The Influence of Feminism on the Development and Branding Strategies of Fashion Brands

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Abstract Fashion and femininity have always completed each other. The fashion industry has been more connected with woman since she entered the labor market. The end of the hoop skirt, the first Chanel pants, Saint Laurent's Tuxedo, Quant's miniskirt, until more recently, a T-shirt with the slogan of activist Chimamanda Adichie, "We Should All Be Feminists," for Dior, turning to apparel as an ally of the feminine evolution. Considering the relationship between fashion and feminism, this paper aims to discuss the influence of the feminist movement in the development of branding strategies in the fashion industry, presenting feminism as a social-political movement and brand equity as a post-purchase relationship. The present study was developed through a mixed methodology, where questionnaires had open and closed questions, to obtain quantitative and qualitative data, thus analyzing the consumer and fashion brands as social agents. This study becomes relevant since it deals with feminism as a political and cultural ideological movement that has broadly emerged in the last years in the field of fashion. Besides, it helps to uncover new loyalty relationships that brands are building with their customers. Thus, from the concept of glocalization, it is possible to translate and unite in communicational tools the brand and consumer thinking, to achieve a true social transformation.

Keywords Feminism · Fashion · Branding · Glocalization · Fashion Consumption

1 Introduction

Women have never been as active in society as they are today. They set aside the domestic function—which still performs as if it were a part of their own DNA— to take the streets, the politics, the education and the labor market. According to the

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report "Social and Employment Outlook in the World: Trends for Women 2018",[1] the overall female labor force participation rate was 48.5% in that year. They are increasingly recognized and certain in understanding of their rights. However, equality is still a utopia that seems distant in the eyes of the so-called minorities— despite the numbers expressing the contrary. In the case of Portugal according to the report of the Contemporary Portugal Database, PORDATA, 56% of the Portuguese population is female.

Due to this isonomy— which allows women an identity antonym to fragility— the social movement called feminism appears relevant. It resurfaces with new connotations beyond an organization, but as a philosophy that fits in politics and culture, seeking the equality of rights between women and men. Besides it defends the end of a society based on patriarch— a social-political system that is structured by male supremacy from "the historical seizure of power by men who appropriated the sexuality and reproduction of women and their products." (Reguant 2001 cited [8, p. 15]).

Driven by feminist movements and going beyond a mere trend, the impact of feminism in fashion has raised issues such as the objectification of the woman's body and imputed sexism in clothing, for example. This phenomenon can be explained because fashion generally turns to the female public and is characterized, as Duarte [5] explains, as a result of the manifestations of life in society, being fostered by the social context. Due to its critical and destabilizing potential, fashion was able to break patterns of representation by proposing various conceptions of subjectivity [10], including how brands dictate their ways within the fashion industry.

Branding is an essential management strategy to establish the relationship between brands and their audience since it leads them into people's daily lives giving and allowing more notoriety [3].

The present study focuses on fashion brand and consumer relationships established by branding communication and considering feminism in the contemporary Era as a political and ideological movement. Moreover, branding equity is presented as a key piece in brand identity construction. Thus, the objective is to discuss how the development of branding strategies by fashion brands is influenced by feminism, since it is through them that the consumer establishes a relationship that goes beyond the traditional sell and buy transition.

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[1] https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports.

2   Context

2.1   *Branding*

The emergence of the brand in its conceptualization dates back to Antiquity [15], where it was noticed the interest in knowing the origin, the production of a particular piece and the classification as useful or worthless, beautiful or ugly, and so on.

A brand is, therefore, something that is always cyclically under construction [15], representing what the company does and its customer's perception of it. The brand surpassed the mechanical field of production, object by object, becoming, thus, a personality immersed in people's real-life [2].

Healey [9] says that branding is a form of conflict between the producer and his consumer seeking to define what the brand is, what promise and what it wants to convey. "The brand, therefore, has to see how customers perceive the things they buy; it is not simply a feature of certain industries." [2, p. 2].

