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Browsing clothing with senses.

A sensorial brand experience concerning visually impaired consumers.

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Structured Abstract

Purpose – It is not possible for a visually impaired (VI) individual to properly understand clothing and fashion brands. However, it can be argued that possibly, some fashion brands are probably more interesting for VI than others. The purpose of this study is to find and understand which are the stimulus or elements of fashion brands that require further analysis, concerning visually impaired VI individuals.

Design/methodology/approach – As fashion brands are normally designed with multi-sensory elements (e.g., product features, store environments and brand assets), some aspects might be

more important for VI, than others, and consequently they might affect the way as these individuals perceive fashion brands. Therefore, in addition of understanding the VI experiences and their preferences regarding clothing, it is also essential to find and understand literature regarding the VI shopping experience and the brand assets. Through the literature analysis, and within the scope of a qualitative method, was possible to define a practical strategy based in the combination of different methods, such as, the implementation of a sensorial toolkit that will be put in practice in further empirical studies.

Findings – Until this point there have been some efforts made by researchers and fashion designers to understand VI preferences regarding clothing and their issues during visits to brick and mortar stores, but there is a lack of knowledge in terms of the relationship between fashion brands and VI individuals, so, finding a qualitative methodology combined with a sensorial toolkit with the implementation of an experiment on further empirical studies seems logical and advisable to study more deeply these consumers.

Originality/value – Due to the lack of scientific studies on the thematic this study offers an original approach, considering fashion design, fashion brands and VI individuals. This paper acts as an useful instrument and a starting point for a further empirical study.

Article Classification: Research Paper

Keywords: Visually Impaired; Brand; Clothing; Store; Senses; Experience; Emotions

1. Introduction

For Goldstein (2006), the visual process always start with the perception of a first stimulus, that is created as a result of the environmental stimuli and the perception of the attend stimuli. However, being visually impaired, affects the way how an individual percept the surrounded environment and a specific stimulus. Globally, there are at least 123.7 million people with moderate or severe distance vision impairment or blindness and 826 million people near vision impairment (WHO, 2019). And it is a fact that, a great majority of countries in OECD still have significant challenges to meet the objective of reducing inequalities (Sachs *et al.*, 2019).

Suffering from an impairment such as visual, encompasses several issues (e.g., social misconceptions towards to the disability), that lead individuals to a physical and mentally unhealthy and overall unsatisfactory life (Teutsch *et al.*, 2016; WHO, 2019). For example, due to the unawareness of society about the disability, VI individuals are more likely to suffer from exclusion every day (Angula and Moore, 1997), an aspect that denies social fulfilment in their lives. So, after all the modern society must do efforts to understand VI individuals. After all, awareness and knowledge about disabilities may change the way how people think and feel about disabilities (Palad *et al.*, 2016) including the visual ones.

In the scientific community and mostly in the last decade, researchers such as Baker, Stephens and Hill, (2001), Burton (2011); Burton *et al.*, (2012), Williams, Neylan and Hurst (2013) and Cho *et al.*, (2020), have addressed issues in their studies based in the analysis of VI shopping experiences and VI perception considering some tangible aspects of clothing. Even though, thinking of clothing as an asset of the brand and an instrument for consumers brand awareness, brand elements, and the intangible aspects of the brand, have been forgotten by researchers.

So, if the act of purchase is normally affected by the visual sense, it is after all necessary to understand: If they are not sighted, how are they connected with a fashion brand? And what is more important if this connection exists, what are the brand attributes and product features that can be preferable for the VI consumer? What motivates them to buy fashionable products?

This paper acts as a key element and a useful tool because through of the literature review analysis, considering clothing, brick and mortar-store and brand assets in fashion, it is expected to: firstly, identify what kind of stimulus brands usually provide to the consumers; secondly, understand within those stimulus which ones could be accurate to eventually use in an empirical study with a VI sample and thirdly, find a coherent qualitative methodology that could be integrated in an empirical study towards VI individuals.

2. Literature Review: The sensorial multiplicity of fashion brands

2.1. VI preferences of clothing designs

For VI, the recognition of a specific product and the final interpretation of that product is based on the recognition and analysis of a particular stimulus (Goldstein, 2010). According to Hammer (2012), VI individuals use their appearance and clothing as a tool to defy the misconceptions that society creates about unsighted individuals (Cho *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, the consumer of fashion products, face the dualism of fashion design and fashion brands, that remains in the desire that an individual has, to be like someone else, but different from everyone else to fit in the society (Rocamora and Anneke, 2015). In the end being fashionable is about having similitude and being distinctive at the same time (Rocamora and Anneke, 2015) even more when it is in true that clothing and fashion are significant elements of communication (Barnard, 2002), and they are visibly present in every human lifestyle.

