (Stockholm Conference) was held, aimed to draw the attention of the international community to global environmental problems.

In 1987 Brundtland releases the report Our Common Future. It's where the most widely used concept of sustainable development arose, the one that meets the needs of the present without compromising the possibility of future generations to meet their needs (BRUNDTLAND 1987). According to Elkington (1994), it is from the date of publication of this report and of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Eco-92) that the concept of sustainable development – which involves the integration of ecological thinking in all aspects of social, political and economic activities – has become a central point in the debate on the role of enterprises in developing strategies for sustainable development. According to Elkington (1999), given that companies exist to generate wealth, the most direct contribution they can make to sustainable development is to create economic, social and environmental value in the long term – originating the concept of "triple bottom line", now widespread.

The Conscious Consumption in Response to the Challenges of Sustainability

According to Pereira (2011) scary forecasts are released daily by the organizations that hold the flag of environmental conservation as a way of awakening the need to consume with responsibility. Sustainability must go

from speech to practice involving not only the industry, but the population in general. After all, high consumption is synonymous with high production, depletion of natural resources and high production of waste.

The conscious, or sustainable, consumption implies a behavioral change in society, with the adoption of environmentally ethical conduct, and the concept of sustainability should be implied when using the word "consumption" (DIAS, 2009). Furthermore, it is essential to involve the production and acquisition of knowledge to best practices of manufacture, use and disposal (FERREIRA, 2008). Following the same reasoning, Instituto Akatu (2005) points out that the conscious consumption is a process which seeks a balance between the individual needs, the environmental possibilities and the social needs in three different stages: purchase, use and disposal. Such definition is enlarged by the OECD (2002 in PAPE et al., 2011), which also considers other steps, besides the ones already mentioned: choice, maintenance and repair.

The goal of sustainable consumption is to adopt alternative forms of consumption, resulting in the reduction of materials and energy, involving all consumers (government, businesses and individuals). Its analysis considers the full life cycle of a product and the more efficient use of renewable and non-renewable resources (UNEP, 2008).

The concept of sustainable consumption, or conscious consumption, is complex and sometimes distinct for different authors. However, the YouthXchange (2011) points out that it is possible to notice that most definitions have some common characteristics: (i) to meet the needs of the human being; (ii) to promote a good quality of life; (iii) to share resources between rich and poor; (iv) to act bearing in mind future generations; (v) to pay attention to the impact of the consumption from "cradle-to-grave"; (vi) to minimize the use of resources, waste and pollution.

It is worth noting that the study of Hamza and Dalmarco (2011) shows that knowledge of actions related to conscious consumption decreases as social class and schooling also decreases. Furthermore, the last survey carried out by Akatu Institute (2013) brings worrisome data, which go against the evolutions mentioned on the awareness of citizens: the number of people less conscious about sustainability has grown from 67% in 2006 to 73% in 2012.

Small Cities

In an analysis in the EBSCO electronic basis, combining the words "Marketing" and "Small cities", only 32 academic studies were found, of which only 18 were published in the last decade. Despite the scant attention given to small cities in the academic world, in practice it is important to highlight the importance of medium and small cities – in Brazil, they account for about 42% of GDP (the 100 largest cities in GDP were disregarded). Moreover, between 2000 and 2005, 58% of the industrial jobs were created in cities with less than 100,000 inhabitants (ESTADÃO, 2008).

Base of the Pyramid

Among the eight millennium goals, defined by the UN in 2000, the first of them is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, reducing by half, by 2015, the proportion of the world population with income up to a dollar a day, as well as reducing by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger (OBJETIVOS DO MILÊNIO, 2014). The strong social inequalities, whether they are based on wealth, gender or ethnicity, are bad for growth, for democracy and for a greater social cohesion (WATKINS ET AL, 2005).

