

What do the non-consumers consume? Activists, alternative, engaged

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Rose de Melo Rocha¹

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7681-5500>

Simone Luci Pereira²

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7412-2129>

¹(Escola Superior de Propaganda e Marketing de São Paulo, Pró-Reitoria de Pesquisa e Pós-Graduação Stricto Sensu, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação e Práticas do Consumo. São Paulo – SP, Brasil)

²(Universidade Paulista, Vice-Reitoria de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação. São Paulo – SP, Brasil)

Abstract

This paper presents a reflective mapping about conceptions and consumption practices of Brazilian young activists that assume critical or alternative postures to the mediatic societies and capitalism. The qualitative-based methodology was comprised of surveys and in-depth interviews. With this approach the youngsters' narratives assume centrality, putting these activists in the condition of subjects of enunciation. Thus, we intended to create visibility to the reflective strategies used by them in the presentation of their lived experiences and the readings they articulate on consumption and consumerism. Out of this multi-vocal map emerges the marks of a critical dialogue that constantly negotiates with narratives of the capital, especially in the corollary of neoliberal entrepreneurial base, clearly responding to the mediatic and technologic scene they are inserted in.

Keywords: Activism. Youth. Consumption. Communication. Media.

Research strategies and methodologic protocol

We present in this paper¹ the theoretical-methodological background and some results of the research *What do the non-consumers consume? Alternative, engaged activists*² which comprise of a mapping and a study of conceptions and practices of consumption and communication in young Brazilian segments that assume critical postures or are alternative

¹ The results of this research were presented at the Research Group Urban Communication and Culture at the Convention INTERCOM 2016 and in the Work Group *Comunicación y Ciudad* from the ALAIC Convention 2016. However, their emphasis were different from the ones we are adopting here.

² The team is composed by the authors of this article, Rose de Melo Rocha e Simone Luci Pereira, coordinating the project, and by the PhD students Danilo Postinguel (PPGCOM-ESPM), research assistant, and Fernanda Elouise Budag (PPGCOM-USP), field coordinator.

to the mediatic and consumption society. The field research was performed in the city of São Paulo, between August 2015 and April 2016, with the application of semi-structured surveys and in-depth interviews with 16 activists. The qualitative approach comprised five items of analysis, contemplating: identities; activism; consumption/consumerism; conceptions of communication and media; youth and political practices. The corpus is comprised of: a) political parties militants, b) environmental activists, c) militants connected to the gender debate, d) vegans, e) migrant activists, f) cultural producers, g) militants of the democratization of media, and h) anti-globalization activists. A balanced distribution of gender was prioritized, comprising the diversity of life stories, social status and neighborhoods, although there is a certain predominance of middle class sectors, in their different expressions. This predisposition is due to the profile of the selected activists, maybe revealing some of the aspects of the assumed focus. In other articles, we detailed the identities of our subjects of investigation, always preserving their anonymity. In order to do that, we use aliases when we quote their speeches.

In this paper, we will analyze the conception of the young about consumption and consumerism, with an interface with militancy and with their own political purposes. Not only the conceptions and worldviews, but the new forms of consumption in the youth were analyzed in this investigation from the creation of a map that is both documental as it is reflective. It contemplates an analytical synthesis of narratives that are identified with the conceptions of consumption, communication and activism of the young people researched, gathered through the semi-structured qualitative surveys, which included open questions of a deeper and authorial scope.

Narrative identities emerged from that, in the speech of Ricoeur (1985), which are built and can be perceived in the specificities of the “stories of life”. Looking back to one’s story, there is an effort to build one’s own identity, in a result of a symbolic appropriation of reality, remembering and concealing passages of one’s life, facts, acts, and building meanings in the process. The life narratives of young activists can bring clues for other investigative developments, widening, thus, the gaze on the phenomenon to be researched, because this technique of research allows a “confidential tone of narration, which brings the interviewee to point landmarks of their life” (BORELLI; ROCHA; OLIVEIRA, 2009, p.34 – Our translation). We assumed the dialog with the methodological grid created by Borelli, Rocha and Oliveira (2009), in the research *Youngsters in the metropolitan scene: perceptions, narratives and modes of communication*, in which they not only used multiple methodological instruments, but also the creation of sound, document, audiovisual and iconographic databases. In the contact with the activists, an ethnographic gaze guided us, allowing us to create an interpretative repertoire of relations of the analyzed subjects with their culture. Trindade (2008) talks about the importance of this method of research for the creation of an ethnology of consumption, constituted by the interpretation of data collected

