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CONSUMER EDUCATION AS PUBLIC POLICY: A CULTURAL ISSUE

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1

Abstract: This research deals with the need to build a reference to what is established in consumer care/protection as a communicative, interactional and interactive process. The focus of the study is to investigate whether and how new media, especially digital social networks, are being used to provide consumers with guidance for consumption, a contemporary phenomenon, in the context of cyberculture. In this article, we deal with Education for Consumption and public policies for its promotion. Initially, we present some considerations on the cross-cutting relationships between culture, public policies and citizenship in the various sectors of society. Afterwards, we bring notes on important historical moments of consumer protection in Brazil, with a focus on Mato Grosso, focusing on public policies on Consumer Education perceived in a survey carried out during the preparation of a doctoral thesis. The intention is to encourage reflection on these policies and the importance of thinking about Consumer Education related to cultural changes so that more effective results are achieved.

Keywords: Communication; Cyberculture; Education for consumption; Public policy; New media.

INTRODUCTION

According to Dias (2012, p. 15-17), the "world is going through a process of building new paradigms for thinking about Man in his human and social relationships", in which information technology occupies "a central place in this re-signification". Thus, another territoriality is organized in the political-economic-social fields, that of digital culture, in which the subject "creates new ways of being in the world. A new space for the organization of meanings", in which new sociabilities are built and constituted and the concepts of space and time gain other meanings. "Today, cyberspace is everywhere building the real of the city, of the urban space, weaving new forms of relationship between subjects, with its own language and different temporality". In the current context of digital culture/cyberculture, where natives and digital immigrants coexist,

What is certain is that in cyberculture fundamental sectors of society were modified and needed (and still need) to be re-signified, such as education and consumption, for example. Today, the practices and meanings of consumption are different from a few years ago and, by consuming or not consuming certain products/services, we are interacting socially and culturally, creating meanings and meanings. With regard to education, Silva (2014), emphasizing its social and cultural aspect, recalls that citizen education occurs beyond the boundaries of the school: currently, we learn with the computer mouse and with the cell phone and tablet screen, in an interactive and collaborative way.

With the increase in consumption in recent decades – boosted by economic and technological development – and due to its importance in society(ies), there is a need to protect and minimally prepare the population for this practice. To achieve this objective, public and private consumer protection bodies have been created, international organizations have become concerned with the issue, governments of different countries have enacted specific legislation for the area and, as a result, consumer education has become a focus of public policy.

I work at a press office for a consumer protection organization in Cuiabá, capital of the state of Mato Grosso.I have observed situationswhere a face-to-face search at an official body is still necessary. Alongside this, there areevery day new tools, interfaces, pages, profiles aimed at promoting consumer protection, whether of a governmental nature or by individual initiatives or by a group of

people and consumers.

In my day-to-day life, following communication vehicles and interfaces used by consumers in search of information and guidance about their rights and, mainly, when talking to people who resort to the agency, I realized that more and more people are looking for a solution of their consumption problems in digital interfaces, either by carrying out research on the subject through search engines, or by talking to other consumers through digital social networks.

With cyberculture, the possibility emerged of using new technologies and digital media in consumer education and in promoting consumer protection, either to enable the exchange of information about rights or who knows even to encourage the production of new knowledge. It is in this perspective that we built our doctoral research, with the objective of understanding how consumer care/protection is established as a communicative, interactional and interactive process in contemporary times.

The focus of the research was to investigate whether and how the Procon-MT website and the digital interfaces associated with it are being used by the agency to provide consumers with guidance for consumption, a contemporary phenomenon, in the context of cyberculture. The doctoral research included a bibliographic review of important concepts in consumer treatment, such as consumption, citizenship, public policies, consumer education, online education, communication, interaction and interactivity, among others. We opted for a qualitative and quantitative approach, with description and analysis of selected cases for virtual ethnographic follow-up. The theoretical contribution brings together contributions from theories of Communication, Education, Languages and Cyberculture.

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The intention is to encourage reflection on these policies and the importance of thinking about Consumer Education related to cultural changes so that more effective results are achieved.

