



Examining the growing trends of bespoke fashion: A sustainability-based approach

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Abstract

This paper examines the emerging trends in bespoke fashion, a sector dedicated to creating custom-made garments tailored to an individual's specific measurements and preferences. Unlike mass-produced or off-the-rack clothing, bespoke fashion emphasizes unique, personalized fits and designs, reflecting a growing consumer desire for individuality, quality, and exclusivity. This trend is not only reshaping the fashion industry but also aligning with broader cultural movements towards personalization and sustainable consumption. The increasing demand for bespoke fashion presents both opportunities and challenges, particularly in balancing the artisanal nature of customization with issues of accessibility, cost, and environmental sustainability. By exploring the historical roots of bespoke tailoring, its modern resurgence, and its role in promoting sustainable practices, this paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the bespoke fashion landscape. Key topics include the impact of mass customization technologies, the environmental and social benefits of made-to-order production, and the potential for bespoke fashion to foster stronger consumer-product relationships and reduce waste. Ultimately, the paper highlights the importance of integrating sustainability into bespoke fashion and leveraging digital advancements to enhance consumer involvement and satisfaction, offering a promising pathway towards a more sustainable and personalized fashion future.

Examining the growing trends of bespoke fashion: A sustainability-based approach

Bespoke fashion refers to clothing that is custom-made to fit an individual's specific measurements and preferences. Unlike off-the-rack or ready-to-wear garments, bespoke pieces are crafted from scratch, offering a unique and personalized fit, design, and construction tailored precisely to the client's specifications and desires. The practice of bespoke customization highlights an increasing consumer desire for individuality, quality, and exclusivity in their wardrobe choices, reflecting broader cultural movements towards personalization and sustainable consumption. As bespoke fashion continues to gain popularity, it challenges the fashion industry to balance the artistry of customization with accessibility, cost, and environmental considerations (Claire Shih & Agrafiotis, 2015). The contemporaneous condition of global luxury markets has led luxury brands into an unprecedented proliferation of products, as customers, especially in emerging economies, crave the latest luxury items. However, the democratization phenomenon of mainstream fashion has enveloped the luxury sector in a wasteful consumption pattern of global proportions, which does not bode well in sustainability terms. Indeed, the rapid depletion of the Earth's natural resources indicates that both the fashion and luxury sectors are culprits in this environmental deterioration. Remedial actions are urgently needed, and the deceleration of fashion and luxury consumption is one of the suggested strategies. The bespoke tailors in Savile Row, London, have demonstrated that competitive advantage can be achieved in a dense network of cooperation and competition. This paper will be a critical examination of the conceptual boundaries of bespoke fashion, its sustainability arc, and its broader role in the collective consciousness of people.

What is bespoke fashion?

Bespoke tailoring, also known as custom tailoring, refers to clothing crafted to the precise specifications of an individual buyer by a tailor. Bespoke garments are entirely unique, created without relying on a pre-existing pattern. In contrast, made-to-measure tailoring employs a standard-sized pattern that is adjusted to fit the customer. Originally, all "fashion" consisted of handcrafted clothing. Creating clothes was a meticulous process, with bespoke tailoring setting the standard for quality and personalization. Bespoke garments were the norm until the Industrial Revolution,

which brought about a profound shift through the advent of mass production techniques. The focus changed from pure craftsmanship to a competition for who could become the biggest global powerhouse of production, distribution, and marketing.

This period ushered in the concept of fast fashion, characterized by rapid production cycles, lower costs, and an ever-changing array of fashion trends aimed at encouraging frequent consumer purchases. Despite its economic success, the fast fashion model has come under scrutiny for its environmental impact, as well as ethical and quality concerns. The rapid turnover of garments contributes to significant waste and exploitation within the supply chain of fashion businesses, sparking debates about the sustainability of such practices in the fashion world.

In response, the fashion industry continues to shift towards more sustainable practices.

Consumers increasingly value quality over quantity, leading to a resurgence in demand for custom clothing and bespoke fashion. This movement not only reflects a desire for garments that uniquely fit the individual's body and style but also signifies a broader trend toward sustainability and ethical consumption.

