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GLOBALIZATION, DIFFERENTIATION, AND NATION BRANDING: FROM CONCEPTS TO BRANDS IN PORTUGUESE FOOTWEAR

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Abstract:

In contemporary globalized societies, the capitalist productive system triggers phenomena of extreme competition, which leads to complex processes of value incorporation in products. Today's consumers do not primarily buy objects; instead, objects are acquired as signs of identity, lifestyle or image. As such, objects are transformed into a code that indicates social positions and cultural preferences. In the market of the symbolic value of products, a factor of great importance is the difference the product provides in relation to others which are similar. Among many other issues, the national origin of the product is a key factor, since the country is associated with reputational capital that is also linked to the products it manufactures. Therefore, in today's globalized world, where cultural references are increasingly global and hybrid, it is of great importance to analyze the assessment process of nation-states by international public opinion. The aim of this paper is the discussion of central concepts, such as cultural globalization and nation branding. Two indices of global brand will also be briefly examined in order to understand how the brand "Portugal" may contribute to the success of the Portuguese footwear industry.

Key words: *nation branding; globalization; differentiation; footwear industry*

1. Introduction: from cultural globalization to differentiation strategies

The complexity of the productive system is one of the most important descriptors of contemporary societies. Prior to the revolutions of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, productive labour was essentially related to the organization of resources and the production of goods for the satisfaction of basic needs or, residually, goods with ritual or symbolic functions. Later, the consolidation of the industrial-capitalist system led to new economic, technological and organizational demands and this generated the structural features that shape today's modern economic system. Fundamentally, our contemporary economic system is no longer oriented towards a subsistence level of production; instead, the whole system is driven by the development of increasingly expanding markets, as well as the establishment of excessive, superfluous, and ephemeral forms of consumption.

The implementation of such transformations took place throughout the twentieth century, in two concurrent ways: 1. the consolidation of consumerism as a major characteristic of modern culture, which has been the effect of advertising, together with the globalization of social practices of consumption; 2. the incorporation of the artifice of difference into industrial production or, in the words of Jean Baudrillard (1974), the "smallest marginal difference." When combined, these two conditions are paramount in supporting the industrial-capitalist productive system: an asset ceases to be a product that meets a need and becomes an object of desire that triggers endless and insatiable needs. The secret of insatiability seems to be *the difference*, that is, the tiny dissimilarities between similar objects. This means that objects are less

and less acquired for their utility or use value; instead, each consumption act becomes part of the personal identity of modern individuals. This rationale is particularly evident in fashion products.

More recently, in the process of globalization, this logic has been dramatically expanded and multiplied. Time-space compression, along with information, communication and transportation technologies, has produced new cultural patterns and references on a truly global scale. According to Robertson (1992a), we are witnessing two contrasting movements: the universalization of the particular and particularization of the universal. As a result, economic, political, cultural, social and technological globalization implies mass deterritorialization. Consequently, as the reverse of this movement, we have the revaluation of local and national practices and products for their originality, authenticity and uniqueness.

The increase of global economic and cultural exchanges and the need for producers to ensure *difference* as an important asset in conquering markets has drawn attention to dematerialized consumption. By this we mean the consumption of products whose mercantile and symbolic value is far beyond the object itself, being directly related to the incorporation of style, identity, social distinctiveness, image or belief. In this context, consumption identities emerge, supported by social signs which aggregate consumer tribes and operate, objectively or subjectively, as indicators of social classification. This paper aims to highlight the relation between the national origin of products and its symbolic valorisation, both in commercial markets and global ranking of nations.

We know that productive activities are not equally distributed across countries. Additionally, due to several factors, certain activities tend to be particularly successful in some countries and they become part of their "brand image". For instance, countries like Italy and France are historically associated with the fine arts, in the same way that solid and reliable car production immediately suggests countries such as Germany and Japan. Some other examples would be the close relationship between Brazil and carnival festivities or sunny beaches, or the undeniable association of champagne with France. Therefore, excellence in specific economic sectors can constitute itself as an identity trait of nations as much as their cultural or religious traditions or their historical and artistic heritage.

From the standpoint of business management, and particularly from the perspective of marketing strategies, the country's image can be enormously supportive in increasing economic value. To put it differently, the more notable and positive is the image of a country, the more valuable will be its products, as the country's image is *transferable* to the merchandise itself. Furthermore, the national origin of the product may be vital to the success of trademark strategies. That is why marketing strategies that incorporate some form of nation branding policy are likely to be designed and implemented by national business associations. This is the case of the Portuguese footwear industry. Indeed, for the last decade this industry has sought to compete in international markets based on the creation of its own brands, as well as the generation of added value based on quality, innovation and product design. In this strategy, the *made in Portugal* label has been believed to be a symbolic element of appreciation and may constitute itself as a *difference* factor.

