

Article

Between Consumption and Environmental Citizenship: Ethical Dilemmas in Contemporary Society

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RESUMO

Este artigo propõe uma reflexão sobre dois papéis sociais contemporâneos, que apresentam origens e construções divergentes e antagônicas, mas que perseguem o bem-estar social – o cidadão ambiental e o consumidor. Tal pesquisa se demonstra oportuna num cenário de preocupações legítimas com as questões ambientais, alvo de conflitos entre decisões e ações de cunho sustentável. O objetivo geral da pesquisa é evidenciar os principais dilemas éticos entre esses papéis sob a perspectiva da ética ambiental. Para tanto, os objetivos específicos são: descrever os conceitos de consumidor e cidadão ambiental, características e percepções epistemológicas; apontar os principais fatores geradores de conflitos entre os papéis de consumidor e cidadão ambiental; analisar as dinâmicas sociais que acolhem os papéis de consumidor e cidadão ambiental sob a perspectiva da ética ambiental. Esta pesquisa tem caráter qualitativo e a discussão foi feita através de análise bibliográfica e de conteúdo, com a construção de um mapa mental.

Palavras-chave: cidadania ambiental; consumo; sustentabilidade.

ABSTRACT

This article proposes a reflection on two contemporary social roles, which have divergent and antagonistic origins and constructions, but which pursue social well-being – the environmental citizen and the consumer. Such research proves to be opportune in a scenario of legitimate concerns with environmental issues, the target of conflicts between decisions and actions of a sustainable nature. The general objective of the research is highlight the main ethical dilemmas between these roles from the perspective of environmental ethics. Therefore, the specific objectives are to describe the concepts of consumer and environmental citizen, characteristics and epistemological perceptions; point out the main factors that generate conflicts between the roles of consumer and environmental citizen; to analyze the social dynamics that embrace the roles of consumer and environmental citizen from the perspective of environmental ethics. This research has a qualitative character, and the discussion was done through bibliographical and content analysis, with the construction of a mental map.

Keywords: environmental citizenship; consumption; sustainability.

Introduction

Accountability for human actions and their consequences on the environment is currently a recurring topic of discussion across different spheres and sectors of society. In its broadest sense, this agenda seeks to involve a wide range of actors, including both individuals and organizations—public or private—and to address the impacts arising from each decision made within the social dynamics in which they participate.

Among the social roles recognized and assumed by individuals are that of the consumer—whose relevance can be measured through economic activity—and that of the citizen—a social member imbued with rights and



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duties, premises and prerogatives directed toward the constitution of a well-adjusted society. From a perspective of human relations broadened by discussions on environmental issues, the concept of the environmental citizen was proposed, framing a balanced relationship between individuals and the environment as (i) an essential element of social membership, (ii) a premise of greater relevance to the condition of full citizenship, and (iii) an essential human right, as recognized by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 48/13 (2021, n.p.), which addresses “the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment by the UN Human Rights Council”¹ considered therein an indispensable milestone for environmental justice.

Environmental justice, according to Herculano (2008), is understood as the set of principles that ensure that no group of people is subjected to a disproportionate share of negative environmental consequences resulting from governmental operations, policies, and programs, or from omissions and failures. Environmental injustice, according to the same author, is understood as the mechanism through which a greater burden of environmental damage is allocated to discriminated, marginalized, and more vulnerable social groups. These concepts guide the initial understanding of what constitutes the environmental citizen, which forms the basis of this research.

The general objective of this study is to highlight the main ethical dilemmas between the social roles identified as “consumer” and “environmental citizen,” from the perspective of environmental ethics. To this end, the specific objectives are: (a) to describe the concepts of consumer and environmental citizen, their characteristics, and epistemological perceptions; (b) to identify the main factors that generate conflicts between the roles of consumer and environmental citizen; and (c) to analyze the social dynamics that accommodate the roles of consumer and environmental citizen from the perspective of environmental ethics.

In order to achieve these objectives and provide answers to the questions presented, this research adopts a qualitative approach, with descriptive and exploratory characteristics. The discussion of the information presented was carried out through bibliographic analysis, with the construction of a mental map.

