

Theoretical-empirical Article

# Agency of Objects in the Food Consumption Abandonment



Agência dos Objetos no Abandono de Consumo de Alimentos

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** we aim to understand how objects influence the practice of abandonment of unhealthy food categories. **Theoretical background:** previous studies explore different typologies to explain variations in anti-consumption behavior and abandonment of product categories from a consumer-oriented perspective. In this study, we follow the new materialism onto-epistemology to recognize that objects have agentic capacities in anti-consumption practices. Specifically, we highlight the abandonment of certain food categories as the interruption of an intersubjective relationship involving consumers and objects. **Method:** our empirical plan adopts an interpretive perspective to describe practices of abandonment of soft drinks and meats and the way consumers build new relationships with these objects. Data collection makes use of in-depth interviews. **Results:** the results indicate that the nutritional and production characteristics of these foods negatively impact the lives of consumers, other living beings, and nature. To mitigate this impact, consumers adopt abandonment practices attempting to break with the procedural relationship and the effects of these objects on their lives and on nature. **Conclusions:** theoretical contributions reveal that the procedural relationship between objects and consumers operates at different levels of complexity, according to the agentic capacity of the object, limiting or making easy the abandonment of unhealthy food categories.

**Keywords:** agency of objects; anti-consumption practices; unhealthy foods abandon; subject-object relationship; levels of complexity.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** o presente estudo tem como objetivo compreender como os objetos exercem influência nas práticas de abandono de determinadas categorias de alimentos. **Marco teórico:** estudos prévios apresentam diferentes tipologias para explicar variações nos comportamentos de anticonsumo e abandono de determinadas categorias de produtos a partir de uma perspectiva orientada para o consumidor. Neste artigo, adota-se a perspectiva onto-epistemológica do novo materialismo, reconhecendo que os objetos possuem capacidade de agência nas práticas de anticonsumo. Em específico, destaca-se o abandono de determinadas categorias de alimentos como a interrupção de uma relação intersubjetiva envolvendo consumidores e objetos. **Método:** em seu plano empírico, adota-se um olhar interpretativo para descrever práticas de abandono de refrigerantes e carnes e a relação dos consumidores com esses objetos. A coleta de dados fez uso da técnica de entrevistas em profundidade. **Resultados:** os resultados indicam que as características nutricionais e de produção desses alimentos impactam de forma negativa a vida dos consumidores, outros seres vivos e a natureza. Para mitigar esse impacto, os consumidores adotam práticas de abandono na tentativa de romper com a relação processual e os efeitos desses objetos nas suas vidas e na natureza. **Conclusões:** as contribuições teóricas revelam que a relação processual entre objetos e os consumidores opera em diferentes níveis de complexidade, de acordo com a capacidade de agência do objeto abandonado, limitando ou facilitando o abandono de categorias de alimentos menos saudáveis.

**Palavras-chave:** agência dos objetos; práticas de anticonsumo; abandono de alimentos não saudáveis; relação sujeito-objeto; níveis de complexidade.

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## INTRODUCTION

Studies involving the field of marketing, particularly those related to consumer behavior, seek to understand the motivations and stimuli that lead individuals to adopt a particular consumption. However, decisions to abandon or reduce consumption constitute as relevant a phenomenon as decisions to consume (Lee, Egea, & Frutos, 2020; Lee, Roux, Cherrier, & Cova, 2011; Suarez, 2010). Despite the common starting point in relation to the political action of non-consumption, this phenomenon has been described by the literature of marketing by means of distinct theoretical conceptions. On the one hand, conceptions focusing on the 'anti-consumption' behavior describe actions, meanings, and experiences of consumption denial (Dalmoro, Matos, & Barcellos, 2020; Dalpian, Silveira, & Rossi, 2015; Zavestoski, 2002), with an emphasis on the recognition of anti-consumption as a rational decision by the consumer (Lee et al., 2011). On the other, perspectives oriented toward the collective agency in consumers' practices highlight consumers' resistance (Dalmoro, Penáloza, & Nique, 2014). In common, these perspectives are predominantly marked by a view oriented toward a relationship of the subject with the object, and toward the mental and decision-making process of the consumers and their agency in relation to a particular product, brand, or social practice.

However, following contemporary conceptions of cultural studies of consumption, the overly consumer-centered perspective ignores the social roles of objects in practices of consumption or even interruption of consumption (Mello, Almeida, & Dalmoro, 2021). For example, Türe and Ger (2016) describe a process involving multiple levels of interaction between consumers and objects. Each interaction transforms both objects and consumers, thus creating routines and configuring the materiality of consumption practices (Schatzki, 2016). In the same direction, Mello, Almeida and Dalmoro (2021) highlight that objects have a social role even when they are not visible in consumption experiences. While these previous studies provide an important contribution to understanding the social role of objects in consumption practices, it is important to also recognize the social role of objects in anti-consumption and product abandonment practices based on this same perspective.

The basis of this argument lies in the notion that objects' agentic capacity interferes with everyday practices by limiting or hindering them. Thus, a description of practices that involve precisely the abandonment of an object cannot fail to recognize the complex relationship between objects and humans. To understand this complex relationship, this study turns to new materialism (Coole & Frost, 2010), for inspiration, recognizing that the agentic

capacity of objects does not lie in a dualistic relationship between humans and material substances, but rather occupies a space in an intersubjective continuum in which objects and individuals acquire different agentic capacities depending on the situation (Coole, 2005; 2013). The notion of objects' agentic capacity becomes a pathway to understanding the ease and difficulty involved in the rupture of the intersubjective relationship between humans and objects that is necessary to constitute consumption abandonment practices.

