Technological innovations in the production of sportwear: from conventional production to Industry 4.0

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Abstract: The present research aims to present the technological evolution of sportwear production by comparing conventional and new production systems. For this, the following production systems were defined: conventional knitting (T-shirt and shoe upper), seamless knitting (T-shirt) and seamless 3D knitting (shoe upper). The definition of these objects of study was based on research that points to walking as the most practiced physical activity by Brazilians. The methodological procedure adopted in the present research is predominantly exploratory. Sportwear can be produced by the conventional process or new production processes. In the conventional production process, there are many steps for fabric manufacturing and confection. In turn, seamless technology reduces working time by creating ready-to-wear articles that require little or no sew, since the product is developed in a single process. In this way, seamless technology impacts on working time by reducing or eliminating the cut and sew operations and the amount of waste discarded. All innovations presented in this research indicate efficient production related to cost, working time, waste management and interaction with the consumer. By adopting these technologies, the textile industry begins to move towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Keywords: sportwear, knitting, seamless, textile and apparel chain.

1. Introduction

The Textile and Apparel chain played – and still plays – an important role in the history of industrialization in the world. Unlike other value-added chains, it includes a large number of process steps performed by different successive industrial units, including: (i) fiber production; (ii) spinning; (iii) weaving/knitting; (iv) garment production process; (v) merchandising; (vi) retail sales; (vii) consumption; and (viii) disposal/recycling (Tobler-Rohr, 2011).

Among the different textile and apparel products, the sportswear represents a great exponent in the world economy and in technological development. The sportswear combines the concepts of functionality, comfort, and safety to meet the performance of each athlete in sport. Sport articles include clothing, footwear and accessories used for both competitive and leisure activities.

In this context, the present research aims to present the technological evolution of sportwear production by comparing conventional and new production systems. For this, the following production systems were defined: conventional knitting (T-shirt and shoe upper), seamless knitting (T-shirt) and seamless 3D knitting (shoe upper).

The definition of these objects of study was based on research that points to walking as the most practiced physical activity by Brazilians (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2013; Brasil, 2018). The methodological procedure adopted in the present research is predominantly exploratory.

2. Research background

2.1. Textile and apparel chain

The Textile and Apparel Chain consists of fiber production, spinning, weaving or knitting, garment production processes, merchandising, retail and sales, consumption and pos-consumption. In 2013, the textile and clothing exportation corresponded to US $ 766 billion, China was the leader in exports of both textiles (39%) and clothing (35%), while the European Union was the largest importer (38%). By 2020, this volume should increase to
Cotton adapted a mechanical propulsion machine capable of knitting several socks at the same time. One of the first mass-produced consumer goods was the sewing machine that dramatically changed the consumption and production of clothes. As a result, this sewing machine was adapted for other segments, such as footwear (McNeil, 2002).

The Third Industrial Revolution, also known as the digital revolution, is focused on the transition from analogue to digital technology, having as ultimate symbol the invention of integrated circuits that allow increasing computational capacity and decreasing production costs. As a result, the industry widely adapted itself to information technology (IT) and has a significant impact on the growth of economic performance until the present day (Schuh et al., 2014). Some technological solutions, such as 3D scanning, 3D modeling and digital printing are gradually being adopted by the textile industry (McNeil, 2002).

The Fourth Industrial Revolution – also called Industry 4.0 – advocates the need for connection between all information flows throughout the production process, in an autonomous production system that allows for fast and flexible production (Gloy et al., 2013). Industry 4.0 is a collective term for technologies and concepts in the value chain of an intelligent factory that monitor production processes (Anderl, 2015). Intelligent machines that anticipate the occurrence of failures or quality problems in the production process and organize the decision and self-optimization processes are other scenarios for Industry 4.0 (Gölzer et al., 2015).

2.3. Sportwear: materials and production processes

The sportwear combines functionality, comfort, and safety to meet the performance of each athlete. Sport articles include clothing, footwear and accessories used for both competitive and leisure activities (Campaniaris et al., 2011).

This segment presents a great impact in the global economy. In 2017, sales in the sports retail sector corresponded to US$ 260 billion. The global market has evolved a lot in the last decades, mainly from the 1980s influenced by the wellness and fitness lifestyle and the professionalization and dissemination of the sport (Sports Value, 2018).

Due to the great variety of sports, sport articles are developed to favor the performance of the practitioner. In this sense, the raw material, yarn and fabric production, confection and chemical finishing are fundamental to meet the practitioner needs and sport requirements (Filgueiras et al., 2007).

Functional elements can be applied to textile products in three moments: (1) in fiber, through new production techniques; (2) in the yarn, by creating new structures; and (3) in the fabric, with surface modifications (Soutinho, 2006; Morent & De Geyter, 2011).
Knitting is the fabric production technique which allows greater elasticity and adjustment to the body and provide freedom of movement. Knitted fabric consists of loops that connect to each other, in the same direction (Figure 1), with mobile connection points, from mechanical needle movements (Liu et al., 2017).

Different types of machines, structures, stitches, yarns and needle sizes can be used to create fabrics (Zhang & Ma, 2018). In addition to clothing, the knitted fabric is also applied to the shoe upper, the portion of the shoe that encases the foot, as shown in Figure 2.

3. Objects of study: description and analysis

3.1. Textile product: Sport T-shirt

The conventional kitting process takes place with the use of only one yarn that can feed all the needles of the machine due to its evolution in the horizontal direction in the large diameter circular knitting machines, as shown in Figure 3.

