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**ILLEGITIMATE IDENTITY IN THE MIDDLE OF AN IDEOLOGICAL CRISIS AND
TENSIONS IN THE CONSUMPTION NETWORK:**

A study on why plus-size fashion brands are illegitimate fashion elements

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ABSTRACT

This Dissertation explores why the plus size fashion field lacks legitimacy with plus size consumers. I have explored the subject in three papers. In the first paper, I study the process of legitimacy of a new emergent market, the Brazilian plus-size fashion market, and the challenges to institutionalization that it faces. I conducted seventeen interviews, performed netnography in four Brazilian plus-size fashion blogs and analyzed in a semiotic fashion an e-commerce shop that sells plus size fashion clothes. My results indicate that despite having legitimate actors promoting these plus size fashion brands, the plus size fashion field is still perceived as a shameful version of the fashion field. I argue here that the fact that one of the logics of the plus size fashion field being stigma, it affects derogatorily consumers' identity projects in a way that prevents them from engaging in within the field cultural capital practices. In the second paper, I conducted a genealogical introspection in which I researched identity issues. As a (self-proclaimed) plus-sized woman I figured it would be relevant to look inside myself in order to explore how my identity entangles with the semiotic-material network that surrounds me in terms of both fashion, food and other elements. My data came both from concurrent and retrospective introspection techniques. In theoretical terms, I used the idea of assemblages and I focused my analysis both on the material aspects of my network of consumption and on the stability of this network. The consequences of my assemblage are linked to a total quality management of my identity, both online and offline, reflected on consumption practices that connect to the idea of a bulimic consumption logic on which food consumption and body management are interlinked. On my third paper, I examine the concept of identity from the perspective of plus size women's consumption of fashion. Fourteen phenomenological interviews were conducted and analyzed from a hermeneutical perspective. Three thematic categories emerged from the data analysis: the construction of identity through fashion, elements of plus size identity and creative strategies to deal with the lack of products for plus size women in retail. Among the main results, the way the term plus size acts as stigma, influencing consumer's identity projects, the role of retail in the stigmatization process and the shopping epic saga, which involves a "black market" with the participation of sellers. Finally, I conclude discussing the role of identity in the instability of the plus size fashion field.

Keywords: Fashion, Plus size, Identity, Ideology, Introspection.

RESUMO

O presente trabalho explora as causas pelas quais o campo da moda *plus size* carece de legitimidade com as consumidoras *plus size*. Eu explorei o assunto em três artigos. No primeiro, eu estudo o processo de legitimação de um novo mercado emergente, o mercado da moda *plus size* brasileira e os desafios para sua institucionalização. Eu conduzi dezessete entrevistas com consumidoras *plus size*, uma netnografia em quatro blogs de moda *plus size* brasileiros e analisei de maneira semiótica um site que vende roupas de moda *plus size*. Meus resultados indicam que, apesar de ter atores legítimos que promovem essas marcas de moda *plus size*, o campo da moda *plus size* ainda é percebido como uma versão vergonhosa do campo da moda. Defendo aqui que o fato de uma das lógicas de campo da moda *plus size* ser estigma, acaba afetando os projetos identitários das consumidoras de maneira depreciativa, de forma elas não se envolvem em práticas de capital cultural que ocorrem dentro do campo da moda *plus size*. No segundo artigo, eu conduzi uma introspecção genealógica em que eu pesquisei questões de identidade. Como uma mulher (que se assume) *plus size*, eu imaginei que seria relevante para olhar para dentro de mim mesma, a fim de explorar a forma como a minha identidade liga-se com a rede semiótica-material que me rodeia em termos de moda, alimentos e outros elementos. Meus dados vieram tanto de técnicas de introspecção simultâneas, quanto retrospectivas. Em termos teóricos, eu usei a ideia de “*assemblages*” e eu foquei minha análise tanto nos aspectos materiais da minha rede de consumo, quanto na estabilidade da rede. As consequências da minha *assemblage* estão ligadas a uma gestão de qualidade total da minha identidade, tanto online como *off-line*, refletidas em práticas de consumo que se conectam à ideia de uma lógica de consumo bulímica em que o consumo de alimentos e gestão corpo estão interligadas. Por fim, no meu terceiro artigo, eu explorei o conceito de identidade a partir do consumo da moda feminina *plus size*. Foram feitas catorze entrevistas fenomenológicas, cujos dados foram analisados a partir de uma perspectiva hermenêutica. Três categorias temáticas emergiram da análise de dados: a construção da identidade por meio da moda, elementos de identidade *plus size* e estratégias criativas para lidar com a falta de produtos para mulheres *plus size* no varejo. Entre os principais resultados, destacam-se a forma como o termo *plus size* atua como estigma, influenciando projetos de identidade das consumidoras, o papel do varejo no processo de estigmatização e a saga épica de compras, que envolve um "mercado negro", com a participação de vendedores. Eu concluo discutindo o papel da identidade na instabilidade do campo da moda *plus size*.

Palavras chave: Moda, Plus size, Identity, Ideologia, Introspecção.

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1 PRESENTATION

Since I started working on the subject of my Dissertation in the last few years, many papers were published on the subject. Two works from Daiane Scaraboto and Eileen Fischer (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, 2016) in particular are worth mentioning. The first paper shows how bloggers are working on institutionalizing the fashion market targeted at plus-size fashion women. The second one discusses how heterogeneities emerge in this field, deterritorializing practices that entangle activist and fashion logics.

These papers and others that touch upon institutionalization logics (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015; Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Humphreys, 2010b; McAlexander, Dufault, Martin, & John, 2014) have, however, overlooked the impact of consumers' identity projects on participating in new market formation. I understand, based on my own experience as a consumer and on the experiences of my acquaintances in relation to plus-size fashion, that these projects are extremely important in the acceptance of one's fatness. Cultural marketing endorses the importance of identitarian projects for success and legitimacy, as well as cultural branding (Holt, 2004; Holt & Cameron, 2010).

In 2012 I started interviewing plus-sized women with a colleague in order to understand how identitarian projects intertwined with retail experiences in these consumers' lives. We identified that mainstream fashion retailers and the retail experience were a source of anxiety for these consumers, who behaved as “stigmatized seekers”, as categorized by Scaraboto and Fischer (2013), that is, consumers who want to be included in the market. The paper that resulted from these interviews is part of this document and it can be found at the end of this thesis (section 5).

As I continued with my research I studied the concepts of ideology (Eagleton, 1991), institutional theory (Scott, 2008), and cultural marketing (Holt & Cameron, 2010). I studied blogs, a retailer, and interviewed consumers. In the end I understood that the answer would not be complete without comprehending the role that objects play upon what defines “fatness” and I therefore included a focus on materiality (Canniford & Bajde, 2016). Furthermore, one of the answers to questions that bothered me could be found inside myself, which led me to undertake a genealogical introspection (Gould, 1995; Stone, Firat, & Gould, 2012).

The sections that follow illustrate this trajectory academically and (a little more) formally.

On the Introduction of this work, I will present the main theoretical concepts that have led me to my research questions and show how these concepts are related. Especially, I will focus on how the semiotic nature of ideological struggle in a consumption field can be related to the networked nature of semiotic-material assemblages, that tend to deny the dualistic structure.

My research question involves comprehending why the plus size fashion field lacks legitimacy with plus size consumers. As I will show in the next sections, the plus size fashion field is an emerging field that has some of the fashion field logics. However, due to the stigma that surrounds the field, consumers fail in identifying themselves with the objects that are offered to them by plus size fashion brands, especially consumers with high cultural capital in fashion. Therefore, the field that looks for legitimacy is barred on the creation of a community, since plus size consumers do not necessarily want to be part of this community, seeing their plus size identities as transitory. This idea is explored on the first paper, where I used interviews of consumers, netnography of plus size fashion bloggers and a semiotic analysis of a plus size fashion online retailer.

In order to explore the subtle balance that holds the identity of a plus size consumer, on the second paper, I turn to the idea of networks and materiality and I show how an assemblage of objects and signs compose the plus size ethos. In order to do so, I conduct a genealogical introspection, examining my own behavior as a plus size consumer.

In the third paper, I explore the relation between plus size consumers' identities and retailers by interviewing plus size consumers and exploring their relation with retail environments and how these environments highlights the stigma of fatness. Finally, I present a final conclusion.

2 INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF ESSAY ON DUALISMS AND MATERIALITY IN THE (IL)LEGITIMACY OF NEW MARKETS

In this Introduction, I will present the main theoretical ideas that guide my work and discuss how the semiotic dualistic perspective used to explain the institutionalization of the plus size fashion field, as well as the relation between consumers' identities and fashion retailers, is completed by the assemblage perspective that is used to explain the conflicts that I have been living as plus size woman.

Dualisms have been an important tool for comprehending consumption throughout CCT history, for example: hedonic and utilitarian consumption (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982); the sacred and the profane (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989); the feminine and the masculine; two perspectives intertwined with forms of doing research (Hirschman, 1993), the subcultural versus the mainstream (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995); commercial and anti-commercial; spiritual, communal, and logics (Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Kozinets, 2002). Such dualisms have been used to understand and explore consumption.

In this Introduction to my Dissertation I discuss the idea of dualisms in the creation of new markets: how do new markets and market practices gain legitimacy? In order to do so I explore the themes of fields, ideologies, and identities.

However, as mentioned in the Presentation, my research question revolves more around the idea of illegitimacy than otherwise. My first two papers will show that the illegitimacy of a new market might be related to stigmatic identities and temporary identities. The stigmatic identity, however, and the idea of its temporality are an assemblage (Canniford & Bajde, 2016) of objects, practices, discourses, and feelings that involve past and future. The third paper will relate identity with the retail environment.

Therefore, in the second part of this Introduction I present the theory that deconstructs the idea of dualisms. Agreeing with Canniford and Shankar (2016), I state that dualisms are a good and important tool for comprehending some phenomena. However, they fail to acknowledge many complexities of the social realities and the glue that holds them together.

2.1 Dualisms and their role in the formation of new markets

Recently CCT literature has been engaging in going beyond the four areas that have defined the field: consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, the socio-historic patterning of consumption and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies, and consumers' interpretive strategies. Recent papers have related this stream of research with the creation of markets (Martin & Schouten, 2014), their evolution (Giesler, 2008), and the processes of institutionalization of brands or industries in a certain field (Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013).

2.1.1 Exploring the idea of fields and markets

The concept of a “field” in the business and management literature draws on institutional theory. In this stream of research institutions are defined as arenas with specific functions (Scott, 2008). Institutional theory derives from a plethora of sociological works, from Marx to Durkheim, going through Weber's work.

In particular, the view of “institution” that I use in my work is related to George Mead's (1962) conceptualization of society and self. For Mead, meaning derives from interaction and language. From this interaction emerges a symbolic system recognized by a whole community, which is an arena with specific functions that is cognitively understood and from which rules and norms are generated, therefore creating the three pillars of institutions (Scott, 2008).

These three pillars are cognitive, normative, and regulative (Scott, 2008). The cognitive pillar, also known as the cultural pillar, is the one that resonates most with Mead's (1962) theory and emerges from interactions and interpretations that form distinguishable symbolic systems and social roles. The whole community involved in these interactions recognizes that these rules, social roles, and behavioral norms emerge in the process, forming the normative system. Therefore, the normative system, which is formed in the interaction process, prescribes and evaluates values and norms. Individuals and their behaviors are judged in a certain field through these norms. Finally, there is the regulative system, which is based on laws and which constrains and regulates behavior.

In this theoretical perspective it is from interactions and socialization processes that rules are internalized by individuals—internalizing practices from a certain field (Bourdieu,

1984). According to an excerpt of Bourdieu on Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992): “to think in terms of field is to think relationally” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 96). Therefore, the concept of field is one worth discussing. The business literature (encompassing strategy, marketing, and consumer research) has addressed such a concept mainly in organizational and consumption contexts. Both forms of analysis rely mainly on Bourdieu’s (1984) sociology. For Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) a field is a locus of struggles. The author states:

In analytic terms, a field may be defined as a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of the species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.) (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97)

In the institutional literature Scott (2008) states that a field is a level of analysis of institutional processes. The author focuses more on organizational fields, which are mainly composed of organizational agents and institutions. Following this type of literature the work of DiMaggio and Powell (1983) is worth mentioning. The authors talk about organizational fields and they explain how the homogenization of organizations happens in these fields. They claim that fields exist after they are institutionally defined. This process of homogenization encompasses a set of normative, regulative, and cultural-cognitive processes (Scott, 2008) that lead to an institutionalization process in which organizations start to be similar in a series of practical aspects. After such a process takes place it can be said that a field is created; they name such a process “isomorphism”.

The CCT literature has been addressing the role of consumers in the formation and maintenance of fields.

One of the first works to address the subject was by Arsel and Thompson (2011). The authors draw on Bourdieu’s (1984) definition of consumption fields, which would be areas of related consumption items (such as fashion or gastronomy) and update the definition. They reinterpret works on communities of consumption that encompass subcultures, brand communities, consumer tribes, and micro cultures of consumption (Cova & Cova, 2001; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Thompson & Troester, 2002) as fields of consumption. By doing so they state that fields of consumption are networks of consumption that are interrelated, brand constellations, and/or products and social media immersed in such networks. Even more recently, Coskuner-Balli and Thompson (2013) included in the definition

of consumption fields the idea of consumers socializing with each other and sharing practices and knowledge inside that field.

These aforementioned papers and other recent literature also posit the idea of field-dependent cultural capital, which is when a consumer whose cultural capital does not form over the practices from several consumption fields but is dependent mainly on a field in which he or she has been socialized. Exemplary of this are Mormon consumers, whose cultural capital develop around Mormon consumption practices, or, when they turn their back on religion, on denying these practices to constitute their cultural capital (McAlexander et al., 2014). In Arsel and Thompson's (2011) paper cultural capital is field-dependent on the indie culture. McAlexander et al. (2014) show how consumers try to escape from the field-dependent cultural capital built on Mormon socialization. Coskuner-Balli and Thompson (2013), on the other hand, show that consumers socialized in high cultural capital milieu might engage in lower-status field consumption practices, being in a consumption field heterology.

According to Dolbec and Fischer (2015) markets can be considered organizational fields. Therefore, the discussion above relating to the idea of consumption fields can also be applied to markets. One of the main points of markets when understood as fields is the idea of legitimacy. Fields sustain the dynamics of legitimacy in their domain. Several papers have evaluated how legitimacy is created and sustained in a certain market or organizational field (Coskuner-Balli, 2013; Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Kates, 2004; Martin & Schouten, 2014; Sandikci & Ger, 2010; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013).

In institutional theory the legitimacy process is linked to the isomorphism process. Institutional theory has been previously used, for example, to examine isomorphism inside organizations through professionalization and professional practices that make institutions alike (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). One of the aspects of institutional theory emphasized by Scott (2008) is the idea of legitimization. Scott states that to be legitimate an institution has to have the three pillars (addressed previously): the normative, which accounts for expected behavior; the regulative, which accounts for legislation and formal procedures; and the cultural-cognitive, which accounts for meanings and their interpretation.

In CCT theory Humphreys (2010b) applies institutional theory to explain that public discourse, for example the media, plays an important role in legitimizing the gambling practice. Humphreys (2010a) considers legitimacy as a process through which ideas become mainstream in the main institutions in society; the media influences public discourse, and changes in regulatory structure make the legitimacy of new markets possible.

More recently, Humphreys and Latour (2013) defined legitimization as the process of general acceptance of a product, idea, or even industry by the general public. Using multiple research methods to study the online gambling industry in the United States Humphreys and Latour concluded that the legitimization process is affected both by how the industry is represented in the media (for example, whether the term “gambling” or the softer term “gaming” is used) and by the terms that members of the industry (for example, online gamblers) use.

One aspect of this stream of research that is worth mentioning is the role of consumers in legitimizing markets and brands, which is an important contribution made by this stream of research.

Sandikci and Ger (2010), for example, examine the process through which stigmatized Turkish women changed the use of the *tessetür* to become a commonplace practice. Scaraboto and Fischer (2013), drawing on Sandikci and Ger’s work and on institutional theory, propose a framework that classifies market change dynamics according to how stigmatized consumers searching for a market to address them are perceived in mainstream markets and what these consumers want. Consumers might be stigmatized seekers when they want to be part of the mainstream market but are not attended to (such as plus-size fashion bloggers or “fatshionistas” as the authors call them). They can also be comfortable collaborators, when they are attended by mainstream markets and collaborate with them. They are resistant rebels when consumers are not attended by markets and they still aim to continue as outsiders. Alternatively, they are mainstream malcontents when they are legitimate consumers but choose to resist the market, such as consumers engaging in piracy consumption practices.

The work of Martin and Schouten (2014) in describing the *minimoto* market is, however, different in the sense that it draws its theoretical basis from actor network theory (ANT) (Latour, 2007). ANT deals with associations of both material and human actors, without looking for “hidden actors” that explain social situations (Latour, 2007). Martin and Schouten explain the market formation of the *minimotos* market by describing three stages. First, there is consumer innovation. Second, consumers form a metacommunity in which they create, co-create, and communicate on the Internet, such as the metacommunity of *fatshionistas* described by Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) for example. Third, industry actors enter this metacommunity, catalyzing and legitimizing these actors.

It is worth noting that the legitimization of brands has also been a topic of study. Kates (2004), for example, studied the roles of brands in a homosexual ghetto. Drawing on institutional theory he describes legitimacy of a brand as the acceptance, or even support, by

consumers of particular brands. In his conclusions he states that legitimate brands play an important role as community symbols. Other examples of works that encompass brand legitimacy include that of Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel (2006), who describe how consumers' interactions and creations act to delegitimize the Starbucks brand. Giesler (2012) draws on Thompson et al.'s (2006) work to show how companies that display a new brand in the market see their brand as being constructed and modified by different discourses, such as that of consumers and the media. Finally, Thompson and Humphreys (2015) explore brand legitimacy through the study of how media discourses interfere with brand ideology after a brand disaster (oil spills). It is therefore possible to conclude from this literature that consumers play an important role in developing markets.

A legitimization process described by Coskuner-Balli (2013) is considered very useful in this Dissertation. Coskuner-Balli studies the legitimization process of the CCT field itself and traces a process that follows the gaining of legitimacy. First, a new academic community is founded with oppositional positions in relation to those of the parent field. Then, the community engages in practices of legitimization, which Coskuner-Balli presents as: (1) mobilizing cultural myths, such as the ones brands use when engaging in cultural innovation (Holt & Cameron, 2010; Holt, 2004); (2) code switching (Schau, Dellande, & Gilly, 2007), which employs certain linguistic and cultural codes in different fields; (3) creating marketing resources; and (4) building communities. Finally, there is the process of gaining cultural and social legitimacy. The main point of interest for me here is the fact that the boundaries of the field are first established and then the field is built. Coskuner-Balli states:

First, the legitimization practices can potentially influence the structuration within the field. While structural/historical factors create boundary conditions in academic disciplines, it is the type of mobilization, code-switching, entrepreneurial and communal strategies that will shape the field. Mobilizing cultural myths can help academic communities to increase the range of their cultural jurisdiction and make known their treatments and inferences and academic knowledge to wider audiences (Coskuner-Balli, 2013, p.105).

In this sense the work of Coskuner-Balli (2013) describing the legitimization process of the CCT stream of research is similar to DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) work on isomorphism, and resonates well with Bourdieu's (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) argument: a field only emerges after its boundaries are defined. Furthermore, Coskuner-Balli asserts that legitimization happens through the mobilization of market myths, the creation of marketing resources, and the building of communities. By looking at the recent CCT culture that investigated such a process, the process is clearly exemplified. In Sandick and Ger's (2010)

work a community of women and producers is formed, creating fashion and defying national myths of modernity. In Scaraboto and Fischer's (2013) work "Frustrated fashionistas", a community of bloggers defy typical fashion beauty-standards and create their own process of legitimizing a different fashion. In Martin and Schouten's (2014) work, minimoto lovers create enough cultural material to start a change in an industry.

This literature also shows that the process is not unilateral and that consumers and other actors participate in the process, improving or preventing the legitimacy process. For example, consumers might engage in creating doppelgänger brand images (Giesler, 2012; Thompson et al., 2006), which companies have to face and dialogue with. Furthermore, the media plays a very important role in the process by dialoguing with consumers and experts (Humphreys & Latour, 2013; Humphreys, 2010a, 2010b; Thompson & Humphreys, 2015).

However, the literature fails to explore the code-switching process, which, according to Coskuner-Balli (2013), is also paramount to the legitimization of a new field. Schau and colleagues (2007) studied the code switching that occurs in small coffee-shops in relation to a major leading brand, Starbucks. It seems that consumers copy consumption and shopping practices in different environments, mimicking what they do in Starbucks.

In order to better understand the legitimization process it is paramount to understand ideology and its role in relation to consumers, companies, and brands. For example, Press, Arnould, Murray, and Strand (2014) investigated ideological tensions and how these affect firms' different strategic orientations in the agricultural field. They found two legitimacies that follow different regulatory rules and are inserted in different cultural-cognitive systems: the chemical-normative legitimacy and the organic-normative legitimacy. Furthermore, they found that these two legitimacies share some cultural-cognitive principles, such as hard work and independence.

Still regarding fields and ideology, even more recent literature has stated that consumption and institutional fields could be analyzed alike (Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015). Studying the yoga market, Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli (2015) stated that a field develops with both the consumption and institutionalization of organizational actors. Furthermore, they stated that a field might be guided by different logics, in the case of yoga these would be the spiritual and the commercial. These logics are sustained by ideologies. Finally, Dolbec and Fischer's (2015) study shows that different actors can be in a field, but not necessarily rapidly reshape the field logics fast; it requires time and legitimization to establish different or concurrent logics in a field, such as the fashion bloggers in the fashion field.

In order to formalize the relationship between fields (including markets and their legitimization process) and ideology, I turn again to Bourdieu: A field is not the product of a deliberate act of creation, and it follows rules or, better, regularities, that are not explicit and codified. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98)

In addition, addressing class ideology and the role of intellectuals in the scientific field Wacquant (on a field note) notes on Bourdieu's theory:

At the core of Bourdieu's theory of symbolic domination is the notion that ideological legitimation (or 'naturalization') of class inequality operates via a correspondence, which is effected only between systems. It does not require that cultural producers intentionally endeavor to mask or to serve the interests of the dominant – indeed, the function of 'sociodicy' of culture is more effectively fulfilled when the opposite is true. It is only by genuinely pursuing their specific interest as specialists in symbolic production that intellectuals also legitimate a class position: 'Ideologies owe their structure and their most specific functions to the social conditions of their production and circulation, i.e., to the functions they fulfill first for specialists competing for the monopoly of the competence in question (religious, artistic, etc.), and secondarily and incidentally for the non specialists (Bourdieu, 1979b: 81-82, apud Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 106).

"Field" therefore is understood here as a symbolic space in which different actors navigate legitimizing and delegitimizing consumption and market practices, sustained by field logics, which are directly influenced by ideologies.

2.1.2 Ideology: logics, discourses and identities.

In institutional theory it can be said that ideology sustains the logics of different market dynamics that can be found in a certain field (Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015). This is relevant because, as previously asserted, markets are subject to field and societal logics. Besides, as Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli (2015) state, ideology is the symbolism of the institutional logics, manifested by material organizational practices. In this sense, ideology plays an important role in markets. Press et al. (2014), for example, state that ideology is one of the elements that is paramount to establishing legitimacy in a field.

