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# Classifying and classified: An interpretive study of the consumption of cruises by the “new” Brazilian middle class

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### ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to make a contribution in addressing a theoretical gap related to how emerging middle class consumers utilize consumption as a classificatory practice. We adopted an interpretive approach and used the method of participant observation combined with in-depth interviews. Drawing from Bourdieu and Veblen, two main categories were used to explain the use of cruises as a means of classification: distinction and conspicuous consumption. It was found in addition to consumers classifying themselves in relation to others, they classify the time spent, space, artifacts, and the very experience of the cruise itself. The cruise simulates, for a short period of time, the life of the “leisure class,” with its attendant conspicuous consumption and waste.

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## 1. Introduction

The social ascent of a significant mass of individuals toward the middle class in emerging markets has changed the face of consumption (Prahalad & Hammond, 2002). However, the phenomenon has, as yet, not received enough attention from researchers, who either focus their interest on consumption at the lower strata of the social pyramid, or persist in studying affluent consumers (Barros & Rocha, 2009). Moreover, as pointed out by Üstüner and Holt (2010, p. 37), the current view of how consumers consume is based on a more universal perspective, rooted in empirical studies developed in the United States and Western Europe. These studies suffer from a “crucial limitation” for failing to recognize that the consumption patterns in emerging countries may differ from those of developed countries.

Emerging consumers are faced with two different and often conflicting influences on their consumption choices. On the one side, following Bourdieu (1984), it can be assumed that the consumption by social actors who move from one class to another has been shaped by the preferences and practices of their original

social group. Emerging consumers are therefore expected to have developed their taste during their socialization processes, which is strongly influenced by their family and peers. Taste is defined here, following Bourdieu (1984, p. 173), as “the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices”. On the other side, as individuals ascend in the social structure, they also seek to emulate the lifestyle of their new peers. In this sense, Brazilian urban anthropologist Velho (2013, p. 93) observed that “the experience of social mobility, ascent or descent, introduces significant variables in the existential experience, whether for people from the working class or middle class”, thereby creating conditions distinct from the “situation of stability or permanence.” This new situation of liminality (Van Gennep, 1908/1978; Turner, 1966), or threshold, in consumption has been rarely studied, reinforcing the need for research that looks at status consumption from the perspective of social mobility.

Our study addresses this research gap, by contributing to a better understanding of how emerging consumers – those still in transition from one class to another – use consumption as a classificatory practice. In fact, these consumers may have accomplished the transition from poverty to the middle class in economic terms, either permanently or temporarily, but they are still in the process of enacting their new social status. We sought specifically to understand the issue of status consumption associated to the experience of social mobility from the

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perspectives of two different groups of actors: the “new” middle-class consumers and those belonging to the traditional middle class.

We chose the consumption of leisure cruises as the locus of our study, since this is a form of consumption that appears only after one has reached a certain level of disposable income. This type of consumption markedly differs from the simple increase of consumption of, or switch to, more expensive brands—also characteristic of the phenomenon examined. In fact, the consumption of cruises in Brazil has increased significantly in recent years, due in large part to this “new” middle class (Neri, 2010). This change parallels similar developments in other countries in the early 1900s. In Britain, for instance, the development of mass tourism was the result of changing conditions that gave the working class access to new types of consumption that were until then a privilege of the wealthy. However, although the very capacity to travel no longer served as an element of distinction, other expressions of distinction were used by different classes of travelers (Urry, 2001).

The study was informed by the following research questions: *How do emerging consumers use the consumption of sea cruises as a classification practice?* and *How do consumers from the traditional and the “new” middle class perceive the experience of sharing the same social space?* In order to answer these questions we adopted an interpretive approach, in which what is at stake is the symbolic construction of reality – simultaneously subjective and collective – by those sharing the experience.

## 2. Review of the literature: Consumption as classification

Positional consumption, or status consumption – the use of consumption to express one’s social standing – is a well-accepted concept in the social sciences. The bases for the study of positional and ostentatious consumption were established by Veblen (1899/1965) in his *Theory of the Leisure Class*. Until Modern times, leisure was the most visible manifestation of one’s high social standing. The leisure class, as envisaged by Veblen, comprised mainly noblemen and priests, whose activities were temporary, such as war, religion, and sports. The “gentlemen of leisure” used conspicuous consumption as “a means of reputability”. The amount and the excellence of the goods consumed serve as “evidence of wealth,” while their lack “becomes the mark of inferiority and demerit.” But it is not enough to be able to consume; it is also required to know “how to consume [...] in a seemly manner” (Veblen, 2000, p. 190–191). Reputability comes therefore not solely from the accumulation of wealth, but also from a life of leisure and from the conspicuous consumption of goods, both marked by waste: on one side, leisure, the “waste of time and effort;” on the other, conspicuous consumption, the “waste of goods” (, p. 196). The urban middle classes tried to emulate, to the extent possible, conspicuous leisure and consumption. Veblen (2000, p. 194) observes that among the lower middle-class families at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century it was the function of the wife to perform conspicuous leisure and consumption “for the good name of the household and its master”. Since then, although the ideology of work has increasingly pervaded all social classes, conspicuous consumption remains the ultimate means of displaying power and prestige in Western societies.