According to the Inequality Watch (2014) in 2008 there were nearly 2.5 billion people living under US\$ 2 per day, which represented about 43% of the world population. Ortiz and Cummins (2011), in their report to UNICEF, compare people who are at the top with the ones at the bottom of the pyramid in terms of income: 61 million people who are at the top (the richest ones, which correspond to 1% of the world population) have equal income, if summed, to the 3.5 billion people who are at the bottom (the poorest ones, corresponding to 56% of the world population). This is an enormous economic disparity, which culminates with companies making efforts in product development for the richest sectors of the population, and failing to analyze the poorest ones.

In his classic book “A Riqueza na Base da Pirâmide”, Prahalad (2010) drew the attention of companies, especially multinationals, to the growth opportunities when working with the poorest sectors of the population, which in general are neglected in terms of consumption potential. According to the author (2010) "the distribution of wealth and the income generating capacity can be understood in the form of an economic pyramid", where the rich ones are at the top there, and the poor ones at the base. The base of the pyramid – called BoP, consists of people with income of up to US\$ 2 per day, but which account for US\$ 5 trillion in terms of purchasing power parity.

Hahn (2008) points out that the people who constitute the BoP belong not only to the least developed countries or developing countries, and the reverse is also true. Therefore, it is not a discussion on the development of countries, but rather on the opportunities for companies to work in the poorest sectors, whether in developed or developing countries. In addition, Hahn (2008) notes that working in this market is a way to reduce poverty through knowledge and expertise of the private sector, including people from the BoP in its value chain – both in the production system and in the consumer system.

Prahalad (2010) emphasizes that various sectors can benefit from purchasing power of the BoP. An example is the mobile phone sector. According to Teleco (2014), there are currently 6.7 billion cell phones in use in the world, and the largest part of them is in the BoP, especially in China (1.1 billion) and in India (907 million). In Brazil, the market of mobile phones reached R\$ 90.2 billion in 2012 (TELECO, 2014), and a good contribution comes from classes D and E, where 67% of the population already use cell phones (TELECO, 2014).

On the other hand, there are sectors, such as the credit for low-income people, in which some companies are obtaining high profits, but based on the lack of knowledge of consumers in this segment. As stated by Grow and Epstein (2007), access to credit was supposed to help this sector of the population to obtain better social conditions, but instead it has become a trap, from which the consumer can no longer leave. The authors highlight that the high fees charged by some companies, the induction to the loan and the lack of information (or not explicit information) end up being detrimental to the consumer.

Karnani (2009) criticizes some assumptions made by Prahalad, such as the one that consumers at the bottom of the pyramid make the best choices. And the difficulty of making good choices resides precisely in the fact that, belonging to the BoP, the consumer is less literate and has less information about the market, which, in general, leads them to not make the best choices. The author (2009) emphasizes that rich people and poor people make bad choices, but this fact is more serious in the case of poor people, since the impact of such choices in their health and quality of life is more intense. Furthermore, when one romanticizes the consumer of the BoP, little emphasis is given to legal and social aspects for their protection.

To reach the BoP, it is essential that companies have the ability to adapt and innovate, and Prahalad (2010) highlights some important considerations, listed below. The first two are aligned with the criticisms of Karnani (2009), with respect to consumer protection in the BoP.

- Respect for the rights of the individual;
- Use of transparent transactions or focus on market-based solutions;
- Scalability for the solutions;
- Reduction of rural-urban and rich-poor divisions through information technology and organization;
- Focus on entrepreneurship and innovation;
- Focus on ecologically sustainable solutions.

For marketing, this is a new topic which begins to be studied by researchers from leading business schools. New models have been developed, offering alternatives to those proposed in the fields of economics, sociology and anthropology (ACHROL; KOTLER, 2011).