In mass manufacturing, high volumes of identical items are produced. In contrast, mass customization involves producing unique items tailored to individual customer desires for a

relatively large market, maintaining efficiency comparable to mass manufacturing (Nayak et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2002). Mass customization is also described as a technology-assisted production process that allows customers to modify the traditional mass production process to

create their preferred design and fit (Fralix, 2001). Gilmore and Pine (1997) define this as a collaborative approach where the manufacturer customizes a product based on customer desires identified through proper dialogue. Davis first introduced the concept of mass customization, emphasizing that new technologies would enable the mass production of customized products (Davis, 1989). According to Nayak et al. (2015), apparel purchasing is rapidly transitioning from the physical domain to the virtual domain. Technological advancements in the fashion industry, such as virtual prototyping, 3-D body scanning, and computer-aided design/manufacturing (CAD/CAM), have already made mass customization a reality.

Creating personalized garments is not a novel concept in apparel manufacturing. In the pre-industrial economy, garments were custom-made to cater to individual consumer

requirements. Measurements were taken from each consumer, and the garments were crafted as unique pieces with preferred styles and fabrics. Consumers either made their own clothes at home or enlisted the services of a tailor to create garments based on their design choices. However, making personalized garments was time-consuming, incurred high unit costs, and was inefficient. Additionally, when using a tailor, customers had to wait days or weeks to receive the finished garment.

Industrialization dramatically transformed garment manufacturing. Production systems were developed to mass-produce standard designs in standard sizes at low unit costs. This mass manufacturing strategy facilitated a cost-effective and efficient way of producing garments in a shorter time than creating one-off pieces. As a result, customers shifted from making personalized garments to purchasing mass-produced fashion at affordable prices. This eliminated customer waiting times, as mass-manufactured fashion clothing was readily available for purchase. However, the continuous production of high volumes in mass manufacturing made customization impossible (Davis, 1989), resulting in limited styles in high volumes and different size ranges. Despite this, mass-manufactured fashion quickly captured the consumer market as customized clothing could not compete with its cost and time efficiency.

The shift to sustainable fashion

Mass production and consumption in the fashion industry have created major sustainability challenges throughout the product life cycle (Dissanayake & Sinha, 2015). The drive to produce affordable clothing has led to higher consumption and disposal rates (Tojo et al., 2012). Rapid population growth and changing consumer preferences have intensified unsustainable production and disposal practices (Niinimäki & Hassi, 2011). The industry is characterized by rapidly shifting fashion trends, high production volumes, excessive consumption, and frequent disposal (Allwood et al., 2006).

To keep up with increasing demand, natural resources are being depleted faster than they can regenerate (Dissanayake et al., 2018). This includes significant amounts of water, petroleum-based fibers, hazardous chemicals, and energy, all contributing to resource depletion and environmental pollution (Christman & Taylor, 2009). Offshore production has further exacerbated issues with increased energy consumption, transportation

emissions, waste, and

negative environmental and social impacts, especially in developing countries where manufacturing is concentrated (The Guardian, 2019). If current practices continue, the fashion industry may account for a quarter of the world's carbon budget by 2050 (Birtwistle & Moore, 2007).

As one of the most polluting industries, the fashion sector is under growing pressure to integrate sustainability into its supply chain (Goworek, 2011). While there are ongoing efforts to adopt sustainability measures, new business models are needed. Mass customization is emerging as a promising approach that could offer both economic and environmental benefits.

Can we embrace sustainable fashion through mass customization?

An increasing number of apparel manufacturers are expressing interest in adopting a mass customization strategy (Lee & Chen, 1999; Loker & Oh, 2002). While this approach shows promise in addressing some of the sustainability issues associated with traditional mass manufacturing, many producers currently view it primarily from an economic standpoint.

However, a thorough examination of mass customization's characteristics reveals its potential to reduce excess production, curb overconsumption, extend product lifespan, and minimize waste generation. Thus, it is crucial for manufacturers and retailers to consider this strategy from not only an economic but also an environmental and social perspective. The following section

explores several ways in which mass customization could enhance sustainability within the fashion industry.

Creating an improved relation with the end-product

Several authors have emphasized the need to enhance customer attachment to products in order to mitigate unsustainable consumption and disposal habits (Gwilt et al., 2011; Fletcher & Grose, 2012). Mass customization provides a stronger connection between customers and both

the product and the producer. By offering personalized treatment, it fosters long-term customer loyalty through the development of trust and relationships. In contrast, mass manufacturing typically lacks direct interaction between the customer and the manufacturer, with products being designed based on general market research and trends (Moser et al., 2006).

