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Luxury Fashion: The role of innovation as a key contributing factor in the development of luxury fashion goods and sustainable fashion design.

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Abstract

Luxury is a quality that is difficult to define as the historical concept of luxury appears to be both dynamic and culturally specific. The everyday definition explains a 'luxury' in relation to a necessity: a luxury (product or service) is defined as something that consumers want rather than need. However, the growth of global markets has seen a boom in what are now referred to as 'luxury brands'. This branding of products as luxury has resulted in a change in the way consumers understand luxury goods and services. In their attempts to characterize a luxury brand, Fionda & Moore in their article "The anatomy of a Luxury Brand" summarize a range of critical conditions that are in addition to product branding "... including product and design attributes of quality, craftsmanship and innovative, creative and unique products" (Fionda & Moore, 2009). For the purposes of discussing fashion design however, quality and craftsmanship are inseparable while creativity and innovation exist under different conditions.

The terms 'creative' and 'innovative' are often used inter-changeably and are connected with most descriptions of the design process, defining 'design' and 'fashion' in many cases. Christian Marxt and Fredrik Hacklin identify this condition in their paper "Design, product development, innovation: all the same in the end?" (Marxt & Hacklin, 2005) and suggest that design communities should be aware that the distinction between these terms, whilst once quite definitive, is becoming narrow to a point where they will mean the same thing. In relation to theory building in the discipline this could pose significant problems. Brett Richards (2003) identifies innovation as different from creativity in that innovation aims to transform and implement rather than simply explore and invent. Considering this distinction, in particular relation to luxury branding, may affect the way in which design can contribute to a change in the way luxury fashion goods might be perceived in a polarised fashion market, namely suggesting that 'luxury' is what consumers need rather than the 'pile it high, sell it cheap' fashion that the current market dynamic would indicate they want.

This paper attempts to explore the role of innovation as a key contributing factor in luxury concepts, in particular the relationship between innovation and creativity, the conditions which enable innovation, the role of craftsmanship in innovation and design innovation in relation to luxury fashion products. An argument is presented that technological innovation can be demonstrated as a common factor in the development of luxury fashion product and that the connection between designer and maker will play an important role in the development of luxury fashion goods for a sustainable fashion industry.

Introduction

Contemporary fashion researchers interested in exploring ways in which to realise a more sustainable fashion industry are faced with a key problem – consumer behaviour. In recent decades the need for individuals to constantly replace fashion clothing, neither worn out nor damaged, has resulted in tonnes of textiles being buried in land fill or dumped on developing world markets in the guise of ‘charitable’ donations (Fraser, 2009). Following a decade of serious research, the ‘un-sustainability’ of these practices is now considered to be common knowledge in the field of fashion design and in the wider academic community. However, the question to be answered is, amongst the mountains of clothing that are being discarded, why are there not more *Chanel*s, *Viuttons* or *Saint Laurent*s? This paper explores the theory that integral characteristics of luxury goods contribute to a connection between the maker and the user of a product and directly contribute to the when and how of its disposal.

Literature Review

The word ‘Sustainability’ has become a catch phrase for academics, researchers, marketing managers, publicists, politicians and brand managers (and others) in the last decade: at last count there were over 100 definitions for ‘sustainable development’ in existence (Article 13, 2010). The vanguard work “Our Common Future”, otherwise referred to as the Brundtland report, was commissioned by the United Nations Assembly in 1982 and delivered in 1987. This report contains the basics of it defined as a plan of ‘sustainable development’(Brundtland, 1987). In the twenty three years since this report was presented it has come under scrutiny as the ideas that were presented are examined in more detail by contemporary researchers. The idea that the world’s resources were not inexhaustible, that continued growth and development was possible without destroying the planet, that it would be possible to move towards eliminating poverty, that cooperation beyond government level was possible and could provide solutions to what was (and remains) a global issue, were revolutionary at the time. Although many writers still prefer Brundtland’s definition as the oldest and the best, and refer to “people, profit, planet,” as “the three pillars of sustainability” (Bader, 2008), some suggest that the ideas of sustainability have moved on in the two decades since they were developed.

