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An initial approach to the concept of responsible consumption among Mexican university students

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Abstract

Since the last century, there has been an international concern to modify production processes and consumption habits that have harmful social, economic and environmental effects. In 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was formulated, from which the Sustainable Development Goals are derived. This has motivated the development of research on the characteristics of responsible consumption and on how to promote its practice at a mass level. Thus, the general objective of this study was to analyze the way in which young university students define socially responsible consumption, as well as the way in which it could be promoted. To this end, an exploratory, qualitative, cross-sectional study was designed, gathering information through in-depth interviews with university students. Among the results, it stands out that the respondents have a general knowledge of the implications of responsible production and consumption, which they associate mainly with care for the environment; they also perceive that the consumer has the power to influence the practices of companies. On the other hand, they consider that consuming responsibly brings benefits, but at the same time, demands additional efforts and expenses. To promote responsible consumption, they propose massive campaigns on social networks aimed at young people. In conclusion, it can be said that the group interviewed, knows the advantages and benefits of responsible consumption, but there are not strong enough and concrete incentives to change habitual consumption behavior.

Keywords: socially responsible consumption, responsible consumer, sustainable consumption, SDG, university students.

Introduction

Since the last century, there has been international concern about the negative effects of industrial development and lifestyle, particularly in developed countries, as well as about inequality and the major problems faced by humanity in general. This led the member countries of the United Nations (UN) to hold the Millennium Summit in 2000. This resulted in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were evaluated in 2015, giving rise to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which seeks to renew the commitment of the MDGs, but contemplating three dimensions of equal relevance: economic, social and environmental. Thus, the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were conceived as a master plan to achieve sustainability at the planetary level. They are interrelated and incorporate the challenges facing humanity, such as poverty, inequality, gender violence and climate change, among others.

SDG 12 is related to responsible production and consumption, and is made up of eleven Goals, among which the following stand out for the purposes of this paper:

- 12.3 ...halve global per capita food wastage at retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses in production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses
- 12.8 ...ensure that people everywhere have the information and knowledge relevant to sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature (Organización de las Naciones Unidas [ONU], (n.d. a).

Associated with the eleven SDG 12 targets are thirteen indicators, among which 12.3.1 stands out for its relevance, referring to the global rate of food loss, ranging from producers to retailers. From the latter up to the final consumer, we speak of food wastage, although there is still no indicator in this area. In other words, in terms of food, there is a metric for sustainable production, although that of sustainable consumption is lacking (Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Agricultura y la Alimentación, FAO, by its English acronym, 2023).

There are criticisms about the ethnocentrism of the SDGs, in particular SDG 12 calls for following developed country production and consumption patterns; in that sense many of these patterns are dictated by management models from more advanced economies, without being characterized by their sustainability.

The importance of the interaction between the three dimensions of sustainable development can be seen in the following: "The use of sustainable consumption and production patterns increases efficiency and productivity, ensures that human activities remain within the carrying capacity of the planet, and respects the rights of future generations" (ONU, n.d. b, para. 9).

Therefore, it is very important that the efforts linked to SDG 12 come from both the supply and the demand side: "It is also necessary to adopt a systemic approach and achieve cooperation between the participants in the supply chain, from the producer to the final consumer" (ONU. CEPAL, 2018. p. 55). It is also necessary to reflect on ensuring sustainability in consumption and production, since "If we do not act to change our consumption and production patterns, we will cause irreversible damage to the environment" (ONU, n.d. c, p.1), and, consequently, future well-being and survival on the planet would be at stake.

Based on the above, it can be affirmed that in order to improve the quality of life of the beings that inhabit the planet, as well as to solve some social injustices and environmental problems, it is necessary to carry out actions to modify the consumption system and promoting socially responsible consumption. In this sense, the present study, of an exploratory nature, had the general objective of analyzing the way in which young university students define socially responsible consumption, as well as the way in which it could be promoted.

Conceptualization of socially responsible consumption

Dueñas et al. (2014) remark that in the concept of Socially Responsible Consumption (SRC), elements of Marketing, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), as well as aspects of the social, economic and cultural context are mixed, going beyond pure consumer behavior. It transcends the elements strictly inherent to the product per se, to consider others corresponding to the actions involved in the production and distribution of these goods and/or services and the ethical and social impact of the companies that are part of this process.

We move from green consumption to ethical consumption, where the latter incorporates an axiological character. In other words, price becomes just one variable in a set of other important elements. In this sense, the concept of Perceived Consumer Effectiveness arises, related to the impact of an individual's consumption actions on the social and environmental scale; equally relevant is the so-called "perceived weight of large corporations".