Development

Among the social roles assumed by individuals, considering the wide diversity of scenarios with which they interact, those related to consumption and environmental citizenship stand out as instruments for investigating possible incompatibilities that hinder an essentially sustainable attitude. Inherent and essential to human survival, consumption is a condition for the existence of biological life and cannot be eliminated. In contrast, within the scope of human relations, the individual, acting as a social being, finds in environmental citizenship the basic condition for an appropriate understanding of the dynamics necessary for social well-being, including nature itself within this spectrum.

Between the roles of “consumer” and “environmental citizen” – characteristics and epistemological origins

Consumption is a condition for survival. The existence of consumption does not initially indicate that there are distortions of consumption within a given society. According to Bauman (2008), there are differences

¹ Available at: <https://brasil.un.org/pt-br/150667-meio-ambiente-saudável-é-declarado-direito-humano-por-conselho-da-onu>. Accessed on: June 27, 2023.



between consumption and consumerism, the latter being a condition arising from liquid modernity². Bauman's concept of consumerism represents a fraying of the act of consuming to the point of completely disconnecting it from individual necessity and associating it solely with desire.

At this point, the role of the consumer becomes dissociated from survival and adheres to a structure of production and absorption of products essentially guided by desire, developing characteristics and actions that both support the capitalist system present in consumer societies and drive local economies. This dynamic justifies the transformation of the consumer into a consumerist through an extrinsic discourse centered on job and income generation. According to Silveira et al. (2021), contemporary consumer society originated in the Industrial Revolution, which induced technological development. Barbosa (2004), however, argues that the movement that initiated the dynamics of consumption as understood in modernity lies in the expansion of the West toward the East, bringing superfluous goods and individualistic ideology as early as the sixteenth century. Ewen (2008, p. 37, emphasis by the author, translation ours):

Even by appealing to instincts—feelings of social insecurity, in extreme cases—it was evident that capitalism could make men and women accustomed to a life of consumption. This social construction of consumers represented a transformation of social and political priorities that thereafter came to characterize a large part of the “life” of American industrial capitalism. The function of national advertising was the creation of desires and habits.

To better understand consumption in modernity and, consequently, the role of the consumer as a social actor, it is important to perceive the change in perception between the use value of products, their exchange value, and commodity fetishism, as presented by Marx (2013). According to the author, use value refers to the perception of the suitability of a commodity to a human need, which brings it closer to its utility. Exchange value, in turn, encompasses additional values related to the labor required for production and acquisition. Marx also presents the concept of commodity fetishism, whereby other qualities are added to the product, obscuring relations of exploitation and domination prevalent in capitalist dynamics of production (Marx 2013).

Baudrillard (2009), building on Marx, distinguishes use value, exchange value, and symbolic value of commodities. Use value refers to the perception of the practical utility of the object; exchange value to the understanding of its monetary worth; and symbolic value to artificially produced needs mediated by signs, sustaining consumption under the logic of desire, in which nothing is sufficient and the subject is driven toward consumerism.

The concept of citizenship, drawing from Aristotle, recognizes the citizen not merely by birth, but by the possibility of participation in the polis—the city of human relations. This conception determines an active construction that includes participation in matters of collective interest, aiming at social well-being (Mendes 2010). Environmental education thus becomes a necessary element for the transformation toward environmental citizenship.

² According to Zygmunt Bauman, Liquid Modernity is characterized by the absence of justification for consumption, since excess supply would dilute the relevance of need, and the pleasure of accessing goods would be sufficient reason to consume—“satisfying human desires in a way that no society in the past could achieve or dream of” (Bauman 2008, p. 105).



First appearing in discussions at the University of Keele Conference in 1965, albeit without much clarity regarding its scope, environmental education gained prominence at the Conference on Environment and Development held in 1992 (ECO-92), with the formulation of the Treaty on Environmental Education for Sustainable Societies (UNCED 1992), through the establishment of sixteen principles that foster environmental awareness (Luzzi 2005).

A responsible civic education requires that students, at their different levels of learning, understand environmental issues, both in relation to existing problems and to alternatives for sustainability (Dias & Carneiro 2016, p. 402).

Education for environmental citizenship must break with individualism and indifference and emphasize community-oriented issues, expressing actions aimed at human dignity and respect for life through thought, reflection, and the sharing of information and learning. These processes must be activated collectively in order to achieve the common good (Herculano 1995).