In the customization process, however, customers become co-designers, actively participating in product development (Piller & Muller, 2004). This involvement creates a sense of belonging and attachment to the product and process, even before the purchase is made. This engagement can enhance the overall shopping experience, offering a higher level of satisfaction through the creation and acquisition of personalized fashion items. As a result, customers tend to build a stronger, more lasting connection with customized products compared to mass-produced garments, which often see a shorter lifecycle from purchase to disposal.

The mass customization strategy provides an online platform where customers can visualize and modify their design until they are satisfied with the final result. A common drawback of online clothing shopping is the inability to verify the fit before making a purchase. However, advancements in digital technology address this issue by allowing customers to view and adjust the design and fit of the garment prior to purchasing. Technologies such as 3-D body scanning and virtual prototyping enable online fitting sessions before the garment is physically produced, ensuring customer satisfaction early in the development process. These technological advancements allow customers to experiment with different styles and fits virtually, offering a more satisfying experience compared to traditional shopping, where alterations are not possible. As a result, the mass customization strategy fosters a stronger connection between the customer and the product from the design stage, leading to greater satisfaction with the purchase.

Extended user period: getting one's money's worth

The duration a garment remains in use by the consumer is influenced by various complex factors, with consumer attachment being a key factor. During the customization process, unlike in mass manufacturing, customer attachment is fostered by involving the customer as a co-designer. This sense of ownership and the uniqueness of the product encourage consumers to retain the garment longer than they would a standard mass-produced item.

Over the past decade, inexpensive, mass-manufactured clothing has increasingly become disposable. Such garments are often bought, worn briefly, and quickly discarded. The availability of cheap clothing has led to unsustainable purchasing behaviors and contributed to a throwaway culture. Fast fashion products are designed with short life cycles, sacrificing quality for lower cost, resulting in high volumes of waste and environmental harm. Despite suggestions that improving product quality and increasing prices could mitigate this damage,

competitive

pressures have driven retailers to lower prices, making clothing more affordable and contributing to its disposable nature. As a result, clothing is often bought for short-term use and enjoyment, making long-term attachment challenging (Karell, 2013).

In contrast, research shows that consumers are increasingly willing to pay a premium for durable, personalized products (Franke et al., 2009; Grimal & Guerlain, 2014). This willingness is linked to the desire to express individuality through their clothing. A premium-priced, personalized garment is viewed as an investment rather than a disposable commodity. With careful design and a price that reflects both quality and design, customer satisfaction is heightened. This satisfaction encourages consumers to retain the garment longer and reduces the frequency of purchasing inexpensive, low-quality clothing. Thus, mass customization has the potential to extend the garment's use phase and lessen the environmental impact associated with rapid production and resource extraction.

Sustainability: What can we do and what have we done?

Enhancing consumer awareness about sustainable fashion

When the customer becomes a co-designer of the product, the environmental impacts of their decisions can be easily and effectively communicated during the design stage. This creates a platform for discussions on developing environmentally responsible products through effective dialogue between the producer and the customer. The producer can educate the consumer about product sustainability, influencing them to become environmentally responsible by selecting sustainable production, consumption, and disposal strategies.

Integrating sustainability into the fashion design process is recognized as the most effective way to create sustainable fashion products (Kerr & Landry, 2017; Boeijen & Daalhuizen, 2010). In the customization process, this can be achieved through an integrated

sustainability indicator tool within the collaborative design process. A user-friendly software tool that indicates the sustainability impact of material choices, designs, colors, and recycling options can guide consumers to make sustainable choices during the design stage. This type of interface benefits both producers and consumers, as sustainability choices are made through

mutual understanding. This leads to an effective collaborative sustainable design exercise, rather than the producer creating a sustainable fashion piece and trying to convince the customer to purchase it without understanding the sustainability impacts of their purchasing decision.

Prioritizing local production

Customer-centric production, competitive manufacturing costs, and timely delivery of finished goods characterize customization. To maximize production flexibility and shorten product development cycles, the manufacturing base needs to shift from large-scale offshore production centers to more local-based manufacturing (Ulrich et al., 2003). The current offshore production system not only incurs environmental costs but also social costs. Issues such as cheap labor, poor working conditions, low wages, and extended working hours are significant social impacts of the current system. Additionally, the lack of environmental regulations in these developing nations allows for the use of hazardous chemicals banned in EU countries and continued water and land pollution from untreated effluent and solid waste.

