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Does Resale Extend the Use Phase of Garments? Exploring Longevity on the Fashion Resale Market

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Abstract: This paper presents a follow-the-garment exploration in which the two Danish fashion brands GANNI and Baum und Pferdgarten (BuF) have been followed in selected resale environments from September 2020 to September 2022. Drawing on data from two pilot studies and an ongoing PhD project which is part of the large-scale Danish research program *TraCE* (trace-im4.dk), an actor-network theoretical (ANT) case study approach is used to explore how mechanisms on the resale market can inform design strategies with the purpose of extending the use and lifetime of garments. Following the idea that design strategies can be improved by studying actual examples of garment trajectories, the resale market is proposed as an appropriate field of research to explore mechanisms that determine how garments perform in circular business models. As resale is considered one of the most effective circular business models in the fashion sector (Niinimäki, 2018), we dive into the market to stimulate a shift in gears from theoretical possibilities to design for longevity and to practical realities where garments are shifting hands. The paper contributes with insights that can further understandings of relationships between fashion design and resale mechanisms and finds that design for longevity strategies are limited in their possibilities to succeed due to the dynamic existence of garments whose destinies rely on user behaviours and are modified with everything that happens with and around them.

Introduction

This paper sheds light on mechanisms in selected resale environments to explore *why*, *when*, *where* and *if* different types of fashion design perform well in circular business models. Focusing on the following research question, we unfold three examples of mechanisms that can deepen understandings of possibilities for circular business models to extend the use and lifetime of garments through resale and design strategies:

> *How do design strategies for extended use and product lifetimes align with mechanisms on the resale market?*

We draw on a case study approach in which the Danish fashion brands GANNI and Baum und Pferdgarten (BuF) have been followed in selected resale environments over a two-year time period. As such, we do not provide generalisable answers that are representative of all brands in all resale environments but follow the journeys of selected garments to examine how ideas about design strategies for longevity resonate with mechanisms on the resale market.

Design for Longevity

Design is not a straightforward process where input *a* (design methods for longevity) necessarily results in output *b* (long-lasting design). Thus, in this section, we present a variety of scholarly contributions that describe design for longevity as a nonlinear concept whether the strategy is directed toward *technical, functional, aesthetic* and/or *emotional* durability (Hasling & Ræbild, 2017). Leaning on Fletcher's idea that design for longevity strategies are necessary but neither suffice to extend use or product lifetimes (2017), we argue that garments are entangled in intertwinements of situated, systemic and contextual parameters that influence their lifespans.

Theoretically, garment lifetimes should be extended by improving the overall product

strength through quality and durability upgrades (Akko et al., 2022). However, just because a product *can* last, there is no guarantee that it *will* last. As Chapman exemplifies, it is relatively easy to design a t-shirt that can last physically for 15 years, while it is strangely difficult to design a t-shirt that someone will want to use and keep for 15 years (2015:74). Thus, while durable product attributes are necessary, a strict focus on material qualities may prevent designers from responding adequately to the issue of increasing longevity (Neto & Ferreira, 2023).

Irrespective of the design strategy applied, the use and lifetime of garments is unlikely to be extended without reductions in wardrobe volumes and the total number of garments in circulation (Maldini et al., 2019). While design for emotional durability has gained traction as a winning strategy to enhance garment lifespans, research supporting the relationship between strong emotional product attachment and increased use is lacking (Fletcher, 2017:7). The same applies to other strategies that are expected to deliver climate and environmental benefits but lack empirical validation. According to Maldini et al.'s review of sustainable fashion strategies neither *production on demand*, *service-based models*, *user involvement*, *multifunctional/transformable/modular garments* or *design for slowness, longevity and repair* have been verified to work in practice (2017:233). However, there is scarce data on how garments actually perform in the hands of users, how long they are used for and in what ways such issues are site-specific and context related (see e.g. Wiedemann et al., 2020).

Perceiving longevity as a decentralised human-object-reliant concept, Fletcher and Fitzpatrick define durability as a diverse and heterogeneous concept that "exists in all contexts" (2021:3). In this relation, Fletcher argues that longevity is a disruptive process that is achieved through the "craft of use" (2016). Craft of use emphasises the impossibility of designers to control garments beyond the design phase and is based on the idea that garment lifetimes rely more on everyday practices of use than design strategies. A perspective that is supported by other researchers, including Gill and Lopes who write that a more sustainable material culture is perhaps "more about making new relationships than making new things" (2011:307).

In this paper, we argue that complex mixtures of situated, systemic and contextual parameters play a profound role in shaping garment lifespans. Following the nonlinear and difficult relationship between design strategies for longevity and actual garment trajectories, we direct our attention to resale mechanisms that hold rich information about integral garment dependencies. As such, we follow the suggestion of Gill and Lopes who argue that the already made hold insights that enable designers to work backwards (2011).

