

A imaterialização da marca: da economia da mercadoria à economia da transformação

The dematerialisation of the brand: from the commodity economy to the transformation economy

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Resumo: *No mundo atual, as marcas vieram a reconhecer que o design e a produção de objetos representa apenas uma parte do seu negócio. Assim, esforçam-se por desenvolver com sucesso novas estratégias de marketing, como o branding baseado na experiência. Todavia, alguns autores apontam para a necessidade de a economia se basear em algo mais duradouro do que a memória que o serviço ou a experiência de uma marca possa despertar no público. Sustentam, portanto, a importância de se desenvolver a “economia da transformação”. Neste artigo, discutimos o processo de imaterialização da marca e, conseqüentemente, a mudança do seu valor no mercado ao longo das últimas décadas. Apoiados em autores que pensam o mundo contemporâneo a partir da análise social, econômica ou das áreas da comunicação, como o marketing e o design, procuramos contribuir para a reflexão e o reconhecimento de questões emergentes que possam estar de acordo com as complexas demandas de um crescimento financeiro futuro.*

Palavras-chave: *marketing; comunicação; marca; experiência; economia da transformação.*

Abstract: *Currently, brands have been recognizing that thinking about design and object production is a part of their business. Therefore, brands have*

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been attempting to successfully develop new marketing strategies for the brand experience. However, some authors have been highlighting the need for an economy based on something more long lasting than what the memory of a service or experience of the brand causes in the public. Diverse authors argue for the development of the 'Transformation Economy'. In this article, we will discuss the process of brand dematerialization, and thus the change of its economic value in the last decades. Our arguments will be supported on authors who think about the contemporary work from a social, economic and communicational perspectives. We aim at contributing to reflection and recognition of emerging questions which can be aligned with the complex challenges of the future financial growth.

Keywords: *marketing; communication; brand; experience; transformation economy.*

The daily circumstances – already treated and deepened in previous publications (DIAS, 2017, 2018; DIAS and MOURA, 2017) – from a globalized and network context, immediate, uncertain and chaotic – named liquid modernity (BAUMAN, 2000) and under an intense hyperconsumption and hyperindividualism (LIPOVETSKY and CHARLES, 2004; LIPOVETSKY and SERROY, 2000) – radically transformed, in a few decades, our reality (FEITOZA, 2017; KOPP, 2015).

In 1973, Daniel Bell affirmed, in his book *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, a set of new characteristics that would lead society to stop being oriented by an economy of production of goods to enter an economy based on services. Today, the term “post-industrial society” is already established and is unanimously accepted, becoming increasingly less relevant the awareness of the distance between us and the physical object. We live in an immaterial and information society, in which we defend the urgency of our development in an era of knowledge, clearly manifested in the intentions of the president of the TED association, Chris Anderson (2016).

If in dates prior to the creation of markets in the 80's, the services offered did not find a great competition³ – not having, because of that, an interest in making them a point of difference between brands –, now, the reality is substantially different. We live in a capitalism of brands, in which choices are multiplied between multiple similar products. The market began to offer a type of “apparent” extension of options of consumption and production, in addition that almost everything can be quickly copied with great quality. In fact, most of these products are not capable of standing out from one another for their traditional benefit, requiring a new model of management in the level of value creation for the brand. Innovation and technical capacity, even though they are important, they are no longer enough. It's acknowledged, therefore, that the brand cannot be a mere label.

3 Market where there were a small number of salesmen for buyers: local services (locksmith, plumber) monopoly tendency service (water or telephone) or oligarchic services (banks, insurance companies).

Considering this approach, we will review, in this article: (i) How the transition was developed from an industrial economy based on the production of consumption goods to an economy based in the immateriality of experience; (ii) the form how the brand could expand to comply the requirements of a global scale market; and (iii) point some of the challenges and difficulties announced by the contemporary paradigms, namely those based on the idea of transformation.

Economy of services: the unattainability of the product

Before the aesthetic promise of value of use got detached as label and, finally, as advertisement image, it already finds itself active outside merchandise, in the mouth and gestures of a salesman. A great part of the functions of merchandise aesthetics, concretely filled later on, is seen as a personal performance of the one using the mask of a salesman (HAUG, 1997, p. 89).

