

ARTICLES

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AD BLOCKING: ADOPTION DISCOURSES AND ADVERTISING ANTI-CONSUMPTION

Ad Blocking: Discursos de adoção e de anticonsumo da publicidade

Ad Blocking: Discursos de adopción y de anticonsumo de la publicidad

ABSTRACT

The present study investigates the discourses on the use of *ad blockers*. Based on in-depth interviews with consumers who have activated blockers, three discourses emerged concerning this new technology: 1) Autonomy and control of advertising effects; 2) Exchanges on the Internet: asymmetry, paradoxes, and search for equity; and 3) Efficiency and convenience. Departing from these results, this study discusses the positioning of anti-consumption studies as the study of “reasons against” consumption. The paper proposes complementary approaches to the anti-consumption research, founded less on the intentional and conscious aspects of consumers and more on the notion of power as an entity disputed by the actors.

KEYWORDS | Ad blocker, anti-consumption, resistance, power, online advertising.

RESUMO

A presente pesquisa investiga os discursos em torno do uso dos *ad blockers*. A partir de entrevistas em profundidade com consumidores que ativaram bloqueadores, três discursos emergiram em torno dessa tecnologia: 1) autonomia e controle dos efeitos da publicidade; 2) trocas na internet: assimetria, paradoxos e busca de equidade e 3) eficiência e conveniência. A partir desses resultados, discute-se o posicionamento dos estudos de anticonsumo como o estudo das “razões contra” o consumo. O trabalho propõe abordagens complementares na pesquisa de anticonsumo, menos baseadas nos aspectos intencionais e conscientes dos consumidores e na noção de poder como entidade disputada pelos atores.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE | Ad blocker, anticonsumo, resistência, poder, publicidade on-line.

RESUMEN

El presente estudio investiga las narrativas que constituyen el discurso de los consumidores en la adopción de *ad blockers*. Basados en entrevistas en profundidad con consumidores que activaron *ad blockers*, se identificaron tres discursos principales en torno a esta nueva tecnología: 1) Autonomía y control de los efectos de la publicidad; 2) Intercambios en Internet: asimetría, paradojas y búsqueda de equidad, y 3) Eficiencia y conveniencia. A partir de los resultados, se discute el posicionamiento de los estudios de anticonsumo como el estudio de las “razones contra” el consumo. El trabajo propone enfoques complementarios en la investigación de anticonsumo, menos basados en los aspectos intencionales y conscientes de los consumidores y en la noción de poder como entidad disputada por los actores.

PALAVRAS CLAVE | Ad blocker, anticonsumo, resistencia al consumo, poder, publicidad online.

MARCOS ERBISTI¹

erbisti@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0003-2321-0943

MARIBEL CARVALHO SUAREZ¹

maribels@coppead.ufrj.br

ORCID: 0000-0001-9736-5273

¹Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Instituto COPPEAD de Administração, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil

INTRODUCTION

In marketing literature, recent studies aim to understand behaviors where consumers distance themselves and, in some cases, oppose companies, categories, brands, and market offers (Kraemer, Silveira & Rossi, 2012; Suarez, Chauvel & Casotti, 2012; Comassetto et al., 2013; Oliveira, Pessôa, & Ayrosa, 2017). According to common sense, the term anti-consumption usually generates associations with movements created by activists against companies and the capitalist system. However, its theoretical definition is wider, including collective, organized, public, and voice oppositions, such as boycotts against companies, as well as more ordinary and even trivial individual actions—for instance, a consumer who ends up abandoning a brand or category. Chatzidakis and Lee (2013) define anti-consumption research as the study related to the “reasons against” that concerns the behaviors when consumers distance themselves from specific acts of consumption motivated by ethical, environmental, and resistance issues, or by symbolic divergences.

Although the anti-consumption concept encompasses these varied possibilities of distancing, research on this theme has historically concentrated on resistance behaviors: on boycotts and actions performed by activists against companies. One of the challenges faced by studies on this theme concerns the fact that in other types of anti-consumption behaviors, occurrences and consequences are harder to be observed (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013). While boycotts and protests are visible behaviors, everyday anti-consumption or distancing is not always tangible and observable. In this sense, little has been investigated about more trivial behaviors of anti-consumption, when consumers end up by distancing themselves from an offer in a silent and impassionate way.

The present study investigates the use of blockers (ad blockers) as a way to contribute to the reflections on anti-consumption. Ad blocker represents any technology that allows the removal of ads from a web page. These extensions are available in free versions, which can be installed in browsers in desktops and notebooks, or apps downloaded in smartphones and tablets. As a digital service made possible through direct and indirect economic exchanges within the Internet ecosystem, blockers are a consumption context (Macinnis & Folkes, 2010) that also represents a concrete and visible anti-consumption action against advertising. So, in the present study, we understand that the adoption of ad blockers represents an action to facilitate Internet navigation as well as a way of distancing oneself from advertising, and therefore, a way of anti-consumption. The

study of advertising distancing presents itself as a privileged context for the investigation of anti-consumption: beyond a consumption experience per se, advertising is a privileged tool for the construction, modification, and diffusion of tastes, beliefs, and values, which shape other consumptions (Acevedo, Nohara, Campanario, & Telles, 2009).