in ethnography and their transformation into reflective language about cultural practices and ways of ritualization of consumption practices.

Rocha, Barros and Pereira (2005) highlight that the ethnographic view defines a posture (not only a technique) that presupposes a conception of reality where the real is not pre-defined. Through the notion of “definition of situation”, it is imposed the idea that the own actor defines the situation in which they live in, and by doing so, they collectively build it. In the ethnographies of consumption developed by its authors, the cultural dimensions present in the daily behaviors of groups or individuals help capturing the systems of classifications that compose their symbolic universes and define their identities (ROCHA; BARROS; PEREIRA, 2005).

Ethnography, along with other methods, allows the access to deep cultural meanings, which wouldn't be exposed in an aware, verbal dimension of human communication, reinforcing the complexity of the phenomenon of consumption, its cultural and symbolic dimension, that cannot be reduced to cause and effect simplistic schemes. Beyond the dimension of materials of consumption, we observe, in our study, that the set of narratives collected also refer to the field of symbolic and cultural consumption and in the level of subjectivities and political identities. It is exactly in this level that the narratives of our interviewees can suggest some kind of resistance or possible gaps.

On youth, consumption and activisms

As a resource of analysis of conceptions and practices directly articulated to consumption and consumerism, it is necessary to limit theoretical landmarks aligned to conceptual approaches that we share in the understanding of youth culture, practices and phenomena articulated to consumption and contemporary ways of activism. Specifically, the research proposes a reflective reading about “youth activism” considering its presence among practices of consumption and communication that question hegemonic processes, speeches and models.

Around the topic of youth, consumption and forms of political agency, Rocha and Pereira (2014) point to a performative and aesthetic dimension of youth actions in the urban scenario. In its daily practices and imaginaries arise meanings of socialities, visions and hearings of the world, sensitivities, affections, where political actions are not dissociated from the elements linked to consumption and entertainment. Thus, we bring attention to the political, aesthetic character of youth appropriation of culture and consumption (ROCHA; TANGERINO, 2010), with youngsters acting as social agents of their narratives and material and symbolic practices.

Another relevant aspect is in an interpretation of consumption that is not confused with the acritical praise of consumerism. If consumption works as a signal to understand

forms of belonging and identity, as well as ways to give meaning and order to the world, “the consumerist logic, from the order of adding, throws us at a quite perverse sirens’ song” (ROCHA, 2013 – Our translation). Facing the dichotomy consumption/consumerism is a task that is imposed in this reflection, seeking to perceive the paradox and contradictions existing there, for a critical interpretation and for a political reading of the forms of consumption.

Thus, we have theoretical bases that apprehend the consumption as a complex social and cultural fact, including the poles of production, circulation and reception, as well as they consider their respective contexts, logics and strategies. In the academic field, we reinforce that the relation “communication, consumption, youth and activism” is still under development in Brazil. We highlight the works of Rocha (2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2013), Freire Filho (2005, 2007), Machado (2011), and, working with youth cultural consumption in an unconventional perspective of activism, which includes communicational and mediatic practices, the studies of Ronsini (2007), Barbalho (2013), Pereira (2015, 2017) and Herschmann and Fernandes (2014).

Generally speaking, we can identify traces of this issue in studies about youth subculture, linked to English and North American researches. In addition, there has been an increase in the production of studies about aesthetics and political action, as well as the artistic production that approaches this interface. In Ibero-America, authors who bring an approximate interpretation about youth, consumption and activism are the Mexican researchers Reguillo (2000), García-Canclini (2006) and Marcial (2006) and the Spanish author Feixa (2014), who articulate youth and political resistance to original practices of production and technological, cultural and mediatic consumption. We assume and reinforce this Latin American perspective of analysis.