Since the beginning of nineteenth-century, consumer consumption has undergone a significant change. Possess just to possess is no longer the main reason for a purchase, especially when it comes to products that are generally not considered essential. The way of buying and form of relation with the desired object, and more than that, how to become related to the product brand, makes branding a key tool when inserted in a competitive world. "Branding is the art of creating trust; with confidence on the agenda, brands cannot be far behind." [23, p. 9].

Branding creates value-added personality when more than ever a brand must adapt to the constant changes of its consumers. Thus, knowing who your target audience actually is, knowing what this person feels and thinks, the brand can position itself by creating loyalty beyond the purchase.

Within a brand, the value of what it conveys to its consumer is one of the most important points to analyze. This is what makes brand equity one of the key concepts of branding because it allows consumers to synthesize the value experience based on the brand's history and what it targets in the future [21]. Therefore, brand equity becomes the result of the reinforcement of brand assets and the efforts involved in their construction [11], i.e., the sum of brand value plus the value added by the consumers.

In brand equity, a brand's identity is the part that aims to make it recognizable and identifiable, making it more attractive to its consumers. For Kapferer [11] there is a huge difference between identity and brand image—being the image the reception and the identity the emission. One can only happen after the other is assimilated and understood by its recipient.

Consumer interpretation is the differential and most important factor for Keller [12]. The author developed the Customer-based brand equity (CBBE) model that presents techniques and practices to influence the consumer behavior based on the understanding of customers' desires and needs in order to please them, so that they do not feel the urgency to search for another brand." The power of a brand lies in what

remains in the minds of its consumers" [12, p. 49]. It is, therefore, the knowledge that the brand has about its user response to the company's marketing strategies [12].

2.2 Fashion

Starting from the same need for identification and communication, expressing oneself is more than intrinsic to the human being. Clothing also has expressed the connotation of segmentation between social classes, characterized periods, and continues today being a social mark of personal definition. However, according to Lipovetsky [13], fashion is not something encompassing all civilizations, it is something that emerges with the advent of conceptions of civic organization, something belonging to the modern western world.

Duarte [5] notes that fashion should be viewed as a "manifestation of life in society", based on a daily analysis that takes into account the immersion and interference of space and time, as corroborated by Palomino [19] when defines fashion as a "system that accompanies clothing and time, which integrates the simple use of clothes in everyday life with a larger, political, social, sociological context." [19, p. 3].

In the sociological context, clothing appears as something that defines us before society [5]. It is a kind of self-affirmation, thus marking the position of men and women in society, as did the bourgeois novice to stand out and establish themselves in mercantile cities.

The functionality of fashion stands for Miranda [17] as a kind of personal identification since it functions as a social tool. The growing individualistic atmosphere has placed men and women in a narcissistic process due to the search for the meaning of symbols and signs endowing them with logicality.

Human behavior has changed with modernity and postmodernity. Globalization has, on the one hand, narrowed borders and minimized differences, on the other hand, it has encouraged the individuality sought of human beings to be even deeper [17], even in the sense of a group distinction. This eventually characterizes fashion consumption as a paradigm, especially when it turns to mass consumption, and cannot infer structural separation between what it calls mass culture and elite culture [7].

The role of men and women in society has changed, and with that, their role as a consumer [22]. Society becomes to be based on symbolic consumption, on the representation of the connotative meaning of the object, and therefore the need to consume, since consumption assumes the role of identity synonym [22]. Lipovetisky [13] states that the purchase will be defined by the reason of the sign exchange value, which in turn defines the emotional character of the fashion consumer's behavior [21], linked to the feelings to which it emerges in the subconscious mind.

For Miranda [17], symbolic consumption is something characteristic of fashion brands, as they are associated with personality acquiring visibility. The differentiation sought by individuality requires variability and personalization concerning the usual product extension. A fashion brand is cheered and then consumed to the extent that

it is endowed with an emotional atmosphere by subjecting the consumer to it, even before the purchase. The pleasure of owning what the piece represents as sensory, emotional, and aesthetic qualifications constitute the emotion that resides in having [21].

Fashion consumption then becomes rampant due to all of its aforementioned components that force the consumer into this endless "race". Svendsen [22] criticizes this system and says that perhaps the race will comfort us because change is always constant and satisfaction increasingly distant and unreachable—defining what is present in the social context.

