

Sustainable Consumption at Home?

The cases of Turkey and Brazil

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Abstract:

We focus on sustainability and consumption in everyday life. We address the call for an interdisciplinary approach by reviewing the extant research on the topic, particularly in the domain of CCT: Consumer Culture Theoretics. Mostly developed by scholars from business schools, from marketing departments, CCT is a stream of study of marketing, markets, and consumption. CCT draws from sociology and anthropology and has been developed as an alternative to economics- and psychology-based studies of consumption and marketing. As in material culture and consumption studies in sociology and anthropology, CCT regards consumption and production to be an interrelated, inter-embedded nexus. We provide a review of the state of the field of sustainability and consumption-production research within CCT.

Empirically, we investigate daily practices that people engage in routinely. We consider the ideals and ideologies of consumers that frame their particular mundane consumption practices. Our work also involves the notions of desire, seduction, morality, and pollution. We explore consumption practices such as food shopping, preparation, and disposal; collecting and disposing the garbage of the home; shopping for cleaning products and cleaning the home, clothes, and the body; and practices such as heating and cooling that serve to make the home comfortable. We compare such daily practices consumers consider to be low impact with those they consider to be high impact as well as those whose impact they have not thought about. Thus, we examine when, where, and how consumers actually engage in more and less sustainable practices. Hence, we address the workshop questions of “when and where does sustainable consumption work?”

We use multiple interpretive methods such as interviews, focus groups, and photo-elicitation/auto-driving. We focus on the growing middle class consumers in south of Brazil: a country, a region, and a demographic group whose consumption levels have been on the rise.

1 Introduction

While it is clear that structural and technological conditions are critical in facilitating or hindering sustainability, we argue that so are daily routines and practices. We focus on sustainability and consumption in everyday life. We examine what people do ordinarily and matter-of-factly and discuss the implications of their practices and ideas for sustainability. We investigate how and when persons end up in high and low impact consumption practices as they go about their daily lives and what these practices mean to them. Hence, we address the workshop questions of “when and where does sustainable consumption work?”

Consumer culture theorists have been addressing this question through distinct approaches and in different contexts. Studies on anti-consumption or resistance movements (i.e. Portwood-Stacer, 2012), on voluntary simplicity (i.e. Alexander and Ussher 2012), on the characteristics of the green consumers (i.e. Connolly and Prothero 2008) or, in a broader perspective, on the relationship between consumption and citizenship (i.e. Trentmann, 2007) are just some examples of how this topic have become of interest for many scholars in the field.

However, the literature also indicates that there is a very small minority of people who engage in voluntary simplicity or sustainable consumption: for example 5% in Brazil (Akatu and Ethos Institutes 2010). What researchers find instead is that there is a disjuncture between discourse and practice regarding environmentally friendly consumption: most people, be they in Ankara or London (Ger 1999; Miller 1998) do acknowledge the importance of sustainability and think that they should consume in a more sustainable manner, but they usually do not. Instead, at least in London (Miller 1998), they engage in a few such practices and think that they are doing their bit.

Might/will more people consume more sustainably more of the time? Some point to various campaigns and practices in the UK or the Scandinavian countries and respond affirmatively. In general, there have been three approaches regarding the spread of sustainable consumption. One argument is that awareness and information are crucial: masses will change their behaviors if they are given information about sustainability issues and the impacts of their practices on the environment (Kearney and De Young 1995; Thøgersen 1994). However, this rational view has not been proven successful. The second perspective is that economic and structural incentives such as taxes and improved public transport can enhance sustainability. A third perspective is that sustainable consumption is and will remain an alternative lifestyle among a small subculture of consumers (Alexander and Ussher, 2012). Research in consumption studies and consumer culture theory support the latter view while also acknowledging the role of the structural context. The notion is that, because consumption is undertaken within a network of ideals and ideologies - such as cleanliness, convenience and comfort (Shove 2003), or individualism, or hedonism- about how to live, what a modern life and/or what a good life is and should be, as well as a global consumerist ethos – most of which counter a sustainability ethos or ideal. Moreover, most consumption entails habits and routines, which are not only persistent but also reinforced by the worlds of advertising and fashion.