Eagleton (1991) provides six definitions of ideology, each being narrower than the previous. In the case of this work, the first three definitions are useful for contextualization. Eagleton begins by defining ideology as simply ideas, beliefs, or values. He then continues by stating that a second definition involves defining a group or class to which these values and

meanings symbolize a socially significant experience. In a third definition he states that ideology, more than a system of meanings for a group, must include relational or conflictive terms, since ideology is the basis for legitimizing interests of different groups that sustain oppositional ideologies. In this sense, looking at Bourdieu's (described in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) explanation of fields, one could say that there are ideological disputes inside fields and also between fields and other institutions in society. This third conceptualization is exemplified in the CCT literature by Press et al.'s (2014) paper, comparing organic and agrochemical types of agriculture.

Press and colleagues (2014) studied the ideological tensions that affect the legitimacy of different strategic orientations among firms. Adding to the comprehension of how ideology sustains market dynamics in a field, they propose that business orientations are extremely dependent ideologies that shape marketplace dramas (Giesler, 2008). In marketplace dramas different ideologies collide, fighting for legitimacy in a field, for example the practice of downloading online music had several meanings for consumers and for the industry before actually becoming legitimate after being co-opted by one organization. Another example of the role of ideology in legitimacy is the semiotic representations that influence legitimization as studied by Arnold, Kozinets, and Handelman (2001). The authors analyze Walmart flyers and discuss how their mythologies, or semiotic representations, are related to legitimacy. For example, they state that the semiotic mythologies of community and patriotism on the flyers, depicted through the omnipresent figure of Sam Walton, Walmart's founder, as "the father", helped in the legitimization of Walmart as the most powerful retail in the United States.

However, ideology has also been conceptualized and studied as an oppositional force against markets and the marketing logic (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004), such as when consumers engage in anti-market and anti-consumption practices, or even when they engage in modifying corporate and market discourse (Giesler, 2012; Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006).

Arnould and Thompson (2005) argue that market ideologies and interpretative strategies form a research branch of this discipline. Historically, studies on ideology inside the CCT discipline have focused on critical media theory and consumers' responses to the market. In general, consumers are understood as interpretative agents who can tacitly adopt dominant representations of consumption identities or rebel against such representations (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004).

However, examining the consumption literature, many works show that it has become one the main sources of contemporary culture (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979). Products

and brands become carriers of meanings and values, or ideology transmission mechanisms. One example examined in the literature is the American girl doll (Borghini et al. 2009). The store where these dolls are sold in the United States is an environment that attracts fans, children, and families who buy the product or those who just spend their time in a playful activity. The ambiance of the store, the products that complement the doll (books, clothes, accessories), and the doll itself (which may be similar to its owner) transmit typical American values of nationalism, conservatism, and good manners (Borghini et al., 2009). A second example is the natural health micro culture: a space where ideological appeals of legitimacy, welfare, purification rituals, and disease are connected with personal success or failure, allying the marketing metaphors for dissemination of those products (Thompson & Troester, 2002).

Consumers understand, albeit tacitly, that their emancipation therefore is not detached from ideologies encouraged by the market, but realize they have the power to act and reframe the symbols that in themselves carry ideological discourses—although this agency is not free from tension, as Kozinets' (2002) paper on the Burning Man festival shows. In this sense, Thompson and Haytko (1997) show how consumers can use and subvert these symbols for their benefit, stating that consumers perceive the existence of different ideological discourses related to fashion—one being hegemonic (the idea of "being trendy"). Some of these consumers neutralize these discourses; that is, begin to adopt them as if they were the truth. However, others dispute and problematize them, adopting competing discourses. The most interesting thing is that the vast majority use these discourses for themselves, adopting them as appropriate for shaping their identity.

An article of particular importance to this work, which shows the presence of ideological discourses of a specific type of consumption—the technologic—and the relationship of consumers with these discourses is that of Kozinets (2008). The author proposes a model that synthesizes theories in technology ideology, taking into account the variability of use among individuals, and he argues that consumers interpellate ideology—that is, take a subjective position in relation to ideology (as described by Thompson and Haytko (1997))—that gives them a strong sense of personal and social identity. Through acts of formal notice, resulting ideological structures influence the writing and speaking of both consumers and the media. From this observation Kozinets develops four ideological discourses (which follow a typical semiotic square structure). Consumers move between these discourses, adopting them “more or less strongly” depending on the circumstances of their lives and identity projects.

A more critical or oppositional view (Hirschman, 1993) is related to critical theory. The critical theory thematic draws on Frankfurtian arguments, criticizing the mass consumption

society. According to Horkheimer and Adorno (1978), ideology is the state of (un)conscience created or transmitted by the cultural industry that would be responsible for keeping consensual participation in advanced capitalist societies (Holt, 2002). For authors inside this stream of research consumption is a simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994); a fake mechanism that fulfills emotional spaces, replacing real social bonds (Willis, 1991), leading to alienation (Marcuse, 2005). Authors such as Hirschman (1993) and Bristor and Fischer (1993) draw on such literature to address the masculine structure in the consumer research area and propose different approaches with oppositional ideologies. Holt (2002) works on this stream of research and on post-modern theories to indicate that consumers have critical consciousness of the mechanisms industries use in the mass consumption society and yet still use brands for identity discourses and bonding purposes.

In the consumer research literature it is also worth mentioning the works regarding consumer movements. Kozinets and Handelman's (2004) paper on consumer movements was seminal to the development of a stream of research on the subject. According to them, consumer movements aim to change elements of the marketing and consumer landscape. The consumers, which are actually critics of consumption and were studied by the author, see themselves as Puritans, the ones who know the difference between right and wrong. In addition, the movement, according to Kozinets (2008), shows a clear opposition to consumerism. Chatzidakis and Lee (2012), on the other hand, explore the reasons against consumption, paying attention to the fact that the reasons against consumption are not the opposites of reasons for consuming. They identify four reasons against consumption: ethical concerns, environmental concerns, consumer resistance, and symbolic concerns. Sometimes, these reasons influence the kinds of consumption.

In this work I draw on Eagleton's (1991) theory and use (market) ideology as belief systems that are inserted in specific fields, provoke discursive conflicts, and that sustain legitimization discourses in specific fields. Furthermore, I also draw on Kozinets' (2008) arguments that these market ideologies influence consumers' identity projects.

2.1.3 Brands and consumers' identities in the consumer culture world

The emergence of new markets might be directly linked with the emergence of new brands. For example, Giesler (2012) discusses the emergence of a new market based on a new brand: the Botox industry.

Brands are a very much studied topic in consumer literature, including managerial definitions and behavioral perspectives. However, the managerial and behavioral models fail to account for the deep social and cultural meaning of brands. In his book *How Brands Become Icons* Holt (2004, p. XI) states: "conventional branding models, however, ensconced in psychological assumptions, have entirely ignored the role of identity myths in building brands". In his work, Holt (2003) takes the notion of market myths from Sydney Levy's (1959) seminal paper that states that buying goods are imbued with social meaning.

In my work, I use brands in a cultural perspective, following mostly the works of Holt (Holt & Cameron, 2010; Holt, 2002, 2004) and Heilbrunn (2015).

In his work "Why do brands cause trouble?" from 2002, Holt describes three brand paradigms. The first is the modern paradigm, based on the following principles and techniques: cultural engineering, scientific brands, and Freudian branding. This model arises from the consumption culture relying on consumers' lack of freedom to choose and acquiescence to a brand's cultural identity. From coercion and criticism to such a capitalist mode (see, for example, the arguments from the Frankfurt school of thought), the post-modern branding paradigm emerges. Its character is based on irony, reflexivity, and authenticity, reasoning with the consumer sovereignty idea that has emerged with post-modernity (see also Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). However, consumers still perceive that sovereignty is forged in the sense that real authenticity is extinct whenever displaced from its original community. Finally, Holt talks about the post-post-modern paradigm, in which citizen artists cultivate their selves through brands. This perspective is further explored in his two books, which I analyze in the next paragraphs.

In 2004, in his book *How brands become icons*, Holt states that iconic brands emerge from stories from everyday interactions and media, and that historical context matters in this construction. Holt (2004) and then Holt and Cameron (2010) state that iconic brands, or any brands in the life-style industry, are successful when imbued with a myth that relates to consumers in a certain historical moment.

The creation of an iconic brand begins with cultural disruptions. A cultural disruption Holt (2004) uses as an example is the emergence of the Reagan era, which ended with the myth of the traditional American worker and created the myth of the typical man who succeed in Wall Street. The counterpart of such a myth is the ironic inversion of this "winner" model, which was used successfully in Budweiser campaigns, for example. This is a typical cultural disruption (the Reagan era) that creates a cultural contradiction based on a national ideology (the welfare state x neoliberalism).

Still, according to Holt (2004), considering these cultural disruptions, brands are created through communication. They draw on populist worlds, which are imaginary places where people's actions are guided by belief instead of interest. A second example is the Beetle, which solved consumers' ideological contradictions by offering a counter-cultural brand that also resonated with the professional market, but which relied on the populist world of bohemia.

With the creation of myth through the narrative rooted in populist worlds, national ideologies, and cultural contradictions, brands start competing in myth markets. These myths are rooted in popular culture, but they go beyond that. Myths address cultural desires and anxieties that individual consumers feel. When brands develop cultural and political authority (collective expectations around the brand) in representing such myths they become a collective phenomenon (Holt, 2003); they become iconic. One of the examples of competition in myth markets provided by Holt and Cameron (2010) is Nike, a brand that proposes a discourse connected to individual achievement in the historical moment of the ascension of the yuppie group. Nike, therefore, innovates in ideological terms, becoming a market leader.

In conclusion, in Holt's (2004) view, iconic brands or life-style brands (in which fashion brands are included) apply precisely this philosophy:

The brand is a historical entity whose desirability comes from myths that address the most important social tensions of the nation. For identity brands, success depends on how well the brand's myth adjusts to historical exigencies, not by its consistency in the face of historical change (Holt, 2004, p. 38).

Since these brands develop forms of addressing such contradictions they are cultural innovators.

The other essential bibliographical source for this work on brands is Heilbrunn's (2015) recent work on market mediations. Heilbrunn takes a deep, theoretical, semiotic perspective to discuss the market, the brands, identities, and objects. He discusses the idea of brands as certifiers of the origin of objects and sellers. In this sense, brands are mediation devices, making goods more desirable through this transference of meaning. He states that we live in an economy of brands, and consumption values interact with this economy. What he terms "consumption values" are the practical valorization ("quality"), the critical valorization ("value for money"), utopian valorization ("well-being"; "festive pleasure"), and ludic valorization ("refinement"; "seduction"). Based on such values brands offer ideological systems that are based on utopian models and act as narrative programs. Such narratives act to justify and legitimize the differences of brands among one another. These consumption values,

which can be either contradictory or contrary (following a semiotic structure), are reconciled by brands. In this sense, Heilbrunn's (2015) definition agrees with Holt's (2004): brands are discursive elements that transmit meaning and reconcile tensions present in a consumption environment.

Therefore, ideology is an important element in defining the role of brands in a consumer society. Other than the aforementioned works, recent literature has stated that brands are elements imbued with ideology (Borghini et al., 2009), that solve an ideological contradiction in technology (Giesler, 2012) similar to those described by Kozinets (2008).

When brands are comprehended as ideological sources that actually act to solve a tension understanding the consequences of branding for comprehending a field become paramount, since they become the link between ideological meanings in a field and the materiality of the goods sold to consumers in the field.

Brands as constructs, similar to ideological or mythological systems, have also been addressed in the literature by other authors, although with slightly different foci. Sherry (2006), for example, addresses a managerial perspective for the creation of meanings for brands and states that myths could be managed and used as a way to form a map of meanings for the brand. Such texts, written for business audiences, endure the legitimate idea of brands as ideological receptacles. On a more theoretical level, brands, as ideological elements, have also been explored as a source of meaning that consumers add to their identities and their cultural capital, looking through the markets' and consumers' lens.

It is also important to note the role of consumers in brand meanings; after all, since brands are important for their identity construction consumers have an active role in also building brand meanings. Previous studies have shown the role consumers have in subverting brand meanings that are planned by marketers (Thompson et al., 2006) and how brands evolve to fulfill the ideological gap this dance between consumers and companies creates (Giesler, 2012). Since myths are collective entities the ideological gap, as I described when addressing Holt's (2004) book, is created by society at large.

In this sense, consumers also play an important part in brand legitimacy. As state previously, Kates (2004), for example, studied the roles of brands in a homosexual ghetto. Drawing on institutional theory he describes legitimacy of a brand as the acceptance, or even support, by consumers of particular brands. In his conclusions he states that legitimate brands play an important role as community symbols. They also play an important role in the delegitimacy of brands, as Parmentier and Fischer (2015) show in their study about how

consumers, by interacting and acting in the virtual world, abandoned the “America’s Next Top Model” brand.

The link between brands and identity is also very strong. In terms of consumers’ identities, Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler (2009), for example explore the moral protagonism of the Hummer brand. The authors state that brand meanings are connected to the mythical resources with which consumers work in their identities when these align with ideological discourses present in society. This perspective reinforces the role of brands as discursive resource providers—much more complex artifacts than mere social markers (Bourdieu, 1984)—and resonates with the works previously discussed, but focusing more on consumers’ perspectives.

Therefore, brands are important ideological elements for consumers, who interact with them in order to disclose different identities (Belk, 1988, 2013; Roedder & Chaplin, 2013). One element of consumers’ identities that connects to the idea of a consumption field is their involvement with different fields in order to enhance their own cultural capital (Arsel & Thompson, 2011; McAlexander et al., 2014).

It is worth mentioning that in spite of the fact that brands have acquired new meanings and play an important role in consumers’ lives, their role as social markers is still prominent. The most influential work on the role of brands, products, and consumption habits in explaining societal structure was Bourdieu’s “Distinction”, in which he discusses how cultural capital is perpetuated among social classes.

However, cultural capital in a consumer digital society (Belk, 2013; Schau & Gilly, 2003) is not necessarily linked to economic capital. Furthermore, consumers might have the knowledge and cultural capital, but not the access to buy the goods that the brands materialize into, which is what happens with plus-size consumers (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) and at-home fathers (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013). Coskuner-Balli and Thompson (2013) compare the cultural capital of consumers and the cultural capital of objects of consumption and, again drawing on Bourdieu’s (1984) terminology, state that when high cultural capital consumers engage in lower status consumption fields they find themselves in a structural incompatibility, aestheticizing or edifying the objects of the lower field. I believe it is plausible to assume that high cultural capital consumers have such a relation with brands, re-signifying them when they find themselves in such a heterology.

Furthermore, consumers’ identities are not stable entities. Therefore, a brief prelude on identity is necessary before concluding this section.

2.1.4 A brief prelude on consumers' identities

The idea of identity has been mentioned in every section; it permeates consumption in an almost pervasive manner, since it is very hard to escape from the idea of identity-self in consumption research (Belk, 1988). Beruschashvili and Moiso (2013) argue that identity projects are important in the consumption of products linked to the self. Identities are influenced by cultural meaning systems and social structures. Fashion, the field I study here, encompasses many of these products and sets up social structures (ideologies), as discussed in the previous sections.

Considering CCT literature, there is a plethora of works that have examined this thematic under different perspectives (Abdalla, 2014; Luedicke et al., 2009; Rosenthal, 2014; Schouten, 1991; Shankar, Elliott, & Fitchett, 2009). For my work, I consider a few findings that address the argument I want to sustain in this Dissertation.

One of the points addressed about identity in the literature is the question of the mutable self. From classical works, such as that by Erving Goffman (1963) who states that people's identities vary with social situations (they wear masks), to post-modern tribalism, several texts have been trying to position identity studies.

The multitude and instability of identities can be seen in several works, probably starting, in the field of CCT, with Schouten's (1991) work on plastic surgery and how this consumption act is connected with desired identities and changing the body to achieve such desired identities and life projects.

Ruvio and Belk (2013), on the other hand, wrote a paper on gender identity, which also underlines its transitory character. They relate stages in the changing transgender identity: (1) conflict emergence, when transgender people experience their identity incongruence for the first time; (2) self-meaning and self-labeling, when they ask "who am I?" and "who do I want to be?"; and (3) coming out to one's self, which is the process of self-acceptance and improvement of one's femininity. They also present the idea of "passing", which is when a transgender person is considered to be the gender he or she identifies with by cisgender people.

I believe this is an interesting work for my Dissertation in the sense that one possibility that will be explored in the results is that the identity of fat people might be considered transitory; just like in Schouten's (1991) paper, changes in the body might lead to better (conforming?) selves.

This presupposition above is corroborated by the work of Beruschashvili and Moiso (2013). These authors present an analysis on the emotional identity projects of overweight

women. These involve pride or guilt when they look at the past, and hope or despair when they look at the future. When despair is the predominant emotion in overweight consumers' identity projects they are very likely to feel socially deviant. This tends to be stronger in women. One of the way-out strategies for dealing with this is avoidance of situations in which being fat is problematic. When guilt is the prevalent emotional discourse it comes with a sense that being overweight is a matter of personal responsibility. Consumers, in that case, elicit "fat stories" and "eating stories"; they would like to be more self-confident, physically attractive, and/or sexual appealing. Finally, the emotion of pride represents the process of coming out; it is the process of fat-acceptance and glamorizes being overweight.

In this sense, it is possible to conclude that the fat identity is stigmatized. Sandicki and Ger (2013) mention stigma in their work and state that stigma influences how a person deals with consumption and that it is socially embedded and is a social construction. They also state that when people are stigmatized by characteristics that are perceived to be controllable they blame themselves. This also supports the idea that fat consumers' identities might be transitory, since control over one's body and one's look has a compound of morality imbued (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995).

In sum, consumers use market discourses to build identity projects. Nevertheless, these projects are not congruent or unified; they are diverse and mutable. In addition, when their identities are stigmatized and incongruent with their projects they can be temporary. One of the market discourses consumers use a lot comes from brands—brands fulfill identity gaps and are also elements with which consumers actually relate (Fournier, 1998).

2.1.5 A brief summary of the literature presented and the consequences to my Dissertation

In this section I have examined how several relevant themes explored in the literature are related to the legitimacy of new markets. I have stated that there are several fields that encompass both consumption and production, that consumers navigate through these fields, and that these fields are sustained by different logics based on marketplace ideologies. I have also stated that these ideologies could be conflicting and that when such ideological gaps occur there is space for the emergence of new brands (or markets) that, in order to be legitimate, have to be linked with consumers' identity projects.

This literature leads to the plus size fashion field. It is a field in construction, where actors such as bloggers, models and brands are fighting to gain legitimation. However, there seem to be challenges for such acceptance that derive from ideological tensions inside the field. In the first paper presented in this work, I intend to show what are the ideological tensions that happen inside the field, how the plus size fashion field relates to the fashion field and one of the reasons why the field is not legitimate yet.

The whole logics presented both in the theory revised are based mostly on the idea of dualisms: different fields with different logics sustaining consumers' (or producers') discourses (Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Press et al., 2014) or conflicting ideologies making possible the legitimacy of brand meanings and identity projects (Giesler, 2012; Holt & Cameron, 2010; Holt, 2004).

This dualism is rooted on the idea that it is possible to explain events dialectically. However, when we do that, we exclude that material world and its relations with the semiotic world of meanings. After the conclusions of the first paper, I felt that there was a lack of the material component and also of a personal component in order for me to fully understand my research problem.

This lack of materiality and of the exploration of a dense personal experience has led me to the second research paper presented in this Dissertation, which deals with materiality and semiotics in order to explore the stigmatic plus size identity.

Therefore, in the next session, I will discuss the idea of assemblages and materiality.

2.2 Discursive dualism and assemblages

Recently consumer culture literature has started to explore the idea of assemblages, which reject the typical dualisms upon which the theory has been built. In order to explain the idea of consumption assemblages I will briefly touch upon some sociological theories that structure this idea. Then, I will present some works that have used this idea and, finally, I will talk about how the idea of dualisms is still valid even when the assemblage perspective is adopted.

2.2.1 Assemblages, networks, and entanglements

In order to address the idea of assemblages, I start with an excerpt from Deleuze and Guatarri (1987) who use the idea of rhizomes in botanic to explain assemblages:

Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs and even nonsign states. The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple. It is not the One that becomes Two or even directly three, four, five, etc. It is not a multiple derived from the One, or to which One is added ($n+1$). It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows. It constitutes linear multiplicities with n dimensions having neither subject nor object, which can be laid out on a plane of consistency, and from which the One is always subtracted ($n - 1$). When a multiplicity of this kind changes dimension, it necessarily changes in nature as well, undergoes a metamorphosis. **Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions, with binary relations between the points and biunivocal relationships between the positions, the rhizome is made only of lines: lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes metamorphosis, changes in nature.** These lines, or lineaments, should not be confused with lineages of the arborescent type, which are merely localizable linkages between points and positions. Unlike the tree, the rhizome is not the object of reproduction: neither external reproduction as image-tree nor internal reproduction as tree-structure. The rhizome is an antigenealogy. It is a short-term memory, or antimemory. The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots. Unlike the graphic arts, drawing, or photography, unlike tracings, the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight. It is tracings that must be put on the map, not the opposite. In contrast to centered (even polycentric) systems with hierarchical modes of communication and pre-established paths, the rhizome is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states. What is at question in the rhizome is a relation to sexuality—but also to the animal, the vegetal, the world, politics, the book, things natural and artificial—that is totally different from the arborescent relation: all manner of "becomings". (Deleuze and Guatarri, 1987, p. 21, emphasis added by the author)

From this excerpt it is possible to identify several characteristics of assemblages. First, in the bold text, Deleuze and Guatarri (1987) emphasize the idea that assemblages are not binaries. Bettany (2016) reinforces that the essential elements of assemblages are the radical-anti-essentialism: the war on binaries. Indeed, it is possible to treat the idea of assemblages as networks (Latour, 2007) or entanglements (Hodder, 2012). Networks, as I will be calling such arrangements from now on, encompass both humans and objects (Hodder, 2012; Latour, 2007).

The idea of materiality and of human agency being dependent upon a relation between humans and objects (Latour, 2007) is a neuralgic point of assemblage theory. Materiality has been neglected in social theory in general (Dant, 2005); however, since the works on technology conducted in the 80s Latour (2007) and others have proposed that the “sociology of the social”, as Latour calls it, was not sufficient to explain science and technology phenomena, proposing instead that networks and assemblages could be used to describe other phenomena as well.

Assemblages, therefore, comprise of humans, objects, and their relations. As mentioned in the excerpt from Deleuze and Guattari (1987), these assemblages are non-centered; humans are as important as objects. The relationship between both is what constitutes social reality.

Another point mentioned in the excerpt by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) is the absence of reproduction of assemblages and the production of a map, that can change or not. This is linked with the stability of networks (Roffe, 2016). Assemblages are heterogeneous and they encompass bodies, expressions, material, and culture (Roffe, 2016). The dependency on the relation between both objects and humans, that have different temporalities, constitutes a certain degree of stability of an assemblage (Hodder, 2012). Hodder (2012) gives the example of global warming: there are so many elements involved in the process that the process is hardly reversible at this point, especially because each element of the assemblage responds differently to nature and has a differently temporality.

However, stability does not mean that assemblages do not suffer any kind of disruption. Assemblages can be deterritorialized (or reterritorialized) when disruptions occur. Taking for instance the example of the plus-size fashion industry itself (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2016), when catalytic triggers emerge, such as a conflict between fashion logics and activist logics that shape the plus-size fashion field, plus-size fashion bloggers build identity works in order to achieve stabilization.

In sum, assemblages are networks composed of material and semiotic elements which constitute social reality. They depend on temporality and are decentralized, because of the material component, which does not necessarily follow human temporality. Furthermore, assemblages, even if heterogeneous, tend towards stability, as a map is relatively stable. However, disruptors may lead to the deterritorialization of such maps and further re-territorialization, going back to stability.

