

Luxury, quality and sustainability: untangling a complex relationship

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Abstract

Luxury is a ubiquitous term in the fashion world, but what does it actually mean to speak of 'luxury fashion'? The specific focus here is on the intriguing relationship between luxury and quality, and the impact of this on sustainable fashion production and consumption.

The exploration starts by looking at cultural understandings of 'luxury', which facilitates a deeper investigation of how 'luxury' can differ quite radically from 'quality' depending on the specific fashion environment. Finally, questions regarding the usefulness of the terms 'luxury' and 'quality' in discussions about sustainability are addressed.

With regards to methodology, the starting point is that of linguistic analysis and the work of Barthes, which is used as a tool for investigating how language shapes the cultural production of fashion. Having done so, cultural theorists including Veblen, Bourdieu and Marx are used to explore possible explanations for shifting meanings.

The primary finding is that in recent years there has been a preoccupation with what are arguably the most superficial elements of luxury: meaning has shifted away from materiality towards something that is almost entirely image-driven. This is what consumers, and as a corollary, those in the business of marketing and representing fashion, understand as 'luxury'. It is understood as being visible, conspicuous, internationally recognizable and invariably linked to branding. By contrast, 'quality' is a term that has become virtually redundant within the fashion world, not least because it cannot be clearly represented in visual form. Indeed, the consumer may feel that it is a stale, outmoded concept because in the contemporary climate of consumption, 'value' is prized over 'quality'. This is further complicated by perceptions that fibres and textiles such as silk and cashmere are, almost by definition, classified as 'luxury', regardless of the quality of the garment or the pedigree of the brand. Thus, we arrive at the paradox of cheap, mass-produced 'luxury' fast fashion.

Herein lies the challenge for those concerned with sustainability in fashion: quality is hidden and represents the knowledge of the craftsperson, understanding of materials, and production techniques. Whilst there is no reason why luxury fashion cannot embody these features, we cannot assume that it does. Here it is argued that if 'luxury' is to be beneficial to the evolution of sustainable fashion, then it is necessary to untangle popular, image-based perceptions of 'luxury fashion', and move towards a greater understanding of the relevance of 'quality' and the material production of fashion.

Keywords

Luxury; quality; cultural production; material production; sustainability

Introduction

Luxury is a ubiquitous term in the fashion world, but what does it actually mean to speak of ‘luxury fashion’? The focus here is to explore the intriguing but largely ignored relationship between luxury and quality, and to subsequently consider how these concepts impact on the sustainability of luxury fashion.

The exploration starts by considering the role of language in shaping our perceptions of fashion. Having established that words play a key role within the contemporary fashion system, there follows a detailed investigation of the terms ‘luxury’ and ‘quality’ as used within the fashion industry. This in turn allows questions concerning the use of these terms within debates around sustainability and fashion consumption to be addressed, with suggestions as to how the luxury sector might make use of such ideas.

With regards to methodology, the starting point is that of linguistic analysis and existing work on written fashion, which is used as a tool for investigating how language shapes cultural understandings of fashion. As this paper is concerned with the realms of the production and consumption of fashion, it also makes use of cultural theorists on this subject including Veblen (1994), Baudrillard (1998) and Bauman (2008).

An inter-disciplinary approach to research is taken here, not least because my own academic journey has included degrees in psychology, art and design, and fashion history at postgraduate level. Having studied and taught fashion in several British universities, written about it for the UK media and worked for a high street fashion supplier, I have experienced the fashion industry from a number of different perspectives. Although I recognize that this is unusual position for an academic to take, I would suggest that it is not only useful but essential if some of the more complex issues facing the fashion industry are to be addressed. Despite much academic work on fashion in recent years, there is relatively little that tackles the problems of fashion (e.g. sustainability), written by scholars of fashion. The cultural preoccupation with the representation and consumption of clothing, as opposed to the wearing of it, tends to be reflected in in scholarly work on fashion. What often happens is that critics of consumerism – who are rarely sympathetic to fashion – pick apart the fashion system while dedicated fashion scholars take up a defensive position, focussing on its less materially troublesome components. Useful discussions around sustainability will only emerge when theoretical *and* practical knowledge about the production, consumption and representation of fashion are brought together. This means that at times belief systems collide as apparently irreconcilable ideas are forced into dialogue, but without this ideological messiness no practical progress can be made.

