

SUSTAINABILITY AND ESG: SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION IN THE NEOLIBERAL SCENARIO¹

SUSTENTABILIDADE E ESG: O CONSUMO SUSTENTÁVEL NO CENÁRIO NEOLIBERAL

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Abstract

This article aims to verify whether corporate sustainability, using the ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) framework, within the current neoliberal capitalist system, can contribute to truly sustainable practices and sustainable consumption. To this end, the tripod of sustainability and its influence on the corporate sector are explained according to the Triple Bottom

Resumo

Este artigo tem como objetivo verificar se a sustentabilidade corporativa, utilizando-se da ESG, no sistema capitalista neoliberal vigente, pode contribuir para práticas realmente sustentáveis e para um consumo sustentável. Para isso, explana-se acerca do tripé da sustentabilidade e sua influência no setor corporativo, por meio do Triple Bottom Line e da ESG. Analisa-se o sistema capitalista

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Line and ESG. The current neoliberal capitalist system and the resulting civilizational crisis are analyzed. Finally, we seek to verify whether sustainable consumption, driven by the corporate sector through ESG, can be an alternative to the civilizational crisis emerging from the neoliberal capitalist system. The inductive method is used, using the techniques of referent, category, operational concepts, and bibliographical research. It is understood that sustainability creates competitive advantages, improves the company's reputation, and strengthens relationships with stakeholders, but, on the other hand, it cannot be ignored that, sometimes, the market can take advantage of environmental care situations simply to increasingly boost its capitalist opportunities. Corporate sustainability, with ESG, is an important way to contribute to mitigating harmful environmental impacts for the survival of humanity, contributing to sustainable consumption.

Keywords: neoliberal capitalism; sustainable consumption; civilization crisis; ESG; sustainability.

Introduction

For over two centuries, humankind has experienced distinct periods, characterized by profound transformations that have served as pivotal moments in history, commonly referred to as “waves of innovation”. The first of these waves was the Industrial Revolution, which began 240 years ago. Presently, and in the foreseeable future, sustainability takes precedence, guiding societal endeavors toward more environmentally friendly choices.

In the corporate sector, in an effort to align business models with sustainability principles, companies are investing in ESG—acronym for *Environmental, Social, and Governance*, which may seem simple with its three letters but carries significant weight. It represents a dynamic and innovative market that is challenging the established *status quo* of companies, governments, and society as a whole, leading a genuine revolution both in Brazil and across the world's major powers.

neoliberal vigente e a crise civilizatória dele decorrente. Por fim, busca-se verificar se o consumo sustentável, impulsionado pelo setor corporativo por meio da ESG, pode ser uma alternativa à crise civilizatória emergente do sistema capitalista neoliberal. Utiliza-se o método indutivo, sendo acionadas as técnicas do referente, da categoria, dos conceitos operacionais e da pesquisa bibliográfica. Entende-se que a sustentabilidade cria vantagens competitivas, melhora a reputação da empresa e fortalece os relacionamentos com interessados, mas, por outro lado, não se pode ignorar que, por vezes, o mercado pode se aproveitar das situações de cuidado ambiental para apenas impulsionar cada vez mais seus ensejos capitalistas. A sustentabilidade corporativa, por meio da ESG, é uma forma importante de contribuir para mitigar os impactos ambientais nocivos para a sobrevivência da humanidade, contribuindo na promoção do consumo sustentável.

Palavras-chave: capitalismo neoliberal; consumo sustentável; crise civilizatória; ESG; sustentabilidade.

ESG seeks to analyze, through assessment and management, the positive and negative impacts companies have on society and the environment.

However, the market often seizes upon situations and innovations to drive further growth within the capitalist system, potentially diluting the genuine concern for socio-environmental conditions under the guise of corporate sustainability, as indicated by the ESG acronym. Despite the absence of an absolute “truth” and the presence of hidden interests, corporate sustainability can still serve as a means to promote sustainable practices and consumption, crucial in light of the crises society faces.