When it comes to clothing, it is difficult to confirm that blind consumers have their own "style", given the reliance of them on sighted companions, friends, relatives or even store assistants to assist them with shopping and garment coordination (Kulyukin and Kutiyanawala, 2010a; Burton, 2011; Williams, Neylan and Hurst, 2013; Falchetti, Ponchio and Botelho, 2016; Cho *et al.*, 2020). Other influencing factors for the purchase exposed by participants were the fit (e.g. form-fitting and flattering to their shape or not too revealing), age (e.g. participants wanted to dress age-appropriately), and occasion (e.g. needing to adhere to a certain style of business attire) (Williams, Neylan, et al., 2013). It is also specified by Williams, Neylan and Hurst (2013), that between those with vision impairments there is the desire to have more and distinct persons to ask for opinions during the shopping experience.

In terms of aesthetic elements in clothing , according to Chang & Lee (2015), VI individuals have special design needs in clothing, such as, more pockets for tops and colour matching between upper and bottom garments. Sleeve/ legs length (e.g. shirt and trouser) and tightness on textile materials, were classified by VI as the most important aspects to consider when they are evaluating upper and bottom clothing products (Chang & Lee, 2015). The casual style was elected as their favourite to use on a daily basis (Chang & Lee, 2015). Was also found that clothes that had some sort of tactile features (e.g. buttons or a pattern sew, like embroideries, onto the surface of the material) are interesting features for the touch sense (Cho *et al.*, 2020) and would be likely to stand out more to an individual with a VI than for someone sighted (Williams et al., 2013). In fact, the importance of touch on consumer behaviour is underestimated. The sense of

touch provides information and feelings about a certain product through physical and psychological interactions (Hultén, 2011). Used as the main sense to feel the fabric, this attitudes allows consumers to perceived richness or quality of a certain material in the garments (Solomon, Bamossy and Askegaard, 2002). For example, this kind of perception may change considering male or female individuals, where the smooth sensation of the silk is more appreciated by female consumers and considered as a fine and high-class material, whereas cotton is considered as a low-class material. As for the male individuals, wool assumes the role as a fine and high-class material, unlike denim (usually made from cotton fibres) that it is perceived also as a low-class and coarse material (Solomon, Bamossy and Askegaard, 2002).

Nevertheless, the need of comfortable, functional as well as fashionable clothing, were the main aspects provided by the participants for the purchase of clothing, varying in terms of importance, considering the unique taste of each participant. Although, garments with a "good feel appeal" (Williams, Neylan and Hurst, 2013, p. 88) were completely forgotten by most of the participants, when comparing with functional features.

Regarding e-commerce, for example, some participants argue that there is a desire to try clothes and that is too risky to rely solely on the text description even though the website has textual descriptions that are easy to understand. So, it is important to use and handle the products before or after the purchase (Alali, 2017). Besides all the factors related with functional features in garments (e.g., comfort, fit, donning and doffing, closure, tactile identification, and storage), symbolic values, such as, group membership, contribute for self-esteem, colour identification, aesthetic beauty, and tactile decoration, contributes for a integration of the VI into the modern society (Cho *et al.*, 2020).

Considering the shopping experience and consumer lifestyles, the notion of fashion style is connected to a large number of fashion products (e.g., clothing) and linked to the consumer behaviour (Kim, 2012). The possible image of a product or a brand that a VI individual may create in is mind will possibly arouse a fascination (Barthes, 1999) and "visual" beautification (Burton, 2011). In fact, consumers are frequently concerned in purchase new styles to enhance and express social and personal identity (Goldsmith, 2002), which means that, consumers self-congruence and confidence, can increase emotional brand attachment (Malär *et al.*, 2011).

2.2. VI shopping experiences towards brick and mortars' fashion stores.

Fashion and clothing are ubiquitous and significant forms of communication in every lifestyle and in every culture (Burton *et al.*, 2012) in which brand symbols represent values, underlying customers' experiences with products or services (Kim, 2012). Products and brands are complexly interconnected by sets of characteristics that are usually evaluated by consumers (Gardner and Levy, 1955). However, a large number of individuals can experience difficulties on their role as consumers (Baker, Stephens and Hill, 2001). For example, in general, the selection of clothing is one of the most pertinent problems for the VI consumer and, though, everyone enjoys to wear new clothes (Walmiki and Vastrad, 2016). The issues that a VI individual has to deal with during their shopping experiences increases their dependancy in others (Kulyukin and Kutiyanawala, 2010b), so, positive or negative experiences can take place when searching for products, when choosing and shopping and/ or when receive a particular service (Kim, 2012).

