

# Children, Consumption and Sustainability

*The negative effects of advertising and the emergency of adequate public policies*

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**Abstract:** Post-industrial society moves forward in a disordered manner and brings along many social risks to which we are still trying to find ways and solutions to a healthier, less unstable and less insecure life. The debate about sustainability arises as a necessary challenge to various contemporary problems faced by the world population. However, to discuss sustainability without discussing a phenomenon that emerged from this scenario, such as consumerism, indicates a disregard towards a deep-rooted habit in both adults and children nowadays. Therefore, this article is intended to make the thoughts and actions of Instituto Alana's Projeto Crianca e Consumo evident as it discusses the consumption with no reflection as a promoted phenomenon in our society since childhood, through market communicational catalyzers such as advertisement. We believe that the discussion about sustainability it should make educators think critically and help children understand the consumption society where marketing strategies barely consider effects like the use of natural resources, exacerbate materialism, frustrations, obesity, early erotization, among other important themes to the study of human sciences and to the well-being of our society. Public policies that take into account the need for an education to sustainable consumption as well as the regulation of advertisement directed to kids, protecting them from these appeals, show up as possible solutions to the topic of consumerism and childhood protection in contemporary society.

## 1 Introduction

The economic model that has migrated from the industrial to the capital era brought with it many social risks to which we are still trying to find ways and solutions to a healthier, less unstable and less insecure life.

To avoid moral judgments about the "political" is to give due importance to the subjectivity of individuals and social groups in their profound complexity, that is, in its many contradictions and paradoxes. The Humanities pay expensively for the thinking process and time they need to expound at length on a subject, and this is most evident today, since efficiency, accuracy and even the importance of an analysis are seen only through a measurable and quantitative sieve, on criteria such as, for example, size, percentage or chemical composition. In short, a sort of biotechnological verdict appears to circumvent the

reflection of social phenomena and demands immediate (shallow, quick) and tangible (visible, palpable) results. Thus, these contradictions and paradoxes are literally translated into operational variables that explain, understand and believe little or nothing.

How can we speak of the relationship - or relationships - between a given society and an economic model, between the production of cultural meanings and its relation to the supply of commercial products or, to be specific, between an action as primitive as surviving – in other words, consuming – and an economic system whose well-being is based on the "supra-satisfaction" of human needs, creates mechanisms and systems that challenge the limits of satiety, and ensures that it is possible to increasingly exhaust our will, whatever that may be?

In analyzing the so-called biotechnological verdict reflected by statistics on consumption, levels of loyalty - and loyalty strategies - levels of confidence in the market, credit capacity, record sales, or that which obeys the relations of stimulus and response, which is the space for discussion, for example, of consumption habits - not those "of" consumption, which categorize individuals -, their cultural meanings, their political representation, their theories of communication?

Consumption is the installed capital in man. The man is seen as a mediator of consumption to gross internal happiness. The commercial objects tell us a lot about the personal and social uses and appropriations, just as the ideals tell us about a "draft" of ideas about the desired future according to well-defined paradigms.

However, it is convenient to separate criticism to consumption from criticism to consumerism, just as it is very different to criticize ideals of a society and its ideologies taken strictly as fundamentalist dogmas. Thus, the role of the object (that it, the commodity and its relation to society by the act of consumption) in the formation of social relationships is important and brings valuable information and data to many areas of the Humanities. On the other hand, there is a question: where do ethnographic observation, sociological and historical analysis end, and where do their describing and epistemological functions begin, operating in an uncritical reality? It is possible to study consumption and define consumerism as an exacerbated state of the material plane of man and his social relations?

## **2 Risk, Sustainability and Consumerism**

Today we live with deforestation, nuclear power plants, air pollution, climate change, accelerated pace of life, the supremacy of having in relation to being, fast-food, high calorie diet incorporated in to the daily life, stress diseases, etc. These are symptoms of the consumer society (Bauman, 2008), and even more of the risk society (Beck, 2010).

The risk Ulrich Beck is referring to is the probability of an event, harmful or not, happening. It is ubiquitous and we learn to live with it. The constitution of the risk society happens in the threat and effects produced in the transition from a feudal and agrarian society to a capitalist, industrial and urban society. Thus, uncertainties are produced as one of the aspects of this reflexive modernization (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1997), where the thinking process of the decisions appears in society as a legacy of the industrial and capitalist period.