According to Achrol and Kotler (2011), the emerging paradigm in marketing points out that management priorities of organizations are changing their focus on growth, customer value and selection of the segments of medium and high classes, for a focus on sustainable marketing (including reduction in demand/consumption), and growth of the markets of low-middle class and the base of the pyramid. Such a change is drastic, once it goes in the opposite direction to the negative effects of traditional marketing: (i) encouraging the rapid consumption of limited natural resources, (ii) encouraging the satisfaction

of desires, without restriction of any kind; (iii) valuation of material desires, to the detriment of non-material needs.

Another major change in the marketing area, which contributes to this paradigm shift, is the fact that the added value and marketing functions are getting closer to the final consumer, approximating the processes of production and consumption (ACHROL; KOTLER, 2011). Many studies point to the need to rethink the products offered to the base of the pyramid, but Achrol and Kotler (2011) highlight that low-income markets have a face of its own, in which the aggregation of value must be closer to the place of consumption, which demand a re-engineering of the entire production process, and not only adaptations in the product itself. Thus, they suggest that the production-consumption distribution networks should be organized around the needs and resources structure of the low-income people.

Methodology

Initially, the researchers have carried out the bibliographical research on the subject, raising the academic research already conducted on consumption and, more specifically, about conscious consumption. In the light of the theoretical review it was identified the need to conduct a field research, given that, as mentioned in topic 2.3, few studies were found. In this sense, the method of exploratory research was chosen, with a quantitative study of non-probability sampling. Data collection used the method known as survey to obtain information from the participants. The study was single-transverse-type, which involves the collection of data from a given sample only once. Compared to longitudinal studies, it provides lower distortion in the responses, but it does not detect changes in behavior (HAIR et al., 2005; MALHOTRA, 2006).

Data collection was made in person, in the period from March to May 2014, through professional interviewers hired in chosen locations. The interviews were conducted in the cities of Jequiá da Praia, in the state of Alagoas (Northeast region), Macapá, in the state of Amapá (Northern region) and Trindade, in the state of Goiás (Midwest region), with a sample of 100 people from each city, totaling 300 interviews. The sample size, and the choice of three cities in distinct regions, had the objective to check possible similarities or differences between them. The main features of the chosen cities and states are listed in table I.

Table I. *Information on States and Cities chosen*

State	% of people with up to 2 minimum wages	Average per capita income (€)	City	Population	% of people with higher education
AP	37%	234	Macapá	398,204	5%
AL	58%	164	Jequiá da Praia	12,029	4%
GO	33%	286	Trindade	104,488	7%

Source: IBGE and Censo 2010

The research instrument was a structured questionnaire, with closed and open questions. This questionnaire was pre-tested with 10 consumers in the city of Macapá (AM). It is worth mentioning that the pre-test was conducted in one of the cities surveyed, in order to prevent discrepant results in the final survey. The profile of the pre-test was composed of consumers of different ages, degrees of schooling and social classes, to assess the need for adjustments, which were made later in order to simplify the process of collecting data – reduction of questions and response options and also adjustments in vocabulary.

The products analyzed in the survey were mainly items of basic necessity (rice, beans, oil, sugar), but a superfluous item, lipstick, was also included in order to verify its level of consumption and compare it to the basic items.

Results

The questionnaire was divided into two large blocks. The first one consisted of questions about the buying habits of the respondents, with the goal of obtaining a picture about the places where the purchases are made, the brands that are acquired and the desire to buy other brands, average price of basic items purchased and degree of environmental awareness. The second block was intended to make a characterization of the sample, with demographic data and data about the use of basic services such as power, water, sewage, waste disposal, as well as access to the internet and dreams for the future – this last question was included in order to assess how much the dream of the person would be linked to the acquisition of material goods.

Qualification of the Sample

As it can be observed in table II below, more than 90% of the sample is composed of individuals under 40 years old, with elementary education or high school, and monthly income ranging between R\$ 400.00 and R\$ 1,000.00. There was a predominance of female responders (67%), and people who live with 3 to 5 people in the same house (70%).