2.2.2 Works on consumer culture using ANT

Drawing on these theories, several papers in the consumer culture literature have been written trying to explain different consumption phenomena using the tenets of assemblage theory. Objects are elements in a network that aggregate family identity practices, singularized spaces, and focal and singular objects. This network goes through modification in the nature and agency of objects, consisting and forming domestic practices with materiality. Bettany and Kerane (2011) also study an object and how it acts on consumers' tensions regarding anti-consumption. They investigate a chicken igloo, which is a plastic house enabling consumers to raise chickens at home. The material of the igloo is problematized, as well as the "unnatural" idea of having a chicken in a plastic house. On the other hand, the igloo provides a way to enjoy organic eggs at home. Both practices rely on the action of a network that is non-existent without the object, which is paramount to these anti-consumption practices. Even more recently, Bettany, Kerrane, and Hogg (2014) analyzed how objects play a significant role in paternity projects and practices.

Other works on consumer research, or marketing journals, also address this subject. Shove, Watson, Hand, and Ingram (2007), for example, show how objects shape consumers' identity projects in the future, how differences in technology (such as digital photography) change consumption and production projects, and even how material (such as plastic) plays a prominent role in the stability of a consumption society. Speaking of identity, mediated identities through objects might actually feel more "real" than identities themselves. This is the case described by Bode and Kristensen (2016), who investigate consumers who track their performance in several aspects of life. The "doppelgänger" that is monitored through technology is actually more tangible than the "real" self, which makes it more real.

Other papers have focused particularly on market formation. For example, Giesler (2012) uses ANT to state that market-creation is a brand-legitimated process. He explains how the market responds with contradiction to branded discourses and how translations in the network can be used to revitalize the brand in the Botox industry. More recently, Martin and Schouten (2014) studied the formation of the minimotos market, through the engagement of consumers and the mobilization of several resources in a complex network that led to the development of this market. Incursions on taste theory have also been made using ANT theories. Arsel and Bean (2013) indicate how consumption practices build through the interaction between objects and discourses that shape high cultural capital as time goes by.

Finally, stabilization and destabilization of networks are also a subject matter in CCT scholarship. Parmentier and Fischer (2015) study brands as heterogeneous components that can be changed, modified, and destabilized by consumers, as was the example of the show “America’s Next Top Model”. Another example of stabilization and destabilization of networks is given by Scaraboto and Fischer (2016), as they mention how plus-size bloggers engage in moral-identity work (Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2009) when deterritorialization occurs in their networks, which are divided between fashion and activism logics.

2.2.3 On networks and dualisms

In this introduction I have shown a dualistic perspective that explains the emergence of markets through brands: ideological conflicts that give space for a brand to build a discourse and mobilize myths that will resonate with consumers’ identities (Giesler, 2012; Holt & Cameron, 2010).

This dualism, however, and as shown by Giesler (2012), co-exists with the assemblages, keeping a network stable (or unstable, when a disruption occurs). The work of Scaraboto and Fischer (2016) is an interesting example of such stability in the network sustained by a dualism. The dualism between the activist logics and the fashion logics drives plus-size fashion bloggers into identity discourses that give stability back to the assemblage that holds together the semiotic-material universe of plus-size fashion.

With this introduction I hope to have clearly addressed the theoretical reasoning that sustains my Dissertation. While ANT and other similar theories are important for comprehending the phenomena that intersects semiotic and material elements (Bettany, 2016), semiotic dualisms are still useful in explaining the elements in which these networks keep their balance. The contradiction between two poles of a dualism is an element of both disruption and stability in a network. Canniford and Shankar (2016) address the idea of dualisms on assemblages. They state that dualisms are important to keep the stability of a network.

This logic between assemblages and dualisms sustains the coherence of the three papers presented. In the first paper, I have explored the illegitimacy of the plus size fashion field using mostly semiotic materials: I have conducted a netnography in plus size fashion bloggers, I have interviewed plus size consumers, paying particular attention to their discourses and I have looked at the content of a plus size fashion retailer. The analysis was performed

within a hermeneutical framework and the results are presented schematically through a semiotic square and a dialectical framework.

Having concluded the first paper, I turned to myself and my relationship with objects and meanings in order to explore what was the plus size fashion identity. The stability of my network does not rely on a dualism, but on a cycle in which materiality and semiotic discourses entangle to form a food-fashion balance. I operationalized the paper by looking at myself and conducting a genealogical introspection.

Finally, on the third work presented on this Dissertation, which was my first work on the subject of the Dissertation and that has been published in a Brazilian journal (in Portuguese, I present it in English in this work), deals with the relation between consumers and the retail environment on reaffirming their stigma. The work does not use a material perspective, but comparing it with the second paper, it is possible to state that the retail is one of the elements of my network as a plus size consumer.

3 ILLEGITIMATE IDENTITY, ILLEGITIMATE MARKETS: IDEOLOGICAL CONTRADICTIONS AND THE PREVENTION OF THE EMERGENCE OF A PLUS-SIZE FASHION MARKET

I have bought some things at that store that I liked ... there are some modern clothes there ... You know ... Modern plus-size fashion, because in general ... I think the problem with buying plus size is that you never find anything modern ... Everything looks like old ladies' outfits.

—Astrid, 29 years old, lawyer

The excerpt above shows ambivalence toward plus-size fashion. The interviewee recognizes some pieces of clothing she likes in a store but at the same time views plus-size fashion as “old ladies’ outfits.” The offers to which she has access are not satisfying to her identity project. She considers herself a modern woman, and the clothes that fit her body do not reflect her self-concept.

However, the plus-size fashion industry is flourishing in Brazil (Cerati, 2015), and plus-size celebrities and bloggers have been gaining prominence in the media and even in the fashion field (McGuire, 2015), promoting plus-size clothes. Why do consumers such as Astrid still think these clothes are not legitimate to their identity project?

In this paper, I will address the process of legitimacy of a new emergent market, the plus-size fashion market, and the challenges to institutionalization that it faces. Following Coskuner-Balli’s (2013) legitimacy model and Holt’s (2004) model of how lifestyle brands become successful, I intend to show why the emerging retail brands in such a market are considered “unfit” by consumers. I posit that this illegitimate market is a phenomenon caused by an illegitimate consumer identity: Ideological tensions sustain a stigma logic in the plus-size fashion field, which prevents the creation of fashion-related myths directed at women who want to be fashion subjects and who consider their stigmatic identities as temporary. Without the myth-identity link, brands do not achieve a lifestyle status.

I will use an institutional view of markets taken from the consumer culture theory (CCT) perspective (Martin & Schouten, 2014; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). This view states that consumers and other actors might reframe field practices (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015), that stigmatized consumers reframe field meanings (Sandicki & Ger, 2010; Scaraboto & Fischer,

2013), and that stigmatized consumers might perceive inadequacy in market offers considering their status as consumers and their previous cultural capital background (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013). Furthermore, I consider the following views regarding brands: brands act as a means for solving ideological conflicts (Giesler, 2012; Holt, 2004; Holt & Cameron, 2010), brands might be considered actors in a field, brands are discursive resources co-constructed by consumers and companies, and brands as semiotic entities (Heilbrunn, 2015) transmit meaning.

In addition, I consider brands to be semiotic resources that solve ideological conflicts in a changing field by transmitting new discourses based on different ideologies. However, when ideological discourses are intertwined with field actors' identities, which are deeply rooted in their previous cultural capital formation, these emergent brands may face difficulties in being legitimately institutionalized.

Therefore, I posit the following research question: How do consumer identity projects, rooted in ideological discourses and cultural capital formation, interfere in the legitimacy process of emerging brands in a changing field?

3.1 Literature Review

In this section, I will address a few theoretical topics of interest that drive the analysis in this study. I will briefly discuss the following main themes: fields and institutional theory, the relation between consumption and organizational fields, cultural capital and field-dependent cultural capital, the idea of legitimacy, ideology and its relation with fields, brands and their relation with ideology, and identity and how it relates with the other concepts that will be discussed.

3.1.1 Fields, markets and the process of brand legitimacy

I rely mostly on the Bourdieuan idea of fields, which treats fields as networks populated by human actors or human institutions that struggle in terms of power, which are only defined after its boundaries are set (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Examples of fields include the scientific field, the academic field, consumption fields (for example, food consumption field or art consumption field) and organizational fields.

In markets, the actors that constitute the networks of fields are organizations, consumers, and media (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). In consumption, fields relate to what consumers consume and what such objects mean in terms of class reproduction and the reproduction of other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1984).

For example, according to Bourdieu (1984) upper classes consumers consume differently than lower classes consumers, which is part of the reproduction of what the author calls cultural capital, a type of capital that can be converted in social or economic advantages. Despite criticisms to this dynamic in post-modern times (Holt, 1998), the idea of cultural capital remains prevalent for explaining consumption and consumption fields.

In management literature, the idea of fields has mainly been developed by organizational scholars. Consumer culture scholars (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015) have been looking beyond organizational involvement in certain fields, developed by authors such as DiMaggio & Powell, (1983) to understand consumers' roles in market formation. They have explored consumption fields, that include consumer-produced content and consumer-generated tensions around the heritage of such content, as consumers who dispute authenticity in indie fields as well as at-home fathers looking for increase in cultural capital (Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013). Following Bourdieu's argument, consumers in consumption fields create field-dependent cultural capital (McAlexander, Dufault, Martin, & John, 2014).

Consumer practices and discourses might also be catalysts for the formation of new fields (Martin & Schouten, 2014; Sandikci & Ger, 2010; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) and tastes inside those fields (Arsel & Bean, 2013). This process that intertwines consumers, media, and organizations leads to the institutionalization of new markets or new organizational fields and the legitimation of normative (expected social behavior), regulative (legal issues), and cultural-cognitive (shared meanings) aspects (Humphreys, 2010; Humphreys & Latour, 2013; Scott, 2008).

Before discussing the process of legitimization in consumption fields, a brief explanation on brands and their roles in this process is necessary.

The idea of brands permeates the whole consumer research area. I draw mainly on Holt's (2004) and Heilbrunn's (2015) works on brands to define them as constructs, similar to ideological or mythological systems, which relate both with products, consumers' identities and ideological tensions in society. Brands, in this sense are important elements of fields. Their legitimation depends on support by consumers (Kates, 2004), on companies' responses to consumers' changes to brand discourses (Giesler, 2012; Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel,

2006), and on the reframing of brand ideology after a brand disaster (Thompson & Humphreys, 2014).

New brands, new products, new consumption practices or even new consumption or organizational fields, in order to be institutionalized, go through a process of legitimation.

The legitimation process described by Coskuner-Balli (2013) is useful to this study. Coskuner-Balli (2013) studied the legitimation process of the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) field and traced a process that follows the acquisition of legitimacy. First, a new academic community is founded with positions that oppose those of the parent field. Then, the community engages in the following practices of legitimation: (1) mobilizing cultural myths, such as the ones brands use when engaging in cultural innovation (Holt, 2004; Holt & Cameron, 2010); (2) code switching (Schau, Dellande, & Gilly, 2007), which is employing certain linguistic and cultural codes in different fields; (3) creating marketing resources; and (4) building communities. Finally, the process of gaining cultural and social legitimacy occurs.

In the legitimation process I will show of the plus size fashion brands that are entering the fashion field, perhaps evolving to a different field, I will follow Coskuner-Balli's (2013) model in order to find out the reasons why these brands do not achieve legitimacy.

3.1.2 Ideology, markets and identities

Ideology is an important factor in understanding legitimacy. Different ideologies coexist in different fields and sustain field logics (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Press, Arnould, Murray, & Strand, 2014) that influence actors' actions. For example, Press et al. (2014) show how two different logics, both legitimate, rooted in different ideologies, coexist in a field. They study the agricultural field and find that there are both the chemical normative and the organic normative logics. They also find out that even the organic normative logics follow different ideological discourses (profit and sustainability). Actors, including consumers (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015), have the power to make different or concurrent logics emerge in a field.

The concept of ideology is a complex one and has been widely studied in CCT as a mechanism that sustains field logics (Press et al., 2014), as a semiotic representation of legitimacy (Arnold, Kozinets, & Handelman, 2001), and as a form of criticism of consumer culture linked with consumer movements (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). In this paper, I use the following definition of ideology: Ideology is a set of belief systems (Eagleton, 1991) held

by consumers, sometimes conflictive with hegemonic belief systems, that sustain legitimation of ideas in different fields. Different ideologies may coexist in a certain field and are directly linked with consumers' identity projects (Kozinets, 2008), who may differ and transition among different ideological discourses.

Contradictions in market ideologies are the basis for the emergence of new brands (Giesler, 2012) and the creation of iconic brands (Holt & Cameron, 2010; Holt & Thompson, 2004). They emerge to minimize cultural tensions in society and are used in consumers' identity projects. This happens because brands are discursive entities that also offer ideological systems and narratives (Borghini et al., 2009; Heilbrunn, 2015). Hence, brands, as more than mere social markers, work in a complex network with consumers and organizations to form social capital and legitimation.

As narratives that minimize ideological tensions in the market, brands are elements linked with consumers' identities. The idea of identity is also one of the major themes in CCT studies (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Identities relate to cultural meaning systems and social structures (Beruschashvili & Moiso, 2013). They also relate directly to goods that are bought and to discourses that are incorporated into one's self (Belk, 1988, 2013). However, identities are not necessarily stable (Maffesoli, 2007). They are connected with desired and projected selves (Schouten, 1991) and might even be conflictive (Ruvio & Belk, 2013). As ideological systems that mobilize mythical resources, brands are elements with which consumers build their own identities (Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2009) and build and transition into cultural capital games (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013).

3.2 Method

The first step of data collection was conducting phenomenological interviews, eliciting experiences and stories from consumers (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989) with 10 plus-size consumers, chosen by first exposing the objectives of the research and asking them if they considered themselves plus size women.

Then, after about two years, ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) were conducted with seven plus-size consumers, chosen through the same procedures as the first ones. These last interviews included interaction with objects on consumers' wardrobes and immersion on their worlds. These interviews varied between 30 and 90 minutes in length and were transcribed verbatim, generating 480 pages of text.

The third step consisted of analyzing discourse and pictorial data, mostly from four blogs, in a netnographic manner (Kozinets, 2002). The blogs were selected for their relevance to the topic through searching mechanisms, using keywords such as plus-size fashion, plus-size and fat. During the preliminary research, blogs that appeared first on the searching engines were considered as more relevant. A preliminary content analysis was also performed, to assure that bloggers were suited to the subject I was researching and had considerable reach with plus size consumers. I requested authorization from the bloggers responsible for the chosen blogs to use their data for my research, following Kozinets (2002). The digital data accounted for 2.61 gigabytes. The fourth step was analyzing the website content of one plus-size fashion retailer, Flaminga, an online store that was considerably mentioned by the bloggers. Text and 192 photos from the website were copied and saved in PDF format. Finally, an issue of *Elle* magazine, whose digital edition cover featured one of the bloggers included in this study, was also analyzed. Table 1 summarizes the data.

For the data analysis, I read all the content collected and created a field diary containing excerpts, codes, impressions, and visual analysis of the material. Two approaches guided the interpretation of the data. First, for the textual material, the analysis procedure followed the tenets of hermeneutics (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson, 1997). For the analysis of the images, the interpretation was guided by a semiotic framework (Mick, 1986; Mick, Burroughs, Hetzel, & Brannen, 2004; Mick & Oswald, 2006). In this sense, images were treated as texts (L. M. Scott, 2009; L. M. Scott & Vargas, 2007) that manifest semiotic signs.

Table 1. Interviewees' and blogs' profiles

Profiles of the participants of the phenomenological interviews		
Name	Occupation	Age
Larissa	College professor	32
Otávia	Lawyer	27
Laura	Lawyer	26
Tarsila	Entrepreneur	60
Regina	Entrepreneur	43
Fanny	Student	17
Tamires	Manager	32
Fabíola	Student	27
Catarina	Beauty professional	43
Marília	Teacher	46
Marlene	Teacher	59
Profiles of the participants of the ethnographic interviews		

Name	Occupation	Age
Astrid	Lawyer	29
Blair	Businesswoman	29
Michelle	Student	18
Fiona	Nurse	32
Tania	Engineer	60
Suzanne	Chef	39
Tamara	Student	28
Ruth	Administrative staff	52
Blogs studied		
Blog	Main bloggers responsible	Number of fans on Facebook
Between Tufts and Vinyl Records	Juliana	90,000
Curvy Woman	Renata/Cíntia/Isabella	60,000
Great Women	Paula	710,000
Magnificent	Carol/Marcella/Marina	8,000

3.3 Results

In the next sessions, I will present the results of the present work. First, I will describe the plus size fashion field. Next, I will discuss the ideological discourses that sustain field logics. Finally, I will discuss the question of legitimacy.

3.3.1 The plus-size fashion field

In this paper, I consider the plus-size fashion field as a separate field from the general or traditional fashion field, following Scaraboto and Fischer (2013). I also use the words “plus size” and “fat” as interchangeable terms, following the narratives of the blogs studied.

I found two main field logics in the data: fashion and stigma. One of the examples of fashion logics found in the data came from a special issue of *Elle* that said “You on the cover.” The cover is silver and reflects the image of the reader who is holding it. One of the bloggers included in this study appears on the cover of the digital edition of that issue. . The issue is supposed to defy fashion discourses.

However, the message of empowerment and celebrating one’s identity clashes with the advertisements in the magazine, which display mostly tall, skinny, blonde girls with blue eyes and long hair. In the first 70 pages, where the main advertisements are concentrated—mostly those of major brands such as Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Dior, Gucci, Valentino, and

Iguatemi shopping mall - an upper-class and sophisticated mall in Brazil -, only one advertisement, from Burberry, features a black model.

These advertisements reinforce a discourse of high fashion in which traditional actors predominate (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015). Feminist critiques such as those of Wolf (1991) and Willis (1991) have addressed such market discourses and how they can be pervasive women's images. Only beautiful women, such as haute couture models, regarded as traditional actors in the fashion field, appear in such advertisements. The models and discourses portrayed in fashion magazines are not representative of women's real bodies and real clothes.

The stigma manifests in bloggers and consumers' discourses through their descriptions of the public's reactions to fatness and through their own "fat stories." For example, in the blog *Curvy Women*, blogger Cíntia comments on Internet users' discussion about Gabourey Sidibe's dress in the Golden Globe Awards. Sidibe is an actress who is admired in the plus-size community for her successful career. At that time, Internet users were saying that she did not look beautiful. She replied that they were jealous of her success: "To people making mean comments about my GG pics, I mos def cried about it on that private jet on my way to my dream job last night. #JK" (Sidibe, 2014).

Sidibe defied the fashion rules reproduced by the public, who argued that she did not conform to the beauty and fashion norms that one must follow to be a fashion subject. Bloggers, who are actors in the field that stand for activism in their narratives (Harju & Huovinen, 2015), stood up for Sidibe.

3.3.2 Four ideological discourses in the fashion field

Field logics are sustained by ideologies (Ertimur & Cosküner-Balli, 2015). Figure 1 depicts a framework that follows semiotic-square logics and describes the ideologies that sustain the two field logics of stigma, derived of fatness itself (Bordo, 2003) and fashion.

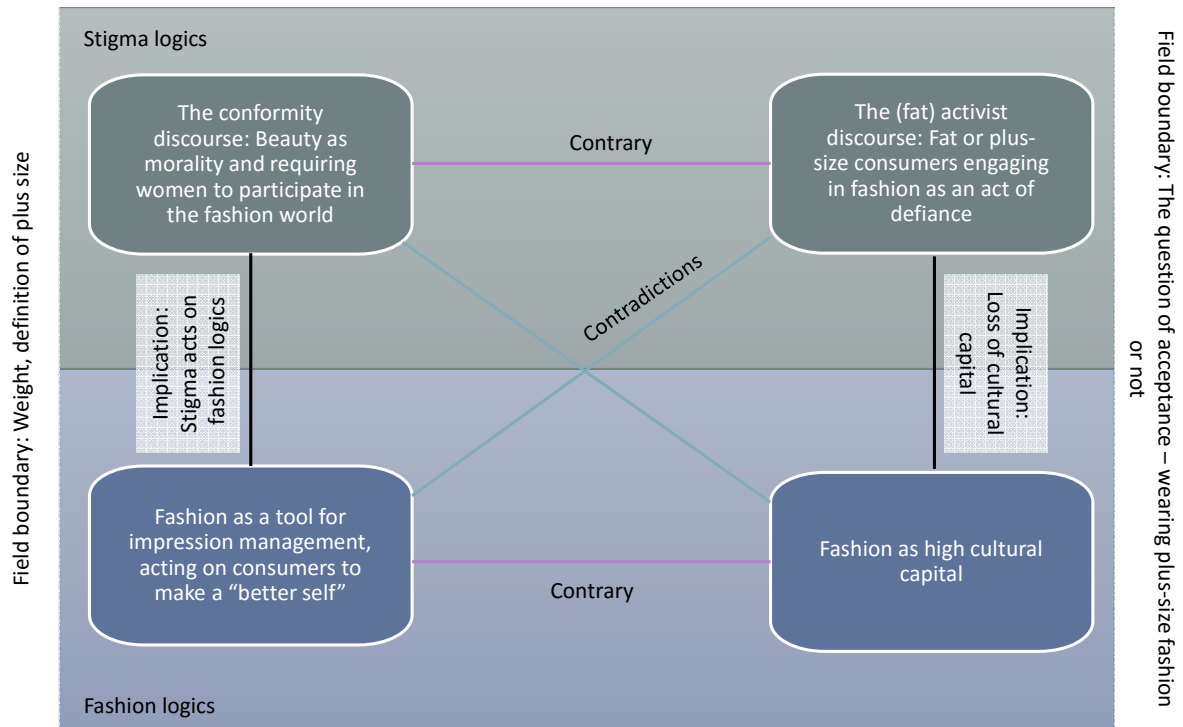


Figure 1. Square of discourses

The first ideological discourse to be analyzed is the conformity discourse. This discourse states that beauty is linked to morality (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995) and that participation in the beauty is required for women’s participation in the fashion world. Therefore, consumers who do not fit into a certain body pattern should modify their bodies to participate in the fashion world.

The conformity discourse involves body modifications instead of playfulness with fashion objects.

That happens because, as the analysis has showed, mainstream fashion considers these plus-size consumers as non-subjects of fashion.

Fashion has been linked with identity and identity projects (Thompson & Haytko, 1997), with group dynamics (Thompson & Haytko, 1997) and also with the structures of consumer society itself (Bourdieu, 1984; Murray, 2002), despite the particularities and peculiarities of contemporary society and its cultural capital dynamics, more fluid than in less fragmented cultures (Crane, 2006; Holt, 1998).

One of the main examples of such conformity discourse found in the data came from an edition of Elle Magazine. It was a special edition that said “you on the cover”. The cover is a silver paper that reflects the image of the reader who is holding it. In that same edition,

one of the bloggers studied on this work appeared on the cover of the digital edition. The edition was supposed to be a defiance to the fashion discourses.

However, the message of empowerment and of celebrating one's identity collides with the advertisings present in the magazine, that display mostly skinny, tall, blonde girls with blue eyes and long hair. From the first 70 pages of analysis, on which the main advertisings are concentrated, mostly populated by advertisings of major brands, such as Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Dior, Gucci, Valentino, Iguatemi shopping mall (one of the most upper-class and sophisticated mall in Brazil) and many others, only one advertising displayed a black model, from Burberry. Another interesting advertising was Dolce and Gabbana's. The ad shows a brunette, skinny model with two old women looking at her. She is at the center. Two old women sitting down, dressed in black, like widows. The old women have bad teeth. They dress like the women of the countryside of southern Italy, Greece, Portugal and (probably) Spain, all in black. The model dresses the Dolce and Gabbana dress, inspired by the Spanish culture. The old women are part of the scenario, not fashionable subjects: they are not young, pretty and skinny, therefore, they do not belong to fashion.

