



# Making a Living. Consumption Dynamics in Poor Neighborhoods in Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro from a Female Perspective

Ganarse la vida. Dinámicas de consumo en barrios pobres de Buenos Aires y Río de Janeiro desde la perspectiva de las mujeres

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**Abstract:** This article explores the social implications and meanings associated with consumer spending on private goods and the circulation of different forms of money in poor neighborhoods. The research is based on a qualitative methodology with in-depth interviews with women heads of household in a poor neighborhood in the city of Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro. The research shows that, contrary to common criticisms about poor management and lack of foresight in low-income sectors, families employ careful planning to manage their resources, navigating contradictory expectations of thrift and economic sufficiency, even in the face of unforeseen events.

**Keywords:** Poverty; Consumption; Money; Status; Goods; Buenos Aires; Rio de Janeiro.

**Resumen:** Este artículo explora las implicaciones sociales y los significados asociados al consumo de bienes privados y a la circulación de distintas formas de dinero en los barrios pobres. La investigación se basa en una metodología cualitativa con entrevistas en profundidad a mujeres jefas de hogar de un barrio urbano-informal en la ciudad de Buenos Aires y en Río de Janeiro. La investigación demuestra que, contrariamente a las críticas habituales sobre la mala gestión y la falta de previsión en los sectores de bajos ingresos, las familias emplean una planificación cuidadosa para gestionar sus recursos, combinando expectativas

contradictorias de ahorro y racionalidad económica, incluso ante acontecimientos imprevistos.

**Palabras clave:** Pobreza; Consumo; Dinero; Estatus; Bienes; Buenos Aires; Rio de Janeiro.

## INTRODUCTION: THEORETICAL APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Consumption and money are complex social phenomena that not only have a material and objective dimension but also a symbolic and relational one. As Zelizer explains: “money is neither culturally neutral nor socially anonymous” (Zelizer 2011, 34). In contexts of high inequality, access to certain goods takes on particular significance, reflecting both household management practices and strategies of resistance against economic hardships. This article addresses two key questions: What significance does access to private goods acquire in these contexts? How do women heads of household manage household finances?

Classic approaches have established dichotomous or incomplete views on the subject, either by emphasizing its rational and instrumental dimension (literature linked to traditional economic theories), or as a factor of domination and alienation (literature associated with critical theory).<sup>1</sup> These perspectives correspond to ideological positions that assess and judge the material realm: the more conservative positions point to the “irrationality” of consumption choices and the hierarchization of spending (especially when it comes to lower-income sectors). The more “progressive” ones denounce an increasing process of individualization and commodification of social relationships. This research moves away from these reductionist views and focuses on how consumption and money management practices are organized within these specific contexts. It aims to demonstrate how these practices challenge moralistic discourses and highlight strategies of planning and saving that defy expectations regarding the consumption patterns of lower-income and vulnerable sectors.

Studies on the sociology of consumption (Bourdieu 1979; Campbell 1994; McCracken 1988; Miller 1987; Slater 1997; Trentmann 2004; Warde 2005; among many others) have made valuable progress in overcoming utilitarian and moralistic biases by highlighting the symbolic meanings of goods, money, and consumption practices. Currently, within the field of sociological studies, analyses considering consumption beyond its material and objective dimension have proliferated, acknowledging its connection to economic, political, aesthetic, religious, and moral dimensions, among other aspects. As Thompson warns, economic relationships and practices are influenced by socially shared norms, values, and expectations under the notion of a “moral economy,” thus emphasizing the social process that consumption practices involve. This process—far from referring to an individual act—involves multiple actors and interrelates with other spheres of society (such as the state, the market, or other class-

<sup>1</sup> For theoretical approaches and debates on consumption, see Sassatelli (2012); Featherstone (1991).

es), that influence and mutually update each other (Zelizer 2005). Thus, consumption practices and the use of different forms of money imply a reflexive process of production and reproduction of social life, which leads us back to classical elements of social theory: on the one hand, to Bourdieu's notion of socially constituted practical sense and the concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu 2007); on the other, to Giddens' proposition of the duality of structure and the concept of recursivity (Giddens 1995). In line with this, the focus of analysis of this article is placed on practices and on the interpretations and meanings that individuals assign to them. Ariztía effectively captures the idea of practice as "an entity that analytically precedes the individual and the structure: both individual action and the capacity of institutions to shape the social world would result from the deployment of practices" (Ariztía 2017, 222).

Exploring the consumption practices enacted by individuals is relevant because through these practices it is possible to perceive how social reproduction strategies unfold in everyday life and how they interact with other spheres of society. "Practice theories comprehend non-instrumentalist notions of conduct, both observing the role of routine on the one hand, and emotion, embodiment and desire on the other" (Warde 2005, 136). Considering this, understanding the social meaning individuals attribute to acquiring goods, along with the institutional framework that objectifies them, is best achieved by situating them within their production context, connected to a specific environment, and distinct social and community relationships.

