132 The future of the fashion designer: changing concepts of the designer and consumer relationship in the age of sustainable practice

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Abstract

The traditional practices of the fashion designer should be no longer acceptable in an industry marked by unfettered consumption, resource depletion, and unethical practices. Globally, the garment industry prioritises profitability over the environment and business ethics. To garner optimal profits, designers influence their consumers' social-psychological motivations and synthesize these with their mastery of aesthetics. However, rather than relying on these actions to create profit alone, future designers must focus on creating profit through higher purposes and values. In doing so, fashion designers will make significant contributions to a truly sustainable future in which the environment and people are protected, and fashion businesses thrive.

This paper proposes a future fashion industry in which designers elevate their creative freedom and motivation to significantly innovate beyond the facile. In this scenario designers extend their talents by creating compelling ethical and creative narratives that inspire consumers' responsibility. The authors first present an overview of the burgeoning concepts in the practices of design and retail. Then, applying Sustainable Product Service Systems (SPSS) as a theoretical framework, the authors propose an enhanced model for the design and retail practices so they may better engage with consumers for a holistically more efficient, sustainable, and cost-effective future.

Additional proposals are made for the future of American design education in support of the changing needs of the fashion industry. Students must gain an increasing awareness of advanced systems thinking, strategic planning, sustainable methods, and consumer psychographics well before entering professional practice. As a result, future designers will be instilled with a deeper understanding of their audience's preferences

while successfully advancing the future industry's sustainable and ethical operations. This paper advances a proposed manufacturing system based on the existing research literature surrounding the influential relationship between the designer and the consumer, and how to best shape an individual sense of fashion and responsibility for a more sustainable future.

Introduction

> *The inquiry [of innovative design] emphasizes the project's true purpose and sheds any false presumptions about how to do the work or what it should be. It ensures design's relevancy by forcing one to ask about its consequence in the world.* (Chimero, 2012: 56)

Instead of necessarily asking 'What is the future of fashion?' it is perhaps more salient to ask, 'What is the future fashion designer?' A fundamental requirement is to understand what will be required of designers in the future, what skills they will need, and the inherent changes in design education that will match the needs of the future fashion designer. This paper will examine alternative product service systems and design thinking constructs that suggest a sustainable future in which the designer has a closer relationship with the consumer and takes long-term responsibility for the clothing that they produce.

The essential shift towards sustainability is an expanded conception of what and how a fashion designer might perform their job and interact with their customers in the future. The role of the fashion designer, and the way in which the fashion industry interacts with the consumer, is inescapably changing. Fashion designers currently use their understanding of design motivation, aesthetic appeal, aspirational desire, coupled with low prices, to instigate consumerism devoid of the larger questions of ethics, long-term happiness, or environmental degradation. 'Trends' are so compressed and overlapped as to become pointless. The present expectation of fashion designers requires them to create clothing that emphasizes object obsolescence without innovation beyond the facile. To compound this, fast fashion brands achieve up to fifty-two deliveries a year, forcing all other mass-fashion retailers and manufacturers to try and keep up, exacerbating the already deleterious effects of the industry.

The current focus of fashion business, therefore, is to make as much money as possible, in as little time as possible, creating a zero-sum game of constant demand that is fundamentally rapacious and promises only to elevate expectation. Indeed, fast fashion gives consumers the chance to achieve designer-like style, without necessarily spending the money (Joy et al., 2012: 286.) If consumers do not understand the fashion

industry's contribution to environmental or social problems, then the motivation to eschew fast fashion is low (Joy et al., 2012: 288). With little time to properly consider tangible innovation, the contemporary fashion designer has less control in directing style choices, so much as over-producing the amount of all style choices, hoping that something will be chosen by a capricious consumer. Fashion designers have chosen to create and interact with their customers through outdated systems and methods resulting in large amounts of waste. The outdated fashion industry creates clothing based on a supply and value chain that is constrained by an analog world rooted in sequential time and literal place. The fashion industry, therefore, must continue the slow and seismic shift towards a future that is wholly different than the one we currently know. While these changes are necessarily slow - because of the enormity of problems as well as complexity - they are essential.