These advertisings reinforce a discourse of high fashion in which traditional actors predominate (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015). Feminist critiques such as Wolf's (1991) and Willis' (1991) have addressed such market discourses and how they can be pervasive to women's images. Only beautiful women, regarded as to be traditional actors on the fashion field, such as haute-couture models, appeared in such advertisings. In synthesis, the models and discourses portrayed in fashion magazines would not be representative of women's real bodies and real clothes (as "real" is interpreted by the plus-size community).

On page 160, the magazine indicates, for example, trends in fashion that supposedly are sexy. However, along with pictures of tall, white, usually blonde and very skinny models, there are texts considering each trend (deep cleavages or cropped tops) are only for women who are skinny and have small breasts. The magazine actually brings excerpts such as:

Pantyhose is the best friend forever of the "mini" skirt. Besides helping with low temperatures, it masquerades possible imperfections. Generous cleavages are also part of the package, but caution: deep versions are one for those who do not have generous breast. Not your case? Prefer squared cleavages instead of V shapes.

Consistent with this discourse, we found consumers who consider their fat selves as transitory and perceive diets or surgery as elements that could lead them to a change, including a change in their relationship with fashion (Schouten, 1991).

For example, Tamara believes that her plus-size condition is temporary. She says, “For me, being fat is something temporary, even if I have been a little chubby for many years now.”

Considering her need to conform and the temporary condition of her body, she does not embrace the plus-size category but wears the clothes to hide what she regards as imperfections:

For example, I have never bought wide-legged pants. I don't know if I would wear them, because my hips are so big and I think they would look even bigger [in those pants] ... I don't like my arms. I don't show them, even when the weather is hot.

Other examples can be seen in the excerpt below, from Astrid's interview, that shows that she avoids wearing a strapless top and that she believes that the same outfit, such as a shorts, would look good in a skinny woman, such as the Brazilian model Giselle Bundchen, but would look bad in a more full-figured woman, such as Valeska BigButt, a Brazilian singer.

So, it is impossible... I mean, I like it, I think it is cute, I even had one when I was younger... But I don't have one anymore because it looks so ugly, my arms are big, so it is trashy, I guess; but I think it's beautiful on other people, I just don't have one (...)
The same short that Valeska BigButt wears, if Gisele Bundchen wears, it will be elegant in Giselle, but not in Valeska, because her tights are big.

Not only, they consider their bodies inappropriate for certain clothes, but some consumers have shown the will. One of the interviewees, Blair, had just gone through a bariatric surgery a few months before the interview and told she was wearing clothes she had kept on her wardrobe from before her period of gaining the most weight, a period right before her surgery.

It is because I am in a transition phase (...) Now that I am skinner, that I have lost almost 20 pounds, I am wearing again clothes that I used to wear before, such as my short shorts.

Blair is one of the consumers who engaged in body modifications in order to conform to fashion discourses.

This conformity discourse, which, as I have just shown, was widespread in consumers' discussions and mostly among commenters on the blogs, is contrary to the activist discourse. Activism is a group-related activity that relies on oppositional ideologies to the

dominant ones (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Activist loci are spaces where members identify with themselves and disclose their identities and stories (Kozinets, 2001). Social science theory has several examples of movements where individuals share their stories to build an activist discourse (Howarth, Norval, & Stavrakakis, 2000).

In this work, activist discourse relates to the discourse blogs (and some consumers) engage when addressing their self-discovery as both fat people and fashionable subjects. Furthermore, this discourse relates with the confrontation of the fashion rules described in the conformity discourse, which addresses fashion as related to conventional beauty standards.

The community of bloggers narrated their own stories and self-acceptance journey, where they realized they did not have to modify their bodies to feel like fashion subjects. In that sense, losing weight is sometimes a sign of disengagement with the community. This fact generates tensions and conflicts. In addition, there is a conflict between being creative with the clothes and trying to look thinner. There is much discussion on what the “right” attitude of a plus-size community member is, since the idea of self-improvement, which refers to looking one’s best (Kravets & Sandikci, 2014; Mikkonen, Vicdan, & Markkula, 2013), contrasts with the idea of being part of a movement and freeing oneself from the market constraints that impose a certain beauty standard (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Therefore, a sign of embracing the plus-size fashion world is buying plus-size clothes, which, as I will discuss later, carries some of the stigma that marks fat consumers.

The blog narratives show that bloggers have critical views of the fashion world in general and of fashion media in particular. As Holt (2002) noted, consumers in the postmodern age are in touch with critical theories and have become critical agents themselves.

Paula discloses that she believes she is a victim of a “sick society” and displays an activist attitude:

The frequent readers of this blog know that I have self-esteem issues. This means I don’t think that being fat is amazing or that I am wonderful the way I am. I talk about how I feel in many posts and I am overtly sincere, more than I should be. I expose myself very much and I always disclose my thoughts and feelings. I am far from being at peace with myself because, yes, I am a victim of a sick society. (Paula, Great Women, April 8, 2014)

One of the elements of such activism is the body, particularly body acceptance. For example, blogger Juliana relates her body acceptance journey and justifies why she is proud to be a plus-size woman:

I am proud of being plus sized. But, contrary to appearance, I am not proud of my size 16 pants. What makes me feel better is the fact that I have freed myself from beauty standards that are not fun at all. I have left behind all the “dos and don’ts” about my physical body, and I have finally managed to see myself completely without hating my body. (Juliana, *Between Tufts and Vinyl Records*, April 23, 2014)

A point that could be addressed, however, the activism related to these bloggers’ discourses is less “combative” and try some kind of reconciliation. These discourses indicate that these bloggers do not want to be a new beauty standard, they want to abolish beauty standards in terms of body size (which creates a conflict with the logics of fashion as a tool for a “better-self”).

In the excerpt below, Juliana contests beauty standards in general and defines what is being “plus size”.

I think that replacing beauty standards is not evolving. On the opposite, I think that depreciating people because they are different from you is mean and ignorant and fat people have been suffering because of this for years. Female self-esteem is not a game with two teams – team skin and team fat – and it is not like someone has to win. Women are not against each other and when they unite, everybody wins.

(...)

I might be mistaken, but when I see people saying “men like a little booty” or things such as “she is not fat enough for being plus size” or “plus size without prominent stomach is not plus size”, among others, it sounds to me like self-repression. As if every woman who wore size 46 had to have small body folds. (Juliana, *Between Tufts and Vinyl Records*, March 23, 2014).

The blog posts also show that self-acceptance is a journey in which plus-size consumers engage to become fashionable subjects. They have to overcome the stigma to feel like women who are able to wear fashion pieces. In addition, the blogs offer a community of support for them to express themselves and relate with the narratives offered on these online spaces (Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010).

The excerpts below disclose some stories of self-acceptance.

"Do you know that will to stand up and saying to the world "I exist and I can do it?", that will to scream that I am capable and that I can be happy just the way I am? So, I've been through this, so have many other women, and I have always let my shyness and insecurity stopping me from smiling.

Every day I got up, looked myself in the mirror and looked for every imperfections people pointed at me during the whole day, and I think

that as a defense, I have always hidden all these flaws with black, long, masculine clothes". (Isabela, Curvy Woman, March 14, 2014)".

"To the ones that do not know it, I have only started wearing short skirts without worrying a while ago. Before, I thought that my ties were too fat and too full of cellulite for that. But then I started noticing other girls who wear skirts – not only the skinny ones – and I realized that they too had cellulite and the skirt looked good on them. I started to look at my legs and see it was not that bad as I thought on my imagination – yes, sometimes our head just creates an image that is so bad of something that looks much better on real life, it is not always the opposite". (Juliana, Between Tufts and Vinyl Records, April 6 2014)

The blogs are also a space where consumers create and discuss cultural capital in the fashion field. However, as Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) stated, plus-size consumers are illegitimate consumers not attended to by the market. In this sense, they are similar to at-home fathers who are high in cultural capital and create a new market to fulfill their needs as consumers (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013). They both have the desire to feel included by mainstream markets but engage themselves in buying the offers they find.

So, they try to recreate the high cultural capital of fashion in the bloggers' discourses.

The fashion as a high cultural capital discourse is the typical fashion logics that have been previously studied by so many authors mentioned in the previous sessions of this work, such as Crane (2006). The fashion logics encompasses both beauty and art and is very intertwined with distinction (Bourdieu, 1986).

Parmentier and Fischer (2015), for example, describe such logics when they explain the show "America's Next Top Model". Unusual situations and clothes that are hardly wore on street fashion are part of the fashion system as a role. And this discourse is also portrayed in fashion magazines through the photos of the fashion editorials, as it is exemplified by Figure 2.



Figure 2. High cultural capital in fashion exemplified by photograph from Elle Magazine

Figure 2 displays fashion in an artistic way, showing a model in a futuristic scenario with clothes and accessories that are distant from the usual prêt-a-porter looks of street style. Fashion as an art, high cultural capital form, is not available to plus size consumers, who have to use creative strategies in order to create their own cultural capital.

In that sense, not being attended to by mainstream markets does not mean that these consumers do not have enough knowledge in fashion practices; rather, brands, fabrics, and combinations are part of their vocabulary. For instance, Tania demonstrates that she understands both fabrics and colors:

Yeah, I put the blouses on this side ... I really like blouses like this, satin ... I use them over tops because I think I do not want to call attention to my waistline ... And you see, my wardrobe, part of it is black, and part of it is colorful, because I like to wear color in summer.

The blogs also show high cultural capital knowledge about trends. However, plus-size consumers must adapt to the high cultural capital practice of a stigmatic public, which entails the loss of quality of the high cultural capital. This is a consumption heterology: high cultural capital consumers in a low cultural capital field (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013). In this sense, high cultural capital contradicts the conformity discourse.

Considering, therefore, that these bloggers and consumers do not have access to the high cultural capital offered by mainstream brands, they create their own discourses, myths and fantasies, playing with fashion. In the next session, I will explore further the process of cultural capital creation on this community.

The last discourse, fashion as an impression management tool, is contrary to the “fashion as high cultural capital” discourse because it is less concerned with trends and creativity. It also contradicts the activist discourse because fashion is not seen as a creative tool for liberating oneself but as a form of looking better, even though better does not necessarily mean skinnier.

The “fashion as an impression management tool” discourse relates to the contemporary discourse of fashion among the middle classes described by Kravets and Sandicki (2014). For these authors, consumers are inserted into a market society, and fashion exists to bring the best out of them. This also resonates with the analysis by Mikkonen et al. (2013) of the show *What Not to Wear*, where the hosts explain how to improve oneself through fashion. The high cultural capital still exists, although it is not represented by the use of brands or fashion as a creative tool but by the use of clothes to present oneself better.

The seminal work of Thompson and Haytko (1997) on fashion discusses how it is both inclusive and distinguishable; the “fashion as an impression management tool” discourse supports this notion. In the plus-size fashion world, this ideology is manifested in the use of clothes to make the body shape of a plus-size person more similar to that of a slim person. On Flaminga’s website, for example, models tend to sustain such a look, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 3. Pictures from Flaminga’s website

This discourse also contradicts the activist one. It suggests that a plus-size woman can conform to some fashion rules while using fashion as an artifact of creativity and authenticity. Blogger Renata exemplifies the contradiction between these discourses:

Clothes that make one look slimmer and stress one's waist area are suggested so that the women look their best. It is for the woman to value her curves ... It is not an attempt to simply make her skinnier or deny who she is. Girls, be careful! Being a fat militant is an overreaction. We are women, we are feminine, and we like fashion. And if we did not care about looking pretty, we would go around wearing a sheet as a dress. (Renata, Curvy Woman, April 7, 2014)

This discourse is also manifested in the discussion of what sizes are "acceptable". Even in the blogs, there is a threshold to what is acceptable in the sense of being a plus size. In order to be a subject of fashion, one cannot be extremely fat. One has to find their better self, regardless of weight, which follows the ideological discourses portrayed by Mikkonen, Vicdan, and Markkula (2013). However, even in the community of plus size bloggers, there is a relation between beauty, fashion, size and health that negotiates field boundaries using stigma. If on the one hand, bloggers justify themselves when exercising and justify before giving a clue on how to look skinner through clothing, there is a preoccupation in looking beautiful and having one specific body shape. For example, Renata, from Curvy Woman, says:

I stand that obese women should be happy, have the right to have fun, work and date, wearing good clothes and good shoes. But I do not stand that people should get fat without limits because this is cool, because this is fashionable or because in her head "whatever".

I know this is a boring issue. But I have to ask: accept yourself the way you are, love your curves, but keep a healthy weight. And to know your healthy weight, go to a nice doctor, who is human and interested on you, who really analyses your habits, family history and physical characteristics and do not limit himself on using a very questionable body-mass-index number (Renata, Curvy Woman, February 19, 2014).

In the excerpt, Renata makes it clear that, despite the stigma is to be contested; there is a limit for fat activism. She criticizes the Body-Mass-Index (BMI), which is a measure that indicates the relation between someone's height and weight and classifies the person accordingly in underweight, normal, overweight and obese as a normalizing form that does not consider human variety. However, she stands that the excess of weight is a problem to health (and therefore a problem to beauty and to fashion).

This section has shown that four ideological discourses frame the plus-size fashion field. Two of these discourses link to the fashion logics: fashion as a high cultural capital marker

and fashion as a tool for impression management. However, the stigma of plus-size consumers has implications on the fashion logics. The main implication is the loss of cultural capital. Since fashion connects with beauty and beauty standards, even when adopting subcultural discourses, having less legitimate consumers trying to be actors in the field leads to the stigmatization of the new actors who attempt to propose something specific for these consumers.

3.3.3 The illegitimacy of the emerging brands

According to Holt (2004) and Holt and Cameron (2010), successful iconic brands are those that close ideological gaps in marketing discourses. This notion was affirmed in Giesler's work (2012) on the Botox industry.

In this section, I argue that the emerging plus-size fashion field is a space of capital creation and marketing myth mobilization. These plus-size fashion brands theoretically close the ideological gaps that were described in the semiotic square (the activist–impression management contradiction as well as the body conformity–fashion as high cultural capital contradiction). However, despite having legitimate actors promoting these plus-size fashion brands in an online market environment with somewhat communal rules (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), the field is still perceived as a “second-hand,” shameful version of the fashion field.

The first part of Figure 3 describes the emerging subcultural capital in the plus-size community through bloggers' practices and actors' actions, which create two myths: the sexy myth and the cute myth.



Figure 4 - Final framework of the study

Fashion bloggers have been the focus of attention of several studies in the recent marketing literature (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015; Harju & Huovinen, 2015; Sandikci & Ger, 2010; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Harju and Houvinen (2015), for example, analyzed several “fatshionista” bloggers through the logics of performance. Their conclusion is somewhat similar to what I presented in the first part of my analysis. These plus-size consumers use normative practices of destigmatization of the terms “fat” and “fat identity” and reappropriate these terms. However, these bloggers also mimic the poses of fashion and fashion bloggers (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015). This indicates the conflict between the fashion logics and the stigma logics. The results of my previous analysis show that bloggers are indeed activists in the plus-size fashion world, even if their discourse is also permeated by the fashion logic discourse. They are role models to consumers, and they are the main actors in the plus-size fashion field. For instance, on June 4, a fan left the following comment on *Between Tufts and Vinyl Records*:

Ju, I wish you would write a post showing looks with sneakers, both low and high top! I have several of them; I love them all and I would like to see some options for how to use them in different occasions (even formal ones, why not?)What do you think? By the way, I love you! You are truly inspiring, and since I found your blog, my life and my self-esteem have improved 100%. Thank you for this and never stop doing this beautiful work that is transforming so many girls’ ways of seeing themselves. Many kisses! (Commenter on *Between Tufts and Vinyl Records*, June 4, 2014).

The excerpt above shows that consumers see Juliana and how she dresses as an inspiration. She is, therefore, a trendsetter, and the way she dresses and the myths she mobilizes set some rules for the plus-size consumers who are her followers.

Bloggers mobilize myths; this resonates with the cultural branding theory. As such, blogs act as important elements in the creation of identity myths based on US popular culture from the 1950s. Harju and Huovinen (2015) came to a similar conclusion regarding a populist world - an ideal world from where myths are taken (Holt, 2004)- that provides two models of women: the sexy woman and the delicate, cute one, both condensed in the figure of the pinup, a 1950s icon that synthesizes delicacy and innocence as well as boldness and sexiness.

From the blogs, I will analyze examples of both models: the sexy woman and the cute girl. In resonance with Holt and Thompson’s (2004) work on heroic masculinity and Belk and Costa’s (1998) work on the myths of the mountain men, consumers cope with these two models and try to make a new model emerge.

Figure 4 shows an example of the idea of sexiness. They are in underwear, slightly curving their bodies to show some body parts, while hiding others. They have make-up on and

their hairs are with a lot of volume. It portrays one of the bloggers studied (Isabella from Curvy Women) in a photo shoot for *Glamour* magazine.



Figure 5 - Picture in Glamour, copied for Curvy Women blog

Sexy is a form of rebellion, a non-conformist attitude, that reflects the tensions of second- and third-wave feminism, since the former criticizes women's objectification while the latter considers the body a political stage to be transformed and recreated using objects of consumption (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Maclaran, 2012).

The other myth found in the results was the myth of "cuteness." Granot, Alejandro, and Russell (2013) studied the concept of cuteness and traced its roots to the Japanese Kawaii culture. The authors claimed that "cute" is a model of behavior and a cultural statement that is ascribed to females, as opposed to the coolness attributed to males. It has aesthetic features such as the use of lipstick, pink, and pastel colors. They also argued that in Japan, the idea of cuteness in fashion is somewhat rebellious, albeit an "indolent, little rebellion, rather than a conscious, aggressive, and sexually provocative rebellion of the sort that has been typical of cool-questing" (Granot et al., 2013, p. 76).

Semiotic examples of cuteness were found on Flaminga's website: Pink, hearts, flowers, and delicate and childish poses were all present in the pictures of famous fashion bloggers on the website, in which they wore the clothes sold there (Figure 5).



Figure 6 - Examples of cuteness from Flaminga's website

As consumers transform themselves into professional bloggers, they start acting as catalysts for new market offers and hubs in the emerging market that has been flourishing in Brazil. Thus, around the plus-size fashion bloggers and the efforts of this community—as both activists and fashion subjects—to legitimize the plus-size fashion world, other actors such as brands, retailers (particularly online retailers), and fashion shows (festivals) have emerged.

Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) argued that fatshionistas and plus-size consumers are stigmatized seekers, which means they want to buy clothes from mainstream manufacturers and retailers. They stated that if consumers insist enough, offers will be available from a few mainstream markets. However, traditional retailers' offerings to plus-size women do not seem to be meeting the expectations of bloggers, as demonstrated by the excerpt below:

When the foreign brand Mango announced the launch of a new plus-size collection, everybody celebrated. Called “Violeta,” the big women (including those in Brazil) could hardly wait to have clothes from a very edgy and fashionable brand. The campaign photo also made us excited: top model Robin Lawley, on her back, showing her curves in a black dress with lace on the back ... I was expecting a collection full of sexy, well-tailored, and structured clothes ...

What the hell were the designers and managers thinking? Is this how they think women dress? Large blouses, without accentuated waists, and ill-fitting jeans? People who have always been overweight know that in the old days, those were the kinds of clothes that we used to find in bigger sizes. Everybody wanted to put us in jeans that covered everything, and shirts were like potato bags ... But fortunately, good plus-size brands try to translate fashion trends and produce clothes that satisfy our needs: modern clothes, good prints, good tailoring, nice fabrics. (Cíntia, Curvy Woman, January 2, 2014)

Contrary to the authors' anticipated dynamics, which predicted mainstream marketers going to the stigmatized seekers (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), the markets have

evolved toward the creation of new brands. These brands use the images of the bloggers and appropriate their discourses, which try to reconcile activism and mimicry of the fashion industry, as pointed out by the present study and by Harju and Huovinen (2015) in their analysis of performative fatshionistas. These brands have been trying to solve the activist–self-management contradiction. They try to reconcile the idea of boldness, represented by activism, and the idea of a better self, represented by fashion as an impression management tool. They have been doing so by endorsing the plus-size community as co-creators and by improving the quality of their clothing, mimicking the traditional fashion industry.

However, the perception remains that these clothes are not fit for modern women who are fashion subjects. The contradiction between conformity (achieved by clothes that hide one’s body) and high cultural capital (real fashion per se) is not addressed by these clothes, as the excerpt from Astrid at the beginning of this work shows. The dichotomy between the low cultural capital transmitters, “granny style” clothes, and the clothes from brands and retailers that embrace the cute or sexy activist discourses can be seen in this post from Paula on Great Women:

Some days ago, I got a pretty dress from the girls from Flaminga, and I am in love because I love colors and prints, and they know that. The dress is from Frida, a brand inspired by the life and works of painter Frida Kahlo. I think I identify so much because the prints are very colorful and texture rich. The summer collection is colorful, young, and comfortable. Later, looking at their creations, I could observe that all the clothes are rich in details, something that one does not see so much in plus-size collections: different cuts and models, so we don’t have to wear the granny style. (Paula, Great Women, February 27, 2014)

The myths (the sexy and the cute) that address the activism self-management contradiction are not enough to erase the non-conformist, stigmatized feeling. In the literature review, I used Coskuner-Balli’s (2013) model of legitimacy, which states that market practices of legitimization include mobilizing cultural myths, code switching, creating market resources, and building community. I have shown that fatshionista bloggers and other actors in the plus-size fashion industry have acted together to create myths drawing on the contradictory ideologies, have created the market resources, and have a sense of community. Coskuner-Balli’s (2013) model implies that these marketing practices would lead to cultural and social legitimacy. However, the stigma of fatness prevents the consumer identity project from happening, because the non-conformity ideology leads to the tendency to hide one’s body, while the self-management discourse leads to a game of hide-and-seek through the clothes. Tamara’s situation is an example of this dilemma. She alternately hides and shows her body.

Nevertheless, in the end, the hide-and-seek game that constitutes plus-size fashion for her will be eliminated when she loses her body folds and her stomach is flat:

My belly is the first thing I want to hide, I am sure of this. But I like my breasts this way ... My cleavage, my legs, I like to show them a lot ... I have to hide my stomach as much as I can ... My body folds as well. Actually, I have to lose them. And I lost some weight. My legs are smaller, my butt is smaller, but my stomach ...”

Another option would be to paraphrase this to improve the flow (e.g., “Although Tamara is proud of her breasts and legs, she feels the need to hide, or even lose, her stomach and body folds

Consumers feel that their identity as a fat person should be modified, either now, by playing with objects that modify the self, or in the future. By considering their plus size temporary, consumers do not incorporate plus size brands into their identity projects.

3.4 Discussion

This study has tried to answer the question “Why are plus-size fashion brands still illegitimate despite having several actors such as activist bloggers and brands investing in this market?”

The data analysis revealed that the plus-size fashion field is shaped mostly by two field logics (Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015): (1) fashion logics, which encompass elements of high cultural capital; and (2) stigma logics, which are manifested in activist discourses (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) and in the desire to hide one’s body in the search for conformity (Bordo, 2003).

