Textiles, connection and meaning

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Abstract

Why do some items of clothing remain safely housed in our wardrobes whilst others are quickly relegated to opportunity shops?

This paper will investigate the practical, emotional and nostalgic connections people make with their possessions. This understanding will be used to suggest ways in which we can better design and promote textiles for the fashion market.

Textiles for the body can be functional, fashionable, symbolic or a combination of the three. The method of 'slow design' will be used, as a vehicle to explore ways that ensure textiles meet the practical and emotional needs of consumers for the long term. Slow design follows a holistic approach where each stage of the design process is carefully considered. Bespoke, well-crafted design can be appreciated on a variety of levels increasing the bond between object and owner.

A garment with cultural significance purchased whilst on holiday has an emotional advantage over a cheap poorly made garment purchased on a whim during lunch hour. The holiday purchase becomes a nostalgic reminder of travels, experiences and people. The cheap disposable garment has an immediate purpose, to protect, or to project an awareness and acceptance of fashion. Fast fashion is consumed in a similar way to fast food. Its job is to satisfy immediate needs, not to nourish long term. Opportunity shops are currently overwhelmed with cheap disposable fashion due to a continual wave of desire and disappointment. If designers can connect with people on multiple levels the desire for quantity over quality may be reversed and relieve the drain on resources.

Introduction

This paper came about through a personal interest in the idea of counterbalancing our fast paced frenetic way of living. People are working longer hours, earning more money and buying more things to fill the void in their emotional lives (Naish 2008). It seems that products purchased to alleviate feelings of emptiness are failing to fulfil their role. The emotional journey from 'desire to disappointment' (Chapman 2005, p.62) often places a functional product into obsolescence, unloved and unwanted (Naish 2008, p.76). This pattern of consumption is responsible for an extraordinary amount of waste, which 'is nothing more than a symptom of a failed relationship' (Chapman 2005, p.65). According to Chapman, over 90% of natural resources mined to create product become waste within only three months (2005, p.8). This alarming statistic emphasises the

important role that connection, meaning and relationship play in addressing our irresponsible habits endemic in throwaway culture.

Designers who seek to create a stronger emotional connection between product and people are finding value in 'slow' methodologies developed from the earlier model, being slow food. Slow food, slow living, citta slow (slow cities) and slow design aim to address the hectic pace in which we operate, and encourage people to slow down and engage in activities that require care, attention, mindfulness (Parkins & Craig 2006, p.4) and reflection. The 'slow approach' enables people to contemplate the fullness of their actions.

This paper will begin by summarising recent literature in 'emotional connection and meaning' from the perspective of contemporary product design. The slow food movement will then be summarised and broken down into its fundamental parts. The adaptation of product design theories in 'emotionally durable design' and principles of 'slow' will be used to consider ways to connect people with fashion for the long term.

Connectivity – lessons from research

The fashion and textile industry is problematic to say the least. The complexities of growing, manufacturing, distributing, marketing and selling textile-based product is often driven by the dollar with insufficient consideration to the social and environmental consequences (Clark 2008, p.428 & Fletcher 2007). Whilst recognising the negatives

currently inherent in industry, we cannot ignore the significant role fashion plays in forming relationships, personal identity and satisfying our aesthetic desires (Fletcher 2007, p.121). Therefore fashion can, and should have a positive influence on the individual and society as a whole. Fast fashion in contrast, is the culmination of a post industrial frenzy where speed, technology, and an exploited work force enable affordable copy cat interpretations of the latest fashion trends (Black 2008, p.11 & 14). Fast fashion does not sustain for the long term. Inferior fabrics, poor construction, along with fleeting trends, render the majority of fast garments outmoded or defective, unloved and unwanted. Jonathan Chapman has addressed the importance of strengthening the relationships between people and product in his book titled 'Emotionally Durable Design - Objects, Experiences and Empathy' (2005). The book contains ideas on how to design and produce artefacts using sustainable methods akin to the products perceived life span (Chapman 2005, p.24). We have seen a radical shift in the way in which people value materials and product. Many believe the industrial revolution to be the main contributing factor (Chapman 2005, p.80). Once upon a time people would reuse retired warn out materials to create something new and functional. This process came out of necessity; new products were expensive and hard to come by. The onset of mass manufacturing has reduced the cost of product, and dramatically increased the quantity available in which to select from. The 'make do and mend' approach is now practiced out of pure need (Clark 2008, p435), or for reasons associated with craft or sustainability (Fletcher 2008, p.101). The disconnection between product and people is responsible for an enormous amount of waste, in total contrast to the 'make do and mend' approach used by our resourceful ancestors.