Zelizer refers to "earmarking money" as the social process by which different types of money are created, how individuals distinguish between classes of money, and how they attribute different uses based on that distinction. "Earmarking" refers to money treatments that indicate the nature of the relationship between the parties in a particular type of transaction. "Money is linked to a multitude of social relations rather than to individuals" (Zelizer 2011, 42). According to the author, the techniques of "earmarking" encompass three main types: 1. Money can assume different roles and meanings depending on how it is used, when it is used, and for what type of social relationship it is used. 2. The creation of specific means of exchange that are used in certain contexts or for certain specific purposes but may have little or no value outside of that context. 3. Transformation of non-monetary objects into means of exchange that acquire monetary value in certain contexts. As will be discussed later, the gender-based division of household expenditure; the utilization of third-party credit; and the acquisition of goods with money from social assistance (just to mention a few), exemplify this.

Local analyses also examine the idea of monetary circulation to explain how social and political relations develop concerning gender (Wilkie and Partenio 2010) or class (Wilkie and Figueiro 2020; Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2023), based on the ways individuals attribute uses and meanings to money. Money is managed and allocated based on various elements that go beyond a simple utilitarian cost-benefit calculation. This paper highlights three of the elements that influence how individuals calculate when consuming and earmarking money: household and family (domestic money management); indebtedness (borrowing and loaning practices); status and social standing (conspicuous spending).

The methodology used to analyze the meanings of consumption practices and the various forms that money takes is qualitative, based on fieldwork conducted in two low-income urban neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.<sup>2</sup> The research focuses on household income management strategies, decisions regarding the consumption of private goods, and the economic and relational choices involved. In this context, “strategies” refer to methods employed to manage income and expenses, practices of monetary saving, and the diverse use of financial instruments to acquire goods in both formal and informal commercial settings.

Despite the specificities of these neighborhoods in each country and their internal heterogeneity, informal settlements share common characteristics that enable comparative analysis. These include deficits in public service provision (e.g., electricity, sanitation, and waste collection); living conditions marked by high levels of informality (in employment, housing tenure, and service provision); irregular layouts and precarious construction; limited access to public transportation; socialization shaped by stigma and multiple vulnerabilities; insecurity; and reliance on social assistance programs, community networks, and civil or religious organizations.

Within the framework of growing popular consumption, the two cases provide insights into how this model manifests in the everyday lives of families from poor sectors.<sup>3</sup>

Fieldwork included participant observation and over 40 in-depth interviews, with participants selected through snowball sampling. Exclusively women were interviewed with the intention of exploring how purchasing and household income management decisions affect them. Additionally, in the case of social program beneficiaries, it is women who receive the money from state assistance. The observation and participation involved visiting various spaces of local consumption (such as local markets and soup kitchens, among others); attending events (local celebrations, recreational, sporting, and religious activities); and visiting institutions (religious and educational).

## DISCUSSION

### Domestic Money Management

Both in Rio de Janeiro and in Buenos Aires, we can observe that the money entering the household is perceived in various ways, and the use made in consumption expenses

<sup>2</sup> The names of the neighborhoods are withheld to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

<sup>3</sup> Many empirical studies have examined the process through which popular sectors have been integrated into the mass consumption market in the context of Latin America’s economic growth during the early decades of the 21st century (Pinheiro-Machado and Mury Scalco 2023; Wilkis and Figueiro 2020; Diaz Rosaenz 2017; Chauvel and Mattas 2008; among many others). The emphasis is placed not only on the significance of this process as a mechanism of social inclusion and recognition but also as a strategy for fostering national economic growth.

is related to this differentiated meaning. Thus, for example, women fulfill the role of managing household income by controlling expenses in areas typically associated with feminine tasks (such as food and childcare). This is reinforced by the fact that they are the recipients of subsidies from social programs.<sup>4</sup> In non-single-parent families money is marked, then, based on the distribution of tasks associated with gender roles. Many of the interviewees in both neighborhoods describe a division of responsibilities differentiated by type of expenditure, often aligned with traditional gender roles. As one respondent explained: “I tell my husband: you take care of the credits, and I’ll handle the food. I take care of the food, clothes, and those household things” (Interview 6, Buenos Aires). Similarly, another interviewee noted: “He pays for the TV subscription, internet, and electricity. I buy things from the market monthly” (Interview 38, Rio de Janeiro). These accounts highlight how financial management is often organized along gendered patterns, with women typically assuming responsibility for daily household expenses and men focusing on fixed or utility costs. As noted in other studies (see, for example, Hornes 2016), this division not only reflects practical considerations but also reinforces socially constructed expectations about women’s association with caregiving and domesticity and men’s alignment with infrastructure and financial stability.

