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Referent-individual: A theoretical outline to think about crime and consumer culture in Brazilian youth[38]

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Classical and contemporary studies on communication means highlight the influence of the media and social media on the development of beliefs and attitudes of individuals. When we think about media discourses – entertainment, advertising and journalistic narratives -, we perceive that it is possible to propose concept review and new meaning to social facts from these narratives. Exposure to the media has a relevant role to intervene on the ways of seeing and thinking about things of the world, operating both as an objective and subjective dimension of the actor. In a general way, individuals are vulnerable to the persuasive process on the media narratives because their positions come from lenient observants of a persistent publicity which defines acceptable behavior, social distinction conditions and elements that incorporate to individuals, giving meaning to their identities in the social structure. Beyond that, media representations assume an active role of social control, stability and change, showing – on the social media, journalistic, soup opera, cinematographic or entertainment narratives – the various versions of being an *individual-in-search-for-distinction*: through cars, clothes, through the shaped body and the objects linked to this human being.

We circumscribe our debate to the group defined as young people, to which psychology establishes a differentiated state of vulnerability given the specific processes of socialization in which their identities are produced parallel to hormonal alterations biologically determined. Even though Bourdieu (1983) questions the meaning of youth, establishing it as a social construction, Lahire (2006) talks about youth as a stage of life, a phase situated between the irresponsibility of children's actions to the responsibility of adult life. It is the moment of constitution of values and search for recognition on the countless social fields on which these individuals circulate. It is given the condition of

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youth vulnerability, and it is about them that we dedicate our study, with the intention of thinking to what extent media and social media discourses establish the social position of individuals and their condition of happiness and group recognition, linked to what they possess: cell phone, car, branded clothing, shaped body, harmonized faces etc.

In journalism and in advertising, *referent-individuals* – such as digital influencers, actors, economic and political authorities, pretty women, and elegant men – inform about serious issues, such as health, economy, and education, mixed to signifiers about how to make up, to dress, to workout, to diet, to behave and to possess, when in a position of credibility sustained by the media or social media. It also announces the entrance password to acquire distinction and to ascend to that social status, as well as to be seen as a stunning, shaped body and face. Owning peculiar objects, wearing certain clothes, making specific aesthetic procedures, and going to proper environments will say to which social group the individual belongs and where he or she can reach (BOURDIEU, 2008). Communication is a structure to the consumption of the public, and the public receives it as meaning to be incorporated to its identity, to its being in the world.

The referent is an object that produces meaning, referring to another, but it is also a meaning, a sign, an internal expectation. According to Saussure (2006), this relation – signifier and meaning – is arbitrary, it is a social construction. Elaborating its structuralist linguistics, Saussure highlights that meanings are generated according to the relation between sounds and concepts. The sign – as a form which refers to a reality or to an object – is defined in an arbitrary way, and its meaning, its value, is defined the same way. Each sign corresponds to a meaning, the thing itself represented and meaning(s) attributed to them. A signifier – the thing itself – may refer to several meaning forms, since many significations can be accessed. On this path, the referent-individual is the optimum point of signification, the expectation of each one to the range of social distinction (BOURDIEU, 2008), some kind of ideal type. Consequently, the referent is "[…] the particular object to which the word corresponds on each concrete case of circumstance or use" (BENVENISTE, 1989, p.231). This way, the meaning is the thought, and the referent is the perception produced from reality, the representation made of it. In short, as a phenomenal part of the sign, the referent-individuals indicate how the world must be seen, interpreted, and lived.

On the context of current capitalism, of which communication means are a part as industrial transnational conglomerates, the radio and TV spectator and the newspaper or internet reader are categorized as consumers. The news and narratives in social media are

products to consume, a merchandise for sale. This way, narratives of digital influencers, publicity, and journalism mix and converge, producing meanings focused on the stimulus on the purchase of commodities and services announced full-time, in a direct or subliminal way. According to Barak (1994), media and even social media are still subordinate to dominant values of political economy. If the entrance password is the possession of certain goods or physical appearance on the dominant media discourse, individuals work on acquiring these goods and on doing the cosmetic procedures. Although the consumption desire clings to individuals without distinction, acquisition of goods or carrying out aesthetic treatment suppose financial resources; therefore, these are defined by the purchasing power.

Even though communication means are an instrument of orientation and guidance towards countless directions, its pertaining condition to the economic structure designs a mediation space to stimulation, essential to sustaining the capitalist model. The media, actually, is an example of the contradictions of capitalism: not only it is a space for debate and criticism, it integrates the same system on the form of conglomerates dominated by entrepreneur groups. This way, Barak (1994) connects the media production to the great ideological system of modern capitalist society.

For this reason, in Brazil, juvenile and infantile programs are intercalated with publicity related to toys, clothes, shoes and even food focused on these groups. On a context of identities formation, this discourse reinforces relations of privilege and inequality, sustaining that there is only meaning – for the individual – when one disposes of goods that define one's position or make him or her circulate on certain social fields. Signifier and meaning – individual and *individual-bearer-of-distinction-defining-objects* – are parts of the relation between use value and exchange value (UV/EV)[39] on political economy.