Going back to the theory, there are a few points that could be addressed. First of all, taking back Coskuner-Balli’s (2013) model. The plus size fashion field is a child field of the fashion field. However, its boundaries are not yet completely determined, since the plus size fashion field is not completely oppositional to the traditional fashion field. Actually, it is still a version of the fashion field that is stigmatized and, despite some attempts, has not transformed the idea of the stigma in an activist logic that could sustain a new cultural capital formation. Since it does not develop an oppositional ideology, the myths it mobilizes do not solve contradictions present in popular culture (Holt & Cameron, 2010; Holt, 2004). If the fat logics is about excess and the condemnation of excess (see Bordo, 2003), simply softening the body excess through “fantasies” of cuteness or sexiness does not resolve the contradiction. The excess keeps morally condemned and the community is not engaged enough and the stigmatic identities of the members of this community are seen as transitory.

Therefore, the main contribution of this work is that when the stigma of an identity prevents from the formation of a solid oppositional ideological discourse, keeping this identity always transitory because of the stigma that surrounds it, the creation of marketing myths that will solve ideological contradictions will not occur. A new field can only be formed once the stigma turns itself in activism.

A few important points have emerged from this analysis. First, the data indicated that the hourglass body type is considered the right body type. All the tips given on websites and blogs on how to disguise a certain body type lead women to contract their stomachs for their bodies to look more like an hourglass. This adds to the fat stigma (Bordo, 2003).

Second, the bloggers show that the desire to be attended to by traditional brands, which would classify these consumers as stigmatized seekers (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), intertwines with the desire to have clothes that are suited to different bodies. These consumers look not only for bigger sizes, but also for clothes that modify their bodies. They look for objects that encompass both the stigma and the fashion logics.

However, considering that these objects seem to represent the stigma logics more and their legitimacy is not supported by an iconic brand (Holt, 2004), these consumers are caught in a heterology of cultural capital (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013). Even when socialized in fashion environments with high cultural capital, these consumers do not find legitimate objects that reinforce such cultural capital. Despite the bloggers' efforts, these objects carry a stigma that is hard to erase.

This leads to the problem of the legitimacy of this new market. These new emerging brands create two marketing myths (Coskuner-Balli, 2013; Holt & Cameron, 2010) that use the discourse of activism to create brand identities. The first one is the sexy myth, which uses elements of vintage images from the 1950s (Harju & Huovinen, 2015) that represent a time when curvy women were the main beauty standard. The second one is the cute myth, which, despite being combative in a certain way (Granot et al., 2013), infantilizes women and their image. The heterology is not resolved by these myths, so these new brands do not rely on these consumers' identity projects (Luedicke et al., 2009), which is the main criteria for the creation and strengthening of an iconic lifestyle brand.

A marketplace drama (Giesler, 2008) is happening in the field, and it cannot be solved by the ideological reworking of marketplace discourses (Giesler, 2012). The main reason for this, and the main contribution of this study to the literature, is that the stigmatized identities of consumers are considered transitional (Schouten, 1991). The activism of those who accept themselves as fat is rather mild, since it also encompasses conformist norms. For consumers

who do not embrace activism even when they identify themselves as fat, the identity question is even more complicated. All consumers have engaged in dieting, and the use of objects to change the perception of one's body was mentioned in all the interviews. The interviewees all shared memories of when they were slim and happier and revealed their wish to become that way once more through dieting or surgery. This raises the question of how a brand can sell to a woman who, as a target of that brand, rejects her actual identity. Perhaps the stigma itself reframes the logics of fashion. If that is the case, then what kind of positioning should a brand for plus size consumers use to be truly accepted by its target market?

Retailers and brands may gain some insights from the data presented in this study. First, these consumers wish to be included in traditional markets, as long as these markets consider their body type and body specificity. They want to be part of the traditional fashion logics and fashion market, but they also want to hide their bodies. Incorporating one's cultural capital, but making these clothes suitable to their bodies, is one way to consider these consumers' needs.

Second, for plus-size fashion brands and retailers, creating a plus-size only fashion category might carry the same stigma carried by the term "fat." Investing in so-called democratic fashion (fashion for all sizes) is a possible strategy to address this issue. Fashion has a long history of incorporating marginal or oppositional movements, including those that tend to be activist or anti-consumption in nature. The activism might lead naturally to the inclusion of curvy (not fat) women in the realm of traditional fashion.

This work has several limitations that leave room for further research. Other stigmatized consumers could be studied, especially those whose figures defy the ideals of beauty and conformity in a consumption society. For instance, disabled and transgender consumers have their own horizontal identities and might not be attended to properly by the market.

Furthermore, I used only blog data and did not include the bloggers' other social media platforms because the blog is still their main platform for content generation. However, interaction in other media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Viber, and YouTube) is richer. Further studies could incorporate the views of consumers from other media, by using netnographies of Facebook or Instagram pages, for example. In this study, consumers' views were taken mostly from interviews.

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4 CLOTHES AS MANAGERIAL TOOLS: INTROSPECTION ON THE ASSEMBLAGES OF PERSONAL SELF-IMAGE AND FASHION

A recent, though rather recurrent theme, in the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) literature has been the use of Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) (Latour, 2007) and of the idea of assemblages (Canniford & Bajde, 2016; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) to explain consumption phenomena (Bettany, 2016).

In general, and in the CCT area in particular, these theories are used to explain the formation and perpetuation of macro-social phenomena such as marketing formation (Martin & Schouten, 2014), taste perpetuation (Arsel & Bean, 2013), brand legitimacy in a new market context (Giesler, 2012) and stability of brand identity (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015). Another focus of explanation for which ANT has been used considerably is to explain how particular objects included in family life are intertwined with micro-consumption practices and meanings (Bettany, Kerrane, & Hogg, 2014; Epp & Price, 2010) or even anti-consumption practices (Bettany & Kerane, 2011), following the material-semiotic fusion proposed by such theories (Bettany, 2016).

In this work I aim to address both foci: the macro-phenomena of the relation legitimacy of consumers with plus-size fashion brands and the micro-perspective of individual consumption.

The legitimacy of brands depends on the mobilization of myths available in the market in order to build a consistent discourse that will address a contradictory ideology (Giesler, 2012; Holt & Cameron, 2010; Holt, 2004). These discourses are linked with consumers' identity projects (Holt, 2004), moral ideals (Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2009) and personal networks of practices and future projects (Fournier, 1998).

However, identity projects are entangled (Hodder, 2012) with the material-semiotic world that constitutes assemblages (Bode & Kristensen, 2016).

Furthermore, consumers that were or are unattended by a determined market might disrupt the stability of a market assemblage, changing and creating new market offers (Martin & Schouten, 2014; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). This seems to be the case in the plus-size fashion market; the effort of “fatshionistas” - plus-size fashion bloggers, as described by Scaraboto & Fischer (2016) and other industry actors has made a new market flourish (Cerati, 2015; McGuire, 2015; SEBRAE, 2014). However, the acceptance process of these new brands and retailers seems to face a barrier (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2016) in actually reaching legitimacy.

I propose here that the assemblage that entangles plus-size (“fat”) consumers’ identity projects is stabilized around the idea that plus-size fashion clothes are translators (Latour, 2007) of a stigma that manifests and is constantly present through most plus-sized consumers’ consumption networks. Furthermore, I propose here that clothes are used as tools to manage plus-sized consumers’ self-image, where consumers are caught in tension between a network of objects, consumption practices and discourses and what we (plus-size consumers) are and what we want to be, what we want to project, and our real selves.

Considering my self-identification as a plus-sized woman I consider the method of a genealogical introspection as a way to address such a description of a consumption network that relates to the assemblages of “fatshion”.

Using introspection, I aim to assemble identity issues through networks of consumption. An interesting work that is worth mentioning in relation to this present article is that of Bécheur, Özçaglar-Toulouseb, and Zouaghi (2012). The authors have, in a recent introspection, stated that issues of ethnicity were paramount to their identities as foreigners living in different countries. In their paper they do not address the particular idea of assemblages; however, in their introspection they describe how objects from different countries are actants in a network. Their social relations were a means to experience ethnicity through objects and consumption practices. Furthermore, their personal dimensions were not considered in the process of classification by others—they were classified by cultural categories. They all concluded that their double ethnicity is what defines their identities and, at the same time, their ethnicities act as prisons in a certain way.

If ethnicity is a prison comprising a network of material–cultural elements, in this introspection I would like to suggest that such is the case with “fatness” and, because fatness is a prison, it prevents me from inserting plus-size fashion clothes in my identity projects without consequences. Therefore, in this particular work, I conduct an introspection in order to propose how fatness is entangled in a network of meanings, objects, and fields that give it its tautness characteristic.

4.1 A review on assemblages and networks

Recently the literature on consumer culture has started paying attention to the networks among humans and things that constitute social order. Overall, these networks have been named “assemblages” (Canniford & Bajde, 2016) or put under the umbrella of ANT (Latour, 2007).

In a recent book chapter on the theme, Bettany (2016) traces the brief history of assemblages and ANT in the consumer culture literature. This subject area, being a somewhat marginal branch of the studies on consumer, by all historical accounts has drawn on critical or interpretative literature in its development (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). By focusing on semiotic structures most authors have not looked properly at the objects themselves, their action, and the importance of materiality (Dant, 2005) to comprehend consumption issues.

In summary, Bettany (2016) articulates the several ANT perspectives by acknowledging their beginnings in laboratory studies and in sociology of science (Latour, 2007) and by underlining that culture is both material and semiotic. By material she means that objects can act, as proposed by Latour (2007) - objects can act, they are actants; they are important elements in a network and their relation with humans constitutes social practices (Shove, Watson, Hand, & Ingram, 2007), cultural entanglements (Hodder, 2012) and the stability of assemblages that hold together consumption practices (Roffe, 2016).

Latour (2007) affirms that objects can translate and mediate meanings in complex networks. Objects as important elements in a consumption (or anti-consumption) network have been addressed in the literature and show that consumption practices and semiotic meanings in social roles are directly entangled in assemblages (Bettany et al., 2014; Bettany, 2016; Epp & Price, 2010). Another point in terms of objects that can be addressed here is that they have their own temporality, that relations between humans and such objects are tautological (i.e. they have tautness) and that, because of these dimensions, an entanglement is hard to reverse (Hodder, 2012). Finally, it is important to address the rejection of dualism if one is to think in terms of assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987): networks are not to be interpreted in terms of opposed meanings, rather they are to be interpreted as a system of interactions.

The irreversibility of an entanglement proposed by Hodder (2012) resonates with the stability of networks, addressed by a plethora of different authors, including Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Networks or assemblages, as I will be calling such arrangements from now on, are stable on their own, but can suffer deterritorialization, or disruption, that lead to changes in the network (Roffe, 2016; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In the consumer culture literature, for example, the work of Martin and Schouten (2014) analyses how markets are created through a

network of objects, consumers, and the media. Giesler (2012) analyses the formation of a new market as well, through the legitimization of brands (the Botox industry), and shows that disruptions may occur in such a process, produced by consumers who create brand doppelgängers. Consumers, therefore, can destabilize a stable network, changing markets, discourses (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2016), and brand identities (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015).

I rely on my relationship with material and semiotic culture in order to shed some light on the reasons why plus-size fashion brands are not particularly legitimate brands that consumers want to relate with and use in their identity projects, and what the role is of fatness in my process of relating with objects.

4.2 Method

In order to answer my research question I have conducted a genealogical introspection (Gould, 1991, 2006), which means that I have tried to gain insights into the consumption phenomena from an insider's view (Gould, 1995).

Introspection is a technique that has been gaining space in consumer research (Gould, 2012; Stone, Firat, & Gould, 2012) but that has raised its own polemics (Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993; Woodside, 2004).

Previous works have compared introspective techniques with auto-ethnography or even creative-non-fiction (Hackley, 2007). The general idea of an introspection is to observe one's behavior and consumption practices and draw theoretical conclusions from such observations. Gould (2006) differentiates concurrent (writing journals on consumption as it happens) and retrospective (remembering consumption facts) introspection techniques. Both techniques can be intertwined. Introspections can also make use of photos and archival data to elicit memories and thoughts (Holbrook, 2006).

Other points worth commenting on regarding introspection are: that different voices can be used in an introspection, the researcher in first or third person and the introspected subjects (whether the researcher or not) in first or third person (Tiwsakul & Hackley, 2012); that an introspection can be conducted by one author alone with their point of view (Gould, 1991, 2008; Hackley, 2006) or by several authors with many different voices (Béji-Bécheur et al., 2012; Minowa, Visconti, & Maclaran, 2012); and that the text itself and good writing are paramount criteria for considering the quality of an introspection (Hackley, 2006, 2007).

In this work my data have come both from concurrent and retrospective introspection techniques. I kept a journal from July 2015 to November 2015, while I was writing

a Dissertation on the subject. In the journal entries I both recalled relevant facts about my fashion experiences, about my feelings as a (self-proclaimed) plus-sized woman myself, and about the relation of fa(t)shion with other areas of consumption in my life. As in other examples (Hamilton, Dunnett, & Downey, 2012), my research has had a deep impact on myself and the introspection was almost a natural consequence of such work.

Furthermore, this introspection is more related to a narrative, which is the technique of writing my own story (very similar to an autobiography), considering both personal and cultural dimensions, even though I have also engaged in metacognitive introspection, which means "thinking about thinking" or investigating my own consciousness (Gould, 2006, 2008). However, as Gould (2012) states, genealogical introspections, even when closer to a determined type of introspection be it narrative or metacognitive, encompass both ways due to the nature of the work itself.

I am aware that this epistemological choice may cause doubts and criticisms. I will address some of them now. This type of introspection has received many critics along the years. Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) being the most notable of them. The authors questioned the techniques of introspection, applied until that point to consumer research, which were mostly based on genealogical introspection (Gould, 1991). They identify five categories of introspection based on the intimacy of the researcher and introspector, the number of introspectors and their function in the work: (1) researcher introspection, (2) guided introspection, (3) interactive introspection, (4) syncretic combinations, and (5) reflexivity within research. They also pointed to six methodological issues they consider in research introspection: (1) time period covered by the introspection, (2) specificity of data collected, (3) data recording, (4) case sampling, (5) analytic stance, and (6) topical appropriateness of the method. Furthermore, Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) state that long-term memories pose many problems; they claim that this creates many biases and they do not really believe in self-generalizations. In particular, they mention that diaries should be made as they occur and researchers should not trust their memories. Woodside (2004), on the other hand, calls for confirmatory techniques in introspection, which would reduce its bias.

Despite the criticisms (Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993), arguing for more cross-checking and, therefore, arguing against genealogical introspection, I agree with Gould (2008) that the method provides intimate information that is difficult to achieve using interviews since, at least in theory; the researcher opens up and does not hide the important aspects of their (my) consumption behavior. As Shankar (2000) states, comprehending oneself is important before we go on to understand others.

Finally, I believe that my introspection has two aspects that need to be addressed. The first is that as a non-native English speaker I had difficulties in writing a text that was good enough for an interesting read - a characteristic of introspections that should not be dismissed. I have sent the paper to an English-speaking proofreader but I lose many advantages in writing something in a language that is not my own.

The second is that I tried to address a theoretical problem through the use of introspection in a formal way. Considering that introspection emerged (as an object in an assemblage it has its own agency) as part of my Dissertation, and after giving reasonable thought to the matter, I structured it on a (quasi)formal paper format, addressing a theoretical problem while using my own data to explore it.

4.3 Results

As I was writing my Dissertation, which had as a field of research the plus-size fashion universe, a few points emerged that made me consider what my role was in the process of writing the work. A few months before the work's delivery date (in July 2015 to be precise) I started wondering what changes the research had prompted in myself (Hamilton et al., 2012) in the process of undertaking a Dissertation on plus-sized women and fatshionistas and the role the outfits play in their lives. Furthermore, I also reflected on what the reasons were as to why I did not wear these clothes myself. These reflections were in consonance with the results of my Dissertation: my results indicated that despite having legitimate actors promoting plus-size fashion brands, such as plus-size fashion bloggers and fashion events, the plus-size fashion field is still perceived as a shameful version of the fashion field. I have argued in my Dissertation that the fact that one of the logics of the plus-size fashion field is stigma, it affects derogatorily consumers' identity projects in a way that prevents them from engaging in in-field cultural capital practices.

However, it was an event during a qualitative methods class that led me to the reflexive thinking about my own fatness. As a result, on the day the event happened (see the entry below), I started a journal on my feelings and thoughts and on what being fat represented to me. On that day, I started my journal with the following entry:

On July 15, a very interesting thing happened. I was on a qualitative methods data class and the main professor asked us to analyze some qualitative data regarding plus-size fashion bloggers, data from other works [note from the

author: works that were not our own]. I made a comment in the class explaining the arguments of my Dissertation and explained that I consider myself a plus-sized, actually fat, woman.

During the coffee break, my colleagues argued: But you are not fat. However, I feel like I am and then I kept looking at the mirror because, well, of course I am.

It is interesting to see that people sometimes do not perceive me as such. Even more interesting is the face people pull when they say: "oh, but you are not a plus-sized person", as if being a plus-sized person would be an offense.

Nevertheless, the point is that: it is. Because obviously I fight my weight, feel bad when I eat anything that "I should not have eaten" and feel guilty when I do not exercise. It is about feeling pretty and sometimes dieting can be very exhausting, meaning paying attention to everything I eat."

The excerpt, taken from the first entry of my field diary, displays a few interesting points that led me to write this introspection, divided into the categories of the assemblage of my consumption network on fatness. First, it is important to address the relevance of fatness itself. My introspection showed that fatness was something always *a priori* to anything else: it influenced my fashion choices, it was a fundamental stone in my relationship with food, it was part of my behavior on social media and of my relationship with my cell phone camera, and it definitely affected my perceptions of time—my past and my future. Much like gender division acts as a phantom, something *a priori* to any gender performances (Butler, 1990), constraining sexuality, fatness is my Lacanian phantom; fatness held this entanglement (Hodder, 2012) together.

In the next sections I review these entanglements in my personal consumption network.

4.3.1 I am what I (do not) eat: how fashion entangles with food

Thompson and Hirschman (1995) argue that beauty is a moral discourse. Beauty, which is indistinguishable to thinness (Bordo, 2003), is supposedly achieved through discipline.

It is impossible not to separate one's eating habits from one's body. What I eat reflects on my body and I feel constantly pressured to watch what I eat. My eating habits reflect my discipline or indiscipline in relation to my actual and my future body. Food, an element that is modified and entangles so much with cultural capital, heritage, and belonging (Cronin, McCarthy, & Collins, 2012), was to me a source of anxiety.

Re-reading my journals I have noticed that in all of them—literally all of them—after I related an experience with fashion or an emotion I always ended talking about food.

What did I eat today? Why did I eat that? What was the amount of food I ingested? Food was an element of tension and neuroticism.

I have, as I was writing my journal on my relationship with fashion, "accidentally" made a journal on what I ate on a daily basis. The day I had both cake and lasagna, for example, I wrote an entry in the journal promising to myself that I would go running the following day and then I remembered one of my favorite dresses and how I felt bad by not being able to wear it when I was a few pounds heavier, right after I stopped smoking. The interesting point is that even when I lost these extra pounds after my divorce in 2015 I did not wear the dress. So what is the point of thinking about a dress that I will not even use?

The point is that both these elements (food and dress) modify my body and modify my self. Food is a necessary source of energy. Nevertheless, in a highly symbolic society such as our own (Heilbrunn, 2015), how does one disentangle food from the network in which it is embedded (Hodder, 2012)? Carbohydrates are, to me, poison, because they come from origins we cannot trace, because they (supposedly) fill our body with ingredients that we are naturally not suited to eat, because they give us too much energy and, when we storage such energy, it converts to fat. Carbohydrates are the cheapest and most energy-efficient foods available (cake and lasagna are easily bought or made) and yet they are the villains. Carbohydrates, the cheap, efficient, and comforting carbohydrates, are not only the supposed enemies of our health they are also enemies of women's aesthetics. They turn them into unfashionable subjects. As such, what is their value? When the body is still the main measure (Bordo, 2003) of these carnal subjects (Stevens & Maclaran, 2012), women, whose cultural capital can basically only be manifested through fashion—considered a futile consumption field¹—carbohydrates are the enemy.

On the other hand, food is also a source of pleasure. I conducted an auto-ethnography exercise in July when I was doing a qualitative research class. The auto-ethnography was about food. Mostly, what I noticed was that I am very engaged in food pornography. When I am on Facebook looking at my news feed I pay attention to a few things: plus-size fashion blogs that I follow, political matters, and food.

I can recall several times that I had stopped whatever I was doing to watch food porn videos on Facebook and then plan to make a recipe. For example, once I saw this Oreo pie. It was a time when I was still married (I both got married and divorced during the time of writing my Dissertation) and we were entertaining a number of friends in our new apartment. I

¹ For a good example see the work of Russel Belk (1995) on collectors and his inquiry on why only men's collections are considered collections, while women's typical collections, such as shoes, are seen as futile.

saved the recipe in a folder that I keep for my favorite recipes - and where I almost never look - and then I made the pie for some friends.

Not only do I like food porn, I like cooking and consider myself a “foodie”. Taking a brief look at my Instagram feed I noticed that from the last 20 photos, three were photos of food - two pictures of things I cooked myself and one of a hamburger I ate in London - and two were photos of drinks - an Aperol Spritz and some Ale beer. Cooking is both a hobby and therapy; it is something I enjoy doing and that I do almost on a daily basis. I like having my friends home to share a dinner with me and I really like to go out to eat.

Food is part of me, part of my cultural capital formation, and part of a contemporary gender performance. Once we are mothers, we cook. Once we marry, we have to know how to cook something. Cooking is the act of producing the enemy. It is a sin, but one that can be indulged if conducted properly, with the right ingredients—the ones that supposedly are not harmful. Through interacting with the kitchen, objects, and ingredients, women situate themselves in different roles: the role of mother or of the professional woman—much the same as the relationship men have with technology which is an important translator of paternity roles (Bettany et al., 2014). Mother or professional, however, women need to take care of their "health": eat natural food, exercise, engage in eating the right nutritious ingredients, and always run from sugar (a few years ago, was not butter the biggest problem?)

The pressure for control of the body is present at the shopping mall, the fashion magazine, the grocery store, the farmers' market and, obviously, in the kitchen. Therefore, our bodies are a source of tension in all traditional female spaces. How does such a neurosis that manifests in my relation with objects and spaces (considering that my body and I are inextricably inseparable) manifest in my personal life? Being both a fan of food and fashion puts me at a crossroad: how can I fit the clothes I want to wear if I do not have the "right body" for fashion? How can I have all the discipline for the "right body" if my hobby consists in ingesting and putting calories into my body? Being undisciplined with the looks of my body, do I even deserve to be fashionable?

By not taking any action of the binary of food x fashion, because it is not a binary at all, it encompasses exercise, retail, actions objects perform, etc., I use instruments to try to compensate for and stabilize a body that is not completely a fashion body—nor a completely undisciplined body. I eat what I want in one meal and then, in another, I eat a salad or just a banana and a yogurt for dinner, if I ate a barbecue for lunch, for example. I avoid fried things and skip dessert. I lightly exercise. Nevertheless, I do not give up on any of the pleasures and the balance is complicated.

Another interesting thing is the scale I have on the floor of the bathroom. I measure my weight weekly, so I can "take action" whenever I feel like my weight has increased. The scale shows a reality that is actually more real (Bode & Kristensen, 2016) than my own perception of my reflection in the mirror. Another form of "measuring" weight gain or loss is through trying on clothes that are particularly unflattering; when they fit well it means I have lost weight (or gained muscle), when they do not it is time to "take action" (change my eating habits). These clothes are objects performing the function of other objects and that translate (Latour, 2007) the meaning that will lead to an action of re-territorialization (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Roffe, 2016) of my personal food–fashion network.