There is a clear distinction between money earmarked as “reproductive,” associated with the role of women as household caretakers and recipients of social assistance funds, and money earmarked as “productive,” linked to the role of men as material providers in charge of services. The former is used for food expenses, cleaning products, and children’s clothing, while the latter is allocated for bill payments and debts. As mentioned before, incomes assume different roles depending on how it is used and for what purpose. To sustain and manage household income, a series of material and relational strategies are activated, where savings are downplayed, and consumption decisions are prioritized, considering the children as a primary concern. Another characteristic is the efforts made by mothers to “efficiently” balance work and family life.

In managing money for consumption associated with household reproduction and care, women employ various strategies and practices to reduce expenses. The most common approach is diversifying places of purchase. When it comes to acquiring household and food products, most women opt for diversifying their shopping venues. In the case of Buenos Aires, shopping is done at leading brand supermarkets and wholesalers (to a lesser extent due to their greater distance from the neighborhood and higher expenditure); popular supermarkets (frequented because of their proximity to the neighborhood, allowing daily purchases with discounted products and promo-

<sup>4</sup> Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programs are social protection initiatives that provide monetary subsidies to low-income families, typically mothers, contingent upon meeting specific conditions, such as enrolling children in school and attending regular health check-ups. According to the World Bank, these programs aim to alleviate short-term poverty while fostering long-term human capital development by improving education and health outcomes. Examples of prominent CCT programs include Argentina’s Asignación Universal por Hijo (AUH) and Brazil’s Bolsa Família. For further reading, see: Cecchini and Atuesta (2017).

tions); neighborhood stores (vegetable shops are the most prevalent within the neighborhood); and the neighborhood market (which offers fresh food, prepared meals, cleaning products, clothing, toys, and household items. Additionally, it is a space where many neighbors go to sell/buy second-hand products).

I shop weekly. I go to the “Día Descuento,”<sup>5</sup> I go to the greengrocer, to the fair. Sometimes, I go to the Central Market. If I can go by car, I go to the Central Market, but if not, I go to the greengrocer because if I take the bus, then I have to return by taxi, I can’t carry the bags, so I have to pay for a taxi, so it ends up being the same cost [...] I buy everything for a week, fruits, vegetables, and then at the supermarket, milk, everything more expensive (Interview 2, Buenos Aires).

When deciding where to make these types of purchases, the total cost is evaluated, considering not only the price but also other factors such as transportation, time invested, and the price-to-quality ratio of the products. Especially in the case of Rio de Janeiro, where the communities are often located on the hillsides of the city, public transport only goes to certain limits, so access is more difficult. In this context, the cost of food and household products involves calculations that extend beyond price, incorporating factors like time and convenience. As one interviewee explained: If “I come back carrying bags, my son calls an Uber that comes up here. The other day it was R\$17 compared to the R\$35 a taxi charges. With air conditioning and all, it drops me off at the same place as a taxi, and costs less” (Interview 36, Rio de Janeiro).

The older interviewees mentioned having a lot of difficulties carrying their purchases up and down and relying on their children who have cars, or in the case of those who are brave enough, use motorcycle-taxis. The difficulty and cost involved in carrying construction materials or heavy and large items like appliances also add an additional cost to the initial price of those products since they must pay extra to have them delivered to their homes. Additionally, as expressed by the person in charge of the residents’ association in the neighborhood, one of the main functions of the organization is to receive the products that neighbors buy, which, due to security and accessibility reasons, stores refuse to deliver to individual homes: “We have some troubles when we buy some things. Because the delivery only goes up to a certain point, from there, there are only hallways, and we need to figure it out. For example, construction materials only reach that point down there” (Interview 24, Rio de Janeiro).

Moreover, families reduce part of their expenses—especially in areas related to food and clothing—when they have community support provided by state or private associations, or through family ties. In the case of Buenos Aires, public schools provide meals “Everything is very expensive. Thank God the girls [referring to her granddaughters] started all-day school and eat there” (Interview 3, Buenos Aires), and soup kitchens expanded within the neighborhood and offer meals during the day or

<sup>5</sup> “Día Descuento” is a discount supermarket chain in Argentina that primarily targets low- and middle-income consumers.

provisions to attendees “The soup kitchens within the neighborhood help you out. At night, you bring the food, at noon the kids go to pick up the meal. So, you have food for lunch and dinner” (Interview 6, Buenos Aires). These supports are interpreted as saving mechanisms.

The testimonies show how the most common practices to reduce these types of expenses (buying in bulk or diversifying the places of purchase) are combined with others made possible by the existence of associative and community entities, such as soup kitchens that operate with government support or the local church managing and distributing donations among the most vulnerable residents. These practices are often seen as cost-cutting measures. Consequently, the idea of saving money is not centered on gaining money but rather on minimizing expenditure, particularly concerning items like food, clothing, and household maintenance.