In the excerpt used to open this section, the author talks about how, before the graphic aesthetic and marketing narratives exist, the awareness of the symbolic fabric transferred to the merchandises through performance of the person who follows/sells the product. The market of services gains, thus, a bigger impulse in late 1960's, in a crescent commercial trend and consumerist frenzy. By witnessing them, they became one of the preferential targets of the satire of the French actor Jacques Tati, in the hilarious film *Playtime*, from 1967.

Image 1: Frame of the movie *Playtime*



As an outcome of neoliberal politics from 1970's and 1980's, the market "boom" comes about and the world economic landscape suffers deep alterations. When the products get to be so good as the competition and with similar costs, it is the quality of service (namely at the post-sale) that may reside a big part of the brand's success. Consequently, emerge, in the scenario of marketing, brands of services that demand additional quality and a radical change in the dominant form of communication from then on.

The most powerful brands begin to appear in our lives through the services they offer, becoming as or more important than the products themselves. Even those which apparently dedicate themselves exclusively to the value of their performance have been increasingly acquiring characteristics of brands of service. As the brand manager Wally Olins says:

[...] The doctor's opinions about the different pharmaceutical laboratories are influenced by what they think about their delegated [of medical propaganda] that visit them, to not talk about similar congresses and offers provided by labs (OLINS, 2005, p. 80-82).

With the increase of service-focused sectors, it is in the brand communication where you find the important task of transmitting the character of the company. It is through this *branding* work that are exposed the “emotional affirmations” of the service that, on its own, is immaterial. In the mouth and gestures of the salesperson, the brand is communicated. Thus, the behavior of staff becomes crucial to confirm or deny what the advertisement is promising. As services depend essentially from the performance of these people, the management of a service brand is about the form the employees live and breathe – the salesperson is, on their own, the brand, as defended by Wally Olins. It is in this sense that such specialist in branding and corporative identity reinforces the importance of employee training in the business of services. If they understand the nature of the service they provide, even with flaws, they are going to be prepared for a honest effort to the good work of the brand (OLINS, 2005, p. 83).

According to the ideology of this new way of working, the people that follow the product (employees, retailers, etc.) are no longer seen as employees and become collaborators. Likewise, the audience also begins to be understood not as a consumer or user, but as a participant in this relationship. However, as observed by Olins, this adjustment does not always happen. According to the author, the brand management of services “is frequently badly managed” (OLINS, 2005, p. 81) insofar as it continues to enforce, wrongfully, the traditional model applied to the product brand management. We can say that the desirable tendency for the accomplishment of this practice goes through the delocalization of the traditional core of power. In this context, Olins reinforces how exemplary is the model practiced by the Swedish bank Svenska Handelsbanken when they seek to complement high technology with high relationship. In the whirlwind of technologic change in our era, this institution seem to be getting to ‘attain oneself in a culture based on service, real, genuine and ‘old-fashioned’ – but now, of course, extremely modern” (OLINS, 2005, p. 89).

With the refinement of industrialization and the extension of consumption society, we have access to a big amount of products with similar quality and aesthetic, since innovation and technical capacity, even though they are important, are no longer enough. In fact, many products seem not to stand out from one another. The brand began to play a determinant role to fill the void provoked by the standardization of production. Thus, along with the idea of brand, the consumer seeks to acquire a supplement of soul, dream and identity (LIPOVETSKY and SERROY, 2010, p. 117). Through a semantic work, there is a relentless attempt of restoring the identity of the products that once was attributed by the artisan or manufacturer. In addition, with the contemporary individual living his pinnacle of individuality – or in a hyperindividualism (LIPOVETSKY e CHARLES, 2004) – more than the use itself, the focus of communication relies on what the object represents for the user, in other words, its representation: in the importance of what means to have it and, essentially, what it will mean to have this object for the others. This phenomenon led to a radical change in the forms of communication:

[...] It wasn't about hammering a message praising the objective benefits of the product [...]. It's about innovating, creating surprises, having fun, making people dream, feel, creating a myth through special effects, beautiful images, rhythmic games and montage. We are far away from the good old behaviorist ad. In many aspects, it turned Hollywood into a model (LIPOVETSKY and SERROY, 2010, p. 118-119)

The world-culture and the hyperbrand

We could ask ourselves whether the aesthetic and creative dimension wouldn't always be crucial within the capitalist universe. The answer is yes. The aesthetic culture based on the product's skin was, since the beginning, a fundamental ally of sales, promoting and highlighting a certain product from its competition. However, in today's globalized world, the aesthetic factor becomes primordial in a completely new scale. It is

not about producing forms that remember the artistic currents, of calling artisans to make objects beautiful in the end of a production line, nor basing a product solely on the aesthetic resulting from the relationship form/function.