The concept of risk society, towards a social theory and a diagnosis of culture, refers to a modernity stage in which the threats produced so far on the path of industrial society begin to take shape. This process shows the self-restraint of that development, as well as the task to redefine the standards (of responsibility, security, control, damage limitation and distribution

of the consequences of damage) reached up to that point, taking the potential threats into account (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1997, p. 17). In other words, it is the normal modernization and additional modernization that are dissolving the contours of industrial society. The constellation that is rising as a result also has nothing in common with the so far failed utopias of a socialist society. Instead, what is emphasized is that the industrial dynamism, extremely fast, is turning into a new society without, first, the explosion of a revolution, overlapping discussions and policy decisions of parliaments and governments (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1997, p. 13).

This reflection leads us to understand that the principle of sustainability gains strength by its integrated understanding of social and environmental needs that oppose to a divided vision to understood development as a mere use of resources where there was no presumption of its finitude, nor the paths that involved its production were questioned.

And as suggested by Beck, Giddens and Lash (1997, p. 67), the ecological issue must be worked along with other issues: technology, development, production arrangements, the product policy, type of nutrition, lifestyles, legal rules, organizational and administrative forms, etc.

However, what we have today is a late response to the consumer society with proposals to curb the progressive advancement of excesses and setting up or capitalizing on a "green speech" as a new lifestyle. For example, the consumption of organic products in evidence, capitalized on this logic, but whose prices exceed the products with pesticides and industrial products. This commoditization of sustainability is established as a similar phenomenon to a trend in which individuals carry the brands by means of reusable bags, car stickers, e-mail signatures, etc.

What becomes important to know is whether these so-called sustainable practices are lasting or merely seasonal (as in fashion) and if they only respond to a marketing appeal that feeds the traditional idea of status. Following this logic, sustainability becomes yet another symbol of consumption, relativized in a brand.

To understand this mechanism, Bauman (2001, p. 116) argues that in postmodern tribes and their emblematic figures and visible markings (indications that suggest dress codes and / or codes of conduct) replace the original totems of the tribes. Being up front and glowing the badges of the emblematic figures of the fashion squad is the only reliable way to ensure that the chosen squad knew of the existence of the aspirant, and it would certainly bestow to him the highly desired recognition and acceptance. Staying ahead is the only way to ensure that this membership recognition lasts as long as you want, i.e., to achieve that a single act of admission solidifies and becomes a residence permit with a fixed, but renewable, maturity. Finally, "staying ahead" promises some security, some assurance of security, precisely the kind of experience so conspicuously and painfully absent from the consumerist life, even when its goal is neither more nor less than the desire to achieve them.

From this perspective of sustainable fashion of consumerism, global discussion and debate on the issue of environment and efforts to think about sustainability become increasingly more frequent in this distorted configuration of environmental preservation as defined above. In lieu of this subject, consumerism has emerged as a sub-theme for being a symptom of market practices and for establishing itself as a paradigm of an economic model that finds its balance

in the expansion of cumulative capacity of the society, in a vision forwarded to the satisfaction far beyond of requirements and, therefore, unsustainable.

Celebrated Brazilian theoretical geographer, Milton Santos, concludes this matter when he says that in the past, those who thought the possibility of social change could also be regarded as optimistic or visionary. And he continues: "I think the difference today comes from knowledge of the material conditions that are already present, much more strongly present. Urbanization, megacities, the invitation to consumerism ... it all comes together to accelerate the movement. One is invited to consumerism and men suffer because they can not consume, and they soon discover that they also suffer because they consume. The potential for change becomes exponential" (Santos, 2000, p. 66-67).

In this sense, the debate about sustainability is presented as a necessary challenge to many contemporary problems faced by the world's population. However, talking about sustainability without discussing a phenomenon that emerged from this scenario, such as consumerism, reveals a neglect of a habit ingrained today by both adults and children.

The current economic model, and its practice of consumerism as a maximum expression of financial prosperity of the economically active population, led to a series of social problems that can hardly escape the political agenda of governments and private sector business. Some of them are: pollution by excessive individual transport, food production generated by market demand and not by agricultural calendar, the use of pesticides in agriculture, the implementation of monocultures at industrial scale, the monopolization of seeds by companies with technology for their genetic manipulation, among other issues such as obesity and violence.