“The EU “A popular way of expressing the three pillars of SD[sustainable development] is known as People, Planet, Profit (or PPP or P3), where People represents the social pillar, Planet the environmental pillar, and Profit the economic pillar. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, 2002, this was modified into People, Planet, Prosperity, where the change of Profit into Prosperity is supposed to reflect the fact that the economic dimension covers more than company profit. Other well-known terms are the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) and the UN's Global Compact.”(Heijungs, Huppel, & Guinée, 2010)

The concept and values of sustainability have been readily accepted and adopted by governments and educators in Australia and New Zealand; in particular the concepts of minimising environmental impact seem to have been at the forefront of what has become known as the sustainable agenda. Sustainability however, is not only to do with saving the environment. For the purpose of background and context, it is important to briefly revisit the foundations of sustainability to avoid becoming a user of what has been referred to as ‘the ‘S’ word’; used to explain the practice of confusing the word sustainability with terms such as green, eco or organic (Silverman, 2007).

The fashion and textiles industries can take a significant share of the responsibility for many of the business practices which have proved unsustainable in the past. In particular the dyeing processes and manufacturing processes associated with the textile industry since the industrial revolution have been responsible for enormous environmental damage (Sellappa, Prathyumnann, Joseph, Keyan, & Balachandar, 2010). This damage, such as mercury poisoning as a result of textiles dyeing, have long term consequences. A recent study showed that mercury levels in Diss Mere, a shallow lake in the town of Diss in Norfolk, UK, reached their highest levels in the mid nineteenth century and remain at an elevated level considered contaminated over 150 years later (Yang, 2010). In developing countries the process of tanning leather (used for fashion shoes, handbags and luggage) continues to be a cause of major poisoning of water sources with chemicals known to cause carcinoma (Akan, Moses, Ogugbuaja, & Abah, 2007; Jaiswal, 2006). Further, despite an increased awareness of the hardships faced by factory workers in mainland China and India, off-shore manufacturing remains a mainstream practice in the fashion industry in Australia (Weller & Studies, 2007) and New Zealand (Blomfield & Trade NZ, 2002). The practice of outsourcing production has resulted in the invisibility of our manufacturing systems and in turn has made the problems of using unsustainable manufacturing processes ‘disappear’. Media exposure of cases such as Nike® using sweatshop labour in their offshore factories had some effect in highlighting ethical issues but the problem remains that the fashion industry is very adept at selling goods to consumers - despite bad press (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). The danger is the emergence of ‘green’ and ‘eco’ brands as marketing tools to simply sell more fashion: a practice referred to as *greenwash* (Arnold, 2009).

A striking example of this discord between wanting to ‘do good’ and actually ‘doing good’ [sic] is the case of the purchase of “make poverty history” wrist bracelets for fundraising from a factory in China with sweatshop labour conditions (Reynolds, 2005). Similarly, it appears that while we are happy to talk about Sustainability in reality we appear far more likely to ‘talk the talk’ than ‘walk the walk’. Throwaway fashion, pile it high / sell it cheap, inexpensive clothing items continue to make up the bulk of our wardrobes if the prevalence of brands such as Top Shop, H&M and Uniqlo (and similar brands such as Supré in Australia and New Zealand) continues. More concerning, it is the same bulk of these wardrobes that is contributing to environmental problems by ending up as landfill and to social and economic problems as a result of being sent to developing nations rather than to landfill (Fraser, 2009). The effect on these developing nations has not as yet been studied in depth, although Fraser has estimated the quantity of clothing from charitable donations in New Zealand that end up

overseas to be quite significant (Fraser, 2009). The influx of millions of free garments into an economy would undoubtedly effect the development of a fashion industry and stifle the potential for manufacturing jobs and training that would result. It is unfortunate that our consumer behaviour, in combination with our desire to do 'good', has resulted in an outcome that goes against the very report that suggests that conserving and reusing resources will eventually eliminate poverty.

