INTRODUCTION

Contemporary fashion is so significant in modern social habits that it is considered a social phenomenon which goes beyond dressing because its dynamics penetrate and dialog with many cultural aspects such as art, design, politics and science. For Svendsen (2010) fashion is one of the most influential elements of modern western civilization and its comprehension allows us to understand our history, our world, our times and ourselves. Today's fashion, more than a mode of production of goods and services, sets itself as a mode of cultural and communicational production.

According to Barnard (2003), fashion as research subject is a complete phenomenon, for not only does it allow a historical, economical, social and technological speech to be built but also it has a value as language, as a communication system, through which one sketches his or her position in the world and his or her relation with it. For Castilho e Sena (2011), fashion should be understood in its semiotic dimension as a system that builds meanings by relations of appearance, as a way by which individuals perceive themselves and build how they want to be perceived by others. Its ephemeral characteristic allows the subjects to express themselves through dynamic and moving images, it being characteristically a phenomenon of complex societies, where today consumption can be seen as a way to express the sociabilities.

In contemporaneity, consumption has increasingly become a subjective process, with more complex meanings and each day more based in sensuousness, in experience, in aesthetics and emotional benefit. Those meanings provide the goods and services an immaterial dimension much more expressive than its functional and commercial characteristic. A circumstance that favors the influence of brands on the individuals' choices and that exponentially widened their value in collective imagination because they are the ones which, through their speeches, conceive, organize and communicate these signs.

With the objective of researching possible ways for the Brazilian manufacturing companies to build more consistent brand projects, it is necessary to understand the context in which this "semiotic brand" has been developed. Under the considerations of Lipovetsky (2007), this article proposes a reflection about the development of consumption until the stage which the author calls hyper-consumption, of how capitalism of consumption grounded the conditions for fashion to achieve its modern magnitude and thus, brands turn from a mere identification need of who produced an item to a position of protagonism in social relations. Finally, think about alternatives to the endless challenges that threaten the Brazilian fashion companies from the
concepts proposed by the Semprini (2006) brand model.

CONSUMPTION STAGES, FASHION AND ITS TIME MARKS.

For Lipovetsky (2007) around 1880, the growth of technical and industrial development, the development of transport, the mass production, the new work relations and the appearance of big department stores summoned a new kind of consumer and characterize the first stage of consumption. However, it is from the second half of the 20th century, around 1950, that mass consumption will definitely consolidate. For the philosopher, this second period characterizes through the junction of the fordist production logic and the fashion logic, a historical moment where along with the enormous offer of products by the market, there is exclusion of many others, resulting them in a reduction of merchandise lifespan, the planned obsolescence. This concept rises to define a strategy to solve the problems that come from the high productivity after World War II. With the end of the war, industrial production (specially in the USA), which was oriented to technological research during the conflict, gives space to the manufacturing in large scales that brings exceedents. The stimulation of consumption as an option and not as a necessity was used as a way out.

In this context, the goods became accessible to an increasingly higher number of people, who got rid of the urges of basic needs to enter the universe of durable goods (automobiles, television, eletrodomestic appliances among others) and started to desire a lifestyle which included leisure activities, vacations and fashion. These consumption layers were until then exclusive to the higher classes and were democratized mainly through cinema and mass media. The USA started to spread their American way of life to all social layers and to the rest of the world, the dream of consumption and abundance (and waste) as a base of prosperity.

Industrial societies become consumption societies. The identities then based in work and citizenship now give place to classes divided in lifestyles. New marketing strategies based in demographic and socio-cultural factors appear. Progress is understood as improvement in life conditions and the advertising speech casts the image of happiness upon a comfortable routine driven by consumer goods. According to Semprini (2006) brands, in this context, develop freely. However, their functions are still limited to naming, identifying who produces and differentianting from others. Advertising then only makes them familiar to a closed group of consumers, its speech is still limited to the product’s functionality and the brands’ spreading and communications are very restrict.