Therefore, the goal is to elucidate corporate sustainability and assess whether, within the current capitalist framework, it can genuinely foster sustainable practices and consumption. To this end, an overview of sustainability, its dimensions, and its impact on the corporate sector will be provided, followed by an examination of its nuances within a neoliberal capitalist economic system. Finally, the possibility of sustainable consumption serving as an antidote to the civilizational crisis stemming from this system will be analyzed.

The methodology employed will use the inductive method, incorporating referents, categories, operational concepts, and bibliographic research techniques.

1 The tripod of sustainability and its influence on the corporate sector: *triple bottom line* and ESG

Sustainability is a word that has been on everyone’s lips lately. While not a novel concept, its enduring popularity persists, with various sectors of society, including business and politics, continually embracing it. Living sustainably is not just a passing trend; it is a necessity (Bosselmann, 2008).

As we are aware, sustainability encompasses more than just environmental concerns; traditionally, it has been framed within the economic, social, and environmental realms, which are often referred to as the “tripod”. It can be stated that “[...] at least since the Johannesburg Summit, there has been explicit discussion about the three dimensions of sustainability: social, environmental, and economic” (Cruz; Real Ferrer, 2015, p. 9, free translation).

This represents a significant step forward in understanding sustainability, as it moves beyond its previously exclusive association with environmental issues, nature, and the looming ecological crises.

In this context, it is worth noting that the preamble of the 2030 Agenda²,

² Preamble: “The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets which we are announcing today demonstrate the scale and ambition of this new universal Agenda. They seek to build on the Millennium Development Goals and complete what these did not achieve. They seek to realize the human

stemming from the 2015 Conference, already underscores the importance of balancing these three dimensions to achieve the objectives and targets for sustainable development set forth.

Illustrating the global crisis faced by the planet across various domains, Leff (1998, p. 15) delves into the broad concept of sustainability, examining the environmental crisis and the principle of sustainability:

La crisis ambiental vino a cuestionar la racionalidad y los paradigmas teóricos que han impulsado y legitimado el crecimiento económico, negando a la naturaleza. La sustentabilidad ecológica aparece así como un criterio normativo para la reconstrucción del orden económico, como una condición para la sobrevivencia humana y un soporte para lograr un desarrollo durable, problematizando las bases mismas de la producción³.

As a result, sustainability emerges as the paradigm of the 21st century, with its primary aim being the construction or adaptation of society to ensure its continued existence under suitable circumstances. It is paramount to underscore the multidimensional nature of sustainability, recognizing that the degradation of the planet's resources, coupled with issues like poverty, injustice, social segregation, and cultural and economic disparities, is unsustainable (Real Ferrer, 2012).

The central objective of the sustainability paradigm is change, transformation, and the preservation of life in all its aspects, in response to the diverse crises defining our current era. Hence, "*el principio de sustentabilidad emerge en el contexto de la globalización como la marca de un límite y el signo que reorienta el proceso civilizatorio de la humanidad*"⁴ (Leff, 1998, p. 15).

With the objective of "redirecting the civilizing process of humanity" in response to the planetary crisis extending beyond environmental concerns to encompass economic and social dimensions, sustainability must be pursued across these three dimensions, acknowledging their interconnectedness and interdependence.

When discussing the sustainability tripod, Calgaro and Pilau Sobrinho (2020, p. 161, free translation) assert that its dimensions "are intricately linked,

rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. They are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental". (ONUBR, 2015).

3 "The environmental crisis came to question the rationality and theoretical paradigms that boosted and legitimized economic growth, denying nature. Ecological sustainability also appears as a normative criterion for the reconstruction of the economic order, as a condition for human survival and support for achieving durable development, problematizing the wrong bases of production" (free translation).

4 "The principle of sustainability emerges in the context of globalization as a boundary and a guiding principle that redirects humanity's civilizing process" (free translation).

with market actions significantly impacting society's daily lives, thereby affecting the environment”.

