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Special Session Proposal

The branded and gendered Brazilian body: material and symbolic constructions in an overlooked context

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<p>Paper 2 “Consumed Bodies”: Revelations from the Gay Consumer Culture in Rio de Janeiro Severino Pereira</p>
<p>Paper 3 “Plastic Fantastic”: Material Interaction and the Plasticization of the Brazilian Body Daiane Scaraboto Marcia Christina Ferreira</p>
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Since its first conference in 2006, CCT has been growing in size and reach. Some have noted that CCT has become much more European in the recent years, with North American and European countries taking turns to host the event. A recent paper by Thompson, Arnould, and Giesler (2013, 164) argues that the CCT heteroglossia should be incentivized through the promotion of a shift “in a direction that more fully recognizes the distinctive theoretical, contextual, and institutional interests of scholars located in the global South.” Indeed, previous culture-centric work focusing on the global South (e.g. Arnould 1989, Bonsu and Belk 2003, Dolan and Scott 2009) has demonstrated the benefits of moving beyond Americo-Eurocentrism in consumer research. Contexts from global South help promote a distinctive logic of marketing and consumption practices which revitalizes the CCT field as a whole and promotes the development of theory. However, studies coming from, or based on, these contexts are not numerous. The few existing studies have focused mostly on parts of Southeast Asia and Africa. Latin America remains a vastly unexplored area for consumer culture researchers. More work on the area is imperative, given the political and economic weight recently acquired by some countries in the international scene. Brazil, for example, now has the 7th largest GDP in the world (UN 2012), and a variety of unexplored issues related to the socio-historical shaping of localized cultures of consumption.

To help close this gap, the three papers in our session engage with Brazilian contexts. Our aim is to go beyond simply having Brazil as the background for the studied phenomena. We want to use this session to theorize the role of Brazilian sociocultural contexts in shaping consumer phenomena. Contexts matter not only because they “engage our emotions and our senses, stimulate discovery, invite description and excite comparison” (Arnould, Price, and Moisio 2007, 106), but also because they provide specific instantiations from which to see, feel, think, and understand consumer behavior. The three papers in this special session proposal take the task of demonstrating how the emerging South may provide CCT scholars with valuable research contexts. With a focus on Brazilian settings, we want to discuss how these contexts help produce specific findings that enlighten understanding of CCT issues.

In particular, our session focuses on how Brazilian contexts provide the conditions for the development of specific material and symbolic constructions of branded and gendered bodies. The first paper develops a socio-semiotic analysis of Brazilian discourses on beauty and status to unearth countervailing positions on colonial discourses on the female body and beauty. The analysis is used to inform how Brazilian luxury brands can use emerging cultural discourses of creativity to leverage their strategic positioning in relation to other discourses pursued by (global) luxury brands. The second paper examines how Rio’s beach culture informs the way gay men use their body to engage in distinct and localized gender expressions. Stigma is resisted through the construction of localized body aesthetics, which leads to a strong internal pressure and stress derived from the practices of consumption and production of an idealized muscled beach body. The third paper examines how the development of Brazilian society in the late twentieth century has shaped symbolic and material constructions of female bodies in relation to plastic. Examining how a Brazilian brand has used the increased plasticization of the Brazilian body in its advertisements, the authors trace a cultural background for analyses of the material interactions between consumers and plastic shoes. Together, these three papers offer insights into different ways in which contexts from the global South illuminate our understanding of the intersections between brands, bodies and gender. The debate following the presentations will be enhanced by our discussant, because of his extensive work on the role of context and culture, discourses, body and brands (Askegaard and Linnet 2011, Askegaard 2006).

1. Leveraging Local Luxury Brands through Understanding Colonial Discourses on Beauty, Body and Gender in Brazil

Recent developments in CCT research have shown a growing interest among CCT scholars in applying cultural perspectives to inform strategic marketing management (McCracken 2011, Holt and Cameron 2010, Peñaloza, Toulouse, and Visconti 2012). The successful introduction of a CCT track at the American Marketing Association Conference also confirms the rising interest among marketers in how a cultural perspective can shed light on understandings of marketplace dynamics (AMA 2013). Despite this growth in awareness, studies trying to explicitly bridge CCT research and strategic management are scarce, and this gap is much more evident in non-Western contexts and emerging markets (Jaffari et al. 2012). In addition, most research on luxury in the cultural field takes traditional markets as their site of investigation (Dion and Arnould 2011; Rinallo and Golfetto 2006). However, luxury market dynamics are changing as emerging markets become not only attractive target consumer markets but also cultural producers that redefine beauty and luxury.

