

Aesthetics for Longevity: How Symmetric Design Enhances Sustainable Luxury Consumption

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The fashion industry is responsible of around 3-8% of global ghg emissions (Janmark et al. 2024). Even if those estimates are particularly inflated because of fast-fashion, luxury fashion brands are required to make their contribution for sustainable development. A growing number of scholars seem to agree on the idea that luxury products are *inherently* sustainable because of the high quality of materials and production processes, which ultimately lead such products to last longer (e.g., Sun et al. 2021; Amatulli et al. 2017). While we support this *product-based view* of sustainability, we believe that whether luxury products can have a longer or shorter lifespan might depend on how long consumers are willing to use them, thus advancing a *consumer-based view* of sustainable luxury. Indeed, it is consumers’ experiences with the product that shape length of product usage (LPU), above and beyond products’ *tangible* durability.

Grounding on the idea that a key component of the luxury product experience is its aesthetics (e.g., Cesareo et al., 2023), we propose that certain aesthetics characteristics of luxury might affect LPU, thus contributing to sustainable consumption. The present work focuses on symmetry (e.g., Bettels and Wiedmann 2019), which is often referred to as the simplest case of balance (Creusen et al. 2010), that can be an effective means to convey immediate gratification to the recipient (Harper and Simonsen 2017), in terms of anticipated experiences when interacting with the object, (i.e., Harper and Simonsen 2017). Previous research has shown that individuals prefer simplicity and symmetry (Palmer et al. 2013, Shepherd and Bar 2011, Harper and Simonsen 2017) over complexity and asymmetry. Therefore, we propose that product design symmetry can be an effective means to induce luxury

buyers to use products longer. Moreover, given that product durability is the result of both functional and stylistic benefits of the object itself (Levinthal and Purohit 1989), we propose that perceived stylistic continuity (i.e., the extent to which a product might survive times and trends; Morhart et al. 2015), could explain why product symmetry positively affects LPU. Building on the idea that symmetry is negatively associated with perceptions of brands as trendy (Bajaj and Bond 2014), we predict that symmetry will make consumers perceive luxury products as more timeless than asymmetric products therefore inducing luxury buyers to use products longer. Finally, we also argue that the effect of symmetry on LPU might depend on individuals' fashion orientation, defined as consumers' tendency to "*buy more new fashion items in order to satisfy their need to keep current*" (Gupta et al. 2019, p. 190). High fashion-oriented consumers constantly look for novel products and experiences (Cho et al., 2015). Given that they gain pleasure from buying new things and being up to date with style (Sproles and Kendall 1986), we expect them to be, in general, less likely to use products for a long time (Gupta et al. 2019). However, we expect that when owning a symmetric product, which is always fashionable, they won't feel the urge to replace it, thus using it for longer time.

We tested our prediction across four online experiments which confirmed the proposed relationships. **Study 1a** tested the direct effect of product symmetry on LPU (Sun et al. 2021). As expected, the results of the independent sample t-test showed that the t-shirt with the symmetric design led to higher LPU than the one with the asymmetric design ($M_{\text{symmetric}} = 5.58$ ($SD=2.00$); $M_{\text{asymmetric}} = 4.58$ ($SD = 2.42$); $t(201.26) = 3.280$; $p < .0001$). **Study 1b** sought to further test this main effect through a real luxury item recalled by consumers. ($M_{\text{symmetric}} = 6.01$ ($SD = 1.503$) vs. $M_{\text{asymmetric}} = 4.91$ ($SD = 2.060$); $t(159.04) = 4.007$ $p < .00$). **Study 2** explored the mediation of perceived stylistic continuity. Results of a mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 4, Hayes 2022) confirmed a significant and positive indirect effect ($b = .6297$, $SE = .17.09\%$ [95% C.I., .3328; .9947]: when the luxury t-shirt was symmetric, consumers reported higher stylistic continuity ($b = 1.4108$, $SE = .2171$, $t(211) = 6.4989$, $p < .0001$), which in turn positively affected LPU ($b = .4463$, $SE = .0894$, $t(210) = 4.9931$, $p < .0001$). Finally, **Study 3** aimed at testing the moderation effect of individuals' fashion orientation (H3). The moderation analysis (PROCESS Model 1, Hayes 2022) with product design as the independent variable (0 = asymmetric, 1 = symmetric), fashion orientation as the moderator, and LPU as the dependent variable confirmed a significant negative effect of fashion orientation on LPU ($b = -.56$; $se = .15$; $t(159) = -3.66$; $p < .001$). More importantly, the effect of the product design and fashion orientation interaction was positive and significant ($b = .43$; $se = .20$; $t(159) = 2.10$; $p = .04$). To test H3, we looked at the effect of product design on LPU at different, continuous levels of the fashion orientation scale, using the Johnson-Neyman approach (Spiller et al. 2013). Results showed that for fashion orientation values higher than 1.91, product symmetry had a significant and increasingly positive effect on LPU, thus supporting our H3.

Overall, our work provides relevant theoretical and managerial contributions. Theoretically, we advance extant literature on sustainable luxury consumption proposing a consumer-based view of sustainability in luxury by focusing on the role

of aesthetics and product design. Second, we introduce the concept of stylistic continuity, drawn from the continuity dimensions of brand authenticity (Morhart et al. 2015), to explain why symmetry leads to higher LPU than asymmetry, thus offering novel insights into one possible psychological mechanism that can link product aesthetics with sustainable consumption. Third, we advance extant research on sustainable luxury consumption by testing the role of fashion orientation (Cho et al. 2015; Gupta et al. 2019).

Managers should be aware that design symmetry can be an effective tool to foster a more extended use of luxury fashion products. Indeed, we found symmetry to be an effective subtle cue for more sustainable behaviors. Furthermore, our results suggest that communication about luxury fashion sustainability should focus more on stylistic benefits, rather than functional ones. Balancing creativity and sustainability will be a key challenge for fashion designers.