Bourdieu’s (1984) influential work on distinction establishes a bridge between the role of wealth and an individual’s social and cultural assets. Taste differentiates and locates individuals in established social classifications and is, therefore, a “marker of class”. Social practices (including social manners, aesthetic preferences, use of grammar, clothing, home decor, and so on) express taste: they are discernable, distinctive and reproducible. Access to, choice of, and form of using goods reflect the economic,

social and cultural capital of the individual. Cultural capital, in particular, is relevant to understand consumption, because it provides a roadmap to how to select, use, and consume products. Judgment of taste and its attendant practices although on the one hand are affected by an individual’s upbringing – formalized and institutionalized – on the other hand are also subject to the influence of friends, acquaintances, and neighbors, throughout the individual’s social trajectory. Formal education plays a role, but it alone does not explain differences in taste, especially when dealing with certain categories of goods that are not part of the educational process:

The effect of mode of acquisition is most marked in the ordinary choices of everyday existence, such as furniture, clothing or cooking, which are particularly revealing of deep-rooted and long-standing dispositions because, lying outside the scope of the educational system, they have to be confronted, as it were, by naked taste, without any explicit prescription or proscription [...] (, p. 77)

The process is dynamic; the symbolic meanings attributed to consumer goods and the beacons of distinction between groups are subject to an ongoing construction and reconstruction. Nonetheless, access to consumption, manner of consuming, and the relations established between different social groups can reveal aspects of distinction inherent to the classification that consumers establish among themselves.

The idea of consuming as a classificatory system, both in terms of representations and in the concrete practices of social actors, has been further developed in the field of social anthropology by Douglas and Isherwood (1979). Goods are used by consumers with the purpose of classification, for inclusion and for exclusion: “Goods are neutral, their uses are social; they can be used as fences or bridges” (p. 12). However, individual goods are not relevant to this purpose; rather, it is the flow of goods that reveals how classification systems are developed and established. Consumption as a system and as a practice of classification is thus used by consumers to articulate similarities and differences between goods and social identities (Rocha, 1985, 2006).

The symbolic use of consumption as classification first appeared in the consumer behavior literature in the second half of the 1950s. Martineau (1958) notes that consumption is an important element in defining social class, and is used by consumers to indicate their social status. Levy (1959, 1981) also draws attention to the symbolic character of goods and to the various “rationales” that guide their choice by consumers.

However, it was only with the emergence of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) that the symbolic meaning of goods gained serious consideration in the marketing discipline. The name CCT was proposed by Arnould and Thompson (2005, p. 868) to designate “a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings.” This new “family of theoretical perspectives” arose as an alternative to the mainstream consumer behavior research, based on a cognitive and experimental tradition, and grounded in quantitative methods.

Holt (1995) identifies three meanings associated with consumption in the CCT literature: consuming as experience, consuming as integration, and consuming as classification. Meanings associated with products are decoded and influence the selection of goods to be consumed (Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982; McCracken, 1986). Thus, the same products that serve physical and biological needs are used to confer status, build identity, and establish boundaries between groups and people in their social relationships (Addis & Holbrook, 2001). Arsel and Bean’s (2013, p. 902) study confirms that the “practice of taste” is not only influenced by social class but also by consumers’

engagement “with socio-cultural regimes embedded in these class structures.”

Few empirical studies, to our knowledge, have looked specifically at status consumption by middle class consumers in emerging markets. Two important exceptions are the works of Üstüner and Holt (2010) and Üstüner and Thompson (2012) in Turkey. The first study compares status consumption strategies of upper middle-class women of high and low cultural capital; the second looks at status games in service encounters between affluent female customers and lower middle-class service workers. Both studies examined specifically, although from the perspective of different groups of actors, the use of symbolic capital by different class factions.

### 3. Methodology

This study used participant observation and in-depth interviewing to understand how consumers from different middle class factions use maritime cruises symbolically as a means of classification. Ethnographic methods are designed to capture the perspective of “the other” and are an integral part of a long research tradition in anthropology inaugurated by Malinowski’s (1922/1976) *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. The method allows a deeper understanding of a particular social phenomenon, in the context in which it occurs and from the perspective of those who participate in the phenomenon (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). As noted by Geertz (1973, p. 5), “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,” around which he constructs his understanding of the world, which is learned and shared by the group to which he/she belongs. Participant observation can be described therefore as a temporary immersion in the life of a specific social group in order to try to apprehend the experience from the perspective of the participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). The method allows an understanding of the “native point of view”, from a “microscopic” perspective (Geertz, 1973).

Participant observation was conducted on two “all-inclusive” cruises, which are preferred by emerging consumers because they incur no extra expenses. In addition, payment can be made in monthly installments, which is also attractive to consumers of lower purchasing power. Although there are differences in prices depending on the type of cabin, all of the services provided on the cruise can be enjoyed by any traveler.

The participant observer can adopt an overt or covert approach during fieldwork (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). In the present study, the participant observation in the first cruise was overt; and in the second, covert. Data collection included the systematic recording of observations in field notes; casual conversations with 25 cruise participants during the first cruise; 7 in-depth interviews with participants two months after the cruise; 31 formal interviews during the second cruise, in addition to photographing and videotaping. The in-depth interviews after the first cruise lasted from one hour to an hour-and-a-half, and formal interviews during the second cruise took from ten minutes to half an hour; these

interviews were recorded and transcribed. The names used are fictitious. One of the researchers acted as a participant observer in the two cruises and conducted the interviews after the first cruise. The three authors were involved in the conceptual and analytical stages of the project.