2. Globalization: why we are (not) all equal

Currently, globalization corresponds to the acceleration of a historical process that mankind has always known: the opening up and absorption of new territories, cultural fusion, the increasing integration and connection on a planetary scale. In a more restricted form, globalization refers to the process of multiplication, acceleration and intensification of global interactions that has been taking place since the 1980's (Robertson, 1992a, 1992b; Giddens, 2002; Lechner, 2008). Roland Robertson (1992a: 8) states that globalization "as a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole". Generally, the concept of globalization sums up the current process of interdependence, connectivity, awareness of globality, and the shrinkage of the world.

For a deeper understanding of the globalization process it is important to bear in mind its various layers: 1. the economic level (massification and transnationalization of trade; economic and financial interdependence; development of free market) 2. the political level (weakening of boundaries; political and

military interdependence; global organizations and social movements) 3. the technological level (technical means of information, communication, and transportation which permit massive and immediate data dissemination, along with the compression of the time-space structures) 4. the socio-cultural level (shared social and cultural practices; deterritorialization of cultural references). We will now focus on the cultural dimension of globalization in order to understand its effects and challenges in the configuration of contemporary societies.

The expression cultural globalization would appear to be a contradiction in terms. The notion of culture is usually associated with specific characteristics of a group or community within definite local, regional or national boundaries. Does it make any sense to talk about global culture? Could there be any cultural forms that are not anchored in a local or national context? It is, however, a fact that local cultural products and practices become globalized. As a result, the origin of global cultural references is now irrelevant or barely noticeable - which is precisely what Gilles Lipovetsky (2010) calls "universal hyperculture". Thus, a global imaginary is created: a set of ideas, characters, images, and languages that circulate throughout the world. The result is the homogenization and standardization of consumption practices and lifestyles on a global scale. However, this is still an incomplete perception of globalization because, while standardizing, it also encourages and facilitates numerous forms of diversification and differentiation. Therefore, globalization should be seen as a dual movement of differentiation and homogenization, production and suppression of difference, cultural democracy and hegemony, localism and globalism (Tomlinson, 2008).

Globalization is thus a complex, contradictory and dynamic phenomenon that combines diversity and similarity. Alexandre Melo (2002: 43) believes that "cultural globalization generates more uniformity and more diversity, and this is not a paradox". A good example of this argument is the fact that some local food is now globalized (hamburgers, pizza, sushi, tacos). Contrary to what might have been expected, that has brought more alternatives for consumers and more diversity of cuisine styles. Along with new and exotic food experiences, people are also more willing to preserve and promote local specialties as part of their cultural heritage. This means that globalization and massification of goods is not always a death sentence for local or traditional products; in some circumstances, global dynamics is what prevents them from disappearing or being replaced. What is more, a *return to the roots* can be seen as a way of resisting and defying cultural homogenization.

3. Global culture and nation branding

A global culture has been in the process of being shaped over the last hundred years. Underlying this process are several factors, fundamentally standardization of tastes and goods and expansion of common imaginary and common lifestyles on a global scale. In the specific domain of consumption, an increasing "cosmopolitanism" is taking place. Due to the globalization of brands and stores, as well as the massification of cultural goods (film, music, literature, sports), a common sensitivity is being fostered worldwide. Subsequently, a new type of consumer is emerging: the transnational consumer with similar desires who aspires to achieve the same products and standards of consumption. Despite this, it is not reasonable to conclude that we are experiencing total economic and cultural uniformity. In fact, it is quite evident that the global supply of material and cultural goods needs to follow the specificities of local markets. Whether in the field of food, fashion or architecture, fusion fashion and hybridization are strong characteristics of today's world. However, at the same time as these globalizing universalistic tendencies, the reinforcement of particularistic identities discloses how local features and traditions are significant references. Overall, global culture would appear to be closely connected to the search for authenticity, uniqueness, and fascination for the exotic.

