

The Shifting Role of the Fashion Designer

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Introduction

Contemporary culture's obsession with design, coupled with an increasing knowledge-based economy and an over-saturated marketplace, requires designers of all media to conceive and contextualize their work in unique ways if they want to stand out and attract consumers. To succeed, designers must shift their focus from simply creating product to developing highly complex narratives that generate new forms of perceived 'value' in the design. No longer is object creation the sole goal of designers. Now, their creations must carry an emotional value that targets the consumer's unique practical and emotional needs. This new emphasis will require designers to move from focusing on the 'what' of design to the 'how' of design, namely through design process and narrative. The articulation of unique design processes and compelling narratives will, in turn, foster a new form of value in the product: emotional value.

Shifting Perceptions of 'Value'

In all design practices, the concept of 'value' is a critical one. Traditionally, value is created by factors of supply and demand, rarity, age, trends (zeitgeists), materials, and/or the brand itself. If the supply of an in-demand product drops, its value rises; conversely, low demand increases supply and decreases price. Not everything rare has value, but when rarity and high demand combine, value escalates. A design's age can also affect value; historical or nostalgic items, as well as the latest and most technologically advanced designs, can create high demand and, thus, value. The materials used in the design can also offer tangible forms of value that can be universally recognized, while the very maker of the object can offer value through brand-associated prestige.

But how does 'value' shift when there is an over-abundance of design? Moreover, how does this over-abundance of design affect consumers' behaviors and perceptions of design? How can designers and the broader design industries respond? These questions are particularly meaningful when considering that nearly 330 fashion presentations are exhibited during New York Fashion week alone, and there are 150-plus fashion weeks around the world. Today's consumers are inundated with 'stuff,' and for the majority, their basic needs are met, and even *over*-met. Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a framework for analysis, once basic necessities are met, today's first world-consumers climb higher up the pyramid to its apex where they actively seek out meaningful life experiences and self-actualization.

The consumer's search for this meaning and self-actualization alters their perception of design and, in turn, the role of the designer. Because of consumer demand for meaning, designers must attract their consumers not merely with their products' *physical* attributes, but with cache – that intangible value that strategically targets and fulfills the consumer's increasingly complex *emotional* needs.

Consumers' emotional needs increase the importance of using the framework of design to create compelling narratives within products. These narratives must be unique, well-crafted, and strategic in order for the designer to stand out in increasingly oversaturated markets where consumers are inundated with offerings. Designers must find ways to outshine the competition and successfully capture their buyers' emotional cravings. The evolving marketplace and consumer behaviors are causing designers to shift their focus from creating a mere object (the 'what' of design) to developing highly complex narratives and design processes (the 'how' of design) that will create new forms of perceived — and emotional — value.

The consumers' quest for emotional value in design is prompting an obsession with design that can be found in nearly every facet of our contemporary lives. Today, the demand for 'high design,' and the attention to it, is at unprecedentedly high levels. Western society's compulsive demand for acquiring all things 'designed' has led retailers of every level to apply 'design' to objects that were previously mundane. For example, in 2012, internationally renowned architect Michael Graves designed over 2,000 'fashionable' household objects for the mass-retailer Target. These objects ranged from spatulas to a table and outdoor patio set. Similarly, Karim Rashid's Garbo family of trash cans for Umbra has sold over 7 million units. Rashid has even designed a manhole cover for New York City's Consolidated Edison (ConEd), leaving seemingly no object untouched by 'high' design.

The dominant force of design is permeating every facet of our daily lives—from suburban homes to urban penthouses — and has entered virtually every socio-economic stratum and cultural community. For example, the growing middle-class' obsession with design can be seen in the 'guest star' fashion collections created by internationally renowned designers such as Karl Lagerfeld, Balmain, and Comme des Garçons for U.S. national mass-retailers like Target and Hennes & Mauritz (H&M). These highly promoted collections are aimed to satiate consumers' yearnings for 'high design'— and buyers can't get enough of them. For example, when Missoni created a suite of products for Target in 2011, the collection included not just clothing but also dishware and even a bicycle. Demand was so great for buying these items that on-line shoppers crashed the store's website less than two hours after products became available through Target online.

A significant contributing factor to the high demand for these types of products are their relatively low cost. For example, in the contemporary retail market, the cost to dry clean a garment can be the same price as the garment itself. This prompts many consumers to wear a garment a few times and then discard it so they can purchase a newer, more fashionable version that fulfills their emotional cravings. In fact, in a recent study thirty-three percent of women stated they consider clothes 'old' after fewer than three wears. This type of behavior signifies a rapidly cycling emotional connection between consumer and product. Consumers buy more and more, faster and faster, to satiate their emotional needs.

The Historic Role of Designers

Traditionally, fashion designers were educated in Bauhaus principles which taught students the practical aspects of design, namely by doing and making. Students studied design fundamentals before progressing to a design specialization. Faculty were practicing designers who imparted their expertise by placing emphasis on making design and perfecting one's craft. As such, designers were often thought of as skilled tradespeople – the makers of the 'what' of design.