For Vega (2006), emphasis on rights and obligations toward the environment must be a prerequisite for understanding the concept of environmental citizenship, together with concern for the preservation of natural resources and ecosystems, as well as a focus on minimizing environmental impacts arising from the dynamics that degrade them.

Conflicts generated by social roles – consumer versus environmental citizen

It can thus be observed that the construction of consumption, supported by desire—by definition unlimited and exclusive—distances the consumer from the role of citizen, a subject who exists through experience and perception of the collective and is oriented toward social well-being. While consumption excludes the individual, rendering them unique in their desires and access, environmental citizenship includes, making perceptible the need for a holistic view of the whole—humanity and the environment. The figure of the consumer therefore perpetuates the

[...] culture of consumption that emphasizes individualization, singularization, rivalry, and envy (Gorz 2010, p. 22).

Despite their initially antagonistic nature, the roles of consumer and environmental citizen are both necessary and important for social construction. On the one hand, consumption sustains the productive dynamics of capitalist society, representing the primary source of revenue for organizations, whether public or private, and making them the main generators of employment and income. From this perspective, consumption drives the need for the production of goods and services, creating job opportunities and generating income for individuals, who then once again act as consumers. This demonstrates that industrial prosperity is a condition for the survival of society itself (Keynes 1936/1996).

The role of the environmental citizen is equally necessary and indispensable. This subject understands, coexists with, and acts in favor of the common good and the environment through dynamics that incorporate principles of sustainability as foundational assumptions, formed within a culture that perceives living nature as a condition for collective survival (Dias & Carneiro 2016).

While consumption is often regarded as destructive and as generating behavioral distortions—such as the culture of consumption and consumerism and the culture of waste—it supports markets and job creation. Conversely, environmental citizenship promotes a preservation-oriented perspective and care for nature, directing attention toward reduced consumption and the production of goods that are more expensive and less accessible.



A question thus emerges that may become central to the discussion: the search for balance between forms of subjectivation of individuals who, within the capitalist system that shapes them, have collective desires suppressed by individual desires, pointing to the absence of solidarity that could otherwise serve as a restraint on social inequalities (Barbosa & Francalanza 2021).

According to Battilana et al. (2015 apud Gottlieb et al. 2020), the existence of multiple logics generates tensions that may be interpreted as incompatible or paradoxical. Incompatible logics lead to a choice between one logic and another, whereas paradoxical logics present integration as a response, through the combination or competition between logics.

It can be concluded that the roles of citizen and consumer described here are recognized as paradoxical logics within “zones of negotiation,” since, according to Collins et al. (2007 apud Gottlieb et al. 2020), they combine perspectives and create new dynamics and languages adapted to distinct existing logics, shaping contextualized decisions and habits.

Social Dynamics and Cultures – Environmental Ethics for Sustainability

According to Buckeridge (2019), Environmental Ethics emerged as a field of study in the 1970s as a result of growing awareness that non-human elements of the biosphere possess value. Strictly speaking, the emergence of Environmental Ethics occurred largely as a counterpoint to the anthropocentric worldview derived from the Judeo-Christian culture predominant in the Western world, according to which nature has always been considered and addressed from the perspective of human interests (Buckeridge 2019).

In his essay on the historical roots of the ecological crisis in the Western world, historian Lynn White (1967) argues that the daily habits of Western cultures are dominated by an implicit faith in perpetual progress rooted in Judeo-Christian theology. This mode of thought encouraged the overexploitation of nature in order to ensure human supremacy over other living beings, as well as the belief that all of nature was created for human use (Brennan & Lo 2016).

In contrast to the proposal inherent in the concept of Environmental Ethics—namely, questioning the foundations of Western thought regarding nature, its existence, and its use in the service of humanity—consumption dissociated from the needs of human survival and linked to desire, that is, consumerism, as structured in the thinking of Baudrillard (2009) and characterized within Bauman’s (2008) concept of Liquid Modernity, represents the resistance of anthropocentric thought in the face of the challenge posed by a new perspective on the biosphere that recognizes the value of non-human elements.

