

## **The role of luxury fashion brands and designers in consumer-led, digital product design**

**Corinna Budnarowska**

Bournemouth University

[cbud@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:cbud@bournemouth.ac.uk)

### **Abstract**

Digitalisation and the rising acceptance of technology (Davis et al, 1989) into everyday life have led to innovations in product development within the fashion sector. Brands are experimenting with product design that combines technological and fashionable attributes to produce lifestyle products for consumers, such as smart watches. Meanwhile, lead-user consumers crave the opportunity for user-involvement and co-creation in the design of their products, demanding bespoke offerings from brands, especially at the luxury end of the fashion market (Katz, 2010). Whilst it is commonly accepted in academic literature that user-involvement enhances product development for brands and often leads to more innovative products (von Hippel, 2005), the rise in disruptive technologies such as 3D printing allow consumers to design and produce products themselves, potentially without need for the brand. So where does this leave the role of the brand and the designer?

This research is exploratory (early stage PhD) but proposes to examine the consumers' relationship with luxury fashion brands in order to determine whether the ability for customers to create their own products will lead to the abandonment of brands or, in contrast, build a closer bond between consumers and brands through the nature of participatory design (Greenbaum and Kyng, 1991) and co-development by allowing consumers to align the brand personality with their own. In order to investigate this, the author will explore the importance of brand personality and emotional attachment for the consumer, considering how consumers use brands for self-congruence, self-expression and belonging (Sproles, 1974), whilst also considering consumers' need for uniqueness (Goldsmith & Clark, 2008). The consumer user-types that would be willing to provide product ideation and co-design may only be limited to trend-aware, technologically-innovative, lead users (Schweitzer et al, 2014), also termed as early adopters or opinion leaders, so this may limit mass-adoption of consumer-led design. It is also acknowledged that upstream co-creation relies on consumers' competence and engagement, alongside consumers' ability to provide meaningful ideas (Vernette & Hamdi-Kidar, 2013), so brands may still be required to initiate the product design and prompt consumers to complete it. If brands were to merely provide the basic product for customers to customise, would they be seen as innovative and could they still command luxury prices? Currently, brands that allow customisation are perceived to be more innovative than standard brands (Schreier et al, 2012; Lang et al, 2015) but will this still be the case as customising becomes mainstream?

### **Keywords**

Digitalisation, design, user-involvement, co-creation, fashion