These machines produce a continuous tubular fabric, with different characteristics and a high production volume. The fabric involves three macro phases: (1) textile yarns selection; (2) knitting process and (3) finishing. The T-shirt confection includes cutting, sewing, finishing and revision of the article, packaging, and stock (Carmelo Comercial, 2019). Figure 4 summarizes these phases.

A knitting technological innovation is the seamless knitting. Seamless is the term for a knitted apparel with tubular structure constructed in a single piece with minimal or no cutting and sewing processes (Lau & Yu, 2016). This technology emerged in the 1980s to provide greater comfort to the user by producing a piece that molded to the body. This production system is widely used for underwear, sportswear, casual fashion and technical textiles (Nawaz & Nayak, 2015; Magnus et al., 2010).

Seamless technology reduces work time by creating pieces that are ready-to-wear, requiring little or no sewing, dramatically reducing labor intensive use. In addition, there is a reduction in material losses and in the finishing stages (Sayer et al., 2006). The seamless machine is composed of needles, wire guides, actuators, selectors that are electronically controlled (Carmelo Comercial, 2019). Seamless production joins the stages of fabric production, cutting and sewing, as shown in Figure 5.

3.2. Textile product: knitted shoe upper

Footwear is one of the interfaces between foot and floor. For sports shoes, in particular, two factors must be taken into account: (1) the prevention of excessive loads that act on the structures of the human body, and (2) the improvement of performance in sports activity (Cardoso et al., 2019).

In addition, comfort and breathability are closely related to the material and weight of the shoes. Lu et al.(2016) affirm that the lighter the weight of the shoes, the greater the comfort and point out that an increase of 1% in the weight of the shoes consumes 3% to 10% more energy when walking. The shoe upper plays a wrapping and protective role for the feet in sports activity.

Conventional shoe upper production consists of warp knitted fabric, processing the fabric (dyeing and finishing), cutting, visual inspection, embroidering, armor transfer, insole transfer, backstitch/sewing, conformation and assembly (1), as summarized in Figure 6.
This fabric can be produced on a warp loom with two or more bars (Figure 7), which can be integrated with other layers of mesh. Old looms have nozzle needles and are slower, modern looms have composite needles and are high speed. For the weave of the mesh, the needles go up, receive a new yarn from the dowels, and go down to form a mesh (Spencer, 2001).

As in the production of the T-shirt, the seamless technology can be used in the production of the shoe upper (Figure 8), eliminating the steps of cutting and sewing.
resulting in the 3D knitting. This technology produces a piece ready for the sole application (Knitting Industry, 2018).

4. Objects of study: discussion and comparison between conventional and seamless knitting

In general terms – both in conventional and seamless production – it is noticed that the fabric production’s principle has not significantly changed. Therefore, technological innovations are related to improve machine elements and production systems, such as new types of needles, techniques to transfer the meshes from one needle track to another, high-speed production, and unlimited patterns creation.

In sportwear case, technological innovation – specially the seamless technology – can transform mass production to mass customization. This industrial sector is characterized by a high consumer demand associated with an expectation of customized and fashionable products.

Mass customization refers to a production strategy that includes planning, design, production, and services that achieve the diverse consumers’ needs without compromising the economy of scale of a company. The mass customization presupposes a user experience, which encompasses all aspects of the end-user’s interaction with the company; however, it is necessary to adopt a flexible manufacturing system that meets the most dispersed orders (Zhang et al., 2019).

Intelligent design for customized products is a trend (Zhang et al., 2017). In addition to the technological innovation, the product development process should include style references (colors, pattern), comfort (sizes, formats, materials) and individual’s context (culture, social habits, preferences).

Based on the comparison between conventional an seamless knitted fabric, the seamless technology suggests: (1) simplification of production process by reducing costs, increasing production and reducing errors; (2) reduction in quantity of production stages and machinery; and (3) creation of different products in a single process (Tsai & Jhong, 2019).

Although the positive aspects previously mentioned, there are challenges to implementing technological innovations in textile industry. First, it is important to integrate expertise, such as design, engineering, computer science, mechatronics. In companies, business models and shop floor, the challenges are related to (1) the social and economic impacts of the loss of many current jobs, due to the replacement of manual labor by automation; (2) the cost of acquisition and implementation of technology, especially for small and medium-sized companies; and, (3) digital security, a robust security protocol is needed to protect confidential information (Kamble et al., 2018).

5. Conclusions

Since the First Industrial Revolution, there have been modifications in the production-consumption and in the organization of society. In the contemporary competitive context, technological tools, the need for a rapid response in the decision-making process, the demand for functional products and the appropriate social and environmental responsibilities of organizations are fundamental principles for the development of new products. The First Industrial Revolution allowed the mechanization of the productive process and stimulated consumption and the need for constant renewal of the products. The Second Industrial Revolution introduced new sources of energy, mass production and the revolution of consumer goods. The Third Industrial Revolution was characterized by the transition from analog to digital and by the segmentation of consumer markets. The Fourth Industrial Revolution, which is the one currently taking place, is based on the integrative and collaborative environment, on the adoption digital tools and on the active role of consumers in the production system.

Sportwear can be produced by the conventional process or new production processes. In the conventional production process, there are many steps for fabric manufacturing and confection. In turn, seamless technology reduces working time by creating ready-to-wear articles that require little or no sew, since the product is developed in a single process. In this way, seamless technology impacts on working time by reducing or eliminating the cut and sew operations and the amount of waste discarded. All innovations presented in this research indicate efficient production related to cost, working time, waste management and interaction with the consumer. By adopting these technologies, the textile industry begins to move towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution.
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