This intersubjective relationship is particularly evident in the context of (anti-)consumption of foods. In view of how vital the presence of food is for life, the practice of anti-consumption of a particular food category requires the existence of another food that can substitute the abandoned category (Dalmoro et al., 2020). Additionally, the association between chronic diseases and certain types of food (Sichieri, 2013) underscores the singularity of food products in their constitution as objects. Although consumers report an effort to abandon foods that nutrition science rates as unhealthy, such foods are still hegemonic in the consumption habits of Brazilians (Alvarenga, 2015). For example, although there has been a gradual reduction in its global consumption, the high level of consumption of soft drinks by Brazilians is still described as a factor of different diseases related to the excessive consumption of sugar (Sichieri, 2013). This also applies to the consumption of meats, the main source of protein in Western diets, which, however, are increasingly questioned with regard to sustainability and animal well-being (Tosun & Gürce, 2018).

Thus, the present study examines the consumption of meats and soft drinks, which are reproved for their damages to health, the environment, and animal well-being, in order to understand how objects exert an influence on the practices of abandonment of certain food categories. Relating practices of abandonment of consumption of foods to the agentic capacity of objects (Coole, 2013) allows understanding why some products are relatively easier to abandon than others, or why, even when there is evidence suggesting that consumers should abandon the consumption of a particular product due to health or sustainability issues, they fail to do so.

In the parts following this introduction, the concepts and empirical verifications are described in five sections. First, the conception of agentic capacity of objects is explored in dialogue with the theories of anti-consumption and abandonment of certain food categories. Subsequently, the methodological construction of the empirical plane is described, then the results are presented and discussed from both theoretical and managerial perspectives, and finally, the final considerations are presented.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Objects' agentic capacity

Bearing the academic mark of new materialism (Coole & Frost, 2010), the idea that objects possess agentic capacity is based on the distributive notion of agency, i.e., not only humans but also objects act in the world. New materialism breaks with the notion that things are separated from humans to recognize an entanglement of matter (including humans) in the co-creation of the material world. As Barad (2007) describes, the engagement in materiality allows humans to produce meaning in the world. In this direction, Bennett (2010) expounds on the vitality of human actions' materiality, recognizing that agency always emerges as an effect of the configuration of human and non-human forces. Thus, agency is distributed, and rather than being a jurisdiction occupied by humans, it is a network of forces affecting situations and events (Bennett, 2010).

Therefore, this idea represents an ontological and methodological turn of agency. Rather than describe agency as a characteristic singular to humans or to objects, the agentic capacity of objects recognizes that agency emerges in the relationship between animate and inanimate entities (Coole, 2013). Animate or inanimate entities can change effects or intentions in their relationship with humans, and they possess a heterogeneous character defined within the network of practices and cultural resources in which the human is (Coole & Frost, 2010). The agentic capacity of objects emerges over an intersubjective continuum, exerting agency from the singularities that humans define for the object itself; in other words, the object's agency does not exist outside its relationship (Coole, 2005).

Coole (2013) says that objects have a weak but effective form of agency. What characterizes this weakness is the absence of reflexivity of materials, which causes them not to struggle for survival or to change the constituted world. Although new materialism shares flat ontologies (Latour, 2007) with other views, the recognition of reflexivity as a tonic for agency distinguishes Coole's (2013) perspective from that notion of agency of materials proposed in Latour (2007) and in other perspectives to the actor-network theory, which grants equality between humans and non-humans and rejects the condition of reflexivity associated to the human. Therefore, in the new materiality, the focus is not on materiality, but on the relationship and on the results of that relationship (Coole & Frost, 2010).

Additionally, studies aligned with the new materiality use terms such as 'matter,' 'things,' 'objects,' and 'artifacts' in a correlate manner, in spite of a long debate that permeates the particular definition for these terms (Govier & Steel, 2021). Matter is the 'rough existence' of materials (Coole

& Frost, 2010). Things and objects are rooted in matter, illuminating the vibration and vitality of matter, constituting actions and meanings capable of giving flow to agency in an open and continuous process of materialization.

However, while things are ambiguous and indefinite, objects have a subject capable of recognizing them, i.e., capable of recognizing objects (Knappett, 2010). Thus, the term 'object' allows describing inanimate things' ability to animate, act, and produce effects in a relationship with humans. Objects are vivacious matter, capable of exhibiting agency and a continuous engagement in the material reality of everyday life inscribed in socioeconomic structures (Coole & Frost, 2010). This definition is important, since the agentic capacity distributed between humans and non-humans does not operate according to the assumption that 'things' exist per se, but rather constitute themselves in the relationship between consumers (humans) and objects.

The focus on objects' agentic capacity also allows adding a layer to the analysis of the set of consumption and non-consumption practices (Mello et al., 2021). Instead of analyzing the relationship between objects and consumers as a fixed relationship, the authors encourage considering the (co-)produced continuum of the interconnection between humans and the materiality animated in the form of objects. Thus, the notion of agentic capacity allows understanding the object's network of force affecting situations and events of consumption (Mello et al., 2021), or anti-consumption, in the case of this article.