Whilst a small number of design practitioners have been looking at sustainable fashion for several years now, those concerned with the *theoretical* dimension are only just starting to do so. As Chris Gibson and Elyse Stanes observe: ‘the rapid rise in publicity surrounding ‘green’ fashion demands a corresponding intensification in academic analysis, but scholars have responded only belatedly, and intermittently.’ (2011: 172). But cultural theorists - precisely because they are at the meeting point of

so many academic disciplines - are well-placed to contribute to debates that concern consumption and ethics in contemporary society, without neglecting the realities of the demands of consumers and the role that fashion and appearance play in contemporary life in a more general sense.

Whereas the majority of theorists from a *fashion* background appear reluctant to engage with the issues of production, academics from other disciplines make a useful contribution to this part of the discussion.

John Brewer and Frank Trentmann observe that:

The processes of consumption and their different meanings can only be properly recovered if we analyse the links that connect (and feed back into) the different places (physical and conceptual) in which goods are produced, distributed, purchased or consumed and given extra meaning. (2006: 13).

Thus we see the way in which issues concerning the representation and meaning of fashion may be linked to both its production *and* consumption.

Most academic literature focuses on either the production, consumption or representation of fashion, so why does this paper attempt address all of them? Detailed work in each of these separate fields makes a valuable contribution, but this inevitably leads to incomplete and fragmented debate. One might argue that this is standard practice within academia: a specialist on the production of fashion might *never* even look at research about fashion representation, nor would they be expected to. Writing more than twenty years ago, Ellen Leopold (1992) noted that the study of fashion traditionally divides production from consumption, and even now few fashion scholars negotiate the theoretical territory of both, choosing instead to focus on one or the other. Subject-specific journals may occasionally deal with issues of sustainability, but these articles tend to be corralled into special issues: they are not generally seen as an integral and ongoing part of fashion in either theory or practice. Similarly, issues concerned with the production or manufacture of fashion are located in entirely separate journals. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, at times academic fashion writing is guilty of lapsing into the defensive and uncritical writing that is a feature of journalistic fashion writing (König, 2006). It might appear treacherous, even reactionary for a scholar of fashion to criticize the subject, yet surely this should be seen as an indication of how far the study of fashion has evolved: no longer a subject in its infancy, the study of fashion should be able to withstand a critique from within.

At this point, it seems pertinent to state my own position and I make no secret of the fact that the subject is approached from the position of being concerned primarily with sustainability. Indeed, it is many years of ongoing exploration of the domain of sustainable fashion that has led me to identify quality, and its sometime correlate, luxury, as important areas from both a theoretical and a practical perspective. This work is inherently concerned with transparency, thus it is logical that I should show my hand and declare my interests from the outset. It is also worth noting that this paper is primarily concerned with clothing and garments rather than, say, shoes, accessories, jewellery or any other sector of the luxury fashion market.

The language of fashion and why it matters

In the contemporary fashion system, it is axiomatic that appearance and image are dominant driving forces. Indeed, one might be forgiven for believing that fashion is little more than a visual phenomenon, yet fashion images provide only part of the story. Whilst visuals, primarily in the form of photographs, dominate the representation of fashion across both print and digital media, text plays a significant mediating role. If one considers the myriad forms in which fashion products are presented to consumers - whether through advertising or editorial – words are almost always used alongside the imagery. The ongoing use of fashion writing, despite huge technological advances in photographic reproduction, print techniques and digital interfaces indicates that the role of fashion text is far more complex than merely functioning as ‘just filler’¹. Elsewhere I have written that:

Fashion text contributes to an understanding of fashion by assigning descriptive or interpretive meanings to the objects and images presented on fashion pages, thereby mediating a cultural understanding of the phenomenon. (König, 2006: 207)

The inclusion of linguistic analysis in this paper is not only relevant but necessary, for as Sue Thomas rightly indicates: ‘language is created or co-opted to map and navigate the new territory of developing ideas’ (2008: 525). Thus if we are concerned with the future of luxury sustainable fashion, we need to be conscious of the words we use to discuss the subject.

Previous work on the subject of fashion writing has led me to the conclusion that it is not itself a temporally stable phenomenon (König, 2006). Like fashionable dress, fashion writing has changed since the inception of the first fashion journals of the nineteenth century. In early incarnations, it was primarily concerned with describing the physical properties of clothing, as Christopher Breward explains:

the language employed to describe new clothing across the range of late nineteenth-century fashion journals carefully constructed the total costume, as if from a pattern, whilst also providing a sensual evocation of the physical and visual sensations to be derived from the wearing and viewing of such a dress. (1999: 26).