Table II. Profile of the Sample

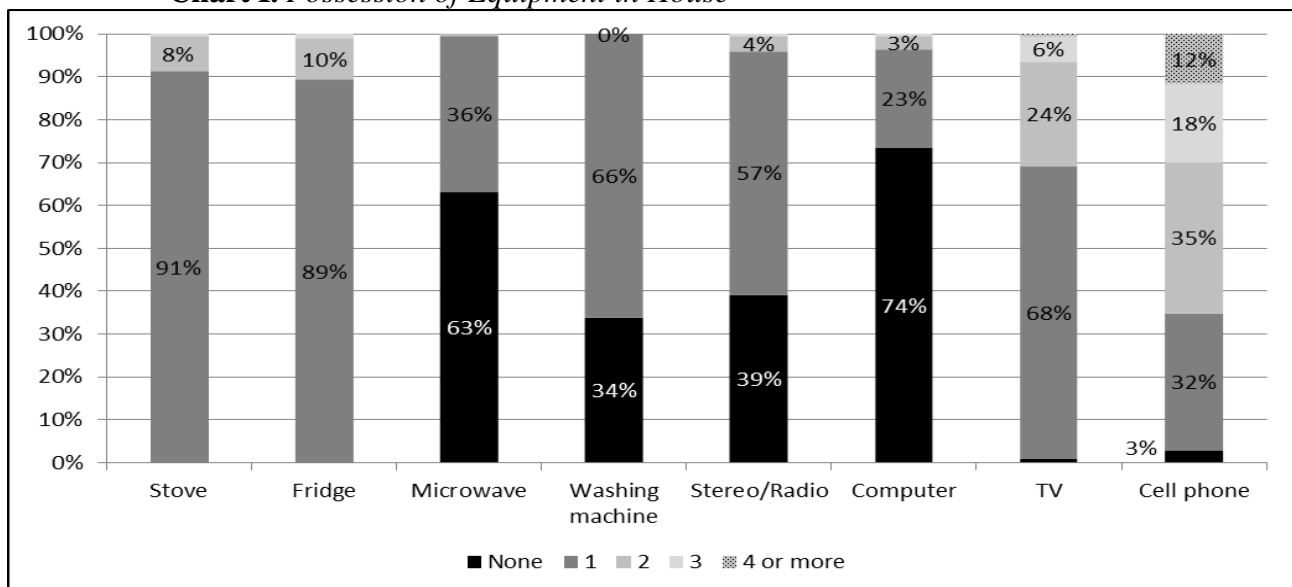
Age		Schooling		Monthly household income	
Under 30 years old	20%	Illiterate	3%	Up to € 125	14%
Between 30 and 40	36%	Elementary school	45%	Between € 125 and € 313	56%
Between 40 and 50	24%	High school	44%	Over € 313	29%
Between 50 and 60	13%	Higher education	7%		
Older than 60	6%	Graduate school	1%		

Source: Dados da pesquisa de campo

With respect to the conditions under which respondents live, 97% have access to electricity, 98% are served by organic waste collection, of which 57% have the waste collected 2 to 3 times a week, and 30% with daily collection. Selective waste collection, however, is present in only 10% of the households searched. Access to water via municipal plumbing is reality for 73% of the sample, but only 33% have sewage disposal via municipality, 55% use domestic septic tanks as sewage. According to Tosta (2012), 30% of urban households do not have, at the same time, access to piped water, sewer system or septic tank, electricity and regular garbage collection. In the sample investigated, this number reached 35%, showing that they are people who still have basic needs of housing to be met, in a situation a little worse than the national average.

Considering the possession of material goods at the houses it is noted that stove, fridge, TV and cell phones are present in almost 100% of the sample (chart I). It is interesting to note that only 26% of the respondents have a computer at home, but 35% have internet access probably obtained through their cell phone, and that, in 26% of the cases, there is at least one cell phone per person in the house.