CULTURE, PUBLIC POLICIES AND CONSUMPTION

When carrying out the bibliographical research for the thesis, we felt the need to deepen some aspects related to consumption, with the intention of understanding relevant points of this important social practice and its implications for consumer protection, the focus of the work. Among them is the close relationship between culture, consumption, citizenship, public policies, consumer education, online education and digital interfaces.

In his article "Deculturalize culture: Current challenges of public policies", Peruvian professor Victor Vich, when talking about the importance of cultural policies, warns that culture can only be changed by the elements of culture. For the researcher, it is the key agent in social change and can no longer be understood as an independent and autonomous field of social evolution because it is inserted in all dimensions of life: 'Culture preexists subjects, and these constitute the inside it, based on its regulations and discourses'.

The researcher defends the articulation between culture, democracy and citizenship

and the inclusion of cultural policies in broader policies so that they can become devices for social transformation and citizen participation. In this sense, work in culture becomes "fundamental in all government policies", because for a political change to be effective, it has to produce, at the same time, a cultural change, which must be rooted in the desires and practices people's everyday lives. Culture can, therefore, be understood as a "transversal dimension to society, whose importance crosses many sectors", being involved in different types of problems that are not exclusive to its sector'. This is the case of the economy, health, housing, violence, among many other examples. (VICH, 2015, p.13-18)

Also for Rubim (2009, p.93) cultural policies need to be thought of more comprehensively, taking into account the transversality and diversity they involve. Since its invention, in the middle of the 20th century, he warns, there have been 'innumerable challenges faced by cultural policies':

> The first emergence of cultural policies on the world stage, between 1970 and 1982, posed a set of challenges and anchored its legitimacy in the construction of national identities, which occupied centrality. The second emergency, which occurred at the end of the millennium, is inscribed in a sociability altered by a new moment of capitalism, in which: new economic parameters are present; glocalization appears as a reality; communications and networks set the tone for society, etc. Transversality and cultural diversity are essential to understand the new challenges. (RUBIM, 2009, p. 93)

Another example of a cross-cutting sector that cannot be thought of separately from culture is consumption. Abrão (2011, p.45-46) emphasizes its social and cultural importance, remembering that contemporary society has been called a consumer society. This occurred especially because new technologies and access facilities have considerably expanded the number of products and services available to the population. However, he explains, consumption was present in all civilizations, inserted in social practices and used as a way of differentiating between people and classes. Therefore, it is important to study it, because "through it the appropriation of social products occurs, that is, consumption is social" and "through it we can identify cultural and social dynamics".

By relating consumption and culture and its importance for societies, the researcher warns that culture needs to be understood in a comprehensive way, realizing that it occurs in the daily life of a society, that is, "it is in everyday life that meanings are elaborated and transformed and it is from it that new movements emerge that form the culture of a society. Thus, culture is dynamic, made by/for the people" (ABRÃO, 2011, p.46).

Canclini (1997, p. 13-15) warns that consumption and citizenship cannot be thought of separately because "changes in the way of consuming have altered the possibilities and ways of exercising citizenship", and these "have always been associated to the appropriation capacity of consumer goods and the way to use them". With the loss of space of traditional institutions in modernity, such as the family, church, among others, especially in the political sphere, the constitution of identities is increasingly linked to consumer relations, which have also become a place of exercise of citizenship. That is, the exercise of citizenship moves from the public and democratic sphere and becomes associated with consumption, the ability to appropriate goods and how to use them.

We know that the concepts of consumption and their manifestations and implications in today's society are diverse and complex. To develop this study, however, we adopted the consumer concept as provided for

inConsumer Protection and Defense Code (Law Number: 8.078/90). Article 2 of the CDC establishes that a consumer "is any natural or legal person who acquires or uses a product or service as a final recipient".

We chose this definition because we believe it is the one that best suits the objectives of our research. We are aware, however, that there are other forms of consumption, which escape what the Code establishes and that the conception of consumption will vary, depending on the theoretical line we approach.