As mentioned in the introduction it is interesting that of the millions of tonnes of second-hand clothing, donated to various charities throughout Australia and New Zealand, why are there not more labels like *Chanel* or *Louis Vuitton*? Sturken and Cartwright identified that it is possible to strip objects of the signifiers of their manufacture to enable commodity fetishes to be developed through branding (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). If this is the case, it may also be possible for objects to retain these signifiers that indicate their manufacture. It is these signifiers that can be used to create a connection between the user and the maker (Finn, 2008). In fashion terms, the signifiers that could be significant are the methods of production themselves, in particular hand finishes that have obviously been made by individuals rather than by machines. In terms of establishing luxury products in the market, this connection between maker and user is often exploited in advertising to promote the history and tradition of quality craftsmanship, in many cases almost anthropomorphising objects as having the quality of a loved family member. It is important then to better understand this connection in relation to questioning why luxury goods endure long beyond their expected life to become treasured items passed on from generation to generation.

The connection between innovative design and luxury product is not new. An earlier study presented at the recent Global Fashion Conference in Porto, Portugal (Finn & Finn, 2010), discusses this in more depth but for clarity, some key points will be made here. The designs of Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel first gained recognition in the 1920s, notably her design for the Little Black Dresses in the late 1920s and the Chanel Suit in the 1930s. Her innovative use of cutting, and particularly her use of wool jersey for the haute couture market is well documented (Davis, 2007; Haedrich, 1972). The re-emergence of the designer in the 1960s saw the Chanel Suit re-designed for a 1960s market with a shorter skirt length and innovative in the use of tweed wool fabric for the luxury fashion market¹. Again, the re-birth of Chanel under the leadership of Lagerfeld in the 1990s saw the Chanel Suit (now designed for a younger market) gain popularity once more.

There is a distinction between innovation and creativity in terms of design despite the terms often being used interchangeably by many writers in the discipline (Marxt & Hacklin, 2005). Richards (2003) identifies that innovation is to transform and implement rather than explore and invent. In other words, the exploration and invention of design variations based on a classic block (or cut of garment) while creative cannot be said to be innovative. Characteristic of Chanel's design method was her ability to be innovative. The success of her designs can be contributed in part to her innovations in relation to fabric, cut and fit of the garments she designed. As her designs are now referred to as 'classics' – the innovation was not focused on the design aesthetic: there has been relatively little change to the 'look' of the suit since the 1930s. That the suit is recognisable as a Chanel (aided by the use of subtle branding such as

logo buttons shown here in Fig.1 & Fig.6) is a contributing factor to the ongoing success of the luxury brand. However, a closer look at the way in which the suit is made reveals some innovations in the manufacturing methods have also taken place. These innovations may have had some consequences for the democratisation of the label but could still prove the cause of future changes in consumer behaviour in regard to luxury product branding.

Research Method

A qualitative multi-method approach has been adopted for this research. A literature and contextual review of works relating to iconic fashion design associated with luxury brands, in conjunction with the analysis of individual luxury fashion objects (object analysis) have been used to explore an experimental method of identifying key factors that determine luxury in designer fashion. The criteria and the outcomes of this analysis, as outlined in this paper, have been used to support an argument that is presented for the purposes of discussion and debate rather than as the results of a definitive study. This paper builds on the author's previous works and provides some early results and discussion from what is a larger, ongoing, collaborative research journey.

Findings and Discussion

For the purposes of this discussion, an analysis and comparison will be made between two suits designed for the luxury fashion brand Chanel® and made in Paris, the first in 1965 and the second in 1991. These garments (objects) were examined to determine the methods of construction, the hand stitched details and the cut and quality of fabrics in relation to common definitions of luxury products that combine quality and craftsmanship with creativity and innovation (Fionda & Moore, 2009; Traldi, Gill, & Braithwaite, 2009; Weaver, 2010). The garments were viewed at length and documented through the methods of sketching, note taking and digital photography at *The Powerhouse Museum* in Sydney, Australia (2010). The method of comparison was based on object analysis – an emergent methodology discussed in Andrade (2004). In this paper Andrade outlines how researchers could gain from using the primary source of a surviving artefact (in this case an evening gown) as a source of information for historical research. In her conclusion she suggests that:

While it is dangerous to extrapolate too much from mute objects that survive for unknown reasons, it is clear that this method of object analysis can lead to useful questions, if not to definite answers, about the nature of couture (Andrade, 2004 p.117).

