IS TIME BECOMING THE NEW LUXURY?

GRADUATION RESEARCH PAPER
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Today, society is an advocate of speed: it is short on quality but big on quantity. Being fixated to the fast lane means being obsessed with quicker, better, more. As Carl Honoré, (2004) author of „In Praise of Slowness” explains: „Many of us are racing through their lives instead of living them, the virus of hurry has infected everything.” (see Fig. 1) This equally applies to fashion.

Brands are performing six to twelve times a year within blockbuster shows to satisfy the sensational world of fashion. They know that within a second, the designs will be copied by McFashion1 (see Fig. 2), which replaces exclusivity glamour, originality and luxury with massclusivity2 (see Fig. 3). A system which ensures that the continually evolving, temporary identities of today’s throw-away society3 will be gratified. Should this race against the ever changing pace of trends not be considered an outdated model? Should we not start shifting towards a new materialism where there is less focus on monetary value and greater interest in the sentiment or back story; where quantity takes a moment of silence, broadening the consumers’ appreciation towards the fewer but better things?

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These questions form the backbone for my graduation project, which is centered around the analysis of the slow and fast fashion model. Within a branding perspective I reimagined the current system and developed my personal vision and mission for my brand KATHARINA MAYERHOFER. Simultaneously they provided guiding principles on how to tackle my graduation collection DUPLEX from a design perspective regarding a conscious choice of textiles and colors; a new approach towards pattern construction; and a new way of communication between the product and the end-consumer.

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1 McFashion; refers to low-cost clothing collections that mimic current luxury fashion trends. It helps satisfy deeply held desires among young consumers in the industrialized world for luxury fashion, even as it embodies unsustainability.
2 Massclusivity; exclusivity for the masses. Products designed for mass-markets that are marketed as being premium or exclusive but really aren’t.
3 Throw-away society; a human society strongly influenced by consumerism. The term describes a critical view of overconsumption and excessive production of short-lived or disposable items.
How does time relate to fashion right now? Throughout a socio-cultural change, emerged by modernization and especially technological innovation, people got used to a faster pace of living and consumer lifestyle which consequently raised the demand for newness and frequent diversity. As novelty connotes consumption, it is noticeable that consumers are not buying for the sake of owning an outspun product anymore rather than to satisfy their addiction to consumption which therefore became crude, aggressive and emotionless. Currently, fashion designers and forecasting agencies are no longer the only channel dictating future trends. Particularly with mass communication systems and mass media that create platforms where trends can be easily molded by anyone that are either influenced by high-, pop-, or subcultures. Now the consumer is in charge. Consequently trends are not predictable anymore but occur spontaneously and at anytime. A development where the industry inevitably had to respond with a flexible system which is called fast-fashion⁴. (see Fig. 1) Main key components are: a quick response policy which is employed to match demand and supply, frequently changing product assortments; product design which fits the latest market needs; and extremely short product lifecycles. (Tsang-Ming Choi, Fast Fashion Systems, 2014) Summarized this means that time is the critical factor. Namely no time to care about employees, resources, the environment or the quality throughout production. Over the years this system has developed fashion into the world’s second largest polluter and one of the most exploitative industries when it comes to workforce ethics. These days it has reached an insurmountable level, where fashion business cannot be conducted in the same way. As it would appear, time is the key factor.

In order to improve the current system, it must be re-designed, with reduced pressure and a decreased level of demand. A shift in the consumer mindset needs to occur for a more thoughtful and deliberate consumption which values quality over quantity. An observation of the larger macro picture of garments’ true lifecycle and environmental impact. Jenny Ericsson & Natalie Karlsson, 2014) With an understanding of where and under which circumstances clothing is produced; what kind of materials are processed; how far it travels to markets; and how to properly care for garments for an extended lifetime.

