

The Truth is in the product: textile workers unite!

Volume 12 Issue 2 - 2026

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Introduction

Fashion and Luxury were once one and the same. And the product, the materiality of it, was at the origin of value. It is only in the late 80ies that the largest part of a fashion product shifted towards the brand. The product would become a means to sell a brand, instead of the other way around. But could we argue that – also in the face of a ‘regenerative’ turn – this ‘post-materialist’ era is coming to an end? This would mean that the power balance in the marketing channel is shifting back to the first tiers again, which means more margins and business opportunities for fiber and textile producers. As known, we have to look at the past to understand the present.

Fashion IS waste

When one looks at the origin of luxury, which was once synonymous with fashion, one of the stories told is about how the color indigo blue was very difficult to keep on a piece of textile. It would fade very easily, making it necessary - if one wanted to maintain that color quality - to dispose of the old and acquire the new. Only the wealthy, the very wealthy, could afford this, so wearing that color became a signal of wealth. The origin of fashion lies in an intrinsic property of the material. Of course, even back in the Middle Ages, if not before, there were quality differences between different types of textiles, and not everyone could afford more refined garments. The new element here, however, is ephemerality; signaling wealth meant being able to dispose, creating waste. This is Veblen’s conspicuous consumption in a context of ‘pecuniary culture’ (Veblen, 2007).

In my first-year course on fashion management, I have been confronting students with this idea, claiming that as a corollary to this pivotal story: no waste equals no fashion. Digging into the role of fashion in the current discussion on the perishability of the earth’s resources would be beyond the scope of this essay, let alone reducing the sustainability issue to a mere question of entropy. Let us simply mention that fashion, as a system of marginal, incremental innovation, is the only industry where new is better than the old, by definition.

When luxury and fashion depart

Moving forward, albeit in time, luxury gradually became detached from fashion. The French-dominated ‘fashion dictat’ of the post-war decades is still linked to the very characteristics of the product. Paris is traditionally home to the Couturiers, and Rome is at the same time the capital of the Bella Vita. While the French own an idea of beauty protected by the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture, in Italy, designers become Stilisti, determiners of style. There is, however, a fundamental difference between the French and the Italians: Italian Stilisti are products of a significant textiles industry. Italians also have functionality in mind.¹ To borrow a metaphor from the food industry: in France, there is the culture of cooking (cuisine), in Italy of eating (mangiare bene). For Italians, good food should be accessible for everyone, just like good quality clothes. The heavily subsidized industry in the North matches up with Stilisti (the first being allegedly

Walter Albini, as shown among others in Volonte’ 2024) and creates something like Pronto Moda, or Pret a Porter, ready-to-wear luxury. This is where the concepts of luxury and fashion start to separate: luxury needs to redefine itself as mass production makes traditional luxury, or fashion, accessible.

The ‘post-materialist’ turn

Additionally, and partly because of this, in the words of Mr. Renzo Rosso (DIESEL and OTB group), clothes become ‘vehicles for a positive message’.² Allegedly, bad quality items with used looks, ‘stonewashed,’ or in any case with a rough finish, ask for a higher price than nice and neat products. Why? Because these become carriers of meaning. This is when the brand is no longer associated with a designer; style is not owned by the maker but by a brand. To be fashionable, the brand needs to renew itself by tapping into the zeitgeist, ‘sucking up’ meaning from its cultural environment. The product’s intrinsic quality starts to lose relevance in what philosophers would refer to as a post-materialist era.

The meaning of price

How does luxury, as we knew it, cope with this? Well, by realizing it is a brand indeed which needs to adhere to the same mechanisms as any other brand. In other words, it needs to invest heavily in marketing communication to draw meaning from its environment. Versace, for many, is famous because of its logo and because of the model-celebrities of the 80ies more than because of its iconic classicism. Luxury is exclusivity, which means literally excluding people, the only way to do that is by asking - often absurdly - high prices. According to the current definitions of luxury in fashion literature, a high price is one of the constitutive elements, a ‘conditio sine qua non’ for a luxury product.³ This basically means that quality or product attributes, to put it in marketing terms, have become detached from the branding. An inverse demand curve has been defining the segment: the higher the price, the higher the revenues.