Conceived thus, the prêt-à-porter\(^1\) changes the fashion system until then based on the axis

\(^1\) The prêt-à-porter was established in France in 1949. It was inspired in ready-to-wear, a mode of production created in the post war by the Americans that reproduced clothes designed by haute couture in large scale, fast and well.
haute couture-copying industry. The factory model consolidates and as time passed it unfolded in a series of small confections that started to meet the needs of a peripheral market, slowly becoming more independent from the ideas and trends imposed by the big fashion houses.

This conquered independence opened the path for a young culture established in individual, nonconformist, hedonist and libertarian behaviors and values to grow. The youth do not identify with older previous generations’ codes and do not wish to do so, hence this culture spread by cinema and music becomes creative incentive for young fashion designers. Observing what is on the streets, the new behaviors, the sport and the endless mass culture manifestations as an inspiration source becomes a recurrent practice in "doing" fashion, bringing the possibility of a new look and the breaking of old codes to this system, by languages extracted from subcultures or outcast groups, making fashion more accessible and democratic. Appearances that once were submitted to impositions of trends, dominant tastes, group ideologies and even financial restrictions, start to be represented according to individual urges and preferences, by the freedom of change, by aesthetics, by well-fare and/or everything together, allowing entities to be floating and changeable.

This context in which consumption is consecrated as a foundation for the development of humanity sustains the growth of big companies (detainers of worldly-recognized brands), market globalization, development of new information technologies and their impact on communications; advertising and development of cultural leisure. Conditions that, in the end of the 20th century, will allow the fashion logic, defined by taste and change, the search for innovation, the frailty of choices and decisions, the cult to individualism and the hedonist culture to spread to all the layers of consumption.

Before so many options of access to this consumption world through an enormous variation of products and a sharp competition, brands start to face a new challenge: look different. There is a necessity to create a personality that identifies them and tell them from one another, an urgency to develop emotional bonds aligning their values to their consumer’s lifestyles and characteristics. Researches and behavior trend forecasts that influence people’s consumption choices become a practice, which will impact fashion and turn into a prerogative in differentiating the brands.

For Lipovetsky (2007) this each day faster cycle gives place to a new stage in consumption development: hyper-consumption’s, mainly characterized by the subjective, experiential, emotional consumption. Less intended to show status or social distinction and more hedonist, more turned to personal satisfaction than to the competitive fights for status and mimetic rivalries. For the author this hedonist consumer of the third stage can be seen as an "experience collector" always looking for new possibilities to look as or more than that, represent another personality.

Hyper-consumption translates this new movement in which investment does not mean symbolic face-offs between groups through acquired products’ values any longer, but individual choices and personal compositions that each one does from the opportunities they are given by the market. Consumption converges
to become an experiental connection and commercial strategies propose to charm and surprise the individuals with investments in "meeting" places more and more playful and "non-places".

BRANDS PROTAGONISM

In this context brands have a role of symbolically "structuralize" the emptiness caused by the crysis of traditional institutions and by the loss of references considered to be unshakable before; amplifying their simply communicational meaning. According to Pompeu et Al (2011), brands have started to occupy this symbolic void left by the weakening of familiar traditions, social roles, family, State, work, ideologies and religion, working as a way of collective and identity union. Today, in a context in which objects are infused of signs, consumption choices of individuals say much more about their identities than nationality, profession or religion did before.

And the brands are the ones that allow a bigger value to be attached to the product, giving the last a meaning that transcends its materiality. In Perez's (2004) definition, the brand acts as a link which intermediates the relations between individuals and companies, their products and/or services, having amplified their range of acting to other territories, as entertainment's, services', politics' and even people's. Semprini (2006) highlights that brands are based on the intersection of economy, communications, consumption and its mechanics are unseparable, for they sustain each other mutually.

According to the author, brands have reached significant importance and influence in the economic field because the organizations and many behaviours of the market consolidate through their construction of meaning. And he highlights that it is of utmost importance that brands understand the five aspects which base the interactions between this market behaviour and consumption's mechanisms for their enunciates to be understood by people: individualism, body, immateriality, mobility and imaginary. Semprini (2006) says that the brand which is imbued by these symbolic senses is a consequence and only develops in societies dominated by the consumption of meanings and observes the progressive complexity of brand communications in contemporaneity.

