



The Cork Thread, A Sustainable Material: Branding and Marketing Implications from A Cultural Perspective

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Abstract. The present study addresses the textile technological innovation developed by Cork-a-Tex in terms of the cork thread, which presents itself as a sustainable object that answers to sociocultural changes and current mindsets, underlining a positive perception from the consumer's point of view. The development of a thread using a natural and noble material, cork, allows for the creation of solutions that meet the growing need for sustainable production. Something that is clearly visible in today's market and demands greater attention. This encourages and stimulates the development of new products based on this material, which plays an important role in the Portuguese context. Our paper will articulate the context and potential of this innovation with the main public access socio-cultural trend listings/descriptions that are the result of both empirical/business and academic research. Content and textual analysis of these texts and results will guide the critical approach and process to reach a justification and framework for the development of proposals and insights. This in terms of a cultural strategy that articulates the branding and marketing actions of this Portuguese company. Also, the result of the bibliographic review and systematization of this project aims to stimulate technological research and development for a new approach to this material in the context of fashion design.

Keywords: Cork · Trends · Sustainability

1 Introduction: Cork as a Material

In the 21st century, APCOR [2] refers to cork as one of the most prominent materials for having diverse applications such as in NASA and ESA shuttles, in highly competitive kayaks, tennis balls and cricket. Also, it is present in world-renowned design

pieces. Cork is a natural material (cork oak bark) and “has a range of applications and attributes that no technology has, until today, been able to imitate, match or surpass” [2, 8].

Cork, a product of the cork oak, is a vegetable and natural material considered part of the Portuguese heritage and a product with unique characteristics and extraordinary potential for the development of new products and the Portuguese economy [2, 8, 17, p. 53, 18] indicates several alternative uses for cork other than the manufacture of stoppers. Many of the developed materials are patented, although they are not on the market, such as rigid panels; granules and residues from the industry resulting from the crushing of cork; condensates of steam from cooking the manufacture of expanded cork agglomerate; cork powder; parts for the automotive industry and coating for various types of transport. Still, it is possible to observe that cork as a membrane can have a different number of applications, which comes close to the use of textiles. Some projects take shape mainly in the field of product design, as is the case, for example, Corque Design; Pelcor, Gencork, Coruche Fashion Cork, which innovatively explores the material using even the texture or the smell that is pleasant and conveys a natural feeling of comfort [1].

It is important to note that the use of cork fabric has, in many cases, been represented through the cork skin which is composed by a thin layer of cork glued in a thin layer of fabric, as we can see in Cunha [5]; Corkpel [3] or Corksribas [4]. However, the differences of this material for a new fabric that was developed in the market, are notorious: we refer to the Cork-a-Tex Yarn. The need to work with a cork membrane that takes the form of fabric was explored by the Cork-a-Tex brand, created from two other founding companies: Têxteis Penedo and Sedacor. Regarding this new material, Pinto [19] tells us that this “high-performance textile [...] incorporates the properties of textile substrates in terms of comfort, touch and appearance” [19]. It also takes advantage of the cork properties as “lightness, thermal insulation, anti-mites, dirt and water repellency and impermeability, which are traditionally only obtained by the addition of functional chemical agents.” [19].

We see that this new material, unlike cork skin, is a new solution for the creation of cork fabrics without requiring the application of additives, such as glue or other fabrics that are glued to a layer of cork, as this becomes soaked in the wire through a paste. It is also relevant to mention the importance of this new development for the cultural and creative industries, where fashion design is inserted. This textile project with cork and natural-based additives contributes to the development of new products and goods with a strong design component, intertwined with the cultural and creative industries, specifically the fashion industry, not least because the use of the cork yarn still is not known in terms of the industry [19]. From a formal point of view, this material uses waste from the cork industry and contributes to the sustainability and reuse of waste. In terms of culture, creation and fashion, the Cork-a-Tex Yarn brings advantages to the sector, with a strong design component (where sustainability and ecology are combined). This new material brings new functionalities that can be used in clothing design, home textiles, technical textiles, decor, leather goods, among others [19].

