

Fashion store re-exists: rethinking fashion spaces in the new post-pandemic scene in Brazil

Mariana de Paula Vasconcelos

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Claudio Freitas de Magalhães

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Monica Saboia Saddi

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to rethink physical stores for fashion sales using the VM approach within the context of technological changes and other necessary adaptations imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. This research is characterized as a qualitative, exploratory and descriptive research, based on a systematic literature review and on a field research. The field research instrument for collecting data is a structured questionnaire composed of four open questions answered by ten specialists in fashion retail. The reviewed literature and the field research carried out made it possible to better understand this post pandemic retail scenario and also to start designing what will make sense for the future to come in regard to the physical fashion retail segment. Based on the information collected it was possible to verify that the physical fashion store and VM strategies in a post-pandemic scenario are linked to three axes: phygital, sustainability and retail experience. These three axes made it possible to project scenarios for designing fashion retail stores. They will add value to their products and allow for greater customer loyalty. Thus, fashion brands need to rethink their strategies for sales at the point of sale, highlighting the importance and the challenge imposed on the VM professionals in this new scenario. Consequently, the physical store is no longer a mere place for doing businesses, but a place where consumers and brands connect, having as a focus consumer experience.

Keywords: visual merchandising; fashion retail; Covid-19; innovation; projections.

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Corresponding author's email:
marianadepaulav@hotmail.com

Introduction

Physical stores in retail are relevant in the fashion sector since it is where direct contact between consumers and a brand's product takes place. Due to the great number of brands in the most different fashion segments, it is necessary to try to differentiate oneself from competitors. A way to make it is innovating in the way the product is presented in a store (Machry and Dos Santos, 2013).

Through design projects developed to a point of sale (POS), the physical fashion store becomes a point of contact with their consumers enabling communication with their identity, providing exchange and experiences with their clients. "The design projects for POS allow fashion companies to promote, through a differentiated environment, other services, uses, activities and experiences" (Saddi, 2013, p.219).

In order to create such differentiated environment, POS design projects resort to a strategic tool called visual merchandising (VM). It is a resource used in several areas, among which Design. This way, it is possible to create a specially planned environment in the store. Such atmosphere is related to the design of an environment through its visual communication that uses furniture, lighting, colors, music, and aromas. These elements work together to stimulate consumers' perceptions, influencing their shopping behavior (Levy and Weitz, 2000). Besides that, for being directly related to the atmosphere in the store, VM also influences the experience a consumer has inside the physical store.

The year 2020 was marked by the Covid-19 pandemic and had its first cases identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. Due to its fast spread, it was soon considered a global pandemic. In order to try to repress the spread, several countries decreed lockdown as a safety measure. This way, non-essential retail businesses had to shut down to limit people circulation and thus restrain the spread of the virus so that health systems would not collapse.

Fashion retail was one of the sectors that suffered the most with the opening restrictions. The Covid-19 pandemic boosted the progress of digital fashion retail in response to the necessity of closing physical fashion stores for they are considered non-essential services. This way, considering all the changes caused by the pandemic, this scenario brought the opportunity to rethink physical fashion POS through VM, which is already a resource to the daily and strategic adaptation of retail businesses.

Fashion retail in Brazil is not for beginners. The country is known for its territorial dimension, cultural and climate differences, not to mention the disrupted economic and legal environment for business. These characteristics make retail businesses—fashion in particular—a real challenge and, at the same time, a competitive differential to whoever wants to conduct business in the country.

The objective of this study was to rethink physical fashion stores using the VM approach within the context of the necessary adaptations imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to respond to this objective, a bibliographic review provided the theoretical background to the approach of the theme. Field

research was also carried out as a four-essay-questionnaire which was answered by experienced VM fashion professionals. Their answers were analyzed using the content analysis method (Bardin, 2021; Laville and Dionne, 1996).

The dynamics of retail: innovating, adapting and reinventing

Due to the advances related to technology, changes related to consumer behavior, and socioeconomical issues, retail constantly needs to adopt new strategies in order to remain in the market. Because of all of this, retail is perceived as a highly dynamic and competitive environment, which is constantly adapting and innovating aiming to attract more consumers, better serve them and stand out from their competitors (Miotto and Parente, 2015; Pantano, 2014; Grewal et al., 2017).