### Abandonment as a form of anti-consumption

The concept of anti-consumption appeared in the literature of marketing in the late 1990s as a theoretical resource to describe behaviors of consumers. It is worth highlighting Hogg's (1998) article, which provides an important contribution to understanding the term by affirming that anti-consumption comprehends 'non-choice' and 'anti-choice.' Since its proposition, the idea of anti-consumption dialogues with the idea of consumer resistance, also conceived in the 1990s (Peñaloza & Price, 1993). Since then, several theoretical efforts have sought to distinguish the two fields, even though these conceptual distinctions have many times failed to properly reflect the boundaries of each field (Dalmoro et al., 2014). Among these efforts, it is worth highlighting the conceptualization of anti-consumption proposed by Zavestoski (2002), which stresses that the concept literally means 'counter-consumption.' Thus, the ontological perspective of studies on anti-consumption focuses on the opposite of the definition of consumption, i.e., the purchase, use, or organization of products, ideas, services, brands, and experiences (Makri, Schlegelmilch, Mai, & Dinhof, 2020). Logically, this means that anti-consumption focuses on the contrary phenomenon to the

purchase, use, and possession of products. This involves phenomena like rejection, restriction, and complaint regarding products, services, or brands. On the other hand, resistance focuses on the power and domination aspects of consumption structures, and on consumers' actions in the pursuit of changes in those structures (Lee et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2020).

Thus, studies on anti-consumption in general comprise in their scope a concern with understanding behaviors and identities that shape attempts to interrupt or control the relationship of consumers with objects and other non-human elements, such as brands (Makri et al., 2020). More recently, the literature of anti-consumption has been trying to go beyond a simple description of rejection, to understand how this rejection or denial of consumption contributes to the regulation of imbalances of consumption (Lee et al., 2020). For example, Pangarkar, Shukla and Taylor (2021) explore the phenomenon of minimalism to describe behaviors of voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption capable of changing consumers' relationship with objects by prioritizing those objects that are most significant and capable of increasing satisfaction and happiness. Actions aimed at controlling objects, their design, and materials, as with the case of minimalism, help us understand how anti-consumption involves an attempt to control the impact of objects on consumers' lives. In the same direction, Wilson, Robson and Pitt (2022) highlight that consumers are capable of subverting or impeding another agent's ability to implement a consumption relationship. Actions that carry an aesthetic awareness, like minimalism, or spiritual awareness, like voluntary simplicity, manifest consumers' intention to control objects in order to avoid consumption. In some cases, this involves not only interrupting consumption, but also seeking the development of more socially and environmentally correct alternatives, such as the case described by Dalmoro, Matos and Barcellos (2020), who highlight the mobilization of different actors to make environment-oriented anti-consumption behaviors viable through the offer of alternative objects to substitute those identified as causes of environmental damages.

By shedding light on the intentionality of consumers in relation to objects, the effective anti-consumption action involves consumers' ability to interrupt the relationship established with certain objects. Thus, the idea of abandonment of consumption of a product allows describing exactly attempts and an actual rupture with the intersubjective relationship between consumers and objects. Abandonment is situated in an intermediate position between non-choice and anti-choice, defined as the act of renouncing something previously consumed, and it presupposes that a decision was made (Suarez, Chauvel, & Casotti, 2012). However, Diniz and Suarez (2018) make a point of stressing that this abandonment decision is not a

binary choice (yes or no), but a process that can be gradual or partial and full of uncertainties.

Actions of abandonment of a particular product category, when understood from the perspective of the subject-object relationship, involve precisely breaking with the interconnection between consumers and objects and the consequences thereof (Türe & Ger, 2016). This rupture can be compromised or boosted by the object's agentic capacity, since without the object the very notion of consumer is questioned (Mello et al., 2021).

This reflection becomes important in the case of abandonment of food categories, as individuals need, for biological reasons, to remain as consumers of foods. Unlike the abandonment of cars or cigarettes, for example (Dalpian et al., 2015; Suarez, 2014), the abandonment of foods must be accompanied by the creation of a consumption alternative (Dalmoro et al., 2020). It becomes relevant to consider how abandonment operates in a dialectical relationship in which the annulment of the counterpart does not compromise the preservation of the subject, as with the case of food consumption.

### Abandonment as interruption of foods' agentic capacity

The relationship between consumption practices and foods has been described by many studies in social sciences (Warde & Martens, 2000), recognizing that consumers' relationship with foods must be understood as something different from the result of discrete persons making independent and intentional decisions and choices (Bennett, 2010). Actions in a material world tend to involve modes of ordering that animate practices related to product categories such as foods (Bennett, 2010). This implies that the modes of ordering of food categories are less the result of autonomous attitudes of consumers in choosing products than an intersubjective process between consumers and foods (Carolan, 2021). It is worth noting that consumers need much ability to deal with the complexities arising from objects' agency when they seek to exert a capacity to choose from provided alternatives (Schouten, Martin, Blakj, & Botez, 2015). Because they are situated in a food network, the abandonment of a food category present in that network requires a capacity to break with the complex relationship that that product possesses within the network (Leipämaa-Leskinen, 2021).

Among these different product categories, meat stands out as constituting a relational network that is both complex and difficult to abandon. Because it is one of the main sources of protein in Western diets, abandoning the consumption of meat involves not only psychological motivation, but also the development of social confrontation strategies (Malek,

Umberger, & Goddard, 2019; Santos, Silva, & Chauvel, 2013). It is interesting to note that consumers develop practices to engage precisely in the social confrontation involved in the abandonment of meat, such as associating the abandonment with environmental sustainability and animal well-being (Tosun & Gürce, 2018). On the other hand, not all foods require social confrontation for their abandonment; the abandonment of some foods may require a personal motivation aimed at individual gains. For example, motivated by a personal interest in lowering the consumption of sugar contained in soft drinks, which can damage health (Sichieri, 2013), the abandonment of soft drinks requires a change in the routine practices of consumption of drinks. However, it also requires breaking with a materiality that, albeit poor in nutritional terms, is strongly present in contemporary society and in the daily choices of consumers within this society (Tosun & Gürce, 2018). In view of the above, for the empirical plane of this study, meat and soft drinks will be examined as objects in order to understand their agentic capacity in consumption abandonment practices.

