

THE CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCE OF TRANSGENDER CONSUMERS IN THE INTIMATE APPAREL RETAIL

Abstract

Clothing is one of the most visible forms of consumption, playing a significant role in the social construction of identity. Transgender people struggle for recognition of their gender identity. One key aspect of it occurs when transgender consumers buy clothing that would help them construct their identity. Our research focuses on understanding the intricate experiences of transgender clothing consumers. To gain insight into the vivid experiences of consumption, we focused on the research subjects' daily experiences. We conducted in-depth interviews with 18 transgender consumers, analyzed using content analysis. Buying intimate apparel involves both positive and negative aspects, a striking duality when considering the importance of this type of product to our respondents. There are specific needs of transgender consumers far from being met by most stores. Also, the lack of availability and the high price of specialized products became evident through interviewees' speech.

Keywords: *Consumer Well-Being. Consumer Experience. Transgender Consumers.*

Track: *Transformative Consumer Research.*

1. Introduction

Imagine being a transgender consumer in a conservative country and facing scrutiny from employees and other customers when buying clothes. Imagine this for intimate apparel. This research focuses on understanding the intricate experiences of transgender clothing consumers. Clothing is one of the most visible forms of consumption. It plays a significant role in the social construction of identity (Crane, 2006), revealing economic, social, and behavioral changes that society suffered over the years (Varotto, 2018). In this sense, consumers increasingly seek to satisfy their clothing needs, valuing the aesthetic effect, comfort, usability, versatility, and functionality (Pessoa, 2012).

Within this identity construction context, transgender people have a gender identity that is not consistent with their sex (BNTPN, 2018). From Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg's (2005) definition, transgender consumers are vulnerable when facing discrimination, marginalization, and social exclusion (Chagas & Nascimento, 2017) as they struggle for recognition of their gender identity. One key aspect of this vulnerability occurs when transgender consumers buy clothing that would help them construct their identity. In the retail environment, consumer-business relationships have recently intensified, as in the consumer experience process. For Carù and Cova (2003), what defines consumer experience is the social relations between the individual and the context in which he lives. The experiential perspective aligns with the latest research, in which the customer does not just make rational decisions but seeks pleasurable experiences, considering the hedonic aspects of consumption (Addis & Holbrook, 2001).

With the present study, we intend to contribute to the literature of vulnerable consumers and consumer experience from the perspective of the transgender consumer. Our paper gives voice to this consumer group, focusing on shedding light on how underwear manufacturers and retailers could improve their buying experiences, ultimately advancing their well-being.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Vulnerable consumers, gender identity and transsexuality

Consumers' vulnerability can be understood as a temporary state of powerlessness in market transactions that, to varying degrees, can occur to all consumers, manifested in experiences of vulnerability in consumer contexts (Berg, 2015). These realities limit their ability to maximize their utility and well-being (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997). These vulnerable experiences are influenced by internal (e.g., biosocial or physical aspects and demographics) and external (e.g., discrimination and repression) factors (Baker et al., 2005). Transgender consumers face both these factors, mainly because society hinders their ability to use their consumption experiences as a path to express their ideals, maintain their lifestyles, build identities and relate to cultural changes (McCracken, 2010).

Moving away from traditional views of gender as a biological characteristic, we side with Bento (2012) and Gomes (2006) while considering that the transgender experience involves questioning the relationship between gender and biological sex. This fluid perspective underscores how transformation and change are possible (Silva, 2012) and how social and professional acceptance, social name, and even the corresponding toilet are factors that validate each individual's identity and experience (Jesus, 2012). Nevertheless, when society faces strangers who do not fit the cognitive, moral, or aesthetic map of the world (Bauman, 1998), aggressions can become natural attitudes that go unnoticed (Odalía, 2004).

Gentile, Spiller, and Noci (2007) identified that social context and relationships with other people are experiential components that impact the consumer's experience since it can affirm social identity or the sense of belonging to a group. From the perspective of the social context, Ruvio and Belk (2012) state that social approval and recognition as an individual directly impact the well-being of transgender consumers.

2.3 Transgender consumption experiences

The consumer experience is a crucial element for marketing (Carù & Cova, 2003) and must consider both objective and subjective characteristics, such as hedonic consumption and its subjective responses (Addis & Holbrook, 2001). These hedonic experiences involve fantasies, feelings, and fun, helping understand the consumption process (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

Experiences are not limited to purchasing products. They include interaction with sellers and other buyers (Molina, García, & Gómez, 2011). We observe the transgender experience when buying products from all these perspectives. More importantly, if we consider

that consumer experiences are entirely personal and exist only in the consumer's mind and that the several aspects of engagement are in play (e.g., emotionally, physically, intellectually or spiritually) (Pine II and Gilmore, 1998), then it becomes paramount to understand how the transgender consumer reads and makes sense of reactions from other customers and employees within the retail environment.