It is evident, therefore, that historically, fashion writing was very much focussed on the material dimension of fashion, and the experience of wearing garments. The decline in the use of technical fashion and textile terminology is indicative of changes that have occurred elsewhere in the fashion system. Whereas in the past many readers would have had a working knowledge of the language of garment construction based on personal experience of home-sewing (for the working classes) and discussions with dressmakers (for the middle classes) such content would be meaningless to the contemporary fashion consumer. This reflects a decline in the skills associated with the production of clothing, whether in a domestic or commercial setting, which correlates with the development of mass-manufactured clothing throughout the twentieth century.

Even since the 1980s, the fashion text in publications such as *Vogue* has changed radically (König 2006). This is reflected in a decreasing use of technical language; an increase in references to celebrities

and 'lifestyle' generally, an overall increase in volume of fashion text, and a discernible shift towards a larger number of shorter articles. The fashion writing of today's magazines, websites or apps is not concerned with objects: its focus is representation. In other words, it is concerned with cultural production, not material production.

The pressured and frenetic nature of the fashion industry means that on the whole, designers, buyers and retailers do not have the time, nor the skills, to contemplate linguistic subtleties. Their primary concern is to attract the attention of readers and potential customers, and this manifests itself in excited exclamations and florid declarations. Given the increased volume of fashion text in recent years, the cumulative effect is that the same lexical set appears repeatedly, exacerbating fashion writing's reputation for cliché and hyperbole. More importantly, fashion editors are unlikely to risk alienating advertisers by printing features that are even slightly critical of any aspect of the fashion industry, as this could jeopardise precious advertising revenue. The result is ebulliently positive writing that leaves very little space for reflection or questions.

Elsewhere I have argued that the generalisations and hyperbole that dominate fashion writing create a curiously shrill domain in which much is broadcast, at great volume, but with a somewhat hollow authority (König 2006). Fashion writing demands rights - to occupy space, to be heard, to be taken seriously in cultural life - but apparently has no responsibilities - to reflect reality, to take ethical work practices or environmental issues seriously, which has major implications for sustainability.

On the one hand, the mercurial nature of assigning meaning to fashion objects can be very convenient: products can represent whatever you want them to, which is very useful if you are trying to sell them. But on the other hand, at some level consumers are aware of this illusory phenomenon so it becomes hard to distinguish apparent features of a product from those that are tangible and real. Moreover, as words and phrases circulate throughout the various realms of the fashion industry, they evolve so as to be understood in context-specific ways.

In light of the pivotal role that language plays in guiding the consumer towards an understanding of fashion it is evident that the term 'luxury' needs to be unpacked in order to ascertain exactly what the term communicates.

Luxury: image and representation

As discussed in the previous section, over the past one hundred and fifty years, fashion has evolved into a phenomenon that is far more complex than the mere wearing of garments. Changes in the way that garments are manufactured, marketed and sold means that above all fashion is now primarily a visual experience rather than a corporeal one, even for the wearer. The image is highly prized in contemporary culture, and nowhere is this more evident than within the fashion industry. In a spectacular coup that obviates any material basis of fashion, image has become more important than either the clothes or even the body of the wearer. Carol Dyhouse writes:

an individual's appearance is increasingly seen as an expression of his or her self, and as a key, in part, to personal impact in a society characterised by an abundance of visual imagery and fleeting impressions. (2010: 197).

It is this emphasis on how one appears to be as opposed what one feels when 'doing' fashion that ultimately dictates perceptions of the fashion system. Within this paradigm there is little space for consideration of the physical and material aspects of fashion: the look, and brand identity becomes all, and the wearer essentially drops out of the picture.

As the image takes priority over all other aspects of clothing, each new technological innovation accelerates this process: by design, smartphones and other such devices celebrate the triumph of the image over the word in contemporary culture. In turn, it seems likely that this has an impact on our expectations and perceptions of clothing. Writing some time before such technology had even been conceived, Hollander observes that: 'fashion photography has come to ape the look of snapshots, to capture the instantaneity of modern visual taste. Clothes *are designed to be seen by flashbulb,*' (1993: 328, my italics). This is, perhaps, even more true today than it was twenty years ago and it is a potent idea as it forces us to think about the very purpose of clothing. Rather than perceiving clothes as material artefacts, designed to be worn *by an individual*, the prism of the fashion system - and specifically the fashion media - turns them into two-dimensional constructs, the primary purpose of which is being viewed *by others*.

