Human body as fashion space: fashion accessories, design and woven fabrics

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Abstract

Purpose – Considering that the human body is undeniable a fashion space, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of design and material choice in the relationship between clothing and accessories, namely, bags, for the fashion consumer.

Design/methodology/approach – Initially the paper provides a historical framing of the use of materials in bags and its relation with clothing. Then, are described the characteristics of materials and how the human body relates to them, specifically how the sense of touch plays a decisive role in materials choice. Thus a natural fiber-based fabric as wool fabric is presented as a choice for some brands in the development of fashion accessories.

Findings – It was found that there are an immense variety of materials that can be used in bags creation, and the use of them has changed over the years, influenced by social and economic conditions, fashion trends, and by technology evolutions in the production of fibers and composites. Taking in consideration that there is a long history of use of woven fabrics with natural fibers and a growing demand for sustainable and organic products, the use of wool natural fabrics in the production of bags were presented as a following road to the fashion industry.

Originality/value – Since the relationship between materials used in apparel and fashion accessories is an area barely documented, this paper contributes to underline the possibility to exceed conventional design barriers and develop innovative and creative wool products pleasant for the human body as a fashion space.

Keywords Design, Fashion, Textiles, Textile fibres, Human body, Fashion space

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Fashion is a concept of many interpretations and applied in different contexts (Barnard, 2002). Fashion can be associated with change and defined by the succession of short duration or short-lived trends, these changes have always been associated with the social, economic and political transformations, which end in the development of new products (Arnold, 2009). Fashion is also part of the construction of the identity of individuals and groups and encompasses an important role in society by the economic
power it has among other industries (Arnold, 2009). Frequently by the origin of the
term, some words are used to relate to fashion, as style, clothing, dress and adorns
(Barnard, 2002). Despite different uses they are all in the same field of action, all this
concepts have a relationship with space and the human body.

Body and space have been for a long time object of study. Historically the human
body was and is a dressed body, be by clothing, tattooing or body painting. The dressed
body performs a determinant role in presenting ourselves to the world (Entwistle,
2000). Also Patrizia Calefato (2004) shares the same idea through the concept of clothed
body, and how it is essential for social life.

“[…] the body is not a passive agent of either, but inhabiting, wearing, altering,
affecting both, an agent of transformation” (Potvin, 2009, p. 8). Body act like a form of
position the human being physically and historically in space, not being only an
instrument or object but allowing an experimentation and perception of the world
(Entwistle, 2000). Thus is apparent that the body can be seen as having a dual role,
is the medium to perceive the world but is itself a form of representation of the world,
it can be part and production of the space or be the space itself.

In this work fashion is defined in terms of adorns, clothing and accessories, used to
involve the human body and use it as a fashion space.

When considering body as space for fashion, is important to reflect on the
characteristics of it, namely the senses. For Lefebvre the body is where the sensory
space is perceived trough senses, smell, taste, hearing, sight and touch (Simonsen,
2005). Merleau-Ponty other author which studied space and the human body, reflects
on the importance of touch in the recognition of the world (Potvin, 2009). In fact touch
is one of the most important senses in fashion, since is the sense that allows textile
perception (Pensé-Lhéritier et al., 2006).

Textiles are the main raw material used in fashion clothing and accessories, others
like furs, polymers, rubber, wood and metals are also used, but is about fabrics that this
study will focus considering their use in manufacturing bags. One of the least explored
materials in the development of accessories is the wool fabric. This is already used in
different kinds of applications, however the applications on fashion accessories are
quite scarce. This paper is held under an applied research project in collaboration with
industry, this industry is the justification of using wool fabrics and thus enhancing
their applications.

Design and fabrics: bags theoretical outline along history
The development of fashion accessories is widely historically contextualized, as well as
its relation to social changes and movements, in such a way that it is possible to
identify and justify the emergence or development of a particular accessory according
to the social and the fashion context of a given period.

The existence of bags dates back to the dawn of humanity and has a long history as
a transport accessory of the most diverse utensils and products. Used by both men and
women, took on different names throughout their evolutionary period: purse, reticule,
pocket, bag, wallet, among others. The development of this type of accessories has
always been associated with the type of products to carry and to wear occasions,
determining this way shapes and materials used in its construction. In this historical
analysis the materials used throughout history are primarily focussed and its
relationship with the type of accessories for each occasion (bags, purses, wallets).
Although being evidence in ancient petroglyphs and Egyptian paintings of the use of
some kind of bags to carry utensils, the historical evolution of this type of accessories
made by most authors (e.g. Wilcox, 1999; Pedersen, 2006) begins in the Middle Age perhaps by records and preservation of paintings and genuine accessories. Consequently, this outline also begins in the Middle Age but with more emphasis on the twentieth century and today.