3. Method

To gain insight into the vivid experiences of consumption of transgender consumers, we adopted a qualitative approach, focusing on the research subjects' daily experiences (Ludke & André, 1986). Following Carù and Cova (2003) four-stage consumer experience model and Scussel, Camatini, Rezende, and Petroll's (2018) vulnerable fashion consumer research on Brazilian consumers, we constructed a semi-structured script and conducted in-depth interviews with transgender consumers. A psychologist, professor, and researcher specialized in diversity collaborated with some suggestions for adjustments. After this first review, a test interview was conducted with a transgender consumer to identify the existence of ambiguity, the clarity of the expressions used, and possible biases, and verify if the interview duration was adequate. The test allowed some slight adjustments to the script before the interviews.

3.1 Data collection

Using a snowball sampling technique and the Laura Vermont LGBT Citizenship Center's support, we invited 30 transgender consumers to participate. This process generated a total of 18 interviews (7 men and 11 women; 8 unemployed; age from 18 to 49 years old; 3 with high school education, 8 attending undergraduate courses, none with university degrees) that were recorded and transcribed.

3.2 Data analysis

For data analysis, we opted for content analysis. We used the top-down approach, in which interviews are structured and analyzed according to predetermined theories (Gheondea-Eladi, 2014). We started with a pre-analysis, reading all material to obtain first insights of the material. Then we moved to the exploration phase, using the themes of the interview script as

a basis. Finally, in the results treatment stage, we organized the themes according to the stages proposed by the theory and issues that emerged during the interview to allow interpretation and conclusions.

4. Results

4.1 Consumption experiences of transgender people

In this section, we present the analysis results and report on the interviewees using codes from I1 to I18 instead of real names. We used the pre-consumption experience as the first category of analysis, including every planning and expectation step involved in the pre-purchase process. Inspiration for what products to buy comes from different sources for transgender women (e.g., bloggers and soap operas) and men (e.g., internet sites with men's fashion content on social media). Motivation to buy can come from different sources, such as utility (e.g., quality and comfort) and social (e.g., I7 - "for someone to see"). Women report being motivated by issues related to play, such as sexuality, beauty as I1 reveals, "to value my body and please my partner," as well as the sense of belonging to the gender, as I16 says, "you feel closer to what you want to look like." As we have seen, consumers not only seek to satisfy their needs – the use of underwear – but also involve fantasies and feelings in this process, issues such as beauty, and have their experiences influenced by personality traits and cultural background (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Pullman & Gross, 2003).

Despite all these positive views, when considering the product use, a more dreadful aspect of the experience surfaces when considering the actual buying experience. For instance, I11 says: "Because of society, I get a little afraid and try to relax and get more comfortable in the environment"; and from I16: "most of us are afraid. People are not used to the trans public, so it's pretty hard". These comments reflect most interviewees' level of concern, fear, and defensive posture when imagining and planning the buying experience. What other customers would take for granted becomes a troubling experience.

Another aspect of the buying experience that hurts satisfaction relates to product design. The interviewees' reports showed difficulties, grievance, and complaints about the modeling of the pieces, mainly coming from women about the experience of wearing panties since most models available in the market were developed for the body of cisgender women. As I14 reports, "Finding a panty that fits and does not hurt me so much [is a challenge]. Because

there are some that tighten so much that it ends up bruising. Recently, I bought two and ... Wow, horrible". This situation generates the need for more specialized products that end up being more expensive for transgender consumers. I8 points out that "Of course it is different, but they could be more affordable (...). It is expensive". The need for specific pieces is mainly focused on women. Many cited safety, reliability, and comfort when using specialized underwear. According to I8, "it makes us super comfortable, it doesn't hurt, and it's something that was made especially for us." I16 also complements: "For example, my panties that are specific for my body help me a lot to walk smoothly and without anyone noticing a weird thing and, as a precaution, I still tie a blouse around my waist to make sure nothing will happen." The same interviewee details the ideal panty model: "its material is as if it were a reinforced bikini, with a thick elastic. It's a strong elastic, so if you look you won't find this product in any regular store". To counter this situation, some respondents report getting into do-it-yourself practices. For instance, I1 posits, "Like these panties, I will make the same model but more personalized." Additionally, I11 considers says "cut a little on the sides to make the panties firmer, right?"

Respondents also report dissatisfaction with the small number of specialized stores, with most of them only operating online, hindering the proof and experimentation experience. On this issue, I16 says that "Sao Paulo is huge and has two stores that serve us. Besides the prices being absurd compared to some others, you have to get there". These situations clearly articulate Baker et al.'s (2005) conceptualization of consumer vulnerability, in which the consumer has no control or faces an imbalance in process. I15 reinforces this when saying that "I bought a specific underwear online, but I did not get the size right and ended up not liking the quality. Most of the sites I've seen are American and, you know, it's not very cheap, you know".