Consumer culture: a necessary debate

Often, consumption practices are considered basic activities in life, providing a character of suppression of biological needs inherent to human nature. Arguments in favor of the frivolity of the acquisition of goods or aesthetic care are also developed. It is important to understand what gives meaning to consumption practices in the

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[39] On the Marxist conception, the use value (UV) constitutes on rational decoding, on the material content of richness, supposing objectivity and utility of the good. The exchange value (EV) is the communication discourse, an abstraction (MARX, 1988).

contemporary world and what is the social value attributed to the success of this practice. If the objective of this article is to articulate theoretically crime, consumption, and youth, it is necessary to articulate the relation between consumption and criminality in the context lived by young people, setting boundaries to the understanding of consumer culture.

On contemporary society, consumption and the ways of executing the forms of appropriation of goods classify and qualify the social position of individuals on social space. Hence, the conception of citizen confuses itself with the conception of consumer: those who don't possess the resources to effectively act on consumption feel excluded from the social structure, separated from the world of social and individual rights, which derives on a simplified idea of citizenship, and also on a bond where social existence depends on the constant renovation of goods (CANCLINI, 1999; ROCHA, 2011) and, currently, the carrying out of aesthetic procedures to delay aging and define a beauty profile for a certain type of standard of living.

But, after all, why are the means of consumption given to some people and denied to others? This is a controversial issue, which helps to discuss the understanding of illicit appropriation of goods as means to define the space of the individual in the world. Looking from a cultural perspective which determines the social structure, the position of a young person, when appropriating goods, may become a rebellious action, in order to negotiate its access to consumption. As Ferrell et al. (2008, p.4) say, culture is not a noun, but a verb and, as such, it assumes passive and active tenses: "Culture suggests a sort of shared public performance, a process of public negotiation – but that performance can be one of acquiescence or rebellion, that negotiation one of violent conflict or considered capitulation".

Contemporary identities are defined by consumption, which is announced publicly as the means to reach equality and freedom, however such discourse leaves a vacuum around the people excluded from this process, to whom it is not given the right of consumption by the lack of purchasing power. Meanwhile, merchandises are exhibited as competent bearers of a legitimizer distinction aura. After the objects acquisition, however, this aura disintegrates, demanding from the consumer the return to the market and a new purchase to recuperate this aura and appease the incessant search for distinction (CAMPOS; SOUZA, 2003). As Leite says (2011, p.2), "[…] we were accustomed to buy in order to consume, not the thing itself, but its promise of fulfillment and happiness".

On the 21st century, the identification between people and the notion of consumers is processed on the epicenter of a context in which to the exercise of citizenship is attributed a meaning to the space of private life and private interests. It is mostly derived from the fact that democracy, in an abstract way, and unequal social inclusion of individuals in public spaces of political participation have presented themselves combined with the diffusion of capitalist values. It has stimulated the growth of the communication means 'action scope and operate as broadcasters of the aesthetic dimensions, which legitimize certain ways of being, or modern – distinctive – lifestyles.

In sociological thinking, the theoretical perspective which first signals the discussion about consumption was Marxism. In Marx, consumption is located inside the production logic. He was more interested in identifying and analyzing the reproduction of capital than in researching the final consumption of goods. According to Taschner (2009, p.51-52), Marx points out that consumption, even when determined by production, "[…] is a moment that has its unraveling and conditionings". The author brings to light an important issue in Marx (apud TASCHNER, 2009, p.52), which is fundamental to thinking consumption:

> The object […of consumption…] is not a general object, but a determined object, which must be consumed in a determined way, to which the production itself must serve as an intermediate. Hunger is hunger, but the hunger which is satisfied with cooked meat, eaten with a knife and a fork, is not the same hunger that eats raw meat, served itself by hands, fingernails, teeth.

Thus, beyond the material look over the social world, Marxism offers resources to think the dynamics of subjectivity, of the values and meanings subscribed to consumption practices. We can understand that consumption is not only an element inside the production and reproduction process of capital; it is necessary to escape the dimension which privileges the economical and think about other levels of social experience. Consumption practices are marked by the shared symbolic structure of a time, they are filled by the values legitimized by a historical moment and are modified by them. Still in the Marxist perspective, Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), by elaborating the concept of culture industry, develop a criticism to the capitalist production system. In the case of the study on mass communication, this system is perceived as a means by which the sphere of culture has entered a logic of cumulative production, using a reproduction technique, in large scale, of cultural goods (BENJAMIN, 1982).

Culture, on the anthropological sense, has a determinant weight over the meaning and form of consumption and must be taken into consideration when it searches to unravel the social meanings attributed to the acts of appropriation of goods. This way, while to

culture is delegated a role to structure individuals and their actions, we verify a way to think about consumer culture (FEATHERSTONE, 1995; ROCHA, 2002; TASCHNER, 2009). By looking at consumption beyond a determination of production of merchandises, considering "[…] its own problems and effects about the social totality […]", one can think about the emergence of a consumer culture (TASCHNER, 2009, p.52).

With the Industrial Revolution, the price of the products falls, but it is needed to consider that consumption does not happen only in by the offer of accessible goods. It was necessary to have individuals willing to consume them. In this logic, Taschner (2009) searches for the origins and possible extra-economical roots of the consumer culture and has the merit of developing an analysis which articulates social, political and cultural levels of a collective life, in order to explain the arrival of habits – and their meanings – of appropriation of goods.