Designers then and now

Historical examples of couturiers and designers are of taste-makers, delivering edicts every season in a closely regulated time schedule. Craft practice was the central source of innovation, necessitating a top-down construct, thus negating any sense of collaboration. Indeed, the process of couture dressmaking and sartorial decision-making was often shrouded in mystery: the sensitive artist making women into rarefied art objects. While this offers a romantic view of an artist, their creative prowess, and their muse, it does little to explain all of what a fashion designer can and should do as an essential change maker.

Fashion designers have long had the ability to bring diverse cultures and environments into their work, creating acceptance for alternative conceptions of beauty through powerful creative narratives. It could be argued that much of the ultimate acceptance of women's rights or gay culture throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries was, in part, through initial visual and sartorial suggestions made by designers (Calefato, 2006). Design attributes such as quality, aesthetics, functionality, and emotional qualities have all been found to offer long-term satisfaction for consumers (Niinimäki, 2011: 156). Consumers respond to ideas of highlighted craftsmanship and attention to detail that promote visual significance (Joy et al., 2012: 287). As business has increasingly sought larger profit with cheaper products, designers have, in many instances, unwittingly weakened the impact of these very insights regarding craftsmanship, aesthetic significance, and the subsequent cultural conveyance of meaning.

In the fast fashion era, expectations of speed and affordability require that innovation is a distant goal that is talked about abstractly with no clear understanding of what that might actually constitute. Machines and cheap labour are often able to replicate the craft

techniques and rarified looks once available to only a few. Craft, as traditionally considered, is no longer uniquely special since is offered cheaply and ubiquitously. If a consumer does not understand the manufacturing process or anything about textiles, they may be unimpressed by traditionally expensive processes, techniques, or types of fabrics (Joy et al., 2012: 288). The digital world reduces the ability to offer exclusivity and originality since image databases such as Pinterest create an overabundance of creative design solutions or craft techniques, thereby homogenizing any new style or look from a designer. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, digital databases have condensed the expectation of speed of creation, from on-line documentation, to retail, to inevitable boredom by oversaturation. Digital media, therefore, is a key factor in democratizing aesthetic and experiential outcomes, consequently generating greater pressure on designers and manufacturers to offer a wider scope of visual materials in which to produce product.

Conversely, consumers have an increased expectation of 'affordable luxury' and heightened customer experience, as the desire for having everything for nothing increases (Amed et al., 2017: 11). Competition amongst brands has escalated as brand loyalty is less prevalent due to consumer demand of signature and exclusive items that feature higher quality, yet at lower prices (Amed et al., 2017: 44-45). Additionally, as our needs are met, we look for meaningful and satisfying experiences which extend into tertiary products and services that surround that product (Brown, 2012: 111). The current methods that designers and retailers have begun to explore are ways in which consumers 'granular customer insights' allow for personalisation and forms of wardrobe curation (Amed et al., 2017: 13). Indeed, 70 percent of American consumers expect some form of personalisation, customised products, or curated recommendations (Amed, et al., 2017:44). Notably, while consumers want more choic, and personalised accommodations, all at lower prices, evidence suggests that an increasing number of consumers also want the places they shop at to align with their own values and priorities of environmental and social sensitivity (Amed et al., 2017:44).

The designer of the future

When viewed through the perspective of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), first world societies' over-abundance of products available to satiate our material needs enables consumers to have their basic needs met and, subsequently, seek out meaningful life experiences for esteem and self-actualization. 'The consumers' search for meaning generates the increasing importance emotionally compelling narratives have in oversaturated markets where consumers are inundated with offerings' (Faerm, 2016: 208). To stand out, designers must capture their audience's emotional cravings through unique narratives that enhance a design's value and appeal. Designers, then,

increasingly will be expected to design emotional experiences that manifest through storytelling, products, and associated systems. Designers must understand not only their buyers' demographic data but also their psychographic data, too. Brown (2012: 115) posits that design's mastery of aesthetics and emotion can enable empathy and understanding to enrich the engagement or participation of a consumer. Rather than relying on skills of designers to create blind consumerism, these same skills can be utilised by practitioners to promote a healthier and beneficial relationship between designer, product, and customer.