Table 1 presents informants demographics by gender and class. Since it seemed inappropriate to ask for the informants’ income level, the classification by social class was based on occupation and neighborhood in which the informant lived, in addition to other clues that appeared during the informal or formal interviews. For example, several informants indicated how much of a monetary sacrifice was for them to buy a cruise, and that they still had to pay the installments for several months; others referred to their own lack of knowledge of “proper manners”; others mentioned that only now they had extra money to spend in this type of activity, etc. In addition, the “traditional” middle class passengers were quite easy to identify, since the participant observer also belonged to this group. Therefore, the participant observer utilized clues such as ways of dressing and behaving, education and language to pre-classify the passengers as members of the “traditional” or the “new” middle class. Later, with the help of transcripts, the three researchers came to a final classification of all the informants. There was no agreement only on one informant; further analysis led to consensus.

Data analysis consisted of: (i) development of a set of categories and initial themes; (ii) identification in the interview transcripts and field notes of excerpts corresponding to those categories; (iii) identification of new categories and themes that emerged from new fieldwork; (iv) regrouping of categories and themes; (v) further analysis of the transcripts for allocation of excerpts to the categories and themes; (vi) constant back and forth – “systematic combining” (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) – between theory and data.

### 4. Results

Two main categories were used to explain the cruise according to the “consuming-as-classification” metaphor (Holt, 1995): Bourdieu’s concept of distinction and Veblen’s concept of conspicuous consumption. These two categories were then divided into sub-categories that emerged from the data.

#### 4.1. Distinction

Classification is an ongoing process on the cruise, by which consumers symbolically define relationships between groups and between groups and objects. They classify themselves in relation to others, defining their own location in the social space of the cruise. They classify time, spaces, and artifacts; and they classify the very experience of the cruise itself. In fact, cruisers produce their own social pyramid, composed of three strata: traditional middle class (TMC), high “new” middle class (HNMC), and low “new” middle class (LNMC). The “upper class” and the “working class” are not perceived as part of the cruise. Fig. 1 depicts the social pyramid of the cruise according to participants.

**Table 1**  
Informants demographics.

Fieldwork activity	Total	Gender		Classification by social class	
		Female	Male	Traditional middle class (TMC)	“New” middle class (NMC)
Cruise 1 (informal interviews)	25	18	7	5	20
In-depth interviews after cruise 1*	7	7	–	1	6
Cruise 2 (formal interviews)	31	19	12	8	23
Total	56	37	19	13	43

\* Conducted with informants of the first cruise.

In addition, the process of classifying and being classified occurs simultaneously from various perspectives: (i) traditional middle-class passengers in relation to “new” middle-class passengers; (ii) “new” middle-class passengers, who demarcated differences among themselves; and (iii) travelers who had previously been on a cruise vis-à-vis those who had not.

On both cruises there were consumers who belonged to the traditional middle class as well as consumers from the “new” middle class. Cruise participants were asked to describe the characteristics of the people in the cruise. As they described the social space of the cruise, they also offered their perception of their own standing in this micro universe. The testimonials below, excerpted from the interviews, provide some indications as to how consumption encounters between TMCs and NMCs tend to manifest.

Consumers who consider themselves members of the “traditional” middle class show reservations in relation to consumers who, by their appearance and behavior, seem to belong to (or to hail from) a social stratum lower than theirs. Tina, a student, was on her first cruise; even so, she compared it to an idealized cruise, which might have been “more expensive” and more exclusive: “Going on a cruise is glamorous. At least it used to be, back in the days when it was still expensive. However, I think a vestige of that cruise glamour still remains.” She ranks the participants with whom she shares the experience:

Every type of person, from all walks of life. There are people with different values; there are people of different ages. At least on our cruise, there are basically all social classes. At least down to class C, this new class C. I think that below class C there isn't anyone who can afford a cruise—as affordable as it may be. I believe there's very few class A, too. So you can more or less see the profile of each class. Class A is pretty much a class that's not too fond of mixing: they prefer things that are more exclusive. Class B on the other hand is a class that has a certain amount of buying power and also likes to take a variety of trips, regardless of who they are. Indeed, Class B is a class that is more carefree in relation to other people. And Class C consists of people enjoying their upward mobility to find out about stuff they've never seen before, although they have simpler tastes and less sophisticated behavior. (Tina, TMC)

The prejudice is present, but sometimes disguised. Veronica is part of the traditional middle class, which must now share consuming environments with the “new” middle class. As she describes it, the travelers are from “all classes, all races,” who, in the past, would not be on the ship: “You see, back in the day, cruises were for the rich only. Today people can save up their money and travel ... So these days anybody can go on a cruise.” Her

discourse conveys discomfort with the behavior of these new consumers:

I went on a cruise at a great time because it was Carnival. It was wonderful; but when we arrived in Santos, the cruise became a mess. A real mess—because of the people getting on board. [...] In the old days, people were so elegant. Regardless of appearances, they dressed better. Let's put it this way: the level of propriety was much higher. And now we see ... And talking to people ... Taking a cruise has become popular. That's great. I really don't think that's bad. I think it's good. [...] But these days, people aren't quite getting it. I don't know. We went into that bar over there, and a young man was sitting, you know, completely barefoot. They act like this is their home. (Veronica, TMC)