Chart I. Possession of Equipment in House



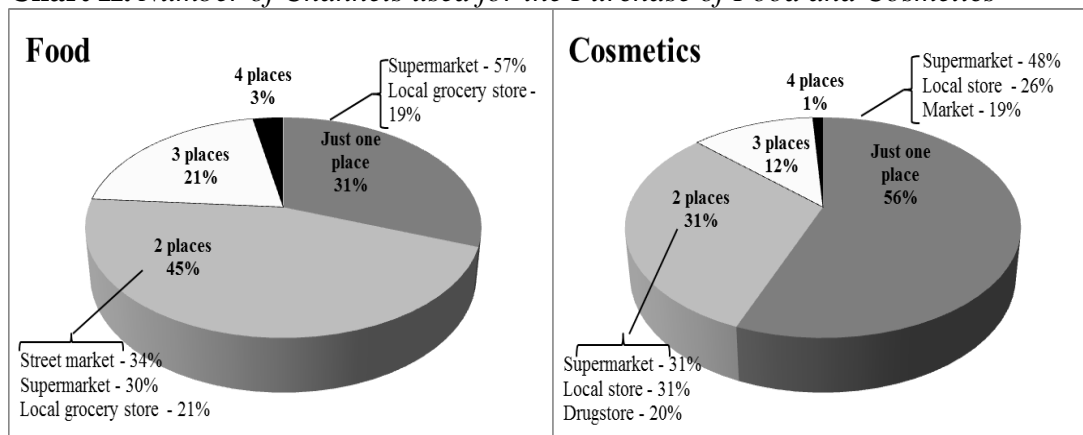
Source: Data from the field research

This is, clearly, a sample that does not represent the Brazilian population, but it brings important data on a stratum of the population that has received little attention from both academia and companies in general. This research offers interesting results on the consumption behavior of these people, their degree of environmental awareness and their dreams of consumption, which will be detailed in the following topics.

Buying Habits and Consuming Desires

Most respondents (45%) usually buy food in two different places. When this type of purchase is made in only one location, 57% of the people choose to do it in supermarkets, followed by local grocery stores and markets, with less than 20% each. In turn, when respondents make their purchases in two places, the channels are more widespread, with the street market being the most chosen place (34%), followed by supermarkets and local grocery stores. When it comes to cosmetics, the number of respondents that makes their purchase in only one channel is much larger (56%), and again the supermarket appears as the main place of purchase (48%), but the second and third places have a greater representativeness: local stores, with 26%, and markets, 19%. When the purchase happens in two places, supermarket and local stores ties with 31%, and drugstores emerge as a representative channel, being chosen by 20% of the respondents (see chart II).

Chart II. Number of Channels used for the Purchase of Food and Cosmetics



One of the questions asked what respondents would do if they received R\$ 50.00 more per month, seeking to understand the value of money for people (even though it's a small amount, but repeatedly). The vast majority of respondents (75%) would spend the money, and, of these, 31% would purchase food, followed by 11% who would help to pay household expenses and 10% who would buy things in general. Savings would be preference for 21% of the respondents and 5% thought the value was low, and were divided between

saving it and spending it. Only two people thought of using the money to undertake a business.