Consumption rests on a tension between seduction and morality (Belk, Ger, Askegaard 2003) and that morality can include many different “rights” and “wrongs,” only one of them being sustainability. Consumption and production being an interrelated, inter-embedded nexus, the ideologies, ideals that float in the popular culture shape both. Individuals and families consume what they consume based on the priorities and values they (learn to) assign to the things and experiences they consume. We consume particular things in particular manners in order to express and construct our identities, social positions, and relationships with others. Such relationships can be affiliative, aspirational or disassociative. We consume

to become like our desired others and to distinguish and distance ourselves from our undesirable others. Consumption desires permeate daily life such that the meaning of life is sought, identity is constructed, and relationships are formed and maintained more and more in and by consumption. We use or long to use brands or products to gain status and social acceptance. Moreover, consumption itself can be empowering – a means of gaining control over lives otherwise dominated by lack of choice (Ger and Belk 1999).

Moreover, people find ingenious ways to rationalize, justify, or excuse their typically high-levels of consumption (Ger and Belk 1999). Consumers find various ways to moralize their consumption patterns in order to legitimize them as being necessary, normal, and decent.

Such justifications depend on the cultural context and the prevalent ethics at a particular time and place. These justifications include deservingness (either as a reward for achievement or to compensate prior relative deprivation); utilitarianism; pursuit of modernity and a “normal”, decent life; joyous connoisseurship; uncalculated pleasure; and shared consumption. The broader ethics that appear to underlie such legitimations include romanticism, Protestant utilitarianism, altruistic sociality, progress, and fairness or equity.

Thus, we argue that we must first understand the existing consumption practices, the values and conflicts involved in daily life, and the possibilities for sustainable consumption practices, all in their specific cultural and structural context. With that kind of understanding and engagement in cultural as well as economic dimensions, a network of agents can potentially boost sustainable consumption, by, as we will argue, relying on popular culture and culturally significant symbolism to make low impact practices desirable, fun, and viable.

Currently, the First World consumption (and production) might well be the primary culprit for environmental problems. However, we see that there is a new middle class in many emerging economies such as the BRICS, Turkey, and elsewhere. This globally rising new middle class is eager to consume just like the rest of their co-consumers in the First World. The image of the “good life” in emerging markets is one of being a successful participant in consumption-oriented society (Ger 1997; Ger and Belk 1996; Shultz, Belk and Ger 1994). Surrounded by material goods and images of goods, pleasurable expectations rise as markets rise. New middle classes consume more and more and value consumption and new products more and more. Then, we wonder, what will the consequences on the environment be, if, with marketization and globalization, the rest of the world consumes at the current levels of the world’s most affluent nations? With that perspective in mind, this study examines ordinary consumption practices among the middle classes in two emerging economies: Brazil and Turkey.

2 Study

We focus on the growing middle class consumers in Porto Alegre and Ankara, in Brazil and Turkey, respectively, where economic growth and consumption levels have been on the rise. Empirically, we investigate daily practices that people engage in routinely. We consider the ideals and ideologies of consumers that frame their particular mundane consumption practices. We explore consumption practices such as food shopping, preparation, and disposal; collecting and disposing the garbage of the home; shopping for cleaning products and cleaning the home, clothes, and the body; and practices such as heating and cooling that serve to make the home comfortable. We compare such daily practices consumers consider to be low impact with those they consider to be high impact as well as those whose impact they

have not thought about. Moreover, we analyze motivations and obstacles for engaging in sustainable practices. Finally, we inquire about the domains and practices, which entail 6Rs – reducing, redistributing, recycling, reusing, refusing, and repairing (Dobscha, Prothero and McDonagh 2012). Thus, we examine when, where, and how consumers actually engage in more and less sustainable practices.

We have used multiple interpretive methods such as interviews, introspective reports, focus groups, and observations in homes and public spaces such as cafes, offices, and streets. We had two focus groups conducted in Brazil and four in Turkey, and twenty-five interviews in Brazil and eleven in Turkey. We obtained twelve introspective reports in each country. We have also about ten hours of observations and field notes.