2.3 Feminism

When speaking about society, we must be aware of the subjects we are looking into and the movements to which they are included. According to the Dictionary of Sociology (1990), a social movement is what comes from the collective objecting by its nature to the establishment of a new order of life. The emergence of new social movements, such as the regionalist and the feminist movement, are direct consequences of the popular rising that occurred after the Industrial Revolution.

In this sense, feminism is a social, political, and cultural movement that, by definition, seeks gender equality and rights equity based on its critical and emancipatory character [8].

Therefore, feminism can be defined as the women's awareness—as a human collective—of the oppression, domination and exploitation of which they were and are submitted, as the object of men's collective within the patriarchy, and its different historical phases. It is a movement that searches for freedom of sex, and all the society's transformations that are necessary for this purpose [8, p. 12].

Castells [4] identify feminism as a practical movement that acts from multiple discourses in defense of women's rights, framed as human beings and not being a constant objectification. "There is, therefore, a common essence underlying the diversity of feminism: the historical, individual or collective, formal or informal effort to redefine the female gender in direct opposition to patriarchalism." [4, p. 212].

According to Miguel and Biroli [16], the focus on the feminist movement on gender inequalities is a potential way to open a new (and broader) configuration of democracy that aims to a more effective way of building an egalitarian society through the structural combat of the various forms of inequalities. This is what makes feminism—beyond ideology—a commitment to society's deepest social change.

Ever since it was recognized as a movement, feminism has opposed physical and psychological dependence on men, imputed by a patriarchal society, in pursuit of legal, intellectual, economic, political, and of course social equality.

Perrot [20] states that the feminism movement behaves as a succession of various waves, spearheaded by the struggle over gender inequality during the nineteenth century with the right to vote. Already in the twentieth century it demanded female

liberation through the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM), facing a confrontation for the right to know, the right to work, to have a salary and citizenship (understood as civil rights), and also to have autonomy over their own bodies.

Feminism, therefore, is immersed in diverse social organizations on several fronts, engaging with each other, agreeing or not, but always dealing with women's rights. Thus, feminist movements have gained international visibility and action—including in the United Nations (UN)—in order to discuss gender issues and assure the development of public policies for women.

According to Valente [24], feminist movements can be considered the most significant revolutionary phenomenon of the twentieth century because of how they broke certain paradigms in a deeply authoritarian and exclusionary political culture for women and other minorities. These movements question deeply about human relations and the socio-political, economic, cultural, and even sexual contexts.

The feminist struggle persists daily, as does the discrepancy between the legal equality that is obtained by the laws and supposedly guaranteed to women, and the practice that is found and faced daily in contemporary society, especially concerning socioeconomic terms. However, more plural and articulate, the feminist movement joins hands with other minorities, thus achieving an even wider range of people, countries, and supporters, dealing with issues such as harassment—moral and sexual— prejudice and wage equity, aiming that democracy stands for a society of limited liability in the credible demarcation between what is public and private.

3   Methodology

Considering the power of branding as a factor of differentiation of a fashion brand, also understanding that fashion is cyclical and momentary, this work wanted to analyze if and how feminist movements had and have the power to influence brands strategies. For this, a mixed interventionist approach was used. The mixed approach allows qualitative and quantitative research to be parallel and complementary [18]. The choice of the mixed approach is conceived by the need to understand both agents of the buying process, the consumer and the brand itself.

For this purpose, questionnaires were developed using Qualtrics platform. Before the application and dissemination of the questionnaires, a pre-test was conducted with 65 respondents over seven days at the beginning of March 2019. The goal was to assess the response time and the effectiveness of each question, aiming to verify if these questions were reliable, valid and operational—fundamental elements in the structure of this type of research [14]. After analyzing these results, it was observed that it was necessary to reformulate the survey and add two more questions in order to understand the consumer's perception of the brand.

