The Production and Dissemination of Conscious Consumption Discourse in Brazil

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This study aims to discuss, with a critical approach, the process of social construction of conscious consumption in Brazil. We analyzed the discourse of an organization sponsored by major Brazilian and global companies called “Akatu Institute for Conscious Consumption” and how it became a standard for conscious consumer acting. This work discusses whether such discourse actually represents a legitimate society claim, or if it simply serves to the interest of the large organizations. Discourse analysis of Akatu’s website shows that the conscious consumption discourse in Brazil can embed a shift of responsibility from the producer to the individual consumer.

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The consumption-driven society holds consumption as central in social life (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Consumers live not only for the things, but also through them (Baudrillard, 1995; Belk, 1988). The relationship between consumers and organizations seems to take a central role in consumption studies. However, the study of consumer resistance movements is still a new area (Cova, Kozinets & Shankar, 2007; Hemetsberger, 2006), particularly in Brazil, one of the most important markets for big corporations such as Nestlé, Volkswagen and Coca Cola (O Globo, 2005). This paper aims to suggest a wider discussion on the movements of resistance to consumption in Brazil.

In Brazil, softer forms of resistance predominate: consumers or companies discourses do not emphasize the end of consumption, but rather, more consensual forms of relationship between consumers and markets, based on the concepts of conscious and sustainable consumption. Brazil’s most important voice in this subject is “Akatu Institute for Conscious Consumption”, created in 1990 by major Brazilian and global companies to promote responsible consumption. Considering the wide penetration of Akatu’s ideas among Brazilian consumers and companies, it would not be an overstatement saying that the discourse of conscious consumption in Brazil has been created by the market itself. So, we ask whether such discourse actually represents a legitimate society claim, or, at the other end, it simply serves to the interest of the big corporations that fund Akatu. By raising such question, we intend to discuss, with a critical approach, the process of social construction of the concept of conscious consumption in Brazil.

An initial discourse analysis of Akatu’s website shows that the conscious consumption discourse in Brazil can embed a shift of responsibility from the producer to the individual consumer. Saha & Darnton (2005) point out that ‘green’ consumption refers to environment, corporate social responsibility, social investment, labor and job conditions, fair trade, responsible communication, transparency and so on. Cohen (2007) posits that more emphasis has been given in the “more efficient consumption”, as opposed to “less consumption”. It is interesting to notice how the addition of the idea of efficiency can change the direction of the actions. This author says that even if the sustainable development has been described as a “three-party process that gives rise to a careful balance among the social equity, economical and environmental objectives, it has been proven in practice that keeping this multi-objective focus is very difficult” (p. 58).

In Brazil, the discussion seems to be restricted to the so-called sustainable and conscious consumption. Back in the 1970s, several institutions were created in Brazil with the purpose of offering some room for businessmen to discuss and implement projects related to the social, environmental and human rights practices. Such institutions have become experts in the defense and promotion of the collective interests of businessmen, also working as reference models that guided business strategic choices (Cappellin et al., 2002). The most successful one, Ethos Institute for Social Responsibility has created Akatu Institute in 1990 with the mission of “mobilizing and making Brazilian citizens aware of their major role, as consumers, in the construction of sustainability of life on the planet” (Akatu, 2008).

Akatu’s guiding principles seem to focus solely on individual consumption choices. It assumes that the best way to reach the ideal of a ‘cleaner’ world is through consumer education. Such principles, stated in Akatu’s homepage, are: (1) plan your purchases; (2) evaluate the impact of your consumption; (3) consume only the necessary; (4) reuse products and packages; (5) separate your garbage; (6) use your credit consciously; (7) value company’s social responsibility practices; (8) do not buy pirate or smuggled products; (9) contribute with the improvement of products and services; and (10) spread conscious consumption. Note that, as Akatu has been born in the market and is nurtured by corporations, it does not question business’ objectives.

The arguments used in the construction of the concept of conscious consumption follow a clear and accurate logic. First, a situation of crisis is presented: “humanity already consumes 25% more natural resources than the capacity of renewal of the Earth (...) if consumption and production standards are kept on current level, in less than 50 years two planets Earth will be necessary to meet our needs of water, energy and food” (Akatu, 2008).
Second, the situation is deemed as unquestionable: “it is needless to say that this situation may make life in the planet difficult, including human life itself” (Akatu, 2008). Also, the solution to the problem seems precise: “the best way of changing this lies in consumption-related choices” (Akatu, 2008).

Within this context, the consumer is the social actor who can—or must—change by being aware of his consuming actions, “maximizing the positive impacts and minimizing the negative ones, therefore contributing with his consumption power for the construction of a better world” (Akatu, 2008). Ironically, the production process and its consequences are not actually challenged. There is a vicious transfer of responsibilities from production to consumption.

Saha and Darnton (2005) noticed that the main motivations for becoming a ‘green’ company are social pressures, opportunity of businesses, and improvement of corporate image. Therefore, it seems appropriate to suggest that, also in Brazil, companies can benefit from such label without effectively having contributed to the sustainability. Although we can identify a group of companies that seek options of sustainability, alternative consumption behaviors end up being absorbed in the prevailing conscious consumption discourse fostered by companies and used to legitimate social roles and positions. The acknowledgment of environmental and social impact of business activities is dissolved in concepts, such as “conscious consumption”, “partnership”, “sustainable development “, “social alliances” and “sustainability”. The creation of solutions with large impact such as the decrease in the emission of gases in the atmosphere becomes a lesser focus when compared to consumer behavior changes (Getz and Shreck, 2006). The power relations are hidden, and the individual consumer acquires the same status as the businessman/producer, of being equally responsible for the future of the planet and for the salvation of life.

References
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Cultivating Hope
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Hope, the elusive feeling that our lives will somehow be better tomorrow, constitutes an essential aspect of the human experience (Farran, Herth, and Popovich 1995). It represents perhaps “…the very heart and center of a human being” (Lynch 1965, 31) that is crucial to not just our day-to-day existence, but more fundamentally, also to our survival. Our research is positioned in relation to the prevailing cognitive perspective, the view in consumer research that hope is an outcome of an individual’s cognitive appraisal of a situation where the possibility of attaining a valued goal gives rise to the experience of hope (de Mello, MacInnis, and Stewart 2007). Such psychological treatises of hope do not illuminate how hope may bind collectivities around the pursuit of common goals, the capacity of hope widely theorized in other scholarship such as history, theology or political science (e.g., Braithwaite 2004a; Braithwaite 2004b; Drahos 2004). Thus, existing perspectives tell us very little about whether and how social settings cultivate hope. Our purpose is to deliver a conceptual insight about how hope is cultivated.

To examine the cultivation of hope, we chose the Weight Watchers as our research context. Our choice is purposive in that prior research leads us to expect that hope permeates the Weight Watchers group meetings, allowing us to extend existing theory on hope (Price, Arnould, and Moisio 2006). Our data collection procedures involved non-participant observation at Weight Watchers’ official group meeting sites in three different locations in a midsized Midwestern city over a ten-month period in 2006. Field notes taken during the observation of 100 meetings in the three Weight Watchers weekly group-meeting locations constitute the body of the non-participant observation data. In addition to non-participant observation, we conducted a series of long interviews (McCracken 1988) with 32 Weight