

# Consumer socialization in adulthood: challenges and directions for research

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## *Abstract*

Consumer socialization is a central subject to the field of consumption studies, since all consumption is learned. Previous research primarily related the phenomenon to the formation of children and adolescents to function as consumers, with studies grounded in positivism. This article is positioned in the tradition of the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research and is inspired by the search for new theoretical and methodological alternatives for consumer socialization in adult life. Thus, we first present a brief review of the research on consumer socialization, reflecting on its ontological contours and challenges. Next, the assemblage theory and the life course perspective are presented. The combination of these theoretical lenses has enabled the construction of an integrative conceptual framework that seeks to offer greater dynamism to the investigation of consumer socialization. Finally, we discuss the contributions of the conceptual framework and suggest methodological strategies to handle new challenges posed by research in the area.

**Keywords:** Consumer socialization. Consumption studies. Assemblage. Life course perspective. Culture and consumption.

## *Socialização do consumidor na vida adulta: desafios e caminhos para a pesquisa*

### *Resumo*

A socialização do consumidor é um tema a ser revisitado, sendo central para o campo de estudos de consumo, uma vez que todo consumo é aprendido. Pesquisas anteriores relacionavam o fenômeno, primordialmente, à formação das crianças e adolescentes enquanto consumidores, tendo sua investigação amparada no positivismo. Este ensaio está posicionado na tradição de pesquisa da Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) e se inspira na busca por novas alternativas teóricas e metodológicas para a socialização do consumidor na vida adulta. Dessa forma, primeiro apresentamos uma breve revisão da trajetória de pesquisa em socialização do consumidor, refletindo sobre seus contornos ontológicos e desafios. Em seguida, apresentamos a Teoria da Assemblage e a Perspectiva do Curso de Vida. A combinação dessas lentes teóricas permitiu a construção de um esquema conceitual integrador, que busca oferecer maior dinamismo à investigação da socialização do consumidor. Por fim, discutimos as contribuições do esquema conceitual e sugerimos estratégias metodológicas para lidar com os novos desafios da pesquisa na área.

**Palavras-chave:** Socialização do consumidor. Estudos de consumo. Assemblage. Perspectiva do curso de vida. Cultura e consumo.

## *Socialización del consumidor en la vida adulta: desafíos y caminos para la investigación*

### *Resumen*

La socialización del consumidor es un tema que debe ser revisado, pues es central para el área de estudios en consumo, ya que todo el consumo es aprendido. Los estudios anteriores relacionaban el fenómeno, primordialmente, a la formación de niños y adolescentes como consumidores, con su investigación amparada en el positivismo. Este ensayo se posiciona en la tradición de investigación de la Teoría de la cultura del consumidor (*Consumer Culture Theory*) y se inspira en la búsqueda de nuevas alternativas teóricas y metodológicas para el estudio de la socialización del consumidor en la vida adulta. Por lo tanto, en primer lugar presentamos una breve revisión de la trayectoria de la investigación sobre socialización del consumidor, reflexionando sobre sus contornos ontológicos y desafíos. A continuación, presentamos la teoría de la Assemblage y de la Perspectiva del curso de vida. La combinación de esas lentes teóricas permitió la construcción de un esquema conceptual integrador, que busca proporcionar más dinamismo a la investigación de la socialización del consumidor. Finalmente, se discuten las contribuciones del esquema conceptual y se sugieren estrategias metodológicas para gestionar los nuevos desafíos de la investigación en el área.

**Palabras clave:** Socialización del consumidor. Estudios de consumo. Assemblage. Perspectiva del curso de vida. Cultura y consumo.

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## INTRODUCTION

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The concept of socialization was already used in various areas before being adopted by consumption studies. In sociology, it is related to the way individuals are shaped and adapted to be members of society. In psychology, it focuses on the preparation and capacities needed to live in social groups. And in economics, it encompasses important aspects for action as an economic agent (EKSTROM, 2006). The concept was introduced into the field of consumption studies by Ward (1974) in his seminal article “Consumer Socialization”, which relates the phenomenon, primarily, to the formation of children and adolescents as consumers, a period considered to be essential for developing aspects that endure and shape behaviors throughout life.

Ward’s article inspired a considerable body of research in the field of consumption studies, especially mainly during the 1970s and 1980s. The subject attracted the interest of public authorities and scholars, who were mainly concerned with advertising targeted at children, the ethical implications, and the need for regulation. It was investigated, for example, whether children could tell the difference between commercials and normal television programming, whether they understood the intentions of an advertisement, and the symbolic value of the products and services, among other subjects (BELK, MAYER and DRISCOLL, 1984; BUTTER, POPOVICH, STACKHOUSE et al., 1981; DONOHUE, HENKE and DONOHUE, 1980; JOHN, 1999; MOSCHIS, 1985). The theoretical contributions in the field of consumption studies at that time derived mainly from cognitive psychology which, broadly speaking, is concerned with stages of cognitive development and individuals’ capacity for processing information (JOHN, 1999).

Consumer socialization is a subject that merits revisiting: it is central to the field of consumption studies since all consumption is learned. Studying consumer socialization means understanding how the individual builds and rebuilds their social role as a consumer (EKSTRÖM, 2006). As an alternative to the cognitive studies, in this paper we follow a sociocultural approach based on the CCT (consumer culture theory) tradition (ARNOULD and THOMPSON, 2005; 2007; 2015; CASOTTI and SUAREZ, 2016), which situates phenomena related to consumption – among them consumer socialization – as immersed in a cultural context, both influencing and being influenced by this culture. The investigation of the phenomenon of consumer socialization in the CCT tradition, therefore, focuses on the learning processes resulting from social interactions in the culture that influence consumption capacities, practices and dispositions. Accordingly, with this vision, we privilege the understanding of the relations among the elements involved, the circulating discourses in the culture, and the deliberate and structural aspects in the socializing processes

Ekström (2006) reaffirms the relevance of the phenomenon, noting, however, a decline in studies from the 2000s due to intrinsic difficulties of the research. The dynamism of the phenomenon, its processes, and its relational character raise ontological questions since isolating it for purposes of investigation is not without difficulty. In addition, factors such as the diversification of family arrangements, aging population, globalization, intensity of use of social networks, social mobility, and diversity in gender roles, among others, cause new socializing dynamics and hinder theoretical proposals within more deterministic perspectives (SETTON, 2011). Another point raised is that the research carried out should encompass the socializing process that occurs during the life of individuals and not be limited to the period of childhood and adolescence (EKSTRÖM, 2006; MOSCHIS, 2007). These difficulties give rise to a theoretical gap and the need for a methodological discussion on how to address such issues.