At the same time, on the other side of the market spectrum, fast fashion has detached from the seasonal rhythm; responsiveness and speed are highest on the priority list, with quality only ranking fourth or fifth. The question is: what does quality really mean? It is truly a perceptual concept. The high price in the luxury segment is justified by indulgent consumers with the conviction of being people able to value and understand quality. According to the premises of Hirshman and Holbrook’s Hedonistic consumption turn,^{4,5} paying a higher price means buying the idea of quality, or in Bauman’s terms⁶: fashion

being a supermarket of identities, buying a ticket to belong to that 'imagined community' that knows what real quality is and values it. The truth is that people are increasingly unaware of a product's quality in terms of materials, construction, or even fit. Price drives valuation and consumption.

The end of luxury as we know it?

In 2013 the maybe most influential fashion journalist Susy Menkes already talks about luxury and its manifestations having become a 'circus' that is totally detached from the business.⁷ The extremes in design and price that culminated in the 'maximalist boom' of, for instance, Gucci or Balenciaga (which eventually led to a considerable decline in sales for the mother company) were a signal that luxury had to change its course. Substituting 'couturiers' or 'stilisti' for creative directors who are not fashion designers makes sense from a branding perspective, but is fashion only branding? No. The most salient element of the current (political) definition of a creative industry is that its products also have a functional, utilitarian value, but their symbolic meaning accounts for differentiation. We have forgotten that the product is everything in this sector, and the product means: design: shapes, symbols, colors, and *materials*.

Looking at the latest comments I find in newspapers and specialized newsletters on the propositions at fairs like Pitti Uomo in Florence or the Milan Fashion Week¹, it becomes clear that materiality, is mentioned more and more often. Along with that, the luxury sector is looking at lowering prices. For established, traditional (French-owned?) brands, this means focusing on producing and promoting more accessible products but also integrating backward in the supply chain. For new luxury brands, more recent and mostly smaller companies, this means focusing on making better products. Price as a signal for quality is losing its effectiveness. Prices must be 'honest'; they should reflect the cost-price more than market demand. People are hopefully becoming more aware of the materiality of products, maybe due to an increasing sensitivity to environmental issues. This is good news for the fiber and textiles sectors.

Design is function, function is textiles

Italian designers have grown up working in textile mills. Understanding weaving techniques, understanding the physicality of fibers, knowing every knit technique and the consequences of all that for draping, for fit, that is where garments start to look (and feel!) good. Design does not start on the drawing board, let alone on a computer screen - in an interview with the Business of Fashion in August 2022 (see the video of the interview <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DsAbi3ZjQP0/> retrieved 13th of March 2026), Yamamoto claims: "When I speak with young designers, I [tell] them to shut your computer...". he said. "If you really want to see real things, real beauty, you have to go there by walking." Design is product development, and it starts with knowledge of the basic ingredients.

¹see e.g. "Milano Fashion Week: la New Wave della moda. Una nuova generazione di stilisti sta ridefinendo i codici estetici, culturali e etici" in the newspaper Corriere della Sera of the 26th of February 2024, voiced and reinforced in comments on these editions in 2025 and 2026 and for instance in the Business of Fashion's State of Fashion report 2026 which claims a major 'reset' aimed at lowering prices and more focus on quality and craftsmanship <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/luxury/the-state-of-fashion-2026-report-luxury-category-outlook-consumers/> (retrieved 13th of March 2026).

The same Renzo Rosso who claimed products being 'vehicles for a positive message' now openly claims that the future of luxury is again in the product.⁸ We may be at the end of a deemed 'post-materialistic world'. Maybe we are in a post-post world, or in a world of new materialism where the good old Marxist concept of value reign, where the amount of labor spent in the product indeed determines its prices. Where the product is not representing the brand anymore, but - again - it is the brand that tells you what you can expect from the product.

Textile producers of the world unite!

Being aware of this would mean investing in new materials, but also, and in my opinion, mostly in new textile production techniques, new weaving and knitting-, and also construction possibilities driven by new applications of digital technology.

If the above is true, this means that there are new business opportunities for the fiber and textiles sectors. The fact that mainstream luxury brands are integrating vertically shows that these are already very much aware of the growing importance of the first tier of the supply chain. Instead of waiting for these larger companies to integrate and exploit the labour and efforts of these (to put it in marxist terms) the fiber and textiles sector should be aware of this, invest more in innovation, seek and exploit opportunities, offset its dependency from the big brands and ...take ownership.

Acknowledgments

None.

Funding

None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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