McCracken (1990 apud TASCHNER, 2009) points to a change of consumption pattern. He calls the traditional consumption pattern of the royal court patina consumption, on a reference to the medieval period, on which the family stood out as a singularity of consumption. It would be the means for the legitimization of the family name through accumulated wealth and riches through generations. The change of consumption pattern identified by McCracken occurs when individuals start consuming for themselves, and not to accumulate richness and prestige to the family. It was a moment of individualism ascension. In this field, the attribution of value to goods started to show an appearance of modernity: not only the family goods had social relevance. The news and the acquisition of something new started to occupy a place that was not admissible before.

On a brief conceptualization of consumer culture, Rocha (2002) says that the dimension of fashion can be understood as one of the basic principles of the consumption means of modernity. There is a subjective and material opposition to the patina consumption logic, as identified in McCracken, and an inversion on the meaning of privilege: the ancient, the tradition and the consumption for to family *status* are undervalued; the new, the innovation and the recent acquisition acquire social relevance.

The development of the field of fashion made it possible an approach of other layers of society to the merchandise. Even with the loss of power of the royal court, after the Bourgeoisie and Industrial Revolutions, the referent-individuals on the consumption field belonged to rich families. However, currently, there was the possibility for the individual of other social classes to move on the social structure, using the representation

of self on the lifestyle space (BOURDIEU, 2008). Contemporarily, it is common "[…] feeling summoned as consumers when we are still being approached as citizens" (CANCLINI, 1999, p.14). As we see it, a big part of this overlapping of meanings has become stronger from media narratives, used to diffuse values that shape the capitalist dynamics. This way:

> The fights of generations about the necessary and the desirable show another way of establishing identities and building our difference. Let us move away from the time when identities were defined by un-historical essences: currently they are configured on consumption, depending on what is possessed, or on what can be possessed (CANCLINI, 1999, p.15).

The crime developed by the desire of consumption, motivated by the search for distinction and belonging to certain groups, can have its starting point on a socialization process of the individuals that contains, on its core, elements derived from productions that regularly stimulate consumption practices, naturalizing them as a way to exercise their humanity on the social-capitalist world. Consumption practices are seen as part of the effort to positional social mobility on the core of social structure. There is a constant struggle of attribution of definitions of meaning of what is necessary and of what is superfluous on everyday life, and the market of symbolic production is the main motor of this struggle.

One can say the search for evidence on the social space becomes an action oriented towards the fulfillment of demands of the individualist and hedonistic modern ego, engineered and reproduced on the products made public by the communication means (MELO, 2009; TASCHNER, 2009; ROCHA, 2011). People, especially young ones (inside a process of identity formation), are more vulnerable to the interpellation of mechanisms of social differentiation guided by the representation of the individuals on the media, attributing power to those who detains goods considered publicly valuable, generating unexpected effects (BOUDON, 1979; MERTON, 1979) and reproducing social dynamics made effective by the desire to possess.

Based on the discussion developed by Augras (1980), we realize that media products have persuasion as a goal. The author considers to there be a "[…] set of techniques that, considering the knowledge of psychological formation mechanisms of attitudes and opinions, intents to use such mechanisms in order to obtain the desired attitudes and opinions […]" (1980, p.67). The communication means on the social structure, on this line of thought, are more than means to communicate.

Advertisement sells lifestyles, merchandises that promised happiness (ROCHA, 2011). As such, they give meaning to life. On this logic, the use value of the good is linked

to its exchange value, on a symbolic relation, referring to identities of the ones who can or cannot consume it. This condition expresses and hides the conditions of production to the political economy: the separation between meaning and signifier, on the level of the sign, or between infrastructure (economic foundation) and superstructure (dominant class), on the level of production of goods. Culture and sign are not separated; they are linked through meaning forms given to the referent by the culture (BAUDRILLARD, 1973)[40].

On consumption, the merchandise is produced as a sign, and the sign as merchandise. It is on the interior of this relation that lies the culture. The effect of the meaning is that the concealed needs are exposed as the UV of the good, when they are, indeed, their EV. The exchange value is obscured, hidden, having the use value as an alibi. On the political economy system, the symbolic ambivalence is reduced, and the equivalence of values is established (BAUDRILLARD, 1973). And, when the meaning of possession is naturalized as fundamental to the definition of identity, the mystification process offered on the market cannot be seen, bearer of a "soul" capable to inflict meaning on the person who possesses it.

If the culture industry supposes consumers can dispose of efforts and capital to reach the products offered to consumption, it is supposed that, on the universe of products, there is a logic destined to assist the universe of potential consumers on their specificities (ADORNO; HORKHEIMER, 2002; BOURDIEU, 2008; CANCLINI, 1999). Hence, different classes and fractions of classes, on the search for mobility on the social world, tend to acquire products that distinguish them, engendering practices articulated on a double dimension of meaning: inclusion and exclusion. This way, also young people are driven to desire the acquisition of *status* via consumption of good considered distinctive and that are, also, included on countless social fields.