This paper proposes a new approach to consumer socialization research by combining the theoretical lens of assemblage (DELANDA, 2006) with the life course perspective (ELDER JR, JOHNSON and CROSNOE, 2003; MORTIMER and SHANAHAN, 2006) from the social sciences. The life course perspective was brought across from sociology to the field of consumption studies by Moschis (2007). Moschis’ basic argument is that throughout life, changes in social roles occur that give rise to new learning, new identities, and new consumption behaviors. These changes can be seen as a sort of cross-section to facilitate seeing the socialization of the consumer, thus side-stepping the ontological problems reported by Ekström (2006).

Assemblage theory (DELANDA, 2006) is rooted within philosophy. An assemblage is a composition of human and nonhuman elements, with their own characteristics, that interrelate, giving rise to emergent properties that can manifest as new consumption capacities, practices and dispositions. Assemblage theory privileges the multiplicity of possibilities and events, rejecting visions based on essence (NAIL, 2017). In the field of consumption studies, we highlight the use of assemblage theory in recent work (CANNIFORD and SHANKAR, 2013; EPP, SCHAU and PRICE, 2014; EPP and VELAGALETI, 2014; HILL, CANNIFORD and MOL, 2014; PRICE and EPP, 2016; SCHOLZ and HANDELMAN, 2014). This theory integrates our proposal by offering a prism of the phenomenon of consumer socialization that is dynamic, procedural and relational, in addition to illuminating our understanding of the role of materiality within.

This paper is positioned in the CCT research tradition (ARNOULD and THOMPSON, 2005; 2007; 2015; CASOTTI and SUAREZ, 2016) and is inspired by the initiative of Ekström (2006) to advocate the importance of studies in consumer socialization in adult life and address the author's call for new theoretical and methodological alternatives. We first present a brief review of the trajectory of research on consumer socialization, by reflecting on its ontological contours and challenges. We then present the assemblage theory (DELANDA, 2006) and the life course perspective (ELDER JR, JOHNSON and CROSNOE, 2003; MORTIMER and SHANAHAN, 2006). The combination of these theoretical lenses enabled the construction of an integrative conceptual framework. Finally, we discuss the contributions of the conceptual framework and suggest methodological strategies to handle the new challenges posed by research in consumer socialization.

## On Socialization: Theoretical Pathway in Sociology

To better understand consumer socialization, a brief retrospect of its origins in sociology is in order. Durkheim constructed the classic paradigm of sociology of education, claiming that human beings are naturally egoistical, moved by passions, and need education to learn to dominate their instincts and be able to aspire to the common good to live in society. Thus, each new human being is like a *tabula rasa*, i.e., void of innate knowledge and essentially like a blank sheet of paper that needs to be filled in through a socialization process. This process supports the construction and performance of the social role that imbues the individual with society's values. Thus, Durkheim's conception is of a passive social agent that forgoes regulation of their natural desires to remain in conformance with society (SETTON, 2005).

In the 1960s, Berger and Luckmann (1967) offer new conceptual advances. The authors assume that human beings are born with a predisposition to sociability and become members of society through a socialization process. One of their main contributions was to make a distinction between primary and secondary socialization. Primary socialization occurs in childhood, a period during which children incorporate basic knowledge, with language being the primordial form of knowledge to become a member of society. Two agents are fundamental in this socialization phase: the family and school. The process of socialization would ideally depend on an aligned and complementary relationship between family and school, and on the relationships between children and the adults responsible for socialization. Secondary socialization occurs later, in adulthood, and encompasses more specific types of knowledge. The authors highlight work as the main socializing agent during this phase, as work is the basis for building the individual's identity.

Starting in the 1970s, the work of Pierre Bourdieu is frequently referenced as essential reading for the socialization process (DUBAR, 2009). He claims the formation of all individuals is based on their insertion in a milieu of origin, and that the social class to which individuals belong causes them to gradually incorporate a habitus. Habitus, a central concept in Bourdieu's work ([1979] 2013), is understood as the individual's embodiment of the social structure, which works as a filter to the practices and productions of meaning that the individual generates in the course of his trajectory. The habitus is both the "principle generator of practices" and "system of classification of these practices" (Bourdieu, [1979] 2013, p. 162), organizing the relation with the experience and guiding the interpretation of its elements and the choices of action of actors in the world. Taste, as a manifestation of habitus, classifies and ranks objects according to the classification system embodied in individuals over the course of their socialization process. Through the notion of habitus, Bourdieu points out the silent and unconscious dimension of the socialization process, which manifests itself through the individual's embodiment of the social structure.

