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Centenary haberdashery in downtown Lisbon

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Abstract

This study begins with a survey on the conditions of traditional haberdashery business in downtown Lisbon, includes a study of the retail trade, analysis of the retro marketing concept and finally investigates the sustainability of consumption. It aims to propose marketing and design strategies that can help revitalize the economic value of haberdashery and remove these businesses from the dangers of obsolescence and anonymity. Having understood the importance of communication with the consumer, through interviews, selecting a qualitative methodology and aligning this understanding with some theoretical concepts, we adopted a set of proposals for the creation of a new identity. For each haberdashery, a new identity was defined, as well as a broad one that encompasses all stores present in this study – RETRÓS. These proposals seek to redefine traditional values by means of orientation and communication support, aiming not only to attract new target audiences, but also to consider creation of a new aesthetic and imagery that should not be disassociated from these brands nor be outdated. With the adoption of this creative strategy, some positive effect is expected on the relevance of haberdashery business, its financial impact and integration in the economic-cultural context that will give new life to Rua da Conceição haberdashery historical shops and their brands.

Keywords: Retro marketing, Sustainability, Innovation, Historical Shops, Haberdasher

Introduction

Reconfiguration of the traditional haberdashery business

Over the last few years, commerce has undergone profound changes, accompanied in parallel by changes in consumer behaviour, adapting and simultaneously demanding new responses from producers and distributors. Consumers began this behaviour in a more intense and constant way due to the mass consumerism that is now inherent to life in the 21st century. These sharp and rapid changes resulted in the rapid obsolescence of some business models, which is why some retail trade that is more traditional and poorly articulated with the evolution of consumption, has become outdated, despite the resilience registered in various sectors.

Rousseau (2017) states that “throughout this century, the face of commerce has changed more than during the previous two millennia” (pp. 10–11). In the second half of the 20th century, a consumption logic was adopted, whose evolution was very fast and intense, bringing new consumption dynamics, but also other standards of consumer demand. It should be noted that the pace imposed today, mainly in urban areas, changes the entire behaviour

that the consumer has towards commerce – by looking for more convenience in consumption and seeking the lowest prices. As products are increasingly accessible and prices tend to be lower, largely due to mass distribution, small and traditional commerce outlets find themselves forced to reinvent and differentiate themselves in the face of this constraint.

When a consumer product fails to work as intended, the consumer quickly replaces it with another instead of repairing it. Replacement is cheaper, less time-consuming and often less costly. For this reason, retail stores with more limited supply or with products that are not ready to consume such as haberdashery, become less frequented by clients, due to the disappearance or at least scarcity of some professions that had regular customers, such as dressmakers. Being less frequented, the businesses break down and their livelihood is threatened. It is at this stage that these spaces are confronted with the need to reassess their business model, as not doing so would only mean financial decline.

Haberdashery outlets are, according to Porto Editora's dictionary, "haberdashery shops"; they are "sellers of retrós, railings [trimmings], articles made of silk thread, etc." (<https://dicionario.priberam.org/retroseiro>). Nowadays, it is almost unrealistic to think that the average consumer goes to a haberdashery to buy tools for themselves or someone else to repair or make a piece of clothing from scratch. The typical 21st-century consumer buys something that is replaced when it no longer is in good condition and without consuming a lot of resources. This is the general picture of the thinking of today's consumers. For this reason, it is urgent that some businesses, although resilient in their present condition, be rethought so that they survive the new challenges of the 21st century. With this concern, this project emerged to present strategies, objectives and goals for five haberdashers located in Rua da Conceição, in the heart of Lisbon.

Based on the above idea, this study intends to define a marketing and commercial design strategy for the five stores. It is hoped that this project will contribute to giving back to these businesses a more stable financial situation due to innovative methods and practices, starting with a diagnostic phase based on the characterization of the business units and ending with an intervention plan aimed at redefining the business and its commercial strategies. This work has as its main objective to restore the vitality that haberdashery once had within the retail market and promote the adoption of strategies intended for a better business future. It is also hoped that the path outlined will reveal some relevance for today's consumers and enhance the reputation of the business units in their context. It is intended that these stores, as a niche in the retail market, become once again a shopping reference and regain their relevance. And, although this reappearance is conditioned by using different strategies from those that are currently prevailing, they gain relevance in the Lisbon retail market.



Image 1: The five haberdashery shops' signs: Bijou, Alexandre Bento, Adriano Coelho, Arqui Chique and Nardo (clockwise from top).