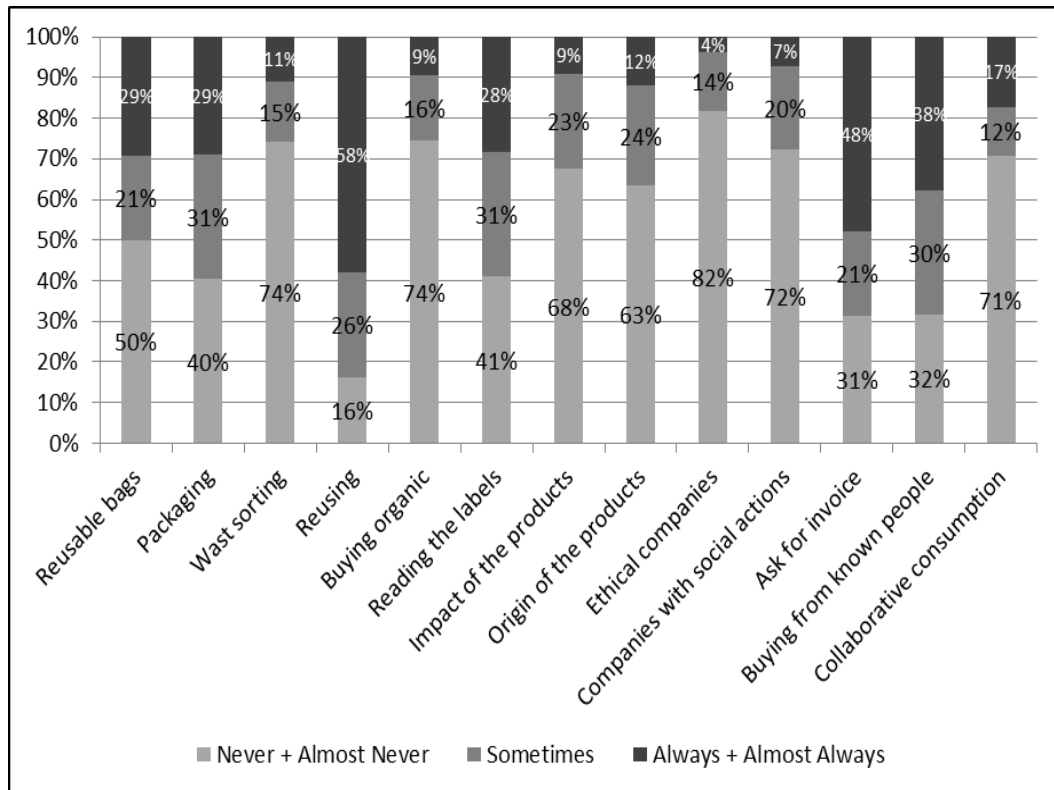
The final question was about respondents' biggest dream, with the objective of assessing what people seek in terms of consumer goods versus other personal achievements (such as a new job, to be happy etc.). The main dream for 29% of the sample is related to issues about home ownership, whether it is the acquisition of the property (22%) or improvements in it (painting, expansion, reforms, 7%), followed by wishes related to studies (start or finish them, 17%) and employment (stability, achieve a better position, 11%). The acquisition of material goods (8%) or services (trips, mostly, 5%), and the desire to have more money (5%), in isolation, are not so representative, but, if added, would be in second place, with 18%.

Conscious Consumption

In chart III some conscious purchase behaviors are presented, as well as respondents' assessments about whether they possess such habits or not. Among the 13 behaviors listed, "I reuse products or materials" appears as the habit that most people have (68%). Other two behaviors that had more than 30% of answers "always/almost always" were "I ask for invoice when I shop in the market" and "I try to buy goods from people I know". Five behaviors had indexes above 70% of answers "never/almost never", namely: "I seek information as to whether the products I buy are produced by ethical companies" (82%), "I sort waste for recycling" (74%), "I consume organic products" (74%), "I prefer to buy products from companies that have social actions" (72%) and "I pay my purchases with other products or services" (71%).

In comparison with similar study carried out by Hamza and Dalmarco (2011), with sample predominantly composed of people resident in the State of São Paulo (80%), it is noted that the main differences are related to the selective collection (74% of answers "never/almost never" in the current sample versus 27% in the 2011 sample), to reading the packaging labels (28% of answers "always/almost always" in the current sample versus 47% in the 2011 sample) and the request of invoices (48% of answers "always/almost always" in the current sample versus 81% in the 2011 sample). It is important to note that two questions were added that were not in the 2011 survey, related to the preference for buying products from known people and to collaborative consumption (payment of a product or service with another product and/or service). Thus, it is possible to see that the sample of this study consists of people with a lower degree of socio-environmental awareness.