Sustainable fashion offers the opportunity of an environmentally and socially ethical purchase that also satisfies a consumer's need of a creative or personal narrative (McNeil & Moore, 2015: 213). Allowing consumers to feel that they are positively affecting change is essential. McNeill and Moore (2015: 220) found that consumers liked the idea of 'buying local' because it meant less carbon footprint and more oversight on worker conditions, while also encouraging a sense of patriotism and pride. Consumers did not associate buying second hand or buying vintage as necessarily being sustainable; they were simply doing it to save money or to have a greater variety available to them (McNeil & Moore, 2015: 220). This suggests that customer involvement within a meta-narrative of positive change, somewhat on a local level and still relatively inexpensive, is a way to move toward sustainable change. This is a 'tall order' and requires that fashion retailers and manufacturers think differently about their standard operating procedures. Increasingly, Product Service Systems (PSS), such as curated product placement or convenience delivery, which have been used to enhance a product's desirability, could be applied to a product to increase the levels of sustainability.

Sustainable Product Service Systems

Sustainability focused PSS have been discussed and fielded for consumer adoption and acceptance (Armstrong et al., 2014; Niinimäki, 2017; Palomo-Lovinski & Hahn, in review). In many instances these PSS are used for unsustainable products but could be easily applied in a more environmentally and socially protective way. Table 1 'Sustainable Product Systems (Select)' lists a variety of current services that might be applied in a sustainable way.

Table 1 Sustainable product systems (select)

Service	Applications of service in practice
Co-design	The process of designing collaboratively with a client to fully

	understand the needs, desires, and preferences that would likely lead to extended use. Currently expensive and time restrictive, application of rapid prototyping applications and 3D modeling would make this a more viable option.
Mass-customisation	The process of presenting a variety of preset customisable options created by designers from postponement stock. Allows consumers to participate in the creative process with less time constraints or margins of error. This is also closely associated with personal curation.
Repair	Many dry-cleaning services in metropolitan cities currently offer services of minor repairs, minor alterations, hemming, or the replacement of closures. If these services were to be extended by offering repair, as well as major alterations, this may extend the life of the garment and encourage extended use.
Take-back	Brands such as Eileen Fisher and Patagonia request that the customers that buy their products return them after their use of them is over. These two companies motivate their customers to do so by offering discounts on future items, as well as promoting a long-term relationship in which responsibility of product is an extended commitment. The returned clothing can be repaired and resold, recycled, or discarded in the most environmentally safe way possible.
Upcycling	The process of extending the use of a garment by fundamentally changing or adding design elements to it.

The ultimate goal of any company seeking to be sustainable would require that all products be kept within a closed-loop system, forever recycled and producing no waste. Niinimäki (2017: 152) posits that the only way to have a truly closed-loop system in which all resources are accounted for is to require that designers, producers, manufacturers, and suppliers are all part of the solution. The significant difference in a proposed Sustainable Product Service System (SPSS) would require an increased incorporation of technology and digital interfaces to keep efficiency high, costs low, and a transparent message of sustainable emphasis. The digital world is simultaneously global in scope and yet can be focused on local community, offering a new set of possibilities to design interaction, collaboration, and research, supply chain management and sourcing, end-use, and consumer motivation. These new pathways are necessitated by the needs of an industry that is running out of resources and is

responsible for so much harm to the environment and its workers. Here, fashion businesses have the opportunity to follow the axiom 'act global and think local' by creating a framework in which greater responsibility, oversight, and specificity of design is possible. In the following proposed framework, designers would have a concomitant connection to the community for which they design, but they would not be limited by it. Conversely, the designer's product, while not required to meet the needs of the global community in physical product, could still offer and utilise global visual information and choice. For example, if an American consumer spotted a textile from an African designer and a garment detail from a Dutch designer, he or she could have it made from physical resources in their own local community.