Research question

According to Creswell (2010), it is important to formulate the questions and hypotheses that lead to an investigation. Punch (1998) argues that a hypothesis is defined by anticipation, as it equates the results with the research problem. Creswell (2003) adds that hypotheses are normally used when one wants to compare two scenarios. Due to the nature and the way this investigation is intended to be focused, the research questions objectively guide the project's implementation.

The opening question marks the start of the investigation: Can marketing and communication design contribute to the revitalization and redesign of the traditional haberdashery businesses in downtown Lisbon?

Following this, operational questions were also formulated in a second phase, aiming to complement and enrich the opening question:

1. How can a traditional business become sustainable and adjust to current socioeconomic and cultural constraints?
2. How can the identity of a traditional business be maintained to make it economically viable?

Commerce as a source of identity

The exploration phase explains the historical and social development of cities and the economic activities of commerce, proceeding to a reflection on their interactions and dependencies, namely in the traditional commerce of downtown Lisbon. The emergence of these business spaces and their evolution is explored, thus creating an information network where all matters explored help to structure solutions to this investigation's problem/object. This analysis would not be fully complete if currently pertinent and frequently debated themes were absent – amongst them, the market concept of *saudade*, nostalgia, the curatorship of commercial space, the sphere of the commercial and cultural world and the paradigm shift of consumption and other strategies for more conscious consumption.

In this subchapter, the main academic works for this investigation are the book by Rousseau (2017), "Resiliência do comércio: As lojas centenárias de Lisboa", the work of Lisbon City Council (Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, n.d.), "Lojas com história", the work "Retromarketing - Old is wow!" by Cruz (2013) and the work of Herculano (2001), "O comércio retalhista Português: Pós-modernidade, consumidores e espaço".

Methodology

In the first stage of outlining the methodology, it was defined that methods of a qualitative nature based on an exploratory study of an inductive nature are privileged. Specifically, in this project, and because the entire historical framework gave us a vision of the past, to understand the present and project the future, it was necessary to find a set of strategies that would allow a deep understanding of the reality on which it plans to intervene. For this reason, the answers to the initial questions were sought through field research, where the formulated question or problem is experienced.

This direct collection was chosen since it is believed that the answers are precisely in the field, obtained through an interview survey, from the various haberdasheries subjected to research.

These interviewed parties are the faces of haberdashery under study, the ones who have been dealing daily and for several decades with these business changes. They are privileged witnesses, who transmitted through their experience and position in the business, the best inputs on the area. The interviews were carried out in the stores of the five respondents to have the possibility through observation of visualizing the environment to which those involved in the interviews are subject (Image 1). After analysing each interview individually, a general assessment of all interviews was carried out. In this way, it was possible to find contrasts or points in common, resulting in the best insights for the project's construction.

Although the interviewees, in general, show discontent and pessimism regarding the adversities of the business, they do not seem to consider other strategies or objectives to solve the problems they identify. For example, regarding graphic identity and communication actions, it is noted that haberdashery, as it was not necessary for many years, never thought of this subject as being extremely important for the dissemination or constitution of their brand reputation. Now that the main consumers, the fashion designers, have disappeared, it is urgent to project the future not only based on sales in the store's physical space. Having been faced with this issue, which plays an important role in this project, they state that they cannot do so, as they do not have the experience, resources or knowledge of how to proceed. Everything that is part of the rules and procedures is traditionalist with little innovative character, almost unalterable from what was done in the year in which the different haberdasheries opened. The way communication is handled is no exception. The values also do not reflect a concern to keep up with the needs of consumers in current times, being limited mainly to quality and customer service, which, despite being important, should not be the only ones.

These were the common points, which were found to be the most pertinent and where the greatest opportunity for transformation and change resides.

- First, most of those responsible for haberdashery show pessimism and discontent with the situation their businesses are going through now but do not consider any strategy or objectives to overcome them. Many can identify where the problem lies, but they cannot formulate an answer to overcome it.
- They do not recognize the importance of communication, marketing or graphic identity strategies. For many years, dressmakers were the main target for this business, relying only on the store's good reputation. Everyone knew that on that street you could find many haberdashers. However, now that it is an almost extinct profession, it becomes urgent to attract new clients and define a communication strategy. With this factor, it is also important that brands have an identity so that they are identified and consistent in the way they present themselves. They understand that this may be important for the business, but they lack resources or capabilities.
- The existing marketing rules and procedures are traditional and not very innovative. They have been the same almost since the beginning of the century. The business continues to revolve around customer service in the sales area, which, despite being very valuable, cannot be sustained in this way.
- Service to the public and product quality are the values these stores find important. A change in the strategy of these stores must, above all, start with the constitution of their base values.