Nowadays, the communications of the contemporary brand goes beyond the realms of advertisement, it has been given many roles to play. With the endless new contact places, made possible by media, internet and social networks advancements, communications had to project itself beyond a tool of image expression (visual identity), of the commercial and material aspects of the product. Communications is held responsible for transmitting the meaning project of its brand, its intangible value, its universe, clearing and potencializing its meanings and building the contact spot with the consumer. There's an aspiration of interaction between the consumers and brands, people wish to relate and make bonds, being communications the responsible for the relationship with expressivities and individual and collective desires. What puts the brand as the craftsman of
It is in the space of convergence between these three big instances that the basement of the brand is established and its semiotic capacity is developed. Thus, for the brands to consolidate among many others they have to develop their competences in perceiving, translate and organize information that flows in the meanings of social space, building and streaming signs that are truly meaningful for the consumers and then can be incorporated to their life projects.

Semprini (2006) highlights two more fundamental aspects in identity sustaining and in the mechanics of brand working: their relationship and evolutive capacities. The brand, as an intersubjective potency is a result of trades that involve many protagonists, therefore its capacity to manage its relationship with workers, suppliers, consumers and the social group is determinant for its success. The author divides these protagonists in three levels: the first pole is the productions and all those who are linked to the brand project somehow are part of it, they are people directly connected to the organization. The second pole is the reception's and many social agents take part of it: users, competitors, people connected to consumer's associations, labor unions, NGOs (which the author calls expanded market) that notice, interpretate, filter and evaluate the messages sent by the brand. And finally the third pole is understood as the general context that consists in the whole socio-cultural space, from which many interferences may come (inspirations or restrictions) and demands, trend impositions (symbolic or cultural) that can have a major or a minor impact on the project.

Still regarding brands relation capacities, Semprini (2006) highlights their contractual dimension. Trades between the brand and their remitees imply in a sort of pact, that is based on a brand's promise, involving aspects such as loyalty and continuity in time and space. These aspects demand a constant monitoring of the brand project, which will assure a better performance with the emitees. Ultimately, the third key dimension of the brand is about its evolutionary capacity. As a mutable and dynamic phenomenon, Semprini (2006) considers a brand as a living entity, because the consumers' goals change, their desires are renewed, the context is modified, the public opinions are transformed and placed on the center of these exchanges, it must become flexible, prepared to react to all inconsistencies of the socio-cultural environment.

For Bronw (2010) brands are organisms that must adapt to a new social contract. The boundaries between products and services are getting foggier given the evolution of their functional performance for a wider, more satisfying and more meaningful experience, they must comprehend the transition of products and services to complex systems and be prepared to break old paradigms, hence the mass production and the careless consumption cycle cannot be sustained any longer.

In the brand model proposed by Semprini (2006) its structure is based upon 5 pillars:

1. The brand project should be legitimate, be true in its purpose, make sense in people's lives.
2. The brand must be able to, effectively, satisfy its consumer's desires (The author will call it brand's promise)

3. That its products and/or services are original and creative, materially concretizing this promise.

4. The brand should be positioned in an specific product or service category so that the offer in understandable by the emitees, and also it should be differentiated from the competition and the other options.

5. The brand's values have to be recognizable by the consumers.

According to the author, for a brand project to concretize its values have to be represented in all strategies, actions and brand manifestations (in case of a fashion brand: the product's design, materials, the logo, the visual identity, showcases, stores' visual merchandising, catalogues, lookbooks, points of sales, sites, blogs and etc.). These manifestations are sensorially noticed through the five senses and they are the ones that allow the emitees to live a brand.

BRAND MANAGEMENT: BRAZILIAN FASHION'S CHALLENGE

Analysing Brazilian fashion brands under Semprini's (2006) concepts' light, it is possible to identify some aspects that demonstrate the frailty of those brands' construction. Fashion logics impose a constant renewal in very hastened paces and timings. It is frequently noticed that hurrying to present new things and make a difference in the market, many small and medium-sized brands concentrate much effort and investments seeking innovation. Motivated by transient happenings or situations seen as market opportunities, with good business chances, many brands end up taking misled decisions that are caused by the lack of attention to these events' coherence with the brand's project, its values and manifestations.