## METHOD

The construction of this study's empirical plane is based on an interpretive perspective. Specifically, the empirical work sought to understand interviewees' perceptions, habits, activities, and events in relation to a food category, thus revealing interconnections, demands, and influences of that relationship in the configuration of abandonment practices. Data about the studied phenomenon were collected by means of in-depth interviews with 15 consumers who have recently abandoned the consumption of meats or soft drinks. To that end, a semi-structured script with 15 questions was designed and organized around four main topics: (a) overview of interviewees — 'grand tour' (McCracken, 1988); (b) food consumption and abandonment practices; (c) reasons for the abandonment; (d) worldview and relationship with foods. The interviewees were selected according to the criteria of accessibility and capacity to contribute to the study. According to ethics precepts for research in human and social sciences, the researcher-interviewee relationship was built through a non-hierarchical condition of dialogue between the researcher and the researched person. At the beginning of each interview, the research topics were explained, the persons involved were presented, and the guaranty of anonymity was emphasized; then interviewees were asked to manifest their free and informed consent orally, which is part of the audio record of each interview. By the time the fieldwork began, the two researchers had already abandoned the consumption of soft drinks, and by its end, the first author had also abandoned the consumption of meats.

After the first interviews with informants of each group (consumers who abandoned the consumption of meat and soft drinks), the selection of interviewees also used the snowball sample technique, aiming at the recommendation of names with different profiles from those initially selected. After conducting 13 interviews, the researchers identified signs of saturation of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), as the explanations given by interviewees contained similar arguments. For confirmation purposes, two additional interviews were conducted, totaling 15 interviews of around 40 minutes each. All interviewees resided in Brazil's south region, and the profile of each interviewee is presented in Table 1.

Data were collected by the first author over the second semester of 2019. The second author supported the theoretical work for building the interview script and interpreting the results. The analysis and interpretation of data followed the category analysis technique (Lofland & Lofland, 1995), involving a process of identification of codes emerging from data, and organization of analytical categories. The protocol for the organization and classification of data was inspired by Saldaña (2015) and supported by the NVivo software. After entering the interviews' transcripts in the software, the researchers conducted a holistic analysis in order to obtain an overall comprehension of the set of data. At this point, the researchers substituted informants' identities with pseudonyms. These pseudonyms were kept over the entire process of analyzing data and writing the article. Then, the first author codified the interviews with terms (descriptive codes) that identified the abandonment practices common among the interviewees. Next, the researchers identified that the abandonment practices involved a relational conflict with the abandoned object. Thus, the identified codes were categorized according to the objects' presence and their influence on interviewees' practices. Finally, the second author analyzed the set of data within each category in order to establish logical and theoretical connections between the categories. This second-order analysis — as described by Lofland and Lofland (1995) — resulted in the creation of three categories: (a) the process of animation of foods' agentic capacity by consumers; (b) practices aimed at confronting this agentic capacity to make the abandonment possible; (c) complexity of the intersubjective relationship between consumers and objects according to the type of food. Finally, the organization of these categories, which emerged from the constitution of an explanatory process for the analyzed phenomenon, was related to the theoretical framework of this article, thus originating the three data analysis sections described below.

**Table 1.** Profile of interviewees.

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Education Level	Abandoned Category
Lucas	32	Sales analyst	Tertiary education	Meat
Beatriz	30	Quality analyst	Incomplete tertiary	Soft drink
Alice	28	Holistic therapist	Secondary education	Meat and soft drink
Camila	35	Bank clerk	Tertiary education	Soft drink
Marcos	29	Self-employed	Tertiary education	Meat
Amanda	25	Call center operator	Tertiary education	Meat
Isadora	25	Attendant	Incomplete tertiary	Meat and soft drink
Luiza	22	Physical educator	Tertiary education	Meat and soft drink
Bianca	19	Student	Incomplete tertiary	Soft drink
Vitor	25	Teacher	Secondary education	Meat and soft drink
Melissa	29	<i>Delivery manager</i>	Secondary education	Meat
Sabrina	19	Marketing analyst	Incomplete tertiary	Meat
Catarina	22	Administrative assistant	Incomplete tertiary	Meat
Sara	33	Learning instructor	Tertiary education	Soft drink
Elisa	24	Self-employed	Incomplete tertiary	Meat

## ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

### Animation of foods' agentic capacity

According to the literature, the reasons for abandoning a particular product category are mainly associated with consumers' psychological, social, and ideological desires to renounce something previously consumed, assuming that a decision was made (Suarez et al., 2012). However, Diniz and Suarez (2018) make a point of stressing that this abandonment decision is not a binary decision (yes or no), but rather a process that can be gradual or partial and full of uncertainties. The collected data help explain this process as they show that consumers establish an intersubjective relationship (Coole, 2013) with foods according to their material characteristics. For example, Sara said that when she started going to a gym, she began to question her relationship with the consumption of soft drinks for what they are made of: "It's a sugar bomb and it brings no benefit to health."

