

Fashion, Identity and Stories Told

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Abstract

Purpose: This research focuses on a case study of one woman, EB, and her lifelong and exclusive wearing of the designs of Yves Saint Laurent (YSL) Rive Gauche. The stories she tells and the reasons for her continual wearing of Rive Gauche reflect a unique perspective of what makes a woman's clothing sustainable.

Design/methodology/approach: EB's clothing, claiming continuity and longevity, was the prompt for an in-depth examination focused on sustainable design from the user's perspective. Phenomenological methodology supported interview questions about motivation for selecting items, what characteristics were valued in the wearing, and feedback and reflections that make the experience of wearing these selections special.

Findings: Findings included her unremitting and intense admiration for YSL as a designer and the continuous dialog between designer, his creations and the wearer that ensued. Data revealed that her stories and reflections were concrete outcomes of her emotional bond to her clothing. Her admiration for the designs for Rive Gauche was singular and intense; her stories were exciting and funny but also disclosed sustainable practices. EB sustainability practice continues in her innovative ability to express her identity through use of her remaining YSL designs that have become multi-functional, loved and cared for items whose characteristics allow for continued wearing into the unforeseen future.

Originality/value: This research supports an assertion that sustainability is tied to the product life cycle and the relationship of the user to the designer. This research also supports the use of phenomenological theory and methods to understand the emotional bonds connecting a user to products.

Keywords: sartorial story, case study, woman's wardrobe, designer fashion, sustainable design

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Introduction

We often study the history of fashion as though it stops with the design, manufacture and distribution of the product. Yet the definition of fashion as the “prevailing style” acknowledges the role the consumer plays in fashion (Nystrom 1928). Though we give tacit acknowledgement to the consumer of the product, the story of the wearer’s experience with the product after purchase is just now being recognized as important (Woodward 2007). Breward (2003) writing in *Fashion*, recognizes this deficiency in the following statement, “In these various literatures, if consumers or audiences are acknowledged at all, their behavior has been classified as simply reactive or passive. Yet fashionable clothing clearly enjoys a communicative role that does not cease once the product is purchased” (p.159).

Woodward (2007) noted that choosing what to wear is always particular to each woman as her sense of self is conveyed through her clothes and occurs in the context of her personal history and culture. Gambini (2006) investigated how people understand sustainability and concluded that the concept is not understood without in-depth consideration of cultural values. Stories and memories regarding dress are the outcomes of individual experiences in wearing and ensuing emotional bonds. If the topic is sustainable design, research had better include examination of the activities and experiences as told from the user’s perspective and if also, what makes for successful sustainable design is culturally embedded, then the context of time and place must be considered.

In this case study, we examine a clothing collection with known longevity some of which is still actively being worn by a professional woman we name EB, recently retired, who insists that once she had experienced the amazing designs of Yves Saint Laurent (YSL) Rive Gauche, she would have no other in her wardrobe. This professional woman maintained her relationship with the designs of YSL throughout her career because they created value and significance for her: through high quality designs, and the mixing and innovative uses that Rive Gauche offered. This woman has retired and continues to wear YSL purchased during the designer’s foray into Rive Gauche. These designs have longevity for 20+ years of active wearing and therefore can be explored through her experiences with sustainable design.

Literature Review

Clothing is a product of our near environment that we attach and give meaning to because of our experiences with wearing, i.e. our sensory and aesthetic experiences when wearing — the textures against our skin, the colors interacting with our coloring, how they make us identify with actions and feelings. We often create personal attachments to designed products that we value, establishing meaning through our lived stories with these products. Increasingly researchers are recognizing the importance of considering this meaning embodied in clothing and the aesthetic experience of the wearer. The aesthetic experience

involves the relationship of form or product, wearer or viewer, and context; that is, the wearer's emotional and cognitive reactions to a designed object must be considered within the context of his or her culture at the time and place, as well as personal experiences, beliefs and attitudes (DeLong 1998).