Over time, various authors have expanded and complemented the definition of responsible consumption; Mejía et al. (2021) point out that both corporate social responsibility and consumer social responsibility have an impact on purchasing behavior. In the presence of a current production and consumption model defined as unsustainable, responsible consumption is a behavioral alternative with a high social and environmental content, which differentiates it from consumption defined in a traditional way.

Likewise, the existence of three variables immersed in responsible consumption (François-Lecompte & Valette-Florence, 2006) has been pointed out: not buying from

companies with socially irresponsible practices; support for smaller, closer companies with social causes and of a certain geographical origin; degree of austerity in consumer spending, with self-regulations in consumption.

Carrero et al. (2010) point out that responsible consumption has the following features:

It is conscious and deliberate consumption; ...It is carried out routinely; ...It is acted upon by seeking external interest; ...It seeks, as an ultimate goal, to modify the context or market structures by acting on business or institutional practices. (p.12)

Kosiak, et al. (n.d.) also point out that this concept has three aspects: ethical consumption, ecological consumption and social or solidarity consumption.

Regarding the practice of responsible consumption, Araya and Rojas (2020) point out that there is still a supremacy of brand value. Meanwhile, Arias (2016) emphasizes the role of education for sustainability, where being, must come before having. Awareness-raising also involves the new generations, where all the corresponding information is not only monopolized by specialists, but where there is an active role of society in this area. She also points out that consumerism has six effects: ideological, sociological, cultural, economic, ecological and health.

Another relevant topic in the study of socially responsible consumption, and about which there is very little written, is that of pro-environmental citizenships in underdeveloped countries in general (Mejía and Puerta, 2018). Within the capitalist mode of production, the consumption variable plays a central role, to the extent of stereotyping its presence with ideals of democracy and freedom. In this human act, planned obsolescence is a central aspect, in combination with the advertising elements that stimulate it. Today, beyond such elements in consumption, the issue of waste disposal has become even more complicated, due to the more complex nature of waste. The establishment of pro-environmental citizenship is based on generating rights and duties, with responsible consumption and disposal practices, within a framework of non-anthropocentrism, extra-national vision, emphasizing the local and with a collective and multi-dimensional vision.

The 21st century marks a radical awareness of responsible consumption. This topic has jumped from being a niche subject to a general level that requires a multidisciplinary approach, to know and understand the factors that drive responsible consumer behavior, and to have elements to make consumers aware of the power they have to contribute to and maintain the sustainability of life on the planet.

Scales to measure responsible consumption behavior

At the same time that the study of responsible consumption began, scales were developed to identify the factors that influence responsible consumer behavior. These scales revealed the multidimensionality of the behavior of this type of consumer. Initially, the scales were aimed at knowing their demographic and political profile; but as this vision was limited, it was expanded to consider behavioral aspects, giving rise to attitudinal scales, which include environmental and social aspects (Villa-Castaño et al., 2018).

These scales began to be developed in the 1970s and gradually became more complex by adding elements to the construct of socially responsible consumption behavior. Thus, in addition to social and environmental factors, aspects related to the behavior of organizations towards stakeholders; and with respect to Corporate Social Responsibility were incorporated (Villa-Castaño et al., 2018).

A relevant scale is the so-called Socially Responsible Purchase and Disposal (SRPD), which seeks to evaluate the impact on the consumer of Corporate Social Responsibility campaigns (Kosiak et al., n.d.); this scale is the result of several experimental cases. It is important to point out that, at present, the difficulty of bridging the gap between attitude and behavior has not yet been overcome, there are difficulties in terms of information, there is also a lack of a geographical contextualizing element, as well as of the interaction between Perceived Effectiveness and Corporate Social Responsibility. As a matter of fact, this topic has a complex and contingent character. The role of business policies, in addition to public policies, is of great relevance in the subject.

Palacios-González and Chamorro-Mera (2020) based on a review of the literature on the subject, have developed a scale to measure socially responsible consumer behavior that includes four groups of variables, namely: concern about the seriousness and consequences of social, ethical and environmental problems facing the world; the perceived efficacy of the consumer in terms of his ability to influence the solution of some social and environmental problems; the perception of personal benefit, which refers to the consumer's evaluation of the advantages or disadvantages he may face by engaging in responsible behavior; and socially responsible behavior (e.g. purchase of products with cause and volume of consumption, among others).

