

iPhone consumption and class identity: a study with low-income individuals



Consumo de iPhone e identidade de classe: um estudo com indivíduos de baixa renda

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ABSTRACT

The purchasing power of low-income people must be considered significant for the market when considering the amount of Brazilians who are placed at the bottom of the social pyramid. Furthermore, these individuals find means to purchase some products that they desire and which are symbols of the status of higher classes. In this study, the product that exemplifies this consumption by low-income owners to increase their acceptance status in society is the iPhone. In this way, the objective is to understand the relationship between the iPhone brand and the upper class identity, and how it is used as a means of insertion in groups by their owners which are placed at the bottom of the pyramid. As for methodology, 24 interviews were conducted with low-income individuals, using a semi-structured script, with the support of the projective technique of the third person. Data analysis was based on Bardin's content analysis. Findings point out that the interviewees believe that they are distinguishing from the poorest people and moving towards the world from those who have greater purchasing power since they become iPhone users. In addition, the interviewees point out that the iPhone is a good that contributes to the acceptance in social groups, which is one of the best ways to minimize suffering with social issues. Therefore, several



sacrifices are tolerated to make it possible to own the Apple smartphone, such as selling or exchanging goods, withdrawing part of the money that would be reserved for food, housing and security, and payment by many installments. Even with all the disclaimers, the benefits that the iPhone is believed to bring to the poor stand out.

Keywords: social classes, bottom of the pyramid, consumer behavior, trickle-down.

INTRODUCTION

Currently, in Brazil, there are approximately 130 million people living below the poverty line (SILVEIRA, 2020). Class C, which can be considered the economic pillar that has supported the development of the country since 2002- this represents the majority of the Brazilian population, considering that two out of three Brazilians belong to this economic class (SILVEIRA, 2020). Given this scenario, it is essential to consider the power of consumption that this portion of the population represents. Prahalad (2005) shows that there is a dominant assumption that the poor have no purchasing power and are not a viable market. Certainly, the purchasing power of these individuals cannot be compared to those with a high income. However, this purchasing power becomes significant when considering the number of class C individuals, as it is a large market.

With the increase in income and credit, a large number of the individuals in classes D and E moved to class C, gaining access to goods that were previously far from their purchasing power, and came to know and experience new categories of consumption. However, as much as they have benefited by rising to class C, the financial reality of this population segment is still difficult and requires making more thoughtful choices (FILARDI; TRINTA; CARVALHO, 2015).

The stigma against low-income consumers is perceived by stigmatizers from different social classes. In addition, low-income individuals tend to further stigmatize other low-income individuals (LEVRINI; POLETTI, 2016). Consumption as a means of status, insisting on it as an item of decency, is most often found



in the strata of society where human contact among individuals and population mobility are greater. There is a struggle to surpass the other, requiring greater expenditure in this direction to indicate a pecuniary decency. No merit comes from spending on basic necessities, except for the comparison with the poorest, who are beyond minimum subsistence (VEBLEN, 1912).

Some centuries ago, sumptuary laws were instituted that established what could be consumed by certain social segments and what was prohibited for others. The reasons for the existence of these laws ranged from a moral apprehension with luxury to a demarcation of social position (BARBOSA, 2004). The author argues that in current society, there is a freedom of choice, in which there is autonomy in deciding how one wants to live and what one wants to consume, in addition to the absence of social codes with power to choose for individuals, given they have the pecuniary means for acquisition. Thus, Barbosa (2004, p. 21) presents three sentences by Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen: "Today there is no fashion, only fashions", "No rules, only choices" and "Everyone can be anyone".

Thus, style and identity can currently be considered options, given that, regardless of social position or income, individuals can make choices about their own position because income functions as a limited barrier (BARBOSA, 2004). Similarly, Bhattacharyya and Belk (2019) state that lower income individuals seek ways to be able to consume what they want. In the case of the present study, the Apple iPhone is considered an object of desire due to the symbolic construction that permeates the use of the device. Considered one of the largest brands in the world, Apple has the potential to influence the market and consumption by societies (BH1, 2018). For West and Mace (2010, p. 270), "the success of the iPhone was based on Apple's conception of the mobile Internet as being another modality of the existing wired Internet, and its leveraging of existing systems competencies". Considered an



innovative company, Apple enshrined the iPhone as a revolutionary smartphone.

In the present study, it is understood that low-income consumers, although they do not have the financial resources compared to that of other social classes, attribute a significant meaning to having an iPhone and, therefore, find ways to obtain the product. Thus, the objective of the study is to understand the relationship between the iPhone brand and upper-class identity and how it is used as a means of group inclusion by individuals at the bottom of the pyramid. The specific objectives established to achieve the proposed general objective are to a) identify how the choice, acquisition and purchase influences for the iPhone took place; b) determine which sacrifices are made for the acquisition to occur; c) describe how individuals at the bottom of the pyramid relate the iPhone smartphone to social classes; and d) establish how the iPhone is used as a means of group inclusion. Although themes related to the bottom of the pyramid have gained prominence in recent years, there are few studies on the subject, and they are mainly focused on luxury consumption. In addition, according to a survey by IBOPE (2017), almost 80% of Brazilians belong to classes C, D and E, classes corresponding to the bottom of the pyramid according to the study by Campos et al. (2020). Therefore, it is a large and influential segment in the country, deserving studies aiming to understand its consumption behavior.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A few centuries ago, patina (age marks that are concentrated on the surface of objects, undergoing a gradual departure from their original intact condition) received a symbolic meaning and was exploited for social purposes because it carried a message of status. It showed that possessions were present in the family for several generations, indicating that they had enjoyed a certain social status for years. For many decades, patina was one of the most important means of distinction by the upper class, until in the



eighteenth century it was overshadowed by the consumer fashion system (Mccracken, 2003).