Relocating manufacturing operations to the countries where the majority of consumption occurs can mitigate the extensive environmental and social damage caused by the global supply chain. Local production must adhere to country-specific environmental regulations and labor laws, helping consumers understand the impact of their consumption behaviors on the environment and society. Furthermore, local production offers better control over production quality, improved working conditions, shorter lead times, local employment opportunities, and reduced costs and emissions associated with global transportation.

Bespoke fashion in the corporate world

Bespoke fashion plays a significant role in the corporate world, from tailored suits to custom office bags, covering a vast portion of corporate fashion. It elevates and gives an identity to one's personality, making a strong impression on clients and attracting the right clientele. Well-fitting, tailored suits are particularly flattering, as they are adjusted to personal measurements, fulfilling office wear needs while enhancing individuality. A well-fitted outfit

reflects positively on an individual's personality, giving a clean and professional impression. In the corporate world, having a strong personality is essential, and how one presents oneself is a key component. Bespoke apparel caters to each individual's unique style, helping them stand out and appear confident in a sea of monotone styles.

Consumers can effortlessly express

themselves through this personalized clothing style.

However, despite all its benefits, bespoke fashion still faces challenges in sustainability. This issue can be addressed by making clothing on a made-to-order basis, ensuring no fabric or

raw material is wasted and providing consumers with exactly what they want. Additionally,

clothes tend to last longer when the consumer is personally involved in the making process, as is the case with bespoke fashion. This approach not only enhances sustainability but also

reinforces the consumer's connection to their clothing, promoting longer use and reducing waste.

Conclusion

An analysis of the mass customization strategy from environmental and social perspectives

highlights several positive aspects supporting the sustainability efforts of the fashion industry. This strategy fosters a user-maker connection, building a close customer relationship with the producer and resulting in deep satisfaction with the product. This satisfaction helps extend the garment's life and promotes more responsible consumption, reducing the need for frequent

purchases and slowing down overall consumption. Manufacturers shift from a product-centric to a customer-centric approach, where customers play a significant role in the product development process. Integrating sustainability into the design stage, rather than addressing environmental issues at the end of the production line, is the most effective strategy.

Collaborative dialogue between the customer and the producer during the design development stage can lead to the creation of environmentally conscious products. Besides environmental and social benefits, mass customization can increase business profits in the long run by minimizing excess production, reducing inventories, and cutting down waste. Satisfied

customers are likely to remain loyal to a particular producer, reducing customer switching between companies.

Additionally, shifting the manufacturing base to local plants can significantly reduce costs associated with global supply chains and lead times.

The current paper provides insight into the sustainability aspects of the mass customization strategy. Mass

customization is gaining traction in the fashion industry due to evolving consumer desires, and the strategy has already proven to enhance both profitability and sustainability. Digital technologies associated with mass customization facilitate effective dialogue between the producer and the customer, eliminating the need for human travel or

sample transportation during the product development process. Key sustainability benefits of this strategy include improved relationships between the product and the consumer, extended usage of clothing, waste minimization, the adoption of eco-friendly printing technologies, and the enablement of repair, reuse, or recycling models.

Additionally, it enhances consumer

awareness regarding sustainable fashion and supports the shift from global to local production. Although mass customization presents operational challenges for producers, the ongoing advancement of technologies and increasing consumer demand for personalized products make it a viable business model with positive economic, environmental, and social impacts.

The examination of bespoke fashion trends reveals a growing consumer desire for individuality, quality, and exclusivity in wardrobe choices, reflecting broader cultural movements towards personalization and sustainable consumption. Bespoke fashion, characterized by custom-made clothing tailored to an individual's specific measurements and preferences, challenges the fashion industry to balance the artistry of customization with accessibility, cost, and environmental considerations. As bespoke fashion gains popularity, it highlights the need for

sustainable practices, particularly through made-to-order production to minimize waste. The synergy between bespoke fashion and sustainability can be further enhanced by leveraging digital technologies to facilitate consumer involvement and reduce the environmental impact of production. By fostering a deeper connection between consumers and their garments, bespoke fashion not only satisfies the demand for personalized style but also promotes responsible consumption and extended garment lifespans. As the fashion industry continues to evolve, embracing bespoke customization offers a promising pathway to achieving both economic success and environmental stewardship.

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