Methodology

The paper relies on actor-network theoretical (ANT) inspiration that situates garments as co-dependent and world-making phenomena that are intertwined with multiple agents of change and stabilisation (Latour, 2008). With ANT, objects can only be understood through their entanglements which means that neither garments, nor users or their surroundings can be seen as stable entities (Yaneva, 2009).

We draw on data from two pilot studies and an ongoing PhD project that is facilitated as a partnership between Royal Danish Academy and 18 companies with different business models. Special attention was given to the brands *GANNI* and *Baum und Pferdgarten* (BuF) who were followed in the following resale environments through fieldwork and netnography (Kozinets, 2019) from September 2020 to September 2022:

1) *Trendsales*, the largest peer-to-peer platform for pre-owned fashion in Denmark
2) *Vestiaire Collective*, one of the largest peer-to-peer platforms for pre-owned fashion internationally
3) *Facebook Forums* for resale
4) Local hybrid/physical resale concepts such as *flea markets* and *consignment shops*.

Based on the observation of more than 5000 active resale listings, data (e.g. images, product category, listing price, condition, material composition, sizing) from more than 50 individual designs were registered and analysed in and across time and resale environments.

By stretching over two years, the data are comprehensive and reflect changes in trends, seasons and other circumstances that can only be achieved over time. Out of several possible themes, we have committed this paper to three resale mechanisms that can inform design strategies for longevity.

Analysis

Mirroring the Conventional Fashion Market

While our fieldwork and netnographic explorations took off within selected resale environments, it did not take long for our attention to be redirected to the conventional market as we were met by strikingly recent designs: garments that were available in the conventional market were often available in the resale environments too (Figure 1). Further, it was not unusual to identify more resale versions of the same designs which were e.g. listed in different colours, sizes or geographical areas and in more of the resale environments simultaneously.

To some degree, the resale market appeared to mirror the conventional fashion market by providing access to resale versions of current designs. The resale versions were often listed with more or less symbolic discounts relative to their first-hand prices which seemed to provide a baseline for the resale valuations. This became apparent when the seasonal sales hit the conventional market, and the price reductions enforced comparable price reductions in the resale environments.

When designs had sold out in the conventional market, it could stimulate hype-like movements in the resale environments. This emerged e.g. from what we have termed “Asking ads” where users sought for specific designs that were no longer available for first-hand purchase. Asking ads appeared often to be self-confirming and boost the desirability of the asked for garments more generally. Thus, when someone asked for a design, it seemed to strengthen the overall garment awareness and inspire others to ask for the same design. In this way, users seemed to confirm each other in the appeal and desirability of certain designs.

Figure 1. Resale versions of BuF AW21 designs. The Delaware Coat and ABI Dress were spotted in the consignment shop *KLAEDER 2.Hand Luksus* on 22.09.2021, just as the collection had launched © BuF.

Reflecting Changing Weathers

While the previously described resale mechanisms seemed to mirror mechanisms on the conventional market, the explored resale environments did more than mimic the fashion calendar. In fact, they seemed highly influenced by weather changes which gave the impression that users want functionally durable garments that match their time-specific contextual needs. Thus, in this section, we focus on local and weather-related mechanisms.

When it rained, rainwear and rubber boots were in demand, when it snowed, it was winter coats and sweaters, and when the summer temperatures were extended a few months, so was the demand for sundresses. The weather-determined preferences appeared both from swift oversupplies of seasonally specific designs from the prior season and the lack of specific seasonally relevant designs for the season taking over (Figure 2).

While the local, weather-related mechanisms appeared highly influential to the explored resale environments, they were strangely disconnected from the conventional market. Thus, in this relation, the resale environments seemed to expose the counterintuitive logics of the con-

ventional fashion calendar which does not reflect the most prevailing user needs on local and temporal scales (Fletcher & Tham, 2015). Due to the apparent importance of functional use relevance, we draw attention to the question of how resale may influence garment-relationships for resale suppliers, i.e. users, in the following section.

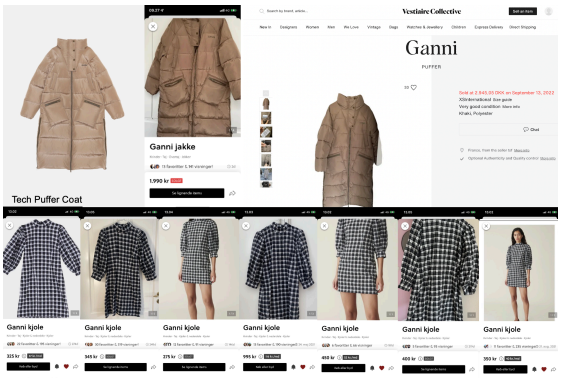

Figure 2. 1) Example of 'asked for' GANNI design (Tech Puffer Coat), showcasing the preference for functionally durable design. 2) Example of a seasonally specific GANNI design (Seersucker Check Dress) that was widely available after the summer of 2022. © GANNI.