Therefore, in this paper, we explain how the analysis of cultural contradictions regarding the female body in Brazil can shed light into the strategic positioning of local and global luxury brands. We ask: How can a socio-historical analysis of relationships between social status and body/appearance help marketers navigate the luxury brand market? How should local and global luxury brands position themselves in the Brazilian market, given the sociohistorical particularities of the relationships between social status and body/appearance? Luxury brands can be viewed as cultural platforms for ideological statements (O'Guinn and Muniz 2004; Askegaard 2006). As such they are highly connected to socio-historical elements that permeate their identity (Lipovetsky and Roux 2003). Advertising, fashion, and design infuse brands with societal values (McCracken 1986) that are not only reproduced but also subject to modification when brands travel to distant markets. Consequently, the translation of a brand's identity into market positioning varies depending on the context in which the brand is operating. In particular, the Brazilian market is characterized by specific beauty values and cultural contradictions intrinsic to the development of Brazilian society. Understanding the origin and interplay of these cultural contradictions is not only key to successful branding in this market but it also allows for promotion of new cultural discourses that may foster local development while rejecting colonial-based discourses.

Our work is constituted of four phases. First, we reviewed historical and trans-disciplinary sources to identify key cultural contradictions framing discourses on the female body in Brazilian society (Da Matta 1997; Holt and Thompson 2004). We were able to identify two opposing discourses that stem from Brazilian colonial history and are related to class and geographical divides. The tropical discourse is linked to valorization of natural beauty and the body of the mestizo women. This discourse is frequently associated with the phenotype of the lower classes in colonial Brazil. The polar discourse is based on the idealization of European beauty and represented the aspirations of the Brazilian upper classes. Although these two discourses have originated in colonial Brazil, they have become deeply inserted in the Brazilian imaginary and have been reproduced over and over in popular culture, including recent music, books and films. Second, we contrasted the two deeply rooted cultural discourses on the female body /status to reflect on the dialectics of tropical vs. polar beauty ideals in Brazil and construct a semiotic square of possible cultural positions. Third, we conducted a semiotic investigation (Floch 2002; Oswald 2012; Ourahmoune and Ozçaglar-Toulouse 2012) of the various symbolic discourses embraced by luxury brands in the Brazilian context. We used global and local luxury brands' print ads collected from Brazilian Vogue and Elle from December 2012 to April 2013 to identify how

different brands positioned themselves in the semiotic square. Fourth, a second wave of data collection consisted of data we collected from the Brazilian Vogue and Elle websites as well as Brazilian fashion and luxury blogs (Kozinets 2009) to enhance and verify the consistency of the ads with the brands' overall positioning from 2010 to 2013 to follow up on and identify the consistent stories/positioning within global and local brand discourses.

The semiotic analysis associated with a socio-historical contextualization of these discourses allowed us to explain the recent transformation of beauty ideals in the Brazilian luxury market and reveal the broader cultural discourses that animate the current positioning of various luxury brands. The emergent semiotic square yields a map of six cultural territories of expression available to luxury brands in Brazil. In particular, the map reveals a space we called rebel/creative, which provides a chance for Brazilian luxury brands to leverage on their local roots without reproducing the cultural segregation of the colonial discourse (Bhabha 2004). Overall, our work helps demonstrate how CCT/cultural research can inform strategic decisions that leverage local discourses in non-Western contexts through a socio-historical analysis of the relationships between the context (Brazil), luxury brands, and local discourses on gender and the body.

