The Construction of Cosmetics-Consuming Women Through Generational Families in Brazil’S 'New Middle Class' Context

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The work of consumption itineraries of beauty products focus on domestic relations between three generations of women from the same family. In-depth interviews, life history, observation and pictures were combined to identify different moments in fifteen families: development of taste, rehearsal by mimicking, premiere, time for adjustments and new beginning

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Theory on consumer socialization has described the cognitive aspects of consumer formation (Roeder, 1999), coupled with extensive measurement developments on family influence on individual decisions (Moschis, 1985, 1988; Commuri, Gentry, 2000; Thompson, Laing, McKee, 2007; Götte, Prange, Uhrvks, 2009). Nevertheless, less attention has been made to the social context to consumer formation (Ward, Klees and Wackman, 1990). Besides, the socialization field has been historically based on a positivistic perspective, which could benefit from contributions of an interpretative and cultural approach (Hirschman, 1986; Holbrook and O’Shaugnessy, 1988; Arnould and Thompson, 2005, 2007) and from social sciences theory itself, as new form of lens to consumer socialization studies (Bourdieu, 1979; Rocha-Coutinho, 2006; Darmon, 2006; Foucault, 1984; Dubar, 2009).

This study aims to provide a social and cultural perspective to the theoretical domain of socialization of consumer (Ward, 1974; Moschis, 1985, 1988), through the use of interpretative tools to investigate beauty consumption in the Brazilian middle class. It seeks to understand beauty consumption itineraries among three generations from the same family – grandmother, mother and daughter. A both social and generational approach (Shah and Mittal, 1997; Bertaux, 1997; Alberti, 2005; Atkinson, 1998; Lins e Barros, 2006) was adopted to investigate family transmission dynamics, which constitute rich laboratories to consumer socialization, within the chosen micro-social scale of a qualitative and interpretive research design (Desjeux, 2004; Cova and Cova, 2002).

Different qualitative methods were considered to allow data triangulation and the emergence of natives’ point of view (Geertz, 1979): in-depth life story interviews (McCrank, 1988; Bertaux, 1997) combined with in-home observations (Rodhain, 2008; Alami; Desjeux; Garabuau-Moussaoui, 2009). Fifteen families were selected by a professional recruiter, and 30 interviews were carried, totalizing a 6 hours minimum interview per family. For the third generation, children aged from 4 to 10, data was gathered in informal conversations, interview with adults and observation of their living space. Social-economic sample definition was inspired by the emergence of a new Brazilian “middle class”, result of an uprising within the social pyramid. This new large group rapidly conquered its space in “cold” statistic studies, but remains largely unknown due to lack of research capable of describing its diversity.

The family life stories enabled the identification of a socialization process from a social point of view. Based on Bourdieu’s social perspective on socialization, the analysis pointed out to four different construction moments of the beauty consumer: the development of taste, the rehearsal by mimicking, the consumption premiere and the adjustments phase.

In the development of taste, rules and judgment are incorporated to form consumers’ values, sense of taste and femininity. Even before girls can understand the meaning of daily care rituals, they begin to incorporate a silent group of values that will shape their appreciation of themselves and others. Manicure and hair treatments such as straitening (for the curly hair), for example, are internalized as basic practices and values for displayed femininity in adult life in Brazil.

The rehearsal by mimicking marks the beginning of concrete action, even if still in the form of childish games. Girls are often observed playing with makeup or giving themselves a “manicure”, from the frequent observation of their mothers and sisters. At this moment, they are not yet consumers, but they are playing as one.

The consumption premiere moment is identified not only by the use of beauty products as a full consumer, but also by the emergence of shopping habits and new use occasions. This premiere may be prompted by events such as the 15th birthday (a still important tradition in Brazilian middle class), the first job, the beginning of going-out with friends without parental supervision, and a first romantic relationship.

After a while, consumers get to know better their consumption needs as well as products, brands and services available. At this moment they enter the last stage, where adjustments are made to their childhood practices, and they start searching solutions, better suited for their grown-up needs. At this moment, the consumer seems to start his adult consumption phase, and the socialization process finds its end.

Particularly in Brazil, an important generational gap seems to indicate uneven family influence, according to different product categories. Life story of interviewed consumers shows a large distance between grandmothers and mother social roles. While the first ones were centered on the household and family activities, the next generation tries to make room for career and education. They get married later and have fewer children, on one side, and strike for gathering more educational degrees, on the other. This gap determines different forms of family influence in operation. While the older generation (grandmothers) relied more on maternal counseling for consumption decisions, the mothers’ generation combines both pairs and family as source of consumption guidance. Depending on the category analyzed, the family influence will be greater or diminished. The most striking example is the consumption of makeup products as means to build a more professional presentation. For this category, interviewees indicated friends and colleagues as the main consumption reference. Nevertheless, for hair treatments, family is still the central unit of influence, determining patterns for volume control standards.

Finally, in order to reduce risk in adopting unknown treatments that, for instance, may affect hair structure - such as the “progressive brushing” – consumers adopt a strategy of triangulating opinions from three particular influence groups: specialists (that provide technical expertise), the media (that guarantee the wide use of the treatment) and the family (that confirm the treatment adaptability to a particular kind of hair). These three sources are continuously confronted in a confirmatory cycle that tries to reduce the risk of adopting new hair solutions. This strategy has not been identified on previous research with upper class consumers in Brazil (Casotti, Suarez and Campos, 2008).

This paper aimed to contribute to consumer socialization research, by offering a social and interpretative perspective. It proposes four stages for consumer socialization from a contextual and social standpoint. Additionally, it discusses specifics aspects of Brazilian middle class consumption, determined by generational changes and particular social network dynamics.
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