Isadora also says that when she started exercising, she understood that foods had an impact on her life: "When I started running, this friend of mine who was already a runner told me one day: When you have a test on a weekend, you should ideally not consume meat for some two days before the test, because meat makes you heavy ... So it started there, already... When I had a test, I'd have no meat for the two days before it, so in those two days I opened up to other foods. I realized that I could eat several other things besides

meat, and then, I became more and more interested, and began to study about it" (Isadora, 25 years old, attendant).

Objects establish an intersubjective relationship with humans, even though humans may often not realize it (Bennett, 2010). It is interesting precisely how the adoption of a particular practice reconfigured the network of forces in a way that made some material characteristics of the foods sparkle — characteristics that until then were obscured in the consumption practices reported in the interviews. When that matter is animated in the form of an object, it sparkles (Coole, 2013) and becomes the trigger that leads the consumers to understand that a particular food affects their life positively or negatively. When asked about what led her to abandon the consumption of soft drinks, Beatriz quickly answered: "Because I no longer saw it as something healthy. I began to take better care of my health, study more about food, and soft drinks are a food product I really eliminated because they have no nutritional value." Sustaining that idea, Alice also mentions the existing concern with the "high sugar content" and the "toxic ingredients" present in this product.

The second characteristic is the food's very essence. Particularly in the case of meat, it is the fact that that food — its constitution as a non-human actor — comes into being through the death of a living being. The accounts obtained through the interview with Isadora make that relation evident: "My grandparents used to live near me, and they had some animals that my father had put there to keep them entertained. ... Keeping hens, ducks, fish; small animals. Then my grandparents grew older, ... and they had

to move into an elderly care home. The little animals stayed there, and someone had to look after them, you know! So, the task came to me. ... Then I began to see that little family grow, the hens laying eggs, the chicks being born, and then I began to think a lot about it, you know, about consuming meat and animals” (Isadora).

Vitor also relates that his decision to stop consuming meat was guided by the logic that “for us to eat meat, animals die.” He complements: “Which is obvious, isn’t it, because it’s a piece of an animal. But I was 18 at the time, and I’d never thought about it.” Thus, the awareness about the mistreatment of animals so that they take on the form of a consumable object ends up working as a trigger for the abandonment of the consumption of that object. In this way, there is the expectation that non-consumption will interrupt the process of death to originate the consumption object.

Finally, foods are composed of natural resources, and therefore their constitution generates environmental impacts, and, again, abandoning their consumption would avoid the generation of those impacts. Lucas mentions the fact that the production of meat and soft drinks consumes much water. Amanda follows a similar perspective regarding the abandonment of meat consumption: “The problems of water, deforestation, and hunger in the world are related to meat consumption.” Complementing this idea, Marcos founds his decision on his education: “Because I pursued studies in the environmental field, I thought that giving up eating meat would be an example for people. ... Following some environmental ideas, it was contradictory for me to eat meat.”

Thus, the material characteristics of a particular food, which are used to constitute a particular object as a food, involving ingredients such as sugar, the transformation of life into death (matter), or the natural resources used to constitute an object, reinforce the notion that the abandonment is situated in an intersubjective relationship with the abandoned object. It is the animation of aspects related to the object that generates triggers for its abandonment. In line with Barad (2007), objects come to express agentic capacity as they interact with humans. In this case, the foods came to exert negative agency on health, the environment, and animal well-being not due to the fact that these objects exist, but from the moment the consumer becomes aware of how these objects are made. As these objects and the impact of their material constitution are recognized in an intersubjective relationship with consumers, their abandonment requires annulling the relationship with them.

## Practices of annulment of objects’ agency

Once constituted in the form of objects composing an intersubjective relationship with consumers, foods can be understood as material elements of practice, constituting practice itself (Schatzki, 2016). However, while agentic capacity lies, in a distributive way, between humans and non-humans, practices are produced and reproduced by people, but they recognize objects’ agency on the materiality of practice, i.e., consumers are endowed with consciousness, cognition, and rationality (Coole, 2013) in the production of a set of practices capable of mitigating foods’ agentic capacity. The first practice identified is the search for informational support. The interview with Catarina reveals that her abandoning soft drinks and meat began after an exchange of information with her best friend, who is a nutritionist: “She became involved with vegetarian folks and incorporated these ideas in her life. ... Because we are really close, she passed me information about it. So, in that exchange of ours, I eventually grew interested in ideologies related to vegetarianism and also veganism, both in terms of health, as she’s studying to become a nutritionist, and issues related ... with the environment, too, the ethics and philosophy dealing with vegetarianism and veganism. ... So, anyway, it became part of my life, finding more about, researching and thinking, ‘no, there’s more to it, it’s not just foods, it speaks of more than that’” (Catarina, 22, administrative assistant).

Catarina also relates that documentaries helped her constitute a body of information that encouraged her action to transform her eating habits: “I had already seen documentaries, I had a body of information that was enough to quit, but the taste aspect still predominated. When my mind began to predominate over the taste aspect, I was able to stop” (Catarina). Catarina’s statement shows that the annulment of the agency of some foods requires a political-ideological motivation capable of understanding that the relationship with foods transcends a relation between flavor and taste and constitutes an ethical relationship with the consumer.