In the Mexican context, the study by Rangel et al. (2020), in which students from a socially responsible university took part, is of interest. Among the results is the identification of four groups of socially responsible consumers, based on their perception of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), measured from the environmental, ethical-legal perspective and their identification with socially responsible companies:

- Skeptical of the environment (22% of respondents).
- Skeptical of Corporate Social Responsibility (12%)
- Corporate Social Responsibility enthusiasts (44%)
- Environmental enthusiasts (22%) (Rangel et al., 2020)

Methodology

As mentioned in the preceding sections, the future sustainability of the planet involves a transformation of both current production and consumption models. Although groups of consumers who practice responsible consumption began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as this line of research, there is still a need for more detailed knowledge of the factors that influence responsible consumption behavior. In this sense, the general objective of the present study is:

- To analyze the way in which university students define socially responsible consumption, as well as the way in which it could be promoted.

From this, the following specific objectives were established:

- To determine the level of knowledge of the SDGs and in particular SDG 12 among university students.
- To find out how university students define responsible consumption and production.
- To determine whether university students carry out responsible consumption actions.
- To identify ways to promote responsible consumption among university students.

Research design

In order to carry out this research, an exploratory, qualitative, cross-sectional study was designed, gathering information through in-depth interviews with six undergraduate students of the Bachelor's Degree in Administration at a public university. Management students were selected, considering that in the future they will be in charge of putting CSR into practice in the organizations.

The categories of analysis included in the interview guide, were based on the scale developed by Palacios-González and Chamorro-Mera (2020), which includes the main constructs considered in the literature on the subject:

- Degree of knowledge of the SDGs
- Concepts of responsible production and consumption
- Concern about the seriousness and consequences of the social, ethical and environmental problems facing the world
- Perceived consumer efficacy
- Perception of effort required and personal benefit

- Actions to promote responsible consumption

Results

The results will be presented according to the categories of analysis in the Interview Guide.

Level of knowledge of the SDGs

In general, there is a lack of knowledge about the SDGs, the organizations that have proposed them and their feasibility, since only one of the interviewees indicated that she was familiar with them. As shown in Table 1, she defines them basically from an environmental perspective, considering that the production processes of companies should not affect the environment or future generations. However, she does not know who proposed them, indicates that it is not so feasible to achieve them, and states that it is an issue that concerns both companies and consumers.

Table 1: Knowledge of Sustainable Development Goals testimonies

"...sustainable development is part of business and the production, for example, of food must take care of the environment from the inputs..."

"...we are looking for a way of producing that is not limited and that food will not be scarce in future generations..."

"...I see it as a bit complicated (compliance with the SDGs) on the part of companies and consumers...not much work is being done...we are advancing a bit slowly..."

Source: own elaboration

Concepts of responsible production and consumption

Regarding responsible production, the interviewees define it in terms of caring for the environment, stating that companies should produce recyclable products, act with environmental responsibility, taking into account the negative consequences of their practices, developing a production system where the environmental effects of the companies' raw materials are reduced, seeking other options to produce, dispose and reuse without harming the environment. Only one of the interviewees stressed the importance of avoiding harm to society and producing what is really necessary.

Achieving responsible production, in the opinion of the respondents, is a shared responsibility between companies and consumers; however, they are skeptical that companies will take the initiative, since in many cases economic interests prevail. On the other hand, they emphasize the role played by the consumer in achieving it and that it is a long-term process; legislators and the government also have a key role to play. Table 2 shows some of the most significant testimonies.

Table 2: Responsible production testimonies

Responsible production

"...implies care for the environment..."

"...use of recycled materials...production of recyclable, non-polluting products..."

"...no overproduction..."

"...a production system where the environmental effects of the companies' raw materials are diminished, looking for other options, not leaving innovation, and how to produce and how to dispose without damage..."

"...that the process is the least harmful to the environment, both to nature and to society, and that it complies with regulations..."

To achieve responsible production

"... consumers to push for; the most important are the government and legislators; the companies through what they produce and the power to decide".

"...responsibility goes beyond pollution, for example in the generation of poverty and also has repercussions in small economies and in other places on the planet".

"...we should not so much think about economic remuneration, but more about human beings and the planet".

"...the consumer must force companies to ensure that society is not affected".

Feasibility

"...very little feasible because of the nature of human beings and that it is difficult to change mindsets."

"...a radical change in production and consumption is unlikely, it requires a very long period of time."

"...to achieve little by little, people change their habits, raise awareness of consumption".

"... it is feasible, sometimes the interests of the companies are more economical than environmental and that is why it is necessary that the consumer obliges".