Competition among companies stimulates the innovation process among themselves. Such innovations allow the company to have a temporary competitive advantage among their competitors, what can unbalance an already established company. For that not to happen, they need to constantly seek innovation (Kaufmann et al., 2003).

For Pantano (2014), retail innovations are almost always connected to technology, because of the great number of innovations based on it. Technological advances in retail can be beneficial both to consumers and to brands that make use of these technologies. Such new technologies are revolutionizing the consumer experience in the store and can define new expectations about what shopping means in the future (Grewal et al., 2017). Thus, in-store experience brought by fashion brands becomes a relevant factor to be considered by consumers (Vasiliu and Cercel, 2015).

In order to launch innovations in the market, companies need to be in constant contact with consumers. Brands which are more established in the market are the ones ahead of the innovation development, once these innovations meet their consumers' needs (Bower and Christensen, 1995). Such innovations will influence how consumers shop and choose products and services. Besides, they will help consumers make good decisions, feel less pressure, or boost their confidence and satisfaction in decision making. Brands, on the other hand, need to adopt innovations to make consumers feel more engaged and simplify their lives (Grewal et al., 2017).

Consumers are more and more interested in living more involving experiences when shopping. They expect to find entertainment and the tools that enhance the quality of the shopping experience that also make them feel empowered. The possibility to innovate within the POS has been expanded due to technological advances, allowing new sensory experiences that are able to communicate products and brands through innovative and more efficient technological tools (Pantano, 2014).

All things considered, one can conclude that fashion retailers need to be aware of the changes that take place in the market, their consumers' new needs and also innovations in technologies and their clients' sensory experiences.

VM for fashion stores

Consumers' interaction with the product and its exhibition within the point of sale are functions related to VM. According to Balgaonkar et al. (2014), VM is everything the consumer sees outside and inside a store, creating a positive image that enables the consumer's attention, interest, and desire. It is a combination of all sensory elements that are in the environment of the store and are perceived by the consumer. Therefore, a well-executed VM project not only fosters a favorable and memorable environment for the client, but also facilitates the shopping process and makes the store environment stimulating and fun (Bernardino et al., 2004).

Morgan (2018) states that the design of a store and VM are directly related once both create commercial environments which are visually inspiring and attractive. "The store design gathers all the aspects of visual merchandising: windows and interior, installations, furniture, accessories and lighting" (Morgan, 2018, p.32).

Another definition given by Frings (2002) states that VM is the means through which one communicates the fashion message of the store, the value, and the quality to consumers. The author also highlights that besides communicating the brand's image to the consumer, VM presents the product that the store offers and shows the consumer how to use it and how to match it.

All things considered, it is clear that VM is fundamental to fashion brands once it helps create an attractive store atmosphere, exhibits products in a way that they will be valued, and also provides fashion information that the brand wants to convey thus communicating the attitude of the brand. When combining these aspects, VM facilitates the shopping process and influences the consumer's experience. Saddi (2008) complements:

More than exposing products for sale, visual merchandising resorts to symbolic associations and uses design techniques and resources to create a shopping environment that enables the consumer to go over the commonplace shopping habit sphere to transform it into a nice and meaningful event (Saddi, 2008, p.93).

Among the main functions of VM, Parker (2003) states that a good VM is not related to only creating something that is visually attractive. It must allow to tell a story that provides a narrative to each product in the store. "A successful display captures the consumer, enticing them with representation of their dreams, aspirations and desires" (Parker, 2003, p 354). Morgan (2018) reaffirms the attractiveness function of VM when stating that it should make consumers feel interested in going into the store by appreciating the store

window and afterwards the store layout, feeling a positive experience inside the store, making them want to return other times.

Adding to the attractiveness function, Saddi (2008) states that one of the most used ways to attract consumers to inside the store is the shop window. It can make the store stand out and impact consumers in a way they desire to enter the store and eventually do. Besides the shop window, other elements can also be used inside the store to draw attention. Graphic pieces, furniture, decorative elements, colors, aromas, sounds, product combinations, and the store layout are resources that can attract the consumer and single the store out from their competitors (Saddi, 2008).