"Landfills around the world swell with fully functional appliances – freezers that still freeze and toasters that still toast – their only crime being a failure to sustain empathy with their users." (Chapman 2005, p.26)

In the early days of the industrial revolution the environmental impact of mass production was of little concern (Chapman 2005, p.167).   Over time we have become reliant on and expectant of industry to fulfil our every whim and desire. With this has come an arrogance, or ignorance of the effect this has on society and the environment. To address this irresponsible attitude, communities are encouraged to consider the environmental implications of purchasing and discarding product. This global educational shift, particularly around the three R's, reduce, reuse, recycle has addressed the 'responsibility' angle and put the onus back on the purchaser. However, many researchers believe that the emphasis on 'recycling' rather than 'reduce', and 'reuse' has placed the responsibility onto waste management systems rather than the individual consumer (Chapman 2005, p.10 & Fletcher 2008, p.107). Most recycling processes actually 'downcycle' product into inferior materials that are incapable of performing the task they were originally designed for (McDonough & Braungart 2002, p.56). For example, aluminium soft drink cans are comprised of two types of aluminium (top and sides) along with paint and other alloys. Conventional recycling does not separate the parts, resulting in an inferior metal hybrid (McDonough & Braungart 2002, p.57). The design challenge is to ensure that environmentally sensitive, well-designed

products can maintain a relationship post the 'honeymoon period' and avoid an early demise.

> 'In the material world, when the adoration and empathy fades – as it almost always does – the original pair bond weakens and fresh bonding urges are motivated. The consumer eye begins to wander, dreaming of more desirable futures with newer models' (Chapman 2005, p.67).

Since many products have been developed to the point of optimum functional performance, people are demanding emotional extras such as pleasure and enjoyment (Savaş 2008, p.170). This is reinforced by strategic advertising campaigns promising a better, happier life through product ownership (Chapman 2005, p.38).

Another researcher interested in the area of design and emotion is Özlem Savaş. Savaş surveyed people in Ankara, Turkey to determine their relationship with material possessions. Savaş established that people feel 'both attachment and detachment in their relationship with products' (Savaş 2004, p.320). Attachment was associated with positive pleasurable experiences whilst using the product and in caring for the product over a lengthy period of time. In contrast, detachment was characterised by negative feelings, unsatisfactory performance, lack of care for the product and a willingness to part with it (Savaş 2004. p.321).

Savaş' theory for attachment and detachment has been summarised and presented below.

Reasons behind attachment to product

The past (family heirloom, gift from family member, memories of people and past events, habitual ownership)

Experience (enjoyment - generates desirable feelings, independence, confidence, release)

Utilitarian (usefulness, tool of trade, performance)

Personal being (reflection of self, symbolises values)

Social being (social status, brand standing, social identifier)

Form (style, colour, visual quality or ambience created)

Reasons behind detachment to product

Utilitarian (poor quality and or performance, inadequate operation)

Personal being (dislike or boredom, poor reflection of self)

Social being (shows individual belongs to an undesirable class)

Form (physical element and style)

Purchase (superfluous products purchased without need, feelings of disappointment whilst using product)

Environmental (living conditions, changes in individual's life or technological

obsolescence)

(Savaş 2004, p.319 - 320)

In his book 'Designing Pleasurable Products, an introduction to the new human factors,

Jordan notes functionality, useability and pleasure' (2000, p.6) as the order of consumer

need. Historically, people were happy with a product if it performed its function

satisfactorily. This soon changed when 'ease of use' became a product consideration.

Once functionality and usability had become an automatic expectation, designers began

to investigate the emotional aspect of product / human relationships. Initially

manufacturers saw 'pleasure' as a way of capitalising on basic human desires (Jordan

2000, p.6). It is now an expected addition to both functionality and useability. If people

are expecting an emotional experience from material possessions, designers need to

consider the kinds of experiences had, their frequency and what this means for the

products life and end of life. The one off 'desire and disappointment' emotional reaction

should be avoided if we are to alleviate issues of endemic waste and consumer

irresponsibility.