New design and brand construct

The future of fashion will, inherently, be a vastly different one than we know today by virtue of lessening resources and the inevitable requirement that the economies of the world are on a more equal footing. Rather than having the third world be in service to the first world as it presently is, there must be a shift towards the first world applying their resources to enable the third world (Faud-Luke, 2009). Future economies within the spectre of climate change will require more equitable collaboration. In short, we succeed when we succeed *together*. Fletcher and Grose (2012) define the changing role of the designer as a communicator and educator, facilitator, activist, or entrepreneur. The emphasis of the future designer is one of community building, helping the consumer in their sense of self-efficacy for sustainable change. The designer is in a position to bring together the needs of sustainable change with the specific constraints or possibilities of creating clothing, while having a deep understanding of aesthetics and style. It is incumbent upon designers to foster a closer communication and responsiveness with their customers to the concerns of the environment, social welfare of manufacturing workers, consumerism, and waste.

A brand which strove for this responsible accountability would be both global and local, thereby incorporating the best of both worlds by responding to the need of the fashion industry to interact on a granular level with consumers while also responding to the rich opportunity for diversity. The digital world enables us to connect ideas, styles, patterns, processes, concepts, or any other brand directive while concurrently allowing for localised points of manufacture, production or directed disposal. A proposed business strategy is to have a design space, production, manufacturing, retail, and post-consumer space that emphasises a closed-loop system. In this scenario, several designers under one roof would create postponement-ready collections that could be altered as per a mass-customised scenario by consumers in cooperation with the designers. Other designers may specifically deal with artisanal labour, upcycling, or

specific types of fashion methodologies. These designers would be employed by the same parent brand or company, so that rather than being seen as competitors, the designers would inherently be collaborators and colleagues. These collections would therefore be available to any other location or designer to adapt or use. This same grouping of designers, production, manufacturing, retail, and take-back would exist throughout the world in specific localities enabling catered social and environmental constructs. This would equip local communities to be a part of a larger system yet also cater to specific tastes and needs.

Figure 1. Proposed sustainable product service system network
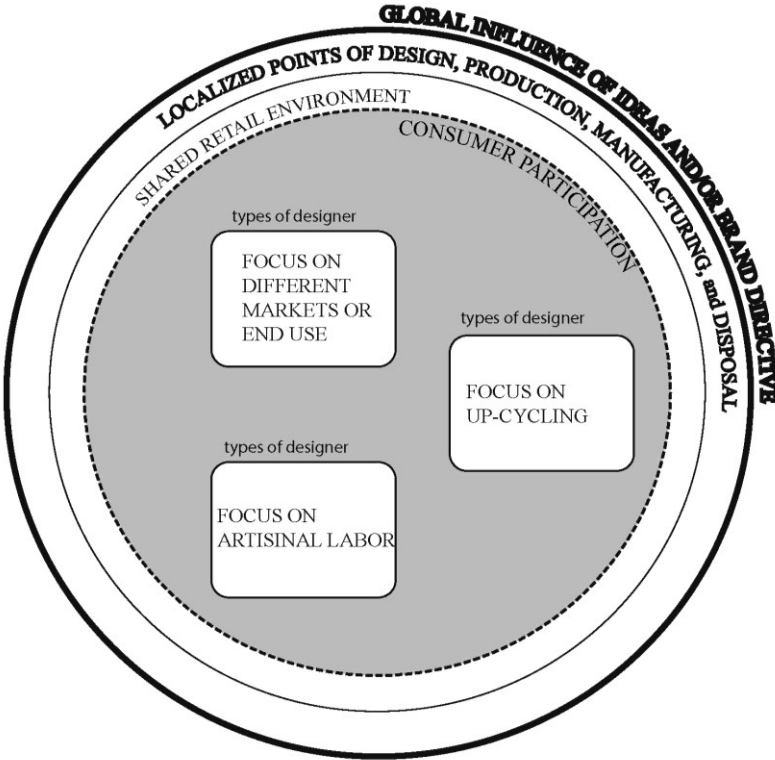
Fundamental to this proposal would be the leadership and transparency of the brand to take responsibility for their labour practices, waste, and an extended conversation regarding care and disposal of all their products in the consumer's care. Consumers would need to be encouraged to bring clothing that was ready to be discarded back to the brand space. Here, clothing could be rented out, sold again, remade, or recycled. Creating a hybridised open forum for clothing purchases in which old and new are equal in desirability would enable a consumer's need for fashion change without straining potential new resources.