In this context, Almeida (2007) posits that the objective of sustainability is to contemplate and operate considering all three dimensions in harmony. When observing nature and ecosystems, one recognizes the integration of their processes, highlighting the necessity for dynamic and interconnected actions. This perspective broadens perceptions as we strive to navigate the path toward survival.

In the corporate realm, the Triple Bottom Line—also known as the Three Pillars Theory—emerges prominently as a management concept emphasizing comprehensive sustainability. This concept, introduced by John Elkington (2004) in 1994, advocates for measuring a company's profits in alignment with environmental and social considerations, fostering a symbiotic relationship among them.

This idea refers to the three fundamental pillars—profit, planet, people—which, when developed in an integrated and positive manner, form the foundation for a company to be deemed “sustainable”. It is essential to remember that a tripod cannot stand if any of its bases are absent; therefore, each perspective is equally vital.

Elkington (1997) underscores the imperative for radical changes to steer companies toward sustainability, particularly in their performance concerning the triple bottom line. He emphasizes that some of the most significant challenges lie not within but between the realms encompassed by economic, social, and environmental outcomes.

In this context, the concept of corporate sustainability “promotes a new business management model that considers, in the decision-making process, not only the economic-financial dimension but also the environmental and social dimensions” (Zylbersztajn; Lins, 2010, p. xv, free translation).

In essence, the Triple Bottom Line directs companies' attention to the economic value they generate as well as the environmental and social impacts they either create or mitigate (Elkington, 2004). For Zylbersztajn and Lins (2010, p. xvi, free translation), this is a crucial responsibility “tied to the commitment to future generations, recognizing that they should have access to the same natural resources and social networks as we do today”.

According to Elkington (1997), achieving sustainability requires a paradigm shift. Thus, one step toward sustainability for a company involves adopting the Triple Bottom Line approach. In this scenario, the transition occurs from the old paradigm, where the financial aspect predominated, to the new paradigm supported by three pillars: profit (economic dimension), environmental quality

(environmental dimension), and social justice (social dimension).

A decade after the emergence of the *Triple Bottom Line* concept, a new acronym composed of three letters arises in the corporate sector: ESG – Environmental, Social, and Governance.

The term emerged in 2004, following a directive from the then Secretary General of the United Nations (UN), Kofi Annan, to five executive directors of major financial institutions on how to integrate these values into the capital market. ESG essentially revolves around three core themes: transparency, risk identification, and responsibility. In practice, each subject presents its own set of challenges. Hence, “ESG is not a progression from corporate sustainability but rather embodies corporate sustainability itself” (Pereira, 2020, free translation).

The guidelines outlined by ESG are based on the analysis of various criteria and are established as follows:

E – Environment / Environmental: In this aspect, the assessment encompasses sustainability criteria and the preservation of natural resources related to (i) Global warming, (ii) Deforestation, (iii) Water scarcity, (iv) Irregular exploitation of raw materials, (v) Waste disposal, and (vi) Reverse logistics.

S – Social / Social: Here, actions related to the community in which the company is located and its internal and external audiences are addressed, such as (i) good practices related to work, physical and emotional safety of its employees, (ii) issues of social projects are addressed, incentives for diversity and social inclusion, (iii) the consumer protection code, (iv) the general data protection law (LGPD) and (v) sponsorship of cultural programs in the context in which the company operates.

G – Governance / Corporate Governance: These are the guidelines, rules, standards, and processes that manage the company as a whole in internal and external relations. They encompass intangible aspects of an organization and are often considered the most challenging to measure. Good governance practices include board independence, senior management remuneration policies, diverse board composition, robust audit and fiscal committees, and adherence to ethical standards and transparency principles (Garcia, 2022, free translation).

When examining the concepts of Triple Bottom Line (TBL) and ESG, it is evident that TBL predates ESG, emerging in 1994, while ESG came about a decade later. This chronological distinction has sparked a debate regarding whether ESG represents an evolution of TBL or if they denote distinct approaches. There is no consensus on this matter since, despite their similarities, they are inherently different (Garcia, 2022).