This preliminary literature review on the topic of 'emotionally durable design, connection

and meaning' provides method for addressing the relationship between people and

fashion. The keys points are;

Establishing and fostering empathy with product (Chapman 2005)

Encouraging opportunities for attachment and eliminating the possibility for detachment – (Savas 2004)

Ensuring functionality, useability and pleasure (Jordan 2000)

How do we maintain adoration and empathy with fashion and textiles? If we can identify with, and experience through the material object we own, there is more chance the object / owner relationship will grow stronger with time, rather than cease to exist.

Slow methodologies

Carlo Petrini founded the first 'slow' movement in 1986, in protest against the rise of 'fast food' culture spreading from the USA to the rest of the globe. Slow food is a not for profit organisation aiming to encourage consumer awareness of agricultural practice, food production and traditional techniques at a local level. The organisation has a 'think global act local' approach, encouraging the awareness of how food choices impact on the world, socially and environmentally (www.slowfood.com).

Slow food embraces biodiversity in the food industry; it protects 'slow' heirloom foods at risk of extinction due to a 'fast' economic push to produce more food in less time for less money, (a homogeneous one size fits all global approach to food) (Honore 2004, p.23 & 60). The slow food community consists of growers, cooks, restaurateurs and patrons in a supportive network with a common goal to preserve traditional local food production and cooking techniques. This network is proving to be an economic success story, with

growers and restaurateurs forging strong links, reducing the need for processing and excessive freight often necessary when food is grown on one side of the world and eaten on the other (Honore 2004, P.60). At the core of the slow food movement is the desire to 'improve quality of life' without impacting negatively on people or the environment (Slow + design Manifesto 2006, p.4).

The slow food philosophy identifies that food should be good, clean and fair.

- Good - meaning tasty, flavoursome, fresh and capable of stimulating and satisfying the senses
- Clean - produced without straining the earths resources, its ecosystems and its environments and without harming human health
- Fair – respectful of social justice, meaning fair pay and conditions for all concerned, from production to commercialization to consumption (Welcome to our world, slow food companion, p.3).

Slow food is not consumed in the commercial 'mass market' sense. Aficionados of the slow food movement are defined as 'co producers' rather than 'consumers' (www.slowfood.com) due to their interest and support of the process from paddock to plate (www.slowfood.com). 'Slow living' has developed out of the slow food movement. It encourages people to invest in the pleasures of everyday life (Perkins & Craig 2006 p.3). Care, attention, mindfulness and reflection are values at the forefront of slow living (Perkins & Craig 2006 p.4). 'Slow design' shares many values associated with slow food

and slow living. It encourages 'design that adopts a systematic view, that looks at the complexities of social networks, develops a capacity for listening and interrelates with the creativity and diffuse entrepreneurship that characterise contemporary society' (Slow + design manifesto 2006, p.2). The 'slow' approach is flexible enough to be applied to a variety of circumstances, making it a useful model in which to address issues of fashion and sustainability.

The simple three-part approach to slow food identified above has been used as a starting point for highlighting 'good, clean and fair' alternatives to 'fast' fashion.

Slow fashion – application of ideas

Good fashion and textiles

'Tasty flavoursome, and fresh' could be interpreted as 'beautiful, well made and designed to fit' This translates well into the bespoke approach to textiles and fashion where designers work collaboratively with their clients in the selection of fibres, fabric development, garment styling and fitting.   A respect for the designer maker and understanding of the design process strengthens the attachment between garment and purchaser (Black 2008, p.78). The concept of 'transparency' readily arises when dealing with issues of sustainability. Providing an opportunity for people to engage with the design process (or at least witness the process) encourages a sense of connection (Clark 2008, p.435). Fast fashion is a hungry beast, relying on 'cheap fabrics, low salaries and worker exploitation' (Clark 2008, p.428) to survive. Making similar copycat

products is faster than bespoke items. Speed of production along with 'labour, capital and natural resources get juggled and squeezed in the pursuit of maximising [output] for increased profits' (Fletcher 2008, p.162). According to Fletcher people are buying one third more garments than four years ago (Allwood in Fletcher 2008, p.163) the combination of affordability, quantity and lack of transparency are the driving forces behind fast fashion.