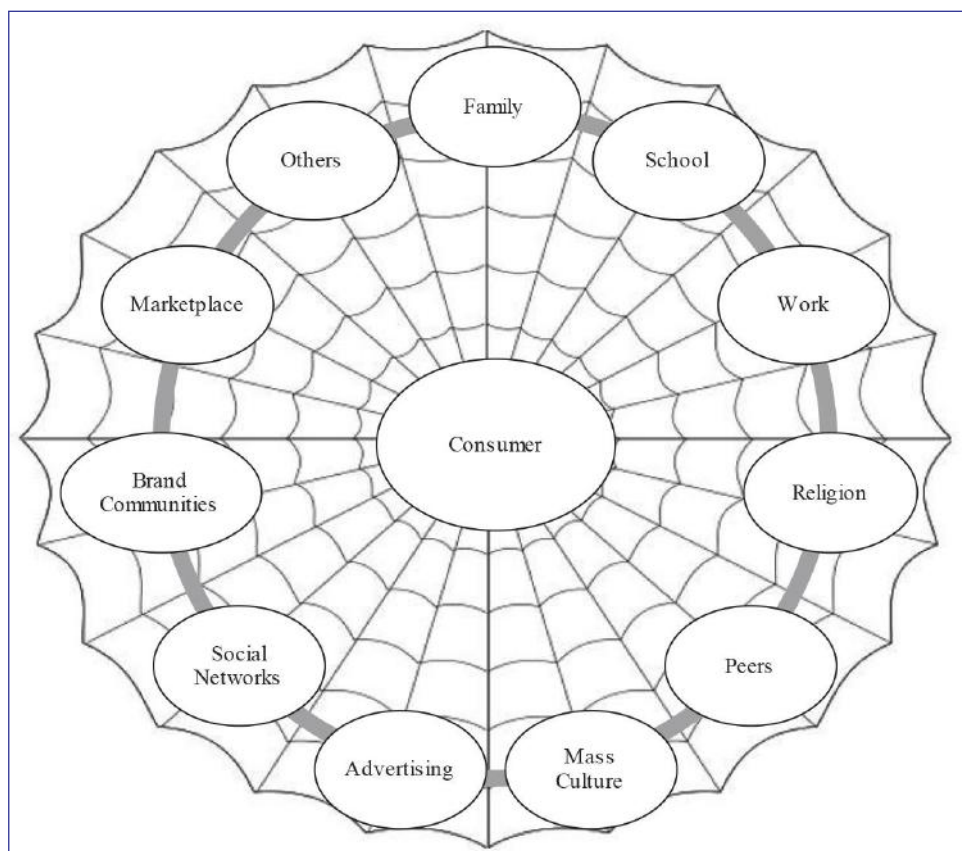
Bourdieu's approach influenced the field of consumption studies, inspiring the studies of various authors (ALLEN, 2002; HOLT, 1998; MCALEXANDER, DUFAULT, MARTIN et al., 2014; SAATCIOGLU and OZANNE, 2013). Several scholars working in the research tradition of CCT speak of this approach as an alternative to perspectives excessively based on individual agency, which do not analyze the social structure with which the individual's practice interacts (ASKEGAARD and LINNET, 2011). However, Bourdieu's perspective is sometimes criticized with respect to its more deterministic view, where individual freedom and creation have less centrality.

Dubet (1996) and Lahire (2002) seek to understand contemporary socialization through a perspective that is different from Bourdieu and that focuses more on the individual's reflexivity in face of the multiplicity of incoherent and diversified socialization experiences. According to these authors, each individual lives multiple social contexts. Thus, the individual assumes a deliberative role by acting subjectively, combining distinct logics of action. These schemes of non-homogenous action are diametrically opposed to the embodied and automated habitus of Bourdieu, thus reflecting a perspective that brings centrality to the individual and their constant negotiation with structural values and references (SETTON, 2005).

From the different views of Bourdieu and his critics, Setton (2011) proposes the process of socialization be studied via a hybrid prism that views the process from an interdependent articulation between collective and individual perspectives and instances.

The theoretical body of work on socialization emphasized family, school and work as the main socializing agents, based on Berger and Luckmann's (1967) paradigm; however, other socializing agents gained relevance over time. From the 1970s onwards, the strength of mass culture and its attendant media and technological apparatus becomes an important diffuser of socialization proposals (SETTON, 2005). Subsequently, further technological advances, globalization, the expansion of market capitalism, social networks, and peers have also gained relevance in this sense (GIDDENS, 1991; SETTON, 2011). Figure 1 aims to depict the contemporary socializing agents surrounding the consumer as a web of influences in terms of consumption behaviors, capacities and dispositions.

**Figure 1**  
**Socializing agents**



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In field of CCT, we do find papers on the influences of some socializing agents; but these works are not positioned as an explicit dialog with the literature of socialization. This may be due to the difficulties mentioned by Ekström (2006) vis-à-vis establishing ontological contours of the phenomenon and presenting a procedural view of it. Examples of papers in CCT include:

- **family studies** – Epp and Price (2008; 2010; 2011); Epp, Schau and Price (2014); Epp and Velagaleti (2014); Price and Epp (2016);
- **religion** – McAlexander, Dufault, Martin et al. (2014); Sandikci and Ger (2010);
- **peers** – Thompson and Üstüner (2015);
- **mass culture** – Askegaard (2010); Hirschman (1988); Holbrook (2008); Holbrook and Grayson (1986);
- **advertising** – Belk and Pollay (1985); Stern (1993; 1996);

- **social networks** – Belk (2013); Scaraboto and Fischer (2013);
- **brand communities** – Muñiz and Schau (2005); Schouten and McAlexander (1995); e
- **market** – Belk (1988); Bettany, Kerrane and Hogg (2014); Diamond, Sherry, Muñiz et al. (2009); Thompson (2004); Thompson and Haytko (1997); Thompson and Üstüner (2015).

It is evident that in general the studies focus on one or two main socializing agents and do not encompass the entire web in which consumers find themselves.

## On consumer socialization: Origins and objects of research

In the 1970s, in the marketing area, Ward proposed the term “consumer socialization,” which (in his words) refers to “processes by which young people (i.e., children and adolescents) acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace” (WARD, 1974, p. 2). With his article, the author sparked a line of research that was concerned not in the formation of a social actor, in a broader sense, but specifically in the formation of a consumer. However, Ward points out that consumer behavior is often a consequence, reflection or response to positions or situations imposed on individuals by social dynamics. In other words, socialization for consumption — despite circumscribing a delimited space of socialization — should not be understood as distinct from the socialization of the individual as a whole.

One can see that, given its focus on the primary phases of life, Ward’s definition intersects with Berger and Luckmann’s (1967) notion of primary socialization, despite being limited to the consumer market as an area of interest. In his article, Ward (1974) claims knowledge is acquired throughout life; however, his focus is on childhood as the basis of the formation of people as consumers. Ward’s definition and theoretical approach became dominant in the field of consumption studies.

John (1999) carried out an analysis of the 25 years of research into the consumer socialization of children. The author drew on Piaget’s theory (which postulates the existence of stages in the child cognitive development) to devise a framework for analyzing consumer socialization. The theory describes three distinct stages: perceptual (3 to 7 years), analytical (7 to 11 years) and reflexive (11 to 16 years). In these stages, John explains how structures of knowledge, decision-making skills, and influence strategies become more sophisticated with advancing years shaping the formation of children as consumers. For example, younger children, in the first stage, perceive only the most concrete aspects of products. The more abstract aspects (based on values and social meanings) are only fully understood in the last stage (JOHN, 1999).

