Can Supermarkets Boost Healthy Eating Habits?

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ABSTRACT

Problems related to obesity as a result of changing dietary habits have generated discussions. This study aimed to make connections between institutional theory and presumable strategies that supermarkets may adopt to minimize problems related to poor nutrition. Eating habits, obesity and overweight indexes were analyzed, leading to the following problem: How can supermarkets contribute to fight epidemic obesity and at the same time take advantages of it?

INSTITUTIONAL THEORY AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

According to North (1990) institutions determine the opportunities in the society, while organizations (among which companies are included) are formed to make the most of these opportunities. In the interstice, ideologies are formal and informal rule makers of society and thus play a key role in the development of different economies. Consumers have different buying behaviors, which are influenced by different factors: social, situational, individual (age, gender, social class), environment (where the food is bought and consumed) and market strategies imposed by firms.

RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

In the U.S., approximately two thirds of adults and one fifth of children are obese or over weighted (CDC, 2009). In Brazil, obesity has also increased, reaching mostly men with higher incomes (Figure 1).
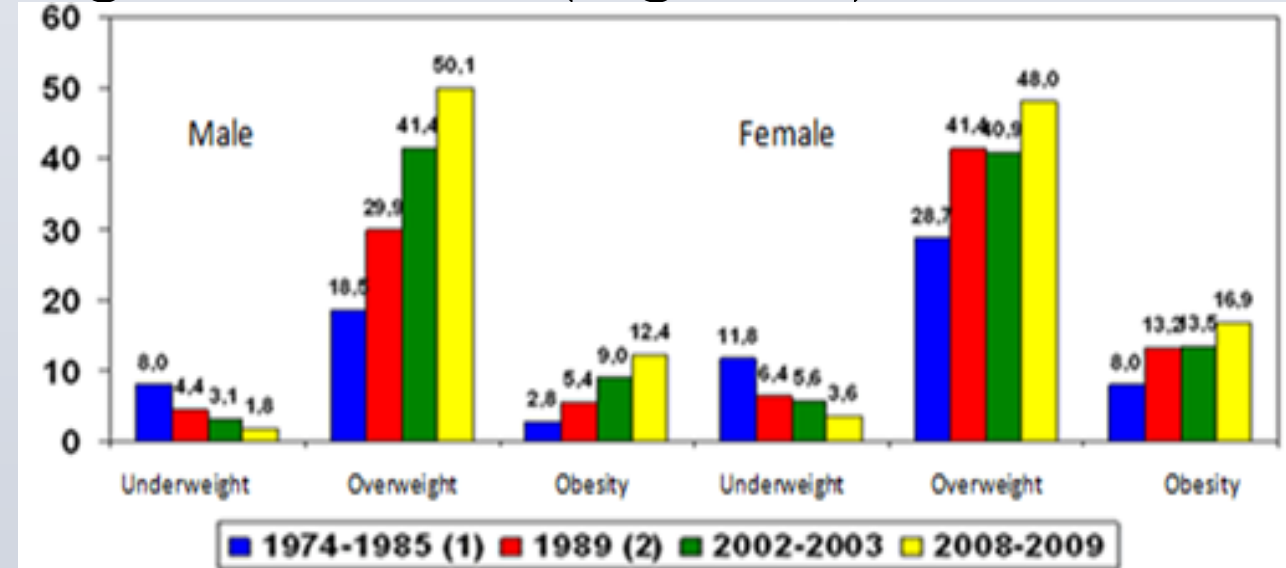

Figure 1: Number of indicators in the ≥ 20 years of age, by gender. Brazil; periods 1974-75, 1989, 2002-2003 and 2008-2009. Source: IBGE, 2010.

This information directly reflects on the importance of this issue, and is related to the upward increase of the average calories consumed by Americans and Brazilians (Figure 2).
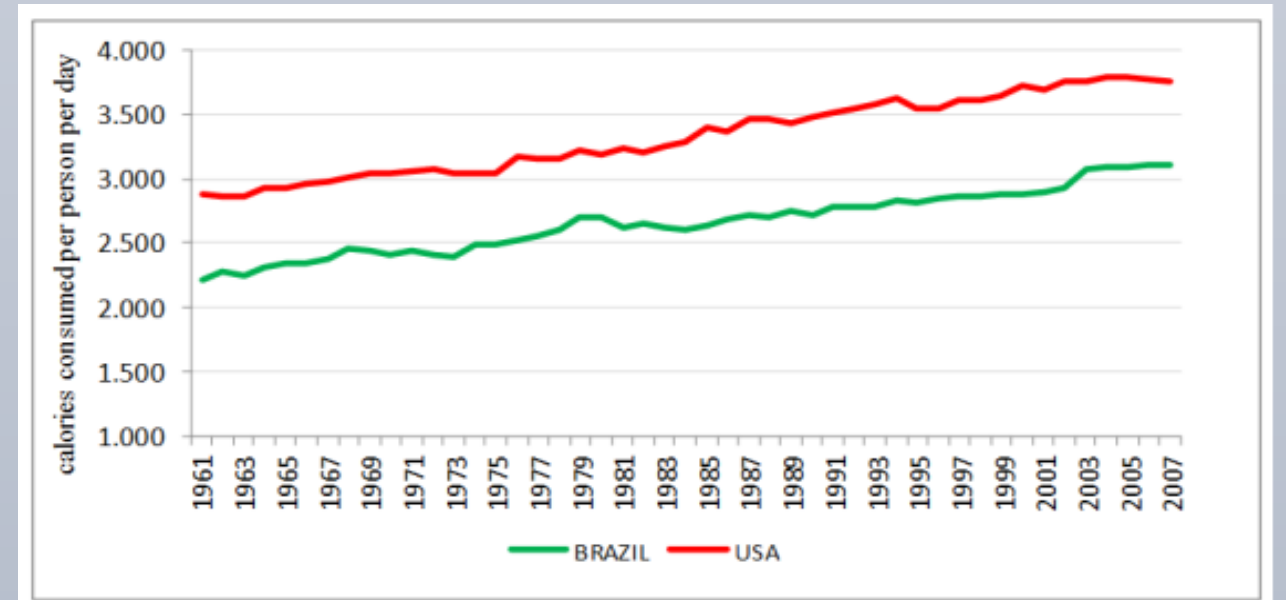