3 Findings

3.1 Daily High-impact Consumption Practices

Most daily food preparing, cleaning, waste disposal and climate control practices are carried out in a routine manner, without much thinking. For example, our Brazilian informants never even think about the environmental impacts of the beef that they consume almost daily. Turkish informants find (over)heating their homes to be much more comfortable than putting on a sweater. In both Brazil and Turkey, a lot of informants still find it simply easy, fast, and convenient to walk out of a room without turning the lights off, to dump all the garbage in the same container, to leave the water running while brushing teeth. Driving a car with the AC set to a particular temperature is also easy as well as comfortable. Brazilian informants consider the AC to be a must; when inquired they argue that without it one would have to endure a lot of discomfort. Taking fifteen to twenty minute showers is more relaxing and fun than cutting short the pleasure of hot water running over your body, especially if your shower tank also has other niceties such as an mp3 player as in some Turkish bathrooms. Cleanliness of the home is of utmost importance for both Turkish and perhaps even more for Brazilian informants (see also Neves 2004) and they use numerous strong detergents in large quantities to make sure that the counter tops and the floors are clean and smell nice. Finally, the highly desirable latest technology and fashions generate still functional but cast-aside phones, laptops, TVs, clothes, and shoes. Even napkins at Turkish cafes are picked from the café counters in multiples, and many, unused, get thrown in the garbage when tables are cleared. In sum, consistent with Ger (1999) and Miller (1998), we do not find much sustainability in the daily practices in the home, as is evident also from the following remarks:

“Yes, cars are worse for the environment than public transportation. But you know, driving a car is a big convenience. And freedom, independence. If so many people are so insensitive to the environment, I will not put myself into trouble, I will not inflict myself in the name of protecting the environment. Either everyone altogether does something or no one does anything. Such things will not happen with the efforts of a few persons” (TR, 28 F, doctor).

“If I have to take care and be concerned about all these things (sustainable practices), I won’t live anymore...Why to work so hard if you can’t enjoy what you have earned” (BRZ, 37 M, IT programmer).

“To be honest, I am lazy when it comes to recycling. I don’t spend the time to go here and there, check out for different types of containers. I see that most people are like

me. If I don't see a benefit for myself, I don't make an effort, I don't spend much time on it" (TR, 23, M student, doctor's son).

"It's too complicated to separate garbage every day, to keep different containers in a small place and, in the end of the day, to have to go five floors downstairs with three different bags ..." (BRZ, F, 53, housewife).

"In the rush of everyday life, the last thing is to consider the environment. It demands a lot ... to take children to school, to go to the supermarket ... and this aspect (environment) ends up in the background" (BRZ, M, 32, controller).

"We are in a period where everything that is ecologically correct is more expensive, and this impact on the pocket of everybody. There are few options, and those that exist are very expensive" (BRZ, F, 51, economist).

We find that a major obstacle to the dissemination of sustainability in the household practices is the fact that such practices usually require "more" from the individuals. "More time", "more resources", "more money", and "more involvement" are reasons that the informants voice recurrently. In fact, such justifications point to the lack of a clear perception about the "real" personal benefits of sustainable practices. The increasing volume of scientific information, reports demonstrating the environmental impacts of certain countries, films denouncing global warming are far removed from the daily and personal life of ordinary people. Such alarms at the macro level are not enough to leverage major changes in behavior at the micro level, in the mundane daily practices. Hence, given a dubious personal benefit, being sustainable becomes something annoying, inconvenient, and, in some cases – as in organic foods and recycleable materials - also expensive.

Moreover, there is also a sense that "others don't do anything, so why should I do?" in the words of a Brazilian informant:

"I do not care to change my habits ... while I am sacrificing myself to care for the environment, I go out on the street and see a neighbor with a hose washing the car. You know, I am giving up of some amenities while others are not doing their part. So why would I do that?" (BRZ, F, 53, housewife).

Such skepticism extends beyond other individuals to the public and private sectors. Many Turkish informants complain about the lack of information about recycling symbols and other symbols of sustainability on packages; they also stated that they do not trust the "organic" labels on foods. Some informants expressed dissatisfaction that the public sector did not do enough to assure sustainable waste disposal. Turkish informants voiced concern that they do not know what really happens to things that are placed in separate recycling bins. Similarly, a Brazilian informant said: *"I would separate garbage, but they say they do it, but they do not come and collect it"* (F, 42, executive secretary). Another confirmed: *"There is this politically correct way to do and to talk about things. In theory. But in practice, the government, they just do not care! In practice, nobody cares"* (F, 47, housewife). That is, "if nobody cares, why should I?" This is a position characterized by more individualism and less trust in the institutions.