CONSUMER DEFENSE: A LITTLE HISTORY

In recent decades, the increase in consumption worldwide has triggered in societies the concern and the need to protect and prepare the population for consumption. Thus, education for consumption becomes the agenda of important public policies, aiming to ensure not only the protection of the health and safety of consumers, but also to ensure that information about their rights and duties reaches them and prepares them to consume consciously. is responsable. With regard to Brazil and Mato Grosso, this also happened. Bodies and sectors were created and specific legislation on the subject was enacted, aiming to provide guidance and information to the population, in addition to ensuring safe consumption.

When we started our study, it was necessary to carry out a historical review of consumer protection in order to better understand how it developed. Below, we present some historical moments that marked consumer protection in Brazil, followed by the main public policies on Consumer Education, with a focus on the State of Mato Grosso. we intendstart a reflection about these policies and the importance of thinking about consumer education related to cultural changes, so that effective results are achieved and the culture of citizenship is promoted.

As in other countries, consumer protection began to develop in Brazil in the 1960s, after a statement by American President John Kennedy recognizing the vulnerability of consumers, their importance in commercial relations and the universal nature of the protection of consumer rights. However, while in the US and European countries consumer protection is a consequence of the consolidation of society, in Brazil its development took place simultaneously with the industrialization of the 1960s and 1970s, economic and social crises, high inflation and rising the cost of living, factors that triggered social mobilizations and gave rise, in 1976, to the first consumer protection bodies in Porto Alegre, Curitiba and São Paulo(BESSA E MOURA, 2014; The History of Consumer Protection in Brazil: 1975-2000, 2001).

In the 1980s, the economic recession and redemocratization intensified the consumerist movement and in 1985 the National Council for Consumer Defense was created, an entity that promoted the inclusion in the Federal Constitution of 1988 of consumer protection as a fundamental right and principle of order economical. As a consequence, the main Brazilian consumerist legislation appears: The Consumer Protection and Defense Code (Law nº 8.078/90), which recognizes the vulnerability of the consumer and establishes good faith as a principle of consumer relations. Among other rights, the Law establishes the basic principles of consumer protection: protection of life, health and safety; right to clear, accurate and adequate information; protection against misleading and abusive advertising and the right to consumer education. (BESSA and MOURA, 2014).

Allied to the worldwide increase in consumption, fostered by technological facilitation, from 1990 onwards, the new socioeconomic period experienced by Brazil,

with the Real Plan, lower unemployment rate and greater purchasing power of the population, will facilitate access to credit. All these factors give rise to a new phenomenon, which especially affects the less favored classes and who were not adequately prepared to manage their finances: over-indebtedness. In addition, there is a growing concern worldwide to promote conscious consumption.

In Brazil, Procon is the body that works directly to protect and defend the consumer. Among its functions are guiding the population, informing about their rights, registering complaints, reconciling and supervising consumer relations. It is a body that integrates the National Consumer Defense System, linked to the Executive Branch, which aims to resolve conflicts between consumers and suppliers, and may be linked to municipalities, states or the Federal District. (BESSA and MOURA, 2014).

Currently, there are Procon units in all Brazilian states and in several municipalities. For a unit to be implemented, the creation must be made official by state decree/law. It is Procon that maintains direct contact with citizens and their demands, monitoring and supervising consumer relations. The body's main purpose is to serve consumers, accepting their complaints and ensuring the mediation of conflicting cases between customers/consumers dissatisfied with the services or products provided by a given company or establishment. Procon is an administrative body, which seeks to resolve consumption problems, especially through an agreement between consumers and suppliers, including legal powers to summon the supplier to appear in a hearing, with a scheduled date/time (BESSA and MOURA,

In Mato Grosso, according to Costa (2010), consumer protection officially began in 1983, with the creation of the Executive Group for Consumer Protection, whose objective was to implement public consumer protection policy, aiming to protect it against deceptive practices and abusive. On September 18, 1986, just over ten years after the opening of the first Procon in the country, Procon São Paulo, the first State Procon unit was inaugurated in Mato Grosso, located in the center of Cuiabá. Over the years, the entity has been linked to various bodies and secretariats. Currently, it is part of the State Secretariat for Social Assistance and Citizenship (Setasc), being one of its adjunct secretariats.