As the consumption society evolved, it completely transformed the notion of culture. If, on one hand, the culture that is considered new and elite is absolved and colonized by the market and by mediatic culture, on the other, commercial goods currently constitute a culture of a new genre - in which Lipovetsky and Serroy (2010, p. 86) call “world-culture”. In other words, in this global context, what is marketable tries to put oneself as a cultural work, trying to fit in, somehow, the creative and aesthetic principles of high culture. Even if there is a tense relationship between culture and economy, the idea of today living in a world of market homogenization and where “everything is culture” (in accordance to the definition of world-culture itself), the artistic sphere do not reject, however, the rules of market. In fact, it has allowed art, after being involved in the values of market, to become a fundamental factor of aesthetization in the daily life and in the world, being a phenomenon called “artealization of the world” by Lipovetsky and Serroy (2010, p. 124). In an interview, Lipovetsky said that, today, “a brand does not only sell a product, it sells a culture, a lifestyle. Designers, advertisers, creatives are hired to invest more in the brand than the product”, and this representation “is the culture” (MARIANO, 2010). It becomes a new dimension of the idea of brand – the hyperbrand (LIPOVETSKY e SERROY, 2010) – as it makes a bigger investment of this immaterial condition, developing its symbolic level through marketing. For example, we can identify the advertisement campaign “Being Portuguese is noble” (2018). The message for this Portuguese brand of charcuterie and canned goods is settled in national pride, giving the Portuguese people the responsibility for the contemporary changes and improvements conferred in the country.

The need of getting to the public in a new way stimulated the formation of creative teams with a hybrid nature. Everywhere, we watch

the trend of projects created from the synergy of different fields crossed, challenging every frontier through the merger of many possibilities. Consequently, it became more and more frequent the collaboration of artists and designers with artists in commercial spaces or big cinema makers in advertisement ads with commercial purposes. With a hybrid character, we highlight the collaboration of the famous Chinese filmmaker Wong Kar-Wai, who was invited to commercially sell the brand BMW, creating *The Follow* (2001), third movie ordered for the show “The Hire” and the one who created the short movie *Déjà Vu* (2012) for the brand of whisky Chivas Regal. The frequency on how these collaborations take place nowadays and the quality resulted from some of these adventures takes us to agree with the social scientists Lipovetsky and Serroy when they defend that “what matters is not if it is a “great” art or a commercial art. It only matters what is created, the work in itself” (2010, p. 124).

Economy of experience: the memory of a brand

This shift in paradigm, triggered around the 80’s, is due to, according to Wally Olins (2005), a combination of three factors: the deregulation of the market, the globalization and the increasingly larger incidence of new technologies in daily life. The confluence of those three conditions and the democratic access to technologies made the competition even more fierce. As explained by Olins (2005, p. 8):

Nowadays, because of the most modern technologies are found available to everyone, every cutting-edge competition of any area are very good. In fact, in order to enter the race, it is necessary to be as good as the best. [...] If every competition are good, wins the one that has the best reputation.

In order to survive, brands had the need to be more than mere labels, getting to feed a universe that expands in museums, games, films, TV shows extend their discussions in the virtual sphere.

The pioneer of this advertisement action was the photographer Oliviero Toscani, in the 80’s, directing the campaign “United colors

of Benetton". For the first time, a brand of clothing is presented in a conventional advertisement support showing social behaviors and the human condition in general in fracturing situations of the decade, or sufficiently controversial not to go unseen to the public indignation and reflection. Through these issues on racism, AIDS, politics or religion, they raised the question whether advertisement can or cannot have a function of social criticism and accusation. With this photographer's action, a new notion of brand begins to be spread, leading beyond its function, which is the identification and differentiation of product in relation to its competitors. The posters of that brand of Italian clothing, often rejected due to the discomfort of their provocations, manifested a boldness close to art objects and were presented in the famous Bienalle di Venezia of contemporary art in 1993 (Aperto '93).