Other effects of consumerism is the relationship between the market and consumers where the latter are defined as individuals who constantly enhance its material voracity, the same one that is understood as a commitment to satisfaction, a circle that diversifies the range of supply under the label of the new and necessary.

In the deregulated and privatized scenario, centered in consumerist concerns and pursuits, the responsibility for the summary choices - the action that follows the choice and the consequences of these actions - is thrown squarely on the shoulders of individual actors. As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out two decades ago, coercion has been replaced by stimulation; by the strong imposition of standards of behavior promoted by seduction; by the policing of conduct operated by public relations and advertising; and by the normative regulation itself, with the creation of new needs and new desires (apud Bauman, 2011, p. 56).

In a psychoanalytic perspective about consumerism feedback, Rodrigues (2009, p. 3) says that in this logic "the self is never satisfied, it is in search of a possible match, it is the same one questioned by advertising with the various communicative approaches to a sharper and mainly symbolic perception."

Thus, besides the speeches, consumers are also diversifying, setting different criteria - profiles - such as purchasing power, education level, frequency of consumption and age. In the latter, the child is no longer understood merely as a passive consumer of parental preference, or custodian of the fidelity of the parents in this or that brand. It's time to see children as the spokespersons of the complex process of choice when shopping, with a specific production line, a self marketing language, a design of forms dedicated to an entire engineering logistics to facilitate their proximity, convenience and satisfaction.

Children thus incorporate a well-defined aspect of the adults in their relationship with the products purchased and their social interactions: the idea of status arises. In the process which the child practices consumption and incorporates the needs expressed by the media, advertising and other reference sources, it is possible to speak of child consumerism within a framework that capitalizes on children and understand them as a subject with full purchasing power, in a money relation that depends on their parents. And today, children and adolescents are considered the richest and most influential generation of all times, as they capitalize some 1.18 trillion dollars per year (Lindstrom, 2004).

Armed with this knowledge, research institutes carry out quantitative surveys on the reach of children in household purchasing decisions and brand consumption habits. As an example, the TNS text showing their expertise to meet consumer trends and consumers; in this case, the children: “the growing influence of children in household purchasing decisions is a common phenomenon throughout Latin America. It is critical for companies to understand this trend so they can position their brands and communicate more effectively. To understand this change, TNS conducted a survey in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Guatemala and Mexico, interviewing mothers and children aged between 3 and 9 years old. The result provides a picture of the influence exerted by children in the consumption habits of households and the brands that are on their minds” (TNS, 2008).

Perez & Bairon (2002, p. 44 apud Rodrigues, 2007, p.7) theorize that Advertising encourages the creation of desires through various signs that not only communicate, but also inform and persuade. The authors classified two basic types of Advertising:

1. Persuasive: it is the advertising that aims to bring conviction about a product. Operates with archetypes to great effect, such as the use of humor, sensuality and playfulness in Brazil, as well as a mixture thereof. Excellent examples of this are the recent campaigns of Brahma beer, which make use of women (sensuality) and Turtle (playfulness) in a humorous context.
2. Informative: it is the one that provides information about the product. It is recommended when the product is new in the market and therefore needs explanations regarding its use indication, how to use, functional attributes, benefits, price, where to find it, etc.

Persuasion by indirect enunciative paths is the path associated with seductive advertising (confirmed and reminded) to other marketing and promotions in cinemas, supermarkets and malls tasting sessions, giveaways and events. As an industry tool of products and services, advertising is still one of the largest marketing communications resources in use and investment. According to survey data released by IBOPE Mídia, the advertising market moved about R\$76.2 billion in Brazil in 2010; 19% more than in 2009 with 64 billion (IBOPE Mídia, 2011). These data demonstrate the participation of the advertising in the economy and society.

### **3 Advertising directed at children and the promotion of consumerism – Instituto Alana’s case of the Children and Consumerism Project (Projeto Criança e Consumo, in Portuguese)**

The Children and Consumerism Project of non-governmental organization Instituto Alana came out in 2005 and develops activities to arise interest in the critical consciousness of Brazilian society about the practices of consumerism of products and services for children. Its main objectives are to discuss and point out ways that minimize the negative impacts caused by massive investments in the commercialization of childhood, such as consumerism, early sexualization, childhood obesity, violence, excessive materialism, the erosion of social relations, etc. It proposes a regulation to any marketing communication directed at children in Brazil. In recent years, it seeks to draw attention and mobilize various social actors to the impact of child consumerism on the rise due to marketing activities directed to children under 12 years of age.