Shah and Mittal (1997) shift the focus from children to adults in their theoretical essay on intergenerational influence (IGI) in the family, related to consumption behaviors such as information search, brands, products and stores selection, use of evaluative criteria, and receptivity to marketing mix variables. These researchers claimed that looking solely at parents’ influence on small children, as in Ward’s concept of socialization, was too limiting and needed to be broadened given that these children became adults and continued to be influenced by their parents in many behaviors and, reciprocally, influenced them. It is worth pointing out that the IGI theoretical approach made progress in the study of socialization in adult life within the same family, as well as listing mechanisms and drivers. However, IGI does not consider the influences between members of the same generation, as in the case of brothers, for example. Moreover, IGI is restricted to the family context and does not encompass other important socialization agents, such as the media, peers, and other institutions.

Ekstrom (2006) and Moschis (2007) call for an expansion of socialization studies to encompass adulthood. Berger and Luckmann (1967) had already stated that the identity, attitudes and behaviors incorporated in childhood were not necessarily maintained in adulthood; moreover, conflicts could emerge between agents during the socialization process, culminating in completely different and even opposite future behaviors. Another important point in this social construction of reality paradigm is that secondary socialization, according to Berger and Luckmann, is centered on work. This vision of a more stable identity linked to work has been shaken in the contemporary world, given that identities have become more centered on consumption and subject to a dynamic process of construction and reconstruction over time (CAMPBELL, 2004).

Learning continues after childhood and adolescence; since adult consumers face a variety of situations in which they have to deal with changes that will, in turn, reflect on consumption behavior. New events generate new challenges that require adaptations in consumption. The process of building identities is dynamic and occurs throughout life (EKSTRÖM, 2006; MOSCHIS, 2007; 2012). Research in consumer socialization in adulthood can provide a broader perspective on consumption behavior



by considering its longitudinal, dynamic and processual character, incorporating various influences of the social environment and thus abandoning the view of a merely deliberative phenomenon restricted to a specific point in time.

Several sociocultural changes are shaping the socialization processes of adults. Gaining an understanding of the socio-cultural context makes it possible to understand the subtleties of the different consumer socialization processes. Contexts related to social classes – issues related to ethnicity – new family arrangements – new gender frontiers – the increasing use of social networks: these are all topics that are still lacking in theorizing in the field and that offer fertile ground for research into consumer socialization (EKSTRÖM, 2006; SETTON, 2005; 2011).

## Combining the life course perspective with the theoretical lens of assemblage theory to investigate adult consumer socialization

Researchers in consumer socialization find theoretical gaps to be filled, while at the same time facing ontological and methodological challenges. Because consumer socialization is a very dynamic process in time and space, with multiple agents and events operating simultaneously, it is an arduous task to isolate the phenomenon for theoretical construction with the beginning and end being delimited. Socialization has parts that are more explicit; it also has others that are more unconscious and that cannot therefore be easily verbalized by consumers, which makes it difficult to obtain information about them (EKSTRÖM, 2006; MOSCHIS, 2007). Capturing this dynamism in the socialization process is the challenge required to revitalize consumer behavior theories and bring them closer to real life. Some points may facilitate this endeavor as the discussion about the theoretical currents applied to the field in order to provide support to studies of consumer socialization. It is necessary to emphasize that the proposal to combine the life course perspective with the theoretical lens of assemblage is not intended to limit other possibilities for research in consumer socialization, but rather to foster interest in the subject.

### Life course perspective

According to Moschis (2007), marketing researchers have already understood that previous experiences accumulated by consumers shape their behavior patterns in the later stages of life, thus pointing to a theoretical gap in the investigation of this connection in consumption-related issues over the life course. Some papers in lifecycle research, for example, suffered from difficulties related to the chronological age of participants, something which is not always aligned with their identities and lifestyles. Moreover, life's events do not occur in a homogeneous, orderly, predictable, and desirable way, which makes it difficult to devise theoretical models (DEBERT, 2004).

The life course perspective (ELDER JR., JOHNSON and CROSNOE, 2003; MOSCHIS, 2007) addresses these difficulties by emphasizing the study of transition events that generate changes in terms of social roles and/or behaviors of the object of analysis, whether an individual, a family, or another community. Some of these events are socially expected in the life trajectory; examples include university graduation, early professional life, marriage, childbirth and retirement. Other unwanted events may occur unexpectedly, such as bankruptcy, illness, constraints and losses of beloved ones; or due to life changes, such as in cases of divorce, change of country of residence, and changes of profession (EKSTRÖM, 2006; MOSCHIS, 2007).

As a result of the changes linked to transition events, tensions can arise due to, for example, the lack of knowledge and ability to face the new situation; the emotions triggered in the process; and the certain mismatch between previously entrenched practices and meanings that now make little sense in the consumer's new context. To cope with these tensions, the consumer begins to adopt adaptation strategies. These strategies can lead, for example, to the construction of a different social identity or to the discovery of new ways of dealing with stress and personal development. Concomitant changes in habits, practices, rituals, people with whom to interact, forms of communication, competences, among other aspects, may occur. This set of changes and consequences may entail participation in a system of socialization that is different from the original one. Therefore, coping strategies involve learning (conscious and intentional or otherwise), new capacities, new behaviors, and new consumption dispositions (MOSCHIS, 2007).

This focus of the life course perspective in transition can facilitate observation of the adaptation strategies that consumers adopt, as well as the consequences in terms of new practices, identities, capacities and dispositions. The centrality of the change also helps to understand the agents of socialization in operation and how they moderate these strategies of

adaptation. Thus, the socialization process becomes more evident allowing the study of its actors, mechanisms and stages (MOSCHIS, 2007).

The life course model (MOSCHIS, 2007) departs from a change trigger-event that will cascade in the consumer the physical, social and emotional demands that generate the following adaptation processes: (a) new social roles and identities through socialization processes; (b) strategies to deal with the stress involved and (c) need to acquire knowledge and skills to develop their human capital. All these processes are moderated by contextual variables that encompass culture, gender, and family composition, among others. Consequently, the consumer changes their practices, meanings, identities, capacities and dispositions. The idea is to understand which mechanisms operate to relate the prior life conditions and experiences to the consequences (MOSCHIS, 2007).

