

Water as a luxury element in fashion

<https://doi.org/10.21814/uminho.ed.139.21>

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Abstract

This article aims to raise awareness about how fashion brands have approached water as a luxury element due to its scarcity, intending to discuss the meaning of luxury and show the huge waste of water within the textile industry. From a short historical line about fashion shows that have used the element of water in their collections or aesthetics on the catwalk, it shows signs that the fashion industry, through artistic approaches, has alerted to the importance of sustainable consumption of an element that can become scarce and that, depending on the point of view, is already a luxury element worldwide.

Keywords

Fashion brands; water waste; textile industry; sustainability; luxury

1. Introduction

Luxury is, above all, a symbol of status, exclusivity, represents purchasing power and constitutes a lifestyle and is often also related to pleasure, desire and rarity (Silva, 2020). Likewise, it is the mark that defines groups and segregates them. In the most diverse historical contexts, it is what separates the rich from the poor and the most valuable from the least valuable. According to Silva (2020, pp.15), the definition of luxury moves away from the rational, as consumers increasingly choose to use luxury products to satisfy their emotional needs.

Luxury products are present in the aristocratic culture, which expresses admiration for classic, timeless items and for the tradition and legacy that a particular brand can carry. However, a luxury product can also be characterized by the novelty, modernity, and trends it represents, symbolizing above all social recognition. When comparing individual symbolism with social symbolism, Silva (2020, pp.20) stated that social symbolism is more important for consumers in general, that is, what others think of me as a consumer is more important than what I think of myself.

In view of the theme presented, we intend to discuss, from the social and artistic point of view, the way fashion brands have used the catwalk to alert about the water crisis, showing for more than 10 years that, being already a luxury element because of its rarity, it may become even more scarce if public policies of water protection are not adopted, in addition to sustainable consumption and use practices also in the Fashion world.

2. Water and the textile industry

A luxury product is typically understood to be rare, scarce, and as such, a testimony to social recognition. Considering that the poorest countries in the world are characterized by difficult access to water, it is possible to argue that in some parts of the world water is already a luxury. For example, in the mostly arid and semiarid regions, where the population suffers daily from drought and resorts to various methods of collecting and capturing water, such as collecting rainwater, drilling artesian wells, or, if none of the two previous possibilities are feasible, there arises the dependence on transportation that provides them with drinking water. Thus, in view of the growing scarcity of water, which makes it a luxury item, it is necessary and urgent to reflect on the role of the textile and clothing industry, in view of the water crisis we face and in respect to the people who live daily without being able to easily access and drink from it. The fashion sector is heavily dependent on water resources throughout the entire production process, from raw materials to the making of the final product for the consumer, and negatively impacting water sources, if there is no effective control and inspection, especially in regions with little water potential (Silva, 2021).

With the growth of the consumption incentives, the disposal of clothing has been increasing, making the useful life of a still usable product shorter, which strongly

impacts the environment. If we pay attention to the textile and clothing industry, we can easily see the worsening of this situation. As an example, in a study carried out in Brazil, based on the global Water Footprint Network methodology, it was concluded that a total of 5196 liters of water are used to manufacture a pair of jeans, with most of the consumption occurs in cotton production (Venâncio, 2020). According to this study, 4247 liters of water are used in cotton planting, 127 liters in weaving, 362 liters in the laundry and confection phases and 460 liters in home washing (Venâncio, 2020).

According to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation report (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017), there are revealing numbers in this sector that force us to rethink and act quickly in favor of sustainability. For example, clothing production consumes 98 million tons of non-renewable resources per year, including water, energy and raw materials. Textile production, including cotton cultivation, uses about 93 billion cubic meters of water per year, representing 4% of global freshwater withdrawal (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). More than two thirds of this water use is attributed to clothing production.

Currently, many of the major cotton producing countries suffer from high water scarcity, including China, India, United States, Pakistan and Turkey. In China, between 80% and 90% of the fabric, yarn and plastic fibers are produced in water-scarce or water-stressed regions (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). Another study, published by the Global Fashion Agenda, suggests that the textile and apparel industry is responsible for 20% of global water pollution and 10% of global carbon emissions (Global Fashion Agenda, 2019).

From 2000 and 2015, global textile production nearly doubled, driven by the expansion of the middle-class population worldwide and the rise in per capita sales in developed economies, while during the same period, clothing utilization (the average number of times a garment is worn before it ceases to be used) decreased by 36% (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017).

Having become a global priority, it is important to rethink the use of water, which is present in various industrial sectors. In the case of the fashion industry, the amount of water used during a year would be enough to quench the thirst of about 110 million people (Common Objective, 2021), which alerts us to the need to adjust water consumption practices within the industry, and we should, for example, promote technologies for its reuse.

As an essential and precious element, water waste must be taken seriously, and the fashion industry needs to have the responsibility to reduce its consumption in the production of its garments. As Dabas and Whang (2022) argued, the social issues should not only be relevant for consumers, but also for the textile and clothing industry. All processes need to be reviewed to decrease the environmental impact.

3. Water as an artistic element in fashion

From an artistic point of view, fashion can still serve as an example and raise awareness about the water crisis. An example of this initiative were the parades of the Hussein Chalayan brand that, in 2014, surprised its guests with outfits, part of the Spring Summer 2016 collection, that dissolved with water. In this show, two showers were placed on the runway, under which two models stood still, wearing white clothes of flowing and translucent fabrics that slowly dissolved, until the final garment was revealed, a dress fully embroidered with Swarovski (MaterialDistrict, 2015).

Already in 2016, the brand Stella McCartney was inspired by ideas of ethical and sustainable consumption and made pieces with recycled and organic materials, in addition to having shown images that warned about the deforestation of the Amazon rainforest during the parade. For its part, in 2018 the Gucci brand also presented sustainable and organic pieces with elements such as tigers and bees, which represented the importance of nature conservation. Also in that same year, Vivienne Westwood showed a collection inspired by global warming and the water crisis, displaying clothes with glacier and water prints, and ending her show with a speech about the importance of environmental awareness.

Finally, in 2021, Balenciaga showed pieces with prints of natural landscapes and with elements such as leaves and clouds, with the purpose of alerting to these same problems of environmental sustainability.

From the point of view of luxury, in addition to serving as inspiration in the creation of collections, water as an element that is part of clothing may also be able to be used as a symbol of power and social distinction. An example of this idea was the fashion show “Crystallization” in 2011, in which the brand Iris Van Herpen used a modelling through which her pieces appeared to be frozen or made of water, and this show can be considered a milestone in the way natural elements can be re-signified in the modern world.

The use of water as a creative element in fashion can be seen as a demonstration of luxury, power, and distinction. This is due to the scarcity of water and its transformation into a luxury product, making its use in fashion products become a status symbol, just like a Louis Vuitton bag is these days. In addition, creativity and innovation in the use of water in fashion are also valued and can differentiate brands and designers in the market on a luxury side, but also as a focus for awareness of climate change and water scarcity.

4. Conclusion

The fashion industry, despite its impact with regard to social and environmental issues, is aware of the need for change, in order to be able to continue to produce luxury products in a sustainable manner and with awareness in the area of social responsibility.

It is possible to approach production in a more sustainable way, through the use of current and modern eco-designs, which can reach more consumers and help to redefine fashion in their daily lives. In this way, it is imperative that the consumer himself contributes to this transformation that needs to occur in the fashion industry along with their own consumption habits.

At an international level, with the goals defined by the various public and private organizations operating globally, objectives have already been outlined for the transformation that necessarily includes changing the fashion sector and dependence on water. Regulation and standardization are also already playing a very important role in this transformation, both for producers and consumers.

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