REPARO-TE

This project is structured to define an important proposal that considers adding value to the haberdashery business in Rua da Conceição, aiming above all to practically answer the introductory question: Can marketing and communication design contribute to the revitalization and reconception of traditional haberdashery business in downtown Lisbon?

After a descriptive phase in which some weaknesses were identified, such as the absence of a graphic identity, communication and advertising, marketing techniques, values and mission, a strategy and some actions are proposed to help remedy some weaknesses and gain business viability.

As a starting point, brand identities were developed, seeking to articulate and balance the traditional form with contemporary communication. Having this confrontation between maintaining a traditional business, which has its heritage, with the new demands of a captivating and modern presentation, this project focuses on the search for harmony between these two different poles. The new graphic identity tries to be representative of what these stores once were and their current and future vision. In this way, five identities corresponding to haberdashery were created: *Bijou*, *Alexandre Bento*, *Arqui Chique*, *Adriano Coelho* and *Nardo*, and one more brand, which brings them together as a group. The name is RETRÓS, and its mission is to represent these five stores as well as their common ground (Fig. 1).

The second step carried out in this project responds to the need to develop a communication and marketing strategy. The means and platforms that best suit the brand and the new target identified were defined. In addition, the motto and values that are intended to communicate

and adapt to the guidelines and values of sustainability were created to communicate the RETRÓS brand. This brand represents the collective of all five haberdashery stores involved in this project. It is a question of changing the perspective towards which these stores are directed and orient them towards being places of knowledge supply and materials for textile repair. This is an opportunity to adapt these businesses to the value of sustainability and act as a hinge for good practices. In the end, it is hoped that haberdashery can reach a safer position in the market, no longer be an obsolete business, start having a relevant and prominent position and contribute to the sociocultural spectrum of the city of Lisbon.

To guide the way forward, explanatory objectives were defined. To make them more concrete and specific, the objectives were divided into marketing, financial and sociocultural objectives.

Marketing objectives:

- Build loyalty with existing consumers
- Increase brand visibility through the media
- Expand the target audience to a younger audience
- Increase consumer involvement with the brand mission and values
- Build a solid image that represents the brand

Financial goals:

- Increase sales volume
- Increase the profit margin
- Make store visits convert into more sales

Sociocultural goals:

- Go beyond the cultural and commercial universe to become a reference in downtown Lisbon
- Promote sustainable consumption behaviour through products and repair services
- Appeal to new conscious consumption for more sustainable practices
- Bring people with a common interest in sewing together to share ideas and knowledge
- Call for more sustainable behaviours through upcycling, which according to the Cambridge Online Dictionary (n.d.) means “the activity of making new furniture, objects, etc. out of old or used things or waste material”
- Promote practical skills in clothing repair

The communication lure, towards which all stores must be directed, should be based on the textile industry’s sustainability. The promotion of a circular economy becomes the most important value to communicate. Hence, within the RETRÓS group, REPARO-TE was born, a service that promotes the circular economy of textile objects through sharing sessions. It is intended that the stores are perceived as centres for the promotion of more conscious consumption, as they can find the knowledge and materials to do so. These stores defend quality as one of the most important values they consider in their products, coinciding with one of the main values of slow fashion.

Business is sustained and directs its conduct, communication and the continuity of a solid and trustworthy relationship with consumers through brand values. The way consumers perceive the brand will certainly be influenced by the values transmitted to them. For this and any rebranding, values that give the brand a skeleton must also be rethought. The base pillars of this brand are the five values of sustainability, quality, service, community participation and search for innovation based on tradition and history.