In addition to the possibility of expanding the comprehension of anti-consumption behaviors, the increasing adherence to blockers must be understood by companies that belong to the Internet ecosystem and depend on digital advertising revenues, including online advertising agencies, announcers and content publishers, and huge players such as Google and Facebook, among others. In February 2017, a global report highlighted the growing adherence to this software: in seven years, the number of world users increased by more than twenty-nine times, jumping from 21 million in 2010 to 615 million in 2017, accounting for 11% of the total number of Internet users in the whole planet (PageFair, 2017). The loss of advertising revenues because of the use of blockers was estimated at USD 21.8 billion in 2015, equivalent to 14% of global investments in advertising during the same year (PageFair & Adobe, 2015).

The present study contributes to the comprehension of this phenomenon by investigating discourses that legitimize the use of ad blockers, and therefore, advertising distancing. Departing from a qualitative approach and based on in-depth interviews with consumers who adopted blockers, we identified three logics that grounded the use of this new technology: 1) Autonomy and advertising effects control; 2) Internet exchanges: asymmetry, paradoxes, and equity search and 3) Efficiency and convenience.

More than mapping the discourse associated to ad blockers, this study analyzes the theoretical work of distinction between anti-consumption and resistance (Galvagno, 2011; Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013; Lee, Roux, Cherrier, & Cova, 2011). As we will argue in the course of this study, anti-consumption research mainly engages in the investigation of motivational, conscious, and phenomenological aspects, rather than broader socio-cultural discussions. As our results suggest, even the investigation of reasons against consumption presents great overlap between functional or symbolic aspects and those of resistance. In this sense, instead of trying to distinguish the origin of distancing, our suggestion is that anti-consumption research contemplates the richness and ambiguity that exist in this behavior.

To delineate these contributions, the study at first presents some fundamental concepts concerning anti-consumption, resistance, and advertising distancing behavior. Then, methodological justifications and choices in the process of data collection and analysis are presented. After the presentation

of results, implications are articulated from field findings, with a conceptual reflection on complementary perspectives for anti-consumption research.

ANTI-CONSUMPTION AND RESISTANCE

Chatzidakis and Lee (2013) propose anti-consumption as an umbrella term, which encompasses not only the studies that investigate restrictions directly related to consumption but also the so-called resistance behaviors that refer to acts which search to transform domination structures, rebalancing power differences. According to Lee et al. (2011), anti-consumption contemplates several practices, such as rejection, restriction, and claim. Rejection occurs when individuals intentionally and rationally exclude specific goods from their consumption cycle, such as, the act of rejecting a brand for functional, symbolic, or ethical reasons. Restriction happens when the consumption of a good is reduced or limited, because it is not possible to cut it completely, as in the case of water and electricity. Claim represents a broader change in the acquisition, use, and disposal logics. It occurs, for example, when consumers choose to make their own products, instead of buying them in the market.

In spite of suggesting a broad meaning for anti-consumption, as in the “study of reasons against,” the framework proposed by Chatzidakis and Lee (2013) keeps the distinction between anti-consumption and resistance, characterizing resistance as opposition to dominant practices in the market, which become antagonistic to consumers’ beliefs and interests. Therefore, consumer resistance would always be related to the intention of confronting domination structures and rebalancing asymmetric power relations (Peñaloza & Price, 1993; Lee et al., 2011; Dalmoro, Peñaloza, & Nique, 2014). Paradoxically, resistance does not always manifest itself through distancing, and can be expressed, for instance, through consumption acts, such as when somebody buys a product of a specific brand just to resist the domination of a competitor.

Izberk-Bilgin (2010) differentiates studies of resistance to consumption according to two fields. The first one, called “liberating,” is interested in the investigation of movements that challenge market’s logic, through the rupture with the market symbolic codes or with the market practices. The second one, called “market bound,” assumes the notion that consumers cannot emancipate from market logics. These studies are more interested in the aspects that encourage and enlarge resistance behaviors than in the processes of critique construction and consumption emancipation.

Discursive and ideological aspects, which support resistance behaviors, were explored in several studies, revealing distinct logics that can be based on political (Sandikci & Ekici, 2009), religious (Izberk-Bilgin, 2012), and nationalist (Varman & Belk, 2009; Alden, Kelley, Riefler, Lee, & Soutar, 2013) oppositions, as well as on the construction of differentiated identities (Holt, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Cherrier, 2009).

ADVERTISING AVOIDANCE

The behavior of advertising avoidance was not invented by the use of ad blockers. According to Duff and Faber (2011), although this is an old behavior, marketing field lacks studies which expand the comprehension of the factors that cause advertising to be ignored, intentional or not.