Besides the attractiveness function, Saddi (2008) comments two more functions related to VM: brand image communication and as a tool to sales. VM communicates fashion, value, and quality to consumers (Frings, 2002). To fashion brands, VM used in shop windows and inside the store not only attracts consumers but also communicates the identity of the brand. Therefore, VM helps create a specific “language” to each fashion brand, enabling the visual presentation of the brand to create exclusiveness to the brand, and their consumers may recognize it just by looking at the VM of the store (Saddi, 2008). The goal of creating identification in the fashion POS through VM is important once it is the “main chain that connects the brand, the consumer, the product and the environment [...]” (Bailey and Baker, 2014, p.10).

The last function explained by Saddi (2008) relates VM as a resource to fashion and sales. The novelties and tendencies that appear in fashion are “taught” through VM, which also facilitates consumption by “suggesting” combinations of products. This way, it provides a better understanding of how to use the brand’s products. Besides, it allows to create strategies in the exhibition of the products which are not well-accepted by consumers. In other words, VM helps fashion brands “[...] integrate the concept and style of the collection developed by the Fashion Design area, with commercial and strategic interest of the Commercial and Marketing departments” (Saddi, 2008, p.98).

Under Sackrider et al. (2009)’s perspective, VM is related to two main purposes: (i) favor the act of shopping, and (ii) affirm the brand’s identity. The first objective is associated to facilitating the client’s journey, allowing them to circulate easily inside the store; increase the legitimacy of the offer, giving the consumer autonomy when shopping; offer a service with the brand image, offering experiences beyond the purchase of the product and translate the notion of quality, presenting the product in a way it is valued and unique. The second objective refers to creating a narrative around the product which turns it into an object of desire and also creates a bond with the brand, standing out among the competitors.

Fashion retailers are more and more investing in design projects in which VM plays the role of experiences “provider”. New environments are created to their POS where all the consumers’ senses are explored. These environments offer experiences that go beyond the purchase using technologies and the availability of other services inside the store.

Prospecting fashion retail

Another important issue to retail in general, fashion retailers in particular, is about planning the future. In our globalized society where companies are inserted, a problem in a country can have consequences in the other side of the globe. Creating strategies becomes a challenge to ensure companies remain in the market (Marcial and Grumbach, 2008). Therefore, in order to reduce uncertainty, it is necessary to study the future. According to Caldas (2004), the more complex society becomes, the more it is necessary to plan and foresee what is about to come. Hence, “[...] the concept of tendency that was generalized in the contemporary society has been built based on ideas of movement, change, representation of the future, evolution [...]” (Caldas, 2004, p. 22).

However, Marcial and Grumbach (2008) believe that there is still a lot of doubt concerning the trustworthiness of studies related to future.

In the beginning of the year 2000, as in other turbulent moments of history, some studies were carried out aiming to demonstrate that the forecast that had been made did not come true. Thus, is it still worth wasting our time studying the future? On the other hand, if our survival depends on the capacity to plan for the future, how would we be without the study of this future? (Marcial and Grumbach, 2008, p.17)

Caldas (2004) reinforces this questioning asking the following: “How can one guarantee, within a productive chain, that investments made along time will have a return, in a market that is apparently run by chaos?” (Caldas, 2004, p.95). Despite the questioning raised by authors Marcial and Grumbach (2008), they still demonstrate the importance of planning the future. Much of the forecast did not come true, however, they were important to humanity. Actually, what they question is if the forecast really did not come true or if by knowing them beforehand, men were able to change the course of history (Marcial and Grumbach, 2008).

For companies, the study of prospective scenarios is considered a strategy to try to minimize risks in environments that are more and more turbulent and uncertain. It is not only about taking a single path, but a plethora of opportunities that can be found.

But what would be the definition of scenario? Caldas (2004, p.210) explains that scenario is a “methodological instrument that allows us to work with anticipation and avoid determinism”. Godet (1987), on the other hand, has a presents comprehensive and academic meaning. According to him, scenario “is the set formed by the description of a future situation and the course of events that enables one to progress

from the original situation to the future situation” (Godet, 1987 apud Marcial and Grumbach, 2008, p.47-48).