As Kate Fletcher⁵ states in „Sustainable fashion and textiles“, 2008): „Fashion will see beauty and greatness in garments that value process, participation and social integration in pieces that advance relationships between designer and maker, maker and garment and eventually garment and user.“ a concept called slow fashion⁶. (see Fig. 2)

Throughout the research into these two systems it became more clear that it is primarily the customers’ attitude that urgently needs to change. People need to switch their mindset from avarice to a more valued consumption where they take enough time to make the right choices. Consumers should consider more appropriate items that better fit their lifestyle and their actual needs rather than just a current trend. Looking at the flooded markets from today, one ought to think that having a lot of choice should create autonomy and individual freedom which results in happiness. Nevertheless, it is stated that an increasing number of choice beyond a handful can lead to an inverted effect. B. Schwartz writes in his book „The Paradox of Choice“, (2005) that too much freedom of choice demotivates people. In particular, their satisfaction with the chosen product over the alternative decreases, leaving them with a feeling of dissatisfaction and regret. A similar effect is noticeable whilst facing today’s wardrobe, where people are overwhelmed by choice and in turn, utilize a smaller range of frequently worn garments. From a personal perspective, this garment range represents the internal ideals of the wearer, and usually hail from reliable quality, but mainly they are the most favorable ones from a design point of view.

This example outlines how buying less, whilst being more conscientious with decision making will lead to an assortment of products that really matters. It is just about buying a garment in the same way as a washing machine, a phone or even a car. Having a strong affinity with items purchased through mindfulness, automatically leads to a more careful handling and an investment which lasts longer than just a season.

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⁴ fast fashion: catwalk designs moving into stores in the fastest possible way in order to respond to the latest trends. They are produced as cheap and fast as possible, often involving the exploitative use of cheap labor, mainly for sale in low cost in wealthier nations.

⁵ author of Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys (2008) and Fashion and Sustainability: Design for Change (2012); her original thinking and progressive outlook has infused the field of fashion, textiles and sustainability with design thinking, and come to define it.

⁶ slow fashion: Fashion that fosters ecological integrity and social quality through products, practices of use and relationships (Kate Fletcher, 2012)
As a result a vision and mission for the brand KATHARINA MAYERHOFER can be stated:

„Appreciating the fewer, better things will ultimately lead to a fuller and better life."

„Fight today’s consumerism by creating a collection where design and quality live beyond seasons.”

This mindset led to a brand concept and collection setup which can be regarded as a response towards the fast-changing, trend-driven fashion landscape as well as the hectic and overcomplicated life we are living in. KATHARINA MAYERHOFER is a brand that cares about the rich story behind a product with a central mission of social change. It has a timeless ethos with a contemporary, casual elegance that lives beyond seasons. A collection with an appreciation towards quality instead of quantity, specified through a conscientious choice of textiles; high workmanship standards; an honest supply chain management; and a transparent way of communicating inside information to the outside world. It is about reducing the wardrobe to a minimum, without excluding variety through a reversible collection setup. A concept which offers two diverse ways of wearability in one garment. Depending on the mood or occasion the garments can change in color, silhouette or tactility, whereby they turn either into an elegant or a more casual and sporty look. As a whole, the collection is divided into two lines as there is the timeless main line called DUPLEX (85%) and the limited extension line (15%) which is running under frequently changing concepts.

Within this collection set up and brand mentality (see Fig. 4,5,6,7) it is not suitable to present within a normal fashion show venue. Instead, it is more relevant to have a well selected crowd in an intimate environment, for example the own concept store. Therefore, it is much easier to convey the right atmosphere surrounding the brand. It gives more time and creative freedom to display the collection in a way that is able to communicate it’s grounded elegance, quality and honesty. Moreover it gives the opportunity to present the limited extension line in direct contact with it’s latest collaboration.
Taking a closer look at DUPLEX, it has the ambition to lay the foundation for a simplified and streamlined wardrobe with a minimalistic approach to basics and wardrobe essentials which live beyond the seasons. (see Fig. 7+8) Garments with a simple design approach and classic color palette which slowly but continuously adapt to the current zeitgeist, rather than quick follow ups to the latest fashion trends. This means that the collection will not change as often or as radically as current fashion cycles. It is more about constantly evolving garments with slight changes in shape, details, colors or textiles. Taking a blouse (see. Fig. 13: white blouse, 2016) as an example would mean that throughout the Spring/Summer season it would be available in lighter colored fabrics such as white, striped cotton or silks, throughout the Autumn/Winter season appearing in darker fabrics such as black cotton or even woolen shirting. However the changes in details and shapes remain infrequent and minimalistic. An oversized blouse would develop throughout several seasons, potentially emerging as a more fitted version or include different details such as button closures, collar shape or cuff finishings.