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[40]On posterior work, Baudrillard (1996, p.9) moves forward on this discussion, questioning more the issue of value, saying that "[…] each configuration of value is reevaluated by the following one, on an order of superior simulacrum. And each phase of value integrates to its device the previous device as a ghost reference, poppet reference, simulation reference". Thus, manipulation is generalized, because the meaning enters an infinite circle, and the arbitrary is as much the signifier as it is the meaning. Let us not, however, enter this level of Baudrillardian thought, because it reflects a discussion which will not happen in this article.

Crime and youth: a look from the prominence of culture

The research of Alexander (1992, 1993) that underlies cultural sociology has contributed to the development of cultural criminology, by asking to what point culture determines social structure. To place culture on this position is key to understand two relevant issues: the consumer culture and the culture of crime. In this topic, we will address the culture of crime.

Research from the beginning of the past century has contributed to the studies about crime, especially the forms of adaptation of individuals to social norms and to deviant practices. The legal definition of crime is conjuncturally cultural, which many times results from social pressures – such as innovative and rebellious attitudes. Thus, before being described by the law, crime must acquire a social meaning, collective, modified as human sensitivity in a given society is altered given social phenomena and its mutable values.

Given the question "what is a criminal act?", it is required to put ourselves on a critical position about the establishment of concepts. The meaning attributed to an action is inscribed in time and in history. The meaning of crime is not glued to the act itself, marked by context, but comes linked to circumventing values. Therefore, the concept is not a fact *per se*, because values, which alter throughout history, contribute to the change on the definition of the act (MELO, 2010).

It is supposed that the ideas underling the constitution of an action as a criminal act must result from premises that make evident that actions possess a social meaning of crime. The relation between meaning and signifier has as mainstay, very often, the utility of considering this or that criminal action and the outcome of the act as an evil to collectivity. Following this logic, the concept of crime is altered throughout history, to embrace the refinement of human sensitivity about social phenomena, that is, given the (changeable) values of individuals (TONRY, 2004; FOUCAULT, 2006; MELO, 2010).

The variable culture is responsible for the senses attributed to human actions. Cultural structure, giving meaning to social forces, interferes and guides the processes to attribute meaning which forms conventions as social facts and, among them, crime. Merton (1970, p.236-237) defines cultural structure as "[…] the set of normative values which rule the common conduct of the members of a certain society or group". According to him, anomie is […] "a social rupture on cultural structure, occurring, particularly, when there is an acute disjunction between norms and cultural goals and the socially structured capacity of members of the group to act accordingly to the first".

A classical understanding of crime is that of any behavior deviant from the socially established by the common sense as normal, in time and space, which reaches the collective morality of individuals and produces a moral outrage on individuals. The definition of laws is not enough to explain every human action that constitutes a deviation and, often, the legal alterations result from social pressure, coming from panic outbreaks which inspire change to assist these demands, not having proof that change is really necessary. For example, on the case of violent crimes performed by young people, it raises an issue about the reduction of the age of criminal responsibility as a solution to reduce crimes committed by teenagers in Brazil (MELO, 2010). Merton (1970, p. 237) also says that:

> The social structure acts like a barrier or as an open door to the development of cultural warrants. When social and cultural structure are poorly interlinked, the first demanding a behavior limited by the other, there is a tension towards the rupture of norms or to a complete disdain towards them.

The tension between culture and social structure may be converted to the conception of cultural sociology about the relative autonomy of culture and its capacity to determine social relations (ALEXANDER; SMITH, 2003; KANE, 1991). In the case of crime, meaning is elaborated from a symbolic coding, which contains values that subdue the conduct of individuals. If the individuals disrupt from these values, the deviant condition of their acts is set there.

Violent crime is a social and cultural fact. If a certain society asks big achievement of their individuals in order to accomplish a distinction position, it is likely that it contains a big number of individuals with deviant behaviors, who are frustrated for not achieving the demanded success. Therefore, it is the culture that sets the goals and establishes the behavior of the individual, maybe stimulating felonious actions, which may or may not be associated with violence, which allows us to link the idea of relative autonomy of culture over social structure (ALEXANDER; SMITH, 2003; KANE, 1991), which is, under these circumstances, provoking the anomic situation.

On this causality relation between culture and social structure, anomie might be the cause of crime, since anomie, as was previously said, is the tension between cultural objectives and the opportunities to achieve them, that is, social disorganization (MERTON, 1970), no matter these goals are of an economic order or not. According to Mertonian approach, the social structure that does not dispose of these two highly integrated levels – cultural objectives of achievement and institutional means to get them – is in anomic conditions and has more chances of having a society with high criminality

levels. Merton (1970, p.209) highlights the importance of money and its condition of being a "[…] prestige symbol […], not mattering how it is acquired, by fraud or within institutions […]". He says: "Culture can be such as to induce individuals to centralize their emotional convictions on the complex of culturally applauded ends, with far less emotional support about the prescribed methods to achieve these ends" (1970, p.207).