This inversion of values has led modern human beings to turn toward technology and the artificial world, emphasizing a new life project: an artificial life in which machines and computers become the most important elements of existence. It has become more appealing to observe nature through images on high-tech screens than to contemplate it directly. Technologies and the advertising surrounding these technical devices make them more attractive than nature itself. *Homo urbanus* seeks to smell diesel oil, walk on asphalt, and acquire products; children want television and the internet. This illustrates the difficult task of establishing an ethic oriented toward environmental protection (Pereira & Horn 2009, pp. 22–23)

In summary, consumerism is a structure of human behavior that reflects cultural resistance rooted in the fundamental values of Judeo-Christian society in the face of a new ethos that positions human beings as participants—rather than as the center—on equal footing and with equal relevance alongside all other elements of the biosphere.



“No previous ethic had to take into account the global condition of human life, the distant future, or even the existence of the species. With the awareness of the extreme vulnerability of nature to human technological intervention, ecology emerges. It becomes necessary to rethink the basic principles of ethics. To seek not only the human good, but also the good of extra-human things; that is, to expand the understanding of ‘ends in themselves’ beyond the sphere of humanity, and to ensure that the human good includes care for them” (Jonas 1997, p. 40).

Although an initial idea may be established that environmental ethics is centered on the balance between human action and ecosystem preservation, between consumption and environmental awareness, it is necessary to understand that these are not stable dichotomous elements, but rather complex and multidimensional ones. Certainly, the discussion of an ethic that corresponds to contemporary concerns regarding environmental causes and their effects does not formulate its assumptions based on issues of easy understanding or a simple scenario.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach and is developed in a descriptive and exploratory manner. The discussion was based on both bibliographic and content analysis, supported by the construction of a mind map. According to Martins and Theóphilo (2016, p. 52), “bibliographic research seeks to explain and discuss a subject, theme, or problem (...)”.

Theoretical comparison was the method used to elucidate the main questions related to the ethical dilemma that constitutes the object of this study. With the aim of constructing a new perspective that reveals the intersection between two socially recognized roles, it is understood that theoretical comparison

“does not mean that we use experience or literature as data, but rather that we use properties and dimensions derived from comparative incidents to examine the data before us” (Strauss 2008, p. 85).

For both content analysis and the development of the mind map, the following categories were defined: the logics that support the construction of the social role; values and behavioral premises; socio-environmental responsibility; and the exercise of influence over the collective. Based on the theoretical framework, it became possible to illustrate the study in order to facilitate the reader’s understanding.

Thus, the understanding presented as the outcome of this study results from a cognitive construction associated with comparative analysis between the initial perception of the theme and the literature, comparing the positions of the authors and analyzing the highlighted categories as references for understanding the constructs of the two roles presented in contrast.

The methodological choices presented define the path adopted for designing the results of this research.

The mind map, as the instrument used to compile the main information related to this study, provides a comprehensive, visually appealing, and stimulating overview of complex topics, with the purpose of facilitating the understanding of cognitive construction and stimulating creativity (Buzan 2005). The decision to use this method of presentation, supported by information and communication technologies, is due, among other reasons, to the significant change in the way contemporary society interacts.



Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have enhanced the use of images and graphics across all fields, including learning. This approach is justified by the cerebral stimulation triggered by sensory perception—especially vision—through such resources. It also offers concrete means that facilitate visualization, known as “graphic organizers,” among which the mind map stands out (Muñoz-González, Ontoria-Peña & Molina-Rubio 2011, p. 345, emphasis by the authors).

Results and Discussion

The focus of the discussion is, therefore, the construction of guiding ideas that should be manifested in social practices. There is little value in discussing concepts that are important for understanding new forms of conduct if, even when oriented toward nature and sustainability, little is actually implemented, thereby making environmental ethics a target of criticism regarding its materiality.

Based on the knowledge formed through the concepts, characteristics, and conflicts between the social roles proposed in the analysis of this research—consumer and environmental citizen—the direction to be followed points toward the idealization of a convergent role, one that presents association and mediation between characteristics and possibilities of action capable of producing concrete results that minimize and mitigate existing, persistent, and severe environmental problems.

It is important to emphasize that while capitalist and consumption-oriented ethics determine actions aimed at producing social well-being through job creation and financial access to solutions for human needs, environmental ethics directs attention to the importance of preserving the land—which, ironically, is a necessary condition for capitalist exploitation itself to remain viable.