In a similar way, this examination, documentation and analysis of the garments chosen to be discussed here has enabled the further exploration of a developing theory surrounding the connection between user and maker in relation to luxury designer fashion, innovation and sustainability.

Table 1: Table of results

Characteristic/ Detail	Hand Finishing Techniques		Industrial/ Mass Manufacturing Methods		Allowances for Bulk Garment Cutting Methods		Other Details/Observations	
	Object A	Object B	Object A	Object B	Object A	Object B	Object A	Object B
Outer Garment	x			x			<p>The treatment of the lining in both the skirt and the jacket are a strong indicator of the quality make of this garment. The lining has been cut the same shape as the outer (which would not be possible in bulk cut garments as cutting is not 100% accurate). The stitching through all of the layers of the jacket would prevent the loose weave tweed from ‘dropping’ as a result of extended hanging or wear.</p> <p>It should be noted that the 1991 garment has not been worn but was purchased from Chanel boutique and donated to the museum. There are some signs of hand stitching: e.g. the hand stitching on the label is prominent, although combined with machine stitching on the care label. The label itself has started to become detached (even though the garment has not been worn or laundered). This could indicate a lower quality in other aspects.</p>	
Lining	x	x		x		x		
Buttonholes	x			x				
Buttons	x			x				
Zip Closure	x	x		x				
Hook & Eye Closure	x							
Garment Labelling	x			x				
Hem Finish	x			x				
<p>Object A = Chanel Suit, 1965. Designed by Gabrielle Chanel.(Chanel, 1965). Object B = Chanel Suit, 1991. Designed by Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel.(Lagerfeld (for Chanel), 1991).</p>								

The Suits

The first of the two suits is article number A8945 - Women's suit (Wool) - designed by Gabrielle Chanel for Chanel, Paris, France, 1965. For ease of use this will be referred to as 'Object A'. The suit has a label in the back neck of the Jacket that reads "Chanel Made in France". There are two pieces: a knee length skirt cut on the bias with a centre front inverted pleat and a semi-fitted, collarless jacket that finishes at the high hip. Both garments are fully lined with no care labelling; the Chanel label appears only on the jacket – indicating that the garments were intended to be purchased and worn as an ensemble. The outer fabric is loosely woven wool tweed in soft pastel colours (shown in Figure 1). This suit is a stereotypical example of the Chanel Suit of the 1960s era. The second of the two suits is article number 91/2020 – Women's suit (Wool), designed by Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel, Paris, France, 1991. For ease of use this will become "Object B". This suit is comprised of two pieces: a straight skirt finishing below mid-thigh (approx 4-5" or 10-13 cm above the knee) and a fitted double breasted jacket finishing at the high hip. Both garments are fully lined. The outer fabric is Wool Boucle with silk lining. Labels that read "Chanel Boutique" (and accompanied by care labels) are attached at the back waistband in the skirt and at the centre back neck in the jacket. The suit is also typical of the classic Chanel style of the 1990s.



Figure 1: Wool Tweed Fabric used in the Chanel Suit designed in 1965 has a hand loomed quality in that it does not look perfectly even in spacing or tension (Chanel, 1965).