CONSUMER EDUCATION AND PUBLIC POLICIES: SOME EXAMPLES

Aiming to promote the culture of education for consumption, various bodies linked to the National Consumer Protection System, such as the National Consumer Secretariat (Senacon) and the Procons units, whether state or municipal, seek to implement education policies and actions for the consumer. consumption. In order to work exclusively with this theme, Senacon created, in August 2007, the National School of Consumer Defense, whose main objectives are to promote consumer education and train employees of the National Consumer Defense System throughout Brazil, in addition to providing the construction of specific knowledge regarding consumer relations, which is fundamental for the elaboration of public policies

The school offers training for members of the national consumer protection system and for consumers, by offering courses and workshops, especially via the Virtual School of Consumer Protection. The courses deal with topics such as advertising, CDC principles and rights, health surveillance, safe consumption and health, intelligence and financial planning, among others. The trainings are free and certified by the UNB.

The workload varies according to the theme.

With regard to the State Procon of Mato Grosso, it is important to highlight that since its creation, the agency has developed actions of education for consumption, and in 1994 a specific sector was officially created to deal with this aspect. Among the main attributions, in addition to coordinating the education actions for consumption promoted by the body, it is worth mentioning contributing to the development of Municipal Procons, carrying out training and technical assistance. It also creates, adapts and supplies informative and educational materials for the development of actions in the area of consumer education, such as lectures and workshops in public and private schools and universities, both in the capital and metropolitan region, as well as in municipalities from the interior of Mato Grosso.

In addition, it is responsible for training the serversof the 48State Municipal Procons. Four editions of Technical Meetings and a State Meeting of Procons are held annually. The purpose of these actions is to train public servants to serve the public, especially with regard to updating consumerist legislation. Procon also participates in various governmental and non-governmental actions aimed at promoting citizenship, such as caravans, mutirões, global actions, among others.

ONLINE EDUCATION: NEW MEDIA AND POSSIBILITIES

Today we have several technologies that allow people to exchange information, share knowledge, issue opinions and re-elaborate knowledge. These digital interfaces, such as social media, for example, have their uses reinvented in practice by their users. Vandresen (2011) explains that the insertion of the computer in the domestic context, made the educational software industry develop.

Online dictionaries, online and collaborative encyclopedias, educational portals, websites developed for learning and tools such as podcasting, webquest, search engines (Google, Google Docs, Google Earth) and Moodle are some of the resources made possible by the internet and that have pedagogical potential..

Santos (2009, p. 5658-5661) argues that online education can no longer be seen just as the simple evolution of distance education, but as a phenomenon proper to cyberculture. For the researcher, it is in the context of social software that people use cyberspace interfaces to co-create information and knowledge, and the network, understood as the entire flow and 'bundle of relationships between human beings and digital interfaces', is the 'social brand of our time', the 'keyword in cyberspace', which brings together, integrates and resizes an infinity of media.

The network also allows for the emission poles to be freed and for people to become emitters and receivers at the same time. For Possari (2009, p.51-54), in the context of technological facilitation of cyberculture, the roles of sender and receiver change, and can no longer be understood only as the one who produces and the one who encodes a message, since any sign can be 'received, stored, disseminated by telecommunication and information technology, whose multimedia supports and hypermedia language make hypertext possible with freedom of choice, of links'. That is, cyberculture allows the reader to construct meanings, as he navigates through hypertexts and hyperlinks and establishes routes/networks for his reading. To think about the construction of knowledge today, therefore, it is necessary to be attentive to the 'new forms of perception and cognition that the current electronic supports and hybrid and linear structures of the written text are making emerge'. The very concept of reading is expanded, 'that is, the expansion of the

concept of a book reader to an image reader and to a reader of hybrid forms of signs, including the reader who navigates through the infoways of cyberspace'.

The receiver becomes co-author of the text/message. In fact, sender and receiver become interlocutors, subjects of interaction (condition of inter-acting) and interactivity (action of interfering, modifying) in the construction of the meaning(s) of the message/text. And cyberspace, adds the researcher, is the interactive communication device, as an instrument of collective intelligence, which makes it possible to develop collaborative learning systems in a network. E-mail, shared document on drive, facebook, whatsapp, twitter, podcast are just a few examples of interfaces with immense potential for building knowledge in cyberculture.