Although the model (MOSCHIS, 2007) emphasizes socialization in relation to new social roles and identity perceptions, we can – in a broader perspective – also investigate how social interactions influence the ways of dealing with stress and the acquisition of knowledge and competencies, within a given context of consumption. In his paper, Moschis (2007) gives examples of studies on the development of compulsive behaviors or addictions in response to stress (HIRSCHMAN, 1992; O'GUINN and FABER, 1989) and on the development of consumption knowledge and capacities (JOHN, 1999).

According to Moschis (2007), the life course perspective can help firms understand better the needs created by particular events so they can tailor their products and services. It can also increase awareness of the implications of consumers' previous experiences and future expectations. Finally, it may be useful for public authorities to identify the risks of developing harmful behavior or vulnerabilities related to consumption.

The foundations of the life course perspective lie in sociology. Predominantly quantitative in approach, it derives from techniques in event history analysis (EHA) (MAYER, 2009; MOSCHIS, 2007; 2012). However, the theoretical body seeks to integrate diverse disciplines, including anthropology, demography, economics, psychology (MAYER, 2009) and marketing (MOSCHIS, 2007). Some studies in the CCT tradition, where the qualitative approach predominates, have already emphasized consumers' moments of transition, albeit without explicitly adhering to the life course perspective. As examples of works that approach the life course perspective are the studies by (a) McAlexander, Schouten and Roberts (1993) that use a divorcee cohort to study consumption behavior relationships; (b) Schau, Gilly and Wolfinbarger (2009), who use retirement as a delimiting factor for their study; and (c) Epp, Schau and Price (2014), who investigated families that coped with great distances between members.

We believe that the life course perspective can be useful as a support for the choice of context and cohort to be used in consumer socialization research in order to deal with the ontological challenges of the phenomenon. While recognizing that learning occurs incrementally throughout the consumer's life, the choice of a moment of transition in which the consumers abruptly deconstructs and rebuilds their consumption practices, capacities, and dispositions may help illuminate theories about the learning processes they use. We believe that investigating the consumer socialization according to a cultural approach can be more effective if the life course perspective cohort is complemented through the optics of assemblage theory, as presented below. Following our proposal, with this combination we intend to (i) emphasize the relational and procedural character of the consumer socialization phenomenon; (ii) value the role played by materiality in consumption; and (iii) account for the dynamism present in contemporaneity.

## Assemblage theory

The bases of assemblage theory were conceived in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, albeit in a fragmented and disorganized fashion. Manuel DeLanda (2006) subsequently organized the theoretical corpus and produced some advances. Nail (2017) prefers to refer to DeLanda's work as a '*neoassemblage*' since he claims the author did not strictly follow the original concepts of Deleuze and Guattari.

The basic idea of assemblage lies in an association between heterogeneous elements, including humans and non-humans, that interact and can couple or decouple. The parts are not fused in a static totality; to the contrary: there is a characteristic

dynamism in these interactions. Thus, this is a social ontology that seeks to understand the form and meaning of elements of the world through interactions with other elements, thereby capturing the complexity of these interactions (DELANDA, 2006). Within the sociology of science, the assemblage is seen as close to the actor-network theory (ANT) (HILL, CANNIFORD and MOL, 2014).

An assemblage presents elements with various material and expressive capacities. These capacities cover a wide spectrum from the purely material to the purely expressive. A conversation, a family, a community or a consumption practice: all of these can be viewed as assemblages. For example, in a conversation, the human bodies and the physical space are predominantly material elements; whereas the facial expressions, dress, and content itself may be more expressive (DELANDA, 2006).

Each element or part has its own capacities. However, in an assemblage, the interaction between the parts reveals emergent properties. Thus, the whole acquires its own properties that are irreducible. For example, the author mentioned that hydrogen and oxygen exist independently of each other, yet when combined, produce water (DELANDA, 2006). Another example highlighted by Deleuze is a composition with a horse, a weapon and a warrior that produces a power for fighting and conquest. When we decouple the warrior, and couple an inexperienced person, this emergent property disappears. In this case they do not form an assemblage, but rather a collection of elements because none of the elements increases the other's potential. Thus, according to DeLanda (2006), emergent properties arise from the constant interaction between their parts. In these interactions, the parts exercise the capacities they possess. Without these capacities and interactions these properties disappear.

Thus, the relations between the parts of an assemblage are regarded as external, given that they can be decomposed. The opposite occurs in the case of interior relations, such that the parts do not have an independent existence. In relation to assemblages' studies, the emphasis is on relations of exteriority through the analysis of recurring pattern of connections and the properties of these connections, and not on the attributes of elements (DELANDA, 2006).

When conversations and other social encounters are repeated with the same participants, longer-lasting social entities tend to emerge (DELANDA, 2006). These social entities, encompassing networks, families, communities, organizations and countries, among others, provide resources to and limitations on their parties; moreover, they cannot be reduced to the people that comprise them. For example, different resources, such as protection, emotional help, and support, may be available to members in a community. On the other hand, limitations may also exist, such as news about non-honored commitments which circulates and shapes the behavior of the parties involved (DELANDA, 2006).

In these social entities, territorialization processes occur that brighten the spatial limits of existing territories or increase the homogeneity of an assemblage. Territorialization is reinforced by habitual repetition. One example mentioned is segregation processes, which exclude some people from a social organization. On the other hand, any process that destabilizes spatial limits or increases heterogeneity is named deterritorialization, which happens when communication technologies cut out the physical presence. In addition to these processes, the entities may have their own codes that further refine their limits, or, on the other hand, may be more open to change in a decoded fashion (DELANDA, 2006).

Assemblage theory does not consider the existence of essences that define identity. DeLanda explains that "the identity of any assemblage at any level of scale is always the product of a process (territorialization and in some cases, coding) and it always precarious, since other processes (deterritorialization and decoding) can destabilize it (DELANDA, 2006, p. 28)". In other words, the identity of the assemblage will be the configuration of the territorialization and coding parameters (DELANDA, 2006). And this configuration changes over time, thus emphasizing the fluidity and dynamism of socio-material collectivities. The personal identity can be deterritorialized due to a loss of balance or to an increase in an element's capacities. Habits and routines are impacted by the acquisition of new capacities. Thus, new capacities increase the chance of the elements entering new assemblages. In a contingent way, the components adapt to the new developments (EPP and VELAGALETI, 2014; DELANDA, 2006).