Initial research that has formed the base of cultural criminology (approaching issues on culture, subculture and power) helped studying especially the forms of adaptation of individuals to social norms and deviant practices. Some social structures can pressure individuals, stimulating them to non-conformist behaviors (MAGALHÃES, 2004). Attitudes defined as conformity, innovation, retraction and rebellion were classified by Merton (1970) and encompass the means by which individuals behave given the rules. These ways of adaptation are extended to the studies on traditions of youth, when delinquency, radicalism and bohemia are qualified as juvenile reactions (MATZA, 1968).

According to Matza (1968), these three modalities of juvenile reaction have distinct implications. He characterizes each group of young people the following way: (i) radicals – they are aware of their intellectuality, they are critical and wish to reform society; (ii) delinquents – whom do not have plans for society, do not wish to rebuild it; and (iii) bohemians – they stand on an intermediate situation, are refractory, however convinced, such as the radicals, from the moral value of the movement they are inserted on.

Conformity is an attitude of maintenance, in accordance with the cultural objectives of a social structure as well as the institutional means to achieve it. The innovative attitude may or may not constitute a crime, because it is a transaction that goes beyond the established habits, but which, very often, covers up crimes and frauds. The rituality assumes adherence to the rules, however some individuals have lost hope of achieving the objectives assumed by society (to study, "to be someone in life"). On the case of rebellion, there is a search for a new structural order, facing the current order (fight for decriminalization of abortion, for the liberation of marijuana). Retraction is the adaptation by apathy, by social indifference.

Although polemic, there are theorists who approach the seduction of crime and sensual experience of criminal acts to the individuals. Katz (1988, p.4) criticizes the scarceness of studies on sociology and psychology that approach the pleasure of criminal practice, standing out that some individuals see a seductive appeal in crime, an attractive

dynamic which compels to criminal action: "when they are committing crimes, people feel drawn and propelled to their criminality". He still says: "To grasp the magic in the criminal's sensuality, we must acknowledge our own".

Surpassing the perspective which related criminal practice to the social condition of poverty, Zaluar (2004) perceives complex arrangements in which culture and the meaning of the individuals 'actions articulate, based on the pleasure of success when achieving the practices 'objectives. On the specificity of the Brazilian social context, however, it is noted, on relations in which the male figure is treated as legitimate holder of power and protagonism, a key point to this discussion:

> The repetition of certain arrangements and symbolic associations relating the use of firearms, the money on the pocket, the women's conquest, the facing of death and the conception of a completely autonomous individual would allow to link violence to a *masculinity ethos*, which later I have considered to be a *warrior ethos*, such as exposed by Norbert Elias (ZALUAR, 2004, p.237).

This means that, on the tension between the individual and the social system in which he was socialized, the option for crime comes as an alternative that is not necessarily painful to the person who practices it, that is, it might contain pleasure. Thus, whether by a compulsion stimulated by the media for consumption (structure), or by an option for criminal practice as a sensual choice (agency), crime is not, for all, something perceived as an evil in its totality (KATZ, 1988).

The theoretical gain offered by cultural criminology is the ability to dissolve conventional meanings of crime, thinking the matter in urban, mediatic and anthropological terms, and social practices as ways of intervention over these meanings. Cultural criminology founds a theory which sails on late modernity, trying to understand the contemporary conditions which confront a new world of crimes and social control, the role of mediation on the constitution of the meaning of crime, the meanings on flow, the social exclusions. Let us look at the following:

> [...] in the 1940s a man could all too often hit a woman in the mouth and it meant … well, not much. 'Domestic violence 'hadn't yet been invented as a legal and cultural (there's that word again) category – that is, it hadn't been widely defined, acknowledged, and condemned as a specific type of criminal behaviour. It took the radical women's movement and decades of political activism to get that accomplished (FERRELL *et al*., 2008, p.8).

Many criminal actions enter the media agenda as national tendencies or as reactions from juvenile subcultures – as it happened in April 2011 at an attack on a public school in the Realengo neighborhood, Rio de Janeiro city, in Brazil. Known as the Realengo Massacre, the crime refers to the slaughter that took place around 8:30 am, in an elementary school in that city. Wellington de Oliveira, 23, invaded the school armed

with two revolvers and fired at the students, killing 12 of them, aged between 13 and 15, and leaving another 22 others injured. To enter the school, he claimed to be a former student. Oliveira was intercepted by police, but he committed suicide before being arrested. Many people defend the idea that this "unfounded" violence – as opposed to a legitimate violence by the hands of the State – does not come from inequalities that frustrate the fulfillment of cultural goals, transcending socioeconomic issues.

Despite that, Ferrell et al. (2008) affirm this violence is partly interlinked with social conditions of exclusion of social layers that are not contemplated by the acknowledged labor market or by the educational system. We can say this episode in Brazil is a straight indication of media technology's permeation into the practice of everyday life. Referring to Garfinkel (1956 apud FERRELL *et al*., 2008), we can state that one kind of degradation ceremony, in which some physical and symbolic pains are inflicted on people as public degradation and denunciation, is a sort of communicative work. So, we have to face "its terrible consequences in all their cultural complexity" (FERRELL *et al*. 2008, p.11).