We highlight some conceptual bases around consumption with which we dialog, due to their unique character, including classic thinkers such as: García-Canclini (2006), who defends a non-reproductive analysis of consumption, articulating it to processes of attribution of cognitive and citizenship meaning; and Baudrillard (2007), approaching what we can call a semiology of consumption, with an analysis that brings the perspective of excess, not only the promotion of scarcity. We dialog with contemporary Brazilian researchers that investigate consumption and its articulations with communication, subjectivity and culture, such as Costa (2005); Rocha and Pereira (2009); and Borelli, Rocha and Oliveira (2009). Rocha and Pereira (2009) create a reflection from the fields of Communication and Anthropology, about contemporary culture and consumption focusing on youngsters:

It is not random that the media highlights the role of the teenager and the young adult in our society, demonstrating their strength as a mediator of technologic innovations and forms of consumption within the family. In this aspect, they became the central character in a market that seeks to attain, quickly and

efficiently, the major users of the new means of communication (ROCHA; PEREIRA, 2009, p.16 – Our translation).

Youth, thus, is the age of experience and which assumes the function of leadership and compass of trends that can help us think about forms of alternative consumption, object of our study. Borelli, Rocha and Oliveira (2009), investigating urban youngsters and their cultural and mediatic narratives, explore another side of youth that walks alongside this imagery of the “sovereign” youngster. They approach “another scenario that also populates the daily lives in our cities, those that reaffirm the existence of an essentially rebel and imminently dangerous nature of youth” (p.15 – Our translation).

From the guerrilla to the contemporary anti-consumerist movement of youth,

Young adults increasingly feel as main characters of an unconventional politics. Young adults, and their mediatic-bodies, increasingly occupy the streets and, using them as wide forums of aesthetic action, make urban culture the most legitimate expression of their diversity and conflicts (BORELLI; ROCHA; OLIVEIRA, 2009, p.13-14 – Our translation).

This young-adolescent culture that emerged “in the bosom of mass culture, from the 50’s onwards” (MORIN, 2006, p.137 – Our translation) enabled the offer to a determined age group, through the mediation of cultural industries, forms of contesting the adult identity, as well as and mainly seeking a certain authenticity. Borelli, Rocha and Oliveira (2009), in accordance with the theoretical principles of Morin (2006), signal the appearance of this youth culture in Brazilian society, especially from the 60’s onwards, when

the youth wins an unequivocal social visibility, aspect that since this original moment corroborates with the intertwining of culture and mass media in the construction of dominant representations of what would be the youth reality in our country. Also from this historical landmark begins the creation of an effective appropriation by the youngsters of mediatic speeches, products and spaces, something clearly associated to the consolidation of a consumption society that is already completely sensitive to the process that authors such as Edgar Morin define as “juvenilization” of the culture (BORELLI; ROCHA; OLIVEIRA, 2009, p.13 – Our translation).

Once inaugurated this youth culture, there were numberless motivations throughout the decades to put the theme of youth in the center of market, theoretical and socio-cultural discussions. From the arrival of an industry motivated by consumption, that offers dominant representations of what would be this youth condition in our country, theory previously

raised by the authors, to the policies of visibility and youth activism inscribed in an urban scene that confront these hegemonic discourses.

Reinforcing this argument, the authors emphasize that “youngsters assume the mediatic character of their existence, either by using the body as an expressive support, or using the city as a support for the inscription of their identity markers” (BORELLI; ROCHA; OLIVEIRA, 2009, p.14-15 – Our translation). In a similar direction, Machado (2011) affirms that, on the one hand, young adults lost interest on the political processes of election, but on the other, they found on advertisement narratives “discourses of engagement, participation and stimulus for citizenship” (MACHADO, 2011, p.13 – Our translation), that in his view, stimulate new forms of enabling political engagement of youngsters through the mediation of consumption goods and their narratives.