In order to make a comparison between the garments a matrix has been created to identify the garment characteristics or details that were to be compared and to identify the distinct methods that would be considered (Table 1). In this case, the details have been considered in relation to the methods of construction and cutting that were used, with a focus on comparing the individual handmade finishes that are traditionally indicative of high quality craftsmanship with the machine finished or automated machiningⁱⁱ on the garments (Romeo, 2009). The results show that the 1965 garments involved a greater use of these methods of hand finishing than the 1991 counterpart. From the observations made in the analysis (a subset of results is presented in Table 1) it is possible to identify that there have been significant changes to the production methods, in consideration of the relatively unchanged design of the suit. Although Object A (1965) has been constructed by machine stitching on the longer seams the jacket and skirt both have a significant amount of hand stitching and finishing. The lining on Object A for example, is not cut with an extra pleat at the hem level to allow movement of the fabric in cutting or sewing (to compensate for inaccuracies in manufacture). The hem of the jacket is supported (or weighted) with a gilt chain (a feature that has become a signature of Chanel). Figure 2 shows these features of the lining. The jacket lining is attached to the outer fabric through all layers (mounted) by a series of rows of stitches approximately 5cms apart (quilted) and has been used to provide support to the outer garment fabric which is a loose weave wool tweed (figure 3).



Figure 2: The lining is of a better quality in the 1965 suit (Object A) and is weighted by a metal chain that is attached by hand stitching visible here (Chanel, 1965).



Figure 3: The Jacket lining is ‘quilted’ at intervals of approx 5cm to prevent the outer fabric from drooping during extended hanging or wearing.

In contrast, while Object B represents the aesthetic of the classic Chanel Suit (fitted, short jacket, collarless, simple skirt), the construction of the garment is significantly different. The construction, wherever possible, has been done using machine stitching. There are three points of hand stitching on the suit: the label (Figure 4), the lining closure and the back of the zip closure. The 1991 version of the Chanel suit (Object B) demonstrates the same construction as most suits currently on the market apart from the hand stitched label (the label would normally only be stitched on by hand if it had been forgotten in the construction prior to the lining being closed). The mainstream market might use machine stitching to close the back of the zip and the lining but small workrooms would probably close these areas by hand stitching also. The more recent suit also demonstrates signs of being designed for bulk cutting. The extra pleat in the lining is certainly an indicator of this. The hem design of Petersham braid on the jacket and the skirt has eliminated the requirement of hand stitching at the hem. The use of fusible interfacing in the main body of the jacket has also eliminated the usefulness of, or need for, the quilted lining seen on Object A. Although there is limited space to include more images from the analysis, based on these few examples it is possible to arrive at the conclusion that there has been a drop in quality between the Chanel suit between 1965 and 1991.



Figure 4: The 1991 Chanel suit has hardly any hand sewn details, but the label is a prominent example. The label here is already becoming detached which is an indication of poor quality stitching (Largerfeld (for Chanel), 1991).

Conclusion and Suggestions

There is a distinct connection between luxury, craftsmanship and innovation. The perceived quality of a luxury garment and the actual quality of the garment are not necessarily in accord. The connection between maker and consumer is evidenced in the signifiers that remain as a result of the production of the garment: in this case the evidence of hand sewing emphasises the human maker as opposed to the mechanisation of mass production methods. These indicators are also involved in making judgements about the quality of a garment. The focus for Sustainability has been for companies to continue to make a profit while considering the environment and the people that they affect in doing so. In governance this means that corporations have shouldered a large part of the responsibility for ensuring they have policies that encourage sustainable practices. If we replace the ideas of profit with those of prosperity, it could follow that consumers might be inclined to take a more active, participatory role. Luxury branded goods, whether high quality or perceived to be high quality, are considered to be more valuable than goods purchased in the mainstream market. A move away from large scale manufacturing to a more traditional workshop environment may result in fashion garments having more imperfections that result from being ‘handmade’

and in turn have more perceived value with the consumers who buy them. Rather than the existing 'luxury goods tax' in Australia perhaps we should consider a 'non-luxury goods tax' be introduced for goods that are of a lesser quality in terms of manufacture, materials or design.

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ⁱ Chanel had used tweed prior to this for suiting in the 1920s and 1930s; however, she is best known for the innovative soft open-weave tweeds that she used in the 1960s.

ⁱⁱ The term automated machining refers to a machining process that involves very minimal skill or interaction on the part of a machinist/operator. An example of an automated machining task is an automatic buttonhole whereby the garment is positioned on a machine bed by an operator who initiates the process by depressing a foot pedal (in this case) and the machine automatically makes and cuts the buttonhole. This is considered to be an unskilled labour task.