Fransen et al. (2015) propose the distinction between three advertising resistance strategies: avoidance, contestation, and empowerment. Avoidance can happen in different ways, including behaviors such as getting out of the room during commercial breaks, turning the TV volume down, or using ad blockers; this characterizes what authors classify as physical avoidance. Mechanical avoidance happens when the consumer uses the remote control to change the TV channel or accelerate the TV commercial. Finally, cognitive avoidance occurs when the consumer does not pay attention to the commercial.

Studying specifically Internet advertisements, Cho and Cheon (2004) identified motivations for distancing the perception that ads were an obstacle to the goal of browsing the Internet and the excessive accumulation of advertising and negative experiences, related to the frustrations generated by browsing these kinds of ads in the past. Shin and Lin (2016) more specifically examined advertisements directed by geographic localization. The results also reveal the obstacles to the browsing objectives, the uselessness, and the eventually necessary sacrifices for qualification as aspects that lead to advertising avoidance.

In summary, the present study contributes to anti-consumption research by addressing not only motivations to avoid advertising on the Internet, but also the discourses created to legitimate this behavior. Previous work on this theme focused on the investigation of public and collective resistance movements. Therefore, within marketing literature, little has been investigated about distancing behaviors—anti-consumption and resistance—which are more private and silent, such as everyday adherence to the use of ad blockers. The following section intends to explain the methodological choices of the present study.

METHOD

Discourses are not the content of an individual's mind; they are created from inter-textual and interdiscursive dynamics, where each narrative is constructed from pre-existent discourses, genders, and records. In other words, discourses exist before and are perpetuated beyond the speech of a specific speaker, providing direction and sense to the experiences lived by individuals (Moisander, Valtonen, & Hirsto, 2009). Discourses are ways of thinking, including ideas, attitudes, and behaviors that combine themselves in the understanding of reality. The perception of reality, in turn, is shaped and influenced by discursive practices and interactions. Therefore, discourses not only describe things, but also make things (Grant, Keenoy & Oswick, 1998).

This study adopted a qualitative approach, where ten in-depth interviews were conducted with users of ad blockers to understand the discourses that legitimize this behavior. In-depth interviews with consumers are a way to obtain deep knowledge about a topic that the informant knows well and is capable of talking about (Belk, Fischer, & Kozinets, 2013). A semi-structured script was created to guide the interviews, beginning with general and broader questions about consumption and Internet, followed by the exploration of specific questions related to blockers. Aiming to generate cultural conversation (Moisander et al., 2009) and release part of the interview from too personal implications, projective techniques were embedded in the script (Rook, 2006), turning the interaction more fluid and dynamic. The shortest interview lasted approximately 25 minutes, and the

longest one, one hour and a half. All interviews were transcribed, summing up to about 187 pages of material for analysis.

The participants were selected with the help of Facebook, through a post published by the researchers while searching for blocker users. The main filter for participation in the study was related to the use of ad blocker programs. Although the selection strategy was more inclusive than restrictive, the interviewees profile reflects the profile associated to the initial adopters (Rogers, 1962) of new technologies. In general, all of them are young professionals from classes A and B, are linked to technology, have high socio-educational level, and are potential opinion leaders. The profile homogeneity also relates in part to aspects of convenience in the process of recruiting and to the use of the snow-ball technique (Penrod, Preston, Cain, & Starks, 2003), where each interviewee indicated another potential interviewee for taking part in the study. The total number of interviews was determined by the process of theoretical saturation (Bowen, 2008); in other words, from the moment the informant reports began to repeat themselves and brought forth little perspectives that had not emerged in previous interviews. Following the procedure suggested by Fontanella et al. (2011), Exhibit 1 presents how the occurrence of statements related to the three narratives on the use of ad blockers was distributed. As can be noticed in the chart, each one of the narratives had at least five distinct manifestations, configuring content with enough deepness to substantiate the analysis results and the comprehension of the different logics. The names of the interviewees, presented according to the order in which the interviews were performed, were altered to preserve their anonymity.

Exhibit 1. Profile of the research interviewees and evidences of theoretical saturation

Name	Age	Profession	Theoretical Statements/Saturation		
			Autonomy and control narrative	Asymmetries on Internet exchanges narrative	Efficiency and convenience narrative
Fred	31	Engineer		x	x
Fernando	37	Designer	x		x
Clara	26	Engineer	x		x
Helena	26	Economist	x	x	x
Clóvis	35	Dentist			x
Alberto	35	Economist		x	x
Neusa	33	Economist	x		x
Enrico	31	Programmer/Professional of Visual Effects	x		x
José	34	Physician	x	x	x
Gustavo	35	Engineer		x	x

Data analysis followed the hermeneutic proposition suggested by Thompson (1997), where the interpretation of the interviews goes on as a series of interactions between the part and the whole. In this process, special attention was given to the broader dynamics of the “historically established meanings” (Thompson, 1997, p. 442), in the search for describing the social discourse that permeates consumers’ texts and identifying the significant structures which legitimize the use of blockers. In practice, the interactive process consisted of two different stages. Initially, all interviews were codified to find recurrent themes in the discourse. Some codes were inspired by the existent literature, while others emerged from the interviews. With the purpose of understanding the holistic context of each interview, summaries were also produced, allowing an in-depth comprehension of each informant. The second stage was inter-textual, where patterns were explored from the different interviews. The generated codes were used in this stage to compare and contrast the interviewees’ discourses. From this constant process of contrast, three logics were delineated, which ground the results presented in the next section.