The second set of practices involves the material substitution of the abandoned object. The material substitution practices involve changing meat or soft drinks for other food categories. These practices are a basic condition for anti-consumption in the context of foods (Dalmoro et al., 2020). In the case with the abandonment of soft drinks, they are readily changed for another drink, and their consumption is simply eliminated: “Initially, I substituted it often with juice, because I was used to drinking something with meals, and I gradually substituted it with water, and today I don’t drink anything while I’m eating” (Luiza). As for meat, the substitution practices are more complex, since, as the interviewees explain, the intake of proteins and amino

acids from meat must be substituted with other foods. Isadora relates the need to turn other foods into the main dish: “If you remove meat, what will you put in instead as your main dish, you know? Because I do it, like, people go: Oh, today we’re having beef and cream and so and so, we’re having steak and so and so... Meat is always the main food, you know. So I’ll take a portion of food, which is anything other than meat, and I’ll make it the main dish” (Isadora). This fact is particularly relevant in the sociocultural context in which the data were collected, where meat is central both in people’s diet and in the cultural representation of society. To face the centrality of the abandoned objects, the interviewees reveal gradual abandonment techniques: “I gave up meat, then I gave up derived products, then I changed all my cosmetics as they ran out. I bought only vegan ones instead” (Melissa).

Another practice is the transformation of the object’s symbolic representation through reference to material elements not associated with food. Vitor’s account explains this practice: “For me, it was very easy, because I began to see meat no longer as food. ... It was no longer something to eat; it was something else, ... it was a piece of an animal.” The same interviewee also adopts a similar practice regarding soft drinks: “I began to reconsider all that, and then I had that click, like, what’s a soft drink? You know, it’s that thing that’s full of sugar, coloring, and flavoring.”

Finally, the third set of practices involves questioning and seeking to change the subject’s position in relation to the object. Self-questioning may be accompanied by abandonment. Luiza, for example, mentions that abandoning both meat and soft drinks influenced, “to some extent, the way [she] see[s] many things in everyday life.” Alice, in turn, built from reading and experiences the concept that “anything that doesn’t come directly from the earth, our body doesn’t process that adequately. In other words, it doesn’t recognize that as food.” It is worth highlighting this relationship proposed by Alice, which underscores that many agentic capacities are identified and responded to at the bodily level (Coole, 2005). As a consequence, the body allows imposing intentionality and motivation on the reconfiguration of the relationship with objects.

Objects’ agentic capacity and the reaction to it by consumers can vary according to the position the consumer gives to the object (Coole, 2013; Mello et al., 2021). Thus, a set of practices adopted by consumers allows building substitution alternatives to the abandoned foods that, in an interrelated way, relativize the position of the abandoned foods in consumers’ food network. This intersection between consumer and object, or its rupture in the case of this study, grants a phenomenological character to the practices, configuring and reconfiguring the forms of abandonment.

## The procedural relationship between foods’ agency and abandonment practices

The routines that configure and reconfigure the materiality of consumption practices are interactional processes between consumers and objects (Türe & Ger, 2016). However, the analysis of data allows observing that these processes can represent a higher or lower degree of complexity in the configuration of abandonment practices. The informants’ accounts indicate that the abandonment of soft drinks involves a much less complex process than that meat abandonment.

The procedural relationship between consumers and objects, in the case of soft drinks, involves a smaller network of actors, in a kind of micro-relationship that makes it easier for consumers to leave the network. The accounts show that soft drinks can be considered easy-to-abandon products, since there are no social actors intervening in the abandonment decision. Different interviewees reported that abandoning soft drinks did not compromise relationships in their social circles, since they could continue to frequent the same places — for example, they could go to dinner at a friend’s place and drink water or juice instead of a soft drink without causing awkwardness or compromising closeness at the dinner.

On the other hand, meat involves a much more complex process, since its abandonment can compromise social experiences, such as going to a barbecue with friends. The interviewees also report that the decision to abandon meat was questioned by friends and family, which adds to the complexity of the network of actors organized around the consumption of meat. This makes abandonment difficult. Vitor highlights the difference between abandoning soft drinks and abandoning meat. “Usually, when it involves only health, as with soft drinks, ... people recognize that it’s bad for health. But when it comes to animal products, such as meat, cheese, and eggs, resistance is still great, because people think it’s healthy, because they’ve always eaten that, it’s a natural thing. Soft drinks are a modern thing, so to speak; ... now, meat, eggs, and cheese have always been eaten ... [people’s] resistance is greater to abandoning it, they believe it’s healthy” (Vitor).

To succeed in breaking with this historically established network, consumers need to make a physiological and ideological effort to disentangle themselves from the intersubjective relationship built by meat consumption, compared with soft drinks. As Elisa (24 years old, self-employed) points out: “There is a social acceptance issue related to vegetarianism, there are paradigms to be broken so we can begin to eat in a healthier way.” The combination of ideological and physiological efforts is also reported by

Lucas, who needed nutritional support to overcome the effect of interrupting meat consumption: “Oh, I’ve always wanted to stop eating meat because of the environmental factor and even nutrition issues, but it takes time; in the beginning, you feel weak... if you go see a nutritionist and stick to their advice, you’ll feel healthier” (Lucas). The object’s physiological impact is also described in Catarina’s statements, though in this case, the body itself manifested an interruption of the relationship with meat: “I stopped on weekdays. Sometimes it didn’t work very well, until a day came when I couldn’t consume it anymore. It was really curious, because I tried to eat a hamburger and I felt sick, but it wasn’t spoiled or anything; I just looked at it and thought: What am I doing?” (Catarina, 22, administrative assistant).

These accounts reveal the complexity about the procedural relationship between meat and consumers. Thus, its abandonment requires that the associative and dissociative mechanisms involved in the abandonment process (Suarez, 2010) operate at a micro level (individual and physiological) and at a macro level (social and ideological). This complexity reinforces the premise that different product categories require a greater or smaller effort from consumers for their abandonment. In line with the conceptions of new materialism (Bennett, 2005), the procedural relationship identified highlights an agency that is neither evenly distributed among all actors in a network, nor governed by a ‘central power,’ like the consumer. The interaction with different types of materiality — meats and soft drinks, in this case — configures different distributions of agency between humans and non-humans.