## Borrowing and Loaning Practices

When money is used for the acquisition of durable consumer goods such as household appliances, various forms of financing and credit come into play. The chosen modality depends significantly on the formal or informal labor status of the family members, primarily because this determines the type of credit accessible to them. In cases where they have banked incomes (typically stemming from formal employment), credit cards tend to be the most utilized instrument, with interest rates and maintenance costs contingent upon the issuing entity. Additionally, in numerous instances, credit card payments coincide with consumption promotion programs such as the “Ahora 12” plan in Argentina which facilitates monthly installment purchases at participating retailers.

When families face limited income, lack formal labor market integration, or have no access to banking services (all typical factors in the study context), they resort to two types of mechanisms to access credit. One involves the formal commercial circuit, while the other relies on informal networks based on family or community ties. Within the formal market, they turn to financing plans provided by specific retail chains (mostly dealing in household appliances and sports apparel) and seek cash loans. As stated by one of the interviewees in Buenos Aires: “The big debt I have is the TV I bought for myself [...] I’m paying the installments of the payment plan that ‘Compumundo’<sup>6</sup> offers, 18 installments” (Interview 3, Buenos Aires). This is also the case in Rio de Janeiro:

Right now, I don’t have a credit card. I had one until it went bust. I also loaned the card and ended up with a lot of debt. I had to buy some things, it became difficult, and I couldn’t manage to pay, so I can’t have it anymore. When I need something, I borrow money and

<sup>6</sup> Compumundo is a retail chain specializing in electronics, computers, and accessories, offering a range of products at competitive prices.



then go and buy it. I'm paying for the phone I got for my son. I'm on the ninth installment, paying 70 reales each in 15 installments (Interview 36, Rio de Janeiro).

The widespread availability of consumer credit through various channels (traditional banks, stores offering instant loans, proprietary credit cards, mutual associations) has enabled astonishing access to various consumer goods. However, the “debt money” represents the existence of a poorly regulated and controlled market with very high costs for these low-income families. The high interest rates they pay for the financed products they acquire, coupled with increasingly large levels of indebtedness, disrupt household finances. The risks to which families are exposed are intensified due to the fragility of the structures on which these strategies are based. Unstable or informal jobs, the unpredictability of emergency situations, and uncertainty about the country's political and economic situation combine in such a way that risk is a latent factor with which they live daily.

With “Efectivo Sí,” my husband withdrew cash. He didn't make payments for three or four months until they seized it. And before being with me, there were two previous seizures at “Casa del Deporte.” He had to contact many financial institutions and refinance everything in several installments, a huge mess (Interview 7, Buenos Aires).<sup>7</sup>

The deployment of diverse strategies for acquiring goods along with the proliferation of multiple financing channels and access to credit results in escalating levels of household indebtedness. While on one hand, financing possibilities enable access to products that would otherwise be unattainable, on the other hand, the conditions under which this occurs and the fragility of the social structures upon which families rely for their daily sustenance make indebtedness an increasingly pressing issue. Chang (2016) coined the term “financialization of poverty” to refer to the financial indebtedness that “has thereby become a generic class trait of rapidly increasing proportion of the economically precarious or surplus population who are frequently or chronically deprived of even very basic means of social reproduction” (Chang 2016, 19). In a scenario of high instability coupled with the low quality of state-provided social services, the basic conditions required for social reproduction increasingly rely on community networks and family ties.

It is important to note that, in many cases, beneficiaries of state subsidies—whether through conditional cash transfer programs or other social assistance schemes—have become “credit subjects.” The regularity of these payments often serves as sufficient collateral to access personal loans. This phenomenon highlights a shift in which financialization integrates popular sectors into the expansion of consumer markets through

<sup>7</sup> “Efectivo Si” is a retail chain in Argentina offering credit services and cash loans to low-income consumers. Credit companies like this are particularly significant due to their widespread penetration in popular sectors and the high interest rates they charge. “Casa del Deporte” is an Argentine sports retail store specializing in the sale of sports equipment, clothing, and accessories.



the link between financing and social inclusion politics. Authors such as Gago and Mezzadra (2015) have pointed out the growing indebtedness of these sectors, suggesting that the expansion of credit access not only facilitates consumption but also reorganizes social and economic relationships. From some critical perspectives, this process seems to reflect a shift in distributive conflicts, historically associated with the labor-productive sphere, toward the domestic-reproductive sphere, now tied to the financial market.

Therefore, it is indebtedness that reinforces vulnerability and inequality. Due to the conditions in accessing the credit market, the interest paid by these families is much higher than that paid by those who have access to financial instruments controlled and regulated by the state. This disparity in access translates into many of the goods they acquire having a higher final cost, making them more expensive. This also reflects the fragility of both the family and occupational structures upon which consumption strategies are based. This fragility increases the risk of missed payments (whether in commercial or familial debt scenarios). For families with unstable, precarious, and informal jobs, the unpredictability of emergency situations and the macroeconomic conditions (especially concerning inflation, which is a unanimous concern among all interviewees due to rising prices and loss of purchasing power) converge in a manner where risk becomes an underlying element. It coexists with them on a daily basis and integrates into their financial management routines.