2 Sociocultural Trends

Dealing with socio-cultural trends is to work on a malleable concept that operates through several different discourses and that can sometimes be contradictory. However, it is certain that the term is closely related to the ideas of “change” or “shifts”, as we can see in several authors, such as Powers [20, p. 10]; Gomes et al. [9, p. 56]; Kongsholm and Frederiksen [16, pp. 25–37]; Dragt [6, pp. 3–39]; Raymond [22, pp. 14–15]; Higham [10, pp. 13–16]; Vejlggaard [29, pp. 7–9]. All of these authors seem to agree that trends are related to the dynamics of society (constantly changing) and the impulses that stimulate cultural development. Powers [20, p. 14] suggests that the term ‘trend’ circumscribes and synthesizes the present, illustrating future discourses. With this, the author discusses the importance of researching trends to understand events that happen in a socio-cultural environment. In turn, Kjaer [14, p. 3] argues that the observation of the past and the present allows for the stimulation of possible outcomes that are to come. We see that Powers [20] and Gomes et al. [9] propose an articulation between trend studies and culture management, associating the need to detect trends through a practice of cultural analysis [9, pp. 54–56], to understand the present. Not to predict the future, but to propose actions.

Socio-cultural trends convey meaning and studying them allows us to work in a perspective that meets the changes that occur socially and continuously [20]. They have a variable impact on the different social layers. Some spread more intensely than others in communities. This way, we can structure them by groups that reflect the intensity of dissemination (confront with the definitions of fads, micro-trends, macro-trends, megatrends, giga-trends, paradigms, which several authors expose, such as Kongsholm and Frederiksen [16], Vejlggaard [29], Higham [10], among others.

Powers [21, p. 3, 20, p. 21] correlates trends as ways of representing cultural patterns. This draws from Raymond Williams and brings the idea that culture can be seen as a living organism, allowing to create and represent different ways of living from different groups, what the author calls the “way of life” [30]. This agglutinating concept contributes to the understanding of different ways of living in society, paving the way for an exploration of trends through the artefacts that are produced and the mindsets behind them.

This way, studying trends implies an analysis that intends to find mindset patterns that become visible in the social environment [9, p. 53], that is, it requires the decoding of messages implicit within the scope of collective mindsets. To analyze trends, it is assumed that the prior identification of these involves the recognition of signals that are exposed to the scrutiny of specialists (see Gomes et al. [9]). These signs are reflections of behaviour and represent society to the extent that they are mirrors of its culture. The reading of these objects (cool signs) follows a proposal based on the contributions of Carl Rohde [23], among others, regarding the definition of this concept and what Gomes et al. [9] propose as a guide for the observation and description of the respective manifestations, to facilitate cultural readings and trendspotting. Within the scope of this work, the socio-cultural trends present in the analysis are already identified by

international research and consulting platforms/networks. Using the data that is already available we can review it in terms of the object of study (Cork-a-Tex Yarn) by means of a content analysis, as we see next.

3 Methodology and Case Study

The literature review contextualized the cork thread and the concept of sociocultural trends. To answer our question and to understand the importance of the cork thread as a sustainable option, we reviewed the description of socio-cultural trends developed by major networks that approach coolhunting and the study of trends. This in order to see if they underline a sustainable mindset as a sociocultural trend. Content analysis presents itself as a starting point that will inform our methodological approach. As Gillian Rose underlines, “content analysis was concerned to analyse cultural texts in accordance with ‘the ideals of quantification and natural science methodology’ [...] every stage of content analysis, from formulating the research question, to developing coding categories, to interpreting the results, entails decisions about meaning and significance” [24, p. 54, 66]. In more specific terms, and in a visual context, the author underlines that the method “is based on counting the frequency of certain visual elements in a clearly defined sample of images, and then analysing those frequencies. Each aspect of this process has certain requirements in order to achieve replicable and valid results” [24, p. 56]. The topic of systematization and replication is very important. Following Gillian Rose’s [24] review of the method process, we can summarize it as: the identification of the problem; the definition of a representative and significant sample [24, p. 57]; the creation of a code and categories on the elements to be analysed; the analysis and counting of references and the interpretation of results that can be crossed based on different codes that could be related.