The proposal here is that in recent years this has created a preoccupation with what are arguably the most superficial elements of luxury: meaning has shifted away from materiality towards something that is almost entirely image-driven. This is what consumers, and as a corollary, those in the business of marketing and representing fashion, understand as 'luxury'. It is understood as being visible, conspicuous, costly internationally recognisable and invariably linked to branding. This is further complicated by perceptions that fibres and textiles such as silk and cashmere are, by historical association, perceived as 'luxury', regardless of the quality of the garment or pedigree of the brand. Thus we arrive at the paradox of cheap, mass-produced 'luxury' fast fashion.

More often than not, the very notion of 'luxury' is shackled to 'the fashion world' which, in itself is a peculiar and artificial construction, and this is where the cultural - as opposed to the material production - takes place. Yet even the notion of a single cultural entity entitled the 'fashion world' is erroneous as there are a number of very different realms, each one of which has a very different role within the fashion industry (Braham 1997). Language can be used to maintain, obfuscate or indeed fabricate these worlds, but each of these worlds maintains the central tenet that fashion is inherently 'fast', and the rarefied domain of luxury fashion is no exception. The world of high fashion, 'inhabited by designers and store buyers alike,' is presented as the natural home of fashion, even though it is exclusive and difficult to gain access to (Braham 1997: 126). The fashion writer is granted conditional access and provides readers with insights, their authority enhanced by sheer proximity to this fashionable land

whilst the presentation of 'insider' items on fashion pages perpetuates the idea that it is a highly desirable, though largely inaccessible realm.

The fashion world least well represented in the media is the one that is concerned with production. This disinclination to deal with the production process leads to an impression that garments simply appear from nowhere, ready to be consumed, an idea introduced in earlier chapters. The fashion media relies entirely on the revenue of advertisers who are unlikely to want to see their products alongside articles on sweatshops or pesticide pollution, or even the more benign yet mundane aspects of fashion manufacture.

Of course, the same can be said of any consumer commodity, so why should fashion be expected to demonstrate a transparency that no other industry shows? It is, after all, a feature of consumer culture that the labour involved in the production of commodities is invisible. But the acquisition of clothing and the subsequent use of it are two very different phenomena, each involving its own set of motivations and behaviours and the notion of fashion as a system of signs is a useful one here. Jean Baudrillard wrote extensively on the prominence of signs in twentieth century life (Baudrillard, 1998), using semiotics as a theoretical tool for making sense of the ways in which material objects are used in everyday life. He argues that it is not things that we consume, but the meanings attached to them. So as the meanings shift across time, space and social context, objects become interchangeable for one another. This idea in particular is quite compelling as an explanation for an insatiable consumer appetite for new products: we never really want the object, just the social meaning that is attached to it at that time. Thus there is no imperative to hold onto a particular item in a consumer culture where other, newer items are always available.

Luxury fashion, of course, communicates a complex set of values through this system of signs. Indeed, it may stand for: cost; heritage; material; lifestyle; exclusivity; recognisability (e.g. brand name). It may whisper or it may shout; it may be composed of natural or synthetic materials; it may be hand-crafted or produced using cutting-edge technology. But above all, luxury is concerned with differentiating itself from the mainstream and the masses. Here one might call on Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption to help elucidate luxury fashion (1994). Yet not all luxury fashion is conspicuous, and conversely, not all conspicuous fashion is luxury. Similarly, Bourdieu's work on taste (1984) suggests that class differentiation is the driving force in consumer preferences, yet access to the luxury market is controlled by economic rather than class status per se. Yet in the contemporary luxury market, all of these characteristics are secondary, for it is the 'dream quality' that is 'essential to a luxury product,' (Joy et al., 2012:287). It would therefore appear that luxury is a mercurial concept that cannot be defined beyond a general measure of cost and a perception of exclusivity. But the proposal here is that an examination of the concept of quality can be used to underpin an understanding of luxury fashion.

Quality: objects, materials and production

Whereas luxury might therefore be conceptualized as subjective and ephemeral, the proposal here is that quality is objective, measurable, perhaps rather prosaic, but nonetheless an extremely useful concept. Whilst the term ‘luxury’ dominates the representation and marketing of fashion, by contrast, ‘quality’ is a term that has become virtually redundant across most sectors of the fashion world, not least because it cannot be clearly represented in visual form. The word itself speaks of musty, early-twentieth century ideas: unfashionable, traditional, elite, safe, boring, even. Indeed, the consumer may feel that it is a stale, outmoded concept and that in the contemporary climate of consumption, ‘value’ is of far greater relevance than ‘quality’. Meanwhile, in terms of research there is a preoccupation with consumer *perceptions* of quality from management, marketing journals rather than actual objective measurable indicators of quality.