Anxious to seize these opportunities to commercially promote an idea or even the brand, it is common to identify these misled approaches in Brazilian fashion. Attempts to personify brands by associating them with momentary celebrities who don't have an image which represents the brand's identity are frequently seen. Other recurring behaviours are the copies of international brands' products and ill-placed messages through marketing images and actions. Variations in visual identity, alterations in market positioning and changes in style and product's development, that ignore the brand's past and essence, are also common. These speeches, badly noticed or ambiguous for the emitees, result in confusion, lack of identification and consequently the brand is weakened.

Brown (2010) observes that to innovate, a company needs to dive into the user's universe to break its resistance to change. One of the ways of leading people to try something new is to be based in behaviours they are already familiar with, incorporating a new perspective to an existing behaviours. According to the
author, an experience perceived as personalized is infinitely more valued than a standard product or service. However, a great part of the organizations mistake simply incremental ideas with innovation, presenting a mere update of a product which is already common to the market as an innovative article.

This behaviour in Brazilian fashion market is very recurrent. Few brands present truly innovative proposals, be them in product design, raw material, factory processes or in communications. Generally, products are mere unfoldings or updates of already existing articles (the best selling in older collections) that are not only predictable and liable of being seen in many other season collections, but also leave an easy path for the competition's copies and take the risk of not making sense to their public.

Many of these difficulties come from the lack of comprehension of the concept of a fashion product. According to Cietta (2012), the fashion products must be considered hybrid articles, because even if their alluring power comes from their meanings in this emotional consumption context, their value also depends on productive processes and the market relations from where they come. For the author, there is no doubt that, in order to increase the brands' perceived value it is more important each day to invest in communications, in distribution and mainly in immaterial production, with creative researches. Therefore, those investments highly increase the fixed costs of the corporations and could compromise the financial health of minor companies.

Due to high competition, economic instabilities and the frequent need to decrease costs, the factory processes of fashion manufacturings are increasingly fragmented by the necessity of outsourcing services. The production stages in confections hardly keep a continuous flux, be it because of outsourced services or lack of communication among the professionals, causing the loss of important information, due to disagreements or even lack of integration and clashes between departments. The concentration of production in workshops' hands (that generally fulfill essentially operational roles) make the incorporation of the innovation and the brand project much harder, because these workshops, being exposed to all those setbacks and pressured by the demands of high productivity, do not wish to take risks with process innovations.

Another great challenge in keeping a consistent brand project is related to communications that in fashion have a double challenge. Besides having the difficult task of translating as clear as possible the meaning of all their products, collections and visibilities (that are very variable, have a shor lifespan and are conditioned to consumption's trends and seasonal changes), it is up to the communications to demonstrate how these are related to the brand's mission, values and identity. Besides that, they are also responsible of managing the endless interpretations and reframings of the consumers, who nowadays take active part of the brands' building. The communications' task is to connect all these elements in a coherent way, creating meaningful speeches in the building of the brand's ideal. This ideal must be represented in all manifestations (in advertisement, in the stores' showcases, in the blog, in the promoted events) and speak the same language as its public, bring meaning to its experiences, establishing bonds with this consumer through their emotional memory.
It is visible that a great challenge in brand management is to keep this pact with their emitees throughout time. Sustaining a coherent language in different medias that brands have access to, each with different dynamics, requires great skill. With the massive presence of fashion brands in digital environments, it has been mandatory to address faster to the consumers' expectations, reading their wishes and desires. This makes keeping faithful to the brand's project a daily and exhaustive task.

Even with all the challenges said before, each day endless small and medium-sized fashion products confections appear in Brazilian market. However, without a new approach in brand management and in more efficient productive processes, these new companies will not be able to survive this so competitive scenario. Either will the already consolidated companies before the accelerated changes in today's scenario. The Design Thinking, a new way of developing projects, could bring interesting contributions to fashion design and branding management.