Sustainable Design, Fashion and the Product Life Cycle

The relationship of the fashion industry to the consumer and the product life cycle has been changing recently from globalized fast fashion to the emergence of a concept called slow fashion (Black 2012). Shedroff (2009) believes that designing for sustainability is essential for the future of the planet and that we must find ways to design as such. According to Schor and Taylor (2002) planned obsolescence is most clearly seen in “fast fashion” which encourages rapid merchandise turnover and relies on consumers' insatiable desire for the new. The consumer of fast fashion, always on the lookout for something new to present a unique appearance, discards without thought of the massive quantities of textile waste (Fletcher 2014). The concept of slow fashion is not the opposite of fast fashion; it is rather an alternative approach for both consumers and designers to engage with fashion (Aakko and Koskennurmi-Sivonen 2013; Fletcher and Grose 2012). Slow fashion encourages consumers to know and value local resources, understand the connections between production and consumption, and the creation of quality products; it “focuses... attention on valuing and knowing the object, and demands design that generates significant experiences” (Clark, 2008 p.440). Products that produce this type of positive response are durable—emotionally, physically, and stylistically. The consumer's continued positive response to the products of slow fashion is the goal, according to Fletcher and Grose (2012). This means creating a product that a consumer will enjoy and keep for a long time because of a positive aesthetic experience.

In a study comparing older users from two cultures on strategies for sustainable design, we found that it matters who the user is and where located, in terms of past experiences in playing out strategies for extended wear (DeLong et al., 2017). For example, what is available in the marketplace will affect extended use of products, e.g. South Korean users who purchased high quality customized ensembles that were available to them as well as users in the USA who bought separates to create their own ensembles oriented to mix and matching. Design strategies mentioned by these users and confirmed in the literature review (Conner-Crabb, et al., 2016) included valuing resources through repurposing materials, encouraging multi-functional attributes, modularity and versatility, and designing for emotional durability. An aesthetic experience that is the viewer's (or wearer's) emotional and cognitive reactions are essential to consider, according to Niinimäki (2014; 2017). Today Postrel (2003) claims that one's aesthetic experience has become a prominent part of the consumption process, that is, what a product looks like to the user is almost as important as how it functions.

What a product looks like involves its style. Style is defined as the characteristic manner of expression, or the distinguishing way in which the parts are put together into a whole (DeLong 1998). Through the form it takes, clothing gives evidence of its current existence, as well as the cultural and historical context of its creation. Loscheck (2009) exploring innovation in the fashion system postulates that styles that retain their use over long periods do so because their cultural meanings are continually renegotiated to produce positive aesthetic responses that are relevant within contemporary contexts. As well, the form of the design is altered just enough to present some new aspect to a familiar design for the viewer to gain pleasure in viewing and wearing the design.

Users influence the product life cycle through their role in purchasing, wearing, caring and discarding of their clothing. Niinimäki and Armstrong (2013) concluded that though products may remain unchanged, their relationship with, and meaning for, their owner may change over time. Chapman (2005) explained that the early stages of a person-product relationship could be described as a ‘honeymoon period, a period of intense synergy within which everything is new, interesting . . .’ (63). Since it is rare for users to sustain long lasting relationships with products, emotional attachment is often withdrawn after the honeymoon period (Chapman 2005). Extending the honeymoon period of clothing through better quality and finding ways to increase usability can result in a dramatic reduction in resources (Fletcher 2013).

According to Niinimäki (2010) consumers are quite willing to purchase sustainably produced clothing as long it meets their aesthetic and emotional needs. Indeed, vintage clothing provides a growing market in the 21st century as an avenue for the consumer’s continual search for the unique (DeLong et al., 2005; 2014). When people experience a continued relationship to the clothing they own, they are likely to manage their clothing with more care, for an increased clothing life span (Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008).

Context of Design and Designer --YSL

The subject of our exploration, EB, and her interest in sustainable but beautiful clothing coincides with the launch of Rive Gauche by Saint Laurent (YSL). EB purchased YSL almost exclusively and his Rive Gauche line that launched in the late 1960s in France and then later in the United States was the label on most of her donations. She wore the YSL designs in a USA Midwestern city known for its access to fashion forward and conservative clothing (DeLong 2000). But first we need to consider the context of YSL, the designer and his designs.

Saint Laurent is often considered one of the fashion greats and a direct heir of the couture tradition of the 20th century. In the 1960s YSL observed, “Fashion would be a sad business if all it did was put clothes on rich women.” He further observed, “There is an enormous unfairness in the prices of haute

couture” (quoted in Savignon, et al., 2012, p. 18). To address this inequity, Saint Laurent created similar garments for both the haute couture and ready-to-wear lines. To achieve this, Saint Laurent “design[ed] within the framework of industrial manufacturing. He developed no details or tailoring or finishing that could not be produced in the factory - unlike the designers of haute couture. He confined his creativity to the factory’s capabilities” (Savignon, et al., p. 11). The Rive Gauche line of apparel was directed towards career-oriented females and opened in the 1960s on the Left Bank in Paris. The line went global by the end of the decade. In this line, YSL created designs with details, tailoring and finishing that could be produced in the factory; he confined his creativity to the factory’s capabilities and therefore transformed the inherent intention of the high-end fashion system that could address the expanding needs of the professional female. With Rive Gauche, Saint Laurent sought to offer quality garments at a lower price affordable to the modern woman, but without sacrificing the design. Rive Gauche was directed towards “career-oriented achievers with neither the inclination nor the means to dress in haute couture” (Savignon, et al., p. 18).