Still on the studies of future forecast, Marcial and Grumbach (2008) stand for the following:

Prospective studies do not aim at predicting the future, but at studying several possibilities to plausible existing futures and prepare organizations to face any one of them, or even create conditions to modify their probabilities to occur or minimize their effects. (Marcial and Grumbach, 2008, p.18)

Godet (2006) explains that a scenario is not a future reality, but a way to try to represent it with the intention to shed light to the current action envisaging possible and desirable futures, which corroborate with Marcial and Grumbach (2008)’s vision when they state that:

Scenarios are not predictions about what will happen, but descriptions, based on plausible hypothesis, of what can happen. The premise is that the future is not predetermined and, hence, can be molded by the action of social actors (Marcial and Grumbach, 2008, p. 12).

Glenn (2009), states that, when trying to use methodologies to foresee the future and improve decision making in the present individuals and companies raise their awareness, which improves precision to take actions sooner and quicker. This makes companies more efficient and fast to deal with changes. Anticipation allows us to foresee the threats and opportunities enabling organizational changes. Interest in research about the future is in the opening of ideas to consider new possibilities and change. It is more worth to anticipate new scenarios than just respond to changes when they are already happening. “The faster the rate of change, the further into the future we should explore to make better decisions” (Glenn, 2009, p. 3). One strategy to deal with change that takes place around us is to foresee them and prepare ourselves to what is about to come.

As far as retailing is concerned, one can notice a sector highly subjected to changes and with the Covid-19 pandemic, they have become faster and more comprehensive. For all the forementioned problems caused by the pandemic, one can consider that 2020 was a very challenging year to fashion retailers. Brands had to adapt themselves very quickly to this new reality, especially with regard to their physical fashion POS. So, what to expect from physical fashion retail influenced by the pandemic? As Michel Godet states: “The future is multiple and uncertain” (Godet, 1996 apud Marcial and Grumbach, 2008, p. 22).

From the examples given on adaptations that took place in fashion retail, one can highlight that this segment is dynamic, which suggests the importance to prospect the future to better suit the changes that may occur.

Aiming to answer the objective of the study, an open-ended question questionnaire was developed to be answered by Visual Merchandising specialists. A questionnaire is a data collection instrument constituted by a series of questions that should be answered without the presence of the interviewer (Lakatos and Marconi, 2003).

The sample of the study was intentional non-probabilistic, that is, by specialists who were more easily contacted and who were available to answer the questions. The selection of the participants happened based on the following criteria: undergraduate degree in Architecture, Design (Fashion, Interior, Product or Graphic), Scenography, Visual Communication and Marketing; or have over 4 years' experience in VM in fashion brands; and currently work in a position that demands VM-related functions. A total of 10 (ten) specialists makes up this sample who will have their identities preserved though the codes E1, E2, E3... E10.

The specialists who participated in the research had the following professional profiles:

E1. Undergraduate degree in Architecture and Urbanism, master's in Design. Runs an architecture office that specializes in and focuses on commercial/retail architecture.

E2. Undergraduate degree in Product Design with 13 years' experience in VM. For the past 4 years has held the position of VM Coordinator of two cosmetic and perfume brands of the same company.

E3. 35 years' experience in VM. Currently works in VM for a national shoes and bags brand, with over 150 stores around Brazil.

E4. 31 years' experience in fashion VM. For the past 7 years has worked in the VM area of two female brands of Soma Group, a great group that administrates ten important fashion brands (female, male and children), with brands in the basic and premium segments and over 250 stores throughout Brazil, also present abroad.

E5. Undergraduate degree in Communication, 13 years' experience in Internal Communication and Visual Merchandising. Currently works for a department store brand with over 600 stores spread throughout Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay.

E6. Undergraduate degree in Interior Design, with courses in VM for fashion retail and fashion Marketing and Communication. Currently works in VM for a department store fashion brand with 340 stores around Brazil.

E7. Has worked in the field for 10 years. Currently holds the position of Visual Communication Manager of a fashion brand belonging to the same group as E4's.

E8. Has a certificate in clothes modeling and fashion, with 4 years' experience in VM. Currently works in VM for a female fashion brand of Valdac Global Brands group, with over 130 stores throughout the country.