RESULTS

According to Thompson (2004), multiple discourses emerge from the complexity of contemporary societies; interweaving and competing among themselves. Therefore, individuals are never under the domination of an unique hegemonic narrative, and this plurality was found in this study. Three discourses around the use of ad blockers were identified: 1) Autonomy and control of advertising effects; 2) Exchanges on the Internet: asymmetry, paradoxes, and search for equity; and 3) Efficiency and convenience. The following analysis presents the central aspects of these discourses.

Autonomy and control of advertising effects

The blocker is above all an advertising restriction tool, and therefore, it naturally articulates rejection arguments toward advertising. Therefore, our interest is to highlight nuances around this discourse. If the advertisements are being blocked, there is at least one functional divergence concerning advertising: a discomfort related to questions of usage, that is, misunderstandings in relation to the repetitive character, the format, or the quantity of advertisements. In this sense, retargeting, which happens when announcers present ads related to searches made or pages recently visited, is significant cause of

dissatisfaction among Internet users, and an important motivation for some of them to use ad blockers.

Something that bothers me deeply is when you search for a bike, or buy a bike, know that for six months you will see bike banners anywhere you look at in your life. (Fernando, 37, Designer)

Once I wanted to know how much a ball cost. I did not even want to buy it, I only wanted to know how much it cost. I searched for it, and for a whole month, whenever I entered my Facebook, e-mail, cellphone, or computer, advertisement of balls was all that appeared. I reached a point of buying a ball just to stop looking at the balls ads in front of me. I could not help it anymore. (Helena, 26, economist)

Retargeting allows announcers to show advertisement only to those who expressed prior interest in a certain product or subject. For content producers and distributors, this type of advertisement is interesting, because they can charge more from announcers for visualization, since they are giving ads not just to mere visitors of their site, but also to potential consumers of that product.

This type of advertisement, which arose to increase sales and improve users experience by displaying ads that would supposedly be more relevant, can end up having the opposite effect, when this cycle of ads repetition bothers the consumers and represents a form of privacy invasion.

Within the discourse of autonomy and control of advertisement effects, we found arguments that transcend the functional issue and reach the conceptual aspect of ideas expressed by advertisement, contesting its tactics and even its role in society. When the interviewees point to the slowness caused by advertisement or the interruption in the flow of content reading, they are articulating functional rejection behaviors. Nevertheless, when they affirm that advertisement—through texts, images, and ideas—presses and manipulates consumers, our informants reveal resistance attitudes they recognize in advertisements, market dominance practices, or commercial pressures (Lee et al., 2011).

On the one hand, it irritates because it retards, it shows me things I am not interested in. On the other hand, the issue with advertisements is that it makes you want to consume things

you do not need. Another thing that angers me is advertising to children. I remember there was a time when my little cousin annoyed me for two weeks because she wanted to have a Furby. Children are groups that still can be manipulated by advertising ... There is also the issue of values. There are advertisements that are still clueless, that are not adequate for the XXI century. We see these sexist macho advertisements of beer, it is bizarre. Because it is a tool that is being used to disseminate a product, but it is also disseminating a behavior which is bad for our society. We are having this discussion about the culture of rape, and this type of advertisement is directly inserted in this culture. Advertisement can have a very prejudicial effect on society. (Helena, 26, economist)

In her speech, Helena articulates several arguments to justify the use of ad blockers. Her commentaries conciliate functionality aspects as well as the invasive nature of advertising; its power to manipulate society and stimulate unlimited consumption. Additionally, according to her, “ad blocker can have this effect of making people consume less.” In this sense, it is important to emphasize the paradox revealed by the work of [Morato, Arcoverde, and Leal \(2017\)](#), which underlines that the approaches for consumption reduction are stimulated not only by consumers and activists but also by the companies and their campaigns, to reinforce aspects of social responsibility and institutional reputation. In this sense, although they bring aspects of anti-consumption, Helena’s arguments align with the perspective offered by certain advertising announcements and other discourses of the cultural industry, as important generating agents of the consumers’ discourse ([Costa & Pessoa, 2016](#)).