The cost difference between ready-to-wear and couture versions of similar styles is noted: while the couture sweater vest and dress ensemble cost 5,500 F, the similar prêt-à-porter version could be purchased for 650 F - a little over a tenth of the price (Savignon, et al., 2012). However, it is important to acknowledge that Saint Laurent did not merely create cheaper versions of haute couture in his Rive Gauche line; rather he elevated prêt-a-porter to higher standards of design and quality. The designer later stated, “I have chosen to present my fashion through ready-to-wear rather than through my haute couture...I think ready-to-wear is the expression of fashion today. I believe that is where fashion is, not haute couture” (p. 44).

Methodology

Van Manen in his book, *Researching Lived Experience* (1990), explains that the “point of phenomenological research is to borrow other people’s experiences and their reflections on their experiences with the purpose of better understanding the deeper meaning or significance of human experience in the context of the whole of human experience” (p.62). The well-crafted and extensive wardrobe of EB illustrates through phenomenological methods the various shades of meaning that made up her life, both professionally and personally. She lived in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis, Saint Paul, Minnesota, graduated from college with a degree in occupational therapy, which she then pursued as her career. Her life— both publicly and privately — led to specific wardrobe experiences and perspectives on her clothing designed by YSL throughout her career and now retired, still wearing his designs.

Initially this woman was selected for interview because of her extensive donations (500+) to museums of designer fashion. The donations were used to explore EB’s motivations for selecting and wearing this clothing. Numerous in-depth interviews were held, of approximately 2 hours each. For each

interview we created a display of her museum donations for her to reference. These interviews revealed her clothing strategies for wearing ~~the~~ this extensive wardrobe of clothing.

In the process of the interviews about her donations we discovered that she retained a wardrobe of YSL she would not give up because they had become the backbone of her current wardrobe in retirement. We asked EB for an additional interview, focusing on this retained wardrobe. In preparation for this post retirement interview, we asked EB to select clothing and accessories that have been favorites for a long time, that she still wears or are an actively considered item to wear from her wardrobe. For each item selected questions addressed: its place within her wardrobe, characteristics that make it a continued favorite to wear, on what occasions it is worn and changes that have occurred in wearing during the lifetime of the item.

Using this selection of clothing as prompts, she told stories about her relationship to various clothing items and to the activities of her life — work, entertaining, sports — and to life events. These interviews covered her experiences with the designs of YSL beyond the clothing she had donated. Thus, interviews cover her pre and post retirement—both when she actively purchased YSL and later as she continues to wear her favorites.

Findings and Discussion

The focus of our research is EB and her extensive wardrobe which she has both donated to a museum from her career wardrobe and pieces she continues to wear in retirement. As a child growing up in Grand Forks, North Dakota, she loved the creativity of designing simple clothing for her Troll dolls. Although she showed promise as a designer, i.e. great interest and awareness of her own body and how to wear clothing to advantage and winning first place in a Singer sewing contest as a teenager, she decided against pursuing a design career. As a teenager, EB recounts when she first became aware of YSL couture —on a visit to Minneapolis when she saw an YSL jacket that began her life-long appreciation of the work of this designer. EB completed her education as an occupational therapist and then established her career located in the Twin Cities. Eventually she became co-founder and president of a Medicare-certified rehabilitation agency specializing in gerontology.

Throughout her entire career, she almost exclusively wore YSL from head to toe — not only garments, but shoes, hats, jewelry, and handbags. Her only other purchases were of products he did not design—i.e. canvas shoes, blue jeans and underwear. She traveled to New York in the late 1970s to meet YSL when he introduced his Opium perfume for women. At that time, she asked him why he did not design canvas shoes or blue jeans. His answer, ‘Because others do them better than I.’

YSL Donations from her career wardrobe, pre-retirement

EB provides an exemplary model for sustainable best practices with her YSL collection. She has maintained and cared for her clothing for lasting effect—she was never so concerned about changing fashions and fashion seasons, as she was about wearing the design quality of YSL.