Furthermore, the lack of support services in the store environment prevents them from being socially active (Elgendy, Sik-Lanyi and Kelemen, 2019). At home, VI have several methods to accomplish tracking clothing in their wardrobes (e.g., marking the garments with differential braille tags or objects or rely in their memories regarding touching perception). Therefore, in a certain way, they are capable to manage their own style and do choices of clothing at home, but with many limitations (Tracey, 2014; Mahulika, 2017). The main factors for the decision of choosing an outfit to wear fall on coordination assistance and wardrobe addition, followed by fashion trends and finally clothing tips (Williams, Neylan, et al., 2013). Possibly, because of all the diversity of offer that a fashion brand normally has the choosing process of a certain garment gets even more complicated during their visits to brick and mortar stores.

Once that fashion does provide extra added values to clothing (Kawamura, 2005), consumers want to experience the pleasure of shopping and personalize their experiences according to their unique desires, have control over the process and want to be perceived as an equal participant in the consumption experience (Baker, 2006). On the other hand, aspects of the retail design directly affect how consumers interact with the environment (Ainsworth and Foster, 2017). The need for understandable information is critical in today's complex shopping environment, mainly because, many persons who have visual impairments and specific target needs, experiences and problems have not been properly addressed by fashion brands (Kaufman-Scarborough, 2000).

For example, individuals using white canes to walk through a store are going to stand out more than an average sighted person (Baker, 2006). In a society that has a strong system of social stratification objects tend to reflect and give social hierarchies (Kawamura, 2005), creating assumptions that are related to beauty ideals, truth, civilization, geniality, shape, social status or personal taste (Berger et al., 1996). Kaufman-Scarborough (2001), explain that VI consumers are challenged every day with problems concerning the access to market and product information and therefore, they cannot perceive and process certain information's in the way that is traditionally expected.

The truth is that VI want to experience consumer normalcy by behave and living like other consumers and having acceptable identities to themselves and others (Baker, 2006). When VI consumers perceive an inequal experience in a fashion store, they may see such experience as a chance to inform others about their capabilities (Falchetti, Ponchio and Botelho, 2016). The outcome of this segmentation, intentional or not, is a restraint and a devaluation of the identities of certain groups of people and consequently one of the negative consequences of marketing (Baker, 2006). However, VI consumers argue that, their needs can only be satisfactorily accomplished when they visit to a brick and mortar retail store (Bradley et al., 2000a).

An experience may be related with acting, feeling, relating, sensing, and thinking (Hultén, 2011, p. 258). Nowadays, shopping has become synonym of engagement and entertainment (Weeler, 2009). The consumer value about an experience exists not in the purchased product or nor on the brand that was previously selected, but rather in the experiences derived from that act of consumption (Hultén, 2011). Hearing, touching and the smelling sensory inputs may trigger memories and lead individuals to different experience moods (Solomon, Bamossy and Askegaard, 2002). In fact, these last authors explain the importance of the five senses as a stimulating factor on consumer behaviour and possibly on purchases. As VI usually use other senses (e.g., hearing, touching and smelling) to percept, communicate, perform mental tasks, remember, understand ideas and beware of the environments (Light, 2005), retail atmospheres may have an important cognitive, attitudinal, and emotional impact on product purchase (Cho and Lee, 2017). The visual sense appears as the common sense when browsing and perceive products, while the sense of sound is connected to emotions and feelings and impacts brand experiences and interpretations, and, the smell triggers sensations of pleasure and intrinsically linked to individuals memories (Hultén, 2011).

Considering lights, music, floor plan and staff attitude in the retail store is important for the success of a brand (Calderin, 2009), because the experience of shopping provides the opportunity self-construction engagement (Baker, 2006) and the opportunity for individuals to create their own unique identity and image (Hultén, 2011). Brick and mortar stores can increase value to the VI shopper's experience through both utilitarian and hedonic means (Solomon, Bamossy and Askegaard, 2002; Foster and McLelland, 2015). In fact, shopping lets consumers have social interaction, which helps achieving social integration and creates the sense of belonging to a community (Baker, 2006) where expectably, their own personality and identity will fit. However, according to Ainsworth & Foster (2017), retail colour spaces and music do not significantly impact consumer comfort. Emotional branding seems more obvious to achieve through services or intangibles aspects of the brand, however, the environmental context of a brick and mortar store may be significant in creating an emotional relation with the consumer (Hultén, 2011).

Fashion brands tend to use on their retail environments specific types of attributes such as floor layout, music, olfactory components and customer interaction with the product to emphasize the shopping experience, however, sighted customers tend to observe the retail atmosphere in holistic terms rather than in terms of attributes (Rayburn and Voss, 2013). For example, Shona, Barry, and Philippa (2003) mentioned that the merchandise colours, presentation style, awareness of fixtures, pathfinding and sensory qualities of materials and lighting are strong aspects that affect the purchase intention.