One source for this classification stems from the historic approaches to fashion design education, in which emphasis was placed on building the skills associated with the practice, such as pattern making, garment construction, designing fashion 'collections,' and understanding the various markets rather than building the abilities to create highly conceptual, contextual, process-oriented, and narratively-rich designs. Academic curriculum focused on existing design methods and industry standards so that graduates could enter and serve the *existing* industry rather than prepare them for the future to challenge, innovate, and revolutionize, the rigid status quo of the fashion design world.

This skills-based approach to design education was appropriate when, for example, the majority of American clothing was made domestically; students transitioned smoothly from classrooms that taught making to design rooms that made. However, by 2009 the percentage of American clothing made domestically dropped to just 5%, and the nation's knowledge-based economy took over from where manufacturing dropped off. If designers were to flourish in the new emerging knowledge-based economy, the historic role of the fashion designer needed to shift from that of being a vocational master who dictates personal taste to that of a conceptualist or innovator who utilizes well researched methodologies when approaching the design process. Fashion design education also needed to remove similarly narrow confines by engaging with other fields: the ability to make significant advances in thought and innovation is often due to a designer's variety of backgrounds.

The Changing Role of Designers Today

Today's fashion industry is failing and it needs to be fixed. The world demands solutions for alarming concerns including environmental depletion and unsustainable production methods. Fast fashion, unprecedented rates of production, and ceaseless consumption are wreaking havoc on our planet's environment. Globally, consumption has skyrocketed; the household final consumption expenditure—the market value of all goods and services purchased by households—has grown from \$1.7 trillion U.S. in 1970 to \$43.1 trillion US in 2013. In the context of fashion consumption, consumers now demand roughly four-times the number of garments they did in 1980 and the same number bought will be discarded in the trash each year.

To satiate their consumers' seemingly unending emotional cravings, fast fashion companies typically design, produce, and distribute product in just twenty days. This rapid 'sketch-to-floor' system, aided by digital technology, now allows some retailers to produce 26 fashion 'seasons' each year, offering new designs on the sales floors every two weeks. To meet production demands, nearly 14.33 million tons of textiles are produced each year while consumers throw away 12.08 million tons in the U.S. alone. This creates a near one-to-one ratio of garments acquired-to-garments discarded. The shortened duration of a garment's lifespan diminishes the

sentimental value placed on it by the consumer. Clothing becomes ‘stuff’ and ‘things’ with no meaning and no emotional value.

Simultaneously, the unpredictability of our world is largely due to how globalized it’s become. For example, in today’s studio a designer might hail from Belgium, design for a German brand that shows in Milan, move to a storied French house that shows in Paris, and finally join an American house that shows in New York, as in the case of Raf Simons whose designs retail globally. The industry’s increasing global engagement with diverse consumers who possess their own unique emotional needs requires designers to understand the nuances of their markets and these markets’ sub-cultures. To respond, design school curricula are becoming increasingly influenced by ethical issues, philosophy, technology, and an increasing sensitivity to different cultures and environmental issues.

By infusing curricula with these competencies, design graduates acquire the knowledge to succeed in the evolving global industry while having an ability to combine their fashion skills with other fields in order to innovate design.

This combinations of seemingly disparate skills and fields—and the ability to look beyond one’s own confined design discipline—is critical for innovation. For example, Speedo’s LZR Racer bodysuit made possible through advanced computer software provide by the U.S. National Air and Space Administration (NASA) and designed in collaboration with Comme des Garçons. Within a week of its launch, three world records were broken by swimmers wearing the LZR Elite suit. Another example is that of the iPhone. The technology for the iPhone existed years before Steve Jobs conceived of synthesizing together all these disparate functionalities into a single device that has set the standard for consumer electronics design.

This role of the fashion designer is no longer siloed as it once was. It is now understood to be a link that can greatly impact local and global economies, and the environment. To succeed, designers must move well beyond their current servile role to the existing industry and into the new role for the future, that of ‘agents of change.’ They will need to identify new opportunities and make connections between them, similarly to what Speedo and Steve Jobs did. The new role will require fashion designers to think more critically and holistically about design if the failing industry is to be innovated and improved. It’s no longer the ‘what’ that is driving design and design education, but the ‘how’ that is spawned by conceptual and contextual thought.

This new role that focuses on the ‘how’ of design will be bolstered by the shift from vocational skills in a *specific* design area towards one that utilizes core qualities inherent in the overall design process: the ability to collaborate and communicate, a capacity for empathy, an ability to articulate design insights to those in other fields, and the capability to act strategically. As leading academics and designers state, the narrowness of one design approach may be necessary at times, yet the ever-growing complexity of our world requires a greater breadth of knowledge of diverse field, both in design and in society. This breath of knowledge, which may be thought of as ‘tools in a toolbox,’ will give designers the diverse tools with which to address and solve design’s increasingly nuanced demands.