Together with access to credit through the formal channels previously discussed, there are other ways to obtain financing for purchasing goods or to have “pocket” money (cash). This includes credit provided by family networks or trusted relationships among neighbors. This highlights that many of the instruments used to finance consumption acquire a significance that surpasses the purely individual as they become incorporated into family and community life, enabling access to goods based on kinship ties and trust (Stillerman 2013). Several interviews highlight this: “For my nephew’s birthday, they ask me to buy him a new cell phone with my credit card” (Interview 12, Buenos Aires). Also, in Rio de Janeiro these practices are very usual: “We buy in cash unless it’s a very big thing, then we use my mom’s credit card and pay in installments. But only for that” (Interview 35, Rio de Janeiro).

In addition to the use of credit from third parties or interpersonal loans, there is a saving practice among the neighborhood residents called “circuitos” following the scheme Geertz termed as “rotating credit association” in 1962. It refers to a type of association functioning as a device through which “traditionalistic forms of social relationship are mobilized so as to fulfill non-traditionalistic economic functions [...] [It] is thus an institution that fits into community patterns and yet aims at planned and ‘goal-directed’ savings” (Geertz 1962, 242). In the case of the “circles” in Buenos Aires, this arrangement is adopted and organized among the neighbors, where bonds of trust, proximity, and reciprocity are fundamental. It is a way of obtaining cash and non-bank-issued money that involves both planning (anticipating the availability of money to access certain goods, saving for a specific purpose) and contingency (allows

for “emergency money” to deal with situations requiring immediate cash). Once again, these practices reflect how strategies are developed that synthesize the objective material realities of individuals (precarious work conditions, low income, informality, exclusion from the financial system, needs, risks) together with subjective elements (social aspirations, the desire to access certain goods, personal preferences, past experiences, community ties).

What people do a lot here, and we’ve done it too, is forming circles. What does this mean? A circle is made up of about 10 or 15 people who save some money. It’s like having a bank that lends you money. You can contribute a certain amount, let’s say for example, 1000 pesos every month until December. That would be 12,000 pesos in a year. So, you get lent 12,000 pesos, but in that year, you have to cover the 12,000 pesos that you lent to the other person. So, it’s like saving or borrowing. They do it a lot here. It’s called a circle [...] You have to do it with a circle of people you know won’t steal or cheat you. For example, my mom does it with a group of friends. I was also in one, and I have that money saved. I keep it there [...] Many people do it, and it serves them a lot, even with more money. It depends on the amount each person can contribute. It can be 300, 500, depending. It’s a way of saving that helps people. For example, if you want to buy a refrigerator, with those 12,000 pesos, you can buy it outright, in cash, after saving for a couple of months or in a year. It’s yourself but with other people. There’s always one person who manages it, who collects the money. Who says, “next Monday, I need the money.” Each month, it’s a different person (Interview 9, Buenos Aires).

In the Brazilian context, accumulating debts not only affects family or personal finances but also operates as a constant threat to a person’s reputation who can potentially be labeled “dirty” or considered an insolvent debtor in the market, and seen as irresponsible and unreliable among peers. Maintaining a “clean name” (Mattoso 2005; Brusky and Fortuna 2002) emerges as a highly relevant dimension for individuals and community relationships. Indebtedness includes a moral and disciplinary dimension where individuals stake their reputation. Trust becomes a value that mediates neighborhood and friendship relationships when a person “lends their name,” meaning they buy a specific item on behalf of another. This practice (lending one’s name and having to repay the debt) creates a system of obligations and reciprocity that mediates social relationships and reinforces ties within the community: “Like a gift, the item carries the mark of trust that the friend or relative placed on it” (Bisognin Castilhos and Vargas Rossi 2009, 65).

I don’t have a credit card. I had one before, and that’s when I stained my name, but then I went and cleaned it up, and then I didn’t want it anymore. Sometimes I ask my mom, for example, at the end of the year to buy clothes, but after that, I try to buy everything in cash (Interview 20, Rio de Janeiro).

In this context, credit purchases and loans among family and friends are common practices, while cash loans through financial institutions (more common in Buenos Ai-

res) are viewed with suspicion and considered options for difficult situations or special events. Loan requests are closely linked to the person making the request, emphasizing individual responsibility. Although debt is seen as a family obligation, requesting a cash loan is a highly personalized act.