A TMC woman traveling with her husband attests to her status, while taking her own social level as a parameter of classification:

This is complicated... The mix is really too much. I recognize the differences, perhaps due to my own social level. It's a question of how one comports oneself, how one dresses. It's kind of complicated for us to be talking about these things. Because there are good people everywhere—wonderful people, in fact. But the friendships only last as long as the cruise. Cruise friendships: they don't survive. (Vani, TMC)

Interestingly, Üstüner and Thompson (2012) found a similar attitude among Turkish upper-class women in their long-term relationships with lower-class service workers in a hair salon. In the cruise, as in the salon experience, upper-middle class members would not consider to extend a relationship beyond the borders of the specific social space in which the relationship was engendered. These ties are not expected to last; they are temporary. The interpersonal communication established among people of different social backgrounds cannot be carried to the “real world”, in which hierarchy separates these class factions.

As proposed by Bourdieu, taste acts as a social marker. An experienced passenger, who has already participated in several cruises, demarcates the class differences among travelers from clues such as social behavior and content of conversations:

Maybe it's social class. The other cruises had people of higher social class. I think they are – I don't know, different – the level is a little higher. But also it's no big deal—people here are nice. Ah, their social behavior is quite different. Not only ... how can I say ... the way people comport themselves in restaurants, the conversations you hear—it's different. You can tell the difference. (Flavia, TMC)

Another frequent cruise-goer describes an idealized past when cruise consumption could be equated to exclusivity, something which may have disappeared:

As for me, the first time I went on a cruise, there weren't so many people; it was more exclusive. And now it's not. Now everyone is going on a cruise. This word-of-mouth thing: “Oh, I'm going on a cruise.” Not that I find it's wrong; I think it's great. But I think that, well, that ... I don't know. I think it's changed a lot. The first time, people got more dressed up; they were more elegant. But things have gone downhill. On my second cruise, I already found people, well, so sloppy ... and now it's even worse. Things have gone downhill, downhill a lot. [...] People of various levels, of all ages. So what is polite for one person, may not be in keeping with another; and what comes naturally to so-and-so might seem rude to someone else, do you see? You can't really say a lot, but there are things ... Yesterday, for example, I was in line to board the ship. And then people arrived and cut in line in front of everyone who had been waiting there for hours. I

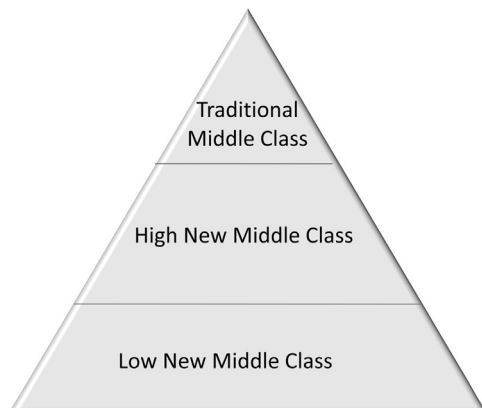


Fig. 1. Classification of people on the cruise.

got the impression . . . that they were just plain rude. (Madalena, TMC)

Even among the consumers that belong to the “new” middle class, differences and classifications will manifest, as consumers engage in endless efforts to classify one another. References to social condition are sometimes derogatory, even when the informants include themselves in a given category:

I heard a guy say “this here’s a jumble. It looks like they ran a sale in the *favela*”. Too many slumdogs and not enough high society. (Claudia, HNMC)

On the first night, things started out with formalities (“good evening,” “excuse me”), but when I started to discover the neighborhood where people lived, I thought: “They’re all from the slums.” (Lucio, LNMC)

In the same social space in which the distinction manifests, the similar looks unusual, as one passenger observes, regarding her table companions:

The worst part is that we live near each other in the same neighborhood. In fact, we live in the same street. The difference is, then, where in the street each one lives; what divides our street is the railway station built in the middle of it. [. . .] But you always think “Oh, you’ll never run into people who live close by.” You do not expect this kind of person among those you’re going to encounter. (Leda, LNMC)

Andrea (LNMC) takes the price of the ticket as a proxy to classify the cruise participants in terms of social class. For her, “Class-A people would patronize cruises of a different standard.” Another “new” middle class consumer notes that in his “dream cruise, the population would be classier; these days, it’s quite a mix; anyone can afford to take a cruise.” He describes the cruise participants thusly:

You have the Class A folks, who patronize the casino and spend at the Casino; and there’s the other folks who come along, look on, and have just as much fun. Even the behavior of the players is different. The people who are already familiar, who have more experience—they already know what to do. In the restaurant too. In the restaurant there were people who didn’t know what to ask for, embarrassed even to ask. (James, HNMC)

The distinctions established among the “new” middle-class consumers themselves often take as a point of reference a higher class. Two women, both members of the “new” middle class, classify other participants as belonging to a lower stratum than theirs – not necessarily based on income – but above all by “culture” (or cultural capital):