Practically speaking, this means that design students must engage in interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary studies – something that is often done through a double major today. As a result, leading design schools are responding by shifting the emphases of their programs from the

‘what’ to the ‘how,’ introducing new double major degrees, offering graduate studies that prioritize design thinking, and designing partnerships with other disciplines that can give students easy access to this required knowledge. A designer’s success will rely on far more than technical skills; it will rely on his or her abilities to understand both the buyer and the buyer’s needs. In doing so, designers will create aesthetically desirable fashion, can improve existing systems, and their products may impart additional meaning and emotional value to the wearer.

Although the designer’s role is changing into one that emphasizes conceptual thinking, the need for strong technical skills has not been mitigated. Students must continue to enter programs that are strategically balanced between skill-building and design thinking. This balance between the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ in education prepares students for the evolving industry since this approach promotes competency and versatility in skills, greater flexibility in thought, and the ability to translate societal trends into fashion design trends. The fashion designer will continue to need to have knowledge of the technical skills required to design – the ‘what’ – but they must elevate their design skills by conceptualizing and contextualizing exactly which objects and for whom they’re designing – the ‘how.’ Consumers’ engagement with products is no longer driven by needs but, instead, by the desire for emotional fulfillment. By adopting this new role, the designer will be able to create uniquely compelling narrative and innovation – the ‘how’ behind their designs.

The Future of Design

As technology continues to advance at a rapid rate – and as society’s needs keep pace – the role of the fashion designer will continue to evolve. The role will likely move deeper into conceptualization of design in order to meet the ever increasing demand for emotional fulfillment from buyers. Demand for faster speeds at which good design is demanded by the general public will continue to increase.

Over the coming years, designers must become not merely creators of *aesthetically* pleasing products, but also become strategic social scientists who can craft *emotionally* compelling objects via narratives and design processes that best target their customers’ psychographic profiles. In this sense, designers will move from dictating personal taste to a conceptualist who employs well researched methodologies when approaching the design process. Designers will have to learn skills relating to understanding the psychology, along with social and economic elements, of their buyers in order to design products that meet very specific needs in an increasingly personalized marketplace.

As the role of the designer evolves, possessing the skills of flexibility in thinking and the ability to conceptualize design – and then produce it – will be critical to designers’ employability. Additionally, designers will have to understand advanced research techniques in design as well as in the social sciences. They will have to shift their approach from creating products whose design is dictated by personal preferences and speculations about buyers’ demands. Instead, they will have to deeply research their buyers in order to determine what the needs and emotional wants of their target demographics are: what kind of designs should be produced, for who, and why?

This new approach to design will promote a more holistic and interdisciplinary approach in the ways designers create products – and the systems required to develop those projects – while leading research that determines what consumers truly want and emotionally desire.

Conclusion

The world of design is changing rapidly and this is shifting the role of the fashion designer. Designers are creating in an overabundant marketplace in which most consumers' basic needs are over-met; consumers are increasingly driven by their search for meaning and emotional fulfillment through design. To stand out and sustain customer loyalty, designers must shift their focus from creating mere product (the 'what' of design) to developing highly complex narratives and design processes (the 'how' of design) that will create new forms of perceived—and emotional—value.

The role of the fashion designer is evolving in the growing knowledge-based economy. As a result, a new paradigm – the 'Designer-As-Social-Scientist' – will emerge. No longer confined to the creation of aesthetically pleasing objects, this new role will also require designers to better understand the psychosocial needs and wants of their audience. Designers must craft compelling objects via narratives and design processes that strategically target their consumers' practical and emotional needs.

Knowing how and where the consumers' future emotional needs are headed will be a necessary complement to the designers' research skill-skills. Rather than asking 'what' to design, in the future designers will ask, 'What type of narrative will emotionally resonate in my targeted audience, and how can this be applied to fashion design and the design process?' Design education is responding to this evolved role of the designer by creating curricula that develops and hones these skills for students, and by creating advanced graduate studies in fashion design that teach advanced design thinking and research methods.

Design is in many respects a service to customers. When designers' work becomes informed by the emotional needs of its audience in our oversaturated world, they will respond with more enduring design. Thus, the distinctions between creators and analyzers—or, designers and researchers—will fade as everyone engaged in the process of defining, planning, and designing product and systems will be considered 'designers.' It is by doing so that the designer and design industry will remain successful and sustainable.

About the Author

Steven Faerm is an Associate Professor of Fashion at Parsons School of Design (Program Director, BFA Fashion Design, 2007-2011). A Parsons alumnus ('94) and Designer of the Year Nominee, he began teaching in 1998 while working for such designers as Marc Jacobs and Donna Karan. He has been awarded 'The University Distinguished Teaching Award' and The BFA Fashion Design Program's 'Teaching Excellence Award,' and has taught and lectured internationally. His research focuses on the future of art and design education, pedagogy, and student development. Steven received his B.F.A. in Fashion Design from Parsons and his M.Ed. from Harvard University.