According to Nail (2017), when analyzing an assemblage, the focus must be on the events and on the relationships between the elements and not on the elements themselves. Key questions would investigate aspects concerning how, where, when, and from what point of view did the events occur; what the assemblage is able to do; what are the changes underway; among



others. The author points out that we can never assume that the assemblage is a final product because it is constantly changing; it is always connected to a network of social and historical process flows that must be understood.

In the field of consumption studies, assemblage theory has become increasingly important as a lens to understand consumption phenomena from a relational and dynamic perspective. At the 2014 North American Conference of the Association for Consumer Research, the most important entity in the field of consumer behavior, a special session was organized so that culture and consumption researchers — early adopters of the use of assemblage — could present the main concepts and directions of research. The papers by Arnould and Thompson (2015) and Casotti and Suarez (2016) reflect on the paths followed by the consumer culture theory (CCT) tradition and highlight the trends and possibilities for contributions of using assemblage in the field. Recent studies also consolidate the wide acceptance and relevance of this theory to the field of consumer studies (CANNIFORD and SHANKAR, 2013; EPP, SCHAU and PRICE, 2014; EPP and VELAGALETI, 2014; HILL, CANNIFORD and MOL, 2014; SCHOLZ and HANDELMAN, 2014).

Hill, Canniford and Mol (2014) highlight the contributions that relational ontologies can offer to the field of marketing and consumption studies. According to the authors these relational ontologies enable marketing researchers to investigate the impacts of material culture in consumption. The meanings, uses and values of objects are not considered to be essential or fixed, but rather emerge from the relations between the elements in assemblages. In other words, the value of the object is defined and re-defined through material changes and practices that are symbolic, discursive and political (HILL, CANNIFORD and MOL, 2014). An example of this aspect was Epp and Price's study (2010) of the history of a family dining table and the changes in its use and meanings over time.

Another point highlighted by the authors is that relational theories also bring to the fore the powers circulating in the network and the efforts of different stakeholders to legitimize or delegitimize practices and meanings, seeking out more followers for their network. In addition, they also point out possible controversies involved in this process (HILL, CANNIFORD and MOL, 2014). Lastly, another contribution of relational ontologies highlighted by Hill, Canniford and Mol (2014) is the view that agency is distributed among the different elements of the network, blurring the boundaries between the consumer and material culture. However, this does not mean that any element of the assemblage has agency per se. According to the authors, here, agency is not seen as an action or an intention of a sovereign actor, but rather is established as an action and intentionality that emerges from a collective network of these human and non-human elements.

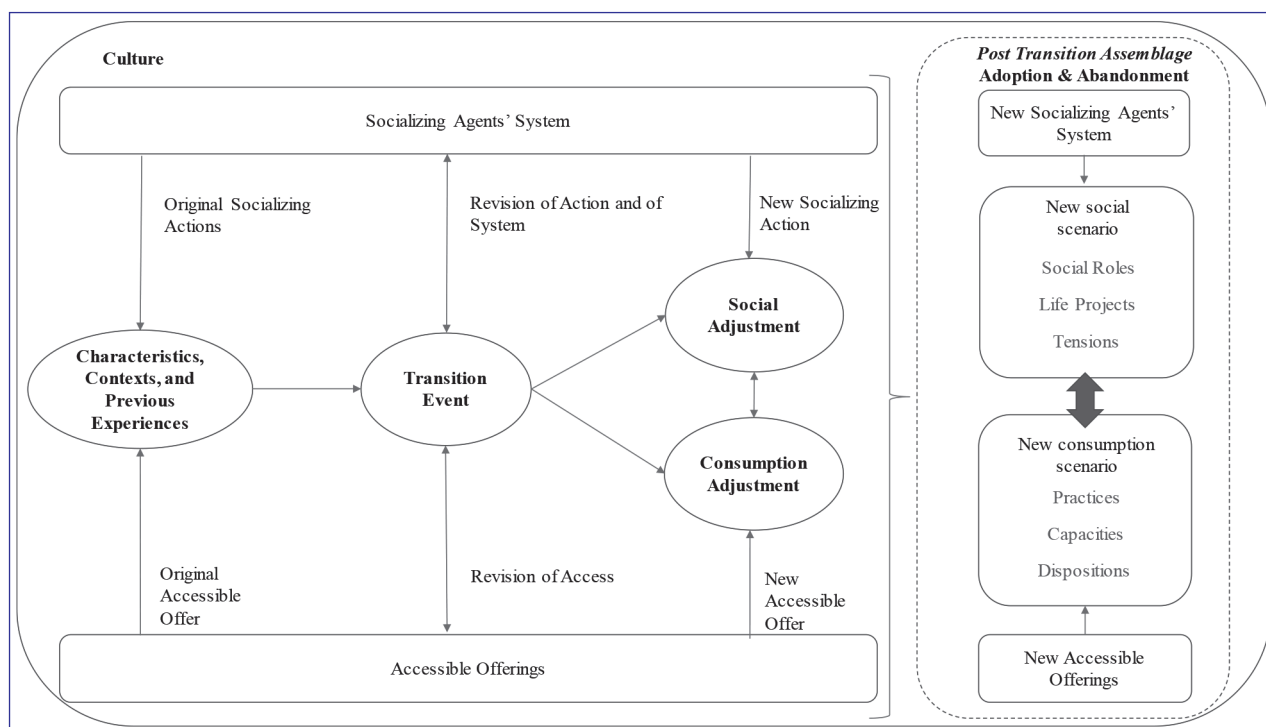
We note here our belief in the production of emergent effects on the structuring practices, capacities, and dispositions of the social role of the consumer, using the lens of assemblage theory. This lens allows us to see the phenomenon of the socialization of consumption as a dynamic network of socializing influences, with human and nonhuman elements, with their own capacities and potentialities, that couple and decouple over the course of time in processes of changes and adaptations. Assemblage appears as a possible alternative to produce knowledge vis-à-vis the deterministic theories on socialization: it provides existing research with flexibility, while at the same time enabling elucidation of the connections with circulating cultural discourses.

## Conceptual framework of adult consumer socialization

Based on a review of the literature, we developed the following conceptual framework, which seeks to integrate concepts of the life course perspective (MOSCHIS, 2007) and of the social ontology of assemblage (DELANDA, 2006) to investigate consumer socialization in adult life.