José (34, physician), for instance, already avoided advertising in other ways before using ad blockers. He changed the channel on television, and since outdoor advertisements were visual pollution for him, he developed ways of physically and cognitively avoiding advertisements ([Fransen et al., 2015](#)). José has always been taught by his family to not trust in what is being showed in advertisements, because “he who needs to advertise is not so good.” At home, her grandmother ripped all pages from *Veja* (a Brazilian magazine) when he was a child, and when finished, she said: “this is the real *Veja*.” Family influence shaped José’s rejection characteristics toward advertising, and

he transposed the behavior learned in childhood to the digital world, through the use of ad blockers.

[Roux \(2007\)](#) states that consumption resistance demands the simultaneous presence of three conditions: that a force is exerted on the subject, that the subject notices it, and that he searches for cancelling its effect. The three conditions mentioned by [Roux \(2007\)](#) are present in the discourses of José and Helena. Both believe that advertising deceives and presses them to consume, therefore the ad blocker arises as an option to cancel this force. According to this perspective, the narratives of José and Helena embed resistance aspects. Discourses such as theirs, however, are also connected with the “reasons against consumption itself,” since both consumers also perceive benefits such as efficiency and convenience in ad blockers. José and Helena are consumers who mix more functional aspects with resistance aspects, and this is what makes it difficult to classify them according the distinction proposed by [Lee et al. \(2011\)](#).

The example of José also teaches us that advertising distancing behavior has not arisen with the ad blocker, and it is not an exclusive behavior related to digital advertising. Some tactics, such as changing the TV channel, turning down the radio volume, skipping or ripping pages from newspapers and magazines have been used since a long time, and are displayed in the research as a part of family habits, taught from one generation to another. However, in the Internet context, our research reveals that consumers feel disturbed not only by semio-discursive strategies used by companies to attract clients ([Castro, Oliveira, & Muyllder, 2017](#)) but also by the possibilities created by technology, such as retargeting. Another technical resource created by digital advertising relates to the ability of identifying consumers that avoid it, and the possibility of controlling and punishing these users ([Elmer, 2004](#)). As [Zwick and Dholakia \(2004, p. 31\)](#) observe, “the digital consumer is not totally anonymous or private anymore,” he is permanently inserted in a regimen of vigilance and observation by the resources, made possible by new technologies and electronic databases. This same systematic monitoring brings the possibility of imposing disciplinary measures ([Zwick & Denegri-Knott, 2009](#)), through rewards for those who consume advertising or punishment for those who try to bypass it. For this reason, the “blocking to blockers,” when ad blocker adopters are identified by their use and have their access denied in content sites, is a source of dissatisfaction for some interviewees. As we will see next, the access and restriction conflicts generated from the use of blockers reveal a second discourse, which sets under observation the exchange modes on the Internet.

Exchanges on the Internet: asymmetry, paradoxes, and search for equity

Some interviewees highlight a search for power balance in their speeches, a determinant characteristic of consumption resistance (Lee et al., 2011). Some consumers believe they participate in an unfavorable exchange when they recognize the loss of their privacy from the capture of user data (Zwick & Dholakia, 2004). Companies dominate data capture and often do it against consumers' wish and agreement (Zwick & Dholakia, 2004), who consider themselves forced and oppressed by these companies from the digital advertising ecosystem and find in the ad blocker a tool to rebalance these relations.

Belk (2010) analyzes different ways of exchanges and differentiates between sharing, gift giving, and commodity exchanges. The best example of sharing would be a mother and her newborn son. She offers everything to the baby but expects nothing in return. Sharing would be based on the everyday exchange of goods with little economic value, on a constant basis, and with little or no ritualization. Gift giving, in turn, is apparently not reciprocal, but it is reciprocal in practice. There is a change of property of goods, and the goods offered have financial or symbolic value. There is a ritual, through the ceremony of gifts exchange, wrapping, etc., and there is an expectation, often hidden, to receive something in return, be it another gift with the same level of financial or symbolic value, or intangible gifts such as respect, trust, or friendship. Finally, in commodity exchange, there is reciprocity in the exchange, property transfer, and use of money. It is an impersonal process, without responsibilities among the parties after the conclusion of the transaction. In this study, we will use the distinction proposed by Belk (2010) to emphasize how the expectation, in relation to different ways of exchange on the Internet, supports discourses that legitimize the use of ad blockers.

Fred, (31, engineer) considers that privacy is the main benefit offered by ad blockers. His discomfort comes from the fact that companies have his data and use them to disseminate advertising with the purpose of selling products to him. The interviewee believes that Internet must have free information flow and is dissatisfied when this freedom is disrespected. He always likes to be in control and is bothered with one collateral effect of blockers: to have his access forbidden by some content sites which identify his use of ad blockers.

With the ad blocker I receive a little privacy. And the fact that some companies need information

on Internet access from my browsing records to try to sell me something bothers me. I feel betrayed to a certain extent. I am giving information without knowing what I am receiving in return. It is a one-way street; this bothers me and the ad blocker is a way to cut it off.