The store design and the music, when well implemented in the physical space, act as important points which can transmit a strong and personalized image of the brand to the consumer (Martins, 2010). The design of the store, the lighting and the music affect the atmosphere in the retail store giving it, for example, coziness, liveliness, tenseness, or detached environments (Custers *et al.*, 2010). For example, the right combination of music (e.g. classical) and lighting (e.g. soft) can determine a consumer's perception of store image, creating the impression of a prestigious store image (Areni and Kim, 1994).

For example, when observing the inside of mainstream brick and mortar brand store (e.g. H&M), the lighting presentation consists of bright fluorescent lighting and plays upbeat music to conceive a live and modern environment. On the inverse, Brooks Brothers plays medium tempo, retro pop songs, with incandescent lighting to create a warm and comfortable environment giving in this way an upscale store image (Koo and Kim, 2013). Kumar and Kim, (2014), state that if a consumer perceives that the music or lighting in the store does not fit the store image, a

negative opinion could be formed about the store and the brand. So, the environment of a store can be sometimes more influential than the product itself in the purchase decision (Kumar and Kim, 2014). With an alternative approach based in the manipulation of the store environments it is possible to increase shopping enjoyment, positive brand attitudes, and consumer brand loyalty (Foster and McLelland, 2015).

2.3. The importance of brand assets in fashion brands

According to Jin and Cedrola (2017), the brand serve as the single most important criterion for purchase decisions among many consumers. In the store not only vision provides high detailed information about environmental and attended stimulus (Goldstein, 2006). When precepting a product on the surrounding environment, hearing and touch are in fact powerful "tools" and high detailed providers to VI (Snowden, Thompson and Troscianko, 2012). When thinking about possible brand identities, functional, emotional or self-expressive aspects must be considered as a benefit (Hultén, 2011). According to Jin and Cedrola (2017), the brand is the most important asset that a company has. If brand emotion is the bond between the brand, products and the consumer, the associations provided by these state of mind, might be tangible or emotional/symbolic (Hultén, 2011). It means that, considerate emotional aspects on branding must be mandatory as a highly effective way to cause customer reaction, feelings and moods, ultimately forming connection and loyalty with the brand (Zhang, 2015). When enhancing the ability of VI individuals to interpret and process the information, brand equity increases and improves the consumer experience and their purchase decision (Aaker, 1992; Jin and Cedrola, 2017).

Individuals capacity of remembering events and memorize specific moments and facts, reinforce the basic principles of design and product development towards consumers (Norman, 2011). In fact, the search for evidence in memory is generally necessary in the attribute-based decision processes (Sanbonmatsu and Fazio, 1990). Consumers look for and purchase emotional experiences around what has been bought. For Jin and Cedrola (2017), there is a vast group of assets that are required to operate a company such as buildings, factories, offices, stores, owners, employees, brand(s), skills and patents. But most of these aspects are changeable and replaceable. However, a brand is forever.

Beyond the store (e.g., brick and mortar or online), brands are usually complemented with several assets that will identify and distinguish the brand (Keller, 2008). Brand assets (e.g., brand names, websites, logos, slogans or taglines, jingles and packages) are central elements to

enhance consumer brand awareness and possible brand associations (Keller, 2008; Weeler, 2009) and considered by Sheridan (2020), as non-verbal based stimuli (e.g., visual colours, logos, characters, celebrities, audio devices and music and scents/tastes). As Weeler (2009) explains, a good brand strategy has to be aligned with business strategy, reflecting the company values and in-depth understanding of the customer's needs and perceptions. So, brand assets must be memorable, easy to recognize and easy to recall, the information about the benefits, attributes and category of the brand and its products should be meaningful (Keller, 2008). In the field of fashion, through imagery and feelings, brand elements must reflect brand personality while the information transmitted by the brand assets may not communicate the essence of the product per se, but should be flexible and adjustable, being possibly transferable across brand product categories and nonlimited to a unique country, culture or market (Keller, 2008).

The next table considers the main criteria to understand which assets could be more helpful and successful to be implemented on an inclusive approach towards VI consumers.

CRITERION	BRAND NAMES AND WEBSITES	LOGOS AND SYMBOLS	CHARACTERS	SLOGANS AND JINGLES	PACKAGING AND SIGNAGE
MEMORABILITY	Enhance brand recall and recognition	Useful for brand recognition	Useful for brand recognition	Enhance brand recall and recognition	Useful for brand recognition
MEANINGFULNESS	Reinforce almost any type of association, although sometimes only indirectly	Reinforce almost any type of association, although sometimes only indirectly	Useful for non-product related imagery and brand personality	Convey almost any type of association explicitly	Convey almost any type of association explicitly
LIKABILITY	Can evoke much verbal imagery	Can provoke visual appeal	Can generate human qualities	Can evoke much verbal imagery	Can combine visual and

					verbal appeal

Table I. Adaptation of the critique of brand element options proposed by Keller (2008) within a memorability, meaning and likability approach.