None of this contradicts the way capitalist economy works in the postmodern era. According to Gilles Lipovetsky (2010: 146), "hypercapitalism based on consumerism is characterized by an economy of variety and rapid renewal of products". Mass production is no longer suitable, since it incorporates less and less added value. Marketing strategies are currently focused on increasingly segmented markets, along with a greater range of choice for consumers. Concurrently, product and trend cycles are getting shorter. Some relevant examples of these tendencies can be found in the domains of fashion, literature, music,

audiovisual contents, tourism, leisure, sports, technological gadgets, and home decoration. In its first phases capitalism was supported by the production of hard, material goods. Nowadays, at the stage of hypercapitalism, economic growth tends to be mostly enhanced by immaterial contents, which are coupled with cultural industries and communication technologies.

At the stage of hypercapitalism, the exchange value of goods is directly related to immaterial features, such as brand, identity, style, aesthetics, creativity, and cultural imaginary. As artistic, cultural production is facing commodification, material production tends to be *culturalized*. Contemporary culture is blurring established binary oppositions: culture and commodity, traditional and modern, handcraft and industrial production, kitsch and chic. Since no sharp distinctions are available, syncretic metamorphic compositions are emerging.

3.1 Nation branding: a brief discussion

In a context of aggressive competitiveness, vast resources are mobilized for the global war of innovation and the generation of value (Buckley, 2011). This is particularly true for products targeted at higher market segments, more willing to acquire expensive goods. A noteworthy component of the perceived value of a product is what Jean Baudrillard (1972) calls "sign value", i.e., the indicative elements of social classification or status. Among many factors that contribute to the incorporation of value, such as brand, design, environmental and ethical requirements, is undoubtedly the country of origin of the product.

The "country of origin effect" was identified several decades ago and it has to do with the influence of a country's image in the differentiation and value a product has on the market (Roth, 1992; Popodoulos, 1993; Laroche, 2005). "Country of origin effect" is a multidimensional concept that refers to quality, reliability, price, safety, aesthetics, and technology, among others factors that are associated with the country of origin of a product. Briefly, this concept helps to underscore what has been stated above: the image of an object is not limited to its materiality. In reality, the object itself condenses a complex set of intangible properties that can only be interpreted in relation to cultural and social meanings within a given society. Indeed, consumer's assessment of things includes not only cognitive-rational aspects, but also emotional and connotative ones. Therefore, the social value of a specific good is the outcome of consumers' and producer's expectations, as well as social representations associated to the conditions of its production. For instance, Asian cars continue to be characterized by mechanical reliability and unimaginative aesthetics because that is a long lasting image among consumers, but also because producers find it advantageous to reproduce this idea.

The expansion of research on the "country of origin effect" has led to considerable conceptual progress. One of most significant advances is the concept of nation branding, proposed by Simon Anholt (2007, 2009). In its scope and complexity, this concept differs from notions like "place branding", "destination branding", "cultural or public diplomacy", "territorial marketing", or "country of origin effect" (Fan, 2006; Hanna, 2007; Dinnie, 2007). Unlike these terms, nation branding has a focus which goes beyond the idea of promoting a particular country through marketing and communication techniques, since countries are essentially different from commercial brands. The concept of nation branding accounts for foreign public perception of the symbolic capital of a nation-state and its positioning in an implicit scale of reputation. Being a complex and arguable concept, it implies some challenges regarding its operationalization, as evidenced by Ying Fan (2006: 7-8):

"Products can be discontinued, modified, withdrawn from the market, relaunched and repositioned or replaced by improved products. Nations or places do not have most of these choices. As there is no tangible offer in a nation brand its attributes are difficult to define or describe. The only benefits a nation brand could create for its audience are emotional rather than functional".

Unlike the original concept of branding, and despite its potentiality for practical intervention, the concept of nation branding is not just a marketing tool (Anholt, 2008) as it spans several theoretical contributions, such as political science, sociology, and anthropology. Public evaluation of nations and peoples is in fact based on many factors, almost all of which are intangible in nature, related to their cultural and religious

identity, ethnicity, historical events, and traditions. Hence, nation brand is a multidimensional concept, as clearly shown in the scheme proposed by Simon Anholt:



Figure 1: Dimensions of “nation brand”, according to Simon Anholt. Available through http://www.gfkamerica.com/practice_areas/roper_pam/nbi_index/index.en.html

According to this conceptualization, a nation’s reputation is the result of a complex interplay between numerous elements that do not depend exclusively on people or leaders, or what the country produces and exports. We would even say that it is impossible to summarize all the variables involved in defining the symbolic capital of a nation-state in a simple index.