A survey with the purpose of collecting quantitative data was directed to the consumer, and distributed through social networks—Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and even by email. It was held online on the Qualtrics platform from April 5, 2019, to the 20th of May of 2019. The survey was projected to select fashion

consumers, looking beyond their answer about a brand of their own choice, and then presenting the feminist movement as a social movement that, in the respondents' conception, could become a social trend linked to fashion. Alternatively, feminism could be interpreted as something that fashion has "appropriated" concerning society, thus qualifying the consumer's perception of brands in general—whether they buy them or not, and how. Furthermore, was also an objective to evaluate if, in participants view, the women's movement has interfered—or not—in their purchasing decisions.

Portuguese fashion brands were the object of qualitative analysis. They were previously contacted by email, when identified the research method and considered the possibility of response. Surveys with open questions were created and shared through the Qualtrics platform and made available from April 15th until May 27th, 2019. The brands contacted had no distinguishing factor, except being Portuguese. Was analyzed how the fashion company's brand perceived the idea of women within the industry, the issue of the feminist movement as something to be worked on by the brand and what this relation would be like in a future perspective. The inquiry was addressed to the creative director of the brand or the one who considers itself responsible for the brands' communication—not being included here communication agencies or brand representation—i.e., the answers were given by people who are actually inside the company, and represent creation and communication, translating what the brand takes for branding, for DNA, and of course for itself.

4 Results and Discussion

The closed-ended questionnaires for quantitative analysis yielded a total of 122 responses. However, within the perspective of completing the survey, 110 responses were considered valid. Most respondents were female, representing a total of 82.7%, to 17.3% of the male audience, with the most relevant age group from 26 to 35 years, followed by 18 to 25 years, 49.4% and 25.9% respectively. Most respondents consider themselves fashion users, taking an interest in clothing, footwear and accessories, where 69.38% often shop at the same websites and 21.4% say they are loyal to them.

Regarding the fashion brand's DNA—i.e., what the brand shows in its construction and also in its communication activities—such as social networks, advertising and direct contact with the consumer—48% of people answered that they consider the brand's identity a determinant factor for purchasing. While 33.7% were indifferent, and 18.4% said they did not care about the instructive values of the brand. This data reaffirms the need to build good branding strategies because, as Aaker [1] says, with this strategy the brand can first genuinely identify its target audience, secondly, establish a relationship beyond purchase with the consumer, and in the end, retain it for future purchases.

To know the consumer's perception of the influence of feminist movements on fashion, six questions were made, starting with the inquiry if the feminist statement would be just a trend. Thus, through objectivity, as explained by Markoni & Lakatos (2003), measurable data captures make room for a possible generalization of results.

It was found, therefore, that 84% of respondents believe that in fashion the consolidation of women as a spokesperson in the pursuit of the imposition of their rights is not a transitory thing, but something that is here to stay, as opposed to the minority who considered the transient assertion, totaling 16%. It is clear for popular culture that the idea of a more popular feminism is an ongoing phenomenon that is not only theoretical, since it can be measured rationally [18].

Most respondents also realize that there is a certain influence of feminist movements in communicating fashion brands, either as they present themselves on their profiles, or as they communicate strategically on their media and communication channels. 32.1% states that they see a moderate amount of this influence, as opposed to 7.4% who says that they do not perceive any sensitization. This confirms what Duarte [5] presents as an expression of life in society, i.e., fashion in general. It translates the atmosphere of contemporary times.

Regarding the influence of these movements on the consumer's purchase decision, there is a clear draw on those who consider themselves heavily influenced and those who do not consider themselves influenced at all, both by 25%. Near this number, 22.5% said they perceived a moderate amount, 21.3% perceived it slightly, while only 6.3% considered themselves very influenced by the movements when making a purchase.

How the brand represents women in their communication media is marked as a decisive buying factor for 33.8% of respondents who considered it very important, followed by 23.8% who considered it slightly influential, 15% considered it largely influential, 13.8% indicated it as a moderate amount of importance and 13.8% do not consider the empowered representation of women to make a purchase decision.

Concerning fashion, 50.6% believe that there is a possibility of fashion becoming more feminist, however, there are doubts. 43.2% said yes, and only 6.2% disagree that fashion and feminism will still have a long way to go, which goes against what author Pamela Gibson (Quoted by Duarte [6]) says when she declares that feminism and fashion live a constant struggle, infrequent turns with no possibility for reconciliation.