“To date, there is no ethic that deals with the relationship between human beings and the land, and with the animals and plants that grow upon it. The land, like the slaves of Odysseus, is still considered property. The relationship with the land remains strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations” (Leopold 2007, p. 30).

Thus, at times social care for survival supersedes environmental ethics, while at other times the preservation of land supersedes consumption ethics. The issue lies in identifying the best among three alternatives: (i) seeking balance between the roles of consumer and environmental citizen; (ii) understanding one role as primary in the ethical confrontation, to the detriment of the one considered secondary; or (iii) conceiving a third path, based on possibilities such as the emergence or creation of new, more complex social roles that integratively encompass both consumption and environmental citizenship. Would this third path represent yet another sustainable utopia?

The reflection underlying the construction of this study is clearly understood through the confrontation between individualism and collectivism—ideas that emerge as consequences of the social and cultural dynamics in which individuals are immersed and that indicate antagonistic views of reality. According to Kotler (2015), an individual’s self-esteem is rooted in social order within collectivist societies, and acting in disagreement with this order may lead to criticism and shame.



In individualistic societies, according to the same author (Kotler 2015), people give little thought to the impacts of their actions on other members of society, disregarding collective considerations in their habitual decisions. The book *Bowling Alone*, by Robert Putnam, cited by Kotler (2015), describes individuals playing bowling—a game traditionally practiced socially—in isolation, illustrating a scenario that runs counter to sustainable thinking.

Figure 1 presents the main results gathered from the indicators previously listed, viewed through the perspectives of the authors who contributed to the discussion that constitutes the scope of this research.

Content analysis is one of several ways to interpret the content of a text, having developed through the adoption of systematic procedures aimed at extracting thematic or lexical meanings by means of the simplest elements of the text (Chizzotti 2014, p. 114).

The categories defined for analysis of the theoretical framework addressed, established to facilitate understanding of the content studied, can be described as follows:

- The logics supporting the construction of the social role – a set of theories that explain the reasons guiding individuals to assume social roles, understood as behavioral expectations predetermined by groups (Campos 2003).
- Values and behavioral premises – what matters to the individual, translated into ideas and objects that carry meanings and behavioral orientations (Thomas & Znaniecki 1927).
- Socio-environmental responsibility – considerations regarding the consequences of individual choices and behaviors, both for the environment and for social well-being (Jonas 2006).
- The exercise of influence over the collective – the impact of individual action in a social role on collective dynamics, as a consequence (Skinner 1953).

Additionally, through Figure 1, the data and results of the content analysis are highlighted by comparing elements that clarify and explain the existence of the two social roles that constitute the object of this discussion.



Table 1 – Analysis by category

CATEGORIES	Consumer	Environmental Citizen
Logics of social role construction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumption Theory – Within the capitalist and economic liberalism context, presents the consumer as a fundamental driver of the system, stimulating production and capital accumulation. • Other Economic Theories – Purchasing based on utility, budget constraints, and preferences. • Behavioral Theories – Motivation and perception of satisfaction in purchasing. • Social Theories – Influence of social groups and consumer culture. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental Justice – Equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. • Political Ecology – Power relations, politics, and the environment; recognition of the use of natural resources driven by political and economic interests. • Environmental Education – Investigates the causes of the environmental crisis and enables possible social changes. • Ecological Modernization – Economic development and environmental protection aligned. • Rights of Nature – Intrinsic rights of nature.
Values and behavioral premises	<p>Values: freedom of choice; quality assurance; compensation for damages; safety; access to information and access to justice.</p> <p>Premises: vulnerability; good faith; clear and complete information; equality; state intervention; full compensation; prevention.</p>	<p>Values: sustainability; responsibility; interdependence; respect; ethics.</p> <p>Premises: awareness; participation; education; sustainable practices; shared responsibility.</p>
Socio-environmental responsibility	<p>Search for products with lower environmental impact; reduction of waste; proper disposal; support for “green” companies.</p>	<p>Conscious consumption; proper waste disposal; participation in environmental actions; advocacy for sustainable practices; environmental education; use of clean technologies; creation of green areas; political engagement.</p>
Collective influence	<p>Direct influence on production and stimulation of innovation; shaping social relations and individual and collective identity – fashion, trends, and lifestyle.</p>	<p>Agent of social transformation and environmental protection through practices that reflect responsibility toward the collective.</p>

Source: Survey data (2025).