Overall, informant accounts indicate that their ideals and ideas of pleasure, fun, comfort, convenience, cleanliness, fast life and saving time, freedom, fashionability, and status reign and weigh much more than the ideal and value of sustainability. Aptly one Brazilian

informant said “*green people are such a boring people*” (F, 47, housewife). Moreover, some Turkish informants consider not caring about anything to be cool and a reflection of their personal freedom. Accordingly, many (but not all) informant accounts also indicate a “me first” attitude and a lack of interest in anything that does not directly relate to self - a culture of individualism which is a usual accompaniment of the emergence of market capitalism (Collier 1997).

3.2 Daily Low-impact Consumption Practices

We discuss the sustainable practices in terms of 6Rs: refusing, reducing, redistributing, recycling, reusing, and repairing after Dobscha, Prothero and McDonagh (2012). Refusal is the rarest in our data followed by reducing. The only informant who consciously refused something - the latest model of a cell phone and an LCD television - was a Turkish retired female lawyer. Informants’ accounts indicate that except a few consumers who resist the world of advertising and consumption, most rarely do. Some Turkish informants refuse certain brands for political or health but not for environmental reasons.

Many more Turkish and Brazilian informants reduce their consumption for non-sustainability reasons such as cost or health/body. A familiar Brazilian parental comment testifies to the cost aspect: “*Do you think I am member of CEEE (local electricity company)?*” The concern with the bill and the health overweighs the public announcements on television about polar bears dying or insertions in family sitcoms about global warming. For example, in a television series titled “*Çocuklar Duymasin*” the father sarcastically says to the kids: “*all these lights on- do we want to be seen shiny from outerspace? We use up so much energy, we warmed up the world*” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75Tci2w-ATA>). Many if not all informants do state that they try to reduce their electricity and water usage by turning off the lights when leaving a room or turning off the faucet while taking a shower, shaving, or brushing teeth mostly for reasons of economy. These findings accord with the results of a survey of 512 students in Kutahya, a small city in Turkey: turning off lights was one of the two (spuriously) sustainable practices (among 28), the other being repairing (Kiraci and Kayabasi 2010). Reducing energy consumption by using pressure cookers and by using fans instead of air conditioners is a common practice in Turkish homes, but again more for economy and health than sustainability per se. In addition, many informants say that they attempt to reduce their consumption of processed foods, fried foods, foods with additives, and foods with GMO for health reasons.

We find redistributing to be a much more common practice. Informants in both countries redistribute clothes, food, electronics, and appliances by giving their old items to other people who might need or want them. Consider Aymin’s (a female Turkish student) account:

“Every 3 months me and my family members separate our clothes, shoes, and other items that we don’t use in order to give them others, mostly people who need them. Also, I look at my mother’s and sister’s items before distributing them and I take something to use myself.”

Repairing is much more common in the Turkish than in the Brazilian accounts. Specialized repair shops for leather goods, for clothes alterations, and for watches and sunglasses abound in every neighborhood, rich and poor, in addition to electronics. Aymin expressed the prevalence of repairing along with the wish for new goods in her own family:

“My father always repairs his phones, washing machine, or other electronic items and he can use such products for more than 10 years. On the contrary, when electronic items are broken, my mother’s first option is to replace it with a new one. I

am similar to my mother because my DVD player was broken and I purchased a new one. I gave the older one to our cleaning lady's son and he repaired it himself without any technician."

Reuse serves practical as well as artistic ends. The reuse of glass jars and bottles for storage, plastic bags for garbage, leftover foods to make soups, sauces or other creative dishes, torn clothes or fabrics or broken glass for creative crafts and decorative items are not uncommon. There are magazines and television programs on the craft as well, inspiring domestic creativity. Some examples from our informants include:

"A lot of things that would go to garbage I take to the school (where the child studies). There, they use it in environmental projects where they create new things from it. They literally create art from garbage" (BRZ, F, 49, entrepreneur).