Notably, both concepts embody the tripod of sustainability, emphasizing the imperative of integrating sustainability into the corporate sector more than ever. This integration should extend beyond mere *marketing* strategies to encompass

concrete actions that uphold all three pillars of sustainability.

Thus, the behavior of companies concerning inclusion and environmental responsibilities/interests is paramount. These profit-oriented organizations wield significant influence over decisions and actions related to the planet, thereby serving as agents of both desired and undesired societal transformations. In the prevailing neoliberal capitalist system, where profit reigns supreme, it is naive to expect companies to forsake profitability. Therefore, without effective management of these companies' actions and thorough assessment of policies driving changes in environmental preservation and social inclusion, corporate sustainability, or stakeholder capitalism—suggested by the UN as a universal solution—will remain nothing more than a utopia (Romaro; Silva, 2022).

The sustainability tripod “stands out as a ‘federating concept’ that progressively shapes the conditions and legal assumptions within the context of sustainable evolution”. Internationally, sustainability emerges as a crucial vector in the diplomatic relations between states, as evidenced by agreements such as the Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biodiversity (Canotilho, 2010, p. 9-10).

Hence, the multidimensionality of sustainability becomes apparent, illustrating a connection between beings and things, demonstrating its interdisciplinary nature by incorporating elements such as the environment, people, economy, and more. While each dimension conveys unique characteristics, they must be addressed collectively and in harmony, as they are complementary to each other.

Against this backdrop of sustainability, encompassing its concept, its tripod dimensions, and its application in the corporate sphere, a hypothesis emerges regarding the potential lack of genuine concern for socio-environmental conditions within corporate sustainability initiatives. This hypothesis is fueled by the notion that the market capitalizes on opportunities to drive sales and further bolster the capitalist system.

Subsequently, the following discourse delves into reflections on how the capitalist system interferes with the achievement of sustainability. It also examines aspects of market policies influenced by neoliberalism, which in turn shapes corporate practices. Moreover, it addresses the civilizational crisis stemming from the excesses observed in the current global context.

2 The capitalist economic system, neoliberalism, and the civilizational crisis

Given the recognition of the urgency and significance of implementing sustainability measures effectively and efficiently, alongside the rise of ESG practices,

it is crucial to acknowledge that the avenues for consummation and success lie within a capitalist framework.

Henceforth, it is crucial to clarify that

As the reproduction cycle encompasses both production and distribution, with the entire system at risk of malfunctioning, capitalism is inherently incomplete. Dismissing a business organization entirely is akin to throwing out essential components along with the unnecessary ones. Failing to address income and employment issues through institutional means reflects a lack of responsibility. Setting aside superficial speeches, it is evident that we are nearing the economic and political thresholds of social stability (Dowbor, 1998, p. 71, free translation).

This range of limitations is concerning, particularly due to its lack of homogeneity. In other words, factors such as income inequality, exploitation, economic crises, socio-environmental impacts, and consumerism contribute to insecurity within the communal environment shaped by capitalism.

In this context, Celso Luiz Ludwig, in an interview, suggests that Karl Marx's intention to replace capitalism with socialism or communism is essential for human survival. Therefore, given the argument that capitalist logic jeopardizes both human life and the environment, humanity must overcome the current economic system to ensure its survival (Mello; Souza; Soares, 2010).

On the other hand, it can be argued that these two societal paradigms—capitalism and socialism—each possess their own theories and significance, despite their contrasting nature, ultimately complementing each other. Despite originating from different premises—the former stemming from market dynamics and the latter from human needs—both ideologies advocate for a universal solution for all of humankind, anchoring their frameworks to the vision of a promising future propelled by their allure (Mello; Souza; Soares, 2010).

Currently, capitalism governs global socioeconomic relations, characterized by elements such as private property, free market dynamics, profit-seeking motives, and the push for globalization, albeit with variations in regulation, security, and economic policies from country to country.