The NGO’s action in defense of the issues that are important today to the studies of environment and consumerism leads us to reflect about discarding and its material and immaterial dimensions. In a unique moment of the discussion on sustainability, reflecting on the private enterprise’s responsibility regarding their fostering actions to cumulative consumption show a clear direction to the excess for profit rather than restraint to reduce the environmental and social problems. Furthermore, strengthening the market for consumer products and media is the erasure of childhood by the absence of public spaces to play, lack of public policies intended to protect this universe and the lack of effective control of the state regarding the abuse of the private companies in relation to children.

Meanwhile, the child audience is important for retention of a habit, excessive consumption as a form of human relations, the exacerbation of concept of having something, the idea of wealth, of brands. Growing up while voraciously consuming things ensures the survival of the market and its economic system, however, the alternatives of the same system are demonstrated to be insoluble, lacking prospects for ensuring conservation of resources and less environmental degradation.

Based on the actions of the Children and Consumerism Project as an agent that presents a social problem, and coming before a time where issues such as sustainability, environmental education and consumer education are on Brazil’s agenda, we question the issue of communication appeals and, especially, advertising in relation to promoting children consumerism.

Communication companies, the market and the advertisers of consumer products have been geared toward children. Although they have a long involvement in the consumer market, up until recently they were considered small agents or buyers of cheap products. They attracted a small portion of the talents and resources of the industries and were addressed primarily through their mothers. That has changed. Today, children and adolescents are the epicenter of American consumer culture, for example. They demand attention, creativity and investment of millions of advertisers. Their preferences drive market trends. Their opinions shape corporate strategic decisions. However, there are few adults who recognize the magnitude of change and its consequences for the future of our children and our culture (Schor, 2009, p. 02).

Researcher Jennifer Hill (2011) points out that children today are immersed in consumerism culture so that every aspect of their lives is touched by a method of purchasing and procurement. In particular, children in North America are increasingly suffering the effects of

consumerism culture in unprecedented levels of involvement. It is therefore necessary to examine the impact of consumerism in order to assess the identity formation and development of young people. Children are receiving an endless volume of messages encouraging the purchase and consumption behavior that affects self-image. In fact, children from ages 4-12 have been increasingly defined by their spending power. Girls, especially, are marketing targets to sell an entire line of products that support a feminine ideal. There is evidence to suggest that the structure of childhood is ending and children are suffering from serious physical, emotional and social deficits directly related to consumerism

In the complex system of media, where internet and television continue to exert predominant and direct influence on child audience (Boyland & Halford, 2012), marketing activities are becoming more widespread. In this sense, advertising is a piece of the mercantile gear, since it is the brands' main communication tool exerting full importance in sales of products and services. It encourages, reminds and repeats all the time so we don't forget the brands of these products. To do so, it uses planning strategies both in creation and media.

When directed at children, the situation is even worse, since the child is still under development and does not have the insight needed to understand the commercial nature of advertising campaigns (Bjurström, 1994). In this case, therefore, the approaches are the most creative yet aggressive ones. An example was the film *Rio*, one of the biggest players in marketing and it was used by several brands through licensing of the characters which have even been presented as gifts in the Happy Meal and also in advertisements of the brand. This action has been identified as abusive and Instituto Alana's Children and Consumerism Project filed a formal complaint. In another complaint filed at Sao Paulo's Procon, McDonald's was fined a historic R\$3 million for associating the sale of food to toys, encouraging harmful food consumption habits to children's health (Blog Consumerism and Childhood, 2011 – *Consumismo e Infância*, in Portuguese). Major brands (such as Nestlé, Parmalat and Mattel) estimate the use of appeals to the children's imagination diverted to consumption through toys, pets, stickers and collectible items (Montigneaux, 2003).

The incentives for consumption without a 'review' of the strategies employed (Singer, 2001), such as to offer a toy for generating the purchase of a high-calorie sandwich, confirm how children became the target of the advertising market, as they are constantly challenged to ask their parents to buy their new daily desires. Transforming children into consumers is a market goal to maintain the life of consumption, since the industry provides products for the whole life of the individual, since his/her childhood. The consumer individual is to be created in his/her early years, with fashions and standards created by the market and not by the phases of life, growth of a subject. In studies of consumer behavior, this was named loyalty or "maintenance strategy" (Hawkins, Mothersbaugh & Best, 2007, p. 322-323).