"As a creative person, I have made a lot of things up to now. Pencilbox from a Pringles box, a handbag from fabric pieces, tealight from broken glasses, vase from a broken pot, curtains from the old fabrics of my grandmom, collages from the old magazines, remodeled clothes, and more" (TR, F, 23, student).

"It's quite rare in our home to throw food away... we usually use ingredients or leftovers to prepare something different ... we are quite creative on that" (BRZ, F, 23, student).

In some cases, reuse can require more skill than handicrafts, as in making soap from used cooking oil. A Brazilian informant explained that she stores *"the used oil in PET bottles to give to my mother-in-law... She uses it to make soap"*.

Recycling was the practice most discussed among the 6Rs. Informants consider recycling to be the utmost indication of environment-friendliness. Some state proudly that

"I prefer plastic bags which have a "recycled" symbol. For my sports clothes, I prefer those made from recycled materials. Also batteries: generally, I don't throw used batteries into the garbage" (TR, M, 23 student).

Others think if they recycle, they have fulfilled their responsibility. In the words of a Brazilian informant, *"we do our part: we do separate the garbage"* (M, 24, student).

Turkish focus group discussions demonstrated clearly that if recycling is made easy, and if they trust that the recycling will actually work, then they do it. In the words of a Turkish informant:

"In Bursa, the municipality leaves a bag for recycling at your door every night. And you say, well, it is here, let's use it. ... In Ankara, the recycling bags are dumped with the other garbage at Mamak (an area in the outskirts) and burnt. So why bother?"

Another informant seconded that she will recycle and has done so if she trusts the end process. She mentioned how her family participated in the "blue lid project" which involved a massive collection of plastic bottle caps (http://www.kapaktoplama.com/mavi_kapak_kampanyasi_projesi.html). The organizers provided a wheelchair to a handicapped person for every 250 kgs of caps.

"We actually would like to recycle, but there aren't any separate bins. Even when there are, we just don't know what will happen to our recycled materials. That's

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why we all collected the blue caps because we were aware that they would become a wheelchair for a disabled person at the end.”

Municipalities, retail chains, stores, schools, facebook and other online communities supported and participated in this nation-wide campaign and more than 250 wheelchairs were handed out. In this case, knowing (and trusting) what happens to the recycled stuff coincided with another motive: helping others - a social, altruistic motive.

There is some indication that, in Turkey, mothers perhaps engage in more sustainable practices than others. Introspective reports reveal that the students lament that they themselves are less careful and responsible than their mothers and that whatever water or electricity saving habits they have, their mothers taught them. In Brazil, however, accounts suggest that there is an increasing awareness on sustainability by children, usually built and stimulated by discussions and practices promoted in elementary schools.

In sum, the following factors seem to encourage sustainable practices. First, and foremost, a sustainable practice is likely to be undertaken if it is easy and convenient to do. Secondly, seeing other people – like them and in close proximity – doing it pushes one to also engage in the 6Rs, consistent with Goldstein, Cialdini and Griskevicius’s (2008) findings on proenvironmental behaviors. For example, seeing neighbors separate garbage and dispose in different containers makes one inclined to do the same much more so than being simply aware of recycling facilities. Conversely, seeing their neighbors and friends not engaging in sustainable practices makes them disinclined. Thirdly, when sustainable practices coincide with other motives such as health, reduced costs, or helping other people, consumers are more prone to undertake them. Fourthly, if a sustainable practice can serve as an expression of a creative self or some other form of a desirable self, again consumers will be more inclined to act in a proenvironmental manner. Finally, the 6Rs in daily life are enabled when institutions take effective action and provide ease, visibility and reliability. For example, supermarkets using recycled bags or “ecobags” and providing collection containers for batteries and used kitchen oils; municipalities (or condominiums) providing containers for selective garbage collection; and municipalities assuring proper recycling consequences.

3.3 Participation in Projects/Campaigns

While our focus is on daily practices, the fact that some informants mentioned certain projects enthusiastically is worth revealing. One example is the recent initiative of a collaborative online forum in Porto Alegre (<http://portoalegre.cc/>). Citizens post their comments and suggest possible solutions related to the city’s problems. On a March Saturday morning, about eighty people followed the suggestion of a local student and went to the shores of the Guaíba River to clean the area of garbage. Late in the morning, about one ton of garbage - from bottles to tires, suitcases and shoes had been collected. The municipality as well as the social media supported it too. The mayor himself attended the event and collected garbage too. By the end of the day, almost fifteen hundred people had twitted and six thousand had “liked” the event on the facebook. In the words of our informants:

“It is cool if you can start a movement, if you can put people together in favor of something that will be good for other people or for the environment.... When you realize that you can really do something, well, this is cool” (BRZ, F, 22, student).