Having talked about the brand’s timeless main line DUPLEX being right on the edge of becoming too basic or too fashionable, people have a propensity to crave newness. Therefore the collection is supported by a limited extension line, designed under frequently changing concepts. Compared to DUPLEX the products can be much more elaborate and handcrafted as the number of units is limited or even custom made. This means that either the pattern making is much more extravagant or the textiles are developed in an experimental and handcrafted way. Therefore the concept inspiration can be very diverse. Either it is coming from relevant topics from society or politics to nature which is providing us with a variety of textures and structures or collaborations with other artists, designers or inspiring figures. It simply gives the opportunity to reflect on current happenings, interests and findings which keeps the brand’s fashion vision contemporary.
For this season, the limited extension line is called „SEQUESTER“ and is largely inspired by the Dutch photographer Awoiska van der Molen. (see Fig. 10, 11, 12, A.v.d.Molen, 2015) The way she approaches nature and analog photography is underpinning my personal mindset and the way of approaching the design process. Penetrating deeply into obsolete places where she isolates herself for several weeks, exercises her attention towards the stubborn core of things. Making long exposures, up to half an hour, at dusk or early mornings give her the opportunity to evoke the beauty in the most monochrome landscapes which she develops in the old fashioned way with a gelatin, silver print process. Most eye-catching, is the atmosphere and depth in her pictures which have a calming yet meditational effect. At the same time they immediately give so much textural input that it is inevitable to use them as inspiration for fabrics where structures and textures are in the focus. (see Fig. 18: fabric experiments, 2016)

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TIMELESS CLOTHING NEEDS IT’S KEY COMPONENTS TO BE ON SPOT.

As soon as clothing should be able to live beyond seasons it needs it’s main key components to be on point. It is all about the right combination of qualitative textiles with a firm workmanship and a timeless design. Talking about the production of a garment, it is necessary to put enough time and development into the workmanship which automatically leads to a higher quality standard and longevity. Thus, it is important to consider the construction of a garment and its possible weak spots. By supporting those through extra fabric and stitching or by preshaping e.g. the elbow or knee (see Fig. 14) prevents from breaking and therefore creates an extended lifetime. These are thoughtful garments with an appreciation towards quality and craftsmanship. Another aspect that concerns the pattern construction just as the design aesthetics is the collection’s concept of reversibility. A functional feature which concerns not only the aspect of reinforcing the garment’s construction but also influences the amount of consumed clothing which will be halved. From a design perspective it is an interesting starting point to take both sides of a garment into consideration and to find solutions how to blend the line between the right and the left side. As a result of the experimental phase, three methods can be regarded as successful. First is the study into textiles that naturally offers two different looks. (see Fig. 16: fabric sample, 2016) The terry-cloth knit for example has a very fluffy feel on one side, with voluminous loops and a more dense and smooth appearance on the converse. Another example includes the use of hemp denim with its dark blue and more elegant appearance on the one side and a rougher, uneven look in white on the other side. Second is the experimentation into creating different silhouettes where it is mostly about combining voluminous with linear shapes. What makes it interesting, is that the linear shape is taking control over the voluminous one which especially becomes visible whilst playing with different lengths in layers. (see Fig. 15, layered dress, 2016) Last is the experimentation with the actual lining of a garment and to turn that into an attractive exterior.