Figure 2

Conceptual framework of adult consumer socialization



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The basis of this framework, which draws on the life course perspective (MOSCHIS, 2007), is to consider the transition event as a specific investigation cohort or as an incident that reveals the dynamics of the socialization process. Although the process of socialization is constant in time, the transition event can trigger different types of change, altering elements of the assemblage and thereby rendering transparent the ontological contours of the phenomenon. The new formed assemblage continues to transform itself indefinitely, which thus suggests a framework focused on the investigation of the processes and not on the outcome of the socialization itself. Thus, the present framework's central axis is the transition event, which is preceded by a configuration of characteristics, contexts and previous experiences and generates a new assemblage with distinct configurations and elements in both the social and more specifically the consumption spheres. The main elements comprising the framework are explored below.

**Transition event** – Originates profound changes in an individual's life and a great flow of emotions and meanings in interactions. These events can have positive socio-cultural meanings – related to achievements, for example – or negative and stigmatizing connotations. These meanings can also undergo a major process of change in society, as in the case of retirement. Formerly thought of as a state of old age and uselessness, retirement in some cultures comes to be seen as a fruitful period of spare time, financial stability and freedom for new projects (SCHAU, GILLY and WOLFINBARGER, 2009). The transition event can be influenced by the consumer's characteristics, contexts and experiences, by the action of socializing agents, and by the offer of products and services accessed in the market. At the same time, the event may cause changes in the structure of the socializing agent system and accessible offerings.

**Characteristics, contexts and previous experiences** – As with the life course approach (MOSCHIS, 2007), we draw attention in the conceptual framework to the connection between individual characteristics, context, and previous experiences to the consumers' transition event. Psychological characteristics and characteristics of contexts such as gender, social class and ethnicity, amongst other, can influence the event and the way the individual copes with it. Previous experiences may provide evidence of learnings and references on how to cope with the situation, which would be different for those who have not faced similar experiences previously.

**Socializing agents' system** – We add the consumer's socio-material reality to the blocks we refer to as socializing agents' system and accessible offerings. At the top, the system of socializing agents includes agents and contexts capable of exerting some kind of social influence on consumer behavior; see the web in Figure 1. Sources of influence are varied and include financial resources, desired or undesired similarity, expertise, amongst others (SHAH and MITTAL, 1997). The conceptual framework views these agents as a set forming a system that fosters a dynamic socializing action throughout the individual's life. However, the transition event may cause the consumer to review relations with socializing agents, possibly generating changes in their relative importance in this system. This may occur, for example, when the transition event has meanings that are controversial in the eyes of the consumer and agents. If religion has exercised a positive influence during the consumer's life and yet they feel discriminated after getting divorced, they may resort to other agents to help them make the changes in their social lives. Intensity of social contact, experiences and ideologies of the socializing agents vis-à-vis the transition can be moderating factors of their influence.

**Accessible offerings** – Accessible offerings encompass products, services, ideas and experiences that circulate in society (via the market or exchange and sharing) and to which the consumer has access throughout life. The consumer has access to a limited set of possibilities, since they have to cope with restrictions of various types, including geographical, temporal, economic, technological, and health, among others. When a transition event occurs, many limitations can also change and modify access to offers, such as in the case of a divorce that triggers a drop in the economic standard and the need for a change in housing. On the other hand, the transition event can also expand access to offers. These effects, in turn, will change the consumer's market possibilities, resulting in transitory or permanent changes in access to offers.

**Adjustments** – Adjustments are the consumer's processes of adaptation in relation to the transition event. The conceptual framework presents the adjustments divided into two interrelated blocks, one predominantly social and the other focused on the consumption aspects. The new structure of the system of socializing agents, when in contact with a new reality in terms of the possibilities of accessible offers, influences the individual in their use of strategies to adapt to the new situation with reflexes in the social and consumption dimensions. The adjustments are presented in more detail in the dotted area to the right of the conceptual schematic. Consumers engage in building a new social role for themselves while abandoning the previous one. Similarly, they engage in new life projects and endure new tensions while abandoning other projects that are no longer meaningful.

Regarding tensions specifically, the very adaptation strategy itself can sometimes generate additional ones and require new minimizing adaptations. Epp and Velagaleti (2014) illustrates the reality of parents who work and need to purchase childcare services such as a nanny and day care, for example. These authors use the central concepts of assemblage to show how the entry of a new element in the family composition gives rise to tensions, such as parents feeling threatened in terms of control over childcare, a loss of emotional connection, and substitutability of the parents' role by others. To cope with these emergent tensions, consumers adopt tension-minimizing strategies, such as customizing care, monitoring, scheduling, or managing activities that will only be undertaken by the parents.

All these adjustments in relation to the individual's social role, life projects and tensions can have reflexes in consumption and can, at the same time, be influenced by consumption. As a result of a transition event, behaviors of adoption and abandonment can occur in consumption vis-à-vis practices, capacities and dispositions. The consumer may seek to engage in practices more aligned with their new social role or in tension-minimizing practices that may, in turn, entail learning new things, thereby increasing their capacity for consumption. Note that the expression "dispositions" in this framework refers to consumer attitudes, tastes and preferences.

**Post transition assemblage** – Even recognizing that before and during the transition event assemblages are also present, we chose to simplify the representation of the conceptual framework by highlighting (dotted area) the rearrangement of the elements of the new assemblage (DELANDA, 2006) after the transition event through the adoption of new elements and abandonment of previous ones. The assemblage formed after the transition event keeps its fluid, transitory character. Therefore, this assemblage is not permanent and will continue to undergo changes and reflect the dynamics of the consumer's life itself. The framework's main aim is not to focus on the final result of a transition but, rather, on the flows and adjustments of processes, relations and properties among the elements involved in the assemblages.

**Culture** – Culture serves as the backdrop to the conceptual framework, since it affects all elements and processes. In the culture, discourses dynamically circulate about the transition event, gender, age, social classes and socializing agents, with

ideological and normalizing content that gives them their own meanings. The existence of cultural normalization provides the consumer with parameters for all behaviors and relations described in the framework. These parameters can influence both in the sense of seeking to adapt to the environment as well as in the sense of generating tensions and stimulating the creative strategies of the consumers to negotiate and solve them. Thus, from the relations between culture, consumer, socializing agent, and the market's products, services, experiences and ideas, connected in an assemblage, that flows of meanings of objects will emerge.