Think about solutions that could increase the VI experiences towards to the product and the brand itself, could enhance fashion brands to be more interactive, immersive, authentic and inclusive as for the environments and products (Foster and McLelland, 2015), even more when, it is a fact that some senses, such as touching, hearing and smelling are sensitive and high detail sources (Snowden, Thompson and Troscianko, 2012) of sensorial experiences .

3. Findings:

3.1. Designing clothing for VI individuals: A designer's perspective

Usually, products that generally provoke unpleasant emotions are easily discarded and move away potential consumers (Desmet, 2012), so, relationships between consumers and brands are heavily influenced by emotional factors (Pawle and Cooper, 2006). Being a fashion designer it is having an active role in the creation and in the product development processes (Manzini, 2009). Being a connector and facilitator, a quality booster and co-producer (Manzini, 2009), the designer is constantly motivated to explore new concepts and new alternatives, with the main goal of promoting the product meaning and improve consumer's quality of life (Gobé, 2002). Apart from these huge responsibilities, fashion designers must also ensure that products relates and communicates properly with possible consumers (Norman, 2011).

So, providing consumers a strong experience and avoiding unpleasant aspects through it (Norman, 2011) is mandatory. Those with visual impairments are in disadvantage because they cannot see what constitutes the 'norms of the fashion' on other individuals and being stylishly judged by them (Burton *et al.*, 2012). Fashion is intensely visual and comprehends an intangible system of signification (Rocamora and Anneke, 2015), and it is also greatly inaccessible for people with vision impairments (Burton et al., 2012). So, the designer creativity, a complex process of ideas, with several phases and gradual improvements (Baxter, 1998; Bjögvinsson, Ehn and Per-Andres, 2012), and, present in all the phases of the product design and development, has to be stimulated (Baxter, 1998) to develop new products with a novelty and usability factors (Ruppert-Stroescu and Hawley, 2014).

Consequently, when questioning and provoking the creative thinking, the future of designs will be potentially influenced by inviting designers to design to reach more senses (Heylighen and Strickfaden, 2012) and not only the visual one. As consumers are capable to create emotions about products that matter to them (Baumeister *et al.*, 2007) the product experience is considered an intricate phenomenon that involve several feelings and reactions, whether physiological, expressive or behavioural (Desmet and Hekkert, 2007). In fashion, designers must be able to understand the powerful appeal of emotions and use their intuitions and artistic skills to exploit (Desmet, 2002) and develop products with attractive interfaces allowing the consumer to create pleasant emotions, facilitating the usability, creating an enjoyable experience, providing wellbeing (Desmet, 2002, 2012; Norman, 2012) and consequently an affective link between human being and products (Norman, 2004; Da Costa, 2013). In fact, according to Norman (2004), clothing design can be visceral once that comprehends the sensorial contact, and, the first impression of the perceptible properties of the product surface characteristics and the product appearance. Pleasure and effectiveness of using the product, and its interactions with possible consumers stimulus their attitudes or behaviour, while reflective Design considers the self-image, personal satisfaction, memories of consumers, and relates with the feelings and experiences that a certain product interaction may provide. Which means that based on prior consumer experiences comes the anticipation that is connected to the first contact with a certain product and its meaning. Followed by the interpretation methods to understand the product according to their related hopes, fears, goals, and desires, reflecting those experiences into an evaluation and then transform that experience to as their own. Finally, recounting appears as the act of the consumer to remember his own experience and possibly finding new definitions to it (Pals et al., 2008).

The fashion consumer behaviour is based in multisensory experiences involving a particular number of senses so it is mandatory that brands try to implement a sensorial communication approach in their marketing plans (Lindstrom, 2013), appealing to a sense strategy in the business and creating strong emotional brand relations with consumers (Malär *et al.*, 2011). However, and aside from many significant elements that a fashion designer needs to consider (e.g., price; fabric quality and garment quality construction; fit of the garment; physical comfort and emotional comfort; the relevance; brand and the convenience and service brands), that consequently affects the adaptive and leadership creativity of the designers and consequently the final design of the product (Jones, 2005; Hines and Bruce, 2007). It is imperative to focus the design process into a chameleon methodology focusing the specific needs of disabled individuals but concealing those particular needs among the rest of the consumers desires.