Throughout his interview, Fred demonstrates a whole imaginary set of the Internet as something “free,” based on “sharing”. In this sense, his discourse suggests that ideally companies and individuals should offer information without receiving anything in return, as in a mother and child relationship—the classical prototype of sharing—described by Belk (2010). Nevertheless, companies do not follow this logic, because they need to receive something from Internet users to make their businesses financially viable. Fred is able to perceive that there is a financial exchange occurring in his relationship with Internet content, through direct cash payment for content access, such as in a commodity exchange, or through indirect payment, such as the right to show advertising to Internet users and search for its remuneration by selling this advertising to companies interested in advertising for that public.

In this discourse, the blocker arises as an instrument to stimulate transparency on the Internet exchange ways, intended to turn more evident on what companies and consumers offer each other, to reach reciprocity in the exchange relations and rebalance in power relations. To Fred, information is power on the Internet, and he believes he is taking part in an exchange when he gives his personal information; but he considers this exchange unfair. This point becomes clear in his search for equity. The moment the informant notices that the companies do not follow the current imaginary set of sharing but something more similar to gift giving, that is, Internet users receive content as a gift, but are expected to be exposed to the advertisements which are presented there, the interviewee feels betrayed and frustrated. The ad blocker is then intended to expose the inconsistency in what would apparently be a sharing logic, but is in practice a reciprocal one. We believe that when Fred introduces the ad blocker in the relationship, he not only deconstructs this imaginary set of the sharing and free Internet but also refuses the gift giving, in which he cannot control exactly what he receives, thereby forcing the Internet system toward a commodity exchange, where what is given and what is received become explicit.

Like Fred, Helena (26, economist) defends business models that could finish or at least reduce the discomfort derived from free use of consumers' information. The interviewee believes

that the freemium model—free access to basic services, paid access to more elaborated services—can be a better option than the “free” model supported by advertising. Paradoxically, Helen positions herself as a user and promoter of piracy and is pleased to explain the tools she uses to download this kind of content for those who do not know them.

For Helena, both the use of the ad blocker and the practice of piracy constitute a form of resistance, a similar behavior to those consumers investigated by Barros, Sauerbronn, Costa, Darbilly, and Ayrosa (2010). At the same time, this attitude seems to be part of Helena’s identity project. What she avoids and does not consume, as well as her tactics to deceive the market, which presents itself as powerful and unfair, are a positive reinforcement of her identity, something similar to consumers who decide to fight against certain brands (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004): to join a voluntary simplicity (Cherrier, 2009) or to abandon certain consumption categories, also having the intention to transform the way society interacts with consumption (Suarez et al., 2012). In this sense, the discourse on exchange ways on the Internet is predominantly grounded on resistance, because it articulates the idea that companies are more powerful than consumers, who suffer pressure for commercial purposes and need to react to this pressure to end power asymmetry.

Efficiency and convenience

Together with the discourses related to autonomy regarding advertising and opposition to the ways of Internet exchange, it was possible to verify a third discourse grounded on more trivial and everyday aspects, concerning usability. This discourse explains distancing from Internet advertising through issues like performance (speed of page download), use experience (clarity in content exposition, ease in the use of services, browsing fluidity), and safety in the use of products. Although ordinary and very functional, these discourses can also be considered as anti-consumption discourses, since they constitute “reasons against consumption” (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013). During the interviews, the efficiency and convenience-based discourse was articulated by all informants, who highlighted arguments such as time savings, faster browsing, reduction of visual pollution, fraud and financial risks avoidance, and increase of physical and emotional safety.

Alberto (35, economist) is one of the interviewees who sees ad blocker as a tool that allows him to save time. When questioned about his major worry on the Internet, he asserts

that when browsing, it is “not losing time” with something that is not his final purpose, and he believes that the ad blocker solves this problem by avoiding distractions from advertising content. Gustavo (35, engineer) is aligned with the perspective of the ad blocker as a tool to accelerate his content consumption, emphasizing that his objective is not to avoid advertising, but to reach the content he desires in an easier way, without distractions and with an improved user experience.

The advantage is to see the content in a faster way, without bigger problems. I do not use the ad blocker to avoid advertisements, I use it so that advertisements do not disturb me. A site that has many pop-up ads makes you work more to see what you are effectively there to see. I like to enter the site and see the content.

As suggested in his speech, the use of the blocker is not related to critics or restrictions to the market or to advertising on the Internet. In this discourse, there is no opposition to dominance practices of a marketplace structure or opposition to market values, which would characterize consumption resistance (Lee et al., 2011). The ad blocker makes Internet browsing more efficient and convenient, and this benefit supports its use as something legitimate.

The presence of these three different consumer discourses to legitimize the use of blockers reveals the overlap of practical and functional aspects with those related to resistance, where consumers look to rebalance power dynamics. The following discussion is meant to address gains and losses in the search of finding a solution to the conceptual confusion in the field (Galvagno, 2011, p. 1688), where great “confusion about the differences and similarities between anti-consumption and resistance” would exist, and to think about alternative perspectives for future studies on the theme.