2. “Consumed Bodies”: Revelations from the Gay Consumer Culture in Rio de Janeiro

CCT scholars have investigated stigma as an attribute that conveys a devalued social identity to an individual across most social contexts, resulting in feelings of powerlessness (Henry and Caldwell 2006) and higher risk in market interactions (Adkins and Ozanne 2005, Crockett, Grier and Williams 2003). Stigmatized individuals exhibit multiple and diverse responses that include resignation, escapism, concealment, and withdrawal, but also confrontation, creative production, and mainstream engagement (Henry and Caldwell 2006). From this gamut of identified responses to stigma, research has given more attention to passive stigma management, that is, identity transformation. Moreover, this work has focused on psychological and behavioral aspects of stigma management (Adkins and Ozanne 2005, Goffman 1988) to the detriment of body transformation. However, we note, the social world of an individual operates to enforce and strengthen a system of meanings and practices associated with the body. The result is a kind of socialization that causes the individual to deeply internalize the discipline and normalization of the body itself (Thompson and Hirschman 1995).

Hence, this work has investigated how the discourse associated with the body as a possession is used by a group of gay men in Rio de Janeiro to face the stigma of homosexual identity. More specifically, we ask: what is the role of body consumption in the attribution of meaning to the Brazilian body by stigmatized consumers? How is body consumption used by a group of gay men in Rio de Janeiro to face the stigma of homosexual identity?

To answer those questions, we conducted an ethnographic study with participant observation, between 2005 and 2008, in the day-to-day life of a group of gay men in Rio de Janeiro. We also did interviews with 20 gay men living in Rio de Janeiro (McCracken 1988).

The hyper valorization of the body – one of the remarkable features of the *carioca* (residents of Rio de Janeiro) identity (Goldenberg and Ramos 2007; Gontijo 2007) – seems to be reflected in the city's gay culture. However, this aesthetics of hyper valorization of the male body seems to be also one of the gay group's internal identification codes – using aesthetic consumption standards to distinguish insiders from outsiders (Schouten and McAlexander 1996).

“Rio de Janeiro is a seaside town where the body is highly valorized, because social meetings happen mostly on the beach. So you are constantly seeing, been seen, comparing yourself with others, and it is natural that one ends up suffering a bit. So

you end up thinking: 'it is about time I take care of the body'. Besides, the gay aesthetic sense is much sharper than that of a straight guy. And so Rio's culture of body worship becomes potentialized in the gay world." (Paul, 35)

The quote illustrates a common discourse in this context, one that shows how the body is modified and managed as an object associated to *carioca* identity (Gontijo 2007) as well as to the local gay culture. According to informants' discourses, strong aesthetic pressure is put on individuals when they enter the gay world. This augmented pressure results from the intersection of the emphasis on the body in Rio's beach culture and the cult of the body in Brazilian gay culture. This aesthetic pressure made many informants engage in a process of reconstruction and manipulation of their own bodies; a process that is consistent with Giddens' (1991) conception of the body as a way to build a unique and integrated self.

During fieldwork, we observed how the context of being in a city as Rio de Janeiro shaped the beauty ideal of the male body to the gay group. In this group, the male body is constructed and negotiated as an ideal of a young and healthy-looking body, which transpires a certain kind of masculinity – in fact, hypermasculinity. Through the manipulation of the body and use of specific clothes and brands, this aesthetics of hypermasculinity appears in the informant's speech as one of the clearest forms of homosexual identity and, consequently, a former opposition to heterosexual identity.

According to our informants, a masculine and toned muscled body is a sign of health and virility, and reinforces a more "normal" (i.e. more accepted to a heterosexual society) homosexual identity. However, the demand for "normality" is achieved through the construction of body aesthetics, which leads to a strong internal pressure and personal stress derived from the practices of consumption and production of the idealized body. After all, stress serves as an internal standard for the group, which simultaneously frees and imprisons individuals battling against stigma, while building a new constitutive stigma group (Crocker 1998, Goffman 1988). The unintentional consequence of this stigma management strategy is that the eternal search for beauty and dissatisfaction with the body transforms forms of social legitimation into sources of anxiety and insecurity. Thus, the body becomes a "badge" (Goldenberg and Ramos 2007, 39) that turns the subject into a vigilant who needs to control his own body, beat it, tame him, and imprison it in order to achieve the "good shape" required by the group. These findings highlight the unintended consequences of coping with stigma by manipulating the local meanings associated to the body through aesthetic consumption.