What, then, are the factors that might be used as indicators of high quality in fashion products? This in itself is surprisingly difficult to clarify. Take, for instance, the following statement made in an academic research paper concerned with high-end fashion:

Creating such products takes time, which in turn limits availability; highly trained artisans work with carefully chosen, exclusive materials that are not produced en masse. (Joy et al., 2012: 287).

Whilst this comment *feels* appropriate in a general sense, it is still rather vague as to the specific factors that define a high-end fashion product and contains a number of assumptions as to exclusivity and so on.

This matter of how to define luxury or high-end fashion products became evident during an investigation of high-end fashion manufacturing in the UK (Malem et al. 2009). The authors of this report noted that: ‘During the course of the research process, it became evident that there are no agreed standards concerning the production of high-end fashion.’ (Malem et al., 2009: 11). This was a remarkable finding: whilst all those involved in the study –stakeholders from across the industry including designers, manufacturers, buyers and retailers - all had a clear sense of what a luxury product was, no sector could actually provide measurable criteria for this. This led to the identification of a number of criteria that could be used to help define high-end products:

- The use of expensive, luxury and / or innovative fabrics and trims, which may include fabrics with a high natural fibre content e.g. pure silk, wool etc.
- Evident high quality of cut and fit of the garment
- Evident high level of skill involved in the manufacture
- Evident high quality of seams e.g. French seams rather than overlocking, where appropriate; pin hems on garments made of delicate fabrics
- Evident partnership between designer and manufacturer in achieving the aesthetic of the garment

- Evident high quality of the finish of the interior of the garment e.g. bound seams, high-quality linings
- Specialist finishing as appropriate e.g. handwork
- Evident high quality of overall finishing and high level of quality control applied

(Malem et al. 2009: 15).

On the basis of this list, key characteristics pertaining to quality might be seen to fall into two main categories of materials and manufacture, with a third category of characteristics relating to skills and knowledge of both designers and manufacturers.

It seems quite obvious that the quality of fabrics and trims used will be central to the overall quality of a garment. After all, the raw materials are of poor quality, then what hope is there for the end product? Textiles and the textile industry generally are quite hidden, certainly from consumers, lost in the complexity of the long supply chains, yet materials can and are routinely measured for quality. A range of tests, in the form of wash tests and other strength tests are undertaken by garment technologists, but even within the fashion industry quality control is regarded as dull but necessary rather than central to the identity of the end product. In terms of career pathways, everyone wants to be a designer: no-one wants to be a garment technician. Yet the people who perform these roles are ultimately central to whether or not a garment is of good quality.

It is in the processes of production that quality is further imbued in a garment. Provenance – in terms of country of origin – may superficially be an indicator of this, but such is the complexity of supply chains that this arguably draws on the historic reputation of different countries. There is an interesting difference between attainment of quality in UK and that coming out of France and Italy, reflecting rather different fashion histories. High-end, designer-led luxury fashion is relatively new to the UK, compared to established ateliers and production units in France and Italy. However, the UK does have some well-established heritage brands, and the template for new high end manufacturing aspirations includes models used by Burberry and Savile Row tailors (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2013). France and Italy, meanwhile, have systematically invested in high-end fashion production (Malem et al., 2009), whilst more recently it has been noted that ‘European manufacturers... often integrate traditional hand craft techniques with cutting edge technology.’ (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2013) This is important as it recognises the relevance to luxury fashion production of traditional skilled handwork, but also of emerging technologies. Whilst couture might be regarded as the very pinnacle of luxury fashion, handwork in and of itself cannot be seen as an indicator of either good quality or luxury. Likewise, advanced technological processes *may* result in high-quality products, or they may be used primarily to bring about economic efficiencies. Clearly, there has to be an interaction between materials and production processes, including the skills of both designers and manufacturers for high quality garments to be produced.

This rather confused and patchy understanding of what quality is in relation to clothing, even within the industry, is very different to how it was in the past. Historically, knowledge of fabrics and textiles was regarded as a valuable component of the domestic economy, and this was invariably the cultural property of women (Lemire, 2005). Writing with reference to the second hand clothes trade between 1600 and 1850, she notes that: ‘a basic knowledge of textiles and their qualities was commonplace within the wider public, especially among women who took care of these items in the home,’ (2005: 34). She goes on to say that for hundreds of years, the items most frequently taken to pawnbrokers were garments or household linens, and that the transactions that took place functioned as an ‘alternative currency system’ (2005: 35). But an alternative currency such as this is only possible when such knowledge is widely known to all members of a community: who today has the skills to assess the value of a given item of clothing, beyond the indicators of its brand identity?