The main idea of the framework is to map elements, interrelationships and critical processes (MILES, HUBERMAN and SALDAÑA, 2014) in order to raise the awareness of researchers and stimulate studies, as we will discuss below.

## Discussion and proposal for operationalization

The conceptual framework presented is an invitation to researchers to investigate the phenomenon of consumer socialization in adult life in a way that contrasts with previous studies. The proposal encompasses a heterogeneous composition of human and nonhuman elements related in a network immersed in culture. In this sense, the proposal changes the choice of cohorts as the object to be studied, the methodological resources, and the units relevant to the analysis. The conceptual framework is consistent with the belief that the tradition of CCT (ARNOULD and THOMPSON, 2005; 2007; 2015; CASOTTI and SUAREZ, 2016) can provide fertile ground for the construction of theories through an understanding of the mechanisms, dialogs, negotiations and meanings involved in culturally contextualized socialization processes. The CCT approach, with the qualitative methodology indicated in this paper, contrasts with the positivist studies predominant in the field of socialization that focus on stages of cognitive development and mental information processing by individuals (JOHN, 1999). Based on our conceptual framework, Box 1 summarizes our suggestions regarding the operationalization of the research.

The focus on the transition event, absorbed from the life course perspective (ELDER JR., JOHNSON e CROSNOE, 2003; MORTIMER and SHANAHAN, 2006; MOSCHIS, 2007), works in the proposed framework as an organizing resource to deal with the difficulties of establishing ontological contours of socialization, as raised by Ekström (2006), bringing a longitudinal perspective. In addition, the choice of the period 'adult life' underscores the occurrence of the phenomenon beyond childhood and adolescence. This choice is in line with the fact that life events no longer follow a determined and rigid cycle (EKSTRÖM, 2006; ELDER JR., JOHNSON and CROSNOE, 2003; MORTIMER and SHANAHAN, 2006; MOSCHIS, 2007).

The conceptual framework allows the inclusion of more dynamism in the investigation of consumer socialization, and greater focus on the processes instead of the results. The elements involved have their own characteristics and can couple and decouple due to events over time leading to emergent properties. For example, the interaction between a consumer and a new product may lead to new consumption capacities, dispositions, and practices, thus altering the original assemblage. Regarding the focus on processes, the framework reveals the following promising candidates for research: connections between culture and socializing assemblage; review of the socializing action and the system of agents; and review of access to offers, social changes, and changes focused on consumption.

As proposed, we need to broaden our view to include the multiple socializing agents that form a network of influence in the life of a consumer. This dynamic of the conceptual framework engenders a cross-section that shows dialogs with these socializing agents and leads to an understanding of their influences on consumer behavior in a way that more closely resembles the actual complexity. This multiplicity of agents was not found in previous consumer surveys, where studies with only one or two socializing agents predominate. Transition events can trigger processes of revision of the system of socializing agents, i.e., some socializing influences may lose relevance for the consumer, while others strengthen in the face of the event. The symbolic load of the transition event in culture or some kind of ideological load of the socializing agents may also influence this revision.

Another important point is the leading role of the market played by the socializing process that is captured by the conceptual framework. The market manifests as products, services, and advertisements, among other forms. This materiality can play a socializing role when it triggers profound changes in the role of the consumer. The view of the assemblage, which contemplates both human and nonhuman elements connected in a network, favors the investigation of the role of materiality in the process and of the understanding of the emergent properties of the connections with this materiality. In addition, the framework draws attention to the fact that the transition event can cause varying limitations in consumption or, indeed, result in the consumer having greater access to market offers. Such movements shape adjustments conditions in the social role of consumer.

Our conceptual framework seeks to support reflections in consumer socialization using a different set of optics than in previous studies. In devising the layout of the framework, we face difficulties to represent the movements involved in the process. We seek to offer a broad – albeit not exhaustive – perspective on the phenomenon of consumer socialization; but we note that, alternatively, the framework may be worked with a focus on a particular aspect, at the investigator’s discretion. We invite other researchers in consumer culture, and perhaps other areas of knowledge, to contribute to the theoretical and empirical trajectory of consumer socialization in adult life. As suggestions for future research, we highlight transition events in contexts involving new contemporary socializing dynamics, such as new family arrangements, social mobility, anti-consumption, and gender diversity.

**Box 1**

**Operationalizing the conceptual framework**

Elements of the conceptual framework	Proposal for operationalization
Characteristics, contexts, and previous experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use the narrative of life history to understand main events, actors and contexts.</li> </ul>
Transition event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choose a cohort as the object of study that represents deeply transformative events for consumers.</li> <li>• Reflect on the appropriate period between the occurrence of the event and the data collection. The time elapsed must be enough to trigger transformations in the consumer’s life and awaken still vivid memories. We suggest carrying out some interviews as a test.</li> <li>• Understand the triggers of the event and the socializing agents involved.</li> <li>• Design a longitudinal script for the interviews (and/or for participant observation), exploring life story before, during and after the event. If necessary, conduct the interview in several steps.</li> <li>• Use photos or other resources to stimulate the consumer’s recollections.</li> </ul>
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyze cultural representations comprising discourses circulating in the culture about the transition event and the social role.</li> <li>• Search multidisciplinary contributions (history, anthropology, psychology, sociology and philosophy).</li> <li>• Investigate processes of interconnection of the culture with the socializing assemblage.</li> </ul>
System of socializing agents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyze cultural representations of agents.</li> <li>• Interview several assemblage actors.</li> <li>• In the script, explore the influences and changes of agents before, during and after the transition event.</li> <li>• Analyze actors, socializing influences, interests and powers that circulate in the network.</li> </ul>
Accessible offerings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the script, explore the restrictions to, or increases in, access to offers vis-à-vis the transition event.</li> <li>• Understand how access to offers can shape social and consumption changes.</li> </ul>
Social Adjustments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the script, explore the social roles, life projects, and tensions before, during, and after the transition event.</li> <li>• Understand strategies adopted by consumers in social settings.</li> </ul>
Consumption Adjustments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the script, explore consumption practices, capabilities and dispositions before, during and after the events.</li> <li>• Understand strategies adopted by consumers in adjustments in consumption.</li> </ul>

Source: Elaborated by the authors.



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