

Consumption, Youth and New Media: the Debate on Social Issues in Brazil

Sueila Pedrozo

Brazil is a country of 195.2 million inhabitants according to the National Household Sample Survey (PNAD-IBGE 2012) in 2011 and many social, economic, educational and cultural contrasts. Although a major process of vertical and structural social mobility has been occurring in the country over the last 25 years, it is not individual mobility but of a whole segment of mobility, as a result of important factors as employment growth, inflation control, more credit availability, price stability, and social programs, which contributed to the upward economic mobility of the poorest segments. On the other hand, it is a country where basic needs of a great majority of the population are not met; as an example, a considerable number of people do not have electric power, and a great majority access the Internet through dial connections due to high costs of broadband access. As a result, the serious contrasts continually reproduce and reinforce social and economic inequalities through prejudice and segregation, based on ethnicity, gender, geographic location, origin and age (Welti 2002, Gacitúa-Marió 2005). Despite all this, global transformations have continually driven Brazil towards a more advanced growth comparable to developed countries but its social, economic, and technological advances are unequally distributed (Rizzini & Barker 2002).

The objective of this dissertation is to investigate consumption in relation to young people and new media technologies. The emergence of consumer and youth consumer culture in particular, was responsible for remarkable changes in young people's behaviour, identity-construction, lifestyles, and choices to mention just a few. More recently, the rise of information and communication technologies has brought even more transformations to the way in which the young live. Nevertheless, issues such as globalisation, labour markets shifts and its increasing demands, as well as inequalities of social, economic, and educational nature, are also addressed in this study as the focus is a developing country. Moreover, this study aims to answer four questions as: What are the relationships between young people's use of ICTs and their consumption patterns and attitudes in Brazil? What are the differences and similarities between youth in a developing country (Brazil) and a developed one (Finland) in terms of ICT use, consumption patterns, identity construction and gender? How do young people, particularly those of lower socioeconomic status, conceive consumption in Brazil? In which ways are the gaps brought forth by the diffusion of ICTs, particularly mobile

phones and the Internet among youth in Brazil, related to other socio-economic gaps (e.g., economic, educational, cultural, etc.)? In addition to the main questions, this dissertation also discusses youth consumption in Brazil and other societies, and the emergence of middle classes as new consumption patterns.

The first research question focuses on young people's practices in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Their practices are closely related to their adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs), their consumption patterns and attitudes despite the socio-economic-educational context of inequalities (Pedrozo 2004). In regard to the second question, its objective is to shed light on the differences and similarities of the cross-cultural comparison carried out between Finland and Brazil (Rio de Janeiro specifically). Issues such as the structural differences regarding the adoption of new technology, the consumption patterns of two different young populations, as well as the issues surrounding identity construction and gender are also investigated (Wilska & Pedrozo 2007). The third research question addresses the growing importance of consumption, the ownership of material goods and the desire to be fashionable and to fit into society. At the same time, Brazil presents a perverse social framework, permeated by inequalities in regard to income, class, education, gender, race and labour, among some others (Pedrozo 2011). In the fourth question the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is addressed in Brazil, along with a discussion on the digital divide in relation to the Internet and its consequences for poor populations, since it is directly related to other kinds of inequalities and factors - social, economic, cultural, educational (Pedrozo 2013).

The first two articles are the final product of a large quantitative survey; the first is an introductory article centred on the Brazilian context and exploring issues as ICTs and youth consumption patterns, e.g. use of money and ownership of goods. It was also a narrow sampling of participants (736) from private and federal public schools in Rio de Janeiro using only the local data set collected in 2003. The second article is a comparative study with Finland using data from both countries; 637 participants from the Finnish survey (2001) and 987 from Rio de Janeiro surveys (2003 & 2004) - 736 participants in 2003 and a further 251 participants from public state schools were also added in 2004. This article focuses on postmodern theories for investigating ICTs and young people's changing consumer identities, consumption patterns and attitudes, and gender, without neglecting the digital divide and inequalities in Brazil. The other two articles are, respectively, the result of a qualitative research and a theoretically oriented article. The third one discusses consumption, globalisation, inequalities, and youth challenges in a more comprehensive way and relates those issues to young people's transitions from schools to labour markets and the implications of those changes. The focus narrows down to individual interviews (14) with participants and their views on those questions within the Brazilian context. The fourth article reviews the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the debate on digital divide; then, the scope is delimited to concentrate on the local context to emphasise, explain, and shed light on the adoption and popularity of mobile phones as tools of democratisation, the slower development of the Internet and, more recently, the so-

cial network sites, despite unfavourable socioeconomic and educational gaps.