Figure 2: The amount of calories consumed per person per day. Source: prepared by the author FAO/STAT, 2011.

SUPERMARKETS

Brazil – 75% of total food sales in supermarkets. EUA – 80%.
Americans focus consume in packaged foods, while Brazilians consume over 75kg more of fresh products (Table 1).

PACKAGE FOOD	BRAZIL	USA
Sauces, dressings, condiments	51	63
Dairy product	117	298
Bakery goods	81	108
Pasta	12	12
Soup and canned food	7	77
Snacks and candy	9	47
Processed frosen, dried and chilled food, and ready to eat meals	115	183
Total (Kg per capita)	**392**	**787**
FRESH FOOD	BRAZIL	USA
Vegetables	208	194
Fruit	161	124
Eggs, nuts and beans	103	88
Meat and seafood	205	197
Total (Kg per capita)	**677**	**602**

Table 1: consumption per capita (kg) in 2002.
Source: prepared by author based on data from Fairfield (2010).

Research shows that 62% of U.S. consumers are looking for a healthier diet. For 45% of "shoppers", there is a concern about the nutritional content of food they buy in supermarkets, a similar statistic in 2009; but in 2006 it was only 32% (ABRAS, 2010). This information highlighted the opportunities that supermarkets have and the strategies that aim to maximize the offer and the demand for healthier foods and that may provide future benefits for both parties.

THE INSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMACY

In this approach, supermarkets that seek to strengthen the organizational identity and the relationship with their costumers need to adequately manage its institutional capital looking for legitimizing their actions.
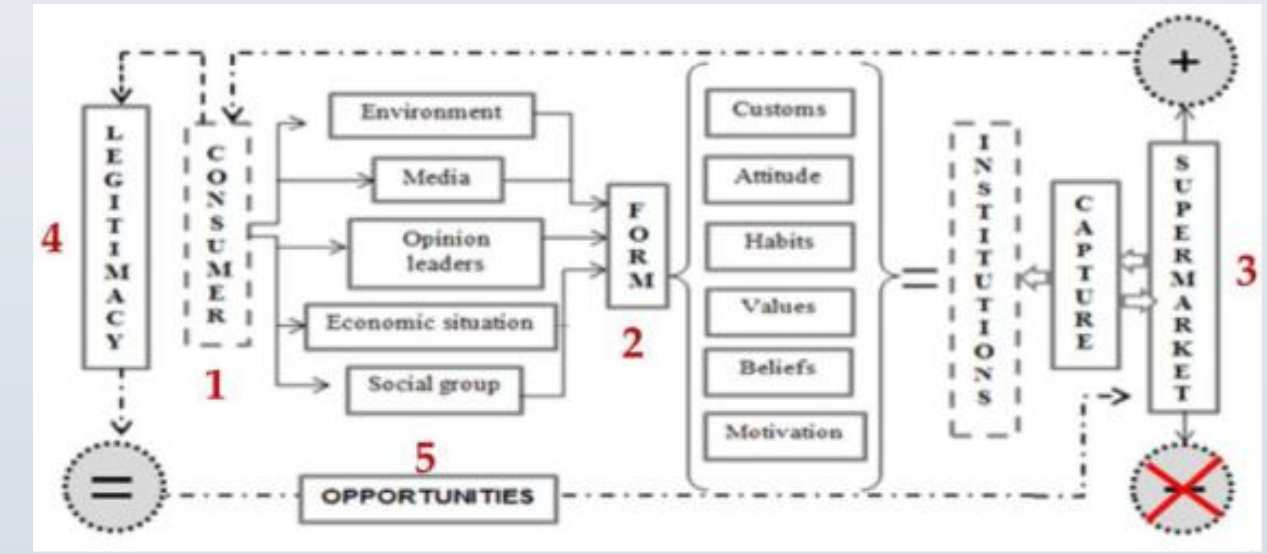

Figure 3: Consumer, institutions and supermarket seeking legitimacy

FINAL REMARKS

Supermarkets could help fighting overweight and obesity problems, and at the same time, take advantages on these actions through the institutional legitimacy that consumers will build regarding the benefits that the supermarkets offer.

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