The economic system in question holds a central position, notwithstanding its susceptibility to cycles of growth and recession. Despite criticisms and the need to address its negative impacts, capitalism's driving force of efficiency lies in competition, while its primary challenge, as mentioned, is the unequal distribution of income.

Moreover, neoliberalism—a political and economic ideology—exerts considerable influence within the framework of capitalism. These concepts, while

distinct, are deeply intertwined, particularly evident in the emergence of neoliberalism shortly after “World War II, primarily in Europe and North America, where capitalism dominated. It constituted a vehement theoretical and political backlash against the interventionist and welfare state” (Anderson, 1995, p. 9, free translation).

During the era of U.S. global hegemony, neoliberalism ascended as the dominant ideology, aiming to address the crisis of the nation-state through commercial ventures and technological advancements (Marrach, 1996).

Both neoliberalism and capitalism assert the importance of competition and profit-seeking for economic efficiency. The former advocates for reducing state intervention in the economy, including cuts in public spending and the privatization of industries—a stance often exacerbating social and environmental issues.

Classical liberalism, originating from the era of the emerging bourgeoisie, advocated for human and citizen rights, which encompassed the right to education. In contrast, neoliberalism places greater emphasis on consumer rights over public and democratic freedoms. It challenges the involvement of the state in promoting social rights. This trend signifies a setback in the social and political sphere, aligning with a world where social cohesion and solidarity face significant challenges (Marrach, 1996, pp. 42-43, free translation).

In the context of neoliberalism, we witness the deregulation of “economic activities by the state, along with the privatization of state-owned productive enterprises and government entities, extending to sectors such as housing, transportation, education, healthcare, and pensions” (Ianni, 1998, p. 28, free translation).

Thus, neoliberalism is distinguished by its efforts to eliminate or relax commercial, labor, and environmental regulations that constrain private economic activities. This economic and political ideology “seamlessly integrates into the administered society of so-called advanced nations, where the citizen is often reduced to a mere consumer, a trend which is gaining momentum not only in Brazil but also in other countries across Latin America [...]” (Marrach, 1996, p. 43, free translation).

Hence, when considering the amalgamation of neoliberalism and capitalism from the standpoint of sustainability effectiveness in all its facets, the overarching context that surfaces is one of a civilization in crisis. In this sense, the “so-called ‘victory of capitalism’ shows that the crisis of capitalism is the crisis of Western civilization” (Mello; Souza; Soares, 2010, p. 23, free translation).

From this perspective, it is important to understand that

[...] no solution is conceivable except through essential changes to the system of capital accumulation in force today. Overcoming the crisis of capitalism requires transcending Western civilization. Moving beyond modernity. Why is it so? We find ourselves confronting not only a crisis in social production relations but a crisis of civilization itself, with the latter encompassing the former. Any alternative we seek must address this broader civilizational crisis. We are not only grappling with the crisis of capitalism but also with a crisis concerning the fundamental tenets of modernity. Consequently, the longstanding polarization between capitalism and socialism is eroding. Both sides are deeply entrenched within Western civilization, that is, of modern times. Some advocate for post-modernity or hypermodernity, while others harken back to pre-modern traditions. Additionally, there are those who envision transmodernity, post-colonialism, or decolonialism, all while recognizing the essential role of work in fostering a better quality of life. Instead of the conventional capitalism/socialism binary, a new dichotomy arises: that of capitalism versus life, or capitalism versus the survival of humankind (Mello; Souza; Soares, 2010, p. 23, free translation).

This realization—that capitalism no longer stands solely in opposition to socialism—carries significant implications and has the potential to be quite disruptive. With this shift in polarization, wherein the economic system is now vying for space concerning the survival of the human species, we are navigating a turbulent path that demands rigorous transformations. Sustainability and ESG practices emerge as potential alternatives, although their efficacy remains to be confirmed.