Figure 2, presented below, proposes a view of the categories of analysis cited in the research through a mind map intended to simultaneously foster understanding and discomfort regarding the two paths presented



in the text, as well as the conflicts between the ethics of consumption and environmental ethics. The comparison presents aspects of each line of thought without, however, establishing a manichean scenario.

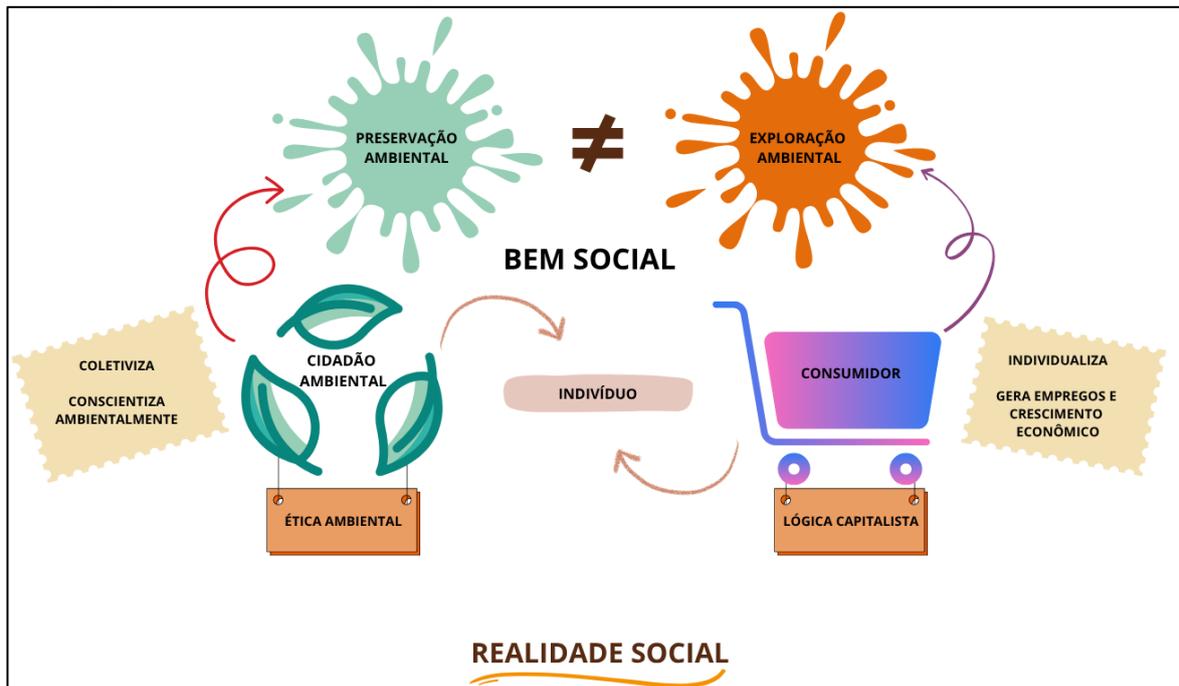


Figure 1 – Mind map – Consumer and environmental citizen: ethical conflicts in the dynamics of social roles. Source: Research Data (2025).

It is evident that, although divergent and conflicting, the social roles highlighted in this study aim at the collective good, considering their social, economic, and environmental dimensions.

Final Considerations

The discussion presented in this research leads to an understanding of the coexistence of two conflicting logics that support the social roles assumed by individuals in favor of sustainable thinking. For the reality of environmental citizenship to be experienced, it is important to emphasize the relevance of environmental education in civic formation, as a distinguishing element for awareness and action.

Since all individuals are, in essence, consumers—given that they seek survival through access to elements available in their environment—the convergence between the roles of consumer and environmental citizen must occur in such a way that environmental ethics exerts influence over consumption practices.

Through Gorz (2010), it is possible to identify the formulation of two institutional logics of a human nature related to the social roles of consumer and environmental citizen. These logics coexist in their complexities within an equally complex scenario and persist even while embracing different and antagonistic values and principles.

For greater depth on the proposed theme and the effective development of a defense for a possible third path of action that determines the confluence between the social roles brought into discussion—consumer and environmental citizen—it is suggested that this research be continued through the use of ethnography and participant observation in different social scenarios and constructions.

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