

INVESTIGATING FUR AS MEDIATOR OF SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract: This paper builds on two sub-projects conducted under the framework of a larger research programme called *Fur and Sustainability – a Design Perspective*. From 2014-16, we (Skjold et al 2016) took part in the programme which was part of a larger partnership agreement between Design School Kolding (DK) and raw fur supplier and auction house Copenhagen Fur (DK). What the paper shows and discusses is the, oftentimes, missed opportunity of acknowledging the potential of design as mediation between production and consumption when seen in the light of the sustainable discourse. The paper exemplifies this with selected findings from the two sub-projects that engage, respectively, with design processes of designers and furriers, and practices of users of inherited fur garments.

Keywords: *Design Mediation, Sustainability, Fur, Design Process, User-Centred Design, Fashion Design, Use Practice, Luxury*

INTRODUCTION

The area of dress design is undergoing drastic paradigmatic changes due to the current sustainable discourse under which highly complex and many-faceted challenges appear across the entire phases of a product life cycle. Still, there is a tendency in both research and industry to focus on what Kozlowski et al (2012) term ‘particular phase’ strategies, focusing on pre-sale phases of production such as extraction, farming or growing of raw materials, material processing (e.g. tanning or dyeing), working conditions, negative environmental impact of production, or shipping. Conversely, a growing field of research on dress design focuses on ways of reducing overconsumption in the post-sale phases of the life cycle by investigating what actually happens in a garment’s life once it is in the hands of the consumer (Fletcher and Tham 2004).

The clash between these two positions within the sustainability debate is important to understand as it vividly depicts the overall problematic challenges facing the garment sector. Ehrenfeld comments on this with his idea of ‘sustainability-as-flourishing’

(Fletcher & Tham 2014, p. 59). In order to obtain this, Ehrenfeld states, the sector cannot continue with business as usual, making adjustments of technology or design practices that reduce negative environmental impact on mere product level as this leaves “*the roots of unsustainability [...] untouched*”. What is needed in order to really create substantial, wide-ranging positive changes are in his mind “*cultural drivers that both eliminate or greatly reduce the impacts of everyday life and begin to bring flourishing forward*” (ibid). These ‘cultural drivers’, he states, could be products based on ‘transformational design’ (ibid, p. 61), which Ehrenfeld sees as being closely linked with the whole understanding of human centred design. What is important here is that Ehrenfeld suggests a fundamental shift in the culture and mindset within *both* production and consumption towards making consumers reflect on “*what he or she really cares about*”, and making designers consider “*satisfying what people can use to address their cares, instead of what they think they need*”.

Hence, what is important in this overall debate is exactly the ways in which ‘transformational design’ can work as *mediator* or cultural driver towards more sustainable practices across the product life cycle as mediation might be seen as an obvious ‘link’ between production (pre-sale) and consumption (post-sale). Therefore, we wish to highlight an example of how a material, through its very properties and the practices surrounding it, might act as a mediator of sustainability. Through exemplary case studies that are part of a larger research programme on fur and sustainability (Skjold et al 2016), we intend to show how general ideas about the value of fur as material are deeply connected with the way fur garments are designed and used. Thereby we address the *production-consumption-mediation paradigm* described by Lees-Maffei (2009) in that we “*refer to the study of design and the channels through which it occurs, and the study of design as mediation*” (ibid:21). As such, our understanding builds on the way in which fur, through its very material properties, acts as mediating ‘link’ between production and consumption that offers a particular set of values and practices which can be viewed as closely linked to the sustainability debate.

METHODOLOGY

What might be particular about the research programme that we draw from in this paper is that as a research team consisting of four researchers each doing their own sub-project, we together covered the entire product life cycle of fur *after* the fur had left the auction house in Denmark. The below figure (fig. 2) demonstrates the way in which the four individual projects of the programme can be seen in conjunction with the already existing efforts of the company of Copenhagen Fur to work with sustainability. What it also demonstrates, is how the idea of sustainability within this company represents Ehrenfeld’s exact concern that matters of sustainability are often linked with mere

technological or technical-driven approaches. While these initiatives may help reduce negative environmental impact, companies fail to consider how sustainable pursuits need to deal with more overall challenges that have to do with how products are actually purchased, consumed and discarded. As such, the figure builds on the already mentioned full product life cycle model of Kozlowski et al (p. 27), together with their recommendation to work with sustainability in all of the particular phases of this life cycle. Subsequently, each of the sub-projects should be seen through the light of their critique that ‘particular phase’ approaches to sustainability have no fundamental impact – only a full life cycle approach can map the potentials and pitfalls that need to be addressed in order to move forward towards a more holistic, sustainable strategy.