In the Middle Age both men and women wore a small pouch attached by a drawstring at the waist, with transport and symbolic functions, these were usually made of leather or fabric, silk or linen, or with pieces of ecclesiastical robes and wall hangings. Already by the middle of the sixteenth century, with the change in style of clothing, the kind of bags used previously was not suitable for the entire volume around the hips created by clothing, thus being brought inside especially of the skirts, which was the first approach to what we now know as pockets. Men continued to wear at the waist leather, wool, silk and metal handbags. At this time also the bags had different functions, such as store perfumes, jewellery and being as a support, where often the bag itself was a valuable gift, made in satin or velvet and embroidered with threads of silver and gold. During the seventeenth century embroidered handbags were implemented fashions, being the embroiderer of great importance in society at the time. At the end of this century also began to be common lace bags. During the eighteenth century it was still common to use bags inside the skirts, normally made of linen or cotton, but with the importance of sewing and embroidery on the lives of women, working bags were developed to be carried in hand; this type of handbag follow-up the reticules. This kind of bags had the most diverse shapes, round or hexagonal, some quite decorated with paintings and embroidery, and made from different materials like metal knits, but having a tendency to be of the same material of clothing, such as silk and velvet fabrics. At the end of this century the bag was already considered essential in the following of changes to clothing tight to the body and source of business between countries. In the early nineteenth century with more rigid forms reticules appeared with wooden or papier-mâché bases and lined with silk, wool twill or leather red morocco. During this century with advancements in science and in industry, appeared a lot of different fabrics and styles, allowing new forms of coordination with the clothing. In the twentieth century and with the industrial revolution, the use of the train as a means of transportation has created the need for wallets and bags suitable to transport of luggage, lined with leather and canvas. Many of the best-known brands today began at this time with suitcases, such as Hermès and Louis Vuitton.

In fact the twentieth century came with the affirmation of the wallet as a key fashion accessory for women, their emancipation and integration in a more active life leading to wallets suitable for all occasions and made from different materials, such as metal knit bags similar to those existing in the eighteenth century, but with a more industrialized production process by using steel, bronze, silver and even gold. With the arrival of the First World War, the explosion of diversity of previous years calmed down as the climate of fear was installed, velvet and black silk wallets with simple white lace applications have become commonplace. After the war emerged another trend, the use of fur to match coats furs and skins of reptiles. Around 1925 began to appear the purses, wallets envelope with small handles or just to hand carry, often with glass beads and sequins, but became especially popular the use of plastics for its ability to be shaped. In the early 1930s, maintained a small size without much ornamentation, but toward the end of the decade, gradually were getting wider and more sophisticated, and manufactured with various skin types as the snake, crocodile
and sea lion, among others. During the Second World War many materials have begun to be scarcer, the leather bags have become rare, and most began to be made of fabric, mostly 100 percent wool from often surpluses of men overcoats, also the craft became a capital gain using the raffia from different colors. Also the use of zip/closures was restricted and options of wood fasteners began to appear and later also wallets in wood from the most diverse forms and finishes. In the 1950s the order has returned to settle with a more serene style where the coordination of accessories and color with the clothing were essential, and where the bags were classic and structured. It was at this time that the bag Chanel 2.55 and the suitcase Kelly of Hermès arose and Louis Vuitton patented his monogram in canvas.

In the 1960s the hippie movement influenced the fashion with handcrafted techniques, crochet, macramé and patchwork. On the other hand also at this time arose a futurist movement inspired by science fiction, which appeared in PVC and vinyl wallets with metal plates and silver finishes. The 1970s started with bags in leather and suede patchwork, but over the decade envelope wallets and clutches padded in pastel colors and floral prints, as well as large shoulder bags in leather and canvas already without the main ethnic look of previous years, become a trend. In the 1980s the diversity and contrasts were vast, where there was room for all kind of accessories according to the different urban tribes that began to show, punks, new waves, rappers, skinheads, gothic and heavy metal. A tendency to recover patterns and ideas from the past started to emerge. For example, Karl Lagerfeld at Chanel reinvented the 2.55 model in jersey, denim, rubber and terry cloth. Also at this time started to appear the knapsacks for everyday use. Miuccia Prada launched a black nylon model considered to be one of the first models of bags completely unisex, inspiring other designers like Vuitton, Chanel, Fendi and Gucci.