Globalization, global conflicts, capitalism and world economic crisis, globalized media, uncertainties, plural forms of criminal action and justifications for punishments constitute the current frame of the criminality studies. Crime enters the public spectacle because the victims 'experiences are publicized, punishments are celebrated, and all is shared by media with the collectivity, which shares the pain of the other every day. If we think in terms of the Brazilian society (and not just in this), the emphasis on the success, on ambition, and on consumption – specially through media, on journalistic programs, on publicity and entertainment, as in social media profiles and soap operas – is not in accordance with the possibilities of most individuals of access to the sanctioned means of achieving these goals. Media stimulus might explain, partially, the crime associated to the intention of obtaining gains, especially to guarantee consumption.

It is, however, fundamental to stand out that criminal practice – focused on consumption or not – may not be exclusively associated to economic conditions, because criminal action is present on many social strata. The seductive appeal of crime which Katz (1988) tells us about reaches all individuals, and some – of any social class – feel compelled to practice it. As said by him:

> The assailant must sense, then and there, a distinctive constraint or seductive appeal that he did not sense a little while before in a substantially similar place. Although his economic status, peer group relations, Oedipal conflicts, genetic makeup, internalized machismo, history of child abuse, and the like remain the same, he must suddenly become propelled to commit the crime. Thus, the

central problem is to understand the emergence of distinctive sensual dynamics (KATZ, 1988, p. 4).

On our discussion, consumer culture is the "siren's song" present on the media, and those who do not have purchase power might or might not be seduced by it. The condition of vulnerability of young people is what puts them in a position of risk. Clearly, to every criminal action there are individual conditions that determine the activity, but here we are attentive to structural determinations, because subjective conditions enter the empirical research exercise, which is not our objective in this article.

Young people and criminal practices for consumption

The belief that some young people admit illicit practices to consume might seem difficult, however Leite and Brenneisen (2011, p.13) managed to say so, even if their research did not intent to. They state the search of resources to leisure and consumption is a common effort among young people, who admit "illicit practices to get money". Leite and Brenneisen (p.14) assert they did not question the fact that illegal activities were carried out to maintain the integrity of the study. And state: "[…] what matters to stand out is that, on both ways, licit or illicit, the young people observed spend most of their financial gain on fashion/clothing […]".

This was noticed by Assis (2012), when he carried out a study with young between 15 and 20 years old attended by a social reintegration center, in Recife. The author identified who committed crimes linked to the theft of goods (tennis shoes, backpacks, electronic equipment such as cell phones, laptops, etc.), whose transgressions, among other causes, had the desire for consumption as the driving force behind criminal action. One of them said: "If I can get enough money to buy a Seaway or Rota do Mar T-shirt, which are in shopping malls, I don't want a 'street fair' shirt, which everyone has". It points out how the individual acts in search of an ideal consumer image, a behavior that brings him closer to the representations present in media narratives: the individual who holds economic power, marked by a lifestyle that places him in a prominent position in his sociability spaces.

In the same research, we were struck by how one of them highlighted a watch ad: "I like the Magnum watch ad, I think it's really cool. He comes showing the clock, then he shows a car, a house, a plane". The enumeration of goods shows that the individual is attracted by the construction of meaning in which the relationship between objects is established, which, in the specific case of this advertisement, configures an image that

whoever can have a Magnum watch can maintain a distinctive lifestyle. This means that to be inserted in a social world that legitimizes citizenship through the exercise of consumption practices, individuals, especially young people, seek any means to enter the game of differentiations – which is, in this case, also the game of inclusions.

According to Assis (2012), the choice of products that young people classify as those that deserve efforts for their possession correspond to goods (clothing, electronic equipment) that have distinctive value in their social contexts. The intention of distinguishing themselves through the use of goods is especially aimed at winning over women and seeking power within the group to which they feel to belong. They claim to resort to illicit forms of acquiring resources to achieve their consumption goals.

Martín-Barbero (1997, p.290) outlines the relation between the means of communication, consumption and social practices expressed on everyday life by standing out that:

> The space for reflection on consumption is the space of everyday practices as a place of *mute internalization of social inequality*, since from the relation with the body itself and the use of time, from the habitat and the awareness of the possible for each life, from the achievable to the unachievable. It is also as a place of impugnment of these limits and expression of desires, subversion of codes and movements of pulse and bliss. Consumption is not only a reproduction of forces, but also a production of meanings: place of a struggle that does not stop at the possession of goods, because it passes more decisively by the *usages* that give them social form and where demands and devices of action are inscribed coming from various cultural competences.

Martín-Barbero (1997) allows a reflection about the social universe of crime started by the desire of consumption among young people. There is an attribution of social meaning to the use of certain goods and practices, exposed by the culture industry. This meaning is contemplated by the social differentiation through distinction practices, which is directly associated to the act of possessing, of consuming, of having, of doing. The desire for the products can be controlled, given an organization of "cultural competences" which indicate the legitimate path towards the acquisition of goods, obeying social and legal norms. However, in the same way there are economic inequalities, there are also unevennesses on levels of cultural competences (linked or not to economic inequalities), causing the arrival of deviant practices of subtraction of goods, a crime motivated by the desire of consumption.