Interaction with sellers becomes a crucial point when considering the consumption experience, especially during gender transition stages. For instance, I12 reports that how employees get confused - "With me it has always been a problem and a great fear not to be known as a trans man, not to be seen as a man. So sometimes I was treated and called as a woman, that was always a huge problem". I12 also reports on hurtful reactions from employees "Just like I told you about a saleswoman looking at us like, 'Are you going to pick that piece?', Or when I pick smaller pieces, you know? They look mocking".

Some transgender consumers reflect on these situations and even propose solutions. For instance, I3 considers that "They need to prepare people for the trans public so that there are no such constraints." According to Jesus (2012), the integral experience of living encompasses social acceptance and is fundamental for transgender people to feel accepted. Additionally, I5 points out, "If you don't treat us well, it doesn't happen. The experience is good

when the treatment is good; treatment is the foundation of everything and respect". Accordingly, Molina et al. (2011) define interaction with sellers as a determining factor of the consumer experience.

Regarding feeling 'seen' by the underwear stores, all respondents said they do not feel considered by these stores. Still, they say that the stores and brands do not worry about preparing their sellers regarding the service. I15 mentioned: "No, the stores definitively don't think about our needs or how they should sell, or comfort." All these reported situations profoundly impact these consumers' well-being, and companies should be concerned about the experience they are providing to customers (Falk & Campbell, 1997; Ruvio & Belk, 2012).

4.2 Intimate apparel and transition experiences

Another critical aspect of the consumption experience of transgender consumer relates to the transition period between genders. Respondents share compelling moments where intimate apparel helped in constructing identity. For instance, E6 reports that "Ah, I felt like a woman. I felt great, wonderful. When I first wore women's underwear, it was a dream come true". For I7, "wearing men's underwear was another step of my transition, another small achievement, but for me, it was the world." I8 reported: "It's like a puzzle, it's like that little missing piece that starts to fall into place." Also, I8 tells how underwear has made a positive contribution to their gender identity: "When we wear underwear, we bring something inside that says 'the woman I want to be is being born.' I remember the first time I put it on... It was the beginning of a significant change". As I16 says: "I would say that underwear is very impactful. I have no problem with my organ, but many of us do. You know, what you can do to relieve is liberating. So for me, underwear is very important in a person's life because it helps in the person's vision, the vision of what you don't want to see."

5. Conclusions

"In fact, it's a little wrong for people to think a trans is different from a straight or bi because it's not! We are people who wear clothes." This comment from I7 sums up the prejudice behind the vulnerable situation that transgender consumers face when buying intimate apparel. This process involves both positive (e.g., identity issues, social meaning) and negative aspects (e.g., vulnerable situations that consumers fear and regret). This duality

is striking when considering the importance of this type of product to our respondents. We observed that apparel companies, retailers, and employees in several ways fail to provide a service that fosters these consumers' well-being. These negative experiences directly impact an experience that is extremely important in the transition between genders and their new identity formation.

We observed that the underwear consumption process of transgender consumers is not limited to the moment of purchase. This observation highlighted the stages of pre-experience and experience with underwear. They revealed the motivation of consumption for reasons such as beauty and self-esteem, concern, and fear of making the purchase, meaning, and emotional impact of the pieces and positively contribute to gender identity.

When focusing on the product experience stage, we understood that the search for intimate apparel has to meet functional needs, offering comfort, and various choices. According to the interviewees, there are specific needs of transgender consumers currently ignored or far from being met by most stores. In the transgender women's case, the main complaints are related to underwear fabric, which is not firm enough for transgender consumers who have not had surgery. In the transgender men's case, the largest number of reports is related to the fact that the underwear is not adapted to use an accessory.

In addition to the difficulty with the product itself, within the purchase and the post-purchase experience, the lack of availability, and the high price of specialized products became evident through several interviewees' speech. One of the critical points mentioned in all stages of consumption was the interaction with sellers and embarrassing situations due to the lack of preparation to deal with this audience, negatively impacting the consumption experience.

This paper's theoretical contribution relates to consumer experience, especially regarding vulnerable consumers' experiences, to encourage studies on transgender consumers and understand their needs and desires, and have their voices heard.

Considering the answers of the interviewed consumers, we suggest, as a management contribution, the portfolio expansion of brands and online and physical intimate apparel stores, so that products meet the transgender audience's needs. Today, the range of options is small, and the average price of products is high. Further, stores should create larger representativeness and better prepare their attendants so that there is no embarrassment or fear of consumers when being served at physical stores.

One of the limitations of this research is related to the sample. The difficulty in finding transgender consumers willing to participate in the interviews has placed us on quantity

constraints. Thus, further studies with transgender consumers could broaden their understanding of their consumer experience.

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