In the 1990s was trending the minimalism allied with technology, with the use of lightweight polyethylene coupled with the most varied materials, jersey knits, tweed and leather, and a variety of finishes. The bags have been given more functional compartments for cell phones, business cards, pens and key holders. Also in this decade, the final recognition of bags as complements in a collection of clothing, with most brands developing collections of accessories as they develop clothing collections (Brand and Teunissen, 2007; Nyamache and Nyambura, 2012; Pedersen, 2006; Wilcox, 1999).

In the twenty-first century, the first’s years came with the most intense diversity in bags design, and a return to more individual shapes and materials is expected to be the future of this industry. Continuous technical innovation leads to new fibers and new materials, but one of the big trends of this century is growing concern for recycling and biodegradability with the use of natural and sustainable fabrics and products (Entrepreneur Magazine, 2012; Gale and Kaur, 2004).

Design materials: the right choice

The design of fashion products in general must always consider aesthetics and functionality in product development (Newell and Simon, 1972; apud Visser 2006). These aesthetic and functional concerns have always been present in bags development throughout the history. Since their existence they have been associated with basic transport functions and meanings of status and aesthetic.

Nowadays consumers more and more choose products by the aesthetic and symbolic attributes (Bloch et al., 2003). The aesthetic attributes are usually related to the sensory experiences the product elicits and can be the materials, the proportion,
color, shape and size (Cappetta et al., 2006). As well as in clothing the materials as aesthetic attribute of bags and the “fabrics handle” determine and influence their success in the market (Cho et al., 2001; Gale and Kaur, 2004). “Fabrics handle” is a term usually used when the relation between the human body and fabrics want to be described. This term can be defined as “[…] the human tactile sensory response toward fabric, which involves not only physical but also physiological, perceptual and social factors” (Pan, 2007, p. 48). In fact the fabrics handle has been largely studied, but remains always a subjective field because of the subjective character of sensation, namely, is based on people’s subjective preferences and can mean different things to people with different backgrounds.

The fabrics handle is one of the main factors that determine the success of a textile product because is essential in purchasing decision, so is important that the selection of a specific fabric or material is done considering the end use and the market/consumer that will buy it (Cho et al., 2001). Some features of fabrics can influence the handle, as fiber properties (e.g. fiber thickness, rigidity); yarn characteristics and type (e.g. staple fiber, continuous filament, density, twist), fabric characteristics and structure (e.g. weight, thickness, surface roughness, structure, yarn density, bending rigidly, thermal conductivity) or finish (e.g. dyeing, heat treatment, calendaring, softening, waterproof or self-cleaning) (Frontczak-Wasiak and Snycerski, 2004; Kayseri et al. 2012; Matsuo and Suresh, 1997).

Bearing in mind the meaning of touch to the relation between fashion and body, fabric handle is here considered one of the main decisive factors in selecting a sort of material of bags development. However the selection of materials can be done based on functional requirements, considering mechanical, physical and chemical properties can also be determined by the market demand or by the financial cost associated. Considering environmental and sustainability questions, the selection of materials can be done by the improvement of the life cycle of the product, the quality and considering the amount of waste result from all stages of production process (Zhao et al., 2012).

**Design materials: natural vs synthetics**

“In the first era, the longest by far, nature was used directly, all species, all materials. The second era was that of what we might call ‘dirty fibers’. Oil, heat and chemicals featured large in this phase. The third era that of the molecular sciences, promises to be cleaner, and to provide greater material quality and diversity. In a sense it also promises to be an era when we return to nature as the defining source of inspiration, comfort and identity” (Gale and Kaur, 2004, p. 60).

Until the twentieth century natural fibers, as cotton, linen and wool controlled the market of clothing and accessories products, but during this century synthetic fibers of regenerated cellulose and synthetic polymers oil based, had grown (Oerlikon, 2010). In twenty-first century these fabrics of synthetic origin are facing a challenge, since ecology and sustainable invade consumer minds. There is a growing tendency to look again to nature and its resources as raw material. Fabrics from cotton and wool that had never disappeared are now in the order of the day, along with new synthetic developments from natural renewable sources, what Gale and Kaur (2004) calls “new naturals.” Many of them are from crops and organic waste materials that with science, engineering and manufacturing advances can be turned to sources for new fibers.
Wool fabrics in fashion industry

Wool is one of the oldest textile fibers used by humans. Its natural qualities are the reason it has been continuously used for thousands of years and despite science evolutions its superior properties have not been totally duplicated by textile scientists. Wool remains a masterpiece of nature and provides a standard by which other fibers are compared (Steele, 2005).