Source: own elaboration

In the case of responsible consumption, the interviewees mention that it is not only a question of consumers, but also involves intermediaries and companies; in the case

of the latter, they refer to considering whether they act ethically, for example, that they do not use child labor, that they pay fair prices to suppliers. Another aspect to consider would be the size of the company, whether it is a large one or a small producer. The students participating on the study also emphasized that consumers should buy what they really need.

Finally, one of the respondents pointed out that in order to consume responsibly, one must be informed about who manufactures the product and whether it can be harmful to the consumer; as well as whether it supports or raises funds for the environment. Table 3 shows the statements made in relation to this point.

Table 3: Responsible consumption testimonies

<p><i>"... consumption is not only a question of the consumer, but also of intermediaries and consumption based on a need".</i></p> <p><i>"...whether it comes from a large company or a small producer".</i></p> <p><i>"...consumers should be aware of how companies work and are organized, that they do not exploit people or children as in China".</i></p> <p><i>"...to choose companies that work in a more environmentally friendly way".</i></p> <p><i>"...in responsible consumption there is a key point: you have to be well informed, you need to have a culture of consumption, be well informed about where the product comes from and if it harms..."</i></p> <p><i>"...if it is a company that supports or raises funds for the environment".</i></p> <p><i>"...buy only necessary products..."</i></p> <p><i>"...how they are produced, looking at what we need..."</i></p>

Source: own elaboration

Concern about the seriousness and consequences of the social, ethical and environmental problems facing the world.

To measure this dimension, respondents were asked to rate the following actions, related to responsible production and consumption, as outrageous, worrying or indifferent.

- Unethical corporate behavior
- Deterioration of the environment
- The disappearance of small shops and small businesses.
- The consumerist practices of today's society

With regard to the first statement, concerning the ethical behavior of companies, the responses were classified as worrying and outrageous, the most frequent being worrying. Likewise, concerning the deterioration of the environment, the respondents rated it as worrying and outrageous, with worrying being the most frequent. Regarding small shops and small businesses, the most frequent was worrying, with one response in the indifferent category. Finally, with respect to consumerist practices, the responses were divided into worrying and outrageous. In general, there is concern about these actions, which can be considered at an intermediate level, in terms of consumer attitude.

Perceived consumer efficacy

When interviewees were asked about the level of influence consumers have on companies to act in an ethical and socially responsible manner, they all agreed that it is high; however, consumers have played a passive role. On the other hand, they point out that it is necessary for consumers to organize themselves, since in a massive way they have greater power. They also consider that the new generations are particularly interested in achieving these changes, although they also mention that it is a matter of conscience and not only of age.

The power of consumers has been shown to modify certain practices such as animal experimentation; however, they point out that they need to be more informed in order to put pressure on companies and achieve a change towards sustainable production systems. Table 4 shows the testimonies that best illustrate the students' responses.

Table 4: Perceived Consumer Effectiveness testimonies

"...good or bad reputation can be influenced and the new generations are more concerned about achieving the ideal".

"...that it is not just a matter of age, but of conscience".

"...if a lot of people make an agreement, you can influence companies; this has to be massively..."

"...the great influence that the consumer has, although many times he has played a very passive role".

"...You can have a very strong power, but you have to be more informed to pressure companies to change the production system to a sustainable one."

"...Some companies use animals, we started to talk, and they stopped experimenting with animals".

Source: own elaboration

Perception of effort required and personal benefit

Responsible consumption requires additional effort in terms of being more informed, dedicating more time to shopping, and in many cases also investing more economic resources, as can be seen in the testimonies shown in Table 5. Respondents point out that the most pollutant products most are the most easily accessible, and in the case of organic products, it is necessary to dedicate more time to their purchase and they are more expensive; the same is true for hybrid cars. They also point out that becoming aware of what is really needed and acting accordingly requires additional effort.

Respondents considered that consuming responsibly provides personal benefits, for example, buying organic food benefits the person in terms of health and also the environment. However, as mentioned above, the healthiest and least environmentally damaging products tend to be more expensive and are not available to everyone, and therefore only a small portion of the population benefits. There are also advantages in terms of optimizing expenses, by not consuming more than necessary, and feeling good about oneself.

Table 5: Perception of effort required and personal benefit testimonies

<p><i>"...time is also consumed in looking for these environmentally friendly products..."</i></p> <p><i>"...I don't know if that's feeling good about myself because I'm taking care of the environment."</i></p> <p><i>"...Also being responsible about services. Turning off the light, turning off the water tap, that benefits oneself and then family members if they carry out this kind of values, and a responsible consumption."</i></p> <p><i>"...all this, as long as it is feasible, since a person with low income will go for the cheapest, despite the fact that the expensive has a greater benefit..."</i></p> <p><i>"...products with fewer chemicals, are healthier products and have no impact on the environment..."</i></p> <p><i>"...there are many benefits, and if there were more people thinking this way, these benefits would be more tangible".</i></p>
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Source: own elaboration

Actions to promote responsible consumption

This category included three dimensions: responsibility for solving social and environmental problems, responsibility for consumption actions and, promotion of responsible consumption.