During her career and through extensive experiences with this one designer, EB learned how to make YSL designs work for her. She rarely purchased a complete ensemble because she discovered that YSL separates were multi-functional and interchangeable season to season. She discovered that these purchases from different fashion seasons all were compatible when purchased in the same color. One of her favorite colors was YSL's navy—she described as “so rich and dark”. As an occupational therapist, she wore a white shirt and navy skirt or trousers under her lab coat and when these separate pieces wore out, she would simply purchase another from another season to replace it. She acquired them separately and one at a time and in different seasons. She started with a jacket and then when she could afford it-- a skirt or trousers to wear with the jacket. When one of the pieces wore out she would replace it with another from a different season. And because from her perspective the designer produced clothing with the same aesthetic, she satisfied her creative passion by rearranging the separate pieces to wear in different ways. EB learned through her experience with Rive Gauche that transitions were made easier, i.e. daytime work transitioned to an evening for play; all goes together in a mix and match way and indeed, EB discovered that YSL was fluid—pieces spanned and transitioned fashion seasons. Soon, her wardrobe consisted mostly of YSL.

EB appreciated YSL because of how his designs met her needs: “They simplified my life!” Her discovery-- that it all goes together, even when purchasing separate items from different seasons--allowed her creativity through experimenting with unique combinations and the development of her most individual style. YSL designs served to stoke her creative urges and satisfy her need for innovation by simply rearranging the pieces to wear in a different way because everything went together. When she donated her substantial collection of YSL to the museum the curator kept asking, “Did you wear this with that?”—with an eye to photographing ensembles authentically as she wore them. “NO, NO, NO! I mixed and matched—I never wore stagnant ensembles.”

EB iterated that in growing up, she found satisfaction in creative design experiences that led to satiating her curiosity and increasing her knowledge and appreciation of good quality fabrics. In her interviews she continued to connect fabric quality with what makes for good apparel design that then can work to flatter the body of the wearer. Through her love for experimentation with innovative design, EB explained that she learned to rely on YSL's quality of materials and construction. She told of her mounting

appreciation for the design of YSL--her first YSL purchase while still in high school, was a blouse which she discovered was imminently chic. Amazingly, she has kept and still wears the blouse today (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Silk blouse designed by Yves Saint Laurent, c.1970.

She explained that YSL served to stoke her creative urges and satisfied her need for innovation—her urge to design through the experience of wearing. She could be innovative by simply rearranging the pieces to wear in different ways and for different occasions because as she explained—"everything went together." For example, EB donated a number of knit separates in a nautical theme that she was adamant to explain that none were worn as ensembles — "I used them as separates because they could be worn any number of ways." She liked to assemble them in new ways each time, and as she explained, they took her from "boardroom to boat."

Elizabeth's exclusive interest in YSL resulted from her deepening appreciation of how his designs allowed her creativity through experimenting with unique combinations and the development of her most individual style. This idea coincides with the ideas expressed by YSL about his Rive Gauche line. As YSL's business partner noted, the designer in his Rive Gauche line sought to provide women with tools —

clothes that could meet their own unique needs (Savignon, et al., 2012). And we learned of some of EBs innovative uses for her wardrobe—even beyond the experience of wearing. For example, the gold satin cape—in addition to wearing it frequently as intended for formal occasions — one Christmas she used the cape as a Christmas tree skirt (Fig. 2). The hat when purchased was taken apart to remove the fuchsia color that was later used for a dog cone (Fig.3).



Fig. 2 Cape designed by Yves Saint Laurent, c.1991-1992



Fig. 3 Hat designed by Yves Saint Laurent with parts temporarily removed by the wearer, c.1990

As her career flourished she continued to purchase YSL Rive Gauche, as well as some of YSL's haute couture designs. She explained that she put her confidence in YSL and her appreciation and joy in wearing his designs grew. As she found herself increasingly lacking time to shop, she found an ever-expanding source of YSL and she could purchase directly from his catalogs. In the interview, she repeated, "I discovered my separates were multifunctional: As I moved from daytime, I could hide my YSL boots under my lab coat, to reveal them in the evening to host a celebratory dinner." She very much appreciated this multifunctional quality.