Taschner (2009, p.90) also enables us to relate the study on consumer culture to criminal actions when she says that "[…] there are many people excluded from leisure and of many ways of consumption, despite participating of the consumer culture […]". All individuals are subjected to questioning about the representations produced and

reproduced on the communication means and, as the internalization of the meanings and traces of distinction by consumption happens, the objective practices of individuals in the social world are rethought over, transformed and adapted to reach the values linked to consumer culture. On the process of externalization of appropriated values, the *individual-who-bears-defining-objects-of-distinction* is configured: a subject distinguished on himself and who disposes of power, adequate to the *referent-individual* model.

Thus, consumer culture has a wider range, which can be perceived *a priori*. This is present on the various domains of social life. For example, modernity's leisure practices are greatly linked to consumption spaces (TASCHNER, 2009). On the execution of practices, the very meaning of leisure is transformed on a principle for social distinction. Highlighting the relation between leisure and consumption, Taschner says it is possible, on the contemporary context of consumer culture, to verify strategies to acquire what it is intended to possess:

> On richer countries, the marriage between leisure and consumption tends to last – massively customized, virtual, culturally oriented – between the rich layers and those who have a job or a business of their own or who are autonomous workers. There one may find niches, where leisure consumption is less directed to tangible products and, more and more, to the consumption of sensations […]. In other segments, which are and – most likely – might remain particularly abundant on countries of the Third World, there are a prone to find low income layers people or unemployed ones who do not have meaningful access to the real consumption market – specially leisure consumption – despite their insertion on the consumer culture (for example: the Brazilian office boy who wears Nike sneakers, bought on installments, and the street kid who obtains the same sneakers through theft) (TASCHNER, 2009, p.90-91).

It indicates that crime can emerge as an access route to goods that one wishes to possess and boast. The social meaning of objects is valued by the propagated representations on the media or social media and vary according to hierarchy socially built over each good on its specific field of use: to transgress social and legal rules gains relevance on the choices of individuals as the merchandise that is intended to acquire detains high exchange value, even if it does not have a high use value.

On our discussion, the acquisition of certain goods by criminal action is closer to a distinction by the exposition of a (false) purchasing power (by illegal possession) than by the power of internalizing symbolic capital. This does not mean that poverty motivates crime, but that young people socialized on a contemporary consumption society and with low acquisitive power (on a socioeconomic structure), tensioned by the desire of possession of certain goods (on a cultural structure of consumption) might be more vulnerable to enter criminality. The criminal act is here perceived as a fast way to access

what one wishes to acquire: the (illegal) means to achieve the objectives set by Merton (1970).

We assume the masculinity ethos is, in a meaningful way, stimulated and reproduced by the products of culture industry, since there is a two-way street on the elaboration of what is going to be offered to the public. According to Leite and Brenneisen (2011), fashion is an affirmation of identity to the young person, according to one of the persons interviewed by them: "To go out all dressed up is so cool, even to hang out, get some girls, the girls see you are wearing the brand, chain, cool sneakers, all dressed up, it's easier to talk to them and get them than the guys who don't wear the brand clothes […]" (Erick, 20 years old, apud LEITE; BRENNEISEN, 2011, p. 16).

Culture industry has the objective to achieve public acceptability and, at the same time, to impose aesthetic patterns and specific styles of merchandise to the individual. It is on the field of cultural productions (soap operas, films, music, journalism, publicity and advertisement) where we find elements that promote the construction of the image of an individual who detains power, of a protagonist social identity and distinctive lifestyles related to the *referent-individual*. Consumption, in this context, is a social practice marked by the meaning of distinction (BOURDIEU, 2008).

Culture industry can expand the pictorial dimension of the relation with goods (ROCHA, 2002), representing and attributing meaning to lifestyles, hierarchically structured according to the social hierarchy of goods (BOURDIEU, 2008). It acts, therefore, as a space of diffusion and maintenance of the structure itself of inequality of everyday consumption practices, legitimizing certain groups and not others. Therefore, it introduces on individuals, including the ones in a context of vulnerability, a disposition, understood as *habitus[41]*, marked by the search of success and pleasure.

Our discussion seeks a theoretical congruence which allows to stimulate research on the relational complex between consumption, crime and youth, and some empirical studies indicate the relevance of our debate. Leite (2011, p.1) points out thematic affinity by narrating studies with young peripheral inhabitants and states that criminality is linked to "the astounding need for consumption". Describing an episode of the movie *A Ponte*[42],

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[41]We understand *habitus* as a "[…] generator principle of objectively classified practices and, at the same time, a classification system […] of such practices […]" (BOURDIEU, 2008, p.162). *Habitus* is a system of long-lasting dispositions which acts on each moment as schemes of perceptions and actions.
[42]Film (from the year of 2007) shows the situation of social inequality in São Paulo's South Zone, Brazil.

the author says that an educationalist, asking a boy to abandon criminal behavior, heard the following: "[…] I don't care about dying… I will die with a 'Nike 'on my foot!'".

