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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CUSTOM CARS: MEANINGS ASSOCIATED WITH CONSUMPTION IN THE EMERGING MEDIUM CLASS

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ABSTRACT

Consumption is a phenomenon that allows people a symbolic experience replete with meanings. The understanding of this practice is not only related to the utilitarian value that the product can offer, on the contrary, there is a cultural dimension that governs consumption actions and the way consumers internalize the meanings of the products. In this research, the automobile assumes the role of study object because it is a product capable of receiving social and cultural projections that increase its symbolic value, in addition when it becomes personalized becomes synonymous with greater benefits. Therefore, this research aims to analyze the meanings associated with the practices of low-income consumers in the purchase of personalized cars. The interest in researching the people of the emerging middle class comes from the active participation that has been demonstrating in the consumption of goods and services in recent years. The results provide information relevant to the process of technological innovation in the production of custom cars, adapting the product to the customer's preferences for affordable prices and design. Finally in conclusion, the information provided may be relevant to the process of technological innovation in the production of customized cars, adapting the product according to customer preferences at an affordable cost. In this way, organizations must develop strategies in relation to the potential for redirection at affordable prices for the low-income consumers.

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INTRODUCTION

World, culturally constituted, it reveals the human constant practices transformations able to express everyday experiences and emotions surrounding their representations. Thus producing a heterogeneous society full of symbols that receive individual allocations of complex meanings that builds (McCracken 2003). In this context, it is observed that people's actions seem to be influenced by a homogenous cultural system, however, governed by symbols and own interpretations that highlight the uniqueness of individuals in society. This differentiation can be expressed through beliefs, behaviors, gender, customs, values and consumption practices (McCracken 1987). Studies such as Hirschman and Holbrook (1982), Belk (1987), Holbrook and Hirschman (1993) and Sherry (2007), brings considerations regarding the understanding of consumption practices associated with the influence of culture and its symbols in this action, as well as the peculiar meanings that consumers attach to products.

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From this perspective, Arnold and Thompson (2005, 2007) consolidated the Culture and Consumer Theory (CCT) contributing to studies on marketing and consumer behavior regarding the relationship of culture in consumer practices and changes in forms of production, understanding this phenomenon from logic, in which the product assumes not necessarily a utilitarian function. This view allows us to observe an explosion in the subjectivity of consumers, inviting companies to be proactive in meeting their needs (Addis and Holbrook, 2001, Amaro and Kingsman, 1999). Thus, there seems to be a transfer decision in demand for products where companies lose the role of choice and the consumer starts to play an important role in the production chain (Peppers and Rogers, 1997). In this context, a new form of production that enables the customization of products seems to approach the consumer satisfaction. Such production offers a variety of products that can reach all audiences, meeting their expectations regarding cost, utility and assigned meanings (Alford *et al.* 2000). Thus, the consumption process may be understood as meaning a movement in which the product becomes instrument of transfer of symbols and cultural interpretations receive from the consumer (McCracken 2003, 2007).

Thus, this study provides a discussion on customized products segment, highlighting the automobile as an object endowed with transformation possibilities. Franca *et al.* (2013) articulates the car seems to involve a strong symbolism in which cultural and social meanings are added on the intention to arouse consumer sentiments and values related to the vehicle. Accordingly, the consumption of the customized car seems to reveal dissatisfaction to the standard model of the vehicle. This dissatisfaction can be justified by the ability of the car has a differentiation that enables the (re) construction of the identity of persons in the same way that can bring social benefits and loving (Rodrigues and Casotti, 2015).

Realizing this differentiation regarding the consumption of cars, we see an active presence of the lower-income population in this practice in recent years. This fact can be justified by the trickle-down theory in which people seem to see the alternative use of imitation and differentiation of classes in order to crave the social visibility that the vehicle can provide (McCracker 2003), or can be explained by government measures aimed at credit and financing facilities available to this audience (Bairon and Perez, 2012). Thus, this class named as new emerging middle class (Neri 2008, 2010) began to express a significant market share of goods and services. In this context, such a phenomenon begins to require organizations a redirect investment into products that meet the needs of other social groups, lower-income, affordable, since consumer practices of these differ from the higher classes (Hemais *et al.* 2013). From this discussion, this study brings contributions in relation to consumption of customized vehicles for the low-income public. For this, this research aims to analyze the meanings associated with the practices of low-income consumers in the custom car purchase. The choice of this theme is justified by the fact the car apprehend costs and feelings by consumers and may also involve social and cultural meanings in the purchase process (Franca *et al.* 2013).

This theoretical essay (Meneghetti 2011) is part of the preliminary stage of a field of research that, in future, aims to understand how cultural, social and subjective factors influence the practice of consumption and car customization process by the low-income public. For this, authors as Arnould and Thompson (2005, 2007), as well as Rocha and Barros (2006), Rocha and Rocha (2007) and France *et al.* (2013), were fundamental to the understanding and development of the results of this study. Besides this introduction, the article is divided into the following sections: a) theoretical framework bringing theoretical contributions on the themes of consumption and production of customized products and meanings associated with the ownership of the car by the low income population, termed as emerging middle class; b) method, which describes the methodological ways that enabled the achievement of the objective c) the conclusion, the results provide information relevant to the process of technological innovation in the production of custom cars, adapting the product to the customer's preferences for prices and design at affordable prices.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research, developed according to the theoretical test model proposed by Meneghetti (2011), part of the preliminary stage of a field of research that, in future, aims to understand how cultural, social and subjective order factors can influence practices consumption of low-income, called emerging middle class (Neri 2008, 2010), the custom car segment / custom.