3. "Plastic Fantastic": Material interaction and the plasticization of the Brazilian body

Moving beyond the idea of objectification (Miller 1998; Borgerson 2009) this study explores material interaction, i.e. the "pragmatic relations that situate the meaning of objects in relation to other objects and the intentions of the designer and the user" (Dant 2008, 11). We examine how consumers relate not only to an object, but also to its material components in order to develop consumption meanings (Kravets and Öрге 2010; Bettany 2007). Current research largely overlooks how material interaction shapes the broader cultural context where it happens (Latour 2000; Watson 2008). Thus, patterns and associations between consumer culture and material interaction which influence the construction of consumer meanings for objects remain underexplored.

We start addressing this gap by accounting for the role of culture in shaping material interaction. We examine advertising and body ideals (i.e. intermediary cultural texts), which could shape designers' creativity and hence interfere with the "situationally contingent ... unfolding engagement between consumer and product" (Watson 2008, 7).

We investigate the material interaction of consumers with plastic shoes drawing from the case of a Brazilian brand: Melissa. Owned by the largest shoe manufacturer in Brazil, Melissa has launched more than 500 different shoes and exported over 55 million pairs to 80 countries throughout 36 years. To analyze this trajectory, we collected the digital version of 111 print ads launched by the brand between 1978 and 2012. Our synchronic and diachronic semiotic analysis of these ads focused on the interplay between plastic and body, and on the evolution of this interplay through time (Berger 2012; Philips and McQuarrie 2002). We ask: What is the relation between plastic and body encapsulated in the ads? How do the proposed meanings relate to body ideals prevalent in Brazil?

We identify six phases distinctly marked by changes on how body and plastic – consumer and material – relate in the ads. From sanitized portrayals in which plastic shoes are worn with socks, through displays of a comfortable relationship where models are sprayed on plastic couches, the relation has evolved to portrayals in which the flesh body is absent, being replaced for plastic dolls, and where bodily shapes are outlined with plastic threads.

Goldenberg, whose research mainly addresses the cultural understandings of the Brazilian body, observes that body matters are more important in Brazil than the clothes someone wears – the body is clothing, she says. “It ... must be exhibited, molded, manipulated, worked, sewed, ornate, picked, constructed, produced, imitated. It is the body that goes in and out of fashion” (2006, 119). Hence, it makes sense to discuss the ins and outs of fashion in terms of body ideals in Brazil and to trace their parallel with the plasticization of the body evidenced through time in Melissa ads (figure 1).

Overall, we notice that changes in the ads might have been influenced by cultural changes (Schroeder 2009), by the evolution of advertising itself, by new trends in graphic design, and by the evolving understandings of plastic in Brazil and worldwide (Gabrys, Hawkins, and Michael 2013). Nevertheless, the increased plasticization of the body through time is unmistakable, and it is also clearly associated with the transformation of the female body ideals in Brazilian society. As portrayed in Melissa ads, plastic and body increasingly merge, seamlessly replacing one another not only through the plastic appearance of bodies, but also portraying the properties of plastic as capacities of the body (e.g. molding). This process goes along with the increasing popularity among Brazilians of plastic surgery, known in the country as *plástica* (Edmonds 2009). Another parallel trend in body fashion is the pervasiveness of body shaping through exercising (*malhação*) aiming to add volume to specific body parts which are valued in the Brazilian ideal of a sexy body, such as thighs and butt. Melissa ads frequently make direct reference to those body ideals, such as in two ads which read: “*Before resorting to silicone, try plastic*” and “*As the plastic takes shape, innocence goes away.*”

We tracked changes over time in these proposed consumer-material interactions and meanings, offering a socio-historical perspective of the role of intermediary texts in shaping material interaction between Brazilian consumers and plastic shoes. Our findings reinforce the need for a more culturally situated analysis of material interaction, even when the focus is narrowed from the object to its material components. Following what Askegaard and Linnet (2011) have called “the context of the context,” we undertake a historically situated analysis for further understandings of body plasticity in Brazilian culture. Understandings of the pragmatics of material interaction are enriched when examined against this fabric of culturally and temporally variant readings of consumers and objects.