At that time, there was an exchange of patina for fashion, for the new. In addition, in the sixteenth century, during the Elizabethan period, consumption was restricted to nobles, but fashion provided the opportunity for lower-class social groups to take part in the consumption revolution. Thus, anyone with the necessary resources could acquire a novelty and use it for status purposes (MCCRACKEN, 2003). With fashion, there was also an explosion in imitative behavior by low-income consumers.

According to Simmel (1957), fashion is a means of imitation and social equalization, but at the same time, it differentiates one social stratum from another. It unites individuals from the same social stratum and distances them from others. When the elite initiates fashion and the masses begin to imitate it in an effort to extinguish the distinctions between classes, the elite abandons this fashion and invests in another. According to the author, the lower classes tend to imitate the consumption of elites seeking status and differentiation, known as the trickle-down theory. The upper classes create a certain line of demarcation, and when the lower classes begin to copy their style, they adopt a new style to differentiate themselves from the mass. With imitation, there will be differentiation, and with the slightest hint of differentiation, there will be imitation.

McCracken (2003) argues that low-income individuals seek the status markers of high-ranking individuals, with a chase by the lower groups and a hasty flight by the upper groups. He also points out that the new fashions that at one time were adopted by the upper class out of fancy now had to be adopted out of necessity due to this imitation. Without the patina strategy to defend them in creating distinction, the only resource is the invention of new fashions. With this, the upper class ended up becoming prisoners of new trends in a continuous process of innovation. With the fall of patina and the rise of fashion, an individual could transform their income into status at any



time without waiting for generations, as happened with patina. The status became immediate.

SOCIAL CLASSES

Considering the existence of social classes implies, in a way, attributing a relationship between classes and the experience of agents because agents “can assign individuals to these classes based on more or less explicit criteria”, and “these individuals think of themselves as members of classes” (BOURDIEU, 2013, p. 107). Thus, the sense of belonging to a class is another dimension that should be analyzed in regard to social classes.

Social groups, and especially social classes, exist twice, so to speak, and they do so prior to the intervention of the scientific gaze itself: they exist in the objectivity of the first order, that which is recorded by distributions of material properties; and they exist in the objectivity of the second order, that of the contrasted classifications and representations produced by agents on the basis of a practical knowledge of these distributions such as they are expressed in lifestyles (BOURDIEU, 2013, p. 111).

According to Resende (2017), the individual not only positions himself in society based on an identity with which he identifies and builds, but he also gives up a politicized identity, structuring the defense of his interests in terms of social struggle.

Bourdieu (2008) states that tastes function as privileged indicators of “class” and that nothing distinguishes class more than the ability to acquire goods. He also brings the idea that individuals are differentiated by the distinctions they make between what is beautiful and what is ugly, distinct and vulgar. Resende (2017, p. 9) points out that the social distinction is “an ontologically conditioned manifestation by the overlap between social groups” and, according to Senna and Hemai (2017), in the case of the same class, the social distinction between consumers occurs not only by the quantity of goods they acquire but also by which products they have among their possessions. The decision about what to consume has a strong influence



on the cultural capital that is obtained by each individual. While subjects with low cultural capital enjoy purchase and possession, those with high cultural capital tend to give greater importance to the moments and experiences that consumption provides (SENNA; HEMAI, 2017).

Bourdieu (2008) coined and used the expression 'cultural capital' to examine class situations in society, being a power resource that has a special relevance compared to other resources, especially economic resources. The expression originated from the association of the terms capital and culture, representing an analogy to the power and possession of certain information, tastes and cultural activities (SILVA, 1995). Warde (2009) presents a clearer definition of cultural capital as the ability of a privileged segment to determine its culture as superior to that of lower classes. At the time, Pierre Bourdieu wanted to report the existence of a division between a high culture, i.e., the elite, and a popular culture. In addition, regarding the possession of goods, the cultural competence and cultivated disposition that are revealed through goods vary according to the categories of those who operate them and the environment to which they apply (BOURDIEU, 2008).

Even a few decades after publication, the concept of cultural capital remains central to understanding the relationships of domination existing in the social structure because it can be understood as an important tool to assimilate the symbolic dimension of the struggle between different social groups (DE ALMEIDA CUNHA, 2007). Bourdieu's persistence in the differences between high and low culture shows how valuable this subject is for cultural studies (WARDE, 2009).