Reflections on complementary perspectives of anti-consumption research

In the present study, we understand the use of the ad blocker as an action to be inventoried by mapping the discourses that justify its use and are constructed around it. Because it extends itself beyond reasons, and analyzes discourses, this study is able to capture the complexity of the advertising distancing phenomenon and demonstrates that more functional aspects and resistance aspects overlap and mutually reinforce themselves.

Researchers such as [Chatzidakis and Lee \(2013\)](#) and [Lee et al. \(2011\)](#) tried to distinguish what would anti-consumption and consumer resistance be to reduce the conceptual confusion existing between these terms ([Galvagno, 2011](#)). These studies define resistance as a confrontation to dominance structures and the search for rebalancing asymmetric power relations. In addition to resistance, anti-consumption according to [Lee et al. \(2011\)](#) includes restrictions on consumption aspects per se, functional or symbolic.

Our analysis demonstrates that the discourses which legitimize the use of blockers bring both functional and resistance aspects. Although some consumers present one of them more emphatically, several interviewees articulate two or three discourses to legitimize the use of blockers. We understand that the distinction of what resistance behaviors would be takes the overlap of reasons for granted, focuses predominantly on motivational aspects, and limits the discussion about the effects that these behaviors have on companies, markets, and society.

In this study, it can be observed, for instance, that even consumers who join the ad blocker for efficiency and convenience aspects can end up altering the power dynamics on the Internet, without having the intention of provoking this social change *a priori*. In the same way, an activist (resistance) can search for support on functionality aspects of the tool to disseminate his/her cause to other users who are less engaged in power issues. To attribute and classify this behavior with the resistance seal would not only be a fruitless task, but would also impoverish the phenomenon.

Next, we present two possible theoretical paths for researchers interested in embracing the anti-consumption/resistance research in an integrative way. The first one suggests the importance of going beyond phenomenological and conscious aspects. The second one is based on the adoption of other notions of power, and thus, resistance.

Beyond aspects of agency and action

Historically, anti-consumption studies have given attention to motivations for distancing and rejection behaviors ([Iyer & Muney, 2009](#); [Kozinets & Handelman, 2004](#)). However, we emphasize the importance of theoretically distinguishing between the anti-consumption/resistance experience of consumers and the anti-consumption/resistance research. Our argument is that anti-consumption research should not be restricted to “reasons against consumption” ([Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013](#));

it should also contemplate dynamics located outside the conscious aspects and the experience of the consumer. When we anchor this definition in the “reasons,” and thus, in the rational aspects of this behavior, we end up limiting the phenomenon’s comprehension. It must be highlighted that many dynamics that distance consumers from certain consuming behaviors and/or alter power relations are imperceptible and out of the individuals’ control. One weakness of anchoring the anti-consumption/resistance distinction in conscious/motivational aspects still resides in the fact that a good part of power relations is not even noticed by the consumer, being a result of the individual development process.

As [Hollander and Einwohner \(2004\)](#) remind us, acts of resistance can have different levels of visibility. If the resistance is easily recognized in the context of the protests, the same does not happen in everyday acts, which—as we have seen—can occur by using the remote control while watching TV, ripping advertisements pages from a magazine, or using a new technology such as the ad blocker. In other cases, acts of resistance are not always interpreted as such; they occur, for instance, with humor and other types of art. Therefore, for them, resistance delimitation would not be limited to situations where the targets or the observers are capable of identifying it. According to them, the discussion related to the actors’ intention is equally complex: must the actor intentionally resist some kind of power for the action to be qualified as such?

This question remains the target of many controversies in sociology ([Hollander & Einwohner, 2004](#)), but our argument is that resistance delimitation according to intentionality excludes important phenomena from the target. Our study underlines the complexity of characterizing this intentionality. Our results reinforce the importance of investigating the phenomenon from a broader perspective, without previous theoretical boundaries and distinctions between anti-consumption and resistance.

The act of focusing on discourses instead of the agent highlights meaning systems, which channel and reproduce consumers’ thoughts and actions that are supported by broadly accepted cultural notions and are anchored in established ideologies. Then, the study brings forth aspects that are not always perceived by the informants themselves. Several interviewees use the ad blocker without even noticing that they are engaged in social changes. Nevertheless, when we detail the discourse around ways of exchanging on the Internet, we are able to glance at a contestation facet of the dynamics around the value of clients’ information and its use by the companies. It is still important to emphasize that discourses allow individuals to understand the facts, give meaning to them, and make and

justify their decisions by negotiating their consequences. In this sense, discourses produce transformations as they generate social consensus and open up the field for innovations to be introduced in the markets.

In summary, we emphasize that the distinction between anti-consumption and resistance is based on a perspective excessively focused on the agent (consumer) and his/her motivational aspects, as the place of intention and power. This perspective would finally restrict the comprehension of the phenomenon and leave structural and contextual conditions aside, which conduct distancing dynamics and affect power relations. The following topic deepens this debate, by discussing how anti-consumption research can be revitalized through a departure from new perspectives regarding power.