In turn, Wimmer and Dominick listed the steps related to data-collection in a content analysis: “1. Formulate the research question or hypothesis. 2. Define the universe in question. 3. Select an appropriate sample from the population. 4. Select and define a unit of analysis. 5. Construct the categories of content to be analyzed. 6. Establish a quantification system. 7. Train coders and conduct a pilot study. 8. Code the content according to established definitions. 9. Analyze the collected data. 10. Draw conclusions and search for indications” [31, p. 160]. As we can see, the process is similar and it revolves around the question and the population, as well as the sample, that allows to study the phenomenon; followed by the definition of the unit of analysis (the specific object, like a photo, or in this case a report) and the categories of analysis; which allow for the gathering of data and counting and analysis of results.

Inspired by this method and process, we build our approach in both a quantitative and qualitative perspective, trying to find a recurrence of categories related to sustainability and how trend platforms/network understands them. Regarding the research question, it relates to the main objective of this study and is summarized in the following sentence: “Is the Cork-a-Tex Yarn a manifestation of the sustainability trend?” Regarding the decision of the analysis units, these are directly related to the research

theme in terms of textual description of socio-cultural trends. The texts that describe trends will be the (textual) objects used in this analysis, being the target of critical exploratory research of their contents. The decision regarding the sample of this research is related to the choice of trend agencies that had open access to socio-cultural descriptive data and that, in a certain way, are articulated with the presented concept of Trend Studies (Cf. [9]). The texts under analysis are original from trend research platforms and networks (the information contained in their websites in January 2020). Our sample is related to the reference of macro socio-cultural trends from the major platforms/networks: Trends Observer (Portugal) [25], Trend One (Germany) [26], Trend Watching (UK) [28], Faith Popcorn/Brain Reserve (USA) [7], The Science of the Time (Netherlands) [27] and Kjaer Global (Denmark/UK) [14, 15].

The construction of the categories that will guide the classification of the sample consists of the following set of keywords, which represent sustainability and are in line with the scope of the proposed question: ‘sustainability’, ‘ecology’, ‘environmentalism’, ‘circular economy’, ‘green’. The table with the research results was synthesized and organized in the following terms: Name of the Platform/Network; Title of the Related Trend (title of the trend identified by the network that has in its description one of the related keywords); Referenced Keywords (the specific keywords that are present in the description); Trend Summary (our summary and reading of the trends’ description provided by the entity):

Table 1. Trend Contents Analysis. Developed by the authors.

Name of the platform/network	Referenced keywords	Title of the related trend	Trend summary
Trends Observer	Sustainable	“The Full Gaze of Sustainability”	More than recycling, it is about the consciousness that resources are finite and we must have sustainable lifestyles, underlining simplicity and natural goods
Trend One	Sustainability, Sustainable	“Sustainability”	Sustainability is now very present in global debate and has an impact in the global economy. Topics of ethical consumption and circular economy are underlined
Trendwatching	Green, Sustainable	“Green Pressure”	“From eco-status to eco-shame”. Sustainable consumption reaching a critical moment and eco-consumption as a must
Brain Reserve	Environmental	“Atmosfear”	“Consumers need to sure about “the purity and cleanliness” of produced, and consumed goods