Veblen (1912) points out that the lines of demarcation between social classes have become vague and transitory, an even more recurrent situation today (BHATTACHARYYA; BELK, 2019). The members of a class accept as their ideal of decency what is trending in the class above them. Thus, they double their efforts to live up to this ideal, taking care not to make mistakes and to maintain appearances. The basis on which good repute resides is monetary



strength, and the means to demonstrate this strength is through the conspicuous consumption of goods (VEBLEN, 1912). The relationship of the poor with material culture cannot be restricted to social class or deprivation. The poor give cultural meaning to their consumption and apply various strategies of meaning to seize the world of goods (MIGUELES, 2007).

IPHONE, THE APPLE SMARTPHONE

Apple boasts prestige in its products due to its differentiated technology and quality (JACOMINO; BIGGI; PÉPECE, 2018). The company brought about a revolution in the telecommunications sector through a series of products that had great success in the market, using a rare differentiation strategy, admirably difficult to be imitated. It was awarded for seven consecutive years, from 2005 to 2011, as the most innovative company in the world by Business Week and I lead the most admired companies in the world for five years, from 2008 to 2012. The differentiation strategy used by Apple allows it to continue charging high prices and, with that, have capital to finance future innovations (HERACLEOUS, 2013).

Apple's smartphone, the iPhone, is an example of success in achieving such great prestige in the market. When the device was announced in 2007, more than 500 thousand sales were made in the first weekend, in addition to lines of consumers searching for the iPhone (LAUGESSEN; YUAN, 2010). According to an article in the newspaper Folha de São Paulo (2018), having an iPhone in the United States in 2016 was a sign of wealth, being the best indication that the individual belonged to the group of the richest. No individual brand was more indicative of belonging to the upper class than having an iPhone.

METHODOLOGY



The objective of this study is to understand the relationship between the iPhone brand and upper class identity and how it is used as a means of group inclusion by individuals at the bottom of the pyramid. For this purpose, a qualitative study was conducted that was less concerned with generalization and more focused on deepening and broadening the understanding of a social group, an organization or other entity (MINAYO, 2000). Data were collected through semistructured interviews (STEWART; CASH JR., 2015) and the third-person projective technique (AITCHISON, 2018) until reaching a saturation point, that is, when no new information relevant to the research is found (BAUER; GASKELL, 2011). During the interview, some questions relied on the third-person technique, which helped the participants free themselves from the ego. They are asked what third parties would do in a given situation and, thus, end up expressing their own views and intentions on the topic without having to admit them (AITCHISON, 2018).

Due to the lack of a consensus on what low income is in Brazil, the respondent selection criterion was based on the vulnerability criterion used by the Federal Universities of Lavras and Juiz de Fora, chosen because the researchers have greater ease of contact. In both, the variables are the family composition and socioeconomic data (such as the income, assets, real estate and vehicles of each family member), housing conditions, having attended public school (mandatory), among others, accompanied by statements that prove the vulnerability. Thus, respondents who were considered vulnerable according to the classification of the universities were selected.

A total of 24 respondents were interviewed: 12 females and 12 males. The ages ranged from 18 to 53 years, with a mean age of 23 years. Of the 24 participants, 21 were university students and both studied and worked. Six students served as seeds for the snowball (VINUTO, 2014), a technique that uses reference chains; it begins with key informants, called seeds, and then

each participant indicates new participants until reaching a saturation point. The study was not limited to university students, therefore, as they were able to appoint new interviewees from any other city, as long as the nominated ones were classified as low income according to the universities' vulnerability criterion. The confirmation that these individuals belonged to the target audience of this study was made through a chat in which the interviewers. Only two nominations did not fit the desired profile and were unable to participate in the interviews.

The location of the interviews depended on the preference of each participant, a benefit provided by data collection via individual interviews. Due to the ease of contact via video calls or telephone calls, interviews that could not be conducted in person were conducted through these means of communication. First, the researchers ensured the confidentiality of the responses and obtained the consent of the study participants through a signed informed consent form. Demographic data for each individual were also collected. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the respondents, allowing exact reproduction of the statements and freeing the interviewer from having to take notes, thus being able to focus on the respondent. The analysis of the interviews was based on the content analysis method of Bardin (1977). Four categories of analysis were created: (i) choice, acquisition and purchasing influences; (ii) sacrifices made to own an iPhone; (iii) iPhone and social classes; and (iv) inclusion in groups and society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

CHOICE, ACQUISITION AND PURCHASING INFLUENCES

To disinhibit the respondents and start the interview in a lighter fashion, they were asked to tell how their stories with the iPhone began. Some respondents claimed that they always wanted to have one, and others claimed that they had the opportunity to have one, liked it, and did not want to cease having an iPhone, varying between need, because they did not



have a smartphone, and desire. Two interesting cases occurred at the beginning of the interviews as per the first statements of two respondents:

“In reality, everyone wants to have an iPhone, right?”
(Respondent 12).

“Ah, I like the iPhone, but for the quality of the product, such as the camera, processor” (Respondent 5).

Respondent 12 holds the view that everyone has a desire to have an iPhone, a view that may be based on personal experience that is being projected on others and/or because there are many people around her who always express this desire, thus giving the idea that it is a phone coveted by everyone. The other case is that of respondent 5 who, in a defensive tone, states that he likes the iPhone because of the quality of the product, pointing to a functional justification for owning the Apple smartphone.