Rethinking power

The concept of power is crucial for the definition of resistance behavior, since resistance relates to the intention of rebalancing asymmetric power relations. Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder (2006) underline that the concept of power has been discussed, in the marketing field according to three different approaches.

The consumer sovereignty model, usually adopted by anti-consumption studies, understands consumers as sovereigns who guide the market with their “invisible hand.” In these studies, power is understood as an ability of free and rational individuals to make their own choices. According to this approach, power would be an entity that is shared between the agents, that is, when one wins, the other loses. Studies that adopt this perspective usually concentrate on conflict moments; their purpose is to understand how consumers’ or producers’ interests prevail during a certain decision (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006). For the same reason, several anti-consumption/resistance studies end up focusing on boycott cases and direct conflicts with organizations.

The second would be the cultural power model, which rejects the premise that the market is politically oppressive and an authoritarian cultural force, to investigate the ways through which consumers resist the disciplinary forces of the market. According to Denegri-Knott et al. (2006), this approach is inspired by the work of De Certeau (1984), who theorizes consumers as creative and active agents, inventing stratagems and tactics to counterattack the companies’ strategies. Then, consumers are able to perceive the market as an antagonist power network. They resist by developing an “art of using what is imposed” rather than

rejecting market products. Consumers’ power manifests itself through creative adaptations, manipulations, and deviations from uses and meanings that were proposed by marketing professionals. The interest in this approach resides less in power measurement and more in the investigation of everyday tactics used by consumers to navigate, subvert, manipulate, and use the structures created and controlled by corporations.

Denegri-Knott et al. (2006) still present the discursive power model, centered on the understanding of how exchanges and interactions between consumers and producers co-create and reproduce the market. This perspective rejects both the idea of the sovereign consumer and the opposition between the all-powerful marketing and the resistant consumers. Power is understood as a co-created force that structures the interaction and exchange field of free agents. Thus, power resides in the ability to construct discourses, as systems that turn some knowledge possible and other knowledge impossible. The consumer articulates power dynamics when he succeeds in mobilizing discursive strategies to determine what can be done in any field of action.

Denegri-Knott et al. (2006) emphasize that the idea of empowerment fits in the consumer sovereignty model, but it does not make sense, neither in the cultural model nor in the discursive model, since the focus of these two perspectives is not on what is gained and what is lost, but on the resistance stratagems (cultural model) and on the aspects of power co-creation (discursive model). Our suggestion is that the anti-consumption/resistance studies would benefit by adopting different perspectives that go beyond consumer sovereignty and actions aiming at power rebalance.

The present study, for instance, is closer to the discursive model, as it sheds light on the discourses employed by consumers in the process of blocker legitimization. To go beyond motivational aspects enables the study to distance itself from stereotypes of “activist” consumers who fight against the system, or “alienated” consumers who simply integrate the system and distance themselves from the offers that do not correspond to their purposes. What the present study suggests is to look at the phenomenon without imposing previous theoretical labels—anti-consumption and resistance—and thus to comprehend the phenomenon in all its complexity and richness.

As suggested by this research, technologies such as ad blockers have a structuring influence, capable of transforming power dynamics, even if they are not perceived as such by consumers. The discussion of experiences and intentions of consumers restricts and loses the focus on a phenomenon much more complex and broader than the motivational and distancing aspects of certain offers or consumptions.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present research inventoried consumers discourses, highlighting three logics that support the use of ad blockers: 1) Autonomy and control of advertising effects; 2) Exchanges on the Internet: asymmetry, paradoxes, and search for equity and 3) Efficiency and convenience. In the conjunction of these three different discourses, consumers combine both functional and resistance aspects. As the present study contemplates this ambiguity and avoids a priori delimitations, we believe that it contributes to the phenomenon's understanding in all its complexity. This comprehension makes it possible to avoid, for example, the activist stereotype as the unique mobilizing agent of changes in power dynamics to include all kinds of consumers, even those who practice an ordinary distancing, are trivial and silent, and are interested in their convenience and functional efficiency. In this sense, the present study contributes to the discussion proposed by Dolbec and Fischer (2015), in their questioning of the differences between consumers who do not have an intentional change agenda and those who pursue an explicit change purpose.

The market is a living system of inter-relations, in which the actions of one part affect the other part. In this sense, it would be valid to investigate the phenomenon from other advertising and online content distribution ecosystem angles, in order to understand the thoughts, positioning, and practices of other stakeholders who interact and constantly influence consumer behavior. This study also underlines the importance of future research in understanding how new technologies represent everyday tools for power dynamics re-articulation. In this sense, a wide field of possibilities open itself for investigating distancing discourses and practices used by consumers and the reactions of organizations in controlling these behaviors.

RAE'S NOTE

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