Today, in addition to the value of reputation that the brand communicates about their products and services, matters even more factors linked to the understanding that the audience has of this reputation. It is no longer enough to the brand to be the best than their competition, it has to be *seen* as being the best (OLINS, 2005, p. 257). In this perspective on the presence of the brand in the current market, Wally Olins clears up that, more important than *what* the brands do is *how* they do it. And even more importantly, is the form they are perceived to do it (OLINS, 2005, p. 8) and their investment in authenticity. We can verify how Ferrari, a brand considered one of the most powerful in the world by Brand Finance (LIMAS, 2013), people's intuition surpasses the notion of the physical product itself and even its use:

[...] This brand does not invest a single penny in advertisement and it is still one of the most admired and valued brands in the whole world. [...] Most of the enthusiasts of Ferrari do not own a Ferrari, and quite possibly would never achieve this dream [...]. Their logo inspire power, luxury and sophistication; a mix of wild speed and Italian finesse. The house of Maranello placed its cars on people's imagination all over the world, and all of this was thanks to a history that is as moving as fierce (LIMAS, 2013).

Wally Olins acknowledges that a work in brand management is fundamental not only to make your differences stand out, but also to show intensely the differences in the market through your own attitude. However, it becomes fundamental in this process a history more based in consistent and relevant actions than just the construction of appearances linked to the material production. The identity of a brand structured over certain values will have to be worked to maintain coherence between what is advertised and what is practiced in reality, becoming increasingly subject to people's scrutiny. An example of this ever-growing sensitivity of the citizen are the anti-capitalist movements and attitudes this last two decades – as the book *No Logo*, by Naomi Klein (2002)⁴ or involved with the success of Walli Olins – revealed against the brand as symbol of the dramatic labor exploitation, the unequal distribution of wealth and the uncalculable waste of finite resources. In the era of network information, the profile of the new consumer reveals a greater restlessness and a bigger availability to fight against the dictatorship of big brands. A paradigmatic example of this position is reported in the documentary *The Light Bulb Conspiracy*. (2010) about consumers that, in the year 2013, gain a judicial case against Apple. These fight was triggered by an action organized by two video artists (The Neistat Brothers) that would not settle with the fact that the battery shelf life of their iPod would only have 18 months. As a protest, they shared a small video through their contact list and it became viral, calling attention to their issue in a massive scale.

Olins defends that, today, the potential of a brand can surpass the function of influence, strategy or commercial tactics that benefits, almost blindly, supreme capitalist goals. This author defends that the model of brand management can be oriented to benefit other purposes – as arts, sports, education, health and other social areas – as a way to encourage people to develop a close relationship with genuinely important and meritable activities (OLINS, 2005).

4 This researcher thoroughly reveals and analyses problems originated by the subversion of consumption society. Since her first edition, she seem to feed anti-globalization political movements.

In this process of immaterialization, it was gradually understood that, to companies, the production of a consumption good is only part of a business. It is with this awareness that many brands currently develop successfully the experience branding and marketing (BRAKUS, SCHMITT and ZARANTONELLO, 2009) – of interaction and proximity, permanently stimulating our desires and understanding the employee and the audience as fundamental references in the process of communication. In 2012, the North American brand of coffee Starbucks already actively applied this model, as presented in a conference by their marketing director at the time, Beatriz Jiménez-Asenjon.

Researches conducted by reference personalities like Joseph Pine and James Gilmore have contributed to an innovative analysis in the field of economy that presents the passage from a service logic to an experience logic. In this transition, authors recognize that the commercial value stopped depending from a traditional concept of service to base themselves in the offer of memorable and pleasurable experiences with that same intention. The authors identify Disney as a pioneer of that change. Since their first edition of the book *The Experience Economy* (1999), they defend that “goods and services are no longer enough” and point towards an inevitable change. They say it’s necessary to “abandon old paradigms of the Industrial and Service Economy in order to introduce new experiences and transformations”. Beyond that, arguing that, for a world saturated with goods and services, “to acknowledge experience as a distinctive economic offer supplies the key for future economic growth” (PINE and GILMORE, 2011, p. IX-XXIV). According to the authors, this change implies going from the mentality of “what” to the mentality of “how”. In other words, it is no longer enough to think only in design and production of things, but rather transform mundane interactions into involving relationships in order to achieve the “interactive sensitivity” of the client (PINE and GILMORE, 2011, p. 25)