E9. Undergraduate degree in Communications and MBA degree in retail. Currently works in Marketing and Personnel for a company that specializes in VM retail which develops projects and services for brands.

E10. Undergraduate degree in Architecture and Urbanism, and Interior Design, and a master's degree in Retail Design. Currently works as a retail designer for a luxury fashion and beauty brand, with over 100 stores spread around the world. Owns a company that develops retail design projects, visual merchandising, strategic marketing, among others.

The questionnaire script with four questions is as follows:

The digitalization of retail and the Covid-19 pandemic have raised the possibility and the necessity to reflect upon what to expect from a physical fashion store. Taking that into account, answer the questions below:

1. Which functions will this physical store perform?
2. What is the importance of VM to the physical fashion store in this new scenario?
3. How has the digital environment changed the way physical stores are perceived by consumers?
4. What will the relation of fashion consumers and physical stores be like in the future?

The answers to the specialists' questionnaires were analyzed using the content analysis technique. According to Bardin (2011), content analysis is a methodological tool that can be applied in several types of discourse. Laville and Dionne (1999) add that it is necessary to identify and select what is essential in what one is analyzing. Content analysis consists of "dismantling the structure and the elements of such content in order to clarify its different characteristics and extract its meaning" (Laville and Dionne, 1999, p. 201). For that sake, according to Bardin (2011), this method follows 3 different steps: pre-analysis, material exploration, and treatment of results, inference and interpretation.

Pre-analysis: this stage aims at organization itself. This stage typically has 3 objectives: the choice of the material that will be analyzed, hypothesis and objectives development, and the development of indicators that support the final interpretation.

Material exploration: it is a long and tiresome stage and consists of coding operations, discounts, or enumeration, in response to previously formulated rules.

The treatment of results and interpretation: in this last stage, results are treated with the purpose of being meaningful and valid. Simple or complex statistical operations are used in order to establish the results of the research.

Based on what has been described of content analysis, the exploration of the material took place in three stages:

Pre-Analysis

In this stage, documents to be analyzed were organized. Interview transcriptions were done and, afterwards, this material and the answers to the questionnaires were read. From this reading, a selection of what would be analyzed was done. The relevant data to the research was selected and copied in a separated document. The rest was disregarded. In order to maintain respondents' anonymity, each one of them received a distinct identification (EA to EJ).

Material exploration

All the relevant information collected in the previous stage received the name registry units. They are the parts of the material that will be used for analysis. They are the relevant information taken from the document. Context units have also been created; they are categories created to facilitate understanding and easily group the registry units. The choice of what part of the material would compose each registry unit was made through divisions that made sense to each context unit created.

Treatment of Results and Interpretation

The conclusions of the analyzed material were drawn through the interactive construction of the explanation in which it is developed "[...] little by little a logical explanation of the phenomenon or the situation under research, examining the units of meaning, the interrelations between these units and the categories in which they are together" (Laville and Dionne, 1999, p.227) and will be described in the next topic.

Rethinking fashion retail: check out

From the analysis of the collected material, it was possible to verify that the physical fashion retailer's strategies and VM in a post-pandemic scene are connected to three axes: phygital, sustainability and retail experience. These three axes are explained below:

Phygital

Technology has changed the way we relate to one another, communicate and shop. New demands arise, making way to new behaviors that need constant adaptation in the way one offers products and services. The digitalization of retail was already an ongoing process but was greatly boosted in a short time

by the pandemic. In this period, retail has become dependent on online transactions once the stores were closed. Soon, the digitalization process must become a priority to fashion retailers.

The expression *Phygital* is a portmanteau word coined from a combination of the words *physical* and *digital* meaning the fusion of the physical and the digital worlds and is becoming more and more frequent in retail nowadays. These two worlds come together to offer the best they have, more points of contact to their consumers, and improve their shopping experience.