One aspect that tends to be overlooked in the various approaches to this concept is that the image/ identity/ reputation of a country does not stand alone. Instead, it is closely linked to the stratification that arises from the global productive system. In other words, prior to considering a country’s status we should pay attention to the implied ranking of major economic, political, and cultural areas. In the world system, centre-periphery relationships often define symbolic positions (King, 2000). Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest the relevance of a superior level of reputation that aggregates large geo-political-cultural areas of the world and that this contaminates the value of nations within its influence. Perceptions related to territorial divisions (North/ South, East/ West), race (white/ coloured) and development level (developed/ underdeveloped countries) constitute a noteworthy part of the reputational capital of countries. For example, it would be difficult for an African country, even with superior economic, social, and political performances, to escape from the low symbolic capital which is *attached* to belonging to Africa (Gertner, 2007: 5-6). With this in mind, it would be advantageous to include this dimension when researching nation brand, or we run the risk of missing an important explanatory variable.

3.2 Nation brand indexes

Grounded in the concept of nation branding, Simon Anholt developed the *Nation Brand Index*, which currently provides the classification of 50 countries, according to the perceptions of respondents from 20 countries. The Index aggregates the following dimensions: population, products, governance, tourism, culture and heritage, immigration and investment. Portugal is not among the countries assessed by this index. Making some use of the suggestion of including geo-political-cultural representations about the ranked nations, it is possible to state that Western European countries (France, Germany, the United

Kingdom, Italy, Switzerland, Sweden) enjoy a very good reputation in all measured variables, conquering the top positions in the ranking (included in the first 10 on the list). As for the peripheral European countries, available information is scarce. It would, however, be true to say that they generally occupy intermediate positions, between the most developed countries (North America, Northern and Western Europe, Australia, and Japan) and emerging countries (Anholt-GfK Roper, 2012).

FutureBrand, a corporation dedicated to brand consultancy, has also developed a reputation index of nations with wider range of measured features. The *Country Brand Index* evaluates annually more than 100 countries in seven areas (awareness, familiarity, preference, consideration, decision to visit, advocacy, associations). Special prominence is given to associations, operationalized in five dimensions (value system, quality of life, business, heritage and culture, tourism) and 23 categories (e.g. history, natural beauty, art & culture, environment, safety, education system, advanced technology, food, resort & lodging options, standard of living, political freedom, tolerance, investment climate, job opportunity, skilled workforce, value for money). When compared with the *Nation Brand Index*, the results differ considerably. As the index includes a larger number of sociological and cultural categories and fewer economic variables, the results give emphasis to democratic, economically and socially developed countries, with high living standards and an important historical, cultural, and natural heritage. Canada is at the top of the list and within the first 15 positions, 10 are taken by European countries. Portugal ranks in 30th in the overall list and is 16th in the ranking of European countries. It is interesting to note that the Portuguese position is right after Western European countries and before Eastern Europe's countries (FutureBrand, 2012).

4. Portugal as a brand: the case of footwear industry

The relationship between the perceived value of a country and the value of its products has been clearly established. This may result in the commercial depreciation or valorisation of national products, both in the domestic market and abroad. The critical factors in this equation are very complex and cannot be reduced to the limits of countries' reputation indexes. For instance, it is manifest that the country image effect, as well as the level of economic development and technological advance, is crucial in the determination of value for specific goods. Focusing on the Portuguese case, it is plain to see that electronic products, namely those for domestic use such as appliances or computers, are not highly reputed. On the other hand, the cork and canning industries, for example, are widely renowned for their excellence and innovation, both domestically and abroad. Other factors to be considered are the consumer market segments, as well as the relative position of the country of origin and the country that imports the goods regarding the level of development or the historical relationships they maintain. If Portuguese wines have little chance of imposing themselves in the European market, the same does not apply to the Brazilian market.

Therefore, the success of products of Portuguese origin in foreign markets is affected by a wide set of variables. For exporting companies, one of the key issues in internationalization processes is related to popularity, renown, and notoriety. Depending on those features, marketing strategies will be affirmative or omission-oriented. The point at issue here is whether the label *Made in Portugal* (or some other form of identification of the producing country) is favourable in terms of value. For a more concrete understanding of this reality, we will carry out an exploratory analysis of the case of the Portuguese footwear industry.

The footwear industry is one of the most relevant Portuguese export-driven sectors - a solid industry with decades of consistent orientation to the external market. Concentrated in two geographic centres (Tâmega & Ave and Entre Douro e Vouga) in the North of the country, the footwear industry employed around 33,000 workers who produced more than 61 million pairs of shoes with a gross production value of 1,376 million in 2011. The share of exports represents 94% of the produced value, with a strong tendency for increase. What is more, for the last two decades, the average price per pair for export increased by 70% as a result of the sector's investment in high value added products (APPICAPS, 2011a).