Chart III. Conscious Purchase Behaviors



Source: Data from the field research

When each city was analyzed separately, it was possible to observe relevant differences regarding adherence to behaviors. In Trindade, for example, it was possible to note a high adherence ("always/almost always") to behaviors such as using reusable bags (73%) and preference for products that use less packaging, or which come in smaller packages (58%). On the other hand, the city of Macapá had a high adherence to collaborative consumption (44%), and Jequiá da Praia, on the contrary, had a low adherence to purchasing products from known people, with only 12% of answers "always/almost always".

Final Considerations

The vast majority (70%) of consumers surveyed have income of up to US\$ 3.50 per day per person, indicating that they belong to the so-called bottom of the pyramid. Although the Inequality Watch (2014) considers the limit of up to US\$ 2 a day, it is worth noting that the sample analyzed has a very low income. Furthermore, according to the classification of ABEP (2008), these people belong to the lower social classes in the country (C2, D and E).

As market opportunities for these people, it should be noted that there are opportunities for daily consumer goods, for example, items to improve the quality of daily life (such as in the responses obtained in question on the

allocation of the extra R\$ 50.00 per month) or the quality of life in general, in acquiring their own house and/or improving it. In addition, these consumers are longing for better education and purchase of durable goods (cars and computers) and services (trips). Other opportunities are related to innovative solutions in relation to access to basic sanitation, selective waste collection and internet, access to electronic appliances such as microwaves, radios, computers, and increased penetration of cosmetics such as makeup items and, probably, perfumes, moisturizers and related items. These results are in line with research carried out by Boa Vista (2014), in which the main consumption dreams of Brazilian are their own house (acquisition/renovation) and durable goods (car/electronic appliances/cell phone).

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that one of the main debates in relation to sustainability in the business world is related to the definition of whom the actor or actors would be, the responsible ones for establishing more strategically the sustainability agenda in business companies. Many people believe that companies will only make a more expressive movement as soon as consumers start to demand it effectively. But, according to Lacy (2013), several companies stated, in a study from Accenture in 2010, that this demand was far from being clear, being possible to check the emergence of a specific segment of consumers with this bias, but that it was still uncertain when that sustainability would be a relevant factor in the purchase decision for most people. Anyway, one thing was clear, according to the study results: 89% of the CEOs interviewed identified consumers as key elements to insert, effectively, sustainability in their strategic processes. According to the result presented in this work, despite all the debate about more sustainable products, many people have no conscience about how their purchase attitude impacts the environment and society. When it comes to change buying habits, these consumers still do not seem to realize the influence they have with their power of choice, showing that consumption can be an area of political dispute, both by the problems associated with it, as well as the understanding of the consumer with respect to their market strength (FONTENELLE, 2006; AKATU INSTITUTE, 2002). One of the greatest challenges of sustainability, then, is the awareness of consumers, so that they really can charge changes from the companies.

The present work presents certain limitations. The fact that the field research has been accomplished through a non-probability sample implies that the results cannot be generalized to the Brazilian population, or even to low-income people. Another issue to be highlighted was the difficulty of implementing the questionnaire, given the distances between the cities and the place of residence of the responsible researchers. There was training of interviewers, but, still, it was necessary to make adjustments to the database (such as the grouping of open responses) to make the analyses.

In future studies, there is the opportunity to do a study with specific focus and more depth in market opportunities for the base of the pyramid, analyzing which innovations would present greater market potential for companies and, at the same time, more capacity to improve the quality of life of these people.

In addition, there is the possibility to deepen the knowledge of the reality of these people through more qualitative methodologies, such as the ethnographic research or by observation. Lastly, the increase in the number of cities with distinct profiles certainly would offer a richer scenario for analysis, extending and deepening the knowledge of existing opportunities in the diversity of the country.

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