The interest in researching this audience comes from active participation that has been shown in consumer goods and services in recent years (Franca *et al.* 2013, Rodrigues and Casotti, 2015), in addition to this research from the assumption that the (re) construction of identity and social / cultural meanings can be directly associated with the changes in the car (Rodrigues and Casotti, 2015), where the standardization of vehicle may show consumer dissatisfaction and the custom car becomes synonymous with greater social and amorous benefits. Initially, the intention of understanding the relationship between culture and consumption, this research sought to be based on studies looking at consumption as a practice governed by a cultural system much broader and complex able to establish rules between permitted and prohibited and fleeing the logic of utility consumption (Rocha and Barros, 2006, Arnould and Thompson, 2005, 2007).

At this preliminary stage, we used articles found in access to regular bases. To filter specific issues and / or associated with the object of study, searches were made from keywords such as consumer behavior, customized production, custom cars, consumption in low-income, culture and consumption, Brazilian culture and social representations. Items collected are mostly publications of the last five years, while another part refers to classical authors that could not be discarded. Initially, for a greater understanding of the problem of this research, searches were made by international classic articles from authors such as Arnould and Thompson (2005, 2007), and national items like Rocha and Barros (2006), Rocha and Rocha (2007) and others who excel in their studies clearly consumer behavior governed by a cultural system that evades the consumer logic of explanation and also argue about the influence of this system in the low-income public practices in the use of customized cars. From these authors, as well as other studies on the practice of consumer cars by low income, for example, the Franca *et al.* (2013) comes the interest in researching the meaning that the consumer public of low-income attributed to service customization of the vehicle that acquires. Therefore, for this test, 24 articles were used.

Consumption, production and low income: meanings associated possession automobile

Understanding the production practices and consumption in a unique way beyond the standard Fordist model, in which up to a point the product could meet the desires of consumers utilities. However, over the years, it was noted that a new stage of production and consumption would be constituting (Kotler 1989), as well as consumer preferences became more demanding and individual. For this, companies started to invest in a system that also provided a low-cost production, but focused on the variety and quality of products, now customized and following a model of lean production to move more and more with the feeling of satisfaction of consumers already perceived their meaningful participation in the production chain (Berman 2002, Machado and Moraes, 2009). This model of production that escapes the standardization of goods and services in the market, showed a break in seamlessly creating mass system coming into play the Junt-in-time system with the generation of a customized production, proposed by Toyota model in Japan (Gusmão 2008). This new form of product generation brought a different perspective to the practice of consumption, where it was realized that the cultural environment also exerts a strong influence in this action, as well as providing a transfer symbols from among the products

and these consumers. This phenomenon is described by McCracken (2003, 2007) as "movement of meanings." In this context, CCT contributes to the field of marketing promoting reflections on the influence that cultural symbols can have on people's behavior (Arnold and Thompson, 2005; 2007). This perspective was influenced by studies such as Hirschman and Holbrook (1982), Belk (1987), Holbrook and Hirschman (1993) and Sherry (2007), which brought contributions to understanding consumption (in) directly influenced by the culture and its contents are transferred to products and interpreted by consumers. Thus, even in this discussion, it is emphasized that this study proposes an understanding of the automobile consumption and their meanings it holds for the ability to engage feelings by consumers (Belk *et al.* 2003).

In this context, the car appears as a mediator between the middle product and the consumer, enabling a transfer of cultural contents receiving particular interpretations from the consumer experiences of each individual (McCracker 2003). And when he receives modifications, seems to show the owner's personal characteristics in the car, so that object can be understood as an instrument that has the ability to (de)construct identities (Rodrigues and Casotti, 2015). Thus, consumption of the car seems customized reveal consumer dissatisfaction with the standard model, a good part of the vehicle, even with many different models on the market. Car consumption by the poor public has significant market share. This audience has gained ground and power in decision-making strategies that promote credit facilities on purchases (Perez and Bairon, 2012). Thus, it is clear that government intervention in minimizing the social differences and provide opportunities in the possession of goods and services seems to be related in some way, with perspective trickle-down theory (McCracker 2003), in which the services before consumed only by the upper classes, now receive the participation of consumed lower classes (Neri 2008, 2010).

Conclusion

This theoretical essay is part of the first phase of field research, the results so far, bring preliminary considerations about possible contributions the area of marketing with regard to understanding the social and cultural meanings that customization service cars can pose to the low-income consumers. While managerial contributions, the information provided may be relevant to the process of technological innovation in the production of custom cars, adapting the product according to customer preferences. Thus, social contributions show that organizations must develop strategies in relation to redirect potential at affordable prices to low-income public. The limitations, there were difficulties in finding studies that covered the topics discussed. In this first moment, the discussions were joined by comparisons between culture and consumption, consumption of customized products and car consumption practices by people belonging to low income public. As for the meanings attributed to the car, it is clear that it carries social and cultural content and that their role goes beyond utility. Understand these meanings from the custom automobile consumption appears to potentiate meanings already assigned to this well. Thus, this first moment the intention would be to promote a reflection on separate axes that seem complex, but seem to integrate the same phenomenon influenced by the cultural context. For further study suggestions, it is proposed that: a) the relationship between consumption and culture, customization of cars and

low-income consumer practices can be observed and tested on consumer practice and / or b) understand how businesses offering customization services for cars realize the demands of these consumers for the product, as well as analyze the competition in quality of services provided between large companies and workshops and / or customization of car lounges.

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