The programme should be considered as a pilot programme in which we tried to open up to notions of what the concept of sustainability might bring about in terms of future practices in the fur industry seen from a design perspective. In other words, how design of fur might stand as a mediator of sustainability – a ‘cultural driver’ created through the ideas behind ‘transformational design’.

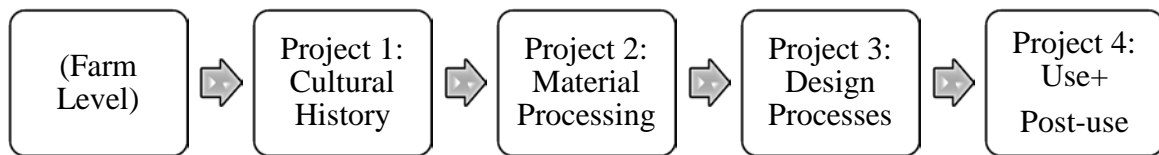


Fig. 2 displays the research design of the programme of which sub-projects 3 and 4 are represented in this paper.

Driven by these insights, the overall methodological approach to the programme was informed by a view on sustainability that places design objects and design processes as central, as illustrated through the model below (see fig. 3). This view has led us to investigate in this paper how the material of fur is mediated between design process and use experience.

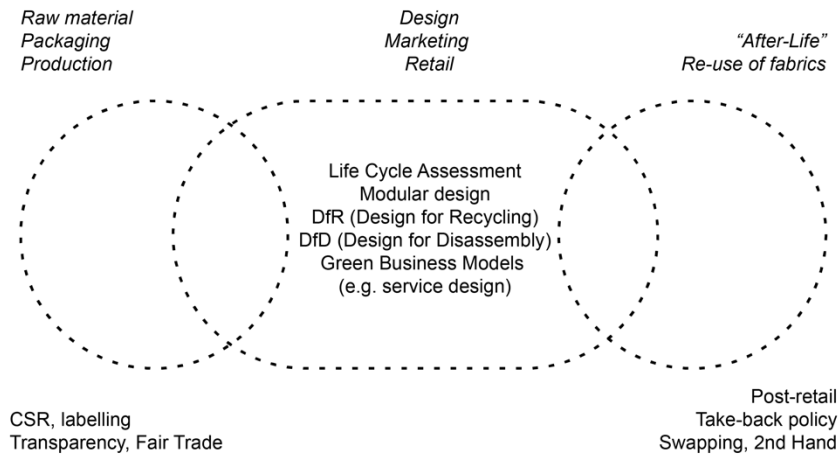


Fig. 3 displays the overall view on sustainability in the research programme, placing design as a central, strategic tool for better ‘linking’ production and consumption of garments.

Placing the paper in this overall perspective, the two sub-projects represented in this paper each builds on individual research methodologies, aims and perspectives.

Project 3 (fig. 2) which evolves around design processes of fur garments, investigates the materials’ influence on design practice via four material parameters; price level, sensorial qualities, durability and craftsmanship. The applied data derives from semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015) with furriers, designers, pattern technicians, and production managers, internal and external to Copenhagen Fur. The 60 – 120 minute interviews were based on the participants’ work. Questions set out from fashion design methodology (Ræbild, 2015) and centred on experiences and practices with fur (past and present) in relation to design processes and costumers. As it turned out, the majority of the interviewees had multiple professional and educational backgrounds. For instance, a production manager might have a trained background as furrier, designer and shop manager. This made the interviewees able to consider and reflect on several perspectives when responding to a question.

Project 4 (fig. 2) evolves around use experiences of fur. Thus, this paper represents a smaller pilot study consisting of five semi-structured interviews with users 25-45 years of age who wear inherited fur. The interviews focused on embodied and situated practices in relation to fur garments based on the concept of the ‘biographical wardrobe’ developed by Skjold. Here, the site of the wardrobe is seen as the connecting point between the micro-level of individual dress practices on the one hand, and the macro-level of societal structures, values and norm-based practices on the other. As shown in prior work (e.g. Skjold 2014/2016), the biographical wardrobe method serves as a way to discover and explore the constant identity work that takes place when people dress, with a particular

focus on the way their dress practice connects past, present and future aspirations, dreams and real life problematics. On the basis of this, interviews are conducted on-site with a specific focus on the objects stored in the wardrobe. This enables talks about and insights into the daily routines and practices of the individual user as well as dialogue about symbolic discourses represented in the worn garments. At a more overall level, the method is fuelled by a broader scholarly interest towards user practices both within dress design (e.g. Klepp & Laitela 2014, Woodward 2007, Fletcher & Tham 2004), and within design research – the latter particularly the practice-based focus of Shove et al. (2008).