In this study, I have used two types of data - survey (Pedrozo 2004, Wilska & Pedrozo 2007) and interview (Pedrozo 2011). In the survey, carried out in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, I used replication of the Finnish survey experimental design (the problem, the research hypotheses and the questionnaire), previously done, to collect and analyse data. Quantitative methods were employed to explain young people's consumption attitudes and trends towards ICTs, This method was chosen because the comparison included a small number of countries, in this case two countries. In regard to cross-national research, comparing countries can be an effective method for comprehending its social context. In comparative studies of two or more cultures, a specific phenomena is studied with the intention of comparing "their manifestations in socio-cultural settings, using the same research instruments, either to carry out secondary analysis of national data or to conduct new empirical work, explaining and generalising from them" (Hantrais & Mangen 1996, 1-2). In the qualitative study, the main purpose was to explore consumption related to social issues and youth perception of fitting in relation to identity construction. I have used individual interviews with a group of 14 participants ranging between 16-18 years of age. Two kinds of interviews were combined: a guide approach interview and a standardised open-ended format; the advantage of using a combined strategy is to join the flexibility of the former with the standardisation of the latter, especially when the sample is culturally heterogeneous, as it was in the study.

The findings of this study show that serious contrasts are accountable for reinforcing and reproducing inequalities in Brazil. Although the country is pushed towards being a globalised society, people's elementary needs are not yet met. Youth face many challenges nowadays; but have, unfortunately, few opportunities. They also experience the transition to labour markets and adulthood much later than in the past, and their transitions are also more undefined. The causes are primarily related to issues of mass education, more demands for work qualifications, and to an increased level of socioeconomic unpredictability within a rapidly changing global context. Inequalities in Brazil jeopardise the future of the youth and bring uncertainties in regard to better education, labour, and citizenship. As an example, in Brazilian risk society, being young is experienced in different ways and shaped by different social inclusions, leading to different prospects to access material and cultural goods. Nevertheless, the ground-breaking emergence of information and communication technologies in the last few years, created a new kind of consumption - mobile phones as democratising tools, the Internet, social networks, and games. It is important to acknowledge, within the Brazilian context, that class stratification still exists, characterised by wealth versus poverty and this structured social and economic disadvantage is reproduced over the generations. On the other hand, consumption practices work as a reinforcement and reproduction of those same social hierarchies. No question that education is one of the main factors, if not the main one, of social mobility and consumption is not a replacement to social classes in Brazil; that is, it is not the answer to social mobility. Less-skilled youth are primarily affected with unemployment and less participation in social and political processes, but also with lack of perspectives

towards the future. Their pathways are critically shaped by inequalities, mainly class, gender, and race; influenced by social, economic, and cultural capital.

Sueila Pedrozo's academic dissertation "Consumption, Youth and New Media: The Debate on Social Issues in Brazil" was presented for public discussion with the permission of the Turku School of Economics, University of Turku, on Saturday, 1 June 2013.

REFERENCES

- Gacitúa-Marió, E., 2005. Conclusions and recommendations. In: E. Gacitúa-Marió and M. Woolcock, eds. *Exclusão social e mobilidade no Brasil* [Social exclusion and mobility in Brazil]. IPEA-World Bank: Brasília, Brazil, 97-108.
- Hantrais, L. and Mangen, S., 1996. Method and management of cross-national social research. In: L. Hantrais and S. Mangen, eds. *Cross-national research methods in the social sciences*. Pinter: London, 1-12.
- Pedrozo, S., 2004. Information technology and consumption habits among young people from Rio de Janeiro. In: T. Toivonen and T. Virtanen, eds. *From time to place: Interpretations from Sociology*. Publications of The Turku School of Economics, Discussion and Working Paper Series 3: Turku, 131-155.
- Pedrozo, S., 2011. To be 'cool' or not to be 'cool': Young people's insights on consumption and social issues in Rio de Janeiro. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 14, 1, 109-123.
- PNAD-IBGE (2012) Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics. ftp://ftp.ibge.gov.br/Indicadores_Sociais/Sintese_de_Indicadores_Sociais_2012/SIS_2012.pdf
- Rizzini, I. and Barker, G., 2002. Promises kept, promises broken: recent political and economic trends affecting children and youth in Brazil. In: N.H. Kauffman and I. Rizzini, eds. *Globalization and children*. Springer: New York, 129-149.
- Welti, C., 2002. Adolescents in Latin America: Facing the future with skepticism. In: B.B. Brown, R.W. Larson, and T.S. Saraswathi, eds. *The world's youth: Adolescence in eight regions of the globe*. Cambridge University Press: New York, 276-306.
- Wilska, T-A. and Pedrozo, S., 2007. New technology and young people's consumer identities: A comparative study between Finland and Brazil. *Young*, 15, 4, 343-368.