There are people who you would classify as not belonging to the high class. They may even have money; but they have no sense of propriety, no culture. By propriety I’m referring to culture. You see people who can afford to take a cruise every week, and then there are the people who worked the entire year – could hardly afford it – but who are middle-class like me, who have to plan. [. . .] And all these people are mixed together. (Paula, HNMC)

I think some people aren’t very well mannered. I think they are people who are starting to travel now, who are not prepared, and don’t know how to do it. [. . .] The Class-C folks have just begun to come to cruises; they’ve increased. There was this boom, and that’s what we see happening. Their financial power has increased, but their level of propriety is still lacking. (Claudia, HNMC)

One can also find rationales to differentiate those perceived as positioned below on the social scale:

We can tell who the lower class people are by their more humble positioning. Such people feel a bit little subdued, as if, normally, they experienced discrimination in their day to day life. You can also see wealthier people. From the way they carry themselves, their comportment. We don’t favor anyone. But we can tell; no question about it. (Francisco, HNMC)

Other consumers of the “new” middle class, in contrast, do focus their attention on those who appear more affluent. The cruise is “very good because there are people with standing, people who know how conduct themselves in any environment” (Joana, LNMC); the “cruisegoers are quite refined” and “very polite” (Mariana, LNMC); and the cruise is “well patronized” by “well-mannered people, who can converse and interact” (Gustavo, LNMC). He uses the expression “born into it,” that is, such manners and customs are acquired through the family and, supposedly, cannot be learned later in life. Such explanation fits Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital.

The classification also served as a demarcation, from the participant’s perspective, of who should not be on the cruise. For example, a passenger observes that “a cruise is not something that the working class can afford” (Sonia, LNMC), while another notes the absence of “Class-A” passengers:

People on board are middle-class. Folks who aren’t rich, who don’t live in a wealthy neighborhood, but don’t live in a slum, either. It’s easy to see by the way people talk: if the person lives in the slum, they have bad grammar, they use slang. [. . .] You get people, well, stuffing themselves with food, spending too much time at the pool, sunbathing. A Class-A person wouldn’t do that . . . There are things you notice – like behavior, speech, dress, amount of food a person puts on the plate, that are signs of class. Because piles of pizza, piles of food – for Class A folks, you wouldn’t get that; they wouldn’t stuff themselves with pizza. (Monica, HNMC)

Because the cruise package is “all-inclusive,” one can assume right away that it is a “middle class” affair:

This is a middle-class cruise. Folks who aren’t that well off—they are worried about whether everything is included or not. And this here is an all-inclusive cruise. Unless you have so much money you don’t have to worry—which is not my case. And I believe that it’s not the case for most people here, because if it were, I think that . . . It’s not bad. It’s great. I’m loving it; but there are cruises with a higher level. (Priscilla, LNMC)

Fig. 2 lists some of the clues used by each middle class faction to recognize and classify the other passengers. Interestingly, TMCs tended to define NMCs in opposition to what they claim to be the proper manner of dressing, eating, speaking, or consuming food. This is often done using derogatory terms. NMCs, instead, define TMCs in a positive way, as people that have something they lack. At stake, in both cases, are the ways by which the *habitus* is manifested.

Having taken a cruise before also conferred distinction in relation to those passengers who had never had this experience. Paula (HNMC), a seasoned cruisegoer, snubbed “Captain’s Night,” an event considered the highpoint by most emerging consumers. And contrary to what was perceived by consumers of the “new” middle class as one of the highlights of the consumption experience, a TMC passenger criticized the service on the cruise:

The service is terrible. You wait two hours to get service. Because everything is “included,” it’s really hard to get service. Now, as for the other cruises I went on, I can’t complain. The

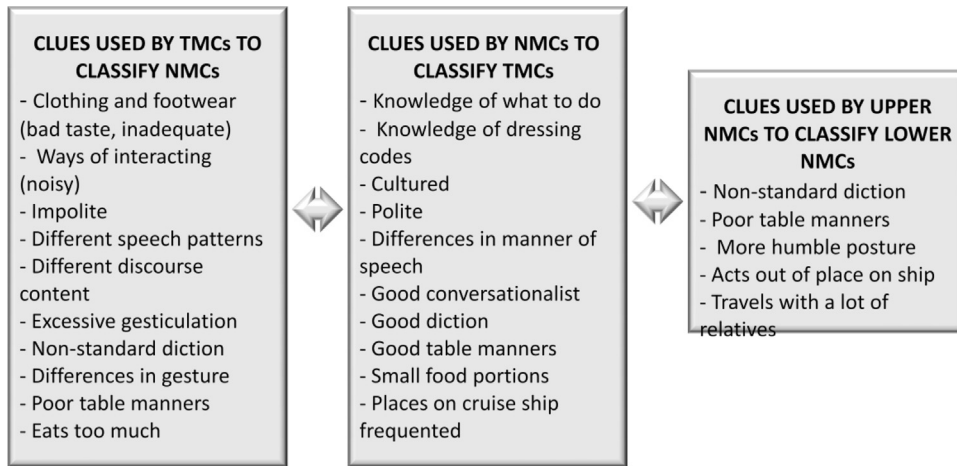


Fig. 2. Examples of social markers used by participants.