Therefore, several objects end up involved in the process of my entanglement with my weight, my food, and my wardrobe. In addition, these objects and situations did not just appear or become recurrent after I reached (did I?) womanhood.

Being an overweight teenager was a truly hard process. I had problems with food, moments of overeating, not only on social occasions, such as parties, especially family parties, but also overeating alone at home during anxiety crises, even when I was a smoker, and cigarettes were a tool for reducing anxiety. When I was 15 I reached 81 kilos and started some difficult diets. One particularly that I recall was the "Pineapple diet". I used to attend a place where I undertook acupuncture to lose weight; I measured my weight weekly there. The professionals who worked there - who were not trained nutritionists - used to give me a printed piece paper with a new diet on it every week. One particular week they gave me a diet that consisted of eating only pineapples for a week; oh, I could also eat two bananas daily. Moreover, I did it and I lost 3 kilos in the process, but gained a few things as well: mouth ulcers, a stomachache and a flu bug.

There is another diet that was very popular when I was a teenager and I tried it a few times; even this year I engaged in a different version of it. It consists of this vegetable soup with cabbage, carrots, tomatoes, bell peppers and other vegetables. One should eat this soup and a few other things, such as a piece of fruit one day and then yogurt another day.

For a food lover like me such diets are torture. For a fashion lover like me sometimes these diets are a necessity. Even if I do not engage in such crazy diets nowadays I do not discard the idea of engaging in them in the future.

4.3.2 Do I want a Dolce and Gabbana uniform that makes my body look slimmer? I guess so

If the relationship between food and fashion is complex, the relationship between the body and clothes is not much simpler. Following the work of Epp and Price (2010), I will try to show how particular pieces (a dress, a uniform, and boots and jeans) had agency on my life, entangled with other objects. The dress was a zebra-patterned dress, bought in 2014, that defied my fashion norms at a time when I was dressing more conservatively. The uniform represented authorities I wanted to defy when I was a teenager, and was a mechanism of equalizing all the young people in a phase of my life when I sought individuality. Finally, the jeans and boots represent the baseness of a cultural environment (Agronomy College).

The dress was bought from this particular store from where my mother and I used to buy. The store owner sends a bag full of clothes to her clients' houses so that the clients can choose their favorite pieces from the bag. She knows my taste and usually already knows my size. In a certain sense, this reduces my difficulty in dealing with tensions in the retail environment (which always remind me of my weight) and minimizes the tensions of being a stigmatized seeker—in the definition of Scaraboto and Fischer (2013), a consumer who does not find offers in the market consistent with her size and the heterology (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013)—in cultural capital that I feel having to buy clothes that I think do not "feel right" (discussed in more detail later).

Coming back from my theoretical digression and introducing the “jeans and boots” case, which happened in the same period when I bought the iconic dress. I had put on some weight at the time - when I put on weight my style changes. I had started to dress more seriously and avoided clothes that were too adjusted to my body. At that time, I also got my first job as a lecturer with undergraduate students and I started to dress more like a professor, which means covering more and wearing soberer clothes.

However, even wearing soberer clothes, I always found it difficult being "basic" when it came to fashion. A brief look at my wardrobe will show you that I like bold accessories: big necklaces; huge, branded sunglasses and prescription glasses; huge, and sometimes colorful, branded purses; high heel shoes; colorful, art-themed scarves; and sparkling earrings. In the conformity–uniqueness dynamics of fashion (Thompson & Haytko, 1997), uniqueness for me comes from these objects. I never managed to leave the house only with jeans, a white shirt and running shoes—not even when I was in high school or college, which leads to the uniform issue. When I was in high school I had to wear a shirt with the school’s symbol (a

uniform, but only the t-shirt) and I have always hated uniforms. Honestly, I think they are fascist little things that exist to make us feel equal to the members of a group with which we do not necessarily identify (colleagues). This is probably not the politest thing to say (it is an introspection, the advantage of this is that it is one of the few methods capable to detect impoliteness), but I do not feel comfortable being with "the masses", who tend to have similar thoughts to each other. Rationally, I know that the "masses" are a concept that are not suited to explaining contemporary, consumption society (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 2002). Still, if someone makes me use a uniform I feel very much like Ortega y Gasset (1932) analyzing the masses in the beginning of the fascist era.

To compensate for the fact that I had to wear the jeans–white t-shirt (the school uniform) combo I used to cut the uniform and customize it, wear destroyed jeans (I destroyed a pair myself once), high heel shoes and incredibly huge earrings, that I do not wear anymore. Even in the sober phase (after all, I would not be 17 forever), sober meant hiding my body—not hiding my rather extravagant accessories. Going back to the time I was a lecturer I was teaching in a university that offers graduation in Business but where the main courses are in the agronomy area. Therefore, I had to get my feet muddied a little, since I took the bus to get there and it stopped a little far from the business faculty. I learned to go with boots and jeans, but high heel boots, matching belts with colorful rocks and details; I kept the extravagant style, but lost any traces of youth in the way I dressed.

So, finally coming back to that particular shopping occasion about the dress. My mother kept saying that I was young - I was 28 at the time - and that I did not have to dress like an old woman. On that particular day a zebra-patterned dress (I am a big fan of animal prints) came into the bag. I tried it on and showed it to my mother. The dress was very different to the clothes I had been wearing at the time; it was more fitted at the body and shorter. My mother said that I should buy it because I looked more age-appropriate in that dress than in the typical clothes I was wearing at the time. However, the first time I wore the dress, at a birthday party, I was not feeling particularly beautiful in it. It showed my body folds and because of that and because of the length as well, considering the dress is shorter than most of the clothes I have., I was only able to wear it with tights underneath—tights that compressed my body in order to change its shape. I took a picture that day to put on Instagram/Facebook and made an ironic comment on it, saying that the clothes were nice, the model not so much and that I was trying to be bold in fashion. Many friends have “liked” the photo and paid compliments to it. I have worn it on a few other occasions—always with tights underneath; with or without a few pounds more, I could not and I cannot wear it without anything underneath.

These three particular objects—the uniform, the jeans–boot combo and the zebra dress—and the many accessories I have mentioned act in different manners. Fashion is a field whose territorial map (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) encompasses art (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015), craft, social-class symbolism (Bourdieu, 1984; Simmel, 1957), activism, and defiance to constituted norms (Crane, 2006; McCracken, 1986), as well as the tension between conformity and differentiation (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). The entrance of new actors and the change in the drawings of that map, which follow or reject these new actors and trends, disrupt this field. At the individual level, however, which is obviously entangled with the whole logics of the field, the network of practices revolves around stabilizing and creating a self. The ideal self not only is linked to objects, but also to a plethora of influences that, through practices (Arsel & Bean, 2013), constitute one's cultural capital formation. In my case, my ideal self, my identity project, encompasses relating with objects that act to distinguish me from the supposedly uniform crowd that I reject and, at the same time, relate to objects that act in order to conform my body to a certain norm.

The distinguishable nature of objects relates to a narcissist behavior that is enhanced and/or mediated through social media.

4.3.3 The body: positions, how I look, the perfect photo, the difference between the photos and myself

The relationship with fashion, which brings about these narcissistic elements, leads to reflexive thinking on my use of social media. How does fashion relate to social media?

I have a very addictive behavior when it comes to social media. The fact is that I do not know how many times I check my Facebook or my WhatsApp every day. Countless, I suppose. I also have an Instagram profile that I check every day and a Medium profile where I edit two publications: one about consumption and the other about politics.

My digital self (Belk, 2013) is carefully assembled and it is something on which I expend a lot of energy. I am aware that, as with most social media users, my behavior on social media is related to social approval and narcissism. I notice the amount of “likes” I receive and, instinctively (or not so much), I tend to reproduce the posts that were the most liked. In order to do so I rely on several tricks: filters, body positions, hiding parts of my body, avoiding repetition of clothes, and avoiding being tagged in unflattering clothes.

In terms of pictures, this relates to several details in the photos and in the poses I make in photos. For example, I have real trouble with my arms. This means that when I am

about to take a full-body picture I will try to hide them in the picture. On several occasions I have hidden behind friends and family so that my arms would not be showing. Another trick I have used several times is to put my hand on my waist and my arms at the back, so they look smaller than they actually are. The camera is an object I can play with, hiding myself from it when necessary.

Another trick - and I know these are basic celebrity tricks as well - is always to hold the camera a little higher when taking a selfie. If I am taking a picture in front of the mirror - which I may not necessarily post, just send to someone to show them a particular outfit -, I usually put some heels on, because they make me look slimmer, hold the iPhone with my right hand, face the mirror, contract my stomach a little, look at the screen, look again at the mirror, usually I set my hair a little, and only then will I take the picture. The position is also always the same: my left hand on my waist and my right hand holding the phone, I look at the mirror and move my head slightly to the left. The camera and the mirror are the carriers of my image.

There is another point about clothes and social media: avoiding repetition. For example, on the weekend of October 31 (on that day) I wore a white dress with black dots that I had bought and used for the first time in Italy earlier in the year. Someone had taken my picture wearing that dress and, mainly because I found it lovely, I wanted to post a picture wearing it. However, on the weekend of October 31, I was a little worried about posting an Instagram/Facebook picture wearing that same dress. Actually, I think about that every time I choose an outfit for going out: will I be posting pictures? Do I have pictures with this particular outfit already?

Finally, I delete or do not tag myself in pictures where my body does not look flattering - which means looking fat. There were times when I did not care so much about looking fat, but at the moment I do.

The completely digital self (Belk, 2013) ends up being more tangible than my real self; it is a projected self, the self that I want to show others. In addition, in this self my body is modified in parts: I cut my arms, I grow in height, and my weight seems less than it actually is. The camera is the object that describes my reality. It changes, filters, modifies, and creates a better self. The camera and the assembling of pictures have the same action that clothes have: they are part of the creation of a better self.

In the next section, I talk about my relationship with the plus-size fashion world and myself as a fat person and researcher.

4.3.4 The past, the research, and the (fat?) me in the future

I have transitioned between feeling fat and feeling ok my entire life. It was harder when I was a teenager. I had episodes of not wanting to leave the house because I felt too fat. In addition, back then my body was not so different to what it is now, at least in terms of height and weight.

My whole family can be considered to be a little fat. They differ in weight and body type; however, my closest female family—my mother and my aunt—are not extremely fat, just a little. I acquired a big part of my fashion education and cultural capital through them and they were always big fans of shopping and fashion in general. Even though my fashion cultural capital includes practices taken from other sources, reproducing my family's practices was an important part of my fashion cultural capital socialization (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013). Moreover, even though they never thought of themselves as slim women they rarely surrendered to plus-sized fashion clothes.

I think the idea that plus-size fashion clothes would act on me and leave me looking like a potato sack was deeply ingrained in my conscious. What are these stigmatized objects? What is it about them that makes us think they make us look old, ungraceful and, well, stigmatized?

Then I started my Dissertation on plus-size fashion and started to look at blogs. My contact with blogs made me engage in a self-acceptance process that was very interesting and, during that "acceptance time", I tried to face the stigma of plus-size fashion clothes. My impressions, however, were not the best. In a note from October 19, I recalled the experience:

I was a little heavier than I was today and I decided that I was going to try to buy clothes from an online store called Flaminga, which was the store that I analyzed for my Dissertation.

I bought two clothes: a skirt and a dress.

I did not know how to properly calculate the size of these clothes. Should it be large? Should it be extra large? I did not know. I saw how it looked on the model, how it looked on the blogger wearing them (Jualiana Romano). I cannot quite remember if it was just the dress or if she chose the skirt as well as one of her favorites.

Anyway, the clothes came home.

The package was beautiful, pink with a flamingo on it which, if I remember well, was also a key holder. I was quite impressed with the box. Very cute.

Then I tried on the dress. I had some friends over; it was winter and I was wearing a black blazer over the dress. I found it too short and a little bigger than I wanted. About the hearts: well, fine, I chose the dress, black dress, with

the little white hearts. However, when I had to wear it, it felt ... weird. Childish, I guess. More like a fantasy than something I would normally wear. In the end, the second time I wore it, it was during a costume party. I tried to make a "50's" look. Interestingly, some friends said that it did not differ much from the type of clothes I wear. This means that I endorse a "rockabilly" 50's discourse that turns fat women into fashion subjects, only they impersonate a fantastic style, a fantasy, something retro, as if we are not from this age...

In the end, I had them both modified. The skirt was very bad in quality and I don't love the fabric of the dress. I like specific fabrics: cotton, silk, jeans ... things that are more "natural" on the body. I do not like polyester very much; the body does not breathe properly.

The plus-size fashion clothes acted on me as if they were a fantasy. A fantasy representative of what I do not want to be. Wearing them I become a stereotype: the cute fat girl who is defying the establishment by wearing a cute fantasy (Granot, Alejandro, & Russell, 2013). Or they act on me as a fantasy of fatness. I either accept the stigma or wear something that dresses me as fat (and therefore boring and old, and all the other meanings associated with the fat stigma) or I embrace the fantasy and become some kind of fat-activist.

In the next section I show how these objects, practices, and discourses entangle and act on my body and on my mind to create a desirable self.

4.4 Discussion

In this work I have proposed a material-semiotic (Bettany, 2016) approach to explain how clothes serve as a tool for managing my self-image inside a network of discourses, practices, and objects.

As in the work of Béji-Bécheur et al. (2012), where ethnicity is considered a prison consisting of an material-semiotic assemblage, fatness is a prison that dictates my relation with objects. Fatness is the element that mediates my relation with a network of consumption elements: food, clothes, and social media. In that prison fashion is both the panopticon that disciplines (Foucault, 1995) my consumption practices, as well as the solution I use to pretend that I am not in such a prison.

My consumption network is stabilized (Thomas, Price, & Schau, 2012) by a balance that holds the idea of the prison together: fashion reminds me that I need discipline, but it is also used as tool to minimize the crime, and pretend I did not perpetrate it. If an event occurred, such as losing weight, suddenly losing interest in food, or suddenly becoming an activist (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Scaraboto & Pereira, 2013) or a consumption-unattached

person (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2012), perhaps this network would be de-territorialized (Roffe, 2016). While the situation of anti-consumption is at its best non-voluntary (Leskinen, Syrjälä, & Laaksonen, 2014), I stay in the prison, trying to manage the several facets of my conflicting selves (Ruvio & Belk, 2013).

Figure 6 synthesizes how my network objects entangle to keep a stable network, where clothes perform the role of the guards of the prison and the social workers that make life in the prison seem better. Using another, lighter, metaphor, but rather related to the idea of discipline and changing “what is wrong”, I mapped my consumption network as a quality cycle (plan-do-check-act or PDCA).

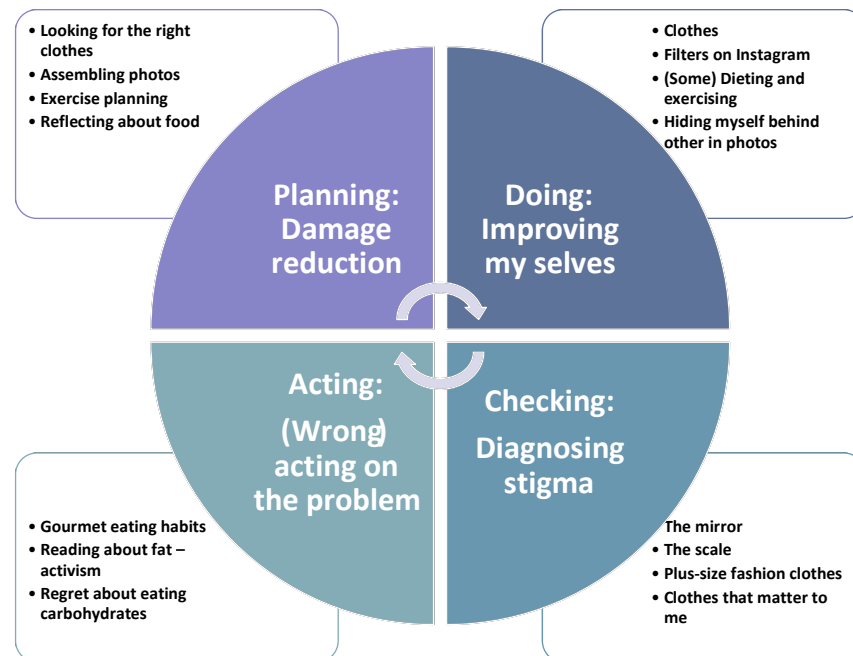


Figure 7 – Assembling my fat consumption tools in a quality-control cycle

The figure shows how I manage my selves through a quality control cycle. First, I plan for damage reduction while eating. This means looking for the right clothes that will act to make me look slimmer than I am. Planning damage reduction also means assembling the photos that go on social media, exercise planning right after eating something I was not supposed to, and reflecting on food and my eating habits. My selves here are the desired ones (Schau & Gilly, 2003) - the ones I aim to have - and I address my network of objects and consumption practices I have to engage in to achieve such selves.

The second phase is my self-improvement, the “do” phase of the PDCA framework - or my punishment in the prison of fatness. This includes hiding the shame of being fat and the

main tools to achieve that materially are clothes and image filters: they hide, they correct imperfections, they act on my body and face in order to let only the best of me emerge for others. These objects are tools for making myself a better self (Kravets & Sandikci, 2014; Mikkonen, Vicdan, & Markkula, 2013). They act by hiding and minimizing the feeling that it is to be in the prison. Dieting and exercising, on the other hand, would be a way out of the prison - a way out that depends on me and on me only. “You can do it”, “what is your excuse?”, “why instead of complaining after eating dessert, don’t you stop eating dessert?” These are affirmations that disclose an ideology that permeates the contemporary moral–beauty ethos (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995): everyone is responsible for their own well-being and for the well-being of the world (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). Discipline is fundamental and it is the basis of management, of society, and of inclusion in the fashion world. An indulgent, yet anxious, person like myself, is always caught in the crisis of discipline (dieting, exercising) and yet being indulgent and using the material-semiotic offers of the market to hide my shame.

The third phase is the rule that measures me: the mirror; the scale; the iconic clothes I have in my wardrobe; and the stigmatized, bad-quality, plus-size fashion clothes that are there to remind me each and every day that I have been indulgent. All these objects perform the same disciplinary function: acting on my self and making it tangible and real—even more real than my loose perception of it (Bode & Kristensen, 2016). These objects objectively show my indulgence by constraining, measuring, or reflecting my body.

Finally, the fourth phase would be the “act” phase; however, this assemblage of food and fashion, narcissism and indulgence, showing and hiding my real and/or desired selves on social media, would not be balanced and stable (Roffe, 2016). The cycle only closes and begins again because I do not act. I indulge myself in eating what I want and then the whole crisis about the consequences of my consumption and the damage-reduction plans begin again. Were I to actually take a stand and resolve (can we, actually?) a consumption crisis that entangles (Hodder, 2012) me among food and fashion, health and hedonism, indulgence and discipline, altogether, acting on me—on us, plus-sized consumers, fat consumers—my map would be changed (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The territory I am in would be another one and I would be entangled in another, different network.

4.5 Final remarks

I believe that this paper has contributed by describing an assemblage that deals with consumers’ self-images. The assemblages described here entangle with each other, bringing material and

semiotic consequences. Using Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) terms, it is possible to say that the balance of this network depends mostly on the instability that food and fashion generates on my personality. Both prison and delinquency (different assemblages, according to Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) are translated by the objects I use on a daily basis. The fat woman consumption assemblage is, therefore, a rhizome that connects directly society bulimic's logic (Bordo, 2003): there is the delinquency of eating, the objects that fulfil our bodies with indulgence and the prison of the perfect body, where objects discipline and punish. How do fat consumers, or stigmatized consumers in general, balance their indulgences (if the stigma is provoked by one) and the disciplinary apparatus that is so present in every aspect of Western life? Objects seem to play an important part in minimizing the entire network; they remember consumers of their stigma and, at the same time, they minimize such stigma by hiding it when used by consumers. I hoped to show the importance of the materiality (Bettany, 2016; Dant, 2005; Latour, 2007) of the semiotic tensions that were so well addressed previously in the literature (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995).

With this introspective work I hope to demonstrate how material-semiotic the importance of materiality (Bettany, 2016; Dant, 2005; Latour, 2007) assemblages relate to semiotic tensions that were previously addressed in the literature (Bordo, 2003; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995) regarding identity, fashion and the body. I argue that without this introspective piece my analysis of plus-sized fashion would not be as thorough, as the personal experience with this issue sheds light on some aspects of the phenomenon which are purposely "hidden" by the subjects or sometimes incomprehensible to "outsiders".

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5 THE WEIGHT OF RETAIL, THE WEIGHT IN RETAIL AND IDENTITY: AN ANALYSIS OF PLUS SIZE FEMALE CONSUMERS

The concept of identity is one of the central subjects in the area of consumer research (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). One of the approaches adopted to explain this concept relates the brands and the products to consumer identity (Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993; Schau, Gilly, & Wolfenbarger, 2009). This relation is due to the idea that objects convey discourses and ideologies present in the popular culture (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), and is used by consumers to build their identities (Belk, 1988).

Besides involving objects and brands, retail is also an element that influences the constitutive process of consumer identity. This argument is based on recent works that indicate that retail is a conveyor of ideologies (Borghini et al., 2009) or cultural discourses (Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006), with which the consumers creatively build their sense of “self” (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). However, other studies show that some consumers are stigmatized and neglected by the market (Sandicki & Ger, 2013; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) because, even if they want to acquire a given product and can afford it, they cannot find it in retail.

This paper examines the relation between identity and stigma, and the role of retail in this relation from the perspective of plus size female consumers, *i.e.*, women who use clothes with sizes equal to or above 44 (Winn, 2004) and who consider themselves above the weight deemed “ideal”. We examine specifically how the stigma of weight affects the creation of an identity project (Shankar, Elliot, & Fitchett, 2009) built upon the extended self by means of possessions (Belk, 1988), and which strategies female consumers create to undertake this project facing one of the main market elements that reproduces the stigmatization discourse, which is retail.

This paper contributes to the literature on consumer culture, mainly connected to interpretative techniques (Gaião, Souza, & Leão, 2012), still little explored in Brazil (Sampaio et al., 2012).

The work is divided in six parts. In the first section, we present concepts related to identity in consumption and retail. In the second section, we discuss the methods we adopted to perform the work and, in the following section, we present the results of the empirical research. The fourth section contains the theoretical discussion of the findings and the relation to the area of retail. At last, we present limitations and suggestions for future research.

5.1 Theoretical basis

This section is organized in two parts: the first one deals with identity and the consumption of fashion, and the second one refers to the role of retail as a means to convey meaning.

5.1.1 Identity, Body, and (Non) Consumption

Identity, in contemporaneity, is an individual project, continuously developed through a given process (Shankar et al., 2009). The identity project involves an attempt to create a coherent self, although fragmented (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995) and diversified (Bahl, 2013).

Consumer culture is an arena for the production and circulation of identity representations (Shankar et al., 2009), whereas the market is the source of the symbolic resources with which people build narratives of identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Schau & Gilly, 2003), expressing sovereignty (Holt, 2002), individuality (Thompson & Haytko, 1997), and features that distinguish them from other groups (Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Kates, 2002; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

Belk, in 1988, coined the expression “extended self” in a seminal work describing forms in which possessions or symbols, such as places, become part of what an individual is. One should note that, in Belk (1988), self, sense of self, and identity are treated as synonyms and indicate the manner in which the individuals perceive themselves. Later, it was investigated how consumers use objects (Kates, 2002), consumption practices (Kozinets, 2002), cultural icons (Kozinets, 2001), and brands (Fournier, 1998; Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2009) in their identity projects.