As we’ve shown in previous publications (DIAS and MOURA, 2017; DIAS, 2017) the same appeal – re equating the insufficient and unidimensional view that is concentrated in the object itself – has been done

by different authors. For the architect Teddy Cruz (2010), society has been perpetuating the idea of beautiful as something magical inherent to the object, not as a notion that comes from a relation which we truly participate in. That is, aesthetics is understood as one thing (“what”) and not as a relation (“how”), making it difficult, according to the architect the abandonment of this modern paradigm when it is socially perpetuated (CRUZ, 2010). However, throughout our PhD study (DIAS, 2015), we realized that, more and more, intellectuals, coming from different areas, seem to prove the thesis of a relational tendency⁵, defending a critical review of established paradigms and opening up a discussion for the theory of relations.

Perceiving the quality of relationships or the involvement of the user during the process of interaction triggered a set of new questions that go beyond purely utilitarian aspects. And it is in this context that a review has been claimed of all the ‘ghosts’ that were excluded from the modernist view of historic linearity of events. This awareness seems to be present in the ever-growing sensitivity with the values of identity of a “common person”, their stories and actions as significant pillars of civilization. Note that this phenomenon in commercial initiatives like the so-called “market of nostalgia”. In this field of research, we increasingly search for inspiration in daily life and in human behavior and the discussion on the importance of a “sensorial” experience. Thus, presuppositions of an objectively pure analysis are shaken, as we may perceive in the book *Doing sensory ethnography* (2009), from the anthropologist Sarah Pink, or in different examples in the world of art and design, like the Pina Bausch’s choreographies; projects based in the relational aesthetics (following the concept of Nicolas Bourriaud); or in flexible methodologies like *design thinking*. There are numberless productions nowadays that manifest this cultural turning point, in which the process takes a more central role than the final result. Thinking of culture through body and senses, the experience is lived not only through the

5 To this purpose, we highlight the studies of Frank Popper (1997), Claire Bishop (2004), Grant Kester (2011), Nicolas Bourriaud (1998), Andrew Blauvelt (2008) and Meike Schalk (2011).

agents researched, but also allowed by the “researcher” himself. The same turning point seems to unfold in the economy level, where we find emerging terms like experience economy and transformation economy (PINE and GILMORE, 2011)

Contrary to the tense relationship lived between culture and economy, in an idea that today we live in a world of mercantile homogenization – where “everything is culture” and the controversial perception that culture that can be anything without any virtue – and symbolic loss, Lipovetsky and Serroy (2010, p. 157) defend the thesis that this situation has, on the contrary, generated a reaction in the core of the problem. These social scientists believe we are living a “cultural vengeance” [...] “in order to counteract the feeling of losing oneself”.

We can, thus, consider that the search for meaning is a defense mechanism responding our historic circumstances and that values like authenticity, empowerment of the common person and involving relationships are the focus of mundane and commercial intentions to reposition some brands in the market. See the recent global communication of the brand Vodafone, in ads like “The story of Hello” or “Installation” (2017/2018).

From economy of experience to economy of transformation

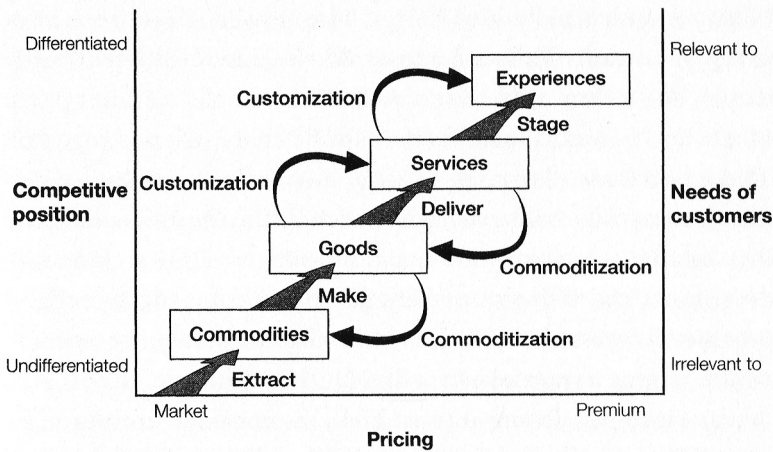
Reporting once again to the thesis defended by Pine and Gilmore, we deem important to refer that the authors go beyond the market model based in experience when they acknowledge that “experiences are not the last economic offer” (PINE and GILMORE, 2011, p. 244). They argue that, over time, they won’t even leave to become a merchandise, since a repeated experience loses its efficacy of involvement and seduction. They defend that people, more than chasing an experience and their active participation, seem to desire something bigger:

We want to transform ourselves, become different. While experiences are less transitory than services, the individual co-participation in experience

often wants something more durable than just a memory, something beyond what any good, service or experience can offer (PINE and GILMORE, 2011, p. 242-243)

According to the authors, an experience becomes automatically a “transformation” when it is personalized to a concrete individual, promoting, at the right moment, something he needs the most. As “experience” is a phenomenon they consider to be on top of services, “transformation” is a phenomenon that appears on top of experience. We can view this triggering of the progression of economic value on Image 2:

Image 2: Elevating the progression of economic value: a scheme from an agrarian economy to a transformation economy, according to Joseph Pine and James Gilmore



Source: Pine and Gilmore (2011, p. 111).

As we can analyze in the author’s scheme, the economic value that results from the transformation economy is not extracted from the product’s tangible nature (as it happens in the Agrarian economy), from the immateriality of the service or the memory of experience. This value comes from, before, the “individual transformation”. The consequence of the commercial offer in this last phase goes beyond consumption,

once when a company orients transformations, the offer is the individual – that’s the argument of Pine and Gilmore (2011, p. 255).

The authors consider this mentality increasingly present in industries that see themselves as part of the service sector. As an example of this awareness, they mention the interview of John Quelch, from London Business School.

We are not in the education business. We are in the transformation business. We hope everyone who takes part in a program in the London Business School – it can be for three days or for two years – get transformed by this experience (PINE e GILMORE, 2011, p. 248).

However, to the authors, the model they call economy of transformation will only find ways to advance in the next decades when the economy of experience finish its course. As it happened with the economy of experience, they say, it will be necessary a long period of adaptation, once both models transport in itself a new vocabulary (like “intangible products”) that require some time of assimilation. The same is verified with the term economy of services, currently generalized.

Final considerations

We deem that the importance of the new approaches referred here, coming from different fields of knowledge, such as economy, design and marketing, seem to emerge from the need of facing an environment in constant change. Through the practical manifestations of the terrain, the most recent lines of investigation have equally revealed a tendency with focus on the human being (in his behavior, participation, experience and transformation) and in the necessary capacity of seeing everything in relation (as an interactive ecosystem) is crucial to fill the “consumer’s” expectation. As referred, the term transformation design have been intuitively emerging from the dislocation of a logic of services of “looking to give an answer to specific problems” to a logic of “providing the organizations the tools and capacities for a service of innovation centered in the human being” (SANGIORGI, 2011, p.

31). The standards (methodological, contextual and even philosophical) coming from these new approaches seem sufficiently distinct from tradition to believe we're facing a potentially significant market to be invested in. To Pine and Gilmore (2011, p. 255), the success of companies and brands will reside in the capacity to understand the "aspirations of individual consumers and companies, guiding them to successfully accomplish these aspirations".

We should, however, question to what extent we can buy or negotiate the transformative process, since it has to have an intrapersonal involvement profoundly reflective so this transformation can occur, beyond the social dimension that has to be observed (MEZIROW, 2000). In addition, transformation implies fundamental changes regarding ideas, points of view or values of individuals. I wonder, then, if we wouldn't have to have a greater reflection and discussion over the mechanisms used in an economy of transformation and their ethical impact, namely for the future of society?

We continue to question: in the era we live in, with the amazing technological potential to empower any individual to its full accomplishment of goals, regardless of the morality of their convictions, shouldn't we be all in full warning mode? Shouldn't be a concern of each and every area to propel a more informed, pro-active and responsible social participation – following what Dias, Guareschi and Hennigen (2017) advocate?

Expecting from areas related with brand communication, like design and marketing, a catalyzing action of good practices and, at the same time, something that propels economy, it becomes imperative to think these concerns in a pedagogical context: in what way they have shaped the teaching landscape of future professionals?

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