Despite this importance and recognition of special properties, the consume of wool has decreased especially in the 1990s where there was a decline in production and demand for wool, resulting in the development and rapid expansion of the production of synthetic fibers and new textile products (Oerlikon, 2010).

In these days the importance of wool textile market has been growing in the sequence of the increasing importance of aesthetic and comfort characteristics sought by consumers, and the passage of a focus from quantity to quality (Grogan, 2012). This continues to be one of the products with the most impact on the textile industry and investments in innovation and new product development of wool have allowed a reborn in the last years (Pierlot, 2010). Lighter, softer fabrics, mixed with other natural or synthetic fibers and with functional finishes, have managed to increase the performance and demand of wool fabrics (Simpson and Crawshaw, 2002). According to International Wool Textile Organization (2012) two-thirds of the world’s wool are used in the production of apparel products, from sweaters, suits and dresses and even “active sportswear.” Some of its most important features are warmth and coolness, breathability, moisture absorption and buffering, resilience, low odour, odour absorption, softness, flame-resistance and biodegradability and recyclability (Johnson et al., 2003).

These natural characteristics of wool despite being more appeal to apparel products, allow the exploration in other type of products with unique features (Johnson et al., 2003), and its versatility has been demonstrated by a number of innovative apparel products.

Possibility of using wool fabrics in addition to apparel manufacture: bags

Historically, the use of the same fabrics in the manufacture of clothing and accessories had even been an obligatory trend, in which the fabric of the bags should be the same as the dress. However the emergence of new materials with characteristics that made it more suitable for use in bags and an eclectic trend in creating a look, meant that many of the fabrics that were used in that combination, silk, velvet and wool were used only for specific uses, such as silk satin handbags on formal occasions. But this usage in conjunction as was done in the past and that some brands do occasionally, is just one of the points in the relationship between clothing and bags, and that obviously depends on the actual use and combination that consumers want.

As previously stated the wool fabrics, for its characteristics and also technical developments and performance, have been used in many different ways. It can be affirmed that the wool fabrics can produce products with added value for the consumer; however in wool clothing, characteristics such as comfort, protection against heat and cold are the most important, but in bags are not so relevant, but characteristics such as waterproof and resistance may already be more relevant in choosing bags of this material (Pierlot, 2010). Considering the features already highlighted of wool fabrics, these may be extended by subsequent treatments such as polyurethane coatings and micro-encapsulation of various compounds. Another reason for the extension of use of
these fabrics in bags manufacture is fashion trends in runways that indicate a future
grow of this use (Grogan, 2012).

Some examples of this use are accessories brands like “SENNES,” “Bronte by
Moon” and “hardgraft,” and also well-known clothing brands that have accessories
with wool, recycled polyester and organic cotton, as “Brooks brothers,” “Paul&Joe,”
“Stella Mcarthey,” “Timberland” and “Channel.”

More specifically, SENNES promote the use of ecological wool and linen, and
announce the brand as “SENNES is North and South, linen and wool, ecological and
sustainable, tradition and innovation, natural and urban, a new experience with old
knowledge, silent exclusivity and pure distinction.” Bronte by Moon presents scarves
and bags made with classic wool fabrics, supporting the “Campaign for Wool”
designed to demonstrate wool’s natural sustainable qualities and supreme versatility.
Other case is “hardgraft” which along with leather, make use of wool and wool felt in
the design of their accessories, promoting the qualities of wool and their applications
possibilities. In clothing brands, for example, Timberland since 2006 start an inside
campaign to go greener, by the reducing of emissions, the carbon impact, energy
consumption and also by producing greener products with organic cotton and recycled
polyester, from clothing to accessories like bags.

There is a common alert of consumers to ecological and sustainable issues and a
-growing demand for this type of products, but besides some cases, as the brands
referred above, are few brands with knowledge about the properties, added value and
advantages raw materials like wool have for fashion accessories production. So in this
context is important to recognize the importance of research projects in collaboration
with industry were the development of wool fabrics for fashion accessories helps to
promote the use of those types of fabrics in the market.

Conclusion
This is a world of materials, are they that give essence to everything that can be seen
and touched. In the choice of materials, one of the most important things to understand
is how to find solutions that are meaningful to consumers, that provide valuable
experiences and a positive impact in society and in daily life (Ashby and Johnson,
2010; Gale and Kaur, 2004). It is the case of sustainable products. In view of the fact that
at present times is a tendency to return to origins, to natural and organic products
(Cappetta et al., 2006) fabrics with natural fibers as wool can end in the right material/
fabric to meet the consumer expectations in terms of fashion accessories.

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