Considering that sustainability entails satisfying present desires without compromising future generations' opportunities and that capitalism prioritizes profit-seeking, private property, and market competition, it is evident that these concepts do not always align seamlessly. However, their interaction is intrinsic.

Critiques of capitalism's emphasis on excessive consumption often lead to unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, exacerbating environmental degradation for the purposes of exemplification. Hence, if companies prioritize profit maximization, it becomes obvious that their practices often overlook potential environmental impacts, especially those with long-term consequences, ultimately compromising overall quality of life. In this regard, ESG emerges as a beacon of change.

Regulation, often sidelined by neoliberal ideals, is crucial in ensuring sustainability within capitalist societies. Measures such as emission standards, energy efficiency regulations, and waste management policies are essential for fostering balance and responsibility, including among corporations, towards the planet and its inhabitants.

Byung-Chul Han presents a compelling reflection, highlighting that “the

more equality there is among people, the more production escalates. This underscores the prevailing logic: capital necessitates equality across all, even treating individuals merely as consumers. Neoliberalism hinges on this uniformity; it would falter if people exhibited diversity “(Geli, 2018, free translation).

This stance underscores our era characterized by rampant consumerism and incessant communication, exacerbating the crisis of civilization. Standardization, coupled with mass production and the pervasive culture of disposable consumption, exacerbates the challenges for future sustainability.

Han further posits that “the world is teetering on the brink of its capacity. Perhaps, in reaching this precipice, there might be a reset, a return to our primal instincts” (Geli, 2018, free translation). Thus, sustainability and ESG initiatives emerge as endeavors to strike a delicate balance between profit-driven objectives and concerns for environmental, social, and governance matters. This holistic approach is inherently complex.

Mitigating the adverse effects associated with neoliberalism and the excesses of capitalism entails embracing sustainable consumption. This involves using and procuring goods and services aimed at minimizing socio-environmental impact, thereby safeguarding nature and enhancing human well-being. However, given income disparities, achieving sustainable consumption proves to be a daunting and costly endeavor. The ensuing discussion delves deeper into this theme.

3 Sustainable consumption as an alternative to the emerging civilizational crisis of the neoliberal capitalist system

Sustainability entails maintenance and requires the implementation of measures aimed at preserving and restoring the planet, fostering a more humane economy, and upholding the dignity of every individual within society. Responsibility for sustainability lies with the entire spectrum of society, encompassing governments, corporations, social organizations, and each individual.

The unbridled consumerism driven by contemporary neoliberal capitalism exacts a profound and detrimental toll on the environment, exacerbating both socio-environmental and human civilizational crises. Hence, there is an imperative to reassess lifestyle choices and promote education geared toward fostering more mindful and accountable consumer habits.

The prevailing global consumption paradigm places immense strain on natural resources. Technological advancements and the proliferation of new consumer goods fuel a relentless desire to acquire the latest products, irrespective of one's

socioeconomic status. However, production is largely geared towards catering to vertical consumption, with new consumer goods predominantly targeting those with moderate to high incomes. Consumerism has transcended mere sustenance and basic needs; the market now incites new desires, even among those lacking the means for basic survival, thereby exacerbating inequality (Giansanti, 1998).

In societies dominated by capitalist economic systems, consumerism has become the focal point of all social interactions. Unbridled consumerism manifests as indiscriminate purchasing driven by pleasure, entertainment, or the pursuit of emotional gratification, giving rise to the pervasive “throw-away culture”, which signifies a breakdown in cultural and social norms. This throw-away culture engenders disorder and has the potential to precipitate scarcity. Therefore, it is imperative to combat rampant consumerism and the throw-away culture by embracing the principles underpinning sustainability, fostering greater environmental, social, economic, and human consciousness. Developing awareness about our consumer habits constitutes the initial step towards achieving sustainable consumerism.