Data from 2010 indicate that Portugal is the 11th largest world exporter with a 2% share, and the country with the third highest average export price per pair (\$25.9 USD), following Italy and France. The industry's performance is even more outstanding when it comes to leather footwear, which represents 70% of the total pairs of exported shoes. Portugal ranks 8th on the list of exporting countries in the leather footwear

segment, with an average price per exported pair of \$32.18 USD. Additionally, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Spain are the main importers of Portuguese footwear, as Europe absorbs about 95% of the exports (APPICAPS, 2011b).

In recent times, the case of the Portuguese footwear industry has been referred to as an example of success at various levels. As a result of the pressing competition coming from Asian producers (with very low labour costs), due to full membership of these countries to free trade agreements and the consequent relocation of factories, this sector experienced considerable difficulty in the early 2000's, namely massive unemployment and a decline in exports. However, the above figures show a significant recovery from losses. The key to progress in the Portuguese footwear industry seems to lie not in the continuity of the dominant productive system established in the last century, but in a "strategic reorientation" (APPICAPS, 2011a: 11) focused on the intangible elements of the product. Confirming this is the fact that there has been a decrease in the number of pairs produced, while at the same time there has been an increase in the production value. According to data compiled by APICCAPS - Portuguese Footwear Components and Leather Goods Manufacturers' Association, from 2005 to 2009, the number of pairs produced increased by 5.9%, while for the same period the variation of value has reached 13.8%.

With a consolidated productive structure and a skilled labour force, the footwear industry initiated a new strategy in the twentieth century. This strategy involved product enhancement through design, fashion, quality, technological innovation, creation of brands and opening own stores. As a result, the number of registered brands and models rose from close to zero in 2002 to 250 in 2008 (APPICAPS, 2011a: 60). In a very competitive market, dominated by China in low-value segments and by Italy and France in upscale products, the Portuguese footwear industry has managed to secure a position in the competition. For some of the most important companies, the goal is no longer to export shoes to be sold as foreign brands, but to increase a reputation of quality and innovation for Portuguese footwear. Some examples of designers/brands are Luís Onofre, Fly London, Carlos Costa, Guava or Nobrand, among many others. For these creators/ producers/ brands the approach to external markets plainly asserts the national origin of their products, i.e., emphasizing *Made in Portugal* as a guarantee of value to final consumers.

5. Final considerations

The internationalization strategy followed in the last decade by the Portuguese footwear industry has been responding to the challenges posed by economic globalization. When goods placed on the markets reveal characteristics that are expected to be found in products of a more reputable national origin, the most important goals of a "nation branding" strategy are essentially achieved. It will nevertheless be a risky strategy if the image of the country remains dissonant with respect to such products. In the case of the Portuguese footwear industry, which factors are expected to assure success in global markets?

As mentioned above, critical consumer trends in postmodern societies involve underlining the difference in marketed products. In more affluent and developed societies, consumption (and clearly the consumption of fashion goods) has much less to do with needs and more to do with desire. The fate of the postmodern consumer is likely to be the structuration of his or her personal and social identity from a consumerist lifestyle and from global distinctive signs and references. This is done by incorporating distinctive elements that offer the consumer a sense of belonging to cultural and social tribes. Additionally, it contributes to the management of his or her social status.

Taking into consideration the degree of globalization of markets, along with dematerialization of consumption and deterritorialization of social practices, it is useful to assess the role of "national brand" in the valorisation of goods. In sum, it is important to stress the reciprocal relationship between the reputation of a country and the value of its products in international markets. That is, the symbolic value of a country and its products' reputational value are symbiotic. In the case of Portuguese footwear for export we may confirm that in the last decade a solid strategy of product development has been taking place, via the intangible components of footwear, as well as the assertion of national origin in foreign markets. The outcomes obtained in terms of growth in exports are encouraging and allow us to anticipate that the success of the Portuguese footwear industry will depend in the future on the ability to impose Portuguese

shoes in direct competition with the most respected producers worldwide. Long-term benefits of the association of Portuguese footwear and fashion product brands to quality design and consumers with innovative profile may further an integrated reputation-image. The symbolic valuation achieved in this process can then operate as a starter, that is, the brand *Portugal* may automatically add value to footwear products designed and manufactured in Portugal.

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