Responsibility for solving social and environmental problems

When respondents were asked who is responsible for solving social and environmental problems, the answers converged in the sense that it is the responsibility of the government, organizations and individuals, although they differed as to the weight that falls on each. Some of the respondents consider that the changes are generated by individuals, and that they are the ones who exert pressure on the other two levels; while others point out that the government plays the strongest role, but the responsibility corresponds to everyone, as can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6: Responsibility for solving social and environmental problems testimonies

"...the central actor and with more responsibility, is the government..."

"...at the macro level it is more the government, at the meso level the organizations and at the micro level the people..."

"...this responsibility is of the people themselves... it is the people themselves who must change their consumption and recycling; to achieve awareness of the society."

"...in a more global way it corresponds to society, not only to the companies or the government, but it has repercussions for everyone; the government has a stronger role".

"...society has the responsibility, it affects everyone, we are on the same planet and we all have to take care of it".

Source: own elaboration

Responsible consumption actions

In this dimension, four aspects that responsible consumers take into account, when making their purchases, were considered: the products are ecological, fair trade, the company does not use child labor, and the company does not have a bad reputation for treating its employees badly or not caring for the environment. The responses in all cases were divided, with half of the participants stating a responsible behavior, and half not, reflecting that there is not a uniform practice of responsible consumption in the group interviewed.

Measures to promote responsible consumption

The interviewees consider it essential to develop mass campaigns on social networks, to provide not only information to raise awareness, but also to propose concrete actions. Likewise, it is necessary to include subjects on responsible production and consumption at all educational levels; and to disseminate at a general level the

damage that current consumption practices are causing to the environment and society. On the other hand, it is suggested that just as companies publish financial information, they publish information on activities related to social responsibility. Table 7 shows the testimonies in this regard.

Table 7: Measures to promote responsible consumption testimonies

"...through the great platform of social networks... everyone knows what responsible consumption is; but not all of us use the information to replicate it day by day... most of us know what it is, damage is already being done by the big industry".

"...to propose, especially in educational institutions, that there should be awareness and improvement actions".

"...just as there are pages with financial information on large companies, there should also be a page on how they work, how they treat their employees, their salaries and who they are buying from".

"... at all educational levels, subjects where responsible production and consumption are studied..."

"...campaigns that inform about the benefits of responsible consumption, and the problems that non-responsible consumption brings, environmental and social".

Source: own elaboration

Discussion and conclusions

The results of the present study show that in the group interviewed there is a lack of knowledge of the SDGs in general and consequently of number 12; however, the respondents have an idea of what responsible production and consumption imply, associating them mainly with care for the environment, and to a lesser degree with ethical and social issues.

Although the students interviewed consider that achieving responsible production and consumption is the responsibility of all those involved, namely: companies, government and consumers, there is a tendency to give the greatest weight to the companies, resulting on the other hand, somewhat contradictory that in terms of perceived consumer efficacy, it is considered that the consumer has a great power, particularly if he is part of a group, to influence production processes and practices that affect the labor and social sphere in general.

When rating some actions of companies that are potentially harmful to the environment and society in general, the responses show a consumer who is concerned, but not enough to move him to action. In addition, even when it is perceived that responsible consumption provides benefits, both to the individual

consumer and to society as a whole, there are certain aspects that are considered limiting, among these are dedicating more time and effort to the purchasing process, and sometimes an extra outlay when acquiring products.

The results indicate that although there is knowledge of the importance of responsible consumption, this is not fully put into practice by the interviewees, who, on the other hand, consider that the changes are the result of direct action by people, and suggest the implementation of massive campaigns in social networks, aimed mainly at young people, in which concrete actions are proposed to produce and consume responsibly.

In conclusion, it can be sad that in the group interviewed, there is knowledge of the advantages and benefits of responsible consumption, but there are not strong and concrete enough incentives to change habitual consumption behavior. As mentioned initially, the present study is of an exploratory nature, and the size of the sample is a limitation, so further studies are required to corroborate these results and make specific proposals to promote socially responsible consumption in the short term, since if production processes and consumption habits are not changed, the survival of life on the planet is at risk.

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