It is proposed here that if, as the research by Malem et al. (2009) suggest, there is a distinct lack of clarity as to what constitutes quality, it seems highly unlikely that consumers would have this knowledge. Unless they have undertaken some form of fashion education or training, the average fashion consumer is unlikely to understand what constitutes ‘quality’ in a garment given the dominance of brand identity in selling such products. But if those involved in those mediating processes disregard the importance of quality, it drops out of the message communicated. Here we see the dangers of separating the object from its representation: consumers are skilled at dealing with representations, but are less good at understanding objects. Such is the complexity of the fashion production chain that consumers are not merely alienated from their labour, as Marx (1990) argued, but on the whole they are quite oblivious to processes of production. Understanding quality therefore involves the demystification of the processes of production, which, arguably, is a reversal of the processes of consumer capitalism. One might even – rather provocatively - argue that quality is inherently anti-capitalist concept, which gives it interesting potential in an uncertain global fashion economy.

What is sustainable fashion?

As indicated throughout this paper, the language we use to discuss a concept is critical in shaping our understanding of it, and for almost a decade a small but dedicated number of fashion researchers and practitioners have been wrestling with definitions of sustainable fashion (see Black, 2008; Fletcher, 2008; Hethorn, Janet and Ulasewicz, 2008; Thomas, 2008). But sustainability gets discussed in a variety of contexts, so it can be difficult to establish a common language. This problem is further exacerbated by the way that terms such as ‘green’, ‘eco’, ‘ethical’ and ‘environmentally-friendly’ tend to be utilised interchangeably in such discussions whether in industry or in the media. In short, there is a lack of clarity that makes conversations, let alone practical solutions difficult to navigate.

The term ‘green’ is one of the oldest in sustainable consumption lexicon: Sue Thomas (2008) notes that its origins lie in environmental activism of the 1960s. But James Lovelock observes that: ‘green philosophy has evolved in a complex way... and fails to speak with a single, clear voice.’ (2010: 145),

so it has become a term that is as undefined as it is familiar. Significantly, Jo Littler notes that: “‘Green products’... are a much more ambiguously defined and less tightly legislated area [than organic products] so are ripe for exploitation.’ (2011: 31). Thus the word ‘green’ can be used liberally to evoke notions of a product being environmentally-friendly without being bound by adherence to any specific conditions of production. For the purposes of academic debate, it is only relevant in that it is a word frequently used by the media as shorthand for ‘sustainable’ or ‘sustainability’.

The relative dimension of ‘green’ or environmentally-friendly products also warrants closer examination. For instance, a cotton garment might be produced in Australia using fibre that has been grown according to the highest standards of environmental protection. But there is nothing particularly environmentally- friendly about subsequently having such a product shipped halfway round the world to a consumer in Europe or the Americas (see also Littler, 2011 for a discussion of these contradictions). Thus we start to see even more of a need to consider production *alongside* consumption within these debates.

Truly *ethical* consumption, I would suggest, is little more than a utopian ideal and is therefore a term that I tend to avoid. The consumer choices that we make are unavoidably interwoven with socio-economic factors and it has been argued that the very concept of ‘ethical consumption’ is itself the outcome of a society that is ‘profoundly individualistic’, where:

Individuals are being presented with both the opportunity of and responsibility for tackling a number of deep-rooted social problems – poverty, exploitation, mass industrialization, pollution – through their purchasing decisions in a world in which we are encouraged to “shop for change”. (Littler, 2011: 33).

In other words, the responsibility of change is placed on the shoulders of the consumer, rather than governments, industry, international trade agreements and so on. Thus we see that the rhetoric of the empowered consumer is at times problematic, a ruse, even, that allows business organisations and governments to shrug off responsibilities and pass them on to individuals.

In their study of sustainable fashion, Janet Hethorn and Connie Ulasewicz refer to a 1987 report by the World Commission on Development and Environmentⁱⁱ which defines sustainable development as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (Hethorn & Ulasewicz, 2008: xvii), but the notion of fashion that is truly sustainable becomes unfeasible once the meaning of the word is really broken down. Consider this explanation of ‘sustainable’ by Yvon Chouinard:

To be sustainable means that you take out of a system the same amount of energy as you put in, with no pollution or waste. A sustainable process is one you can do forever without exhausting resources [or] fouling the environment. (2008: ix).