Bespoke fashion offers some favourable advantages; 'its slow approach and emphasis on longevity, craftsmanship and new interpretations of luxury' (Black 2008, p.78) fulfil some of Savaş' 'attachment' criteria listed earlier in the paper. Currently bespoke fashion comes with a hefty price tag, making it undesirable and unaffordable to the majority of the population and specifically those riding the wave of fast fashion. The idea of bespoke for the masses is flawed for the simple fact that materials and the handcraft approach are expensive and therefore only accessible to the rich. (Fletcher 2008, p.165) However, if people buy less 'fast' garments and take the time to consider what they need from fashion, their money could be better spent on fewer well-designed garments using materials that are durable both physically and in the context of time (Fletcher 2008, p.165). Fletcher suggests that the fashion 'sector could halve its material use without economic loss if consumers pay a higher price for a product that lasts twice as long' (2008, p.174). Quality, transparency and good design are critical factors in ensuring fashion and textiles can be classified as 'good'.

Economic globalisation makes the practice of good design difficult. The name 'slow food' came about in direct protest to the insensitive global onslaught of an American 'fast food' hamburger chain. The name 'slow food' encapsulates a '... critical reaction to the symptoms of incipient globalisation' (Craig & Parkins 2006, p.19). 'Slow' in the broader context suggests a better, more ethical alternative that uses globalisation to its ethical and economic advantage.

Clean textiles for fashion

In the United Kingdom 'Help the aged shops … pay councils more than £300,000 a year to dispose of unwanted goods' (Naish 2008, p.98). Ever changing fashion trends, poor quality textiles and construction mean that cheap imitator garments end up in charity shops relatively soon after their initial purchase. Nobody wants to pay money for what is essentially out of fashion, and an inferior quality product (Naish 2008, p98 - 99) therefore 'fast fashion' goes to landfill. At the time of publishing Sustainable Fashion and Textiles design journeys 'the total amount of clothing and textile waste arising per year in the UK [was] approximately 2.35 million tonnes, which equates to nearly 40kg per person per year', with 30kg per person per year going to landfill (Fletcher 2008, p.98). A small percentage of undesirable textiles are used for cleaning cloths, shredded and used as stuffing material or broken down and reworked into new yarn (Fletcher 2008, p.99). The European Union has legislated 'that all textiles will be banned from land fill by 2015 and will have to be collected separately from other rubbish' (Fletcher 2008, p.99).

Material innovation can provide a solution to the problem of excessive textile waste. Careful matching of materials to use aligns the product with its perceived lifespan (Fletcher 2008 p.174). Fletcher has suggested that 'one night wonder', garments purchased on a whim for a particular occasion could be biodegradable or taken back by the company that sold the garment in the first place for reuse (2008, p.176). One of the major resource hungry stages in the life cycle of a textile garment is laundering. Water, detergent, tumble-drying and dry cleaning are relied upon to keep clothing fresh and wearable. Fletcher argues that material innovation can provide opportunities in which to phase out the laundering process for particular garments. She suggests that underwear, which is worn once and washed, over and over again could perhaps be created from non woven cellulosic material, designed, coloured and produced to satisfy the fashion of the time. After a single wear, underpants could be composted along with kitchen and garden scraps in domestic compost bins. This systematic approach follows the principles 'industrial ecology and permaculture gardening, where waste from one component becomes food for another in a closed loop, cradle-to-cradle system (Fletcher 2008, p.108).

Matching material to use could alleviate some of the substantial water and energy requirements at the 'care' stage of the garments life cycle (Fletcher 2008, p.178). Encouraging a 'co producer' approach to consumption, and encouraging transparency in design and manufacturing should assist in making the fashion and textile industry 'clean'. If garments are unable to maintain a long-term relationship with their purchaser,

then perhaps they should be made using biodegradable materials that can be reclaimed by nature in the short term.

Adopting a local approach to design and manufacturing lessens the need for excessive freight, where materials are transported thousands of kilometres from one supplier to the next (Fletcher 2008, p.140). Transportation is reliant on fossil fuels, a hungry consumer of the lithosphere, and heavy polluter of the atmosphere. Localism encourages people within communities to connect and share skills and creativity to provide for one another and express their cultural difference (Fletcher 2008, p.140). 'Economic resilience, social engagement and cultural and aesthetic diversity' (Fletcher 2008, p.140) are characteristics of localism. Communities develop a sense of personality that gives them a point of difference to their neighbors. Localism addresses the negatives associated with excessive transportation and mass-produced product for the global market.