Advancements in fashion education to support Sustainable Product Service Systems (SPSS)

The decline of natural resources, the increase in environmental pollution, and climate change are requiring the fashion industry to create environmentally sound and sustainable viable solutions that are also requiring fashion programs to rethink their antiquated educational practices. Contemporary American design school curricula, modelled on Bauhaus ideologies that emphasize how things are made, and design aesthetics, are beginning to give way to new, advanced educational models that prioritise a greater understanding of the interconnectivity design plays in the world. Lydia Matthews, Professor of Visual Culture at Parsons School of Design, describes this new direction by stating, '[Designers] recognize that they need to understand world systems, whether they're economic, social, ethnographic, or cultural. At the same time, social scientists…are beginning to understand that the systems they work with are in fact designed and that there's a fundamental need to communicate visually and materially across cultures and in a globalised condition' (Agid, 2008: 13).

The future design school, particularly in the context of SPSS, must be one in which students replace their traditional roles as independent 'style dictators' - in which they are taught to create designs based on personal whims and biases in the hopes their work will appeal to a broad audience - with that of 'design partners' who work collaboratively in cross-disciplinary teams. Within this structure, design proposals are grounded in exhaustive research into their targeted consumers' attributes and behaviors. These lateral partnerships will foster interconnectivity by situating designers within broader contexts, thus allowing students and future designers to interface with new methodologies and insights that may be synthesised with their own for innovative products, systems, and solutions. The myopic, self-focused designer is becoming ineffective and marginalized, since 'society today demands a new generation of professionals that can design not only products, but systems for living as well' (Muratovski, 2010: 378).

Graduates will succeed in this future marketplace if they are taught to think and work fluidly across the traditionally rigid boundaries of 'siloed' practices. Building this skill set in students will require American design school curricula to increasingly promote and encourage students' openness to integrating new insights into the design process itself, beyond the mere concern of crafting projects for aesthetic appeal alone (Zimmerman, 2003). Thus, students must become nimble in working across different spaces - the literal and the figural - if the fashion industry is to develop and implement successful SPSS strategies. Students will acquire this 'design dexterity' through cross-disciplinary design courses and projects in marketing, consumer relations, and systems thinking

that blend economic, social, and cultural contexts. At the same time, the implementation of SPSS will require those students in the traditionally peripheral 'spaces', such as business studies, to design and to engage with coursework that provides insights into fashion-specific design processes, sustainability in the garment-making context, and required resources. A shared, empathic understanding of differing yet complementary practices and attendant problems that need solutions will be critical if progress is to be made through SPSS. Additionally, the collaborative coursework will help ameliorate the 'us and them' binary relationship commonly felt between professional designers and business leaders, thus making SPSS a stronger joint effort.