According to Pullin (2009, p. 90), "understanding for whom we are designing acknowledges that we are not designing for everybody at once". These methods, in a certain way, reflect the basis of product development on inclusive design, where the product is directed for the disabled individual to aid those who are less able in achieving some goals but also to facilitate tasks for the able ones (Heylighen and Strickfaden, 2012). However, if individual needs are oftenly considered in the development of precise products, such as disability aids, these particular features in the product unconsciously provide separation and stigmatizing (Hannukainen and Hölttã-Otto, 2006), increasing the issue of social exclusion. So, if one product and/ or service may be a problem solving for all people, will also be better for the wider range of consumers. This kind of design thinking is in fact the basis for Inclusive Design (Clarkson *et al.*, 2007), that focus on the development of mainstream products and services that will be useful for a wide range of consumers (Goodman-Deane *et al.*, 2014), disabled or nondisabled. Thus, in order to create products that will succeed in the fashion market it is important for the fashion designer to be aware of the inclusive design paradox. In other words, when designers settle the necessity that disabled individuals must participate more actively in design, the engagement results positively to several controversies in inclusive design (Luck, 2018) once that traditionally, mainstream product designs do not explicitly consider the needs of disabled individuals (Persson *et al.*, 2015).

So, it is indeed necessary to create empathy (Tschimmel, 2011; Tschimmel *et al.*, 2017), to have a positive impact on VI consumers' lives having into account their specific needs, but it is also imperative to design products that fuses functional features with fashionable ones (Weinswig, 2018). Within the scope of inclusive design and its methods, fashion designers as Camila Chiriboga[1], Rugilė Gumuliauskaitė[2], Balini Naidoo[3], Maria Sol Ungar[4], Alexa Jovanovic[5] and Babette Sperling[6], developed in the last years a variety of inclusive projects, products and brands related with the development of clothing for VI with specific features (Pina *et al.*, 2020a). The designers worked closely with VI individuals in order to understand their needs and preferences, to achieve plausible solutions to their issues that are mainly related to choosing, wearing, and caring for the garment. Still, there are some issues about their products that are important to mention in this paper.

Regarding the garment and considering the further production of the goods, there is an incompatibility between the design of the products and techniques that were applied. It means that some of the techniques applied may be successfully implemented into a few salesman samples, but hardly implemented into the bulk production and possibly in the manufacturers production chain. Not to mention the possible expensive selling price of the garments. Also,

there is no information regarding the colour pallete so, it can be stated that these designers tend to do their choices following their own personal taste combining it with VI preferences. It is also an interesting fact to realize that usually VI tend to rely on the opinions and interpretations of relatives, friends or store assistants to understand what the colours mean (Williams, Neylan and Hurst, 2013). Even more when In this case colours may be directly associated to the brand and its products and evoke positive or negative feelings (Solomon, Bamossy and Askegaard, 2002). According to Solomon, Bamossy and Askegaard (2002, p.40), "consumer colour choices may be affected by trends", so, it is imperative to analyse and to integrate colours throughout the design creation and product development processes.

Due to the impossibility to determine technical and functional properties of the fabrics used on garments construction, there is a lack of information and applicability of some fabric technologies that could be helpful to improve the engagement and relationship of VI with the product and the brand. Concerning the application of technology in the garments, the use of voice technology was also a concern for one of the designers, however, the implementation of that system did not reach the global VI community and other products and brands. To finalise, it is significant to mention the (in)convenience of braille tags and braille embroideries in the surface of the textile material that appears to be a benefit for VI, but it is at the same time an aspect of exclusivity and ambiguity assuming that anyone is able to read it, when, on the top of that, it is known that its usage is declining rapidly in favour of audio in North America (Alam, 2019).

Generally, all designers focus the development of the products essentially into aesthetics and functionality aspects but alienate its integration into the fashion market and its relation with the brand. Consumer brand equity (D. Aaker, 1991; Aaker, 1992, 1996) (e.g., brand associations, brand awareness and perceived brand quality) becomes an important foundation of distinction (Khan *et al.*, 2014) that helps consumers to interpret, process and store information about products and its brands, affecting their self-confidence in the product purchase and satisfaction on user experience (Wood, 2000). A strong brand identity will help build brand equity through increased recognition, awareness, and customer loyalty, which in turn helps make a company more successful (Weeler, 2009, p. 11). Due to the unfamiliarity of these analysed products and its inadaptation to the taste of mainstream consumers, brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand associations and perceived quality (D. A. Aaker, 1991) were compromised, thus these particular products did not subsisted in the fashion market.

3.2. Development of a Qualitative Methodology Strategy

During the literature review and further analysis were found several issues and constrains related with VI individuals, social and economic, and VI consumer issues related with products and with shopping experience (Baker, Stephens and Hill, 2001; Baker, 2006; Kulyukin and Kutiyanawala, 2010a; Burton, 2011; Williams, Neylan and Hurst, 2013; Chang and Lee, 2015; Falchetti, Ponchio and Botelho, 2016; Cho *et al.*, 2020).