Fair textiles for fashion

'The textile and apparel industries are the largest source of industrial employment in the world' (Dickerson 1999 in Maynard 2004, p.16). With as many as 26 million jobs world wide (Fletcher 2008, p.42) many people are reliant on fast fashion for employment.

The fashion and textile production process 'involves one of the longest and most complicated industrial chains in manufacturing industry' (Fletcher 2008, p.41). Due to its sheer size and work force, many unethical labour practices in developing countries go

under the radar (Fletcher 2008, p41). Fairtrade Labelling International (FLO) is an international system of standards committed to producing ethical goods, establishing a 'credible, independent consumer guarantee for products that help producers in developing countries get a better deal from international trade' (*The Fairtrade label: Guide for certification of Cotton Products* 2007, p.2). It empowers people who have traditionally been exploited providing safe working conditions, fair pay, health care and education (Fletcher 2008, p.23). Fairtrade is primarily concerned for the social welfare of employees involved in the cultivation and production of product. Successful Fairtrade products include; coffee, tea, cocoa and cotton. Cotton cultivation in developing countries involves undesirable working conditions, low pay and little job security (Fletcher 2008, p.23). 'As many as 100 million rural households are globally involved in cotton production (*The Fairtrade label: Guide for certification of Cotton Products* 2007, p.3) with many facing hazardous working environments (Fletcher 2008, p.23). Cotton production has been audited, and Fairtrade cotton is available at a retail level. The wider textile and garment-manufacturing industry requires a complex auditing process to ensure the numerous stages in the supply chain are ethical, this is currently being developed by FLO (*The Fairtrade label: Guide for certification of Cotton Products* 2007, p.3). The concept of transparency in production and manufacturing will become increasingly important as consumers demand to know the origin of materials, and labour involved in the development of product. Pressure at the retail level by 'co producers' may encourage a full audit of the supply chain and enable more complex fashion garments to emerge both at the small, medium sized enterprise level and by larger companies.

Fairtrade encompasses all industries where disadvantaged people are involved in the cultivation and production of product. It uses an auditing system and encourages transparency and an ethical approach to production and consumerist behaviour. It aims 'to make more visible in consumer's minds the importance of raw commodities, the many livelihoods dependent on them and the origins of the final products that they buy' (*The Fairtrade label: Guide for certification of Cotton Products* 2007, p.2).   Creating a transparent supply chain provides the co producer with a window to view their product in the making. This awareness may assist in establishing empathy with product, through 'experience and social being' as suggested by Savaş (2004, p.319 - 320). If we can identify with, and experience through material possessions, there is more chance the object / owner relationship will grow stronger with time, rather than cease to exist.

Conclusion

Present day designers have been trained to 'delight, persuade, pamper and mollify consumers' (Wood 2007, p.101) into buying more product more often. The current economic model identifies good design, as profitable design. Slow design adopts a more holistic approach, 'for 'good' design to occur, designers need to be aware of the consequences of their creative decisions and the impact they have on the life of the product' (Underwood 2008). In order to foster 'good' design, designers need time to consider their role in the broader context of consumption and waste.   Designers, industry and consumers need to shift their attention from the financial 'cost', to

environmental and ethical 'cost'. The following 'three lines of reflection' provide a starting point in which to approach design from a sustainable perspective.

> 'Valuing of local resources and distributed economies
>
> Transparent production systems with less intermediation between producer and consumer
>
> Sustainable and sensorial products that have a longer usable life and are more highly valued than typical consumables (Clark 2008, p.429 & Slow + Design manifesto 2006, p.3)

A shift in focus is necessary to encourage established designers and industry to adopt a slow approach. Focusing on the merits of a 'slow' may assist in reducing the current practice of 'desire and disappointment' in the fashion industry. To curb mass-market consumption, we need to educate people on the consequences or their fashion choices, similar to the, reduce, reuse, recycle campaign. Through education and motivation, people may begin to connect their actions with consequences, raising the individual from a passive consumer to an active co producer. Good design practice, a transparent supply chain, a think global act local approach, encouraging personal connection, valuing empathy, quality over quantity and ethical practice may assist in maintaining the 'desire' people feel for their existing fashion garments. Thackara states that 'relationships based on the development of mutual trust through time remain the vital essence that makes markets work' (2005, p.42).   'Good, clean, fair' fashion is economically, socially and environmentally viable.

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