The issue of youth and youth culture is fundamental in our approach, although the discussion about consumption and activism may take us to other developments that include different age groups. The focus on the relation between youth and urban culture in metropolises such as Sao Paulo is given by the experience of research accumulated by the authors of this paper, that are dedicating themselves to think youth culture as category and locus of reflection to understand wider issues of the contemporary culture of media and consumption.

It is worth highlighting that here we seek to map and understand the circuits of material and symbolic production and consumption in which groups of activists are inserted that establish a critical posture with the logics of consumption. However, beyond the acclaimed consumption society in this moment of contemporary culture we are seeking to see manifestations emerge and reverberate from different origins and flags, that defend alternative forms of production and consumption. We see, for example, references to consumption practices as political affirmation of identities in the contemporary feminist movement, in blogs and communities on the Internet dedicated to the subject. According to Paraizo (s/d), some are extremely popular, such fact is evidenced with the “[...]20 thousand followers only on Twitter and an average of 200 thousand monthly accesses” to Lola Aronovich’s (feminist professor at the Federal University of Ceará – UFC) blog. According to Averbuck (2013),

Feminism isn’t about you stopping wearing lipstick, heels or getting down on all fours. No one is going to kick you out of feminism if you wear mascara. But it opens you to the possibility of only wearing make-up when you want to, not because you have to be flawless and beautiful every day to make the world pretty. [...] Feminism isn’t about hiding your body; quite the contrary, we demand the right of walking around with the clothes we want to without harassment or embarrassment. A clear example of that is the SlutWalk. (AVERBUCK, 2013 – Our translation).

Costa (2005), after reflecting on the scientific beliefs and notions that attribute to consumerism the immediate and wide responsibility for some of the most dangerous pathologies in contemporary society, defends that “[...] *A lot of what we want to be conditions the way we materially produce the circumstances of our lives*” (COSTA, 2005, p.179 – Our translation). In other words, our choices of ways of life take us to certain choices of consumption – which, in case of our subjects of study, result in practices of consumption that can be considered “alternative”. Finally, Costa says that, “if we want to, therefore, face the ethical problems of our time, we have to reconsider our ideals of happiness and not give to ‘consumerism’ more than what it deserves” (2005, p.181 – Our translation).

We realize, in addition to that, especially due to the recent processes of inclusion by consumption in Brazil, occurred in the first decade of the 21st century, a reconfiguration of perspective of production, circulation and consumption on behalf of traditionally peripheral segments, including many youngsters natives of urban peripheries, that quickly appropriate technologic resources and benefit from public policies with cultural base. In addition to that, there are consumers of new brands and contents, which generate a whole new artistic and cultural circuit, which extrapolates geographic and class barriers.

Narratives on consumption and consumerism – some results

In the origin of numberless youth manifestations, and of aggressive and iconic actions such as black-blocks, we have an articulation with anti-globalization movements coming from the United States. Issues with environment and sustainability, among other aspects, guided activist efforts of proposing alternatives for the functioning of capitalism itself on post-industrial societies. That is, without denying it, certain social actors make an effort in promoting transversal struggles, exercising new ways of living in the cities, in the countryside and even in the mediatic and communicational scenario, such campaign being led by groups of democratization of the media, for example, represented amongst our interviewees.

In addition to that, when we analyze the narratives of vegan militants, we perceive that they propose another way of eating, thinking and consuming, in a non-consumerist, selective and ethical fashion. The activists linked to the gender debate, in turn, defend the creation of a new agenda of public debate, transiting from blogs to traditional political forums, but they suggest political spaces characterized by the collective and shared forms of management. Militants of political parties also assume, in another form, this debate. Activists linked to the immigrant’s rights postulate, in turn, forms of visibility/audibility and forms of insertion and citizenship, looking for media in search for the right of representation.