The extension of the self by means of objects of consumption in search of an identity project happens in a context of interaction between individuals and groups of individuals. The consumer who invests in a given project is subject to the judgment of others, therefore alterity (Oliveira & Leão, 2012) plays a fundamental role in the construction and legitimation (Sandicki & Ger, 2010) of the identity project undertaken by the consumer.

If from social interaction, embedded in ideological discourses, emerge negative and stereotyped evaluations of a given group of consumers, these will be considered stigmatized (Sandicki & Ger, 2013) and probably excluded from certain environments of social life (Goffman, 1963). Studies that consider the identity of consumers stigmatized for their physical characteristics (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), sexual orientation (Kates, 2002), or consumption

choices (Kozinets, 2001; Sandicki & Ger, 2010) have concentrated on the tensions caused by possessions that make the individuals identify themselves more with the stigmatized group or distance themselves from the stereotypes.

As Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) indicate, plus size consumers can be considered a stigmatized group. Moreover, they are stigmatized because of a characteristic that is considered controllable, which is their own body or parts of it. The body is part of the extended self (Belk, 1988) and it can be modified (Almeida, 2006) or controlled (Thompson & Troester, 2002). The body is the stage where the meanings of brands and objects are exposed (Fontenelle, 2008) and is the object of symbolic discourses of youth and beauty (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). As it is considered controllable, the individuals whose body collides with the expected symbols tend to be stigmatized, including morally, for being guilty of the moral laxness with which they treat one of the main belongings of their self.

5.1.2 Retail as a Conveyor of Meanings and Its Role in Consumer Identity Formation

One of the main manifestations of the process of transmission of discourses by means of the market are retail stores, protagonists of contemporary life, for they are places at the same time of leisure and consumption (Albino, Resende, Siqueira, & Carrieri, , 2010).

Contemporary studies in the area of consumer culture indicate that retail, for instance of goods, conveys meanings and even ideological discourses (Borghini et al., 2009; Dion & Arnould, 2011; Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006). These discourses are conveyed by means of the retail atmosphere, the disposition of objects in the sales area, colors, the product mix, among other elements (Borghini et al., 2009) that are relevant in the choice of the store by the consumer (Haytko & Baker, 2004).

The transmission of these meanings by retail occurs through communication, which can contribute to the legitimation of the brand (Arnold, Kozinets, & Handelman, 2001), as well as through the experience of the consumer in this environment (Borghini et al., 2009; Dion & Arnould, 2011). The concept of experience is the subjective response of any consumer to any contact with a company, either direct – purchase or use of services – or indirect – unplanned encounters, including advertising, comments, among others (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Thus, retail will not only convey meanings, but also obtain responses from consumers based on their experiences, interpreted and elaborated according to their individual identity projects.

Given that the extended self depends not only on physical and tangible objects to be consolidated (Belk, 1988), even though the possession of these objects creates important relations for it (Ahuvia, 2005), the association of identity with a store can happen. However, if there is a scarcity of products and the consumers are not catered to by retail, as is the case with plus size consumers (Scarabotto & Fischer, 2013), the possession is not consolidated, and the consumers may suffer identity tensions, as in the case of Turkish women who sought fashionable alternatives to a fashion that prescribes the usage of the veil.

In this context, retail focused on plus size might intensify the consumers' inclination to assume their stigmatized condition (Goffman, 1963), segregating them as consumers of fashion. On the other hand, the retail environment can act as a protection mechanism for the stigmatized: firstly, introducing plus size fashion consumers in a peer context, mitigating the stigmatized condition; secondly, as Goffman (1963, p. 144) points out, the non-stigmatized can offer the courtesy of not giving importance to their "defect", thus leading them to a perception of being included and accepted as the others are.

5.2 Methodological Procedures

This section is divided in three parts: in the first one, we shall discuss the epistemological considerations of the research, which guide data collection and analysis. Then, we shall describe the collection procedures. Finally, we shall explain the analysis procedures.

5.2.1 Epistemological Considerations

The empirical work was carried out under the premise that identity and the meanings of consumption are dialectically related (Thompson, 1997) as part of the consumer experience (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio, 1989), within a context that situates it (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). Given this premise, we searched for narratives that could reveal meanings imbricated in the common practices of the daily life (Santos & Pinto, 2008, p. 9) of consumers.

Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989) argue that existential phenomenology is a way of bringing experience to consumer research, and they develop a method of phenomenological interviews widely used in subsequent works (Thompson & Haytko, 1997;

Thompson & Troester, 2002). In his turn, Thompson (1997) develops a hermeneutic scheme that he considers adequate for the analysis of these interviews.

Our approach is similar to Thompson's (1997) and to that of other works which recommend the usage of a hermeneutic circle (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989), *i.e.*, of deep and concomitant analyses of the whole and of the parts of consumer narratives, hermeneutically searching for an interpretation of meanings (Bleicher, 1980). The authors blend horizons with the text and get actively involved in the task of holistically understanding the stories told by the consumers (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson, 1997).

5.2.2 Method of Data Collection

In order to access the data, we conducted in-depth, phenomenological interviews, formatted as dialogues, without any pre-structured script, and avoiding questions that use "why", so as to encourage the interviewees to develop their ideas and to eschew rationalizations of their life experiences (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio, 1989). The interviews produced narratives (Hopkinson & Hog, 2006) of life stories of female consumers and their relation to fashion.

We interviewed 14 women, resident in different cities of the state of São Paulo. The profiles of the interviewees are described in Table 1. The decision to interview women is related to the link between fashion, beauty, and femininity in contemporary society (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Two interviews were conducted with more than one person at the same time: with Laura and Otavia, who are sisters, and with Regina and Francine, mother and daughter. This procedure had the advantage of accounts of shared experiences and situations lived together. Nevertheless, in the case of the interview with Regina and Francine, the authority figure of the mother might have inhibited the daughter from revealing certain experiences. We looked for women who were apparently above the weight deemed "adequate". We did not select what would be plus size necessarily by the clothing size, since there is no consensus on the subject, even though several references indicate that the bottom plus size number is 44 (Winn, 2004). However, when explaining to the interviewees the purpose of the work, we made clear what would be the subject of the interview, so that our prejudgment on their appearance was revealed. Those who explicitly rejected the plus size label or, in our perception, concealed their clothing size (two cases) were not invited to the interview. The names were modified to preserve their identities.

Table 2. Description of the Interviewees

Name	Profession	Age	City
Larissa	College Professor	32	São Paulo
Otavia	Lawyer	27	Ribeirão Preto
Laura	Lawyer	26	Ribeirão Preto
Tarsila	Entrepreneur	60	Ribeirão Preto
Regina	Entrepreneur	43	Batatais
Francine	Student	17	Batatais
Tamires	Manager	32	São Paulo
Marina	Marketing Analyst	26	São Paulo
Katia	Receptionist	18	Jundiá
Patricia	Financial Analyst	42	Campinas
Fabiola	Student	27	Ribeirão Preto
Catarina	Beauty professional	43	Ribeirão Preto
Marilia	Teacher	46	Ribeirão Preto
Marlene	Teacher	59	Ribeirão Preto

We conducted interviews until the variability of information did not occur anymore and the interviewees reinforced ideas that had already been expressed. The interviews were recorded and integrally transcribed, totaling more than 10 hours of audio and 88.738 words.

5.2.3 Method of Analysis

The analysis was made alternating between the whole and the parts, aiming at the understanding of the relation between identity and the symbolic meanings conveyed by objects and places (retail). Having that in mind, all the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed by two of the three authors, paying more attention to the analysis of the narrative movement, *i.e.*, to the interaction between past and present in the consumer interviews and in the cultural influences that seem to affect their identity projects (Thompson, 1997).

After considering each interview as a whole, with its own meanings, two of the authors isolatedly set standards, discussed sequentially in group by all the authors of the study. It was necessary to return to the parts (interviews) to elucidate certain aspects of the interpretation or revise excerpts that conveyed meanings relevant to the analysis as a whole. The process was repeated until an integrated interpretation of the concepts arose.

5.3 Results

In the next sessions, we present the results of the work.

5.3.1 Identity: fashion, weight, and the role of retail

The analysis of the interviews resulted in three thematic categories: the construction of identity through fashion, what it involves to be plus size, and the creative strategies to deal with the lack of products for plus size women in retail. These thematic categories are not interpreted isolatedly, but intertwined, composing a conceptual scheme representative of the identity discourses of the interviewees. The conceptual scheme is illustrated in Figure 1.

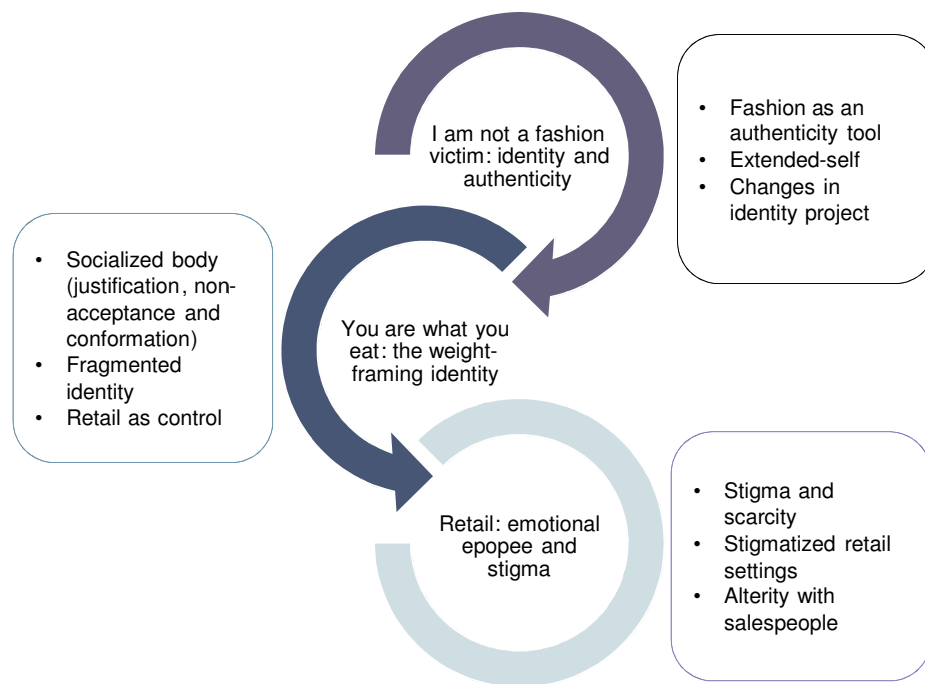


Figure 8. Conceptual Scheme: Integration of Categories of Analysis

5.3.2 I am not a fashion victim: identity and authenticity

Fashion is a central element in the identity of the interviewed female consumers, being relevant to negotiate the level of authenticity and inclusion in relation to different social groups (Thompson & Haytko, 1997) and to present themselves to the world as a thinner person. The

tools used for this are the pieces of clothing, the brands, and the stores patronized by female consumers, that help in the formation of their extended self.

In the excerpt below, Marilia speaks of her relation to fashion:

I've already been through the fashionable phase, the latest fad, which is what was being worn at that moment, so I wanted it to fit me anyhow. Now I know that it can't be so, because it's not every piece of clothing that suits you well. So today, for me, fashion is the clothes I'm comfortable with, of course, within a range of things that are being worn, right? So, sometimes it turns out to be things that I like very much, for instance, now it's wider flares, straighter trousers... But nowadays it's what I feel well in. So it's a jeans, a large T-shirt, a robe...

The quoted excerpt is representative of most of the interviewees' narratives and illustrates two aspects of fashion identity. There is the idea of a personal and authentic style, which, as in Thompson and Haytko (1997), exists by being in confrontation with what the interviewee considers massified or the "latest fad", a term that signifies the current fashion, of the moment, sold in every store, especially department stores, but that is perceived as scarcely accessible to the plus size public, because it is not available in their size.

The element opposed to the "latest fad" is the "personal style". The personal style is the core of the relation between the interviewees and their attire. The style, which connects the interviewees to the brands that they relate to (Fournier, 1998) and to objects that convey meanings (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979), varies according to the identity projects of each one. Larissa's excerpt, which defines her style as "dazzled suburban", illustrates her identity project of connection with fashion (in that case, with fashion in make-up) as a reaction to what is considered elitist, in an attempt to establish a coherent "self" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The style, as Murray (2002) indicates, is a place where the politics of difference are emphasized.

The dazzled suburban style is like this... Nowadays I enjoy very much reading fashion blogs, right? I read a lot of foreign blogs... and I follow many make-up blogs here, right? But C-class make-up blogs, not Dior make-up blogs, no, that's not it... Brands like Avon, Natura, Boticário, MAC... But tops is MAC, you see? No Dior, Chanel, not those things.

Larissa's excerpt also exemplifies her fashion learning process. This "personal style" stems from the learning that occurs during the interviewee's life, from the context in which she grew up, from the persons she relates to, and from the access to specialized information about fashion. Learning includes the dress protocol suited to each occasion, the stores where to buy, the various possibilities of combinations, and the brands chosen, consistent with her "personal style" and also with the management of impressions sought by every female

consumer, in order to differentiate herself and at the same time minimize cultural and class tensions.

Learning comes with age. Also with age comes a change in what is considered personal style. The fashion narratives illustrate projects related to the interviewees' body (Murray, 2002). As the interviewees mature, their body projects change and the desire for conformity diminishes, opening more room for the consolidation of a consistent style and for the acceptance of their own body. Moreover, the financial issue becomes predominant as they mature. The excerpt below, from Marilia's interview, illustrates these situations:

And it's not just adolescence, I think we go through another period of acceptance... until the moment comes when you begin to accept yourself the way you are... and to value other aspects, so you start to value other aspects in clothing... That's why I think that... in some moments, it's good to be able to afford a piece of clothing when you find it... not just having to wear the latest fad, we can create a personal style, because clothing is something you must feel well in...

As mentioned above, fashion identity is not separate from the form of the body. In the next subsection, we explore more deeply the relation of interviewees to their weight.

5.3.3 You are what you eat: weight as a shaper of identity

Weight is usually seen as a source of anxiety for the interviewees. As in Thompson and Hirschman (1995), their bodies are socialized, and their image is characterized by perceptions conditioned to social relations, normative prescriptions and moral meanings, that judge the body as something that results from the discipline of the spirit (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995; Thompson & Troester, 2002).

This process of socialization of the body involves especially three dimensions: justification, non-acceptance, and resignation of the body before what is considered an ideal body. Francine's featured comment is an example of a justification discourse. Francine accepts and understands the discourse that links thinness to beauty. From her interview and her mother's comments, Regina, being fat is already a part of her identity: she assumes herself like this and seems to accept the situation. However, she feels the need to detach herself from a "fat spirit". If, as Thompson and Hirschman (1995) argue, fatness is associated in popular culture to a lack of care with the body – a moral issue, that links the care with the body to the pureness of the

spirit – Francine seeks to justify her condition by her lifestyle (precollege student), to detach her body from the discipline of her spirit. In her own words:

I'd eat [...] just a salad, [but] I have to go back to class, because I finish at 12:30. At 13:30 I have class, so I don't have time to sit at the restaurant and eat. So I eat, yeah, anything. That's calories, right? So, I'm getting fat earlier because of my lifestyle, and then it becomes more difficult to watch my weight.

To justify the condition of fat seems to be a strategy to detach herself from the non-acceptance of her own body.

The relation of alterity (Oliveira & Leão, 2012) is also important. The interviewees notice that the reaction of society in general to fatness tends to be negative. Laura, for example, is offended and feels stigmatized (Goffman, 1963):

I think our society is very aesthetic, really, it's like, I hear a lot of jokes, they make a lot of jokes about people, fat boys here, fat girls there. There's even close friends of mine who've already said something like: "Hey, you won't spare even fatty here?". And it comes out like that, naturally. [...] People think like that, most of them. I don't want to mingle with this kind of people.

Non-acceptance leads to "defense" strategies against the fatness stigma, reinforcing the idea of a diversified identity, of the separation between the spirit (intelligence) and the body (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995), together with the overvaluation of other aspects of personal identity, for instance academic and professional success. Larissa's comment illustrates this situation: "[I was] really very big [...] and such, but I didn't care, I didn't consider myself ugly or nothing, it simply didn't matter, I thought that was something people with low IQs did".

Non-acceptance also leads to attempts at losing weight: among the interviewees, at least five of them used amphetamines, others made plans of implanting a gastric balloon, besides countless diets and physical exercises. It is interesting to notice that these attempts at losing weight happen motivated also by the possibility of choosing the desired clothes, of the "latest fad", which adds a new element to the tension between authenticity and resignation (Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

As they mature, there seems to be a situation of resignation to the plus size condition, even if this does not eliminate the tensions of a fragmented identity in search of a coherent whole (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This does not mean that the conflict with the body and the feeling of not being an adequate subject for fashion will dissipate, but these consumers seek legitimation for their own image and often become active propagators of a new

discourse on beauty standards. The access to blogs specialized in fashion has shown to be an important element for these consumers (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), facilitating the access to information which it would be difficult to obtain without these on-line tools. Otavia's comment is an example of this process:

I've always been on a yoyo diet, but that's a hormonal problem [...] I stopped buying clothes, then you end up with those ridiculous clothes, clothes that squeeze you, that are not comfortable. Then you stop going out. At least, that's what happens to me. Then reading blogs I started to accept and say: "No, dear, I can go out and be gorgeous", and it really improved my self-esteem. So I started buying again, I stopped depriving myself because of my weight, and I totally stopped, because I was really depriving myself.

The role of retail in non-acceptance and conformity is prominent. On one hand, the interviewees' comments show discontent with the lack of offers (as in Fabiola's excerpt, that closes this subsection), which leads them, among other reasons already mentioned, such as the social control of the body, to attempts at losing weight. On the other hand, the offer of plus size stores evokes ambiguous feelings, since it forces them to face their identity projects as female consumers who assume themselves as fat (resignation), which leads to moral dilemmas related to the failure at losing weight. The interviewees' relation to retail will be analyzed in detail in the next subsection.

In some stores your 42 is going to be 46, you know? I usually buy at stores where I know they have it [...] I spoke about fast fashion, I like to buy at stores, you know, that change their collection, more than one, you know? [...] I went into Luigi Bertolli the other day, at Ribeirão Shopping. I went there, nothing fits me in that store, nothing.

5.3.4 Retail: emotional saga and stigma reinforcement

As in Sandicki and Ger (2010), or Scaraboto and Fischer (2013), the studied female consumers face difficulties in consuming fashion because of offer scarcity. Scarcity reinforces the stigma due to the fact that the garments in the stores are not adequate to their bodies. The general perception of the interviewees is that the store sizes are not standardized, *i.e.*, sizes with the same number vary from one brand to another.

The tensions that arise in the identity projects of female consumers (justification, non-acceptance, and resignation) are linked to the response that retail gives to their appearance. Clothing sizes are a source of anxiety for the interviewees, as illustrated by Marina's comment:

They never have L [...] so it makes me think [...] Then I see a woman, much thinner than me, taking L, and I say: “Is it, like, so tight for me? And I can’t feel it? Or is it so loose for her?”.

The stigma of being above weight is reinforced by scarcity. One of the alternatives that exist against scarcity is to resort to stores specialized in the plus size public. Nevertheless, the perception of female consumers is that this specialized market does not necessarily offer the objects and brands desired to complete their identity projects.

The interviews indicate that the consumers whose involvement with well-known brands and more recent trends is less intense tend to appreciate more the products sold in this kind of store than those whose interest for fashion is more relevant for the definition of their identities, thus corroborating Haytko’s (2004) suggestion, for whom the retail experience derives, among other factors, from trend awareness.

Some of the criticisms to plus size stores are portrayed in Tarsila’s and Larissa’s comments, respectively:

Gee, it’s awful, I think those fabrics heat more than plastic! Really, and those garish patterns, those things with little golden threads, you know? No, it’s too... too old-fashioned.

Nowadays there’s a lot of stores, like, neighborhood stores. There where I teach, for instance, there’s a lot of stores that put out the two mannequins to show that they have a larger standard. So, in those low-revenue neighborhoods, there’s a lot of slutty-style garments, you know? Like, short clothes with very strong colors or lots of patterns, that kind of thing... And then there’s the normal thin mannequin and the bigger mannequin. And it’s always an awful piece of clothing, right? Like, in this mannequin.

In the interviewees’ perception, plus size stores market products whose image does not convey joviality and sensuality, except in rare occasions. Even older female consumers seek joviality and sensuality, even if they do not wish to be “slutty”, or hypersensual women, as Tarsila argues. The fact that plus size clothes are still perceived as gloomy clothes reinforces the idea that a fat female consumer is necessarily ugly and needs to hide.

A second option to elude scarcity is to go shopping in places different from those where the consumer lives. These places can be bigger cities, where there is more variety (usually São Paulo), or cities abroad (usually Miami). This is a way of increasing choice, in the case of trips to cities within Brazil, and also of having access to famous brands, with more affordable prices and pieces available in the adequate sizes, in the case of shopping abroad. As Larissa states:

I bought at Zara, where I had never shopped here in Brazil, and there I said: “It’s not possible that I’m shopping at Zara abroad and I don’t in Brazil!”. But it’s because I found a lot of 44 garments there, I looked at the rack and could find my size, then I tried it on and it just fitted. It’s very annoying [...] when you go to a store, you want to buy, you have the money to buy, and you can’t find the things that you want, here it happens a lot. There it happened very little.

A third option against scarcity is to be found in the relation to the saleswomen. Many interviewees said that they patronize stores that sell sizes such as 50, 52, and 54, but do not divulge this information ostensibly. These stores are, in Fabiola’s description, small shops, traditional stores, different from department stores. The information is coproduced between saleswomen and consumers (Cova & Dalli, 2002) in a relation in which the saleswoman controls the information, and may pass it forward or not. Thus, a relationship of power is configured between the saleswomen and the consumers. This relationship of power involves the saleswoman as a partner, priestess, or tormentor (Fischer et al., 2009), this latter role being stigmatizing.

Saleswomen as partners adopt a solidary behavior toward clients and use a vast array of communication tools (telephone, e-mail, cell phone) to announce beforehand the arrival of garments. These saleswomen develop a relationship that borders on friendship with their clients and tend to “take them” with them when they change stores.

In their turn, saleswomen who assume the role of priestesses warn when the products are available at the store, put aside the garments for the consumers, and send bags with products to their homes. Marlene calls this parallel market a “black market”, and the sacerdotal character is justified by the distribution of information and resources that are in the hands of the saleswomen, thus increasing scarcity for the consumers who are not included among their “followers”.

Finally, there is the profile of the saleswoman as a tormentor. These saleswomen use the relationship of power to retain customers by means of the controlled access to plus size clothes. Marina’s experience expresses this relationship. She tells that, when she bought at domestic stores (now she prefers to buy abroad), she became friends with saleswomen and often ordered L garments from the catalogue. But she says: “She [the saleswoman] won’t show you the catalogue if you don’t go there at least once a week to buy something”, and adds: “I was friends [with saleswomen] in every store”.

5.4 Discussion

We explored how stigma and scarcity in retail affect identity projects of plus size female consumers and how these consumers elude scarcity to make real their desired extended selves.

The interviews indicate that fashion is a significant element for the identity definition of female consumers, which is in consonance with the previous literature on the subject (Murray, 2002; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). But the stigma that haunts plus size women, reinforced by fashion retail, leads them to connect their fashion identities to their weight in two different ways: (1) accepting themselves and seeking alternatives in retail to feel included in fashion (SCARABOTO and FISCHER, 2013), and (2) rejecting themselves and seeking to conform with standard beauty norms, while morally justifying their condition (THOMPSON and HIRSCHMAN, 1995). The two situations are not mutually excluding and are often present in the narratives of the same interviewee, being part of a diversified identity that gains substance and reflection as years go by.