In this regard, it is valuable to delineate the distinctions between “consumption” and “consumerism”:

[...] “Consumerism” is a social arrangement that results from recycling mundane, permanent and so to speak ‘regime-neutral’ human wants, desires, and longings into the *principal propelling and operating force* of society, a force that coordinates systemic reproduction, social integration, social stratification and the formation of human individuals, as well as playing a major role in the process of individual and group self-identification and in the selection and pursuit of individual life policies. [...] Unlike *consumption*, primarily a trait and occupation of individual human beings, *consumerism* is an attribute of *society*. For a society to acquire that attribute the thoroughly individual capacity of wanting, desiring, and longing needs to be, just as labour capacity was in the producers’ society, detached (‘alienated’) from individuals and recycled/reified into an extraneous force which sets the ‘society of consumers’ in motion and keeps it on course as a specific form of human togetherness, while by the same token setting specific parameters for effective individual life strategies and otherwise manipulating the probabilities of individual choices and conduct (Bauman, 2008, p. 41).

Therefore, unlike consumption, which is an intrinsic aspect of individuals’ lives, consumerism is defined by the act of acquiring and using products motivated by desire, often without the necessity of actual ownership. This behavior is frequently influenced by media, societal pressures, and the desire to belong to a particular group.

Consumerist culture is characterized by this insatiable craving for

consumption, disposability (the so-called throw-away culture), and the pursuit of the latest market offerings. Consequently, within consumerist culture, novelty holds inherent value, and individuals perceive their societal belonging in relation to consumption—wherein their lives revolve around the act of consuming (Pereira; Calgaro; Pereira, 2011).

Thus, “consumerist culture is marked by a constant pressure to be *someone else*” (Bauman, 2008, p. 41). Consequently, the framework of consumerism is “defined by the manipulation of consumers and the symbolic value attached to consumption, ultimately constituting a totalitarian system that fosters insatiability in the pursuit of unattainable happiness” (Pereira; Calgaro; Pereira, 2011, p. 34, free translation).

In addition to the individual challenges stemming from consumerist culture, there lies the issue of the unbridled expansion of production, resulting in devastating consequences for the natural environment. Boff (2015, p. 168, free translation) elaborates that “predominant patterns of production and consumption are causing environmental degradation, depletion of resources, and a mass extinction of species”. Therefore, there is no longer room for thinking about consumption without addressing sustainability. A paradigm shift towards sustainable consumption is urgently needed.

The rights to an ecologically balanced environment, sustainability, and consumption are crucial factors in ensuring a high quality of life, both for the present and future generations. To achieve this, however, society must enter a social pact towards a sustainable global governance. The concept of sustainable consumption must be disseminated widely, and facilitated by consumer education, which can aid in raising awareness among society and mitigating various environmental issues (Sarreta, 2007).

Sustainable consumption entails providing services and associated products that fulfill basic needs and enhance overall quality of life, while minimizing the utilization of natural resources, toxic substances, waste emissions, and pollutants throughout the product or service life cycle, to safeguard the needs of future generations (PNUD, 1998, p. 65, free translation).

Within the spectrum of consumer rights and responsibilities, sustainable consumption emerges as increasingly pertinent. Given the finite nature of natural resources, there is an urgent demand for education and guidance to foster conscious, responsible consumption practices that align with principles of sustainability (Sarreta, 2007).

Once more, we highlight the significance of transforming the lifestyle and

consumption patterns of society as a whole since these are the initial steps towards environmental preservation, planetary care, and the attainment of sustainability across all its dimensions, even within the framework of neoliberalism and capitalism. Hence, “when considering proposals for shifting consumption patterns towards sustainability, primary objectives should center on conserving natural resources and enhancing both environmental quality and people’s quality of life” (Cortez; Ortigoza, 2007, p. 12, free translation).

Sustainable consumption thus advocates for a paradigm shift from production to consumer behaviors. In this context, it is imperative for consumers to actively seek information about supplier companies and the production processes of the goods they intend to consume, which involves verifying if there are environmental considerations, ensuring there is no exploitation of slave labor, and assessing whether the company genuinely implements ESG initiatives. Therefore, consumers should not only pay attention to the “price and quality of goods and services provided but also consider companies’ conduct concerning their ethical and socio-environmental responsibilities” (Idec, 2019, free translation).