For Brown (2010), Design Thinking is a mind model used by designers to give life to their ideas. For the author, it replaces the traditional methods of product creation and is based on the analysis of the relation between people and products, person and people, aligning consumers' urging needs to the technological resources available inside the organization. The Design Thinking implies in experimental methods of innovation centered in the human being, it starts from the comprehension of people's needs and motivations to create experiences and in creating opportunities for the involvement and active participation of collaborators and consumers.

It is a collaborative process, an interdisciplinary work proposal performed by a team with different formations and that identify with a brand project, creating empathy and motivation. With a hollistic view, the method is willing to involve people for them to feel free to collaborate actively in each innovation space: inspiration, idealization and idea implementation. In practice, Design Thinking is done through brainstormings and interdisciplinary teams, it incentivates the creation of more prototypes during development and creates synergy among the involved through the construction of narratives and scenarios.

What is seen today in confections are multidisciplinary teams, each professional defending their own specialization and representing the ideas and demands of their department in the company; transforming the project in a wearing negotiation and leaving the brand project in second plan. In a design thinking proposal, work becomes more collaborative and interdisciplinary, performed by a team with different formations, it allows the expression of capacities and encourages all involved to take part of the idealization and innovation implementation environments.

Transforming the culture of Brazilian fashion companies so that they can find a breakeven and keep economically sustainable is a challenge as essencial as introducing a brand culture in them. A way to introduce this culture in the organization is through engaging the collaborators, because it is extremely
important that this concept permeates all departments, motivating the participation of the professionals as active collaborators in the processes. Based in Design Thinking’s premisses, this engagement could be achieved when new ideas are proposed through multidisciplinary workshops, as facilitating the understanding of the collections and product mix’s concepts through illustrated panels and moodboards in all departments, generating scenarios to contextualize the ideas and clarify their meanings. Make the productive process clearer with the support of storyboards, mapping the production flux of the company in a way which is easy to understand, with creative, playful and colorful visual communications. Making these storyboards available to all the involved departments, so that they can play the role of instruction manuals (guiding the processes) and inventories, (allowing to see the gaps and production constraints) allowing future corrections. And finally, seize less intensive work stages, or stages between collections, to increase pilot projects stimulating employees’ creativity and integration.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The reflections produced by this article sought to deepen the understanding of the enormous importance of consumption in the building of identities, as a ruler of social practices and cultural scenarios in contemporary societies. From this comprehension it was established how consumption, brands and fashion are intrinsically connected, how their dynamics grow stronger mutually and how the comprehension of these conditions can contribute in the strengthening of Brazilian fashion brands.

Analysing Brazilian fashion brands, it is visible that they not always benefit from this favorable environment to their development. Most of them do not show any worries about developing and managing a consistent brand project. Others, aware of its importance, begin its implementation, however it’s noticeable that most of them fail when they try to make the brand’s values permeate all processes and the conceived brand’s manifestations be derived from the project.

Taken in consideration that today the consumption choices involve complex interactions and consumers choose brand which align to their life projects, the importance of the incorporation of brand culture in Brazilian fashion companies becomes evident. However even it being a fundamental factor of market differentiation, it is necessary that its implementation is carefully planned and controlled, for it is still a very onerous investment for the companies.

2 It is important to highlight that the reflections which rose from this research do not claim to present absolute truths or finished thoughts about Brazilian fashion brands. In a so extensive and full of particularities market, the presented hypotheses resulted from the experience of the researcher as a Fashion Designer and Coolhunter and in consultancies given to fashion brands.
It was verified that the adoption of the Design Thinking in fashion brands management reveals itself to be an effective strategy. Its focus on the user, its collaborative and integrator view, its vocation to flexibilization and humanization would fulfill two functions at the same time: it would facilitate the incorporation of a brand model (the re-design of productive processes and the integration of teams and departments, motivating the creative capacity of all contributors) and would allow the incorporation of a true innovation culture in fashion companies.

REFERENCES