When asked about which models they have owned, the most commonly found among the respondents are the iPhones 4, 5 and 6, also including the variations 4S, 5S, 5SE, 5C, 6S and 6 plus. The most current model found was the 8 plus, with two respondents. One curious occurrence was that when asked whether low-income individuals use iPhones, respondent 20 noted what was actually found in this study.

“I think that because of its cost, it is more difficult to use. Except for an older model that costs less” (Respondent 20).

Regarding the form of acquisition, the most frequently observed were purchasing a used phone from a third party, a new phone in many installments, or gifted (new or used) from parents living abroad. In most cases, a new iPhone was purchased by selling the old one, thus paying only the difference. The respondents justify the purchase of used phone because they do not believe it is a good deal to buy a new iPhone, as noted by respondents 1 and 10.

“I prefer to buy second-hand because a new iPhone is not a good deal, since I'd pay R\$ 3,000 for a new iPhone 8, and tomorrow the XRS would be launched, and the one I got would lose value. So, it's not going to pay off, you know? Like, I paid R\$ 1,300 for this cell phone [used iPhone 6]. Today, if I tried to sell it



for R\$ 1,000, I couldn't. The maximum I can sell it for is R\$ 900. So, I still prefer to buy second-hand semi-new than to buy new" (Respondent 10).

"Today, I wouldn't buy an iPhone zero because the price goes down a lot in a matter of 6 months, 1 year, you know? And then, the price stabilizes. So I prefer to wait a while before buying one" (Respondent 1).

In this sense, according to the results obtained, the price decrease occurs very fast. In addition, some respondents, such as those mentioned above, make the purchase already thinking about selling in the future to acquire a more current model. Thus, they do not see the advantage of paying much more for a new iPhone because when they want to sell it, there will be a very large difference in price. Many respondents, even those who recently purchased an iPhone, have in mind the next models they want to have, as is the case of respondent 24.

"I had the 5S, and now, I have the 6S, and I'm about to buy the 7" (Respondent 24).

"I had the 4, 5 and 6. The 4 was the 4 and 4S, then the 5 and 5S and the 6. I haven't been able to get beyond the 6 yet" (Respondent 10).

In the latter case, respondent 10 makes clear his desire to acquire more current models, and the financial condition is the obstacle, as he stated throughout the interview that he already has plans for how to acquire the next phone. Another point to be discussed regarding the form of acquisition is the greater ease of purchasing an iPhone abroad, as the respondents indicate that the product is more expensive in Brazil. Thus, there were many cases of relatives living or traveling abroad and sending or bringing the devices.

"Then, after the 'guy' [boyfriend] traveled and was in Hawaii, he had the opportunity to buy it because it is much cheaper there. Otherwise, I wouldn't have it today because it is expensive" (Respondent 22).

Most respondents are university students and depend on family income, which in many cases comes from only one parent. One observation is that these parents who do not live in Brazil do not participate in maintaining the



home, and the mother is, in most cases, the only one responsible for the home and the children.

Regarding the influences that the respondents experienced to decide to have an iPhone, all stated that they always heard very good things about the product, whether from family members or friends and peers, in addition to seeing the product in the media, such as in movies. In some cases, the respondents received scholarships to attend private high schools and saw many students with the iPhone, as is the case of respondent 6.

“I studied at a private school. Everyone had one. I was on a scholarship. [...] And then the first thing I did when I started working was to buy my iPhone in installments. It wasn't even an operating system preference because I hadn't even tried an iPhone, but I said, “I want an iPhone”; I went, and I got it in installments, you know? ” (Respondent 6).

In this case, the respondent had never handled the device, but because she came into daily contact with schoolmates who used it, she felt the need to have his own phone. Thus, when she started working, the first action was to buy the phone in installments. As can be observed, the social pressure on the individual was great, to the point that she could not wait to have the financial conditions to purchase one in cash, opting to buy it in installments and acquire it quickly.

SACRIFICES MADE TO OWN AN IPHONE

The respondents were asked if low-income individuals give up something or stop spending on goods more necessary for their quality of life in order to buy their iPhone. Many respondents pointed out that the need for approval by society is so great that these individuals would even stop eating to buy one. None stated going hungry but indicated not eating as well in order to have an iPhone, placing the possession of a valued good ahead of even food. Other cases seen by the respondents are cited.



"I've seen a friend of mine selling a bicycle to buy it, saving money, stopping going out and be able to buy it, you know?" (Respondent 3).

"In São Paulo, I think I know many people, as I told you, people who live in low-income communities, can't even plaster the walls of their house, it's no joke; it happened in my family. The people live in a low-income community, they haven't finished plastering their house, it's all brick. My cousin started working as a hairstylist, and the first thing he did was to buy an iPhone 6. He paid 12 installments, and it was the first thing he did. I said to him, "man, you could have helped your mother". They are not so poor that they want for basic things, but they don't have a comfortable life, you know? He works to pay that bill and the basic needs he can. [...] the person starts to work, the first thing they'll do is to buy an iPhone in installments because of the social aspect it brings, you know? " (Respondent 6).

"There are people who even, I don't know, get sick and such because of this, depression, I don't know, like "I'm the only one who doesn't have an iPhone. My God, I need to buy one". In that case, I definitely think they stop buying other things to give more importance to this" (Respondent 18).