Parallel to the bibliographical and documental research, wesupport in virtual ethnographyto compare and analyze the information collected in the survey, seeking to identify how communicative processes occur between consumers via the internet and whether they provide interaction and interactivity between interlocutors. Virtual ethnography is aspecific methodology for studying the internet and which has been widely used by researchers interested in studying cultural behavior online, and can be understood analogously to ethnography (FRAGOSO; RECUERO & AMARAL, 2011).

For the development of the thesis, we analyzed four cases that served as a basis for understanding how consumer protection takes place in Procon-MT, via the website and digital interfaces and associated with it. The research points, although it is present, to the little interactivity between the interlocutors. This allows us to assume that the consumer needs to have a more effective communication process.

With regard to the bodies that work to promote consumer protection, we noticed that many of them try to provide information and guide consumers. To achieve this objective, news ranging from institutional publications, informative news, interviews, among others, is produced and made available. As a rule, this material is made available on the institution's website and replicated by news vehicles and blogs that are dedicated to the defense of rights and consumer rights.

However, with regard to this material and others produced and broadcast on news sites in Mato Grosso, there still seems to be little collaboration/participation by readers/consumers, even though the vehicles allow the inclusion of comments. The same happens in institutional profiles made available on digital social networks, such as Facebook, for example. It is common to find posts where there are no comments. We also found posts where there are comments, albeit few, but they refer to a subject other than the post.

It must be noted that we also found platforms/profiles on social networkscreated especially for consumers to claim. In Mato Grosso, we cite, in order to exemplify, two profiles that bring together groups of consumers. One of them, 'Aonde ir em Cuiabá', was created with the aim of people praising places where they've been, and the other, in Cuiabá', aims to receive complaints about companies providing services/products. It is, as described in the profile, a collaborative page, composed of a "group of indignant consumers who do not accept to be silent". In these two profiles, people tell their experiences in the consumer market. In the comments we identified reports of similar experiences, thanks for sharing the information, guidelines and advice on how to proceed.

CONSIDERATIONS

Our study indicates the need for bodies linked to consumer protection to urgently

appropriate the available digital technologies and communication networks and insert them into the promotion of education for consumption. As with Education as a whole, in view of the new teaching and learning scenarios that are taking shape in the context of Digital Education, Procons and bodies that work to promote consumer protection cannot ignore this need. Under penalty of neglecting its potential to provide innovation and promotion of orientation/education for consumption and not being able to carry out one of its functions, which is to prepare the consumer for conscious consumption. This is because it is undeniable that consumers already use the internet and digital technologies to seek information and guidance on their rights.

When we carried out the virtual ethnography and analyzed the cases selected for the doctoral research, we could observe that the consumer lacks knowledge, therefore, education for consumption (not school/education). Even if the consumer has access to information and that in the communicative process it is sometimes perceived that there is interaction and interactivity, it is necessary that access be expanded and that new possibilities for implementing education for consumption are built, in which the designs of the projects of different interfaces in order to take the best possible advantage of the potential of the technologies available today.

If social networks and interfaces that deal with consumer protection are already being used to report experiences and consumption problems, it seems to us that they can also be used to, through interaction between their users, encourage the exchange of information, clarification of doubts and, who knows, even the construction of new knowledge. Interfaces and digital social networks - such as the email itself or the document shared on the drive, instagram facebook, whatsapp, twitter, podcast, among others - are examples of interfaces with immense potential for the construction of knowledge in cyberculture and for online education.

With regard to Education for Consumption, it is important to point out that there have been considerable advances in recent decades, both in Brazil and in Mato Grosso. However, despite the fact that several laws have been enacted, bodies and sectors created to develop specific consumer education actions, it is necessary to consider not only whether these actions are effective, but also whether cultural aspects are taken into consideration in the process.

As the authors cited here point out (RUBIM, 2009; ABRÃO, 2011; VICH, 2015), consumption is a social and cultural practice. In order to change these practices, we cannot think in isolation. Public policies need, therefore, to be thought out more comprehensively so that they really achieve effectiveness, foster citizenship and promote relevant social changes.

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