A key element in this educational model that supports SPSS will be curricula that teaches students the vital, participatory role consumers play in design. The research methodologies that reveal data into rapidly evolving consumer behaviors will be of equal importance. The over-saturated marketplace in which consumers' needs are met (and even *over* met) is radically altering the ways consumers relate to design. As a result, students must learn advanced primary, secondary, and ethnographic research methodologies that will enable them to identify and strategically target their consumers' psychographic profiles. They must also learn how to craft and creatively present narratives that appeal to these nuanced profiles while reflecting any current zeitgeist in which they are operating. Thus, design briefs must begin by priming students through new queries that underpin the subsequent stages of the design process: 'How does my audience wish to feel?'; 'Why are their preferences shifting?'; 'What emotional "value" will they seek from designed products and/or experiences?'; 'How will these research findings inform and guide my design process(es), outcome(s), and method(s) of presentation?'

By addressing these questions in conjunction with necessary design elements, such as aesthetics and function, students will be able to become professional designers who successfully fulfill the tangible and intangible needs of their consumers. Tim Brown, CEO of the renowned design company IDEO, highlights this marked shift in the designer's role by stating, 'Now, however, rather than asking designers to make an already developed idea more attractive to consumers, companies are asking them to create ideas that better meet consumers' needs and desires. The former role is tactical, and results in limited value creating; the latter is strategic, and leads to dramatic new forms of value' (2008: 2).

This proposed model of design education promotes a pronounced shift in the designer's role from 'design dictator' to 'designer-as-social scientist.' As a result, future designers will create new forms of emotional value in design that enable and support SPSS. These academic initiatives will produce more collaborative and horizontally-oriented

designers who can leverage others' views and, with their team members, develop their designs strategically to ensure they produce enduring solutions (Wolff & Rhee, 2009). When designers prioritise consumers' emotional needs, they will stand out from the competitive 'noise' in the contemporary oversaturated marketplace. Simultaneously, consumers will connect more deeply with the designers' products and likely retain them longer, thus contributing to environmental sustainability. Brand loyalty is then strengthened, thus engendering a sustainable business that saves valuable time, money, and environmental resources.

Conclusion

The necessity for the global fashion industry to adopt significant change is unprecedented. While advancements have been made, the ongoing depletion of natural resources by the fashion industry greatly inhibits the earth from becoming sustainable (Leonard, 2010). Concurrently, business sustainability is also tenuous; the oversaturated marketplace challenges companies to create innovative ways to capture consumers' attention and maintain brand loyalty. Therefore, advanced solutions must be implemented by the industry if the environment and future practitioners are to become/remain sustainable. This paper considers ways that could engage communities to consider clothing production as a more closed-loop system—much like the local food movement in which consumers experience farmers' markets that promote organic farming, local economies, thoughtful consumption, and greater transparency. This model contributes to environmental sustainability via local practices while business sustainability is created through narrative-rich experiences that fulfill consumers' emotional needs. In the same manner that these farmers and farmers' markets promote sustainable practices and community participation, so too can the fashion industry.

The proposed Sustainable Product Service System would create a locally considered space that promotes site-specific design, manufacturing, and retail in conjunction with a global perspective, presence, and digital distribution of ideas. The unification of these three practices under one roof aims to promote greater communication and collaboration for innovative solutions. Consumers would participate directly with the design and manufacturing processes, thus fostering educational exchanges between parties. These exchanges, in turn, create and strengthen environmental and business sustainability: Practitioners would gain a deeper awareness into consumers' physical and emotional needs (and consequently, develop more enduring product) and consumers would likely form loyalties towards companies that fulfill their shifting physical and emotional needs. This paradigmatic shift in the industry will require academia to respond. New curricula must prepare students for this emerging role of 'designer-as-social scientist' that requires practitioners to acquire psychographic data

about their targeted audience well before entering the design stage. Design education must teach students the complex interconnectivity design has with the world, in addition to the traditional design elements of aesthetics and function. Design, as product or system, will play increasing roles in shaping social, economic, and cultural frameworks. The application of SPSS, then, becomes a strategic initiative by the future fashion industry benefiting both industry and consumers alike and, most importantly, the future of our planet.

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