“Now, every strategy created for retail should consider these two worlds for the consumer. Brands and stores which are not omnichannel (are both in physical and digital channels) will not survive from now on. It is necessary to be present in all the contact channels with the consumer (physical + digital)” (E10)

To consumers, there is no longer a difference between these two channels, for they are part of the same process. They want an integrated experience, in which physical and digital are only one. *“The consumer won’t have this difference; they will only choose the channel through which they will purchase the product [...]”* (E5). The connection between these two worlds offers a better coexistence, comfort, freedom, and autonomy, enhancing the shopping experience. *“Every digital acceleration process brings about the adoption of a new mindset aiming towards autonomy, convenience, practicality, agility and experience—elements that are present in our digital realities [...]”* (E9).

With the pandemic, online practices have gained force and consolidated in the consumer’s shopping routine. It is their decision now to choose which channel to use, according to their needs. For that to happen, the brand should offer these two environments and they need to be integrated. *“The consumer does not see a division between online and offline, the focus should be projected in the experience that these two universes deliver in an integrated way (E9)”*. There is not a channel better than the other. They both work well together; each one can boost and support one another. *“[...] it’s more and more a joint work. The digital with the physical. One works in favor of the other”* (E2).

What one can see today is digital retail being used by consumers as the best channel to evaluate and compare prices between products. However, even with the growth of online practices, the physical store becomes the main channel chosen by consumers to carry out the purchase, for it is a way to check the product and have immediate delivery. *“The client comes to a store nowadays having already researched the online shop and goes to the store only to buy what they want, for a convenience of maybe not paying for shipping, or maybe being able to try it on, touch the fabric, give a last check up in the product”* (E1).

Sustainability

The Covid-19 pandemic triggered changes in consumer behavior, who became more interested in sustainable practices. This new consumer started caring more about issues related to the sustainability of

the services and products they consume. In other words, there is a growing perception of the impact of their choices, of how they consume and the consequences to society as a whole. *“The consumer becomes more aware of their shopping, only shops if it’s necessary or if the store evokes desire in that particular product” (E8)*. Therefore, they look for brands that have *“incentives also in terms of sustainability” (E2)*.

In this context, brands started paying more attention and giving more visibility to sustainable practices, from the production of their product to the place where it is offered. *“Another point is that we’re going to stop producing waste. It makes no sense to produce waste with decor” (E3)* in shop windows. What was before seen as a differential to a brand, started being considered essential, having become an indispensable value and part of their lifestyle. Now it is paramount that brands communicate what they are doing about this theme, reassuring consumers, and gaining their loyalty in their products and services.

The consumer seems to be willing to change their behavior towards products, services and brands that prove they make a positive impact on society and the environment.

Retail Experience

With the intensification of online businesses, a lot has been questioned about what would actually happen to physical retail. Some said physical stores had their days numbered. The truth is that physical retail is not ending but going through meaningful changes.

“I think physical stores will definitely keep existing, but it will not be only a physical store to sell products. I believe physical stores will be a space of the old so-called experience. I think the main challenge today is to try to really understand what this experience that we have to create to our customers is like” (E4).

Physical stores cannot be a place to only display products. *“The store loses its relevance as a commercial transaction and takes on a new role to the brand” (E1)*. The brands should use their physical space as a medium to get closer to their consumers. *“Physical stores will grow as a space to offer experiences, socialization, interaction and dialog involving brands, the communities where they belong to, and the purposes that make them move and connect to consumers” (E9)*.

Within this context, the function of VM gains power for it is the necessary tool to offer consumers a new experience to the product and the brand.

“So, the shopping experience... It is very important. And what is the shopping experience? The shopping experience is the architecture of your store. The shopping experience is the way your product is displayed. The shopping experience is the song that is playing and it’s the way you are assisted. All that... The shopping experience is whether your product is worth what it says it is, that is the shopping experience” (E3).

VM is responsible for the creation of a store atmosphere that is capable of establishing an emotional connection between consumers and the brand. *“VM, as a fundamental element in the construction of immersive store atmospheres, becomes a tool to humanize the brand” (E9).*

Physical stores must focus on something virtual stores still cannot offer consumers, becoming a space for the consumer to immerse in the brand’s universe, a place where they can interact with the product and get involved with the brand, without necessarily buying the product. *“They will visit the stores to live experiences and connect with the lifestyle of the brand (buying something will be a consequence of it)” (E10).* This experience offered by the physical store will be considered a differentiation factor among brands. Physical spaces should offer something that goes beyond the mere display of products. *“It will not be just exhibitors of products as before but a provider of memorable experiences to the consumer” (E10).*

“For those brands that knew how to explore the potential of the physical environment, as a space of emotional connection between consumers and brands, fashion stores tend to become a way to blow some steam, a space of freedom and discoveries, of expression and experience, an environment capable of fostering and becoming the stage of great social transformations!” (E9).