Was also found which assets are more likely to be used in an empirical approach due to their memorability, meaningfulness and likability (Solomon, Bamossy and Askegaard, 2002). Inclusive design considerations appears in the literature review as the an mediator factor, that is, if for instance, many fashion designers tried to understand VI needs (Clarkson *et al.*, 2007) and propose several clothing that obliterate those issues, it would be perceptible the non-success of those products in the fashion market. Not to mention the fact that, due to the specificity of features applied in the clothing, in the attempt of develop inclusive products some fashion designers would fall into the exclusion of those products onto the mainstream consumers (Persson *et al.*, 2015; Luck, 2018).

Nevertheless, if considering the VI senses perception and stimulus (hearing, touching and smelling) and their possible influence in the consumer emotional connexion, attachment, relationship with a fashion brand, seems to be influential aspects to consider for further analysis (Desmet, 2002; Desmet and Hekkert, 2007). For example, when thinking about the value of aesthetic features of clothing, it seems obvious to relate them with the act of seeing, once that it is from this ability, that individuals usually rely and consequently fall in love with embroidery details and colourful prints (Gallace and Spence, 2011).

So, the visual product aesthetics (e.g. textiles, colour, decoration, shape and size) are attributes that clearly contribute to the style of clothing (Bloch, Brunel and Arnold, 2003; Workman, 2010) used several times as communication tools, creating in the consumers all of kinds of sensations and emotions. On the other hand, tactile perception can be defined as the perception of what is tangible in the clothing, so, when an individual touches a textile material absorbing all the sensations, the act provoke and stimulate the tactile receptors that will then send the information to the brain where it will be processed (Erikson, 2013; Atkinson *et al.*, 2016). Consumers have a complex sense of belonging, resulting from the necessity that individuals have on shape multiple identities and performances of the self (Coster, 2019) so, once consumers want to relate themselves more with the fashionable products, they are also avid for more information. Even more when individuals capacity of remembering events and memorize

specific moments and facts reinforce the basic principles of design and product development towards consumers (Norman, 2011), and, most likely, positively influencing VI individuals.

Currently, there are interesting textile products in the market that simplify consumer's life (e.g., anti-stain, easy-care, and anti-crease properties). There is also a greater variety of sustainable, eco-friendly materials (Ha, Kwon and Lennon, 2011), and ethical brands, as well, that were still not properly focused in previous studies and properly evaluated by VI consumers. Then, when developing mainstream clothing it makes sense to have into account VI consumer preferences earlier into the creative process and product development (Cho *et al.*, 2020), to improve the emotional attachment to the brand and its products in the future, and, bringing consequently, social acceptance and diminishment of social barriers (Elgendy, Sik-Lanyi and Kelemen, 2019).