ships were more luxurious, they had more employees, the people were more like . . . [ . . . ] Another issue is the food. So, in order to eat, you have to line up, even in the restaurants. I've never seen such a thing. It's my sixth cruise. But this one I wouldn't recommend. All the others I would recommend. (Flavia, TMC)

The passengers in the “new” middle class who had been on a previous cruise, more than the traditional middle class passengers, would use the first cruise to distinguish themselves from the others: a “veteran” was someone who had unique knowledge obtained by experience: “It's really like that – the guy who's never sailed before doesn't know how to behave. Now as for us – who are more accustomed . . .” (Maria, LNMC)

Another passenger was on her third cruise, but still harbors a “little dream” on cruise voyages:

My dream is a veranda stateroom. Sitting there on the veranda enjoying the sea view. That's something I'm going to do, God willing. At night, you can, instead of mixing with people, go out to your own little varanda . . . That's what a varanda is for. [ . . . ] This one here is a bit shabby. Nothing like the Advantage (fictional name of a ship), the biggest one, I think . . . That's something I'm going to do, God willing. (Janaina, LNMC)

The difference manifests even among those who, although on their first cruise, embarked on a previous port: “You can see in people's eyes that they are coming on a ship for the first time. You see people doing things incorrectly” (Edson, LNMC). It's important, then, to show the others how to handle what's happening on the ship—from the physical space to the daily activities. Any previous knowledge of the ship can thus be used as a social marker, to show more knowledge than the newbie.

#### 4.1.1. Classification of time, places and artifacts

The axis of the temporal classification of the informants articulates around two dichotomous categories: “daytime” and “nighttime.” Daytime refers to the “popular,” “normal,” and “common.” Nighttime is the purview of refined “elegance,” “class,” and “formal dining.” The classification of the two spaces follows the same dichotomous logic: spaces that are “noble” and “common.” The à la carte restaurant is “upscale,” with “more elaborate” dishes; whereas the self service restaurant communicates “simplicity,” of the “rice-with-egg-and-steak” type. The artifacts (food, amenities) are classified too. The food, for example,

if “upscale,” is served in “precious little” portions, “much smaller than the plate” because the wealthy “eat like a bird.” Another classification, also built around opposites, is that of the “restaurant” or “processed” food, in contrast with “homestyle” food, with its familiar and authentic flavors. Beverages are classified thusly: canned and draught beer are common, whereas hot beverages, mixed drinks, champagne, and whiskey are elegant. Thus, the first belong more to the daytime environment, the latter the nighttime. Finally, the cruise experience itself is the subject of classification, particularly among travelers belonging to the traditional middle class and among those who have already been on a different cruise: There is an opposition between “this cruise” (referred to sometimes pejoratively as “shabby,” “downmarket”), and the “other cruise” (which can be either some cruise in fact experienced or merely idealized), whose symbolic properties classify it as “elite,” “fancy,” “upscale.”

Table 2 presents examples of terms used by consumers to sort the time, people, space, the artifacts, and the experience.

#### 4.2. Conspicuous consumption

The cruise emulates, for a short period, the life of the “leisure class,” as conceived of by Veblen, with its conspicuous consumption and waste.

One of the most important aspects of the experience of consumption reported by informants is abundance. The symbolic value of abundance stems from the fact it is not something that emerging consumers experience in their daily lives. The abundance on the ship carries a connotation of wealth and luxury. The abundance of food and drink also reinforces the party mood. The limit of consumption in this environment is demarcated and controlled by the participant. Participants are impressed: “Guys, I'm seeing the drinks really flowing; a lot of food . . . awesome!” (James, HNMC). Another passenger, who was traveling with his wife, Joana, remarked: “So much pampering. There's so much food: you can eat all day if you want. Eat, Joana, eat. . .” (Adilson, LNMC). This is why one of the memories of a participant interviewed after the cruise refers to “eating all day,” “from the time I woke up until bedtime,” such that “you never get hungry or thirsty” (Leda, LNMC).

Refinement can be in opposition to the bounty in the cruise experience. The “small” portions served in the restaurant, considered “upscale” by the participants, is noticed and remarked in the interviews. A low “new” middle-class passenger in the cruise hierarchy thought the servings were too small:

**Table 2**  
Examples of terms used to classify.

What	“Normal” and “poor”	“New” and “wealthy”
Classification of time		
Time	Daytime	Nighttime
Classification of people		
People	“Upwardly mobile,” “economizes,” “impropriety,” “slumdog,” “humble,” “shy,” “unprepared”	“Buying power,” “polite,” “wealthy,” “high class,” “upscale,” “propriety,” “good upbringing,” “classy,” “born into it”
Classification of space		
Restaurant	“Popular,” “normal,” “common,” “very”	“Buying power,” “polite,” “wealthy,” “high class,” “upscale,” “propriety,” “good upbringing,” “classy,” “born into it”
Classification of artifacts		
Food	“Every day,” “common names,” “simple,” “rice with egg and steak,” “chicken soup”	“Weird,” “distinguished,” “diplomatic,” “decorated,” “refined,” “with different names,” “elaborate,” shrimp, lobster, crayfish, salmon, duck, brown gravy, consommé
Beverages	Canned beer, draft beer	Hot beverages, mixed drinks, champagne, whiskey
Apparel	“Basic outfit,” “casual outfit,” “relaxed,” “thrown together,” “sloppy,” “Bermuda shorts,” “sandals”	“Suitable outfit,” “elegant,” “more formal,” “line,” “impeccable,” “well turned out,” “formal,” “upscale,” “high heels,” “makeup,” “long,” “shine”
Classification of the experience		
Cruise	“Shabby,” “middle class,” “affordable,” “downmarket”	“Another class entirely,” “another level,” “elite,” “fancy,” “upscale”