Projections for Physical Retail Fashion Stores

Based on the answers of the field research, specialists pointed to a shift of the purpose of physical retail fashion stores. The three axes raised made it possible to show projections of some points we believe will be even more present in a physical retail fashion store. These points have been assembled and are presented as follows.

New layouts and points

As physical stores lose their exclusively transactional function and do not have to keep all the stock in the store, there is the opportunity to create new retail store formats, new points of contact with consumers, and offer new ways of experience. Louis Vuitton has introduced a new selling format, LV By Appointment, in which mobile stores are sent to their customers’ homes with exclusively selected products (Figure 1). Another example is perfume brand Miller Harris which created the Ice Cream Van to celebrate the launch of their new fragrances, touring the United Kingdom (Figure 2).

Figure 1 - LV By Appointment



Source: <https://robbreport.com/style/fashion/louis-vuitton-will-now-bring-a-truckload-of-its-merchandise-right-to-your-doorstep-1234597173/>. Access on 29th May 2021.

Figure 2 - Ice Cream Van



Source: https://cosmeticsbusiness.com/news/article_page/Miller_Harris_appeals_to_sweet_toothed_consumers_with_Ice_Cream_Van_UK_tour/157588. Access on 29th May 2021.

Storytelling

Everybody tells stories. Creating narratives in the store is a way to try to involve the consumer with the brand. Thus, as a resource of the fashion brand's media, the store becomes the stage to the creation and development of this narrative, through an experience that involves all the senses. To celebrate the Louis Vuitton and NBA collab, part of their shop in Japan was transformed inspired by sport and streetwear. The environment of the store was projected keeping this theme in mind, showing the consumer the partnership between the two brands (Figure 3).

Figure 3 - Louis Vuitton and NBA



Source: <https://superfuture.com/2021/05/new-shops/tokyo-louis-vuitton-x-nba-pop-up-store/> Access on 29th May 2021.

Localism

It is necessary to keep the essence of the brand inside the store, but their stores can be adapted according to the place where they are. Thus, they must be aware of the local causes and also shape their stores according to customers' specific needs in each region. Nike Unite tries to create new experiences through the community where they are. The design elements in the store establish connections with the neighborhood (Figure 4). When Australian beauty products brand Aesop decided to open a store in São Paulo, it had its design done by the Campana brothers and *cobogó* (a tile with typically Brazilian design) as an inspiration (Figure 5).

Figure 4 Nike Unite



Source: <https://news.nike.com/news/nike-unite-retail-concept>. Access on 29th May 2021.

Figure 5 - Aesop São Paulo

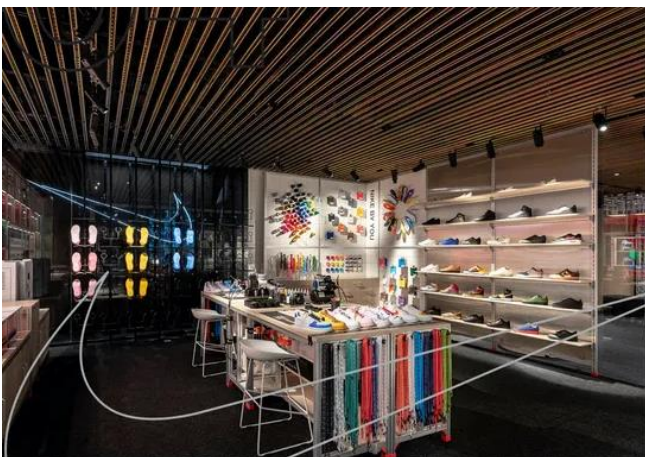


Source: <https://casa.abril.com.br/profissionais/irmaos-campana-projetam-nova-loja-da-aesop-em-sao-paulo> Access on 29th May 2021.