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From a textile point of view (see Fig. 18: fabric experiments, 2016) the collection exclusively consists of natural materials such as cotton, silk, linen, hemp, wool, merino or alpaca. These fibers naturally provide positive features including a skin friendly touch, rich appearance, breathability and a non-static feel. Depending on the climate, they are either warming or cooling or moisture absorbing or repellent. Moreover, when it comes to the structure and texture of textiles it is all about creating striking contrasts which are primarily made within outfits rather than in items themselves. While looking at single garments it is noticeable that they have quite a monochrome appearance which makes them timeless and easy to combine. As soon as they are put together in outfits the different structures are highlighting each other and create an interesting relief for the eye. Combinations such as a smooth, translucent silk with a hairy and densely knitted terry cloth, or a rough and sturdy hemp denim that goes together with a soft and drapey cotton, create variety and add depth to the outfit. Another important requirement during the fabric sourcing is the certification with the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS). It is the world’s leading processing standard for textiles made from organic fibers. It defines high-level environmental criteria along with the entire organic textiles supply chain and requires compliance with social criteria as well (globalstandart.org, 2012). This guarantees the organic status of textiles which covers the processing, from cultivation to harvest, as well as an environmentally and socially responsible manufacturing, packaging, labelling, trading and distribution. With this transparent and honest way, suppliers are exposing their personal production and manufacturing details. It is an essential development which enables the transfer of information on to the unaware end consumer. Further education is therefore required in order to improve environmental and social awareness for clothing production. How can they find out about the true costs of fairly produced garments? Through offering a system (see Fig. 17: QR-code, 2016) which gathers individually composed sets of data per product, it offers the buyer the opportunity to take a look behind the scenes. They will be informed about every component the garment is comprised of, the amount of effort it takes during the production process; an average mark-up which is added in order to guarantee the brand’s survival; and the care instructions. To make sure that the information will permanently stay on the clothing there will be a QR-code badge which can be scanned. It provides the before mentioned insights anytime and simultaneously eradicates the need of all the inside labels. This is a system which offers the consumer the possibility to buy a product with complete awareness.
The idea of luxury is an ever changing concept which is subjective and a matter of taste that boils down to personal preference. This also applies to time as a new luxury, especially in relation to fashion. Therefore, the aim for KATHARINA MAYERHOFFER is to create a six-outfit collection which represents the vision and mission of the brand. It is all about the concept of reversible garments produced with certified textiles which are able to communicate through their QR-code. This not only makes way for the industry to be more environmentally accountable but also physically reduces the amount of items required by people, without limiting their desire for newness.

As Marc Jacobs, a well known, international fashion designer from the US, said “I think there is something about luxury- it is not something people need, but it is what they want. It really pulls at the heart.” (WGSN, lifestyle futures, 2015)
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SOURCE LIST

BOOKS:
Choi, Tsan-Ming (o. J.): Fast fashion systems. o.V.
Fletcher, KateTham, Mathilda (o. J.): Routledge handbook of sustainability and fashion. o.V.

ONLINE ARTICLES:

IMAGES:
Fig. 1: Anon, 2014, www.rampage.us
Fig. 2: Anon, 2015, www.fashionculturesparsons.wordpress.com/2015/03/06/mcloth-im-wearing-it/
Fig. 3: Anon, 2014, www.ecouterre.com
Fig. 4: Joe Sheehan, 2015, http://www.pataka.org.nz/joe-sheehan/
Fig. 5: Daniel Gurton, 2014, http://www.blackblessedblog.com/test/ing/_/2014/01/simple-plan/
Fig. 6: Anon, 2014, https://de.pinterest.com/pin/407364728775842072/
Fig. 7+ 8: H. Fuglbjerg, 2014, http://www.hannefuglbjerg.com/fashion-i/
Fig. 9: Anon, 2015, https://it.pinterest.com/pin/494270127825477907/
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Fig. 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18: Katharina Mayerhofer, 2016
Fig. 19: Anon, 2014, http://neon-verse.tumblr.com/post/98811641193/think-about-it-neon-neonsign-neonsignage
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