Symptoms of depression are cited by respondent 18 due to the great desire to own an iPhone, resulting in the various sacrifices that can be made to make the purchase. Respondent 6 stated that the first thing her cousin did when he started working was to purchase an iPhone for the social well-being provided by the device. The same occurred with the respondent herself, as she reported during the interview how the purchase took place. All her friends from the private school she attended on a scholarship had an iPhone; therefore, she reserved her first salary payment to buy one. She even reveals some regret for having spent so much on the device, an amount that could have been invested in other items, as shown below.

"Oh, I regretted buying it after I paid all 12 installments, [...] because today, I am a student, poor, depending on the university restaurant, so I think I could've used that money for so many things" (Respondent 6).

The respondent points to regret; however, during the interview, she states that she would not cease to be an iPhone user and would strive to have another if she lost her device, thus showing that she would be willing to make sacrifices again to purchase an iPhone.



To circumvent the ego issue, the question about the sacrifice of giving up something to own an iPhone was made in the third person, asking what other people would do. After posing the question, according to the openness that the participant showed, they were asked if they would also give something up. Some respondents, without being asked about themselves, related their own experiences. Their cases can be seen below.

"I could have traveled; I could have paid to get a license; I could have saved it to pay for college. No, I preferred to buy a cell phone. It was my choice. I had R\$ 2,000, and that's it. [...] Today, I understand. And today, I think "it was too much for my reality" (Respondent 6).

"I myself, for example, I'll give you a personal example. I gave up building a wall for my garage to be able to buy an iPhone, you know? [...] I could have at least already started building my garage" (Respondent 10).

"Me, I gave up getting my license to buy it, to pay for my cell phone" (Respondent 11).

"It was basically my 15-year-old present. I gave up having a party to get it. It was about R\$ 4,000... almost R\$ 5,000"(Respondent 18).

Both respondents 6 and 11 are referring to the national driver's license. Both report not paying to get this document to instead purchase an iPhone. Other things were also given up, such as the case for respondent 10, who decided not to build a wall for his garage, something that would offer more security to store his motorcycle, and of respondent 18, who gave up his 15th birthday party to acquire an iPhone. The debutante ball is a traditional party in Brazilian culture when a girl turns 15. The respondent, when stating that she gave up having her parents throw her the party, shows that it was a great sacrifice she made to be gifted the iPhone she so desired.

Some cases of parents who made personal sacrifices to purchase an iPhone for their child were reported. Respondent 6 stated that this happened in her home. Her sister was so sad that she did not want to eat because she was the only one in her group of friends who did not have an iPhone, and therefore, her parents made the effort to buy her the device. An example of



the effort of the parents and the insistence of the children can be seen in a statement by respondent 23.

“People prefer to save on essential things, such as electricity, water, food, a day out, the children's routine, or for the family to save money together to buy a futile thing that is an expensive cell phone for the child. [...] I am a son, so I know. We keep putting things in our parents' heads until we get what we want” (Respondent 23).

That respondent tells the story of his own case, in which he kept insisting until his parents bought him an iPhone for his birthday, a futile good as he puts it. He recognizes that his parents made sacrifices and knows of more such cases.

The study participants were also asked what they would do if they permanently lost their device. The most common answers were to opt for payment installments or to save on certain expenses to buy another iPhone. There were also cases in which the respondents would agree to purchase an older model or a cheaper used model. Some even claim that they would temporarily have an Android device until they were able to raise enough money to purchase another iPhone. All of them show great interest in having an iPhone phone again.

“But if I lost it, I would try, I don't know, buying it in I don't know how many installments, but I would try to get another iPhone because it's very bad to go back” (Respondent 4).

“I thought 'can I wait for Black Friday? Could I try to get a crappy cell phone?'. Like, 'My God, would I be able to stay with a crappy one until then?'" (Respondent 6).

“I would establish a goal: 'I will spend a year with this phone while saving to buy another [iPhone]. Then, I'd sell this phone and buy another [iPhone].' [...] I'd focus on being able to get another iPhone” (Respondent 8).

“I'm already giving up things to save money to buy my phone. It's everyday things, like not going out, eating out, silly things, saving, not buying clothes to save so you can have money to buy an iPhone. Especially me, because I don't like to buy in installments, I prefer to buy in cash. So, I usually save; I give up a lot of things to be able to save money to buy the phone in cash” (Respondent 9).



Participant 9 lost her iPhone during the week of the interview. She reported what she will actually do to get another one, while the others stated what they would probably do if they lost theirs. Two interesting cases of how the respondents refer to Android devices can be seen in the statements of respondents 4 and 6. According to respondent 4, having to be an Android user again is a setback because, according to respondent 6, it is a poor-quality phone. Many refer to it with an air of inferiority, not considering it a good thing to have.

Given the various motivations presented in the previous section, making sacrifices to own an iPhone is common among low-income citizens. According to Veblen (1912), no class, not even the most insanely poor, renounces all conspicuous consumption. Much discomfort is endured to have an object that confers decency. According to Bourdieu (2008), it is the individual's personality that is at stake, and thus, they feel obligated to declare the ability to have certain goods. This is part of the findings of this study on the iPhone.