These discoveries are in consonance with works that explore the issue of identity in contemporaneity. The search for a coherent “self” (Shankar, Elliot, Fitchett, 2009) permeates the postmodern fragmentation (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). However, the positive identity view exposed by Firat and Venkatesh (1995) does not consider the socialized body (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995), that depends on alterity (Oliveira & Leão, 2012) to be accepted and legitimized (SANDICKI and GER, 2010).

Retail appears as a problem and a solution for plus size women. At the same time that it reinforces stigmatization through conveyed discourses (Dion & Arnould, 2011) and promotes the exclusion of the stigmatized (Goffman, 1963), it also brings possible solutions, restricting or enabling the materialization of objects that constitute the extended self. In other words, retail discourses are ambiguous and interpreted by female consumers in different ways (Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel, 2006), but almost always through the lens of the socialized body (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). They find reassurance in some saleswomen and the specific solutions of some stores or brands, but feel excluded in certain environments. Both reassurance and exclusion occur because of the format of their bodies.

When stigmatized or excluded, resorting mainly to plus size stores whose offers often do not include brands or products perceived as sophisticated, female consumers who seek a more traditionally fashionable extended self (Belk, 1988) do not completely realize their identity projects. When catered to by traditional retail in terms of clothing offer, female

consumers seek the partnership of saleswomen in order to have access to these objects, which, even when available, are much sought after.

The “black market” operated by saleswomen shows another aspect of power in the relation between female consumers and retail. The experience of consumption (Meyer & Schwager, 2007) becomes (un)legitimizing of the identity of the consumer who seeks to overcome the socialized body, while shaping her fashion identity out of it. That experience may be reassuring or disturbing, depending on the agents involved in it (especially the saleswomen).

There is also evidence that plus size female consumers are engaging in creative solutions to be included in the world of fashion (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), such as the access to plus size fashion blogs and shopping in places other than their cities. New plus size stores and brands that have appeared in Brazilian retail might come to offer new identity narratives, whose meanings will be co-created by consumers (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), especially through the internet, a purchase alternative that has gained importance. This store format can give access to the products, even though the purchase does not allow for try-on and generates many product returns (The Economist, 2013a). This is an aspect that could be explored in future research.

5.5 Managerial implications

Official statistic data indicate that 48,5% of the Brazilian population are above the weight considered ideal (BRASIL, 2012), a trend similar to that of other Latin American countries, where fast food became popular in the last decades (The Economist, 2013b). These persons represent a new and expanding market for fashion retail in Brazil. Contrary to the results of previous works (Chattaraman & Rudd, 2006), but in line with the results of other works (Otieno, Harrow, and Lea-Greenwood, 2005), our research has shown that the interest of the plus size woman in fashion exists and is expressed in the creative way in which she buys the pieces she wears. Brands that seek to cater to the plus size public may incorporate colors, creativity and even stylists’ signatures in their pieces, since, albeit female consumers struggle with weight and have their identity marked by the plus size condition, there is a movement to appreciate the self-esteem of these women.

As seen in the data analyses, retail can become an instrument of stigmatization for these women, so that the purchase experience, which could be ludic and fun, becomes unsatisfactory and (even) oppressive. Several elements concur to this situation: a lack of standardization in clothing sizes, the availability of the pieces, their quality, and the treatment

given by saleswomen. Whether the retailer is exclusively dedicated to this public or not, measures such as minimizing the variation in the sizes of garments within the same store or brand, making available pieces that follow current trends, keeping the saleswomen trained to deal with this particular public, and avoiding discriminating practices might make the purchase experience more pleasant and raise the average ticket of these clients.

It is up to each retailer or brand to decide if this public will be catered to or not. In case the decision is positive, the representation of plus size women in the communication of the brand must be discussed. Plus size models do not necessarily exhibit sizes above 44 (some wear a 42 size, or even 40), and visually would hardly be perceived as fat. If a retailer seeks exclusively the plus size public, maybe the choice of models who really seem to be above weight might be more successful.

The on-line segment seems to be a promising form of investment for the public in question, especially when the retailer is exclusively dedicated to plus size consumers. In spite of some disadvantages that this modality brings for the consumer, such as the impossibility of trying on the clothes, several companies have implemented innovations to improve the on-line purchase experience or integrate the on-line stores to conventional retail stores (The Economist, 2013a). Investments in this modality seem to be an opportunity for retailers, especially those who seek to work exclusively with a plus size public, catering to the fashion needs of these consumers, who want to be a part of the world of fashion and are willing to spend for it.

5.6 Limitations and suggestions for future research

This paper presents some limitations. Firstly, the demographic and geographic differences could have been more accentuated. Even though we interviewed persons with distinct socioeconomic profiles, in the perception of the authors, none of the consumers belongs to a D-class profile or lower. Besides, only two interviewees are Black, which may have introduced a bias in the data, considering that there is evidence that the influence of beauty standards is smaller in Black people groups (Evans & McConnell, 2003).

If identity in fashion raises the issue of the socialized body (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995), there is also evidence that it is influenced by structural class and revenue issues, which prevent the consumers from creatively building their identity (Murray, 2002).

Questions also persist in relation to retailer strategies. The plus size fashion market seems to be growing and gaining legitimacy among some of the interviewees, who already

associate themselves with a plus size identity. This aspect could be explored in the light of retail ideology (Borghini et al., 2009), especially through an *in loco* study, seeking to understand how the appropriation and interpretation of this ideology by female consumers happens.

To conclude, given that both identity issues and discourses are conveyed by objects and places connected to brands (Fournier, 1998; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel, 2006), there is an opportunity to deepen the study of consumption and plus size retail in relation to them, by means of questions such as: (1) The scarcity of well-known brands affects the identity of female consumers? (2) What is the perspective of the retailers of these brands and what are their reasons for not being in the plus size world? (3) Is there room for an exclusively plus size brand to reach a symbolic luxury potential?

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6 GENERAL DISCUSSION

The general research question that has guided this work relates to the illegitimacy of plus-size fashion brands with plus-sized consumers, how the consumption assemblage acts on fat consumers' identities and influences this process of illegitimacy, and how the retail environment was, at the time the third paper was published, an environment that haunted plus-sized women, reminding them that their bodies were illegitimate. In this section I discuss the three papers I presented and make some theoretical relations.

6.1 The illegitimate identity

According to the results of the third paper, which was published in 2013, the plus-size fashion industry was considered illegitimate by consumers: interviewees said that they were haunted by these retail environments, which reminded them of their own fatness and that the offers made by plus-size fashion brands were not suitable for them because they were not aligned to their identity projects. Plus-size fashion clothes were compared to clothes targeted to elder women and to clothes that did not match the fashion styles of these women.

The framework presented within that paper (see Figure 8) stated that fashion acted on these women as an identity project that related to authenticity (Thompson & Haytko, 1997) and to their extended self (Belk, 1988) in a contingent identity project that changed with time.

The first part of this framework (authenticity) resonates with fashion as a cultural capital discourse (presented in the semiotic square discussed in the first paper - see Figure 1) that organizes the discourses found in plus-size fashion blogs, a fashion magazine, and interviews with plus-sized consumers. As Diane Crane (2006) states in her book about fashion and its social role, cultural capital is a paramount element of fashion. Contrary to the typical model of transference of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Simmel, 1957), Crane asserts that high knowledge in fashion is independent of social class. The first paper on this work found a parallel situation: high knowledge in fashion is independent of having the "right fashionable" body.

Crane (2006), however, does not emphasize the role of the body in the fashion process. Bordo (2003) argues that modern consumer culture focuses on the body. By analyzing several advertisements she posits several observations about this relationship. First, she asserts

that obesity and anorexia are two sides of a bulimic culture that incentivizes both food binge consumption and compensations to keep a slender body. Furthermore, in her interpretation of the slender body she states the horror that the consumer culture displays towards fat. Fat—not only weight but also body parts that are representative of fat, such as the stomach or hips—are rejected and supposed to be eliminated, eradicated, and/or burned.

As Figure 1 have showed, the body is a socialized aspect of women's identities that is constantly addressed for themselves and for the public: some of them conform with that, some do not accept their bodies, and some navigate between narratives that justify their bodies as they are but try to avoid the moral judgments (Bordo, 2003; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995) that follow the fat body (indulgent, lazy, undisciplined). Several fashion mechanisms relate to the body and the difficulty women have in justifying their bodies in the public sphere. In the third paper the retail environment is comprehended as a mechanism of control—when these consumers go shopping they are reminded of the inadequacy of their bodies; they cannot find their size and salespeople mistreat them. In this sense the retail environment plays a similar role that clothes, mirrors, and scales play for myself as described in the second paper (the one about my own consumption assemblage): they are entities that act on us, plus-sized women. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) say, semiotic systems, such as the meanings attributed to the female body and its public character, depend on assemblages formed by both human and non-human elements. The retail environment, the scales, the clothes, and several other elements that constitute the fashion environment are part of such assemblages that entangle with plus-sized women's identity projects.

So far, the reinterpretation of the three works has showed that the socialized body of plus-sized women is constrained by the traditional fashion system, despite the traditional fashion system being part of these women's identity projects. This finding in itself can be understood as a contribution, since it shows the role of fashion not only as a distinction mechanism or as a world of elements with which consumers can play with their identities in a post-modern ethos, but as an element that acts upon these women, reinforcing the stigma, since fashion is the symbol of the stigma. Consumers, therefore, wish to part of a system in which they do not belong.

In this sense these plus-size consumers face a consumption heterology (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013), which means that despite many of them being socialized on high cultural capital environments their cultural capital circulates in a perceived lower social-status consumption field—the plus-size fashion field. Therefore, the main contribution of this work is to make explicit the stigmatic logics that is sustained by fashion-beauty ideological discourses

that prevents brands from creating a mythical world from where consumers can take resources for building their own identity projects. This scenario is particularly suited in the case of plus size consumers, since their stigma is perceived as caused by themselves. As Bordo (2003) puts it, society is permeated by a bulimic logic: women are portrayed both as consumers who eat very little and as consumers who indulge in binge consumption of food. The female body is particularly connected with the female weight. Other stigmatized consumers, such as disabled people, transsexual consumers or racial minorities, even when stigmatized, are not necessarily blamed for their own stigma. Other consumers who could be compared to plus size consumers are, for example, smokers or consumers who engage themselves in risky behavior. However, these consumers are not *always* in the situation of being condemned for their choices.

From this point on I discuss what the solutions are that consumers find to their illegitimate identities and how these solutions relate to the legitimacy of plus-size fashion brands.

6.2 A legitimate solution

The third paper presented in this work was the first one to be written. In this paper, in the third circle of Figure 8, my co-authors and I found that consumers identify three forms of coping with their illegitimate identities in retail environments. The first one is to go to plus-size fashion stores. However this was far from being a particularly good solution.

The plus-size fashion clothes, in 2012, were regarded by all discourses found to be illegitimate, unsensual, and targeted at "old ladies". Besides the relation between beauty fashion and youth, denouncing a big degree of ageism in the consumer-culture/fashion world, these women simply did not relate their selves with these objects (Belk, 1988). Therefore, they had to find other strategies to feel fashionable, such as looking for clothes abroad or developing special relations with salespeople who would select special clothes that fitted these women.

However, as many press texts stated over the years that followed (Cerati, 2015; Coltri, 2011; McGuire, 2015; SEBRAE, 2014), the plus-size fashion industry flourished. Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) relate the beginning of this process of institutionalization in their work. They define plus-sized consumers as stigmatized seekers, which means that they want to be included in mainstream markets, but are not attended by them, and outlined the role of plus-size fashion bloggers in the process of institutionalizing these consumers as legitimate ones. In my work, I found that bloggers reverberate indeed an important discourse that defies the stigma

of being fat and that tries to make consumers feel comfortable with themselves by advocating, most of the time, that they do not have to conform to the prevalent body discourse, which implicates changing one's body to conform to fashion.

However, these bloggers do not escape the contemporary body politics (Bordo, 2003). Harju and Houvinen (2015), for example, in their study of fatshionista bloggers conclude that whilst they use normative practices of destigmatization of the word “fat” and “fat identity” as well as a re-appropriation of the terms, which is a form of activism, these bloggers act with mimicry in emulating the poses of fashion and fashion bloggers (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015). The conflict between the fashion logics and the stigma logics is very much at the heart of the matter.

Bloggers and consumers try to find a “better self”, which is one of fashion's contemporary discourses (Kravets & Sandikci, 2014; Mikkonen, Vicdan, & Markkula, 2013). However, for plus-sized consumers, composing a better self through fashion means playing with our own bodies.

The “better self” ideology prevents the activism. Fat-activism, and activism in the plus size world is permeated by fat-activism, includes the acceptance of a stigma that, as I mentioned previously, is connected with a moral choice (overeating, being undisciplined).

As I stated in my introspection (second paper), I noticed this tension between trying to conform and trying to accept myself—a process that started to happen during the writing of this project. As Figure 7 has showed, however, my consumption assemblage (Bettany, 2016; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) functions in the logics of bulimia, as Bordo (2003) states. I manage myself as if I were a product, a public product ready to be evaluated by others. I oscillate, sometimes accepting myself, sometimes conforming myself. I look for a better self and the objects and discourses that surround me are the map for my actions and for reaching my identity projects.

This was not only my experience. In the first paper I gave examples of both bloggers and consumers engaging in these discourses and showed that they are present in the same speeches and in the same texts—even when contradictory.

So, the illegitimate identity is counterbalanced by a plethora of strategies relying on assemblages (Canniford & Bajde, 2016; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) composed by human and non-human entities (Hodder, 2012; Latour, 2007) that hold the plus-size fashion field together. Scaraboto and Fischer (2016) recently investigated how plus-size fashion bloggers work their identities between the fashion logics and the fat acceptance logics in order to stabilize (territorialize) their fat fashion sub-assemblage. In my work I see a similar phenomenon

happening, but the catalytic triggers that cause the deterritorialization of this balance are not necessarily caused from outside and the sub-assemblage is always fragile, because consumers perceive their situation in this sub-assemblage as temporary.

The activist ideology influences the industry up to a certain point, since there is a lack of engagement of the regular consumers with the movements. Furthermore, I showed on the second paper that the assemblage comes from within as well, and that food is part of a relationship. The bulimic ideology brings food habits and food into the plus size fashion assemblage. Both in the case of bloggers, who disclose parts of their personal lives on their websites, and consumers a whole assemblage of objects brings to mind the semiotic reminder that fatness is a problem. The same assemblages then offer a way to counterbalance this fatness, sometimes using the activist discourse to offer an appropriate re-territorialization. The objects that translate (Latour, 2007) the activist discourse are the plus-size fashion clothes.

As Scaraboto and Fischer (2016) have stated, and as I have tried to show in my work, the plus-size fashion field is permeated by the fat-acceptance-activist discourse. However, as Figure 1 has depicted, this discourse is part of a stigma logic that also encompasses the conformity discourse; they are part of a bigger picture that is entangled with several other elements.

Considering such a scenario it is possible to discuss the emerging plus-size fashion market in Brazil. From the interviews I found excerpts that show that there has been more acceptance of the emerging plus-size fashion brands in Brazil. Besides the further acceptance of such brands, an interesting element that was found in my analysis was that plus-size retailers are now considered to be some kind of “safe-space” for these consumers. Trying to escape from the epepee they are submitted to, when trying to find clothes themselves, they rely on plus-size fashion stores, where they know they will find the right size. This was a longitudinal change that was perceived between 2012, when the first round of interviews was performed and mostly younger consumers, who followed plus-size fashion bloggers and were more engaged with internet in general, bought some plus-size pieces of clothes, and 2014, when consumers that were lower in fashion cultural capital (that did not have so much information about fashion) were also consuming in such retailers. Even with such advancements, the legitimacy of such brands is still complicated.

I found that cultural myths, cultural codes, market resources and communities (Coskuner-Balli, 2013) are being built to constitute legitimacy of this new market: a community has been formed, led by the activist bloggers; there is an attempt to actually create regulations in this market, through events and claims for patronization; and the brands try to mobilize

cultural and marketing myths, such as fashion shows or female archetypes such as the sexy woman with curves or the cute, innocent woman.

However, typical life-style brands, as Holt (2004) describes them, depend on consumers' use of these brands in their identity projects. In order to become iconic they have to solve ideological contradictions and cultural tensions that are present in a culture in a certain moment (Holt & Cameron, 2010; Holt, 2004); this occurs when consumers start using these brands in their identity projects.

The problem with plus-size fashion brands is what holds the assemblage of the plus-size fashion field together is the balance between stigma and fashion. Plus-sized consumers and even plus-size fashion bloggers, who praise activism, do not fully embrace their identities as fat women. Tricks to look better, to look slimmer, to achieve a certain body shape are used, and these bloggers and consumers still work on the fashion logics when they shape their identity projects. The plus-sized fashion clothes, despite their increasing legitimacy and the evolution of the field, are a reminder of an identity these individuals do not want to embrace; they are a second option. Even when the retailers of these clothes become a safe space for these women the safe space itself is a sign of stigma. They are, so far, excluded from the fashion field.

Will these brands be legitimate one day? There have been some signs that the plus-size world is in a process of legitimization. Some brands have been creating collections that encompass sizes from very small to very large, coping with the differences that objects for slim and curvy bodies evidently have.

Furthermore, Juliana Romano has been on the digital cover of *Elle Magazine* and 4th wave feminism (Maclaran, 2015) has been inserted and debated in traditional media (as Juliana's cover exemplifies), bringing the body to the center of the debate on female magazines, a traditional and still institutionalized female space (Wolf, 1991).

There is, therefore, evidence that that marginal or outsiders' practices in a field (the plus size sub field) is becoming institutionalized, as it happened in Dolbec and Fischer's (2015) work, that discuss the example of fashion bloggers, whose practices were slowly incorporated into the fashion field. Will the plus-size aesthetic be incorporated into the fashion field, excluding the stigma logics?

Considering that the consumer culture we live in sees fatness as a moral flaw, as the portrait of consumption indulgence, and lack of discipline (Bordo, 2003) in a world that reproduces the values that praise individual responsibility (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014), I believe that only parts of the subcultural capital of the plus-size fashion world could be legitimized.

The resurrection of the curvy woman could become a legitimate practice—though not mainstream but as a subfield.

However, considering the bulimic characteristic of late-capitalist markets (Bordo, 2003) and the difficult relation between fashion and food, it is possible that plus-sized women, especially the ones who are considerably overweight, will probably still be excluded and, therefore, will not embrace fatness as their identity and will still consider plus-size fashion brands as illegitimate.

6.3 Theoretical contributions

I started this Dissertation talking about the relationship between assemblages and dualisms. I found out in this project that dualisms, despite the criticism that authors who work with the ideas of networks (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Latour, 2007) have made about them, are an interesting form of analyzing a field, such as stated by Canniford and Shankar (2016).

I have used ideological discourses to describe a field, relying on dualisms: stigma versus fashion, expression and activism versus conformity, and cultural capital heterology on consumers' fashion situations. However, such ideological discourses should not be taken as structures or fixed semiotic meanings in consumer culture. These dualisms, such as the dualism presented by Bordo (2003) between the consumption discourses and the control discourses that shape a bulimic cultural status, are the semiotic and pragmatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) consequences of an assemblage of objects, media, industries, and consumers who keep this cultural status stable.

Fashion works because it has an excluding characteristic. Despite the fluidity of what cultural capital means in these (post) post-modern times (Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Holt, 1998), not everyone can be “in fashion”. There are institutions that define what is acceptable or not in the fashion field (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015) and the fashion industry follows the rules that prevail in such institutions.

Subcultures and different practices might be included in the fashion field, appropriated by it, worked by it, even making these practices some sort of simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994). However, it depends on engagement with the oppositional nature of these subcultures.

This complex network of meanings and objects that carry these meanings to consumers' wardrobes constitutes the fashion assemblage that is deterritorialized when new

groups, such as fashion bloggers (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015) or plus-size consumers, try to enter it. The territorial indexes become deterritorialized icons (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and the map of the assemblage, which is the material-semiotic (Bettany, 2016) comprehension of a certain situation (in this case the fashion field) portray both the ideological tensions that emerge in the field (Press et al., 2014) and the material participation of the different actors (Latour, 2007) in this entangled (Hodder, 2012) network.

Considering the theoretical discussion presented above, I consider that the main theoretical contribution of this work is underlining the role of identity in the instability of the plus-size fashion field. The assemblage of this field settles its territory in the illegitimacy of the stigma, but there have been attempts to destabilize this balance that keeps the field in the dark side—much like the consumption field of at-home fathers (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013)—to make it more legitimate. However, consumers' identities are different plateaus (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987): whilst activism permeates the attempt to deterritorialize the fashion field, plus-sized consumers are trapped in a bulimic assemblage that balances indulgence and control in order to try to be a fashionable subject.

6.4 Managerial implications

There are some managerial implications that can be addressed from this work. What can be seen from the interviews is that plus-size fashion brands are considered illegitimate as a result of a problem in the identity-brand connection. One could expect that changes in social beauty patterns would also change this connection if plus-size consumers become legitimate fashion actors. However, considering the fashion field as it is today such an option is very unlikely.

Plus-size fashion brands, or retailers that aim to invest in this public, could take some action to minimize this perception however. First, they should continue investing in quality. Even though quality is not an objective concept the perception that plus-size fashion clothes are poor in quality is still very strong amongst these women, despite the fact that companies have been making investments both in marketing communication and production. Maybe placing some emphasis on this more utilitarian side of the outfits could minimize the stigma that is related to quality.

Second, the retail industry is an interesting environment for exploring the plus-size fashion market. The traditional retail environment haunts these women because it reminds them of their undesired identity. The plus-size retail environment, despite still being stigmatized, is

a safe space where women can feel comfortable in trying on different clothes without suffering with scarcity of sizes and models. The big chains, however, are in limbo; they have been trying to launch plus-size collections, but offering different clothes and collections is not what these consumers find “democratic”. On the other hand, the department store environment is not a safe space for these consumers. Perhaps investing in bigger sizes, when possible, for some of the traditional collections could be a form of reaching such a public. There are also production issues: different shapes, different bodies, and more material use. But for smaller sizes of the plus-size spectrum this could be a solution.

In terms of plus-size models, using them is becoming more and more mainstream. It seems to be a good strategy for brands (especially retail chains) that want to reach this audience, since it creates a lot of identification and plus-size fashion models are talked about considerably in social media.

6.5 Limitations and further research

There are several limitations that can be pointed to in this work. Only four fashion bloggers were researched and these bloggers are all from Brazil. Furthermore, only data from the blogs were used, excluding Facebook or Instagram, which do not show much interaction. These bloggers are, however, also active on platforms such as Facebook or Instagram. Interaction among bloggers and fans, as well as how much these bloggers influence consumers, are research questions that could be addressed by investigating such platforms.

Furthermore, my interviewees were selected using snowball sampling since the subject was delicate. The choice was conscious, because I searched for openness and gathered information on a very intimate area of their lives. However, the fact that the interviewees were selected by snowball sampling reduced variability. All but three of my interviewees were white and all of them were middle-class or wealthier. It is possible that their relationships with their bodies and with fashion are affected by class and race (Murray, 2002).

Future research could also address other stigmatized groups in consumer research, including others who face difficulties in their daily lives and even access to public goods, such as people with disability. The changes in the fashion field could also continue to be the object of investigation, since it is a very proficuous field for understanding consumer research. Finally, I believe that it would be good that introspection and the relation between research and the

researcher are used and pushed further in other works, since it gives a complex perspective of a small universe that perhaps would not be achieved through other methods.

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