The authors also come to the realistic conclusion that: ‘there has never yet been, nor is there now, a sustainable business or a sustainable fashion on this planet.’ (Chouinard, 2008: ix). On a more positive

note, Hethorn and Ulasewicz argue that: 'sustainability is about seeking solutions while maintaining healthy economies and solving social inequities' (2008: xxi). They go on to say that:

the issues involved in sustainable fashion include, but go beyond, environmental ones... It is really the people, working as designers, retailers, manufacturers and consumers, living in countries throughout the world who have power to act in ways to create the most impact, both positive and negative.' (2008: 3).

It is this rather more robust, pragmatic understanding of sustainable fashion that is most useful as it acknowledges that sustainability is a global, industry-wide issue involving not just the production and consumption of fashion, but also anyone involved with fashion.

The issue of defining sustainable fashion is further exacerbated by the fact that historically the sustainability agenda has been markedly anti-fashion in tone. Fashion has often singled out for specific criticism in a way that other goods with a high rate of obsolescence - for example, mobile phones, laptops - are not. Moreover, the problems of fashion consumption are typically situated as a female problem due to the well-established historical links between female identity, fashion and consumption. It is also striking that the whole academic field of consumption is dominated by male sociologists: Zygmunt Bauman, Robert Bocoock, Martyn Lee, Alan Aldridge, Don Slater, a gendered pattern broken only by the voices of academics such as Celia Lury and Mica Nava. In light of this, it is hardly surprising that *male* consumer activity fails to register as a 'problem': men are situated primarily as producers and commentators whilst women are posited as troublesome consumers.

Whilst the muddled terminology is problematic enough for discussions within the industry, it translates extremely poorly into the media, and consumers are left with a patchy understanding of what sustainable fashion might actually be. Conversations around the sustainable consumption of fashion are often constrained by the simplistic black-and-white thinking that dominates the mainstream media. Not only does this have the effect of oversimplifying debates, it also limits the opportunity for finding practical solutions. Though academic writers are generally more willing to entertain the possibility of grey areas and complex models of explanation, debate around sustainable fashion tends to play out according to the conventions of traditional journalism. Within this framework, the polarisation of points of difference is routine, leaving little space for nuanced discussion. Complexity doesn't make good media copy and even the idea of the 'long read' has become a niche media entity, an anomaly within a landscape of soundbites and short, clear messages. As a result, only the most dedicated readers are going to engage with complex deliberations, particularly when no clear or immediate resolution seems possible. Unfortunately, the term 'greenwash' punctuates many media discussions of sustainability. Like so many journalistic terms, it has become shorthand for a complex set of issues, profoundly cynical and is employed indiscriminately against large organisations and tiny businesses alike. Moreover, it has undoubtedly contributed to consumer fatigue on 'green' issues. For many consumers, information about the environmental footprint of a specific product is all just 'greenwash', meaningless information used by advertisers in an attempt to boost the desirability of products.

So, given that the fashion industry is one that thrives on rapid turnover, novelty and obsolescence, can a global demand for fashion ever be reconciled with very real environmental constraints? The problem, I would suggest, is not fashion consumption *per se*, but the *frequency* with which clothing is consumed and discarded. Zygmunt Bauman makes an explicit link between consumption and consumerism, writing that:

Principal among the consumerist ways of dealing with disaffection is disposal of the objects causing disaffection. The society of consumers devalues durability, equating the “old” with being “outdated”, unfit for further use and destined for the rubbish tip... Consumers are not expected to swear loyalty to the objects they obtain with the intention to consume. (Bauman 2007: 21).

Though Bauman is discussing consumption generally, the fashion system is one of the areas in which the waste of ‘outdated’ goods is very visible. He goes on to discuss the relationship between economics and waste: ‘the consumerist economy thrives on the turnover of commodities, and is seen as booming when more money changes hands; and whenever money changes hands, some consumer products are travelling to the dump.’ (2007: 36). It is the ‘prodigal waste’ of which Bauman writes that sustainable fashion can potentially challenge. After all, it is objects that carry the burden of sustainability, not representations, whether in the form of images or words. Thus there is an imperative of the values of material quality to be communicated if they are there, or addressed if they are not.