It is interesting to see in these testimonials the reference of their identities as activists, with highlight to the fact that these activists dialog in a critical and astute way with the capitalist narratives, especially in the corollary of neoliberal and entrepreneurial

base. They also clearly respond to the mediatic and technologic scene they are inserted in: without letting themselves be coopted, they transit strategically through these fields. Thus, we can locate in the narratives of our subjects an active conscience of the place of technicities and medialities in their daily life, in their way of acting in the world and giving visibility to their politicities, subjectivations and political expressivities. We indicate in this auto-biographical space the penetration of politics in the daily life. Although it may initially sound oxymoronic, the disbelief in the institutional political ethos lives with the certainty that there are spaces where one can and must act politically. We now arrive to a relevant aspect. To act politically is also manifested, to them, in the way they decide what, how and what is useful to consume.

Generally, our subjects maintain critical postures to the consumption society and to practices associated to the addition or irrationality, and in this case they reinforce that they perceive differences between consuming and consumerism. Technologies, information, culture and entertainment arise as positive forms of consumption in the speech of activists, as well as sustainable or conscious eating habits, that for example stimulate the local market. On the other hand, industrial foods, cars, products manufactured by slave labor, or products with misogynistic, xenophobic or prejudiced ideological content are rejected by these young people, expressing the commitment with conscious and responsible consumption practices and imaginaries This is what we observe in Vanessa's approach. She is a biracial cultural producer, living in Vila Madalena (west zone of São Paulo):

Well, I try to consume as consciously as possible. I am not a vegetarian, and I don't buy from only natural brands, yet. But I would like to someday. I am not consumerist. I don't go to the mall, I don't... I don't know, I use only the necessary. I have a cellphone to work, not because of status or trends. I try to buy only the necessary. Eat a lot of fruit. I spend more on joyful experiences. Going out, going on a trip, than with stuff.

The relationship between these youngsters that we analyzed and their conceptions and practices of consumption seem to be of constant negotiation, getting uses and tactics created by these groups to break rules, subvert or resist. Along with that, there are many logics of incorporations, seductions and various forms of resistance, without reducing these practices to dichotomic oppositions, as an "integration to the system", or, contrarily, univocal "resistance", as Edu presents, anti-globalization militant, white, living in Pompeia (west zone of São Paulo):

I think that a positive side of consumption may be that people get happy when they buy things. But I also think this is bad, people getting happy from what they consume, what they buy. And I guess that organizes life in every aspect.

And even, I don't know, what I said just now that I don't worry about clothing, but I know the clothes I wear are also a way for me to express something. And the very fact that I don't care a lot about clothing is also a form for me to set myself apart based on consumption. (Our emphasis)

It is a conflictive process of constant negotiation between different social groups, dominant groups and hegemonic culture. In this notion of negotiation, there is a repositioning of meanings in a cultural resistance, not only seen as a total battle against the hegemonic, but also giving space for modes of resisting that are made astutely, in the in-between, in network actions and in collective identities. According to Adriana, environmentalist militant, “Brazilian”, as she defines herself in terms of ethnicity, living in Vila Madalena (west zone of São Paulo):

I wouldn't consider consumption as 100% negative, right? Even because, seeing consumption in a broader sense, and not only purchasing. And nowadays I don't think consumption is only passive. For example, music festivals. There are festivals where you can go, consume it until it runs out, go away and everything is cool. There are other festivals that are not like that. I believe there is a type of consumption that is responsible, so I am there consuming and interacting, I am a part of what I am doing and there is consumption in itself, you know? That type of passivity is alienating, you know? There is the negativity of comfort... The alienating comfort of consumption. But we can consume in many ways. We can consume culture, we can consume information.

