

Chapter 14

Fusion of Artisan and Virtual: Fashion's New World Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Three defining pillars spearhead the current global fashion system: speed to market, overt supply (and consumption) and low prices. This contrasts with a juxtaposing position, through the evolution of slow fashion constructs, embracing artisan techniques with bespoke methodologies. Additional to this is an emerging paradigm integrating new technologies including the strengthening of online retail, virtual interfaces for communication with end-users including customised manufacturing and small scale production runs plus the capacity to communicate and market to anyone, anywhere at anytime across the globe. When these two potentially disparate cultural positions in fashion are considered in tandem, it can facilitate opportunities for small-scale operations to use their size as a platform for flexibility, responsiveness and growth. This model provides for customised and personalised options for a discerning and socially responsible fashion customer. The blurring of bespoke and virtual sees the rise of the digital fashion artisans.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a world... where you connect with a brand whose ethos you respect, so as to acquire through experiential interfaces, beautifully developed fashion items that are customised to not only your needs and beliefs but also your body and in a quality that will last a lifetime. This is an environment where artisan and bespoke practice fuse with new technologies, so as to provide fashion across the globe at a touch of a button. Your wardrobe consists of a series of one-off creations suited to you, sought from designers spanning the world. This is not the future, this moment is now.

This chapter considers an emerging model of fashion practice that aligns to small-scale entrepreneurial businesses that fuse bespoke concepts within a virtual environment. Fashion is on the brink of change as a new world order responds to fast fashion constructs such as; volume supply, low pricing structures and

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supply chain acceleration. The fashion industry is gradually acknowledging the increasing adoption of slow fashion constructs beyond a fringe alternate movement as sustainability immerses into mainstream consumer thinking. (Gebel, 2015) An alternate proposition emerges that bridges the worlds of artisan heritage with new technologies, fashion that has the capacity to embrace innovative systems, which supports independent and innovative design. This environment provides the opportunity for customers to have customised fashion product evolved to fit their shape and aesthetic preferences, the true extension of personalised clothing, enabled by technologies and through technologies. The brand and customer, wherever they are across the world can develop an intimate relationship: reflective, analytical and profound.

Smaller scale operators, emerging brands and independent fashion houses have a real opportunity to capture this moment and embrace viable business models that merge the qualities of small-scale processes with large-scale global interface. This proposition addresses the paradigms within the fashion system between: 'self and mass' as well as 'bespoke and global'. This combines to further understand the fashion systems relationship to the 'past' and its 'future' and provide opportunities for an emerging creative generation.

BACKGROUND

The fashion system has been controlled over the past two decades by the increasing power play of fast fashion, which comprises three defining pillars. These are speed to market, overt supply (and consumption) and low prices. In combination these three central paradigms of the contemporary global fashion system have lead to a commodity culture within the fashion industry. (Webster, 2013) This has been a significant shift from the foundations of the fashion system half a century ago. Bringing these three pillars into interplay has lead a system that perpetuates the need to produce more products, more quickly at the cheapest possible price to achieve market entry and maintained access and achieve the minuscule margins inherent in this process. (Lamson-Hall, 2013) According to Elizabeth Bates published in Entrepreneur;

Brands design an entire season's collection of 10-15 styles, do their best to estimate the demand based on wholesale orders or past seasons' performance, and then produce thousands of pieces abroad. These mass-produced pieces are presented to consumers at inflated prices to account for probable markdowns as time and excess supply devalue them. (Bates, 2014, para. 3)

To search out inexpensive resources to produce fashion product compromises have been made. This includes the limited time designers have to reflect on appropriate designs for the market and the culture of constant markdowns at retail so as to move product off racks and shelves to make way for a new shipment. (Webster, 2013) This combined with a system that perpetuates sweatshop cultures of production and contributes to toxic environmental pollution (Brown, 2010) means that as an industry alternate means of creating, producing and consuming fashion need to be considered. Prior to deliberating what alternative and appropriate models of practice for small-scale operators can be considered within the fashion system, some insight into current industry mechanisms will inform why the need for optional criteria.

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