## Conspicuous Spending

In both locations where the fieldwork was carried out, there are normative principles regarding financial management that emphasize individual capacity for effective use. Thus, the ability to save or optimize monetary earnings relies not only on objective material circumstances (where income and cost of living are crucial) but also on the motivations and meanings that individuals assign to money. Narratives about consumption and saving practices are shaped by normative perspectives. Some aim to set aside funds for unforeseen circumstances or to achieve future goals, while others label themselves as “bad money managers”, unable to maintain “disciplined” spending habits. Individuals themselves justify and rationalize their behavior, often influenced by this rational-utilitarian logic. The common belief, deeply embedded in the testimonies, that spending on consumption is a rational decision linked to income doesn’t just influence personal reflections but also forms the “logical” basis for evaluating one’s or others’ behaviors as either irrational or incorrect in handling money:

For instance, some interviewees express concern over what they perceive as poor financial management among others, often echoing stigmatizing narratives about the supposed inability of marginalized groups to prioritize spending. As one respondent from Buenos Aires remarked: “I don’t see so many people in need. Maybe I see people poorly managed, who perhaps receive many aid programs, and instead of using them for what they’re really given, they use them for something else. I see that in the poorest people” (Interview 7, Buenos Aires).

Similarly, in Rio de Janeiro, another respondent highlighted the importance of prioritizing essential needs over what they described as unnecessary expenses:

Our salaries are for eating, dressing, and those things. We don’t spend on parties, or anything like that. There are many people who don’t have much and spend on that, they have needs and spend on that. But we, who are Christians, already think about what we’ll need, what we’re going to use. We spend on what we need, nothing unnecessary (Interview 32, Rio de Janeiro).

These quotes illustrate how interviewees may reproduce broader prejudices that frame poverty as a consequence of individual failure rather than structural conditions. Such narratives align with a long-standing discourse that blames the poor for their own poverty, portraying them as irresponsible or incapable of managing money effectively. This perspective, deeply ingrained in societal imaginaries, reinforces stereotypes that marginalized groups spend disproportionately on non-essential items, a claim frequently used to justify inequality.

In line with this argument, one interviewee, for example, critiqued what they perceived as a pattern of debt accumulation among co-workers: “Most people are in debt. I tell my co-workers, ‘They increase your salary by two reales, and you already want to spend 100.’ And even if no one receives an increase, they’re already spending in advance” (Interview 29, Rio de Janeiro).

These narratives, while reflecting personal experiences, should be understood as situated within a broader context of economic precarity and societal stigmas. They reveal how individuals internalize and perpetuate dominant ideologies about poverty and consumption, often shifting the focus away from structural inequalities and systemic barriers. By reproducing these discourses, the interviewees navigate and make sense of their own economic realities, albeit through a lens that risks reinforcing stereotypes.

The justifications reveal that consumption patterns serve as legitimizers of social status and reflect the representations of the interviewees themselves regarding social hierarchies. As Bourdieu expresses:

Every agent must, at each moment, take into account the price he fetches on the market of symbolic goods and which defines what he can afford himself (that is, among other things, what he can lay claim to and what he can legitimately appropriate in a universe where all goods are themselves hierarchized). The sense of the fiduciary value [...] guides strategies which, to be recognized, must be pegged at just the right level, neither too high (pretension), nor too low (vulgarity, lack of ambition), and in particular the strategies of dissimulation from and assimilation into other groups which can, within certain limits, play with recognized distances.<sup>8</sup>

The home, including its size and material conditions, is one of the most relevant elements when it comes to demonstrating a position of superiority and distinction within the “morro” (hillside communities in Brazil). Other items like cars or electronic devices can also serve this function.

Work appears to function primarily as a means to facilitate the acquisition of goods that confer status and establish hierarchies. What truly matters, then, are the conditions made possible by work—such as adequate income, financial stability, and economic security—particularly when linked to formal employment (“com carteira assinada”). Having a job that enables one to acquire material possessions becomes crucial, as these possessions serve to distinguish individuals and communicate their social position. This reflects the importance of economic capital in defining one’s place in society, with consumer goods acting as key markers of status and social differentiation. Therefore, the consumption of certain goods not only communicates a particular hierarchy or position but also serves to differentiate from a “poor identity.” Not being poor (or being less poor than others) includes displaying a certain economic capital through consumer goods and also managing income in a “proper” way. This entails, for instance, not falling behind on debt payments, directing expenses efficiently (investing

<sup>8</sup> Translation by Loïc Wacquant (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2013).

in “necessary” goods, allowing for some indulgence but refraining from squandering on what are perceived as vices, etc.).

The significance the interviewees assign to housing extends beyond the security and pride associated with home ownership; it plays a pivotal role in setting oneself apart. The state and amenities of homes serve as potent indicators of status and economic advancement. Subsequently, a substantial portion of financial resources is channeled into household expenditures, covering repairs, renovations, room expansions, flooring completion, room constructions, as well as investments in furniture and equipment. Moreover, the desire for the material prosperity of one’s home persists as an ongoing aspiration, consistently revitalized for these very reasons.