EB's love of good design resulted in her delight in wearing YSL and what she calls her "confident" clothes. When asked if by confident she referred to the clothes or the wearer, she reflected—and then agreed it was both and involved an interaction. She must be confident to wear YSL designs. The message of confident clothes was interactive—with YSL intending this mix and match quality and EB picking up on the idea. In this dialog between designer and professional woman the interaction was apparent—designer and client teamed up to create value and significance for each other: through high quality garments and the mixing and matching to satisfy creative urges that Rive Gauche offered to this professional woman and her

wardrobe. And coincidentally, in a 1983 interview, YSL explained that a woman's wardrobe should not have to change frequently as she should be able to use pieces already in her wardrobe and add to them (Savignon, et al., 2012).

YSL Wardrobe Worn in retirement—post career

When YSL quit designing Rive Gauche in 1998 EB quit buying YSL. This means that most of this extended wear wardrobe is at least 20 years old. The story she told followed the pattern of attitudes and behavior toward her wardrobe of her previous interviews when she was actively purchasing YSL. The relationship of YSL to her personal identity held strong. She refuses to donate to a museum much of her current wardrobe because YSL is no longer designing ~~and~~ these roomy, comfy pieces she continues to enjoy wearing.

What has she kept? She described “comfy clothes” consisting of loose dresses in trapeze shapes – fitting at the shoulder and fuller toward the hemline. She has a dozen of these dresses--mostly in wool knit but she also likes silk—especially raw silk; she has just a few of cotton and linen, as these are not her favorite materials. Increasingly she has appreciated the quality of YSL fabrics and as she grew toward retirement, she discovered that larger sizes were roomy and comfortable—while still looking great on her tall and willowy figure.

Clothes she selected to bring in included many accessories she kept for repeated wearing. For example, she keeps this showstopper of a shiny red flower pin that has also been repaired repeatedly—“Be careful!” she admonished. “It is fragile--one of the petals is just taped on.” She revealed a chip that had been repaired with red YSL nail polish –works perfectly and just shows the wonder of YSL designs. They can be repaired and still look new (Fig. 4.).



Fig. 4 Red flower pin, designed by Yves Saint Laurent.

EB continues to enjoy mix and match pieces. For example, here is a favorite—a wool knit two-piece black top and bifurcated bottom. She brought in several wonderful YSL scarves that she continues to wear to create a “pop” of color (Fig. 5).



Fig.5 Wool knit black two piece designed by Yves Saint Laurent with scarf

She said she wears them around her neck and even as a turban. With one of the colorful, long, rectangular scarves she demonstrated how to wrap it into a turban. She also showed how she takes a necklace and wraps it around her wrist to create a bracelet.

She continues to innovate ways she uses the pieces she has kept. For example, one sweater is versatile: “I can wear it as a dress or smoosh it up on my body to become a sweater. Even my Great Dane occasionally wears this sweater—e.g. his head through the neck hole, front paws through the sleeves.” (Fig. 6a and 6b).



Fig. 6a. Dress designed by Yves Saint Laurent.



Fig 6b. Yves Saint Laurent dress worn as sweater

Another example she brought in is a multi-colored plaid mohair coat by YSL she purchased many years ago. Her story she told was, as she walked through the Oval Room at Dayton's department store, this coat captured her eye on the sales rack. She couldn't believe the low price and bought it. Since purchase as a coat, it has since become a sort of bathrobe that she enjoys wearing in private. (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Mohair coat

Summary findings, conclusions and implications for theory and practice.

Data revealed that her stories and reflections are concrete outcomes of her emotional bond to her clothing. Her admiration for the designs of YSL Rive Gauche is singular and intense; her stories prompted by the clothing are exciting and funny. Her wardrobe told her story of wearing, experiencing, defining and redefining YSL that continued to define who she was during her career, and now as she transitions into retirement. EB discussed the way her clothing was used through repeated wearing, the importance of taking care of the clothing i.e., storing, cleaning. She often mentioned multi-functional clothing that she used in innovative ways. But most importantly, she simply enjoyed wearing the designs of YSL!

This ends the story of one woman and how she created her confident and personal style through exclusively wearing the designs of YSL. You could conclude that EB earned the right to wear designer clothing — not as a woman of leisure who afforded luxury through inheritance or family relationships, but through developing her career to afford her own wardrobe. Throughout her lifetime spent with the designs

of YSL she portrayed elements of sustainable practices: extended and multiple uses, innovative, multifunctional ways of wearing clothing, and her emotional attachment to her favorites. Moreover, luxury is sustainable. EB values clothing and considers each piece a bargain as she accumulates the number of times she has worn it. A takeaway message is that researchers must consider product life cycle in any future definition of luxury OR sustainability.

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