Some study participants did not understand that they made efforts to own the device. Even though they did not make an exchange, giving up some other good to make the purchase, most claim to have saved on their expenses to be able to get the money to purchase an iPhone or opted for a large number of installment payments, which are also sacrifices. Even with the ego issue present, in addition to reporting cases of close or not so close third parties, some respondents recognized that they prefer to own an iPhone rather than invest in other more necessary home or personal expenses and that they will make the choice again if they lose their device or if they want a newer model.

IPHONE AND SOCIAL CLASSES

Most of the respondents, when asked about which social classes use the iPhone, state that middle- and upper-class individuals do because of the high



price of the device. Thus, it is a good that is consumed primarily by people with higher purchasing power, as seen in a statement by respondent 2.

“From what I see most of the time, the upper class, because people, like, from what I see, the richest people have an iPhone” (Respondent 2).

However, some also stated that as much as the iPhone is not accessible to the majority, all classes can have it. Two interesting cases are those of respondents 10 and 12:

“The bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie because it has the power, it has that thing about the iPhone status, and the proletariat because it's a poor person's dream to have an iPhone” (Respondent 10).

“I think that everyone can own an iPhone if they want to. [...] Because in the same way that you can pay for a Samsung cell phone in 12 installments, you can pay for an Apple phone in 24” (Respondent 12).

Respondent 10 states that “a poor person's dream is to have an iPhone” due to the experience he has had in his environment, showing how this good is valued among people at the bottom of the pyramid. Conversely, respondent 12 states that low-income individuals would already split payments for another smartphone from another brand. Therefore, they could acquire an iPhone by splitting the payment into a larger number of installments. Other respondents who claim that all social classes can have an iPhone add that some have to make more effort, make more sacrifices than others and, as put by Filardi, Trinta and Carvalho (2015), have to make more well-thought-out choices.

“I don't know, anyone can. Of course, there are people who will need to make much more effort than others” (Respondent 14).

“I think almost all of them today. There are people who have to... like I split it into 10 payments, people have to split into 30 payments” (Respondent 13).

“Today, parents want to please their children so much, you know; they go out of their way to buy something for their children. Most of them today who have an iPhone have bad credit with the SPC and Serasa, but they take out installments to buy a present for their kid. So, in my opinion, any class currently



can have one; all they have to do is be willing to end up with bad credit or to save money to buy one" (Respondent 23).

The sacrifices mentioned range from splitting the purchase into many payments, saving money and ending up with bad credit in the Credit Protection Service (Serviço de Proteção ao Crédito – SPC) and Serasa credit reporting companies. A point that can be observed in a statement by respondent 23 is the effort that parents who do not have good financial conditions make to buy products that children insist on having, as is the case for respondent 23 himself and other study respondents.

Three respondents also added the following: lower-class individuals have iPhones but are limited to older versions of the device, with the newest versions being owned by individuals in higher classes. An example is presented below in a statement by respondent 1:

"I don't see the iPhone today as a middle- or upper-class phone. [...] Today, you buy an iPhone 4, which still goes for like R\$ 200, R\$ 300. You buy an iPhone 5 for R\$ 400, you know? [...] Therefore, I don't see it as being for the upper class. Unless you are talking about iPhones that cost more than R\$ 5,000, which are the new ones. Then, ok. I understand that those iPhones are only for the upper class because it is very difficult for someone to be able to pay \$R 5,000 for a phone. So, I believe that these devices are for the upper class. However, the iPhone itself is not" (Respondent 1).

For the participants who stated that individuals who own the iPhone belong to classes higher than the middle class, a second question was posed. They were asked if low-income individuals do not have iPhones and if the device is truly limited to upper classes. Many pointed out the issues of installment payments, saving money, and buying a phone, but two interesting situations emerged. The first was recognizing that they themselves are low-income individuals and have the device; therefore, the lower class does use the iPhone.

"No [it's not limited to the upper class], because I have an iPhone; my family also has an iPhone (laughs). I don't think so because we also see people who don't have much and have an iPhone. Sometimes, they sacrifice one thing or another to have an iPhone" (Respondent 2).



"If I consider myself lower class, then yes, you know? So it is my case. I don't know. I think that due to the opportunity that people are now having to buy at a better price because they are bringing it from abroad, they can have it. A lower class that gets paid a normal salary, depending on their duties and commitments, they are able to save to buy one or to split it into payments. So, one is able to have it "(Respondent 8).

"Yes, they use it but not because the person goes and buys an iPhone, spends their money like that to acquire an iPhone, but instead because they were gifted it or something, I imagine" (Respondent 16).

All three respondents indicated their own acquisition. Respondent 2 split his purchase into payments, and respondents 8 and 16 were gifted iPhones from relatives living in the United States. Therefore, they point out that the way the bottom of the pyramid is able to use an iPhone has to do with the way they managed to acquire the product, reflecting their own reality. The second situation is to note that there are several levels of low income, and in classes below that of the respondents, there are still people with fewer financial resources.

"Like I said, there are people who are not able to acquire one, but they still do; but, I think it depends on the level of low-income, you know?" (Respondent 17).

"When you don't have the money to buy it cash, you buy it in installments or buy a used one. You sell an old cell phone and save money to buy another. But there are [people at the bottom of the pyramid], [...] there is a certain segment that is able to have this access but not everyone" (Respondent 15).