Personalization

Personalization allows products and services to be offered in an exclusive way. This process is valued by consumers who always look for uniqueness, and thus fostering a greater connection with the brand. Nike has an area in some of their stores called *Nike by You*, where clients can personalize their products however they want (Figure 6).

Figure 6 - *Nike By You*



Source: <https://www.nike.com/house-of-innovation>. Access on 29th May 2021.

Sustainability

Sustainability is no longer a differential and has become indispensable to brands. Consumers are no longer passive and start demanding brands to show what they do to take care of the environment. This issue

is not restricted to the product itself and extends to the physical store. This way, the brand's physical space brings about the opportunity to foster a more sustainable environment and also offer experiences that are relevant to the theme. Ace & Tate, a glasses brand, reused plastic materials found on the streets and brought them to the interior design of their store in Antwerp (Figure 7).

Figure 7 - Ace & Tate



Source: <https://www.creativereview.co.uk/ace-and-tate-sustainable-retail/> Access on 29th May 2021.

Sensory technologies

Going hand in hand with the physical space, technology is being used with the purpose of facilitating the shopping process and also help brands offer their products in a more innovative way. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, these technologies can also make consumers more at ease when visiting a fashion store. Tokyo H&M offered their clients the experience of customizing products using augmented reality technology in the launch of their Star Wars collection (Figure 8).

Figure 8 - H&M Tokyo



Source: <https://magic-leap.reality.news/news/magic-leap-used-bring-ar-h-m-star-wars-fashion-collaboration-tokyo-developed-by-warpin-media-0216705/> Access on 29th May 2021.

Omnichannel

Shopping opportunities are endless nowadays. One can buy anything anywhere. Therefore, the fusion of different retail platforms tends to become more frequent. Online and offline join forces to offer the best of both worlds, providing more points of contact with their consumers and an integrated experience. Los Angeles Nike store has a space dedicated to clients who are registered in the brand's application to buy online, try products on, and pick them up in the store (Figure 9).

Figure 9 - Nike omnichannel



Source: <https://news.nike.com/news/nike-by-melrose-store-los-angeles> Access on 29th May 2021.

Conclusion

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, 2020 was a year that forced everyone to live new experiences. It was the year that changed the way we lived, worked, shopped, and had fun. The field research described in this study showed that the retail digitalization process which had been happening was accelerated by the pandemic. Besides, the Covid-19 pandemic made brands rethink the purpose of their physical stores. The study also showed that physical fashion stores are still relevant in this scenario. However, they are (and will be) going through significant changes. Thus, now more than ever, brands need to rethink their POS strategies.

Therefore, one can notice a new role for the physical fashion store. Taking the specialists' words, what one should expect to see in the forthcoming years is a change of approach of the physical store leaning

towards experiences. Physical stores are no longer a place where transitions take place; they have become a place where one can get involved, interact, and socialize with the brand. Shopping in the store becomes a consequence of that, not a priority in the POS. This offers an opportunity to create multisensory experiences between client and brand.

The scenario that is more likely to happen—and is already happening—is the combination of these two worlds, namely virtual and physical. Brands offering more convenient solutions when integrating these two means. Contactless payment, online shopping, store pick up, online shopping combined with physical store return, or even physical store shopping and home delivery are some of the possibilities today. It is important to highlight that consumers purchase the brand, not the channel where they are. This way, they expect the brand to deliver a meaningful experience, regardless of the means chosen.

Because of online shopping, the size of a physical store must be revised. A sales area is no longer necessary to present all the products of the brand, for this area is not directly related to product display anymore and also because the products can be found in the store's online environment. Thus, the physical store has an additional value that goes beyond the product and works as a point of contact. It is no longer seen as place of product distribution and starts to be seen as a media channel. A platform that will enable experiences which are not available online.

We cannot overlook the social aspect related to fashion physical stores. The pandemic made it even more evident how sociable we are and how much we need human interaction. As everything becomes more digital, we long for more socialization. Technology still cannot substitute touch and human interaction. In-person shopping allows customers to socialize and have a more involving experience than the one offered by an online platform.

All the changes and challenges faced by fashion retail makes it more evident that the VM professional in this area is important, once they are responsible for developing and creating the involving atmosphere in the store that is so necessary nowadays.

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