The future of sustainable luxury fashion

Luxury fashion is not the silver bullet that will magically resolve all of the issues of sustainable fashion, but it can certainly be regarded as part of the solution. Almost by definition luxury is exclusive: it is not for everyone, but there is an existing consumer perception that high-end fashion is more sustainable than cheap, fast fashion:

Heritage and quality appeal because they do not conjure up pollution, dwindling natural resources, and global warming...There is little exploitation of labour, since most ateliers are attached to big fashion houses located in major fashion cities, such as Paris and Milan. (Joy et al. 2012, 287).

So there is a genuine opportunity for the luxury sector to capitalize on this perception and explicitly redefine itself in terms of the values embodied by the products it sells. The influential economist and writer Fritz Schumacher wrote that ‘for his different purposes man needs many different structures, both small ones and large ones, some exclusive and some comprehensive.’ (1993: 49), which is a useful approach to adopt when looking at a complex set of issues such as those discussed here. If the long-term aim is to engage consumers with ideas around sustainable consumption, it must be preferable to offer a *variety* of ways in which to do so rather than merely prescribing a single fixed model of idealised consumer behaviour. This will, however, involve a shift from focussing on intangibles such as image and lifestyle to the more concrete realities of materials, production and garments.

Herein lies the challenge for those concerned with sustainable fashion: quality is hidden, and represents not just the calibre of the materials used, but also the knowledge of those involved in design and production, as well as appropriate production techniques. Whilst there is no reason why luxury fashion cannot embody these features, we cannot *assume* that it does. If 'luxury' is to be beneficial to the evolution of sustainable fashion, then it is helpful to uncouple luxury fashion from popular, image-based perceptions of it that dominate the circulation of fashion ideas. Instead, there needs to be a move towards a greater understanding of the relevance of quality of fibre, textile, design and production techniques.

There is also work to be done within the design and production of luxury fashion. Better knowledge of fibre and textile quality extends the life of fabrics: the more robust a fabric is to start with, the longer the garment can remain in useful circulation. The re-use of clothing has significant implications for the reducing turnover in the production of fashion, as high-quality, well-made clothing inevitably has a longer lifespan than products made of poor quality materials. Second cycle of luxury is key to it being of value in terms of sustainability, but this is fundamentally dependant upon quality.

The physical, sensory components of fashion are paramount to making the wearing of it pleasurable. Yet in contemporary visual culture there isn't even the vocabulary to describe feelings around physical experiences relating to how clothing might feel on the body: everything is framed in terms of how one looks rather than how one feels when wearing clothes. But human beings are physical, visceral beings, not pixelated, screen-based entities and perhaps we are in danger of forgetting how to feel. There needs to be greater recognition throughout the design process that these are garments to be worn, not just photographed, looked at and circulated as a set of lifestyle values. Luxury fashion is in a strong position to respond to this, though, and narrative could be useful in communicating ideas about material quality. Whilst some sectors of the fashion market might regard 'See Now Buy Now' as the great new hope for fashion retailing, it is interesting to note that some high-end designers have already indicated resistance to this model. Speaking at Milan Fashion Week in 2016, the designer Ermanno Scervino commented: 'I think that it is not for me, it is not for (products of) excellence... We have long (designing) time frames. I am not interested. (Gumuchian and Hoang, 2016). Furthermore, those countries which, as discussed previously in this paper, have an established traditional of high quality design and production (namely France and Italy) have on the whole been less enthusiastic about embracing the See Now Buy Now Model than high-end brands based in the United States or the United Kingdom. Cited in the International Business Times, Carlo Capasa, head of Italy's national Chamber of Fashion (Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana) commented that: 'When you want to make a collection creative, you need the time, you need to study the fabrics, specific research, (Justice, 2016). There is also considerable potential for brands that produce a limited line of luxury products rather than great sprawling multinational corporations, as messages about provenance and quality can more easily be conveyed to consumers.

Is this all too much to ask of the fashion sector? In recent years, parts of the food industry have undergone some interesting transformations, reflecting increased consumer interest in the provenance and quality of what they eat, so perhaps there is hope for fashion, too. Though luxury fashion is not – by definition - for all, there is potential for new ways of conceptualizing fashion, with an emphasis on quality, to filter through to the rest of the market, allowing quality to become something that other parts of the industry aspire to. In conclusion, quality is the key to sustainable luxury, and without it the words and images are little more than a shimmering and problematic mirage.

ⁱ In 2001, Laura Craik, then Fashion Editor at the Evening Standard wrote ‘We know that fashion isn’t real news, unless a company buys one of its rivals... it’s just a nice picture. The words are just filler.’ (Porter, 17/09/01, www.guardian.co.uk)

ⁱⁱ also commonly referred to as the Brundtland Report