The competition was identified and the target consumer characterized as one who does not just look at function and aesthetics. Consumers have a series of requirements that often involve ethical behaviour. Consumers with ethical concerns related to sustainability who seek to deepen their knowledge of sewing and upcycling are considered the target audience. We are mainly looking for a young/adult target audience between 23 and 45 years. Based on the structural issues for the RETRÓS brand and the individual haberdasheries, the concept to be followed in the communication campaign was identified, as follows:

- **Rationale:** A growing number of consumers are increasingly looking for ways to adjust their consumption to more sustainable ways and practices, such as maintaining and preserving their clothes for as long as possible. The path to achieving this is still hampered and conditioned by the lack of knowledge of where to find the necessary tools and knowledge in one place.
- **Insight:** Stores that survive are like a piece of clothing that is very dear and that the owner seeks to preserve and make it last. It takes persistence, care and some 'patching'. These haberdasheries, which persisted over the years, now help to repair something that is also treasured by consumers, such as clothing. Haberdashery history gives colour and meaning to patches and seams.
- **Promise:** Facilitate the provision of training or materials for repairing and preserving textiles. Sustainability and the pieces that are dear to consumers are also important for those who visit the store, which is the justification for this pledge.
- **Campaign concept/signature:** Patching is creating.

During the interviews with those responsible for each store, it was verified that communication or visual identity was never given much importance as a way of boosting the business. This compromises the memorization of the brand and its credibility. Communication without this becomes fragile and inconsistent for the consumer. For this reason, an identity was created for each haberdashery and for the group that aggregates them, as well as a manual of good practices, to guide the brand's implementation. Even though the identities are all different, we sought to check common aspects that would make it seem that all brands come from a common visual style and that they all belong to the same core. In addition to the logos sharing the same graphics, there was a concern to preserve some aspects that are still part of the brands, such as the lettering on each store's façade. This element, which is part of

the logo, was linked by a symbol that represents of a characteristic haberdashery object (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: The graphic identity of RETRÓS and the Alexandre Bento, Adriano Coelho, Nardo, Arqui Chique and Bijou haberdasheries (L–R) represent what this business is all about.

As for the graphic identity of RETRÓS, it was chosen because it embodies the core word that names the businesses represented and refers to what they still sell. ‘Retro’ is also the beginning of the word ‘retrospective’, which means looking back, paralleling the antiquity of this business supported by traditional foundations. From this, the intention is to create an identity with a view to the future. Concretely in the symbol, each haberdashery is represented by two retrós threads and a colour. Each thread is an indispensable part of building something. Together, they can give a body to a unit, like a fabric.

Since the fashion industry is one of the most polluting, sustainability was defined as a primary value for the brand, and a service was created shared by all the haberdasheries involved. These are sessions for the practice and dissemination of knowledge about upcycling. It is not enough to offer the sale of materials; it is also necessary to share knowledge. These sessions, which are intended to bring together interested parties with issues related to sustainability seek to deepen knowledge of sewing and upcycling, and the repair of textile objects or creating objects from waste is proposed. The sessions will be held alternately in each store involved with three agents responsible for each session: a store employee, a designer and two seamstresses or experts in this area. The presence of all these agents is essential for the proper functioning of these REPARO-TE sessions (Figs. 2 & 3).



Figure 2: Graphic identity of the REPARO-TE programme.

Although it is a social and environmental project, there is also the purpose that products are sold and that sales increase. The intention is to help sell old stock and for new consumers to start visiting these stores. With this new insight associated with ecological practices, we want this new consumer to look to haberdashery stores as tool stores, where they can find the necessary materials to give a new opportunity to their textile pieces through textile upcycling. In this way, after registration is paid, a bag and consumable materials will be made available.

These sessions are very important, as they reinforce the value that the RETRÓS brand intends to pursue. Although a large financial return to each store is not envisaged, this service is part of the strategy to communicate the importance that sustainability asserts for the brand. Because we believe that REPARO-TE is an important service and that it promotes the brand, a communication strategy has been created to communicate this service. The dissemination will include cultural agenda platforms, online platforms of stores with a history, RETRÓS social networks, the RETRÓS website and a collaborative network of associations or entities that promote similar services and with the same mission. All disclosures must be made on the RETRÓS brand website, which will contain more information and direct access for registration.



Figure 3: Information brochure about the REPARO-TE programme.

A good name, as the respondents said, is no longer sufficient for effective communication. As this area is forgotten, and as it was confirmed as an important field, a communication strategy focusing on the means that are more permeable to the target audience was planned. Thus, digital media was the chosen channel, including the RETRÓS website, but mainly focusing on social networks like Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, each with a purpose and a mission. The YouTube channel should work as an extension of the REPARO-TE programme and the brand's main value, namely sustainability. The website has a more institutional and

informative function and should contain information about the brand and the haberdasheries as well as enabling the registration and scheduling of the REPARO-TE sessions.