In the analysis, the coded findings of these two sub-projects were merged with the remaining project. The respective historic and material focus of sub-projects 1 and 2 were taken into consideration (see fig. 1), just like the findings from several supportive interviews with stakeholders and media, together with material from a field trip to China, the currently largest market for Copenhagen Fur. All together, the accumulated shared processing and analysis left space for an overall understanding of ways in which design can work as a driver for sustainability *and* create value within the company (Lønne & Skjold 2016).

DESIGN AND USE OF FUR

Treated the right way, fur garments can last up to 30+ years or even longer (IFTF 2012). Hence, our study brings evidence of how furriers, designers and users strive to sustain the potential longevity of fur garments through various practices that can be described through a three-string focus on, respectively, 1) resource efficiency/maintenance, 2) tactile and visual properties and 3) fit and style/styling.

Firstly, fur is considered particularly valuable by both designers, furriers and users due to material costs. To furriers, the expensiveness of the material installs a strong awareness of how to secure full use of the material. Primarily, *'it is all about making use of everything. If one cannot use all of a skin in a product, you must use it in another'* (furrier A) or basically *'using it to the max'* (pattern technician K). Moreover, according to the participants in project 3, material durability has traditionally spurred re-design of garments, which was described by furrier A: *'If you start out with a coat, you can use the material and change it into e.g. a jacket and a bag, given there is a craftsman available'*. In the practices of the interviewed users, similar attention was given to the fact that fur is considered an expensive material. Some of the fur garments were considerably worn and old and might not represent significant monetary value today, but the fact that they had been expensive at the time of purchase played an important role in the way the users treated the garments. For example R, who had inherited a raccoon fur jacket from her

mother and was a student at the time of the interview, said she would never be able to afford a fur like that. So she stores it and uses it instead of buying a fur to her own taste. To personalise it, she, like more of the interviewees, has played with ideas at some point about how to repair or even re-design it.

Secondly, perceiving fur as something particularly valuable was voiced to stem from the tactile and visual properties of fur which seem to spur particularly strong emotional reactions. In the case of designers and furriers, they perceived these properties as a) incentive for choosing it, and b) affective of the way they work. As expressed by furrier H *'It kind of possesses a third dimension that makes you happy'* or *'It adds a very special texture; it provides more variation'* (product manager B). Yet, same qualities demand a particular design approach that differs from textile materials, as expressed by pattern technician S *'You have to think differently in terms of volume because you constantly have to envision a surface with a fullness on top of the toile prototype'*. So, while sensorial properties are key, hands on experience with the material becomes vital. Speaking of hands, what was particular when interviewing users was that they all cuddled and caressed the fur when speaking about the garment. Indeed, the strong tactile properties of the material helped evoke memories as two of the interviewees explained how the garment reminded them of the person who gave them the fur; in the case of K-M, her fur jacket had been worn by her grandmother during winter visits, so she could remember touching and smelling it. In addition, K explained how her inherited seal jacket evoked childhood memories of morning walks to school with her mother who is now deceased. This made the fur garments in question very high valuable and extra cared for in the wardrobe.

Thirdly, it seemed as if these properties altogether affect the design decisions of designers and furriers, as well as the use practices of the interviewed participants, in relation to fit, style and styling of fur garments. As for the designers and furriers, they perceived long-lasting design as a core design brief when working with fur which they expressed through ideas about style and fit. For example, designer F explained how, *'what we sell is often a model that has a broad appeal with regards to age - it is fit and shape that matters'*, bringing evidence of how extra care is made to adjust styles to the individual body shape of the costumer, this way making it last potentially longer in the use phase. This approach was elaborated by the same designer who expressed how, *'The big problem is price. You need to earn some money to afford it, so if you buy, you must buy something that you can love for many years - something that is becoming'*. Some also expressed how they considered ideas about more timeless design styles, as S who explained how, when working for a former employer *'we did a type of biker jacket, and I still see people wearing it. I imagine it is because those icons, they kind of stay'*. In this respect the cost of the material directly affects the design, as material usage influence construction and thereby shape. Relating this to the study of people who wear inherited fur, it was