Look, about the real restaurant, I didn't enjoy it much. It was a really haughty. Really. But I went to the restaurant for appearances. Then I would leave the fancy restaurant and would go straight down to the self-service. Get it? The posh don't eat much. We don't get much to eat upstairs, so then we have to go down and eat more. (Mariana, LNMC)

Waste is something that on the cruise, the participants are aware of at all times, for example, significant amounts of food and drink being thrown away or attractions for a scant number of participants. This is so especially when, although the ship is docked, the food is still provided. The issue of food waste is criticized:

You thought you were getting one kind of dish but then you got served something other than expected, and it wasn't tasty. And it sucks if you don't give it a fair try and you send the dish back, without ever having given it a chance because it was unappealing. Because the food just won't go down; it's something you would not even digest if you knew what it really was. It's like you ordered it for the sake of it, just so you can leave it. That's how I see it. Because food is a sacred thing. (Paula, HNMC)

The conflicting values regarding food are deeply ingrained in one's upbringing and is one of the most powerful differentiators between classes. On one side, TMCs look at food as pleasurable, but requiring self-restrain. On the other side, NMCs see food as materially desirable for its own qualities of nourishment and strength, as noted by Bourdieu (1984).

The service – like the abundance and waste – points to the wealth and life of the “leisure class.” For many emerging consumers, the fact of being waited upon is a novelty given that they are from an environment in which it is often they who are serving others. Most informants belonging to the “new” middle class were positive about the service, even though, on occasions, the informants of the traditional middle class as well as those who had already been on a cruise had criticized it. A LNMC passenger commented on the opinion of her acquaintances who had already been on a cruise and for whom the service was one of the highlights of the experience:

I saw people talking about the staff; they were quite dazzled by them. [...] They talked about the nights on the cruise, they talked about the days, the service onboard. They talked about all these things... About the service, about the staff onboard being very polite: that's what I really noticed. These people being so

well prepared for this job. And it was great the experience of having contact with them too. ... You're already on the high seas, and they don't leave your glass empty in front of you two minutes. So, it's a luxury that makes you feel very good. And it leaves you satisfied because you paid for it. (Leda, LNMC)

Fig. 3 summarizes the symbols of conspicuous consumption identified.

**5. Discussion**

For Lévi-Strauss (1962), classification systems are the basis of human thought and establish an ordering principle of the natural world and social relations through a constant process of grouping and separation of beings and things. In the context of the hedonic experience of a sea cruise, consumption is used to classify people, time, spaces, artifacts, and the cruise experience itself.

The classification of the people on the cruise is made in relation to the self. Because all on board consider themselves part of the “middle class,” they perform an operation of internal classification which, from their perspective, recognizes three strata, in this paper called “traditional” middle-class, high “new” middle class, and low “new” middle class. Note that this perspective depends on a self-assigned position. When passengers see themselves as members of a “traditional” middle class, they recognize the coexistence on the

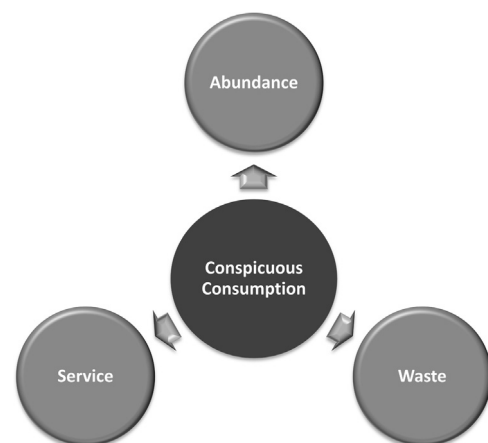


Fig. 3. Symbols of conspicuous consumption on the cruise.

cruise of others who aren't like themselves in terms of behavior and appearance, and exhibit certain unease in sharing the space with "other people." The *habitus* is used, then, as a marker of social class. Beyond economic capital – which, supposedly, is similar – it is the cultural capital that demarcates the differences.

Although TMCs display some benevolence toward those who have ascended and now have access to new types of consumption, they are still seen as "strangers," dispossessed of the cultural capital necessary to properly enjoy the cruise. Ultimately, they are intruders, who render the consumer experience of a sea cruise less desirable and glamorous. Thus, "friendships" among consumers of different middle class strata are restricted to the environment of the ship, and do not extend in time or to other spheres of life. It is necessary, albeit unconsciously, "to 'keep their distance,' to 'maintain their rank,' and to 'not get familiar.'" (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 17). These findings also are consistent with the study of Üstüner and Thompson (2012) on consumer relations in hair salons in Turkey. Such relationships between employees and customers, although friendly, are restricted to the environment of the salons and never transcend the space from which they originated.