Preserving the New-Like Appearance

From the perspective of the explored resale environments and the rapid conversion of new garments to resale garments, the resale option seems to encourage a material culture of non-binding garment relationships. In this section, we draw attention to resale's validation of such garment relationships and ask how the resale possibility may impact product care and maintenance.

Based on our explorations, it seems reasonable to argue that resale shapes user behaviours, firstly by legitimising half-hearted purchases, and secondly by encouraging users to perceive these purchases as investments. As the resale market relies on the willingness and capability of users to deliver excellent supplies of pre-owned garments, it is interesting to explore how it shapes their behaviours in terms of product care and maintenance. Across the explored resale environments, 'product condition' revealed itself as a highly important factor. Thus, the presence of the resale option may create incentives for users to treat their garments extraordinarily well.

While we cannot determine the correlation between product condition and resale performance in this study, our data give the impression that the resale performance of GANNI and BuF designs depends on their approximation to a 'like-new' appearance. Throughout the data collection period, the explored resale environments were loaded with garments in excellent condition, sometimes despite being several years old. As such, the possibility for users to grow revenue streams out of their wardrobes may positively impact product care and maintenance, even when human-garment relationships are non-binding.

Discussion

Just as the conventional fashion market, the resale market is influenced by multiple mechanisms that guide garment trajectories, regardless of their intrinsic, material attributes. As it appears from our analysis, garments rely on a variety of mechanisms that determine how they perform through use and on the resale market. This poses questions to understandings of longevity as an exclusively design-reliant concept.

In the explored resale environments, the performance of GANNI and BuF designs seemed e.g. related to mechanisms from 1) *the conventional fashion market,* 2) *changing weathers* and 3) *new-like product appearance* which support the idea that longevity has as much to do with the variable contexts that designs are intertwined with as the designs themselves. Thus, design strategies that are systemic and encapsulate both the complexity of human-garment relationships and their dependencies are needed.

The explored resale environments seemed to mirror movements on the conventional market, including its culture of rapid garment relationships. In this relation, the frequent introduction of new collections that leads to recurring discount cycles on the conventional market had a negative impact on resale performance: when designs were sold on discount, they seemed to lose monetary value in the resale environments as well. Other research has too pointed to relationships between movements in the conventional market and the resale market (Sihvonen & Turunen, 2016; Choi & Kim, 2019). A relationship which appeared to shape patterns of supply and demand in both markets in our explorations where the performance of designs seemed to follow a predictable rhythm that,

again, had more to do with mechanisms than design attributes.

The tendency for seasonally relevant garments to perform well, makes us assume that they are primarily purchased to be used rather than re-sold. Thus, as users did not appear to purchase with the *intent* to resell, we like to think of them as purchasing with the *possibility* to resell. At least many garments from GANNI and BuF revealed themselves as promising investments. While considering garments as investments and purchasing them with the resale possibility in mind may express a culture of non-binding garment relationships, it can positively impact how garments are treated: when users consider garments as valuable, it is likely to affect their behaviours. Thus, the resale possibility may positively impact human-garment-relationships in terms of product care and maintenance.

As stated initially, emotional product attachment does not necessarily increase use. Thus, in this light, the non-binding garment relationships may limit the accumulation of inactive garments in private wardrobes. According to a survey by Laitala and Klepp, reused garments are, nevertheless, used 30% less than garments acquired from new, while garments that are set to be donated or resold are used 22% less than garments planned to be thrown away (2021). On this notion, we will finish the discussion by stating that our data do not indicate that resale lives up to its reputation as a provider of extended use and product lifetimes - and that academia, as far as we know, offers no such evidence.

Conclusions

Focusing on GANNI and BuF, we have committed this paper to explore how design strategies for extended use and product lifetimes align with mechanisms on the fashion resale market. The resale performance of garments has been shown to rely on a variety of non-material mechanisms exemplified through *the conventional fashion market*, *changing weathers* and *new-like product appearance.*

Focusing on resale mechanisms rather than intrinsic and material design attributes has allowed us to view garments as contextually reliant and dynamic objects that are constantly evolving and modified with everything that happens within and around them.

From the lens of the resale market, longevity is among other things a culture-, context- and user-dependent concept that relies on multiple mechanisms other than those installed in the garments. Thus, in the attempt to extend use and product lifetimes with circular business models and resale, a holistic durability concept that encapsulates the non-stable and constantly evolving genesis of garments, their users and their environments is essential.

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