This shows that these respondents consider themselves to be low-income but distance themselves from the poorest. The possession of goods establishes this differentiation between the poor and the "poor poor", as put by Castilho (2007). Because of this condition, some respondents do not consider themselves to be low-income because with effort, they are able to acquire certain products that for other individuals who experience greater difficulties or even hunger would not be possible. Thus, they believe that they are distinguishing themselves from the poorest and moving towards the world of the richer (BARROS, 2006).

“I think that people, it may seem like I'm cursing, people who have no means, who we call poor, they are aware that it is superfluous” (Respondent 11).

That is, the iPhone is a good for people who have the resources to acquire it. The “poor poor” people would not spend a large amount of money on this product. In the respondent's statement above, it is observed what is addressed by Levrini and Poletti (2016): the stigma against the low-income consumer is perceived independently of the social class of the stigmatizer, often being individuals at the bottom of the pyramid who are more judgmental of those with low income.

Another point noted during the discussion of this topic in the interviews was the imitation of elite consumption by the low-income class, a point discussed in trickle-down theory (SIMMEL, 1957). As a way to resemble people with higher purchasing power, the bottom of the pyramid seeks to consume the same products, as cited by respondent 22. In this case, they also believe the iPhone is a quality product because it is acquired by rich people.

“Sometimes, because a rich friend has it, then they think it is good and want to buy one because if the rich have it, it must be good. So, I'll have one too ”(Respondent 22).

Given all the respondents' statements, it can be noted that even though there is a dominant assumption that the poor do not have purchasing power (PRAHALAD, 2005), many are able to acquire an iPhone, especially a second-hand device. Barbosa (2004) points out that regardless of social position, an individual can choose who they want to be because income ends up functioning as a limiting barrier. This can be seen in the form of acquisition of the iPhone among the respondents in this study. Most are gifted it, buy it used from third parties or split the payment into many installments. In many cases where new iPhones are paid for in cash, the old one was sold or given as a down-payment, and the remainder was paid; thus, income is not a strong barrier to the consumption of this good, as argued by Bhattacharyya and Belk (2019). People with lower purchasing power find a way to obtain what they want.



INCLUSION IN GROUPS AND IN SOCIETY

Some respondents claim, using the third person, that many people are afraid of not belonging to certain groups. Thus, they use the iPhone and other brands recognized as expensive as a way of being included in certain groups and society.

“In groups, people consider the iPhone a good cell phone” (Respondent 2).

“Maybe it's a way of like 'look, if you all have an iPhone, I also have one. So, I can better integrate into your group'. [...] Yes, maybe like 'cool. You can hang out with us and all that’” (Respondent 4).

Respondent 2 discusses the value given to the iPhone compared to other smartphones in the groups he frequents. In turn, respondent 4 points to the need to show that he has an iPhone to be accepted and participate in a particular environment, being “one of us”, as put by Goffman (1951). The third-person technique enabled this finding because the conviction with which this respondent answered the question, it is possible that it is an experience that may have happened to him or that he witnessed closely. Respondent 4 also states that sometimes the issue of showing his iPhone is not always because he wants to show it off but because he feels the need to. One of the justifications for this need is the fear of being seen as an inferior person, which is a point of concern for low-income people.

“Maybe I don't want to show it off on purpose, but [...] you know when sometimes you are influenced by the environment? [...] suppose, I have to have an iPhone to fit in that environment because everyone has one, and if I don't have one, everyone starts to look at me as inferior (Respondent 4).

During the study, cases were found of people who had been influenced to get an iPhone because they saw that almost the entire school class or even the entire school had one. Another example that shows the fear of not fitting in is mentioned by respondent 8, who relates his own case in



which, before starting a private preparatory course for university entrance examination, was concerned with the environment he would be in.

“Maybe I could be judged for being there because I don't have an iPhone. 'What do you mean, you're here and you don't have an iPhone? What cell phone do you have?' (Respondent 8).

This issue of feeling pressure from an environment is indicated by respondents as being even greater in younger people, such as adolescents. They suffer more when rejected by the groups they want to belong to and end up insisting with parents that they need an iPhone, as observed in statements by respondents 4 and 6.

“Like it or not, when the person is younger... I felt that about my sister when she was much younger, that sometimes she was very influenced by social aspects [...] by seeing everyone having it, wanting to have it too, to feel at least part of that environment. Because for example, those who are more mature don't have this problem. You learn from life that if this group doesn't accept you, there are others, [...] but when the person, for example, is young, especially for those who are 14 years old, who are in adolescence, they want to be accepted by society more. And sometimes they're more influenced to have more expensive things because they want to enter that environment” (Respondent 4).

“In her [the sister's] social circle of teenagers, she is 17 years old, it is very important. So, her argument to my mother was 'mom, everyone has an iPhone and I don't'. This is a matter of ascension even for them (Respondent 6).

In addition to acquiring an iPhone to be able to belong to certain groups of friends, respondent 4 states that the iPhone helps attract partners, as the device is something that draws attention and indicates better financial conditions.

“Let's suppose, I want to win over a person, then I'll show that I have an iPhone to show that I have greater purchasing power” (Respondent 4).