To truly embed sustainable consumption into society, consumer education must take center stage, which could start from early years in schools, within families, through government policies aimed at guidance and societal action, ESG initiatives by companies, and consumer protection laws, among numerous other avenues. In that regard,

The notion of conscientious and sustainable consumption extends beyond mere behavioral changes by consumers to encompass technological advancements by suppliers. These technologies should be employed in a manner that preserves the environment and benefits the collective citizenry. It is evident that to materialize the principles of citizenship education, fostering the development of an idea of sustainable consumption as a hallmark of the 21st century intertwined with environmental perspectives, it is imperative to consolidate and implement policies within public educational institutions, leading to the development of conducive learning environments that facilitate creative processes and foster the construction of individual subjectivity while enabling the access to global information in a critical, reflective manner, thereby encouraging sustainable consumption (Pereira; Calgaro; Pereira, 2011, p. 43, free translation).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encompasses 17 objectives, including objective 12, which strives to ensure sustainable production and consumption patterns.

In this context, with the introduction of Law no. 14.181/2021, which updates consumer legislation, particularly the Consumer Protection Code (*Código*

de Defesa do Consumidor – CDC), the concept of sustainable consumption is included; thus altering the National Consumer Protection Policy (Política Nacional de Defesa do Consumidor, PNDC) by incorporating a new principle outlined in Article 4, IX, which emphasizes “fostering actions aimed at the financial and environmental education of consumers” (Marques; Miragem, 2020, free translation).

Sustainable consumption, therefore, is a means of consuming that ensures not only the fulfillment of current generations’ needs but also those of future generations. This involves choosing goods manufactured with environmentally friendly technology and materials, employing consumer goods rationally, minimizing waste and excess, as well as considering post-consumption by ensuring that any waste generated does not harm the environment.

The discourse surrounding “sustainable consumption” emerges as a counterbalance to the pursuit of “reckless development and relentless economic growth”. Recognizing that consumption is the ultimate goal of the production process, consumer education focused on cultivating more conscientious and responsible consumers serves as a potent preventive measure (Cortez; Ortigoza, 2007, p. 13, free translation).

In light of these insights, the nexus between end consumers and corporate sustainability becomes apparent. Consumers wield direct influence over the progress and advancement of corporate sustainability by making informed choices in their daily consumption practices, favoring products from companies committed to environmental, social, and humanitarian progress. Considering such factors when selecting consumables represents a collective step forward for society.

Conclusion

The interconnectedness of multidimensional sustainability, ESG principles, and consumer society within the framework of neoliberalism and capitalism is becoming increasingly relevant. The pursuit of profit must evolve to encompass concerns regarding social and environmental well-being.

When contemplating corporate sustainability and sustainable consumption, it is evident that these issues intersect with resilience and the establishment of an equitable, socio-environmentally responsible system. Therefore, while strategies implemented by companies in support of sustainable consumption are crucial, they must translate into tangible action.

The excesses inherent in neoliberalism and the capitalist system, in general, hinder the promotion of sustainable consumption. In this context, the tripod of

sustainability and corporate sustainability holds significant value, particularly as ESG practices gain traction amidst global concerns.

Sustainability is recognized as conferring competitive advantages, enhancing corporate reputation, and fostering stakeholder relationships. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the market may sometimes exploit environmental initiatives merely to capitalize on capitalist opportunities. This manifests itself as a niche market presenting itself as “eco-friendly”, while its underlying motivation is purely profit-driven, exploiting the global environmentalist movement.

Demonstrating environmental consciousness in corporate decision-making can serve as a means of promoting the company to consumers. Even so, it remains a vital avenue for mitigating detrimental environmental impacts crucial for humankind’s survival, thus contributing to the promotion of sustainable consumption, with high hopes that this intention remains genuine and can be adopted across small, medium, and large companies.

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