We are doing some renovations; we’re going to paint and fix things up a bit. Everything is done step by step because dealing with the builder is complicated. We need to buy materials and pay up front. Paying to get things delivered. We pay for materials in installments, everything in installments. I have a “Bradesco” credit card,<sup>9</sup> we need to have it because otherwise, we can’t do anything [...] Right now, I’m paying for something. I went a year without buying anything, and now, the refrigerator is starting to malfunction, so I’ll need to buy a new one soon (Interview 33, Rio de Janeiro).

In this notion of accessing certain goods and consumables which carry symbolic value in relation to status and the hierarchy individuals assign to them, the notion of deservingness, self-gratification, or allowing oneself certain expenses aligns with community-shared expectations and valuations that are considered appropriate and consistent with one’s position in the class structure. The clearest example is the expenditure on leisure and entertainment (such as vacations, outings, and personal care), as well as the purchase of goods for children.

According to Zelizer (2005), the acquisition and use of certain goods serve as a representation of households’ social positioning for those “outside”. Aspirations to status are expressed through comparisons with others. Within the neighborhood, many of these aspirations manifest as strategies for differentiation, while outside the neighborhood, they function as strategies for assimilation. The consumption of specific objects thus emerges as an expression of status, regardless of their objective characteristics or utility.<sup>10</sup>

When I buy things for my kids that are really out of style or cheap,<sup>11</sup> I feel really bad. When I take them to school and suddenly everyone is dressed elegantly, of good quality, and there I feel totally poor, you know? Now, for example, they gave me a bunch of things at the

<sup>9</sup> Bradesco is one of the largest private banks in Brazil.

<sup>10</sup> Although this paper does not delve into the symbolic value of specific objects, studies in this field reveal the socially constructed attributes surrounding items such as mobile phones or sports shoes, which express distinction, differentiation, recognition, and the ostentation of power, among other aspects. See Figueiro (2013).

<sup>11</sup> The interviewee uses the expression “berreta” to refer to something of poor quality.

union. It's the first time in all these years that I've gone to pick up the backpack and school materials for the kids. And well, they'll take everything, but of course, everything is really cheap... So, my daughter complained about the backpack, she said to me, "Oh, that ugly backpack!" and it made me feel really bad (Interview 1, Buenos Aires).

Unlike classic theories that consider the emulation of consumption patterns of higher classes as the primary motivating and determining factor for consumption among lower sectors (Veblen 1974), both case studies demonstrate the opposite. Consumption tends to lean more towards resembling better-off neighbors or distinguishing oneself from those considered poorer. This does not imply the absence of "external" influence. Many women interviewed who were working as domestic workers, for instance, are in close contact with the more intimate universe of middle and upper-middle-class families. They express a certain satisfaction in receiving several pieces of clothing they own and use as donations/gifts from their employers. While these similar consumptions (clothing, household appliances, or technological devices) have the ability to bring these two universes closer (though under different acquisition conditions), such goods only acquire distinctive meaning and significance when displayed within the local community. In other words, it is when these possessions are compared or identified with the consumption of those in the same geographical and situational space that they communicate their positional value. While the distance (geographical, educational, economic, occupational) separating community dwellers from higher sectors appears insurmountable, proximity to neighbors works as a "mirror" (Sarti 2003) reflecting possible aspirational desires.

My husband enjoys shopping at expensive brand stores, such as "HBS." Not me, neither for myself nor for my children. I only shop at the end of the year or if we have a 15th birthday party or a relative's wedding. If it's someone I know. Since I don't have the means to buy at those places, sometimes I don't even go. I prefer not to go (Interview 37, Rio de Janeiro).

The normative notions dictating how expenditure and savings should be managed are intertwined with possible unforeseen circumstances and the individual experiences of necessity encountered by many interviewees or their surroundings. Learning the rational management of finances and its administration becomes crucial, given that obtaining certain consumer goods and the "proper" use of money involve calculations beyond mere mathematical equations. It incorporates past experiences; objectifies social aspirations and individual desires; considers self-perception within the class structure; and also encompasses material—objective elements such as the availability and scarcity of monetary resources. Both money and consumption are influenced by a moral dimension that condenses assessments regarding utility, virtue, rationality, and necessity.

I'm generally not much of a spender. I try to save. From a young age, you have to learn that because if you start spending, spending, spending when you're young, later when you're on

your own, you won't be able to manage. That's what I tell my sister, well, my sister is terrible with that. I'm always telling her things because she already has a child! It's one thing if you're alone and you live a crazy life, do whatever you want, but she already has my nephew, and it's complicated. She doesn't know how to manage herself; she spends it all. She splurges. She doesn't plan ahead... I tell her, "Always leave something for any situation [...] You won't have any other option but to learn to save" (Interview 9, Buenos Aires).