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Name of the platform/network	Referenced keywords	Title of the related trend	Trend summary
Science of the Time	Circular, Environment	“Sustainable and Responsible”	Underlines three topics: going circular, specially in terms of cities; the impact of climate change in terms of droughts and floods; clean tech and ethical consumption, as well as climate engineering technologies to support an environmental turn
Kjaer Global	Circular	“Circular Economy”	People are aware of the finitude of the resources and the growth of circular economy, “[they) are increasingly favouring access over ownership and 3 in 5 think that ‘sharing is better’ for the environment”

4 Data Articulation

Trends, being representations of socio-cultural changes, represent the collective mindset. As proposed in Table 1, the analysis of data across different trend networks leads us to the understanding that sustainability issues are relevant in the current context, as all of them, directly or indirectly, try to describe different related issues such as recycling, natural resources, simplicity (lifestyle) or conscious consumption. The trend titles themselves are attempts to directly reference sustainability. We see keywords such as ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable’ in three cases, and other words addressing the same issues but with parallel terminologies (‘environment’, ‘green’ and ‘circular’). The results show that the analyzed trend reports underline that ‘sustainability’ is present in the collective mindset and plays an important role in the development of new products regarding this concept. The networks also point to the need of transparency in the processes of production and promotion. This is pertinent to provide consumers with information regarding what they purchase. It is also noteworthy the notion that resources are finite and consumers play an expressive role in ethical consumption issues, underlining the importance of honest purchases (consumer empowerment). These guidelines seem to reinforce the issues and strengthen the idea for the cyclicity of products. In this way, consumers become the owners of their choices, generating a change in habits with an impact around them. Regarding ethical consumption, this seems to be part of a reflection that is marked by ‘responsibility’ and ‘conscience’, inevitably through the idea of belonging and sharing spaces between collectivities. With this, the content that the networks present express the need to create

alert calls on sustainability issues in the context of environmental care and the promotion of spaces that show careful management, both in terms of ecology and the inherent processes. There is also a need for new developments (for example technological ones) linked to the search for generalized well-being, as suggested in the reports. In this context, the search for materials and innovation surrounding sustainability has to be encouraged. Regarding marketing issues, it is important to refer to cork as an important sustainable material. In this regard, the acquisition of this product seems represents added value since, underlining recycling and circularity process. It seems to be important to obtain a material that meets the consumer's mindset and the Cork-a-Text Yarn fits broadly into the concept of 'sustainability', reflecting the emerging trend identified. Trends, from this point of view, are structures that facilitate intermediation between brands and audiences, as they translate mindsets allowing the creation of more succinct applied strategies [14]. The branding and the strategies to be addressed in the brand should reinforce even more this material that reflects change and is endowed with national significance. This path is relevant in the context, for example, of the use of culture and its representations as an element of brand communication [11, 13]. In this way, creating a narrative around the material permits to associate characteristics to the brand such as 'innovation', 'responsibility' and 'heritage', as well as the issues that transpose the medium where they are inserted¹. Thus, the relevance of trend analysis for strategic creation, allows brands to identify opportunities that are essential for their affirmation.

5 Conclusions

Trend analysis is advantageous for the development of strategies for the Cork-a-Text brand, as it allows to reinforce the brand's positioning with regard to audiences and consumers. Globally, trend reports point to the emergence of sustainability as a predominant trend and the rising of a mindset that is widely propagated in society, which guides brand strategies in this context.

The Cork-a-Text Yarn product, made from cork, has properties that fall within what sustainability stands for (both in its physical properties and production process). Thus, it seems appropriate to communicate the Cork-a-Text Yarn as a product within the 'green' context to reach an audience that participates and values the cyclicity processes, as observed in the studied trend descriptions. Regarding cork, as a peculiar material, its application in new contexts is important in order to disseminate this material with specific and relevant characteristics in the current scenario. The creation of new products (in this case, fabrics) is stimulated through the cork and Cork-a-Text Yarn as well as the research for new materials, which can bring new readings and applications.

¹ This practice is reflected in Holt and Cameron [12] when addressing the theory of cultural innovation, bringing an approach to mythological construction of brands from cultural and representative elements of them.

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