It was still necessary to understand whether there was any relation between the answers and the fact that the respondent identifies themselves as a feminist since this was not a criterion of incidental distinction. Therefore, of all respondents, 72.84% describe themselves as feminist people, as opposed to 27.16% of respondents who do not call themselves activists in this way. This great number of self-affirmations is made possible by feminism acting in many quarters, being syncopated and resurgent [20].

The above data generally reveals that consumers perceive the influence of feminist movements on fashion brands, either through their products or mainly through their media. For them, feminism is something that will remain as a trend, increasing future buying intentions concerning the brand's interpretation of the image of women in their communication vehicles.

The qualitative survey for brands was first made available via email with a link to the Qualtrics platform. 74 Portuguese fashion brands were contacted, resulting in a total of 16 answers, with 8 valid answers from David Pereira, Katty Xiomara, João Sousa, Meam, Ariev, Josefinas, The Co.Re and Susana Bettencourt.

All brands chose to answer the questionnaire without the physical presence of the interviewer, alleging a lack of time and inadmissible appointments. However, since the questions were open-ended, they were comfortable explaining, in fact, their opinion without previously stated assertions. The questionnaire construction and the respondents answers were done in Portuguese, but translated to English to the purpose of the present paper.

Regarding the perception that brands had of women in the fashion industry, there was a conceptual difference between respondents. The view of women in fashion was seen as something objectified by some: "in *general, similar to the image that society has, i.e., as something sexist*", and still "*futile and unimportant*". However, in counterpoint, the female image associated with independence and trust is understood by some: "*Right now, the fashion world is taking women to many levels*", placing them "*always ahead of men*". In general, although fashion has been "cruel" in terms of beauty standards, between thinness and the eternal pursuit of sensuality, there is a social change fostered by the view of woman as a driving agent, as we can see: "*Before the image that was sold was the sexy, thin and tall woman and nowadays we see many campaigns in which the focus is the identity and strength of the woman. What women increasingly want is independence, they look more at what they want and need when women were once born to serve the family and to ignore their desires and dreams.*"

Regarding feminism, it is clear that most respondents do not know how to name or describe, and still discredit its strength as a social movement, arguing that the struggle should be about equality: "*I don't believe in feminist movements. I think women are very capable and it is up to each of us to ensure respect and the fight for the rights that assist us […] feminist movements tend to focus on ancillary themes.*" And also: "*Gender equality will be the most important aspect in fashion, because a woman viewed as equal as a man means the world is balanced*." This perception contradicts what Garcia [8] establishes as feminism, since this would be a social movement that encompasses the political and cultural areas, seeking in its definition gender equality, thus not having a dissociation between such movement and what respondents perceive as equality.

In contrast, some recognize the importance of the cause: "*These days, I think the most mediatic movement was undoubtedly the MeToo that transcended the feminist frontier.*". Concerning design influence, they consider feminism a milestone: "*In my SS18 collection I was inspired by Amelia Hart, who was part of the beginning of the Suffragette movement and the first female pilot to cross the Atlantic […] Also in SS19 I spoke of Resilient individuality and acceptance of the human being as a whole.*" This corroborates with the premise that "*body liberation is fundamental because society tends to create stereotypes that we, as designers, can and should try to break.*" And also: "*Today having a feminist voice is easier, but perhaps less serious, because in many cases a woman thinks she already has everything she wants and is entitled to because she wrongly puts a negative weight on the word feminist, connoting competitively or with a need for higher quality women than men.*"

There is, however, some uncertainty regarding the ability for interference and association between the above movements and the consumer, however in the fashion

industry "*the most relaxed and extravagant pieces, not in the sensual sense, have been gaining more expression. Women no longer just want to show the body but show that they are much more than that*", which can be considered a certain influence, because as Svendsen [22] explains, society now has symbolic consumption as a kind of foundation. Additionally, because of this there is a need to consume, since consuming assumes an identity character.