Among the "new" middle-class cruise consumers, an internal distinction can be discerned, which stems not from income, but rather from "propriety" or "culture." The effort to distinguish the self seems spontaneous and not always conscious. The organization of social space, through classificatory schema, allows consumers to symbolically demarcate "one's place." Artifacts, space, and time offer concurrently the possibility of "classifying" and being "classified". The dichotomy of "poor" versus "rich" encompasses virtually everything that is part of the cruise, materially and symbolically. Although NMCs will try the "new" and things that are the purview of the "rich," for the "sake of appearances," in the end, they prefer what is "normal," the purview of the "poor," thereby staying within the comfort zone they are used to.

Familiarity with sea cruises is also used as a marker of distinction. Experienced consumers use the knowledge of how the cruise runs and the attendant social norms to demarcate superiority. Sailing on a cruise provides access to social codes of conduct that allow the emerging consumer to establish and reaffirm, with respect to themselves and others, their belonging to the middle class (Douglas, 2003).

Conspicuous consumption manifests through an abundant number of events and quantities of food and drink in keeping with idealized images of the "how the others live." Castilhos and Rossi (2009, p. 63) use the expression "ethics of plenty" to characterize how poor consumers use the consumption of plenty of food as an indicator of status and element of distinction with respect to the "poor poor." The waste, although bothersome insofar as it threatens moral, ethical and even religious values construed over a lifetime of restrictions, seems to be an essential rite to foster a distinction between those who may and those who may not enjoy a sea cruise. Without the waste, there would be no conspicuous consumption; nor would it be possible to emulate the idealized life of the elite (Veblen, 1899/1965).

In this context, the act of being served assumes particular importance; indeed, it reverses the roles and makes the one who provides services to others in their day to day life the subject of attention of an army of servers who are at once invisible (cleaning services) and personal (waiters and chambermaids, who "recognize" the passenger). All this is associated to an absence of concern about who will "pay the bill," because everything is "included." In sum, the cruise offers – if only for a fleeting period – the experience of living the life of the "leisure class" and establishes the upward mobility of consumers to the middle class.

## 6. Final remarks

This study sought to understand certain aspects related to the consumption of cruises by consumers belonging to the "new" middle class of Brazil, which only recently began to have access to status consumption. Through participant observation on two cruises and in-depth interviews, this study sought to understand how consumers use the experience to organize the social space in which they are inserted, based on classificatory aspects of consumption linked to luxury, glamour, leisure, abundance and waste. Thus, the study provides a singular vision of how upwardly mobile consumers, in passing from a world of hardship to the consumer society, experience and interpret a new consumer experience that brings them closer to the idealized life of the upper classes.

The ascent of individuals from poverty to the middle class does not create necessarily a homogeneous group. Subtle but nevertheless clear-cut distinctions (from the perspective of each faction) continuously emerge, as individuals try to determine their standing in relation to others. Symbolic struggles take place as consumers of greater or lesser cultural capital meet in the same services scenario. Such a meeting, as far as the evidence suggests, renders the experience less attractive and therefore less desirable for traditional consumers. Whereas the group of upwardly mobile consumers seems to enjoy and appreciate the presence of traditional consumers, the latter reject their new companions, whose manners and behavior are seen as distasteful and the object of disgust, revulsion, and even indignation. Thus, from a theoretical standpoint, the study results reaffirm the idea of classificatory consumption and support the assertions of Bourdieu with regard to the mechanisms by which the distinction is produced.

Nevertheless, the entrance in the consumer market of more than 40 million Brazilians who constitute the "new" middle class, as well as a similar phenomenon in several developing countries such as China, India, and Turkey, indicates that in many other situations, in addition to sea cruises, the traditional middle class and the "new" middle class must face each other. As such, the theme is both relevant and unexplored; thus it poses a challenge to companies and researchers.

The results of the study challenge the classic division of social classes in upper, middle, and lower classes, and in subgroups within these classes (e.g. Warner, 1949). Such classifications assume substantial social stability, even if there is a constant ascent or descent of individuals from one class to the next. These social class conceptualizations were brought into the marketing discipline and refined by several scholars (e.g. Martineau, 1958; Berkman & Gilson, 1976; Coleman, 1983). However, the recent phenomenon of ascent of a huge number of individuals to the middle class in developing countries challenges old concepts and assumptions particularly about the middle class. It does not seem enough to distinguish between upper and lower middle classes, a classification mainly based on economic capital. Rather, it appears of utmost relevance in emerging markets to consider the distinction between a "traditional" middle class and a "new" middle class, and to bear in mind that other subgroups exist within these class factions, based on cultural capital and lifestyles.

Bourdieu (1985) argues that social classes are an intellectual creation of social scientists, although useful for statistical purposes and as an indication of the probability of individuals assembling themselves in certain ways (e.g. marriage, clubs, etc.). For him, the social world is a "space of relationships" (p. 725) and a "space of lifestyles" (p. 730). In this social space, individuals produce in practice their own classification of their position in relation to others, as our results show. These representations have to be taken into account not only by sociologists and marketing scholars, but also by marketers, because they may be more relevant to



understand consumption patterns of the “new” middle-class than traditional conceptualizations.

Although the phenomenon of the “new” middle class manifests not only in Brazil, but in most emerging countries, the results of the study cannot be generalized to other countries or service encounters. Further research is necessary to shed new light into the phenomenon.

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