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The analysis of data showed a process in which consumers recognize in the materiality of foods the source of negative impacts on their lives, and thus adopt a set of abandonment practices so as to mitigate those impacts. The relationship between abandonment practices (Suarez et al., 2012) and the agentic capacity (Coole, 2013) of foods in the constitution of consumers’ nutrition practices constitutes a procedural relationship that can involve higher or lower levels of complexity, according to the intersubjective configuration between object and consumers. Thus, the first theoretical contribution of this article regards the recognition that objects’ agentic capacity operates in a procedural relationship. In other words, the relationship between objects and subjects is not situated exclusively in the object’s agency or in the consumer’s subjectivity, but in the ability of both to preserve a relationship of interaction (Coole, 2013) and, in the case of abandonment, to break with that interaction.

In the case of abandonment, human actors (consumers) and non-human actors (foods) continue to exist, but there is a rupture of the intersubjective positional relationship that connects both and produces the object’s agency. In other words, objects’ agentic capacity is not dichotomic in relation to the subject (Coole, 2013), but it gains form in the encounter between object and subject, thus configuring and reconfiguring the experience of its consumption (Mello et al., 2021). Abandoning consumption does not mean eliminating the object, but changing the way this encounter, which configures and reconfigures the object’s role in the consumer’s life, takes place.

Specifically, the analysis of data shows a procedural relationship between objects (foods) and consumers (and their abandonment practices). First, there is the animation of material particularities that express objects’ agency in the relationship with consumers. Objects’ agentic capacity manifests itself in agentic exchanges between human actors and objects grouped in an ad hoc manner (Bennett, 2010), i.e., it is circumstantial and constituted in the relationship with each consumer. Thus, abandonment begins precisely with questioning the role of a particular object in the subjective relationship with each consumer. It is interesting to note that when consumers drive the sparkling of objects’ material particularities — such as the high sugar content in soft drinks —, these particularities become the trigger for abandonment. The food’s essence is perceived by the consumer as unsuitable, or the environmental impact for its constitution also works as a trigger for abandonment. In line with Mello et al. (2021), objects’ agentic capacity involves an individualization in the way the relationship with objects is constituted over time. It is not about the object’s exerting agency, but rather about the fact that its material characteristics animate an intersubjective relationship that consumers would like to interrupt.

Subsequently, consumers configure specific practices to annul objects’ agentic capacity. The search for information about the negative impacts of a particular object on health or on the environment helps consumers break with the intersubjective relationship they have with the object. To that end, they also carry out the material substitution by building relationships with other objects so as to break with the need for the previous relationship. In addition, changes to the symbolic representation come to illuminate the negative agency of the abandoned object, making its abandonment desirable.

These findings confirm the proposition by Diniz and Suarez (2018), according to which the abandonment of a particular product is not a binary choice (yes or no), but rather a process involving the animation of objects and the development of practices of annulment of these objects’ agentic capacity. It is suggested that the human

condition may provide some prominence, for it is up to the consumer to take control and interrupt this intersubjective relationship, since the abandonment did not involve food intolerance or other contingent aspects that might require consumption abandonment. Besides, this process of rupture of the encounter between object and subject is not a non-choice decision but an anti-choice decision (Hogg, 1998). Non-choice does not represent a rupture, but rather rejecting an object to choose another instead, in a process that may change in a future choice — in other words, an individual decision that may constantly change. Anti-choice is a practice, and it reveals not only actions, but an exercise of agency by the consumers with the purpose of undermining the influence of a particular object on their life, on the lives of other living beings, and on nature.

In the case of foods, it is important to note that complementarily to the voluntary abandonment described in this study, the abandonment of certain foods may result from financial and access issues that require a non-voluntary abandonment. However, in such cases, the decrease in the agentic capacity is in the individual, and not in the object, in a process that leads to abandonment due to inaccessibility on the part of the consumer, rather than to the consumer's breaking with the object. The object's agentic capacity is not annulled but reinforced in non-voluntary abandonment.

Another contribution of this study involves the recognition that the relationship between objects and abandonment practices operates at different levels of complexity. In line with Coole (2013), although the agency is distributed between humans and objects, it is not homogeneous. The abandonment of soft drinks shows low complexity and operates basically in a micro-social network that connects consumers and objects. In contrast, the abandonment of meats is complex and operates in a network that involves several human and non-human actors. Thus, in addition to physiological aspects — such as health gains —, the abandonment of meat consumption also comprises ideological aspects. As identified in previous studies, meat is a central food in the Western diet, and it forms a complex food network (Leipämaa-Leskinen, 2021; Tosun & Gürce, 2018). The abandonment of meat consumption involves disentangling oneself from this social and cultural network, which is sustained by that abandoned object, unlike soft drinks, whose network is kept through the substitution with similar products.

These results contribute to the search for explanations about the different degrees of difficulty in abandoning foods, as with some products that, though they have a negative impact on health, are not abandoned by consumers. Food product categories more often abandoned are those corresponding to products easily substituted within the same food network, such as soft drinks and manufactured foods.

On the other hand, less frequently abandoned categories correspond to products that have a more complex procedural relationship in the food network, exemplified here by meats and animal products. Generally, this occurs since the soft drink abandonment process requires only the simple change of one drink for another, whereas the abandonment of meat involves breaking with an ideological conception of what food is.