interesting how they all made great efforts to adjust fashion styles of former decades into their present, modern-day wardrobe in order to sustain the use of the garment. Like E, who had inherited a Persian lamb coat in a 1960s swinger coat/A shaped style by her mother, which she typically styled with e.g. tight jeans and sturdy biker boots in order to comply with the dominant trend silhouette of the period of the interview. Or R who felt that her raccoon jacket, which was designed in the 1980s, was too voluminous for her petite and delicate body shape, so she wore tight-fitting garments on her legs *'not to look like a big ball'*. There were also examples of old fur pieces being re-designed entirely because they were deemed too precious to throw away.

DISCUSSION

Looking at these practices one could argue that the findings showed above could be seen in the light of Lees-Maffei (2009), *as the material of fur itself becomes the channel through which mediation occurs*. Following further Lees-Maffei, we wish to point at ways in which our study reflects the idea that *"To study mediation is to study the phenomena which exist between production and consumption, as being fundamentally important in inscribing meanings for objects"* (ibid:19). Accordingly, we wish to point at the way fur design could be a well-fitted example of Dant's idea that the form of the mediating object itself, and the way we perceive this form, determines how it conveys 'messages' into material culture which again determines the way we interact with it; thus highlighting how *"objects that mediate are not generating their own messages, they are mediating messages from other humans removed from their receiver in time and space"* (Dant 1999: 154). Subsequently, what we have displayed above are examples of meaning-making in relation to fur design which mediates a particular set of values and consequent practices in design processes as well as amongst users. Our question is whether these meanings might be viewed in the light of the sustainable discourse, and if so, what kinds of approaches to sustainability this could entail.

Firstly, it could seem that design processes are tuned towards a material use, whereby literally nothing is left to waste. Thus, they align with the concept of Zero-Waste where pre-consumption sustainability is addressed as *'fashion design that wastes no fabric, by integrating pattern cutting in the design process'* (Rissanen & McQuillan, 2016:11). Also, users in the study expressed how the original price of purchase made them reflect on how to maintain the fur garments in use for as long as possible. This aligns with Klepp's finding of the way users seem to take extra care of more expensive garments and keep them in use for a longer time period (Klepp 2010:169).

Secondly, it was found how the material of fur seems to activate particularly strong

sensorial experiences. According to Lupo (2012), this is value that transcends functionality and allows for user involvement and ‘conversation’ over time via tactile and visual dimensions. The particular emphasis on the felt experience of the material speaks into what Clark (2008) argues as a necessary shift in sense hierarchy, from the visual to the sensorial, if product longevity is to be achieved. Same argument is found in Skjold’s concept of ‘sensory anchoring’ which shows how users store and use garments for a longer period if they feel comfortable (2014).

Thirdly, these above properties were found in the study to incite focus on embedding longevity in the design which fundamentally aligns with the slow design approach (Lupo, 2012). As expressed in the interviews, user satisfaction is obtained by fur designers decoding and servicing individual user needs. Such individually crafted items are suggested as emotional and economical investments that offer fit and appearance, and thereby product longevity (Clark, 2008), furthered by customized service relationships with costumers (Gwilt, 2013; Lim et al., 2012). Also, the material durability of fur has prompted a tradition of re-design and alterations which align with the way *wardrobe-surgery*, e.g. a re-modelling of quality garments in a co-creation between designer and user, is proposed as a slow fashion strategy providing ‘product authenticity’ through craft (Clark, 2008; Lupo, 2012). Similarly, the efforts of users in the study to prolong the use phase of the fur garments through styling or re-design could well be seen in the light of Fletcher’s concept *craft of use* which promotes the sustainable perspectives of the way in which individuals maintain, repair and re-design garments of particular value (Fletcher 2016).

CONCLUSION

Through these arguments, we have shown how design of fur, and the material of fur itself, might be seen as a mediator of particular values that bring forth particular practices amongst designers, furriers and users. Values and practices which it makes good sense to investigate in the light of the current, sustainable discourse.

Through this, we have pointed at the often ignored importance of design as mediator between production and consumption, as ‘sustainability’ too frequently becomes reduced to matters of product-level or consumption-level.

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