Brands were also asked if they, as members of the fashion industry as producers, considered that the ascendant female statement is merely a trend or something that will stand, and whether the questions raised by feminism should be discussed within fashion. In response, all brands believe that this new perception of women is something that is here to stay and that should be worked within the fashion market, as this is "*very woman-oriented […] the discussion has to be raised here too.*" And also: "*Female affirmation is not a trend but a necessity. The standards of society are different, and they are no longer going back.*"

Regarding the influence of these movements with the branding strategies, it was questioned if the brand went through any adaptation process since most people considered feminism as something divergent from a trend. However, most respondents said they had not developed any changes in brand communication, and those who passed through changes in the past considered that this assumption is already an intrinsic part of brand DNA. A respondent said: influences existed *"through my life rather than outside tendencies. However, everything fits perfectly."*. And yet, regarding the likely impact of these movements on the brand's behavior towards its audience, most respondents may identify but are unsure, while the other vast majority described the effect these movements have had on communication with their consumer as certain.

Finally, intending to verify if fashion—as an industry—will become more feminist, since there is agreement on the permanence of female affirmation in this atmosphere, most of the interviewers have doubts about the future of fashion. 57.8% answered the statement as "*perhaps*", while 42.2% answered affirmatively the same question. One said: "*I think the world will be increasingly genderless and unprejudiced. This is the future we all need.*", as Castells [4] points out concerning the changes that must be signed in society regarding values, dogmas and ideals, as they have lost their legitimacy due to the social changes arising from feminist struggles that can increasingly embrace and aggregate people that are not represented by the current society.

5   Conclusion

In this study, feminism was presented as an ideological social movement that has links with fashion and branding. We have tried to understand to what extent this ideology can influence the branding strategies of fashion brands in Portugal, considering both the creators and the consumers.

As saw in the references reviewed, feminist movements play a key role in the struggle for the affirmation of women's rights. Thus, the research was developed based on this idea. The objective was to collect data on the perception of individuals as consumers of fashion and social agents. The data gathered expressed consumer loyalty to brands, but, above all, the attention to the role attributed to women within the fashion industry. The new consumer— more aware of their purchasing power— is also concerned with the brand identity and therefore considers the way it is built, namely in terms of the values that underlie it.

Regarding fashion brands— even though divergent positions have been identified— this study can conclude that is not yet evident a direct influence of feminist movements on the way brands relate to their audiences. There is, however, a growing concern about the subject within the industry.

The data collected also allows understanding that the way we look at brands in the Portuguese market is changing thanks to greater social openness and disintegration of prejudice and stereotypes. Brands recognize and consider positive the way women's image has changed within the fashion industry, attributing this paradigm shift to the power women have gained in society in the last years.

Despite this recognition, it appears that the awareness of feminism is still slightly present in brands. Most of them address gender equality issues, but dissociate this concept from feminism, ultimately giving the idea that feminist movements go on a distinct path. Thus, it seems that there is no understanding of feminism as a movement that seeks equality and equity, ideas that are categorically at the root of the concept.

In general, it can be concluded that the affirmation of feminism by fashion brands is not a trend, but a long-term phenomenon, which will eventually define the industry itself. In this sense, both the brand and the consumer tend to be increasingly concerned with the representation of the image of women in communicational media. As a result, we will attest a gradual interest as well in the brand identity and branding that joins the feminist and fashion elements.

The link between branding, fashion, and feminism must continue to be worked on, as there is still a long way to go before brands can establish a direct relationship with consumers concerning the values they uphold. If consumers are increasingly aware of societal problems today, fashion brands will only be able to connect with this audience if they too embody these concerns. Feminism is an example of a movement that, as part of consumers' lives, cannot be ignored by brands, but rather must be worked on by them.

Future research should focus on exploring the development of feminism within fashion brands, its conception as a transformative agent of sociability, and aspects related to purchasing relevance. From another perspective, it would be interesting to compare female and male consumers, in order to analyze the differences in customs, values, interests, thoughts, and of course, buying processes.

Given the relevance of feminism in the social and academic fields, focusing on this duality of fashion brand consumption can stimulate the development of other work in the areas of communication, branding, marketing, fashion, and gender studies.

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