However, the practice of direct marketing communications aimed at children may be considered abusive, once it takes advantage of the naivety of the child to convince him/her to buy products without proper reflection. A child who doesn't even understand that advertising was created to sell, does not have the necessary personal instruments to reflect on the impacts of production and consumption of a particular product or service, i.e., on the type of resources used, on social and environmental impacts of production, on the type of disposal, and even about the actual need to buy that product or service. Therefore, turning the child into a consumer may even be a market goal, but it is neither ethical nor sustainable.

According to Olmos (2011), the child becomes accustomed to be treated early on as a consumer and not as a being in formation, with the right to play, socialize, study and meet all the stages of child development. And in future we will have citizens that were raised in the logic of unbridled consumerism and without reflection, further aggravating the environmental crisis the world already experiences.

#### **4 Overall conclusion**

The scenario of encouraging child consumption and regarding the discussion on environmental issues, where there's the confront of diverse and contrasting views on consumption and little is discussed about consumerism, we understand that the discussion on sustainability must go through the education of children for mediating a more vigilant look over this scenario, where marketing strategies don't really take effects into account, such as use of natural resources, exacerbated materialism, frustrations, obesity, early sexualization, among other topics that are important to the study of the Humanities and the to welfare of our society.

Among the effects of the current risk (and consumption) society, consumerism shows the effect of accumulation, above-satisfaction, a kind of momentarily and renewable gross national happiness, whose means of subsistence (natural consumption) and sustainability makes little sense. As noted above, discussion is complex, the environmental issue must be worked along with other issues such as production, technology, type of nutrition, lifestyles, legal norms, among others mentioned herein. However, what stands is the commoditization of the concept of sustainability to increase sales through a built status, the sustainable trend of green consumption.

Advertising within all other support mechanisms, is the spokesperson for the consumerism industry and establishes its criteria for quantification of target audiences to increase their success. Children are seen and never forgotten, since they are key in capitalizing and becoming loyal to the habit of consumption.

Stimulus to shopping during childhood in this scenario of discussions on sustainability and environmental education bring the permissive contradiction that nothing helps the understanding that the production process of products depends on the resources used, and we are increasingly abusing these limits, taking from nature much more than it can offer, in addition to discarding and polluting beyond what is supportable by the planet (Sustentabilidade, 2008).

If in the current economic model, consumerism is seen as the greatest expression of financial prosperity of the economically active population, how can we keep the idea of environmental sustainability once children are already immersed in this logic?

Scientific research in this area could help a better reflection of these issues. However, Nancy Jennings and Ellen Wartella (2007, p. 149) warn about the low number of researches involving the following topics: children, advertising and consumerism. According to the authors, researches on advertising and marketing practices have a relatively short history. Although the theory about children and consumption has been started in the 30s and some researchers began their studies on the topic in the 50s and 60s, many studies on advertising started in the 70s and 80s with the growth of researches on children in general. A review of scientific articles on advertising, consumerism and marketing in academic databases indicates only about 300 citations on this topic, with most studies focusing on the effects of marketing



to children (64% of all citations). Little attention has been devoted to exploring the content of children advertising (10%), however, more attention was given to other topics of research, including discussions on regulation and updates / reviews of the literature on the matter (26%).

In addition purposeful researches to the increased discussion based on the theme, the issue of public policy for monitoring the abuses of the private sector in encouraging consumerism and early participation of children in the consumer market is another gap in the country. In a series of questions for the Rio+20, Cristovam Buarque asks about the direction of investments for other purposes such as weapons, whose amounts could serve up to two billion children if they were directed to education (Buarque, 2011, p. 61). For him, the turning point of civilization towards the future where everyone is included and nature is respected in social and ecological harmony, can no longer be based on revolutions tested over the past centuries. It is not just about revolution, but a metamorphosis of the current model for a new standard. This involves a change of mentality. The way is thus in education, especially for children and youth. (Buarque, 2011, p. 72).

Thus, it is vital to foster researches and also the implementation of public policies that take into account both the need for education for sustainable consumption and the regulation of advertising aimed at children, protecting them from these calls. These assumptions are possible solutions to the issue of consumerism and the protection of children in contemporary society.

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