“Yes, it is cool if you can tell people that you are running and fostering a campaign on something” (BRZ, M, 23, student).

So, be it the empowerment of “a sense of ‘I can really do something,’” “a normal person like us doing something” or the social aspect of telling people that you have done something of significance, people can and do participate in such grassroots projects.

A second example points to another reason for the success of a sustainability campaign: a Turkish recycling NGO organized the installation 190 bins in a neighborhood for the disposal of used glass receptacles in collaboration with a glass company and Zeytinburnu municipality in Istanbul (<http://www.cevko.org.tr/cevko/home.aspx?lang=fr-CA> Cam Şişeler Sizden Tiyatro Biletiniz Anadolu Cam’dan!). If a person brings at least three glass bottles or jars, they receive a ticket for a children’s play at the municipality’s theatre during the period 26 March - 27 May 2012. In this case, starting a new practice of recycling was augmented by a fun family activity (and monetary benefit) for the participants.

Thus, informants can and do participate in sustainability projects and feel good or proud or gratified about it too. It seems that such projects entail one or more of several factors: a sense of empowerment - that their acts can really make a difference for a better world; a sense of gratification of having actually helped someone; an altruism factor – helping needy people; the “cool” factor; some additional incentive like a theatre ticket; a fun factor; a tangible factor, where they can really see the consequences; and participation of multiple agents – such as stores, municipalities, schools, NGOs.

4 Implications of the Findings

Brazil and Turkey are typical representatives of contemporary developing countries. While economic stability, international recognition and industrial and market consolidation play its role on a macro level perspective, it is the boon of consumption power and the consequent access to new lifestyles that characterize these contexts in the micro level dimension. Individuals make sense and advantage of these new conditions through consumption. Actually, there is a sense of finally deserving it. This scenario is not consistent with the discourse that happiness and better quality of life won’t come from consumption, and that it is necessary to go on a diet (consumption wise) in order to save the planet.

If the ethos and ideologies of pleasure, fun, comfort, convenience, cleanliness, fast life and saving time, freedom, fashionability, and status reign, then sustainability projects must make use of these ideals and ideologies. That is, sustainable practices should be framed to be fun, pleasurable, cool, fashionable and seductive, possibly using cultural intermediaries, like popular culture (TV, films, you tube, social media, etc.) or creative professions (advertising, designers, artists, etc.) in order to become spread out in a more desirable way.

Sustainable practices should also be related in a way that could be recognized as liberatory, freeing and empowering the individual. When someone can experiment the power of suggesting or taking part in a project that (a) can really make a difference in a specific context, and/or (b) have tangible and visible positive consequences for an immediate setting, and/or (c) the results – and the feeling resulting from it, and the recognition for it – can be easily shared with others, there is a greatest potential for these experiences to become disseminated and of interest for more people.

The discourse of sustainable behavior should also have some link to the “me first” ethos. “I am a helpful person”, “I am a creative person”, or even “why should I do that?” are ideologies that have somehow to be explored in terms of strategies of consumer empowerment related to sustainable practices. Although ensuring the collaboration of a network of actors is expected, welcomed and probably more effective (including institutions,

organizations, NGOs, online communities, local communities, etc.), in order to get broader adoption, sustainable practices have also to be associated to individual benefits and rewards. Following this, companies could reward consumer with cash, “green” points or tickets to cultural events for a minimum amount of returned garbage, as well as promoting those customers who have suggested or better responded to a sustainable project. Additionally, sustainable practices must be easy and convenient. Brazilian data shows that some people have adopted practices for recycling used oil and batteries since supermarkets and condominiums have provide special containers for collecting it.

These several stimulus and resources to the spread of sustainable practices seem a way to foster a more political and civic dimension of consumption, but something that can be cool, easy and even desirable, instead of a duty or a diet.

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