Respondent 4, who spoke a lot about the issue of inclusion, belonging to groups and winning over a partner, shows his indignation at not being able to be who he wants to be.



“There is no way. As much as we try, sometimes, try to maintain our personal standard, it is very complicated to see an entire society doing one thing and you being the only one different from that. The person has to go through an enormous acceptance process. Also, I believe that it doesn't matter whether it is the iPhone or anything else; if there is a large group that has the same accessory that is sometimes expensive, much more expensive than the person is able to afford, they will end up being influenced into having to have it, especially, sometimes, for you to be accepted” (Respondent 4).

This respondent provides a reflection that, as much as they do not want to, low-income individuals end up feeling obliged to make certain purchases to be accepted into society. According to the interviewee, being different from what you often witness is frustrating, and the only way out is consumption or a difficult process of acceptance, the second being even more painful than the first. Therefore, as a way to be accepted and minimize suffering from social issues, purchasing an iPhone seems to be the best option, according to the findings of Jacomino, Biggi and Pépece (2018), whose study results identified the purchase of an iPhone as a means of integrating into a social group.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article aimed to understand the relationship between the iPhone brand and upper-class identity and how it is used as a means of group inclusion by individuals at the base of the class pyramid and, as specific objectives, (i) to identify how the choice, acquisition and purchase influences for the iPhone took place, (ii) to determine which sacrifices are made for the acquisition to occur; (iii) describe how individuals at the bottom of the pyramid relate the iPhone smartphone to social classes and; (iv) establish how the iPhone is used as a means of group inclusion.

In most cases, the choice of an iPhone was due to the influence of other people, such as family members, friends or even the media. The acquisition was made by purchasing a used device from third parties, a new device in many installment payments or a new or used device gifted by parents living



abroad. The purchase of an iPhone was often made by selling the old one, paying only the difference.

It was observed that low-income individuals often make sacrifices, failing to spend on more basic necessities, such as food, housing and security, to instead purchase an iPhone. In addition, there were cases in which the respondents sold or exchanged goods to buy an iPhone. However, despite all the sacrifices made, the benefits that the iPhone brings to people remain in the foreground.

According to the opinion of most of the respondents, the social classes that own iPhones are the middle and upper classes due to the high price of the device, being consumed by people with higher purchasing power. However, when asked about the lower class, the majority states that these individuals can also have an iPhone through greater effort, making more sacrifices than other people in higher classes.

The respondents believe that they are distinguishing themselves from poorer people and moving towards the world of those who have greater purchasing power because they are iPhone users like those individuals, a point discussed in the trickle-down theory that addresses the imitation of elite consumption by the low-income class. However, the motivations for owning an iPhone go far beyond the simple desire to display that one has a better financial condition and belongs to a higher class. There are deeper factors behind it, such as the fear of discrimination, prejudice and judgment of other people. All respondents stated that low-income individuals are afraid of appearing poor, as this can have several negative consequences. Thus, they feel the need to find solutions so that they are not perceived as such. Some respondents do not consider themselves to be low-income, and poverty is something distant, while others recognize themselves as being low-income but always remember that there are people with fewer resources, a feeling of “there are people poorer than me”. The difference they see is mainly in the possession of goods, such as an iPhone, thus distancing themselves from the



poorest, because with effort, they can acquire certain products that for other individuals who are experiencing difficulties or even hunger would not be possible. Therefore, apparently, stronger than coming closer to the rich is the desire to distance oneself from the poor poor, creating an intraclass differentiation and escaping the social problems that those people face.

As it is a subject that involves ego issues, the main limitation of the study was to extract information about the status and symbolic consumption of individuals, who tend to close themselves, making it difficult to obtain deeper answers about the real motivations of consumption. However, the projective technique of the third person collaborated, making the interviewees able to project themselves on other people or, after talking about third parties, admitting that they also did, felt or acted in a certain way. As with any qualitative research that chooses not to use software for analysis, the practice of manually transcribing and analyzing all interviews is hard work and requires researchers' time. However, it brings a great wealth of contact with the information at the time of the interview, the transcription and, shortly afterwards, the analysis, generating a broader and richer understanding of the topic in question.

The insertion in groups is one of the reasons, even if unconscious, for the purchase of the smartphone from Apple. The issue of acceptance is something that weighs on low-income individuals, which look for ways to achieve respect and acceptance. Some respondents pointed out that younger people are more influenced by the medium to acquire the Apple smartphone seeking for acceptance and status. Thus, as a suggestion for future research, a study involving the search for status and insertion in groups through the iPhone by Brazilian adolescents is recommended. Another suggestion emerges from the trickle-down theory. In it, Simmel (1957) points out that the low income individuals imitate the consumption of the elite and, with this imitation, there is a move on the part of these high-income people as a way to differentiate themselves from the low-income individuals who



perform the imitation. Thus, a survey is suggested in order to understand if and how the elite tries to move away from the low income individuals that also own an iPhone. Would the consumption of very high-priced launches be an escape strategy? Another interesting issue is that of differentiation within the same social class, that is, for bottom of the pyramid people the acquisition of goods can be used to differentiate themselves and show superiority to close individuals in the same social circle.

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