From a managerial perspective, these findings underscore the importance of understanding the procedural relationship between objects and consumers and the degree of complexity of this relationship in the management of brands and product portfolios. Products that present a simple procedural relationship, such as soft drinks, allow companies to preserve a relationship with consumers who abandoned a particular product by supplying alternatives. In this case, there is the substitution of material elements that animate a particular object with other similar products that do not contain those elements. Consumers do not break their relationship with the brand or other products of a company, but only with a product in particular. For example, consumers who cease to buy soft drinks are not against the industry or against a particular brand; they only abandoned the product due to the presence of sugar in the material constitution of that object. On the other hand, complex abandonment processes, as with meat, involve reconfiguring the food network sustained by that object, including brands and any products associated with meat. The abandonment involves not only substituting the matter that animates a particular object, but also interrupting the object's very animation. In this case, the abandonment of meat is complex both for consumers and managers, as it involves the complete annulment of the object and of all intersubjective relationships associated with that product.

In the sphere of social contributions, recognizing foods' agentic capacity allows breaking with views according to which only the lack of critical rationality in consumers would be responsible for the consumption of foods that are harmful to health and the environment. The first step toward encouraging the abandonment of these foods is precisely to animate material elements of the food's composition that work as triggers for the generation of abandonment practices, such as the amount of sugar. When consumers ignore these material elements and their impacts, they are less likely to adopt abandonment practices. Thus, public policies highlighting the material elements that animate a particular object and its impacts on consumers' health are fundamental to guide consumption abandonment practices for unhealthy foods. Additionally, it is important to recognize that although anti-consumption and related practices such as voluntary simplicity involve the rationalization of consumers through non-choice (Pangarkar, Shukla, & Taylor, 2021), in the case of (anti-)consumption of foods,

there need to be alternatives capable of substituting the non-choice (Dalmoro et al., 2020). This indicates that the abandonment of a particular food category is not limited to a non-choice behavior, since it requires the (re)configuration of both the material reality of food provision and the social and economic structures this reality is inscribed in.

## LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As a closure to this study, this section highlights its theoretical-methodological limitations, among which is the limited group of consumers centered on two specific food categories. Future studies can expand understanding of objects' agentic capacity in abandonment practices based on different object categories, such as technologies. The study also emphasized a complex relationship between human and non-human actors based on the specific conception of distributive agency arising from new materialism, as proposed by Coole (2005; 2013). Thus, future studies can explore abandonment practices in the light of other flat ontologies that place objects and subjects on an equal footing. This allows understanding anti-consumption beyond the anthropocentric agency that predominates in previous studies to establish a connection between humans and non-humans in anti-consumption practices.

Contextual limitations should also be highlighted, since beef consumption is an element that is strongly present in the sociocultural context in which the interviewees are situated. Thus, future studies can seek to understand the agentic capacity of meat in contexts where the cultural meanings of this object are less culturally prominent. Additionally, financial restrictions may alter the intersubjective relationship between consumers and objects, and therefore configure abandonment practices complementary to those identified in this study.

Finally, conceptions arising from new materialism, which consider that humans and non-humans possess different agentic possibilities (Coole, 2013) have proved to be robust epistemological lenses both for studies on consumption and for studies on anti-consumption. Future studies can expand the network of human actors who exert agency on food (anti-)consumption practices, such as physicians and nutritionists. It is suggested that contradictions of the scientific discourse be examined as to whether they increase the agentic power of objects targeted by abandonment, since as observed in this study, those foods that are distinctly rated as harmful to health by scientific discourse tend to be easier to abandon. This allows to advance understanding of the socio-materiality and the complex relational structure that involves consumption practices or the rejection of particular food categories.

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## APPENDIX A — Interview script

Note: Data collection was conducted following ethical precepts on qualitative research in social sciences; respondents' acceptance to participate in the study was confirmed at the beginning of the interview, and the anonymity of names and the confidentiality of complete data were ensured. Over the review process, the data are made available to editors and reviewers, though without subsequent public disclosure, so as to preserve informants' anonymity and confidentiality.

Script:

### 1. Identification data

- a) Name
- b) Age
- c) City
- d) Occupation
- e) Education

2. What product or category did you stop consuming? Why?

3. How long has it been since you reduced and/or abandoned the consumption of this product or category?

4. Can you describe how this consumption reduction and/or abandonment behavior appeared in your life? Did someone influence you?

5. What are the main reasons that led you to abandon the category or stop consuming a particular product? Why?

6. Did cultural, social, personal, or psychological characteristics, at any point, influence your choice?

7. Is your reduction and/or abandonment behavior related to any type of intolerance (physiological aspect, health condition), ideological issue (worldview), or food preference (flavor)? Why?

8. Was the consumption reduction and/or abandonment process traumatic? Can you describe how it was?

9. Did you substitute the abandoned product or category with another? What led you to do that?

10. Did you notice any changes in consumption habits after reducing and/or abandoning a particular product or category? What were they?

11. Did the fact that you don't consume a particular product or category influence the behavior of other people in your everyday life (family, friends, work colleagues, etc.)? How was it?

12. In your opinion, did the fact that you stopped consuming this product or category affect you social relations? If so, how did you deal with it?

13. Do you believe that self-questioning about the consumption of a particular product or category stimulates your reduction or abandonment behavior? Why?

14. Do you believe that category abandonment and/or consumption reduction practices are related to the context of a healthy life? Why?

15. Do you consider yourself a healthier person for having stopped consuming a particular product? Did this feeling emerge in the short term or in the long term?

Other comments: \_\_\_\_\_