Spontaneously, when they are questioned about consumption practices, some activists are emphatic when defining it as something shallow and superfluous. However, this conception that sees with distrust the fact that there are people living for consumption, do not stop them from distinguishing consumption and consumerism – which they relate to illness, to compulsion. They understand the first is about the act of buying what is necessary. As Ney, vegan activist, white, living in Mairiporã (city around the São Paulo region):

I don't think we can say there is someone who does not consume. My type of consumption is not materialistic to keep buying, buying, buying, I want to buy this, I want to buy that, far from it. I always seek to use everything I got, used and bought as much as possible. I am not susceptible to marketing. So, when I buy some things I use them really to their full extent. I will only exchange that when the item really cannot help me anymore. And not because I was influenced, because someone told me it was the prettiest, because someone told me it was 10% faster and so on. Consumption is inevitable. It is a part of life. Consumerism is an illness. So... Even in terms of psychology, consumerism is

generally linked to an emotional void. So, you try to fill that void that you have inside, that sadness with things, with food... So, consumption is necessary. Consumerism for me is a condition, an illness, something someone is trying to fill with stuff and it is also the fact that the whole industry is programmed for it, to make the person consume.

Rejecting everything that seem superfluous to them, they are consumers avid for entertainment, fun, information and connectivity, in different aspects and through different materials. Faithful users of cellphone and computers, they associate consumption to access. Critical of the monetization of life, they want fun and information, but deny the passion for purchase and the financial exploitation of access. It is what we can understand from Gilberto's arguments, cultural producer and filmmaker, black, living in Grajaú (south zone of São Paulo). He says: "I consume a lot of stuff related to the audiovisual world, to entertainment. I consume a lot of YouTube and Netflix. I don't go to the cinema often, but it is a considerable amount". In addition, he mentions that he is "avid for information, so I usually say the thing I like most is information. But I select, I don't read anything and everything".

These enthusiasts of displacement and mobility say often that they do not "want" to have a car. On self-care, the social conscience is also manifested, expressing, for instance, in "homemade" food practices and in vegetarian and/or organic diets. They update, maybe involuntarily, alternative practices from previous decades, such as buying new and used books in used bookshops, clothes in vintage stores, for aesthetic and economic reasons, or not eating McDonald's due to the worker and animal exploitation.

Reflecting on the classic association between consumption, lifestyle, identity and happiness, they notice the ambivalence of the contemporary capitalism. If consumption is "the purchase and exchange of merchandise and the formation of people's subjectivity", the positive is that "people get happy when they consume". But there also lies the negative aspect, linking happiness only to the consumption. In a similar direction, more than one interviewee notices that consumption is linked to spending money, at the same time in which it appears as a form of manifesting identity. Negatively, as mentioned by Graça, LGBT activist, no ethnicity declared, living at Aclimação (south zone of São Paulo), it "delimits, segregates, discriminates and pre-establishes social roles in which people have to fit in".

The mention to logics of excess and discard contemplates positive aspects of solidarity economy (buying from small producers). In a counterpoint to consumerism, consumption can also be related to a more complex view on survival. "It can be basic survival, eating, drinking, sleeping and living. Going to a survival that is not that basic, but is necessary: meeting friends, taking the bus", ponders Marília, political militant, white, living in Vila Buarque (central zone of São Paulo).

Consuming to fill existential voids can be negative, as well as commoditizing relationships, those that these activists value so much: meeting friends, going to bars and parties, as long as the privileged is the exchange there, not the consumption in itself, for trend, vanity or futility. They consume, therefore, due to the desire of meeting people. And they reject superficiality and greed. After all, as Gilberto emphasizes, “I don’t have time. We don’t have time anymore, right? So today you do not negotiate money anymore, you negotiate time”.

Reviewing this map of narratives on consumption and consumerism of young activists, we can highlight: 1) that they choose what and how to consume, and what they deny having or practicing; 2) that they consume access to information, knowledge and entertainment; 3) that these choices and practices are guided by ideologic convictions and through a considerable dominion of productive dynamics associated to capitalism; 4) that when they consume, propose an active way of doing it, conscient of the market appeal, without giving into it; 5) they use technologic content and material, but they avoid the consumption of standard products and services that emphasize corporations that they consider pernicious, even when it is about the information and culture; 6) they consume affection, joy, encounters, and in this perspective they move and occupy the city and social networks; 7) they resist, when they do not consume certain products and services, when they strategically use others, when they refuse the consumerist dynamic, compulsive and alienating; and, finally, 8) they resist, when they fight to manage their professional, political, family, personal and leisure time, as if they looked to invert the centripetal logic and the compulsory acceleration dictated by the intangible, financial, globalized capitalist system, updating (with party and affection) the criticism to the monetization of life and existence. In this aspect, the ideologic conviction and the nature of their activist practices constitute the peculiar way of critical insertion in the contemporaneity, building gaps and marking the in-between in the consumption society.