Figure 1

Phase	Time period	Description	Example	Brazilian body ideals
1. Friendship	1979-1985	The body does not touch plastic: the sandals are worn with socks. Brazilian actresses are portrayed in natural, informal postures. Models have their feet on the ground (literally) and plastic is visible only in the shoes. The caption for one of these ads reads: "Melissa: the star of the plastic era."	http://goo.gl/B0BKs8	In the late 70s, when Melissa was launched, the popular soap opera <i>Dancing Days</i> was on air (1978-1979). The main character in it was played by Sonia Braga. She was short and had tan skin, a thin waist, large hips, small breasts, and long curly black hair. Hers was the ideal body in Brazil at that time (Freire 1987), which permeated Brazilian culture through prestigious imitation (Mauss 1974). That ideal was close to the body nature gave many Brazilian women.
2. Desire	1990-1994	Ads portray famous Brazilian and international top models wearing Melissa shoes without socks. Contrasting with the previous phase, now there are other plastic elements on the ads in addition to the shoes. Body and plastic are shown in a comfortable relationship.	http://goo.gl/D1cFE3	Increasing familiarity with European and American models introduced other types of body into the Brazilian imaginary. The 90s is known in the fashion world as the "supermodels era" (Gross 2011). The most popular soap opera in Brazil at the time was <i>Top Model</i> (1989-1990). Melissa launches its " <i>Top Collection</i> ."
3. Intimacy	1998	Non-famous teenagers pose in playful or resting poses, wearing the plastic shoes and minimal clothing (comfortable, underwear). The shoes are transparent, beige, or black. The feeling is of intimacy, and the plastic shoes are portrayed as part of the almost naked body. Melissa launched a campaign targeting teenagers, with the slogan "Always the same, always different."	http://goo.gl/xQmnbG	In the 90s, Brazil opens up to imports. Hence, foreign cultures influence Brazilian culture in a much more pervasive way. International brands and styles are adopted by Brazilian consumers, who were dissatisfied with the local scenario. The grunge is one of the strongest influences of the end of the 90s, and sets the tone for the body ideals prevalent at that time: the body is loose, natural, unattached to consumption objects, including accessories and clothes.
4. Fusion	2002-2005	Melissa ads featured Barbie-like dolls instead of human models. The body becomes plastic. The ads are colorful and playful, and slogans refer to the attractiveness of plastic ("The men who	http://goo.gl/rv0sMv	Plastic surgery starts to be widely known in Brazil. Thanks to the work of Dr. Pitangy and his medical students, plastic surgery starts to be offered in the national public health system in 2001. The early 2000s are characterized as the boom of plastic surgery in

		invented plastic ended up victims of their own invention,” and “Before resorting to silicone, try plastic”). This is Melissa’s first attempt to replace body with plastic in ads, a representation that would be resumed later, at phase 6 (Sublimation).		Brazil.
5. Simulation	2006-2011	Human models are back in the ads, following the brand’s strategy to invest on celebrity sponsorships. The models showing in the ads gain plastic-like properties: firm, doll-like postures, and un-natural smoothness and glow to their skin. These portrayed models and celebrities are juxtaposed over colorful graphics, in scenarios redesigned by computer.	http://goo.gl/qgvmL4	The number of plastic surgeries in Brazil almost doubles between 2008 a 2011, reaching one million operations per year (SBCP 2013). <i>Funk</i> music culture gains prominence, and along with it comes an exacerbation of workouts to shape the bottom part of the body. Women with large, shapely rear ends are monicked “Fruit-women” (<i>Mulheres-fruta</i>) and become national celebrities (2006-2009).
6. Sublimation	2012-2013	The body is once again replaced with plastic. Here, however, this replacement is intensified. Facial expressions and other human features are absent – only bodily shapes are displayed.	http://goo.gl/LEZaSW	São Paulo Fashion Week becomes the most important fashion event in Latin America, with one million visitors (compared to 100,000 in 1996). With the increasing relevance of fashion for Brazilian consumers, there is not one clear body ideal, but a myriad of options consumers may emulate, depending on their identity goals and social milieu.

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