The interviewees' own discourses often contradict themselves or justify actions because reflections on practices (both their own and others') are also influenced by normative and moral representations that indicate how and what should be consumed based on the objective material situation of each individual. Within the narratives, contradictions emerge between what can or should be spent rationally and morally, on one hand, and the actual consumption practices, on the other. For example: "Raising children costs a lot, in terms of clothing, food, the things they ask for, everything. I buy them. They don't like just anything; they like good things, expensive brands" (Interview 35, Rio de Janeiro). This is also evident in Buenos Aires:

At home, I still don't have ceramic flooring. And I say, I can't have a plasma TV and not have ceramic flooring. So, for example, I would prefer to have the flooring first and then, yes, buy something else. But I have a computer because you must have a computer for the kids. I lost the priority of getting the flooring because I wanted the kids to get to know the sea and I wanted to have a vacation with them before they grow up (Interview 1, Buenos Aires).

Many times, children appear as a way to justify expenses, while priorities regarding which expenses to make and which ones to relinquish depend on the area they refer to. Expenses related to leisure activities, certain household appliances, or technological devices are justified based on what is needed ("I have to buy a computer and printer because the kids need it for school"), what is permissible ("I can treat myself' and go out to eat at McDonald's"), and what is deserved ("I want to go on vacation after a year of work and effort" or "I was the only one who didn't have a new cellphone"). It is through the trinity of needs, desires, and wants that individuals articulate reflections on their own consumption practices and the meanings they attribute to the use of money. Within these reasonings, it becomes evident that in purchasing decisions and established priorities, not only do "external" factors operate (such as prices, the job market, commercial arrangements), but also multiple forms of calculation that go beyond the disposition of economic resources, including the assessment of goods as means of differentiation and distinction among people with limited resources.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze the characteristics and meanings attributed to the practices of money usage and consumption of private goods in low-income sectors.



Both objective and subjective elements play a role in these practices and in the financial calculations that families make. Monetary transactions and consumption reflect the macrosocial conditions that influence these practices (such as labor market conditions, pricing systems, credit tools, etc.), reshaping the meanings individuals assign based on various factors like gender, class, status, family and neighborhood ties, among many others.

Contrary to common criticisms regarding poor management and lack of foresight in low-income sectors, interviews conducted in both locations demonstrate that there is indeed budget planning, as well as strategies for purchasing and saving within the spending routines and practices of these communities.

The reflections that subjects make about their own consumption practices (which, due to their level of routineness, appear as natural, automatic, and given) are also infused with a discourse laden with morality. In line with the moralizing discourses and interpretations of consumption widely disseminated in the social sciences, the reflections that individuals make about their practices are also influenced by criteria of legitimacy and economic rationality that are culturally and socially constructed. As highlighted by Barbosa and Campbell:

From a cultural perspective, basic needs are those considered legitimate, and their consumption doesn't evoke guilt, as they can be morally justified. Superfluous needs, as the name implies, are associated with excess and desire. Consequently, consuming them is deemed illegitimate and demands rhetoric and justifications that ennoble or elevate their significance (Barbosa and Campbell 2006, 37).

For this reason, justifications frequently arise when acquiring certain goods, many of which are presented as necessary. The same logic operates when judging, assessing, and qualifying the behavior of others. In this sense, in many interviews, it is common to point out irrationality and poor management as the culprits behind economic difficulties.

On the other hand, the possibility of being able to consume beyond one's income is facilitated by the widespread availability of credit, various forms of financing, and consequently, indebtedness. In this regard, the type of integration into the labor market is decisive. Those with formal jobs can access better credit conditions and financial instruments, along with more security and foresight. However, experience shows that both the credit market and individuals operate through channels that exceed formality. Family loans, the use of third-party credit cards, and cash loans with extremely high interest rates (more prevalent in Buenos Aires than in Rio de Janeiro), result in multiple experiences of indebtedness and refinancing of commercial agreements, greatly detrimental to the family. The instability of household economies and the unpredictability of risk situations not only lead to payment delays but also pose a constant and latent threat of "tarnishing one's reputation," as observed in the Brazilian interviews. In this regard, unlike in Buenos Aires, cash loans through financial agencies are not

a widely adopted tool among families in Rio de Janeiro. While used as a method to obtain cash (especially for expenses related to home construction or renovation), loans between family members and trusted acquaintances are the most prevalent practices among the interviewed families.

This analytical perspective holds a triple utility. Firstly, it aligns with a tradition of sociological studies that has been reconsidering economic practices beyond the classic utilitarian approach of the resource-optimizing individual, thereby enriching the understanding of various social processes. Secondly, these analyses serve to problematize and question certain moralistic discourses and normative views regarding what and how the poor should consume and use money. Many of these representations and assessments about the economic functioning of lower-income sectors are ingrained not only in notions of “common sense” but also in media and political discourses. Finally, comprehending inequalities (both material and symbolic) from broader perspectives, understanding the social meanings embedded within them, can contribute to improving the design of public policies intervening in these areas.

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