Conclusion

The contributions that can be made to equate the current state of the units/businesses with history and identity in themselves entail several challenges. The first is to have a comprehensive research objective and, although in a state of decline, it is the traditional haberdashery outlets of downtown Lisbon. Conversely, this study also considers the enormous challenge of reflecting, researching, analysing, creating and proposing hypotheses to keep alive, dynamic and successful, the businesses of the few existing haberdasheries on Rua da Conceição.

In summary, an environment of instability and despondency, closely linked to the past, could be detected in the stores in this study. In recent years, several stores have closed, and those that survive express fear for their future because they think their business has become obsolete. These stores have little relevance to society and do not present great value to consumers, and except for a small niche, demand has been decreasing. Despite the interviewed subjects showing discontent and pessimism in the face of business adversities and seeming unable to find solutions, they are faithful to defending the businesses' interests and relevance. They do not seem to consider a strategy or goals to address the problems they identify with; their financial condition has deteriorated, their preferred audiences of dressmakers have disappeared. Strategies, knowledge and means to attract potential customers are lacking. They do not consider the need to create a visual identity or develop communication actions to add value to the business beyond sales in the store's physical space. In general, they do not reveal any concern with keeping up with new business models or being more active on this front.

This leads to an extreme need to rethink the business and add value and relevance based on innovation. The entire project component in this work was based on this objective and developments were initially thought of in the context of retro marketing. The most interesting option, but also the most challenging, was to follow the path of sustainability and new business values, as well as a way of interacting with markets and (re)conceptualizing the business model. There is a type of consumer who is interested in issues related to the environment and ethical behaviour, who seeks to repair their clothes or try to make the most of their potential. In the search for competition, it is concluded that there is a market for this project (REPARO-TE) that is sensitive to these issues. This was verified through informal conversations and the frequency of meetings organized by relevant stakeholders.

One objective considered in this project was to reach some answers and these were found. A business, despite trying to stay true to its principles and focuses, must also try to understand the social environment and what its needs are. Without these, stores are losing focus, function and identity. A new strategy, business concept and ways of communicating were designed. Values such as sustainability gave rise to the REPARO-TE project. The strategy first went through an analysis of business objectives, value and analysis of the competition, realizing how important it was to create a new image for the brand(s) – individually and together.

Considering the importance of the visual image, work followed to define this image, as an expression of identity – RETRÓS, and of each business unit. A fusion between traditional and current was intended as an element of communication.

To the question raised at the beginning of this study, i.e. whether marketing and communication design can contribute to the revitalization and redesign of traditional haberdashery business in downtown Lisbon, it is considered that marketing and communication design can effectively contribute to this. That said, some of the actions and pieces created for this purpose are evidenced in the proposal, considering that a traditional business can be redefined, becoming sustainable and adjusting to consumer trends and market demands, and it is still possible that with this innovation, its identity and traditional business traits are maintained.

Study limitations and recommendations for future research

The qualitative method adopted allowed the collection of in-depth information from field agents who have been in the haberdashery business for decades, since the information that exists about this business in Portugal is very limited. This lack of information constitutes the greatest limitation in this study. The sample is also a problem, since of the agents interviewed, now only four haberdashery owners in Rua da Conceição remain.

For this reason, and because the knowledge of this business has tended to be passed on orally over generations, it is feared that some relevant information may have been lost over time. As there are not many studies on this topic, the information described in this project, supported by the interviews, may not be the most reliable, even though there are not many more actors or sources.

The conclusions reached cannot be extrapolated to other spheres of traditional business. For future works/projects, it is proposed that the approach to this type of case be carried out in a more integrated way in a network involving other stakeholders. During the realization of this project, the need emerged to speak with other social actors, namely the identified direct competition. It should be a more in-depth study, involving, for example, suppliers, customers, official bodies and the Municipality of Lisbon, to obtain a multidimensional view of the same issue. For example, in the business itself, it must be possible to identify the strengths and weaknesses more deeply to try to establish a network of opportunities for each entity involved.

In addition, it is possible to plan and integrate the promotion actions in tourist actions, circuits and activities by integrating visits to haberdashery outlets in exclusive tourist itineraries. Some small agencies arrange visits to the city of Lisbon to places with little prominence in conventional tourism. They aim is to give a different perspective of the city of Lisbon to those who are interested in places that are still unexplored, and this could be an additional opportunity. For example, the Loft brand already organizes visits to haberdasheries on Rua da Conceição and some fabric stores for participants who are interested in sewing and buying relevant materials. These itineraries work as both cultural and functional visits.

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