Leite (2011) links consumer culture to anorexic disorders, to child prostitution and to criminal practices. She highlights real working conditions and consumption possibilities, whose access password is given to few. Dying with a "Nike" on the foot is more than searching for recognition on the eyes of others, it is the certainty that one is not a loser. It is better to die possessing, being somebody, the *individual-bearer-of-defining-objects-of-distinction*, on an attempt to come closer to *referent-individuals*. Hence, it makes sense to think about young people who choose robbery, drug trafficking and theft to also enjoy this "party" to which they were not invited, as it was sung by the Brazilian singer Cazuza, who recalls:

> They didn't invite me / For this poor party / That men set up / To convince me / Paying without seeing / All this drug / That already comes spotted / Before I born / They didn't offer me / Not even a cigarette / I stood at the door / Parking the cars / They didn't choose me / Boss of nothing / My credit card / It's a pocket knife [...][43]

Consumption, youth, and crime: still a research question

The orientation of capitalist society towards consumption beyond control seems to build an ideal of happiness intrinsic to money and the possession of goods (ROCHA, 2011). Capitalist information society shapes the profile of an individual whose focus is the process of social distinction by consumption and by the achievement of limitless pleasure. In name of social position and lifestyle as elements of one's symbolic capital, the individual takes on a *habitus* to assure the meaning of belonging to a certain social group (MELO, 2009).

The communication means and social media are on the root of this consumer culture. This indicates the conditions of possibility for the media to lead, as a negative causality or a perverse effect of meaning, an individual that, in the name of hedonism, may steal or boast on the social place where one stands to retain more resources and power or to occupy spaces of distinction. Certain types of consumption characterize to what social field it pertains, because it is a process of distinction established on post-modernity, an epidemic of consumption which seems difficult to escape from. The lifestyle is

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[43] Lirics: Brazil, by Cazuza, 1988. In Portuguese: Não me convidaram / Pra esta festa pobre / Que os homens armaram / Pra me convencer / A pagar sem ver / Toda essa droga / Que já vem malhada / Antes de eu nascer / Não me ofereceram / Nem um cigarro / Fiquei na porta / Estacionando os carros / Não me elegeram / Chefe de nada / O meu cartão de crédito / É uma navalha.

influenced by the communication means, which indicate how to dress, and what to visibly possess to legitimize the place of speech (MELO, 2009).

The value of richness is a symbol of success on capitalist societies. Culture pervades all individuals of a society, however it is required to consider idiosyncratic differences of their life stories. Thus, the reactions, or the means of adaptation, are going to result precisely of the difference of each individual and his/her belonging to several subgroups, which as submitted to the cultural stimulus and to the structural limitations of access to achieve objectives of success. The convergence point between the delinquent and middle class, for example, is often the valorization of power, of goods and of money. Who already has money wants to possess goods, to have pleasure; who does not have purchasing power is also susceptible to the same desires.

The individual is stimulated to consumption to show a social position. Who wants to occupy this place needs to dress, to use the car, to have a cell phone, anyway, to boast objects that determine their position, from which one may look at others and express externally one's condition of distinction (MELO, 2010). Lifestyle, the boasted objects on one's body are exposed on the social shop window. To the ones who cannot materially consume, it is possible to possess using force. As Paixão remembers (1988, p.176) about what DaMatta (1997) says, "[…] the shattering of property is the 'do you know who you are talking to? without individuals voiceless politically and dismissed of masses the of [44]' a proper forum […]", a way to reveal the conflict and the crisis of capitalism. On these cases, the use of the street works as a public arena of confrontation in favor of the right to consume. After all, it is the capitalist society that announces citizenship defined by consumption.

What can we do about it? There are multiple answers and a challenge. The challenge is to suspend the idea that the causes for criminality on the Western are based on the logic of survival strategy. To the multiple causalities of criminal practices, we can add psychological and sociological elements: the desire for possession, power, pleasure, and distinction. One of the possible answers is the confrontation of communication policies, thinking about ways of controlling the production of the media and social media on programs aimed at kids and young people, when the individual is in the primary phase of socialization.

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[44] This expression was the theoretical issue studied by DaMatta (2020). It is concerned with the social class discursive power used in Brazil by the elite when referring to their economic conditions and family origin, named by DaMatta as "familismo".

Countless research already points to the relationship between childhood, adolescence, and the influence of the media over consumption practices (CAMPOS; SOUZA, 2003; BOCK *et al.*, 2009; TASCHNER, 2011; LEITE, 2011; LEITE; BRENNEISEN, 2011). As Taschner (2011) says, if there is already an asymmetry on the relation between producers and adult consumers, this asymmetry gains exponential dimensions when the consumer is a child or a teenager. It is true that, on the process of socialization, young people have learned what is publicity and what is their intention, but they do not stop being influenced by it. Motivated to possession by the recurrent impact of the media discourse, such individuals act on it: they buy the goods, ask for someone to buy it for them or appropriate it.

Media narratives stimulate consumption – on its various forms, from journalism to the soap opera – and integrate the current capitalist dynamic, which demands freedom on its practice to announce goods associated with *individuals-bearers-of-defining-objects-of-distinction* (UV/EV). Through repetition, the propaganda and the media narrative persuade the individual, each time more dissuaded of his defense mechanisms. It makes sense to question this practice when we see a determinant variable in it – not the only one, that is true, but a relevant one – of the subliminal stimulus even of illicit practices to guarantee access to consumption when purchasing power does not exist. Galeano illustrates (2011), reporting what a young Argentine said: " ... When you have nothing, you think you are worth nothing".

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[45] All direct quotes on this article from Portuguese references were translated to English by the authors.

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