Therefore, fashion designers and brands when designing and selling products need to reconsider the way of how they communicate with VI consumers to reduce issues and possible exclusion constraints during their shopping experience. If WGSN fashion trend forecasts for the next season mention the importance on implementing sustainable and functional textiles (WGSN, 2019) on fashion product developments through an inclusive experiment based on a sensorial experience approach and the analysis of stimuli evoked (e.g., textile materials with technical, traditional, sustainable and trendy features) for clothing, it would be possible to allow VI consumers to have a sensorial experience considering touch, smell and hearing senses. When relating these individuals with clothing textile materials and items of product construction such as trims, embroideries, and others (Pina *et al.*, 2020b), there is the opportunity to remark their preferences and emotional relationship with a particular feature. Apart from the product features analysis it will also be interesting to go deeper and try to understand the importance of store environment stimuli (e.g. music, lights, staff attitude and products display) and of course brand assets stimuli, preferably the ones that are not possible to perceive by VI (e.g. logotype, symbols). Regarding the VI individuals and consumers of clothing and fashion brands and their interpretation and interaction with clothing features, brand assets and store environments must be considered. Also, concerns related mainly with VI perception of stimuli though senses, VI economic and social and inclusive design are to be considered. The next diagram offers a perspective of the adopted research strategy for a possible qualitative approach.
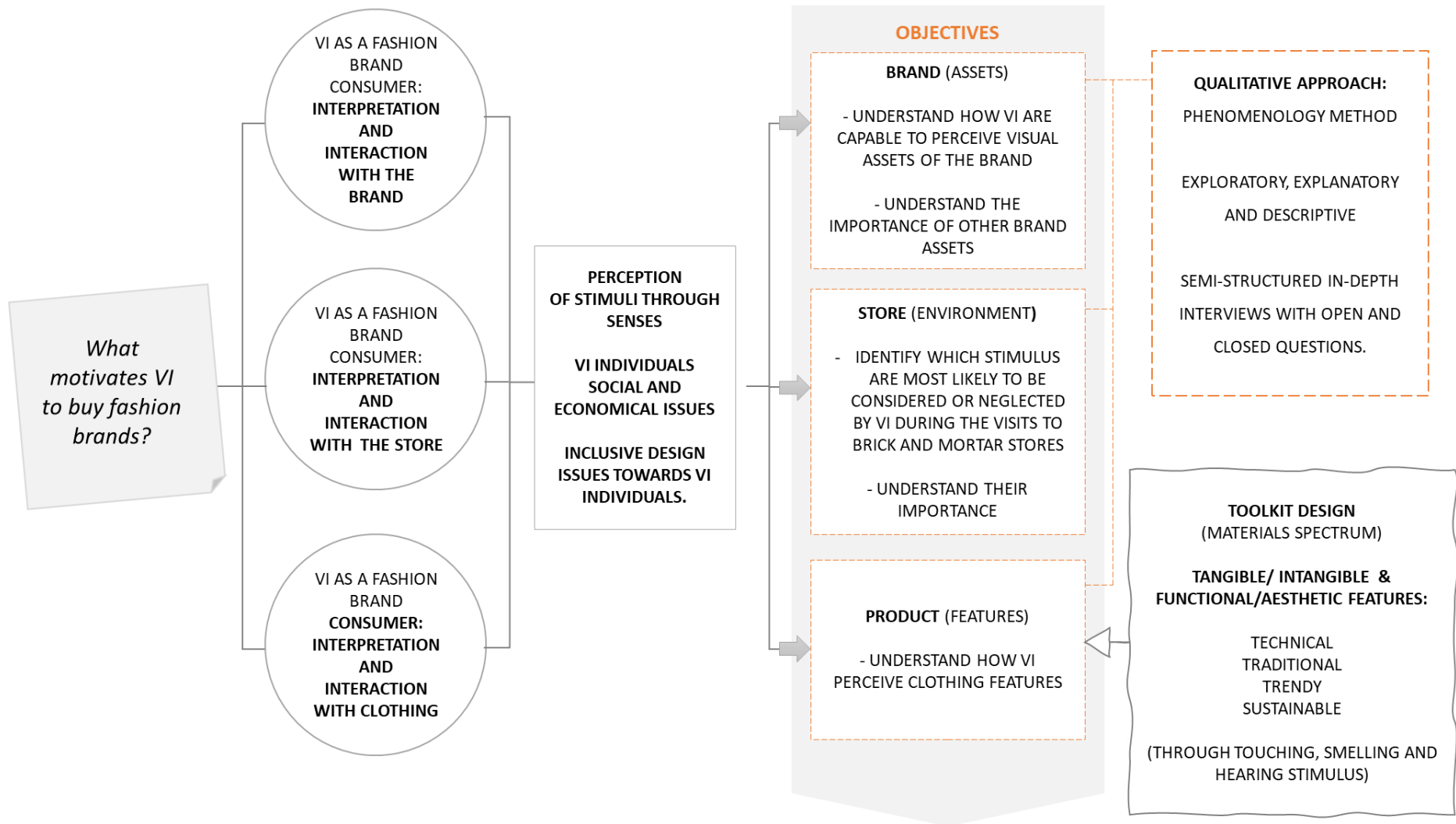
Figure I. Diagram of the qualitative methodology approach for the empirical study.

4. Conclusion and improvements for further studies

A qualitative methodology combined with the sensorial toolkit and the implementation of an experiment on further empirical studies seems logical when considering VI individuals. Through the literature review was possible to identify several considerations and issues related to VI individuals and their actual concerns regarding clothing and their consumer experience at brick and mortar stores. However, brand concerns considering VI were not yet addressed by other researchers in the field of fashion and branding. Considering clothing, brick and mortar-stores and brand assets in fashion was possible to define some pertinent objectives that will be implemented in order to achieve a further qualitative study. These three possible approaches, brand assets, store environment and product features analysis may allow researchers in the future to understand more clearly the VI consumer, be closer to their preferences, and possibly find new inputs to increase sighted and unsighted consumers experiences, improving their emotional relationship with fashion brands. Within the scope of a qualitative method and through a explorative, explanatory and descriptive analyses (Marshal and Rossman, 1995), it will be possible to reach a phenomenology study and broach VI experiences as they are experienced and described by the VI. So, with a multi-sensory brand-experience methodology conception and the implementation of a sensorial toolkit as an aid to VI individuals' evaluation, hopefully it will be possible to better comprehend their relationship with clothing and brands.

As for the research limitations, unfortunately there was no opportunity to perform a practical study and share the results in this paper, however, it is a consideration and an improvement to be done on further studies. Regarding the earlier stage of this study, it is also a limitation not to be able to mention specific clothing features to apply in the sensorial toolkit. However, the analysis of trends, the search of materials and the contact with suppliers in the field of textile industry were already done.

5. Acknowledgements

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