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Rose de Melo Rocha

She is a professor and researcher in the Graduate Program in Communication and Consumption Practices at the *Escola Superior de Propaganda e Marketing* (School of Higher Education in Advertising and Marketing – ESPM/SP), where she also worked as a Coordinator (from January 2011 to February 2015). PhD in Communication Sciences at the School of Arts and Communication of the University of São Paulo – ECA/USP, with post-doctorate in Social Sciences/Anthropology at *Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo* (Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo – PUC-SP). She has experience in the study and teaching of the relationship between images and imaginaries, the history of the interface communication and consumption, the processes of urban communication, the theories of communication and media. She dedicates herself to the investigation of youth practices and culture in Brazil, currently under two main focuses: 1) New forms of activism, their conception on consumption, communication and media; 2) Processes of visibility and celebration in technologic, urban, cosmopolitical and mediatic contexts. She received the Intercom Award in 1999, given to the best PhD thesis in communication in Brazil presented in 1998. She was a coordinator at the Urban Communication and Urban Cultures Research Group at INTERCOM (2009-2013). She currently coordinates the Work Group Communication, Consumption and New Political Flows: Activism, cosmopolitanism and counter-hegemonic practices at COMUNICON. She was vice-coordinator of the Work Group Image and Mediatic Imaginaries at COMPÓS. She participated in the investigation network of the Work Group CLACSO Youth and Infancy in Latin America (2014 to 2017). She was an editor at E-Compós from March 2008 to March 2011 (Journal of the National Association of Graduate Programs in Communication). She has published books in co-authorship and different articles in academic journals in Brazil and Latin America about the following themes: studies on youth, media and the city; aesthetics of violence; image theories; communication and consumption. She works as an ad hoc consultant in funding agencies: E-mail: rlmrocha@uol.com.br.

Simone Luci Pereira

She is a professor at the Graduate Program in Communication and Mediatic Culture at *Universidade Paulista* (UNIP). Graduated in History (bachelor and teaching degree) (1994), Master's in History (1998), PhD in Social Sciences – Anthropology (2004) at the *Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo* (Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo – PUC-SP). She did three post-doctorate programs: two in Brazil; a) in the Music Graduate Program at the *Universidade Federal do Estado*

do Rio de Janeiro (Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro – Unirio), with a senior PostDoc scholarship FAPERJ – 2012 to 2013, in the Research Group Urban Music in Brazil and b) in the Communication Graduate Program at the *Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro* (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro – UFRJ), with NEPCOM (2016-2017); as well as an international post-doc at the *Programa de Investigación Posdoctoral en Ciencias Sociales, Niñez y Juventud (Red CLACSO de Posgrados and Red INJU – 2014/2016)*. She participates in the international network of investigation at the Work Group CLACSO Youth and Infancy in Latin America. She coordinates the Communication and Urban Cultures Research Group at INTERCOM (2017-2018). She researches and works in the interface of the fields of Communication, Music and Anthropology, with an emphasis on the study of musical-mediatic practices, urban cultures and youth; memory, listening and mediatic music; migrations/diasporas, identities and social interactions linked to musical-mediatic practices. She's also a researcher and vice-coordinator at MUSIMID (Study Center in Music and Media), linked to UNIP's Communication Graduate Program and to ECA-USP. Member at the IASPM-LA (*Asociación Internacional para el Estudio de la Música Popular – Rama Latinoamericana*). She participates in scientific events in Brazil and abroad and publishes many works in events, journals and books. She works as a reviewer in national and international journals and funding agencies. E-mail: simonelp@uol.com.br.

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